Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of Silent Hill

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Ending Silent Hill 2
It is the climactic scene. Step by step James Sunderland climbs the rusted fire escape onto the roof of the derelict Lake View Hotel. Once there, he encounters an incarnation of Mary, his dead wife, who passed away three years ago following a prolonged illness. James has found himself here at the end of a tortuous journey that began when he received a mysterious letter from Mary telling him that she was waiting for him in their “special place.” The battle has been long and arduous, through abandoned apartment blocks, a zombie-infested hospital, a decaying prison, and a labyrinth crawling with evil creatures. After an angry confrontation on the roof, Mary transforms into a grotesque monster, strapped to a metal cage, hovering in the air, with bloodsucking moths swarming from her mouth and vicious tentacles flailing. James struggles to destroy the creature with what little ammunition remains in his inventory. Finally, the monstrous Mary falls to the ground, her broken body lying pathetically on the floor, mouthing the same word over and
over: “James... James... James... James.” There is nothing else the protagonist can do. He is alone with this twisted mutation of his dead wife, who pleads for release. The only action available is one that repeats the murderous act that terminated Mary's life all those years ago, the same act that has haunted James ever since and driven his hopeless search through the apartments, streets, and buildings of the deserted lakeside town of Silent Hill. James raises his rifle or, if no ammunition remains, his foot, and—for the second time in his life—he puts the pathetic creature out of her misery.

The above describes the ending not of Silent Hill, the 2006 feature film (dir. Christophe Gans, Canada/France), but of Silent Hill 2, the video game developed and released by Konami five years previous. The franchise belongs in the category of “survival horror,” a game genre combining horrific imagery, gothic narrative, and baroque puzzles in an often psychologically wearing yet compelling interactive experience.1 Silent Hill is a particularly intriguing, and long-running, example of the cycle, and the ending to its second installment is one of the most ambiguous and disturbing of recent video games. Through a combination of nonparticipatory digital film sequences (e.g., the argument between James and Mary, Mary's transformation, and her fall upon defeat) and sections in which players control the action (e.g., James's ascent, the battle with monster Mary, and her final execution), the ending to Silent Hill 2 raises complex questions concerning player agency, the structuring of gameplay, and the gendering of the role that video-game players are invited to perform. Encapsulating the game's ambiguity is this final moment when no other option but to kill the crippled figure of James's dead wife is given. Throughout the preceding hours of gaming, attentive players will have come increasingly to suspect that the protagonist, who appears so devoted to his dead wife, constitutes the video-game equivalent of an unreliable narrator. Numerous clues suggest James's implication in Mary's death following a long illness, even if the character himself appears oblivious to his own history. Players are left to question whether this was an act of kindness or despair, love or hatred, euthanasia or murder. While battling the mutant Mary—a truly horrific creation worthy of a
horror video game’s final challenge—little opportunity is allowed for reflection, but the reduction of the monster to a prone, immobile figure, one blow away from death, provides players time and space to ponder the significance of their actions. Killing Mary in such a deliberate manner, thus forcing James to reenact the source of his guilt and shame, is the only way to finish Silent Hill 2. Of course, just as a spectator may quit the cinema, a player may refuse to play the game, choosing instead to switch off the console and to leave James’s fate unresolved. But, if done so, many hours of often grueling game playing will be rendered meaningless. That degree of investment, if nothing else, tends to compel participants—however aware, however uncomfortable—to complete the game’s narrative circle.

Depending on the perspective adopted, this may be a moment of video-game misogyny in a title that features a male protagonist dispatching numerous creatures of monstrous femininity, of which mutant Mary is just one. Or else this game critically engages with such images and actions, presenting a perverted world analogous to the psychological interior of a tortured man consumed by bitterness, resentment, and conflicting feelings of love and hatred toward a woman whose life he felt forced to end. Crucial to either reading is the extent to which players are implicated in James’s actions. This is a familiar issue within film and media studies, in which, for example, the meaning and impact of films like A Clockwork Orange (dir. Stanley Kubrick, UK, 1971) or Taxi Driver (dir. Martin Scorsese, US, 1976) or Natural Born Killers (dir. Oliver Stone, US, 1994) are often seen as contingent on viewers’ relationship with Alex or Travis or Mickey and Mallory—one seemingly intensified in video-game play by participants’ physically active role in controlling the central protagonist. Are players effectively interpellated into James’s acts of violence? Or do they stand outside the character’s narrative, repulsed by the brutal violence the game requires, appreciative of the character’s inner turmoil, and horrified by the action implicated in the final button depression necessary to complete Silent Hill 2?

