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Gender Games: A Content Analysis Of Gender Portrayals In Modern, Narrative Video Games

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GENDER GAMES: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF GENDER PORTRAYALS IN MODERN, NARRA-

TIVE VIDEO GAMES

by

JARED FRIEDBERG

Under the Direction of Dr. Wendy Simonds

ABSTRACT

Video games are a multi-billion dollar industry; 67% of households in the United States have at least one game player. The considerable reach of this medium makes it crucial to assess the messages that audiences are taking away concerning gender in these games. In this content analysis, I investigate the representation of binary gender in the narratives of modern video games from the perspective of cultivation theory. Ten popular games from 2007 through 2013 are selected for this investigation. The characteristics of each game's main character are evaluated in the context of the narrative to uncover emergent trends, tropes, and themes over the course of gameplay. Men outnumber women in protagonist roles, and women serve as catalysts for the central conflicts throughout the narrative. Gaming narratives also tend to embody the male power fantasy trope, with both male and female protagonists becoming masculinized through the story's progression.

INDEX WORDS: Video games, Media, Gender, Cultivation Theory, Gender Schema Theory, Narrative

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my amazing partner who listened patiently to my rantings and ravings as I changed my methodology again and again. It is also dedicated to everyone out there discussing, writing, and fighting for gender equality in video games. Keep fighting the good fight.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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1   INTRODUCTION

"For the longest time in human history, stories were told only face-to-face. A community was defined by the rituals, pathologies, and imageries held in common. All useful knowledge was encapsulated in aphorisms, legends, proverbs, tales, and incantations and ceremonies." (Gerbner, 1998)

Society disseminates values through the telling and re-telling of stories. These stories are all around us, playing on a continuous loop every day. These stories are in the quick 20-second commercials during television shows, the simple prose of a children's book, and the cinematic blockbusters that Hollywood churns out every year. With advancing technology, stories have evolved from our early ancestor's cave paintings to mass-consumed technological marvels enhanced by near-magical computer graphics. The medium for story telling has evolved, as has the ability to reach large audiences around the world.

Stories serve many functions. They can be entertainment, but stories are not always told to be entertaining. They can have a moral or lesson, though some stories are non sequiturs devoid of a firm meaning. Stories are changed and influenced by the context in which they are told. There is the simple example of children playing "whisper down the lane" or "telephone" where the first child whispers a statement to the next child, and that child to the following child, until the phrase reaches the final child. Very often, the ending phrase is radically different from the original one. This is the case with stories being passed down from generations, over centuries, through vastly different cultures: the story takes on the meaning of the people who are telling it. The story is the result of the culture in which it is embedded.

1.1   Creation

Perhaps the newest medium for storytelling is video games. The pioneers of the video game industry were seemingly unaware that the burgeoning medium could function as a platform for storytelling, but as developers experimented with new types of games, the potential for storytelling became clear. Ste-

ve Russell, a student at MIT in the early 1960s, is often credited with creating the first video game, though many similar types of computer interfaces popped up in very rapid succession in the early to mid-1960s (Kent, 2001).

Russell transferred to MIT in 1961 where he was captivated by a campus organization, the Tech Model Railroad Club (TMRC). The members of this club focused their efforts on the emerging computer industry. They had access to complex computer systems that would often fill entire rooms, and had permission from professors to experiment and modify the existing computer programs on file (Kent, 2001).

Russell was a fan of science-fiction sagas and pulp-stories, and these stories influenced the type of computer programs that he wanted to see. He had an impressive idea for an interactive screen where two space ships flew around in orbit engaged in a battle. The space ships would be controlled by actual people who used the computer inputs to maneuver the space ship. Despite Russell's tendency to procrastinate, he managed to complete the program in a bit over a year. Upon reflecting on the game, Spacewar, Russell muses:

> "Spacewar was essentially like the game Asteroids. The spaceship controls were four switches. One let you rotate counterclockwise, another was for rotating clockwise, one fired your rocket for thrust, and the last one fired your torpedoes. The basic version used switches on the console, and your elbows got very tired."

The game became very popular among TMRC members and the rest of the computer department at MIT. Russell allowed anyone to make modifications (now commonly known as hacks) to the program he created, resulting in some innovative additions to the original game. TMRC member Pete Sampson created an additional program that added stars to the background of the game. Dan Edwards, another member, added a sun in the middle of the arena that exerted gravity on the battling spaceships. Tired of sore elbows from playing the game and flicking switches, two members even cobbled together spare parts to function as wired remote controllers for the game (Kent, 2001).

In two years, from 1961 through 1963, Russell's vision and the modifications provided by the TMRC resulted in the earliest instance of game creation, game distribution, and even game hacking. Russell never made any money from his game. In those days, computers and programs were not marketable to a public consumer base. MIT gave the program to PDP, the company that manufactured the computer on which Russell had created his game on. PDP bundled Spacewar into every future PDP system as a diagnostics test, essentially giving the game away for free. PDP executives likely had no idea that the program could be marketed to the public, as computers would not be entering the home for many years to come, and arcades were still far on the horizon (Kent, 2001)

Video games provide an innovation that no previous story medium has ever provided: participation and control. These new factors provide a set narrative to its audience, but also allow a degree of interactivity and freedom within the narrative that previous storytelling media have not allowed. The audience is immersed in the story because they effectively are the protagonist of the story, or even the god of the narrative world in the game. This immersion changes not only the procession of the narrative, but also how the audience consumes the meaning, characters, and message of the story. This immersion in an interactive environment suggests that video game narratives may have a deeper impact on audiences than any visual media that preceded it.

1.2 Controversy

During the 1970s and 1980s, arcades machines, known as cabinets, made video games a part of youth culture (Kent, 2001). Each cabinet housed a single game and was usually playable by multiple people in a single session. Each round of play usually cost only a bit of pocket change, making games a cheap hobby. Atari, a popular arcade company, led the charge on bringing game consoles in to the family living room. However, after the success of Nintendo's *Nintendo Entertainment System* (NES), video games became a central component of home entertainment centers.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, as games evolved into a multi-million dollar industry and began telling stories with the detail of Hollywood's most profitable releases, many critics began pointing out

that games seemed to cater to a specific male, white-dominated audience. The characters and stories presented in games, critics argued, excluded representation of women, minorities, and the LGBT community. While some academics in previous media analyses of video games note this as well, little has been done to address the issue as video games became a mainstream force in entertainment culture.

In 2012, Anita Sarkeesian, a 28 year old graduate student in social and political thought, started a campaign on the public-donation oriented website Kickstarter. The campaign focused on analyzing and addressing common gender tropes found in video games from a feminist perspective. Her proposal was to develop a multi-part video series to showcase these gender tropes and inspire discussion on the lessons that audiences take from these tropes in games. The initial response was overwhelmingly positive, and Sarkessian's campaign met its initial $6000 campaign goal in 24 hours. However, this good fortune was short-lived. Following the initial success, a vocal group began protesting the campaign, pushing back against her attempts at a feminist analysis and decrying her for making the video game community look bad. The protests against her eventually devolved into stalking and daily threats of rape and death. Her website was hacked, her partner and family members sent threatening messages, and her YouTube channel was nearly shut down by internet trolls in an attempt to discredit her work (Watercutter, 2015).

These actions did not deter her or destroy her Kickstarter campaign: by the end of the campaign run, individuals had donated over $150,000 to the video series, 25 times more than her initial goal of $6000. The extra money allowed her to expand the videos into deeper themes, use more games for her analysis, afford better equipment to shoot her videos, and translate the videos into several different languages (Watercutter, 2015). As of September 2014, Anita Sarkeesian has released six videos of this series. After each release, she has received threats of sexual violence and murder from individuals who are vehemently against her research and findings.

What caused so many self-described gamers to have such a hostile reply to Sarkeesian's analysis? Is there an aspect of gaming that encourages this kind of gendered behavior? Is this behavior possibly linked to more macro-level gender attitudes? Are misogyny and advocacy of sexual violence reinforced in

video games themselves? These are questions that many gaming journalists have also asked of the gaming community since Sarkeesian's initial proposal and the attendant backlash.

1.3   Background and Purpose

Video games have become an integral part of the world's entertainment industry. According to the Entertainment Software Association, a company that tracks video game sales and revenue, customers spent a total of 20.77 billion US dollars on all video game hardware and software in 2012 (Essential Facts About The Computer And Video Game Industry, 2013) . An advertisement survey used to identify the popularity of media figures declared that Nintendo's mascot Super Mario was more recognizable by children than Mickey Mouse (Beasley & Standley, 2002). This shift in interests demonstrates that video games have come to take the place of television in children's visual medium of choice.

Video games started out as a niche hobby, drawing teenagers to dark arcades or providing some amusement for kids while parents were busy. Players comprised an underground subculture with a voracious fan base; far less popular than television shows, movies, and comic books that were the most popular media of the 1970s and 1980s, but popular enough to be responsible for a coin shortage in the early 1980s (Kent, 2001). Today, people from all walks of life play video games; whether it is a few minutes of *Angry Birds* while waiting for the bus, a *Wii Bowling* league in senior citizen community centers, or sneaking turns in *World of Warcraft* while at the office. Games have seemingly taken over every electronic device that they can: they are on our computers, our phones, our televisions, and our tablets. Due to the size of the video game industry, the popularity of games among mainstream culture, and the emergence of a human-computer interaction that is not yet fully understood, academics should take video games seriously (Newman, 2013).

Video games rose to prominence in the arcade boom of the 1970s, and became popularized in people's homes with the releases of the Atari 2600 in the early 1980s and the Nintendo Entertainment System in the mid-1980s (Esposito, 2005). These early gaming consoles were primarily marketed as a product for children due to their simple mechanics and colorful graphics. The next generation of consoles,

including Super Nintendo and Sega Genesis, was released in the early 1990s, improving the graphical and processing capabilities of the previous gaming systems but still incapable of rendering realistic images. The mid-1990s saw the release of the original Sony Playstation and the Nintendo 64, the first home gaming consoles capable of rudimentary three dimensional graphics. With these new graphical capabilities, video games began to depict more realistic environments and scenarios. As a result of these graphical and software advances, game developers no longer created games marketed exclusively towards kids and began experimenting with more mature themes and content. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (www.esrb.org), a non-profit, self-regulatory organization formed by the Entertainment Software Association, also rose to prominence during these years due to parents wanting to make more informed decisions on what kinds of video games to buy for their children (Glaubke, Miller, & Esperjo, 2001)

As the era of the Sony Playstation 2, Microsoft Xbox, and Nintendo Gamecube emerged in the early 2000s, developers had better tools with which they could craft more complicated stories through use of voice actors, musical soundtracks, and detailed settings. These newer graphics also allowed developers to depict more realistic and diverse characters (Schleiner, 2001). People rendered in older video games tended to look pixelated or blocky, sometimes barely resembling a human character at all. Artists were able to put greater detail into clothes, hair, facial expressions, and body shape in ways that were not possible on earlier gaming consoles (Kutner & Olson, 2011).

The release of the Microsoft Xbox 360, the Nintendo Wii, and the Sony Playstation 3 in 2005 and 2006 marked the start of the most recent (and longest) cycle of existing game consoles. This current generation of gaming consoles includes many games that resemble the best of what the film industry has to offer in terms of production value, narrative, and characterization. Some games blur the lines between game and film, almost creating a completely new genre that could be more accurately described as "visual interactive media." For instance, the *Uncharted* series allows the player to control protagonist Nathan Drake through stories and scenery that draw inspiration from *Indiana Jones*. The *Mass Effect* series allows the player's character, Commander Shepard, to interact with various space-faring races and uncover the secrets of the galaxy, complete with homages to *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*.

Many games of this generation were created with the story as the central component, and the gameplay as a way to experience that story. Budgets for some games reached Hollywood spending levels. Hundreds of pages of dialog, directions, and descriptions are created for many game's narratives. Gaming engines dedicated to rendering detailed emotional responses for characters break new ground every year in an attempt to make computer generated characters seem more realistic to audiences (Newman, 2013).

Historically, games have been marketed towards a male audience (Miller & Summers, 2007). Early home console games depicted muscle-bound men holding guns and staring defiantly at hordes of monsters, or holding weapons while gesturing aggressively. If women appeared, they were displayed as objects on the arms of male heroes, or they were captured by villains, awaiting rescue by male heroes (Schleiner, 2001). Male characters were present, central, and the empowered vehicles through which the player experienced the game world. Men were strong, determined, and cunning, while women awaited rescue or were killed off, functioning as an object to inspire the male avatar to begin his journey (Sherman 1997).

As time progressed and technology improved, this gender divide remained (Schleiner, 2001). Recent studies report that male characters still outnumber female characters in video games and that there are still vast inequalities between the depiction of men and women in game narratives (Downs & Smith, 2009). Miller and Summers (2007) note that women appear far less frequently in games than men as both primary and supporting characters. They also pointed out that players will often only be allowed to control a male character through a video game's narrative. There is also evidence to suggest that the consumption of these gendered depictions can lead to the internalization of conventional gendered ideology. Dietz (Dietz, 1998) reports that youth rely on actions and portrayals of both men and women in order to negotiate their own expectations of gender. What boys and girls see and learn when playing games can translate into their own conceptions about gender.

Gender analysis on visual media has been an important topic for scholars attempting to understand how individuals form ideas and schema about gender behavior (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). Bogt (Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010) notes that popular media continues to perpetuate un-

realistic expectations regarding romance and sexuality, promoting traditional gender-based power divisions for a wide audience. Rigid ideas concerning men and women's visual media preferences lead to tongue-in-cheek use of the moniker of "chick flick," which references a romantic comedy film marketed directly towards women.

The problem of gender inequality in modern games needs to be examined more thoroughly. Many previous scholars look at the media surrounding games (magazines, reviews, cover art), but few look at the actual game content (Dill & Thill, 2007). Using the perspective of the main playable character of the game, in this research project, I analyze the representation of men and women in video games. I compare and contrast how men and women characters interact with the game's narrative. All of the video games in this sample are single-player, off-line experiences involving only myself as the participant and observer of these narratives. I evaluate the data on gender from the perspective of cultivation theory, which posits that consistent exposure to ideas and messages presented in television may influence audiences to adhere to these beliefs (Gerbner, 1998). Television and film exhibit the dominant gendered values and preferences of society and pass on these values to audiences all over the world (Brown, 2002). It is my goal through this study to demonstrate that modern video games exhibit power-based gender dynamics through representation and characterization of their protagonists, supporting characters, and narratives. Cultivation theory provides an explanation concerning how these gender dynamics are disseminated from this visual medium to gaming audiences.

This thesis serves to update the current existing research on gender in video games, determining how gender inequalities are currently perpetuated through gaming narratives. I also evaluate the visibility of both men and women as main characters in gaming narratives, and the emergent themes and tropes surrounding gender. The last eight years have seen an increase in women game developers and producers; and while they are still outnumbered by men, there are more women game developers now than at any other time in the industry's history (McGonigal, 2011). This increase of women in the industry and the audience could be the catalyst for characters and narratives to express a more progressive nature of gender in video games.

In a relatively short time, games have become a crucial part of our culture's entertainment and socialization (Kent, 2001). Game discussion among children and teenagers has become a type of social currency: it has become a way that kids and teenagers play, compete, cooperate, and bond. Games have brought people together over a common hobby, both in-person and over the internet. They discuss their favorite games at conventions dedicated solely to video game appreciation, debate their favorite gaming moments on online forums, and cheer as new games are revealed at E3, the annual electronic gaming expo. Bessenoff (Bessenoff, 2006)suggests that audiences compare themselves to their favorite television and movie characters and attempt to integrate these characters' traits into their own personalities. With the enhanced degree of interaction that video games offer over film and television, it is reasonable to expect the same comparison among consumers of video games. Games are essentially one of the newest agents of socialization. Sociologists cannot afford to ignore the messages, themes, and narratives that lie at the core of many of these gaming experiences.

1.4   Cultivation Theory

Cultivation theorists suggests that visual media are among the most influential social forces in our culture (Brown, 2002). Television establishes dominant cultural norms and produces them on the news, in commercials, and on story-driven shows. An individual could sit on their couch for a single day, simply watching television, and step away with an accurate impression of social norms and important symbols in that culture (Gerbner, 1998). Cultivation theorists hold that longtime viewers of television will come to assimilate the attitudes and beliefs encouraged on the myriad programs available on the hundreds of possible channels. Young people and adolescents may be particularly susceptible to the ideologies advocated through television, as their beliefs are typically in more flux than those of adults.

Teenagers and young adults rank television shows as one of the top "educators" of sexual activity, pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections (Brown, 2002). Television serves as a perpetual mainstream of dominant gender attitudes, and these attitudes are enforced through the stories and reports that are always available for consumption. Viewing these gendered patterns in media helps legitimize the

dominant gender scripts to the viewer. They then attempt to confirm these beliefs during social interaction outside of the visual media (Brown, 2002) (Gerbner, 1998).

There is also evidence that men and women process these shows differently, consuming them in a gendered way. Men empathize more with men characters in television narratives, particularly when a man character argues with a woman character as part of the show's narrative. When an argument between men and women is presented outside visual media, responses concerning which gender that men empathized with are significantly more mixed. Women approve of more scenes of sexual intimacy on regular scheduled television programs than men do, with men dismissing these scenes as unrealistic and women stating that they represented intimacy fairly well (Brown, 2002) (Gerbner, 1998).

2   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1   Defining Video Games

In order to discuss video games, it is important to establish a working definition of the term "video game." Though they have been around for over thirty years, there are still many competing ideas for a proper definition for video games (Esposito, 2005) (Zimmerman, 2004). In my thesis, I use the definition and concepts developed by Nicolas Esposito, a French media researcher, to describe the core foundation behind video games. His definition states:

"A video game is a game we play thanks to an audiovisual apparatus and which can be

based on a story." (Esposito, 2005)

This definition is based on the ideas of previous visual media scholars, such as Eric Zimmerman and James Newman. It summarizes the meaning of "video game," but it is important to explore the core concepts behind the definition: game, play, audiovisual apparatus, and story. Esposito uses Eric Zimmer-

man's ideas to articulate a game as a voluntary interactive activity in which one or more players follows rules that constrain their behavior, enacting an artificial conflict that ends in a quantifiable outcome (Zimmerman, 2004). This definition describes the gameplay that is a central component to all video games, and also reinforces the concept of adhering to established rules and a quantifiable outcome (such as winning or losing the game).

The term "play" is important to describe since it is the main action that individuals use in order to experience games. Zimmerman (2004) describes the idea of play as the free space of movement within a rigid structure, existing because of and despite of the rigid structure of the system. What needs to be emphasized in this description is the idea of moving freely, while being constrained by certain rules. This interactivity is similar to how the concept of game is described, but represents the physical action of participation in the game. Games need rules to create motivation and goals; boundless free space of movement is meaningless without constrictions and limits.

The audiovisual apparatus is a basically the computer console, whether that is a Super Nintendo, a Playstation 3, or an iPhone, used to interact with the gaming contents. The controller would function as a part of this audiovisual apparatus, as would the screen for viewing the game and the speakers for listening to music or dialog. The computer system is what allows access to the participation and interactivity of the game (Esposito, 2005). It provides the audience with the ability and tools to play the game.

