

MARIE-LUISE MEIER

Gender in Games –  
Methodology and Analysis





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When I started my university studies, I found my true love. My first seminar on literary theory was taught by a scathing scholar who was profoundly annoyed by my habit of destroying the well-crafted time schedule of his lessons with nose-y questions. Soon after, I realized that I was madly in love with literary theory and the way in which cultural artefacts relate to our lives and identities. It impressed me how that scholar was able to read the cryptic language of literature and culture in ways that I had never experienced before. I knew within the first weeks of my studies that I wanted to be a literary scholar, too. That was, however, before I found my second love, movies. In the end, I finally arrived at the one that I intended to marry in the shape of this dissertation: video games.

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### **Article III:**

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### **Article IV:**

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### **Article V:**

Meier, Marie-Luise (2020). From Dating Simulators to Milestones of Video Game Culture: Dating Patterns and Eroticism as Reward in Games. In: Angela Fabris, Jörg Helbig (Eds.). *Cinerotic: Eroticism in Films and Video Games* (203–217). Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier. (Literatur, Imagination, Realität; 57).



## CONTRIBUTION

The author of this thesis is fully responsible for all articles that are part of this dissertation, except for Article IV which was co-authored. In Article IV, the author of this thesis is responsible for the literature review and for defining the key terms. She is fully responsible for introducing the concept of *preferred playing/default* choices as well as applying that concept in the analysis to show how it is intertwined with ethical decision-making.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

Video games have globally become one of the most profitable entertainment markets (Saltz 2015, 60). In 2019, over 2.5 billion people played video games worldwide (Spiegel, 2020). In the US, for example, the video game industry has grown bigger and more profitable than the movie industry and the North American sports industry combined (Witkowski, 2020/2021). Still, even today, gaming is often seen as a niche activity of children and young men, and only worth a newspaper article when combined with accusations of triggering a mass shooting or contributing to the miseducation of children. Additionally, video games still suffer from the stigma of being deemed “niche”, “subcultural” and ultimately “not art”.

Gaming, however, affects society in multiple forms. In addition to gaming as a hobby, gamification has become an essential part of other industries. Entrepreneur David Edery and business scholar Ethan Mollick, for example, describe how video games are used to market new products, gather potential customer data, and commodify the labor of fans (Edery and Mollick, 2008). Researchers like James Paul Gee (2003) and Kurt Squire (2006) advocate for the use of video games and virtual environments in classrooms, while game scholar and designer Ian Bogost (2007) sees the potential for video games used by activists and politicians to persuade audiences and to motivate them to take action. Video games are omnipresent, and even after more than ten years, Robinson et al.’s (2009, 17) words still hold true: “Whether we like it or not, [video games] are the medium of our moment.”

Due to the success of mobile games, most people are, by now, part of gaming culture, even if they would not classify themselves as gamers. Although it is often deemed to be a male hobby, gaming is nearly equally attractive to female and male gamers (e.g. ESA, 2020).<sup>1</sup> Games appeal to players of all genders and ages via a variety of platforms, be it computers, consoles or smartphones. An increasing number of women have become frontrunners in competitive esports. Li “Liooon” Xiaomeng who won the Hearthstone Grandmasters Global Finals at the BlizzCon Esports tournament in 2019 is such an example. Gender was an important topic in the public discourse surrounding her victory. Li herself stated: “I want to say to all the girls out there that have a dream for esports competition: If you want to do it and believe in yourself, you should just forget your gender and go for it. As long as you want to play well you can, no matter what gender you have.” (Miller, 2019)

While games are appealing to all genders, gender remains, next to race and sexuality, the source of the greatest bias in contemporary gaming culture, gaming companies and ultimately video games themselves. The #GamerGate movement is one incident in which the misogynistic attitudes within gaming culture surfaced

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<sup>1</sup> Similar reports such as the Digital New Zealand Report (Brand 2016, 9) show a notable growth of the number of females as a proportion of all players over time. The same holds true for most countries.

and became visible to the wider public (Pakman, 2014). The term is used for a gendered harassment campaign against the game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu, their private lives, their stances regarding gender in games and their sheer presence as female game developers in a male-dominated field. “At its base, #GamerGate was an exaggeration of the normative rhetorical practices of hardcore online gamers, a blown-up version of their complex and contradictory views regarding the politics of embodiment and identity.” (Condis 2018, 3) The issues regarding representation and gender around games have proven to be a systemic worldwide problem, which persists on different levels in all parts of gaming. Frum (2013) sees a persistent “boys’ club attitude” in gaming, while Anita Sarkeesian has criticized misogynistic representations within video games.<sup>2</sup>

While video games are criticized by non-players for lacking depth, critics like Nae (2022, 32) point out that “[v]ideo games are not politically neutral artefacts. Like other narrative media such as novels, films, or comic books, video games entertain a complex dialogue with many of the values, norms, and practices fostered by the culture they belong to.” This is connected to cultural fears and fantasies (Murray 2017, 3), the construction of self and identity as well as gender as an essential part of identity (Cole, 2014). Gameplay designer Manveer Heir acknowledges the importance of representation: “The way we portray characters matters to the world at large and has reaching effects beyond video games. ...It impacts how people treat each other in real life, and I really think that this matters.” (Scimeca 2014)

The #GamerGate debate raised the question of how media constitutes and reproduces gender as well as how gender constitutes media in return (Seier and Warth 2005, 107). This double perspective is what Seier and Warth (2005, 96) understand (following Teresa de Lauretis) as “cultural technologies” that power or propel each other. The influence of video games, however, is often deemed greater than that of other media as video games are consumed more actively than, for example, radio and film (Hemovich, 2018; Das et al. 2017, 1–10; Madigan, 2016; McMahan, 2003). Bandura (2011, 265–299) does not see video games as distinct from other media, but stresses the influence of media in general on the consumers:

Social norms, including gender roles and self-perceptions, become internalized and modeled through prolonged mass media consumption, including video games. Researchers maintain that repeated exposure to negative gender stereotypes negatively impacts self-schemas powerfully enough to transmit lasting impressions of body dissatisfaction, lower self-efficacy, and less self-esteem.

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<sup>2</sup> In May 2012, Sarkeesian started a Kickstarter campaign to finance a series of YouTube documentary short films named *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. The campaign was followed by a storm of misogynistic attacks against Sarkeesian and her videos (Shaw 2014, 1). Sarkeesian’s work is still used by the public and scholars alike, which underlines the strong entanglement of academia and video game journalism (e.g. Kiel, 2014).

While some game developers have started addressing the issue of representation<sup>3</sup>, especially in terms of gender, others seem oblivious to the bias that is still prevalent within the medium. To counter this, Murray (2017b, 40) stresses that there never were politically neutral or raceless forms of gender representation. Nakamura (2017) even argues that the current moment, where women have become an increasing presence and consumer power in games, would be the right time for scholars with backgrounds in women's, queer, ethnic and cultural studies to concern themselves with Game Studies and "to strategize about the future of race, gender and digital media." Up to now, too little research has been conducted into the medium and its representation of gender. This is the research gap that the present thesis seeks to fill.

This dissertation strives to tackle biased representations in video games by offering a way to analyze gender in games that builds on the gender methodologies of other disciplines, but focuses on games as a unique medium. While there is already considerable scholarship on gender representations in video games, as will be shown below, these studies have tended to not consider the interactive and performative nature of games and gameplay. Their range of topics is often limited to games that resemble movies, which can be analyzed in the framework of film studies, and therefore feature approaches that are not specific to the medium. This dissertation, however, begins with the unique nature of games and the methodological challenges this creates. Approaches from different disciplines, like drama studies, film studies and empirical approaches from the social sciences, as well as Game Studies, are needed to approach video games in their entirety. This is why the present dissertation, too, is inherently interdisciplinary.

The dissertation is also innovative within Game Studies. In the past decades, research has mostly focused on the debate around whether video games are a ludic or narrative medium, which has led to a stagnation in developing methodological frameworks for games (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2008, 222–224). Although my own humanities background is evident in my focus on close reading, the reading will be attentive to the technicalities and particularities of video games, especially their interactivity, rules, objectives, mechanics, and the ergodicity<sup>4</sup> of video games.

The goal is therefore to devise a methodology for close reading that takes into account the nature of video games as a uniquely multidimensional medium. This

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<sup>3</sup> Representation is used in the following sense: "[R]epresentation refers to the re-presentation of men and women in the media, referring to questions that stress the disparity in the number of men and women present in media and the roles they fulfill. On the other hand, representation refers to the portrayal and imagining of gender, questioning how women and men are portrayed in media and the meanings attached to these portrayals." (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 20)

<sup>4</sup> Aarseth claims that interactivity is an over-simplification of the dynamics of user-game relations. The term makes it appear as if the system is engaged in a dialogue with an active agency. Ergodicity on the other hand means that the user follows the prompts of the program and "the game plays the user just as the user plays the game" (Aarseth 1997, 162).

holistic reading of games tries to overcome some of the indeterminacy and subjectivity of previous approaches to game analysis. In my thesis, I will develop the term *preferred playing*, heavily influenced by Stuart Hall's *preferred reading*, that allows game analysis to identify the most likely text resulting from a playthrough, which in turn can then be further analyzed for gender, but also potentially in terms of e.g. race and class. The *preferred playing* is one of the key findings of the present dissertation as it directly tackles the problems of subjectivity in game analysis. Furthermore, my approach to gender analysis, which I call *possibility frame*, provides a framework to analyze video game characters within the dynamic *space of possibility*, thereby creating a versatile tool which is able to work with the particular way video games represent.

In the following cover article, I will collate my work, which has been published in five articles, to develop a cohesive methodology, which I will then use on one case study to show the possibilities and limitations of my proposed approach. I will start out with a literature review which locates my work within existing research and identifies the need for a new methodological approach that would create a textual basis out of a video game, before turning to my research questions. I will then lay out the game-specific set of tools to analyze gender representation within games. I will continue by demonstrating how to analyze video games for gender, introducing ideas from my individual articles as well as necessary additions that did not fit the tight length requirements of article-based publications.

## 2. SETTING THE PROBLEM: RESEARCH ON GENDER IN GAMES

According to Jenny Sundén and Malin Sveningsson (2012, 3), “[t]he research area of ‘gender and games’ (which more often than not translates as ‘women and games’) appears to be expanding steadily, and yet critical feminist Game Studies scholars are still relatively few and far between.” In research on gaming communities, gender has been discussed, for example in the context of discrimination against female and non-binary players (Heeter 2016, 375–377) or widespread sexism in *World of Warcraft* (2004) (e.g. Brehm, 2013; Oliveira, 2018). However, discussions of gender representation are rare as research tends to focus on the player community, rather than video game content.

As a result, many gender-related studies and pieces of games journalism are old, but their message is still relevant today, because the problems they identified, like the underrepresentation of female characters and the stereotyping of female protagonists, persist. Miller and Summers (2007, 733–742) showed that there was only “1 female for every 5.3 male characters.” While this number has increased and video games are becoming more diverse, as small informal studies (e.g. Croshaw, 2021) show, adding female protagonists does not end the unequal treatment of genders within video games. Instead, they can create a new layer of problematic depictions. As Hemovich (2018, 209) underlines, these games may “resort to subjecting women to highly degrading and sexually voyeuristic acts that take center stage over any otherwise defining personality traits or abilities.” However, the issue varies depending on the sector of the industry. Hemovich (2018, 212) correctly notes that indie game developers often create more diverse female game heroes than the so-called AAA game studios.<sup>5</sup> However, games from AAA studios like *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) or *Overwatch* (2016) that have a cast of characters with diverse backgrounds, genders and sexualities prove a product does not have to be sexist to be successful. Yet, many games from AAA studios still have questionable representations, especially of female characters who are subjected to sexual and other violence.<sup>6</sup> These new types of representation show why tools to analyze gender systematically are still needed for contemporary video games.

The general idea that societal gender inequalities seem to crystallize in cultural artefacts is by no means new. Research on gender and gender roles grows out of

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<sup>5</sup> AAA (pronounced *Triple-A*) is an informal classification which is used to differentiate between independent games and publishers (*indie games/indie developer*) and games produced and distributed by a mid-sized or major publisher. AAA games usually have a larger development and marketing budget available than indie games. Just like the movie equivalent, namely Hollywood blockbusters, AAA games try to appeal to a broad audience.

<sup>6</sup> Hemovich (2018, 210), for example, analyzes *Heavy Rain* (2010) in which “the only playable female character is held at gunpoint and made to perform a nude dance against her will. Also disturbing, players in *Red Dead Redemption* can earn achievement trophies for capturing a woman character with the intent to tie her on train tracks and kill her.”

the feminist movement of the 1970s, and the feminist criticism of the time, among other things, challenged the claim that the male experience is universal (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 11). Stereotypes, social roles, ideologies and pornography were among the first subjects that were researched (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 11). The journal *Sex Roles*, one of the first internationally acclaimed journals that included articles on video games, has been publishing quantitative studies regarding gender relations, gender stereotypes and sexualization as well as gender-based violence in video games for almost 20 years. These, however, largely focus on the ratio of male and female characters as well as their outer appearance.

Initially, articles that combined game and gender studies mainly focused on two fields: 1) violence and pornography within video games, often combined with their influence on children, and 2) underrepresentation. One of the earliest studies on gender in games focused primarily on violence, but also claimed that 60% of arcade games contained male characters, 2% female characters (Braun and Giroux, 1989). The first larger study examined the intersection between violence and stereotypes (Dietz 1998, 429). Although video games have changed due to the extensive development of new gaming technologies, Dietz's more than 20-year-old study is still one of the most quoted studies on gender and video games. She claims that female characters are primarily non-playable, objects of desire, the "goal" of the game, like the damsel in distress, and that they wear dresses with stereotypically coded colors such as pink as well as high heels and leotards (Dietz 1998, 434–35).

In the 2000s, studies started to include game-specific parameters, such as the platforms on which games are released, and gradually substituted the topic of violence with a stronger focus on underrepresentation and stereotyping. The question of the "symbolic annihilation of women by the mass media" (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 32) is particularly important in those works, for example in numerous studies on the underrepresentation of females (e.g. Miller and Summers 2007). Beasley and Standley (2002) are among the first to focus on the release platform, in this case the Nintendo 64 and PlayStation. They analyze 47 games and come to the conclusion that only around 14% of the 597 characters are female, with fewer female characters and more sexualization in the Nintendo games than in PlayStation games (Beasley and Standley 2002, 279). Jansz and Martins (2007, 146), on the other hand, find an almost equal number of males and females in their small study of just 12 games. They instead criticize the strong stereotyping within games as well as the emphasis on muscles in men and breasts in women.

Until around 2018, most studies of gender in video games are quantitative. They see female and non-binary characters as underrepresented and less likely to be playable than male characters (e.g. Ivory, 2006; Scharrer, 2004; Miller and Summers, 2007; Downs and Smith, 2010; Robinson et al., 2009; Mou and Peng, 2009). Moreover, many games are just analyzed in terms of how female characters tend to be designed as objects of the male gaze (e.g. Dickey, 2006; Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Grimes, 2003; Ivory, 2006; Jansz and Martins, 2007). There have been alternative readings of how, for example, the body of Lara Croft in *Tomb*

*Raider* is not merely a visual object, but also a powerful subject and a vehicle for the player's actions (Carr, 2002; Flanagan et al., 2005; Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001), but they remain an exception. Most analyses focus on mainstream titles and do not take independent developers into account. Up to this point, gender was mostly used synonymously with sex, meaning that the representation was solely analyzed in binary oppositions as well as in terms of sheer presence or absence of female characters. This discourse did not lead to the development of a methodological framework nor did it grasp the way in which games represent differently from other media. In his reading of *Tomb Raider*'s protagonist Lara Croft, Kennedy (2002) comes to the conclusion relevant for this dissertation: "It is clear that games are an increasingly sophisticated representational and experiential medium and that we need analytical tools which are precise enough to capture both the similarities and the differences to other forms of leisure consumption."

Since 2015, research on gender and games has been embedded within the bigger context of *geek culture*<sup>7</sup>, with studies mostly focusing on the community and not the medium itself (e.g. Maloney et al., 2019). Genre remains one of the important issues in research on video games and gender. Jennifer Malkowski (2017, 19–37) describes how the trope of the playable femme fatale in video games differs from the filmic one. Her conclusion, however, is that in video games, the "threatening power [of the femme fatale]" is being downplayed as a result of "a revival of 1940s-style gender anxiety" (Malkowski 2017, 34). History remains an important topic of research. It is, however, often concerned with the game industry and less with the medium itself. Soraya Murray (2017b) also studies the video game industry, but focuses predominantly on the politics of games themselves, especially postcolonialism, whiteness and ideology in games. She concludes that in games, whiteness and maleness are still a universal expression of humanity (Murray 2017b, 137).

Murray's conclusion in particular concerns US video games. The problematic focus on the US market and the US mindset as universal remains an important topic in academia. Aoyama and Izushi (2003) point out that the cultural requirements for games differ vastly between the Eastern and Western market, in particular with regard to their use of femininity and masculinity. Video game stereotypes and settings are only rarely explained within their socio-cultural context. Localization and translation are also rarely the focus of analysis. Glasspool (2016, 100), for example, notes that with Japanese roleplaying games (J-RPGs) in particular, companies often try to include as few markers of "Japaneseness" as possible, but also stresses how many fictional elements still cater to a Japanese-

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<sup>7</sup> *Geek culture* is a "subculture of enthusiasts that is traditionally associated with obscure media (Japanese animation, science fiction, video games, etc.)." (McCain et al. 2015, 1) With more and more comics turning into mainstream superhero movies and the possibility to connect via online channels and geek conventions (e.g. Comic-con or Dragon\*Con), the subcultures "have become multi-billion dollar industries" (McCain et al. 2015, 1–2).



oriented taste in video games.<sup>8</sup> A relatively new branch of research is concerned with players' approaches to perceived "gaps", e.g. – in the communities' eyes – missing content, representation and topics within video games. Whelan (2020) investigates the niche of female modders<sup>9</sup>. This is a valuable addition to gender Game Studies in so far as it shows what players are missing in terms of gender and representation.

One of the latest publications that deals with video games and gender is closely related to my research. Nae (2022) establishes the close connection between Judith Butler's concept of performativity and the kind of performativity that video games offer. He determines, also relying on Ian Bogost's concept of *procedural rhetoric* (2007), that video games' particular rhetoric is embedded within their interactive design that sets them apart from other media and their representation of gender. For Butler, gender is culturally constructed and not a fixed category but performed via various modes of representation. Nae (2022, 33) claims that video games as procedural media "occupy a privileged position in the social construction of gender since, unlike linear media, they turn passive recipients of expressions of gender into enactors of gender."

This literature review shows that in terms of gender, no universally accepted methodology exists to analyze gender specifically in video games. Previous research uses binary oppositions to grasp only the quantitative dimension of gender in games, relies on long-standing tools of literature and film studies such as the history of tropes or the prevalence of nudity and instances of sexualization. Mostly, it does not reflect on the subjectivity of the analyst's reading of a game (as opposed to the possibilities the game might give), does not take into account especially ludic stereotypes, does not include gameplay and rules as an important category for the analysis of other parameters (such as race or gender) and engages

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<sup>8</sup> This leads to the broader topic of cultural representation of femininity and masculinity. There are notable cultural differences in how ideas of femininity and masculinity are articulated in characters, which requires researchers to adapt to certain forms of femininity and masculinity for global products like video games. An example of this is the erasure of especially female BIPOC in the main character cast of Japanese video games due to the fact that "white skin is considered a superior sign of judging beauty, purity, chastity, femininity and moral virtue" (Hussein 2010, 405) until today, connecting whiteness in game characters to positive characteristics like happiness and darker skin to the opposite (Hussein 2010, 416). In the case of masculinities, the popular Korean "soft masculinity" (Jung 2011, 39), which attracts e.g. Japanese female fans of actors embodying this beauty ideal, would be perceived differently through the lens of a researcher who does not consider this in their analysis. This layer of a game's reading is further complicated by a game's global reception, as they are in many instances marketed not to a single country but worldwide. While **Article V** and **Article I** include cultural markers of (Japanese and American) femininity/masculinity, a detailed integration of this component could be used to develop my methodological framework even further.

<sup>9</sup> Modders are players who create their own content for video games, which they then share with others via various platforms such as Steam or Nexus (Postigo, 2007). The term is derived from the word "modifying". As they question the idea of videogames as a fixed medium, they draw awareness to the needs of players by filling the gaps for desirable content themselves.

too little with game specifics in general, such as genre and gaming traditions, which differ from region to region. The research does also often not engage with the games itself, but with supplementary media such as comments in forums or *Let's Plays*.<sup>10</sup>

While Nae's work understands gender as fluid and changeable, none of the other publications mentioned above assume this kind of flexibility for video games. They also do not question the notion of "text" in the context of games. This is a major issue because of the subjective nature of the individual playthrough on which most argumentations rely. The subjectivity partly stems from the fact that, as Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011, 299) argue, two players will most likely not encounter the same media assets while interacting with the game or they will encounter them in a different order. This weakens claims about gendered bias in video games, since they can easily be countered with the claim of having encountered different parts of the game or claiming that all parts of a game are equally important and likely to appear, making the biased parts appear more insignificant in the overall fabric of the game. This is especially important for gender. Subjective accounts can easily be dismissed in an argument about misrepresentation, often accompanied by the statement that the person analyzing the game is biased or sensitive – an argument that feminist critiques are especially likely to face, as the discourse around games is still embedded, as stated before, in the boys' club attitude, which often rejects ideas of gender equality outright.

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<sup>10</sup> *Let's Plays* are recordings of other players playing a video game. Most of them include commentary from the players. Viewers watch *Let's Plays* for enjoyment, since their form resembles movies and does not need active participation.

### 3. RESEARCH QUESTION AND FOCUS

The overall research question that connects the five articles gathered in the dissertation is – what methodology allows researchers to cover the different aspects of gender in games, while being attentive to the unique nature of games as an interactive and performative medium? The developed concept of *preferred playing* serves as a foundation which minimizes subjectivity in game research. Upon this foundation, multiple approaches have been created in the different articles included here to analyze video game characters in terms of gender.

**Article II** lists several approaches that try to solve the problem of subjectivity in using the individual playthrough as a text for analysis, for example Iser's concept of the *implied reader* (1974), partly synonymous with Aarseth's *implied player* (2007), and Schmierbach's (2009) approach to multiple players and playthroughs, reviews and journalistic articles as additional documents (Malliet, 2007). More empirical approaches like relying on a corpus of reviews or multiple players, however, will not necessarily result in objectivity as they are still incomplete, subjective accounts. The other extreme is the seemingly objective coding of, for example, every character in a game in past quantitative research that does not take into account the performativity of games, in which characters might be present in one person's playthrough while being absent in others. This binary system also fails to grasp the importance of one character in regards to another, thereby falsely viewing, for example, the objectification of a by-standing character as equally important as that of the main character who occupies more screentime. James D. Ivory (2006, 104) points out that video games strikingly differ from other media in that the experiences of each playthrough can differ radically depending on the skills, the invested time and the decisions of the player. The ergodicity (Aarseth 1997, 1) of the medium does not appear in most contemporary analyses. An inconsistent or nearly nonexistent narration, heavily influenced by the player, must be analyzed as such. This is especially true for politically charged topics like gender.

While **Article II** does not feature a detailed problematization of terms like "subjectivity", it should be noted that qualitative research is "inevitably influenced by our position and experiences as a researcher in relation to our participants." (Greene 2014, 1) This is particularly true for insider research,<sup>11</sup> "which is concerned with the study of one's own social group or society." (Greene 2014, 1) While I would argue that work on video games, due to the complex nature of games and their framework, is rarely possible without being an insider, my own work is certainly influenced by me being a long-time player of games, and a feminist scholar and woman with a background in literary and film/media studies. This grants me, as an insider, both knowledge and access (Green 2014, 3–4) as well as methodological advantages in the research process (Chavez 2008, 476).

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that the outsider-insider distinction is problematic, since, according to Chavez (2008, 474) both insider and outsider largely contend with similar methodological issues around their positionality and their knowledge.

This means that I can leverage my own position as resource, but it might also threaten my objectivity (Workman, 2007). The proposed methodology, however, falls under the techniques and tools which assist insider research in avoiding bias, as it is meant to establish “dependability and confirmability” (Greene 2014, 7; see also Guba, 1981) beyond those established in Game Studies, as discussed in the literature review. Especially in connection with feminist studies, approaches that are intended to be subjective can be revealing, as they often “employ feminist, queer, crip, or critical race theory, emphasize the centrality of identity and positionality in their interpretive analysis.” (Stang 2022, 231) They do, however, put researchers in a position of vulnerability, as the aforementioned treatment of Anita Sarkeesian shows. Stang (2022, 232) explicitly mentions criticism from ludology-oriented individuals, which could be counteracted with a methodological approach like mine that highlights game-specific characteristics. Minimizing bias, especially in close reading, can strengthen social-justice-oriented work as that of feminist scholars and provide them with additional backbone in the still politically-charged climate.

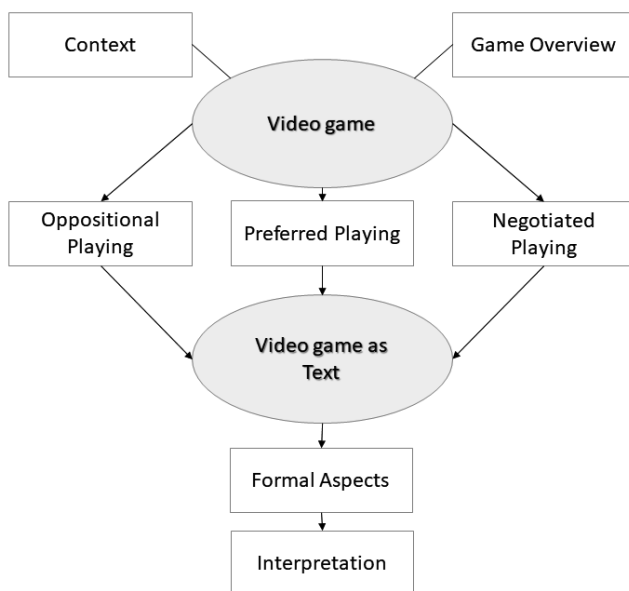
Many of the approaches described in the literature review can therefore be used more effectively if the analysis considers video games as a unique medium. Binary oppositions need to be broken up with concepts like Fernández-Vara’s (2015) *space of possibility*, but I argue that a fitting methodology has to tackle the problem of subjectivity first. In **Article II**, using Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler’s concept of *nudge* (2008), I transform Stuart Hall’s notion of *preferred reading* (1973) into the concept of *preferred playing* to create a new approach to textual analysis appropriate for video games as interactive media. The *preferred playing* is the most likely way the game is played according to the game’s structure, and the concepts of *negotiated playing* and *oppositional playing* underline that many games are not only played to reach the end and win but also to, for example, engage in roleplaying or to use the game as a sandbox for personal experiences. The resulting texts can then be analyzed further through different lenses.

In my corpus of work, I propose a range of lenses to analyze gender. I concentrate mainly on character analysis in **Article III** and **Article V**, transformative uses of established concepts of gender studies (**Article I**) and on immersion (**Article IV**). While my concept of *preferred playing* from **Article II** is, in my work, used as a tool for gender analysis, it can also be used for other topics such as race. The same applies to the other concepts that I introduce throughout the articles and the cover article.

While this framework is intended for academic use, it also strives to influence public discourse by providing a reliable vocabulary that provides three-dimensional insights into gender in video games by perceiving them as *games*, i.e. inherently performative media. Because no extensive discussion of methodology could be found at the time of writing, the frame chapter provides a step-by-step manual for analyzing gender in games.

The general structure of this cover article is inspired by Fernández-Vara’s *Introduction to Game Analysis*, one of the most important introductory works in

Game Studies. The young discipline still struggles with developing a common foundation, so it is important to connect new work with previous literature, to help establish a cohesive discipline. I put the perspectives proposed by Fernández-Vara (context, the general game overview and the formal aspects) into a gendered context. Instead of her formal aspects, suited for a general game analysis, I propose the three core aspects of my own research: the transformative uses of longstanding tools of gender studies (*performativity*, *Othering*, *hegemonic structures* and *hegemonic masculinity*, connected to the notion of *androcentrism*, *compulsory heterosexuality* and the *male gaze*), tools for analyzing characters in games and tools to tackle immersion. I will link my methodology to other scholars' work, discuss the terminology used and propose directions for further work. I will then apply my methodology to a case study, *Code Vein* (2019) to demonstrate how the methodology can be used. Although such extensive analyses are not usual in frame chapters, I believe it is necessary here as the full methodological range could not be used in any of the articles included in the dissertation. In the final part of my work, I will reflect on the affordances and limitations of my work, while suggesting directions for further research.



*Fig. 1: How to analyze video games for the representation of gender with the preferred playing.*

Fig. 1 marks the way in which the dissertation proposes games should be approached to analyze them for gender, but also illustrates the structure of the cover article. These layers of context, game overview and formal aspects form the basis for researching gender in video games. Fernández-Vara (2015, 56) defines context as the step in which the game is situated historically, culturally, socially and economically. The game overview is necessary to establish the scope of an analysis. Games rely on a broad categorization as well as a rule- and gameplay-based overview<sup>12</sup>. The formal aspects cover specialized approaches like character analysis, immersion and performativity. The contribution of my articles can mainly be situated in the general approach to the *preferred playing* and the formal aspects, which can, framed by the other layers, be used for a gender-based interpretation.

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<sup>12</sup> Gameplay can be defined as the combination of rules and geography in a game (Egenfeldt et al. 2008, 102).

## 4. METHODOLOGY: HOW TO ANALYZE GENDER IN GAMES

### 4.1. Playing the Game

Before beginning the analysis, it is mandatory to actually play the game. Two aspects, namely the feeling of a game and the difficulty, are often overlooked in gender analysis, but offer important insights into gender relations (Fig. 2).

Playing Gender: Relevant Aspects of Play
Game Feel (Swink 2009)
Difficulty

Fig. 2: Aspects of play that are relevant for gender analysis.

While some scholars argue that so called *Let's Plays* could substitute for actually playing the game or even create more critical distance (Fernández-Vara 2015, 28–29), I argue that the haptic dimension of a game, e.g. the feeling of the controls, is central for a holistic analysis. Game designer Steve Swink argues that the feeling of play is one of the most important aspects of video games. Game feel is the “[r]eal-time control of virtual objects in a simulated space, with interactions emphasized by polish.” (Swink 2009, 6) The feeling is less relevant for turn-based games than for games that feature real-time action (such as shooters and platformers). Controls that feel “floaty”, “responsive”, “loose” or “rigid” (Swink 2009, 1) can change the interpretation of a game. A character appears more competent (and also empowered in terms of gender) when handling the character feels impactful and intuitive. This means, for example, that if pressing one or two buttons in combat is already as impactful as pressing five or six buttons on another character, the first character will feel stronger and more capable. The player embodies the character to a certain degree. Swink argues that when driving a car and being involved in an accident, one rarely thinks “my car had an accident” but “I had an accident”, seeing the car as an extension of oneself, which is the same case in video games (Swink 2009, 12). Cutting that connection removes one central dimension of games from the analysis.

Most *Let's Plays* on YouTube offer little to no context about the person playing or feature seasoned players, who are already overfamiliar with the content of the game and the genre, therefore mastering objectives with greater ease than intended by the game itself. *Let's Plays* usually show the solution or the outcome of the best option, not necessarily all options, potentially chosen on the basis of previous playthroughs. Playing is the only way to explore the *space of possibility* in a video game. *Let's Plays*, however, can be used as an analytical tool to provide additional information when trying to capture details like the *mise-en-scène*, which might have been difficult to grasp while playing. Recording one's own playthrough

might be valuable, because it combines the dimension of play with the possibility of analyzing visual material without hurry.

One problem that often arises when doing research on games is difficulty. Unlike movies, video games do not unfold without player interaction. Difficulty and losing are recurring topics among game scholars (e.g. Furze 2016, 150) as well as players (e.g. Sterling, 2016). Detective games, often realized within the genre of point-and-click, are difficult because they rely on players' memory and problem-solving skills. Other games, however, achieve difficulty by, for example, limiting the time available for an action, demanding a good set of reflexes or an in-depth knowledge of the genre. Strategy games are hard due to the complexity and number of possible interactions, just like in chess, where the mastery of the board and of the pieces is essential.

Difficulty can also be an important part of the analysis of the game in terms of gender. Mia Consalvo talks about the so-called “gaming capital”, which stands for the different preferences and playing practices of players<sup>13</sup>, but also defines the knowledge of players. Looking at what gaming capital is actually needed to “beat a game” can be valuable in terms of defining the intended audience and putting themes, motives and tropes into context (Consalvo 2007, 3–5). This can be seen, for example, in the “souls-like” genre, named after the famously difficult *Dark Souls* series, one of the most defining genres of recent years (Wood, 2022). Souls-likes games make players feel constant threat of losing equipment, experience or hours of progress (Rougeau, 2017). In terms of gender, they are especially interesting because they can be viewed as a continuation of arcade games. Gaming was, at the time, a predominantly male domain (Williams, 2013). The difficulty was part of the financial model of arcade games, because losing a game meant that the player had to spend another coin to continue playing, which only added to the threat of defeat. Both arcade games and souls-likes follow the model “fail, overcome and win.” Matthew Byrd (2016) sees these games as a counter-movement to mainstream gaming. Mainstream gaming aims to make gaming appealing to a broad spectrum of players, including women who are still perceived to be more interested in so-called “casual” games (Cieślak, 2022). Souls-like games can thus be considered a genre which attracts male gamers.

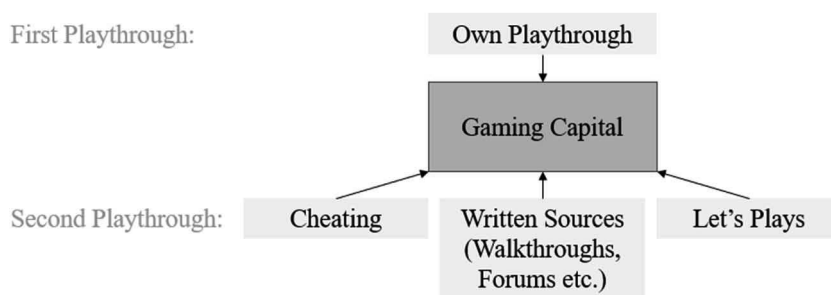


Fig. 3: Ways to enhance one's own gaming capital and to tackle difficulty.

<sup>13</sup> This is related to Bartle's (1996) player types, namely Killers, Achievers, Explorers and Socializers, which each come with their preferred type of game content and approach to gaming.



There are, however, ways to tackle difficulty, which also serve as additional sources to analyzing a game (Fig. 3). Walkthroughs<sup>14</sup> and cheats not only offer help, but also additional insight into, for example, branching narratives and optional content. Consalvo has found that cheating is defined in a variety of contrasting ways by players, some categorizing the mere act of informing oneself through sources outside of the game as cheating, while others only perceive the use of cheat codes and changing the code of the game as such, embracing the consultation of walkthroughs and forums as part of the playing experience (Consalvo 2007, 83–105).

After completing the game once, cheating in the second playthrough can help a researcher gain access to shortcuts to specific parts of the story or to preconditions in simulations that would otherwise take hundreds of hours to achieve. The same is true for walkthroughs, which can help with finding the desired path if it is not obvious in a progressing story.

Fernández-Vara (2015, 27) states: “Establishing how much one needs to play the game in order to obtain relevant information is one of the first early decisions to make.” The point at which a scholar can claim to have “mastered” or “finished” a game depends solely on the research question. So-called *games of progression* (Juul, 2002) are usually narrative focused, often featuring an act-like structure that can be analyzed, for example, with Syd Field’s three-act screenplay model (Field, 1979) or Rowe’s (1939) dramatic structure. If games do not branch, it is usually enough to play through them once. If more choices are given, it is advisable to play the game multiple times or inform oneself regarding alternative progressions, e.g. via *Let’s Plays*, since the haptic dimension is already covered by one’s own first playthrough. In the rare case that the amount of branching is so enormous that it cannot be covered within the time available for the research, there is always the option to go with the *preferred playing* as explained in more detail later (Meier 2021a, 159). In *games of emergence* (Juul, 2002), comparable to chess, such as *Bejeweled 2* (2004) or *Hearthstone* (2014), the researcher has to gain a good insight into the game before working with the *preferred playing* to get a clearer picture of what the game actually tries to represent. This is also advisable for massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), which feature a potentially near infinite number of missions.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Walkthroughs are manuals on how to complete a game successfully, which are, for more linear titles, structured according to the game’s narrative, or offer ideal strategies on how to beat games that are closer to, for example, chess or tennis.

<sup>15</sup> Quoting from the actual game remains a problem in Game Studies. Often, *games of progression* are easier to divide into separate parts for ease of citation. Some have an act structure with explicitly named chapters, while others need a more complex combination of methods for citation. For example, in some *games of progression* (e.g., *Fallout 4* (2015)), events are triggered not necessarily chronologically, but when certain preconditions are fulfilled, for example completing another mission or meeting another character. While many encounters are not easily reproduceable, naming preconditions and place of the event helps to make a quotation verifiable. With *games of emergence* such as *Hearthstone* (2014), an online card game, a round of cards is influenced by the chosen character (the diegetic card player), the opposing character, the card composition of the player’s deck, and possible changes to the core ruleset of the game. These parameters already help to reproduce a situation accordingly.

## 4.2. Context

The socio-historical and technological context, including year of development, country of origin and localization<sup>16</sup>, as well as the developer and publisher, are especially important for a gender-oriented reading (Fig. 4). I will also go into greater detail about genre, especially in the form of gendered game genres and transmedia storytelling as one of the persisting trends in popular culture (and subsequently the gaming industry). Game genres work differently from literary genres or movie genres. As the literature review shows, not only settings and topics are gendered in game genres, but also approaches to difficulty (e.g. casual games are more likely developed for female players) and gameplay. The genre of a game therefore already strongly hints at the target audience on multiple levels. As for the transmedia storytelling, the transition of a narrative from one medium to another highlights in which ways games deliver gender bias differently than other media.

Context and Gender: Relevant Aspects	
Socio-historical Context	e.g. social norms, popular influences of the time, country of origin, marketing, target audience, localization, translation
Technological Context	e.g. technological affordances, console or home computer, game version, input device
Developer/Publisher	e.g. team size, AAA vs. indie games, oeuvre of developer/publisher, circumstances and creative freedom, budget
Genre	e.g. history of genre, gendered genre, typical tropes and stereotypes of a genre, target audience of a genre
Transmedia Storytelling	e.g. ideological predispositions, translation of ideologies from other media into gameplay
Paratexts	e.g. marketing, box, forum discussions, journalistic pieces, Steam achievements, fanfiction, developer's website, ratings, reviews

*Fig. 4: Aspects of context that are relevant for gender analysis.*

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<sup>16</sup> Game localization is more than just the process of translating a video game for the foreign market. It usually entails a cultural adaptation, e.g. editing out religious symbols for certain countries.

First, starting with the **socio-historical context**, the circumstances under which a game was produced help to map the social norms and popular influences of the time. Tristan Donovan (2010, 117–118), for example, sees many of the games developed in the 1980s in the UK as part of British Surrealism, inspired by Monty Python. Games like *Custer's Revenge* (1982), with representations of cowboys raping Native American women, reflect a time when sexual violence and racism had not been as problematized as today (Oscala Star-Banner 1982 8B). Women's rights groups heavily criticized the game but the resulting publicity led to the game selling about 80,000 copies, twice as many games as other adult-only games (Herman 1997, 88).

The second important socio-cultural context is the country of origin or region. This, however, is problematic in itself. Many developer teams are multicultural and include developers of different genders and backgrounds. Tying a game to a specific culture can therefore be hard. Nevertheless, the audience tends to group games by region of origin – especially when talking about “Western games” (W-RPGs) in contrast to “Japanese games” (J-RPGs). J-RPGs tend to be more character-centered, which influences the use of round or flat characters. The roles of and outlooks for female characters often mirror aesthetics and tropes that have already been popularized in anime and manga. As I stress in **Article V**, what is understood as obscene or taboo differs by country. Pelletier-Gagnon and Picard (2015, 37) state that themes of female degradation, stalking and even rape are allowed in Japan, as well as featuring naked underage girls, since Japan relies on a problematic “self-regulated system of ethics.” However, video games as products are distributed around the globe. Examining a game's economic context must therefore include where the game was distributed, how it was marketed and to whom, as well as asking what the business model behind the game was and is (Fernández-Vara, 67–77).

Third, when analyzing games that have been translated and localized, one should look into the particularities of the original, as shown in **Article V**. Poison and Roxy from the game *Final Fight* (1989) could, without any problems, be perceived as women, but were turned into transvestites in the American localization, because during that period it was deemed more problematic to beat women than transgender people (Shaw 2014, 36). Changes to the visuals can be equally significant, for example in *Final Fantasy VIII* (1999) the “left-facing swastika [...], which in Japan is recognized as an auspicious Buddhist symbol, was changed to a European-style cross in the USA and European localizations.” (Glasspool 2016, 104)

After the socio-historical context, one should first identify the **developer and publisher** of a game in addition to the **technological context**, with attention to the fact that video games are usually a team effort. The team working on the game *Watch Dogs* (2014), for example, initially included ten people but was enhanced to thirty and more than 1000 people were needed to release the game on different

platforms, work on trailers, marketing and more (Dutton 2013).<sup>17</sup> Conditions set by the publisher usually have a huge impact on the product and the marketing. In *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), one of the best-selling titles of 2017, the developer could press for their vision of a female protagonist while the publisher wished for a male protagonist, but such power from the developer is rare (Peterson, 2015). Similar decisions are made throughout the development process of many games, invisible to the player. Thus the analysis should focus on the game itself.

Nevertheless, team size and structures can already give insight into what to expect from a game in terms of technology and presentation. Alex Amancio, one of the developers of *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2014), famously claimed that they "had to" cut female assassins from the co-op mode, because "it's double the animations, double the voices, all that stuff, double the visual assets – especially because we have customizable assassins." (LeJacq, 2014) As the developer, Ubisoft, is one of the biggest video game companies of all times, the absence of females in multiplayer mode can be interpreted as a conscious choice that has little to do with technological or budgetary restrictions (LeJacq, 2014; Grieve, 2020). By contrast, many indie developers are known for pixel graphics and a focus on story, which is easier and cheaper to develop than a huge three-dimensional world with photorealistic graphics. Style and technological context should therefore always be considered in relation to each other but not necessarily deemed dependent on each other.

It often proves valuable to look at the range of products the developer has developed. Many Japanese companies such as Nintendo have a longstanding history as a toymaker and arcade machine producer, which results in a game tradition with much fewer avatars, but agents which can be transformed into merchandise (Aldred 2016, 361). Analyzing the oeuvre of a studio can also lead to insights into typical genres and gameplay conventions.

As the second part of the technological context, it is essential to map out which version of the game is being analyzed. Video games are often released on different platforms (consoles, PCs, different operating systems) and feature at times striking differences. One example would be the game *The Last Remnant*, which was released for Xbox (2008) and PC (2009). Next to substantial changes in the combat system, three new classes were made available for PC, which could be analyzed regarding their availability for the gender-exclusive races that the game features. Additionally, many games have remakes, remasters or enhanced editions that feature additional or different content (e.g. in the *Final Fantasy VII* remake (2020; original 1997). The exact number of the game version should also be added. *Spiritfarer*, a game originally fully released in 2020, was patched on December 13, 2021, with major content update for two characters (Thunder Lotus,

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<sup>17</sup> Famous directors are often taken as counterexample to the claim that games are a team effort. While directors like Yoko Taro or Hideo Kojima, who are represented in the media as the single most important people of the *NieR* franchise and the *Metal Gear* universe, potentially have a considerable power over the design of their respective franchises, their influence is strongly limited due to the sheer size of the video games they claim responsibility for.

2021). Analyzing those characters before and after the update, would, for many research questions, yield a different result. Lastly, it is highly advisable to not only name the platform, but also specify the input device, since interpretation can differ depending on whether the game was played with, for example, keyboard and mouse or a controller.

When considering **genre** and the implications of a genre, it can be, as recommended by Juul (2007, 205–216), valuable to trace the history of a genre. In movies, soap operas target a predominantly female audience, Westerns a male one (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 52). As a result, we can talk about “gendered genres.” (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 52) Genres set in the domestic sphere are thus traditionally regarded as feminine, while masculine genres are typically set in the public sphere or feature physical altercations as well as themes of victory and defeat (Neale 2013, 327). With video games, however, this genre categorization is further complicated by the medium’s inherent variety of relevant factors, such as mechanics, perspectives, settings and the incorporation of traditional genres. Game genres are therefore defined through both ludic and filmic categories, each with their own set of stereotypes and gender roles (Eder and Thon 2012, 159).

First-person shooters, as well as action games in general, are more likely to feature male protagonists. Game genres also serve as a marketing argument. Even if a certain game attracts players of all genders, it should however not be considered an indicator for an equal treatment of genders within the game. Glasspool (2016, 100) notes that while games from the longstanding *Final Fantasy* series are often hailed for their rather balanced male/female player ratio, this does not mean that they are “free from hegemonic gender norms.”<sup>18</sup>

While the categorization of genre is particular to the medium, media increasingly interact in popular culture. Bolter and Grusin (1999, 55) state that media are in a permanent state of communication, influencing each other: Every act of medializing is also an act of remediation. Video games experiment with elements from other media more than any preceding medium, e.g., explicitly literary inspired video games like *Zork* (1980), those inspired by comics and graphic novels like *Framed* (2014), or inherently filmic video games like *Heavy Rain* (2010) that are closer to interactive movies. All forms of remediation share two common criteria: immediacy and hypermediacy (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 5). In the case of immediacy, the preceding medium vanishes, whereas with hypermediacy the medium draws attention to itself and makes itself the topic of discussion. In what Bolter and Grusin (1999, 5) call the “double logic of

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<sup>18</sup> The most famous games in the series, *Final Fantasy VII* to *X*, feature exclusively male heroes, with *Final Fantasy XIII* (2009) as the first one to break the tradition and feature a female protagonist. In the previous games, the heroes’ love interests were famously killed off to progress the protagonist’s story, as with Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII* (1997), are idealized beacons of morality, like Yuna in *Final Fantasy X* (2001), or fulfill the prototypical role of the princess, such as Garnet in *Final Fantasy IX* (2009).

remediation”, those mechanics do not cancel each other out, but oscillate between transparency and opacity (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 33).

This is why games are often part of **transmedia storytelling** that “focuses on the presentation of different aspects of a fictional world across different media, rather than on how story events may be retold in a different medium.” (Fernández-Vara 2015, 80) Some video games can be tie-ins for movies, byproducts of movie releases, or inspired by or faithful adaptations of other media (Fernández-Vara 2015, 81). Of primary importance for our purposes is how another medium’s world is translated into the ruleset of games. The world of Robert E. Howard’s *Conan the Barbarian*, for example, has gone from stories published in *Weird Tales* to novels to numerous other media, most famously the film which stars Arnold Schwarzenegger, Marvel’s comic series, numerous television programs and different kinds of games. In the “Conanverse”, women have, as in many older works of the sword and sorcery genre, very restricted roles (damsels, seductresses and mothers). However, the ruleset of, for example, *Conan Exiles* (2017) treats men and women similarly. Their ludic attributes are the same, they can take on the same roles, and even the introductory cutscene, despite featuring Conan as the hero who saves a scantily dressed woman, seems to communicate a different approach to gender by allowing the woman to later save Conan.