Using the example of the Silent Hill franchise, this article explores the construction and representation of gender across
the series, focusing on the games' construction of masculinity as a gender position that the player performs. The above description of the second installment's final scene suggests the extent to which the series raises complex questions concerning identification, characterization, narrative, violence, and agency in video games, complicating common assumptions concerning the simplicity of the medium. The meanings of video-game texts can be seen as located in the intersection between audiovisual design, gameplay, and context. The varying degrees of import placed by players and critics on these areas—the way a game looks and sounds, the actions involved in playing the game, the narratives that situate gameplay as symbolic actions through cut scenes, box covers, and instructions—have central significance to the ideological readings that video games are understood to produce. Currently in its fifth installment (Silent Hill: Origins [Climax Studios, 2007]), the Silent Hill series appears on PlayStation, Xbox, PC, and PlayStation Portable and in arcades (as Silent Hill: The Arcade [Konami, 2007]). The franchise has been adapted into a comic book series, digital art, fan fiction, and a feature film. The games' penetration of other media forms indicates Silent Hill's status as a brand, part of an emerging video-game canon that includes Tomb Raider, Resident Evil, and Final Fantasy. As survival horror, the series has many intriguing parallels with horror cinema and cinema in general, suggesting productive theoretical and methodological questions that are similar to, and also different from, those raised by film and film studies. And consistent with horror cinema, the construction of gender across the Silent Hill video game presents many challenges to received understandings concerning the operation of representations and identity formations in popular media.

**Masculinity and Video Games**

In the introduction to their collection From Barbie to Mortal Kombat, subtitled Gender and Computer Games, Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins observe the slippage between the categories “woman” or “girl” and “gender” within much feminist research, acknowledging that, despite a title that seems to encompass femininity and
masculinity, their collection similarly focuses largely on representations of women in video games and on the experiences of female gamers. More recently, Diane Carr notes the paradox within video-game scholarship: "While the majority of players are reputed to be male, most of the critical attention directed at questions of gaming and gender has focused on girls and women." A cursory survey of the titles available in games stores, or a brief overview of the imagery, language, and implied readership of most popular video-game publications, reveals a masculinity that appears rooted in the traditional iconography of action, guns, and violence. The very stereotypical nature of this brand of machismo might explain why critics, keen to present video games as a cultural form worthy of serious academic consideration, have largely avoided interrogating the models of manhood presented in contemporary video games. Much work discussing video-game representations and constructions of masculinity—admittedly as a sideline to the more usual focus on constructions of femininity—emphasizes the pervasiveness of dominant modes of male gender and sexuality, comparable to the excessive stereotypes of superhero comic books or action-hero cinema.

For example, in an early study analyzing video-game packaging, among stereotypical representations of women, Eugene F. Provenzo Jr. notes many muscular-chested males armed with huge weapons, wearing torn clothing, and posed in dominant, aggressive stances. Games, Provenzo argues, encourage dependence in women and dominant gender roles in males. Similarly, Nola Alloway and Pam Gilbert note how video games and their attendant culture associate masculinity with power, aggression, strength, and competition. Alloway and Gilbert see this regressive masculinity reflected in video-game magazines and their often sexist and homophobic reviews, advertisements, and editorials. Stephen Kline, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Greig de Peuter use the term "militarized masculinity" to describe the video-game industry's tendency to construct gameplay around gender-coded violence and combat appealing to a base of young male players. And underlining parallels between film and video-game subject positions, Derek A. Burill uses the James Bond franchise as an example of both
film and video tie-ins facilitating a performance of a violent, sexist “boyhood” structured around killing enemies and saving (largely inconsequential) females in a macho display that parallels many recent popular constructions of white masculinity.