Story is an aspect of this definition that is also central to this paper. Not all video games have story or narrative as a primary component, but story has emerged as a vital part of many games during the last decade. Story in video games refers to the narrative that the developers transpose onto the gameplay to immerse the audience further in the game itself. Stories involve characters and a plot, and in order for the story to progress, it requires the approval (through gameplay) of the gamer to continue forward. Story in games can be told through conversation between characters, a monologue, text on a screen, movie cut scenes, through contextual clues intermixed with gameplay, or a combination of the previous devices (Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2005). In the earlier history of gaming, stories were often told in manuals and books that came with the games. Some games even included video or cassette tapes in an attempt to

immerse the player further, since the immersion in the game itself was constrained by the limits of tech-nology. Games are now capable of telling complete, compelling stories without the use of extra booklets or outside gimmicks.

The main difference between games and television or cinema as visual media is the degree of in-teractivity. Games are interactive and therefore dependent on greater investment from the player than most other media types. In order for the story to progress in a game, it requires input from the player. This input can be as simple as walking in a particular direction, or as complex as having to maneuver stealthily through an area of enemies to reach a goal within a time limit. In either case, the advancement (and in some newer games, the direction) of the plot depends entirely on the effort and involvement of the player (Hunicke, LeBlanc, & Zubek, 2005).

Jansz describes games as a "lean forward media," because the game player must always be aware and vigilant of what is going on in the game (Jansz, 2005). Games require reasoning and critical thinking in order to understand the best way to move forward in the game's story. This type of interaction is con-trasted with what Jansz (2005) characterizes as "lean back media," referring to television and cinema. Jansz explains that "lean back media" differs because there is no interaction from the viewer in order to progress in the story, leading to a more passive experience than playing video games.

2.1.1   The Avatar and The Player

The avatar is the bridge between the player of the game and the game world. It is the embodiment of the player within the game's narrative. The avatar, while usually the main protagonist of the video game, differs from the protagonist of other visual narratives such as film or television due to the merging of the spectatorship of film and the participatory nature of games (Rehak, 2003). This dynamic invests more of the player's attention than if they were just an audience to the events: the player is able to control this ava-tar, taking the actions they wish to take within the confines of the rules of the game. Rehak outlines five

characteristics that are essential for proper cooperation between the player and avatar in the diegesis of the game:

1. The player identifies with the on screen avatar
2. The player can control the avatar through a physical interface, such as the game controller or keyboard and mouse
3. Engaging with the avatar demonstrates constraints of the narrative but also demonstrates the possibilities of the world of the video game
4. There are extradiegetic rules perceptible to the player of the game but not the avatar. This could be a timer, musical cues, high score, or "extra lives."
5. Frequent breakdown and reestablishment of the rapport between the player and avatar.

The avatar represents the player, but there is an established separation between the player's thoughts and the avatar's action. A common attribute in most video game avatars is the ability to be killed within the diegesis of the game, but to come back ready to overcome the previously insurmountable obstacles. Due to this ability, the player as the avatar will often have to repeat sections of gameplay and narrative. Leaving and returning consistently to the game's avatar within the narrative helps the player identify themselves as that character within the game (Long 2008). They associate the appearance of the character as their presence in the narrative. As the avatar, and therefore the player, fails within the context of the game, the player is able to understand the rules of the game more clearly. The avatar's triumphs and failures assist in emotionally connecting the player to the avatar and, by extension, the game (Rehak, 2003).

Since the avatar reflects the thoughts and desires of the player, it stands to reason that the role, personality, and actions of the avatar may influence how the player views and understands their own role in the narrative. For instance, a player may participate in the game narrative differently if their character is rendered as weak or ineffectual or if their character is presented as aggressive and tyrannical. Responses

from other characters in the game to the avatar will also determine the way that the player feels they should act and react in the game's narrative. Thus, if one gender is consistently linked with certain traits throughout various gaming narratives, the player may come to connect these traits with that particular gender (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011).

2.2 Gender and Media

Prior literature demonstrates that character representations in cinema and television continue the tradition of gender inequality that has been a part of visual media since the early days of film and television. Identifying how these inequalities cultivate the viewer's understanding of gender is vital in recognizing the kind of power that media has over its audience (Posavac, Posavac, & Posavac, 2004). These character representations also show the extent to which these inequalities have become part of video game narratives.

Harrison (2003) explores a prevailing portrayal of women's bodies in mass media: that of a woman with a slim waist and a large bust (Harrison K. , 2003). This physical ideal has been touted on magazine covers, television shows, and film. Harrison notes that this development has become more extreme in recent decades, with waist sizes shrinking and bust sizes increasing since the 1960s. Harrison dubs this unrealistic body type as the "curvaceously thin woman," a figure that has become a goal for many women to achieve since it has become standardized by mainstream media. For women on television, thinness has become the norm, and this has influenced women, particularly young women, to consider various types of body modification (e.g. dieting, exercise, medication, surgery) to achieve this form. Harrison points out the absurdity of this form from a biological standpoint: it is impossible to reduce weight from the waist without losing weight from the bust as well, demonstrating that this ideal may truly be a fantasy only achievable through unhealthy or artificial body alteration.

Harrison (2003) demonstrated these theories by asking male and female participants questions about the ideal female form and appropriate methods to achieve it, then showing them images and clips of television shows featuring the curvaceously thin female form. Following these clips, she asked the partic-

ipants about how they viewed their own bodies compared to what they saw on the screen. Harrison learned that showing these clips increased both men and women's approval of extreme body alteration (surgery and strict dieting) for women to achieve the ideal form. Women also reported greater dissatisfaction regarding their own self-image, with smaller women wishing to increase their bust size and larger women wishing to decrease it. Harrison also noted that while thinness was a trait that the women wanted, they desired the ideal waist and bust size over just being thin. Overall, images in the media not only dictated body satisfaction, but also increased the desire for extreme techniques to achieve the established curvaceously thin form.

Groesz et al. (2002) conducted a meta-analysis examining the relationship between body dissatisfaction and the thin media ideal (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). They aimed to evaluate whether all media resulted in an increase in negative body perception, or whether it was specifically related to the curvaceous thin ideal. Groesz et al. note that while the fantasy of the thin ideal is reinforced through family, peers, schools, and business, mass media has the most visible use of this representation. Like Harrison (2003), Groesz et al. also note that the thin ideal presented in media is usually impossible for women to achieve without medical intervention or dangerous body modification. They suggest that the media are responsible for propagating an impossible ideal, one that is designed to generate feelings of negativity, poor confidence, and body dissatisfaction among women.

In their analysis, Groesz et al. (2002) utilize results from 25 different studies on body satisfaction and media imagery in order to aggregate data for analysis (Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). The compiled data indicated that the thin ideal specifically had a negative influence on body satisfaction, much more so than imagery of "averagely" proportioned women and heavier women. The muscular male ideal was also examined, but this imagery had less influence on men's body satisfaction. Groesz et al. postulate that these different impressions result from the depiction of men's bodies as capable and powerful, and women's bodies as sexual objects. They conclude that since media are the biggest promoter of the slender female form, they are responsible for continuing to establish this form as the desirable standard of beauty.

Olivardia et al. (2004) investigate how body and muscularity distortion in visual media may impact body dissatisfaction and symptoms of depression among male viewers (Olivardia, Pope Jr, Borowiecki III, & Cohane, 2004). They note that male characters in visual media have become disproportionately overrepresented compared to female characters; however, the female characters epitomize thinness whereas the male characters epitomize bulk and muscle. They also cite a content analysis that demonstrated that the male centerfolds of Playgirl magazine have lost 12 pounds of fat and gained 27 pounds of muscle during the last 25 years of publication (Leit, Pope, & Gray, 2001). Olivardia et al.'s sample involved 150 college aged men whose responses were measured with a self-reported questionnaire from heterosexual women regarding preferred male body type.

In terms of body self-perception, the men estimated themselves to be fatter than their actual measured body-fat percentage, but they also overestimated how muscular they were. The men reported that they thought women would prefer the larger, muscular male action and television actors, but the questionnaire reported that the women preferred smaller and thinner male bodies. Their analysis of the respondents' symptoms of depression and feelings of inadequacy underscored that feelings of muscular inferiority led to dissatisfaction with self-image. However, these feelings did not translate to comparison's involving obesity, presumably because the men were more at ease with being recognized as larger, but not smaller. Olivardia et al. conclude by noting that many of the social comparisons in which men engaged involved idealized masculine figures in the media, and the negative emotions that result from that process can lead to depression and unhealthy body modification (Cohane & Pope Jr., 2001) (McCreary & Sasse, 2000).

Bessenoff (2006) sought to evaluate the impact of the media on individuals' self-image (Bessenoff, 2006). Specifically, she was curious about why people's perception of models in a magazine or actors on a television show would influence how an individual evaluates their own self-worth, and whether other variables moderated this process. She postulated that two theories, self-discrepancy theory and social comparison theory, explain media's influence over body image. Social comparison theory, described by Festinger (1954), states that individuals compare themselves to others whom they believe to be

similar to themselves (Festinger, 1954). There are two trajectories of social comparison: downward and upward. In downward comparison, individuals compare themselves to those they perceive as lower in order to elevate their own mood and confidence. In upward comparison, individuals compare themselves to those they view as above, which generally results in dissatisfaction and negative mood. Self-discrepancies, as summarized by Higgins (1987), are representations of an individual's self-concept where they feel that they fall short in some way (Higgins, 1987). When individuals have a high level of self-discrepancy, they see themselves as falling short of others in many ways, while a low level of self-discrepancy is associated with self-satisfaction and contentment (Bessenoff, 2006). Higher self-discrepancies have been linked with extreme weight-loss behavior such as eating disorders and invasive surgeries.

To study the interaction of self-discrepancies and social comparisons, Bessenoff (2006) recruited 112 women participants for a study. Using visual advertisements, body-image questionnaires, and scales on self-esteem and mood, Bessenoff calculated individual self-discrepancy levels and whether or not those with higher levels of self-discrepancy were more likely to participate in social comparison. She concludes that exposure to visual advertisements with a thin and sexualized female model resulted in increased social comparisons from most participants, but the participants with a higher level of self-discrepancies engaged in more social comparisons than those with lower self-discrepancies. Those who were already unsatisfied with their own self-image were more likely to experience negative mood after viewing the advertisements, and express interest in weight loss, weight gain, or medical intervention to achieve their desired physical goal.

Bogt et al. (2010) explores the possibility that certain types and genres of media have more influence on self-image than other types (Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010). They note that while media in general present an unrealistic account of human romance and sexuality, some media reproduce and enforce traditional gender roles more than others. Bogt. et al. also predict that those who hold views that value traditional gender roles will look for media that replicates these representations, further perpetuating rigid gendering in their personal schema. This assumption is based on the ideas of priming theory

and social cognitive theory. Priming theory, summarized by Jo and Berkowitz (1994), states that external stimuli (such as visual media) can produce social scripts based off repeated exposure to this stimuli (Jo & Berkowitz, 1994). Consistent viewings of these stimuli solidify it as the "correct" or "appropriate" model of interaction. Social cognitive theory, explained by Bandura (1989), states simply that people learn their own behaviors and habits by watching and imitating those around them (Bandura & Harris, 1989). This process has been found to apply not only to those in an individual's immediate vicinity, but also to those in media.

Bogt. et al. (2010) pose three questions concerning media influence: Are different forms of media exposure linked to adolescent sexual attitudes and gender stereotypes? Which media genres are connected to sexual attitudes and gender stereotypes? Is the relationship between media, attitude, and sex moderated by gender? The study focused on adolescent participants, aged 13-16, because their conceptualization of gender is still developing (Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010). Data collection for their research involved examining participants' sexual attitudes, media exposure, television and music preferences, internet habits, and sexual experience.

Bogt. et al. (2010) examined the association between media exposure and attitudes towards sexuality and gender, and found that higher levels of television viewing were correlated with stronger gender stereotyping and higher levels of permissive and unsafe sex. Adolescent girls who watched more soap operas and romantic movies were more likely to believe and endorse traditional gender stereotypes. Adolescent boys who liked romantic movies were also more likely to believe in traditional gender roles. This was also true about boys who watched sports programs and sexualized television. Bogt. et al. also noticed that preferences for certain media genres was correlated with adherence to gender stereotypes. A preference for sexualized media was associated with gender stereotyping in both male and female participants. The authors concluded that media genre preference is a significant indicator in whether or not male and female adolescents subscribed to traditional gender stereotypes and behaviors.

2.3   Gender and Games

Video games potentially have the same ability as film to influence gender schema and body image because they rely on the same processes as television and cinema: creating a visual world with characters and narrative (Ivory, 2006). An examination of the gender representations commonly seen in gaming shows that games have taken many of the gender tropes common in other visual media and used them in their own narratives. Video games may even reinforce rigid gender tropes more strongly than television or film because of the interactivity inherent in video games. This interactivity makes audiences an active part of the progression of the narrative and development of the characters, as opposed to watching everything unfold in television and film (Jansz, 2005).

Dietz's (1998) research emphasizes how children's and teenagers' expectations of masculinity and femininity are reinforced by their everyday observed experiences (Dietz, 1998). Dietz posited that video games, like television and film before them, have become an agent of socialization, referencing the idea that media play a prominent role in developing social norms in youth. She suggests that young women who continuously see their likeness in video games being imperiled or sexualized will associate these tropes with their gender. Individuals who accept these representations of women will come to view and understand their personal interactions with these media portrayals in mind.

Dietz (1998) examined the depictions of women in a sample of the best-selling video games in 1995 and created a coding schema for describing the different ways women were depicted in the game. Of the games she examined, 41% had no women at all (playable or non-playable) and 28% of the games had sexualized representations of women. Of women present in the games, the most popular depiction of them was of the "damsel in distress" trope seen commonly in television and cinema. Women were also rendered in a curvaceous way, with particular attention on the shape of the body and hips as well as the form of the breasts. Dietz summarizes her research by observing that children and teenagers may internalize these representations into their own understanding of gender.

Children Now, an organization that investigates how children perceive video games, conducted a content analysis on video game characters in a random selection of 70 best-selling games (Glaubke,

Miller, & Esperjo, 2001). This analysis measured the rates of men and women characters in the games and the manner in which each gender was portrayed. A unique approach that the Children Now gender study authors took was to create a scale to measure the "Girl-Friendly Features" of popular video games. The characteristics of their scale include: clear explanation of the rules, female-player controlled characters, puzzle elements, and cooperative play. They discovered that of the 70 games examined on the "Girl-Friendly Features" scale, 51 video games contained less than 50% of the variables on the scale to be considered girl-friendly, 15 contained 51%-75%, and only 4 contained 76%-100% of variables. Children Now concluded their study by suggesting that the patriarchal foundation of most games reinforces gaming culture as a place only acceptable for men, limiting women's participation in gaming culture.

Similarly, Beasley and Standley (2002) hypothesized that video games are sources of information that individuals use to build ideas of gender behaviors and stereotypes (Beasley & Standley, 2002). They differentiated video games from other visual media in regard to interactivity and repetition. In many games, the player's character may repeatedly "die," forcing them to complete sections of gameplay and narrative repeatedly. The fact that many games also take significantly longer to fully complete than watching a television show or film means that many individuals will spend more time immersed in games than in other types of visual media. The authors utilized gender schema theory, as explained by Bem (1981), to describe the relationship between video games and gender construction. In gender schema theory, individuals form their own conception of acceptable attitudes, behaviors, and clothing through their collective experiences (Bem, 1981). These experiences can include what they learn from their family and friends, as well as what they see in visual media.

Beasley and Standley (2002) measured gender role stereotyping by looking at the presence or absence of women game characters (Beasley & Standley, 2002). They also examined the clothing that these characters wear, particularly the differences between men and women's clothing. The researchers found that women were heavily underrepresented in the games, appearing less than anthropomorphic characters with no determinate gender. The women who were present in these games were also more likely to have low cut shirts and exposed arms and legs than men. Nearly half of all the female characters were identi-

fied as having a large bust by using a software program that analyzes computer models. Beasley and Standley conclude that women in video games are depicted and dressed to bring attention to their bodies and their sexuality, which can have an influence on the creation and modification of gender schemas. They postulate that as audiences play and interact with video game characters, the more likely that this imagery may be normalized, particularly in younger game players.

Violence in video games has been a central focus for policy makers for many years. Bartholow et al. (2002) looked at how violent imagery in games may elicit a different response among male and female video game players (Bartholow & Anderson, 2002). Historical research in the area of video game violence shows that game violence can potentially lead to aggressive attitudes and behavior, but the authors noted that not all games are violent. They also pointed out that increased aggression has also been noted in individuals who play competitive fast-paced games, such as sports and board games. The authors reported that children who played a fighting video game were more likely to "rough-house" after they were done playing the game. Few studies examine gender differences in responses to violent imagery in games, but in this study, women were far less influenced by the violence in games than men. The authors attributed this to socialization differences between men and women, but also note that the lack of women game characters in their sample potentially made women participants less immersed in the games. They suggested that these gender differences in immersion may be witnessed in games lacking women as main characters.

For their research, Bartholow et al. (2002) had participants play a violent, competitive video game, while a control group played a non-violent, competitive video game (Bartholow & Anderson, 2002). They sought individuals who had a passing familiarity with video games but were not avid players, so as not to confound the results. The researchers found that aggression was measurably higher in the violent competitive game group than the group which played the non-violent competitive game. This aggression effect was also much more evident in men than women. Even when evaluating and accounting for possible socialization effects, men still had a more aggressive response to the competition than women. The researchers admitted that their measure of aggression may be more biased towards looking at more

direct forms of masculine aggression over the more subtle forms of female aggression, but they also noted that the games themselves may play a role in the differing responses. For instance, the violent game had selectable characters, but they were nearly all male. The non-violent game also had a similar gendered dichotomy. The researchers postulated that men were able to identify more with a character that was the same gender as they, while women struggled with immersion because they were underrepresented in the game. It may be that women are less influenced by the imagery in games because they feel excluded from the medium to begin with.

Dill and Thill (2007) were also interested in investigating sexist imagery in video games and its link to perceptions of gender (Dill & Thill, 2007). They focused their analysis on the subculture surrounding gaming, pointing out that avid game players (called gamers) participate in online gaming blogs, attend gaming conferences, and read gaming-oriented news sources and magazines. They hypothesized that hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity, two gender tropes seen in television and cinema, are also common traits among game characters. Hyper-masculinity, defined by Scharrer (2004), is the exaggeration of "macho" characteristics such as a desire for action and danger and a more traditional view of relationships and gender (Scharrer, 2004). Hyper-femininity emphasizes feminine characteristics and stereotypes such as dependence, submissiveness, and sexuality. The authors suggested that hyper-feminine characters in media send the message to women that their sexuality is the core of their being, whereas hyper-masculine characters traits boil down to their strength and violence.

Dill and Thill (2007) employed two different methodologies: a content analysis of gender depictions in gaming magazines (Study 1) and interviews with teenagers that required the participants to make a list of characteristics for men and women in video games (Study 2) (Dill & Thill, 2007). The authors found that 80% of women in the games were depicted as a stereotyped representation. Women were also largely absent in video game magazines and advertisements, representing only one quarter of the characters in gaming publications. At the conclusion of Study 2, they reported that female characters were described by participants as provocatively dressed and thin with a curvaceous figure. The terms "big boobs" and "slutty" were the most common descriptors participants gave for women in games. The single most

commonly used adjective for men was "muscular." It appears that many of the teenagers described Harrison's (1998) "curvaceously thin woman" of television and film. The sample in this study defined men characters as powerful warriors, while women were looked at as sex objects.

