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Through Her Eyes: The Gendering of Female First-Person Shooters

Elizabeth Renshaw

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THROUGH HER EYES: THE GENDERING OF FEMALE FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

By

Elizabeth Renshaw

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In Rhetoric, Theory and Culture

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To Laura, you know what you did.

Abstract

While the video game industry has attempted to address their years of mistreatment towards women, within games and how they are produced, by hiring more women and including more female characters as playable options, these fixes have been superficial at best. Not only are there still few females as main characters in video games, but that there are so few female video games. By this I refer to the fact that video games told through the eyes of female characters often do not feature a gendered narrative, unlike multiple games with male POVs in which the storyline directly reflects their gender. This issue, however, is not just about inclusion of more female stories, but also execution. Female FPSs may lack a narrative reflecting their gender, but they often feature gameplay that represents a stereotype of females as weaker and less aggressive than men. The purpose of this analysis is to explore how first-person shooter video games gender (or not) their female texts, through both narrative and gameplay.

Through Her Eyes: The Gendering of Female FPSs

Imagine waking up in a bunker, your hands cuffed to a rusty bedpost. A man stands in the corner with his back turned. Another sprawled on the floor, dead. The first man turns towards you and begins to spout doomsday prophecies. This is Joseph Seed, the cult leader of Eden's Gate. His prediction of a "world on fire" has come true as moments before numerous nuclear bombs were detonated around the globe. Joseph leans over you, with a cold, intense stare (Figure 1). His gaze, constructed through a low angle, is intimidating and threatening.

Figure 1

Joseph utters: "You're all I have left now. You're my family. And when this world is ready to be borne anew, we will step into the light. I am your Father and you are my child. And together, we will march to Eden's Gate."

As the world above crumbles, both literally and figuratively, the ceiling florescent lights in the bunker dim casting even darker shadows on Joseph's face and, leaving you alone with him and his smirk. Harnessing the visual conventions of film noir where hard light is associated with masculinity, this psychological thriller game recreates a sense of danger embedded in both patriarchy and patriotism. This is just one of three endings players can experience upon completing *Far Cry 5* (2017), a first-person shooter game set in rural Montana. You play as an unnamed deputy who, along with two US Marshals and the county sheriff, is dispatched to arrest the cult leader, Joseph Seed. Unlike previous games in this franchise, players can customize the deputy based on gender, skin color, hair options, and clothing. These choices result in small changes throughout the game, such as what pronouns are used to address your avatar or how low-pitch your death rattles are, where the available pronouns are he and she and the pitch is articulated along gender lines with high pitch representing a feminine avatar and a low pitch signaling a male avatar? None of these alterations, however, are meant to alter the plot. Whether you choose male or female, white or black avatar, the implication is that you'll experience the same story. Regardless of your avatar, the ending has you locked in a bunker with John Seed, waiting however long the half-life of a nuclear bomb is to see the light of day again. If you have chosen to play with a female avatar, there is far greater horror & suffering awaiting you. Joseph craves company, the power-trip from being worshiped, and most of all he desires family. The potential for rape is not directly implied by the game's developer *Ubisoft*, but that is this ending's very problem. The game does not formally acknowledge that that gender matters in the players experience of what is assumed to be a uniform and universal plot. *Far Cry 5 is exemplary of the complicated*

ways in which gender is engaged in the production, representation, as well as play of First-Person Shooter (FPS) games.

Press Start

In 2017, the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) released its report on sales, demographics, and usage data in the computer and video game industry. According to the ESA's findings, "women age 18 and older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population than boys under age 18," and women of all ages make up 42% of the overall game-playing population (*2017 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry* 7). Unfortunately, the gaming industry has yet to recognize this growing audience. According to the International Game Developer Association (IGDA), only 21% of game developers have a world-wide identity as women (*Developer Satisfaction Survey 2017 Summary Report*). Misogynistic crusades such as #GamerGate, lack of representation within the industry and the sexual harassment suffered by the few women employed have hampered the growth of female portrayals within games and contributed to a masculine gaming culture. Within video games, all too often females are seen as Other or are rendered invisible. They are consistently used as expendable avatars or characters to be gawked at as mere objects of curiosity. Female avatars are positioned as powerless damsels in distress in need of saving, as overly loquacious companion in need of silencing, or as bosomed temptress to tame or kill. If female avatars are seen as defenseless others, straight, white males are deemed as capable and thus playable. Not only are there still few females as main characters in video games, but that there are so stories few told through the eyes of female characters.

Developers have failed to recognize implicit and explicit gender differences. Even on the few occasions, when FPSs feature a sole female character, these games often lack a gendered narrative or gameplay, unlike multiple games with male POVs in which their gender affects both the narrative and gameplay. This issue goes beyond just video game creators, but to the very scholars who studied these texts. Aubrey Anabele, in her book *Playing with Feelings: Video Games and Affect*, laments how game studies "seems to want to move beyond the still-important question of representation by figuring a computational realm in which power works in ways that are detached from lived experience and, hence legible only to those with the power to decipher them (56).

This issue of recognition is not just about inclusion, but also execution. In this dissertation, I explore how first-person shooter video games gender (or not) their female texts, with gameplay and narratives that references the protagonist's gender. In talking about gendering female FPSs, I use "gender" as a verb. To gender is to code, to internalize, to produce a narrative and gameplay that "becomes essential to the formation, persistence, and continuity" of the subject's gender designation (Butler *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* 3).

Her-story

Female characters, in general, have had less than dignified treatment within video game texts themselves. More often than not, female figures in games are limited to non-playable characters (NPCs) in need of rescuing, protecting, or killing (Summers and Miller 1030). Tracy Dietz's analysis of video game violence and gender roles found that games were filled with princess and damsels in distress with "21 percent of the games"

analyzed portraying females as victims" or in other words in positions lacking power. (Dietz 435). This study, however, only covers video games up until the late 90s. Subsequently, this trend has evolved to position female characters who possess agency, some ability to control their actions, as a threat that needs to be visually consumed or eliminated: "recent female video game characters are not only found to be sexy, but also aggressive." (Summers and Miller 1030). Summers and Miller note that "Options for playable female characters are limited to gamers and, when available, she will most often be impractically masked and armored for gamers' visual pleasure." (Summers and Miller 1028). For every battle-suit wearing Samus Aran, there is a Bayonetta with her black catsuit and bouncing boobs. Female characters are thus often positioned as objects to be looked at and to be conquered. The visual pleasure here is derived through the objectifying gaze of the male characters as well as the presupposed male game player, where the gaze is endowed with power and agency.

First-person shooters have underutilized the use of women as the main character more than any other genre of video games as approximately only twenty percent include females at the forefront (Hitchens). In 1994, *Rise of the Triad* and *Zero Tolerance* were the first FPS games where the player had the option, but was not forced, to play with a female avatar (Ibid). In 1998, the expansion pack *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Mysteries of the Sith* replaced Kyle Katarn with Mara Jade thus giving the option to play a female main character. It wasn't until the year 2000 that mainstream FPS games featuring a female,

and only a female, lead became available.[1] In a survey of over four hundred FPSs conducted in 2011, Michael Hitchens found that eighty-one percent of FPS had the gender of the main avatar enforced as male. Nineteen percent of games featured a female avatar as enforced, optional, or gender unspecified. Finally, only four percent of the games overall had the female avatar enforced (Hitchens). However, even when females are at the fore-front of the character articulation, their gender is not always reflected in the gameplay and/or narrative.

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[1] *Perfect Dark* & *The Operative: No One Lives Forever*

Tutorial

> . Defining terms is tricky. There is an unspoken assumption behind the practice: that if a definition is correct-if it manages to capture the essence of the thing under discussion-then everything that logically follows from that definition will be correct too. And so scholars often take great pains to demonstrate that there is a strong correlation between their definitions and reality.

> The "correction" of a definition isn't a property of the relationship between the word and reality; it is a function of the conversation that the definition facilitates. And, indeed, multiple contradictory definitions can all be equally "correct" if they each manage to independently structure a producing discourse (Upton 12).

In assessing the ways in which FPS games are gendered, this dissertation explores how does the narrative of these games represent the protagonist's gender? What kind of gameplay can evoke the protagonist's gender? And does the narrative and gameplay reference the same gender? In order to answer these questions, I will first define two key terms: gameplay and narrative.

Terminology

Gameplay

In the analysis, I harness definition of gameplay established by Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc, & Robert Zubek and their concept of MDA (mechanics-dynamics-aesthetics). Their lecture series, "MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research,"

presented over several years at the Games Developer Conference was intended as a methodology to be shared by scholars and developers alike. For LeBlanck and Zubke, gameplay consists of mechanics, dynamics, and affects.

Mechanics

Mechanics are the ludus of a game, that is the rules at play. They refer to all necessary pieces that one needs to play the game, including the equipment, the venue, or anything else necessary for play to be had. In considering the game as a system, the mechanics are the complete description of that system. Another way to consider mechanics is as a "system of constraints" (Upton 15). Designer and scholar Brian Upton, building upon the work of academics Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, explains that the rules of a game (not just video games) are a system of constraints, a varied group that can include:

> the physical geometry of a level, or the behavior of the enemy AI, or the amount of damage that a hand grenade does… Anything in the game that proscribes the player's ations is a constraint. The player is free to move around within the game world, to trigger actions, even to change the world's configuration, but always within limits laid down by the game itself (Upton 16).

But mechanics do not need to be constraining. Take for instance a game like *Borderlands* (2009), a bizarro sci-fi FPS set on the perilous planet Pandora, filled with kooky characters, and even crazier physics. In the game, players take control of a Vault Hunter, inter-planetary mercenaries with little regards to the rules or laws. As such, the laws of

physics in the game are nigh non-existent.[2] For instance, when a player falls from a great height, despite the hard impact, there is no loss of health. The lack of damage, a cartoonish effect in a game filled with outlandish aesthetics, is a mechanic that reflects the topsy-turvy tone of the game.

Dynamics

Dynamics refers to the "behavior" of the game, the actual events and phenomena that occur as the game is played. When viewing the game in terms of its dynamics, the question asked is, "What happens when the game is played?" The relationship between dynamics and mechanics is one of emergence. A game's dynamics emerge from its mechanics (LeBlanc 440-41). If the mechanics are a set of rules or a system of constraints, then dynamics are *how* players operate within that system.

When playing *Dishonored* (2012), a first-person stealth action-adventure game where the player undertakes the role of a scorned assassin Corvo, choosing to sneak past a guard rather than execute him is an example of the game's dynamics. A dynamic choice need not be a decision between a better or worse action, though the outcomes they produce may differ. If the player executes a guard, then his comrades might hear the struggle and be alerted to Corvo's presence. If the player fails to properly perform a stealth move, which is more difficult than most execution mechanics, then they might lose more health in the process. Choosing stealth over vicious is not a right or wrong choice, but purely a matter of a gamer's desired play style.

---

[2] This is, after all, the same game that describes a quasar grenade as E=mc^(OMG)/wtf

Affects

In Hunicke, eBlanc, and Zubek's initial proposal of MDA as a formal analysis of gameplay, the A stood for "aesthetics." I find the term "aesthetics" problematic as it is more often used to describe artistic quality and not an experience. Instead, and in order to maintain the MDA acronym, I have chosen to use the term "affect," rather than aesthetic. Affect, as defined in the field of cultural studies, is more than just a sensation, emotion, and feeling. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, in their seminal collection *The Affect Theory Reader*, argue that affect "at its most anthropomorphic, is the name given to those forces-visceral forces beneath, alongside or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion-that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought" (Seigworth 2). A video game's affects are its emotional content, the desirable emotional responses that players have that result from playing the game. A game's affects emerge from its dynamics (LeBlanc 441); how the game behaves determines how it makes the player feel. For instance, the difference in affect between two racing games from 1997, *Mario Kart 64* and *Diddy Kong Racing*, is that the former intends to be fun with its random item generator mechanics and its lack of dynamic options to compensate for this apparent chaos. *Diddy Kong Racing*, on the other hand, has much more strategic dynamic capabilities due to its hierarchical item generator system, thus creating a more competitive affect.

Narrative

In Brian Upton's *Aesthetics of Play*, in order to use game studies to critique and inform literary studies, he starts his analysis "anchored firmly in much older critical and

philosophical traditions" (Upton 5). Like Upton, rather than "trying to protect game studies from being colonized by literary studies" for this analysis I want to adapt traditional narrative theories with medium-specificity in mind. Some of those differences include video games non-linear, procedural, interactive, and ergodic nature (Ibid). This isn't a radical concept. Narrative scholar H. P. Abbott brought attention to the difference between literary narratives and video games in aside for his primer, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. For Abbott, the bare minimum definition of narrative is "the representation of an event or a series of events" (Abbott 13). These events or sequence of events constitute the text's story and the narrative discourse is "how the story is conveyed (Abbott 15). By this definition, story and narrative discourse share a similar emerging relationship to mechanics and dynamics by Hunicke's formulation. A game's narrative discourse is determined by how the rules at play (mechanics) are played (dynamics). But a video game's dynamics are not static. Per our *Dishonored 2* example, a player may experience a different narrative discourse based on their dynamic choices. How can this multiplicity be resolved? This brings me back to the necessity to bear medium-specificity in mind. For Abbott, Espen Aarseth's *Cybertex*t answers the "role-playing conundrum" in a manner that is compatible and evolves somewhat seamlessly from traditional definitions of narrative. For Aarseth, a sequence of events is not a story, but actions. These actions or ergodic, "situation in which a chain of events… has been produced by nontrivial efforts of one or more mechanisms (Aarseth *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* 113). These ergodic chains of events created by the player's actions or interactivity produce "intrigue," events singular to each player based on their dynamics choices:

> [Rather] than a fixed story with its linear course, there are multiple possibilities, and that particular series of events that actually happens is recorded in the manner of a log: Instead of a narrative constituted of a story or plot, we get an intrigue-oriented ergodic log (Aarseth *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* 113).

For our analysis, when discussing the events of the games installed by the developers prior to the gamers playing, traditional literary terms (ex. story, plot, narrative) will be used. Aarseth's terminology will be used when discussing events of the games dependent upon players' interactions.

Methodology

> As game designers, we need a way to analyze games, to try to understand them, and to understand what works and what makes them interesting. We need a critical language. And since this is basically a new form, despite its tremendous growth and staggering diversity, we need to invent one (Costikyan 196).

In the sixteen years since Greg Costikyan laid down the theoretical gauntlet, numerous designers and scholars have attempted to develop the Holy Grail of methodologies. Similar to defining terms, this is no simple task nor is there a "correct" answer. Rather than perform the tantamount task of creating an entirely new methodology, this analysis will be using a refined version of the inquiry into drama in games set forth by Marc LeBlanc in "Tools for Creating Dramatic Game Dynamics." According to LeBlanc, the topic of this essay "comes from [his] first lecture at the Game Developer's Conference (GDC) in 1999… At that time, it was becoming clear that our discourse on game design needed more of a conceptual framework" (438). LeBlanc's analysis is founded on three

questions: How does the narrative function create affect? What kinds of dynamics can evoke the narrative? From what kinds of mechanics do those dynamics emerge? These inquiries are "a way to place individual topics of discussion in their proper aesthetic context" (Ibid). In this case, the individual topic of discussion is the gendering of female FPSs and his three schemas for understanding games-mechanics, dynamics, and affects,[3] in terms of his three motivating questions form the basis for our conceptual framework, ludonarrative synchronicity (LeBlanc 441).

Ludonarrative Synchronicity

Ludonarrative synchronicity is not just an adaptation to LeBlanc's theories, but also a response to a term that sparked a thousand *Twitter* posts: ludonarrative dissonance. The term's originator was Clint Hocking, a former level designer, game designer, and scriptwriter for Ubisoft Montreal, who frequently blogged about his experiences as a developer on his personal website, *Click Nothing: Design From a Long Time Ago*. Hocking's blog post "Ludonarrative Dissonance in BioShock" gave rise to a debate that previously had been of little consequence, how narrative and gameplay are at odds in video games. According to Espen Aarseth, editor-in-chief of *Game Studies*, this argument is:

> used as a touchstone by beginners to prove they know their way around the field, but -- without exception, the writer doesn't have a clue, and the paper is typically about something entirely unrelated to the issue of whether games are narratives or

[3] LeBLanc uses the term aesthetics as previously discussed in the terminology section.

> not. What it does signal is that the writer feels the need to blend in, to show that they are aware of some stuff that has gone before (in those murky days of 1998-2001), but the effect is that they end up perpetuating the myth that there was a group of narrative theorists who had a quarrel with another group called 'ludologists'. (This is not the place to explain that great misunderstanding, instead see Aarseth 2014, but suffice it to say that the so-called ludologists were all using narratology, whereas the so-called narratologists were not, with the possible exception of a little bit of Aristotle.) This is not at all to suggest that there should be no more discussion of the relation between games and stories, because there is very little actual, informed, productive disagreement in our field, both on that topic and many others, and room for much more. Direct, vocal criticism is, or should be, a sign of respect. So perhaps there is too little of both? (Aarseth "Game Studies: How to Play -- Ten Play-Tips for Aspiring Game-Studies Scholar")

Hocking's post was hardly informed or productive. He only uses the phrase "ludonarrative dissonance" once, in the title, thus a firm definition of his term, or how he defines ludology and/or narratology is never provided. It can be surmised that ludonarrative dissonance refers to the gap between "what a text is about as a game and what it is about as a story." Despite the lack of scholarly context, after Hocking published his blog post, the term was reused and repurposed by academics of various disciplines and journalists alike. Computer scientist and physicists Mikael Hansson and Stefan Karlsson in their study, "A Matter of Perspective: A Qualitative study of Player-presence in First-person Video Games" used ludonarrative dissonance as "a perceived disconnect by the player, brought on by inconsistencies between actions required of the

player, through a game's ludology, and a narrative story portrayed within the fiction context," but they do not define what constitutes ludology (Hansson Mikael 2). Military entertainment scholar Matthew Payne describes ludonarrative dissonance in *War Bytes: The Critique of Militainment in Spec Ops: The Line* as a "disaffected state" (269). Sociologist Scott Hughes ' essay "Get real: Narrative and gameplay in 'The Last of Us'" uses the term ludonarrative dissonance in the abstract and is listed as a keyword, but like Hocking he never actually uses it in his article. While Hocking's term has become common usage for players, developers, critics, journalists, and academics, not all agree with its application. Semionaut and narrative designer Corvus Elrod regarded the term as pointless and redundant. For example,

> we have a situation where the fight choreography does not uphold the fiction behind the show. But don't refer to this as choreonarrative dissonance. Nor, for that matter, do we refer to the poorly written and delivered dialog as dialonarrative dissonance. Or the lackluster camera work as cinemanarrative dissonance (Swain) .