As suggested by James Sunderland’s ambivalent dispatching of a pathetic and helpless incarnation of his dead wife in Silent Hill 2’s climactic confrontation, this is a series that deviates from the uncompromisingly macho, triumphantly aggressive, and uncritical narratives and expressions of masculinity with which video games are associated. In the first Silent Hill (1999), players control Harry Mason, a widowed husband and single parent searching for his lost daughter through the mist-shrouded streets and houses of the titular town. In Silent Hill 2, as discussed above, James Sunderland comes to town seeking his dead wife. Silent Hill 3 (2003) is the only game to feature a female protagonist, Heather. Silent Hill 4: The Room (2004) stars Henry Townshend, a man inexplicably trapped in his own apartment, who escapes into a series of nightmare worlds, in a narrative involving a serial killer, a sinister religious cult, and the near death of his neighbor Eileen Gavin. With its emphasis on unremarkable, ordinary-looking, morally flawed male characters, the series reflects the more nuanced assessment of Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, who observe alternative versions to the video-game “macho template” in the melodramatic film noir protagonist of Max Payne (Rockstar, 2001), the feminized hero of Prince of Persia (Ubisoft, 2003), and the parodied hypermasculinity of Duke Nukem (n-Space, 2000). Examining Silent Hill as another alternative to usual male characterizations, rather than considering the wider construction of masculinity in video games, has many benefits. The observation made by Jo Bryce and Jason Rutter—that distorting conclusions can be reached by writers extrapolating small uncontextualized samples, not appreciating contemporary video games’ complex gender constructions, and employing passive models of the ways players attribute meaning to depictions of femininity and masculinity—are undoubtedly familiar to theorists of cinema. Calling for a more complex approach, Bryce and Rutter assert that “individual games, characters and violent representations must be considered in relation to the diverse variety of
game genres and representations of violence in the contemporary games market.11

This study, in focusing on *Silent Hill*, addresses such a necessity, presenting a detailed interrogation of the series' various constructions of masculinity. Aspects interrogated include character design and characterization, weapons, maps, game goals, tactics, monsters, beginnings, endings, and optical perspectives, indicating the range of considerations involved in comprehensive video-game textual analysis. As a horror series, the masculinities these games evoke often contrast with the confident, dominating, assured masculine identities observed within other genres. *Silent Hill*'s male characters are variously familiarized and domesticated, persecuted, unstable, and tortured by guilt and emotional turmoil. While in some respects conforming to familiar gender formations, the games frequently complicate, undermine, or interrogate such stereotypes. At times, the series actively engages with gender issues identified by video-game critics: the construction of infallible one-dimensional heroes, the male-rescue-female game goal cliché, and the suturing effect of first-person perspective. As such, *Silent Hill* represents a fascinating site for an academic analysis exploring the construction and deconstruction of white masculinity in contemporary video games.

**Gendered Gameplay in *Silent Hill***

Gender and identity are complex and contentious issues within video game studies. Some critics argue that the audiovisual dimensions through which avatars—the figures that players manipulate and control—are gendered, classed, and raced are irrelevant to video gamers' engagement. For example, Espen Aarseth, a vocal critic of film and media studies' involvement in the field, dismisses the visual aspects of video games' most analyzed character, claiming that "the dimensions of Lara Croft's body . . . are irrelevant to me as a player, because a different-looking body would not make me play differently."12 The argument that controllable characters' functionality empties them of gendered significance is also made by James Newman. With some evidence, Newman argues that,
when choice is available, a gamer’s decision about which character to play is based not on traditional identifications but on “gameplay-affecting characteristics.” For instance, in the case of Princess Toadstool, *Super Mario Bros 2’s* only female character, gamers privilege the character’s ability to float to areas inaccessible to other avatars, irrespective of their—or her—gender (199–30). Again, according to such arguments, gender signification, representation, and construction become irrelevant in the functional interactive world of video games.

Similar arguments might be applied to the first game in the *Silent Hill* series. It begins with a digital video sequence—or cut scene—depicting Harry Mason emerging from his car, having crashed on the outskirts of the titular town, to discover that his daughter Cheryl is gone. Players almost immediately take control of Harry’s movements, following Cheryl into the misty lakeside resort. Events are therefore structured around the aims and activities of a white, heterosexual, male figure, whose body occupies the screen’s center, whose movements direct the virtual camera, and whose masculinity is evident through avatar design and accompanying literature, and frequently reiterated through progressive cut scenes. Yet video-game critics might still argue that the genders of Harry or James or *Silent Hill 4’s* Henry are not important to the *game* of *Silent Hill*. From this perspective any discussion focusing on the identity of the protagonist imposes an inappropriate critical framework derived from film and literature, which does not account for video games’ crucial difference from these more established cultural forms. Video games may use narratives and forms of representation to situate action, contextualize play, motivate players, and shift units, but these texts are primarily games, not stories. Consequently, these figures are not characters in a narrative; they are avatars in a game whose visual details soon become unimportant as players engage in the more pragmatic abstract processes of spatial navigation, weapons triangulation, and puzzle solution that the games demand.