Miller and Summers (2007) also explored the different depictions of male and female video game characters in gaming culture (Miller & Summers, 2007). They based their research on the established idea that media imagery can shape individual perception concerning gender behaviors, suggesting that these images can contribute to an individual's own gender identity. They noted that games may be the most influential visual medium because games give their audience an unprecedented amount of control and interaction with their characters on-screen behaviors. Miller and Summers reported that past studies have found women to be severely underrepresented in gaming narratives. When women were present, they were far less likely than men to be the primary playable character. They were also more likely than men to be depicted in clothes and roles that accentuated their sensuality over their abilities. Men have often been portrayed as more muscular and capable, while women are more attractive and sexualized.

In order to evaluate gender roles in video games, Miller and Summers (2007) studied video game oriented magazines and reviews to determine how characters were depicted in games and how they were discussed by gaming critics (Miller & Summers, 2007). They found that men were the primary playable character in 51% of games evaluated, while women were the playable character in 26.5% of games. Men were also found to be significantly more muscular than women, supporting previous research. Women were also more likely than men to wear revealing clothing and be sexualized, which is also consistent with prior research. Miller and Summers suggested that it is likely that these representations negatively impact both men and women because of how unrealistically they depict both genders. They note that children are especially at risk from this imagery because their gender schemas are still being established.

In 2008, Barlett et al. organized a study involving college-aged men and women and their sense of body-image following variably timed sessions of video games (Barlett & Harris, 2008). They defined body-image as self-awareness of one's body and the effects that this awareness has on self-esteem and self-satisfaction. They recognized that previous media studies demonstrated that men's body-image was

more negative after viewing shows with larger, more muscular men, while women's body-image was more negative following shows with thinner, smaller women. They hypothesized that these media effects also apply to video games, and that the sample's body-image may be more negative than after television due to the participatory nature of video games.

Barlett et al. (2008) observed that men who played video games emphasizing muscularity had a negative body-image and a more positive perspective on physical strength than they had before the gaming session (Barlett & Harris, 2008). Interestingly, they also found that men who played as or viewed more obese male characters had a negative body-image, but also a more negative view of muscularity. After playing their video game session, the women reported a more negative body-image along with self-reported lower sexual attractiveness, something that the men did not report. Barlett et al. identified three points of interest from their findings: both men and women reported a more negative body-image following video games than following other visual media such as television and cinema, these results were found independent of the participants BMI, and these results were also independent of the experience that participants already had with video games.

Martins et al. (2011) conducted a content analysis on male characters of the top 150 selling video games from 2008-2009 (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011). Their goal was to compare the types of masculine bodies found in video games to a computer-generated model of the average male body, collected from a biometrics survey company. They indicated that evaluations of masculine body imagery in games has yet to be examined thoroughly, and that new technology now allows the average male body to be compared to the different body types in video games. Martins et al. develop their analysis from the perspective of cultivation theory, noting that some studies have already begun linking cultivation theory and video games, finding the effects of cultivation as strong as or stronger than television (Harrison & Bond, 2007) (Williams, 2006).

Martins et al.'s (2011) results alluded to the idea of a "muscular gradient" for male characters (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011). Photorealistic men in games had larger bodies than the average male model, but as the video game character grew more unrealistic ("cartoonish"), the bigger his

muscles also grew, until they were comically large. Interestingly, they found that none of the video game characters truly adhered to the muscular V male ideal found in television and cinema. All of the male video game characters were larger and had bigger muscles than the average male, but none reflected the bulky upper body slanting down to a smaller waist described by Pope et al. (1999) in their analysis of leading male roles in television and cinema (Pope, Olivardia, Gruber, & Borowiecki, 1999).

Research findings have remained consistent on games throughout the previous two decades: men are given power and strength, while women are weak, sexualized, and imperiled (Collins, 2011). Women characters are rarely main characters; they are often relegated to sidekicks, supporting roles, or as a goal for the main man character to achieve, such as a damsel in distress or sexual conquest. Gamers more commonly experience games by playing as the man protagonist; they play the game as a woman protagonist far less often. This discrepancy has led to the opinion, both within the gaming industry and from a portion of its audience, that the male perspective is more important to gaming narratives than the female perspective. These narratives also reinforce the rigid gendering seen in cinema, television, and advertisements.

3   METHODOLOGY

This research follows up on previous efforts to evaluate gender in video games. Many researchers have evaluated video game characters based on imagery or descriptions in gaming magazines and websites, but have not studied characters in the context of the game itself. Most research on the effects of gaming does not examine the more recent gaming era of the Playstation 3, Xbox 360, and Wii. This is crucial, because these consoles have created the most realistic and immersive games currently available.

This research will examine video game characters from 2007-2013, building on the foundation established in prior literature and seeking out emergent ideas and themes that have developed in recent games.

3.1   Sample

The units of analysis in this project are individual story-based video games. I gathered this sample based on popular and critically-acclaimed video games released on the Sony Playstation 3, the Microsoft Xbox 360, and the Nintendo Wii video game consoles. I determined popularity by looking at the number of units sold, as reported by the NPD sales group (a market metrics tracking website) and VGChartz.com, a website that reports video game sales from the gaming publisher (VGChartz Methodology, 2015). I used the website Metacritic.com, an aggregate website for media reviews, to measure critical acclaim. The website compiles reviews from the most popular entertainment websites and assigns a meta-score based on an average of the reviews (Metacritic Games, 2015). The scale is divided into five different categories: universal acclaim, generally favorable reviews, mixed or average reviews, generally unfavorable reviews, and overwhelming dislike. This score reflects how well-received the video game was by the critics of the gaming industry.

The website also incorporates a meta-user score, which is an aggregate of user reported ratings on the website. These scores are broken down into three categories: positive response, mixed response, and negative response. While it is the critic's job to examine and discuss the subtleties of the gameplay and narrative, the user-reported ratings provide insight into how well received the game is by players.

For the purpose of this project, I chose games from the years 2007 through 2013, the primary years that the Sony Playstation 3, Microsoft Xbox 360, and Nintendo Wii were on sale. I selected games that sold over one million copies in the United States and had received Metacritic scores of "Generally Favorable or Higher" and meta-user scores of "Positive." Once I established this sample, the games were evaluated for whether or not they were narrative-based. Narrative as a central component for a game was determined by the game description on Metacritic, Amazon.com, and the game's own website. I classified a game as "narrative-based" if two of the three descriptions discussed the character(s) of the game, the

world in which the game takes place, and the central conflict that drives the game forward. For instance, the description of the *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* on Amazon.com reads:

> The Empire of Tamriel is on the edge. The High King of Skyrim has been murdered. Alliances form as claims to the throne are made. In the midst of this conflict, a far more dangerous, ancient evil is awakened. Dragons, long lost to the passages of the Elder Scrolls, have returned to Tamriel. The future of Skyrim, even the Empire itself, hangs in the balance as they wait for the prophesized Dragonborn to come; a hero born with the power of The Voice, and the only one who can stand amongst the dragons. (Bethesda Softworks, 2015)

This description includes mention of the primary player controlled avatar (the Dragonborn), the world in which the game takes place (the empire of Tamriel), and a driving conflict (the high king of Skyrim is murdered; individual groups vie for the throne). I chose seventy narrative based games using these criteria, ten from every year from 2007 through 2013. I wrote the name of each game on a note card, shuffling the deck of cards several times. I then counted and selected a game at every seventh card, gathering a final sample of ten games.

3.2 Procedure

In order to collect the necessary data, I played each of the ten games to the completion of the narrative. I considered the narrative as completed when, as in television and film, the credits would roll at the conclusion of play. Throughout each narrative, I took notes using a coding sheet that summarized vital aspects of the game's background, the character's description, and the character's interaction with the game's narrative. Capturing these aspects of the main character and their role in the narrative gave a much more universal approach to how these characters were acting within the game. The length of the main

narrative varies considerably from game to game. However, according to www.howlongtobeat.com, a website that measures how long it takes to complete a game, the longest running narrative in this sample, *Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword* clocks in at 38 hours, and the shortest, *Portal 2*, at 8.5 hours (How Long to Beat.com, 2015).

3.3   Explanation of Coding Sheet

I created the coding sheet to evaluate metrics about the game, narrative, and main character. These data are important for putting the primary avatars in the games into the narrative context. The initial recorded data offer general information about each game, its name, its year of release, the gaming consoles on which it was released, the developer of the game, and the thematic genre of the narrative. The release year could indicate whether certain ideas or themes in games were more prevalent during certain years. The console of release may shed light on whether some narrative ideas happen more on one gaming console than another, or if games released cross-platform (on more than one gaming console) have different gender constructions than games only released on one platform. Knowing the game developer might show whether a particular company is prone to enforcing or excluding certain traits in their characters or narratives. Genre is also an important factor to consider because there are so many different types of games. A game set in a fantasy world with magic may have different themes than a game set in a modern military world.

Information about the main character (the primary player-controlled avatar) is vital because it explains the character that the player will be exploring the game as through the duration of the narrative. There will be a deeper analysis of this avatar in the next section of the coding sheet, but this section was meant to capture the basic metrics. Name, gender, race, job, and age are all characteristics that are usually available to the player from the beginning of the game, and so they are coded as important characteristics for the avatar. Metrics are also collected for games that allow the player to build their own avatar from the ground up. In games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the player is able to create a character with almost limitless possibilities (the player is able to select age, gender, race, and physical build). This can be a

taxing effort for most gaming budgets, and so most games have a pre-created avatar for the player to control, or in some cases, a small selection of pre-created avatars. However, the ability to design a primary player controlled avatar is a facet that is increasing in the video game industry, and could signify a shift in the gender representations of video game characters.

The setting of the game describes the world in which the narrative takes place. Narrative settings in games can be fluid since games may shift environments multiple times to hold the player's attention. However, it is important to establish a description of the setting in order to note any standout facts about social order, gender politics, racial interaction, and political structure. This helps root the primary avatar to a more believable world.

The main character is the perspective that the player uses to live in and navigate the game world, and so this is the character that players will interact with the most. This individual leads the player through the narrative, and the story will be seen through the eyes and context of the main character. The story is driven forward by how players use the main character to interact with the gaming world, and how supporting characters respond to these actions. Games generally begin with a pre-established avatar, but some games allow the player to design their own protagonist.

The plot synopsis of the narrative is a summary of the major story events that occur in the game. This synopsis is gathered by playing the main story of the video game and noting the important chronological sequence of events, the climax of the game, and how the narrative is resolved. This section also puts the primary avatar within the context of the plot, demonstrating how his or her actions and motivations drive the game's story forward.

3.4   Updates to Previous Research

A primary difference between my work and the works of previous scholars in the field is the method of evaluation. Many scholars examine extraneous information around the game: box art, advertisements, reviews, and even descriptions from gamers (Ivory, 2006) (Scharrer, 2004) (Beasley &

Standley, 2002). Few scholars take a look at the characters in the context of the narrative itself, and no measures have been completed on the most recent era of video game consoles (Miller & Summers, 2007) (Dietz, 1998). In my view, it is important to evaluate these characters in the stories from where they arise, and to analyze the actual game as it is played.

4   RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Table 1: Avatar Representation in Sample

Name of Game	Name of Avatar	Gender of Avatar	Race of Avatar	Occupation of Avatar	Type of Game	Age of Avatar
Assassin's Creed 2	Ezio Auditore	Male	Caucasian	Assassin	Action/Adventure	22
Bioshock	Jack Ryan	Male	Caucasian	Unknown	Military/FPS	Unknown
Dishonored	Corvo Attano	Male	Caucasian	Queen's Guard	Action/Adventure	39
Fallout 3	Customized	Customized	Customized	Wanderer	Roleplaying	19

Infamous	Cole McGrath	Male	Caucasian	Bike courier	Action/Adventure	27
Portal 2	Chell	Female	Mixed race	Test subject	Action/Adventure	33
Red Dead Redemption	John Marston	Male	Caucasian	Retired Outlaw	Action/Adventure	38
Resident Evil 5	Chris Redfield	Male	Caucasian	Soldier	Survival Horror	35
The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword	Link	Male	Caucasian (Hylian)	Adventurer	Action/Adventure	20
Tomb Raider	Lara Croft	Female	Caucasian	Archaeologist	Action/Adventure	23

4.1   Findings

Finding #1: Men are heavily overrepresented in comparison to women as primary playable avatars

Of the ten games in the sample, seven games featured a male protagonist as the primary player-controlled avatar, two featured female protagonists in the starring role, and one game allowed the player to determine the gender of their avatar. Although the sample is smaller here, these male to female ratios are similar to those found by Glaubke et al.'s (2001) report on male and female player-controlled avatars: men still outnumber women in leading narrative roles in video games. Despite women playing video games at higher rates than ever, many shy away from these narratively-focused games in favor of "casual games," which are classified as puzzle games, phone games, and web browser games (Collins, 2011) (Jansz, 2005). These casual games do not require a lengthy time commitment and can be picked up and played without any narrative investment. These data suggest that the overrepresentation of male primary playable avatars may work to exclude female audiences from participating in narrative-driven games, since so many of them are dominated by male protagonists.

Finding #2: Gaming narratives largely play out stereotypical male fantasies of power, violence, revenge, and control. Even some games that feature female protagonists incorporate these themes.

The overrepresentation of male protagonists ties into the themes presented in gaming narratives and the ways that games allow their audiences to interact with the characters of the story. In this sample, nine of the ten games center on the main character attacking, maiming, or killing other human beings or monsters in order to move forward in the game's plot. These primary player-controlled avatars (PPAs) are all somehow competent and adept at combat and killing, even the ones who claim to have never been in such violent situations previously. Killing and combat is how these characters survive the narrative, and it is how the game developers want their audience to interact with the narrative. These actions adhere to traditional ideals about men and masculinity: men resort to violence and physical strength to assert their identities (Jansz, 2005). These violent actions are not just a component of the game; they comprise the core mechanics of the game.

Since the narrative often serves as a vehicle for the combat, the themes and ideas that are part of the game's story must also fit the combat and physical violence in the game. It would be jarring or absurd to have a game's narrative focus on puppy training, but have the protagonist fight and kill his way to his goals. The core themes found in these gaming narratives are based around power, violence, revenge, retribution, and pride. In *Assassin's Creed 2*, Ezio sets out to avenge the deaths of his family by killing everyone involved in the murderous plot. *Bioshock* has the protagonist, Jack, manipulated by a rebel group to kill Andrew Ryan, the ruler of the city of Rapture. In *Dishonored*, Corvo's lover (the queen) is murdered in front of him and he is blamed for her death. He escapes from prison and begins a murderous campaign to kill those who framed him and replace a corrupt government. Cole in *Infamous* is gifted with electrical super powers after an explosion and must use them to defend his city from gangs and rescue his girlfriend who has been kidnapped. In *Red Dead Redemption*, Marston's family is held hostage, forcing him to hunt down and kill the former members of his criminal gang. *Resident Evil 5* sees Chris Redfield face off against his long-time nemesis to prevent a biological attack and rescue his missing partner. Link in *Skyward Sword* must leave his floating island and search for Zelda, who is being threatened by a mysterious stranger. *Tomb Raider* strands Lara Croft on a lost island where the inhabitants kill or capture the rest of

her crew. She spends the game killing her way through the locals in order to prevent a ritual sacrifice of her best friend.

Many of these narratives involve the protagonist having something forcefully taken from them (family member, loved one, freedom, friends), resulting in a loss of power and control. The narrative then prompts the player to take revenge on the person or group who left the protagonist in a powerless state. Of the ten games in the sample, 7 of them begin with the protagonist in a state of complete powerlessness (alone, weaponless, no support or assistance): Corvo being held prisoner (*Dishonored*), Chell waking up in an abandoned laboratory (*Portal 2*), Ezio watching soldiers execute family (*Assassin's Creed 2*), Lara stranded alone on an island (*Tomb Raider*), John left for dead in the desert (*Red Dead Redemption*), the unnamed avatar being abandoned by the protagonist's father and hunted down by his enemies (*Fallout 3*), or Jack barely surviving a plane crash (*Bioshock*). The other three games begin with the protagonist in a state of very limited or minimal power: Chris and Sheva as soldiers in an overrun military zone (*Resident Evil 5*), Link as a swordsman in unknown and dangerous lands (*Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*), or Cole with superpowers trapped in a city descending into anarchy (*Infamous*). Moving from a place of doubt and powerlessness to a place of confidence and power is a central theme running through all of these narratives.

These topics (power, violence, revenge, control) are associated with stereotyped beliefs about masculinity, and these stereotypes are perpetuated throughout popular gaming narratives. Even when the protagonist is female, such as Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider*, she questions the deaths she causes in brief moments of respite, but goes eagerly into killing again when she approaches the next group of enemies. These narrative themes tie into the stereotypical ideals that men are aggressive, stoic, protective, and always in control (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011) (Jansz, 2005) (Dietz, 1998).

It is also important to mention that of the 10 games sampled, 8 of them starred a Caucasian protagonist. Of the 2 games without a Caucasian protagonist, one allowed gender and race customization (*Fallout 3*), and one featured an avatar of indeterminate race whose culture was never explored (*Portal 2*). All of these protagonists are young: 5 were between 19 and 29 years of age, 4 were between 30 and 39

years of age, and one protagonist's age was never specified. Thus, most of the protagonists in this sample were young, white men.

Finding #3: Women are more likely to be plot devices or supporting characters whose roles drives the protagonist forward, limiting their agency and identity

Even though men are overrepresented in the PPA role of gaming narratives, women are still present in the stories. Fundamentally, however, they fulfill different roles than men. Women drive the story forward not by the actions they take, but through the violence or harm done to them or the unconditional support that they offer the protagonist. Their role is secondary to the protagonist, but their disposition is what helps engage the protagonist in the events of the story. Sometimes, a loved one of the protagonist (wife/daughter/friend) is imperiled, injured, or killed, and this event serves as a sort of "call to action," starting the protagonist on the journey. In other ways, violence or harm visited upon a woman related to the protagonist depends upon the connection that the player has to their PPA. A villain may seem aloof or unintimidating, but when that villain harms or murders a loved one of the PPA (presumably a character with whom the player is connected), it invests the player in seeking revenge on the villain. Five of the ten games relied on the kidnapping or imprisonment of a woman supporting character to move the story forward. Two of the ten games had women characters close to the protagonist brutally murdered during the narrative. Women may also serve as support for the male protagonist. They will provide them with advice, heal them when they are injured, point them in the right direction, or provide them with the tools (mainly weapons) that they need to overcome narrative obstacles. Six of the ten games utilized women in these support roles.

There are numerous instances of female characters fulfilling these types of roles throughout this sample. In *Assassin's Creed 2*, after Ezio's father and brothers are murdered, his mother is left catatonic throughout the narrative due to shock. He moves his sister into his uncle's mansion, where she provides support and direction when Ezio needs assistance moving forward in his quest.

In *Bioshock*, Jack has the option to harvest the power growing within the young girls, dubbed the "Little Sisters," running around the city (killing them, strengthening himself), or purge them of this power and save their lives. His actions, whether they are those of a savior or those of a killer, influence how other characters in the game respond to him, as well as how the narrative ends. He also receives guidance on the game narrative's lore from Dr. Tenenbaum, who is one of the doctors responsible for creating the Little Sisters, and is trying to get Jack not to harm them in order to assuage her own guilt over her experiments on the Little Sisters.