From an industry-perspective *Grantland*'s resident video game journalist Tom Bissell agrees that "some designers and critics regard ludonarrative dissonance as a core problem in modern game design" (Bissell).Despite these objections, the term continues to be used in game reviews, criticisms, and scholarly articles.

It is not my intention to continue in Hocking's footsteps, but to co-opt this popular usage of "ludonarrative". Rather than assess whether a video game "manages to successfully marry their ludic and narrative themes into a consistent and fully realized whole," ludonarrative synchronicity is designed to analyze how the ludic/gameplay and

narrative themes interact, whether in harmony or at odds, to create a subject (Hocking), which in our case is gender. The how instead of what is part of the reason why ludonarrative synchronicity is an effective methodology to analyze these female FPSs. The problems surrounding female FPSs in this study is less a matter of what is included in the games, but how these elements are gendered. The major obstacle to more female FPSs developed is not just about inclusion, having more games feature a female lead, but a matter of execution. This goes against a common argument for improved media portrayals of non-white, cis-males, through increased visibility quantitatively. According to filmmaker and trans-activist Jen Richards "there is a one word solution to almost all the problems in trans media, we just need 'more'. And that way, the occasional clumsy representation, wouldn't matter as much because it wouldn't be all that there is" (Feder). The titles explored here, however, are less marred by clumsy or stereotypical representations, but a lack thereof. Through comparative ludonarrative synchronicity, pairing up two similar female FPSs with each other, we do not see a slew of problematic portrayals of females, but hardly any recognition for their gender at all. When ludonarrative synchronicity is lacking, when the narrative and gameplay do not interact or gender two seemingly different subjects, then another (arguably greater) slight to females occurs: the disappearance of their representation.

Insert Coin

In choosing which FPSs to focus on as sites of analyzing the gendering of games, I implemented three criteria points. First, and foremost, I questioned whether the game could be categorized as first person shooter via the use of the first-person camera and a

shooting mechanic. Second, I considered whether the female character was given or chosen. I focused on characters that can be mechanized or in other words are movable and actable. Three categories of character engagement emerged here: alternate choice, customizable, and sole option. Last, but not least, I have considered the industry standing of the games via their accreditation through AAA and their belonging to one of the four periods of FPS game development.

Is the game a first-person shooter?

Mark J. P. Wolf argues that "player participation is arguably the central determinant in describing and classifying video games, more so even than iconography" (113). For instance, a game like *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), in which players direct Mario to jump from platform to platform, beam to beam, cloud to cloud, is a "platformer." A role-playing game (RPGs) such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), centers on the player creating his character whether it is by the avatar's appearance, skills, or social interactions.

For a first-person shooter there are two aspects that separate these games from other genres. The first is the game's use of a first-person camera. Using the terminology first-person "point of view" is a matter of contention, best explored by Alexander Galloway in his essay "Origins of the First-Person Shooter." This essay appeared in his collection *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture* which was meant to "formulate a few conceptual movements, a few conceptual algorithms, for thinking about video games… [but] above all, this book is about loving video games" (Galloway xii). In his "Origins of the First-Person Shooter," Alexander Galloway compares the subjective camera shot of

film noir to the first-person point of view camera in FPS. For Galloway, a subjective shot is one of accuracy "when the camera shows what the actual eyes of a character would see", while a POV shot is a generalized approximation (41). This goes against visual studies scholar Frederic Jameson who describes "'Point of view' in the strictest sense of seeing through a character's eyes" (112). Galloway clarifies his claim by noting that "subjective shots are more extreme in their physiological mimicking of actual vision, for, as stated, they pretend to peer outward from the eyes of an actual character rather than simply to approximate a similar line of sight" (43). He explicates himself from this argument of terms by saying that "video games are the first mass media to effectively employ the first-person subjective perspective[4]… used to achieve an intuitive sense of affective motion (Galloway 69). Rather than ask if modern-day FPS feature subjective or POV shots, he emphasizes what these shots create: action? I emphasize modern-day as the graphic capabilities of early FPS such as *Doom* and *Wolfenstein* wouldn't allow for loose, natural camera movements. Nowadays, with better technology, some FPS can mimic the physiological state of a character, such as blurring one's vision after being injured or near death. As for why I choose to use the term "camera" rather than either point of view or subjective view, "camera" emphasizes the player's control over their gaze. They are moving the camera, it is the player's viewpoint, not their avatar's.

The second integral aspect of FPS as a genre is the shooting mechanic. Continuing with Galloway's essay, weapons are as equally essential to the FPS as the

---

[4] Underline added for emphasis

subjective perspective, with how an avatar's weapon appears on screen (57). However, Galloway does not see violence as a key for these types of games. FPSs are not the only video game genre that feature violence. He argues that even a game like *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) or *Thief* (2014) that feature weapons and killing, emphasize avoiding violence and using a stealth dynamic instead (69). His argument, however, overlooks why players are provided a weapon in the first place. A focus on stealth and pacifism doesn't negate violence as key to the FPS genre. For even if a player chooses (or tries) to avoid committing carnage themselves, the enemies will retaliate nonetheless.

Is the female avatar given, not chosen?

According to Janet Murray, in her seminal piece *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, "an avatar is a graphical figure like a character in a video game" (J. H. Murray 113). These can include non-playable characters (NPCs) such as enemies, figures to populate the world, or side characters who offer assistance. For our study, the focus is on the avatars that players can control themselves. In FPSs, disembodied hands, wrist, and forearms typically are the only portions of the playable avatar's body presented on screen, along with a weapon in the foreground. When it comes to avatars players can control, there are three types or options: alternate choice, customizable, and sole option.

For a game like *Left 4 Dead* (2008), a FPS zombie-hunter, players have the choice between four characters: Francis, an outlaw biker, Bill, a Vietnam Veteran, Zoey, a university student, and Louis, a district account manager. In this particular title there is no advantage or disadvantage between picking one avatar over the other, their stats are all the same. Other titles, such as *Dishonored 2* (2016) feature a choice between two

different avatars with a different set of abilities. One can play as Corvo, an experienced assassin, or Emily, an assassin-in-training. Each has similar powers, but Corvo's mechanics are designed to favor melee-combat and Emily's range abilities favor a more cautious dynamic. It is less that there is an advantage or disadvantage, just a different choice in playstyle.

Another type of avatar option is the customizable character. This is most often found in RPGs where the player can change a number of aesthetic traits of their character. The *YouTube* series Monster Factory highlights the degree to which players can alter their avatar's appearance. For *Fallout 4* (2015), a post-apocalyptic RPG that allows players to switch between first-person and third-person camera, the McElroy Brothers created a monstrous being known as "Final Pam." (Figure 2)

Figure #2: The Unyielding, The Undying, The Devourer, The Existence-Eater, the Fearkeeper, Final Pam

Standing nearly ten feet tall, her face covered in pockmarks, with a sharply upturned nose and chin, Final Pam the not-so-benevolent is an extreme example of what can happen when players are given the opportunity to alter their avatar's appearance. In fact, this customization became so (in)famous amongst the gaming community that Bethesda, Fallout's publisher, made Final Pam canon with her inclusion in their online game, *Fallout 76* (2018). Not all customizations are purely for aesthetic purposes. While in *Destiny* (2014), a multiplayer FPS, players first choose a race and gender that does not affect access to any skills or change the game's challenge level, when choosing their avatar's class and sub-class, these choices alter the mechanics and dynamics of the game. A player could create a male Exo Titan Defender, given equipment and abilities (mechanics) that favor melee combat (dynamic). Changing the Titan Defender to a female Awoken race would not alter the given mechanics and resulting dynamics.

While not a FPS, Bioware's *Mass Effect* (2007-2017) series had a unique combination of a female character as both an alternate choice and a customizable avatar. The default selection, John Shepard, can have his physical characteristics altered, along with his background and class that changes his combat, technology, and magic skills. But players were also given the option to turn Commander Shepard into "Fem-Shep." While the narrative that follows alters according to the customized character (in the first *Mass Effect*, players were unable to romance NPCs of the same gender), male Commander Shepard was the default choice with all of the advertising, promotional material, and references being focused upon him. All of this despite the character model initially being designed as female (Cooper).

For this project, I am concerned with the final type of avatar: the sole option,

where the player is given no choice in whom to pick as there is only one protagonist whose qualities (ex. gender) cannot be customized or altered. Examples of this include Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*, Link from *Legend of Zelda*, or Master Chief from *Halo*. There are no choices, one plays the single determined character the game provides as given.

Was it produced by a "AAA" studio?

In the video game industry, AAA is equivalent to a major film studio like Universal or book publisher such as Random House. Video game studios of this size include BioWare, EA, and international powerhouse Nintendo. Mainstream titles are usually regarded as being "at the cutting edge of game development… big budget productions where only the speediest and most visceral graphical experiences will do" (Dunning 93). I am restricting my search to AAA games as I contend that a female FPS published by an indie studio will either lack the cultural impact of mainstream games or not be creatively as hampered by the misogynist culture found in typical AAA studios.

To understand why the FPS genre has lagged behind in regard to gender equality, the problem needs to be placed within the genre's historical context. For the purpose of this dissertation, I have broken down the chronology of FPSs into four historical periods: the rise (1991-95), the dead zone (1996-2001), the peak (2002-09), and the collapse (2010-18).[5] This chronology outlines the ways in which FPS games were initially seen as

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[5] Much of the history of FPS has been pulled from Klevjer's "The Way of the Gun: The aesthetic of the single-player First Person Shooter" and Hitchen's "A Survey of First-person Shooters and their Avatars."

inclusive of both male and female players and subsequently shifted towards narrative and aesthetic choices that privileged a masculine experience in opposition to a genre designate for young female players.

The Rise (1991-95)

The FPS genre came about in the early 1990s thanks mainly to advancements in computer graphics. *Catacomb 3-D* was the first wide-released FPS in 1991, though stylistically more credit is given to *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) as the birth of the genre (de Meyer and Malliet).[6] During the rise of FPSs, the number of titles released rose exponentially each year, from just one in 1991 to thirty-five in 1995. This initial stage was conceived as inclusive of both male and female players. Other key titles released during this period include *System Shock* (1994) and *Star Wars: Dark Forces* (1995). It was also during this period where we can see a step away from "women games." As defined by Shira Chess in *Ready Player Two*, women games "are not games that women play, but rather games that in their design, marketing, or style appear to be intended for late teen or adult female audiences" (Chess 16). Chess points to the release of new consoles (Sega Genesis in 1989, Super Nintendo Entertainment System in 1991, and the PlayStation in 1995) as part of the turn from what was originally an inclusive market (Chess 9). More violent titles, such as the FPSs *Doom* and *Quake*, were produced and

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[6] Some have argued that 1973's Maze deserves the title of first first-person shooter, but the game was never commercially released, rather it was freeware available via the ARPANET. For more information refer to Richard Moss' "The First First-Person Shooter" from *Polygon*.

marketed specifically towards men (Kent 531). FPS games emerged in opposition to "women games" and were seen as relevant to a predominant masculine audience.

The Dead Zone (1996-2001)

This period of growth was followed by a quick drop in '96 where only twenty-two titles were released. This lull continued into the 21st century, with an average of twenty-two FPSs released a year. All of this decline was shaped despite and because of the prevalence of new home console systems, including the original Playstation released in 1995 and the Nintendo 64 in 1996. Known as the fifth-console, 32-bit, or 64-bit era, these systems had the capability to display FPSs, but could not compete with the quality of PCs with their graphics and processing speeds. However, the arcades that were the secondary market for these FPSs were in decline because of the 5th-generation consoles. It was a time of technological transition and the FPS genre got caught in the middle. Still, several classic games and franchises rose from that dead zone, including *Quake* (1996), *Dark Forces II* (1997), and *Unreal* (1998). It was also during this time that the gap between male and female games grew as "in the mid-to-late 1990s there began a slower emergency of video games specifically targeting young girls" (Chess 10). These games often featured pop culture figures, such as Barbie, and simplified, feminized gameplay involving the likes of dress-up or interior design. Despite this lull in both FPSs and action-based female games, 2000 saw the first two female-led FPSs released: *Perfect Dark* and *The Operative: No One Lives Forever*. This would become a trend for female FPSs, that when the market was in despair, developers took chances of female leads.

The Peak (2002-09)

Just as suddenly as the FPS genre lost popularity, it shot back up, raising from twenty-three titles in 2001 to thirty-eight in 2002. *Metroid Prime* was among the games released during this time period. The highpoint of this era was in 2005, when fifty-five FPSs were made available. In 2006, *Gamasutra* reported the first-person shooter as one of the biggest and fastest growing video game genres in terms of revenue for publishers (Cifaldi). Much of this increase was due to the arrival of the seventh-generation consoles such as the XBOX 360 in 2005 and the PlayStation 3 in 2006. There was a small dip or valley between ’06 to ’08, but the average number of titles released still averaged forty-three games a year. During this gully, the first *Portal* (2007) and *Mirror’s Edge* (2008) titles were released, just as we saw with *Perfect Dark* and *The Operative*.

The Collapse (2010-2018)

After a quick bump back up into the 50s in 2009, the FPS genre collapsed. From 2010 to 2018 the average number of FPSs released was eighteen titles, with a high of thirty-two in 2011 and a low of ten in 2018. The period included only a single female FPSs produced, *Alien Isolation*. However, if the trend established continues, this low period could signal the production of more female FPSs title in the near future. Female oriented FPS games tend to emerge in moments of crisis and decline of traditionally masculine-coded games within the genre.

This dissertation analyzes several FPS with female protagonists to explore how the games gender (or not) their female texts. It does so by considering the gendering of games as a phenomenon articulated within the ebbs and flows of the gaming industry

broadly defined. I have selected six games representative of three periods of development within the AAA cluster: *Perfect Dark and The Operative: No One Lives Forever* as representing *The Dead Zone Period; Metroid Prime, Portal, and Mirror's Edge* as exemplary of *The Peak, and Alien: Isolation* as prototypical of *The Collapse stage.*

Below are six games that fit my criteria and are thus analyzed in terms of their gendering in this dissertation:

Title	**(Initial) Year of Release***	**Developer**	**Historical State**
Perfect Dark	2000	Rare	Dead Zone
The Operative: No One Lives Forever	2000	Monolith Productions	Dead Zone
Metroid Prime	2002	Nintendo/Retro Games	Peak
Portal	2007	Valve Corporation	Peak
Mirror's Edge	2008	E.A./Dice	Peak
Alien: Isolation	2014	Creative Assembly/Sega	Collapse

All these texts, sans *Alien: Isolation,* have sequels or reboots, hence the use of "(initial) year of release." Unless there was a change in developer or massive change in the production team, I will be analyzing not just the original game but its follow-ups as well.

Literature Review

The conceptual approach of this *chapter* is how FPS establish gender through both gameplay and narrative. As such it is key to understand how feminist/gender and

visual studies are interpreted through video game studies. Concepts of particular interest are the bodies and genders of avatars, how the "camera" is controlled in FPSs, and what is seen through this "lens."

Female or Feminine?

One of Judith Butler's most famous maxims may be that "gender is in no way a stable identity… rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time" (Butler "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" 519). Butler is not avoiding defining gender, she is trying to turn away from the binary categories of man and woman and the ever-changing qualities associated with femininity and masculinity. Continuing this temporal explanation, Butler quotes de Beauvoir who "claims that woman is an 'historical situation,' she emphasizes that the body suffers a certain cultural construction" (Butler "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" 523). These claims stand in stark contrast to other feminist scholars like Susan Bordo and Moira Gatens. For them, the body is not an abstraction constantly undergoing the process of identity formation by means of various performances. The body is material (Thomas 58, 62). Both Bordo and Gatens rebel against the idea of how the body is "tabula rasa, awaiting inscription by culture" (Bordo 35). Gatens takes aim at how the gender feminism of de Beauvoir "took the female and the male body to be passive and inert, a blank sheet ready to be written on through the processes of socialization and in so doing, maintained the mind/body opposition which is the cornerstone of western thought" (Thomas 57). What these inscriptions miss is the processes of nature. Bordo brings in this factor to female

development, building upon rather than discarding Butler and other Foucauldian gender feminist, focusing on how the embodied experience is affected by culture, history, and biology (Bordo 34, 42). For Bordo, despite what qualities a body takes on or performs, one cannot escape their body and the biological facets that come with it. Don Ihde, in *Bodies in Technology*, finds a way to combine both Bordo and Butler's perspectives. He uses "body two" in his work to define the "culturally constructed body that echoes with a Foucauldian framework, the cultural body as experienced body" (Ihde 17). "Body one," on the other hand refers "to the bodily experience that Merleau-Ponty elicits… perspective as a form of phenomenological materialism insofar as his concept of the lived body is one that holds that the active, perceptual being of incarnate embodiment" (Ihde 16-17).[7] But what about virtual bodies, without any materiality to be had? Could these be a "body three?"

Cyborgs

As mentioned in the "Tutorial" section "an avatar [as] a graphical figure like a character in a video game," but also according to Janet Murray avatars are a "mask that creates the boundary of the immersive reality and signals that we are role-playing rather than acting as ourselves" (113). Returning to our previous discussion, Judith Butler argues that "gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which body gestures, movements, and enactments of

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[7] We will discuss embodiment in greater detail later in Level Three, particularly regarding the game *Portal.*

various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (Butler "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" 519). Avatars in video games are a kind of bodily enactment that can fulfill Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman," through the player's performance of the avatar's, rather than their own, identity. Donna Haraway echoes this language, referring to cyborgs as uncanny creatures that are not born, but constructed, entities epitomizing "transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities" (Haraway 154).

This aspect of being unborn is what differs females of the material world from their cyborg counterparts. The biological function of birthing is missing. In *Fallout 3* (2008) the game begins

> for the player who initially sees nothing but a black screen. Gradually, some bright light appears, we hear a heart monitor, and (what we assume is a doctor's face materializes out of the dark. It becomes apparent that the player is experiencing his/her own birth: the onscreen darkness represents the dark of the birth canal; the bright lights are those of the operating room; the first voice you hear is that of the doctor, who, it turns out, is your own father. Your father asks you to choose your gender, your name, and then he employs a "gene projector" to "see what you'll look like when you're all grown up." (Boulter 18-19)

Jonathan Boulter, author of *Parables of the Posthuman: Digital Realities, Gaming, and the Player Experience*, deems this sequence as "the birth of the player," not the avatar. The absence of the mother in this instance is not an anomaly, but a seedy trope within video games. From *BioShock* to *Dishonored*, *Far Cry 4* to *Mirror's Edge*, "the most

common state for a mother in games, is to be dead. Deaths often occur in childbirth or the early childhoods of protagonists (Campbell). Susan Bordo, in her analysis of reproductive rights and the politics of subject-ivity, asks are mothers (the epitome of female biology) persons (Bordo 71)? Apparently not in video games. This is just another example of how video games fail to recognize gender. For scholars like Haraway, cyborgs offer liberation, they are "a matter of fiction and lived experience and that changes what counts as women's experience" (Haraway 149). Cyborgs are "creatures of a 'post-gender world… a world without gender which is also a world without genesis" (Haraway 150). It is, however, without biological beginnings that video game avatars enter a world not where the male/female binary has been overcome but erased. Females have been made invisible.

Upon return to definitions of gendering as formed by Butler and de Beauvoir, then an avatar can become female. Scholars like Boulter focus on the relationship between players and their avatar's identity created by that player and their experiences. I, however, wish to focus on the formation of an avatar's identity prior to a player's ergodic actions. With the exception of *Fallout 3*, a majority of FPSs' stories start with avatars in media res, already experiencing the game's overall narrative. The avatar given to the player is one who has already been performing and thus undergoing the gender process. Future post-human scholars could add a fourth sub-question to the purpose of this ludonarrative synchronic analysis. Rather than just "does the narrative and gameplay reference the same gender," they could ask "does the game start (with the pre-defined narrative) and end (through the player's intrigue-oriented ergodic log") with the same gender?

Plurality of Identities

Bear in mind that not all females, material or otherwise, are alike. This is one the core tenet of intersectionalism. For this dissertation, I am deploying Patricia Collins and Sirma Bilge's definition of intersectionality.

> Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways… Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (Collins and Bilge 2)

Collins and Bilge's interpretation of intersectionalism is heavily influenced by Kimberle Crenshaw's work, particularly "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." In this piece, Crenshaw considers

> intersectionality a provisional concept linking contemporary politics with postmodern theory. In mapping the intersections of race and gender, the concept does engage dominant assumptions that race and gender are essentially separate categories. By tracing the categories to their intersections, I hope to suggest a methodology that will ultimately disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable (1244)

As for the many factors alluded to by Collins and Bilge, Crenshaw writes that "the concept [intersectionalism] can and should be expanded by factoring in issues such as class, sexual orientation, age and color" (1245).

Since the mid-to-late 90s game studies, particularly feminist game studies, have used "intersectional approaches to consider larger issues of diversity such as sexuality, ethnicity, social class, and other factors [that] play into and exacerbate problems that have already been documented in terms of gender within video games" and the industry (Chess 16,19). In *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Bonnie Ruberg pushes for other forms of intersectional engagement including disability, neurodiversity, religion, and nationality; several of which are touched upon in this dissertation (13).

Straight to Video (Games)

> Books about new media often make a point of emphasizing how video games represent a radical break from older forms of art… the purpose behind putting forth this idea of a radical breaks seems to be two-fold: to carve out a unique critical space for discussing games that frees the discourse from the constraints of pre-existing critical methodologies and to establish video games as being on the vanguard of some sort of postmodern cultural revolution. I disagree with his approach (Upton 5).

While it is important to recognize the medium specifics of video games, it is just as imperative to recognize the landscape set by previous art forms and their engagement with one another. Numerous game studies scholars have backgrounds in film studies such as Bernard Perron and Mark J.P. Wolf, as well as multiple creatives who work in both genres like Ken Levine (*BioShock*) and Rhianna Pratchett (*Mirror's Edge*, *Tomb Raider*). Beyond personnel, there are a myriad of overlaps between the two entertainment formats. To grab as large of a market share as possible, as early as "the 1980s video games such as

E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial (Atari, 1982), capitalised on the fame of their cinematic counterparts to attract new audiences" (Fassone, Giordano and Girina). This trend continues today with the release of film-based games such as *Days of Thunder* (2011) and *Mad Max* (2015), but also vice-versa, with Hollywood producing films-based-on-games, like *Pokémon: Detective Pikachu* (2019) and *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020). Video game series such as *Kingdom Hearts*, which brings together characters from the *Final Fantasy* video game franchise with the Wonderful World of Disney, exemplify the boundless nature found in modern trans-media cooperation. "The relationship and reciprocal influence between cinema and video games goes well beyond storylines and characters" to technical techniques as well (Fassone, Giordano and Girina). Our focal point here is the use of the camera and the difference between what is seen by its lens in film versus video games.

Gamer's Gaze

> The spectator identifies with himself, with himself as a pure act of perception (as wakefulness, alertness): as the condition of possibility of the perceived and hence as a kind of transcendental subject, which comes before every *there is*… and it is true that as he identifies with himself as look, the spectator can do no other than identify with the camera, too" (Metz 25)

A viewer can relate to the cinematic camera, and often the subjects on screen, but they do not control this camera. What makes the camera's viewpoint in video games different than those used in film is that the gamer can control the field of view to a greater extent. While developers can control and place restrictions on just how far the gamer can turn the

camera, usually keeping it anchored as so the gamer never loses sight of their avatar, the gamer still has choices that are missing from the film viewer's experience. The gamer's gaze isn't fixed. Film controls the dimension of time and space and such coding allows the camera and filmmakers to create the gaze. Therefore, in comparison to moviegoers, gamers' have greater freedom to create their own spectacle through their experience with their avatar.

Point of View

There are two camera views that are most often used in video games to display the world inhabited by the avatar: third-person and first-person. Video games presented in the third-person lack the camera placement and freedom of movement like its omniscient cinematic brethren. In films, the camera's location is often only restricted by the 180-degree rule. Outside of this, it can focus on any key subject it wishes from a manner of perspectives. The third-person camera in a video game is almost always locked on to the avatar, restricted to following the player's character.

Back to the debate surrounding Alexander Galloway's definition of POVs shot as a form of generalized approximation (41) while "subjective shots [are] more extreme in their physiological mimicking of actual vision, for, as stated, they pretend to peer outward from the eyes of an actual character rather than simply to approximate a similar line of sight" (43). Which raises the question, do modern-day FPS feature subjective or POV shots? I emphasize modern-day as the graphic capabilities of early FPS such as *Doom* and *Wolfenstein* wouldn't allow for loose, natural camera movements. Nowadays, with better technology, some FPS can mimic the physiological state of a character, such

as blurring one's vision after being injured or near death. Nicholas Mirzoeff tells us of soldiers describing their actions "as being like a videogame" are not speaking in the metaphorical sense" (297). This, however, is not the case in all FPS and will be a point of contention discussed in relation to each game.

The female point of view is nigh absent in video games. Approximately only 25% of all genres of video games have a playable female leads. Amongst this sample, a majority of these games use the third-person, rather than the first-person, camera view (Hitchens). This includes iconic female characters such as Lara Croft, Bayonetta, and Ellie from The *Last of Us* series. However, the inclusion of female characters does not inherently create the female point of view.

The power of Classical Hollywood cinema regarding how it portrays women, is in how it "builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself" (Mulvey 716). This is achieved by

> forming a scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object), and, in contradistinction, ego libido (forming identification processes) act as formations mechanics [so that] the image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man adds a further layer demanded by the ideologically of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form—illusionistic narrative film (Mulvey 724).

Including a female avatar as playable, and thus active, adds a layer of complication to this argument. However, by relying on classic Hollywood cinematic techniques, video games risk the inherent heteronormativity of the woman as image and man as bearer of the look (Mulvey 719). Thus, to avoid the failings of Western filmmaking, video games can turn

to avante-garde cinematography Mulvey recommended and practiced herself. Examples of such include *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), which begins with Mulvey directly addressing the camera/viewer. While breaking the fourth wall in cinema is often used "destroy the satisfaction, pleasure and privilege of the "invisible guest" or camera, it is only natural for NPCs to address the camera/viewer in first-person shooters (Mulvey 725-26).

Chapter Preview

One way to think about the organization of this dissertation is chronologically as with the exception of *Alien: Isolation*, the case studies are presented in chronological order, based on their release dates. This allows us to explore how female FPSs have evolved alongside the video game genre itself and view the titles in context with other FPSs of each period. Another way to consider the layout of this project is thematically, since it follows not only the evolution of the female FPS, but each text is paired with other titles that feature similar issues of gendering games, from gameplay that deprives females from specific actions all the way to narratives that confront feminists issues head on.

Level One: Svelte Spies

Perfect Dark and *The Operative: No One Lives Forever* were the first two games released with a solely playable female avatar in the FPS genre. Not only were the games released the same year, but they feature similar leads (international spy) and influences (James Bond). Their comparison highlights the objectification and consumerism of the

female body, set forth by scholars such as Baudrillard and Bordo. The aesthetics of the protagonists have obvious narrative implications, but it is how the games integrate their clothed bodies into the gameplay that emphasizes the gendering of the texts.

Level Two: Alien Queen(s)

Space-based FPSs have explored infinity and beyond since the original *Doom* sent Doomguy to the moons of Mars to fight demons and the undead. It is this focus on exploration that separates our two space sirens, Samus from *Metroid Prime* and Amanda Ripley of *Alien: Isolation* from other inter-galactic titles based purely on combat. While both games feature numerous battles, the games emphasize exploration and discovery as a way to improve one's chances when fighting carnivorous creatures. Could it be that the gameplay emphasizes a brain over brawn dynamic based on female stereotypes surrounding physicality and mental capacity Stereotypes are just one form of predetermined expectations that affect Samus and Amanda. Unlike the other games in this study, *Metroid Prime* and *Alien: Isolation's* protagonist are not original characters. Both characters are part of popular multimedia franchises and players press start with numerous presumptions already in place. Due to their *in-media res* nature, the gendering of these games appears locked in from the start, but is the choice to have female fighters as necessary as it first appears?

Level Three: Bullet (Free)-Time

Portal and *Mirror's Edge* complicate the FPS genre by introducing two additional intersectional elements to the gendering of games, namely race and pacifism. Chell and

Faith of *Portal* and *Mirror's Edge* respectively allow for an intersectional study of female FPSs as neither are the default white, male nor fit the mold of previous female leads. These titles also present an alternative, less-violent approach to shooters. This raises the question of whether *Portal* or *Mirror's Edge* feature divergent gameplay because of their unconventional protagonists or does their hero's gender play little to no role in their title's more pacified play-style?

Boss Battle

Represented violence can take many forms. Where Judith Halberstm[8] uses literary and cinematic examples to explore imagined/queer violence, I use video games. Like Judith Halberstram's seminal piece, "Imagined Violence/Queer Violence," I'm implementing fictional examples of imagined violence and articulated rage via video games "to elaborate a theory of the production of counter realities as a powerful strategy of revolt emanating from an increasingly queer postmodern political culture" (Halberstram 190). This chapter features the culmination of trends found through my six case studies, particularly how females enact violence. I discuss what females shoot with, who they shoot, and how often they actually don't use weapons. Finally, a delve into the current landscape looks like and what the future of female FPSs could be.

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[8] I've chosen to refer to Halberstram as Judith when discussing pieces they initially published under that name and Jack when discussing their current work.

Level One: Spy vs. Spy

It wasn't until the year 2000 for a mainstream first-person shooter to come out featuring a female, and only a female lead. *Perfect Dark*'s Joanna Drake and *The Operative*'s Cate Archer. Rare's *Perfect Dark* and Monolith Productions *The Operative: No One Lives Forever* were released within six months of each other, on separate consoles (*Perfect Dark* on the N64, *The Operative* for PS2). Unlike their male counterparts of the time, such as *Deus Ex*'s JC Denton or the nameless soldiers in *Counter Strike*, Drake and Archer had personality and a flair for fashion. Comparing *Perfect Dark* and *The Operative: No One Lives Forever* highlights the objectification and consumerism of the female body, as set forth by scholars such as Baudrillard and Bordo. The physical aesthetics of the protagonists have obvious narrative implications, but it is how the games integrate their clothed bodies into the gameplay that emphasizes the gendering of the texts.

Not only were the two games female first-person shooters, but they featured similar spy tropes in response to one of Nintendo 64's most popular FPS: *Goldeneye 007* (1997). While *Perfect Dark* was Rare's attempt to distance themselves from *Goldeneye 007* with a futuristic intergalactic take on espionage, *The Operative: No One Lives Forever* was a parody of James Bond and his ilk.

Svelte Spies

In both games, the avatars of the super-spies express their femininity through body shape, an affinity for fashion, and accessories. While these forms of expression are

not exclusive to the female realm, it wasn't until the early 1990s that the "diet industries, the cosmetics manufacturers, and the plastic surgeons 'discovered' the male body" and how to manipulate it (Bordo xxiii). The female body is "a high maintenance proposition," with exercise, eating (or not), clothes, and cosmetics used as tools for upkeep (Thomas 53). In modern Western culture, the desired female body image is one of slenderness, often "equated with competence, self-control, intelligence, and feminine curvaceousness (in particular, large breasts) (Thomas 55). The games thus mirrored cultural practices that associated feminity with slenderness and a sense of fashion. In other words, the import of these cultural constructs of femininity into the gameplay contributes to their gendering.

The idealized female body is a consistent trope not only in these two games but in modern video game culture more broadly. *Feminist Frequency* founder Anita Sarkeesian has tackled this topic multiple times. At a gaming lecture held at NYU, Sarkeesian said that It's as if male characters are free to embody whichever physique best communicates their personality or abilities, but when it comes to the design of female characters, that kind of imagination or creativity doesn't seem to exist" (Totilo "How Anita Sarkeesian Wants Video Games to Change"). Male heroes can be bulky mountains such as Kratos from the *God of War* series or lanky and effeminate like Cloud from *Final Fantasy 7*. Females, on the other hand, are usually thin, young, and attractive, a concept further explored by Anita Sarkeesian in her *Women vs. Tropes* video, "All the Slender Ladies." This body type is extenuated by form-fitting and/or revealing clothing that serves little practicality or function for the female's line of work. For instance, Lara Croft is an archaeologist who spends most of her days exploring treacherous jungles and caves. Yet she wears mid-thigh shorts and cropped tops that reveal her mid-riff to the dangers of her

surrounding terrain. Her outfit is not meant to function as work gear, but rather to serve the male gaze as set forth by Mulvey. The visual pleasure here is derived from the voyeuristic ability to look at the objectified female body. The avatar is not only gendered but also sexualized: literally underdressed and undressed.

While voyeuristic gaze has traditionally been theorized in the context of cinema, a growing body of scholarship has addressed the ways in which this concept is useful for understanding games and gaming culture as well. While not all video game scholars would reduce video games to being "interactive movies," Mike Ward uses this grounding to explain how Lara Croft is

> grounded in an ever more refined combination of oppositions that, tied to a fetish, integrate the player into a closed cycle of narcissism and voyeurism. The interactive movie format potentiates the bind between the one who is looking at/playing with the seen object to the point where the difference between the two objects collapses. One sees and is seen; one sees himself or herself in the object. Moreover, one sees in the object his or her actual or better or true self. Voyeurism and exhibitionism coincide; one is at once man and woman. The individual satisfies his or herself (Deuber-Mankowsky 43).

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which *Perfect Dark and The Operative* justify the physicality of their female leads by way of their narrative and/or gameplay or as whether their design is purely to satisfy the male gaze and cultural expectations. Video games appear to be responding to two different trajectories: first, the broader cultural climate of feminine beauty in which associated with slimness and youth; and second, the visual

cinematic tradition in which the female body is set as an object of visual pleasure for a voyeuristic male spectator.

Jane Bond

In order to understand how *Perfect Dark* and *The Operative* stand in stark difference to their male counterparts or a stereotypical Bond girl, one must understand the perceived misogyny in the super-spy stories of the 1960s. I use the term "perceived" as the sexism and subordination of women in these stories has been considered by some critics less a comment on the weakness of the fairer sex, but a satire of over-compensating masculinity (Holland). According to Umberto Eco, Bond women share five characteristics:

> Dominated by the Villain, […] Fleming's woman has already been previously conditioned to domination, life for her having assumed the role of the villain. The general scheme is (1) the girl is beautiful and good; (2) has been made frigid and unhappy by severe trials suffered in adolescence; (3) this has conditioned her to the service of the Villain; (4) through meeting Bond she appreciates human nature in all its richness; (5) Bond possesses her but in the end loses her (45)

On the other side of the spectrum, other scholars have described a Bond woman as "naturally enough, beautiful. More importantly, she is independent, defiant, and probably dangerous. She [… is] one of the lasting icons of feminine strength, beauty and resilience of the past half-century […] And, despite the popular conception, [she is] anything but subservient to 007" (d'Abo and Cork 113). Both sides agree that the body of a Bond woman is integral to defining her, a trend seen in both *Perfect Dark* and *The Operative*.

What *GoldenEye 007*, and other video game entries set in the James Bond universe, lack is his infamous sexual exploits. Rare's *Goldeneye 007* is based on the film *Goldeneye* released in 1995 and sticks fairly close to the movie's plot. *Goldeneye*, both the film and game, featured the first female M, played by Judi Dench, along with two other core female characters: the damsel-in-distress Natayla Simonova and the sadist Xenia Onatopp, who has a penchant for crushing her enemies between her thighs.

While Bond doesn't sleep with Simonova in the game (and it is only implied in the film that he does), he can still penetrate her: with a bullet to the head. The player will fail the escort missions if he does so, but the options are endless as to how a player can murder her, including shooting her in the face, setting off a remote explosive near her, or even some glitches in the game that will result in her death if the player shoots too close. YouTuber Anto RetroGamer uploaded a video entitled 'Natalya Abuse': Funny Ways to Die-GoldenEye 007" which features a compilation of her deaths. Anto RetroGamer clarifies that he does not hate Natayla "or any other female protagonist in any other videogame. It's more like a grudge towards her. Anyone who has played GoldenEye 007 on 00 Agent in the levels where you have to protect Natalya, will know what I mean." Natayla Simonova has found herself high on lists such as *What Culture*'s "15 Most Offensive Gaming Characters Ever" where she was described as "another infuriatingly inept escort character whose lack of regard for her own well-being almost borders on suicidal. She's the worst type of escort character: dumb, useless and actively working against the player". Protecting Simonova from enemies, herself, and your stray bullets is the bane of numerous escort missions featured in the game. The tables are turned,

particularly in *The Operative*, where the female agents have to protect men who are often unwilling to be saved by a woman.

Despite Natalya's best (or lack thereof) efforts, upon its release *GoldenEye 007* became an instant classic. It was the third best-selling video game on the Nintendo 64 console, falling behind two titles featuring the Italian plumber, Mario. Reviewers praised the title for its multiplayer, gameplay, and realism. According to one of the UK's longest-running video game magazines, *Edge*:

> what stands out most about *GoldenEye* is the depth of its atmosphere. The realistic setting, remarkably well-animated characters and interactive backgrounds combine to create a genuine sense of 'being there' which is rarely experienced in a videogame. Bullet holes pepper walls after frantic battle scenes, lights can be shot out, shrapnel breaks nearby windows, smoke lingers momentarily after explosions, hats can be shot off enemies' heads, and characters react differently depending on where they're hit – shoot them in the head, for example, and they go down immediately, but more sadistic players can inflict harm on limbs several times before the injuries prove fatal ("Goldeneye" 77).

For three years after *GoldenEye 007*'s financial and critical success, Rare Studios tried to catch lightning in a bottle again, developing a spiritual successor to *GoldenEye 007*. However, it was the game's prominence that led Rare down a different path. Initially, the plan was to adapt the next Pierce Brosnan Bond flick, *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997), but "the success of *GoldenEye* [had] reinvigorated the James Bond property as a subject for video game production (much in the same way as the parent film re-established the cinematic franchise)" and Rare lost the rights to develop the game in a bidding war with

Black Ops Entertainment (_Ltd.). This opportunity lost gave rise for the chance for the Rare creative team to develop a title of their own IP (intellectual property). According to design support Ken Lobb, the developers set forth three features they wished to include in their next FPS title: secondary functions for all of the weapons, a female-lead, and aliens (_Ltd.). Eventually this evolved into *Perfect Dark.*

Perfect Dark

Perfect Dark is set in the (now) near-future of 2023, where humankind is caught in the middle of a war between two alien species: the Maians (stereotypical grey and lanky extraterrestrials) and the reptilian Skedars, who have the technology to disguise themselves as Scandinavian humans. Along with the intergalactic conflict, two rival factions are competing to become the dominant corporation on the planet: Carrington Institute & dataDyne. The former is supposedly an R&D center, but is actually an espionage organization with the Maians, while the latter is a defense contractor secretly teamed up with the Skedars. The player emerges as Joanna Drake, a newly appointed agent of the Carrington Institute, as she sets off on her first mission. Over the course of her subterfuge, Joanna later teams up with an Maian named Elvis to save Earth from both aliens and corrupt humans.

Joan of Dark

Producer David Doake said that after the success of *GoldenEye 007,* he wanted to develop a game starring a woman, but never gave any reason besides “it would be different” (_Ltd.). The developers named Joanna Drake after Jeanne d’Arc, the French

name for Joan of Arc. Poet Christine de Pizan wrote of Joan as an “outstanding, representative member of the female sex. Such extraordinary prowess, she claims, has clearly brought honour and glory to all womankind ” (15). The warrior woman of the Hundred Years War, Joan helped the French hold the British at bay before she was betrayed by her countrymen, accused of heresy and burned at the stake. Joanna Drake is also placed at the forefront of a great war between two alien superpowers. Not only did the developers base Drake on a famous female fighter and her military prowess, but also borrowed Joan’s look. Drake’s short, cropped, black hair (though promotional images have it as red) (FIGURE 4) resembles numerous depictions of d’Arc, particularly Albert Lynch’s Jeanne d’Arc 103 engraving. (FIGURE 3).

Figure #3: Albert Lynch’s Jeanne d’Arc 103 engraving

Figure #4: Joanna Drake

The short hair provides Joanna with a slightly androgynous look, masculine in her hairstyle, but feminine in her slender frame and facial features. According to psychologist Sandra Bem, androgyny is "seen as a gender identity consisting of a balance between positive feminine and positive masculine traits, which leads to distinct advantages for individuals (Bem and Lewis 634). If this definition would be followed further then "an androgynous person is more competent on a wider variety of tasks independent of what sex the task may usually be associated with (Woodhill and Samuels 17). Thus, the androgynous female warrior, can outshine her masculine male counterparts. The same goes for secret service agents. John le Carre, famous author and super-spy himself, believed that "men [were] mostly to blame for rash actions taken by British espionage regarding the Iraq war. It his experienced belief that "if there were any wise women present when the notorious and acutely embarrassing Iraq Dossier, justifying Britain's involvement in the war… were in the room, they were outgunned by the men of madness" (Le Carre).[9]

The Clothes Make the Woman

While Drake's facial features defy conventional female expectations, her choice of stereotypical feminine clothing (tight-fitting, revealing) should not be misconstrued as an adherence to society's wants and desires. There was a time when Joan of Arc was depicted "with long flowing hair, while her armour was moulded to a womanly body and was often worn over skirts" (Warner xx), but this was meant to reflect the historical

[9] As a side note, while Joanna Drake's place of birth is never revealed in game, she was voiced by British voice actress, Eveline Fischer.

context under which such paintings occurred. Cross-dressing was a transgression of the highest order. In the Sixties, Joan of Arc imagery returned to "a new boyishness," that was both acceptable and desirable (Ibid.). Joanna Drake's attire, a modern/future woman, reflects a "certain degree of emancipation achieved with some freedoms for women. There's no need any longer to dress as a boy when hampering petticoats, tight-lacing, keeping your knees together, and mincing belong to the past, or when you can win Olympic gold in Taekwondo or join the army if wish" (Warner xxi).

According to artist B. Jones, the team at Rare wanted Joanna to be a fashionable character, with different outfits for different levels (_Ltd.). Why would Joanna's fashion sense be relevant to her job as a spy? Bond retains the same outfit through nearly the entirety of *GoldenEye 007*. Secret agents and spies do don different clothes and styles, but this is often used as a form of light disguise in order to blend in, not stand out (Mendez). Drake's varied fashion does not lend itself to identity concealment, as her facial features are never hidden or altered. For instance, in the level G5 Building: Reconnaissance, Joanna is wearing a vest, just a vest, with no undershirt on (Figure 5). Combine this barely buttoned top with her low-rise leather pants and Drake is revealing just about as much skin as she has covered. The outfit is even less functional when Drake escapes outside the building, into the pouring rain. functional when Drake escapes outside the building, into the pouring rain. At least Joanna's ability to perform athletic feats, such as running and climbing in this get-up, in this get-up is feasible compared to her party frock. The dress features a thigh high slit, accentuated by black sandal pumps

(Figure 6). Yet, somehow, Drake is able to dash about the Carrington Institute, gunning down aliens without so much as a stumble.

Figure #5 & 6: G5 Building: Reconnaissance & Carrington Institute

While beauty aesthetics in relation to the body are concerns for both men and women, according to Jean Baudrillard, "for women, beauty has become an absolute, religious imperative" (278). Susan Bordo, in "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity" echoes this sentiment, saying that "in our own era, it is difficult to avoid the recognition that the contemporary preoccupation with appearance… still affects women far more powerfully than men" (166). According to *Perfect Dark*, this is a trend that continues into the year 2023.

The danger in playing dress-up is that it can misconstrue "putting on makeup, styling hair to be conceived only as free play, fun, a matter of creative expression" (Bordo 253). But these choices are rarely only fashion, rather "they are also experienced by many women as necessary before they will even show themselves to the world" (Ibid.). The plurality of outfits Archer dons is part of a vicious cycle to maintain the "interest and allure-the 'sexiness' of change and difference itself… she is sexy because of

the piquancy, the novelty, the erotics of putting on a different self. Any different self would do" (Ibid.).

The Operative: No One Lives Forever

During the Second Great Console War, while millions were playing *Perfect Dark* on the N64, Playstation 2 loyalists were treated to *The Operative: No One Lives Forever*. Whereas *Perfect Dark* was *GoldenEye 007* set in the future, *The Operative* takes place in a universe similar in style to the Sean Connery Bond films. According to the game's official website:

> Players assume the role of Agent Cate Archer, a beautiful but deadly operative working for UNITY-a super secret international organization dedicated to protecting humanity from megalomaniacs bent upon world domination. As matters of such delicacy aren't the sort of thing UNITY usually entrusts to a woman, Archer has thus far been relegated to menial busywork out of harm's way. Ironically, Archer's lucky break comes as a devastating blow to UNITY, when an assassin identified as the notorious Dmitrij Volkov liquidates over half of UNITY's active undercover operatives around the globe in the space of a week. Can Archer thwart this plot before it's too late? Is there a traitor in UNITY's ranks? It is up to Agent Archer to unravel these mysteries and thwart a conspiracy that threatens the entire free world. From tense subterfuge to in-your-face combat, No One Lives Forever™ ups the ante for plot-driven, 1960's-influenced spy action with killer weapons, vivid international locales and deadly arch villains.

Sexy Sixty's Spies

While the misogyny of the Sean Connery Bond era films was not parody, *No One Lives Forever* is self-aware of such irreverent, misogynistic behavior and is brimming with "wry humor". Cate Archer is not passive but will actively call out even her superiors for their gross improprieties towards her and other women. Cate admonishes Bruno, her mentor, for not remembering the name of a woman he recently slept with. When reluctantly offered a mission of dire importance, the director assures Cate that they are without choice and that "matters of such… delicacy aren't really the sort of thing one would usually entrust to a woman. Emotional inconstancy and assassination do not make especially good bedfellows. The player is given the chance to reply with either: "Implicitly. But you shouldn't be ashamed. Administration is a perfectly noble career" OR "I'll try to surpass your expectations." Even when Archer is saving helpless men, they feel the need to criticize their savior. While rescuing Dr. Schenker, he exclaims "They sent a woman to liberate me? Mein Gott in Himmel! This was not part of the arrangement" Archer informs him that he "can lodge a formal complaint the minute we set foot on Western soil. In the meantime, can we go?" before easily dispatching four guards with relative ease. She tries to hurry up the Doctor to vacate the premises, which he does so begrudgingly quipping that "it seems I have no choice." No choice but to follow the woman who just saved his life.

In truth, Cate shares much more in common with another British super-spy than Ian Fleming's creation: Emma Peel of television's *The Avengers*. Described as "the beautiful, clever female equivalent of the impossibly cool James Bond," Emma Peel presented audiences with "a violent woman as a new mock-heroic, ironic comedienne…

and whose dialogue was the smart repartee of an ironic survivor on the war *against* evil". For Archer, she is more a survivor of a culture war against women, than the literal combative war she is trying to prevent. While discussing the appeal of Emma Peel, Hendin states that "popular culture has forged ironic, witty statements of women who can subordinate times, places, and environments to their own will" (285). Archer does so by standing her ground against the prideful patriarchy, whether it be found in friend or foe.

While Peel's male counterpart, John Steed, was "a non-sexual, gentleman," one of Archer's partners is masculine bravado personified. When Cate first meets Tom Goodman, one of U.N.I.T.Y.'s American operatives, he is distracted by her womanhood. Moments after being introduced, Goodman's ego is already castrated by the unexpected gender of his new partner. He orders an "Old Grand Dad. Bring the bottle, a tumbler, and a bowl of ice." Cate asks if he is celebrating to which Goodman, goofy smile and all says "Compensating, actually." His hyper-masculinity, as compared to Steed's eunuch nature, only serves to justify Cate's need to be "as deadly with a pistol as [she is] with [her] tongue." Otherwise, she would choke on the misogyny constantly surrounding her.

Dressed to Kill

Despite Archer's progressive nature, her apparel is both anachronistic and a parodic, Americanized vision of 1960s British fashion. According to UK's *InStyle* magazine, the 1960s fashion was "veering away from the nipped in waist and fitted bodice that defined the fashion of the decades before it". Archer wears tight, leather jumpsuits that cling to her form and are zipped down to reveal an obscene amount of cleavage. Though she wears the space-age inspired leather ankle boots designed by André Courrèges, the

developers added heels to the traditionally flat boots, which isn't ideal when being chased by Russian and German spies ("An introduction to 1960s fashion"). Emma Peel was also a fan of Courrèges "geometric tailoring… and Mary Quant's A-line chic," but her outfits included practical pants and were zipped up properly (Hendin 286).

While the outfits are not functional for her line of work, they do serve another function. Jean Baudrillard in "The finest consumer object: the body" compares the ethics of fashion to those of beauty by using the example of Bridgette Bardot, a fashion icon for the 1960s British clothing scene: "BB feeling 'at ease in her body' or 'precisely fill[ing] up her dress' is part of this pattern of the 'harmonious marriage of function and form'" that abstracts the body into little more than a function as sign-value" (280). The sexual awakening of the 1960s, which Cate Archer lives in, led to "the representation of the body as capital and as fetish (or consumer object)" (Baudrillard 277). Even if Archer's choice of clothes is one of resistance, proving to her superiors that her femininity is not a weakness, "orchestrated as a mystique of liberation and accomplishment," it is also a "labour of investment (solicitude, obsession)" that is less about exploitation of the body, but "more profoundly alienation" (279).

Scent of a Woman

Even Archer's gadgetry is beauty-based. At Santa's toy shop (*The Operative's* equivalent to Bond's Q) Cate is given access to various gizmos such as a barrette that doubles as a lock pick and a weapon that "when you slash an adversary, the pressure on the blade releases a small amount of toxin into [the enemy's] bloodstream. Quite deadly." Cate is also provided a lipstick explosive in an array of three colors, each with their own

unique property. The same goes for her perfume bottle, with “scents” such as acid, sleeping, and stun. In the second *No One Lives Forever* title there is a fourth scent, body remover, which also appears in the first game but as a powder. Cate uses this powder/scent to hide her tracks, not leaving any bodies behind to attract attention to her deadly activities.

Figure #7: Lipstick Grenade

The leftover remains of henchmen and how to dispose of them has been a key dynamic source in numerous stealth-based video games, such as the *Metal Gear Solid* and *Hitman* franchise. Sometimes, however, the gameplay forces this dynamic in at the risk of weakening the narrative. Per our example earlier with Conan O’Brien playing *Hitman: Absolution* (2012) for one of his “Clueless Gamer” segments, the “incredible amount of storage everywhere” for the disposal of murdered henchman is an allowance for the gameplay but places a constraint on the narrative. Why would there be corpse receptacles around every corner of a mad man’s mansion? In *The Operative*, the designers justify

changing this classic dynamic, with the use of the body removal powder/scent. The techs at Santa's Workshop inform Cate that

> a judicious agent doesn't leave corpses lying about, as they tend to arouse suspicion. Judging by your slight frame, you won't have much luck hauling bodies away, so we've come up with this special body removal powder just for you. Sprinkle a bit of it on dead tissue and voila! The cadaver will vaporize almost instantly.

Even if the reasoning is sexist, by the techs not the developers, the alteration in gameplay dynamic is tied into the narrative and Cate's gender seamlessly.

Femme Fatales

Joanna Drake and Cate Archer were the first sole females to star in their own FPSs. After Microsoft acquired the rights to the *Perfect Dark* IP, a sequel was released, *Perfect Dark Zero*, in 2005. In 2010, a remastered version of the original title was released, and Joanna Drake has appeared in trans-media properties, such as Perfect Dark novels and comics. *The Operative: No One Lives Forever*, sadly, lacked similar success. A sequel, *A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way* was released in 2002, as well as a spin-off, *Contract J.A.C.K.* in 2003. The latter, however, featured a male protagonist. Due to copyright and ownership issues, The Operative franchise has been stalled for over fifteen years.

Which is a shame as the key difference between *Perfect Dark* and *The Operative* when it comes to their gendering is the games' recognition of gender at all. As I illustrated, Drake's gender choice was less a choice and more a whim by the Rare developers. When reviewing the narratological elements, such as the plot, there is little

gendering to be found. Her mission to save the planet is one that could be completed by any super-agent, male or female. Drake is never put in any position where her gender is advantage, such as use her womanly wiles to distract or persuade nor sneak in or to covertly traverse a level as woman may be perceived as less of a threat. Joanna Drake is more often referred to as Agent or Perfect Dark rather than Joanna. Even when she is in danger, when her ship crashes on an alien planet and transmission jammed, her handler cries out in concern "Agent Dark, are you there? Perfect Dark, please reply!" There are instances in which her handler does refer to Drake by her first name, most often when chastising her. "Don't joke. You have to be careful, Joanna" as she is admonished for her callous dismal of enemies lives. In this moment, she is as Julia Kristeva would say "a female who can wreck the infinite." By this I refer to her unbridled nature, eager for power over her enemies, her raw violence that extends to murder or the desire of (Kristeva 167). Drake is only seen as female when she tests her superior's patience, when she poses a threat, not when her life is in danger.

That being said, Drake's ability to perform is never questioned by her superiors, unlike Archer whose credentials are constantly questioned due to her gender.

Goodman: We'll I'm sorry, but I didn't realize I was gonna have to babysit on this assignment.

Archer: I may be a woman, but that doesn't mean I can't take care of myself.

Goodman: Oh, I get it, you're one of those women's libbers. Dress up in men's clothing, ride motorcycles, smoke cigars, that kind of thing?

Archer: Just because I can take care of myself doesn't mean I'm not a woman. They're not mutually exclusive, you know.

Goodman: But isn't the point of women's liberation to allow young ladies--like yourself--to become men?

Archer: The point is to allow young ladies to become whatever they please.

In his retrospective of the game, gaming-website *Kotaku'*s leader editor Kirk Hamilton writes that this:

> exchange perfectly encapsulates No One Lives Forever's particular brand of confident, low-key feminism. It's not about women being men, it's about women being whatever the hell they want to be. It's noteworthy that Archer herself explicitly lays it out, particularly since she's not living in some abstract video-game fantasy world; she's a 1960s woman living in the era the women's liberation movement actually got underway… the only people making a big deal out of Archer's gender are men; she's perfectly content to just go about doing an awesome job and saving the world (Hamilton).

I disagree with the latter argument, that the only people making a big deal out of Archer's gender are men. Archer does indeed make a big deal out of her gender. She is not silent on the issue. If men are condescending or patronizing, she will call them out, as seen above. Where *Perfect Dark* is subtle in its gender dynamics, *The Operative* revels in this conflict.

Perfect Dark and *The Operative* reflect the complex ways in which female characters were introduced into the predominantly masculine FPS genre during what I have termed the Dead Zone of game development. The gendering of *Perfect Dark* was not motivated by the narrative and still relied on the male gaze for Joanna Dark's design as an objectified marker. *The Operative* attempted to balance its gendering as parody,

with over-the-top misogyny, but also fell prey to male voyeurism. The ludological consequences for each game's gendering remain unclear, until we look at the state of female FPSs twenty years on. From what weapons are provided to their interaction with enemies, *Perfect Dark* and *The Operative* established tropes that two decades later are ingrained within the sub-genre, for better or for worse.

Level Two: Alien Queen(s)

With perhaps the exception of the films *Decoys* (2004) and *Species* (1995), extraterrestrials are equal-opportunity devourers. Predator aliens could care less if their prey is male or female. The xenomorphs from the *Aliens* series will attack whatever unlucky human crosses their paths. It seems only logical that in space, heroes are found in all shapes, sizes, and genders. Space-based FPSs have explored infinity and beyond since the original *Doom* (1993) sent Doomguy to the moons of Mars to fight demons and the undead. It is this focus on exploration that separates our two space sirens, Samus from *Metroid Prime* (2002) and Amanda Ripley of *Alien: Isolation* (2014) from other inter-galactic titles based purely on combat. While both games feature numerous battles, the games emphasize exploration and discovery as a way to improve one's chances when fighting carnivorous creatures. Could it be that the gameplay emphasizes a brain over brawn dynamic based on female stereotypes surrounding physicality and mental capacity. Also, unlike the other games in this study, *Metroid Prime* and *Alien: Isolation*'s protagonist are not original characters. Due to their *in medias res* nature, the gendering of these games appears locked in from the start, but the choice to have female fighters is not as necessary as it first appears. This chapter explores the role of genre and franchise in establishing gender conventions and expectations in FPS games.

Brains over Brawns

Thus far I have focused on the stereotypical conceptions of the body, "prevailing models of femininity and masculinity… characterized by firm breast, well-rounded buttocks, tiny waist, and hourglass shape, while [males] can be distinguished by large shoulders and

over-sized muscles" (Trépanier-Jobin 98). If men are assumed to be more muscular, then they would be favored in feats of strength. But what of tests of mental might? Television action heroine Emma Peel "prevails through potentially lethal encounters by a mixture of violence and cool intelligence" (Hendin 287).

The specific form of intelligence tested in *Metroid Prime* and *Alien: Isolation*, is that of spatial awareness. In a study on sexual differences and spatial recognition, a team from the University of Montreal found that

> women's superior incidental memorization of the global configurations [is] formed by the relative positions of common objects within delimited arrays. This memory advantage may rest on a cognitive mechanism akin to that regulating women's primary reliance on a route navigation strategy that leads them to be more precise about landmark orientation when drawing maps of both unfamiliar and familiar sectors (Ecuyer-Dab and Robert).

Another study, completed by the Technical University of Crete found that when placed in a complex virtual environment "a clear gender difference was found with female participants correctly identifying objects in their correct location more often than the male participants" (Paraskeva et al.). Thus, if in our world females have navigation strengths, then why not in the virtual world. Exploration is key for both titles, along with the ability to return to routes previously locked and find key items.

Previously On…

By in medias res nature, I am referring to how both *Metroid Prime* and *Alien: Isolation* take place in the middle of a well-defined narrative. Both games feature plots that are

connected to previous titles, as well as (loosely) to each other. *Metroid Prime* is fifth in the series, but second chronologically. The Metroid and Alien franchises have also been inextricably connected since the first Metroid title. Samus from Metroid has been battling aliens since 1986 and Amanda Ripley was first introduced that same year. Metroid director Yoshio Sakamoto admitted that "Alien had a huge influence on the production of the first Metroid game. All of the team members were affected by HR Giger's design work, and I think they were aware that such designs would be a good match for the Metroid world we had already put in place" (Hudson). Samus and Ripley bear striking, and not incidental resemblance. Sakamoto confirmed this as well as Nintendo Power when they were re-designing Samus for Super Metroid comic book (Hudson). These similarities continue into *Metroid Prime*.

As both texts are part of popular franchises, with established leads, players press start with numerous presumptions already in place. According to Laurie N. Taylor and Zach Whalen, nostalgia can "be understood in constructive terms, as the process by which knowledge of the past is brought to bear on the present and the future" (3). But the strength of video games, regarding the commodification of nostalgia, is that they are "capable of referencing virtually all of the media forms of the 20th century" (Sloan 547). This section will also explore the importance of franchise components and heurmentic horizons. As used by Flint Dille and John Zuur Platten in their manual for writing and designing video games, franchise components are

> certain elements and qualities that make a game and its ilk unique: When story intersects, (you can decide whether it is a smooth merge or a collision) into the nitty-gritty of game design, this is where the larger franchise elements you

> develop for the property can really come into their own. Think about the unique ideas in your game, and how they could be expressed beyond gameplay and story (111).

These franchise components can create horizons of expectations for players familiar with previous titles. Collin Pointon, a philosopher and self-prescribed "slave to video games," applies Hans-George Gadamer's concepts to games saying that "players have a hermeneutic horizon that consists of conscious and unconscious ideas of what [a] game is, how it works, what to do in it, how it will affect them, what they want out of it, and so on" (8). These prejudices evolve over time, as players converse with the game, but their expectations also linger well after gameplay. Such presuppositions can then influence the hermeneutic horizons at the outset of playing games from the same franchise or genre the player is accustomed to. With characters so ingrained within their franchises, the question becomes whether or not the gameplay and/or narrative even needs to reflect the avatars gender to be regarded as a female FPS.

Metroid Prime

1986 was a watermark year in video game history. Still going strong companies like UbiSoft and Bethesda Software were established. That year also saw the release of the first *Legend of Zelda* title and *Castlevania* game. But, more importantly, it was the year the world (or at least Japan, it was released in the US in 1987) was introduced to Samus from *Metroid*. The game was developed by Nintendo and a slew of their all-star employees, including Hiroji Kiyotake (creator of Wario), Hirokazu Tanaka (*Tetris* composer), and Yoshio Sakamoto (game designer for *Donkey Kong* Jr.).

Early *Metroid* games were action-adventure sidescrollers or platformers. Players would guide Samus through alien planets and spaceships, zapping cybernetic enemies and exploring levels for bonus items. The games were non-linear; Samus would more often backtrack to find power-ups versus moving forward through the story. *Metroid Prime* broke both these rules, being the first entry in the series in first-person point of view and with a narrative at the fore-front.

The Last Bounty Hunter

According to an unused introductory monologue from the game, *Metroid Prime* takes place:

> 10 years ago, below the surface of Planet Zebes, the mercenaries known as "Space Pirates" were defeated by interstellar bounty hunter Samus Aran. Descending to the very core of the pirate stronghold, Samus exterminated the energy-based parasites called "Metroids" and defeated Mother Brain, the leader of the pirate horde. But the Space Pirates were far from finished. Several pirate research vessels were orbiting Zebes when Samus fought on the surface below. After the fall of Mother Brain, the ships escaped, with the hope of finding enough resources to rebuild their forces and take their revenge. After discovering a possible pirate colony on planet Tallon IV, Samus has once again prepared for war, hoping to end the Pirate threat forever.

It is while on her way to this planet that the gameplay begins, with Samus heading to a Space Pirate frigate after intercepting a distress signal, only to find the all the crew dead, killed by their own science experiments. She faces off against what is left of the parasites,

including the Parasite Queen. While Samus is able to defeat the gigantic beast, she damages the ship in the process, leading to its self-destruction. Before Samus can escape the frigate, she has a run-in with Meta-Ridley, a cybernetic version of her arch-nemesis. In the midst of the fight, Samus' suit of armor is damaged. She and Meta-Ridley escape the ship before it is destroyed and Samus pursues Meta-Ridley to a nearby planet, Tallon IV.

Clearly the game is combat heavy, but there are plenty of moments when Samus is just hunting rather than shooting. During this "downtime" Samus explores and item-gathers, a mechanic heavily used in previous *Metroid* titles. In order to alternative and secret routes throughout levels, Samus often needs to find keys or new armaments. But the gathering in *Prime* is used for much more than just picking up resources and power-ups. *Prime* alters the dynamic and affect of this mechanic by using it to reveal narrative information through. Much of this information is provided when Samus scans her environment and details are presented on her HUD (heads-up display) through a series of visors. The Scan Visor can present Samus with "creature morphologies, Space Pirate logs, Chozo literature, and much more" ("Metroid Prime: Instruction Booklet"). The Thermal Visor "can track enemies using their heat signatures. Not only does this visor help locate enemies hidden in dark areas, but it can also be used for acquiring alternate targets on enemies. A thermal scan can often find a hidden weak spot on an otherwise difficult enemy" ("Metroid Prime: Instruction Booklet"). Samus' power suit is also equipped with a Combat and X-Ray Visor.

This additional mechanic, the visors, would not have been as seamless in previous *Metroid* games due to their 3rd-person point-of-view, a major franchise component up to

this point. Changing the point-of-view allowed the developers to provide narratological reasoning for Samus to spend more time exploring than hunting. It allows her to learn more about her enemies beyond their weaknesses, but goes as far as to reveal their motivations.

The Right to Look

While Samus has erroneously been credited as the first playable female protagonist (that honor goes to Ms. Pac-man back in 1981), she was the first for Nintendo. Sadly, the reason for this is just as innocuous as Rare's decision to feature a female lead in *Perfect Dark*. In a roundtable interview with Sakamoto, he admitted that "It is true that in developing the original Metroid, we were partway through the development processes when one of the staff members said, 'Hey, wouldn't that be kind of cool if it turned out that this person inside the suit was a woman?' So that's how we decided on that" (Hudson).

Despite the reasoning (or lack thereof) for Samus' gender, her character has remained a popular example of a (mostly) non-sexualized female heroine. Unlike Bayonetta in her black cat-suit, mammaries defying gravity, or Lara Croft with her extreme hourglass figure, Samus is mostly seen wearing practical armor.

There have been several stark exceptions to this hidden figure. In the original *Metroid*, players got a sneak peek under the suit depending on how fast they played the game. Under five hours, Samus takes off her helmet to reveal she is a woman. Finish under three? Samus takes off her armor completely, revealing a form-fitting leotard. But, if the player could complete the game in under an hour, Samus strips down to a bikini.

For those in the know, inputting the password "JUSTIN BAILEY" allowed players to play the entirety of the game with stripped down Samus (Shapiro).

This trend of revealing rewards continued into *Metroid Prime*. If players could collect seventy-five percent of the items in the game, then Samus will take off her helmet, just as she did in the first *Metroid*. However, this time going the extra distance doesn't reveal extra skin, rather after the credits the fate of the titular Metroid Prime is revealed.

Irreplaceable

To change Samus' gender, after three decades, would be a nigh impossible feat without major narratological reasoning. Nor is it necessary. The *Metroid* franchise doesn't need to go to such an extreme to include a male protagonist. Samus has appeared in every entry of the *Metroid* franchise, along with even unassociated titles such as the *Super Smash Bros*. series. There have been no other protagonists in any *Metroid* game. But is this necessary? Must Samus appear in a *Metroid* title for it to be a *Metroid* game? After all, the franchise isn't named after her character, but rather the main alien antagonistic species. For example, another long-running Nintendo series, *The Legend of Zelda*, has changed up the gender of their protagonist. Link has not been the only playable character in the series. Princess Zelda was the lead in *Zelda: The Wand of Gamelon* (1993) and *Zelda's Adventure* (1994).[10] The difference with *Metroid*, however, is that there are no

[10] Neither of these games are considered canon as they were not produced directly by Nintendo.

other characters with pre-established backgrounds and personalities. Samus truly is irreplaceable in the series.

Alien: Isolation

A majority of the *Alien* multimedia franchise have included the appearance of Ellen Ripley, from the original four films, numerous novels, and comics.[11] That is the case for *Alien: Isolation,* where Ellen's voice is the first to be heard in game, with a recording of her final lines from the first film.

> Final report of the commercial starship Nostromo. Third officer reporting. The other members of the crew-Kane, Lambert, Parker, Brett, Ash and Captain Dallas are dead. Cargo and ship destroyed. I should reach the frontier in about six weeks. With a little luck, the network will pick me up. This is Ripley, the last survivor of the Nostromo, signing off.

Amanda, Ellen's daughter and *Isolation*'s playable Ripley, never got to hear her mother's supposed last words. That is, until now. Amanda is contacted by a Weyland-Yutani android, offering her the opportunity to travel to a remote space station where her mother's salvaged flight recording is being held. However, while being transported to the Sevastopol, Amanda is separated from her group. Not only does she now have to look for her mother's recording but find a way off a ship infested with homicidal humans, aggressive androids, and one vexatious xenomorph.

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[11] However, *Alien: Isolation* is the only video game of the franchise Sigourney Weaver has lent her voice to.

Last (Wo)Man Standing

Looking at the entirety of the *Alien* complex, the Final Girl concept is in full effect. The last (wo)man standing in various *Alien* properties, beyond Ripley in the first four *Alien* films, include Alexa Woods from *Alien vs. Predator*, *Prometheus*'s Elizabeth Shaw, and of course Amanda Ripley. A male survivor is uncommon in the franchise. According to Carol Clover, the Final Girl is:

> Introduced at the beginning and is the only character to be developed in any psychological detail. We understand immediately from the attention paid that hers is the main story line. She is intelligent, watchful, level headed: the first character to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the pattern and extent of the threat; the only one, in other words, whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation. We register her horror as she stumbles on the corpses of her friends. Her momententary paralysis in the face of death duplicated those moments of the universal nightmare experience in which she is the undisputed "I"-on which horror frankly trades. When she downs the killer, we are triumphant. She is by any measure the slasher film's hero (518).

Ellen Ripley is used as an example multiple times by Clover in her slasher manifesto *Men, Women, and ChainSaws*, particularly the chapter "Her Body, Himself." Clover describes Ripley as a "space-age female Rambo," a comparison also used by Yvonne Tasker in *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (519). Both scholars focus on Ripley's and other Final Girls' lack of femininity, often composed with

masculine elements as basic as their names (Clover 520). Other masculine qualities of Ripley include her weapon prowess and muscular build (Tasker 15).

Like Mother, Like Daughter

Alistair Hope, creative lead on *Alien: Isolation* made it clear that Amanda was " her own character; she's not just a clone of Ellen Ripley.[12] She has a slightly different perspective on the world, but she shares many traits with her mother — being able to focus under pressure, striving to survive" (Marchiafava). Both Ellen and Amanda are quick to realize when a situation has run afoul and are resourceful in the face of danger. However, Amanda lacks several of her mother's more masculine attributions. She has no "natural leadership," following the advice of others rather than forming her own plans (Tasker 148). Unlike her mother's athletic build, Amanda is slender, not even toned. It is the differences between mother and daughter that the narrative and gameplay highlights.

Ellen was a warrant officer, which while a military rank is more often a duty that includes technical assistance. Regardless, Mother Ripley would have had at least minimal weapons training. Amanda, on the other hand, is a mechanic. *Isolation* provides us with no background information that would suggest she knows how to handle a gun. The game limits what weapons and resources are at Amanda's disposal. *Alien: Isolation* also limits what mechanics Amanda has access to based on her lacking the physical prowess seen with other sci-fi slasher final girls. She is unable to jump or leap over obstacles. In doing

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[12] Unlike those alien abominations in *Alien* 4.

so, it is harder for Amanda to run away from enemies and thus she must be stealthier as she traverses her environment.

Thus the game's emphasis on crafting. As Amanda sneaks around the Sevastopol, she picks up items that she can craft into various tools and weapons including an EMP mine, flashbang, medikit, molotov, noisemaker, pipe and smoke bomb. Her mechanical background makes her a space-age MacGyver. Even some of the weapons found away are not the traditional ammo-based firearms, including a bolt gun and flamethrower ala the first *Alien* film. While it is handy to have such guns, they are not the best way to survive.

Bulletproof

It's absolutely not a shooter," he stresses. "The weapons are never the solution.

They can be part of the solution but you're not going to win the game with them.

That ain't gonna happen. They're almost a hindrance rather than a help (Bond).

Thus far I have been using Mark P. Wolf's concept of video game genres, that emphasizes game mechanics and "player participation [as] arguably the central determinant in describing and classifying video games, more so even than iconography" (113). For a game like *Alien: Isolation*, where guns will most likely get you killed, does that negate it being a first-person shooter? Critics, and lead artist Jude Bond above, have described *Alien: Isolation* as a survival horror game, but for the purposes of this dissertation, I believe the game can be both. Even though the main character is going to die repeatedly if the players try to shoot their way off the Sevastopol, the game's affect (horror) relies on the player's horizons of expectations of what a first-person shooter is.

Collin Pointon, a philosopher and self-prescribed "slave to video games," applies Hans-George Gadamer's concepts to games saying that "players have a hermeneutic horizon that consists of conscious and unconscious ideas of what [a] game is, how it works, what to do in it, how it will affect them, what they want out of it, and so on" (Pointon 8).These prejudices evolve over time, as players converse with the game, but their expectations also linger well after gameplay. Such presuppositions can then influence the hermeneutic horizons at the outset of playing games of a genre the player is accustomed to.

For the first hour or so of gameplay, Amanda's only options for survival are to run or hide. Eventually she picks up a revolver. Soon after Amanda comes upon a dead body riddled with bullet holes. It seems the other humans on the ship are armed and trigger happy. It would appear that having a revolver on hand would now make the odds even but Amanda has limited ammo, no allies for backup in the midst of a large firefight, and gunshots have a nasty tendency of attracting Xenomorphs towards Amanda or whomever lets off a loud bang. Regardless of the temptation to use the revolver (and eventually a shotgun), the game is designed for this dynamic choice to be a last-minute solution when up against fellow mortals.

As for the use of guns against the game's other antagonists, if the films have taught us anything, the androids created by Weyland-Yutani can be just as dangerous as the xenomorphs. The game makes this clear when Amanda, while hiding in the vents, witnesses a Working Joe sustain multiple gun shots at close range before promptly dispatching with ease the armed human. The player can empty a clip or two and

eventually disable a Working Joe, but it would be a waste of resources and only attract more enemies to the sound of the commotion.

Space Sirens

With characters so ingrained within their franchises, the question is less whether *Metroid* or *Alien* could feature another gendered protagonist, but whether or not the gameplay and/or narrative reflects their avatar's gender to begin with. Samus and Amanda appear to be on opposite spectrums physically. Samus can jump to great heights using her Power Suit, while Amanda cannot jump at all. Amanda must use aural clues to hear when a xenomorph or Working Joe is sneaking up on her, where Samus can just use her X-ray visor. It is less what they are capable of doing that they share in common and more why. What affordances the characters are provided are used mainly for exploration rather than combat. Both Samus and Amanda spend about the same amount of time gathering info and items as they would battling aliens. *Metroid Prime* and *Alien: Isolation* push for brains over brawns, that it is better to learn about your opponent and prepare to fight than to rush in laser guns blazing.

Level Three: Bullet (Free)-Time

Portal and *Mirror's Edge* were released during a small lull in the "peak" years (2002-2009) of the FPS genre, 2007 and 2008 respectively. With the market flooded with classic titles such as *Far Cry* (2004), *Doom 3* (2004), and *BioShock* (2007), it took a great deal to stand out amongst the herd. Just as in Alien: Isolation, where guns weren't always the answer, *Portal* and *Mirror's Edge* restricted players' use of projectiles, rather than following along with the blatant shoot 'em up dynamic featured in traditional FPSs. This raises the question of whether *Portal* or *Mirror's Edge* feature divergent gameplay because of their unconventional protagonists or does their hero's gender play little to no role in their title's more pacified play-style? The chapter explores the ways in which issues of invisibility, disability, and pacifism complicate the gendering of FSP games. It details the ways in which feminity becomes articulated through voice and the rejection of violence: modalities that are in start contrast with the voyeuristic and militaristic stylization of the main avatars in FPS games.

I Am No Man

Rather than feature yet another straight, white male, the two games use females with complex identities. *Portal*'s Chell is a racially ambiguous, augmented, fractured female, while *Mirror's Edge*'s Faith Connors is one of the few non-white playable females in video games, not just the FPS genre. They are a step away not just from the default male protagonists, but the other females of this study. Thus, this chapter engages with gender through the framework of intersectionality. For this dissertation, I am deploying Patricia Collins and Sirma Bilge's definition of intersectionality.

> Intersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways… Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (Collins and Bilge 2)

One of the complications Chell and Faith raise to Collins and Bilge's definition is that intersectionalism describes a multi-layered identity. What will be shown is that the identity of our two female avatars are less layered and more interchangeable and unstable.

Violent Femmes

If one was to find a trend amongst the FPSs released during the "peak" years, excessive, meaningless violence would stand out. Violence in these games lacked consequence. The level of conflict was shallow. This could be achieved by having the opposition "unclearly defined, just there to represent darkness against the heroes" (Annander). Enemies could also be portrayed as "caricatures in [their] unwillingness to see reason" (Annander). For instance, in a title such as *BioShock,* players are forced into the fray as they battle their way through demented Splicers, enemies addicted to an addictive chemical compound known as ADAM, which gives users superhuman abilities and mania. The player is given no choice but to murder them, as the Splicers will attack on sight and continuing hunting the player until they dispose of their prey. Another way of eliminating any ethical qualms regarding violent behavior is to destroy the illusion of death.

> In most games, enemies simply fall over as if an off-switch is flipped. Barring a yell of agony, characters don't ever die, they just stop running their AI behaviours and turn to ragdolls. There might be blood, bone, or even lost limbs, but we don't perceive this as part of anything but a posthumous spectacle. It's often just the cue that tells us the enemy is actually dead, and won't stand back up. A flashing cross in the middle of our screen or an exploding head doesn't really matter - it's interface (Annander).

While this assertion accurately portrays a majority of FPSs during the rise of the genre, FPSs of the 2000s reveled in their presentations of death and pain. In *Borderlands*, players come in conflict with a variety of Psychos, scavengers who are literally psychopathic and extremely hostile. One in particular, Face McShooty, encourages the player to… well, shoot him in the face. Rather than urging the player by threatening them with violence, McShooty mouths off. "SHOOT ME IN THE FACE! IN THE FAAAAAAAACE! DO IT! SHOOT ME IN THE FACE! FACE FACEFACEFACEFACE! NOW! BULLETS IN THE FACE! WANT EM! NEED EM! GIMMEGIMMEGIMME! If the player refuses to shoot McShooty, he yells hysterically "I NOTICE YOU HAVEN'T SHOT ME IN THE FACE! CURIOUS AS TO WHY! Maybe you're weighing the moral pros and cons but let me assure you that OH MY GOD SHOOT ME IN THE GODDAMNED FACE!! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR!?" The player can choose not to shoot McShooty, but he will continue to re-appear throughout the game, regardless, chanting incessantly IN THE FACE! NOT SO COMPLEX! NEED IT! WANT IT NEED IT HAVE TO HAVE IT! FACESHOT! BOOM! BRAINS EVERYWHERE! Not the KNEE, not the ARM, not the SPINE -

FACE! IT HAS TO HAPPEN! HNNNNG! FACEY FACEY FACE FACE! TIRED OF WAITING! NO MORE WAITING! NEED A FACE SHOT! BOOM! SQUISH! YAY!.

The following era (2010-) would feature postmodern titles that used excessive violence as a key dynamic, to argue against the genre's conventions and expectations. In analyzing third-person shooter *Spec Ops: The Line* and its challenging of the mainstream industry, visual studies scholar Soraya Murray concludes that:

> The protagonist of most first- and third-person military shooters assuredly fights on the side of right. In this game, fantasies of full-spectrum dominance remain technically fulfilled, but morally frustrated. As a player, this frustration results largely from feeling dragged into Walker's insanity and self-righteous military display, without having any real power to choose otherwise. In fact, after using the aforementioned cinematic elements and military shooter signifiers to present a conventional vision, *The Line* deftly exploits morally condemnable tactics as a strategy for confounding players' expectations that they represent the good (160).

But *Portal* and *Mirror's Edge* raised the question of violence's necessity by its absence. While male contemporaries like *BioShock* (2007) and *Far Cry 2* (2007) were exhibiting over-the-top violence and gore, blood is nearly absent in *Portal* and *Mirror's Edge*. Though these alterations were a change to the standard FPS of the time, they weren't that different from previous female texts that lacked such violent confrontations.

Portal

A silent protagonist, with a face unseen, fighting mechanical foes with a matter-bending projectile weapon. This could describe the heroes of two of Valve Corporation's most

popular video game franchises: Gordan Freeman from *Half-Life* (1998) and Chell from *Portal*. It is revealed in *Half-Life 2: Episode 2* (2007) that both games take place in the same fictional universe, though there has been no crossover with the two main characters.

Both games were released in Valve's famous Orange Box set, along with *Team Fortress 2* and re-releases of *Half-Life 2* (2004) and *HL 2: Episode One* (2006). While the only non-established game in the collection, *Portal* became the highlight of Valve's massive release. Robin Walker, a Valve game designer, was surprised by the game's reception.

> We didn't really know what to hope for with *Porta*l. We'd put it in front of enough play testers to be confident that players would have fun with it, but *Portal* didn't fit any existing model of a successful game for us to know how it was going to really turn out. There wasn't much of a history of first-person puzzle games, let alone ones that combined a new gameplay mechanic with comedy. The Orange Box really solved *Portal*'s biggest challenge, which was to explain itself to players. By putting it in the Orange Box, we didn't have to do the heavy lifting of explaining to people why they should buy this thing that was unlike anything they'd played before—instead, we could lure them in with *Episode Two* & *TF2*, and surprise them with the game they had the least expectations for (Roberts).

Sans franchise expectations, and against the hermeneutic horizons expected with FPSs, *Portal* was able to be just as popular as the established Valve titles, with Chell joining the ranks of Gordan Freeman as an unofficial mascot for the developing company.

Comparing Valve's two iconic two mutes can reveal a great deal about how gender plays out in their stories. In *Half-Life* and *Half-Life 2* (2004) players control

Gordon Freeman. Unlike Chell, players start the game aware of Freeman's visual appearance (bearded red-head, more muscular than expected for a scientist stuck in a laboratory bunker for eighteen hours days) thanks to marketing material. Players learn of his backstory as they progress through the game. Gordon is an MIT-educated theoretical physicist, working at the secretive Black Mesa facility. His team's experiments inadvertently open up an extra-dimensional portal, releasing violent alien beings. Freeman, the ideal combination of nerd and jock, must battle his way to the surface and away from the murderous extraterrestrials.

Chell's appearance and past is shrouded in mystery, with contradictory clues placed by the designers in mostly the sequel. In 2007's *Portal* and the 2011 sequel *Portal 2*, one play as a test subject for Aperture Laboratories named Chell (her name isn't revealed to the players until *Portal 2*). In the games, Chell is forced to solve dangerous puzzles by using a portal gun that creates worm-holes that one travels through to traverse over acid pits, pass by laser turrets, and avoid being squished under metal platforms.

Eyes Without A Face

Not only does Chell go nameless in the first game, but players never see her face in either game. Unlike the other FPSs on this list, there are no third-person cut scenes that provide the player with a full body view of their avatar. There are also no reflective surfaces for one to stand in front of in order see the avatar while still in the first-person point of view. Players can create a series of portals that allow them to see the figure of Chell from the back, but the game never commands them to take such action and only through experimentation would the player ever perform such a mechanic.

What can be seen of Chell is her leg augmentations. In the first *Portal* she wears Advance Knee Replacements, also known as spring heels.

Figure #7: Advance Knee Replacement

Though these spring's design is remarkably similar to the prosthetics used by Olympian Oscar Pistorious, Chell's are not replacements for an injury or disability. Rather they are used to prevent such injuries for the test subjects in their dangerous workspace, such as falling from great heights or leaping from platform to platform. In *Portal 2*, Chell wears long fall boots, with a similar design and purpose.

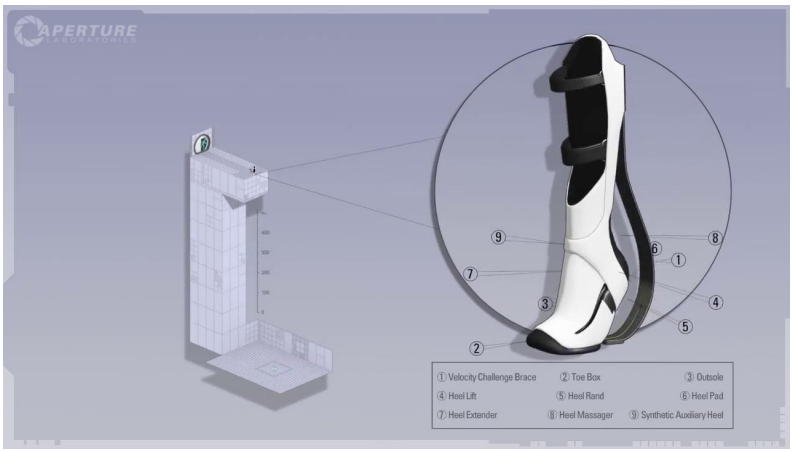

Figure #8: Long Fall Boots

While the augmentations are functional as safety apparatus, they do serve another function. Jean Baudrillard in "The finest consumer object: the body" states that "it is the skin which clothes [the body], though not the skin as irruption of nudity, but as prestige garment and second home, as sign and as fashion reference" (278). Whether it be Chell's footwear in *Portal* or its sequel, both force her feet and legs into the same position one would find themselves when wearing women's heels. They are, as Baudrillard would say, the "harmonious marriage of function and form," providing Chell with life-saving support but also helping her maintain an athletic, desirable figure (280). Compare these to Gordon Freeman's assisted attire. *Half-Life* features a long-jump module, used for similarly duplicitous navigation. However, the module is designed in back-pack form. More utility than fashion statement.

Ghost in the Chell

Chell may not be physically disabled, but she does appear fractured to the viewer. According to Lennard Davis, encounters with disability can be "a disruption in the visual, auditory, or perceptual field as it relates to the power of the gaze (138). The inability to view Chell as a whole is a disruption to our visual field. The player lack the power to gaze upon the entirety of Chell. This fractured visuality complicates the voyeuristic masculine gaze that characterized the representation of female avatar in earlier FPS games. This visuality thus complicates the construction of Chell as powerless object to be observed. Taking away Chell's voice, takes away an auditory connection with the character. She may not be missing a limb, but an absence is still felt by the gamer. The

expectation to behold the female avatar is betrayed and in that lack one reveals the affective expectations associated with FPS more broadly.

Per Lacan and Freud, a splitting occurs when faced with disabilities and comes from a repression of our own -cognitive dissonance (174). When faced with the uncanny, we are facing the "Real in Lacanian terms," how the player saw his/her/their body prior to the mirror-stage of our pre-adolescence (Ibid.) A split occurs, between reality and the desire for some sort of normalization that has been bred into us. One wants to perceive more and the lack thereof is disempowering.

I could ask what normal is, but with Chell I am more interested in the thin line between the humanoid and the disabled. Augmentations are not exclusive to the disabled. Using cybernetics, humans can try to achieve super-human qualities rather than just trying to be "normal". Chell's spring heels and boots are an example of such, as they allow her to jump great distances and reach tall heights. The disabled can be embodied by fragmentation, lacking a sense like vision or hearing, or having an amputated limb.

But what about the fragmentation of mind and body? Rather than using cybernetics to improve one's body, what does it say about embodiment when technology is used to separate one's consciousness from its shell of skin and bones. Are we still human if we lack a body to embody, as Katherine Hayles asks?

This question of embodiment is not only relevant to how we, the gamers, relate to Chell, but our relationship with her main antagonist. Just as in *Perfect Dark*, the series features a female villain, that is if robots can have a gender. GLaDOS (Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System) oversees the testing facility. The original intention was to have Aperture Science's founder, Cave Johnson, upload his consciousness into the

system. However, as the technology wasn't completed before he succumbed to moon rock poisoning, it was Caroline's, his secretary, personality that was installed instead. Unused dialogue lines hint that this may have been done against her will ("No. Listen to me. Sir, I do not want this!) Which leads us to also ask, can non-humans even have a gender?

Thus far, I have defined gender as a performance via the extensive scholarship of Judith Butler. Therefore, GLaDOS' physical form (whether it be that of an all-seeing eye in *Portal* or a potato battery in the sequel) is less keen than her personality traits, specifically her voice. In "The Materiality of Informatics," Hayles considers talking as a "body practice that serve to discipline and incorporate bodies into the complex significations and performances that constitute gender within a given culture" (200). How is it then, that without a mouth attached to a face that is part of a body, can GLaDOS have characteristics that imply her gender? For the very same reason that Chell's gender identity is lax: sound.

Actress and opera singer, Ellen McClain, provided the voice for both Caroline and GLaDOS. But just having a female voice actress does not make a robot female. Anni Vilkko's Gender and Qualitative Methods posits that we "learn gender through to total sensorium [but] gender is also represented, contested, and reinforced through the aural (95). There are particular gender inscriptions involved, particularly pitch & timbre. Studies have "demonstrated a bias associating certain personality characteristics with vocal gender cues, such as high pitch equating submissiveness" (Bell 230). These gender biases allow listeners to prescribe a personality to the sonic waves they hear, regardless of what (if any) visual produces them. However, these values are not static. Just like

Butler's definition of gender, "voice is culturally and historically constructed and performative," with concepts of what is a male or female sound ever in flux (Silva). Therefore, I argue that GLaDOS' voice by modern standards has "feminine" qualities with her soothing soft spoken nature and matter of fact, rounded at the edges tone (Jones). It is a simpler task to gender the disembodied robot, than the fractured body of Chell.

The Cake is a Lie

Players may never see what Chell fully looks like or hear her voice, but there is dialogue throughout both games that hints towards her gender. As Chell makes her way through the trials, GLaDOS mocks her passive aggressively. In the first game GLaDOS taunts Chell with the reward of cake, if only she is willing to quit the tests. According to Susan Bordo, in our current social climate the "control of female appetite for food is merely the most concrete expression of the general rule governing the construction of femininity: that female hunger be contained" (Bordo 171). For Chell, to give in to GLaDOS's taunt to stop taking the tests for the reward of cake is to fail as a woman. Using food as an incentive isn't necessarily a gendered prank, men like cake too, but "the incidence of eating disorders has always been disproportionately high among females (Bordo 50). But in *Portal 2* the number of jokes about weight and direct body-shaming increase. GLaDOS, angered by Chell killing her in the previous game, is more scathing in her insults.

> Go on. Get a big FAT eyeful. With your big FAT eyes. That's right. A potato just called your eyes FAT. Now your FAT eyes have seen everything. Wait? Why

> DID you trundle over here? You're not HUNGRY, are you? It's hard to see, what's that in your hand? Knowing you it's a deep fryer… One of these times you'll be so FAT that you'll jump, and you'll just drop like a stone. Into acid, probably.

Like the temptation of cake, body-shaming is not exclusive to females, but "the preoccupation with appearance… still affects women far more powerfully than man" (Bordo 166). Even GLaDOS is angered by her change in appearance from Portal to *Portal 2*. After Chell destroys GLaDOS' personality cores, the AI's physical structure is heavily damaged. In the sequel, the fate of the feminine technological tyrant, is to return in a biological form. GLaDOS is back online but uploaded to a potato battery. GLaDOS laments "You know what my days used to be like? I just tested. Nobody murdered me. Or put me in a potato. Or fed me to birds. I had a pretty good life." From tempting with food to turning into a tasty treat "her"self.

Fe-Male

Despite all of these potential gendering identifiers, the developers at Valve considered not bringing back Chell for the sequel. In early testing, *Portal 2* featured a new male character, but players rejected this idea. Not because of his gender, but "what bothered them was when GLaDOS woke up and didn't recognize them as the person who done these things to her" (Faliszek and Wolpaw). *Portal 2* only required a female protagonist, because it was a continuation of the narrative from the original *Portal*. However, if Chell's gender had been changed to male or never revealed in 2007, the sequel may have have had no issue altogether. This is just another example of how video

game developers ignore gender. What is overlooked is how having a female avatar rather than a male affects the game. In the case of *Portal*, a female lab rat versus a male test subject changes the affect of the game from mastery to survival. Males avatars are assumed to achieve "'masculine' satisfaction accompanying gameplaying mechanics of dominating one's environment using violence and aggression" (Watts 255-56). Games like *Portal* and *Mirror's Edge* deny this satisfaction by taking away mechanics of violence and aggression.

Mirror's Edge

While Chell may never have had the opportunity to fire bullets, the protagonist of *Mirror's Edge* has the option to not shoot lead projectiles. *Mirror's Edge* centers on Faith Connors, a "runner" or courier who transmits rebel messages while evading capture from a corporate government complex. Her sister, a cop, is framed for the murder of mayoral candidate Robert Pope, who intends to maintain and even intensify the surveillance state. Faith makes it her mission to prove her sister's innocence but is hunted down by a corrupt police force and free-running assassins.

At the Edge

Unlike the other FPSs featured in this dissertation, Faith Connors is not white. It isn't clarified within the game specifically what her race is, but there is an Asian influence in the character's design, particularly her eye shape and jet-black hair. UCLA's Asia Institute listed *Mirror's Edge* as an honorable mention for their Best of 2008: Asian-themed Video Games, describing Faith as Eurasian (Hong).

Figure #10: Faith Connors

There is far too little character development, personality, or effect on the plot to perform a proper intersectional study between Faith and her female FPS comrades in this study, however, Faith's nigh indistinguishable identity can be compared to another Asian-American female video game character who was also nearly washed of her ethnicity.

In Stephanie C. Jennings "Women Agents and Double-Agents: Theorizing Femininze Gaze in Video Games," she discusses how *Resident Evil*'s Ada Wong is "largely whitewash[ed] [of] her racial identity" (243). In this horror franchise Wong has played a femme fatale whose fealty is always brought into question. Her motives are as mysterious as her background, both narratively and racially. The only codes that implicate her cultural heritage are her physical appearance and global locations in the game (Jennings 243). Jennings refers to Sara Ishii's work on video games and Asian female representations for a potential remedy to this white-washing:

> If the *Resident Evil* games incorporated information on Ada Wong's family or personal history, her culture may establish her race more effectively than her physical appearance. An expansion of a character's persona and a reduction in the

> emphasis on her appearance is an initial step in breaking down structures that perpetuate gender and racial stereotypes within video games (95).

Using Ishii's proposal, what could have been done to highlight Faith Connor's racial background? It is never established whether Faith's parents were born in America… or if America exists as The City is an anonymous urban police state. Geography withstanding, there are other elements of a race's culture that can survive despite location migration. For instance, Faith Connor's prominent face tattoo. It holds two purposes in *Mirror's Edge*: edgy character design and as a Runner's tag. But why not a third reason? Tattoos have a vast, enduring legacy in Asian countries and the meaning behind Faith's ink could have been used as a representation of her culture. There are other options as well, such as dialogue. Faith could have referred to her sister or parents using terms of endearment with language specific to her cultural heritage. Neither or these would have required adjustment to the gameplay and could have been added to the narrative during voiceover, character interaction, or cutscenes.

Follow the Ruby Piped Path

Another reason *Mirror's Edge* stands out amongst this collection of text is that shooting (in any form) is not the core mechanic of the game. There is a greater focus on the player's parkour skills than their aim with a gun.[13] According to *The Guardian's* list of

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[13] I switch between using the terms parkour and free-running as the game does not use the proper definition either. According to Red Bull's Adam Matthew "parkour is the art of economical movement through urban spaces, and is characterised by the tricky obstacles in its environment. Freerunning is a competitive offshoot that focuses more on the abilities and expression of the person rather than the performing space… according to the

Beyond Lara Croft: 30 Truly Interesting Female Game Characters “her reliance on evasion and melee combat rather than guns [that] separates her from a mass of first-person heroes,” male and female alike (Kate Gray). It is possible to complete the game on “pacifist mode.” To obtain this objective, the player must never fire a single bullet, even ones that miss their target or only wound rather than kill their opponents. Players can grab a gun, or disarm an opponent, but they cannot fire it. There is no narrative change if this is the dynamic style a player chooses, but if played on the PlayStation console they do earn a system trophy, basically bragging rights for dedicated players.

DICE developer’s intention was to start from the ground up regarding how a first person “shooter” should move. "The first thing we wanted to look at was just getting the feeling of movement and momentum, so walking, jogging and running," says Owen O'Brien, senior designer, "very simple things, but things that haven't really been done well in first-person shooters" (Totilo "Ea Discusses 'Mirror's Edge' Sickness Concerns, Lack of Color Green"). This, however, came at the price of producing quirky mechanics when the shooting portion was introduced. During the game’s initial training sequence, Faith is first taught how to disarm a hostile before she learns how to shoot. In the same turn the players are shown the buttons to shoot, the controls to drop or pick up a weapon are revealed. This is the developers' way of hinting to the players that shooting is not a priority, but an option. What this tutorial does not reveal is how limited Faith is in her

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terminology used in the game’s s XP progression menus, *Mirror's Edge* plants itself firmly in the freerunning camp.”

actions once she has a gun in hand. The heavier the gun, the slower Faith moves. In a game that is built around flow and momentum, a sudden loss of speed can be just as deadly as a bullet. Also, when the gun has run out of ammo, Faith does not have the option to reload it. She can carry it, losing speed, throw it at an enemy like a ranged weapon, or discard it and try to boost back to her normal flow.

Reload

In 2016, Dice released a reboot, entitled *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst*. The game goes into greater detail about the setting Faith runs about in.[14] The City is called Glass, hence the numerous buildings that Faith can wall-run on. Society is constantly surveilled by the Grid, part of the totalitarian techno-corporatocracy. Runners are rebels to this system, defying the state apparatuses to secretly deliver messages to other resistance members and foil the Kruger's Security next project, Reflection. While doing so, Faith finds her sister, though killed during the November Riots, brainwashed into believing that Gabriel Kruger, head of K-Sec, is her father. Faith now must save both Glass and her sister from Kruger's Machiavellian rule.

While maintaining multiple mechanics from the previous title, *Catalyst* does not fit the criteria for this dissertation as it is no longer a first-person shooter. Faith Connors remains under fire, but she is never given the option to shoot back. Returning to Alexander Galloway's argument that *weapons*, not violence make up a FPS, Faith's lack

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[14] The prequel comic book series, *Mirror's Edge: Exordium,* provided more background info on Faith's family.

of gun disqualifies this reboot from our study.[15] However, comparing these titles allow us to see what roles guns play mechanically and narratively in the original *Mirror's Edge*.

After the release of *Catalyst*'s first trailer, EA Games executive Patrick Söderlund clarified that

> we're not going to turn this into a shooter. On the contrary, in fact. But we are going to evolve Faith and the story. The first game was a lot about running away from things," he said. "And, even though you want to have sections with that, you also want Faith... she's a powerful character and you want her to take control. You'll see a little bit more of that in this game.

It may seem counter-intuitive to have a character take control when they lack a mechanic to fight back (shooting). But rather than tweak the unwieldy gunplay, Faith's parkour and melee abilities were re-tooled. Instead of facing her enemies Faith on, she does what comes to her naturally: run away in style. Game critic Matt Kim found the original *Mirror's Edge* ludonarratively dissonant because "the narrative for both her character, and what the free running couriers typically are in-universe don't support the notion that Faith, or any of her compatriots, are violent murderers." It was the gameplay, not the narrative that demanded shooting. All too often Faith found herself surrounded by enemies, leaving shooting as the less-challenging dynamic player, rather than trying to parkour away. Hence the pacifist mode system trophy, rewarding players for choosing the less convenient dynamic route.

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[15] Refer to Methodology section

Jump Around

Portal and Mirror's Edge represent non-traditional FPS in two ways: style of shooting and identity. Chell and Faith of *Portal* and *Mirror's Edge* provide some level of complexity with their avatars and present alternative, less-violent approach to shooters.

Ironically, Chell and Faith are complex female avatars because they are shrouded in mystery. *The Operative* provides Cate Archer's background through expository dialogue. The player also has dialogue options, able to form her reaction and personality to their choice. Both *Metroid Prime* and *Alien: Isolation* take place *in media res*, with players already aware of if not their avatar but of the world they inhabit. While *Mirror's Edge* attempts to provide some background on Faith and her parents, this only leads to more questions than answers. It can only be assumed by Faith's last name, Connors, that her mother was Asian rather than her father, but there is no proof of this. The player does not know why Faith chose to follow in her parent's footsteps and rebel after the November Riots, while her sister joined the police. *Mirror's Edge*: *Catalyst* tries to answer these questions, but as the game is a reboot, the conclusions are no longer canon to the first game.

Chell is essentially a *tabula rosa* avatar. *Portal* is the only title where the player is never provided a cut-scene with a third-person view to see what Chell looks like in her entirety. Looking back at Janet Murray's definition of an avatar where "[a] mask that creates the boundary of the immersive reality and signals that we are role-playing rather than acting as ourselves," allows for further understanding of the incomplete relation between player and avatar (113). Without Chell's entire body revealed or even hearing

her voice, it is much easier for a player to immerse themselves within the game and play as themselves for they know so little about their avatar to begin with.

As for how these two texts alter the genre from shoot 'em up to jump around, the question asked was "whether or not the change in mechanics are a limitation because of the characters' genders or an affordance to their kind." Chell and Faith are limited to what type of weapons they have access to. Chell only has a portal gun and Faith can only pick up whatever pistols or shotguns she disarms from her enemies (at a cost). As will soon be discussed, the limitation of weapon types is often representative of the gender stereotype that females are weaker and therefore cannot handle larger weapons. While neither are able to disprove this fallacy, executing feats of strength, another physical quality of theirs is highlighted instead: agility. The heights Chell can reach are not achieved through leg muscles of her own but are assisted by her Aperture-approved prosthetics. However, to achieve such distances and survive the great drops without tumbling into pits of acid or pools of lava requires its own level of coordination and athleticism. Faith needs similar precision to perfect her parkour gymnastics and dodge enemy attacks.

Chell and Faith are rebels with a cause, surviving extermination from corrupt forces, whether these be the security state, rancorous robots, or the male-dominated video game industry. They rebel in the games' diegesis and non-diegetically as well. Both avatars are a step away from the traditional video game hero, including their female counterparts. Their narratological divergence (characterization) is then represented ludologically, with unconventional mechanics and pacified dynamics.

Boss Battle

What are the differences between how females enact violence in these texts versus their male counterparts? If, as Halberstram says that simply reversing gender "never simply replicates the terms of an equation. The depiction of women committing acts of violence against men does not simply use 'male' tactics of aggression," then what are the "female" tactics of aggression (Halberstram 191). To answer this, I ask: who commits violence, how is this violence enacted, and upon whom?

License to Kill

In "The Lady is a Terrorist: Women, Violence, and Political Action," Josephine Gattuso Hendin discusses how women committing extreme acts of violence can be seen as a form of resistance and rebellion of the patriarchy. Hendin uses real-life examples such as Patty Hearst, to fictional characters like Philip Roth's Seymour "Swede" Levov from *American Pastoral*. These women are sprung from, as poet Jude Jordan and queer scholar Judith Halberstram would say, a "place of rage: a political space opened up by the representation in art, in poetry, in narrative, in popular film, of unsanctioned violences committed by subordinate groups upon powerful white men" (Halberstram 187). In our texts, Chell, Amanda, and Faith are all deemed terrorists, anarchists, and public enemy #1. However, they were not the instigators. Chell was forced into being a lab rat. Amanda got stuck on the Sevastopol and Faith is merely the messenger. Their place of rage "is ground for resistance" (Halberstram 188).

But one man's terrorist can be another woman's patriot. Several of our females are positioned and permitted to kill, their occupations are ones that emphasize the

"sanctioned use of aggression, force and violence" (Myrttinen 38). Joanna Drake and Cate Archer are spies, while Samus Aran is a bounty hunter who has worked alongside with various military organizations in the past. For these three, their imagined violence is NOT "the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions of aggression from 'the wrong people, of the wrong skin, the wrong sexuality, the wrong gender'" (Halberstram 199). Drake, Archer, and Aran are sanctioned, are white, exude stereotypical femininity that falls in line with the expectation of their genders. Chell, Amanda, and Faith are not sanctioned, are diverse, and defy generic definitions of sexuality and gender.

Guns Don't Kill People, Girls Do

Henri Myrttinen argues in "Disarming Masculinity" that "weapons are part of one notion of masculinity, a militarized view that equates 'manliness' with the 'sanctioned use of aggression, force, and violence'" (Myrttinen 37). Does this mean that when females take up arms that they are exuding masculinity? Not necessarily. First, females are restricted in terms of what weapons they are provided with in FPS. In reality there are "types of handguns [that] are marketed specifically for a female clientele," but this rarely extends to shotguns, semi-automatics, or rifles (Myrttinen 43). The use of heavy machine guns and long rifles are limited to male FPSs, along with melee weapons such as power tools that create grisly murder sequences. Take for instance *BioShock 2* (2010) and *BioShock Infinite* (2013). In the sequel players are placed in a monstrous, metal diving suit known as a Big Daddy, equipped with a massive drill for a right arm. To disperse of waves of enemies, simply charge the drill and plow through their chests with ease. The prequel, *Infinite*, provides players with a Sky Hook that can be used not only to help traverse

through the levels, but also to slice into enemy's brains. Such weapons of mass destruction are missing from female FPSs.

Size and power matters, especially when the sexualization of weaponry is considered. It is almost passé to say that a man's gun can be compensation and "while the relationship between men and weapons is often sexually charged, simply equating weapons with phallic extensions is too simple" (Myrttinen 44). In the Marines, guns are feminized, hence the chant "this is my rifle, this is my gun. This is for fighting, this is for fun." In the FPS *Team Fortress 2* (2007) the Heavy character names his over-sized machine gun, Sasha. When women take hold of weapons, it becomes a form of violation—not necessarily castration, but a breaking of conditioned social norms that associate violence with masculinity.

No Men Were Harmed in the Making of This Game

Females are limited not only in what they can shoot, but who they can attack and how visceral (or lack thereof) nature of these violent acts. Unlike male FPSs, which allows the player to shoot men, women (never children), animals, aliens, or what have you, female FPSs often limit enemy types to non-humans, such as robots and extraterrestrials. In *Perfect Dark*, even when Joanna shoots at what appears to be a male enemy, it turns out to be an alien in disguise. *Metroid: Prime* and *Portal* feature no human enemies. *Alien: Isolation* features a handful of humans, but they don't pose the same threat as the androids and xenomorph. In *Mirror's Edge*, if a violent dynamic is chosen rather than pacifist mode, the security teams are masked and therefore their gender and race remain unknown. The same goes for *Perfect Dark*, where the henchmen are masked (or aliens).

When violence is committed against males, the targets are rarely white men, failing again to meet Halberstam's definition of rage. Without such unsanctioned violence, which in this case is "violence against white men perpetrated by women or people of color [that] disrupts the logic of represented violence, lacks the unpredictable power Halberstram says arises from such rage.

Providing anonymous target practice also helps downplay the violent acts taking place. According to Timothy Welsh, "we care for an NPC not just because they look us in the eye, into our souls, but we look into theirs" (Welsh 131). Inversing queer artist David Wojnarowicz's statements on visualization, players can deal with death when they don't own it (Wojnarowicz 35). Gamers are often criticized by the public for their seemingly lack of empathy towards the death of NPCS. Martin Annander, design director at Toadman Interactive and a vocal video game journalist bemoans how

> when someone observes our games from outside the hobby and the aggressive behaviors we express. All they typically see is the violence. All they hear is our defensive desperation in protecting that violence. They don't see the countless hours it takes to master a weapon in Counter-Strike - they see the headshots and blood spatter. It makes our hobby (or job) look shallow and sadistic (Annander).

There is a balance to be had between killing NPCs for point-value versus emotional value. Welsh explains that with military shooters such as *Call of Duty* and *Battlefield* use

> the game's first-person perspective to organize a player's affective response to NPCs within the context of contemporary "virtuous" warfare. Military shooters… typically consist of eliminating wave after wave of interchangeable, insignificant NPCs. Though the prospect may outrage onlookers concerned about the apparent

> disregard for human life, players understand that these are infinitely respawning digital objects and therefore dispensable. The challenge for game makers is less often to convince players to overcome an aversion to on-screen violence as it is to get them to attribute worth, value, and significance to an arrangement of pixels (Welsh 131).

Killing needs to be made worthwhile, whether it be in the form of points, rewards, or mission completions. But in female FPSs, that is not necessarily the case. During Joanna Drake's first mission in *Perfect Dark*, after she asks if all the targets are expendable, she is informed that she has to be careful because "the code keys will only operate while the only is still alive. If you kill them, they are useless." In order to complete the mission, the player can only knockout the key holders, otherwise they fail the mission and must restart the level.

Another way to assuage any guilt players may have if they choose to murder and rampage is by including non-human enemies. With the exception of *The Operative* & *Mirror's Edge*, the main antagonist of each title is almost always a female robot or alien. For *Perfect Dark* it is the artificial intelligence Dr. Caroll, until "she" has a change of heart in the third act of the game. *Metroid Prime*'s incarnation of Samus' arch-nemesis, Meta-Ridley, is a cybernetic alien creation. Amanda Ripley has to fight both cybernetics and aliens, though all are male. In *Portal*, Chell is trying to kill a back-talking feminized robot. *The Operative* & *Mirror's Edge* stand out for having main male, human antagonists, *Mirror's Edge* more than the former. During the final confrontation, Faith finds her sister being held hostage by the traitor Jackknife. He kidnaps Kate onto a helicopter, but before he can fly away, Faith jumps on before it can leave, knocking

Jacknife out of the helicopter to fall to his death. It is the least gorey death a final boss can have.

Dodge, Duck, Dip, Dive, & Dodge

Neo-noir ex-cop vigilante Max Payne is a man of few words. In his video game franchise he chooses his words carefully. So when he isn't grunting, groaning, or bemoaning the loss of his family, listen. "Firing a gun is a binary choice. Either you pull the trigger or you don't." This may be true for Max and his fellow male protagonists, but females don't always have this choice. Sometimes they are given weaker weapons. Other times no weapons at all. But the main reason why females may be wary to pull the trigger in their game's emphasis on stealth. This is determined most often by the level design and enemy AI (artificial intelligence).

Dead End

In its simplest form, level design is "the data entry and layout portion of the game development cycle. A level is, for all intents and purposes, the same as a mission, stage, map or other venue of the player interaction. As a level designer, you are chiefly responsible for the gameplay" (Ryan). According to designer Bart Vossen, specifically regarding the gameplay aspect of level design, it "refers to the space in which the combat takes place. This includes the shape of the area, placement of objects and other gameplay elements in the area. It also partially includes which enemies are encountered, because these alter the mode of interaction and experience of the space" (Vossen). The design of levels affects how a player traverses the level, or their gameplay style which results in dynamic choice.

A digital space's design can also convey narrative, emotion, and meaning, particularly when applied to a game's architecture, its aesthetic style, and the ambiance it creates. Even the smallest of details, a throwaway prop, can have significance and purpose in the game's level design. The importance of props in evoking affect is evident in *Alien: Isolation* when Amanda initially picks up a revolver. Soon after Amanda comes upon a dead body riddled with bullet holes. It seems the other humans on the ship are armed and trigger happy. This detail adds to the affect of fear and trepidation, reminding the player just how quickly death can come in this game if Amanda isn't careful.

Level design is also about flow. Sigeru Miyamoto, creator of *The Legend of Zelda*, Mario, and numerous other Nintendo franchises, puts focus on directing the player in his level design.

> There are four goals he aims for in designing levels for the benefit of the player. The first is level flow. How do the spaces in the level fit together? Where is the player supposed to go, and will she know how to get there? Next is intensity ramping. Does the intensity of the experience ramp up in a satisfying way? Do monsters get more difficult as the level goes on? Does the player get a chance to learn how the enemies work and then display her mastery later? Third is variety. Is there sufficient variety in the gameplay? Do enemy encounters frequently repeat themselves? Are the spaces varied in interesting ways? Finally, is training. If the design requires new skills from the player, does it teach and test those skills appropriately?(Stout)

Following through with Miyamoto's definition, allows an exploration into how the level design in many of the female FPSs push players towards a sneaky dynamic. *Mirror's Edge* is the most obvious example of a game which features flow-focused level design. The City's color palette is cold, mostly greys and blues. Red pipes and platforms guide Faith's journey. Engaging in combat slows Faith's flow, thus emphasizing avoidance versus aggression. For intensity ramping, *Metroid Prime* is a prime example. With the help of her visors, Samus is able to learn more about her enemies and how to defeat them. She is already provided data on how to unlock doors with hidden routes and shortcuts. Spending time exploring, rather than fighting, helps Samus in the end rather than charging in head first. If Samus has not found information on an enemy, then it is most likely better for her to avoid them until learning how to take them down.

As for training, that is all *Portal* is. In fact, it was due to testers' complaint that the game seemed like an endless tutorial that the developers added in GLaDOS (Roberts). In *Portal* there is only one combat scenario, the final battle with GLaDOS. Since Chell's portal gun is not an offensive weapon, she is restricted in how she can fight back as GLaDOS floods the room with neurotoxins and fires rockets at her "favorite" test subject. The only way for Chell to survive is to avoid the turret defenses, while creating wormholes to "toss the Aperture Science Thing We Don't Know What It Does" into the "Aperture Science Emergency Intelligence Incinerator?"

Antagonist Instincts

Out of all the supervillains featured in these texts, GLaDOS has the most maniacal antagonist instincts, especially after Chell gets her stuck as a potato. Despite her witty

nature, GLaDOS lacks complex artificial intelligence. By this I mean that her programming (by the developers, not Rock Johnson) is basic. Her dialogue is preset based on actions performed by the player, with no variations. In *Portal*'s climactic battle, the turret defenses GLaDOS control are also rhythmic and predictable, allowing the player to learn their timing in order to avoid being blown up.

GLaDOS is a literal example of Artificial Intelligence, an intelligent machine (Mitchell 17). There is some debate surrounding what it means to impose a computer with human intelligence. The questions revolve on the centrality of emotional, verbal, spatial, logical, artistic, social, or one of the many other ways human dissect information. As Mitchell posits, do we "simply want to create computer programs that perform tasks as well as or better than humans, without worrying about whether these programs are actually thinking in the way humans think" (Mitchell 18). AI as applied to video games refers to "computer-controlled enemies in a game" (Upton 16). Just as there are various forms of artificial intelligence in our realm, so are their several different types of AI in the virtual world. A basic AI in a FPS is about as intelligent as William Grey Walter's Turtles. Resembling a modern day Roomba, these battery-powered, wheeled, dome-shaped devices scooted around their surroundings by sensing light and physical objects in order to maneuver, and eventually "learn how to interact with their environment," with unpredictable movements that appeared to "exhibit a form of 'free will'" (Kline 78-79). Two years after creating his robotic wonders, at the 1951 Macy meeting, Walter defined cybernetics, a field of study under which artificial intelligence is often studied, as "on one hand, the mechanical apotheosis of reflexive action [as in his robot tortoises], on the

other, the incarnation of information" (Kline 49). Complex enemies in video games would be the latter.

The original *Unreal*, thanks to its sophisticated engine, was able to produce complex enemies through both level design and AI. In a retrospective on how *Unreal* deserves the same place in history as remembered titles like *Half-Life*, co-founder of PC gaming site *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* John Walker had this to say:

> *Unreal* feels like a combination of a corridor shooter and an arena shooter, seamlessly switching between the two, its weapons and systems coping with both tight spaces and wide open hillsides. It's the game that taught me to circle strafe, and its enemies feel better to fight… Enemies duck and roll and run about, hiding behind cover, circle around you. Most of its luck, absolutely, but it gets lucky so damned often they start to feel like incredibly sophisticated AI (Walker).

The luck Walker refers to is RNG, random number generating, programming. Rather than having NPCs, whether friends or foes, programmed with the same patterns, a RNG creates variety and unpredictability, thus making enemies seem more realistic and deadlier. When an enemy AI unit is no longer predictable, when their pattern cannot be discerned, players have to play smarter, or in this case stealthier. Running in, guns blazing, may not be the most effective dynamic playstyle when one is unsure how the enemies will respond.

What may appear to be the most sophisticated AI any of our females faced would be the xenomorph from *Alien: Isolation*. Sega and Creative Assembly used a systemic AI, "a collection of decision-making systems that react to what is happening in the game. It needs to know when it can participate in the experience and it what level it should do

so" (Thompson). This system would be similar to a network of subsymbolic AI or perceptrons. Networks are defined as "simply a set of elements that are connected to one another in various ways" (Mitchell 35). Subsymbolic AI's have "fast perception, such as recognizing faces or identifying spoken words… systems designed to learn from data how to perform a task" (Mitchell 24). In *Isolation*, there are two sub-systems that communicate to increase the affect of horror and terror. The director-AI tracks the players movements and informs the alien-AI to the player's location. Rather than tell the alien-AI the specific location, the director-AI provides it with data points which will affect how the xenomorph performs its tasks. The director-AI will let the creature know when a player is within walking distance, triggering the xenomorph from a passive to active state. From there, the alien-AI relies on its behavior tree, a "system of nodes responsible for selecting what type of behavior to execute. These top-level nodes would then have the alien execute within large sub-sections of the tree responsible for specific sub-behaviors relating to specific tasks" (Thompson). This is where the alien-AI loses a level of sophistication. As the player progresses through the game, the xenomorph's level of difficulty increases. Its vision range expands, it's attacks are quicker, the alien is seemingly learning about how the player plans to evade or kill it. However, the alien-AI never learns the player's patterns. Checkpoints reached in the game unlock new sub-nodes on the behavior tree, providing the AI with new tools that only appear to be learned based on previous knowledge gained. A sophisticated AI does not need to have intricate programming to be effective, but exhibit a form of "free will". There are other ways to have complex AI without altering any of their mechanics. Instead, designers develop individualized characteristics, rather than a clone army. In *The Operative* Cate Archer is

given a body removal powder, which she uses to hide her tracks, not leaving any bodies behind to attract attention to her deadly activities. If a fallen foe is not disposed of, his comrades will notice. For instance, after causing mass chaos in a Moroccan hotel, the guards are put on high alert. One can continue to run through the hallways, dispensing of Fez'd goons or, players can slow down to overhear conversations such as this:

Goon #1: Any sign of her yet?

Goon #2: Nope.

Goon #1: Damn, I gotta pee!

Goon #2: Well, go then?

Goon #1: What if she shows up when I'm in the restroom?

Goon #2: Good point. Can you hold it?

Goon #1: (meekly) I guess so.

In this case, stealth is not a dynamic choice that effects the difficulty of the game, but the narrative experience. Kirk Hamilton, *Kotaku*'s editor-in-chief and unofficial head of *The Operative* fan club had this to say about the AI in the game:

> One of the coolest things about the enemy banter was that it was a real, non-gameplay reward for effectively using stealth. For my part, I didn't care so much about making it to the end without being detected—the real reward was that if I did so, I'd get to overhear conversations like these. That alone made it worth it (Hamilton).

OBLIVIOUS HENCHMAN #1: Why do you think there is such a low ratio of women in the criminal industry?

OBLIVIOUS HENCHMAN #2: Lack of interest, probably.

OBLIVIOUS HENCHMAN #1: You don't think it's sexism?

OBLIVIOUS HENCHMAN #2: I'm sure there's some of that, but it's not like we get a lot of resumes from women.

OBLIVIOUS HENCHMAN #1: Maybe it's socialization. Maybe girls grow up thinking crime is for men, so they don't consider it as a career option.

Hilarious and wise.

The Future is Female

What can we expect from the future of female FPSs? Will they continue the trends above or buck the system? According to Elton Jones at Heavy.com, "2019 was a pretty solid year for first-person shooters," with the release of original titles such as *Apex Legends* and additions to established franchises like *Far Cry: New Dawn* and *Metro Exodus*. Two other series returned recently as well, with female leads for the first-time.

Wolfenstein: Youngblood

Among this slew of sequels is *Wolfenstein: Youngblood*. In *Youngblood* players have the option to choose between not one, but two female characters: twin sisters Jessie and Zofia Blazkowicz. They are the daughters of William Joseph "B.J." Blazkowicz, the main protagonist of the franchise and (in)famous killer of Hitler. Jessie & Zofia are G.R.I.T.s., girls raised in Texas and they have plenty of it as well. Like many of the females in this dissertation, Jessie & Zofia were trained to be killers, Nazi-hunters specifically. Some would even say, based on who their father is, they were always destined to fight the alt-

Reich.[16] The Blazkowicz sisters blast away anyone associated with the alt-Reich: men, women, dogs, robot dogs. *Youngblood* features the most diverse cast of enemies to be killed. It also features the most diverse cast of females, including the NPCs. Zofia and Jess are assisted by their best friend, Abby Walker, an African-American techno-wiz. A number of the members of the French Resistance movement are also women and women of color.

Half-Life: Alyx

In March 2020, another entry into a famous FPS franchise was released. *Half-Life: Alyx* narratively takes place five years before *Half-Life 2*, the title where the character Alyx Vance first appeared.[17] She is a young woman of Afro-Asian descent and a member of yet another resistance. In *Half-Life 2* and its following chapters Alyx is an NPC that assists Gordon Freeman fight against the Combine, a group of inter-dimensional mecha-aliens and their loyal human followers. She is known for her hacking skills and agile physicality, both of which come through in *Half-Life: Alyx*. What makes *Alyx* the one of the most unique female FPS and the *Half-Life* franchise isn't how it subverts tropes, but

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[16] The *Wolfenstein* series takes place in an alternate universe where Germany won World War II.

[17] For more information about the *Half-Life* franchise, refer to the introduction of Level Three

its exclusive release on VR (virtual reality) devices such as the Oculus Rift and HTC Vive.[18]

To Be Continued…

The video game industry has danced around this issue of female representation for far too long. Whatever fix that needs to be made will take time, but our time seems to be the right time. While there have been no other announcements of first-person shooters for 2020 or 2021 that feature a female, and only a female, lead, if we have learned anything from this dissertation and these game's chronologies it is that when the genre needs it most, females will rise.

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[18] There were modifications created by fans that allowed players to experience *Alien: Isolation* on the Oculus Rift, but the developers never officially released the game for such systems.

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