However, formal approaches to video games do not consider the extent to which “gameplay-affecting characteristics” might themselves be gendered. In Newman’s example, the choice of an avatar whose movements conform to qualities traditionally asso-
ciated with femininity (grace, lightness, and delicacy) suggests that it is gameplay itself, when playing as Princess, that becomes feminized. The gendered video-game experience is not solely—or even primarily—an issue of visual representation but is expressed through game mechanics, structure, and goals, irrespective of or potentially working in opposition to character or avatar design. For example, *Pacman* (Namco, 1980) was reportedly designed to attract women gamers, producing a perceived female-coded gaming experience founded on the pleasure of eating, at odds with the avatar's evident masculinity.\(^4\) Conversely, J. C. Herz—in a point reminiscent of arguments surrounding female action heroines—questions the progressiveness of female avatars who feature only in "masculine" video games played by male gamers.\(^5\) The criticism of video games' dominant and hegemonic masculinity is not only that games—like the *Silent Hill* series—feature disproportionate numbers of male playable characters but that certain modes of masculine gameplay alienate female gamers.\(^6\)

Situating *Silent Hill* 3's central character, Heather, within debates surrounding female protagonists in horror cinema and video games illustrates how a female avatar can facilitate masculine gameplay. Particularly appropriate to considerations of Heather's function for male gamers are connections that Cassell and Jenkins draw between Lara Croft and Carol J. Clover's concept of the "final girl." One purpose of horror film heroines, Clover argues, is to displace male spectators' experiences of fear and imperilment onto a female figure. Filling this final girl iconography, from the opening sequence Heather resembles the archetypal "boyish knife-wielding victim-heroes of slasher films," while the mode of exploitative 1980s horror is further evoked through a digital effect simulating videotape distortion used throughout the game.\(^7\) In the case of *Tomb Raider*, Cassell and Jenkins argue that Lara Croft's exaggerated femininity precludes male spectator/gamer identification with a masculinized female character, confounding further parallels between Clover's horror heroines and the female videogame avatar.\(^8\) In contrast, Heather's nonsexualized appearance, short hair, and unfeminine features arguably facilitate such an investment.
Indicating the extra dimension that player participation adds to such critical assessments, in applying Clover’s ideas to horror video games, King and Krzywinska suggest that the participatory element—whereby players know threats encountered by game characters might be overcome by their own skillfulness—constitutes, for male players, “a reassertion of masculine identity” through mastery of game systems. In presenting such a game environment to be dominated, Silent Hill 3 provides a traditionally masculine space for the rehearsal of traditionally male activities. By involving the mapping and navigation of complex architectural spaces, the destruction of aggressive monsters, the solution of problems, and the overcoming of obstacles, the game seems to reproduce what have been seen as typically male drives to kill, conquer, and colonize. If this desire personifies the “masculine” within video games, Silent Hill 3’s gameplay remains consistently male orientated, and dismissing the visually gendered dimensions of the game’s avatar—as would Aarseth and Newman—enhances rather than diminishes such claims. Additional feminizing touches of audiovisual representational design (such as the antirape device found in Heather’s bedroom, the girlish squeal that the avatar emits when placed too close to a precipice, or puzzles involving nail polish remover) do little to compromise the masculine sensibilities that govern the series’ gameplay.

**Masculinity in Silent Hill**

If masculine gameplay overrides Silent Hill 3’s female protagonist, this masculinization clearly extends beyond the gender of its three male characters. Play, involving the participants battling increasingly challenging environments and confronting increasingly malevolent creatures, embodies the combination of “violent action” and “exploration of space” identified by Cassell and Jenkins as defining the masculine disposition of many video games. Throughout the Silent Hill series, there is a clear emphasis on weaponry, which becomes more sophisticated as each game progresses. In Silent Hill 4, players graduate from battering adversaries with steel pipes, wine bottles, and golf clubs to using stun...
guns, pistols, and revolvers. Repeat play of Silent Hill 2 affords players an extremely effective chain-saw weapon, evidence of the series' not-irony-free location in popular horror cinema. Progression through many game stages depends on the defeat of "boss" creatures.\textsuperscript{81} Levels of Silent Hill 3 conclude with battles between Heather and the "Missionary," a speedy creature wrapped in dirty rags and brandishing long rusty blades; "Leonard," a subterranean sewer dweller, part human and part lizard; and the "Memory of Alessa," a series of bloodied versions of Heather herself.