Dishonored begins with the Empress, Corvo's secret lover, being assassinated in front of him. The assassins also kidnap her daughter, Emily, the heir to the throne who the narrative hints is actually Corvo's daughter as well. The Empress's death and her daughter's kidnapping together form the catalyst that sets Corvo on his journey to pursue the Empress's murderers and rescue Emily.

A woman character's death being used as a narrative catalyst is detailed aloud by Cole, the main antagonist of *Infamous*. This trope differs from the damsel-in-distress trope because, instead of rescuing the woman character, the protagonist uses the guilt and shame over the woman character's death to justify his violence and brutality against his adversaries. About two-thirds of the way into the narrative of *Infamous*, the villain, Kessler, kidnaps Cole's girlfriend, Trish, and makes Cole choose between rescuing her and saving a group of doctors. No matter which choice Cole makes, Kessler ends up killing Trish, which serves as the catalyst to make Cole hunt down his adversary. At the end of the narrative Kessler tells Cole that he is actually Cole from the future who has come back in time to prepare him for a coming apocalypse. In the final monolog of the game, Cole says:

> My brain lurched, unable to accept that Kessler and I were the same person. He'd come
> back in time to mold me into the savior he failed to be, going so far as to kill the woman
> he loved, that I loved, so that I wouldn't be tied down by emotions. Kessler wanted me
> strong, ruthless, so that when I faced the beast, I'd be able to make impossible decisions,
> all for the common good. (*Infamous*)

Plot-wise, Trish's death is used as a device to goad Cole into killing Kessler, and prepare him for the future obstacles he will be facing.

In *Red Dead Redemption*, John Marston's family (his wife and son) are held hostage by federal agents in order to force him to hunt down the remaining members of his gang. He is initially shot and left for dead by the gang, but he is found and nursed back to health by a rancher named Bonnie. Once Marston recovers, Bonnie provides him with contacts and equipment to aid him on his journey. Towards the end of the narrative, Marston dies defending his family in a shoot-out with the federal agents. Years later, the death of Marston's wife due to the grief over her lost husband spurs his son to hunt down the agents who killed his father.

Resident Evil 5's narrative begins with two main characters, Chris and Sheva; however, the player is only able to play as Sheva after completing the game narrative once. Sheva functions as Chris' partner, providing back up to Chris throughout the duration of the story. In the narrative, Chris discovers that Jill, his previous partner who was presumed dead, is still alive and likely in danger. His search for Jill drives Chris forward when his commanders and overwhelming odds would have otherwise made him turn back in his quest.

The core story running through *Skyward Sword*'s narrative concerns Link trying to find and protect his close friend (and romantic interest) Zelda. Zelda is pursued by evil forces through most of the game. Link receives support and advice from an old woman, Impa, in the local temple, and from a young warrior woman (later discovered to be a younger version of Impa who traveled to the present time) who helps improve Link's skills with his sword while giving him cryptic advice as to Zelda's whereabouts. Towards the end of the narrative, the antagonist captures Zelda, forcing Link into a final confrontation.

Finding #4: Male and female primary avatars are still sexualized, though to a lesser extent than was found in earlier studies. While remaining physically attractive, there is less emphasis on their clothes and body.

Previous gaming studies demonstrated that both women and men undergo degrees of hypersexualization in gaming narratives (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011) (Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009) (Harrison K. , 2003). For women, this type of representation emphasizes their clothing and attractiveness; for men, their muscle and strength (Miller & Summers, 2007). While these characteristics are still apparent in men and women in gaming narratives, they are less accentuated than previous research has reported (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011) (Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009). Only one of the men, Chris Redfield, can be described as overly muscular. The other seven male protagonists are all physically fit, but their muscle definition is not as emphasized as previous gaming protagonists.

The woman protagonists are all attractive, but they are not overly sexualized. For instance, Lara Croft wears a dark blue tank-top, long khaki pants, and ankle length boots. Though her clothes become somewhat torn and messy, this reflects her trials of being stranded on a dangerous island, and it is shown as her braving the elements and conditions rather than catering to the male gaze. Chell in *Portal 2* sports a white tank top with orange pants and a jacket tied around her waist, though the player rarely gets a complete glimpse of Chell due to the first-person perspective of the game. Her outfit never changes throughout the game and appears to be what one would wear to a track or field event: she wears it for her comfort and athleticism, not sexual attention.

Finding #5: The growth in technology has allowed for more complex protagonists, including positive female protagonists. However, women's character trajectories often fall in line with the male power fantasy, suggesting that women's gender in these games is somewhat invisible.

The advancement of technology in video games has resulted in more realistic appearing PPAs in video games than previous generations of gaming. Due to men's overrepresentation in the PPA role, audiences are often exposed to male characters over female characters. In previous studies, researchers noted

a lack of strong, positive (non-sexualized) female leads (Stermer & Burkley, 2012). However, positive modern woman protagonists have emerged that enjoy the same characterization that men protagonists do. While their representation in gaming has not grown significantly, game developers are now creating more dynamic woman characters than found in earlier years of video games. The women in these games have fleshed out backgrounds, personalities, goals, desires, and mysteries.

In *Portal 2*, Chell has a story that slowly unfolds over the course of the game. As she explores the ruins of the Aperture Science laboratory, her rivalry with the computer system GLADOS, an advanced artificial intelligence, reveals more of her personality even as she remains silent throughout the game. When the player figures out a difficult puzzle, they feel intelligent both as themselves and as Chell, because she is the PPA that the player has connected with in the game's narrative (Long 2008). While Chell remains aloof and mysterious throughout the narrative of *Portal 2*, other characters and enemies who doubt her early in the game end up conceding that it is too difficult to outwit her.

In *Tomb Raider*, Lara Croft is tormented by the loss of her parents throughout the narrative. Many supporting characters remark that her parents would be proud of her after she performs particularly heroic actions, and she confides in monologues that she is fearful of not living up to the career that they had built in archaeology. These aspirations are part of what drives her forward through the narrative. She begins the game frightened of her surroundings, repulsed and angered over being stranded on this island. By the end of the narrative, her enemies fear and respect her and she commands armies of supernatural soldiers in order to save her captured friend. She is presented with challenges that she rises to meet. The events of the narrative leave an emotional toll on her, which is something she is not afraid to admit. Similarly to the male protagonists, she ascends from a place of powerlessness to a place of power.

These similarities call into question the importance of gender in gaming protagonists. If a female protagonist follows the same character arc as most male protagonists (powerless to powerful through violence and combat), all within the male power fantasy, what are the differences between playing as a male or female protagonist? The agency of the female protagonist is limited due to adhering to a masculinized narrative. In this sample, two games out of the ten have a woman protagonist, with a third game (*Fallout*

3) allowing the player to choose their avatar along binary gender. Of these three games, only *Portal 2* does not result in the woman protagonist becoming a brutal murderer fulfilling a violent power fantasy.

These findings represent how modern video games generally portray men and women. Results seem to be consistent with previous findings: male protagonists outnumber female protagonists; narratives are characterized by male power fantasies; women in supporting roles tend to function as objects for the male protagonists; and men and women are stereotypically physically attractive but less sexualized than in past research. Evaluating these gendered examples in terms of cultivation theory establishes how these inequalities are reinforced to gaming audiences.

5   DISCUSSION

Cultivation theory posits that visual media is one of the primary storytellers in our culture. Values and expectations of society are passed to audiences through popular mainstream visual media (Stermer & Burkley, 2012). As viewers consume these stories, they come to assimilate the dominant values and concepts they watch and play on screens into their own reality, perpetuating a perspective that is continuously augmented through repeated viewings (Brown, 2002). Examining the data through the lens of cultivation theory demonstrates how these inequalities in video games tie into larger social problems that pervade how gender is conceptualized and understood. It is also crucial to investigate the message that gaming audiences are receiving about gender by continuing to play games with unequal gender representation.

5.1   Cultivation Theory and Findings

5.1.1   *Representation*

Women's underrepresentation as primary playable avatars can be attributed to a dearth of women in visible fields like science and technology. These areas have historically been male-dominated, locking out most women who tried to enter them by way of misogynistic cultural attitudes and undervalue of their contributions in technology fields (Charles & Bradley, 2009). Recent years have seen that monopoly slowly dissipate, but these fields are still overwhelmingly occupied by men. The shortage of women in these areas diminishes their role as programmers and developers for gaming companies, resulting in fewer protagonists that are representative of women.

Men have traditionally monopolized technology companies because it was not considered socially acceptable for women to enter these types of industries (Charles & Bradley, 2009). A shortage of women making or contributing to narrative-based games may suggest to game developers that women are not interested in this kind of medium. Game developers focus on crafting narratives that appeal primarily to male audiences because they, as men, are able to create a story that will resonate with other men.

Essentially, the broader social belief that women do not have the ability to create innovative technology is attributable to the traditional roles that limited women's status in the work place. This belief continues to be perpetuated through actively excluding women's representation in gaming narratives. From the perspective of cultivation theory, the consistent lack of female protagonists reinforces the notion that this underrepresentation is acceptable and normal, and that developing more female protagonists violates a social construction that games are for men.

5.1.2 Power Fantasy

The core mechanics of most gameplay rely on the player becoming comfortable with the rules of the gaming world, understanding the restrictions and limitations of these rules, and finally mastering the tools that the game allows the player to use (Esposito, 2005). Game developers want players to feel powerful and capable. In designing a game, the difficulty is an important consideration because a game that is too easy will result in player's disinterest, and a game that is too difficult will be inaccessible to all but the

most skillful gamers. It is up to the developers to fine-tune the game so that the player can overcome the obstacles present in the game, letting the player feel triumphant and victorious.

As progressing technology allowed for more complex stories in video games, developers began merging the elements of compelling gameplay--rules, restriction, power, triumph--into the themes of gaming narratives. Gameplay that conveys a sense of power and triumph may limit the investment that a player has in the game, however, establishing an engaging story that allows the player to follow the metamorphosis of their protagonist in a complete story arc creates a lasting experience.

Most games convey the illusion of power by having their protagonist fight and kill their way to the end of the narrative. Frequently, modern games also have their protagonist collect experience points which allow them to receive a boost in their attributes (which may include strength, defense, health, etc.) and unlock new skills. The protagonist collects these points by completing various actions and missions throughout the game. Collecting experience points, boosting attributes, and unlocking new skills allows a protagonist to kill enemies quicker, kill more enemies, or survive longer against strong enemies. Six out of the ten games in the sample have this point-based system, while the other games have the protagonist gain these skills as part of the narrative.

In many video game narratives, becoming powerful means becoming a violent murderer. Nine out of ten games in the sample require the protagonist to kill other humans in order to survive the narrative. Use of violence and physical domination has become a common part of video game plots because, in catering to a male audience, they adhere to the traditional male tropes of strength, action, and aggression (Bartholow & Anderson, 2002) (Dietz, 1998). Power in games is measured by how effectively a character can kill their opponents. Four games, *Bioshock*, *Dishonored*, *Infamous*, and *Red Dead Redemption*, grant some rewards for killing fewer people or committing good deeds, but the narratives continue on if the player decides to mercilessly kill all enemies in their path. *Dishonored* and *Portal 2* are the only games in which the player could theoretically survive the narrative without killing a single person.

Only two games in the sample represent power as intelligence, wisdom, or cunning: *Fallout 3* and *Portal 2*. *Fallout 3* allows the player to update their intelligence rating, and the penalty of a low intelli-

gence rating means that the protagonist is unable to converse with certain characters, potentially missing out on hints and side missions. *Portal 2* grants the protagonist more skills and tools to solve the game's physics-based puzzles as the story progresses, leaving the protagonist with abilities to overcome obstacles without harming people.

Video games feed into the stereotypical belief associated with masculinity that violence is a viable way to overcome problems. The more powerful a protagonist is, the larger their propensity for violence and the more brutal their violent acts become. Engaging in these game narratives means, in many cases, experiencing a violent power fantasy. Cultivation theory indicates that consistent exposure to this trope strengthens the association of violence and strength with masculinity, continuing this traditional gendered stereotype.

5.1.3   Women in supporting roles

Women are underrepresented as protagonists in narratives but are still present in every game of this sample as secondary characters in the game's narrative. Often, they are a driving force behind the protagonist's quest, someone of great importance to the PPA who is in danger. Her danger is what engages the protagonist in his or her journey. This trope is not a new aspect of video game narratives. In discussing the 1987 game *Super Mario Brothers 2*, Sherman (1997) noted that children were perplexed by the option to play as the Princess, since she was who Mario was trying to rescue in the original game. "…it's really weird…now she's helping you instead of creating the problems," noted a young boy as he played the game (Sherman, 1997). Essentially, female supporting characters in games create the problems that the usually male protagonists have to clean up.

The "damsel in distress" trope is a consistent facet of literature, art, and film (Sherman 1997). It became a defining aspect of many early video game narratives, such as *Super Mario Brothers*, *Legend of Zelda*, and *Double Dragon* (Sherman, 1997). The prevalence of the damsel in distress trope demonstrates

that the belief that women need to be protected, rescued, or kept chaste still resonates with mainstream culture.

Two games in this sample also demonstrate an emerging theme with women supporting characters: the death of a woman character as motivator for the protagonist. The murder of Cole's girlfriend, Trish, is a pivotal moment in the narrative of *Infamous* that makes Cole realize that he needs to be the one to kill Kessler, the main antagonist of the narrative. The Empress' murder at the beginning of the narrative of *Dishonored* and subsequent framing of Corvo for the crime starts Corvo on his journey to clear his name and kill the true murderers. Despite the prominent roles that these women had in the lives of the protagonists, we do not see them interact with the protagonists throughout the narrative. Trish is absent through a significant portion of *Infamous*, fearful of Cole's new superpowers, and the Empress is only seen at the very beginning of the narrative of *Dishonored*, greeting Corvo on his return from a long journey. Essentially, the women's role in the narrative is for them to die, to give the protagonist justification for violence and brutality.

Besides functioning as a catalyst for the plot, many women in video games also work in a caring or nurturing capacity toward the protagonist. They collect information on which the protagonist can act, they nurse them back to health when they are wounded, or they attract the attention of the villain while the protagonist launches a surprise attack. Akin to the damsel in distress trope, this still means that the bulk of the agency in the narrative comes from the protagonist, who is most often male. These character functions can likely be traced to the abundance of women in "supportive" professions such as nursing and secretarial work. Women still experience the repercussions of unequal career representation to the point where, even now, some careers are still thought of as "women's work" (Shapiro & Williams, 2011) (Rogers & Menaghan, 1991) (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Essentially, women as secondary characters are present to move the story forward, or support the protagonist in their mission.

In terms of cultivation theory, this example posits that women lack agency. Throughout these stories, women are characters whose primary role is to serve as narrative motivation for the protagonist. When assimilated into a game player's world view, this idea may lead to that person disparaging the

choices that women make or underestimating women who are in positions of power. This is because gaming narratives imply that women find meaning when they give purpose to the protagonist (and, by extension, the player) in a supportive capacity. Outside of that purpose, their presence is superfluous to the flow of events. This also serves to cloud women's identities as individuals, encouraging the belief that women work best in supportive occupations and roles rather than roles requiring leadership and decision-making.

5.1.4   Sexualization

Much of prior research into video games' gender depictions paid close attention to the sexualization of the characters. Portraying attractive or beautiful people is not a new trend in visual media, but as games are programmed on computers rather than filmed by a camera, video game creators have unlimited possibilities for character design. Men and women in games have typically been portrayed as both physically attractive and athletic (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011) (Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009) (Barlett & Harris, 2008) (Ivory, 2006) (Dietz, 1998). However, the sexualization of these characters has been different for male and female characters.

Martins et al. (2011), in a content analysis of male gaming characters, found that men in general were represented larger and more muscular than the average man (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011). This was true for all types of games, from games using cartoonish graphics to more realistic-looking games. However, the physical dimensions of these characters still reflected an attainable body type for men. These were not exaggerated appearances, and so Martins et al. (2011) suggested that male gamers likely would not be heavily influenced by consistent exposure to these characters.

This sample did not stray from the previous masculine tropes: men were characterized by muscular, yet attainable builds. Some of them (Cole from *Infamous*, Link from *Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*, John from *Red Dead Redemption*, and Ezio from *Assassin's Creed 2*) appeared slightly thinner than the examples given by Martins et al. in their analysis. All of them were able to perform outrageous, occasionally superhuman athletic feats, such as vaulting up the sides of buildings and successfully

fighting large groups of opponents. In terms of cultivation theory, while these men's physiques are not outrageously disproportionate, repeated exposure may affect audience's understanding of how a man "should" appear. This may promote negative impressions of men who fall outside of this ideal.

Martins et al. (2009) examined female gaming characters and determined that the more realistic a game appeared, the thinner their female characters were portrayed (Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009). They also noted that, as opposed to men's physical depictions, women were characterized by an exaggerated physical ideal. The physiques of many of the female game characters are not dimensions that can be attained by actual women. In many games, women still adhered to the curvaceously thin woman as described by Harrison (2003): the dimensions of bust, waist, and slenderness are impossible to achieve without medical intervention or body modification (Harrison K. , 2003). Martins et al. (2011) question why men's physiques, while still representing a physical ideal, would be less exaggerated than women's physiques.

Female protagonists' bodies in this sample did seem to differ from prior research. While still thin and athletic, they are not as disproportionately slim as Martins et al. found previously. They are able to perform many of the athletic feats that their male counterparts did: Lara climbs trees and takes out groups of enemies, Chell leaps large chasms and volleys herself through impossible traps, and the female avatar of *Fallout 3* is a weapons expert by the end of the narrative. In the perspective of cultivation theory, a person who has experienced repeated exposure to this thin ideal would develop negative impressions of women who fall outside of this physical parameter.

Another important aspect of the sexualization of male and female PPAs are the characteristics that are emphasized. For men, that historically has been the size of their muscles and height (Olivardia, Pope Jr, Borowiecki III, & Cohane, 2004). For women, that has historically been their breasts, waist, hips, butt, and slimness (Harrison K. , 2003) (Dietz, 1998). The emphasized attributes of men demonstrate their ability to intimidate enemies and perform feats of strength. Women's bodies accentuated how attractive and sexualized they appear. Essentially, male PPAs' bodies are associated with action and ability, while

women's bodies are created to be looked at. Men have agency to act, while women are acted upon, thereby limiting their agency.

While the observed characters in my sample do not completely line up with previous findings regarding sexualization, these preceding results still remain a part of very recent gaming history. Although the protagonists appeared less sexualized than in previous studies, they are all still slim, fit, and attractive. They represent a physical ideal of beauty that, while less exaggerated than in previous studies, still has ramifications for how audiences identify with these characters. In the perspective of cultivation theory, a player would learn from playing games that men are meant to perform and intimidate, while women should be more preoccupied with their physical appearance. Men who are not characterized by strength or women who are indifferent to their appearance fall outside the norms presented by gaming protagonists, and may therefore be devalued or openly reviled. This sets up men as dynamic actors while women wait to be acted upon.

5.1.5   Characterization

The growth of technology has increased the potential for more engaging narratives and realistic graphics. Early gaming relied on the player to use their imagination for much of the plot and character reaction. Up until the last decade, games relied on the player reading the dialog (and some exposition) from text on the screen. Updated gaming consoles have allowed characters in narratives to appear to express emotion and thought, making them more relatable to audiences. This feat is done through using greater ranges of facial expressions, transposing actions and movements from actual people onto game characters, and creating more complex dialog for narratives (Newman, 2013) (Kent, 2001).