This gender equality is most likely a product of its time. The game was released in 2017, but Conan’s literary adventures started in 1931. However, the shift in the franchise’s gender representation can also be explained through the video game’s particular interactive element. While submissive and restricted female protagonists in a novel might spark an emotional reaction, this reaction would probably be even bigger when the player is actively forced to *reenact* the degradation. In addition, the video game has to introduce new characters, because in a multiplayer game, not everyone can be Conan. The transmedial world that the game is part of can therefore be seen as a predisposition, a starting point to examining in which way a game differs from the established lore and ideology and how those ideologies are translated into rules and objectives. This means that it is always worth investigating if a game is part of an established franchise, what part of an existing world is pronounced, which parts might be neglected or even erased, and what role the player embodies compared to the audience of other media incarnations (Fernández-Vara 2015, 83). Many of these questions include a gender aspect.

When discussing target audiences, it is also, as a last step, worth looking into what Gérard Genette calls *paratexts*. Paratexts exist in relation to the main text and influence the way in which the audience might interpret it (Genette 1997, 1–15). Paratexts could be reviews, discussions in forums, the box of the game, fanfiction, the game’s commercial website, interviews with the developer, commercials for the game, Twitch streams and YouTube videos (Fernández-Vara 2015, 55–85).

Video game digital distribution services like Valve’s Steam or CD Projekt’s GOG.com not only sell the games, but also showcase a plethora of paratexts.<sup>19</sup>

Paratexts can be a valuable addition when, for example, discussing the main objectives or topics of a game. One example of this would be Steam’s achievement system. For some games, the achievements already set the tone for what is expected of the player within the game, therefore participate in the framing of the game.<sup>20</sup>



Fig. 5: Top-voted comment on Steam for Code Vein (retrieved December 21, 2021).



Fig. 6: Gender-related comment on Steam for Code Vein (retrieved December 21, 2021).

Paratexts can also be helpful in evaluating if the individual perspective matches that of other players. One should first play the game and then look at reviews or community works. Here, the most upvoted comments are of particular interest. In the case of *Code Vein* (2019), comments like those in Fig. 5 already show the

<sup>19</sup> For example, when playing a game on Steam, next to the “PLAY”-button, the platform offers news from the developer, a community hub for sharing walkthroughs and fanart, discussing subjects around the game as well as the opportunity for providing bug reports. It is possible to find groups for multiplayer games, compare oneself to friends who have also played the game or examine one’s own collection of trading cards that one is awarded for simply running the game.

<sup>20</sup> In *Code Vein* (2019), for example, the achievement “Oliver Collins” states: “Defeat Oliver Collins in the ruined city underground.” This is a necessary step to complete the game. The game features 14 out of 43 achievements that use the formula “[Name of the enemy]: Defeat [name of the enemy] in [place]”, which already sets the tone for the game, framing combat against named enemies, so-called “bosses”, as one of the central elements of the game.

context in which the game is perceived. Other comments, as seen in Fig. 6 display attitudes towards gender by recommending the game based on the female characters' pronounced breasts.

### 4.3. General Game Overview

In her introduction to game analysis, Fernández-Vara suggests giving an overview of the game after contextualizing it. The multipart overview she suggests ensures that the reader has the same knowledge of the game as the researcher (Fernández-Vara 2015, 86). This, however, easily turns a research paper into an overelaborate description of the game, which is why I propose that a minimalistic general game overview is sufficient.

Depending on the kind of game, the general overview should consist of different elements. If the game happens to be a *game of progression*, it is advisable to give a short synopsis. One should then name ways in which the player usually interacts with the game during a playthrough, e.g. by fighting in turn-based- or real-time strategy battles or by interacting with objects as is the case in point-and-clicks. Even if games of progression usually put more stress on narrative and character development, it is important to address the gameplay loop.<sup>21</sup> Fernández-Vara (2015, 88–166) recommends stating whether the game is a single-player or a multiplayer game (or both), and if different game modes exist. This usually changes the way in which players interact with the game. To keep the amount of general information manageable and not to overwhelm the reader, it is advisable to refrain from mapping out mechanics and rules of the game in detail at this point.

Fernández-Vara acknowledges that subjective accounts can be problematic, since they are “easiest to dismiss (and even ridicule if not done properly). It is easy to fall into intentional fallacy, misattribution, or plainly irrelevant interpretations.” (Fernández-Vara 2015, 207) I would also argue that the key to interpretative analysis, historical analysis and illustrating a theory (Fernández-Vara 2015, 177) should still be based on the medium and be deduced from that very medium.

### 4.4. The Circle and the Line: Space of Possibility and Preferred Playing

Many studies on video games downplay the importance of the text and subsequent text analysis for game analysis and instead analyze the subjective playthrough of the player/researcher. This, in turn, invites the criticism of qualitative game research, cited above, as being subjective (Fernández-Vara 2015, 207).

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<sup>21</sup> “A Gameplay Loop is a game design term that is used to describe the repetitive activities that a player will take while playing a game. It, essentially, defines what the player DOES while playing.” (Duetzmann, 2020)



In **Article II**, I develop Fernández-Vara’s (2015) *space of possibility*, but concentrate on different readings that form the foundation for precise results when analyzing video games for topics such as class, race and gender. In this article, I use the concept of *nudge* (Sunstein and Thaler, 2008) to transform Stuart Hall’s concept of *preferred reading* (1973) into the concept of *preferred playing*. With this I created an approach to textual analysis which is appropriate for video games as interactive media. I discuss markers of *preferred playing* as an alternative to more traditional close reading.<sup>22</sup> I combined them with concepts and insights from contemporary Game Studies and game design on the different layers of the medium. This article proposes a way to navigate choice architecture in video games to create different texts, ranging from the *preferred playing* to the *oppositional playing*. This helps create a solid foundation for finding bias in games. In this frame chapter, I want to contextualize my findings further and put them in relation to existing research.

In **Article II**, I argue that qualitative game research should take into account the content of video games by mapping it in its entirety as the *space of possibility* and then identifying the *preferred playing* within that spectrum with the help of the markers of *preferred play* (Fig. 7). In visual terms, I describe this as “the circle and the line” (Meier 2021a, 158). The first step is a collection of data from the game, the *space of possibility*, which gives an overview of the sheer range of content (e.g. characters, clothes, possible actions). The *preferred playing* is closely intertwined with the most important feature of video games, interactivity (Bogost 2007, 46).

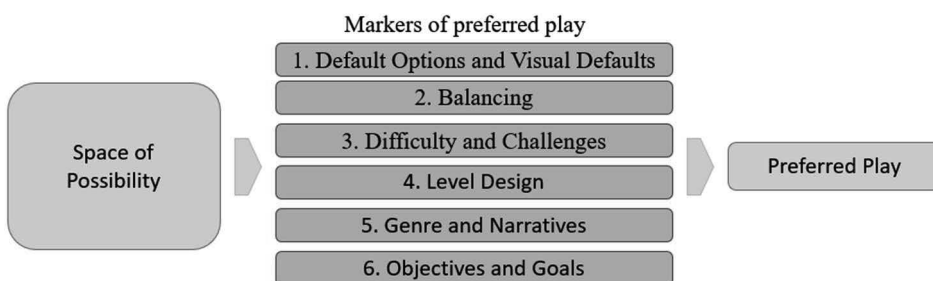


Fig. 7: Through the markers of preferred play, the preferred play can be deduced from the space of possibility.

<sup>22</sup> Since my methodology centers around a close reading approach but can be and was used to identify ideological meanings in video games, it could be argued that it is an ideological reading rather than close reading, resembling poststructuralist methodology more than the formalist foundations on which close reading is founded. Close reading, however, as formalist methodology “was itself an ideological movement” (Wright 1990, 438), trying to uncover automatisms under the habitual. “[T]here is no reason why the relationship between ideology and form should not be scientifically investigated [...]” (Wright 1990, 438) This work therefore makes use of close reading, because social claims could remain hollow if they are not based on a formalist foundation, and thus undermine the effort for more objectivity in Game Studies.

The *space of possibility* is mostly concerned with the hard-coded content of the game. My approach to determining the *preferred playing* takes into account not just this hard-coded space, but also the procedural content and rhetoric. Hard-coded data can be graphics, text and sound. “Procedural content, on the other hand, consists of giving the computer the instructions on how to create that content.” (Fernández-Vara 2015, 134) In this regard, Chris Crawford (2003, 89–91) refers to *process intensity* vs. *data intensity* – while processes are indirect and abstract when creating content, data is concrete and direct. These two types are also stressed in different kinds of games that rely on hard-coded content and are less ergodic like *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) while games like *Dead Cells* (2018) have procedurally generated levels. The two extremes on that spectrum are, as previously stated, *games of progression* and *games of emergence*, as defined by Juul (2002). Especially newer games, however, often feature traits from both *games of progression* and *games of emergence* to keep players immersed and entertained for a longer time.<sup>23</sup>

The *space of possibility* is, according to Fernández-Vara (2015, 252) “[t]he potential actions and events in a game; what the player could do and the potential results of those actions, as opposed to actual specific actions that have already been carried out.” Video games are, as Bogost (2007, 46) claims, “not a re-creation of the world, but [they are constructed] through selectively modeling appropriate elements of that world.” Therefore, every part of video game architecture must be perceived as a conscious decision and can be used for interpretation to show what possibilities exist for interaction.

For a holistic picture, this should be the first step to game analysis. Depending on the research question, this can take on different forms, which can be time-consuming, as I also show in my **Article II**. I will go into greater detail on character analysis in combination with the *space of possibility* in the next section. Generally speaking, in terms of gender, the analysis should determine the gender ratio among the in-game characters, how they are gender-coded, what spaces they act in and traverse, and to what degree they can undergo inner, outer or societal change over the course of the game.

Video games of the last 10 years in particular often feature characters who can be given a variety of clothes, which can be analyzed for gender bias. In that process, certain trends are already visible. In *Persona 5* (2016), for example, characters can be dressed in different costumes that are “merely cosmetic and don’t influence the outcome of the game.” (Park, 2021) Park calls choosing the right outfit an “enhanced experience”, thereby stressing the importance of outfits for the

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<sup>23</sup> *Dead Cells* (2018), for example, is a game of emergence in that it has procedurally generated levels, yet it also has an overarching story, which is a typical sign of a game of progression. This story, revolving around the protagonist and the uncovering of his identity, is taken up in dialogues and cutscenes, and also spans the DLCs of the game. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) on the other hand features a strong overarching story, but also returning small missions on the war table as well as free exploration in the vast gameplay world.

enjoyment of the game.<sup>24</sup> Clothes can be changed when access to the menu is possible but are fixed for certain events. At this point, it is not important which outfits are worn more or are to be worn in certain situations, since mapping all possibilities is the goal of the method's initial steps.

Gender, however, can be mapped on more than just the level of character. In the chapter on context I already named the topics of genre, technology, socio-historical context and relation to other media, which can be influenced by hegemonic structures. Games themselves can roughly be divided into two layers, **the layer of world and narration** and **the layer of gameplay**, which are, depending on the game, more pronounced or almost non-existent (Fig. 8). The markers of preferred play, which are used to determine the *preferred playing*, operate on these two levels. On the *layer of world and narration*, it is worthwhile to look at the worldbuilding, space and level design, sound design, morality and ideologies, as well as the narrative design. The **layer of gameplay** invites researchers of gender to examine the interface, goals, rules, mechanics, choices, single-player vs. multi-player modes and difficulty. As hardcoded content, these unchanging variables yield results that do not depend on the player but on the game itself.

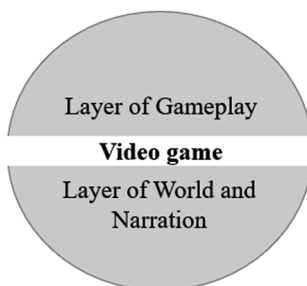


Fig. 8: The two overarching layers of video games.

The **layer of gameplay** is often underrepresented in the close reading of games. Games are rule-based media. Therefore rules, goals and mechanics constitute how someone can interact with the game world, which path is desirable and what ultimately drives the player, thus charging mechanics with meaning. With regard to the *space of possibility*, for example, mapping objectives/goals, conventions/rules and mechanics can already make gendered bias visible. “Since the rule sets of games can reflect an ideology, we can also see how a game can make an ideological statement.” (Fernández-Vara 2015, 132) Mapping out mechanics, rules, and goals, can foster an understanding of gendered mechanics.

Among the most central aspects of game design are player objectives: “In games, [...] the objective is a key element without which the experience loses much of its structure, and our need to work toward the objective is a measure of

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<sup>24</sup> One of the central characters, Ann, for example, has more than 20 outfits at her disposal in the version released in March 2020. Nearly half are tight leather suits, the other half mini skirts, combined with bare legs or leggings.

our involvement in the game.” (Fullerton 2004, 29) Game designer Andrew Rollins adds: “Often a game has not only a primary objective but also secondary aims that have to be attended to before you can reach the final goal.” (Rollins and Adams 2003, 55) Fullerton (2004, 60–63) defines six categories of objectives that are often used in games:

Capturing: Capture X and/or avoiding to be captured by X.

Chase: Catch X and/or elude X.

Race: Reach Y before X.

Alignment: Arrange your game pieces in a certain spatial configuration.

Rescue or escape: Get a defined unit or units to safety.

Forbidden act: Get the competition to “break the rules” by doing something they shouldn’t.

These do not include narrative goals, but mainly remain on the level of mechanics and gameplay. Both narrative and ludic goals must be taken into consideration. I propose to call narrative goals “quests”.<sup>25</sup> A distinction can be made between the *mechanical objectives* (like reaching the end of the stage and touching the flagpole before the timer runs out to not die) and the hypothetical experiential objectives (Guay 2016, 194–196) in which the player adds their own expectations. I would also add non-essential objectives such as setting a new high score, since they do not constitute a winning condition, yet the game invites the player to pursue them. One example would be setting a time limit to a level that would normally not have one – or completing a speed run (Meier 2021a, 166).

These goals already follow a certain hierarchy. As an overarching concept, the victory condition or goal dominates all other concepts and interactions. The objectives are secondary and further structure the arc created by the victory condition. Experiential goals should only be taken into consideration when researching *negotiated* or *oppositional play*. In the case of *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), this mapping of objectives would lead to the following conclusions: The game’s victory condition stresses the active/passive dichotomy of male hero and female damsel-in-distress. The levels are arranged as a hero’s journey, showing Mario’s fitness and expertise. However, violence is not necessarily encouraged. “Beat the enemy” is not the victory condition or an expressed goal. Mario could ignore all enemies on the screen to just race to the end. Masculinity in this case does not require the capability to inflict pain, but is connected to fitness, reflexes and planning ahead. Femininity, on the other hand, is defined solely through passivity and absence until the very last moments of the game.

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<sup>25</sup> This is similar to those in *Super Mario Bros.* (1985), when at the very end of the game, the princess exclaims: “Thank you Mario! Your *quest* is over. We present you a new *quest*. Push Button B to select a world.” (emphasis by me) Saving the princess, which is a narrative goal and main objective, is the so-called *victory condition* (Brathwaite and Schrieber, 2008), which is further subdivided into stages, where Mario is informed that the princess is in another castle. The main premise of the game is therefore to free the passivized damsel-in-distress from her castle, which is stressed time and time again.

The victory condition and objectives are part of a broader set of rules, which shape video games. Rules are the key to achieving the objectives (Perron 2016, 74). Perron puts rules on the same level as “conventions”, which are “not seen as constitutive or operational rules. They are unwritten and/or implicit rules.” (Perron 2016, 75; Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 574) Conventions, in the sense of literary studies, are not “waiting to be uncovered in a text, but in fact precede the text and make discovery possible in the first place.” (Rabinowitz 1987, 27) Wilson stresses that conventions are “looser, less abstract, more resistant to formulation, and altogether more flexible than rules” (Wilson 1990, 85) and they are acquired in a different way than rules are.

An example of a convention would be the fact that health in video games is predominantly marked through the color red, as seen in the widespread design of health bars and health potions. Video games build on a very specific knowledge which has to be acquired in order to understand the language of video games. Perron (2016, 77–82) names several kinds of conventions, such as gameplay conventions, genre conventions, or narrative conventions. Gameplay conventions are, in his view, closely connected to conventions of theater and film, as some levels are built like stages, where the fixed viewing angle can be likened to a virtual camera. In regard to genre conventions, he mentions: “First and foremost, the establishment of conventions happens within the particular genre, and even within popular franchises.” (Perron 2016, 79) This shapes what has been called the “horizon of expectations” (Jauss 1982, 23) within literary studies. In a classic shooter game, which is marketed as such, the player expects shooting, in a horror game, the typical markers of the horror genre. Finally, he mentions that games still partly use narrative conventions from other media. Rune Klevjer (2002, 197) says that games oscillate between cutscenes and play. Introductory cutscenes, which have the same function as an establishing shot in movies, help the player to orient themselves in the upcoming levels, while cutscenes after a hard fight can reward the player and foster engagement. The narrative and its structure, ranging from the introduction to the epilogue, shape levels and expectations.

The knowledge of game conventions is central to the *preferred playing* (Meier 2021a, 167–169). Mapping them, however, can already give insight into the unwritten rules of the game, especially the layer of gender. While many of them (such as the color-coding of health) have little significance for gender, some do. The genre of the first-person shooter, for example, which is shot through a subjective camera that usually hides most of the player character’s body, is inherently less prone to sexualize the player’s character in conventional ways, e.g. by framing the body. This means that the convention makes the player’s character function mainly as a vehicle. Gendered attributes would have to be underlined in other ways, e.g. in cutscenes, with pronouncing the hands in a certain gendered way, choosing an overly feminine/masculine voice for the character etc. Beyond this rather muted example of gendering, conventions are borrowed from other media.

The concept of *preferred playing* is dependent on the notion of *implied player*, a notion parallel to Iser’s implied reader. The *implied player* is the “affordance

and appeal structure of the game which holds all the preconditions necessary for the game to ‘exercise its effect.’” (Farca 2016, 2) Parallel to Stuart Hall’s ideas, the *implied player* is the entity whose decoding of the game’s procedural rhetoric is fully symmetrical to its encoding. This process may be heavily gendered, as in action games, borrowing from the traditions of the action genre, “the role of the implied player is that of imposing white male supremacy as the norm for the game’s reception.” (Nae 2022, 35) This results in “[t]he implied player [being] expected to make sure that during virtual recentering the player construes the mentally constructed storyworld through the ideological spectacles of patriarchy.” (Nae 2022, 35) Nae argues that the very structures of action games, the procedural rhetoric,

strives to naturalize the superiority of white cisgender heterosexual masculinity, but this superiority is unstable and must be constantly reaffirmed through violence as a form of gender performance. The illusion of freedom of action fostered by mainstream games is, in fact, a freedom of violence against other white heterosexual males, the gender/racial/sexual other, and the white heterosexual male self. (Nae 2022, 35)

This implied male player acts within a world carved by rules, which acts as a cosmos on its own. As Juul (2005, 164) points out, “[r]ules separate the game from the rest of the world by carving out an area where rules apply; fiction projects a world different from the real world.” This also means that safe spaces are established, which are legitimated by genre traditions and, in terms of video games, create “a safe haven for a violent performance of masculinity unparalleled by any other medium.” (Nae 2022, 35) In contrast to movies, games carry the additional layer of agency. The action performed here and the (often gendered) violence committed is not primarily a product of the interaction between game parts, but committed by the player’s own limited agency (Nae 2022, 34; Mukherjee 2015, 155). Therefore, mapping out the genre conventions of video games and determining which ones are or are not in fact used can be fruitful, especially for genres that are traditionally prone to gender bias.

This also applies to mechanics. Since no universally accepted definition for game mechanics exists (Lim et al. 2013, 168–198), I will use mechanics to refer to “the rules and procedures that guide the player and the game response to the player’s moves or actions.” (Boller, 2013) Mechanics as the interplay of rules and procedures sit at the heart of video games – rules should be conceived less as limits, but as a framing for the interactions that have been made possible within games. They not only set limitations, but “the imposition of constraints also creates expression.” (Bogost 2007, 7) In this context, play “is the free space of movement within a more rigid structure.” (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 28)

Mechanics are more obvious than conventions, because the ruleset is taught and enforced by the games and does not rely entirely on previous knowledge, like

crafting mechanics for weapons and tools,<sup>26</sup> and is more or less unique to the game. Mechanics are therefore always connected to the way in which the player character interacts with the world around them. While these are strongly shaped by genre conventions, mapping them can be worthwhile when it comes to gender, especially when characters of different genders are offered different means in which they can interact with the world. *Vampire – the Masquerade: Bloodlines* (2004), for example, makes it easier for female vampires to attain blood as they can seduce both men and women, whereas men can only seduce women. Women are therefore inherently seen as bisexual predators.<sup>27</sup>

These examples help to illustrate my concept of *preferred playing* and default choices. *Preferred playing* marks the way in which the game is intended to be played. The created text, in return, forms a certain meaning. This is not necessarily a conscious choice in game development, as Nae adds: “[A]lthough many game designers may create a game with a particular political purpose in mind, they often rely on ready-made conception of gender which they may not be aware of or do not interrogate.” (Nae 2022, 32)

A cornerstone of my concept of *preferred playing* is the concept of *nudge* by Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein (2008). *Nudge* interferes with the decision-making process in a “relatively weak, soft, and nonintrusive [way] [...] because choices are not blocked, fenced off, or significantly burdened.” (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 5) While the concept of nudge has led to “a revolution in behavioral science research” (Maier et al. 2022), it has been severely criticized for having a limited evidence base (Lin et al. 2017) or even no effect at all. Video games, however, have not been researched in the context of nudging. I argue that the multilayered nature of video games, which encode nudges on more layers than Thaler’s and Sunstein’s initial proposals, such as placing healthy food in cafeterias on eye-level to make it a more likely purchase for customers (Thaler and Sunstein

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<sup>26</sup> The crafting mechanic in *Fallout 4* (2015), which is different from, for example, that in *Don’t Starve* (2013).

<sup>27</sup> Other examples can be given here. In *Darkest Dungeon* (2016), a turn-based horror tactics game which centers around exploring dungeons and slaying monsters, abilities are bound to classes which are always represented via one gender. The antiquarian is always female, the bounty hunter always male. The vestal, a priest-like beacon of light, is always female. Her set of actions includes healing other characters of stress and of wounds. While the vestal can also fight, this is not as central as in, for example, the always male man-at-arms, who exclusively interacts through fighting. In *Darkest Dungeon*, however, both genders occupy not only healing but also fighting roles. In *Children of Morta* (2019), the player can play different members of a troubled family. There are two modes of play: One is concerned with the planning of the journey, honing skills and weapons, watching cutscenes with family members, while the other features a dungeon in which characters fight, revive fallen companions, encounter and converse with other characters, and loot treasure. While all characters can fight, they do it in different ways. Male family members like John, Kevin, Mark and Joey are close-combat fighters, stabbing, slaying and hitting their way through enemy lines, while the female family members such as Linda and Lucy resort to ranged combat, framing them as more delicate and less engaged in direct violence. Their sets of (fighting) mechanics differentiate them from their male counterparts.

2018, 1–3), gives more opportunities to surround players with nudges. For a strong nudge, for example, the game’s goals could work in unison with the visual defaults, the narrative framing and other markers of preferred play as presented in Fig. 7. A strong nudge borderlines a shove. While the shove offers no alternative to following the game’s lead (see Meier 2021a, 163–164), a strong nudge gives off the impression that the player is considerably worse off without following the game’s lead even though they could nevertheless succeed. While this is something encoded in the game’s architecture, the overall effect could only be measured with further research with empirical tools such as interviews or player testing, a direction I intend to pursue after the completion of this dissertation.

Some nudges can be found in the visual rhetoric and visual defaults, a subcategory of default options, as they are especially effective in conveying the *preferred playing*. The arrangement of visuals can be essential in video games and hence video game analysis benefits from visual rhetoric, as its meanings are not necessarily established through language. (Helmers and Hill 2004, 2; Bogost 2007, 21) Framing something as central on the screen during a playthrough stresses “what is the desired, the recommended, or simply the best option.” (Meier 2021a, 165) My concept of *preferred play* is closely related to Ian Bogost’s (2007) concept of the procedural rhetoric in that it also strives to deduce the meaning communicated by video game rules. Bogost’s concept is one of the few that takes into account the unique way in which games present a certain rhetoric, which is used to deliver an ideology. He defines *procedural rhetoric* as follows:

[P]rocedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular. [...] Procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created. (Bogost 2007, 2–3)

I stress that analyzing rules can already yield results about the hegemonic structures within a video game, whereas proceduralism takes into account the ideology which springs from the interplay of certain sets of rules. While Bogost and I are both interested in the meaning which springs from the interplay of different systems, I approach this topic by first providing a spectrum of options and then offering markers to identify the most likely interplay. In analyzing the *preferred play*, the procedures that the player most probably encounters become visible. These in turn can be used to effectively uncover the rhetoric of a video game and unveil bias.

[P]rocedural rhetoric is the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively. Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes. Following the classical model, procedural rhetoric entails persuasion – to change opinion or action. Following the contemporary model, procedural rhetoric entails expression – to convey ideas effectively. (Bogost 2007, 28–29)



I use a similar approach in **Article V**, uncovering how different systems interact in those games, forming a procedural argument as to how courtship, love and sexual attraction work. In these games, love is typically depicted as a series of actions, ranging from gifts to a quiz about the preferences of the loved one, which form the process of courtship, which is in itself selfish, materialistic and one-sided, using persuasion and manipulation to achieve the ultimate goal of “mutual” love or sex. Bogost’s and my approach could be combined to approach gender, in that procedural rhetoric provides the tools to describe the interplay of systems involved in the construction of gender, which have previously been identified as part of the preferred play.

Another set of topics central to video games not included in **Article II** because of length limitation, are video game narrative, the narrator and authorship, which are situated on the **layer of world and narration**. In the following, I will touch upon those terms and relate them to the concept of *preferred playing*, while still maintaining that rules are more important for the concept than the narrative. This goes hand in hand with the discussion of who is actually the author of a video game. Murray discusses “procedural authorship”, which means “writing the rules for the interactor’s involvement, that is, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant’s actions.” (Murray 1997, 152) Games in which the player has a strong involvement in the narrating process (e.g. by steering the narrative with choices) usually spark something called *emergent storytelling*<sup>28</sup> (Jenkins, 2003), which at first seems harder to analyze with the concept of *preferred playing*. This means that the environment itself enables the player to construct a narrative, as opposed to a more traditional kind of narrative presented by a narrator.

Nevertheless, in most games of progression, the overarching story is narrated in a way that can be described ontologically.<sup>29</sup> However, in emergent narratives, the video game and its narrative instance and the player team up to shape and narrate the story together. The freedom to form those so-called micronarratives is, to a certain degree, present in all games, but more frequent in games of emergence, especially games that are created to simulate cooperative storytelling (e.g., *RimWorld* (2013) and *Wilderness* (2021)).

Deducing the *preferred playing* is easier in directed play, since the markers are clearer, the narrative branches clearly and does not diffuse into a plethora of choices. Nevertheless, even games of emergence use certain units of gameplay and often narrative that can be taken as markers. These can be rules, as mentioned above, but also certain conventions that have been formed out of the practice of *preferred play*. In **Article II**, I mention “book moves” as standard moves or

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<sup>28</sup> Emergent narratives can be defined as follows: “[I]n the case of emergent narratives, game spaces are designed to be rich with narrative potential, enabling the story-constructing activity of players.” (Jenkins, 2003)

<sup>29</sup> For example, using Genette’s *Discours du récit* (1972) and *Nouveau discours du récit* (1983) to differentiate between homo- and heterodiegetic narrators.

openers in chess, which are most adept at dealing with situations arising from the game's ruleset (Meier 2021a, 167).

Narrative units can, depending on the game, have a greater or lesser influence on the *preferred play* than gameplay units – which, again, comes from the fact that “some video games include a story and expend great effort to make it the most important point of the experience they offer, while others feature a very limited story (or [...] no story at all).” (Arsenault 2016, 479) Narrative units, according to Bizzocchi et al. (2013, 1),

range from the game-long story framework that forms the backbone of the experience, down through all varieties of game levels, missions, and side quests, which are in turn made up of a number of individual micronarratives. Naturally, due to the nature of interactive narratives, different players can experience these narrative arcs in different orders. This requires a modularity of design, as narrative elements will be encountered in various orders depending on the interactive decisions of the player.

These micronarratives can be seen as the smallest narratological unit in a video game.<sup>30</sup> While the very same seemingly chaotic forming of narration can be observed in other video games, they also follow a certain form of *preferred play*. To take Bizzocchi's example of a hockey video game, when a player has the puck, it is very unlikely that they will perform certain actions, such as ending the game or aiming for their own team's goal. Since the game is shaped by the rules and the objective (scoring more points than the other team by maneuvering the puck into the other team's goal), it will spark a certain set of standard maneuvers and standard procedures.<sup>31</sup>

As with objectives, narratives can also be put into a certain hierarchy and thereby be weighed against each other to analyze a video game, for example, in terms of gender. In the example of *Super Mario Bros.* used above, the story of the damsel in distress, the princess who must be saved by Mario, forms the overarching narrative. It is partly synonymous with the winning condition, which is saving the princess. Micronarratives such as Mario completing certain stages

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<sup>30</sup> Bizzocchi et al. define them through the example of the hockey video game *NHL 12* (2012): “Every time the player's team takes possession of the puck, a new micronarrative arc begins. The next stage is complication, as the player moves the designated hockey player into a scoring position and struggles with the opposition for a clear shot. Ultimately, this arc will be resolved with either a successful goal or the defenders taking possession of the puck. This micro-arc is repeated many times within a game period, with differing outcomes each time contributing to a larger story arc.” (Bizzocchi et al. 2013, 6)

<sup>31</sup> In video games that share similarities with emergent games like hockey, such as the tactical game *Anno 1800* (2019) where the player colonizes islands and builds production chains, there is an additional layer of feedback to player actions in the form of diegetic commentary. If, for example, a trade route is established, the in-game narrator acknowledges the event. This elevates the emergent narrative to a higher level, thereby reinforcing the behavior it comments upon.

or gathering a mushroom should be seen as subordinate and therefore not as important for deducing gender bias.

It should be noted that what the game itself establishes as its overarching narrative is irrelevant when determining its dominant rhetoric. This dominance depends on duration and frequency instead. This is the case in *Fallout 4* (2015), as I showed in **Article II** (Meier 2021a, 165–166).<sup>32</sup>

This implicit hierarchy of layers, usually governed by the goals of a game, helps researchers solve ambiguities in a gender-related reading of a video game. As games are especially versatile media, it would be unwise to generalize a hierarchy of layers for all games. Games of emergence, as mentioned before, usually rely on gameplay rules as the most important layer for communicating ideology. A small number of rules creates vast amounts of emergent content. Games of progression, on the other hand, strongly focus on narrative and rarely use rules or branching narratives to enforce interaction, and thus mostly make use of the narrative layer. It is furthermore possible that a game communicates two vastly different ideologies on different layers, which can result in a ludonarrative dissonance, which describes a conflict between a video game's narrative told through story and that told through gameplay (Swain 2010). In cases like these, one layer might even be used as a cover-up for bias in another layer. When determining the layer that holds the dominant meaning, it helps to investigate which layer is emphasized or more elaborate. Some games are very rudimentary in story, others prevail in story alone. Some might be carried by characters, in others, like strategy games, they are secondary. In this case, it could even be useful to examine which aspects players tend to stress or which ones are highlighted in the game's marketing. Another approach to resolve ambiguity would be to look into the time a certain layer occupies within a playthrough, whether, for example, cutscenes and dialogue outweigh emergent aspects like combat and exploration or whether it is the other way around.

## 4.5. Gender as a Lens for Game Analysis

In the following segment, I want to explore three foci (or lenses) for analyzing gender that I developed in my articles. In **Article I** (2022a), I transformed tools of gender studies used in film and literary studies to make them viable for Game Studies. In **Article III** (2022b) and **Article V** (2020), I proposed approaches to character analysis, and in **Article IV** (2021b) I dealt with the issue of immersion and gender.

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<sup>32</sup> While the main narrative focuses on the Lone Survivor saving his or her son, this subject occupies only a small portion of the game, making it more of a background narrative than an actual foreground story. In this example, the emphasis on gameplay furthermore outweighs the importance of the overarching narrative. It is more rewarding to roam the wastelands, slay raiders, build settlements and explore. All mechanics and rules are built around this – the whole game world rewards this approach over just following the main storyline.

### 4.5.1. Transformative Uses of Gender Studies for Game Studies

Up to this point, no established methodology to analyze gender in video games exists. One reason for this is arguably that video games are “the assimilator of all earlier forms of media culture.” (Murray 2006, 187) This makes them profoundly complex. Insights into the methodological approaches of earlier forms of media culture are needed to analyze games. In **Article I** (2022a), I evaluate how established approaches to sex and gender from different disciplines can be used in video games. I want to expand on those concepts and look into *performativity*, *subjectivity*, *Othering*, *hegemonic structures* and *hegemonic masculinity* (connected to the notion of *androcentrism*), *compulsory heterosexuality* and the *male gaze* (Fig. 9).

Concepts to approach gender in games from other disciplines
Androcentrism
Hegemonic structures and masculinity
Heteronormativity (and compulsory heterosexuality)
Male gaze
Othering
Performativity
Subjectivity

Fig. 9: Concepts to approach gender from other disciplines that can be transformed to be used on video games.

Some of these concepts have a long history in analyzing gender relations in society and media. Although they have partly been contested<sup>33</sup>, they are still useful for the analysis of games. Games are new media, and yet they are strongly tied to media traditions and genres that are prone to old-fashioned forms of objectification and passivization of female characters, for example in the fantasy genre.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>33</sup> An example is Mulvey’s male gaze, a concept which she reflected on in an interview later (see Sassatelli 2011, 123–143). The concept has also been criticized, for example, in form of the *matrixial gaze* (Ettinger, 1995) or with the concept of the *female gaze* (Pollock, 1988).

<sup>34</sup> Early video games from the 1970s and 1980s were heavily influenced by Pen & Paper, an analogue form of role-playing game (RPG) in which the partakers describe their characters’ actions through speech, which is in return heavily inspired by fantasy literature such as Tolkien’s works (Blüml 2014, 31). Mainstream fantasy has always been part of the regressive affirmative culture (Baker 2012, 438), which features nationalism, xenophobia, sexism, simplified good vs. bad structures and advocates self-sacrifice for the greater good (Baker 2012, 439). The ways in which the topics of fantasy are sexist or naturalize sexist agendas have not changed significantly in the past decades. In conclusion, while video games show new ways of gender inequality, many issues can still be grasped with longstanding tools, if those tools are transformed in a way that takes into account traits unique to video games, like their ergodicity.

These forms of objectification, however, could influence the player more easily on a subconscious level due to the active participation of the player. Underrepresentation, the lack of female characters in protagonist or leadership roles, combined with making players not only watch, but play out these conceptions, is believed to influence consumers more than letting them passively experience these circumstances in a noninteractive medium.

The **performativity** of gender occupies a central role in the question of why constructions of gender are so essential in video games. According to Judith Butler, performativity means that hegemonic norms and gender identities are quoted and repeated (Sina 2016, 16).

In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceede [sic!]: rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 1988, 519)

Through repetitions of gendered acts, gender is instituted and stabilized. Thus, individuals are formed through gendered acts, which they then repeat. In video games, gender is performed in a double sense, since games are both in themselves a performative medium and offer the player the opportunity to act out a role. This, however, is greatly limited. While games are simulative to a certain point, their affordances as simulations are narrowed down due to limitations both on side of the developers, who have a limited team and limited finances to create a game, and on the side of the consumer, who has to have the processing power to run a game with a certain complexity. Video games therefore allow for a very limited set of interactions within the world. In the case of roleplaying games, these are typically fighting with various weapons, running, maybe jumping, talking in limited dialogues to a certain set of other characters, drinking potions and other minor actions. With Butler's definition of performativity in mind, this means that acts that can be analyzed are already severely limited by the game. The critical question within that framework is if the acts allowed by the game are different for characters of different genders. In conclusion, video games partly imitate – or rather simulate – existing gender norms and practices with rules embedded in code or they break with them.

This, however, gives room for possibilities if the developers are willing to use them. Players could be allowed to simulate acts outside of society's gender norms. They could be enabled to break through the rigid code of hierarchical binaries (Bublitz 2002, 74) to subvert and challenge norms. As I show with my close reading of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (**Article I**), however, female characters engaging in activities and domains associated with masculinity challenge patriarchy only to a certain point. It is the value system within the world that needs changing, while established binaries have to be decoupled from the notion of gender.

Empowering<sup>35</sup> an isolated character is not enough and leads to the phenomenon mentioned in **Article I** as well: In *Fallout 4* (2015) the main character is certainly empowered, but this empowerment is not mirrored by the world nor is it commented upon. Since many video games are set in a fantasy world, gendered norms and traditions are further stripped of their socio-cultural context, so employing them as “natural” and “given” regardless marks the constructedness of the otherwise artificial character of gender. However, video games heavily borrow from each other on different layers in a pattern of remedializations (Seier 2007, 138). Once a trope or norm has been established through this repeated remedialization between games, attempts to break the perpetuating cycle are rare. The discussion of adding a female hero to the longstanding *Legend of Zelda* franchise in which, despite the name, the hero Link is the protagonist, elicited the infamous response: “If we have Princess Zelda as the main character who fights, then what is Link going to do?” (Brown, 2016) Tropes such as the “damsel in distress” have a long history in video games (Hemovich 2018, 208), and bigger companies such as Nintendo rarely change a product that is working for the consumers.

Gender analysis should cover the characters but also the world, because this also sets restrictions to the freedom to perform gender outside of binary oppositions. Video games are often seen in relation to Huizinga’s magic circle, which he defines as “all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.” (Huizinga 1950, 10) This sparks the question whether gender is forced upon the subjects within the game world or if gender can be performed freely – and, consequently, if that performance has an impact on the game world.

In my elaborations on oppositional play, a form of gameplay chosen by players who are aware of the *preferred playing* and consciously choose to play differently to arrive at different outcomes, I see another form of performativity in a theatric sense (Meier 2021a, 160). This echoes Nitsche (2016) and Mackay (2001, 53) who define RPGs in particular as theater and role-playing within those games as a performance. This approach is more player-centric by inquiring which role the player occupies in relation to the game and the characters in it. It can also be useful to ask how the game invites the players to act within a role, whether they are encouraged to repeat the gendered norms of the world given or to break them.

Performativity also prompts the question of **subjectivity**. A subject can be described as “the condition of being a person and the processes by which we become a person; that is, how we are constituted as cultural subjects.” (Barker 2012, 220) The subject in this case can be a character but also the player’s search for subjectivity inside a game. This is limited by the roles that the player can

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<sup>35</sup> Female empowerment is defined here in accordance with the definition of the European Institute for Gender Equality mainly in five ways: “[W]omen’s sense of self-worth; their right to have and to determine choices; their right to have access to opportunities and resources; their right to have power to control their own lives [...]; and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create a more just social and economic order, [...]” (EIGE, 2016)

occupy within a game. Subjectivity in video games is complex, since the players themselves are subjects who can be foregrounded within the game, actively engaged, or passivized to follow and engage in the story of the characters involved. Therefore the question of subjectivity – and of *whose* subjectivity – should be one of the first queries when analyzing a game for gender. It is also possible that the subject’s agency clashes with the agency of the character, making it hard for the player to act out a character they do not feel attached to.

Often games use binary oppositions like civilization and barbarism, male and female, rule and serve (Hall 2013, 228). Oppositions are particularly important because humans form their identity in the symbolic demarcation from others (also ‘**the Other**’) and by tabooing certain areas of life. “The ‘Other’ is fundamental to the constitution of the self to us as subjects, and to sexual identity.” (Hall 2013, 227) It is only possible to deem oneself as white, cultured and male, for example, because society opposes them with concepts of non-white, uncultured and female (Hall 2013, 228). The concept of Othering is especially prevalent in video games. Many operate on clear-cut notions such as hero/antagonist and the good (NPCs)/the bad (monsters). This is also visible in terms of gender, where females are often connected to passive behavior or non-violent action (healing), males to active and aggressive behavior. This is especially striking in action games, as Nae (2022, 38) points out, and even in games that actually feature a female protagonist. Othering is often done with perceived differences. In the case of female video game characters, this is often done with a hypersexual design with pronounced breasts, legs or attractive features. Lara Croft, for example, must satisfy the male gaze while being the perfect capable action heroine (Nae 2022, 38). Video games, however, can other on multiple levels, intradiegetic and extradiegetic, from the gameplay to the visual and even the auditive.<sup>36</sup>

In **Article I**, I also touch upon the subject of **androcentrism**, equating the male and the human, to game analysis. When opposing “male” to “female”, the latter is marginalized (Hall 2013, 225). This is closely related to the concept of **heteronormativity**. In this, humans are only complete when in a heterosexual relationship and the nuclear family (Kiel 2014, 19–21). Hall (2013, 226) states that society is unsettled by “matter out of place”, suggesting that non-heteronormative representations are also unsettling.

There is a clear essentialist dichotomy between active males and passive females (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 5). Roles like prince, knight and thief as

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<sup>36</sup> Other ways are locking female characters into certain classes deemed female (as the already named trope of the female healer and the male warrior), just allowing them a certain set of non-violent skills or giving them roles deemed feminine like being the voice of a group instead of a fully fledged fighter. Employing women as sidekicks or love interests is another example of Othering. Examples for this would be the *Zelda* series with hero Link and love interest Zelda, who has to be saved from Ganon, as well as Princess Peach, who needs to be saved by plumber Mario in most of the franchise’s games. It would also be possible to other female characters by singling them out as the only characters with a musical theme that consists of strings when the male characters’ musical themes feature percussion and drums as “stronger” instruments.

opposed to princess, healer and nun are often not only inscribed in the social roles of the characters within video games, but are also part of the ludic system in the form of character classes and skills available for characters. This can be seen as an example of Gramsci's concept of naturalized **hegemonic structures**, which are, among other thing, gendered.<sup>37</sup>

For example, we can use Adrienne Rich's (1980) concept of "compulsory heterosexuality" and the devaluation of relations between women in the context of the "ritualized demonstrations of mastery over girls' bodies" (Pascoe 2007, 23) in a heteronormative society. This is naturalized in games with a narrow range of female representations, a heterosexual range of interactions and topics that only concern the male-female relationships. Due to the fact that this narrowing is never spelled out but created by employing invisible rules within the code, it seems natural. This is especially visible in dating games, as I show in **Article V**.<sup>38</sup>

On the other hand, male characters in video games often follow the contemporary male ideal of **hegemonic masculinity**: "[T]he currently most honoured way of being a man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men." (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 831) This results in a hierarchy that places men who most resemble this ideal type into leadership positions (Hall 2013, 248). Hall thus concludes that aside from the relation between femininity and masculinity, men's studies should also be concerned with the different types of masculinity that exist in the first place (Hall 2013, 297). Mark Moss (2011) lists a variety of stereotypes and presents their historical roots and media contexts. Moss's research into concepts of masculinity is especially pertinent to video games, as protagonists from AAA titles often represent the contemporary ideal of hegemonic masculinity while also functioning as role models for the identities of their audience (Moss 2011, 2). In addition, video game characters are caught in the dilemma between the traditional, archaic image of masculinity on the one hand and their individual development on the other (Blazina 2003, XI–XIII; Moss 2011, XV).

Females are often objects of what Laura Mulvey calls **the male gaze**: "[W]omen are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness." (Mulvey 1975, 837) The female becomes an object of desire, a fetish for the male character as well as the male-intended audience.

Mulvey's concept of male gaze has, in recent years, often been criticized as outdated, since it refers back to Hollywood movies predating Mulvey's publication

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<sup>37</sup> Hegemonic structures are gained by "[...] naturalizing power relations. For example, women are considered as naturally more caring than men. If we take caring as a natural character trait of women, it is also natural that women take care of the children. Hence, a societal structure that confines women to the private sphere of the home and men to the public sphere of work is thus naturalized." (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 11–12)

<sup>38</sup> In *HuniePop* (2015), females strip during dates when the player manages to get high scores in the match-three game that forms the core of *HuniePop*'s gameplay (Meier 2020, 214).



in 1975. One could argue that a) women in contemporary media are depicted differently and b) that movies work differently from video games. Both claims are, to a certain degree, true. Indeed, Inness (2004, 1) notes that the number of tough women in the media has increased dramatically. The tough action heroine, often seen in video games, is a response to social change and feminist criticism (Tasker 1993, 19). This, however, as often noted, does not make the depictions less objectifying, as has been shown in the many analyses of Lara Croft (Herbst 2004, 22). Technology allows, to a certain degree, for agency of the female character, but she still has to act within a framework dominated by the male gaze and be pleasurable for the intended male player. The aspect of play need not, in this context, necessarily be empowering, since the player has control over the body of a female protagonist (Herbst 2004, 27).

Mulvey's (1975) identifies three main kinds of gaze: the camera's, the audience's and the gaze between characters. Male characters are, in her opinion, the active lookers while the female characters are part of the visual spectacle (passive objects to be looked at). Mulvey (1975, 838) argues that the woman exists to evoke feelings in the hero as well as the male audience, but does not bear meaning herself, which creates a clear-cut active-passive-dichotomy. This holds still true for video games, as seen from the example of Lara Croft who has to be sexy, so her power is not threatening. Also, the kind of empowerment that she now has, the power of an action heroine, calls into question the very definition of empowerment. It provokes the question how power is defined, since "[i]n the past, killing has been defined as the ultimate power, a power generally attributed to men." (Herbst 2004, 40) Giving a female character the power to kill therefore does not make her automatically empowered, since she is still a puppet and is still acting out power according to male norms.

Agency, however, shapes the concept of male gaze. In video games, the camera can either be fixed to a certain angle or perspective or can be freely moved around by the player. This can be meaningful in respect to Mulvey's understanding of victimization due to perspective. Such third-person and first-person perspectives can be indicators of sexualization, as Sarkeesian (2016) stresses in her video *Strategic Butt Coverings*. The camera can frame the behind of a character, can linger over their shoulder or even be top-down, which alters the meaning and puts characters in either empowered or victimized positions. Characters are often reduced to their bodily attributes (e.g., in *Beat'em Ups* via muscles (Seger 1990, 27; Rogers 2010, 83–84)). The third-person view in particular can come with certain implications. For the modern *Tomb Raider* games, Nae (2022, 39) attests: "[T]he game's third-person view places the player in an ambivalent predator/ protector position which, on the one hand, grants him a privileged visual perspective onto the female playable character's body, yet, on the other hand, assigns him the role of protecting Lara from the dangers surrounding her."

It is also critical that the theory is used for media in which the player is active or passive. It is therefore important to differentiate between the *mode of simulation* and the *mode of narration*. For Schröter (2013, 27f.) in the mode of narration (representation in the narrow sense of narrative events), information is primarily

communicated through cutscenes or scripted events. In the mode of simulation, however, ludic events emerge only from the player's interaction with the game. They are therefore structured indirectly via game rules, interactive mechanics and goals. A proximity to filmic conventions of representation can mainly be found in the mode of narration, as for example when *mise-en-scène*, camera and montage are employed in cinematic cutscenes for the purposes of character development.

Mulvey's theory of the male gaze still applies to cutscenes that function as movies and consist of a fixed camera, a certain montage, a fixed *mise-en-scène* as well as lighting. Games that are heavily built upon cutscenes, such as *Heavy Rain* (2010), benefit greatly from such analysis. In many cutscenes, the player is either passive or only involved in developing the scene further in other cutscenes. In the mode of simulation, certain parts are often fixed as well. There is a *mise-en-scène*, which only varies in the way the player perceives it.<sup>39</sup> The light source, quality and color is, in most cases, fixed as well. The first-person perspective in video games is equal to the subjective camera of the movie, but the field of view can be altered in most games, which also alters the *mise-en-scène* and thus the portrayal or even inclusion of characters. The camera movement can be tied to a certain angle, but can also be free, which has to be taken into consideration during the analysis. This applies especially to the inclusion of a third-person view, since it frames the main character all the time, making them a permanent part of the picture. Sarkeesian (2015) identifies this as a greater risk of sexualization for female characters.

Lastly, the theory of male gaze is often criticized for the rigid dichotomy of genders, which leaves no room for active women or passive men (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2014, 23) as well as nonbinary characters. In the case of male bodies, it is still hard to define when exactly a body is sexualized or idealized.<sup>40</sup> If empowerment is, in the visual language, explicitly linked to the male body, this underlines the need to destabilize the established visual language altogether.

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<sup>39</sup> Rauscher (2015) therefore also refers to this as *mise-en-game* in video games. While the *mise-en-scène* is concerned with the stage design and arrangement of actors in a scene of a film or theater, this stage and the actors have different functions in the context of a game, e.g. must be playable, lead to clues, abide to the rules of the game etc.

<sup>40</sup> In the intro of *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015), the protagonist Geralt is shown naked in a bathtub, legs spread out, with dimmed lights around him. If he was a female character, this would be an instance of the male gaze and Geralt an object of desire. The camera, however, explicitly caresses his muscles and scars, therefore introducing him as battle-hardened, dangerous and active. In the very same scene, he also kills a magical lobster that had entered his tub, proving that he is ready for battle. This scene also features the witch Yennefer, who is curled up on a canopy, reading, with her body turned sideways, so her curves and her behind are especially pronounced. The camera lingers on her back, her falling hair and breasts, and the setting does not afford her the same agency and aggression, therefore rendering her an object of desire. With killing as the dominant marker for a male form of empowerment, this sparks the question of whether Geralt would still be idealized instead of sexualized if he were a woman in this scene, and if Yennefer would be sexualized if she were a man.

#### 4.5.2. Character Analysis in Games with Possibility Frames

I explicitly tackle the topic of character analysis with a focus on gender in **Article III**. I show how the first part of my methodology, the *space of possibility*, taken from Fernández-Vara (2015) but expanded to fit the needs of video game analysis on gender, can be used as a first step to analyze characters. I specifically explain that video game characters should not be viewed as static entities, but as dynamic, to fit the medium's dynamic nature. By dividing character analysis into different game levels on which gender can be analyzed, I make gender more tangible for the purposes of uncovering bias.

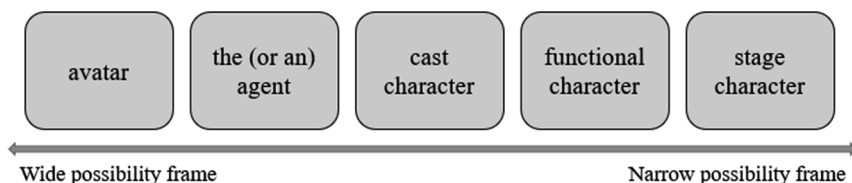
Rather than seeing them as static, I propose to analyze characters as evolving and performing gender. Like Salen and Zimmerman (2003, 30–38), I stress that games convey meaningful stories through meaningful play. As already stated, many games nowadays feature a narrative which can be analyzed with narratological tools, but Eskelinen and Tronstad (2009, 195–220) and Juul (2005, 199) emphasize that activity is still an essential part of the interpretation. For that reason, **Article III** (Meier 2022b, 82) also stresses the importance of interpreting rules and gameplay for character analysis and being attentive to medium-specific aspects. If a character has to fulfill mainly ludic needs, they are often reduced to a narrative stereotype or an empty shell, resembling a chess pawn rather than a round character found in a novel or a movie. They are fictional entities, but also an access point for the player to the game, more a stand-in than fully fledged personalities (Aldred 2016, 355).

To analyze characters in video games as a spectrum rather than static entities, I propose a medium-centric approach, which asks “whether a game lacks possibility for female empowerment” (Meier 2022b, 83), which can be widened to include all genders. My approach concentrates on the interactive elements and the possibilities of characters to be different and act differently according to their gender. It solves the problem of static observations that only serve as a snapshot of a certain moment within a game rather than the full medium in motion and interaction. The theory of *possibility frames* affects individual characters over which the player can in some way enact power. I propose the following questions as leading questions for character analysis:

- 1) What possibilities of development does a character have?
- 2) Are, in this context, the possibilities of female and male characters (and non-binary characters, if available) the same or at least equal in quantity and quality?
- 3) Are possibilities on narrative and ludic levels the same or can a ludo-narrative dissonance be observed? (Meier 2022b, 83)

To tackle these questions, I proposed a scheme to divide characters into certain **character types** and a **4-level model**. The character types are defined by the control the player has over them. This amount of control usually goes hand in hand with the possibility of the player to change their characters and to participate in empowering (or, as also possible, constrain) them.

Before tending to these levels, one must determine what kind of character will be analyzed, the types of which resemble the types of narrators developed by Susan S. Lanser (1981), ranging from 1) the (autodiegetic) protagonists, 2) one of the protagonists, 3) the side character, 4) the involved observer, 5) the uninvolved observer to 6) the uninvolved narrator (Lahn and Meister 2008, 69), although all roles are intradiegetic and not necessarily connected to the narration of the game. For video games, in **Article III**, I have divided the types of characters into 1) avatars, 2) the (or an) agent, 3) cast characters and 4) function characters or stage characters (Meier 2022b, 83–84) (Fig. 10).



*Fig. 10: Types of characters in video games (inspired by Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. 2008, 209).*

Traditionally, game characters are subdivided into player characters (PCs) and non-player-characters (NPCs). NPCs can, just as PCs, be anthropomorphic, non-human, or human. Sorg (2010, 343) explains that they can be ornamental, ludic in every form (like enemies), explain the rules of the game, structure levels or fulfill a narrative function within the world as part of the greater conflict, they can function as an explanation or even legitimation for actions within the game. This division, however, does not grasp the variety of game characters available. It marks PCs as dynamic and changeable while NPCs are static, which does not necessarily have to be the case, and also does not address dynamic player control that can grant or refuse player access to a character, causing them to shift between PC and NPC. The 4-step model of questions provided above breaks with the binary structure to create a fine-grained model of character analysis.

The first and most important differentiation is that of **avatars** and **agents** (Meier 2022b, 83). The word “avatar” refers to the visible body, which Hindu gods choose when they visit the mortal world and was first used in the game *Habitat* (USA 1986–1995) to describe characters which represent the player in the digital world. James Newman (2002) calls them the “vehicular embodiment” of the player. The avatar is defined as the physical manifestation of the player in the gaming world, with next to no differentiation from the self of the character (Tronstad 2008, 258). Waggoner claims, following Tronstad, that in games like *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* (2006), the avatar is constituted through the options provided to individualize the character. Avatars foster what Salen and Zimmermann (2004, 453–455) call “double-consciousness”, directly identifying with that character, while at the same time acknowledging that the player is a separate person (Aldred

2016, 355). Burn (2006, 73) adds that characters are always part of both the ludic and the representational system, with one being more pronounced than the other.<sup>41</sup>

Avatars often resemble marionettes as they can be fully manipulated (Aldred 2016, 368) and have no life or personality on their own. They are often fully customizable, and it is critical to analyze which categories of customization the player is afforded for gender, as I argue in **Article III** (Meier 2022b, 82–86). It is worthwhile to ask whether the same character options (e.g. make-up) are available for avatars of both (or all) genders, whether the voices are staged in clearly gendered ways, or what body types are available (especially if there are gender-neutral body types that do not pronounce sex). Because priming and framing are important parameters of character creation, it is important to analyze whether there are default options and if yes, what those predispositions are.

While nonbinary characters are a minority within games, it is also important to look at how clearly the lines between genders are drawn – and also, what those options include. Do certain parameters like beards not exist when choosing “female” or do both have access to the same options? Also, does the game allow the player to choose between voices and to pick a voice that breaks with established gender conventions?

Avatars should be understood as “extended, prosthetic, part-of-ourselves type of character(s)” who “embod[y] empathy, in which the player experiences a kind of physical or bodily connection to the character” (Tronstad 2008, 256), such as the avatar of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). The depiction of categories thus also gives insight into the ideology of the world, how clear-cut gender distinctions are in the game world, and how rigid the rules of displaying sex and gender. A very narrow framing of gender would, for example, exclude some players. The possibility to individualize an avatar tells the player what roles they can assume in the “cyberdrama” (Murray, 1997) and which ones are off limits. Games like the *Mass Effect* series (2007–2017), for example, advertise the offered freedom to create and explore their own role in the game world.

In contrast to avatars, Waggoner (2009, 9) proposes the term “agent” for characters whose skillset and outer appearance cannot be changed. They are usually the face of certain franchises.<sup>42</sup> They have a background and a personality, cannot be altered, and follow their own agendas and incentives instead of purely relying on the player’s goals. As they are inherently more static, it is easier to analyze them with tools from literary or film analysis, including for their gender performance (Glasspool 2016, 108). The other three categories of characters that I suggest for character analysis are taken from Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al.’s (2008, 209) typology that distinguishes between cast, functional and stage characters:

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<sup>41</sup> In *The Last of Us* (2013), characters like Joel can be seen as agents and separate entities that make decisions on their own, but are, at the same time, controlled in combat.

<sup>42</sup> Such as protagonist Cloud for the game *Final Fantasy VII* (and subsequent reboots and remakes) or as Samus for the *Metroid* (1986–2021) franchise.

[C]ast characters [...] have a particular function in the game, which relates to the story and they have their own agenda such as the fighting companions of the main protagonist. *Functional characters* have a general function in the game that expires soon after a certain type of incident. *Stage characters* are part of the scenario, moving around with no or next to no personality or function in the game. (Meier 2022b, 84)

Traditionally, avatars are the most flexible types of characters. In games that rely on randomly generated content, there might also be randomly generated characters, which in turn are highly flexible. Normally, however, **functional characters** and **stage characters** in particular have a very narrow possibility spectrum.

In general, video games center around characters (Schröter 2013, 22). If avatar and agent form a continuum, this can also be attributed to the concept of the pawn (or German *Spielfigur*) in contrast to the (narrative) character (or German *Erzählfigur*) (Sorg 2010, 342). A pawn is a cluster of ludic attributes, part of the rule system of a game.<sup>43</sup> Eder and Thon (2012, 179–180) claim that games rely on simple, stereotyped characters to heighten the often competitive action in video games, usually in the form of combat.

Video games contain long-standing social and filmic stereotypes like the “stupid blonde” or the film noir private eye but, according to Glaubke et al. (2001, 16), also draw from ludic concepts, such as the challenger, fighter, hero, antagonist, killer, soldier and helper. These are often gendered, which is most obvious in the “distaff counterparts”, the feminine versions of iconic male video game heroes (e.g. Ms. Pac-Man in relation to Pac-Man (Kiel 2015, 173)). The male character is, according to the androcentric model, the blueprint and the female counterpart is created in relation to the male hero, often with stereotypically gendered behavior and appearance (Kiel 2015, 173).<sup>44</sup>

While many characters fulfill a ludic need within the world, such as that of a merchant or an enemy (Sorg 2010, 355), they are, according to Eder and Thon (2012, 179–180) regularly simplified into stereotypes. Their function is tied to action (Eder and Thon 2012, 160). Their simplicity thus makes it easier for players to orient themselves inside game worlds, understanding rules and objectives. Stereotypes, however, reduce otherwise dynamic structures like gender to an essentialist understanding (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 33) and tend to be used in pejorative ways and be emotionally charged (Dyer 1999, 245). An unbending concept is, however, desirable in many games as it can be easily understood by the player. A simple character is often used for simple conflicts, which form the basis of most games whose focus is set on more elaborate gameplay. Following

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<sup>43</sup> It historically stems from sports and board games, while the narrative character has its roots in literature, comics, movies and TV (Sorg 2010, 348–355). The (narrative) character has been imported into games from movies and literature with the respective tropes attached to it.

<sup>44</sup> Anita Sarkeesian (2013) calls these counterparts “Ms. Male Character”. She lists the recurring female gender markers: bows, lipstick, long eyelashes, the color pink, big breasts, a pony tail, high heels, painted nails, outfits that pronounce breasts and belly button as well as heart icons in the design (Sarkeesian 2013, Ms. Male Character, 8:15–8:30).

Batinic and Appel (2008, 314), I stress how gender stereotypes interact with notions of ethnicity, age, sexuality and class. Stereotypes are products of discourses (Lünenborg and Maier 2013, 207) and thus subject to change (Gilman 2013, 278–279). However,

[t]o reverse the stereotype is not necessarily to overturn or subvert it. Escaping the grip of one stereotypical extreme [...] may simply mean being trapped in its stereotypical ‘other’ [...]. This may be an advance of the former list [of stereotypes], and is certainly a welcome change, but it has not escaped the contradictions of the binary structure [...]. (Hall 2013, 261)

Overturning or changing stereotypes is difficult – it is more useful to describe the ways in which they function and influence us (Hall 2013, 263–264).

After determining the type of character for the analysis and how static or dynamic they are, the analysis modeled in **Article III** proceeds on **the level of character surface, the level of narration, the level of gameplay and the level of space and gameworld** (Fig. 11). These game levels or layers are a fine-grained version of the above-mentioned two-layered model. While the two-layered model is strictly divided into the ludic part of the game and the narrative part, the levels of space and gameworld as well as character surface can both be analyzed as belonging to the sphere of gameplay or narration.

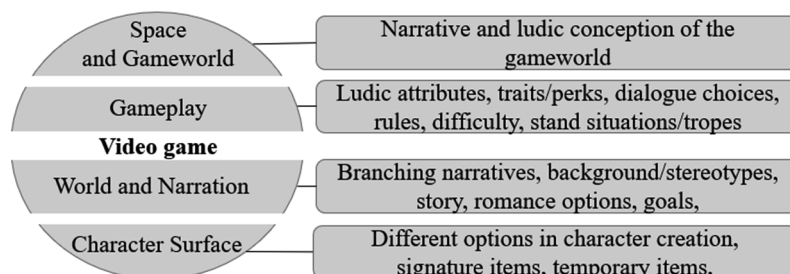


Fig. 11: 4-level model for character analysis.

The first level is the **level of character surface** and covers “the possibilities of creating one’s own character”, including how flexible character creation is and how characters of different genders have access to different outer experiences and roles (Meier 2022b, 84). This layer also includes the discussion of signature items and temporary items.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup> “What I call signature items are attached firmly to the characters, and are technically part of the model. They can also potentially carry gendered meanings. An example for a signature item would be the sword Cloud carries in *Final Fantasy VII* that has a phallic connotation with violence but it also acts as a symbol for rebellion. Less important in its meaning are clothing and weapons in general, i.e. items that are attached temporarily to characters or character models. It should be analyzed whether those can be changed and also if doing so changes the implied role or even diegetic interactions with the character.” (Meier 2022b, 84)

The second level, the **level of narration and gameworld**, tends to the world in which characters act (discussed in detail above in section 4.4 on *preferred playing*). Nonlinear games normally branch<sup>46</sup>, which makes them harder to analyze with conventional narratological tools. This layer includes the discussion of background and stereotypes (as explained above), story, romance options and goals. Romance options are discussed in detail in **Article V**. In general, one should look for differences in the backgrounds of characters of different genders to examine whether different tropes have been used. The hero's journey as a transformation of the self and the world, for example, as depicted in Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), is often only available to the male hero of a story.

Characters are also defined through their relationships to other characters, e.g. how they interact with those who inhabit the gameworld. For Lara Croft, Nae (2022, 38–39) notes that the character of the original game is sexualized and subjected to the male gaze, but not subject to hegemonic structures within the game. In the series' reboot, however, she learned everything from her father and does everything to please him. Romance options are especially important from the perspective of gender. While some games exclusively revolve around the subject of dating, many popular games offer dating as a "side quest" or a mini-game (Meier 2020, 201). A game's dating options provide insight into what kinds of courtship they perceive as normal and which ones as deviant. In **Article V**, I propose a model for analyzing dating patterns, which revolve around the gameplay (visual novel, dating simulator and hybrid dating game)<sup>47</sup>, the reward (erotic content, pornographic content, light romance) and the gendering of dating games (male-oriented, female-oriented) to classify them.

When it comes to quests and relationships, many games nowadays feature romance options which are discussed passionately by the player community. Therefore, it is useful to examine if there are such options and if so, whether they are gendered. Lastly, games consist of goals on a gameplay level as well as on a narrative level. Goals help to classify characters as they can imply a desire to either change something about a gendered situation or to protect the status quo. Therefore, the analysis needs to pay attention to whether those goals are gendered and if stereotypes apply. Often, female characters tend to pursue more peaceful goals (helping or saving others) while male characters' goals usually feature revenge or excessive violence. It is thus worth investigating if the narrative goals of the characters align with the ludic objectives of the game or if they stand in opposition.

An important part of analysis concerns the player reward for romance, which, as **Article V** (Meier 2020, 213–2015) shows, often means nudity and sex, but in many cases also romance and intimacy. The player may be presented with sexual imagery as well as cutscenes, which can be interpreted with tools of film studies such as camera movement, types of shots or interpretations of the *mise-en-scène*.

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<sup>46</sup> Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al. (2008, 211) define branching as the existence of multiple paths in a narration. It often enables character growth and change, as it invites possibilities.

<sup>47</sup> The connecting element of the genres is that the romance is mainly text-based (Cavallaro 2009, 8) but follows a pattern embedded in gameplay.



Nevertheless, the disconnect between the often gameplay-focused leadup to the reward and the reward being not inherently game-specific is worth noting, since this marks the reward as clearly catering to the likes of the player and the player's sexual preferences rather than the character.

The third level, **the level of gameplay**, features stats or ludic attributes (if applicable), traits/perks, choices (in regard to dialogue or the game world), rules and difficulty, and standard actions/tropes. I partly elaborate on these in my discussion of *preferred playing* (section 4.4). Many roleplaying games work with attributes like Strength, Wisdom or Charisma to show the ludic capability of the character within the game world. It is notable that often, especially in more classic games, female characters excel in Wisdom, Charisma and Intelligence, while male characters are often superior in Strength, Constitution and Dexterity. This shows how genders are treated differently under the game's surface. On a much broader scale, rules and difficulty are relevant when analyzing whether a game imposes different sets of rules on different genders. For example, the analysis needs to look at whether certain dialogue options (e.g. flirting) and certain roles and careers (such as classes/jobs) are restricted by gender or whether all genders interact with the world in the same way.

The last category, **the level of space and game world**, is both narrative and ludic. The game world is the foundation on which the character stands in terms of gender. While fantasy should be a tool of empowerment, fantasy worlds mostly mirror conventions set in the real world. The *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019) series perpetuates the idea that kings are male and powerful while females resort to intrigue behind the backs of their husbands. As I warn in **Article III** (Meier 2022b, 77–82), the term of “historical authenticity” is often used to excuse contemporary forms of gender bias and the exclusion of strong female characters. Since games are a product of medial representation, worldbuilding choices must be perceived as deliberate. Therefore, limitations for genders that do not occur during gameplay but are established as the circumstances of the world can be explicitly identified as examples of a moral or ideological bias against one gender. It is also worth noting whether those biases are discussed in the game or are left unchallenged.

### 4.5.3. Immersion, Gender and Video Games

I already make use of the concept of *preferred playing* in **Article IV** in which Mattia Bellini and I show how versatile the *preferred playing* as a tool is. We try to connect ethics with the problematic terms of immersion and gameflow, which influence moral choice-making in video games. We reflect on the implication of these aspects on players' ethical choice-making and how the architectures of a game mirror, generate or enhance different behaviors regarding moral decisions (Meier and Bellini 2021b, 1). We also tackle a mechanism with which games can easily influence players' views on certain topics such as ethics or gender.

Immersion is one of the central aspects of Game Studies and closely related to subjectivity, identity and embodiment. Nae (2022, 37) even believes the history of video games to be closely connected to the history of immersion, especially regarding action games.<sup>48</sup> While total immersion can never be achieved, since the player is always, to a certain degree, aware of the fact that they play a game (Nae 2022, 15), immersion is important for identifying with a character. One will automatically feel closer to the character they embody when they are immersed in the world and their story. This can lead to identification, which fosters empathy. The degree of identification, however, relies on several factors. Shaw concludes that some individuals look for certain markers (e.g. race, class, gender, sexuality) for identification, but for her, “identification requires a distance between audience members [...] and a media character.” (Shaw 2014, 79) Her interviewees mentioned “specific identifiers, some asserted that they identified with characters because of these characteristics only in the absence of other, deeper ways of connection with characters” (Shaw 2014, 72), others said that they identify with characters that they can relate to or that are narratively complex. Nae adds that avatars that function as an empty shell, such as the “unnamed silent protagonists” (Nae 2022, 17), are therefore especially uninviting for identification.

In our article, Bellini and I (2021) dealt with the phenomenon of immersion in video games and its importance for game design as well as interpretation. The term ‘immersion’ is employed by scholars and game designers to define the technological affordance of the medium, which allows players to control entities in other worlds but also to mark being absorbed into that world (Nae 2022, 9). We define immersion in accordance with Murray (2017) as “the feeling of being enveloped by different social norms and engaged in an intense learning situation. It is also associated with the feeling of being transported into a nonimmediate reality in the context of mediated representations.”

Through haptic and visual output, the game tries to integrate the player “in a 360° space of illusion, or immersion, with unity of time and place.” (Grau 2003, 13) Interactivity refers to the possibility of interacting meaningfully with the game world. The player should be able to perform the actions necessary in any given situation. If there is a small obstacle, the player would infer that it is possible, i.e. that there is a rule, to jump over that obstacle, which counts as meaningful interaction. Nae (2022, 12) argues that the more actions are supported, the more immersive a game becomes.

In our article, Bellini and I isolate different layers on which ethical decision-making can be fostered in players (Fig. 12).

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<sup>48</sup> “This aim is achieved through the increase in the level of audio-visual mimeticism (immediacy), the complexity of the mechanics and the symbiotic nature of the controls (interactivity), and, beginning with the mid-1990s, through the creation of complex and consistent storyworlds (narrativity).” (Nae 2022, 37)

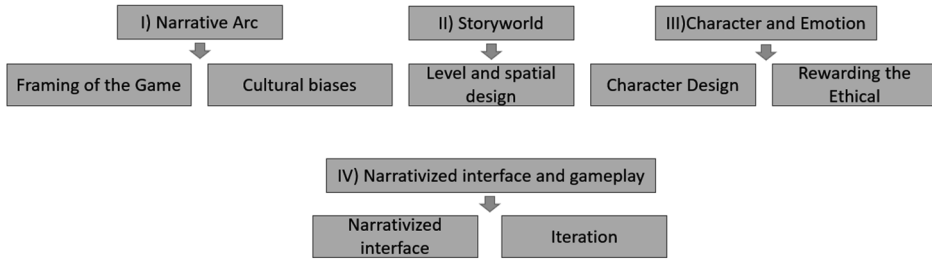


Fig. 12: Layers for ethical interaction.

The same layers can be used in game design, to foster a deeper understanding of sex and gender. We propose that on the first layer, the **narrative arc** of the game<sup>49</sup>, the game’s framing and its cultural biases are especially important (Meier and Bellini 2021b, 4–5). With regard to framing, the beginning and end of the game are an obvious focus. This not only includes the intradiegetic beginning and ending, but also the extradiegetic framing: In games, this is for example the launcher of the game or the title screen/menu, which can already include depictions of characters or gendered information.<sup>50</sup> The second point, cultural biases, asks for the historical, genre-specific and evidence-based tropes that inspired the game, such as, for example, the noir genre inspired *Heavy Rain* (2010).

On the second layer, the layer of the **storyworld**, Bellini and I talk about level and spatial design. Jenkins (2003) argues that video game architecture resembles amusement parks. While there are numerous ways to traverse levels, game designers usually communicate certain preferred paths. They do this to, for example, establish the mechanics for an upcoming boss fight or to introduce characters and themes that are referenced again later in the game.<sup>51</sup> This can also be used to introduce gendered matters, stances towards gender and characters, or to equalize

<sup>49</sup> Defined as the “logical sequencing of narrative events in time and space.” (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2012, 3)

<sup>50</sup> The title screen of *Wilderness* (2019), for example, depicts a group of heroes from the game’s hero roster. Every time the game starts, a different set of characters is generated for the title screen. These usually mixed-gendered groups convey a different message than an all-male group of characters, as in *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2015), which only shows protagonist Geralt, although the game features a strong playable female character named Ciri. The title-screen already prepares the player to exclude other genders from the experience of the game. It also usually sums up or introduces the kind of game that the player is confronted with. *Disco Elysium* (2019), for example, does not even show characters, but the city in which the game is set, and although there is a main character, he is, compared to the stories of all the other characters he meets in said city, quite insignificant.

<sup>51</sup> With regard to ethics in the game *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), we (Meier and Bellini 2021b, 6) argue: “Following the ethical path feels natural due to the narrative and interaction design (imaginative immersion) as well as the movement-like controls (gameflow), making it the *preferred playing* of the scene: If players develop empathy towards the android, they can master the final confrontation with him without losing Connor.”

a situation by giving characters of different genders the possibility to show proficiency and depth during a level.

On the third layer, **character and emotion**, we deal with issues similar to those I addressed in **Article IV**. Since many video games are character-driven, changing between acting as the character and witnessing actions of the character, the topic of embodiment plays an important role. There are differences between watching a character perform an action and performing it yourself. Empathy equalizes the affective state of two agents (Decety and Jackson, 2004). Lankoski sees this in relation to the notion of simulation, stating that the agent enters an as-if mode, “imagining how they themselves would feel in that situation.” (Lankoski 2011, 295) We therefore argue that playing the victim feels instinctively wrong in *Detroit: Become Human*, which practically forces the player to side with the suppressed group and work towards freeing them (Bellini and Meier 2021b, 6–7). At the same time, we see that ethical behavior is rewarded in-game. Since rewards are, as stated in **Article II**, a powerful tool for developers to foster a certain kind of behavior in players, certain attitudes and actions towards gender can also be rewarded.<sup>52</sup> Lankoski’s (2011) model of player character engagement in computer games can be seen as useful addition on this layer. In this, he proposes the aspect of *engagement* instead of immersion (Lankoski 2011, 293). He differentiates between *goal-related engagement* and *empathic engagement* and equally sees, similarly to my methodology, the game architecture as the driving force behind the way and scope in which players interact (Lankoski 2011, 297–298). In his *goal-related engagement*, emotions “relate to the player’s own goals and choices” (Lankoski 2011, 297) while in his *empathic engagement*, players foster recognition and alignment towards characters, whereby characters elicit a form of positive or negative attachment (Lankoski 2011, 306). His proposal can help to further differentiate the role of characters within the ethical decision-making process.

Lastly, we focus on the **narrativized interface and gameplay**. Video games communicate information on both intradiegetic and extradiegetic layers. The layer of the interface and menu is typically extradiegetic but can also be part of the game.<sup>53</sup> Interface and menu can also convey gendered information. In *Fallout 4* (2015), for example, out of 77 skill and attribute icons on its character perk chart, only four (Aquagirl, Party Girl, Action Girl, and Black Widow) feature a woman as the representation of the protagonist, and only if the protagonist is actually female. It should also be noted that none of the displayed enemies are female, even though in-game hostiles regularly are. From this interface, one could conclude that the world consists almost entirely of men, reproducing the symbolic annihilation of women (Krijnen and van Bauwel 2015, 32).

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<sup>52</sup> An example from *Detroit: Become Human* (2018) would be that helping the android sex workers leads to a preferred ending or even the “best ending” of the game. Interaction with them also fosters an understanding in the player about the difficult situation of sex workers, about their concerns and worries, and thus about their value as human beings.

<sup>53</sup> For example, in *NieR: Automata* (2017), the robot protagonist’s supposed operation system.

In our last point on ethical decision-making in games and proposing a framework for ethical game design, we turn to the matter of iteration. Iterations are common in video games. If the game's narrative itself offers a lot of variety or is, as a game of emergence, different in every playthrough, it has high replayability. Iterations in games can exist on the layer of the game itself, but also include only parts of the game (for example in roguelike games where the player traverses new randomly generated levels every time). In our example, *Detroit: Become Human* (2018), every branch of the game can be played separately, generating high replayability, as different choices lead to vastly different outcomes. Games that offer a choice between female and male protagonist, such as *Fallout 4* (2014), would benefit from replaying certain sections as the other gender, if playthroughs differed more. The fact that, apart from small differences in dialogue, this is not the case, stresses that *Fallout 4*'s character is indeed an avatar which occupies the androcentric perspective, and even when played female, she still effectively occupies the role of the male. Games like *The Last of Us* (2013), which in certain sections offer the playable perspectives of both the male and the female hero, already foster a deeper understanding of gender.<sup>54</sup> Different iterations therefore allow deducing a game's conceptualization of gender from the game design.

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<sup>54</sup> Ellie is looked down upon due to her gender and age, which is felt even stronger when playing Joel, who is masculine, strong and aggressive in his approach, and usually treated with respect.

## 5. TESTING THE METHODOLOGY: A CASE STUDY OF GENDER IN *CODE VEIN* (2019)

As the discussion above showed, a number of levels have to be analyzed in order to capture the complexity of gender present in the video game text and its play-through. As the methodology I have developed has been published in different articles with length limitations, each of them was able to only cover a part of the method. The following case study seeks to show the method as a whole at work.

*Code Vein* is an action role-playing game developed and published by Bandai Namco Entertainment. It was released for PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and Microsoft Windows in September 2019. The following interpretation will use the PC/MS Windows version 1.53 (05/26/2020), which was played with an Xbox Controller.

Analysis category applied: 4.1. Playing the Game 4.2. Context
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I will focus on gender representation. In accordance with the methodological framework I introduced in this article, I will take into account the presence or absence of genders, possibilities of development that characters of different genders have, and on which level bias is visible. While a traditional, binary coded analysis of the game may lead to the conclusion that indeed males and females are present in equal proportion, a more detailed examination can reveal gendered biases in the representation. Next to character analysis, embedded in narrative and ludic layers, I want to focus on the influence of genre in this piece.

Events and information in *Code Vein* can be quoted in two ways. One can either quote events via the spaces in which they happen, which follow a chronological order, or quote the vestiges, character-specific memory spaces, from which important information about characters can be retrieved.<sup>55</sup> The progression of levels, their rhetoric, becomes more and more drastic, which goes hand in hand with a progressively apocalyptic aesthetic.

The game is a to this date unique mixture of a so-called “souls-like game”, inspired by the game series of the same name, and a Japanese anime-inspired post-apocalyptic dystopian world, which leans heavily on the lore of the game *God Eater 3* (2019). Both the *Dark Souls* series and *God Eater 3* were published by Bandai, who seem keen on producing souls-like games as their signature genre. They are deemed “challenging, often punitive” (Rougeau, 2017) and thus attract an audience that enjoys the challenge and a high number of failures which ultimately leads to a greater feeling of success. Due to a design concept called “animation priority”, every action that the player induces must play out in its

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<sup>55</sup> The general order of levels and therefore spaces goes as follows: Ruined City Underground → Home Base → Ruined City Center → Dried-Up Trenches → Howling Pit → Cathedral of the Sacred Blood → Memories of the Player (“Queenslayer vestige”) → Cathedral (Revisited) → Ridge of Frozen Souls → Ashen Cavern → City of Falling Flame → Crown of Sand → Crypt Spire → Provisional Government Outskirts → Provisional Government Center → Gaol of the Stagnant Blood.

entirety and cannot be canceled. This sort of commitment easily leads to severe punishment for risk-heavy actions often resulting in the character's death.<sup>56</sup>

In the case of *Code Vein*, the genre, which has been identified as male as discussed in subchapter 4.2., is paired with the anime aesthetic, which in itself is often criticized for its over-sexualized females (Mae et al. 2016, 251).<sup>57</sup> I will analyze gender relations on the level of lore and narration, the level of space and game world, and the level of character surfaces. Gameplay will be a central element to all parts of my argumentation. Likewise, the *space of possibility* and the *preferred playing* of the game will be essential to all layers. A final conclusion will determine in which way the game's layers empower characters or create bias.

The world of *Code Vein* is clearly inspired by postapocalyptic franchises such as *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015).<sup>58</sup> That style is further influenced by the Japanese Visual Kei movement, which consists of flamboyant costumes and an often androgynous aesthetic.<sup>59</sup> In the case of *Code Vein*, this style is evoked in the way the game dresses its vampire-like beings, so-called revenants. Each revenant has a unique gift called "blood code", with a special set of skills. The world of *Code Vein* suffered the so-called great collapse, due to which "the Horrors" appeared and a vast majority of the human population died. The revenants are trapped in the city of Vein, in which they fight for blood beads. The remaining humans inside the ruins of the city are herded like cattle, traded like slaves, and owned by the gangs which rule the city.

In the core conception of the world, the roles are strictly divided between men and women. This cannot be changed, because the story is entirely told in cutscenes and dialogues. Male masterminds like general Gregori and researcher Mido come up with ideas and experiments, while women shoulder burdens and endure. The stage character Cruz, the "Queen", is often mentioned during the plot

Analysis category applied:  
4.3. General Game Overview  
4.5.2. Character Analysis:  
Space and gameworld  
4.5.1 Transformative Uses:  
Othering of women as  
enemies; Forced male gaze

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<sup>56</sup> Dying and reviving is thus essential in souls-like games and part of the genre's design. Unspent experience points are dropped and must be retrieved, usually involving yet more combat. Additionally, due to the scarcity of save points, the player must travel through vast hostile territories to regain the lost currency.

<sup>57</sup> Coles (2019) acknowledges this in his review of the game, when explicitly describing one of the characters as "[a] peculiar girl who is unreasonably well-endowed (the game is almost infuriatingly focused on titillation)." Coles (2019) continues by calling it "[a]n unholy union of anime, Dark Souls, and My Chemical Romance," which "is as much about style as substance."

<sup>58</sup> This can be seen in the face masks that strongly resemble that of *Fury Road's* (2015) villain Immortan Joe, an obsession with tubes, a cult-like structure focusing on a liquid substance (blood instead of *Mad Max's* oil), and an overt focus on a unique art style.

<sup>59</sup> Strauss (1998) identifies the following characteristics: "outrageous, usually androgynous looks – gobs of makeup, hair dyed and sprayed in ways that made Mohawks look conservative and a small fortune spent on leather and jewellery."

and in memories where she regularly undergoes torture to find a cure for the blood hunger of the revenants. She then turns into an evil being of great power, which must be slain. In Cruz, Corwin (2020) sees one of the most striking incidences of mistreatment of women in the game: “The experiments were akin to torture, resulting in her going into a Frenzy, using the very same powers the torture embedded into her to become an almost mindless enemy intent on destroying what was left of humanity. She is in great pain and unable to either save herself or die.” Cruz is barely a character and has no backstory. She becomes the hostile Other to be destroyed, a hurdle to be overcome, before her body is turned into a literal plot object.

The Othering of women as monsters is hardcoded within the game, which has been taken over from older media traditions. Monsters in general are the Othered “bodily manifestations of evil” (Halberstam 1995, 162) who, according to Halberstam (1995, 27) represent “the disruption of categories, the destruction of boundaries, and the presence of impurities.” In *Code Vein*, however, the player plays revenants, who are vampires, and sympathizes with their problems and their pain. They have become the norm and are beautiful and strong. The enemies, however, are the true monsters who are Othered against the mostly male revenants as Others.

Almost half of the bosses are female, and those female bosses are usually sexualized. The first female boss, the Butterfly of Delirium, is a pink-skinned woman who wears high heels, a string and a bra.<sup>60</sup> While the camera in this fight is flexible, the boss must constantly remain in the center of the screen to track movement. It is also part of the *preferred play* to keep a certain distance from the enemy, since the close-range attacks are potentially deadly. As a result, the whole body is visible throughout the fight, with the breasts of the butterfly consistently occupying the center of the screen. They become even more pronounced when she attacks with a ranged attack and leans her head back while displaying her chest. Her screams are clearly female.

The misogynist rhetoric becomes even more visible with the Invading Executioner, a young woman with two ponytails, a tight ballet suit and high heels. For one attack, she dances on her weapon, a spear, like a pole-dancer on a pole, before riding the phallic stick towards the player. The Invading Executioner is a faster enemy and it is hard to focus on her female attributes during the fight. The game, however, frames the fights against bosses with cutscenes, which leave the player in a passive state, not disturbing the male gaze. The player is not granted any agency to avoid the male gaze as well as the objectification of the women.

Another boss, the Successor of the Claw, showcases the design of female-intended enemies even more clearly. She is a human-like cat in a black body suit with breasts emphasized by the differently colored fabric around them (Fig. 13).

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<sup>60</sup> She has no arms but six butterfly-like wings as well as a tail with a monster’s face. While floating, she seductively raises her legs to pronounce her heels. The spiderwebs in the background conjure up the stereotype of the black widow, only emphasized by the fact that she also attacks with poison.

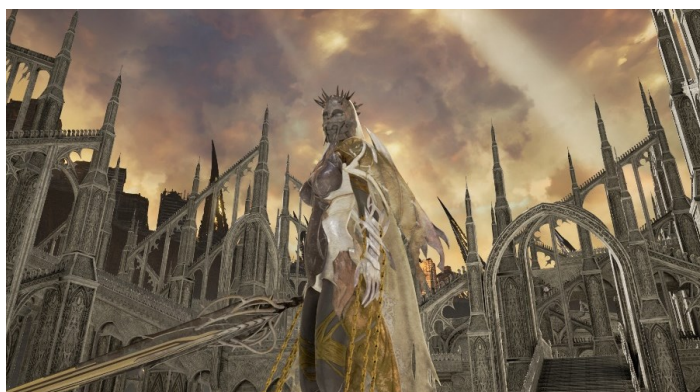


She walks on her hands and knees, often exposing her behind, tucked in tight leather pants, towards the player when she turns during attacks. In one attack, she even stretches her legs, propelling her behind in the air. Her sounds are also clearly female. When defeated, she curls on the ground, thereby even more resembling a pet for the male-intended male.



*Fig. 13 Successor of the Claw, soothed by being defeated by the avatar (City of Fallen Flame). Screenshot by the author.*

All female enemies dress in revealing ways and are, during fights, presented as sexually provocative, which makes it seem like the player's actions rein them in and punish them for their inappropriate behavior. The male bosses mostly fight in full armor which covers everything, even their faces. There are also numerous regular enemies who are intended to resemble both women and men. The male-intended enemies' appearance is dominated by armor that pronounces their wide upper body and broad shoulders. They are idealized, not sexualized. Roughly two types of female-intended enemies exist. One is grotesquely overweight, wearing a hammer and a gas mask, stressing their monstrosity. The other has a slender build and wears a tight suit that stresses breasts and body shape (Fig. 14).



*Fig. 14: The slender knights in the Cathedral of the Sacred Blood. The suit pronounces their female form. Screenshot by the author.*

Apart from enemies, the world is literally built on the shoulders of passivized women who sprang from the remains of the dead queen, the so-called successors. The above-mentioned Successor of the Claw (Fig. 13), for example, was formerly a woman named Emily, who sacrificed herself for the well-being of her close friend Yakumo. She was tortured in experiments by the scientist Mido and is, in memories, crucified, before she is then turned into a literal pet, a human-like cat. In her memory, her thinking centers around her love interest: “The only thing I had to look forward to was the day when Yakumo would finally wake up.” (Emily 1) The Successor of the Ribcage is yet another woman, who sacrificed herself for the wellbeing of the world and nourishes the revenants with her blood, which “blooms” on the trees in form of blood beads. Women are being tortured and sacrificed in biblical ways, sacrificing themselves to nourish and heal others. The apocalypse is used to justify mistreatment of humans, but especially women. For example, a nameless woman is regularly attacked by different revenants who lust for her blood and is traded like a commodity.<sup>61</sup>

Analysis category applied:  
 4.3. General Game Overview  
 4.5.2. Character Analysis:  
 Space and gameworld;  
 stereotyping and gender roles  
 of women in the world;  
 semantic spaces occupied by  
 women

Some female characters are characterized predominantly through their noble suffering (like Io), some, like Emily or Cruz, must be slain in order to rein them in and end their suffering. Women in general tend to occupy supportive roles in the world of *Code Vein*. While Louis’ pre-ordained role is to gain knowledge and take initiative, the females are presented as motherly caretakers who sacrifice themselves for the sake of their children or are being sacrificed to not hurt them. Since the player is forced to fight the female-intended monsters and engage with the female characters in the form of cutscenes and non-skippable dialogue, there is no *possibility frame* for a more empowered development.

The roles of females in the gameworld can further be seen from the spaces they are allowed to occupy. Semantic spaces are gendered as they are always occupied by the same characters. At the headquarters of the avatar and their team, for example, the trader Coco is always found leaning on a racing car, which, however, has no significance for the present where there are no cars. Thus the car does not indicate a male dominated space but is purely cosmetic, to highlight the half-naked body of the female character for the avatar and the player alike. This leaves us with the conclusion that this presentation is merely meant to visually appeal to the onlooker, as her half-naked body is complemented by the car, forming an attractive object for the avatar and the player alike (Fig. 15).

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<sup>61</sup> The gender inequality has been noted by others: “[T]he game neither offers a fantasy world of true equality nor engages meaningfully with discrimination. Its supposedly-powerful women have little agency, or are demonized while also being heavily sexualized.” (Corwin, 2020)



Fig. 15: Coco leaning on the racing car in the headquarters. Screenshot by the author.

The main character is an avatar-type, which, however, lacks agency, which results from the dominating mode, the mode of narration, that brings the game often close to a movie. The world is not dominated by environmental storytelling, but by traditional narratives that take place in cutscenes and via traversing the memories of other inhabitants

Analysis category applied:  
 4.5.1. Transformative Uses of Gender Studies: Game modes  
 4.5.2. Character Analysis:  
 Focus on character surface;  
 avatar-type character

of the world (Epstein, 2020). The player is merely an observer of events in the past. This is even underlined by the fact that the protagonist often lingers to force the player to follow the protagonist’s view and the narrated set pieces. Instead of being able to actually shape the story or influence events, the protagonist is reduced to a “TV anime-style delivery” (Tolentino, 2020) of the events. The memories (called blood echoes) are static within a space that is traversed by the player, resembling Jenkins’s (2003) understanding of levels as a theme park. The player is guided by lights to follow a preferred path to the windows and doorways that reveal the past of the character to which the blood echo is connected. In the end of each blood echo, a door awaits, which opens to reveal light. The player now knows more about the explored character than before. The vertical architecture of these levels further enhances the impression that the player goes deeper – descends – into the memories of another person. This mode of presentation is not without its problems. The characters whose memories are traversed usually have no say regarding the fact that the avatar (and in Mulvey’s sense also the player) literally becomes an observer, at times even a voyeur, of the characters’ most intimate secrets.

The protagonist of *Code Vein* is an avatar-type character. After starting the game, the first prompts the player to “remember name” or “remember appearance”. *Code Vein* has a very elaborate character editor, which can be used not only to create a character for the game, but as a game within itself to recreate

characters from anime, TV shows and musicians.<sup>62</sup> The game is designed to encourage flawless looks despite the grim, postapocalyptic world. The enormous size of the editor (the game offers, for example, several hundred types of eyebrows alone) in theory implies that the possibility spectrum should be enormous. This, however, is not the case. The player can choose between only male and female gender. Male is displayed first and can therefore be deemed to be the default option. Both the female and male characters have a default appearance.

Under the male gender, 32 “basic appearances” are listed, which are a shortcut to starting the game. Except for seven, all of the basic appearances have light skin, which is thereby marked as standard. This is especially striking, since brownish colors (7) dominate among the choices. Most have short hair and armor that pronounces their male body. The three body types for males range from “wide shoulders/wide upper body” to “smaller shoulders/smaller upper body”. The body type of characters cannot be customized further and therefore it is not possible to create a character that does not fit the picture of the slim, athletic male. It is impossible to create a face that does not cater to the perfectly symmetrical anime aesthetic. The game, however, does not differentiate between female and male hair styles. There are 58 hair styles, which also feature female-connoted ones with two ponytails on each side. Makeup is available for both male and female characters, as well as fake eyelashes, scars and a variety of accessories ranging from hats, glasses, necklaces, additional strands of hair, and bags to gloves, collars, and earrings. Most seem to borrow from a Visual Kei and Goth aesthetic. While the availability of makeup for male characters seems to imply a fluid sense of masculinity, this is not mirrored in the game itself.

The clothes for males are in general not revealing or sexualized. Only one of the nine available outfits shows skin. Three of the outfits especially pronounce shoulders or chest muscles. The available voices are stereotypically male and deep. For the stereotypical female character, however, the first “basic appearance” shown has a revealing cleavage and wears hotpants to underline her long legs and naked thighs. The default body type has the medium breast size, with hips slightly wider than the breasts. Type B features larger breasts, C, the last option, offers smaller ones. This means that bigger breasts are considered closer to the default, since a player must click through all options to arrive at a smaller cup size. Breasts, hips, behind and shoulders are merged into one option. It is not possible, for example, to make only the shoulders wide but keep the hips small. Out of the eight clothing options, four clearly pronounce the breasts. The voices are clearly female, ranging from soft-spoken to snippy.

Thus, while it is possible to create a character that is not sexualized, it is not presented as the default. The quantity and quality of the available options clearly hint at a distinctly gendered aesthetic. The preferred options create idealized

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<sup>62</sup> The Steam frontpage’s first ten results of the game’s community content (2 August 2021) show four pictures in which players present characters from popular culture (e.g. Sora from *Kingdom Hearts*) instead of giving insight into the actual game content.

characters that either cater to androgynous anime aesthetics or are subjects of the male gaze with sexualized forms.

The game's introduction, which pronounces the term of "remembering", clearly indicates that the player can fully customize the background of the avatar. This is further underlined by the fact that the avatar suffers from amnesia when he or she wakes up. They start as blank slate that is literally written in the blood of the protagonist. While in theory, this offers a lot of freedom, the protagonist later recovers his or her memory, retrieving their "own" blood code, so that the theme of "inventing oneself" is discarded for the theme of "remembering who one *really* is". The blood code of the avatar, which is available via menu, has a description that informs the player of its origin and main purpose. The blood code of the protagonist is called "Queenslayer", so the protagonist is always defined by the fact that he or she killed Cruz in the past, making the killing of a tortured woman their biggest achievement.

The blood codes connect the protagonist to their companions. Every companion at some point gives their blood code to the avatar by letting the protagonist bite them. This almost cultish behavior of devotion towards the avatar fits the general aesthetic of the game. This is established by Io, the first acquaintance of the avatar, in the first sequence of the game. Here, Io puts the head of the protagonist in her lap (Fig. 16). This gesture, which is meant to project motherly tenderness, is deeply gendered. In this scene, the center of the picture is occupied by Io's half-naked breasts, which transform the player into Mulvey's voyeuristic observer and construct a heteronormative picture.

Analysis category applied:  
4.5.1. Transformative Uses of  
Gender Studies: Forced  
heteronormativity  
4.5.2. Character Analysis:  
Gameplay



Fig. 16: Io with the protagonist's face in her lap. Screenshot by the author.

The exact interpretation of the scene depends on the protagonist’s gender, but in all interpretations the protagonist occupies the space as the male cult leader. While the male protagonists in combination with the half-naked breasts evokes (hetero)sexuality, due to the complete lack of queer content, this would not be the case if the avatar was female. Here the framing strongly influences the *preferred reading* of the game.

The other blood codes show clear gender bias, which is not obvious at first glance because of the equal combat proficiencies of both genders. The 28 blood codes are almost equally attained from male (14) and female (13) characters. They do, however, provide a different spectrum of abilities. The blood codes of male characters are mostly offensive gifts, with focus on strength, dexterity, close combat, heavy armor and an aggressive fighting style.<sup>63</sup> Female-inherited gifts, however, underline support, defense and self-sacrifice (Fig. 17).<sup>64</sup>

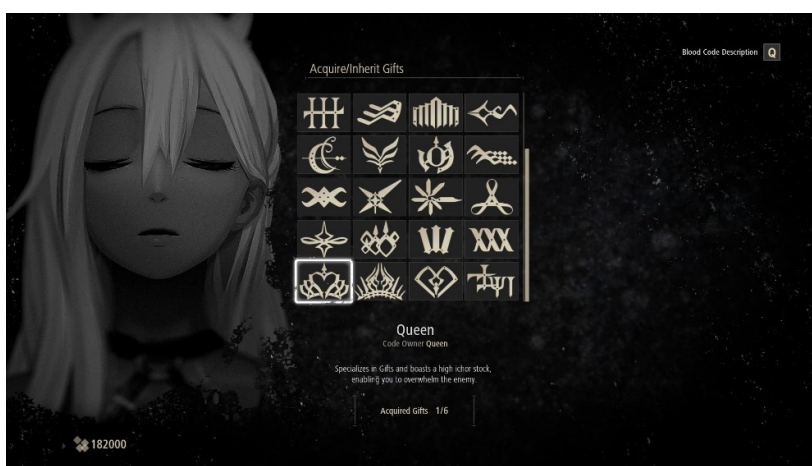


Fig. 17: The Queen’s blood code, featuring a heart-shaped crown, offers the gift of self-sacrifice to the avatar. Screenshot by the author.

<sup>63</sup> “Berserker: Features high strength and endurance. Its low ichor stock can be offset with heavy armor” is one example, “Assassin: Optimal for melee combat. [...]” another. One male-inherited gift reads “Heimdall: Specializes in highly aggressive melee combat”, another one “Hades: Boasts high attack power based in strength and dexterity”.

<sup>64</sup> “Mercury: Allows for safe exploration with its balanced stats [...]” is one example, with “well-balanced” also pronounced in the code Scathach. The Artemis code “suffers from low endurance”, Isis “[s]pecializes in ranged combat”, Eos “[b]oasts support-type Gifts”, as well as Demeter, which “features Gift-based support”). Ishtar, the Queen’s blood code, even goes as far as to make self-sacrifice the prime argument for this blood code, proclaiming: “Features Gifts that aid attacking/defending, including Gifts involving self-sacrifice.”

The main cast consists of an equal number of men and women. Louis, Yakomo and Jack are the males of the team, Io, Mia and Eva are the females. The three most important functional characters are Coco (a female trader), Murasame (the female swordsmith), and Dave (an advisor). While the number of characters is equal, the fighting is, at the beginning of the game, exclusively male.<sup>65</sup>

Analysis category applied:  
4.5.2. Character Analysis:  
Cast characters, focus on  
world and narration, character  
surface; stereotyping on ludic  
and narrative level

Although all characters have different backgrounds, they are similar in one aspect: their background always relates to a character of the other sex, enforcing heteronormative relationships. Louis is a good friend of Cruz, which is mentioned in his memories, Yakomo's memories are all about Emily, Io solely exists in relation to the male-intended protagonist, Mia in relation to her brother, Jack in relation to Eva and Eva in relation to Jack. Even the supportive team follows this scheme. The types of relationships either revolve around love (male characters) or around motherly love. Women are therefore mainly characterized in their relation to their children or child-like family members or to the men they love. These relations are also established as central in the introductory sequence, which is playing when no key is pressed in the main menu of the game.

The appearance or actions of the companions cannot be controlled by the player. The player can just choose an appropriate companion whose preset fighting style best synergizes with one's own character build. Playing as a dexterous fighter, for example, synergizes best with either a companion in heavy armor or one that can heal. The fact, however, that for a long period only two companions are available, can also result in the player adapting their playstyle to that of their companions, in an instance of *preferred playing*. One example is the fight against the Butterfly of Delirium, which poisons the companion and the player alike. If the player does not provide a cure, the companion dies and thereby becomes ineffective. The player is thus forced to choose a supportive role, at least at the beginning, underlining their existence as a mere bystander to the game's events.

It is up to the player to uncover the companions' backgrounds, defining how well-developed they appear. Each background is explored via the respective character's memories, which are collectibles in the maze-like levels of the game. While it is possible to miss most of the memories – except for the very first one of Oliver Collins, which serves as an example of how the system works – it cannot be argued that this is very likely. When the companions regain memories, the blood code that the avatar extracts from them affords new abilities. As difficulty is central to the game, dismissing the search for memories is highly unlikely. If the player chooses to inform themselves about the game, which is more plausible

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<sup>65</sup> Louis and Yakomo are, for more than the first third of the game, the only available fighting companions until Mia joins the group during the episode in the Howling Pit. Io, although present from the very start, joins the fighting group even later (Cathedral: revisited), and Eva only becomes available at the end of the game.

as a result of the challenging difficulty, they learn that the game offers three different endings. The “best” ending is only triggered when all memories are restored and if the player fails to do so, they are punished by letting the avatar transform into the next Queen, who is then killed by the companions, who take the place of the previous Successors.

Characters are defined by their competence in battle to complement the playstyle chosen for the avatar. The competence of the companions characterizes how much the player cares about them. Louis, Yakumo, Mia and Io are the only characters that are regularly shown in cutscenes, framed as important, and for a long time, only Louis and Yakumo are available as companions. It is therefore most likely that in the *preferred playing*, players do not get to know and experience the remaining characters. These four central companions also already occupy all important playstyles.<sup>66</sup> As all enemies sooner or later approach and attack ranged fighters, Mia’s strength is, when embedded in the gameplay of the game, not an asset but a weakness, making her inherently inferior to her alternatives. Therefore mainly two males and one female character, who joins the fighting group very late, seem competent.

The four are also defined as central by the framing of the game in terms of screen time. Most time is given to Louis, the first permanent companion that the avatar meets in the first map in which the player can freely roam. He is a nimble fighter who makes the avatar fight faster and can improve the team’s attack power.<sup>67</sup> Louis’s connection to and search for knowledge is pronounced both on the ludic and the narrative level. His main goal is to find out why no new blood beads are growing, making it a key point of his character. He introduces himself accordingly: “I am Louis. I’m researching blood beads.” (Ruined City Underground) He wants to help the current civilization by establishing a continuous blood flow, thereby ending the gang wars. In the best ending of the game, his wish is fulfilled and his mission therefore complete. *Code Vein* features a mechanic that is related to the dating patterns on which I elaborate in **Article V**. Providing certain “trading items” to companions results in them offering special items in return, reacting either happy or disinterested. Louis’ favorite items are Yellowed Books and Faded Comics. Other, less valued items include Fragrant Tea, Elegant Fountain Pens and Spotless Instruments. This spectrum of items consists mostly of objects that are connected to knowledge such as books, or to high culture and a sophisticated lifestyle.

Yakumo Shinonome is the second companion available in *Code Vein*. He will join the fighting team after the tutorial dungeon. Yakumo is a melee fighter who wears heavy armor. Due to the difficult nature of the game, with hard-hitting enemies, he appears as one of the most competent companions, due to his

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<sup>66</sup> Louis is nimble and hard-hitting, Yakumo wears heavy armor and has a high survivability, Mia is engaged in ranged combat and Io heals and wields strong magic in battle.

<sup>67</sup> His blood code is called “Prometheus”, a Titan god of the Greek pantheon who is best known for defying the gods by stealing fire from them and gifting it to humanity in the form of technology, knowledge, and more generally speaking, civilization (Hansen 2005, 32).

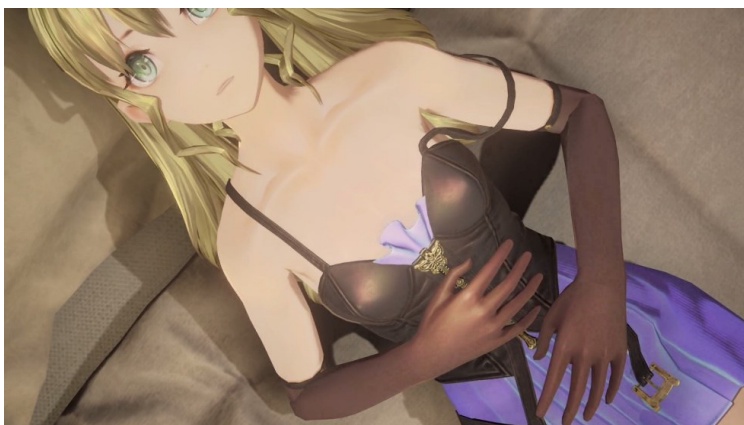


survivability. Yakumo is characterized by strength and reliability in friendship.<sup>68</sup> In ludic terms, his playful, easy-going attitude and his stereotype of the “relaxed friend” is furthermore stressed by the Trade Items he likes: alcohol, toys and food.

The backgrounds of the female characters differ vastly in tone and stereotypes from those of the male characters. Mia Karnstein plays a central role in the promotional material alongside the player character, but this is highly misleading. She is primarily defined through her relationship to her brother Nicola, of whom she is very protective. She is introduced in a scene where she attacks the party to steal an item to save him, and then agrees to join the party only to find a place her brother dreamed of. “Her arc is only connected to the main plot through her little brother. Even her motivation to stay in the party connects to Nicola.” (Corwin, 2020) Nearly every utterance of hers centers around her brother, e.g. “Thank you... for watching over Nicola. I really appreciate it.” (Ashen Cavern) Mia joins the team much later than the other two companions. She uses a light, ranged weapon, the bayonet. She also has an advanced healing skill, which makes her a better healer than the two male companions (“Guardian Aid”). Being a ranged fighter and a healer, she falls into two stereotypes often attached to female characters who are depicted as frail supporters who shy away from close combat. This is further underlined by her appearance as a blonde, fair-skinned girl with a petite build. She wears a black spaghetti strap corset, with one strap hanging off her shoulder in an erotic fashion. She wears her hair in a child-like way, pulled up in twin tails. Her relation to her brother makes her occupy a motherly role. It depends on the avatar, not her, whether she can ultimately save her brother. What is not up to the avatar, however, is the way she is sexualized by the camera. In a sequence that plays after she loses Nicola, the camera slowly caresses her body, panning from her feet to her face, thereby crossing her upper body with the strap of her top falling off her shoulders (Fig. 18). Although initially presented as a fighter, she prefers Aromatic herbs and Fragrant tea as trading items, adding to the stereotypically feminized representation.

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<sup>68</sup> His blood code is called “Atlas”, referring to the Titan who is condemned to hold up the sky for eternity.



*Fig. 18: Mia waking up in the headquarters, the camera caressing her body (Howling Pit). Screenshot by the author.*

The other central female character is Io, who is characterized in the most misogynic way in her appearance and in her story arc. Io indeed represents a number of toxic female stereotypes. Firstly, she introduces herself as “not a very capable fighter” (Homebase). She uses magic to fight and is also the most effective healer (via the skill “Sympathetic Boon”). For healing others, she sacrifices 70% of her own life to restore 70% of the avatar’s life. Thus her greatest asset and role is to sacrifice herself for the benefit of others. One of her clones summarizes this existence as follows: “My Successor... He said I should live for myself, instead of as an Attendant of the Relics... But to what end?” (Ridge of Frozen Souls) Io is an otherwise empty character. She starts off without memories, but learns that she is part of a breeding program that specifically creates humans like her. Serving and sacrificing are her only options. “Even if some revenants must be... sacrificed... for our survival.” (Oliver 1) This seems to apply almost exclusively to women, however. No matter what ending is shown, Io is always sacrificed in one way or another. In the “bad” ending, she turns to ash; in the “good” ending, Io sacrifices herself, becoming a tree to nurture the revenant population with the fruits of her body; the world is born anew out of her. The protagonist receives a fruit from her, while a choir sings in the background, underlining the biblical inspiration of the scene, which seems closely tied to Jesus sacrificing himself for humanity, not only through his death but also in offering his body as bread. The lyrics of the accompanying background song exclaim “I was born for this.” (Gaol of the Stagnant Blood).

Io finds her identity in dying and exists only in relation to the protagonist. That she is otherwise empty is emphasized by her favorite items, Local Pennants and Curious Novelties, described as: “Its use is unknown, but it boldly declares its existence.” This description is similarly empty and vague, refusing to state what kind of novelty it is. Io is presented as an empty vessel into which the player can project whatever they please. Her being a body without personality is stressed by her sexualization. Her most prominent feature are her large, round breasts, which

are only partially covered by a very short torn dress. Her innocent yet provocative impression is further stressed by the fact that she is often found lying on a bed, surrounded by candles (Fig. 19). Her clothes and cape, which covers nothing but her shoulders, are part of a uniform that all Attendants wear, which marks her as yet another one of many without any personality of her own.



*Fig. 19: Io's bed is in a pronounced position inside the chapel. The player witnesses her slowly getting up multiple times to watch the memories of other companions through her. Screenshot by the author.*

Io sacrifices herself to literally nourish others. Just as Cruz, she sees her doing as a form of deliverance, of giving birth to something new: “She [Cruz] fought until the very end against the monster inside her, desperate to save revenants from their thirst. [...] I want to *deliver* salvation... not just consolation.” (Io 3) Cruz herself speaks of the queen as “a monster growing inside me”, resembling a pregnancy. Following this logic, tainted women like Cruz, who have a background filled with torture and doubt, deliver monsters (here in the form of the “Queen”), while pure, empty women like Io deliver nourishment.

A similar strain can also be observed in the secondary characters. Murasame's memories reveal that she was top of her class in the military academy she attended but she explains her combat abilities with her proficiency in gymnastics. While initially portrayed as competent, she panics and her team, consisting solely of male fighters, knocks her unconscious and saves her. They die and Murasame stops fighting, resorting to selling weapons.<sup>69</sup> This assigns her into the category of “damaged women” who can no longer fend for themselves.

This analysis shows that although the game has a balanced number of male and female characters, this does not prevent gendered bias. The team itself might

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<sup>69</sup> Her blood code is named “Hephaestus”, son of Zeus and Hera, the god of smithing. This is fitting insofar as Hephaestus is often depicted as a lame god (Graves 1955, 51), who is unable to fight any longer.

consist of male and female fighters, but the female combatants join the team later, framing the male characters as more central and more competent. My approach to character analysis shows that characters are offered almost no *possibility frame* to avoid being sexualized on the different levels I proposed, which include components of world and narration such as background/stereotypes, story and goals, but also discrimination on the level of gameplay in the form of stereotypically female traits/perks and ludic roles. With the enemies in *Code Vein*, I could show one type of female Othering.

My *preferred playing* maps the gender bias which the player most likely encounters in the game. The *preferred playing* is the result of the interplay of different systems, which I analyzed on my proposed layers, that of space and gameworld, gameplay, world and narration as well as character surface. The proposed context as a first step of the analysis already shows that the game is catering to a male audience in genre and setting. The game then presents a world that builds upon strong female characters who are destroyed via torture, turned into monsters, and have to be beaten into submission by the male-intended avatar and his team. The game frames the energetic fights with cutscenes, in which the player remains passive and becomes a voyeur, watching over the shoulder of their avatar, stressing the male gaze one is locked in. Although the game features an elaborate character editor, the *possibility frame* of this editor allows only certain types of bodies that draw from stereotypical appearances of idealized men and sexualized women. Queering is made impossible by its absence within the limited cast of characters. While the avatar's gender can be chosen, the hard-coded cutscenes and tropes within the game frame it as a first-and-foremost male experience within a world in which women sacrifice themselves to nourish and protect others.

## 6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

While gender has been one of the most vocally debated issues connected to computer games in public discourse, especially after the #GamerGate and other related scandals, research in games studies has not developed sufficiently nimble tools for identifying and analyzing gender in the complex interactive medium of games. In my literature review I showed that methodological tools that would do justice to the interactive complexity of games have not been the focus of researchers in the past decade. This was the main research gap that my work sought to fill in the different case studies included in the dissertation. In all of the articles I stressed the effect of the medium's inherent interactivity on the players' behavior and, through this, on the displayed content.

In order to create a methodology suitable for the complex medium, I developed several new concepts. The most important one of them is the notion of *preferred playing*, developed on the basis of Hall's (1973) *preferred reading* and Sunstein and Thaler's concept of *nudge* (2008). In **Article II**, this was combined with game architecture and narratological tools to create a holistic approach to gender in games that would be attentive to the socio-historical and technological context of games. I showed the importance of localization, genre, paratexts and transmedia storytelling. I identified three aspects that can help to analyze gender: transformative use of established tools of gender studies, layers for a dedicated analysis of characters, and ways to employ immersion in game analysis.

I have tested different aspects of this methodological toolkit in all five articles included in the thesis, as well as the case study included in the present chapter. I tested the transformative uses of established gender studies' tools in **Article I**, with the conclusion that binary oppositions such as male/female, active/passive and fighting/supporting as well as fatherhood/motherhood are still prevalent. These result in different kinds of hegemonic masculinities and femininities, closely related to existing stereotypes.

Character analysis was my focus in **Article III**. With the concept of the *possibility frame*, I a) demonstrated that ludic parameters such as attributes and skills are just as important as characterization via narrative, b) showed that interactivity fosters change and growth of characters and can be analyzed as a spectrum for empowerment and c) showed that the gameworld and its affordances can be analyzed for gender bias in order to estimate the starting position for empowerment for female and male characters alike. In a similar vein, **Article V** develops my ideas on character analysis by offering a typology to analyze not only dating games but also features of dating games in other game genres. With the help of this typology, the rhetoric of the dating process in games can be systematized and analyzed for bias on different levels such as gender. In **Article IV**, I used my *preferred playing* approach, but tied it to immersion and ethics.

The case study introduced in this cover article brought together the different elements of the methodology developed and tested it on the *preferred playing* of *Code Vein* (2019). I focused on the transformed tools of gender studies and

character analysis on both narrative and ludic levels, for the sake of length and focus, as well as the context, especially the genre and difficulty. I demonstrated that the game's rhetoric strongly favors male characters as heroes and female characters as suffering for the male good. The game is static in its display of gender, giving practically no opportunities to change the tight boundaries of gender performativity. The characters' backgrounds are presented as static stages for the main character to walk through. Even in situations in which the player is given a choice, the *possibility spectrum* as well as the preferred options always objectify the character. Also in its ludic parameters, the game tends towards gender stereotyping. The analysis clearly shows that an equal ratio of female and male characters as well as female and male antagonists does not lead to an equal treatment of genders. The representation of the narrative does not always match that of the ludic rhetoric, but as games are rule-bound, the latter should be regarded as even more important than the often superficial narrative.

While the methodology proved to be viable in all analyses presented in this thesis, there are also limitations, which require further research. The vast amount of data presented by a game still proves to be a challenge, even if narrowed down to a handful of characters and specific game layers/topics. In the case of *Code Vein* (2019), only four characters with the most screentime were analyzed because, due to the several layers of videogames representation, even one character analysis yields many pages of data.

The thesis mostly worked with games of progression. *Code Vein* (2019) is fairly straightforward with little branching. One of my previous case studies focuses on a game of emergence (Meier 2022b, 92–97), but even there, the game's narrative supported the analysis of gender representation. The next step would be to apply the methodology to multiple games of different genres, technological eras and with different ratios between story and gameplay. It would be useful to analyze games of emergences like card games or an MMORPG, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, in its entirety to see whether further tools are necessary to grasp a medium as versatile, fast-moving and often as enormous as video games.

The problem of the massive amount of data could partly be avoided by developing the models of *preferred playing* and default choices further. A list of typical default choices, e.g. a list of typical visual defaults as presented in character editors of games, could be developed. These could be used to shorten the list of findings in games by simply stating what set of default choices is available to which degree. This would codify the reading of games even more, allowing for more stress on the actual interpretation of the findings.

Lastly, investigating if markers of *preferred playing* are indeed synonymous with the actual observed behavior of players would be helpful to determine what further development my methodology requires to grasp the playstyles of different player types. From the players' perspective, there could indeed be several *preferred playings*, which are different due to country of origin of the player, gender, background and other factors such as preferred platform. While the *preferred playing* strives to negate such player variety by tying the text to objective markers within games, the existence of different player perceptions of what is preferred in

the first place should be examined. Further research with empirical tools could also foster the understanding and effectiveness of nudges within video games, thereby providing an answer to the question of what could generally be regarded a strong nudge and on which layers of video games nudges have the strongest effect.

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## SUMMARY IN ESTONIAN

### Sugu mängudes – metodoloogia ja analüüs

Videomängudest on saanud üks kasumlikemaid meelelahutustööstuse osasid (Zach 2015, 60). 2019. aastal mängis maailmas videomänge üle 2,5 miljardi inimese (Spieltimes 2020). Näiteks USA-s on videomängutööstus kasvanud suuremaks ja tulutoovamaks kui filmitööstus ja Põhja-Ameerika sporditööstus kokku (Witkowski 2020/2021). Nii on enamik inimesi mingil viisil seotud videomängukultuuriga, isegi kui nad ei nimeta end mängijateks.

Kuna mängudest on saanud oluline popkultuuri osa, peaksime rohkem tähelepanu pöörama ka nende kaudu edastatud ideoloogiale. Sugu on rassismi ja homofoobia kõrval suurim eelarvamuste allikas tänapäeva mängukultuuris, mängutööstuses ja ka videomängudes endis, nagu on näidanud #GamerGate või Anita Sarkeesiani vastu suunatud vihakampaania. Sellised skandaalid panevad videomänge tootvad ettevõtted tegelema soolise kallutatuse probleemidega nii personali tasandil kui ka oma toodetes. Kriitikud nagu Nae (2022, 32) rõhutavad, et „videomängud ei ole poliitiliselt neutraalsed artefaktid. Sarnaselt teiste narratiivsete meediumidega nagu romaanid, filmid või koomiksid on videomängud keerulises dialoogis paljude väärtuste, normide ja tavadega, mida edendab kultuur, millesse nad kuuluvad“.

Väitekirja eesmärk on luua metodoloogia soo analüüsimiseks videomängudes, mis põhineb teiste erialade kogemustel, kuid keskendub mängudele kui mitmemõõtmelisele interaktiivsele meediumile. Loodav metodoloogia toob kokku kirjandusteaduslikud ja soouurimuslikud meetodid ning videomängude tehnilised erijooned, laenates lisaks termineid majandus- ja õigusteadusest. Metodoloogia keskmes on lähilugemine, mis püüab vältida paljudele varasematele uuringutele omast määramatust ja subjektiivsust. Ei ole ju tõenäoline, et kaks mängijat kogeksid mängu täpselt samamoodi. Subjektiivsuse vähendamiseks on käesolevas doktoritöös Stuart Halli mõistest *eelistatud lugemine* tõukvalt arendatud mõiste *eelistatud mängimine*, mis võimaldab mänguanalüüsi käigus jõuda kõige tõenäolisema läbimängimise tulemusel tekkiva tekstini, mida saab omakorda edasi analüüsida, seades fookuse soole või näiteks rassile või klassile.

Doktoritöö koosneb viiest teadusartiklist ning neid raamivast katusartiklist, milles paigutan oma uurimistöö varasema erialakirjanduse konteksti ning tutvustan loodud metodoloogiat detailselt. Seon oma metodoloogia teiste teadlaste töödega ja pakun välja võimalused selle edasiarendamiseks. Seejärel rakendan väljatöötatud metodoloogiat juhtumiuuringus, kus vaatlen ühte videomängu, „Code Vein“ (Bandai Namco, 2019), et näidata oma lähenemisviisi võimalusi ja piiranguid.

Valitud lähenemisviis on suuresti inspireeritud Clara Fernández-Vara (2015) lähenemisest videomängude analüüsile. Olen Fernández-Vara struktuuri täiustanud, asetades tema pakutud perspektiivid (kontekst, üldine mänguülevaade ja formaalsed aspektid) soolisesse konteksti. Tema formaalsete aspektide asemel

kasutan soouuringutest laenatud analüüsivahendeid (performatiivsus, tegelaste välimuse analüüs, võimestamine), tegelasanalüüsi ning kaasahaaravuse mõju.

Jenny Sundén ja Malin Sveningsson (2012, 3) nendivad mängu ja sugu käsitlevat uurimistööd kokku võttes, et kuigi see valdkond näib stabiilselt laienevat, „on kriitilisi feministlike mängude uurijaid ikka veel suhteliselt vähe“. Enamik uuringuid keskendub mängukogukondadele ning soolistatud kujutamisiiside analüüs on saanud oluliselt vähem akadeemilist tähelepanu, seda hoolimata suurest soolisest tasakaalutusest. Näiteks 2007. aasta uuring näitas, et iga 5,3 mees- tegelase kohta oli ainult 1 naistegelane (Miller, Summers 2007, 733–742). Kuigi videomängud on sellest ajast alates muutunud mitmekesisemaks (Croshaw 2021), ei ole naispeategelaste lisamine lahendus sugude ebavõrdsele kohtlemisele videomängudes, sest, nagu väidab Hemovich (2018, 209), „Veelgi problemaatilisemad on videomängud [...], milles küll on naispeategelasi, [kuid] nad on pandud silmatorkavalt alandavatesse ja seksuaalselt vuajeristlikesse olukordadesse, mis varjutavad mis tahes teised defineerivad isiksuseomadused või võimed“.

Mängu- ja soouuringuid ühendavad teadustööd keskendusid alguses peamiselt kahele valdkonnale: 1) vägivald ja pornograafia videomängudes, sageli koos küsimusega, mis on selle vägivalda mõju lastele, ja 2) alaesindatus. Dietzi enam kui 20 aastat vana uuring kuulub endiselt oma valdkonna enim tsiteeritud allikate hulka. Dietz nendib, et naistegelased on peamiselt mittemängitavad tegelased, ihaldusobjektid ja mängu „eesmärgid“, nagu näiteks hätta sattunud neiu, kelle mängija peab päästma, ning et nad kannavad stereotüüpselt kodeeritud värvidega kleite (nt roosa), kõrgeid kontsi ja liibuvaid riideid (Dietz 1998, 434–435). 2000. aastatel hakati artiklites uurima ka mänguspetsiifilisi parameetreid, näiteks platvormi, millel mängu avaldatakse, ning järk-järgult asendus vägivalda teema alaesindatuse ja stereotüüpide küsimusega. Lisaks oli umbes 2018. aastani enamik videomänge käsitlevaid soouuringuslikke töid kvantitatiivsed. Neis toodi välja mittebinaarsete ja naistegelaste alaesindatus ning see, et naistegelaste mängimine on vähem tõenäoline kui meestegelaste puhul (nt Downs, Smith 2010, Ivory 2006, Miller, Summers 2007, Mou, Peng 2009, Robinson jt 2009, Scharrer 2004). Lisaks analüüsiti, kuidas naissoost tegelasi kiputakse liialdatult seksuaaliseerima (Dickey 2006, Dovey, Kennedy 2006, Grimes 2003, Ivory 2006, Jansz, Martis 2003, Miller, Summers 2007, Taylor 2006b). Enamik analüüse keskendus pea- voolu mängudele. Soolisi kujutamiskäsitlusi analüüsiti ainult binaarsete vastanduste kaudu, tuvastades naissoost tegelaste olemasolu või puudumise.

Ehkki need tööd näitasid naiste alaesindatust, ei loodud selget metodoloogilist raamistikku ega toodud välja, kuidas mängude kujutamiskäsitlused erinevad teiste meediumite omadest. Enamasti ei võeta arvesse mängude valikute spektrit, mis on oluline ka soo analüüsis. James D. Ivory (2006, 104) osutab, et videomängud erinevad teistest meediumitest selle poolest, et iga läbimängu kogemused võivad olenevalt mängija oskustest, investeeritud ajast ja otsustest kardinaalselt erineda. Minu artikkel „Perceiving the Default: Navigating Choice Architecture in Video Games“ (Meier 2021, 155–156) püüab lahendada individuaalsest läbimängimisest tulenevat subjektiivsuse probleemi, toetudes Iseri eeldatava lugeja kontseptsioonile (1974), mis on osaliselt sünonüümne Aarsethi eeldatava mängija

omaga (2007). Lisaks aitab subjektiivsus vähendada see, kui mitu mängijat mängivad mängu läbi (Schmierbach 2009) ning kasutatakse arvustusi ja ajakirjanduslikke artikleid kui lisadokumente (Malliet 2007).

Enne analüüsi alustamist tuleb mäng reaalselt läbi mängida, kuna mängu haptiline mõõde on määrava tähtsusega. Mängimine on ka ainus viis uurida videomängu võimaluste spektrit. Punkt, mil teadlane võib väita, et ta „valdab“ mängu või on selle „lõpetanud“, sõltub uurimisküsimusest. Kui mäng ei hargne, piisab tavaliselt selle ühekordsest läbimängimisest. Kui aga antakse rohkem valikuid, on tavaliselt soovitatav mäng mitu korda läbi mängida või uurida välja, millised on alternatiivsed trajektoolid, kuna haptiline mõõde on juba kaetud esimese läbimängimisega. Harvadel juhtudel, kui hargnemiste hulk on nii suur, et seda ei jõua uurimiseks ette nähtud aja jooksul katta, on alati võimalus valida eelistatud mängimine, nagu hiljem täpsemalt selgitan.

Konteksti osad, mida pean videomängu sookeskse lugemise jaoks eriti oluliseks, on sotsiaal-ajalooline ja tehnoloogiline kontekst, sealhulgas arendusaasta, päritoluriik ja lokaliseerimine, samuti arendaja ja väljaandja. Näiteks on ajas muutunud arusaamad seksuaalsest vägivallast. Veel üks mängu sotsiaal-kultuurilise konteksti oluline tegur on päritoluriik või -piirkond. See on aga iseenesest problemaatiline. Paljud arendajameeskonnad on tänapäeval mitmekultuurilised ning nende hulgas on eri soost ja eri taustaga arendajaid. Sellegipoolest, nagu rõhutan oma artiklis tutvumismängude muustrite kohta (Meier 2020, 206–207), mõistetakse niilbust või tabu riigiti erinevalt. Pelletier-Gagnon ja Picard (2015, 37) väidavad, et näiteks naiste alandamise, jälitamise ja isegi vägistamise teemad on Jaapanis lubatud, nagu ka alasti alaealiste tüdrukute kujutamine. Tõlgitud ja lokaliseerimisprotsessi läbinud mängude analüüsimisel tuleks uurida originaali iseärasusi (nt ühes riigis naisena kujutatud tegelane võib teises muutuda transsooliseks, sest naiste peksmist peetakse probleemsemaks kui transsooliste inimeste peksmist, vt Shaw 2015, 36).

Pärast riigi ja lokaliseerimise erijoonte nimetamist tuleks pöörata tähelepanu mängu arendajale ja väljaandjale. Videomänge tuleks käsitleda meeskonnatöona. Näiteks Nintendol on pikk ajalugu mänguasjade ja -saalide tootjana ning seetõttu on nende mängutraditsioonid agentidega võrreldes palju vähem avatare (Aldred 2016, 361). Stuudio loomingu analüüs võib anda ülevaate tüüpilistest žanritest ja mängukonventsioonidest. Lisaks arendajale ja väljaandjale on oluline kaardistada, millist mängu ja millist selle versiooni analüüsitakse. Videomängud avaldatakse sageli eri platvormidel (konsolidid, arvutid, erinevad operatsioonisüsteemid), mis toovad vahel kaasa olulised erinevused. Mängud, mis võivad veel muutuda, tuleks samuti nimetada versiooni täpse numbriga.

Sihtrühma üle arutledes tasub uurida ka seda, mida Gérard Genette (1997) nimetab paratekstideks: ülevaated, arutelud foorumites, pakend, fännikirjandus, reklaamleht veebis, intervjuud arendajaga, mängu reklaamid, Twitchi voogedastused ja YouTube'i videod (Fernández-Vara 2015, 55–85). Alati tuleks uurida, kas mäng on osa väljakujunenud frantsiisist, millist osa olemasolevast maailmast rõhutatakse, millele mäng keskendub ja mis roll on mängijal võrreldes

publikuga, kes tarbib mängu teistes meediumites (*ibid.*, 83). Paljud neist küsimustest on muu hulgas soolised.

Üldine mänguülevaade tagab, et lugejal ja uurijal on samad teadmised mängust (Fernández-Vara 2015, 86). Sõltuvalt mängu liigist peaks üldülevaade koosnema eri elementidest: edenemismängu (ingl *game of progression*) puhul on soovitatav teha lühikokkuvõtte, mille järel nimetatakse, kuidas mängija läbimängimise ajal mänguga tavaliselt suhtleb (nt võideldes käigupõhistes või reaajas strateegialahingutes või suheldes objektidega, nagu mängudes, kus tuleb osutada ja klõpsata). Kuigi edenemismängudes pannakse tavaliselt rohkem rõhku narratiivi ja tegelaste arendamisele, on siiski oluline käsitleda mängutsükli. Suuresti loole keskenduva traditsioonilisema rollimängu puhul peaks ka kokkuvõtte keskmes olema lugu ja teemad.

Väidan, et kvalitatiivne mängu-uuring peaks võtma arvesse Murray defineeritud videomängude omadusi (Meier 2021a). Kasutan nügimise (ingl *nudge*) mõistet (Sunstein, Thaler 2008), et arendada Stuart Halli (1973) eelistatud lugemise kontseptsioonile toetudes eelistatud mängimise mõiste. Erinevad nügimistehnikad võimaldavad välja selgitada, milline on kõige oodatavam läbimängimise viis. Eelistatava mängu tuletamine on suunatud mängus lihtsam, kuna markerid esilduvad otsesemalt, narratiiv hargneb sirgjoonelisemalt ja ei haju liigsete valikute tõttu. Sellegipoolest on eelistatava mängimise markerid olemas ka esilekerkimismängudes (ingl *games of emergence*). Need võivad olla reeglid, aga ka teatud kokkulepped, mis on kujunenud eelistatud mängu praktikast.

Analüüsi esimene etapp on terviklik mängu sisu kaardistamine võimaluste ruumina, millele järgneb eelistatud mängimise määramine selles spektris (Meier 2021a). Võimaluste ruum puudutab enamasti mängu püsiprogrammeeritud sisu (nt graafika, tekst, heli). Nii saab püsiprogrammeeritud ruumi kõrval arvesse võtta ka protseduurilist sisu ja retoorikat (arvutile juhiste andmine sisu loomiseks, vt Fernández-Vara 2015, 134). Selline lähenemine aitab luua kindla aluse mängudes avanevate eelarvamuste leidmiseks, näiteks tuues välja mängusiseste tegelaste soolise suhtarvu, nende soolise kodeeringu, aga ka selle, millistes ruumides nad tegutsevad ja milliseid läbivad ning mil määral võivad nad mängu jooksul muutuda.

Sugu saab kaardistada ka muudel tasanditel, nt žanr, tehnoloogia, ühiskondlik-ajalooline kontekst ja seosed teiste meediumitega. Maailma ja jutustamise tasandil tasub vaadata maailmaehitust, ruumi- ja tasandikujundust, helikujundust, moraali, ideoloogiat ning narratiivikujundust. Mängimise tasandil saab uurida liidest, eesmärke, reegleid, mehaanikat, valikuid, üksikmängija ja mitme mängijaga mängurežiime, raskust, modifikatsioone ja sohitegemise võimalusi, kuna need asuvad mehaanika ja semantika ristumiskohas, keskendudes potentsiaalselt soolise tähendusega interaktiivsusele. Mängu võidutingimus või lõplik eesmärk domineerib läbivalt kõigi teiste mõistete ja vastasmõjude üle.

Videomängude analüüsimiseks on vaja interdistsiplinaarset lähenemist, ning sugu on üks keerukust lisav kiht. Arvatakse, et naistegelaste alaesindatus ja nende puudumine peategelaste või kesksetes rollides mõjutavad tarbijaid rohkem kui sama sisu passiivne kogemine mitteinteraktiivses meediumis, sest mängijad

peavad neid kontseptsioone mitte ainult vaatama, vaid ka läbi mängima. Nii nagu soolise käitumise aktid jälgendavad eelnevaid tegusid (Butler 1991, 201), imiteerivad – või pigem simuleerivad – videomängud osaliselt olemasolevaid soonorme ja tavasid koodi sisseehitatud reeglitega.

Defineerin performatiivsust kui mänguruumi, mida mängija saab kasutada oma mängunägemuse väljalamiseks (Meier 2021a, 171). Soo puhul on see aga alati seotud mängijat ümbritsevate sotsiaalsete olude ja normidega ning nende mängusisese esindatusega. Seetõttu on videomängudes sugu performatiivsuse võtmes analüüsides oluline nimetada konventsioonid, mis raamivad või piiravad esitusvabadust. Tehes naisest passiivse ja ilusa armastusobjekti, saab mees edukalt täita aktiivse ja sitke kangelase rolli. Eelkõige esindavad just menukate kommertslike mängude peategelased sageli kaasaegset hegemoonilise maskuliinsuse ideaali (Moss 2011, 2).

Laura Mulvey (1975, 837) sõnul on naistegelased sageli mehe pilgu objektid. Videomängudes kaamera kas fikseerib teatud vaatenurga või mängija saab seda vabalt liigutada. On oluline, et teooriat kasutataks nii mängija aktiivsust kui ka passiivsust nõudvate meediumite puhul, eristades simulatsiooni ja jutustamist. Oma traditsioonilises tähenduses kehtib Mulvey mehe pilgu teooria endiselt stseenide kohta, mis toimivad ka mängu sees filmidena (fikseeritud kaamera, montaaž, misanstseen, valgustus). Ka simulatsioonirežiimis on teatud osad sageli fikseeritud, eriti kolmanda isiku vaates.

Artiklis „‘War Never Changes.’ Gender Roles and the Transformative Potential for Role Reversal in Roleplay Games with Post-Apocalyptic Settings“ (2022a) hindan, kuidas saab videomängudes kasutada eri distsipliinides välja kujunenud viise läheneda bioloogilisele ja sotsiaalsele soole. Käsitlen nii stereotüüpide ja rollide ümberpööramise kui ka heteronormatiivsuse, hegemooniliste struktuuride ja meestekesksuse teemasid. Samuti kasutan lähilugemist, et uurida, kas apokalüpsise kui kõikemuutva sündmuse kaudu saab ümber mõtestada soorolle ja murda väljakujunenud stereotüüpe. Uurin neid küsimusi ühiskonna, tegelaste ja mängumaailmas pakutavate mänguvõimaluste tasandil.

Artiklis „The Hardest Battles are Fought in the Mind: The Role of Women in Viking Age Games“ (2022b) uurin videomängude tegelaste analüüsimise võimalusi. Teen ettepaneku mõista sugu spektrina ning analüüsida tegelasi arenevate ja performatiivsetena. Mängutegelased erinevad kirjandus- või filmitegelastest meediumispetsiifiliste aspektide poolest. Kui tegelane peab täitma peamiselt mängulisi vajadusi, taandatakse ta sageli narratiivseks stereotüübiks või tühjaks kestaks, mis meenutab pigem etturit kui romaanis või filmis leitavat väljaarendatud tegelast (Aldred 2016, 355).

Videomängude tegelaste kui spektri analüüsimiseks kasutan meediumikeskset lähenemisviisi, mille fookuses on küsimus, kas mängus puudub võimalus suurendada naiste teguvõimu (Meier 2022b). Sama küsimuse saab loomulikult esitada kõigi sooliste identiteetide kohta. Siinses töös kasutatava lähenemisviisi korral keskendun interaktiivsetele elementidele, käsitledes tegelaste võimalusi olla erinevad ja käituda erinevalt, vastavalt oma soole. Selline lähenemine võimaldab ületada laialt levinud tava vaadelda tegelasi staatilistena. Võimaluste raamide

teooria mõjutab üksikuid tegelasi, kelle üle mängija saab mingil moel võimu rakendada. Pakun tegelasanalüüsi juhtküsimumustena välja järgmised küsimused:

Millised arenguvõimalused tegelasel on?

Kas selles kontekstis on nais- ja meestegelaste (ja võimaluse korral mitte-binaarsete tegelaste) võimalused ühesugused või vähemalt kvantitatiivselt ja kvalitatiivselt võrdsed?

Kas narratiivi ja mängu tasandi võimalused on samad või võib täheldada mängu-narratiivi dissonantsi? (Meier 2022b)

Neid küsimusi analüüsin eri tasanditel ja eri tüüpi tegelaskujude korral. Tegelasel olen jaotanud nelja tüüpi: 1) avatarid, 2) agendid, 3) osatäitjad ja 4) funktsionaalsed tegelasel või lavategelased (Meier 2022).

Esimene tasand puudutab tegelase väliseid jooni. Eder ja Thon (2012, 179–180) väidavad, et filmid ja mängud toetuvad lihtsatele, stereotüüpsetele tegelastele. Videomängudes võivad need tuleneda ühiskonnas ammu tuntud stereotüüpidest, näiteks loll blondiin, kuid Glaubke *et al.* (2001, 16) järgi ka mängusisestest mõistetest, näiteks võitleja, kangelane, vastane, tapja ja abistaja. Need tegelasel on sageli soolistatud. Videomängudes kasutatakse soopõhiseid stereotüüpe stiilivahendina regulaarselt. Mängu-funktsioonid on esiplaanil, samas kui narratiivsed omadused on taandatud stereotüüpse miinimumini (Schröter 2013, 27).

Teine tasand hõlmab narratiivi, mida tutvustasin põhjalikumalt eelistatud mängimist käsitlevas alapeatükis. Kuna mittelineaarsed mängud tavaliselt hargnevad, on neid tavapärase narratiivvahenditega raskem analüüsida, kuid samas võimaldab see tegelase kasvamist ja muutumist. Järgmisena võiks analüüsida mängimise tasandit, mis sisaldab tegelase statistikat või mänguatribuute (kui need on olemas), omadusi/hüvesid, valikuid (seoses dialoogi või mängumaailmaga), reegleid ja raskusastet ning standardseid tegevusi/troope. Viimane kategooria, ruum ja mängumaailm, on nii narratiivne kui ka mänguline. Paljud fantaasia-maailmad on rassiliselt ja sooliselt (narratiivselt ja mänguliselt) piiratud. Samuti väärib märkimist, kas mängus arutatakse levinud eelarvamusi või jäetakse need vaidlustamata.

Mängu kaasahaaravus (ingl *immersion*) on mängu-uuringute üks keskseid aspekte, mis on tihedalt seotud subjektsuse ja identiteediga. Artiklis „Framing the Dilemma: The Influence of Immersion in Ethical Choice Making“ (Meier, Bellini 2021) käsitlesime Belliniga videomängude kaasahaaravuse fenomeni ja selle tähtsust mängude kujundamisel ja tõlgendamisel. Mäng üritab haptilise ja visuaalse väljundi kaudu integreerida mängija illusoorseesse ruumi (Grau 2003, 13). Interaktiivsus loob võimaluse mängumaailmaga tähendusrikkalt suhelda ning narratiivsus võimaldab kirjeldada, kuidas mäng motiveerib mängijat eesmärgipärase narratiivi kaudu.

Minu uurimisküsimuste seisukohalt on kõige tähtsam kaasahaaravuse liik see, mida Ermi ja Mäyrä (2005) nimetavad mänguvooluks. Seetõttu rõhutasime oma artiklis, et õppimine ja harjutamine on mängimise ja teadmiste omandamise



olulised osad, kuid mängu haaratuna toimub protsess passiivselt ning seega võetakse potentsiaalselt omaks alusideoloogia või ka probleemsed stereotüübid nii, et mängija seda ei teadvusta.

Katuspeatüki lõpetab näidisanalüüs, milles testin oma metodoloogilist lähenemist. Videomängus „Code Vein“ on küll tugevad naissoost tegelased, kuid neid piinatakse ja nad muudetakse koletisteks, kelle eeldatult meessoost avatar ja tema meeskond peavad alistama. Meeskond ise võib koosneda mees- ja naisvõitlejatest, kuid vaikevalikute tulemusena liituvad naisvõitlejad meeskonnaga hiljem, raamides meestegelased kesksemateks ja pädevamateks. Kuigi mängul on keerukas tegelasteredaktor, lubab see ainult teatud stereotüüpseid kehasid ning puudub ruum stereotüüpide õhnestamiseks. Olgugi et avatari sugu saab valida, kujutavad mängu püsiprogrammeeritud kaadrid ja troobid seda kui peamiselt meeskogemust maailmas, milles naised ohverdavad end teiste kaitsmiseks.

Kokkuvõttes pakub doktoritöö välja võimaluse analüüsida sugu mitte ainult interdistsiplinaarse nähtusena, vaid võttes arvesse ka videomängude ainulaadseid omadusi. Selles protsessis arendasin välja mitmed mängude uurimiseks kasulikud mõisted nagu *eelistatud mängimine* ja *võimaluste ruum*. Kombineerisin *eelistatud mängimise* ning Sunsteini ja Thaleri *nügimise* kontseptsiooni (2008) mänguarhitektuuri analüüsi meetodite ja narratoloogiliste tööriistadega, et luua terviklik lähenemine soole mängudes. See osutus võimalikuks suuresti tänu soouuringutes väljakujunenud tööriistade uuenduslikule kasutamisele, tegelaste süvaanalüüsile ja kaasahaaravuse kaasamisele mänguanalüüsi.

Kuigi näidisanalüüs näitas metodoloogia efektiivsust, tuvastas see samas puudujäägid, mis nõuavad edasist uurimist. Neist olulisim on mängu pakutav tohutu andmehulk. Teiseks, siinses töös analüüsisin valdavalt vähe hargneva edenemismänge. Järgmise sammuna tuleks rakendada metodoloogia eri žanridesse ja tehnoloogilistesse ajastutesse kuuluvate mängude korral. Välja saaks töötada tüüpiliste vaikevalikute loendid, näiteks tüüpiliste visuaalsete vaikeväärtuste loendi, mis on esitatud mängude tegelasredaktorites. Nende abil on võimalik lühendada leidude loendit, märkides lihtsalt, milline vaikevalikute komplekt on saadaval ja mil määral. See kodifitseeriks mängude lugemist veelgi ja võimaldaks pöörata rohkem tähelepanu tulemuste tegelikule tõlgendamisele.

Lõpuks võiks uurida, kas eelistatud mängimise markerid langevad tõepoolest kokku mängijate tegeliku vaadeldud käitumisega. Eesmärk on tuvastada, millist edasiarendust sinne metodoloogia nõuab, et mõista erinevate mängijatüüpide mängustiile. Mängijatel võib olla mitu eelistatud mängimise viisi, mis erinevad mängija päritoluriigi, soo, tausta ja muude tegurite, näiteks eelistatud platvormi tõttu. Kuigi eelistatud mängimise mõiste eeldab, et mängijate mitmekesisus on vähem oluline kui mängu objektiivsed markerid, tuleks seda eeldust empiiriliselt testida.

## ARTICLES

## CURRICULUM VITAE

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### Selected Publications

- Meier, Marie-Luise (2020). From Dating Simulators to Milestones of Video Game Culture: Dating Patterns and Eroticism as Reward in Games. In: Angela Fabris, Jörg Helbig (Ed.). *Cinerotic: Eroticism in Films and Video Games* (203–217). Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier. (Literatur, Imagination, Realität; 57).
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- Meier, Marie-Luise (2021). Perceiving the Default: Navigating Choice Architecture in Video Games. *Methis Studia humaniora Estonica*, 22 (27/28), 155–177. DOI: 10.7592/methis.v22i27/28.
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- Meier, Marie-Luise (2022). “War never changes.” Gender Roles and the Transformative Potential for Role Reversal in Roleplay Games with Post-Apocalyptic Settings. *Gamevironments*, 16, 33–67. DOI: 10.48783/gameviron.v16i16.172.

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- Meier, Marie-Luise (2020). From Dating Simulators to Milestones of Video Game Culture: Dating Patterns and Eroticism as Reward in Games. – Angela Fabris, Jörg Helbig (Ed.). *Cinerotic: Eroticism in Films and Video Games* (pp. 203–217). (Literatur, Imagination, Realität; 57.) Trier: WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier.
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**Uurimisvaldkonnad:** mängude uuringud (eriti mänguteooria), soouuringud, transmeedia uuringud, düstoopiline ja spekulatiivne ilukirjandus, transhumanism, 20. ja 21. sajandi fantaasiateooria

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