Nevertheless—and here the traditional model of masculine gameplay becomes more problematic—the Silent Hill series differs from the standard "militarized masculinity" described by Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter as "run through labyrinthine settings, evade death, hunt down enemies, and kill them at high speed in lavishly detailed ways."\textsuperscript{22} The first significant point of departure is the characterization of the games' male protagonists. Belonging to the previously noted survival horror genre, defined by Nic Kelman as "games in which the player usually takes the role of a normal human being in an environment overrun by demons, zombies, ghosts, etc." (emphasis mine), Silent Hill's male heroes are nondescript individuals, denied the muscular body, supernatural powers, or fighting skills typically bestowed on video-game protagonists.\textsuperscript{23} For instance, Henry Townshend is described by the game booklet as "a rather introverted young man in his late twenties."\textsuperscript{24} A reluctant and cripplingly domesticated male, Henry is unable to leave home, his front door being inexplicably laced with padlocks and chains. Similarly, other men in the series are depicted as not particularly masculine by the standards of action adventure game heroics. Silent Hill's Harry, according to Carr, "is resoundingly normal. He's a regular guy and an average shot. He doesn't know kung fu. He even trips over on his way downstairs," while Silent Hill 2's main character appears, at the beginning of the game, to be on the verge of lovelorn suicide.\textsuperscript{25}

The unremarkable nature of Silent Hill's main characters is not simply an issue of narrative context and avatar design; it also impacts on players' interaction. Combat in the series is a messy affair, frequently entailing the use of makeshift melee weapons.
that avatars handle in a clumsy and chaotic manner, resulting in similarly clumsy chaotic battle at odds with the elegant gunplay and precision targeting systems boasted by more militaristic game systems. Avatars grunt and flail, swinging wooden boards and broken bottles in a desperate attempt at self-preservation. Since it is statistically impossible to shoot all creatures, with limited ammunition and supplies littering the game space, players must frequently adopt a particularly unmanly strategy: running away, an approach recommended by most Silent Hill strategy guides. Concurrent with the survival horror genre, gameplay evokes a particularly unmasculine sense of helplessness, entrapment, and vulnerability—rather than the mastery and control of more militaristic series and genres. Heather might most easily fit Clover’s formula, but Silent Hill’s emphasis on “survival and victimization,” like the generically comparable Resident Evil discussed by Sara M. Grimes, means both female and male protagonists function as “final girl” figures.

Within video games, movement through space is a central theme, on which Helen Fuller and Jenkins provide particularly insightful commentary. Identifying parallels between the “heroic metaphors of discovery” in popular discourses surrounding both cyberspace and colonial travel accounts, Fuller and Jenkins suggest that video games are organized around a similar colonizing heterosexual masculinity. Yet if spatial progression within video games satisfies traditionally male fascinations with expansion and conquest, Silent Hill repeatedly frustrates such pleasures. Progress across the town is often slow and frustrating, as the avatars’ default mode is a leisurely stroll rather than a run. Protagonists are incapable or unwilling to jack abandoned vehicles in the style of the antiheroes of Grand Theft Auto, a video-game franchise with a more assured and traditional masculine identity. Indeed, both Silent Hill and Grand Theft Auto initially present maps detailing expansive game spaces, but while Grand Theft Auto’s cities increasingly open up to successful players, as Silent Hill progresses, participants encounter torn-up stretches of tarmac, roadblock barricades, and obstructive scaffolding as the map’s streets and alleysways become scored with impassable red lines. Contrasting with the sprawling spatial “sandbox” of Vice City, Silent Hill becomes more and more
restrictive, until a single narrow pathway emerges through the streets, buildings, and alleyways. In a comparative critique of the game, Carr describes the sparse linearity, clear sequentiality, and directed gameplay of Silent Hill that "maintains a tidal pull on the player." Male characters and players might entertain "masculine" beliefs in free will, self-determinism, and heroic individuality, as well as faith in the video-game's player-centered interactivity, but these prove illusory. Indeed, player progress is manipulated by game structure in a manner that parallels game characters' manipulation by supernatural forces. Discussing the horror video-game genre, Krzywinska talks about the experience of "being acted upon by the game's deep structure," an assessment that corresponds with film critic Peter Hutchings's description of male horror cinema spectatorship as "an experience of subjection, of having things done to you by particular films."