Men PPAs are all fully fleshed out, realized characters. They have back stories, fears, and goals that help the player relate to them (Newman, 2013). However, narrative games largely cater to a male demographic due to their overrepresentation of male protagonists, their reliance on the male power fantasy of strength and violence to advance the gameplay, and casting women in supporting roles rather than primary roles (Ivory, 2006). Based on this evidence, one could assume that female PPAs would be under-

developed characters, or exist solely as stereotypes of women. Even though women PPA representation is still heavily overshadowed by men PPAs, in the games I studied, women PPAs enjoy similar character portrayal to men PPAs. The female protagonists in this sample even follow the same trajectory as men: beginning in a place of powerlessness, collecting new weapons and tools, and finally triumphing over adversary in the end to claim victory.

This equal characterization also has its complications. Since women follow similar character arcs as men (i.e. powerless to powerful), one can argue that game developers disregard gender in character development. Any character can fill the role of the protagonist if they begin, evolve, and end in the same places. Lara starts out powerless, but she begins eagerly killing and attacking as soon as she has a weapon in her hands, despite reportedly never holding a gun or fighting prior to the story. Chell is confused and unsure at the beginning of Portal 2, she wakes up in an underground laboratory years after the events of the first game with no knowledge of what transpired. However, she quickly adjusts to completing her tasks without hesitation. Aside from physical appearance there is very little characterization separating a female protagonist and a male protagonist.

From the perspective of cultivation theory, this type of characterization can have the effect of "diminishing" gender differences. Seeing men and women follow the same trajectories and react in similar ways may advance the idea to gaming audiences that gender does not matter. While games like *Tomb Raider*, *Portal 2*, and *Fallout 3* feature female protagonists, games should strive to go beyond representation and recognize that men and women have different experiences due to their gender. Instead of neglecting this, incorporating these perspectives into the protagonists' personalities may result in characters with novel character arcs.

5.2   Sociological Impact

The continued existence of gender inequality in games may not be surprising, as it has been observed in many prior studies about video games (Stermer & Burkley, 2012) (Dill & Thill, 2007) (Beasley & Standley, 2002) (Dietz, 1998). Given the massive popularity of video games, the observed gender

tropes in video games could have a culture wide impact, leading to game players who adopt and enact these beliefs about gender in their daily lives.

5.2.1 *Gender Schema Theory*

Gender Schema Theory asserts that individuals create schema, or information networks of association, through interaction with peers, family, and media (Bem, 1981). Individuals categorize information about groups of people depending on differences emphasized during interactions. These differences can be as simple as activities or interests, or more complex like behavior and conversation. These schemas facilitate cognitive decision-making and judgments about situations and people. Schemas can be similar for people in comparable sociocultural situations, as many schemas are dictated by the dominant collective beliefs of a society (Lemons & Parzinger, 2007). However, this can result in unreliable cognitive schemas that perpetuate inequality by associating groups with stereotypes or social constructions (Lemons & Parzinger, 2007) (Bem, 1981). Most schemas are developed in youth, and encourage people to process interactions and behavior from the perspective of the rooted schema (Martin & Ruble, 2004)

Bem (1981) links the development of schemas with the reproduction of gender roles and divisions that pervade society. She posits that the psychological theory of sex typing, attributing traits and behaviors to individuals based on their gender, leads to schemas relating to gender. Sex typing may increase in environments where differences between genders are accentuated, such as classrooms where boys and girls sit on opposite sides of the room, or offices that employ only men. Sex typing decreases when gender similarities and intermingling between genders are encouraged.

As video games enjoy the same ubiquity as television and film, the gendered content in the narrative of games likely has a role in the development of gender schemas. The content in games generally over-represents men in positions of power and action, and casts women into roles that support or drive the actions of the male protagonist. While female protagonists can have strong development and characterization in the few games in which they appear, they tend to follow the same character trajectories and engage in the same type of gameplay as men, which has the effect of obscuring their identity as women. Game

narratives place importance on men's perspectives over women's perspectives even when a woman is the focus of the game; therefore, consistent exposure may assist in the development of schemas that value men over women.

5.2.2   *Self-Discrepancy and Social Comparison*

Repeated exposure to the avatars and characters contained in this sample of video games may also provide a standard that individuals use to judge themselves and others. Self-discrepancy theory describes how an individual's conceptualization of who they are compares to what they consider an ideal (Elsend & Moller, 2007) (Bessenoff, 2006) (Higgins, 1987). High levels of self-discrepancy may result in the individual engaging in such behaviors as disordered eating or social anxiety in an attempt to achieve their ideal (Bessenoff, 2006) (Higgins, 1987).

Festinger (1954) describes social comparison theory as comparing oneself to others that they perceive as similar to themselves or in the same peer group (Festinger, 1954). An individual engages in upward social comparison when they feel that they met or know someone that represents an ideal that they are trying to achieve. This upward comparison may result in feelings of anxiety or depression (Elsend & Moller, 2007) (Bessenoff, 2006). Bessenoff (2006) found that individuals with high levels of self-discrepancy were more likely to participate in upward social comparisons. Bessenoff's study demonstrated that highly idealized media figures (celebrities, actors, models) triggered individuals with high levels of self-discrepancy to engage in more upward social comparisons than those with normal levels of self-discrepancy.

The games in this sample demonstrate that male and female gaming protagonists still uniformly represent an idealized version of physical attractiveness and strength. Bessenoff (2006) noted that celebrities and models led to increased self-discrepancy; thus, it is possible that regular exposure to these video game protagonists may result in a similar process in the player. Many modern games appear more realistic than ever due to evolving technology, and so the characters look more human than they have in older games, which could lead players to believe that real people may and can resemble these avatars. As high-

ly idealized media figures have done before them, game characters may promote unrealistic standards concerning the physical standards of men and women. Thus, prolonged and repeated exposure to video games may lead to an increase in negative self-image and unhealthy behaviors in order to achieve this expectation.

5.2.3   *Agent of Socialization*

It is evident that video games have become a powerful agent of socialization for children and teenagers. Agents of socialization—family, schools, peer groups, and mass media—are external institutions that assist in developing identity and expectations for an individual (Dietz, 1998). Considering that over half of American households own at least one device dedicated solely to video game play, the video game industry should be concerned with how they are socializing younger generations (Essential Facts About The Computer And Video Game Industry, 2013).

Video games have been a popular activity for children since the late 1970s, and game playing has quickly moved from arcades into the living room (Glaubke, Miller, & Esperjo, 2001) (Dietz, 1998). A study conducted by Cummings et al. (2007) found that, in a randomly chosen selection of adolescents, they played video games for an average of one hour per weekday and ninety minutes per average weekend day (Cummings & Vandewater, 2007). This number has likely increased due to the easy availability of games on smartphones, web browsers, and tablets. Games' ubiquity suggests that they are an integral part of many adolescent lives and that adolescents spend several hours per week taking in the narrative themes present in these games.

Many children and adolescents, therefore, are regularly exposed to some of the gender tropes discussed in this paper. These tropes make appearances in many video games, and so younger gaming audiences may incorporate them in to their own understanding of gender. Essentially, games assist in the socialization process of the young people who play them, and the gendered findings observed in this sample may promote negative, stereotypical expectations of both men and women. Video games alone may not completely shape the gender socialization of an individual, but it is apparent that some video games add

to the chorus set by the rest of visual media concerning unrealistic body expectations and gender dispari-

ties.

6   CONCLUSION

In this paper, I provide an update to how modern video games represent gender through the charac-

teristics of the primary playable avatar and the narrative of the game. I evaluated a random sampling of

ten popular games by playing through their narratives and observing the primary character, setting, sup-

port characters, and narrative story arc. I reached five conclusions after analyzing the collected data: (1)

men outnumbered women as the narrative protagonist, (2) most game narratives portray violent male

power fantasies, (3) women supporting characters were often relegated to being a damsel-in-distress or as

a murdered victim to justify the protagonist's violence, (4) there is diminished emphasis on male and fe-

male sexualization compared to previous studies of earlier video games (Stermer & Burkley, 2012)

(Barlett & Harris, 2008) (Beasley & Standley, 2002) and (5) both female and male protagonists are more

complex than ever, but women often follow the same character trajectories of men, minimizing how im-

port gender is in these women protagonists. These findings are interpreted from the perspective of cultiva-

tion theory, suggesting that these games are perpetuating gender inequalities to gaming audiences. The

impact of these inequalities are demonstrated in the context of gender schema theory, self-discrepancy

and social comparison theory, and as an agent of socialization. These theories all express how the gender

inequalities prevalent in games may come to shape the attitudes and beliefs of gaming audiences.

Overall, these data show that gender inequalities are still present in modern video games, which

conforms to previous gendered stereotypes (Stermer & Burkley, 2012) (Downs & Smith, 2009) (Miller &

Summers, 2007) (Dill & Thill, 2007) (Glaubke, Miller, & Esperjo, 2001) (Dietz, 1998). While video

games have done a better job of showing that women are capable of being powerful protagonists, men

still enjoy wildly disproportionate representation as main characters and games still employ many stereo-

typical gender tropes. Game narratives still adhere to the male fantasy of power, strength, vengeance, and

violence, continuously reinforcing traditional masculine ideals. Protagonists of all genders are less sexual-ized than in prior studies, but they still represent attractive, physically fit, able-bodied characters that per-petuate difficult or impossible physical standards for audiences to achieve. This is especially true for fe-male game protagonists, whose physical appearances rarely resemble realistic-looking women.

Video games, and the technology behind the games, can do much more. They can do better. Vid-eo games present audiences with an immersive experience not seen in any other visual medium: the op-portunity to control how the protagonist interacts with the story. Video games have limited themselves by trying to mimic film and television, and this has led to a glut of games that focus on the same narrative arcs and tropes, essentially guaranteeing that popular releases will resemble film and television. Instead of continuing the inequalities perpetuated by other media, developers are in a unique position to create games that convey to the audiences the experience and the emotional toll of social oppression while providing tools and ideas to solve these social ills.

Outside of the restrictive boundaries given by larger publishers, some developers have crafted unique experiences that demonstrate that games can invoke different themes than those seen in many of the violent, popular games. These independent (or "indie") games are generally created by individuals or small development teams away from the large gaming companies and publishers of the industry. A popu-lar indie game, *Papers, Please*, focuses on the perspective of an immigration officer in a fictionalized country. The officer must decide who is allowed in to the country and who is rejected, and the narrative shows the emotional toll that this process has on both the officer and the immigrants. *To The Moon*'s nar-rative follows two scientists (one is a woman of color—a rarity in terms of video game representation) who are using a fictional invention to pore over a man's memories and honor his dying wish of getting to go to the moon. The story also touches on social issues around those with autism, and how to better re-spond to individuals on the autism spectrum. Independent video games can help change how people per-ceive the gaming industry by focusing on themes other than the fulfillment of the violent male power fan-tasy and would attract a more diverse array of players.

There are some popular narrative-based games that have made changes in portrayals and depictions of characters. Game series like *Mass Effect*, *Fallout*, *Elder Scrolls*, and *Dragon Age* allow the player to customize their protagonist (gender, race, height, weight, hair, etc.). The *Mass Effect* series made headlines for including same-sex relationships in the third installment of the series (Krupka, 2014) one of the first series to allow players to choose to enter a same-sex relationship. The fifth installment of the *Elder Scrolls* series, *Skyrim*, also included same-sex marriages as an option in the narrative, as does the second game in the *Dragon Age* series. The recent third installment of *Dragon Age* includes a transgender character, which is almost never encountered in mainstream video games (Stonecipher, 2014). Electronic Arts, one of the biggest gaming companies in the world, hosted the first ever industry-wide discussion of LGBT issues in video games in 2013 (Corriea, 2014).

These games show that the medium can be used to shed light on social problems and allow audiences to empathize with these situations on a personal level, and that enjoyable – and even successful – mainstream games can feature a non-male protagonist, or even one who is not heterosexual. Rather than continuing to marginalize women, set impossible physical standards, and retell the same violent male power fantasy, game developers should consider experimenting more with games that defy these staples of the industry. Game narratives that feature more female protagonists (or, at least, a different perspective from the white male protagonist) and that rely on more than violence to interact with the story may reach wider, more diverse audiences. The video game industry, as an agent of socialization, should consider the gender inequalities they are promoting and upholding, and ponder a more inclusive, even-handed approach to their narratives.

6.1   Future Direction

This current study, along with prior studies, has established that games continually contain gender inequalities in their representation and portrayal. Researchers should delve more into linking how gender inequalities presented in games manifest in players' ideas and attitudes. It would also be interesting to examine whether different rates of game consumption influences attitude towards gender in different

ways, or whether gaming in general has a deeper influence due to its interactivity. Paying attention to different genres within the narrative classification may also show that certain types of games are better than others with regard to the perpetuation of gender inequality.

Another big area for researchers to look at is race in video games. This sample only contained one non-white character, suggesting that narrative games exclude the perspectives of people of color. How can games better account for these minority perspectives? How has excluding non-white characters in many gaming narratives influenced gaming audiences' understanding of race?

Finally, it would serve sociology well to become more involved in studying the gaming industry. Video games are the most interactive visual media available, and the possibilities are limitless concerning the variety of themes and lessons that can be incorporated into a game. Sociologists could work with gaming companies in order to help them be more inclusive to women, people of color, and sexual and gender minorities. They could also work with programmers to develop their own games that promote education about social issues. There are numerous films and books that use sociology as a powerful tool to examine disparities, oppression, and stratification. Why not use this knowledge to develop games that also confront these issues?

6.2   Limitations

This research has some limitations. A larger sample would need to be considered in order for the results to be more generalizable. More researchers would be able to delve further into the dialog and scripts of these games, looking for nuanced gender interactions. Some previous studies (Martins, Williams, Ratan, & Harrison, 2011) (Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009) (Beasley & Standley, 2002) used specialized software to analyze virtual body proportions and clothing; this could be helpful in comparing how gaming characters' bodies and attire have changed over time. I was also unable to weave the concepts of game company, year of release, or genre into the results in any meaningful way due to the small sample, which is something that should be considered for future research. Being able to replay or re-

watch the gaming narratives, particularly from different social perspectives, could add more validity to these results.

7   References

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8   APPENDIX

Assassin's Creed 2

Year of Release: 2009
Consoles released on: Playstation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer: Ubisoft
Type of Game (thematically):

Action/Adventure   Roleplaying   Survival Horror   Military/FPS

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications out of 100): 91
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings out of a high score of 10): 8.5
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group): 5 million

MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION
NAME   **Ezio Auditore**

GENDER   **Male**

RACE   **Caucasian**

JOB   **Assassin**

AGE   **Early 20s**

Setting

The setting of this game is 15th century Italy, specifically (in the beginning), the city of Florence. The main narrative of the game is told through a framing technique: a secret order (the assassins) in the present (2012) are looking at the genetic memory of a fellow assassin in order to gain clues about a great catastrophe that is going to befall the world. The story unfolds through this framing technique, with only momentary interruptions in the historical narrative to return to the modern present.

The story is also meant to depict a reasonably accurate setting of how 15th century Italy would actually appear. The city is built in the game based on maps of 15th century Florence, and many of the politicians and religious figures encountered were actual people in this time (though some dramatic liberties are taken).

The Main Character

Ezio is the son of an influential Italian aristocrat who is also secretly a member of the Assassin order, a group dedicated to fighting the Templars who wish to control humanity (Ezio is unaware his father is part of this order). At the outset of the game, Ezio is depicted as a womanizer and typical pampered rich boy, albeit with a charming personality (he could be described as an affable rogue). He is often referred to as attractive and handsome. He runs races with his brother through the streets of Florence, cavorts with women, gets into alterations with rival families, and has an immature outlook on the future. His mother and father worry about Ezio, as he seems to have no ambition or desire to settle down or get into the banking business like his father. After tragedy befalls their family, Ezio is left to take care of his mother and sister as they flee for their lives. He is forced to either come to terms with maturity or let the remaining living members of his family die. After he discovers the truth of who his father was, and that he was killed by enemies of the Assassins, Ezio trains to become an Assassin in order to avenge his family. Even though he has ambition and drive now, he is still largely motivated by revenge throughout the gaming narrative. He ultimately tries to help the citizens of the Italian cities he travels to, and is essentially a good character, but his desire for revenge is something he is focused on during every part of the story.

It is important to note that Ezio's style of combat, as an Assassin, is stealth. He never likes coming out into the open to combat his enemies, he prefers hiding in the shadows and sneaking around than full out confrontation. When he does attack or kill in front of others, he moves quickly and escapes to a hiding place in order to avoid detection.

Appearance

Ezio Auditore of Assassin's Creed 2 is covered in a large white cloak throughout much of the game which hides any muscle mass. He does present as fairly thin, and his actions throughout the game show him to be spry and athletic. He also engages in parkour and climbs over buildings and leaps between rooftops, though he does not have supernatural abilities. The camera presents as free roaming, giving the player full control over how they would like to see Ezio perform his actions through the game. As opposed to many of the other protagonists, Ezio becomes fatigued when running for too long, putting a restraint on one of the more impressive feats exhibited by many video game characters.

Ezio wears an elaborate outfit that reflects his membership of the assassin's guild. The base of it is a long white cloak with hood, with long brown gloves, brown pants, and brown boots. He sports a red side cape and red sash in the middle of his chest which also displays the logo of the assassin's guild. He is able to customize his clothes throughout the game (changing his cloak to a variety of colors), but the general outfit remains the same. In certain cut scenes when he pulls his hood down, he has short brown hair pulled back in a tight ponytail.

Plot Synopsis

The game starts in 15th century Florence, Italy, letting you take control of Ezio Auditore, the son of an Italian aristocrat (who is also secretly part of the Assassin order). The Audiore family is of the wealthier families in the city, and life is relatively easy for them. The enemies of the Assassins, the Templars, orchestrate a plot to kill the Auditore family for unknown reasons. Ezio, his mother, and his sister

are away from their home, but his father and two brothers are killed. Ezio flees with his family to the countryside where he is found by his uncle, who owns a large villa in a small town.

His uncle helps train him in the way of the Assassins and provides him the clues to uncovering why his family was targeted by the Templars. This search takes place over nearly two decades. In this period, Ezio befriends Leonardo da Vinci and Niccolo Machiavelli (the latter who is also a member of the Assassins), and the Medici family. Ezio manages to trace the plan to kill his family to a Templar named Rodrigo Borgia (the primary antagonist). Ezio also discovers that the struggle between the Assassins and Templars centers on powerful artifacts called Pieces of Eden. These artifacts are weapons capable of destruction and control, and so are highly sought after by the two battling groups.

Ezio eventually finds a Piece of Eden with the help of other Assassins. Unfortunately, Rodrigo Borgia also locates a Piece of Eden to counter Ezio's piece. In the final sequence of the game, Ezio sneaks into The Vatican to assassinate Rodrigo Borgia, who is now Pope Alexander VI. After a confrontation, Ezio nearly kills Borgia, but decides not to since it will not bring his family back. Ezio claims Rodrigo's Piece of Eden and uses both acquired Pieces to unlock the vault under The Vatican, providing him with a prophecy that the world will be coming to an end in the year 2013.

Bioshock

Year of Release: 2007
Consoles released on: Playstation 3, Xbox 360, PC, Mac
Developer: Irrational Games
Type of Game (thematically):

Action/Adventure   Role Playing   Survival Horror   Military/FPS

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications): 94
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings): 8.6
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group):4 million

MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION
NAME   Jack

GENDER   Male

RACE   Caucasian

JOB   Unknown

AGE   Unknown

Setting
The narrative setting is in an underwater city called Rapture. The year is 1960. The city was created and funded by a wealthy businessman named Andrew Ryan who adheres to Ayn Rand/Atlas Shrugged libertarian ideals. It was built with the purpose of escaping government regulations and oversight, so that society's best and brightest minds could prosper and invent to their heart's content without regulatory constraint.

The city lasted over a decade, but class warfare broke out among the population. A business tycoon named Frank Fontaine started several successful companies, supplanting Andrew Ryan as the economic center of Rapture. Despite Rapture being founded on free market ideals, Andrew Ryan eventually led a police force and shut Fontaine down, sinking him and his business to the bottom of the ocean floor. Ryan then took over all of Fontaine's companies. As Fontaine was a champion of the lower classes, this stoked a lot of ire among the population of Rapture.

This unrest was further fuelled by the development of a type of genetic engineering. These genetic plasmids allowed people to use powers, such as lightning, fire, and telekinesis, which go beyond normal capabilities. Plasmids were created through a type of underwater organism referred to as ADAM, which only seems to thrive in pre-pubescent girls. As people used plasmids, their addiction to ADAM overwhelmed their sanity, and so cyborg guardians called 'Big Daddies' were assigned to each girl to protect them. The ADAM filled girls were referred to as 'Little Sisters.' These plasmids were only affordable by the very rich, though. Access to this technology, or lack thereof, led to a civil war in Rapture. As more people began to use this technology, they began to see that it created mental and emotional abnormalities. Using it too much drove most people insane. These ADAM addicted individuals were referred to as 'Splicers,' referring to individuals who spliced too many genetic plasmids with their own DNA.

The city eventually had a complete social collapse, descending into anarchy, which is when the game starts.

Main Character

The central conflict involves the main character, an unnamed protagonist, and his journey to escape Rapture. His plane crashes in the Atlantic Ocean at the entrance to Rapture, and he ends up trapped inside while looking for help. The protagonist meets the leader of the underclass, Atlas, who led the rebellion in Rapture. He tells the protagonist that if he assists him in killing Andrew Ryan, the creator and leader of Rapture, that he will help the protagonist get back to the surface and to safety.

The role of the character, as well as his motivations and goals, are fairly vague in the beginning of the game. He is a Caucasian male in his 30s from his exposed hands, voice, but aside from that he has no discernible description or occupation. In the game, he is a confidant and assistant to the leader of the rebels in Rapture. From early on, he demonstrates a proclivity for violence, as he has no qualms or issues with killing those who are in his way in Rapture. Violence and danger do not seem to faze him much. He also willingly undergoes the genetic engineering technique that drove many in Rapture insane.

Jack comes across several morality choices throughout the game that result in him being a more benevolent or ruthless protagonist. These choices will influence for how other in game characters react to your protagonist. While remaining ruthless makes the game easier, the benevolent choices result in a better end result for Jack and the rest of Rapture.

Appearance

Jack of Bioshock has no true image throughout the game. There is no official art or design of him in the narrative, and you only catch glimpses of a caucasian male in broken mirrors and water reflections. The player essentially plays the entire game from first person perspective, viewing the narrative from the eyes of Jack. Besides being able to wield weapons and participate in combat against enemies, it is difficult to get a grasp on Jack's physical build.

Since the game is first person perspective, and the cut scenes of the game do not stray from this perspective either, it is hard to determine Jack's physical appearance. The only discernible characteristic related to his fashion choices is a small tattoo on the underside of his left wrist of three black chains linked together.

Plot Synopsis

The main character, Jack, is on a plane that crashes into the ocean. He swims to a nearby lighthouse and takes an elevator down, which brings him to the lost underwater city of Rapture. He is contacted by a man who calls himself Atlas. Atlas identifies himself as the leader of the rebellion in Rapture,

supporting the underclasses as they fight to free Rapture from the oppressive rule of Andrew Ryan. Andrew Ryan built the city as a kind of libertarian paradise, but his greed led to him becoming a dictator over the city. Atlas asks if Jack will help save his family, whom Ryan has captured, and in return Atlas will help Jack get back to the surface. Jack agrees.

Jack makes his way through Rapture, encountering dangerous splicers and eventually running into a Little Sister guarded by a Big Daddy. Jack defeats the Big Daddy, and has the opportunity to either save the Little Sister or kill her, using the ADAM she has. Atlas encourages Jack to kill the Little Sister, but Dr. Rosalind Tenebaum intervenes and asks Jack to save her. Dr. Tenenbaum helped create the Little Sisters but is deeply regretful of her role, and so is now trying to find redemption. However Jack chooses impacts how characters talk to him and view him throughout the game: harvesting gets Jack vilified by Tenenbaum and her allies and praise from Atlas, while saving them makes Atlas doubt Jack's ability to survive in Rapture.

When Jack finally does encounter Atlas' family, Andrew Ryan sets off an explosion, killing Atlas' wife and child. Atlas is grieving, but has Jack reconvene with him to make a strike against Ryan. As Jack continues helping Atlas, he is filled in on what helped lead to the downfall of Rapture through the stories of Atlas, Dr. Tenenbaum, and recordings left behind from Rapture's citizens.

After fighting through splicers and Big Daddies, Jack eventually arrives at Andrew Ryan's office. He walks in, prepared to end it once and for all. Andrew Ryan hints that Jack is not in control of himself, that Atlas has been leading him on throughout the entire game's narrative. Jack kills Andrew Ryan, and upon doing this, Atlas reveals that his true identity is Frank Fontaine, the business tycoon. Fontaine also tells Jack that he is actually Andrew Ryan's 'illegitimate son,' and that Fontaine had biologically programmed him with false memories in order to bring him to Rapture. The only way into Andrew Ryan's main facility was a near perfect genetic match to Andrew Ryan, and so Jack qualified. Fontaine tells Jack that with Andrew Ryan gone, he is going to sell the plasmid technology to countries on the surface, and change humanity.

Tenenbaum and the surviving Little Sisters rescue Jack, and they all agree that they need to stop Fontaine before he gets to the surface. They track Fontaine's escaping submarine, and Jack kills Fontaine as the submarine surfaces. Depending on if Jack chose to save or kill the Little Sisters through the narrative, he either lives happily, or decides to rule Rapture as a dictator.

Dishonored

Year of Release: 2012
Consoles released on: Playstation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer:Arkane Studios
Type of Game (thematically):

Action/Adventure   Role Playing   Survival Horror   Military/FPS

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications): 89
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings): 7.8
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group): 1.77 million
MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION

NAME   **Corvo**

GENDER   **Male**

RACE   **Caucasian**

JOB   **Queen's Guard**

AGE   **39**

Setting
        The narrative takes place in the city of Dunwall, a capital city of an empire that reigns over a series of islands named Gristol. The time period is meant to invoke late 17th or early 18th century Western Europe, with some elements of steampunk (advanced technology in a primitive setting) used as well. Gristol is ruled over by a benevolent Empress, who is renowned for her good heart. There is still a sharp divide between the rich and poor, and the Empress' governmental powers are limited by her theocratic government. Much of the city is impoverished, while the upper elite have plentiful food and drink.

Dunwall is also currently inflicted by a plague. The plague affects the poor more than the rich, but many prestigious members of the upper class have also died due to the plague. Renowned physicians have developed some medicine to combat the plague, but only the rich can afford it, and it does not appear that the medicines can completely cure the disease.

The empire also follows a strict religion called The Abbey of the Everyman. This religion is also responsible for the oppressive government restrictions on the underclass. The Abbey follows 7 cosmological signs that all dictate denial of basic human desires. The practice of any other religion, particularly witchcraft, is forbidden by the religion. The High Overseer, considered the highest religious representative, governs the religion in Gristol. However, the elite are often found to be violating the tenants of the religion with little or no consequence, while the police force brutalizes the underclass for every slight religious infraction.

Despite being ruled by an Empress, Gristol seems to have rigid gender roles, as no women appear in the guards or military of Gristol. The city has quite a large and respected brothel, and many of the poorer women simply resort to prostitution. There are also various brutal gangs that operate in the poorer districts, and these are also all devoid of women. Even though the ruler of Gristol is a woman, her power is largely held in check by the male dominated theocratic government.

Main Character

Corvo Attano is the protagonist of the narrative of Dishonored. Corvo is the primary bodyguard of the Empress, and as the game confirms, also her lover. He is also the first of the royal bodyguards that is low born and born outside of the main reaches of the Empire. Not much is known about Corvo's past, and even many of the people he works with in the military of Gristol know little about him before the day he came to the main court of Dunwall.

Corvo is basically the physical embodiment of "tall, dark, and handsome." He has long brown hair, a muscular physique, and an aloof demeanor. He is quiet, and rarely speaks unless it is absolutely necessary. He is renowned for being a formidable officer for the Empress, and is quite capable in battle. After the early sections of the narrative, a mysterious supernatural figure known as "The Outsider" grants Corvo powers that allow him to do things that normal people cannot, such as teleport or freeze time. These skills help him throughout the course of the narrative and are confirmed to be the witchcraft that the Abbey of the Everyman seems to fear so much.

Also central to the narrative and Corvo's character are the options to complete the narrative in either a mode of "low chaos" or "high chaos." These modes reflect how Corvo completes his mission. If Corvo is stealthy and does not kill or fight his way through areas, then that is considered a "low chaos" action and the game rewards it accordingly. Likewise, if Corvo slaughters enemies and is seen by many guards, it will result in a "high chaos" action and the narrative will change accordingly. Supporting characters will become more warm or fearful of Corvo depending on whether he completes his missions in low or high chaos, respectively. Essentially, Corvo has his base mysterious personality, and the player shapes how aggressive or benevolent Corvo is through how he surpasses obstacles in the narrative.

Appearance

The player sees the game through a first person camera mode, through the eyes of Corvo. However, the player does see images of Corvo in the game's static movie clips, providing a good idea of his appearance. He is fairly tall and thin, but not overly muscular. He has some supernatural abilities that enhance his physical capabilities, but he is a trained and formidable soldier even without these additions. Most of the supporting characters refer to Corvo's reputation in awe and respect, since he became well known for military exploits in the years before the game's story, suggesting a fair amount of physical fit-

ness and training. Overall, even though Corvo is not seen too much by the player throughout the game, it is safe to assume that he is muscular and fit, though not as bulky as some of the other male protagonists.

Plot Synopsis

At the game's outset, Corvo is returning to Dunwall from a mission abroad attempting to discover the cause and solution to a virulent plague sweeping the city. After he greets the Empress' daughter, Emily, and the Empress herself, Jessamine, assassins appear on the rooftop. Corvo tries to fight them off, but they use magic to teleport around him and kill the Empress. One of the other assassins also kidnaps Emily. The guards come running in and just see Corvo with his sword out and blame him for the death of the Empress. They attack him, arrest him, and charge him with regicide and kidnapping.

A few months later, Corvo is set to be executed, but a sympathizer smuggles him a key to his cell. Corvo escapes through the sewers and is greeted by a ferryman. This ferryman takes Corvo to a rebel group, who informs Corvo that they are aware of his innocence and they are trying to overthrow the brutal government that took the Empress' place after she was killed. The rebel group is being led by Admiral Havelock, a high ranking official of the Gristol military, along with Lord Trevor Pendleton, another high ranking member of the Gristol government. They appeal to Corvo to assassinate a few high up figures so that they can move in, take over the government, and restore order to the empire. Gristol has since fallen on difficult times, as the plague has spread unchecked and the new Lord-Regent who replaced the Empress is a brutal man with draconian tactics.

The evening before his first mission, Corvo is approached in his dreams by a mysterious being known as The Outsider. The lore of the game's religion, The Abbey, warns that The Outsider is an evil being who tempts people into signing away their souls, but he informs Corvo that he wishes to grant him powers to assist in his journey. These powers increase Corvo's senses, vitality, and strength. It also gives him unique abilities, such as teleportation, slowing down time, and possessing enemies minds.

Corvo begins killing vital members of the corrupt Gristol government one by one, plunging Gristol into an even greater state of paranoia. Corvo eventually finds Emily, the former Empress' daughter, being held captive. He rescues her and brings her back to the rebel base, and the rebels immediately begin grooming her to take the Empress' place once they win the government back.

After assassinating enough key members of the government to cause a near total collapse, Corvo infiltrates the Lord-Regent's mansion and assassinates him. The Lord-Regent's journal and final words implicate him as the one who brought the plague to Dunwall as a method to control the underclass, who he perceived as a danger to the upper class. Unfortunately, the plague was much more virulent thjan he had anticipated, and he lost control of its spread. Admiral Havelock and Lord Pendleton take over the government and put Emily on the throne after the Lord-Regent's death.

On the evening of their celebration, Havelock and Pendleton poison Corvo, in an attempt to cover up their assassination plot. They also kill off most of the remaining rebels at their base. A member of the group sympathetic to Corvo quickly slips him the antidote to his poison and sets Corvo adrift in a boat, telling him that he should get away from Dunwall and never return for his own safety. His boat drifts into the hideout of a man named Daud, who controls a gang of warriors who all have the same supernatural powers as Corvo. Daud tells Corvo that his group was the one hired to assassinate the Empress by the Lord-Regent. Corvo takes on Daud's guards and Daud himself, overcoming them and steering back to Dunwall to rescue Emily.

When he arrives in Dunwall, he learns that Havelock and Pendleton are holding up at a military base at sea, along with Emily. They have fractured the government further, resulting in the beginning of a civil war in Gristol. Corvo storms the base, navigating his way to the top, where Pendleton and Havelock are waiting. Corvo finds that Havelock has killed Pendleton and is attempting to enforce his own rule with Emily as a puppet leader. Corvo subdues Havelock and frees Emily from captivity. She assumes the throne, making Corvo her bodyguard until the end of his days. The ending has slight differences depending on how brutal Corvo was throughout the game, and if he defeats Havelock fast enough. If Corvo waits too long to subdue Havelock, he kills Emily and Gristol is plunged into anarchy.

Fallout 3

Year of Release: 2008
Consoles released on: Playstation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer: Bethesda
Type of Game (thematically):

Action/Adventure   **Role Playing**   Survival Horror   Military/FPS

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications): 90
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings): 8.0
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group): 5 million
MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION

NAME   **User created**

GENDER   **User created**

RACE   **User created**

JOB   **Student/Wanderer**

AGE   **19**

Setting
        This game is set in the year 2277 in Washington DC. Now known as the "Capital Wasteland,"
Washington DC and the surrounding area is a barren desert after a nuclear attack from China on the United States. The United States has essentially disbanded, and much of the populace lives in small towns and

villages. Gangs of raiders and thieves attack the few settlements that have managed to spring up. Mutations from the radioactive fallout resulted in some new creatures and people.

The world uses a kind of anachronistic landscape. For instance, the nuclear war happened in the year 2077, but the remnants, architecture, and music reflect the 1940s/1950s era United States. These aspects of the game create an odd dichotomy with the modern advancements of computers, lasers, robots, and high technology of the latter half of the 21st century.

Before the country was bombed, some of the population was selected to live in underground, high tech vaults to ride out the attacks. These were outfitted with food and shelter enough to last for a century or more. Most of the vaults never opened their doors again unless instructed to or by outside interference.

The protagonist begins the narrative in one of these underground vaults, Vault 101. He has lived there for his entire life with his father and has never been to the surface. The vault has a sizable but dwindling population, and everyone is assigned their job/duties through an aptitude test that all students take at age 19.

Main Character

The protagonist of Fallout 3 is essentially whomever the player wants him or her to be. There is a robust character design from the beginning, letting the player choose physical attributes from hair style, facial structure, weight, gender, race, and build. Following that, the player builds the key attributes of their character, allowing them to craft a character that is intelligent or strong or charismatic, or average at everything. The narrative of the game is filled with choices and a morality system. Players can have their protagonist choose a righteous path, an evil path, or a neutral path. Each of these opens up different possibilities in the narrative. As the protagonist interacts with the world more, his or her actions may increase renown. Renown is how well known the protagonist is to the supporting characters of the Capital Wasteland. For instance, if the protagonist's renown is high and they have committed evil deeds, many towns will close their doors to him or her, but the various gangs and raiders of the countryside will welcome the protagonist with open arms.

There are also different character perks that the player can unlock depending on gender choice. For instance, male protagonists can unlock the "Ladykiller Perk" which allows increased combat damage against women as well as dialog options with women not normally present, and female protagonists can unlock the "Blackwidow Perk" which allows the same bonuses as the "Ladykiller Perk" only for women against men. The protagonist's father's dialog will also change slightly when referring to the protagonist as his son or daughter, and some of the enemies have gendered specific insults when attacking the protagonist, such as calling a male protagonist a bastard or a female protagonist a bitch.

Physically, both male and female characters are capable of the same characteristics. You can power up (as in, raise the strength or intelligence of a protagonist) male and female protagonists identically. There is no difference in the weaponry or armor that male and female characters can equip (men can even wear women's armor, and vice versa). Both male and female protagonists have access to all missions. Some of the male supporting characters tend to respond more favorably (and at times, slightly creepily) to the female protagonist than the male protagonist. There are more comments in game about the physical appearance of the female protagonist than the male protagonist.

Appearance

Fallout 3 is unique because it allows the player to build their own protagonist from the ground up. The age of the protagonist remains the same, but the player can create their character's gender, race, height, weight, hair style, and facial structure. There are also randomly generated preset characters if the player does not feel like doing this. Of note, the race of the main protagonist's father also changes based on the skin color that the player chooses for their character.

This is also one of the few games that allow a shifting camera perspective for the player to experience the game. The player can play the game in a first person perspective (through the avatar's own eyes) or a third person perspective (behind the avatar) and switch these perspectives at any point along the course of gameplay.

Plot Synopsis

The story begins with the birth of the main character, which allows the player to "design" him or her from the start. The game shows brief flashes of the protagonist over their years as a child and into their teenage and early adult years. The protagonist's father ends up as the vault's primary doctor. The protagonist and his father appear to be happy living in the vault, and the protagonist grows close with the daughter of the leader of the vault (the overseer).

At 19, the protagonist takes a test to determine what their adult job will be in the vault. On the morning after this test, the protagonist awakens to alarms. His/her father has opened the vault and escaped, against the rules of the vault. The police force attempts to hunt down and torture anyone related (family wise or socially) to the protagonist's father, but the protagonist escapes with the help of the overseer's daughter.

Once the protagonist escapes the vault, he/she finds himself/herself in the middle of the Capital Wasteland, the sprawling desert ruins of Washington D.C. Approaching a nearby shanty town, the protagonist finds that his/her father passed through and left only brief hints as to why he escaped the vault and where he's heading. The protagonist spends the journey learning about the inhabitants of the Capital Wasteland and tracking his father. Of note, there are several factions vying for control of the land. The Brothethood of Steel is a military organization dedicated to preserving the knowledge lost in the war and protecting the people who have no protection. The Enclave is a rival military faction under the guidance of President John Henry Eden that is trying to recapture and restore the United States to its former glory. However, the Enclave has a strict interpretation of the U.S. Constitution and has been known for committing war atrocities to get their way. Slavers/Raiders are groups of outlaws who wreak chaos and havoc on the settlements around the Capital Wasteland. Finally, the Super Mutants are a giant mutant race of brutal warriors who mindlessly slaughter and eat any humans they come across. No one is certain where they evolved from, but they have their own civilization and are able to communicate in English.