This dynamic is exemplified in the first game's opening level. Following the introductory digital sequence, the player is compelled, through a combination of cut scenes and dead ends, to follow Cheryl into a narrow alleyway. Traveling this unidirectional route, participants may become increasingly uncomfortable, as darkness suddenly falls, sirens sound, and the walls and ground become splattered with indeterminate animal remains. This one-way path ends in a bloody fenced area, and, as with the end to Silent Hill 2, there is no way out. The gate locks behind the protagonist, trapping him in a confined space with several snuffling monsters that inevitably eviscerate the hero even before his story has begun—upon which Harry wakes in the booth of a diner, the previous sequence having been merely a disturbing dream. It is an introduction repeated in Silent Hill 3, in which Heather breathes her last breath while trapped within a grotesque amusement park, only to wake in a burger restaurant at a shopping mall, and, more extensively, in Silent Hill 4, in which every monstrous location is structured as an ambiguous dream. A familiar horror cinema device used to unsettle audiences, these false openings here serve an interactive purpose, allowing players to familiarize themselves with controls in an inconsequential training level. But in addition to their functionality, something is established of the games'
thematic content. Not only is the male protagonist the subject of brutal, chaotic, disorientating forces, but, from the outset, he has already failed in his quest.

**Damning Masculinity in Silent Hill 1, 2, and 4**

Failure is a frequent theme across the *Silent Hill* series, particularly regarding one of the most familiar play-motivating devices within video games. From *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981) to *Shadow of the Colossus* (Team Ico/Sony, 2005), the male-hero-rescuing-helpless-female trope endures, structuring all three of the male-centered *Silent Hill* games. The original *Silent Hill* sees Harry searching the town for his adopted daughter, a quest that reinforces patriarchal power relations defining men as responsible for the protection of both women and children. In *Silent Hill 2*, James returns to the town to rescue his wife from the underworld in which she is trapped. The entire second half of *Silent Hill 4* sees Henry retracing his steps through the game environment, leading to safety his dependent next-door neighbor, Eileen Gavin, whose injuries leave her less physically capable than the hero. Unable to climb ladders, Eileen is further limited to fighting with a handbag and riding crop, unlike Henry, who is equipped with firearms, swords, and broken bottles. Each game, in its way, enforces the mythology of male as protector of the female, and, arguably, each player, in performing the role of Harry, James, or Henry, is structured into adopting a similar ideological position. Yet, as previously noted, these are not traditional heroes, as they are variously feminized through narrative, design, and location. And while these individuals might adopt the stance of heroic masculinity, it is a position that is constantly problematized and frustrated. *Silent Hill 2*’s James, for example, is depicted as a pitiful romantic character according to the game manual, “wasting away in empty, lifeless days of mourning” before receiving a mysterious letter from his wife. The fact that Mary is dead casts James in the *Max Payne* mode of tortured masculinity while perversely transforming the male-hero-rescuing-helpless-female formula into one of desperation and despair. The booklet outlining the game
scenario suggests James has little belief in finding Mary, his quest being hopeless from the start, thereby subverting the common video-game structure in which invulnerable heroic males embark on achievable quests to rescue incapable females.\footnote{31}

In this way, *Silent Hill* can frequently be understood as presenting a critical discourse on masculinity, rather than an enforcement of traditionally male narratives. The creature design in *Silent Hill 2*, for example, recalls Barbara Creed’s discussion of gendered imagery in horror films, with creatures embodying a kind of “monstrous femininity” recurring throughout both game and series.\footnote{32} “Mannequins,” animated shop-front dummies with two legs protruding where their heads should be; “Bubble Head Nurses,” shuffling automatons that patrol the hospital level; and “Lying Figures,” creatures straitjacketed in embryonic sacks—all these *Silent Hill* figures, along with monstrous Mary, can be seen as grotesque reflections on female sexuality and reproduction. But a monstrous masculinity also features in the game, for example, in the phallic “Mandarins” (with their long fleshy legs and protruding spikes), the “Abstract Daddies” (human figures trapped on walking doors that are explicitly linked to incestuous rape), and “Pyramid Head” (an executioner figure who drags a huge phallic/castrating knife in his wake).\footnote{33} Moreover, an understanding of the game as expressing a straightforward antagonism toward femininity is complicated by *Silent Hill 2*’s often surreal and expressionistic landscape, which is strongly connected with the protagonist’s mental state, implying a more critical disposition inherent in the game’s imagery. Various impossible and unsettling objects, spaces, and characters—a tailor’s dummy dressed in Mary’s clothes, graffiti addressing James by name, and a grave featuring the protagonist’s tombstone into which the player must leap—suggest that play exists in a psychotic zone constructed from the wife killer’s guilty conscience, a post-suicide hallucination nightmarishly combining James’s most intimate and distressing memories, or a grizzly purgatory in which other dead people also relive their darkest moments. The game world consequently expresses without endorsing James’s ambivalent attitude toward Mary and women in general.
Similarly, if *Silent Hill* 2 represents a critique of misogyny, *Silent Hill* 4 can be understood, among other things, as an examination of the power dynamic associated with the male gaze. The main development of this installment is the introduction of first-person perspective. While the game’s strange worlds are navigated using a traditional survival horror third-person view, whenever the player is trapped within the titular room, play is seen through the protagonist’s optical perspective in a manner similar to that of first-person shooter (FPS) games like *Quake, Half-Life,* and *Doom.* Comparing the FPS apparatus to that of cinema, Sue Morris parallels this continuous visual subjectivity with the cinematic point-of-view shot, arguing that video games’ impression of agency and interactivity produces an even greater sense of identification. Here the gaze of the player, the avatar, and the virtual camera become one. Morris writes, “If primary identification is the cinematic subject’s identification with the act of looking, then the FPS player is unequivocally the one doing the looking. He or she is invisible in the game, just as one’s own body is mostly invisible from one’s point of view in real life. The player is placed in the scene not only by the first-person point of view but also by his or her total control over this point of view.” Although Morris carefully avoids gendering the FPS player, gameplay personifies Kline, Dyer-Witheford, and de Peuter’s “militarized masculinity” in being generically founded on military combat, competitive violence, and an assertion of spatial mastery through the eradication of enemies. Observing close connections between video-game and military industries, Claudia Herbst also illustrates the gaze’s significance in technologies of war, heterosexual male eroticism, and video-game culture. If the cinematic optical perspective that Morris references is, as Laura Mulvey famously argued, largely male, sadistic, and controlling, a fit exists between FPS’s masculine themes and its visual interface.

However, contrary to conventional theories, the ability to see while remaining unseen within *Silent Hill* 4 evokes not mastery and control but powerlessness, contributing to the player’s sense of entrapment. Life goes on outside Henry’s apartment, visible through his window, his front-door spy hole, and a break in the wall;
yet the player can only watch, unable to interact despite the medium’s interactivity. This first-person perspective moreover frames a critique of visual power dynamics running throughout the game. Silent Hill 4’s third level, for example, takes place in a panopticon. The gaming goal—to occupy the tower’s center, from which all prison cells are visible—structures play around the achievement of optical authority, but realizing this aim entails investigating many rooms surrounding the controlling hub, which testifies to the debilitating influence of the authoritative gaze. Elsewhere, a lonely photographer, who takes illicit pictures of his nurse neighbor, suffers a grizzly and humiliating fate. As the titular room becomes a haunted space, a disturbing voice chants, “I’m always watching you.” The most chilling critique of male voyeurism implicates the protagonist in the brutal assault of Eileen, aligning the player with a vicious serial killer through a shared sadistic male gaze. In the game’s first half, players are encouraged to look through the hole in the apartment wall at Eileen performing various activities: watching television, laughing, sitting alone. Peering at Eileen—a direct reference to Psycho (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, US, 1960) in a game series steeped in movie references—makes the player uncomfortably complicit in her subsequent attack by the game villain, a position enhanced following her hospitalization by the presence of a disturbingly incongruous bloodied toy rabbit in the space she used to occupy.