The protagonist finds a close friend of his/her father, who informs the protagonist that their father was originally a part of a large research team dedicated to bringing clean water back to the Capital Wasteland (most or all water is irradiated unless it undergoes a very expensive treatment). However, the research team had a lot of difficulty, and essentially concluded that the project was nearly impossible. When the protagonist's mother died in birth, the protagonist's father left the project in order to find safe haven for himself and his infant. The protagonist's father had a breakthrough in the project, which prompted him to escape the Vault in order to find his former cohorts and restart the clean water project.

The protagonist contacts the Brotherhood of Steel, who agrees to protect the research team while they restore clean water to the land. Meanwhile, the Enclave captures the protagonist, telling him/her of their plan to sabotage the clean water device in order to make people more dependent on the Enclave. The protagonist escapes Enclave custody and confronts the president of the Enclave, revealed to be a giant super computer. After destroying the computer, the protagonist flees and returns to the research team.

As the research team is implementing the clean water device, the remnants of the Enclave execute one more assault on the Brotherhood of Steel and research team. The protagonist's father is killed, and the narrative ends on the final decision that the protagonist must make: whether to sacrifice him/herself in order to get the machine operational, or to make one of his/her friends complete the project.

Infamous

Year of Release: 2009
Consoles released on: Playstation 3
Developer: Sucker Punch Productions
Type of Game (thematically):

Action/Adventure   Role Playing   Survival Horror   Military/FPS

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications): 83
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings): 8.4
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group): 1 million
MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION

NAME   Cole McGrath

GENDER   Male

RACE   Caucasian

JOB   **Bike courier/super hero**

AGE   **Mid to late 20s**

Setting
  This game is set in Empire City, a large fictional metropolis inspired by New York City and Chicago. The game starts immediately following a large explosion near the center of the city. Thousands are killed in the initial blast, but a few individuals who survived the explosion also begin exhibiting strange powers. Shortly after the explosion, a plague rampages through the city, sickening thousands. The U.S. government quarantines Empire City to prevent the plague from getting out and to hunt down the group responsible for the initial attack. While the quarantine prevents people from leaving the city, the government does very little to assist the citizens still trapped inside. Gangs and looters begin taking over the city, making a tense situation even worse. The city is basically on the verge of complete social anarchy.

Main Character
  Cole MacGrath is the main character of the narrative. He starts the game as a bike courier, delivering packages all over Empire City. Unfortunately, one of his packages contains a bomb that goes off, killing thousands instantly. Cole, even though he is at the center of the blast, somehow survives and starts exhibiting electric based super powers.
  Cole mentions that before the blast, he was a "nobody." He was a bike courier in his late 20s, dropped out of college, and had parents that were generally disappointed with his life choices. He laments spending most of his time lazing around with his bestfriend, Zeke, who also has not made many ambitious choices with his life. Cole's girlfriend, Trish, is a paramedic who cares for Cole, but tells him he could be so much more. Unfortunately, Trish's sister was in the vicinity of the explosion, and Trish blames Cole for her death once word get out that Cole was the one carrying the bomb. Overall, he seems preoccupied that he never really amounted to much before gaining his powers, and wants to try to rectify that now that he is capable.
  In the game, Cole is given the option of playing through the narrative making good choices or evil choices. Good choices require Cole to be more altruistic and help out people, while evil choices have him using his powers primarily for self-gain. Zeke and Trish will question and shun Cole's actions when he makes evil choices, while the street gangs will be friendlier to him. Making good choices results in Cole partnering up with the remaining law enforcement units to try to take the streets back.
  Cole speaks in a deep, gravelly voice. He seems quite happy with his powers, eager to try them out in new ways. He cares deeply for both Zeke and Trish, but seemed very content on just floating by in life until he received these powers. He has a tall and athletic build, and specializes in street parkour, which involves using the urban environment to perform gymnastic-type feats. This makes Cole quite capable physically.

Appearance
  In the game itself, Cole looks fairly tall and thin, but not overly muscular. However, when the game shows dramatic movie scenes in order to move the story along, Cole's muscle mass is far more evident. Cole is also a bit of an acrobat and partakes in parkour, which is a type of urban obstacle course training routine. He is able to climb up the sides of buildings, ride on the backs of trains, glide over power lines, and fall long distances without taking damage. He also dispatches many enemies through punching and kicking, reinforcing his physical strength and presence. The camera in Infamous is described as free-roaming, which allows the player to tilt the camera around Cole and see him from various perspectives throughout the gameplay.
  Cole wears a dark yellow jacket with black streaks on the sleeves, black fingerless gloves, and black pants with pouches strapped to the side. He also has a grey knapsack slung over one shoulder. His light brown hair is buzzed in a military style fashion. Cole is largely covered with the exception of his

head, face, and neck. Though in many of the movie scenes Cole is shown as muscular and large, in the game itself Cole's clothes seem baggier and his frame skinnier/thinner.

Plot Synopsis

The narrative begins immediately after a huge explosion in the middle of Empire City. Cole wakes up to fire, death, and mayhem all around him. People are screaming that terrorists are attacking, and the buildings around Cole are crumbling and crushing everyone below. Cole notices that electricity seems to be attracted to him as he runs through the chaos. After being hit with a bolt of lightening, Cole passes out and wakes up a few days later in the hospital. His bestfriend, Zeke, and his girlfriend, Trish, are there waiting at his bedside. They tell Cole that the city is locked down and people are getting sick. They make a plan to try to break through the quarantine, but it fails. Cole is captured and interrogated by an FBI agent named Moya, who seems to know about Cole's powers and what's going on. She wants Cole to investigate a terrorist group called "The First Sons," the group suspected of setting up the explosion in the first place. She also wants Cole to find her husband John, another FBI agent who was undercover with the First Sons. She informs Cole that the bomb that caused this explosion was a special creation from the First Sons, called the Ray Sphere. The Ray Sphere is currently missing and the FBI suspects it will be used to cause another explosion soon.

Moya gives Cole some assignments in order to start restoring structure to the city and figure out what the First Sons have planned. Moya tells Cole to track down a woman named Sasha who also has superpowers. Sasha is suspected of controlling one of the violent gangs in the area, as well as having connections to the First Sons. Cole encounters Sasha, and she tries to seduce him, telling him they are destined to be lovers. After Cole wins out over Sasha in a fight, she tells him that he needs to track down Kessler, the leader of the First Sons.

Kessler eventually finds Cole first, touching his head and giving him a vision of the future in which the entire world is destroyed. Kessler says that he is responsible for this destruction, and that Cole will need to work harder to stop him, as Cole's powers are still weak. Kessler fights Cole, leaving him beaten, but not dead.

Moya has Cole venture further into the city and he continues restoring order where he can. Cole eventually finds the Ray Sphere, the bomb responsible for the initial explosion. Jealous of Cole's powers, Cole's bestfriend Zeke turns the Ray Sphere over to Kessler, who plans to use the bomb to increase his powers further. Zeke allies with Kessler, abandoning Cole.

Moya's husband John contacts Cole and meets up with him to give him more information about the activities of the First Sons. He says that Kessler showed up a few years ago and seized leadership of the First Sons, giving them information on how to create the Ray Sphere. The First Sons primary goal was to jump start the evolution of humanity, and while the explosion from the bomb kills most people, it gives certain people super powers. John also informs Cole that Moya is not his wife, and that she does not work for the FBI. Moya promptly severs all contact with Cole, and he suspects that she works with a different organization all together.

Kessler lures Cole out into the open by capturing Trish and giving him the dilemma of saving a group of doctors or Trish. No matter what choice Cole makes, Trish is killed by Kessler. After that, Cole hunts down Kessler, who reveals that chose Cole specifically to be the one to activate the Ray Sphere. When Cole finally beats Kessler, Kessler once again puts images of the future into his mind. He reveals that Kessler himself is Cole from the future who has come back to find Cole. In the original future, a destructive super villain appeared and destroyed the world. Cole could have stopped him, but he fled with his family. The super villain, called the Beast, eventually found Cole and killed his family anyway. In his grief, older Cole used his powers to travel back in time to train younger Cole to be ready to fight the Beast this time. Kessler then dies, and Cole begins to train his powers in order to fight the coming threat.

Portal 2

Year of Release: 2011
Consoles released on: Playstation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer: Valve Corporation
Type of Game (thematically):

      Action/Adventure   Role Playing   Survival Horror   Military/FPS

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications): 95
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings): 8.3
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group): 2.28 million
MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION

NAME   **Chell**

GENDER   **Female**

RACE   **Caucasian* (the developers have stated they left her nationality intentionally ambig-**

uous)

JOB   **Lab Test Taker**

AGE   **Late 20s to early 30s**

Setting

        Portal 2 is set during an unknown future period at Aperture Science Laboratories, a technological-ly advanced testing lab for new inventions and devices. The lab is massive and seems to encompass a large number of square miles. It has seen better days though, and currently sits abandoned by any human scientists or overseers. The lab is run and operated by an essentially sentient computer artificial intelli-gence named GLaDOS. GLaDOS, equipped with a female voice and dubbed as "she" throughout the game's story, continues executing her directive of testing and collecting data from human subjects, even without any human oversight. However, there are dozens of human test subjects frozen in stasis that GLaDOS regularly uses for her testing operations.

        At the outset of the game, the vast lab is slowly being overtaken by nature. Trees and plants grow throughout the facility and many of the computer systems are no longer functioning properly. GLaDOS has been dormant since her memory cores were removed and incinerated at the conclusion of the original Portal and many of the remaining human test subjects that were in stasis had their life support shut down due to lack of power. The Aperture Science facility seems to be failing.

Main Character

        Chell is a unique character in that she is given nearly no history, background, or dialog in the game. The player controls Chell in the first person perspective. Other supporting characters in the game acknowledge her existence and even make conversation with her, but she is given no lines of conversation to reply with. Her voice actor is essentially only responsible for the grunts and shouts she makes when performing acrobatic feats throughout the game or in pain. The main antagonist insists that Chell's per-sonal file at the science facility reports that she was adopted, but even this is never confirmed as there is evidence that the antagonist is unreliable.

        In the original Portal, Chell was a test subject selected by GLaDOS to evaluate a gun that creates portals. These portals link and so can be used to solve unique puzzles. GLaDOS pushes Chell through a variety of test environments, leaving her to die in the end. However, Chell uses the portal gun to escape and manages to remove GLaDOS' computer core, destroying a good chunk of the science facility in the process. In the end, Chell is weakened and captured by an unknown group.

Appearance

        Chell wears a white tank-top with the words "Aperture Laboratories" in black print on the chest, along with an orange jacket tied around her waist, orange and brown pants, and large white boots with mechanical bracers (made to absorb impact from falling). Her black hair is tied up in a ponytail. Despite moving through old sewers, sustaining a few injuries, and wading through toxic sludge, Chell's clothes remain unchanged and unscathed throughout the duration of Portal 2. Since the game is played in first person perspective, the only time the player sees Chell is in mirror reflections or brief glimpses of her personnel file in the computer systems. Her arms and upper chest/shoulders remain exposed throughout the narrative.

Plot Synopsis

        Much of the script and situations in Portal 2 is cast in a darkly comedic/sarcastic light. This influ-ences how the player views some of the situations presented along the narrative.

        Chell begins the game by waking up in a room resembling a motel room. She is informed over in-tercom that many years have passed since she last woke up. A floating personality core, Wheatley, comes

to her and says that he woke her up because he needs her help getting out of the lab. The lab has become dilapidated and overgrown with plant and wild life since GLaDOS is no longer awake to take care of the facility. The two cross through some of the lab areas and Chell finds an abandoned portal gun to assist them on the way. Wheatley tells Chell that the only way out of the facility is through GLaDOS' old system room. Unfortunately, the emergency systems that utilize their exit tunnel reawaken GLaDOS, and she sets up a variety of new portal tests for Chell to pass through, all the while complaining about Chell's previous attack on her.

In the midst of the portal testing, Wheatley escapes and tells Chell that he knows how to shut down GLaDOS again. In the middle of one of the puzzles, Wheatley leads Chell into a hidden area of the science facility that controls GLaDOS' weapons systems. They successfully disable these systems and confront GLaDOS, who is powerless without this weaponry. Chell uploads Wheatley to GLaDOS' system, and he downloads GLaDOS' memory and personality to a small potato baterry, sending it down a trash chute. Unfortunately, the same faulty programming that corrupted GLaDOS and made her malicious also corrupts Wheatley, and he sends Chell hurtling down the same trash chute.

Chell wakes up and finds GLaDOS in her potato battery form. GLaDOS offers to team up with Chell, so that Chell can escape the facility and GLaDOS can get her regular body back. She promises that she will not run any further portal tests on Chell. Chell discovers that they are in the original ruins of Aperture Science from the 1950s. All of the recordings detailing the history of the lab are still playing, and all are narrated by Aperture founder Cave Johnson and his assistant Caroline. Each floor that Chell and GLaDOS climb advance them into Aperture by one decade, until they arrive in the early 2000s and Cave Johnson's recording announces that Aperture has gone bankrupt. In a last ditch effort to show that they are valuable to the United States government, Aperture shows off their advanced technology by downloading the mind of Cave's assistant, Caroline, into a computer as an AI codenamed GLaDOS, revealing that GLaDOS once had a human mind.

When they reach the upper levels where Wheatley has taken over the lab, GLaDOS tells Chell that she needs to find 3 corrupted memory cores to upload to Wheatley's system. After Chell locates these cores, she uploads them to Wheatley, who begins to tear apart the facility. As the ceiling is torn off, Chell shoots a portal to the moon, sending Wheatley floating into space. GLaDOS is completely restored in her body and closes the portal for Chell before she is also lost in space. She thanks Chell for restoring her and tells her that she never wants to see her again, sending her to the surface above the science facility to live out her days.

Red Dead Redemption

Year of Release: 2010
Consoles released on: Playstation 3, Xbox 360
Developer: Rockstar
Type of Game (thematically):

Action/Adventure   Role Playing   Survival Horror   Military/FPS

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications): 95
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings): 8.7
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group): 6 million

MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION
NAME   John Marston

GENDER   Male

RACE   **Caucasian**

JOB   **Retired Outlaw**

AGE   **38**

Setting

       This game takes place in the year 1911, in fictionalized towns and deserts around the southeastern United States. The area itself is supposed to represent the tail end of the Wild West and the cowboy era, as it is slowly being taken over by industry and technology.

       Like much of the United States at this time, there is a rigid class and gender divide. This rears its head in many of the social interactions of the game, with women not really instigating much of the action throughout the game, and minorities (blacks and Latinos) being relegated to the role of criminal or servant. The gangs of outlaws that controlled much of the area in previous decades are slowly being run out of town or killed by federal troops as the land becomes more developed.

Main Character

       John Marston could best be described as an "alpha male." He swears, he drinks, he pushes back when he's pushed around, and he responds in gruff, monosyllabic statements. He led a previous criminal life in a gang, but retired and settled down for a more peaceful life as a farmer. He has a wife and son whom he remains fiercely loyal to throughout the narrative. They are his main motivation for even participating in the narrative: FBI agents are holding them hostage until he tracks down and kills the main bosses of his former gang.

       He is also described by many supporting characters as ugly and unattractive.
John Marston's morality appears to be at the center of his character, and it plays a vital role in how the game narrative unfolds as well. For instance, John will get offers for several different types of jobs. He can protect bystanders from criminals, stop a bank robbery, or recover missing people. He can also play the other sides of these missions, and rob banks, hunt down individuals, and sow mayhem in the towns of the game. How the player chooses to interact with the world changes how the supporting characters of the game see John. He retains his gruff personality no matter what morality the player aligns John with, but other characters' fear or admiration of John increases with his actions. If a player is immoral, John will likely have a bounty on his head from town sheriffs, supporting characters will be frightened to assist him, and he'll have more difficulty accepting deals that pay well. However, being considered moral leaves John open to being swindled more on deals or given simpler jobs to complete.

Appearance

       John sports the attire of the typical "western outlaw" seen in many Hollywood films. He is heavily armed, equipped with a large rifle on his back and two guns in their holsters, along with a significant quantity of ammunition. He wears a brown hat and a charcoal gray jacket over a khaki button down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He also has on dark gloves, grey pin-stripe pants, and brown boots. His presence would fit in well in Hollywood western films like "True Grit" or "Tombstone."

       John has numerous scars on his face and arms, which fits his history spent in violent gangs. He stands fairly thin and of average height compared with the rest of the game's characters. He seems quite physically capable (particularly when someone alludes to his criminal history) and spends a lot of the game riding long distances on horseback or engaging in gunplay or hand-to-hand combat with enemies. The only part of his body physically exposed is his arms, though later in the game he receives a long sleeved jacket which covers this up.

Plot Synopsis

The story establishes John Marston as a former outlaw who is trying to make an honest living with his family after many years spent as a criminal in a gang. Long after he has left the gang, the new federal Bureau of Investigation (BOI, years later reforming as the FBI) tracks down John and threatens him with imprisonment unless he turns in the former leaders of his old gang. He first goes after William-son, his former comrade who is now the acting leader of the gang. Williamson shoots Marston, but a local ranch hand named Bonnie nurses John back to health. After recovering, Bonnie puts Marston in connection with various people who can help him apprehend Williamson. Marston finally leads an assault on Williamson's gang, but Williamson flees to Mexico to seek refuge with Escuella, another former gang comrade of Marston's.

Marston arrives in the middle of a rebellion and after some back and forth, sides with a rebel group who says they can track both Williamson and Escuella. After helping the rebel group track down tactics and weapon experts, Marston leads an assault on the local general, Allende. Marston captures Allende, and Allende reveals the location of the gang members that Marston is tracking in exchange for his life. However, the rebel leaders kill Allende anyway. Marston tracks down Williamson and Escuella and executes them both.

When Marston returns to the United States, the government agents say that they still need John to capture the final gang member and John's old mentor, Dutch. Marston initially refuses, stating that capturing Dutch was not part of the initial deal. The government agents threaten his wife and son if he does not cooperate with them. Marston finds that Dutch is in the process of starting a rebellion against the United States with the local Native American reservation. Marston corners Dutch and is ready to kill him, but Dutch chooses to end his own life instead. Before he dies, he tells Marston that the government likely is not done with him, and won't be until he's dead.

Marston is able to return to his family and live a normal life for some time. Unexpectedly, though, the government agents lead a surprise assault on Marston's farm. Marston leads his family to safety, but the agents end up killing him. A few years later, Marston's son Jack sets out to hunt down the agent who killed his father.

Resident Evil 5

Year of Release: 2009
Consoles released on: Playstation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer: Capcom
Type of Game (thematically):

Action/Adventure   Role Playing   **Survival Horror**   Military/FPS

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications): 84
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings): 7.6
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group): 4 million

MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION
NAME   Chris Redfield

GENDER   Male

RACE   Caucasian

JOB   **Counter-Bioterrorist Soldier**

AGE   **35**

Setting

       The setting of this game is the fictional country of Kijuju in Africa, located around the Sahara desert. The game starts in an urban setting, drifting out to the countryside and desert as the story progresses. All destinations in the game are fictional. The people inhabiting these areas have been infected with a parasite that causes hostility and physical mutations, creating a hostile situation for the protagonists. The game delves into the abuses that some pharmaceutical companies have committed in under developed countries, and the adverse effects that some medical companies have on populations.

Main Character

       The main character of this game is Chris Redfield. He was also the main character of the original Resident Evil in 1998. His experiences in that situation and subsequent games led him to join an anti-terrorist organization dedicated to stopping biological and viral based weapons (the zombies in the original game were found to be caused by a virus developed by a pharmaceutical company). At the outset of the game, Chris is sent to an African country to investigate reports that a new parasite is being used on the people and causing them to become violent. Through flashbacks, we find that Chris is still in anguish over the loss of his partner, Jill (who was also a playable main character in Resident Evil 1 and 3), who apparently went missing on a recent botched mission and is assumed dead.

       As the game narrative unfolds, Chris is introduced to his new partner named Sheva. She is from the unnamed African country where this parasitic outbreak is taking place. She tries to warm up to Chris, but he is cold and off-putting, likely due to still carrying grief over Jill. Chris' mental anguish takes a center role in his character development, particularly as events in the narrative suggest that Jill may still be alive. He presses on to discover the answers behind the parasite being used on the local people and figure out the truth about his missing partner.

       Chris is a fairly flat character, and while his actions and drive likely define him as "good" and "moral," his personality is focused on accomplishing his mission. This makes him one-dimensional, existing to be a sort of blank slate for the player to place their own personality and ideas onto. He is gruff, but not harsh, respecting his teammates and partners but doesn't deviate much from the path of what is ethically right.

Appearance

       Chris is dressed a lot like a typical "military commando" seen in many movies. He wears a shirt marked with his military outfit that stretches tight across his chest, exposing his arms. He has on light gray cargo pants with knee pads and metal-tipped boots, and his belt carries gadgets and ammunition at his waist. He has a holster at his side for a pistol, and carries a larger rifle and knife on his back. His arms are massive, appearing to almost burst out of his shirt, and are the only exposed part of his body. All in all, Chris appears as a capable protagonist, ready for combat. He is even larger and stronger compared to other military personnel he comes across through the game, giving Chris a kind of "physical exceptionalism." The camera in the game takes an "over-the-shoulder" perspective, hovering just over Chris' left shoulder and zooming in when he aims his gun. However, the camera can also be rotated at different times, giving players full view of Chris' actions and appearance.

Plot Synopsis

The story centers around Chris and Sheva, agents of a biological counter-terrorist organization sent to Kijuju (a fictionalized country in Africa) in order to apprehend a rogue scientist, Irving, who is going to sell a biological weapon to terrorists. There are also reports that some of the local townspeople have been acting odd, and rumors circulate of a new type of dangerous parasite.

Chris and Sheva encounter extremely hostile and psychotic locals who attack them on sight, forcing them to fight back with lethal force. After some investigating, Chris and Sheva find evidence that a pharmaceutical company named Tricell is responsible for the state of the villagers, and is using the community as a test ground for military usages of the parasite. They also learn that the rogue scientist, Irving, that they are after is actually in talks to sell his biological weapon to the CEO of Tricell, Excella.

When trying to apprehend Irving, he leaves behind a flash drive with a video showing Chris that his former partner, Jill, is alive. However, she seems to be working with a man named Wesker, who was Chris and Jill's antagonist in the original Resident Evil. Chris is confused but presses on, thinking that Jill is under duress.

Chris and Sheva finally corner Irving, but he injects himself with a dangerous virus which mutates him into a large beast. Chris and Sheva kill him, but Irving tells them that Excella and Wesker are working together on a kind of doomsday virus. Irving had already sold his weapon to Excella, and Wesker modified it with the research from the old company Umbrella, shut down in previous Resident Evil games.

Chris and Sheva catch up to Wesker and Excella, but before they can fight, Jill leaps into the fray. Chris is too shocked to fight back, but Sheva notices that there seems to be a device controlling Jill. Sheva and Chris manage to subdue Jill and remove the device, bringing Jill back to her senses. She joins them to stop Wesker and Excella from executing their plan.

The trio encounters Wesker, who kills Excella because she has "outlived her usefulness." Wesker tells Chris that he is planning on unleashing this doomsday virus all over the globe, and that the missile carrying the virus is nearly ready to launch. Chris and Sheva manage to sabotage the missile launch, crashing the missile into a volcano. Jill goes to summon military back-up while Chris and Sheva fight Wesker. In the end, Chris, Jill, and Sheva all take down Wesker, and escape the area.

The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword

Year of Release: 2011
Consoles released on: Nintendo Wii
Developer: Nintendo
Type of Game (thematically):

Action/Adventure   Role Playing   Survival Horror   Military/FPS

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications): 93
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings): 7.9
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group): 1.94 million

MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION
NAME   Link

GENDER   Male

RACE   Caucasian

JOB   **Student/Adventurer**

AGE   **Late teens**

Setting

The game begins on a peaceful, floating island called Skyloft. Every person living on Skyloft has a special kinship with a giant race of birds called Loftwings. These Loftwings bond to the denizens of Skyloft and allow the individual that they bond with to ride on their backs and fly through the sky. Those who have a strong kinship with their Loftwing are given permission to take a test to become a Knight of Skyloft. These knights are charged with patrolling and protecting the floating island from any danger that may threaten Skyloft. This test for knighthood is open to both men and women of the island.

The hierarchy of Skyloft allows both men and women to become a Knight of Skyloft. Though a male patriarch is the leader of Skyloft, the religion of Skyloft revolves around a Goddess named Hylia. The religious belief of Skyloft is that Hylia took their ancestors from the cursed land below the clouds and brought them to protection in Skyloft. She then sacrificed herself to ensure that the evil from the lands below could not find its way up to the clouds, and will be reborn as a human if Skyloft ever faced danger.

Main Character

Link is the protagonist of the game, and his story starts on the day that he is about to begin his test to become a Knight of Skyloft. Link himself does not have any dialog throughout the game, but it is easy to assess Link's personality based on how other characters react to Link's actions, and how they discuss Link's history on Skyloft. Many comment on Link's seemingly natural ability with a sword, and his strong connection with his Loftwing. Link's Loftwing is also unique because of its red feathers, something that only occurs every century. Many of his peers also say that Link can do things in the air with his Loftwing (tricks, dives, formations) that the knight academy has not seen in a long time. However, many of his peers also tell him that his natural talent makes him lazy. He is continuously late to lessons, barely ever practices his skills, and likes to sleep more than work. Some of the students think that he places himself above the rest of his peers, and so shun him for his arrogance.

Link has a strong rapport with Zelda, the daughter of the village patriarch. Zelda is depicted as kind hearted, willful, and daring. She chooses not to take the test for the Knights of Skyloft, opting to follow in her father's footsteps of leadership of Skyloft. Link and Zelda also seemingly have romantic feelings for each other, but they do not confess these feelings in the outset of the game (though they come close). Link is very protective of Zelda, to the point where he would readily risk his life to ensure her safety. This protective desire of Zelda is one of the driving forces of the game's narrative.

Appearance

Link wears a long green tunic over a white undershirt along with a matching green cap. He has tan gloves and boots, and carries a large blue shield and a sword strapped to his back. The third person camera perspective has the player angled behind Link through much of the game, but the camera is also able to circle around Link and show him from different viewpoints during gameplay. This gives players a good view on Link's form throughout the game.

Physically, Link resembles an elf from the "Lord of the Rings" series. He has blonde hair, blue eyes, and is slight of form, but is still able to perform great feats of strength and athleticism. Even though he is depicted as somewhat lazy, his peers recognize and respect his physical strength.

Plot Synopsis

The narrative begins with Link having a nightmare about a great hulking beast standing over him, devouring everything in its path. Link wakes up in his bed on the day of his test for knighthood and is informed his Loftwing has gone missing. Zelda finds Link and tells him that she overheard some of

Link's rivals in the knight academy saying that they hid Link's Loftwing somewhere. After Link stands up to his primary rival, Groose, he tells Link where he hid his Loftwing. After Link finds his bird, he arrives just in time for the test, and beats out Groose for the one open knight position. Link and Zelda celebrate Link's victory and acceptance into the knighthood by flying around Skyloft together. However, a dark storm cloud and tornado tears through the sky, pulling Zelda off of the bird and down to the surface.

Link explains to Zelda's father, Gaepora, what happened, and he launches a search party. As Link sleeps, he hears a voice calling to him. He follows the voice to the Goddess statue, a monument dedicated to the Goddess Hylia. As he enters, the spirit manifests itself as a floating woman, and introduces herself as Fi. She says that she is the spirit of the Goddess' sword, and that Link is caught up in events now that mark him as the Goddess' chosen hero. She presents the sword to Link and tells him that she inhabits the sword itself, and so will be joining him on his journey down to the surface.

Link's Loftwing leads him down to the surface, at a place marked by Fi. An Old Woman (character name) introduces herself and says that they stand on sacred ground where an ancient evil was sealed away, called the Sealed Grounds. She tells Link that she did encounter Zelda, but that Zelda is set on a mission of her own. She cautions Link that a dangerous enemy is also trailing Zelda. Link takes off in the direction that the mysterious woman gave him, and comes to a fortress in Faron Woods. Link follows Zelda's trail, but is attacked by a man named Ghirahim. Ghirahim tells Link that he was the one who generated the wind that knocked Zelda to the surface, but that she was rescued by a servant of the Goddess (the old woman). Ghirahim and Link battle, but Ghirahim escapes, telling Link he's still hunting Zelda. Link once again picks up Zelda's trail and continues his search.

Link tracks Zelda to Eldin Volcano, but unfortunately, Ghirahim is also there. After eluding a trap set by Ghirahim, Link is approached by a young warrior named Impa who tells him that Zelda is purifying herself at the three temples across the land. Impa also tells him that his efforts to find her are falling short, and that he needs to double his efforts in order to protect Zelda.

Following Zelda to an abandoned mining facility in Lanayru Desert, Link finds Zelda and Impa just as Ghirahim does. Ghirahim blocks Link and attacks Impa. In the action, Zelda throws Link a harp, dubbed the Goddess harp. Impa pulls Zelda into a portal called the Gateway of Time, destroying it as they pass through. Neither Ghirahim or Link can follow them through. Ghirahim reveals that he still has one other, more dangerous way of finding Zelda.

Link returns to the Sealed Ground to find Groose from Skyloft waiting for him there. Groose demands to know what happened to Zelda, and declares that he will find Zelda before Link can. After discussing what has happened with Link, Groose agrees to support Link in his journey. Just then, the ground begins shaking, and the Old Woman tells Link that the seal to the ancient evil is weakening. She shows him how to use the Goddess harp to temporarily reseal the evil in its prison, and tells him to investigate Skyloft for more clues on finding Zelda.

At Skyloft, Link learns that he most repower the Goddess Sword in order to follow Zelda. After revisiting some previous locations on the surface, he returns to the Sealed Grounds, with the Goddess Sword fully powered and renamed the Master Sword. He uses the power of the weapon to open the time portal at the sealed grounds, finally reaching Zelda.

Zelda reveals to Link what Impa has told her. Long ago, a demon king named Demise attempted to conquer the land and claim the Triforce, a holy artifact that grants the wishes of its bearer. Hylia protected her people and the Triforce by sealing them to Skyloft, but she was unable to fully destroy Demise. She sealed him away at the Sealed Grounds and made preparations to support the one who could defeat Demise in the future, who is now Link. Zelda says she is the reincarnation of Hylia, but must stay in the past to maintain Demise's seal so that Link can find the Triforce and defeat Demise in the present. She sends him back to his time and bids him to search Skyloft for the Triforce.

Link finds the Triforce in Hylia's statue and uses its power to break through the Sealed Grounds and finish Demise. In the climactic battle, Ghirahim uses Zelda's power against her, completely restoring Demise. Link combats Ghirahim and Demise, finally finishing them off with the power Zelda's magic and the Master Sword. As things return to normal, the Old Woman reveals that she is in fact Impa, the

young warrior woman from the past, who has been watching over the Sealed Grounds for hundreds of years. Zelda tells her that her duty is complete, and Impa finally passes on in peace.

Tomb Raider

Year of Release: 2013
Consoles released on: Playstation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer: Crystal Dynamics
Type of Game (thematically):

Action/Adventure   Role Playing   Survival Horror   Military/FPSBROWN

Metascore (a score from Metacritic based on an average of numerous major publications): 87
User score (a metacritic score based on fan/public ratings): 8.3
Units sold (based on the NPD sales group): 3.4 million

MAIN CHARACTER INFORMATION
NAME   **Lara Croft**

GENDER   **Female**

RACE   **Caucasian**

JOB   **Archaeologist research assistant**

AGE   **23**

Setting

        The bulk of the game's narrative is on an island off the coast of Japan called Yamati. In the game's lore, the island is shrouded in mystery, and there always seems to be storms of unknown origin in the seas around the island, making it difficult to approach by sky or water. It was once ruled by a magical queen named Himiko, but none have inhabited the island since she died centuries before the present day. The island itself has many "Lost" like mysteries about it, and it becomes clear that a wide range of people throughout history were stranded on the island. A modern-day cult dedicated to the resurrection of the ancient Queen Himiko has a small but highly militarized civilization on the island.

Main Character

        Lara Croft is a young archaeologist from a rich family of well-known archaeologists. Lara is eager to set herself apart from her family's success and prove that she can succeed without her family's money and reputation. She is shown to be ambitious but a bit naïve. The narrative of the game throws her into very dangerous situations, and she finds herself becoming the leader of the survivors from her initial crew after they crash on the island.

        From the outset of their time on the island, Lara seems frightened and anxious, but she reluctantly steps into the role of leader and protector. She has to kill many men throughout the game (there were no female opponents on the island), and until about halfway through, they all underestimate her ability. She even confesses that she did not know she was capable of such violence. She becomes something of a "one-woman army," killing hundreds of people through the narrative of the game. It should also be noted that her weapon of choice is the bow and arrow (though she does use other weapons, this is the default in all of the promotional material for the game).

        Lara has a deep personality. The game can be seen almost as a violent "coming of age." As some of the survivors she has vowed to protect, as well as her mentor, die off through the game, she becomes a hardened warrior, a far cry from the woman at the beginning of the game. She learns to survive, hunt, and kill quite brutally when she needs to. As she progresses through the game, her clothes and skin become dirtier and dirtier, reflecting her new savage nature. The dynamic of the game sets Lara up at the outset as someone being hunted, but by the end of the game she is mercilessly hunting down those who attacked her and her friends.

        It is also important to note that this game in particular is a reboot of the "Tomb Raider" series. The creators wanted to take the series away from its sexualized root and give Lara and the game a new feel. Lara's physical appearance, in terms of her body, is far less emphasized than previous games in the franchise, and heavy importance is placed on her character arc.

Appearance

        This entry into the series redesigned Lara's character model, toning down her sexuality and giving her a more "average" body build as a response to the prior emphasis on sexualizing her body. Throughout the game, Lara wears a blue tanktop, cargo-khaki pants, and black lace-up boots. Her long, brown hair is tied up in a simple ponytail through the game's narrative. In the beginning of the game's narrative, her clothes are clean and fairly new looking. As the narrative progresses, Lara is injured several times and ties several bandages on her arms and legs. Most of the game also has Lara covered in mud, sweat, and blood from the ongoing ordeals and trials of the game, adding grittiness to her character that was not in previous games of the series. Her arms and upper chest/shoulders remain exposed throughout the duration of the game's narrative.

Plot Synopsis

Lara begins as a new archaeology student on a boat with an experienced archaeology team. The leader of this team is the host of a popular treasure hunting show and is looking for the next big episode to film. His expedition is following up on the legend of the magical Japanese queen Himiko on the lost island of Yamatai. Lara considers herself lucky to be on such an exciting search, but is essentially relegated to janitorial and support duty. Her bestfriend, Sam, is also on this crew, but she is slightly older and more experienced than Lara.

A sudden storm destroys their boat, stranding the crew on the island. When Lara wakes up, she is tied upside down in a dark cave. She manages to cut herself loose, and is chased by an angry men who is eventually crushed by a cave-in. She stumbled upon Sam, who is in the company of a man named Mathias. Mathias says he has been stranded on the island for some time. They make camp for the evening, but when Lara wakes up the next morning, both Sam and Mathias are gone.

Lara finds the survivors of her crew, and they set out to look for Sam and a few of the other missing members of the group. It becomes evident that the island is most definitely inhabited by a militarized group, and their society seems centered on worshipping the mythological Japanese queen Himiko. Approaching one of the villages, she encounters Mathias again, who says that he is the leader of the island inhabitants, dubbed the Solarii. Their goal is the resurrection of Queen Himiko. Mathias says that Sam is a descendant of Queen Himiko, and so she will be used as the vessel for Himiko's awakening. Mathias has the Solarii try to kill Lara, but after some initial reservations, turns the tables on the cult and fights back, killing many of them in her escape.

Lara regroups with the expedition members, devising a plan to free Sam and escape the island. They assault the Solarii's central compound, killing many of the cult members as they free Sam. They hijack a helicopter, nearly escaping the island until a massive, sudden storm crashes the helicopter. Lara and her group sustain massive injuries, and the Solarii once again capture Sam, leaving Lara's group to die.

The survivors of Lara's group tend to their wounds and find a wrecked boat that they think they can use to escape the island. Lara convinces them that the cult is likely causing these mysterious storms, and that they still need to rescue Sam before they leave. They agree, but say if that this situation isn't resolved within the next few days, that they'll cast off with or without Lara and Sam.

In exploring the region further, Lara stumbles upon the tomb of an ancient group of Japanese samurai. The ghost of one of the samurai approaches her and gives her a vision, explaining the island further. The samurai was a former guard for Queen Himiko. Himiko's spirit is still alive on the island. The spirit of Himiko was supposed to transfer to a chosen woman of her bloodline, but her last successor killed herself in the process, trapping Himiko in her mummified body. The storms are a result of Himiko's rage, and the Solarii are able to control the storms to keep people away or on the island. The samurai says that Lara needs to burn Himiko's body in order to destroy her spirit. Him and the rest of the ghostly samurai can finally move in to the afterlife once Himiko's spirit is destroyed.

Lara leads a final assault on the Solarii with the assistance of the undead samurai army. She finds Mathias with Sam in Himiko's burial chamber as he prepares the transfer of Himiko's spirit into Sam. Himiko creates a storm inside the chamber to impede Lara's progress, and Mathias starts the transfer. Lara kills Mathias, but cannot figure out how to stop the spirit transfer. Some of the samurai emerge and tell Lara to burn Himiko's body, as they have very little strength to hold Himiko's spirit in check. Lara burns Himiko's corpse, which ends the storms, destroys Himiko's spirit, and allows the samurai army to find peace in the afterlife. Sam and Lara escape from Himiko's burial grounds unscathed.

Back at the campsite, the remaining members of the expedition take off on the repaired boat. Returning to the mainland, they make plans to return to the United States, but Lara disappears. Her parents, famous archaeologists, left a journal full of supernatural treasure sites that they encountered. Initially dismissing them, she now believes in what her parents wrote, and sets off to follow their trail.