Conclusion

Despite the male-centered nature of the video-game industry, in terms of game genres, playable protagonists, and gameplay, there has been curiously little in the way of detailed analysis of the kinds of masculinities contained within contemporary video games. Academic studies of video games and gender, like early feminist criticism of film, television, and popular culture, are largely concerned with analyses of representations and constructions of femininity. Those mentioning masculinity largely conclude that video games contain regressive models of male behavior characterized by aggression, domination, and heterosexualized superior-
ity to women. The masculinity of video-game culture, pervading broader game structures and goals, results in the predominance of violence, conquest, and militaristic action as the preferred mode of interactive engagement. All, it is argued, contributes to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity.

Broadly speaking, this may be a fair assessment of the games industry as a whole, although it does ignore the appeal to children, women, and "family" gaming evident in more recent games and console promotions. More important, such analyses do not acknowledge the complexities and contradictions in the images of masculinity on the screen, the narratives of masculinity in which they are situated, or the masculine positions game players adopt in relation to specific games, genres, or franchises. This essay, in its concentration on representations and constructions of masculinity and in its detailed focus on a single video-game series, aims to contribute to the developing field of video-game studies. As this focused textual consideration indicates, video games contain the possibility of alternative masculinities that challenge prevailing stereotypes of the medium. The Silent Hill series proves an interesting—albeit atypical—case study, indicative of the richness and ambiguity of a game franchise unusual among video-game titles in many respects. Admittedly, masculinity remains Silent Hill's dominant mode of game play. Three of its four protagonists are heterosexual men. Spatial exploration, military combat, and patriarchal rescue goals undeniably feature throughout the games. Yet, notwithstanding such features, the men of Silent Hill frequently contrast with the assured, unquestioning, militarized hypermasculinity regarded as standard across the industry; instead, they are ordinary, flawed, even neurotic to the point of psychosis. Throughout the Silent Hill series, many aspects associated with video-game masculinity are undermined. Spatial expansion is frustrated by impassable barricades, domestic incarceration, or a deterministic game structure. Military activity is curtailed by meager resources, modest weaponry, and the protagonists' own shortcomings. Heroic quests often fail: Harry's daughter is lost to the cult of Silent Hill, James's wife remains dead, and Henry's impotence is repeatedly underlined as more neighboring residents are murdered. The men
in these games are variously vulnerable and helpless, plagued by their own inadequacies, manipulated by unseen forces, tortured by their pasts, and unable to interact with the outside world. The landscape of *Silent Hill* reflects the guilt, anxiety, and misogynistic fears of these imperfect men.

If the games industry is currently in its infancy, game scholarship is only in embryonic form. It has not yet been a decade since Aarseth declared 2001 “year zero” in video-game studies, and there remains considerable debate concerning suitable methodologies to be applied in the analysis of games, the nature of video games as texts, and appropriate approaches toward issues of representation in a medium in which the consumer has a significant participatory role in defining the audiovisual experience being consumed. The video-game form itself continues to be derided and ignored, as Newman observes in the introduction to his recent study of the medium and its culture, “Everybody Hates Videogames.”

Certainly, criticisms that contemporary video games indulge players in a particularly unreconstructed mode of masculinity, which rewards violent action over imagination, emotion, or empathy and which actively excludes, marginalizes, or objectifies women, do have clear foundation in recent blockbuster titles. But a distinction must be acknowledged between the video-game industry, with its current emphasis on macho combat, and the medium itself, the potential of which has yet to be fully realized or appreciated even by those most closely involved in its production. The *Silent Hill* series is notable in this respect: a commercial franchise that works within generic and industrial constraints, yet manages to challenge traditional models of masculinity and their implication in conventions of video-game characterization, representation, and play. Despite the many horrors it contains, *Silent Hill* indicates the challenging potential of this emerging art form.

**Notes**

1. Several academic definitions of “survival horror,” an established video-game genre, are available. One of the most recent defines the genre as including games in which “the player controls a

2. These titles shall be excluded from this analysis. *Silent Hill: The Arcade* was available only in Japan, while *Silent Hill: Origins* had only just been released after this article was submitted.


21. James Newman defines the boss as “an end of level, or sometimes inter-level, guardian that must be defeated in order to progress to the next level” (*Videogames, 77*).


34. Sue Morris, "First-Person Shooters—A Game Apparatus," in King and Krzywinska, ScreenPlay, 89.


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James Sunderland from *Silent Hill 2*: A nondescript man in a claustrophobic domestic space. © Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo