



Special issue

Gender Issues in Video Games

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Introduction:

Gender Issues in Video Games

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Since the beginning of the 1990s, many feminist scholars have highlighted the proliferation of gender stereotypes and sexist narratives in video games, as well as the marginalization of female players and game designers. The solutions advanced to address sexism in game culture and to diversify the game industry have followed three primary trends.

During the 1990s, the small proportion of female players and the growing importance of technological literacy encouraged many scholars and activists to promote the creation of computer games specifically designed for girls. Even though these games risked naturalizing gender binaries, ghettoizing female players, socializing them according to stereotypes, and limiting the exploration of alternative designs (De Castell and Bryson, 1998), transforming the game industry one step at a time, by creating spaces where young girls would feel comfortable to play, was the most realistic approach for many (Kelley, 1998; Laurel, 1998; Martin, 1998). Simultaneously, groups of female players like *Quake Grrl* proved that women can enjoy beating boys at their own games, and that many assumptions about what girls want are not accurate (Jenkins, 1998). Although the Girl Games movement prevailed during this “first-wave” of game feminism (Jenkins and Cassell, 2008: 5), not everyone agreed on the form that these games should take. The anthology *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998) crystalizes the debate as to whether games for girls should reflect women’s aesthetic preferences and involve typical female activities (pink games) or appeal to girls’ real-life interests and

favours exploration and co-operation instead of competition and aggression (purple games) (Laurel, 1998; Martin, 1998). In 1995, the release of *Tomb Raider* and its acrobatic female character with an oversized bust, Lara Croft, launched an ongoing debate as to whether this iconic figure is a demeaning or empowering model for women (Kennedy, 2002).

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of female players increased, the gender gap in technology slowly closed, and the advent of MMORPGs allowed both male and female players to experiment more freely with gender identities. However, the rarity of women game designers, the marginalization of female players, the dimorphism between male and female avatars, and the proliferation of passive or hypersexualized female characters persisted (Consalvo and Harper, 2009; Corneliussen, 2008; Huntemann, 2010; Sarkeesian, 2013). At the same time, the conception of gender as an evolving social construct was spreading through feminist studies, and more voices called for gender-neutral games that would appeal to both men and women (Brunner, 2008; Fullerton and al., 2008). The publication of *Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat* (Kafai and al., 2008) surfed on this “second wave” of game feminism; many of the contributors shift their attention from game mechanics and representations towards contextual factors that explain gender disparities within gaming practices (Taylor, 2008). During this period, discussions on gender issues in video games, however, remained mostly centred around white heterosexual women.

After two decades of game feminism, and despite growing awareness of the need for inclusivity in the video game industry, discussions on gender issues in video games are far from obsolete. Repeated episodes of harassment, and threats towards female game designers or feminists who publicly denounce stereotypical representations in video games, are reminders that sexism in game culture is not eradicated, and that further efforts are needed to change perceptions (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Goldberg and Larsson, 2015). It is also time to take stock of what has been achieved to date; many scholars now realize, among other things, that gamers from ethnic and LGBTQ communities have been excluded from the conversation, while the rarity of coloured and queer characters in video games has been ignored. In the past few years, many scholars have tried to widen the scope of discussions around gender issues in video games, and to address these

blind spots of game feminism. They started to discuss topics such as alternative, reflexive or critical representations of gender, the diversification of game characters and production teams, and masculinity in video games (Kafai and al., 2016; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017; Shaw, 2014). Inspired by recent developments in gender and queer studies, more researchers have adopted an intersectional approach to gender/race/class/age, or a postmodern approach to gender as something that we “do” and that is open to exploration on an individual basis, thus collectively initiating a “third wave” of game feminism (Richard, 2013).

The anthology *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai and al., 2016) crystallizes this transition from second to third wave game feminism by bringing together articles on topics such as the emergence of non-normative and anti-racist identities in independent or serious games (Lepore and Denner, 2016; Nakamura, 2016; Pearce, 2016); homosexual romances in video games and players’ reactions towards them (McDonald, 2016); collective, intergenerational and familial gaming practices of African-American, Mexican and Latino female players (Gray, 2016; Richard, 2016; Siyahhan and Gee, 2016); and the embodiment of various identities by male players (DiSalvo, 2016). This book suggests incentives for diversifying production teams and highlights the fact that coloured women in the tech industry often suffer from a double impostor’s syndrome; they feel at once invisible because of their gender, and highly visible because of their ethnicity (Bryant, 2016). The authors also gather articles about various ways to promote different gender identities through design and marketing (Flanagan and Kaufman, 2016; Westecott, 2016).

The recent publication of the collection *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017) indicates that the third wave of game feminism has achieved a certain maturity, as queer theory has come to be associated with research beyond the scope of gender studies. In this book, queer theory is indeed mobilized to challenge persisting dichotomies in game studies (narratology/ludology, production/reception, control/agency, success/failure), as well as strict definitions of what is a game and a gamer. Queer theory is also used to question a variety of assumptions on the ways games should be studied, played or criticized (2017: ix-x). The authors do not exclusively study

LGBTQ characters or gamers, but include design and gaming practices that shatter former ideas, or use queer theory as a method to rethink the foundations of game studies (2017: xiii-xvii).

The articles presented in this special issue of *Kinephanos* are part of this third wave of game feminism, inspired by intersectionality and queer theory. They were written by speakers who participated to the second edition of the *Game History Annual Symposium on the History of Gender in Games* co-chaired by Mia Consalvo and Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin. This event took place at BAnQ (Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec) on June 26 - 27 2015, with the collaboration of TAG (Technoculture, Arts and Games, Concordia University), CMS|W (Comparative Media Studies | Writing, MIT), the Canada Research Chair in Game Studies & Design (Concordia University), LUDOV (Laboratory for the Documentation and Observation of Video Games, UdeM), Homo Ludens (UQAM) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). One of the goals was to document the emergence of a “third wave” of game feminism, while promoting dialogue between scholars and people from the game industry. The articles in this special issue cover three tracks of the conference: game feminism, gender representations in games, and the role of women and minorities in the game industry.

The article “Bridging Game Studies and Feminist Theories”, written by Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin (UQAM, Montreal) and Maude Bonenfant (UQAM, Montreal), addresses the topic of game feminism. Starting from the premise that feminist theory remains underutilized in game studies, the authors demonstrate that mobilizing concepts from feminist pioneers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Betty Friedan, and Laura Mulvey contributes to a better understanding of how and why gender stereotypes in video games (such as Ms. Male, Smurfette, Damsel in Distress, Natural-Born Happy Homemaker and Sexy Action Heroine) are problematic. They also provide an overview of concepts developed by more recent feminist authors, such as Karen Boyle, Barbara Creed and Martine Delvaux, which highlight the damage caused by constant victimization of women in games, the abjection of their sexuality, and the serial reproduction of stereotypical female bodies. On a more positive note, the authors offer a glimpse of how feminist theories can inspire promising new game characters that undermine patriarchal and heteronormative schemes.

The next four articles address gender representations in video games. In her article “Diversity without Defense: Reframing arguments for diversity in games”, Adrienne Shaw (Temple University, Philadelphia) provides alternative justifications for diversifying video game representations. The author defends the idea that depicting marginal identities in video games is politically important, not because of the alleged direct effects on audience attitudes, nor to fulfil the presumed need of minorities to identify with game characters, but because it expands the types of identities all players are asked to identify with. From this perspective, the diversification of game representations should be considered part of making games better for everyone, instead of a targeted marketing strategy for a niche audience. In addition to the evident benefits of this approach, explains the author, it would also allow for a more large-scale diversification of video game representations.

In her article “The Poetics of Form and the Politics of Identity in *Assassin’s Creed III: Liberation*”, Soraya Murray (University of California, Santa Cruz) mobilizes an intersectional approach from visual and cultural studies to analyze *Assassin’s Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) and its central female character Aveline de Grandpré. This game, which is set during the colonial period that preceded the American War of Independence (1775-1783), uniquely presents one of the few black heroines of the video game landscape. The author explains how Aveline is a departure from the damsel in distress stereotype and the Orientalist trope of the exotic victim, while stressing that a deeper analysis of the game’s poetics reveal the persistent influence of Orientalist fantasies and the imperial violence characterizing the history of the European empire. To illustrate how cultural norms and power relations are translated within the game, Murray studies the Persona System on which *Liberation*’s gameplay relies, involving three costumes and modes that Aveline can utilize depending on the circumstances she is in and the mission she needs to complete. Every persona comes with different limitations and affordances that are inherently related to the character’s gender, ethnicity, and class. At the end of her article, Murray highlights the uncertainty surrounding Aveline’s sexual orientation, which she interprets as another facet of the character’s fluid identity and adaptability.

The last two productions of the *Tomb Raider* series and their controversial female character, Lara Croft, are also under scrutiny in the article “Andromeda on the Rocks: Retreading and Resisting Tropes of Female Sacrifice in *Tomb Raider*”, from Meghan Blythe Adams (University of Western Ontario, London, Canada). Although these games move away from the damsel in distress stereotype by staging a capable and courageous female character, Adams suggests *Tomb Raider* (2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015) do not fully realize their subversive potential, because the endangerment, rescue, and death of female characters serve as sources of guilty pleasure for the player. The games’ narrative, which revolves around the kidnapping and the sacrifice of female characters, is analyzed through the lens of George Bataille’s theory of the ritual sacrifice. The author also highlights the spectacularization and erotization of Lara Croft’s death, before turning to a discussion on the ambiguity of her sexual orientation.

The article “The Witcher, or The End of Masculinity (as We Know It)”, from Dawid Matuszek (University of Silesia, Katowice), looks at how the protagonist of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015) deconstructs traditional models of masculinity involving heroism and paternalism. While the first two games of the *The Witcher* series depict Geralt of Riviera as first a “collector of women” and then a sex toy for powerful witches, *Wild Hunt* problematizes the masculine/feminine dichotomy by portraying the character as a nomadic, immature, and half-castrated subject, whose masculinity is not fully achieved and whose gender identity remains ambiguous. Through the lens of Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory, the author describes the evolution of the character’s relation to masculinity after an event makes him realize how much his world does not welcome valiant knights who wish to protect damsels in distress. As the avatar cannot be customized, Matuszek asserts that the player is more a witness to the complexification of the character than an accomplice.

The female protagonist of the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007-2012) is thoroughly analyzed in the article “FemShep : féminité sexualisée ou subversive? Analyse du personnage féminin de la série *Mass Effect*”, written by Pascale Thériault (Université de Montréal, Montréal). At first glance, Jane Shepard (called FemShep by the fans) seems to distinguish herself from the majority of female game characters in terms of her looks and skill, but the author’s detailed

analysis of the character, the game, and its promotional campaign reveals that FemShep is a feminized copy of her masculine counterpart, like many other female characters of the video game landscape. The author also asks herself if the wider range of romantic options for FemShep, compared to those of BroShep, illustrates a better tolerance for lesbianism than for male homosexuality in our societies, or if it should only be interpreted as another proof that *Mass Effect*'s narrative was written for the male avatar. Even though FemShep's movements and interactions are modelled on those of BroShep, FemShep embodies a new form of femininity that overcomes the limitations of traditional action heroines who are strong and active, yet also objectified and fetishized. The mix of feminine and masculine attributes in FemShep's body contributes to subverting gender norms. While the subversive potential of the supporting female characters of the series is not fully realized, their femininity contrasts with the masculine aspects of FemShep in a way that makes them more obvious.

This special issue of *Kinephanos* ends with an article from Brie Code (Tru Luv Media) entitled "Is Game Design for Everybody? Women and Innovation in Video Games". This article examines the role of women and minorities in the game industry. Previously a game designer at Ubisoft, the author shares her personal experiences within the game industry, complemented by the perspectives of colleagues, to highlight four barriers that affect the integration of women in this workplace: 1) the fact that computer science was, until recently, seen as a masculine domain, 2) the rarity of non-stereotypical women avatars that can inspire women players, 3) the influence of unconscious bias during the recruitment process, as well as 4) discrimination, marginalization, and favoritism. The author also suggests solutions to overcome these barriers, and emphasizes the benefits of diversified production teams in terms of innovation and working conditions.

Each author adopts, in their own way, a contemporary perspective on gender issues in video games, imbuing discussions of this topic with complexity, and conveying a message of hope. The authors highlight the positive initiatives undertaken by the game industry these past few years, while pinpointing elements that could yet be improved to change dominant mentalities. This special issue of *Kinephanos* exhibits the wave of optimism that is currently flooding game feminism, buoyed and supported by a wave of changes throughout the game industry.

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Édition spéciale

Problématiques de genre dans les jeux vidéo

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Introduction :

Problématiques de genre dans les jeux vidéo

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Depuis le début des années 1990, plusieurs chercheurs et chercheuses féministes s'efforcent de mettre en évidence la prolifération de stéréotypes de genre et de trames narratives sexistes dans les jeux vidéo, de même que la marginalisation des joueuses et des conceptrices de jeux. Au fil du temps, les solutions proposées pour s'attaquer au sexisme dans la culture vidéoludique et pour diversifier l'industrie du jeu ont toutefois suivi trois grandes tendances.

Durant les années 1990, la faible proportion de joueuses et l'importance grandissante des technologies numériques en incitaient plusieurs à faire la promotion de jeux spécifiquement conçus pour les jeunes filles. Même si ces jeux risquaient de naturaliser la vision binaire des genres, de ghettoïser les joueuses, de les socialiser en fonction de stéréotypes et de limiter l'exploration de designs alternatifs (De Castell et Bryson, 1998), il semblait plus réaliste pour certains d'amorcer la transformation de l'industrie du jeu par la création d'espaces dans lesquels les jeunes filles se sentiraient à l'aise de jouer (Kelley, 1998; Laurel, 1998; Martin, 1998). Au même moment, des groupes de joueuses comme Quake Grll faisaient la preuve que les filles peuvent battre les garçons à leur propre jeu et que les présuppositions sur les goûts féminins ne reflètent pas toujours la réalité (Jenkins, 1998). Alors que le mouvement des « jeux pour fille » (*Girl Games*) prédominait durant cette « première vague » de féminisme vidéoludique (Jenkins et Cassell, 2008, p. 5), tous ne s'entendaient pas sur la forme que devaient prendre ces jeux. L'ouvrage collectif *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell et Jenkins, 1998) faisait état du

débat opposant l'idée que les jeux conçus pour les jeunes filles doivent refléter leurs préférences esthétiques et inclure des activités typiquement féminines (*pink games*) à l'idée que ces jeux doivent prendre en considération les intérêts réels des jeunes filles et créer de nouveaux modèles de jouabilité fondés sur l'exploration et la coopération, plutôt que sur la compétition et l'agressivité (*purple games*) (Laurel, 1998; Martin, 1998). En 1995, la sortie du jeu *Tomb Raider*, mettant en scène le célèbre personnage féminin acrobatique à la poitrine gonflée Lara Croft, a en outre lancé un débat toujours d'actualité sur la nature dégradante ou subversive de cette figure désormais iconique (Kennedy, 2002).

Au fil des années 2000, le nombre de joueuses a considérablement augmenté, le fossé technologique entre les hommes et les femmes s'est lentement refermé et l'arrivée massive des jeux en ligne multijoueurs a permis aux joueurs et aux joueuses d'expérimenter différentes identités de genre plus librement. Toutefois, la rareté des conceptrices de jeux, la marginalisation des joueuses, le dimorphisme sexuel entre les avatars mâles et femelles ainsi que la prolifération de personnages féminins passifs ou hypersexualisés ont persisté (Consalvo et Harper, 2009; Corneliussen, 2008; Huntemann, 2010; Sarkeesian, 2013). Au même moment, la conception du genre comme un construit social changeant et contextuel gagnait du terrain dans les études féministes et plusieurs voix s'élevaient pour réclamer la création de jeux plus neutres qui susciteraient autant l'intérêt des hommes que des femmes en permettant, par exemple, de personnaliser son avatar avec un éventail de choix plus variés (Brunner, 2008; Fullerton et al., 2008). L'ouvrage collectif *Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat* (Kafai et al., 2008) surfait sur cette « deuxième vague » de féminisme vidéoludique, alors que l'attention des auteurs se déplaçait des mécaniques de jeu et des représentations vidéoludiques aux contextes culturels expliquant la disparité des pratiques de jeu féminines et masculines (Taylor, 2008). La plupart des discussions portant sur les problématiques de genre dans les jeux demeuraient toutefois centrées sur les femmes hétérosexuelles blanches.

Après deux décennies de féminisme vidéoludique et malgré une conscientisation grandissante de l'industrie du jeu sur la nécessité d'une meilleure inclusion, les discussions sur les problématiques de genre dans les jeux vidéo sont encore loin d'être obsolètes. Les multiples

épisodes de harcèlement et de menaces à l'endroit de conceptrices de jeux ou de féministes qui dénoncent publiquement les représentations vidéoludiques stéréotypées nous rappellent que le sexisme dans la culture vidéoludique n'a toujours pas été enrayeré et qu'il reste encore des efforts à faire pour changer les mentalités (Chess et Shaw, 2015; Goldberg et Larsson, 2015). L'heure est désormais au bilan : plusieurs chercheurs et chercheuses évaluent le travail qui a été fait dans le passé et constatent, entre autres, que les joueurs et les joueuses des communautés ethniques et LGBTQ ont été laissés de côté, alors que la rareté des personnages féminins de couleur et des représentations *queer* dans les jeux vidéo a été ignorée. Depuis quelques années, plusieurs chercheurs et chercheuses tentent donc de complexifier le débat entourant les problématiques de genre dans les jeux en concentrant leur attention sur ces points aveugles des études féministes vidéoludiques, sur les représentations de genre alternatives, réflexives ou critiques, sur la diversification des personnages et des équipes de production ainsi sur la masculinité dans les jeux vidéo (Kafai et al., 2016; Ruberg et Shaw, 2017; Shaw, 2014). Inspirés par la théorie *queer*, par l'approche intersectionnelle des variables genre/classe/ethnicité/âge ou par l'approche postmoderne du genre comme quelque chose que l'on « performe » et que l'on peut explorer sur une base individuelle (Butler, 1990), ces chercheurs et chercheuses ont collectivement amorcé la « troisième vague » de féminisme vidéoludique (Richard, 2013).

L'ouvrage *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai et al., 2016) consolide d'ailleurs ce passage de la deuxième à la troisième vague de féminisme vidéoludique, en regroupant des textes qui portent sur des sujets comme l'émergence d'identités de genre non normatives et antiracistes dans des jeux indépendants ou sérieux (Lepore et Denner, 2016; Nakamura, 2016; Pearce, 2016), les romances homosexuelles dans les jeux vidéo et les réactions qu'elles suscitent (McDonald, 2016), les pratiques de jeu collectives, intergénérationnelles et familiales de joueuses afro-américaines, latinas et mexicaines (Gray, 2016; Richard, 2016; Siyahhan et Gee, 2016) ainsi que l'éventail varié d'identités masculines qu'incarnent les joueurs de jeux vidéo (DiSalvo, 2016). L'ouvrage fait également la promotion d'incitatifs pour diversifier les équipes de production et met en évidence le fait que les femmes noires qui travaillent dans l'industrie des technologies souffrent souvent d'un double syndrome de l'imposteur : elles se sentent à la fois invisibles en raison de leur genre et hautement visibles en raison de leur ethnicité (Bryant, 2016).

Le livre regroupe enfin des articles sur les manières de promouvoir différentes identités de genre par le biais du design et du marketing (Flanagan et Kaufman, 2016; Westecott, 2016).

La publication récente de l'ouvrage collectif *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg et Shaw, 2017) laisse croire, quant à elle, que la troisième vague de féminisme vidéoludique a déjà atteint une certaine maturité, dans la mesure où la théorie *queer* en est venue à inspirer des recherches qui débordent le cadre des études sur le genre masculin/féminin. Se caractérisant par sa propension à faire voler les frontières en éclats, la théorie *queer* y est entre autres mobilisée pour déconstruire une série de dichotomies qui perdurent en études du jeu vidéo (narratologie/ludologie, production/réception, contrôle/agentivité, succès/échec), de même que les définitions strictes de ce que sont un jeu et un joueur ou une joueuse. La théorie *queer* est également utilisée pour remettre en question une variété de présupposés sur les manières d'étudier, de jouer ou de critiquer les jeux (2017, p. ix-x). Dans cet ouvrage, les auteures ne se limitent pas à l'étude des personnages ou des joueurs LGBTQ, mais s'intéressent à tous les designs et les pratiques de jeu qui bouleversent les idées reçues ou qui utilisent la théorie *queer* comme méthode pour repenser les fondements des études du jeu vidéo (2017, p. xiii-xvii).

Les articles présentés dans cette édition spéciale de la revue *Kinephanos* s'inscrivent dans cette troisième vague de féminisme vidéoludique et s'inspirent également de l'approche intersectionnelle et de la théorie *queer*. Ils ont tous été rédigés par des participants et participantes à la deuxième édition du symposium annuel Histoire du jeu, qui s'intitulait « Histoire des problématiques de genre dans les jeux » et qui était co-présidée par Mia Consalvo et Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin. L'événement a eu lieu à la BAnQ (Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec), les 26 et 27 juin 2015, grâce à la collaboration du TAG (Technoculture, Arts and Games, Université Concordia), du CMS|W (Comparative Media Studies | Writing, MIT), de la Canada Research Chair in Game Studies & Design (Université Concordia), du groupe de recherche LUDOV (Laboratoire Universitaire de documentation et d'observation vidéoludiques, UdeM), du groupe de recherche Homo Ludens (UQAM) et du Conseil de recherches en sciences humaines (CRSH). L'un des objectifs de la conférence était de documenter l'émergence d'une troisième vague de féminisme vidéoludique, tout en favorisant le

dialogue entre les universitaires et les gens de l'industrie du jeu. Les articles du présent numéro couvrent trois axes de recherche abordés dans le cadre de la conférence : le féminisme vidéoludique, les représentations de genre dans les jeux vidéo et le rôle des femmes et des minorités dans l'industrie du jeu.

L'article « Bridging Game Studies and Feminist Theories », rédigé par Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin (UQAM, Montréal) et Maude Bonenfant (UQAM, Montréal), s'inscrit dans l'axe du féminisme vidéoludique. Partant de l'idée que les théories féministes demeurent sous-utilisées en *game studies*, les auteures démontrent qu'une mobilisation des théories de pionnières féministes comme Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Betty Friedan et Laura Mulvey aide à comprendre pourquoi sont problématiques les stéréotypes de genre vidéoludiques comme la *ms. male*, la demoiselle en détresse, la fée du logis et l'héroïne d'action sexy. Elles montrent également comment des concepts développés plus récemment par des auteures féministes comme Karen Boyle, Barbara Creed et Martine Delvaux peuvent souligner à quel point sont dommageables la victimisation constante des femmes dans les jeux vidéo, l'abjection de leur sexualité et la reproduction du même modèle de corps féminin d'un jeu à l'autre. Sur une note plus positive, les auteures offrent un bref aperçu des théories féministes pouvant être mobilisées pour analyser ou imaginer des personnages de jeux qui transcendent les schèmes patriarcaux et hétéronormatifs.

Les quatre articles suivants s'inscrivent dans l'axe des représentations de genre vidéoludique. Dans son article « Diversity without Defense : Reframing arguments for diversity in games », Adrienne Shaw (Temple University, Philadelphie) propose un argument alternatif pour justifier le besoin de diversifier les représentations vidéoludiques. L'auteure défend l'idée que représenter des identités marginales dans les jeux vidéo est politiquement important, non pas en raison des effets directs que les représentations sont censées avoir sur le renforcement des conventions de genre, ni pour combler le présumé besoin qu'ont les minorités de s'identifier aux personnages, mais parce que cela contribue à varier les types d'identités auxquelles tous les joueurs et les joueuses sont appelés à s'identifier. Dans cette optique, la diversification des représentations doit être envisagée comme une manière de faire de meilleurs jeux pour tout le monde, plutôt qu'une stratégie de marketing ciblé mise en branle lorsqu'un jeu s'adresse aux membres de groupes

marginalisés comme public de niche. En plus d’être difficilement critiquable, explique l’auteure, cet argument favoriserait la diversification à plus grande échelle des représentations vidéoludiques.

Dans son article « The Poetics of Form and the Politics of Identity in *Assassin’s Creed III : Liberation* », Soraya Murray (University of California, Santa Cruz) s’appuie sur une approche intersectionnelle des *visual* et *cultural studies* pour analyser le jeu *Assassin’s Creed III : Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) et son personnage central, Aveline de Grandpré. La particularité de ce jeu, dont l’histoire se déroule durant la période coloniale précédant la guerre d’indépendance des États-Unis (1775-1783), est qu’il met en scène l’une des rares héroïnes noires du paysage vidéoludique. L’auteure explique en quoi le personnage d’Aveline se démarque du stéréotype de la demoiselle en détresse et du trope orientaliste de la victime exotique, mais qu’une analyse plus poussée de la poétique du jeu révèle l’influence persistante du fantasme orientaliste et de la violence impérialiste qui caractérise l’histoire de l’empire européen. Afin d’illustrer comment les normes culturelles et les dynamiques de pouvoir peuvent se transposer dans les mécaniques de jeu, l’auteure étudie ensuite le système de personas qui régit la jouabilité de *Liberation* et qui comporte trois costumes et modes qu’Aveline peut utiliser selon les contextes et les missions à accomplir. Chaque persona confère au personnage féminin des compétences et des limitations différentes, qui sont intrinsèquement liées à son genre, son ethnicité et sa classe. Enfin, l’auteure souligne l’incertitude relative à l’orientation sexuelle d’Aveline, qu’elle interprète comme une autre facette de son identité fluide et de sa capacité d’adaptation à toute situation.

C’est au tour des deux derniers opus de la série *Tomb Raider* et de son controversé personnage féminin Lara Croft d’être examinés à la loupe dans l’article « Andromeda on the Rocks: Retreading and Resisting Tropes of Female Sacrifice in *Tomb Raider* » de Meghan Blythe Adams (University of Western Ontario, London). Même si ces jeux prennent leur distance par rapport au stéréotype de la demoiselle en détresse en mettant en scène un protagoniste féminin agile et courageux, *Tomb Raider* (2013) et *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015) ne réalisent pas leur plein potentiel subversif, car ils utilisent la mise en danger, le secours et la mort des personnages féminins comme des sources de plaisir coupable pour le joueur présumément masculin. À la

lumière des textes de Georges Bataille portant sur le rôle du sacrifice rituel, Blythe Adams analyse la trame narrative de ces jeux, qui tourne autour du kidnapping et du sacrifice de personnages féminins, avant de souligner la spectacularisation et l'érotisation des mises en scène entourant la mort de Lara Croft et d'aborder l'ambiguïté de son orientation sexuelle.

Le texte « The Witcher, or The End of Masculinity (as We Know It) » de Dawid Matuszek (University of Silesia, Katowice) étudie, pour sa part, la déconstruction du modèle de la masculinité héroïque et paternaliste qu'opère le protagoniste masculin Geralt of Rivia dans le jeu *The Witcher 3 : Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). Alors que les premiers jeux de la série *The Witcher* dépeignaient Geralt of Rivia comme un « collectionneur de femmes », puis comme un jouet sexuel entre les mains de puissantes sorcières, *Wild Hunt* problématise la dichotomie masculin/féminin en présentant le personnage comme un sujet nomade, immature, à moitié castré, à la masculinité inachevée et à l'identité de genre ambiguë. Analysant le personnage à la lumière de la psychanalyse lacanienne, l'auteur décrit l'évolution de son rapport à la masculinité après un événement qui lui fait réaliser à quel point son monde n'est pas fait pour les preux chevaliers cherchant à protéger les demoiselles en détresse. Puisque Geralt of Rivia est un avatar non personnalisable, explique l'auteur, les joueurs et les joueuses sont davantage les témoins de la complexification du personnage que leur complice.

Le protagoniste féminin de la série *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007-2012) est lui aussi soumis à un regard analytique dans l'article « FemShep : féminité sexualisée ou subversive? Analyse du personnage féminin de la série *Mass Effect* » de Pascale Thériault (Université de Montréal, Montréal). Bien que Jane Shepard (appelée FemShep par les fans) semble, à première vue, se distinguer de la majorité des personnages féminins de jeux vidéo, en termes d'apparence et de compétences, l'analyse détaillée que fait l'auteure du personnage, du jeu et de sa campagne promotionnelle permet de constater que FemShep est une copie féminisée de son pendant masculin, à l'instar de nombreux autres personnages féminins du paysage vidéoludique. L'auteure se demande, en outre, si les options romantiques plus variées de FemShep, par rapport à celles de BroShep, illustrent une plus grande tolérance envers le lesbianisme qu'envers l'homosexualité masculine dans nos sociétés ou s'il s'agit seulement d'une autre preuve que la

trame narrative de *Mass Effect* est écrite en fonction de l'avatar masculin. Même si le langage corporel et les interactions de FemShep sont modelés sur celles de BroShep, par manque de considération pour les spécificités de l'avatar féminin, il n'en demeure pas moins que FemShep incarne une nouvelle forme de féminité qui surmonte les limitations de la majorité des héroïnes d'action fortes et actives, mais aussi objectifiées et fétichisées. Le mélange d'attributs féminins et masculins sur le corps de l'avatar contribue à subvertir les normes de genre. Quant aux personnages féminins secondaires de la série, leur potentiel subversif n'est pas pleinement exploité, mais leur féminité contraste avec les aspects masculins de FemShep d'une manière qui les rend plus évidents.

Cette édition spéciale de la revue *Kinephanos* se conclut par un article de Brie Code (Tru Luv Media) intitulé « Is Game Design for Everybody? Women and Innovation in Video Games », qui s'inscrit dans l'axe du rôle des femmes et des minorités dans l'industrie du jeu. Ayant été conceptrice de jeu pour la compagnie Ubisoft, l'auteure partage son expérience personnelle au sein de l'industrie du jeu et la met en perspective avec les témoignages de collègues, afin d'identifier quatre barrières qui nuisent à l'intégration des femmes et des minorités dans ce milieu de travail : 1) le fait que l'informatique était jusqu'à tout récemment perçu comme un domaine masculin; 2) la rareté des personnages féminins non stéréotypés desquelles les joueuses peuvent s'inspirer; 3) l'influence des préjugés inconscients lors du processus de recrutement et 4) la discrimination, la marginalisation et le favoritisme. L'auteure propose également des pistes de solution pour faire tomber ces barrières et met en évidence les bénéfices d'une équipe de production diversifiée, autant sur le plan de l'innovation que sur celui des conditions de travail.

Ces articles s'inscrivent, chacun à sa façon, dans une approche résolument contemporaine des problématiques de genre dans les jeux vidéo, qui cherche non seulement à complexifier les discussions, mais aussi à véhiculer un message empreint d'espoir. Leurs auteurs soulignent les initiatives positives mises en œuvre par les compagnies de jeux vidéo ces dernières années, tout en relevant les éléments qui pourraient encore être améliorés pour faire évoluer les mentalités. Ce numéro spécial de *Kinephanos* illustre donc le vent d'optimisme qui souffle actuellement sur

les études féministes vidéoludiques et qui est lui-même propulsé par un vent de changement dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo.

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Bridging Game Studies and Feminist Theories

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Abstract

Starting from the premise that feminist theory remains underutilized in game studies, the authors demonstrate that mobilizing concepts from feminist pioneers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Betty Friedan, and Laura Mulvey contributes to a better understanding of how and why gender stereotypes in video games (such as Ms. Male, Smurfette, Damsel in Distress, Natural-Born Happy Homemaker and Sexy Action Heroine) are problematic. They also provide an overview of concepts developed by more recent feminist authors, such as Karen Boyle, Barbara Creed and Martine Delvaux, which highlight the damage caused by constant victimization of women in games, the abjection of their sexuality, and the serial reproduction of stereotypical female bodies. On a more positive note, the authors offer a glimpse of how feminist theories can inspire promising new game characters that undermine patriarchal and heteronormative schemes.

Keywords: video games, feminism, representation, gender, stereotypes, feminist theory

Résumé en français à la fin du texte

Introduction

Game feminism has widely flourished during the past two decades. Many scholars, game critics and feminist activists have voiced concerns around the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes and sexist narratives in video games, while arguing in favour of diversifying game characters and plot devices (Cassell and Jenkins (eds), 1998; Graner Ray, 2004; Kafai et al. (eds), 2016; Kafai and al. (eds), 2008; Lignon (ed), 2015; Ruberg and Shaw (eds), 2017; Shaw, 2014). A growing number of statistical studies (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2009; Brehm, 2013; Dietz, 1998; Fox and Tang, 2014; Williams and al., 2009) and qualitative content analyses (Corneliussen, 2008; Huntemann, 2013) identify recurrent sexist tropes in video games, highlighting their problematic aspects. Feminist theories, however, remain underutilized in offering explanations as to why these tropes are harmful, or why there should be more nuanced and diverse gender representations in games.

This article will illustrate how seminal feminist theories can be mobilized to better understand why gender stereotypes in video games are damaging, regardless that these theories originated prior to the digital era. More precisely, Simone de Beauvoir's "Second Sex", Luce Irigaray's concept of women as a "Currency of Exchange" and Betty Friedan's notion of the "Feminine Mystique" will be used to explain how Ms. Male, Smurfette, Damsel in Distress and Happy Homemaker characters are enmeshed in an outdated patriarchal system. Laura Mulvey's theory of the "Male Gaze" and Karen Boyle on gendered media violence will respectively be utilized to elucidate why the objectification of female characters in video games is detrimental, and why female characters are commonly portrayed as victims in video games. Barbara Creed's concept of the "Monstrous Feminine" will be mobilized to show that female monsters in video games often consolidate ancient myths and beliefs about women's sexuality. Finally, Martine Delvaux's recent analysis of "Serial Girls" will be introduced to critique repetitive and homogenous representations of female bodies in video games, advertisements, and promotional events.

Ms Male and Smurfette characters and de Beauvoir's "Second Sex"

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Second Sex" can be employed to study Ms. Male and Smurfette characters from a critical perspective. In a [video](#) broadcast on her website *Feminist Frequency*, Anita Sarkeesian (2013d) describes the Ms. Male character as a feminine version of

an existing male character, which game designers have modified by adding stereotypical, arbitrary and socially constructed markers of femininity such as long eyelashes, red lipstick, blush, pink outfits, bows, high heels, jewelry, beauty marks, etc. Instead of creating an original female character with her own features, game designers transform a male character into a female character by adding feminine attributes to the original body. These attributes allow the players to quickly identify the character as female, while reducing her personality to its “girly-ness” and reinforcing gender binaries. The real problem with this, explains the feminist activist, is that women are thus “marked”, while men generally remain “unmarked”. Ms. Pac-man (*Pac-Man*, Namco, 1980), Amy Rose (*Sonic the Hedgehog*, Sega, 1993), Dixie Kong (*Donkey Kong Country 2*, Nintendo, 1995), Toadette (*Mario Kart Double Dash!!*, Nintendo, 2003), MeeMee (*Super Monkey Ball: Banana Splitz*, Sega, 2012) and Pretty Bomber (*Super Bomberman R*, Konami, 2017) feature among the numerous Ms. Male characters of the video game landscape. When a female character is the only woman among a group of male characters, like Wendy O Koopa in *Super Mario Bros. 3* (Nintendo, 1988), Lily in *Scribblenauts* (Warner Bros., 2009), White bird in *Angry Bird* (Rovio Entertainment, 2009) and Wonder-Pink in *The Wonderful 101* (Nintendo, 2013), she corresponds to a trope coined the “Smurfette” by feminist author Khata Pollitt (1991). In addition to serving as the token chick in a male-dominated environment, the Smurfette character sends an underlying message that boys are the norm, and girls the variation (Sarkeesian, 2013d).

De Beauvoir’s theories can help untangle the deep historical roots of these tropes in Western patriarchal culture. In her famous book *The Second Sex* [*Le deuxième sexe*], written in 1949, she suggests that men are considered universal subjects by default, while women are seen as referents of alterity:

[Woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (Our translation, 1949, p. 15)

Thus, the word “man” does not only serve to designate a gender, but also the entirety of human kind. In patriarchal cultures, women are marked as the negative, the opposite, or the contrary of men: the “second sex”. According to de Beauvoir, this phenomenon is well-illustrated in the story of Genesis, in which God created Eve from Adam’s rib so she can serve as his companion and

prevent his loneliness (1949, p. 14-15). Sarkeesian (2013d) herself uses this example to draw parallels with Ms. Pac-man, who is built from Mr. Pac-man's body. In addition to showing that representations of women in correspondence with masculine models are part of a long tradition, de Beauvoir's theory highlights the problematic aspects of Ms. Male and Smurfette characters. All civilizations have been organized around this Same/Other duality, explains de Beauvoir, because it is easier for any subject to define itself in opposition to an "Other". In the case of men and women, the reciprocity of their relationship is, however, denied: "It is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One" (our translation, 1949, p. 17). The relationship between men and women is "asymmetrical"; men describe women as the opposite of themselves, but never the other way around (1949, p. 242). Consequently, men are autonomous and can exist by themselves, while women only exist in relation to men. Men are sovereign subjects with intrinsic value and meaning, while women require men to be valuable and meaningful. Another consequence of this lack of reciprocity is that women's bodies, desires and sexuality have rarely been properly depicted in patriarchal discourse; rather they have often been conceived and depicted as the opposite of men's paradigmatic bodies, desires and sexuality. In his psychoanalytic theories, for instance, Freud depicts a girl's "Electra complex" as the counterpart of a boy's "Oedipus complex", and female "penis envy" as the parallel reaction to male "castration anxiety". By doing so, he fails to understand the specificities of feminine libido and disregards the possibility that girls may wish they had a phallus for the power and privileges that are associated with it (1949, pp. 82-84).

Ms. Male characters are a particularly good illustration of the asymmetrical relationship between men and women, as they are usually designed by men and perform the role of a male character's sweetheart or mother-of-his-child instead of having an identity and life of their own (Sarkeesian, 2013d). The Smurfette character also symbolizes this unbalanced relationship between men and women, in so far as she sends the underlying message that boys are "central" while girls are "peripheral" (Pollitt, 1991). In the nineties, the presence of Ms. Male characters in video games was partially justified by technological limitations and by the fact that game producers were mostly targeting young male players. Now that technologies allow for the design of more realistic characters, and women represent half of the gamer population (ESA, 2015), we need to ask

ourselves why these tropes persist in video game environments. In her article “FemShep: féminité sexualisée ou subversive? Analyse du personnage féminin de la série *Mass Effect*”, featured in this issue of *Kinephanos*, Pascale Thériault (2017) describes the female version of Shepard from the *Mass Effect* series (Bioware, 2007) as a new type of Ms. Male character. Although her body shape differs from that of her male counterpart and she is an active playable character, her movements and interactions are copied from those of the default male avatar, instead of being adapted to her body and feminine outfits. As a result, when she wears a skirt as a casual outfit, sits down and spreads her legs in the same fashion as the male avatar, she [exposes her crotch](#) in a very inappropriate and ludicrous way. According to Thériault (2017), this “wardrobe malfunction” was not intended by the game developer and can be interpreted as a lack of concern for the particularities of the female avatar. As pointed out by Sarkeesian (2013d), the female variant of Shepard was almost absent from the games’ teasers, trailers, posters, print ads and magazine covers. Moreover, she is always referred to as “female Shepard”, while the male avatar is only called “Shepard”.

De Beauvoir’s theory can help us to establish why Ms. Male characters still exist despite improvements in graphic design and changes in gamer demographics. When confronted with the arrival of women on the marketplace after the Second World War, explains the feminist author, Western societies insisted that women keep wearing dresses, skirts, corsets, heels and so on, to preserve the differences that mark them as the desirable “Other” (1949, p. 312). Even though Western societies accepted that women could perform traditionally masculine roles, the ideal woman remained one who embodied alterity and who could be easily differentiated from men (1949, p. 392). Considering de Beauvoir’s theories, we can speculate that the inclusion of playable Ms. Male avatars in recent video games has something to do with our society’s obsession for preserving differences between men and women in contexts where they are more or less equal in terms of power, social roles and positions. This would explain why the female avatar in *Mass Effect* occasionally wears a skirt even though she acts and moves like the male avatar. This could also serve to demystify the exaggerated dimorphism between male and female avatars in online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). Even though male and female avatars from the same races have identical strength and skills in the world of Azeroth, the female avatars

are thinner versions of the overtly muscular male avatars. Moreover, their feminine features (breasts, tiny waists, buttocks) are accentuated in ways that remove any ambiguity regarding their sex (Trépanier-Jobin, 2013, p. 202). We could say the same for other MMORPGs like *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) and *Guild Wars* (ArenaNet, 2005).

Finally, de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* contributes to our understanding of why women would keep playing games that display these tropes, beyond the fact that they may not have many alternatives. Because women have always been defined by men, explains the author, they feel that they require them to exist and cannot afford to break this vital relationship (1949, p. 21). Markers of femininity have become part of women's identities, making it difficult for them to break away from these markers without having a feeling of self-annihilation. De Beauvoir encourages women to overcome this feeling, to refuse the myth of femininity and to assert their subjectivity, instead of letting themselves be passively shaped and modelled by men (1949, p. 406). Following de Beauvoir's advice, we could encourage women game designers to create female characters who have a personality and a body of their own instead of ones that are modeled on male characters. As expressed by Adrienne Shaw (2014) in her book *Gaming at the Edge*, women game designers should not, however, carry the burden of diversifying video game representations alone. Creating innovative characters should be a responsibility shared by every game designer. Our energies should therefore be put towards the creation of more diverse development teams, as argued by game designer Brie Code (2017) in her article "Is Game Design for Everybody? Women and Innovation in Video Games", featured in this issue of *Kinephanos*.

The Damsel in Distress trope and Irigaray's theory of women as currency

Luce Irigaray's theory that women have historically functioned as a "Currency of Exchange" indicates the patriarchal roots of the most widely used trope of the video game landscape: the Damsel in Distress. As pointed out by Nina B. Huntemann (2010) and Anita Sarkeesian (2013a), many of the most popular video game narratives of all time involve helpless, passive, gorgeous damsels saved from perilous situations by courageous men who often become their husbands afterwards. This stereotype can be traced back the ancient Greek legend of Andromeda who was chained naked to a rock as a sacrificial offering to a sea monster before being saved by a man

named Perseus who claimed her as his wife (Sarkeesian, 2013a). This figure can also be found in countless seventeenth- and eighteenth-century folktales involving a knight-errant who proves his chivalry by saving a vulnerable woman, as well as in numerous fairy tales adapted by Disney, such as *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* (Do Rozario, 2004). In the video game world, the trope made its first appearance in *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981), a game inspired by the movie *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933) in which a lady named Pauline cries for help while a hero called Jump Man climbs up ladders and avoids obstacles to rescue her from a crazed ape (Huntemann, 2010, p. 252). The kidnapping of a damsel by a male villain, followed by her deliverance by a masculine hero, quickly became Nintendo's favourite plot device. In the [final stage of *Super Mario World*](#) (Nintendo, 1990), for example, Princess Peach calls for help, slowly falls from Bowser's vessel when he is defeated by Mario, and rewards her saviour with a kiss on his cheek before heart-shaped fireworks explode over their heads to symbolize their forthcoming union. Nintendo repeated this plot device in 14 games of the core series, and judging by the [trailer of *Super Mario Odyssey*](#) (2017) for the Switch console, in which Mario appears to cross an open-world-like setting to prevent a forced marriage between Princess Peach and Bowser, they show no sign of giving it up.

Nintendo is not the only game company that abuses this trope. Kidnapped, cursed, possessed or petrified women appeared in countless arcade games, beat-em ups, first-person shooters and role-playing games such as *Dragon's Lair* (Cinematronics 1983), *Double Dragon* (Technōs Japan, 1987), *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005) and *Devil May Cry 4* (Capcom, 2008), as demonstrated by Sarkeesian (2013a) in her video [“Damsel in Distress part 1”](#). We may want to think this cliché has become less common, but in fact it is being used in an increasing number of games like *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones* (Ubisoft, 2010) and *Double Dragon Neon* (WayForward Technology, 2012). Even if the damsels sometimes help the masculine hero to fulfill his quest by opening doors, giving hints or even saving his life (Sarkeesian, 2013b), they still feature in someone else's story instead of being the heroines of their own adventure. Humorous variations on the Damsel in Distress plot device can also be found in several independent games (Sarkeesian, 2013c). In *Fat Princess* (Titan Studios, 2009), for instance, the ultimate goal of male characters is to capture the enemy's princess while feeding their own princess with slices of cake so she becomes too fat to be

kidnapped. In the multiplayer game *Castle Crashers* (The Behemoth, 2008), several knights fight together to defeat the enemy and rescue the king's princesses. At the [end of the game](#), they fight each other to determine who will get the only princess that the king makes available as a reward. When the winner removes the princess's veil to kiss her, he discovers that she looks like a grotesque clown. Far from criticizing or deconstructing the Damsel in Distress trope, argues Sarkeesian (2013c), these games use humour to justify their reproduction of a worn-out stereotype.

Luce Irigaray's theory helps to elucidate how the Damsel in Distress trope reinforces an outdated paternalistic concept that women are men's property, and can therefore be exchanged to cement or break alliances. In the chapter "Women on the Market" of her book *This Sex Which Is Not One* [*Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*], Irigaray explains that patriarchal societies are based on a trading system in which men play the role of traders, and women the role of merchandise, commodity, or currency (1977, p. 169). Within this trading system, women's exchange value relies on men's specific needs and desires. Women are therefore deprived of their specific value and reduced to transactional objects that circulate from one man to another (1977, p. 176-177). This system was implemented in primitive societies where men from different clans exchanged women to prevent incestuous unions or make alliances, and survives in the western tradition of asking a father for his daughter's hand. According to Irigaray, mothers are excluded from this trading system in so far as they only have reproductive value, while virgins have the highest exchange value and prostitutes represent a value that can be exchanged (1977, pp. 180-181).

The Damsel in Distress character in video games is a modern incarnation of this old tradition. The fact that she is a character who fuels rivalries, and who often kisses, hugs, or screws her saviour, gives the impression that women are tractable objects and that they must give their bodies to their rescuers as rightful compensation (Huntemann, 2010, p. 253). The Damsel in Distress is not the only trope that can be interpreted through Irigaray's theory that women function as "currency". The prostitute character from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004) provides another illustration of a woman cast as a tractable object between men. In this game, the male avatar, controlled by an assumed male player, drives a prostitute to her clients, picks her up, and takes a cut of her salary. Ironically, the male protagonist himself becomes a commodity when the

prostitute pays him to have sexual intercourse at the end of the [pimping mission](#). Some people highlight this scene to argue that *Grand Theft Auto* should not be taken seriously, but from a critical perspective, the scene seems to use humour as a pretext to convey harmful depictions of women.

The Damsel in Distress trope has long been overrepresented in the media landscape (especially in action films and Disney princess movies); in video games, however, the trope exceeds the level of representation to contaminate game mechanics. In games, damsels may also serve as a motivation for the player, a treasure to be discovered, or a prize to be won for completing the game. As Sarkeesian (2015) explains in her video [“Women as Reward”](#), the Damsel in Distress plot often involves a “Smooch of Victory”, which is sometimes replaced by “Sex of Victory” according to which the rescued victim explicitly makes her body available to her saviour, as is the case in *The Witcher 2* (CD Projekt, 2011) and *Ride to Hell: Retribution* (Eutechnyx, 2013). Even leading female characters can serve as a reward for assumedly straight male players (Sarkeesian, 2015). Samus Aran from *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1987), for example, is covered from head to toe during the gameplay, but shown garbed only in a leotard to players who complete the game in less than three hours. In *Metroid Prime 3* (Retro Studio, 2007), the bonus ending includes a [scene](#) in which she removes her heavy armour, while the camera zooms in and out, and pans over her tightly wrapped body. Instead of being exchanged between male characters, Samus is offered by male designers as a trophy to presumed male players.

Luce Irigaray’s theory clarifies the ways in which the Damsel in Distress and her Smooch (or Sex) of Victory are anachronistically bound up with the patriarchal male-dominated system, as they perpetuate an archaic conception of women as spoils of war that dispossesses females of their own bodies. In her book, Irigaray asks herself what would have happened if women refused to participate in this trading system and found an alternative way to live: “What if these ‘commodities’ refused to go to ‘market’? What if they maintained ‘another’ kind of commerce, among themselves?” (our translation, 1977, p. 193) Similarly, we could ask ourselves what would have happened if women players refused to play games in which female characters are objects of exchange between men? Perhaps the game industry would have worked towards the diversification of game characters more actively. Irigaray’s interrogation demonstrates that players have

responsibilities concerning the games they consume, as much as designers have responsibilities concerning the games they produce. It would, however, be a mistake to believe that only women players suffer from this division of roles; men can also be uncomfortable with the idea that people of their gender have to be courageous and fearless in any perilous situation (for an explanation of how video games reinforce hypermasculine stereotypes, see Salter-Blodgett (2012)). As explained by Shaw (2017) in this issue of *Kinephanos*, women players and marginalized audiences are not the only ones who would benefit from more balanced depictions of gender in games; all players who contest sexism and who are provided with a growing number of game options should boycott games that display these tropes. This would accelerate the diversification of game representations, as the creation of more complex, empowered and multidimensional women characters for a large proportion of the gamer population would become financially profitable for game companies.

The Natural Born Happy Homemaker and Friedan's "Feminine Mystique"

Betty Friedan's (1963) book *The Feminine Mystique* suggests another avenue for identifying traces of patriarchy in video game culture. After conducting interviews with numerous housewives, Friedan identifies a "problem that has no name": a widespread sense of dissatisfaction among suburban wives that sometimes develops into depression. Refusing to believe that this symptom could be the result of a dysfunctional libido, as suggested by many psychiatrists, she develops the concept of the "Feminine Mystique", which is the false idea that all women are fulfilled as housewives and mothers (1963: 1). According to Friedan, this myth is partly constructed by the media, especially by women's magazines in which so-called experts popularize Freud's deterministic idea that "anatomy is destiny", and in which subject matters are confined to cosmetics, furniture, and motherhood as if women have no interest in economy, civil rights and politics (1963, p. 24-28, 45 and 154). The Feminine Mystique is so powerful, explains Friedan, that women who feel unhappy think that they are abnormal or sick, instead of considering the possibility that a career is missing in their lives. They "grow up no longer knowing that they have the desires and capacities the mystique forbids" (1963, p. 66). In her book, Friedan therefore tries to demonstrate that well-educated women are meant to be more than a "set of reproductive organs in heels" (Collins (2013) in Friedan, 1963, p. xii).

Like women's magazines from the sixties, many video games associate female characters with maternity and domesticity, even though a majority of women were already participating in the labour force in the early days of the games industry. At the end of *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo, 1996), for instance, Princess Peach tells Mario that she baked a cake for him, and at the beginning of *Super Mario Galaxy 2* (Nintendo, 2010), Bowser tells Mario, "Maybe I'll have Peach bake me something for once." Because Peach is associated with the traditional female activity of baking, and confined to the castle's interior, balcony or porch (except when she is kidnapped), she appears as a Natural-Born Happy Homemaker. *Legend of the Seven Stars* (Nintendo, 1996) is one of the rare games in which Peach is a playable character who fights the Mushroom Kingdom's enemies alongside her male compatriots. However, her main weapon is a frying pan, while other male characters' weapons have nothing to do with household objects. In the *Megaman* TV series (Capcom, 1994), based on the eponymous video game series (Capcom, 1987), the female character Roll is a humanoid robot who looks like a schoolgirl, created by Dr. Light to help with the housekeeping, cleaning and cooking. In the fighting game *Tatsunoko vs. Capcom* (Capcom, 2008), Roll appears as a playable character who uses her broom and bucket as weapons.

Borrowing from Friedan, we can see how these games reinforce conventional divisions of labour between the sexes and consolidate the myth that women are more devoted to their home and their children than men because of their biology (1963, p. 8). Even though the majority of women now have careers, the idea that balancing work and family is a feminine concern persists (Lipovetsky, 1997, p. 296). While Friedan emphasizes how the Feminine Mystique is responsible for the misery felt by many women, we can argue that both men and women suffer from this myth. In many modern societies, men who wish to stay at home and take care of their children often have to deal with social stigma and are constrained by parental leave regulations.

In games made for girls, the association of women with maternity and domesticity transcends the realm of representations, extending into the mechanics of gameplay. One might think that the creation of these games would have stopped with the girl games feminist movement at the end of the nineties (Cassell and Jenkins (eds), 1998), but in reality, games made for girls are still alive and well. In the mini-games of the website Play.Barbie.com (Mattel, 2014), targeted towards

young girls, activities revolve around marriage, housekeeping and child-bearing, such as decorating a house, babysitting, baking a cake for a child, or organizing a wedding by choosing a dress, selecting a ring and designing a cake. In the past few years, a couple of adventure games were added to the website, but gameplay remains oriented towards the completion of simplistic tasks that underestimate young girls' cognitive capacities. We could say the same for many francophone girl games websites like jeux-fille-gratuit.com, jeux-fille.fr and jeuxjeuxjeux.fr/jeux/fille, which revolve around makeup, food, fashion and decoration. In the multiplayer girl game *Barbie Dreamhouse Party* (Little Orbit, 2013) for Nintendo Wii, gameplay occurs entirely inside a domestic space and involves household duties: after Barbie's opulent pink mansion is put under lockdown, Barbie and her girlfriends (controlled by the players from a third-person point of view) are trapped in different rooms and forced, by a pink robot named Closet, to find girly objects or household items such as shoes, sorbet bowls, buckets, brushes, detergent bottles and boxes of clothes, and put them in the correct order on four pedestals. Succeeding in this overly simplified task allows them to unlock fashion items and mini-games such as catching falling boxes of shoes, matching accessories with their fabulous outfit, making piles of cupcakes, grooming dogs, etc. This trend is unfortunately not limited to digital games; a few years ago, Lego made a surprising move by creating two different collections for boys and girls. While the collection for boys called *City* is based on the exploration of public spaces, professional activities and means of transportation, the pinkish collection for girls called *Friends* revolves around domestic settings and tasks, in addition to offering more limited possibilities in terms of construction and creativity, transforming the Lego set into a mere dollhouse.

These games for girls tell young female players what their real-life interests and range of activities should be confined to. In addition to sending an underlying message that the domestic sphere is a feminine domain, these games literally train young girls to become "good" mothers and spouses by asking them to constantly perform household related tasks. As demonstrated by Bogost (2007), video games can be a powerful means of persuasion; in addition to conveying ideological messages through representation (as in all forms of media), they force players to perform actions and follow procedures according to a program's code, in ways that can shape behaviour and alter a player's vision of the world. The introduction of the book *Feminine Mystique* written by Cail Collins in

2013 suggests to what extent these repetitive and superficial domestic tasks can be alienating for the women who perform them. Before urbanization and industrialization, explains the author, women played an instrumental role in the family economy, through crafting various items and exchanging them for other supplies. Women were also perpetually exhausted by the amount of work involved in cooking, cleaning and manufacturing things. After Americans moved from farms to cities, and following the invention of home appliances, suburban housewives were freed from their most time-consuming – and most creative – chores, and being a stay-at-home mother and wife no longer required specific abilities. Reduced to consumers whose biggest concern was to find the best laundry detergent, women (especially well-educated ones) became lonely, bored, unfulfilled and depressed (Collin (2013) in Friedan, 1963, p. xii-xv). Similarly, girls who play games such as *Barbie Dreamhouse Party* have nothing to do other than clicking a button to choose between a limited selection of dresses, shoes, jewelry, ingredients, etc. Just as suburban wives of the sixties were stripped of fulfilling craft activities, young girl players are deprived of challenging and stimulating gameplay. Moreover, the appropriation possibilities of girl games are limited to such a degree that little space is left for inventiveness and emancipation. In this context, it comes as no surprise that young girls are less interested in games than boys (ESA, 2015).

Hypersexualized female characters and Mulvey's Male Gaze

The theory of the male gaze, developed by Laura Mulvey in her iconic 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, supports an understanding that the objectification of female game characters is part of a long tradition. In her article, Mulvey focuses on two contradictory pleasures provided by conventional cinema: identification with the character on the screen and “scopophilia” which, according to Freud, involves the pleasure of “taking other people as objects” and “subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (1975, p. 198 and 202). In patriarchal societies characterized by gender inequality, the pleasure of looking has been unevenly divided between the active/male/subject of the look and passive/female/object of the look (1975, p. 203). According to Mulvey, Hollywood movies reinforce this unfair division, insofar as female characters are used as mere spectacles that interrupt the flow of action, while male characters control the action and serve as the “bearer” of the spectator’s look (1975, pp. 203-204). As a result, female characters are reduced to erotic objects of contemplation for the visual pleasure of male characters within the

story, and of spectators in the audience. According to Mulvey, different cinema techniques, such as pans over women's legs or close-ups of women's faces, are used to structure the film around the male protagonist's look, in a way that encourages both men and women viewers to identify with him and fix their gaze on the passive female character (1975, p. 204). In light of Mulvey's theory, female viewers are stuck in a double bind; they are forced to identify with the opposite gender and objectify their own kind. Conventional Hollywood films therefore seem to be made by men and for men. Other feminist film scholars, like Teresa de Lauretis (1984) and Linda Williams (1991) believe that the identification of the viewer with the character is a more complex and fluid process; women spectators may also identify with the passive female character or with both characters in alternation. In any case, there seem to be few good options for women to identify with, and no role model to draw inspiration from.

Similarly, many female characters in recent video games are used as eye candy to please the target male audience. In her video [“Women as Background Decoration”](#), Sarkeesian (2014) highlights the presence, in numerous games such as *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft, 2012), *Forza Horizon* (Turn 10 Studios, 2012) and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos, 2011), of “insignificant non-playable female characters whose sexuality or victimhood is exploited as a way to infuse edgy, gritty or racy flavouring into game worlds”. Objectified by the way they are dressed and animated, these characters are designed to function as mere ornaments to titillate assumed straight male players. AAA companies not only display scantily clad female bodies in their video games, but also in their promotional campaigns. A 1997 [Sega Saturn advertisement](#), which was selected as the best ad campaign of the year by *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, features a gorgeous naked blond woman whose breasts and pubic area are hidden by screenshots of the company's games, and whose image is accompanied by the following text:

In case you did not notice, there is a beautiful, naked woman on this page. When you've got Sega Saturn's triple 32-bit processing power, NOTHING ELSE MATTERS. She's got blonde hair, blue eyes and the best body her money can buy. SO WHAT! There's no time for distractions when you're deep into Sega Saturn [...]

The woman appearing in this ad is not only treated as a beautiful decoration, but also referred to as a useless distraction for male players. As pointed out by Sarkeesian (2014), we can trace this

trend back to a 1971 [advertisement](#) for the *Computer Space* arcade cabinet, featuring a woman in a transparent nightgown passively standing beside the machine. These ads are not only selling a game, but a culture in which women are reduced to their passivity and their “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 203). Just as *films noirs* objectify their powerful and deadly *femmes fatales*, recent video games also tend to hypersexualize the most empowered female characters. Special agent Rachael Foley, from *Resident Evil: Revelations* (Capcom, 2012), for example, earned the nickname “pair of walking tits” for her plunging neckline, which goes all the way down to her belly (Perron, 2015, p. 105-106).

Because video games are an interactive medium, players are not “passively” looking at what producers want them to see; they actively control their avatars by moving the camera, and therefore become partly responsible for the objectification of female characters (Sarkeesian, 2014). In mature content open-world role-playing games like *Watch Dogs* (Ubisoft, 2014) and *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012), some sexy female characters “programmed with crude looping sexualized behaviors” even serve as “minimally interactive sex objects to be used and abused” (Sarkeesian, 2014). For all these reasons, video games seem to amplify the pleasures of scopophilia involving the subjection of someone to a *controlling* gaze. In video games, the objectification of female characters does not only operate at the level of representation, but also at the level of gameplay, since the mechanisms and cinema techniques that allow visual pleasure are embedded in the program code, and their use is left to the discretion of players.

According to Mathieu Triclot, the critical distance from a fictional character required for visual pleasure is more difficult to achieve with a playable protagonist, because players tend to consider them as their alter egos (2015, p. 29). On the contrary, Marion Coville believes that playable female avatars who always appear from behind increase the scopophilic pleasure of seeing without being seen (2015, p. 56). Some male players reported to choose to animate female avatars in MMORPGs because they find they are more pleasant to look at (Bonenfant, 2013, p. 180). While male avatars generally have their butt strategically hidden, obscured, cut out of the frame with an over-the-shoulder camera angle, or covered by a piece of fabric as is the case in *Batman: Arkham Knight* (Rocksteady Studios, 2015), action heroines often wear light clothing and tight outfits that mould

to their butt and seem inappropriate in their perilous situation (Sarkeesian, 2016c). Policewoman Jill Valentine from *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 2002), for instance, wears a uniform that enhances her curves without providing any protection against bloodthirsty zombies (Perron, 2015: 107). Much has also been written about the objectification of the infamous character Lara Croft (Blanchet, 2015). Feminist game scholars are generally ambivalent towards this action heroine who is at once a “feminist icon” and a “cyberbimbo” (Kennedy, 2002), a “kick-ass, intelligent female superhero” and a “hypersexualized caricature” (Graner Ray, 2003). In her article “Andromeda on the Rocks: Retreading and Resisting Tropes of Female Sacrifice in *Tomb Raider*”, published in this issue of *Kinephanos*, Meghan Blythe Adams (2017) highlights the ambivalence of Lara Croft in the recent games *Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2015). Although her feminine features are less exaggerated than in previous games of the series, and her outfit is better adapted to the role of adventurer, her deaths are more spectacularized and eroticized than ever. Indeed, richly detailed moments of her peril are accompanied by heavy breathing, whimpering, and her final gasps before dying, and the scenes in which she is impaled on branches, pipes or other phallic objects are imbued with sexual symbolism.

Sarkeesian’s (2016a) video [“Body Language & The Male Gaze”](#) provides a glimpse of how Mulvey’s concept can be mobilized in studies of female video game characters. Drawing on Mulvey, we can also speculate that in games like *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil*, players are simultaneously encouraged to identify with the female protagonist, and to objectify her. Both male and female players are therefore stuck in an uncomfortable and contradictory position. However, male players have more opportunities to identify with characters of their own gender that are not objectified. As Shaw (2014) demonstrates in *Gaming at the Edge*, identification is not the only pleasure available through gaming, and the possibility for players to identify with a character that resembles themselves is not as important as seeing their gender, body type, style and sexuality being somehow represented, validating their existence. What Mulvey implies about Hollywood cinema in 1975 can be equally applied to video games in 2017: the constant objectification of female characters and action heroines gives the impression that video games are made by men and for men. In addition to consolidating the idea that men are meant to look while women are meant to be looked at, many video games with action heroines exclude women from their assumed

audience. Less sexualized and objectified female protagonists would allow players of all genders to identify with female avatars without having to enter into a conflicted voyeurism, in addition to making women players feel more welcome in game culture.

According to Mulvey, the fetishization of female characters arose as one of the responses to the castration anxiety evoked by women's bodies, alongside the response of sadism (1975, p. 205). When female characters in Hollywood movies are not objectified, explains the author, they are subjected to male characters' sadistic desires, and are often brutalized, kidnapped, violated or killed. The same can be said for female characters in video games, who are more often victims of men's violence than the other way around, as we shall see in the next section.

The female victim and Boyle's theory on gendered media violence

Karen Boyle's (2015) study on gendered media violence suggests that the frequent depiction of women as victims rather than aggressors is based on essentialist conceptions of women as weak and caring. In our society, violence is generally associated with men and victimhood with women. According to Boyle, violent women such as Karla Homolka, who helped her husband rape and kill three teenage girls in Canada, and Janet Charlton, who killed her partner with an axe because he abused her daughter and herself, are considered guilty of breaking the law and transgressing gender norms (2005, p. 95). They represent a threat to essentialist conceptions of women as biologically nurturing, passive, and vulnerable, as well as a menace to gender binaries and to the domination of men (2005, p. 98-100). Boyle explains that our society generally finds two different ways to contain these threats; either denying the agency of violent women and focusing on their victimhood, or disavowing their gender and depicting them as unnatural women. For example, Homolka was considered subject to manipulation by her husband and a victim of his violence. She therefore got a relatively short sentence of 12 years in jail, despite the gravity of her crimes (2005, p. 101-102). In contrast, Charlton's act of self-defense was interpreted as an unconventional and unfeminine choice she made as a divorced woman and former escort. As a result, she had to spend 21 months in jail for trying to survive her partner's aggression (2005, p. 107). Women who are capable of violence are sources of anxiety in our societies, as illustrated in *noir* and *neo-noir* films such as *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987) and *Basic Instinct*

(Verhoeven, 1992), in which a *femme fatale* momentarily disrupts the patriarchal order by plotting against a man before being neutralized or killed (Boyle, 2005, p. 126). This partly explains why news reports rarely point out the gender of male perpetrators and victims, while the gender of female abusers is often emphasized and their femininity denied. According to Boyle, the most socially accepted violent women in our societies are mothers who are protecting or avenging their children, since childbearing and child-caring have traditionally been considered sites of female power. Inversely, the most unnatural crime for a woman is to kill or harm a child (2005, pp. 118-119).

Boyles' theory concerning gendered media violence suggests a hypothesis as to why the game industry seems hesitant to depict women as violent, preferring to cast them as victims. It can also be used to explain why the very few violent female protagonists in video games are often fighting for their lives or trying to defend vulnerable people, such as children. This is the case of Bayonetta; though she refuses to take care of a child or to be called "mother", her mission consists of saving the world while protecting a child and her guardian (Coville, 2015, p. 64). In *Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2013), Lara Croft fights for her survival and kills to save her vulnerable female friend Sam. Boyle's theory can also help to elucidate why survival horror games more often allow players to choose a playable female character, in comparison with any other video game genre (Perron, 2015: 100). Emily Hartwood, from *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992), and Jill Valentine, from *Resident Evil: Revelation* (Capcom, 2012), feature among the numerous female avatars who can be controlled by players to run away from monsters and zombies. Players of survival horror games derive pleasure from feelings of danger and vulnerability, because their gameplay is based on escaping more than attacking (Perron, 2015, pp. 113-114). Since masculinity is, by convention, incompatible with the role of victim, it seems more "natural" to cast a woman in the role of a terrified playable character who is constantly running for her life, shouting, falling, limping and hiding.

Boyle's theory suggests serious consequences of wide-spread depictions of men as perpetrators of violence and women as victims; the recurrence of this trope in media representations constructs men as powerful, dominant, and aggressive, while reinforcing the belief that women are vulnerable

and passive. In addition to normalizing men's violence, it keeps women in a "state of fear that consolidates patriarchal control" and stigmatizes women's acts of aggression even in cases of self-defense (2005, p. 80). It would, however, be inaccurate to believe that only women suffer from this division of roles. As Boyle explains, male victims often feel more trapped and isolated than female victims because they do not comply with the standard model of masculinity, and this is possibly why they turn into aggressors more often than female victims (2005, p. 99).

Women-as-Monsters and Barbara Creed's Monstrous-Feminine

Occasionally, female game characters are neither sexy action heroines nor passive victims, but terrifying monsters that the player must eliminate in order to survive. Barbara Creed's theory of the Monstrous-Feminine articulates how monstrosity in video games is often associated with female reproductive organs and fears of powerful women. As Creed (1993) explains in her book *Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, every society has its own conceptions of what is horrific about women. Because of Freud's influence, men's fears of women are often associated with a boy's assumption that his mother was castrated by his father. In his paper "Fetichism", Freud (1927) writes: "Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital" (Freud in Creed, 1993, p. 1). Freud (1922) also compares the sight of female genitalia surrounded by hair with the horrifying sight of Medusa's decapitated head. In ancient Greek mythology, Medusa is a monster who has venomous snakes in place of hair and who turns onlookers into stones. For Creed, it is not surprising that Freud makes such an analogy; he considers the snakes phallic symbols that mitigate the threat of castration, and the fact that Medusa "stiffs" her onlookers allows the psychoanalyst to make a clever analogy with the male erection: "[becoming stiff] offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of the penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact" (Freud in Creed, 1993, p. 2).

Drawing on Campbell's research on primitive mythology, Creed defends the idea that man does not fear woman as castrated, but rather woman as castrator. Indeed, Campbell notes a recurrent motif in primitive mythologies: the "toothed vagina", which supposedly provoked injury or castration during sexual intercourse. As pointed out by Creed, this belief was sometimes used to justify that "women must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened – usually by a hero

figure – before intercourse can safely take place” (1993, p. 2). The counterpart of the *vagina dentata* myth, explains Campbell, is the “phallic mother” who is perfectly illustrated by the figure of the witch with her long fingers and nose (1993, p. 1). The expression “phallic mother” appeared for the first time in Freud’s (1933) *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* to describe how “the fear of spiders expresses dread of mother-incest and horror of the female genitals” (1933, p. 24). In Freud’s theory, “terrible phallic women” such as witches (with their protruding teeth and their broomsticks), represent failed attempts to disavow and compensate for the mother’s lack of a penis, alleviating the threat of castration (Freud in Fenichel, 1946, p. 303). Barbara Creed disagrees with this essentialist view of women as castrated victims. For her, the fear of castration led men to create another monstrous fantasy involving the figure of the woman castrator (1993, p. 5). In her book, she therefore tries to deconstruct the myth that fearful women are those who are castrated, and to explore the idea that women instill fear when they are active and powerful. To emphasize the recurrent connection of the abject and the monstrous with women’s sexuality and with the fear of women as castrators, she analyzes many “faces” of the monstrous-feminine in horror films, including the woman as monstrous womb (*Aliens*, Cameron, 1986), the vampire (*The Hunger*, 1983), the witch (*Carrie*, 1976), the castrating mother (*Psycho*, Hitchcock, 1960) and the deadly castrator (*I Spit On Your Grave*, Monroe, 1978).

In video games, the terrible phallic woman is often represented by a female villainess who holds a whip, swords or guns. As Sarkeesian (2016b) points out in her video [“Sinister Seductress”](#), many games, such as *Diablo 3* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2013) and *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013), also depict female monsters as spiders. In *Doom 3* (ID Software, 2004), the female monster named Vagary takes the form of a naked female bust on a giant spider’s body, whose enlarged abdomen carries a demon fetus. The [female monster](#) of the game *Battle Monsters* (Sega, 1995) is obviously inspired by Medusa: her head is covered with snakes and she uses a giant boa as her main weapon. Men’s fear of sexual difference and castration, however, is better symbolized by sexualized female monsters. In *Resident Evil: Revelations* (Capcom, 2012), for instance, overtly eroticized special agent Rachael Foley turns into a monster after being attacked by a zombie, and becomes one of the most fearful bosses of the game. Bernard Perron describes this monster as the perfect embodiment of the “phallic woman”, because a viscous phallus appears

in the middle of her face (2015, p. 110). Careful examination of this [strange appendage](#) allows one to distinguish a cavity with teeth, recalling the *vagina dentata*. Considering Creed's explanation, we can better understand that the association of female monsters with phallic or castrating women reinforces harmful myths and beliefs about women's sexuality as something to be repudiated and controlled, in addition to reflecting ongoing fears of sexual difference and powerful women who challenge the patriarchal order.

The repetition of similar female bodies and Delvaux's "Serial Girls"

The "Serial Girls" figure, theorized by Martine Delvaux in 2013, helps to explain how the repetition of similar female bodies in different games, within the same game, or in games' paratexts leads to the consolidation of unrealistic beauty canons. As described by Delvaux, Serial Girls are a configuration of several female bodies that look alike, share common shapes, and are in a transitional state between childhood and adulthood:

The serial girls are like twins whose movements are perfectly coordinated, who move in sync beside each other, who can only be differentiated from one another by a detail in their clothing, shoes, hair and skin colour, or by slightly distinct curves... Girls as machines, girls as images, girls as spectacles, girls as merchandise, girls as ornaments... they are the illusion of perfection. (Our translation, Delvaux, 2013, pp. 10-11)

The Serial Girls' bodies are all based on the same model for beauty - a thin young woman with long legs, slight curves, delicate facial features and fleshy lips. To illustrate this figure and emphasize the idea of seriality, Delvaux provides examples of mass-produced Barbie Dolls and Real Dolls, as well as the perfectly synchronized naked bodies of Tiller Girls and Crazy Horse dancers. However, Serial Girls may also refer to any individual female body or to any fragmented female body part (breast, buttock, legs, etc.) that serves as a metonym for the whole series, constantly displayed by fashion, television, film and advertisement industries. In this regard, Delvaux provides the example of women's body parts featuring on DIM's stocking advertisements (2013, p. 73).

Not surprisingly, we can find Serial Girls almost everywhere in video game culture: Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996), Vanille (*Final Fantasy XII*, Square Enix, 2009), the female characters from *Dead or Alive Xtreme 3* (Tecmo, 2016) and many others all seem to be cast

from the same mould. Countless video games' promotional campaigns participate in this global serialization and fragmentation of women's bodies. As mentioned by Pascale Thériault (2017) in this issue of *Kinephanos*, Bioware launched an advertisement campaign in 2011 for *Mass Effect 3* that involved asking players to choose a female protagonist from a series of [six avatars](#) who have the exact same body shape, but are distinguished by different skin, hair, and eye colour. This way, Bioware was sure to end up with a female protagonist that fit perfectly with beauty standards while creating the illusion of choice for players. A [controversial advertisement](#) for the *PlayStation* remote with two joysticks, published in the *Paris Games Week* catalogue in Fall 2012, displayed an image of a woman's bust with one breast at the front and one at the back, juxtaposed with the slogan "Touch both sides for added enjoyment" (Mar Lar, 2013). After receiving strong criticism, Sony apologized and explained that this publicity was only intended for the convention's participants who were mostly young men (the subtext being that women players were not meant to see it, nor attend the convention). In this advertisement, a woman's body is not only fragmented into pieces, but also artificially transformed in a way that emphasizes her function as a sexual toy. The same can be said for the [Bundle](#) of *Dead Island: Riptide* (Deep Silver, 2013) which includes a hand-painted figurine of a dislocated and bloody female bust with breast implants. Mutilated female bodies such as these illustrate how serial girls are deprived of humanity and reduced to mere pieces of meat. The Serial Girls figure also applies to booth babes who dress alike, parade together, and pose with players at video game conventions to create a spectacle (in recent years, booth babes have tended to be replaced by cosplayers who also reproduce Serial Girls' features). Appearing side-by-side, booth babes are almost undistinguishable, emptied of individuality and dispossessed of their souls. They remain anonymous, instead of having identities and names of their own. Delvaux talks about the rigidity and the frigidity of serial girls; when they move mechanically alongside each other, they seem programmed, robotic, corpse-like. After all, women are less threatening when they are emptied of their humanity, their substance, their sweat, and their blood (2013, p. 35 and 66-67).

In many games and most MMORPGs, seriality does not only operate at the level of representation for female avatars, but also at the level of gameplay for both male and female protagonists. Indeed, avatar personalization tools give players a limited range of options for changing the appearance of

their playable character. In *The Sims Online* (EA, 2002), for instance, it is possible to change the skin colour, eyes, nose, mouth and haircut of both female and male avatars, but impossible to modify their body size and shape. No matter what options players choose, their avatars will always look similar. The same can be said for the avatar personalization tool of MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004); players can choose between a wide range of races that seem very different at first glance, but which are all based on the same hour-glass (female) or V-shaped (male) moulds.

Martine Delvaux's theory helps to clarify how and why most female game characters seem based on the same inaccessible beauty model, following a mechanical mode of production that characterizes modern capitalism and production lines (2013, p. 66). Just like manufactured products, serial girls rely on reproductions of the same instead of the actualization of difference. Although they create the illusion of diversity through variations of skin, eye, and hair colour, they remain interchangeable objects of consumption that are equally decorative. The main issue, explains Delvaux, is not a single occurrence of the Serial Girls figure in one media, but the continual repetition of the same body type in many varieties of representation. The seriality of these figures is what leads people to judge real women by unrealistic beauty standards, while encouraging women to align their image with an artificial model to become part of the series (2013, p. 213). This serial model of femininity is so pervasive that it tends to replace the women of flesh and bones it is supposed to represent (2013, p. 192). Delvaux's theory raises concerns that the repetition of serial girls in countless video games, advertisements, conventions, and avatar personalization tools tends to naturalize unachievable beauty norms, such as an extremely tiny waist and perfectly round breasts.

Conclusion

In light of these examples, it becomes clear that game studies and feminist theories can mutually benefit from the establishment of more bridges between them. The fact that traditional feminist theories, written decades ago, are highly applicable in studies of representations of women in video games today indicates that these theories are not outdated, and that work still needs to be done in game culture regarding gender equality. All the stereotypes and theories explored here deserve

more extensive attention and analysis; the main goal of this article was to provide a broad overview of potential applications of feminist theories in critiquing problematic aspects of gender stereotypes in video games. The authors wished to show how past and present feminist theories may be used to uncover old-fashion patriarchal dynamics that influence many female characters, providing the occasion to actualize frequently forgotten theories and to argue in favour of a more active dialogue between game theorists and feminist thinkers.

This article may give the impression that game culture is condemned to be a sexist playground. It is, however, important to stress that feminist theories could also be mobilized to highlight the innovative or critical potential of some female game characters. For example, Monique Wittig's (2007) provocative essay "The Straight Mind" could foreshadow how woman characters who are (or could be) involved in same-sex relationships, like FemShep in *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012), contribute to denaturalizing heteronormative norms and increase tolerance towards homosexuality. Butler's theory on the drag queen or drag king's gender parody points toward the subversive potential of women characters whose feminine features are highly exaggerated, as demonstrated in Coville's (2015) analysis of *Bayonetta* (Sega, 2009), but can also be utilized to analyze women characters who cross-dress and act "like a man", such as Zelda in *Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998) and Aveline de Grandpré in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012). Her theory concerning parodic repetition of the heterosexual model within a butch/fem couple could, for its part, be mobilized to study lesbian relationships in games like *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012). Mulvey's conception of an alternative cinema that short-circuits visual pleasure suggests the subversive potential of leading women characters who are only playable from the first-person point of view, such as Samus Aran from *Metroid Prime* (Retro Studios, 2002) and Chell from *Portal 1* and *2* (Valve corporation, 2007 and 2011). Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* could help in stressing the empowering aspects of woman characters whose bodies are intrinsically bound to technology, as is also the case of Samus and Chell. Feminist theories could also be mobilized to imagine innovative game characters that are yet to be designed. Luce Irigaray's (1984) theory on the goddess and the mother-daughter couple, for instance, could help inspire original women characters who compensate for the absence of these figures in the biblical narrative and in the media landscape. Delvaux's (2013) theory on how the Serial Girls figure can be appropriated by

groups of women who unite to form a collective, plural and political entity – like Femen or Pussy Riot – could inspire game designers to create groups of women characters who join forces and perfectly synchronize their movements to neutralize an enemy. Feminist theories are an inexhaustible source of inspiration, and it is up to us to use them wisely.

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Résumé

Partant de l’idée que les théories féministes demeurent sous-utilisées en *game studies*, les auteures démontrent qu’une mobilisation des théories de pionnières féministes comme Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Betty Friedan et Laura Mulvey aide à comprendre pourquoi sont problématiques les stéréotypes de genre vidéoludiques comme la *ms. male*, la demoiselle en détresse, la fée du logis et l’héroïne d’action sexy. Elles montrent également comment des

concepts développés plus récemment par des auteures féministes comme Karen Boyle, Barbara Creed et Martine Delvaux peuvent souligner à quel point sont dommageables la victimisation constante des femmes dans les jeux vidéo, l'abjection de leur sexualité et la reproduction du même modèle de corps féminin d'un jeu à l'autre. Sur une note plus positive, les auteures offrent un bref aperçu des théories féministes pouvant être mobilisées pour analyser ou imaginer des personnages de jeux qui transcendent les schèmes patriarcaux et hétéronormatifs.

Mots-clés : jeux vidéo, féminisme, représentation, genre, stéréotype, théorie féministe



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Diversity without Defense: Reframing Arguments for Diversity in Games

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Abstract

Most media studies arguments for the representation of marginalized groups have focused on exploring why more diversity in cultural texts is important. Points that have been made encompass everything from claims of direct media effects to analyzing how trends in representation reinforce hegemonic norms. Because of this, we tend to only see diversity as being possible when a strong “good business sense” case can be made. In contrast, by treating diversity, rather than pluralism, as the expected norm, we can begin to think more creatively about representation beyond niche marketing and simplistic assumptions about what “good” and “bad” representations are.

Keywords: video games, feminism, representation, gender, sexuality, diversity

Résumé en français à la fin du texte

Introduction

Cutting through disciplinary differences, theoretical interventions, and methodologies, when it comes to research on representation, there is one fairly consistent theme: Representation Matters! Media studies arguments for the representation of marginalized groups largely focus on exploring why more diversity in media is important. Points made encompass everything from claims of direct effects to analyzing how trends in representation reinforce hegemonic norms (Gross, 1998; Hall, 1997). In my recent book, *Gaming at the Edge* (2014), I took a slightly different approach to punctuation via an audience-based study: Representation matters? My goal was to investigate if and how representation came to matter to people who play games and are members of marginalized groups, looking at the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality.

Although my participants expressed a wide array of positions on this central question (representation matters?), one thing was very clear: seeing people like them in the media they consumed was not the primary driver of their media choices. Yet, many still regularly embraced the importance of representation in a general sense. They rejected direct media effects theories, embracing a more active audience description of their own relationship to the media they consumed. Some did express the possibility that representation had a great effect on others, somewhat like a third-person effect (Davison, 1983), particularly on children and young adults. However, they rejected market logic-driven forms of representation that only represent groups well when they are being targeted as consumers. Many of my participants insisted that they did not necessarily need to see one specific aspect of their identity (like sex, gender, sexuality, race, etc.) represented in all their media, because their identities and relationship to media characters were complex enough to let them feel like they could connect with a wide array of media characters. But what they did need is people like them, in an expansive intersectional sense, to be seen. Representation matters because it makes their identity legible.

Building on that project, I want to suggest a slightly different approach to punctuation moving forward: Representation matters. By doing so, I am not rejecting the importance of exclamations and questions. Rather, I am suggesting that representation being important in the social sense is well established, and yet we consistently feel called upon to defend it. Based on my own

research, I posit that the exclamation point approach, though unintentionally, actually helps reinforce the lack of diversity as a norm. That is, we only see diversity as being possible when a strong case for it can be made, such as a good business sense or a direct effects case; and that is precisely how ideology works. The status quo gets to be enshrined as such while we constantly have to explain why exceptions to the norm might exist.

Embracing “Representation matters.” allows us to refuse to be put on the defensive. “Representation matters.” forces those opposed to diversity to fight our certainty rather than dismiss our exclamations, while also not placing the burden of demanding representation on particular bodies. I have yet to hear a good articulation of why diversity in representation is bad for anyone. All of the arguments I have seen dismiss the discourses in favour of “representation does matter” out of hand, but they never actually make the case that diversity in media is a bad idea. At most, they point to specific failed commercial examples, but even then fail to take into account marketing explanations for those failures. New arguments for representation can offer new possibilities for what representation and critiques of representation can look like. In *Gaming at the Edge* (2014), for example, I suggest that we can actually argue for more diversity in games precisely by pointing to where representation is not as important in games. Building upon that, in this article I reconsider the history of how games came to be so narrowly targeted, what waves of feminist history show about how we might counter the dominance of particular forms of white hegemonic masculinity in games, and consider critically how arguments for representation have shaped resistance to increased diversity in video games. I conclude that “Representation Matters.” can help restructure the debates around who gets to be in games, and offer some suggestions for how feminist game scholars in particular might frame their work moving forward.

But, Representation Matters!

Now do not get me wrong: coming from a cultural studies perspective, I do think there is plenty of evidence that representation matters. Even from an audience perspective, certainly, some people care a great deal about representation in games and other media. They want the characters on the screens, playable or not, human or not, to occasionally look like, act like, think like, or

interact in the world like they do. It is easy to jump from those experiences to marketing arguments that say we should have more female characters in games so more women will play games. But not everyone feels that way.

Following a survey of children ages 11-18, Rosalind Wiseman and Ashly Burch found that a fair number of participants had no preference when it came to their player character, though they do say girls preferred having a female character more than boys preferred having a male character (Hall, 2015). Heidi McDonald (2015) has similar findings regarding romance options, where heterosexual players care less about the optional same-sex relationships in games with romance options, but homosexual and bisexual players care a great deal about having them. However, Wiseman and Burch's data show that the gender difference is mostly driven by the high school girls, as looking just within age groups, middle school boys cared more than middle school girls about playing as male characters. There are some interesting generational and social context issues going on here that require more in depth analysis. A nice supporting piece of data to my own research with adults is Wiseman and Burch's finding that the vast majority of their respondents did not care about the gender of the protagonist (Hall, 2015).

Wiseman and Burch's reading of their findings is similar but slightly different from my own. They suggest that creating a large number of male protagonists is turning potential female players away; thus it is good business sense to make more female protagonists. This can be explained by the fact that they are developers who were presenting their findings at the Game Developers' Association annual conference. However, lots of people say similar things both inside and outside the industry. In 2009, Brenda Brathwaite (now Romero) was already saying: "It took them a while, but developers eventually got hip to the fact that there are women out there who want to control female characters, and now they're getting hip to the fact that there are LGBT gamers out there who want to control LGBT characters" (Ochalla, 2009). Constructed this way, however, the argument treats gender and sexuality as mutually exclusive. It also positions marginalized groups' representation as contingent upon their consumption of the medium and gives the impression that if no women played games, there would be no case for representing women well or making them protagonists in games. Even Wiseman and Burch insist that game

designers should include female protagonists if they do not want to push girls away (Hall, 2015). But what if they do? Perhaps that is why misogynists are so intent on driving women out of gaming. If the majority of arguments are framed this way, the mere presence of women as a desirable consumer base does seem to be enough to change game content.

The trouble, moreover, is that when we jump so quickly to the “women play games, therefore they should be represented in games” argument, we ignore that there is no such thing as a singular woman to be represented. Forms of femininity and relationships to female as a sex and to feminine as a gender identity are complex. Gender and sex are not inherently tethered to one another, and neither is truly binary (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Moreover, they intersect with race, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, embodiment, etc. Relatedly, if we always approach representation as good business sense, then we are only suggesting representation matters to in-group members to the extent that they are an interesting market, despite the fact that the wide variety of media representation studies suggest it matters because media representations reinforce hegemonic ways of seeing the world. To put it over simplistically, representing minorities well to themselves might do some psychic good, but it does not do much towards breaking down power structures.

Going back to Representation Matters? for a moment, one of my former interviewees articulated the importance of representation in media broadly in this way: “[Seeing people like me in media] shows that I’m being heard and seen and I’m being acknowledged and I’m here.” If representation in media is a form of evidence for what forms of being in the world are possible, then it is important for everyone to see, not just for the people who might appear, on a surface level, to look like those characters. That is, representation has to be about more than niche marketing.

Moreover, the marketing approach, evident in Romero’s quote and the Wiseman and Burch discussion of their results, dismisses those players who do not care, personally, about sharing identifiers with games’ player-characters. Take my interviewee Julia, for instance, who when talking about Kratos in the game *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica Studio, 2005) said: “He could

be a bunny rabbit for all I care.” If we take players seriously when they say they do not care what the thing on the screen looks like, does that negate all arguments for more diversity in games? I do not think so. If Kratos could be anything and the game would be as enjoyable (though certainly there would have to be narrative changes), then why not a woman, why not a Black trans man, why not, indeed, a bunny rabbit? If it truly does not matter, then there is very little reason for white male characters to be treated as the default norm. Not defending representation as all important is just as powerful to me, and less marginalizing and essentializing, than saying there should be more female player-characters so high school girls will play video games more. It would also be less dismissive of the 40% of girls who did not prefer playing as a female character in Wiseman and Burch’s study (Hall, 2015).

One thing Wiseman, Burch and I agree on though is that if representation does not matter to a fair percentage of players, then perhaps the dominance of heterosexual, white, cisgendered men is not necessary. They suggest it is not necessary because girls play, but I suggest that even if game designers think their target market is hetero/white/cis male players, they can create more diverse games. Diversity should be more than a marketing hook to draw new audiences. By treating diversity as the expected norm, we can begin to think more creatively about representation beyond niche marketing, outside of treating gender, race, sexuality, etc. as distinct issues to be handled, and move beyond simplistic assumptions about what good and bad representation looks like.

How Did We Get Here?

Part of how we talk about representation in games is tied to problems with how we tell the history of games, both in a popular and an academic sense. For instance, it is often taken for granted that games were once a boys-only domain and now, increasingly, women play games. Certainly, a lot of game advertisements from the 1980s and 1990s do hail a particular form of heterosexual masculine subject. However, lived experiences and advertisements rarely correlate. Gaming as an activity has been much more omnipresent and its audience much more diverse in reality than is evident in the advertisements.

Women have been a part of the game industry and have been players of games, as long as games have existed. Digital games have also been influenced by feminisms since the beginning. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) point out in *Games of Empire*, digital games were invented during second wave feminism and, while the impact of that context was not always evident in their content, it was part of the social milieu into which games were born. Nineties cyberfeminism, they argue, helped shape both the Girl Games movement (i.e. female friendly games for young girls) and the Grrl Gaming movement, which they describe as “a more kick ass affair, appearing in the hyperviolent world of shooting games through the amateur player production of female ‘skins’ or avatar identities and the formation of female game clans such as PMS or Babes with Attitude” (2009, p. 21). They argue that these player-created female avatars, in turn, demonstrated to the industry that maybe they should include women as an option when they make their games. But then, what happened? Why are there so few women in the games industry? Why is it common knowledge that games are a masculine hobby?

Certainly the industry is not very diverse. Two reports, nearly ten years apart, show that the majority of people in the industry (at least those who read English and took the survey) are heterosexual, white, males (IGDA 2005; 2014). In 2005, 88.5% of respondents were male, 83.3% were white, and 92% were heterosexual. In 2014, those numbers changed a bit: 76% were male, 81% were white, and 86% were heterosexual. Although it would be easy to say things got better looking at some of the changes in numbers, it is important to note that the 2014 data includes students and professors, whereas 2005 was a survey of people working in game companies. The 2014 report even points out that 30% of the students surveyed were female, which might be part of what is driving that jump from 11% to 22% female respondents. The 2014 report also oddly collapses Africans and African Americans, but it is unclear how or if folks in the broader Black diaspora were included. Moreover, they continue to use English only surveys, meaning that large portions of this global industry are being left out of the picture of what the game industry looks like. It would be interesting to see how much all of these numbers change if you remove students and teachers, and if you parse this out by role in the industry. But, no matter how you slice it the industry is pretty homogenous.

The thing to remember though is that this is not simply an accident of history. People who are members of marginalized groups have always worked on games, since the beginning, but there is clearly something in how the industry has been structured that has reinforced this homogeneity. I suspect it follows much the same reason all tech jobs have become such male dominated fields. As Janet Abbate (2012) points out in *Recoding Gender*, women were the original computer programmers, back when it was clerical work (though clerical work that required those women to have advanced math degrees). It was the post-WW2 professionalization of the computer industry that helped push out women, people of color, and anyone who could not get the college degrees that served as gateways to the new industry. Aphra Kerr's (2006) *The Business and Culture of Digital Games* and Casey O'Donnell's (2014) *Developer's Dilemma* detail some of the dynamics of who gets to be in the game industry, including how norms in hiring and industry culture serve as gate keepers. Moreover, as Laine Nooney (2013) points out, the very way game history has been recorded leaves out those who were/are on the margins: "There has always been more girls to game history than Roberta Williams—we just have not always known where to find them." Finally, in her overview of how game culture became associated with masculinity, Carly Kocurek concludes that early popular coverage of video games countered moral panics around the new medium by "presenting gamers and gaming as representative as an emergent ideal of masculinity" (2015: p. 191). Gaming was made a masculine field, and is continually remade as such.

The hegemonic norms of the game industry also inform game fandoms. Pointing to how women who enjoyed SierraOnline's graphic adventure games felt turned off as the industry shifted to hardcore console gaming (that is, they liked those specific kinds of games, but did not necessarily identify as gamers), Nooney asks: "Is the weird historical trick here that what we have written thus far are not histories of gaming but a history of gamers and that is why so much gets left out?" When I tell non-game studies people that I study games, they often say: "I haven't played games since Atari, Pong, Pac Man, Mario, etc." I wonder sometimes if this is because this is the last time the person I am speaking to remembered games being *for* them. Even the casual games movement does not seem to have changed this feeling, as the term "gamer" has become so heavy with cultural signification that people tell me they do not play games... except

CandyCrush... SingStar... Rockband and so on. Even though Jesper Juul has argued that the “casual revolution” has meant that “video games are fast becoming games for *everyone*,” casual games are still framed in a manner that sets them outside gaming culture (2010: 152).

When it comes to the gaming audience, the common knowledge that video games used to just be for guys and are now, in an ever present now that never becomes a then, gaining more female players is a bit myopic. If we look at the Electronic Software Association reports from the last eleven years (as far back as they are available), the gender split actually has not changed that much.¹

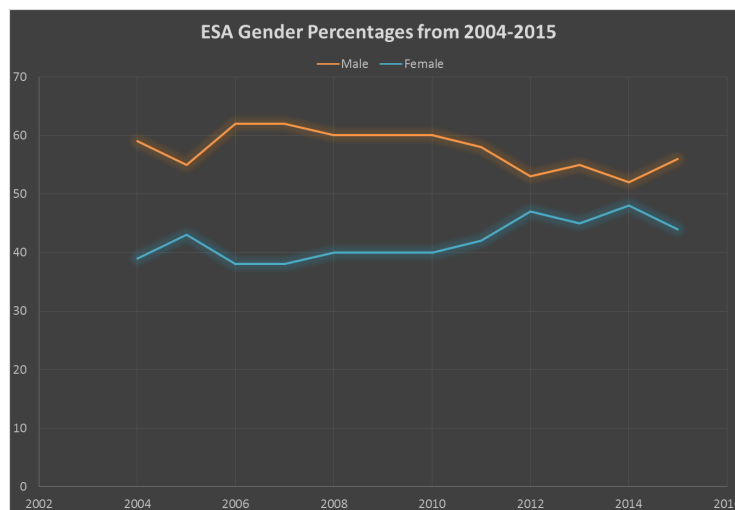


Figure 1: ESA Gender Percentages from 2004-2015

If anything they look a little cyclical, though this data is limited by the fact that they only go back to 2004, and that ESA does not provide much info on how data was collected and how data collection changed over the years. Still, the gender split waivers between 60/40 and 50/50. Yet every year or so, there is another news story proclaiming with surprise that nearly half of video game players are women. Women play games! Adults play games! It is actually surprising that a headline in 2014 says the industry does not know so many women play games given how much

¹ These reports are not all clearly archived through the Electronic Software Association’s website, so each was found by using a search engine to find “ESA Essential Facts” for every year prior to 2016 until none could be found (e.g. 2003 and before).

that story has been repeated over and over for nearly a decade now (Jayanth, 2014). It is almost as if the industry does not care.

It is also important to recognize that the ESA is a lobbying organization whose job is to convince policy makers, as well as the general public, that games are GOOD! They might not be the “other white meat” or “incredibly edible”, but the organization promoting games is seeking to do something very similar to rehabilitating their products’ image.² Games, they report, fix everything from the economy to art, education to health. If games are critiqued as being exclusionary, then they will prove just how diverse their audience is, though they only consider age and gender as relevant factors. They have never reported on race, sexuality, disabilities, class, etc. Claims that “everyone plays games!”, however, ring false against subcultural and pop cultural representations of gaming as a particular kind of activity engaged through particular kinds of bodies. As Mia Consalvo and Chris Paul (2013) point out, within game culture certain types of games count. This is why gamers and people in the industry often dismiss the ESA’s claims that lots of women game by saying they do not play real games. When the industry wants to be good or when some gamers want to dismiss claims that game culture is exclusionary, then the “nearly half of video gamers are women” headlines are trotted out. If one suggests this is a reason games and the industry should change, the “oh, but women only play... [insert whatever casual game is currently popular]” refrain plays once more.

Since the 1990s, many of the attempts to rectify the under- or misrepresentation of women in games have focused largely on courting new female players and designers via “female-friendly” game content. Many of these efforts are driven by the idea of getting more women in the game industry, a clearly necessary equity task given that the industry is so homogenous. Projects that push for more women to enter the industry, however, tend to assume all women are feminists. This assumption in turn allows misogynists to point to female friends discounting feminist arguments as evidence that feminist critiques are wrong. Of course the spirit of such programs should not be too quickly discounted. They are trying to address the very real issue of how

² “The other white meat” was an advertising slogan from the U.S. National Pork Board. “The incredible, edible egg” was a campaign from the American Egg Board to encourage people to eat eggs. In both cases, the campaigns were in response to claims that those products were unhealthy.

women are integrated into games as an industry, a culture, and a commercial product. The unfortunate outcome of gender being such a primary focus of attention in the analysis of games for a long time, however, is that gender in turn became one of the ways people understand their relationship to games.

In my own work, for example, I have found women less willing to identify as gamers, regardless of what they play (Shaw, 2012; 2013). That is not to say that women refused to identify as gamers, or even that they said gender was a reason they refused, but there do seem to be clear and noticeable gender divides in who is willing to invest the gamer as a label, or interested in doing so. Similarly, Wiseman and Burch's study found that 65% of girls surveyed said they were not gamers, while 65% of boys said they were (Hall, 2015). Other studies have described the multifaceted nature of gamer identity (De Grove, Courtois, and Van Looy, 2015; Grooten and Kowert, 2015) and the way discourses about gamers affect how people describe their gameplay (Bergstrom, Fisher, and Jenson, 2014). "Gamer" has become imbued with meaning and is an investment in a fandom. It is more akin to film buff than moviegoer, which is why it is unproductive to call everyone who plays games a gamer. But people do not need to be gamers to count, and for us to care if and how they play games. This was actually a core argument of the so-called "death to gamers" articles which circulated in August 2014, and which in turn became one of several factors that rallied people to the GamerGate cause. I will return to that later.³

So what happened? Why do we continue to forget that women have always made and played digital games? The video game industry crash of the 1980s resulted in a narrowing of the target market, at least in the United States. American game marketers, as well as the game press, began targeting a safer core of white, cis male, young boys and teens... or so the story goes; Koucurek (2015) questions this oversimplification. Graeme Kirkpatrick observes in his analysis of 1980s and 1990s UK gaming magazines, by the 1990s "the gender identity of gamers has been firmly consolidated" (2012). At the same time, amid rhetoric that games are a key entry point into STEM careers and games are boys' toys, the girls' games movement focused its efforts on

³ It is outside the scope of this paper to provide a true comprehensive summary of such a complex phenomenon as GamerGate. For an overview of GamerGate, see Chess and Shaw (2015), Massanari (2015), and Mortensen (2016).

developing games to get girls interested in gaming. Marketing games for girls as a niche audience, however, helped reinforce the idea that mainstream games were for a male audience. As Amanda Cote (2015) demonstrates, mainstream gaming companies more or less ignored the girls' games movement. Her analysis of *Nintendo Power* shows that, from 1994 to 1999 (the core era of the girl games movement), the magazine continued to represent gamers as male, and constructed games culture as a heterosexual, masculine culture. The more recent push towards casual games similarly brackets out these games for everyone, which allows so-called hardcore games to remain targeted to a narrow audience. And as many have argued, game critics and people in the industry who are pushing back on treating this specific group as core now clash with a fan-base that grew up as the core market. This is the history that helped create GamerGate, among many other cultural and social shifts too numerous to cover here.

Moreover, the trouble of emphasizing gender is that efforts to organize women in game development, to get young girls, as well as women interested in gaming, and to represent women better in games reinforce the idea that gender is binary and fails to acknowledge how gender performance intersects with things like sex, sexuality, race, etc. As Dietrich Squinkifer, creator of games like *Dominique Pamplémousse* and *Quing's Quest*, discussed at their keynote during 2014's *Meaningful Play* conference, organizations that promote women in games are not inherently welcoming to people who are gender queer, non-binary, or transgendered. Games that treat gender diversity as a simple picking of female or male avatars are not really representing gender diversely. There are many ways in which an overemphasis on gender as an organizing factor of movements to fix the game industry reflects earlier articulations of feminism as only interested in a collective identity as women, and too often resulted in the erasure of lesbians, women of color, women who do not come from economic privilege, transwomen, and everyone who lives at the intersection of those and other marginalized positions. Perhaps, then, part of the way forward is to revisit feminist history.

Erosion, Not Evolution

We often hear the history of feminism described in waves, and it is important in feminist game studies to connect our research to those political contexts. In *Games of Empire*, Dyer-Witford

and de Peuter (2009) argue that there are some connections to be made between second-wave feminism and attempts at dealing with gender in the early games industry. They identify similar links between third-wave and cyberfeminisms, and 1990s girl game and grrl gamer cultures. As the feminist movement wave tale goes, the first wave of feminism was about suffrage, reproductive and economic rights. The second wave of feminism is often framed in relation to the Equal Rights amendment, *Roe v. Wade*, and Women's Liberation. It is where we get the phrase "the personal is political," meant to emphasize the way sexism pervades everyday life. The third wave of feminism is often characterized as embracing transnationalism, intersectionality, difference, and multivocality. The internet tells me we are now in a fourth wave of feminism, because kids these days use Tumblr more than glue sticks, and Twitter more than poster board. But the internet as a technology has been around since the second wave and has become an increasingly common household utility during the third wave (e.g. 1990s cyberfeminism), so maybe tools are not the only defining factor. Some have used "fourth-wave feminism" synonymously with post-feminism, a term which itself is used to encompass reactions to feminism from a wide range of political positions—most of which oversimplify feminist history and activism. Taxonomies make it really easy to oversimplify them.

But there is something useful in the waves. I suspect the wave theory works rhetorically to help us come to terms with the fact that feminists today are fighting many of the same fights feminists have been fighting for centuries. Reproductive freedom, sexual liberation, and economic equality have been on the table since the first wave. We still do not have the second wave's Equal Rights Amendment. And despite the fact that third- and fourth-wave feminists insist that we need intersectional and transnational feminism, reality rarely lives up to political ideals. That is not to say feminist activists have not accomplished anything. Waves work to erode rocks and beaches slowly. They break existing structures down, but in their wake leave new worlds behind. In response to a critique that the erosion metaphor might be too destructive, an audience member at one of my 2015 talks put it this way: erosion is what gave us the Grand Canyon.

It is also important to remember that at no time is the reality of history easily summarized by such taxonomies. There have always been disagreements within and among feminist movements.

Intersectionality, for one, was not invented in the 90s. Black feminists, in particular though not exclusively, have been arguing that feminism needs to be intersectional throughout all of feminist waves. From Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman Speech" in 1851, to the Combahee River Collective's Statement in 1977, about the importance of fighting against interlocking systems of oppression, to Bernice Johnson Reagon's 1981 call for "coalition politics" (later used as part of a key argument in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, though rarely do those citing Butler cite Reagon), Black feminists have been pointing out the limits of a gender-only focused feminist critique all along.⁴ If we are to chart any shift in mainstream feminism over the past few decades, it is fair to say that more people who identify as feminists are now aware of the importance of intersectionality. Increasingly we see popular conversations on representation reference intersectionality.

Waves work slowly, and while transformation takes time erosion is probably a better model than evolution when thinking about how change happens. Evolution is passive, probabilistic, and assumes change inevitably happens. Erosion, on the other hand, is active. It requires slow, constant, unrelenting activity to be sure, but it does not just magically happen on its own. Feminist games criticism, production, and scholarship have similarly come a long way. From starting conversations about the importance of representation in games, period, we are now in a better place to think critically about what inclusion and representation mean.

This all culminated, for me and others, in 2013. That year it seemed like everyone was talking about representation with renewed urgency. Momentum for this began before this certainly, but 2013 was a year that made it feel like everything came together: From the mainstream industry, 2013 saw EA's Full Spectrum mini-conference on LGBT issues in gaming and the #1reasontobe panel at GDC (a follow-up to 2012's #1reasonwhy panel). LostLevels, an unconference, happened for the first time outside of GDC to allow people who could not afford the conference's high admission costs to meet. GaymerX held a very successful LGBTQ focus fan convention in San Francisco. In the academic realm, the Different Games conference and

⁴ Sojourner Truth's speech is reproduced in Schneir (1994). The Combahee River Collective's Statement and Reagon's talk are reproduced in Smith (2000) [1983].

Queerness and Games conference were held for the first time, and are now going into their fourth year. Much as I hate the phrase, it seemed like things really did get better. This was not just a feminist game studies wave, but a whole ocean of feminist, anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-classist, queer, social justice oriented games research, design, and fandom.

Then, in August of 2014, GamerGate happened. And while I do not have space to talk about all the particularities of GamerGate, I do think it is fair to say that the threats of hacking, doxing, swatting, and the dog-piling of harassment that some “gaters” engaged in raised the stakes of doing critical games work. When I cut through the multiple discourses and events around GamerGate, one thing is very clear: How we talk about representation popularly and academically really does matter to the extent that how we make our arguments shapes the type of opposition we see.

Reframing the Argument for Representation

There are two main arguments for representation: we want to see ourselves reflected in our media and media affects our view of people unlike us. In both cases, there tends to be an oversimplification of what constitutes good and negative representation. Good representation is described as authentic, realistic, or showing groups well. Bad representation, on the other hand, is false, unrealistic, or shows groups negatively or stereotypically. What is wrong with that? Well, as Richard Dyer (1999) points out in his essay “Stereotyping,” critics tend to focus on whether or not stereotypes are true and proving that they are not. Lesbians should not be represented as butch because that is just a stereotype, for example. That is one way of approaching a problem, but in constantly saying that stereotypes are not true, we tend to perform the rhetorical act of saying people who are members of marginalized groups and perform stereotypically either do not exist or are somehow bad. There are many butch lesbians in the world, and their gender performance should not be ignored because of how it has been used in media representations to signify deviance. Rather than focusing on the truth of stereotypes, Dyer argues that we need to focus on how they are being used in a text. Are they being used to make those characters comical, to justify our hatred of them, to make what happens to them a fault in their person, and more generally to make them seem less than human compared to other

characters? Those moments when stereotypes are used to dehumanize are precisely those in which they promote patriarchal, white supremacist, and heteronormative ideologies in media. Too often people are focused on what a good representation of a given group looks like. Such questions are inevitably limiting. Races, genders, and sexualities are not fixable, knowable, static entities that can be pinned down and represented. Good representation necessarily fails to encompass the totality of a group in a single body and recognizes its own failure to do so. This requires substantially more diversity in games and all media.

For critics, Wiseman and Burch's findings (and my own research) suggest representation does not matter because the so-called target market does not always need to see itself represented. If niche marketing is the goal of representation, then proving that market doesn't exist is the primary form of resistance. Similarly, in the absence of empirical findings about direct effects, the argument that media representation matters is assumed to fall apart; and strong media effects are simply hard to find. In the conclusion of my book (2014), I argue that it might be more beneficial to think about the ways media representation creates what is and might be possible.

Rather than see demand for representation as a limitation on creativity, we could reframe it as a checkpoint in design. If we revisit those two ways people talk about media representation mattering, then we have a little more nuance to work with. One, media affects our view of people unlike us, specifically because if we do not have a wide range of knowledge about marginalized groups, media is one of the only ways we get to know them. If that representation is always the same, we only have a very narrow view of what the people who are like that (whatever "that" is) are like. This also means that representation of marginalized groups designed for a mainstream audience is often overly positive, to correct decades of misrepresentation. Two, we want to see ourselves reflected in our media, but no single media representation will ever be able to fully represent every member of a group because of the inherent diversity of human experiences. This also means that representation of marginalized groups designed for a marginalized audience can be more complicated. There can be negative representation of marginalized groups because members of those groups realized that those images do not represent the entire group.

The trouble with games is that the industry has actually done the opposite. Good representation or diversity has mostly been witnessed in games directed towards marginalized audiences. For years, people have said that to get a female-player market you need good representation of women. Good representation is not included in games for a male market, because it is assumed men do not want to see good representation of women— but, put in such stark terms, the statement sounds ridiculous. If games, as a field and an industry, focus on expanding representation simply because they want to get a new market, this means that they have decided that their typical market does not want diversity. Whether or not this is true is a question that still needs to be answered. Wiseman and Busch’s research is a good start, but it requires more contextualization to make sense of the apparent gender and age differences in children’s responses about whether and how they care about representation. My own work has focused instead on the corollary question: do people who are members of marginalized groups automatically and deeply care about representation?

For most interviewees, identifying with characters in media and seeing people like them in media (and especially games) was “nice when it happens.” Nice, I argue, is more than ambivalence or apathy. It is a defense mechanism, a pushback against being held responsible for one’s own marginality. That is not to say representation did not matter at all to them. They talked a great deal of how it mattered within specific texts, and this observation is similar to research findings I have from projects over the past ten years. Specifically, players are aware of how representation can come to matter in specific games. With this as an entry point, we can begin to critique games and how they represent groups in medium-specific, audience-centric ways.

What Now?

How do we move forward from this history, though, without focusing so much on niche marketing or media effects arguments? How am I going to convince the video game industry to care about representation if I do not make a strong case for representation? First, I do not think the industry needs me to take care of it. Sure, games can increasingly offer a multitude of representational possibilities, but that is not the only kind of representation we need. Game developers need to challenge themselves to make games that offer more kinds of narratives,

more kinds of characters, and more kinds of mechanics if they want to promote innovation. Can designers look critically at their work and ask themselves why they made the choices they did? What would it mean to flip the race, gender, sexuality, embodiment, and voice of the character they have created? When creating avatar design choices, what has shaped the options made available? What logic underlies the structure of the options that are made, and what would happen if that logic was simply forgotten? The industry must treat diversity as a goal in its own right, rather than an exception to the rule or the sole domain of those who are marginalized. How they do that, if they do that, is up to them.

Second, how much has the game industry cared about what academics and critics have to say, already? Sure, we have seen changes in representation in games. We have seen changes to the structure of the industry. We have seen some changes to how the audience is envisioned. But those changes have been glacially slow if we consider how long people have been making the case for them, and whatever changes we have seen, there is still a long way to go. At my most optimistic, I assume that if I keep putting my case out there, eventually it will sink in and someday, maybe, more people will make similar arguments. At some point, all of those arguments together will influence some game designers to approach their job differently. I do not think aiming for erosion is the same as giving up though. Change takes time, which does not mean we need to be patient, but that we have to keep working.

Finally, at my most honest I can say that it is not my job to tell the industry what to do. I am not an industry consultant, and I am not being paid to fix the game industry (though I am certainly open to offers). Research need not serve capitalism. As T.L. Taylor (2004) asserted in a blog post on *Terra Nova*, game researchers need not think about their work in relation to what it means for the industry: “A lot of the work we do can certainly be used to retain players or find new demographics for games but I believe we have to retain a space for other kinds of work - often basic, often critical - to exist.” To that end, outside of grant proposals, perhaps we should stop demonstrating games matter by focusing on their market share or the size of the audience. There is a wealth of possibilities in representation beyond the mainstream AAA industry. Indeed, most

of the more interesting LGBTQ representation in games has come from indie designers working with the tools available to them to make and distribute games, and that has been true for decades.

In keeping with the diversity without defense argument (Representation matters.), knowledge production about media culture need not serve media industries directly or even at all. Research, like representation, lets us see the world in new ways and think creatively about how else it might be structured, and that should be impact enough to keep doing this work. Things will change as long as people invest in change. As Sarah Schulman says in *The Gentrification of the Mind*: “I’ve noticed through my long life that people with vested interest in things staying the way they are regularly insist that both change and accountability are impossible” (2012: 52). She then quotes Audre Lorde who says: “That you can’t fight City Hall, is a rumor being spread by City Hall.” Hope and optimism, particularly from marginalized positions, are revolutionary acts. So let’s keep insisting, hoping, and knowing that games can be better, rather than spending all of our energies proving why they should be.

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Résumé

La plupart des études portant sur la représentation des groupes marginalisés dans les médias cherchent à comprendre pourquoi plus de diversité est nécessaire. Les arguments avancés comprennent non seulement ceux fondés sur l’idée que les représentations ont des effets directs sur leur audience, mais aussi ceux qui analysent comment les représentations médiatiques renforcent les normes hégémoniques. Pour cette raison, nous avons tendance à voir la diversité comme étant possible seulement lorsqu’elle fait partie d’une stratégie commerciale. En revanche, poser la diversité, plutôt que le pluralisme, comme la norme permet de penser la représentation des groupes marginalisés de manière plus créative, sans la concevoir comme une stratégie de marketing ciblé et sans faire de présupposition sur ce qu’est une bonne ou mauvaise représentation.

Mots-clés : jeu vidéo, féminisme, représentation, genre, sexualité, diversité



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The Poetics of Form and the Politics of Identity in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*

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Abstract

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation (Ubisoft, 2012) is a stealth, open-world adventure game about chattel slavery. A third-person historical fiction, *Liberation* presents a rare example of an exceptional black female revolutionary, and the first heroine of the highly successful franchise. Modeling an intersectional visual/cultural studies approach, I focus on three levels. First, I consider the cultural context into which this character is introduced. Second, I deconstruct the game's aesthetic origins, unveiling its poetics of form. Third, I analyze the central player-character, Aveline de Grandpré, and the mobilization of her unique Persona System, elucidating the connections between cultural content and game mechanics.

Keywords: Assassin's Creed, Liberation, representation, gender, race, sexuality, cultural studies, games

Résumé en français à la fin du texte

Introduction

Games are mass culture forms that constitute powerful ways of understanding one's place and possibilities in the world, through complex persuasions and social engineering. Understanding their machinations can endow users with more agency as stakeholders within a given culture, in a given moment. My interest in games is rooted in intersectional cultural studies and visual studies approaches. Cultural studies utilizes an interdisciplinary toolkit borrowed from sociology, history, literary theory and political science, among others. One of cultural studies' interventions was to erode the barrier between the high and low, and mobilize deep analysis of the "popular" or "everyday" to reveal the workings of power manifested within culture, and to mine opportunities for contestation and resistance. Stuart Hall (1932-2014), whose name is synonymous with cultural studies, was director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham from 1968 to 1979. He is widely considered to be one of cultural studies' founders, and its most iconic voice. Hall was largely responsible for bringing issues of race/ethnicity and representation to cultural studies, while also enhancing and expanding the important Marxist-inflected work on popular culture done by his colleagues, Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and others. As one scholar of Hall's thought noted, "For him, culture is not something to simply appreciate, or study; it is also a critical site of social action and interpretation, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled" (Procter, 2004: 1). Visual studies is connected to the project of cultural studies, and was engendered by art history's disciplinary unwillingness to integrate new genres, material culture, the popular and the global into its object of study (D. C. Murray and S. Murray, 2006). As quintessential forms of visibility within a twenty-first century context defined by political, cultural and economic conflict, games both mirror and are constitutive of larger societal fears, dreams, hopes and even complex struggles for recognition. Utilizing *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) as a focused example of playable representation, this essay models a mode of unpacking games for their complex significative potentials, through analysis of context, poetics of form, and politics of identity. This constitutes part of a larger examination of games as

culture, modeling a critical approach that fully embraces them as operating at the frontline of power relations within dominant culture.¹



Figure 1: Enter the memories of Aveline de Grandpré. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012). Created, developed and published by Ubisoft. Screen shot by author.

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation is a stealth, open-world adventure game about chattel slavery. This third-person historical fiction presents a rare example of a black female central protagonist, and the first heroine of the highly successful franchise. Set in colonial America in the 1760s, *Liberation* centers on Aveline de Grandpré, a New Orleans-raised Creole woman. By day, she is a gentlewoman of leisure, born of a former slave, and living under the care of her French merchant father. By night, she becomes a freedom fighter whose attacks tip the balance of power in the formulation of the new nation. In her three guises of lady, assassin and slave, Aveline negotiates her people's freedom using her feminine wiles, lethal skills and ability to blend into the enslaved population. For the sake of this examination, I will focus on three levels: first, I will frame the fraught cultural context into which this character is introduced, with the release of the game for the PlayStation Vita in 2012, and then the re-release in HD form for consoles and PC in 2014. Then, I will discuss the game's aesthetic origins, which unveil a particular poetics of form. Finally, I will critically examine the central player-character, Aveline de Grandpré, and the mobilization of her unique Persona System, elucidating the connections between the cultural

¹ The author wishes to thank UCSC's Arts Research Institute as well as the UCSC Arts Dean's Excellence Fund for their generous support of this research. Earlier forms of this research were presented at the Canadian Game Studies Association in Ottawa, the History of Gender in Games Symposium in Montréal, and The Queerness and Games Conference in Berkeley, all in 2015, and the School of Art at Texas Tech University in 2016. Finally, thank you to Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin, the blind reviewers, D. Fox Harrell, Jill Murray and Derek Conrad Murray.

content and game mechanics. In a larger sense, this research conveys how a politics of identity is present in the form of the game as well as its content.

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation Scenario

The narrative of *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* is complex in that it utilizes a narrative frame within a frame. The game that is played is introduced as a product of a fictitious global corporation named Abstergo Industries, which has innovated the technology to mine genetic memories for their entertainment value. The corporation is controlled by the Templar Order, a secret monastic military society that prizes the pursuit of order and the control of free will, for the sake of world peace and to curb the natural brutality of human beings. Their sworn enemies, with whom they perpetually battle, are the Assassin Order, which values free will and fights to defend it. These conflicting ideologies have resulted in an ongoing covert war between the Assassins and the Templars. Through their innovation of the "Animus" device, Abstergo allows individuals to enter the memories of progenitors and virtually experience their lives. Abstergo's tagline is "History is our playground." The life of the assassin Aveline de Grandpré is one such batch of memories, intended to mould historical memory, but according to the narrative, also the first extracted for entertainment purposes. Her virtualized life takes place at the end of the French and Indian war, in the colonial period just previous to the U.S. War of Independence, also known as the American Revolution (1775-1783), during which time the thirteen colonies secured sovereignty from Britain. In an extremely detailed and rich rendering of historic New Orleans, we meet Aveline first as a child. We witness a primal scene of horror in which the young girl is separated from her mother in the city, after innocently chasing a loose chicken. She stumbles into a slave auction in progress, cannot find her way back, and is shoved to the ground by an unsympathetic white guard. Racial dimensions of this primal scene imply that this is likely the moment of Aveline's coming into awareness of both her own racial difference, and the precariousness of her position. Transitioning to the grown Aveline, we see her awake in terror from a nightmare of this past memory. This sets the tone for her character as traumatized and driven by the past.

Through gameplay, we see Aveline's story unfold in her relations with those around her. Her African mother is absent, missing or presumed dead. Her father is Philippe de Grandpré, a

wealthy French merchant. He has raised her and has another wife, Aveline's stepmother, Madeleine de L'Isle. Madeleine has educated and brought up Aveline in the home, and they are initially portrayed as having close relations. Fairly quickly the player is also introduced to the fact that, while Aveline is someone of privilege and status, she is not content to be a gentlewoman of leisure, and she spends her nights using her skills as a member of the Assassin Brotherhood, aiding those in need and concealing her actions from her family. Her work begins with an investigation of mysterious slave disappearances, and from that point, the story and the environments through which she moves expand. In the course of the game, she travels across several regions that primarily include the Louisiana Bayou and the ruins of the ancient Mayan city of Chichén Itzá in the Yucatan, Mexico. Using the device of nested narratives, the *Assassin's Creed* series moves across key historical moments, creating speculative fictions against a backdrop of actual events.



Figure 2: Aveline as a child with her mother. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012). Created, developed and published by Ubisoft. Screen shot by author.

Context: GamerGate and the Traffic in Representation

The year of *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation's* release (2012) proved a particularly watershed moment in terms of visibility and press coverage of the ongoing culture war around the presence of women and socially-defined minorities in games. Anita Sarkeesian, a young feminist media critic, started a Kickstarter crowdfunding campaign to support her series of web videos, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. The resulting vitriolic attack on her work and her person included an

outpouring of incitements to rape and kill her (Sarkeesian, 2015).² Though she is one of many women targeted, Sarkeesian has in many ways come to embody a burgeoning organized feminist critique of games representation that pushes back against the stereotypical representation and objectification of women in games. Among the others targeted are Jenn Frank, Leigh Alexander, Mattie Brice and Samantha Allen.

On August 16, 2014, Zoe Quinn, a young game designer known most for her *Depression Quest* (2013), was smeared in a blogpost on Reddit by a former boyfriend, Eron Gjoni. He accused Quinn of providing sexual favours in exchange for positive reviews of her game, a claim that was later confirmed as baseless (Lewis, 2015; Parkin, 2014; Plante, 2014; Eördögh, 2014; Biddle, 2015). Nevertheless, an organized harassment effort began on 4chan, an image-based, mostly anonymous bulletin board. When actor Adam Baldwin used the hashtag #GamerGate for the first time on August 27, 2014, in regard to the Quinn corruption conspiracy, the tag quickly spread and became synonymous for an online movement that alleged a breach of journalistic ethics, ostensibly caused by conflicts of interest between game makers and professional game reviewers.

Leigh Alexander, in a *Time Magazine* article on GamerGate, described the incidents as evidence of “sharp growing pains” in the industry. Ultimately characterizing the debate as a “tension between ‘games as product’ and ‘games as culture’”, Alexander astutely gets closer to the core of what I would describe as a politics of identity at play in games that supercedes the notion of games as consumer products (Alexander, 2014). Lisa Nakamura similarly noted that GamerGate, “showed the world the extent of gaming’s misogyny and internal conflicts over death threats made against female gamers, critics, and game developers by a cadre of male gamers” (Malkowski and Russworm, 2015).

These recent game “culture wars,” notably GamerGate, definitively confirm that games traffic in the politics of representation, just as any other form of mass media. For example, retrograde images of women as hyper-sexualized or passive, as well as dehumanizing racial and queer

² To know more about this issue, see also: Sreenivasan, 2014; Alexander, 2014; Frank, 2014; Stewart, 2014; Woolley, 2014; Ryerson, 2014; Ip, 2014; Lien, 2015.

images still pervade the mainstream industry. Observing these representations of “others” in games clearly shows how issues of difference and power remain at the forefront of the struggles for socially defined minorities. It marks a persisting anxiety around the presence of these constituencies in technological fields, including the games industry, which is now a global multi-billion dollar enterprise. From a perspective of how power is enacted through the popular, the GamerGate struggle to prevent “social justice” issues from seeping into and ruining games is the extension of a false dualism between an “activist” group (largely female, queer-identified people, and people of color) engaging in some kind of identity politics, and a so-called “normative” group (GamerGate) that is not. This places the “activist” group’s work in an inherently marginalized position as “political”—and this becomes the limit of their expressiveness. At the same time, this implicitly constructs the “normative” group as not “activist”, not “political” and most importantly not practicing a form of identity politics from within their dominant position. In fact, the GamerGate position is neither normative nor apolitical, despite their protestations to the contrary, that they are merely protecting games from unethical journalistic practices. There is such a sense of unshakable domain over this realm of representation—a very aggressive form of territoriality and identity politics at play, that is going unnamed. I no longer think that it is useful to merely point out racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. in games with a base presumption that these exist as a result of ignorance. It is more accurately the result of a form of essentialism and territoriality—an attempt to assert control over the lucrative and influential sphere of playable representation. My claim here is that the purportedly apolitical stance of GamerGate is, in fact, a very rapacious expression of identity politics. This positionality functions as a means to veil or mask the solidarities, and the sense of territoriality around what should or should not be included in a discussion of games, implicit within their stated commitments. I should note here that I am not suggesting that those associated with GamerGate necessarily hold any consolidated sense of power. Rather, I am suggesting that, as Hall has written, “Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle” (1998: 453). As a form of everyday culture, games constitute a flashpoint for dominant and subordinate entities to fight for recognition.

During an interview in 2014, Anna Everett described the persisting resistance to speak of race, gender and identity politics, cautioning that: “racial and gender assumptions still operate as

functional structuring presences underlying too many of games' 'procedural rhetorics' and tropes of mastery" (Everett, Champlin, and Vanderhoef, 2014: 5). Adrienne Shaw characterizes game culture as "particularly masculine, heterosexual and white" and digital games themselves as "the least progressive form of media representation, despite being one of the newest mediated forms" (Shaw, 2015a: 6). This is true in the sense that, with little exception, dominant games present a vision of the world that is devoid of postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial, feminist, queer or any other critical cultural intervention. Aveline appears in the middle of all this. While surely the developers of Aveline's character could not have foreseen GamerGate, the formulation of this character came at a prescient time. At the very least, a significant upswing in hostility toward the presence of difference in games representation, in games criticism, and in the industry presented a unique context for the introduction of such an unusually inclusive, multidimensional and nuanced figure within a major franchise.



Figure 3: Aveline above New Orleans. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012) image provided by Ubisoft, Inc. Created, developed and published by Ubisoft.

The Poetics of Form; or What Lies Beneath

Shaw has well explicated the construction of authenticity in *Assassin's Creed*, as well as the narrow versions of historical realism presented, and the failure to ultimately present a revisionist intervention (Shaw, 2015b). Describing a "tyranny of realism" present in games that purport to historical accuracy, Shaw outlines the ways in which the potential opportunities and affordances of more open simulation are sacrificed. She writes that both game designers and critics:

focus too much on questions of accuracy, rather than emancipatory possibility. It is also indicative of how imagined audiences over-determine the stories companies are willing to tell. If we can only imagine new ways of viewing what has been, we never get a chance to imagine what might be. (Shaw, 2015b: 21)

This is an extremely important critical conversation, particularly given the prevalence of games that model themselves after historical events or claim a particular kind of accuracy, even while necessarily indulging in all manner of speculative fiction. However, for the sake of this discussion, I am interested in the game's intersection with tropes of Orientalism, whose accuracies are more connected to "the 'dream life' of a culture", than historical fidelity (Hall, Jhally, and Media Education Foundation, 2006).

The original *Assassin's Creed* (2007) owes much to the swashbuckling vision of *Prince of Persia*, which was described by its creator Jordan Mechner as "a game inspired by movies". During a presentation on the connection between *Prince of Persia* and cinema, Mechner described the direct influence of early filmic versions of stories from *The Arabian Nights*, such as *The Thief of Bagdad* (1924) starring Douglas Fairbanks. The original action sequences for the swordfights in the first *Prince of Persia* were lifted directly from those by Errol Flynn and others in *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938), using a rudimentary rotoscoping technique (Center for Games and Playable Media, 2011). *Assassin's Creed* was originally envisioned by game designer Patrice Désilets as *Prince of Persia: Assassin*, and would have featured the prince's bodyguard as the central playable character. Eventually, it evolved into its own title, but the connective tissue runs deep.

The spectral presence of the swashbuckler and fantasy of adventure against an exotic backdrop looms heavily in the very form of *Liberation's* core mechanics of navigation, stealth and combat.³ The presence of Aveline as a heroine can be read against the typical scenario of the Orientalist fantasy of "saving the princess" employed by Mechner in *Prince of Persia*, and inspired by innumerable previous iterations of otherness around perceptions of the Arab world. Here, I am thinking of the trope of the victimized and passive female imaged within an

³ In an interview, *Assassin's Creed: Unity* (2014) Creative Director Alex Amancio identified the core mechanics of the AC series: "There are three core pillars: navigation, stealth, and combat. The combination of those three things is really unique, it's very *Assassin's Creed*" (Williams, 2014).

Orientalist rape fantasy iconography, such as popularized, for example, in the romantic silent films *The Sheik* (dir. George Melford, 1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (dir. George Fitzmaurice, 1926) starring Rudolph Valentino. This imaging of an imperilled woman seduced or dominated by an Arab was in fact illustrated on the 1989 Broderbund cover of the original *Prince of Persia*. The noted Palestinian American academic and political activist Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, unpacked the deployment of extremely potent fantasy and stereotypes around Islamic society through various textual practices. Like Stuart Hall, Said was committed to cultural critique, but from a post-colonial perspective that interrogated cultural representations of the strategically exoticized “other”. He wrote:

To believe that the Orient was created—or, as I call it, “Orientalized”—and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination, is to be disingenuous. The relationship between the Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony (Said, 1979: 5).

Consider that, if we apply Said’s assertion to persisting tropes that resurface (sometimes to the extreme) in games, we must try to understand them not as outmoded ideas, that once outed, lose their potency. Rather than seeing games as reflecting the world as it is (nuance), we had better conceive of them as operating within the matrices of power, and as recreating the object of representation in a desired and highly buttressed form. That is to say, they are not mirrors of reality, but in some way must be understood to shape understanding around a given subject. Even though players are much more diverse and actively selective in their filtration of messages gleaned from such representations, we should not downplay games’ persuasiveness and profound rootedness in the project of imperialist expansion, and reification of patriarchal values.



Figure 4: Aveline fights. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012) image provided by Ubisoft, Inc. Created, developed and published by Ubisoft.

Here, I am neither suggesting anything about the individual creator's or team's perspectives in their development of the *Prince of Persia* or *Assassin's Creed* series, nor making a presumption of their intentionality. What I am asserting has everything to do with the extremely durable myths and fantasies that are inevitably expressed in the language of the cultures that birthed them (Said, 1979: 8). These exist underneath the surface of *Liberation*, less in its literal narrative and setting, and more in its "poetics", that is to say the perceptible game elements, and how they converge and bring into being particular aesthetic and expressive effects for the player. This is related to new media scholar Lisbeth Klastrup's definition of poetics as it relates to virtual worlds:

A poetics of virtual worlds deals with: the systematic study of virtual worlds as virtual worlds. It deals with the question "What is a virtual world?" and with all possible questions derived from it, such as: How is a virtual world an aesthetic form of expression? What are the forms and kinds of virtual worlds? What is the nature of one world genre or trend? What is the system of a particular developer's 'art' and 'means of expression'? How is a story constructed? What are the specific aspects of instances of virtual worlds? How are they constituted? How do virtual worlds embody 'non-fictional' phenomena? (italics in original, Klastrup, 2003: 101)

Klastrup goes on to describe a kind of "worldness" created through the manifestation of these elements together in a given virtual world. This must be adapted slightly as Klastrup was referencing the community experience of virtual worlds such as *Everquest*, which she goes on to analyze specifically. However, the notion of a "poetics" is clearly applicable in terms of what I would describe as a focus on those aesthetic formations, and complex cultural signifying practices that, together, contribute to the world-making of a game and its affective experience.

In the case of *Liberation*, Aveline is a kind of princess who is in possession of the sword, and she is doing the saving, rather than being saved. This breaks with the damsel-in-distress trope and places the female figure at the center of the narrative in an activated, heroic role. However, a significant dimension of the game's poetics issues from the core mechanics: the combat, stealth and navigation. The manner in which our protagonist moves through environments with fluid maximum efficiency and command suggests a particular kind of relation to place. The covertness of her movements and the clandestine meetings suggest, among other things, access to an

insider's knowledge of the machinations of power at play in her environment, and perhaps some influence in this regard. Her methods—largely consisting of sword fighting and various kinds of hand-to-hand combat—invoke the beloved swashbuckler through her distinctive fighting stances and dramatic swordplay, and through her strong, prototypical “chivalric” desire to rescue and defend others. Together, these elements signify what lies beneath the story of Aveline, namely the vestigial presence of the decidedly gendered swashbuckler and Orientalist fantasy, which rests upon a notion of adventure that Stuart Hall described as “synonymous with the demonstration of the moral, social and physical mastery of the colonizers over the colonized” (Hall, 2015: 106). Hall discussed this specific connection between fiction, imperialism and notions of adventure in relation to the 19th century novel. However, the phrasing is very apt here, and I would extend this characterization and apply it to a broader period of European colonial expansion. In other words, while the game's narrative of liberation and its exceptional heroine of color break with the dominant reading of the swashbuckler figure and Orientalist fantasy, the game's poetics retain the eroded, fragmented, accumulated gestures that recall a cultural history of European empire.

When considering the reality of this in relation to an intersectional feminist critique, it is hard to ignore the imperialist origins of the *Assassin's Creed* formulation, and the question of whether wholesale rejection of games in general and these poetics of empire more specifically might be the only proper response. For example, writing on imperialist militarism, bell hooks states:

Early on in feminist thinking activists often failed to liken male violence against women to imperialist militarism. This linkage was often not made because those who were against male violence were often accepting and even supportive of militarism. As long as sexist thinking socializes boys to be “killers,” whether in imaginary good guy, bad guy fights or as soldiers in imperialism to maintain coercive power over nations, patriarchal violence against women and children will continue. In recent years as young males from diverse class backgrounds have committed horrendous acts of violence there has been national condemnation of these acts but few attempts to link this violence to sexist thinking. I conclude the chapter on violence in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* emphasizing that men are not the only people who accept, condone, and perpetuate violence, who create a culture of violence. I urge women to take responsibility for the role women play in condoning violence... (hooks, 2014: 64-5).

Hooks continues, arguing that “we must acknowledge that men and women have together made the United States a culture of violence and must work together to transform and recreate that

culture” (hooks, 2014: 65). The dismantling of the culture of violence found in so many action games would advance the cause of feminism. However, in the absence of a paradigmatic shift in which a larger culture of violence no longer holds sway, it is incredibly useful to identify and acknowledge the submerged poetics of Orientalist fantasy and imperialist violence that underpin the very formation of the formidable *Assassin's Creed's* world-building.

Politics of Identity: Enter Aveline

Atop this already sedimentary foundation rests another complicated construction, in the form of Aveline. The unusual primary character and the Persona System, are considered to be the primary innovations of the game. The persona's mechanics built into *Liberation* modulate the degree to which Aveline can move, unencumbered, through the game space. The gameplay dictates which persona is to be used for each mission, and there are dressing chambers throughout the city. The Lady guise is a corseted gown with lace and a brimmed hat. In it, Aveline is most persuasive and influential with in-game characters, and able to more easily extract information and use diplomacy. She possesses the skills to bribe and “charm” male guards, and is a less suspicious figure. However, it is impossible to jump, climb or sprint. Within this persona, Aveline is weakest in combat, as there is limited availability of weaponry. The Slave persona is simplified, also relatively weak in combat with limited access to weaponry and tools. Its primary advantage is that it allows the character to free run, and also grants Aveline the anonymity that allows her to blend in with the local slaves and workforce, crowds, or other groups. The third persona, that of an Assassin, renders Aveline persistently “notorious”, which limits her anonymity. However, in this guise she may also free run and climb, and it allows her to execute a “chain kill”, which is a maneuver that more efficiently dispatches with up to three enemies simultaneously when fighting against larger groups. Jill Murray, one of the writers at Ubisoft Montreal, and co-writer of *Liberation*, suggested that in her mind, Aveline felt most authentically herself as an assassin, on the rooftops (J. Murray and Murray, 2015).



Figure 5: Aveline as lady, charming and bribing. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012) image provided by Ubisoft, Inc. Created, developed and published by Ubisoft.

Murray (2013) presented on the development of Aveline and strategies for effectively writing for diverse characters. In a talk entitled “Diverse Game Characters: Write Them Now!”, she examines strategies regarding writing motivations, setting, voice, research, as well as gameplay to define character, as well as the mobilization of particular mechanics in games, and the importance of creating greater sensitivity to diversity within the game design team. Responding directly to the claims made by Evan Narcisse that *Liberation* specifically reiterated certain kinds of racially-oriented tropes, such as the Back-to-Africa movement, the slave vendetta narrative, the tragic mulatto and the Uncle Tom, Murray insisted that these were not consciously built into the design, and as she came onto the project after the inception of Aveline as a character, “there was no time for a cultural studies course or to learn about the entire history of African American film and literature” (Murray, 2013). According to her, the team was more focused on getting the context right, so that they would properly understand the rule of law imposed by the shifting colonial presences of France and Spain within the Louisiana region during the time. The emotional core of the story, informed by slave narratives that Murray researched, reveals itself most directly in the diary pages of Jeanne, Aveline’s mother. In these scraps of narrative that are discovered throughout the game, Jeanne chronicles her experience of being a *placée* under the regulation of the *Code Noir*, a French legal document that regulated slavery in the French territories.⁴ As these articulations are subsumed somewhat beneath the primary narrative, they

⁴ *Plaçage* was a system of informal common-law marriage between a white man and a woman of colour, which was not legally recognized (because interracial marriage was forbidden), but did grant the woman and any children

feel secondary, although they provide great insight into the absent mother, Jeanne, around whom so much of Aveline's identity revolves. Murray spoke of how Aveline's subjectivity inspired the Bulgarian designers to make unique game mechanic adjustments to suit her different conditions. These were reflected in her clothing options, and the corresponding skills and limitations accorded to each.

Digital media scholar and computer scientist D. Fox Harrell makes an important intervention through his theoretical considerations of creative expression, cultural analysis and computational systems. One of his key concepts is the notion of "phantasmal media", which unpacks ways in which cultural worldviews can be built into computing systems. A "phantasm"—a term with origins in cognitive science—is a blend of a cultural idea and sensory imagination that may fluctuate from one societal context to another but which, within a given societal frame, is seemingly implicit and immediately perceived. These phantasms are highly suggestive and not conscious knowledge, but like ideology, they are persistent, implicit and largely invisible. Through theorization as well as the development of computational models that take into account the interstices of cultural phenomena at the code level, Harrell intervenes in the ways in which user representations can and sometimes do make use of phantasms that stereotype or codify power dynamics through the very rule-based systems and data structures from which they are constructed.

Phantasmal media, therefore, is about understanding computational media in terms of cultural meanings. It functions as a manual for thinking through systematized methods and for theorizing what he calls "cultural computing". In addition, it articulates methods for devising systems of computational expression that more accurately reflect the subtle and unexpected functioning of identity-based elements such as social stigma, inclusion and exclusion, interpersonal relations, non-verbal cues, gender, race, sex, ethnicity, fashion, metaphorical expression, and relative social station or class. The larger, overarching aim would be to create models of these systems that are more complex and able to computationally account for the subtle goings-on of cultural meanings as they come into being. Harrell's work emphasizes both the conceptualization of what

produced some economic benefits and liminal security, as well as recognition of the relationship among free people of colour (Kein, 2000).

he calls a “world view” in computing systems, and the importance of expressivity, which are often insufficiently addressed in computing, or as he himself assesses, are dismissed by some in the field as fundamentally outside the aims and values of computing (Harrell, 2013). Harrell’s vital intervention provides disciplinary language and theorization that illuminates how worldviews are built into the data infrastructure of computational systems, and how this can affect engagement with that system. It is important to mention that in his case, this argument is not limited to reductive views of identity defined in terms of race, sex, gender, class and nation, but addresses categorization in general, and the larger issues of inequity that expand to include themes of interest to Harrell like oppression, power relationships and empowerment (Harrell, 2015).

Harrell’s research can help enliven an understanding of the Persona System built into *Liberation*, which modulates the degree to which Aveline can move, unencumbered, through the game space. For example, in the first sequence, a short mission entitled “Taking Care of Business” requires Aveline to investigate a missing shipment from the family business. In the guise of a lady, she bribes the ship’s guards, then “charms” the lecherous Captain Carlos Dominguez, in order to gather intel on the whereabouts of the missing cargo. When it is revealed that the goods have been hidden in two warehouses, Aveline must charm at least one guard in order to locate the missing goods. While the lady persona limits her freedom of mobility, which can be palpably sensed with the more lumbering movements of the character in her burdensome dress, the charm function is only executable while in this persona. Dressing chambers dot the city so as to provide adequate access to changes of garb. Missions provide didactic instruction about which persona to occupy, and it is highly unlikely to be able to complete a mission without the proper guise. In a mission entitled “The Secret of the Cenote”, Aveline, garbed as a slave, is in Chichén Itzá in a cave system beneath the ancient Mayan ruins. There, Aveline must navigate underground cave ponds and the extreme verticality of the caverns to find an artefact that contains a prophecy. The mobility required would be impossible in the lady guise, and the previous investigations have necessitated that Aveline blend in with the slave population that makes up the nearby community and dig site. The limited weaponry of the slave guise is acceptable, since most of the game activity consists of navigation. Aveline runs and climbs with ease, and as the environment is friendly to the semi-freed slaves, this cover allows her to move freely within the local

population. There is no need for her to coordinate a rebellion or concern herself with the disempowerment that comes with the signifiers of being a slave. Because the more powerful assassin guise would generate a spike in her notorious status and thereby call attention to her investigations, it is not an option for the mission. In a mission entitled “A Fool’s Errand”, Aveline travels to contact a fellow brother of the Assassins, Connor. As he is aware of her true identity, notoriety is not a concern, so there is no need for her to mask herself as lady or slave. With her maximum mobility as an Assassin, and her arsenal of weapons, she is best equipped to navigate the wintery terrain and locate her next mark, an officer who possesses knowledge of the identity of a key enemy. Like the cavern sequences, navigation of the space as “lady” would be impossible due to the necessary leaps and climbs, and she is well served by the additional armour that her assassin garb provides. Throughout the game, selection of persona is closely tied to the specifics of missions, and gestures toward the relative mobility and access afforded to the guise Aveline must adopt. At times, the effect is tedious in terms of the obstacles it throws up around gameplay. However, within the logic of the game, it is intended as a means to generate a series of insights within the player about the fluidity of identity and the politics of context, as it bears down on Aveline’s racially marked body. In this case, and in keeping with Harrell’s research, the Persona System effectively makes the affordances of each mode more complex so that, through play, internal self-inquiry around these various constructions is engendered. In other words, power relationships between playable and non-playable characters are determined by the game mechanics, which (as Harrell theorizes) embody particular cultural meanings in the game’s system of computational expression.

Reviewers generally accepted Aveline as a positive step in games and a complex representation. Critic Evan Narcisse noted:

Aveline may be a nearly superhuman assassin, but she’s still cut off from her history in a very raw way. You feel that void in this title. By putting you in a game where you play through the sometimes painful push-and-pull of gender and racial identity in American history, *Liberation* takes a potentially polarizing risk (Narcisse, 2012a).

Manveer Heir of Bioware, who has begun speaking out from within the industry on the necessity for more nuanced representations, similarly pointed to the game as a step forward in pushing the centrality of a character’s identity from the narrative to the mechanics level (Heir, 2014). It is

true that Aveline is a complex character, rendered in a manner that takes into account her race, her gender, as well as her class status. These are configured as integral in the game mechanics, particularly in regard to her own spatial mobility, skills and abilities. The complicated question of the character's facility to pass as other "personas" is literalized in the three forms of clothing as signifiers of complex agency.



Figure 6: Aveline blending in as a slave. *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012). Created, developed and published by Ubisoft. Screen shot by author.

Aveline's capacity to pass from one class status to another, through her use of ingenuity and the manipulation of costuming as a tactic points to a kind of intersectionality being expressed in the game—a point to which I will return. But its more immediate reference invokes the complexity of race in early American history, and more specifically the figure of the ex-slave Harriet Tubman (c.1822-1913), a freedom fighter, Union spy, abolitionist, and iconic "conductor" of the Underground Railroad. In her lifetime, she became the first woman in American history to lead an armed expedition during the Civil War as a scout. Tubman does not appear in *Liberation*, as some other historical icons in the *Assassin's Creed* series have. The game's timeframe (1760s-1770s) pre-dates Tubman's birth. However, the strategic use of clothing invokes the memory of this figure, who was known for utilizing various disguises and misdirection to evade captors. In one oft-repeated anecdote, Tubman was required to enter into a county where she would likely be recognized by a former master. Wearing a large bonnet to cover her face, Tubman carried two live chickens whose legs were tied loosely with string. When the former master passed nearby, Tubman pulled the strings and the chickens began escaping and making a scene, causing a

distraction. As one historian wrote, “Harriet was nearly always prepared with a change of costume or some other diversion” (Clinton, 2004: 89). The misdirection using fowl is—perhaps coincidentally—echoed in Aveline’s childhood traumatic moment of chasing after a loose chicken and thereby being separated from her mother. Privilege was in fact largely dependent not only upon race, but also upon one’s class. Tubman exploited this, posing as a slave, an old woman, and even donning a Union soldier’s coat and rifle during her army scouting. In keeping with the image presented in *Liberation*, it is important to remember that not all black people were slaves during pre-Independence times; in fact significant numbers of them were not. The first Africans in what would become America arrived as explorers and servants, as well as a labour force (Gonzales, 2003: 304-305). Free black people had more mobility, and some were privileged and themselves owned slaves.

Aveline’s sexual identity is similarly contingent. A presumption of heteronormativity might be made around Aveline’s sexual status, on the basis of the game mechanic of “charm” which is used exclusively on male targets, and the repeated male non-player-characters’ verbal references to her beauty. However, this matter is markedly understated in the game context. There is a strong sense that she and her childhood friend, Gérald Blanc, are close, and that he harbours romantic feelings for her. Reviewer Evan Narcisse makes mention of this and suggests that this may be a thematic nod to the “social impropriety” and prohibitions around their potential interracial union (Narcisse, 2012b). In addition to this restraint around Aveline’s sexualization, players never see Aveline naked or scantily clothed. In fact, while other characters seem preoccupied with her romantic future, Aveline has her sights set on other concerns. Early in the game, for example, Aveline’s father admonishes her: “I do fear you are more like your father than is fit for a lady...” He then indicates that Blanc has requested her assistance at the family warehouse, and his wife Madeline reacts to this by commenting to Aveline: “Is that all he has to offer? I should think for all his attention, he would request your hand.” Aveline replies: “All the same, it’s the work that interests me.” Later, in another cutscene, Gérald broaches the subject of his affection for her, and Aveline deftly sidesteps the conversation, while not pushing him entirely away.

The inference within the cutscene suggests Aveline's preoccupation with the urgent matters at hand. However, one critic takes the interpretation further, proposing that Aveline's character may be a paradigmatic example of how some games are slowly integrating indirect references to LGBTQ subjectivities into games. In Aveline's reappearance as a part of the PlayStation exclusive DLC for *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2013), buried content as well as encoded dialogue led game critic Jagger Gravning to point out the notable ways in which sexuality operated around her. He mentions the figure of Aveline among several others, such as Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* reboot, whose significations were ambiguous enough to create the space for possible queer readings (Gravning, 2014). The markers analyzed by Gravning, as pointing to Aveline as queer-identified in some way, included her Assassin's clothing, a modified male costume. Combatants in pursuit sometimes refer to Aveline using a male pronoun, calling out: "He's getting away!" or "He's trying to shake us!" And, in discoverable recordings documenting the experiences of the subject who is accessing Aveline's genetic memories, we learn that this person is male. All three of these elements point, for Gravning, to a potentially transgender narrative. But most important and highlighted by the author is a section of dialogue between Aveline and a revolutionary female slave figure and potential Brotherhood recruit, Patience Gibbs, that overtly plays with sexual innuendo during their initial meeting:

Patience: "What is it you want, if not my charm?"

Aveline: "Only you. Charmless."

Patience (stepping closer): "Is it a game of flats you fancy then?"

Aveline: "A friend sent me. Connor. He will offer you safety and training."

Patience: (stepping even closer) "Mademoiselle, if you get my charm back, you can take me as your game pullet."

Uttered as repartee, this 18th-century inflected dialogue makes reference to lesbian sex (in the term "flats") and a young prostitute or sexually forward girl (with "game pullet") (G. Williams, 2001: 1110, 501). Importantly, Aveline does not display a phobic response to Patience's coy remarks, though it is less certain whether she is receptive. As Gravning puts it, "ideas of gender fluidity and homosexuality constantly surround the character Aveline. Yet she neither confirms nor denies a specific orientation" (Gravning, 2014). It is in keeping with Aveline's character, in

fact, that the liquidity that defines her own shifting identifications may also extend to all dimensions of herself. She continually re-orientes herself as per context and necessity. Maybe, in the roles of assassin, spy and freedom fighter, Aveline's sexuality would just be another tool in her arsenal (not unlike James Bond, or the Blaxploitation hero who uses sex to get what he wants). There isn't enough specificity to say for certain, but in Aveline, there is a strong sense of becoming, and queer potentiality in the sense of departing radically from normative gender role expectations on many levels. While some of these schematic references are ultimately inconclusive, these allusions at least disrupt the automatic presumption of Aveline's sexual preferences and interior life, opening up the possibility of other readings.

More importantly than the discursive imaging of her sexuality, Aveline stands as a strikingly intersectional figure in the history of game protagonists. Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized the notion of intersectionality, unpacking the ways in which race and gender bear down on the lives of Black women, and highlighting the necessity of a more holistic approach to their experiences. Acknowledging the multidimensionality of the women of color, Crenshaw noted that her "focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991: 1245). "Through an awareness of intersectionality," Crenshaw writes, "we can better acknowledge and ground the differences among us and negotiate the means by which these differences will find expression in constructing group politics" (Crenshaw, 1991: 1299). When considering the representational politics of Aveline as an intersectional construction, we realize she occupies a rare position as a character whose subjectivity—as a woman of color, of a particular class and sexuality—is directly manifested and continually re-instantiated to the player through game mechanics.



Figure 7: Aveline and Patience Gibbs. *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* (2013). Created, developed and published by Ubisoft. Screen shot by author.

Conclusion

In considering the playable representations of games, it is important that we mine and fully understand the phantasmal aspects of culture that are at play. This is impossible without a contextual understanding of the object of study in relation to the milieu from which its representations and signifying practices arise. If it is true that, as Jill Murray (co-writer of *Liberation*) suggests, Aveline is most herself in her Assassin's guise, then it is in this gender non-conforming mode that the game presents the most possibility of complex agency, through its mechanics. Aveline and her personae do model a more diverse and multi-layered game protagonist, crosscutting issues of race, class and gender—and in her second iteration, fluid sexuality. The game mechanics, in this case the Persona System, functions to engender self-inquiry in the player as to the complexities of social mobility at the many intersections of Aveline. This is achieved through the specific affordances and limitations of each persona. But, on the level of its poetics—or all that constitutes a game's "worldliness", as Klastrup put it, ethical questions must be asked about the forms that chatter deep beneath the surfaces of our games. In a larger sense, it is important to account for how a politics of identity is expressed not only through the manifestation of the exceptional figure of Aveline, but in the very form of the game's playability.

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Soraya Murray is an interdisciplinary scholar who focuses on contemporary visual culture, with particular interest in contemporary art, cultural studies and games. Murray holds a Ph.D. in art history and visual studies from Cornell University, and is Assistant Professor in the Film & Digital Media Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Murray's On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender and Space is forthcoming from I.B. Tauris (London) in 2017.

Résumé

Assassin's Creed III: Liberation (Ubisoft, 2012) est un jeu d'aventure et d'infiltration en monde ouvert portant sur l'esclavage. Cette fiction historique à la troisième personne comporte un rare exemple de personnage féminin noir et révolutionnaire qui se trouve aussi à être la première héroïne de la populaire franchise. En s'appuyant sur une approche intersectionnelle s'inscrivant dans la tradition des *visual/cultural studies*, l'auteure développe une analyse du jeu en trois temps. Dans un premier temps, elle considère le contexte culturel dans lequel le personnage est introduit. Ensuite, elle déconstruit l'esthétique du jeu en dévoilant sa poétique de la forme. Finalement, elle analyse le personnage principal, Aveline de Grandpré, et ses différentes personas afin de mieux comprendre les liens entre le contenu culturel et les mécaniques de jeu.

Mots-clés : Assassin's Creed, Liberation, représentation, genre, race, sexualité



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Andromeda on the Rocks: Retreading and Resisting Tropes of Female Sacrifice in *Tomb Raider*

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Abstract

Based on close textual analysis of *Tomb Raider* (2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), this article uses Georges Bataille's work on the role of ritual sacrifice to interrogate the video game industry's depictions of women in need of rescue. *Tomb Raider* (2013) and its sequel present the endangerment, rescue, and death of women as sites of pleasure for the player; additionally, the player can experience both the role of sacrificer and proxy-sacrifice through gameplay. Through an exploration of these themes, this article ultimately questions the player's culpability with regards to the proliferation of the female sacrifice trope in games and the treatment of women in game culture.

Keywords: *Tomb Raider*, ritual sacrifice, damsel in distress, video games, culpability

Résumé en français à la fin du texte

Introduction

Through close textual analysis and Georges Bataille's work on the role of identity in ritual sacrifice from *The notion of expenditure* (1933) and *Hegel, death and sacrifice* (1955), I interrogate depictions of women in need of rescue in *Tomb Raider* (2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015). I argue that at the narrative level, the game subverts this trope, but the consistent staging of endangerment, rescue and death as sites of pleasure for the player prevents the subversion from going any deeper than the text's surface. Ultimately, this paper aims to raise questions of player culpability with regards to the proliferation of the female sacrifice trope in games. Rather than looking at player-character death as a game mechanic, as much of the key critical work on death in video games does (Westfahl, 1996; Aarseth, 1997; Juul 2005; Galloway, 2006; Tocci, 2008; Juul, 2013; Flynn-Jones 2015), I will consider the narrative use of female sacrifice more broadly. First, I will discuss the cultural trope of the damsel in distress, then I will look at how this trope operates in video games specifically. I want to articulate how the depiction of women in peril provides important context for the concept of player-character death as a form of ritual sacrifice: the thrill of sacrifice relies on our fascination with how the erotic and the violent intersect in the body of the female victim. I will then look at the representation of sacrifice in *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2015) in detail before considering the role of the game industry and the game player with regards to this trope's future in light of Gamergate.

Your Princess is in Another Castle (Still Chained Up)

I would like to begin with the image of a character that prefigures the sacrificial female in video games: Andromeda of Greek myth, chained to the rocks and about to be sacrificed to a monster, before being rescued by hero Perseus (Figure One).

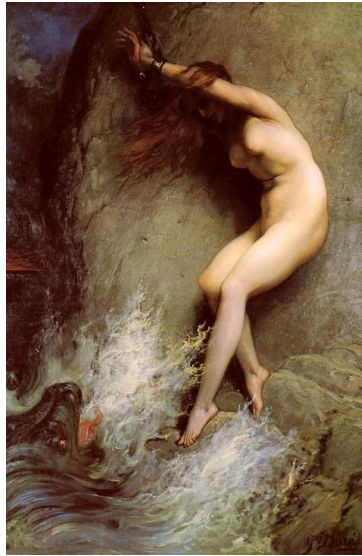


Figure 1: Gustave Doré's Andromeda (Wikimedia Commons)

Gustave Doré's 1869 painting depicts Andromeda as nude, helpless, and restrained by chains. From the lower left-hand corner of the image, a monster approaches. Perseus is absent and it appears that Andromeda is about to be killed. I want to draw attention to the fact that typically, in both classical and modern art, Andromeda is depicted naked (or nearly naked) and helplessly bound while awaiting rescue or death. The image of Andromeda in art is charged with a high degree of erotic potential. This erotic potential derives not only from Andromeda's nudity and chains, but more specifically in relation to her peril and the potential staging of her ritual sacrifice to the monster. In *Hegel, death and sacrifice*, Georges Bataille describes "the palpable and intentional excitement of sacrifice [...] The excitement of which [he] speak[s], is definable; it is sacred horror: the richest and most agonizing experience" (1955, p. 94). Part of the erotic appeal of Andromeda on the rocks is the prospect of this excitement - the possibility of her sacrifice continuing uninterrupted by the arrival of the rescuing hero. The possibility that Andromeda will be devoured, rather than rescued, is a possibility charged with both erotic and horrific appeal, agonizing because some part of the spectator's mind anticipates the perverse pleasure of seeing her killed. Consider the appeal of spectator sports like NASCAR; the real thrill is the possibility of a fatal crash.

In video games, we see Andromeda transposed in the classic damsel in distress character. While this common set-up of a vulnerable female romantic object that must be rescued from the possession of a monster or a villain is not exclusive to games, it is a key game plot that relies heavily on the trope of the sacrificial female, who resembles the classic depictions of Andromeda.¹ Anita Sarkeesian identifies the myth of Andromeda as a forerunner of the damsel in distress in “Damsel in Distress: Part 1 – Tropes vs Women.” Like Andromeda, the sacrificial female helplessly awaits rescue by a hero who claims her as a romantic conquest in exchange for saving her. Both are often physically restrained while being menaced by a monster or villain. Some iterations of this trope are post-sacrifice: the hero must avenge the sacrificial female, who dies at the beginning or the middle of the game’s plot. The original *Donkey Kong* arcade game (Nintendo, 1981) features the earlier pre-sacrifice example, while *WATCH_DOGS* (Ubisoft, 2014) has multiple depictions of both the pre- and post-sacrifice examples. As noted by Mia Consalvo in *Hot dates and fairy-tale nights: Studying sexuality in video games*, the common video game trope of the damsel in need of rescue hails back to early examples such as the character first named Lady, then Pauline, in 1981’s *Donkey Kong* (2003, p. 172). Consider the first stage of the game: the player must control Jumpman, avoid rolling barrels, and maneuver him up the girders to rescue Pauline from the monstrous ape that has kidnapped her. We see her calling for help, which reinforces that the game is not merely about mastering the skill and timing required to jump over barrels; these are actions in the service and context of rescuing a woman from a monster. This trope has been discussed in detail in Anita Sarkeesian’s *Tropes vs. Women* series in a three-part series on the Damsel in Distress (2013). The sheer abundance of games utilizing this trope is staggering; Sarkeesian points to *Donkey Kong* as the most famous early example of its use in video games in “Damsel in Distress: Part 1 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games”. In the years since the release of Sarkeesian’s first season of *Tropes vs. Women*, little has changed in terms of the prevalence of the damsel in distress. There are three sacrificial females in *WATCH_DOGS* (Ubisoft, 2014): the protagonist Aiden loses or risks losing his niece Lena, his associate Clara, and his sister Nicole. Lena is killed early in the game by assassins attempting to kill Aiden, while Clara is killed at Lena’s gravesite. Nicole manages to survive the

¹ Further analysis on the heterosexual rescue arc has been done in Sherman’s *Perils of the princess: Gender and genre in video games* (1997), Consalvo’s *Hot dates and fairy tale romances: Studying sexuality in video games* (2003), and Adams’ *Renegade sex: Compulsory sexuality and charmed circles in Mass Effect* (2015).

events of the game, though Aiden's efforts to rescue her from a kidnapping are a significant portion of the gameplay. *WATCH_DOGS'* largely non-romantic examples of sacrifice depict women over whom Aiden has a familial or social sense of responsibility, which viewed through a patriarchal lens still may entail degrees of ownership.

Across video game history, iconic series such as *Super Mario* and *The Legend of Zelda* feature kidnapped romantic interests. The rescue arc initiated by the kidnap of these romantic interests presents both the pleasure of preparing the sacrifice, and averting it. This arc offers players the opportunity (and sometimes even the necessity) of metaphorically chaining naked Andromeda to the rock, enjoying the scopophilic pleasure of observing her in her bound state, and culminates in heroically rescuing her (Mulvey 1975).² The endangered sacrificial female in video games titillates while presenting an opportunity for heroism. By playing the game, the player participates in the damsel's endangerment as much as her heroic rescue and is encouraged to enjoy both actions. While instances drawn from the rebooted *Tomb Raider* series are my key examples in this paper, these dual pleasures can be found across game genres and periods. How a player might experience this offer likely differs from one individual to another, but the prospect is consistently presented as a site of, and opportunity for, pleasure.

A Threefold Sacrifice: Bataille, Identity and Ritual

The philosophy of Georges Bataille, particularly as expressed in his texts *The notion of expenditure* (1933) and *Hegel, death and sacrifice* (1955), provides a theoretical context for my use of the ritual sacrifice concept. In his reading of Hegel, Bataille explains the specific method through which humanity attempts to circumvent the problem of misrepresenting death, namely, the act of ritual sacrifice:

Concerning sacrifice, I can essentially say that, on the level of Hegel's philosophy, Man has, in a sense, revealed and founded human truth by sacrificing; in sacrifice he destroyed the animal in himself, allowing himself and the animal to survive only as that noncorporeal truth which Hegel describes and which makes of man, in Heidegger's words, a being unto death (Sein zum Tode), or, in the words of Kojève himself, "death which lives a human life". (1955, p. 194)

² The use of Mulvey to positively connect Bataille's theories of eroticism to feminist critique can be found in Chris Vanderwees' *Complicating Eroticism and the Male Gaze: Feminism and Georges Bataille's Story of the Eye* (2014).

In Bataille's reading, sacrifice is a response to the necessity of dwelling with the negative, using both representative and literal means which combine sacrifice as well as play. I would like to assert here that player-character death can be considered as a kind of ritual sacrifice performed by the player in the space of the game. In ritual sacrifice, the one performing the sacrifice identifies with the sacrificial object, much like the player does with the player-character. Bataille writes, "In the sacrifice, the sacrificer identifies himself with the animal that is struck down dead. And so he dies in seeing himself die, and even, in a certain way, by his own will, one in spirit with the sacrificial weapon" (1955, p. 194-195). In sacrifice, identity becomes plural, shared among the key elements of sacrifice. The role-playing game *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare, 2009) enacts this plurality in the latter stages of the game. The player-character, a Grey Warden charged with protecting the kingdom of Ferelden against the encroaching armies of the orc-like Darkspawn, is presented with a quandary. Grey Wardens traditionally are charged with killing the dragon leading the Darkspawn armies; in doing this, the Grey Warden takes in the soul of the dragon so both of them permanently die. The player-character is expected to take part in a sacrifice like the one described by Bataille, and in so doing, simultaneously becomes both killer and killed.

This narrative plays out in the function of player-character sacrifice in general gameplay. In player-character death, play as a fusing of belief and pretense, as well as the player's identification with the player-character, are in alignment with Bataille's description of the sacrificer's identification with the object of sacrifice, and with the sacrificial weapon. It even incorporates the tragicomic element that Bataille identifies in ritual sacrifice before adding: "At least it would be a comedy if some other method existed which could reveal to the living the invasion of death" (1955, p. 195). Ritual sacrifice, which is the closest the sacrificer can come to experiencing death, is both comic and tragic. This is reflected in the tone of the many video game characters' death compilation videos available on *YouTube*, with titles like *The many ways Mario has been killed in his twenty-five years of gaming* (2012). These compilations place various levels of emphasis on tragic and comic elements, combining deaths ranging from cartoonish to gory with the comedic device of portraying many deaths in quick succession and

occasional accompaniment by a soundtrack. However, tragedy persists beneath the comic elements: laughing at death does not change its fundamental power over us.

The tragi-comic ritual sacrifice of the player-character is a long-running trope in the *Tomb Raider* series. From the series' first installment in 1996 to its most recent in 2015, Lara Croft's deaths have always been tinged with degrees of humour. Her early deaths are particularly funny: her screams as she falls to her death only accent the clunky collapse of her polygonal body. Throughout most of the franchise's existence, Lara's deaths have been comic rather than grisly, but the 2013 reboot of the series sharply changes the tone of Lara's death scenes.

Spectacle and Death Animations

Since 2013, Lara's deaths have been undeniably spectacular; they are crisply animated and the accompanying audio presents the sounds of injuries as they are inflicted, her cries of panic and pain, and her final gasps before dying. We can see minute movements as Lara fruitlessly tries to grasp at objects impaling her (as in Figure Two, where she has a pipe impaling her from the base of her head, well into her skull). The technical details of these deaths are matched by dramatic staging: Lara is impaled on branches and pipes, mauled by wolves, and strangled.



Figure 2: "Tomb Raider Definitive Edition Death Scenes Montage" (Youtube)

The changing ratio of comedy to drama and evolutions in technology have made Lara's new death scenes some of the most eye-catching content ever produced by the franchise (this appeal

can be seen in the view counts of Youtube compilations like *Tomb Raider Definitive Edition Death Montage* (2014), which has a relatively unimpressive roughly 257 000 views at the time of this writing, in contrast to the over 6 200 000 views of *Tomb Raider All Death Scenes / Violent Deaths Compilation 18+* (2013) (Figure Two). Lara's death scenes (be they funny, horrifying or both) have a great deal of precedent in games. Bataille writes in *Hegel, death and sacrifice* that "the spectacle of sacrifice makes his humanity manifest" (1955, p. 199). What distinguishes this spectacle for Bataille is the scale and force of the display: it overpowers us with gaiety and anguish. Historically, media has reacted to, and condemned, the violent spectacles presented in video games, particularly as a kind of overpowering visual seduction. Concern over the colourful flashing screen in the dark arcade has undertones of paranoia surrounding the power of spectacle. Violent spectacle in video games has also been the object of multiple moral panics, with concerns ranging from the violent driving in the arcade game *Death Race* (Exidy, 1976) to the match-ending fatalities of the *Mortal Kombat* series. However, it is the increasingly overt eroticism of Lara's death throes that particularly connote Bataille; key feminist critiques of Bataille have frequently debated whether his depiction of erotic violence against women undercuts his usefulness to feminist thought (Dworkin, 1989) or in fact substantiates it (Sontag, 1967; Schultz, 1987). Here his unabashed celebration of the beautiful, brutalized female is useful specifically because it is an example of that eroticism at work. I say this not to undercut or devalue feminist critique of Bataille, but to draw parallels between this eroticism at work in philosophy, as it is in Bataille, and in video games, as it is in *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013), and more broadly.

Player-character death animations frequently invoke this power of violent spectacle. From the early days of commercial video games, player-character death has generally had two key distinguishing features: a special combination of animation and audio that signifies death, and a slowing and/or suspension of gameplay. Observing [the death of Mario](#) in the classic platform game *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1985), we can identify a special animation sequence in which Mario's body is thrown upwards before falling off the screen, accompanied by a musical cue still associated with Mario's death in modern iterations of the franchise, followed by a Game Over screen and a minor key version of the *Super Mario Bros.* theme. Versions of this format in

which the dead or dying player-character is shown to quickly rise and fall (the latter motion often taking them off-screen) have persisted in death animations for platform games ever since. Player-character death as a form of ritual sacrifice frequently contains within it an element of spectacle: from Mario falling off the screen to the gory demise of Lara Croft, the death of the player-character is both an interruption of play and an audiovisual display that characterizes the presentation of death in the game. Underneath these variations in tone, the scene of player-character death remains an eruption of spectacle in the course of game-play.

Digging Up *Tomb Raider*: Putting the Series in Context

The particular game text that most clearly demonstrates this dual pleasure of specifically enacting female peril and rescue is the franchise reboot *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013). Since her first appearance in the original *Tomb Raider* (Core Design, 1996), Lara Croft has remained the subject of intense critical analysis because she is a gun-toting female protagonist, but one whose breasts are as famous as her twin pistols. Academic engagement with Lara's potential feminist and anti-feminist implications (and analysis of the nature of that academic engagement) can be traced back to early references in Cassell and Jenkins' *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*; as noted by MacCallum-Stewart, references by authors of essays in their collection, including Jones, Subrahmanyam and Greenfield, and Cassell and Jenkins themselves, are often negative and identify Lara as innately anti-feminist even when quotations from interviewees and research subjects speak positively of her (MacCallum-Stewart, 2014, Cassell and Jenkins, 1998). MacCallum also notes two key pieces of criticism which have further explored Lara's complexities, beyond her portrayal as a flatly misogynist character; Helen W. Kennedy's *Lara Croft: Feminist icon or cyberbimbo? On the limits of textual analysis* (2002) and Diane Carr's *Playing with Lara* (2002). MacCallum-Smith's article *Take that, bitches!: Refiguring Lara Croft in feminist game narratives* (2014) examines the sex-negative, fan-discounting tone of much *Tomb Raider* criticism within game studies. These four points of reference – Cassell and Jenkins, Kennedy, Carr and MacCallum – show the progression of academic discussion on Lara. Popular cultural discussions of the character have shown less evolution, as noted in the descriptively-titled *Two Decades of Breathtakingly Sexist Writing About Tomb Raider* by Joseph Bernstein (2013). Bernstein's article is tongue-in-cheek but it

illustrates that even the most well-meaning attempt to discuss Lara risks retreading sexism both overt and subtle. What this signifies is that Lara remains an immensely fraught character, subject to a great deal of hotly debated gendered analysis that must be acknowledged prior to any further discussion.

Burnt Offerings: *Tomb Raider* (2013)

While the 2013 release of *Tomb Raider* ostensibly departs from the long-running trope of the sacrificial female, its use of female characters put in peril and rescued as a source of pleasure undercuts this innovation. In the reboot, Lara is a young archeologist at the beginning of her career. Lara's youth and inexperience are emphasized through references to her age in dialogues, her fearful reactions to danger early in the game, and her increasingly exposed and injured body. She is trapped on the island of Yamatai after her research expedition is shipwrecked. The island is populated by a group of exclusively male cultists, the Solarii Brotherhood, who have littered the island with dead bodies, killing or converting men who come to the island and ritually sacrificing any women they come across. In this section, I will first look at the game's narrative engagement with female sacrifice through two key characters - Lara's friend Sam, and a priestess named Hoshi whose story is told in documents found by Lara. Then, I will look at the game's thematic engagement with the sacrificial female in the animations in which Lara's peril ends in death rather than survival.

In the script of *Tomb Raider*, the spirit of the ancient Sun Queen Himiko, ruler of Yamatai, is transferred from body to body through ritual female sacrifice. However, the interruption of this ritual many years prior to the events of the game trapped the Sun Queen's spirit in the corpse of the most recent sacrifice. Since then, the Sun Queen's spirit has caused storms around the island of Yamatai, trapping survivors, who eventually form the cult that kidnaps Lara's friend Sam. The bulk of the game's narrative is taken up by Lara's efforts to find Sam and the other survivors from her ship's crew, and rescue Sam before the cult sacrifices her to become the Sun Queen's new host. In contrast to Sam, Hoshi is a long-dead princess who committed suicide after realizing she was intended to be a host for Himiko. The game ostensibly deviates from the standard trope of the sacrificial female in video games: the cult who kills women is the enemy,

and Lara brutally kills its members throughout the game. Lara, our female lead, is the hero, not the damsel. But by looking more closely at the game, we can see the cracks in its apparent subversion of the trope. While Sam and Hoshi are candidates for sacrifice to the Sun Queen, Lara's sacrificial role is more thematic. I will discuss each in turn and how they retread or insufficiently resist the damsel in distress trope that the game ostensibly rejects.

In Sam's case, she rather neatly fits the role of damsel in distress. As a descendant of the Sun Queen, she is sought by the cult as an ideal candidate to become Himiko's new host. She is kidnapped three separate times in the game and Lara's mission is explicitly to save her from the cult. In a nod to the classic trope of the kidnapped romantic object, the nature of Lara and Sam's relationship has some romantic overtones. In short, Sam is not particularly different in this regard from early incarnations of Princess Peach. She is a female romantic object the hero player-character must repeatedly save from peril. The game features a scene in which Sam argues with one of her captors that she doesn't want to be sacrificed. He responds, "This is not about what you want. It's about what you are" (Crystal Dynamics, 2013). He refers here to her bloodline, but his pronouncement also references her gender, her lack of agency as a character, her lack of opportunities to make choices, and her continuation of the tradition of the sacrificial female in media and video games, whose rescue is as much a ritual as her peril. "You saved me, I knew you would" says a white-robed and flower-crowned Sam to Lara at the close of the game, before Lara bridal-carries Sam to the boat on which they and a few other survivors will escape the island (Crystal Dynamics, 2013). The fact of the matter is that we all knew she would. This rescue arc is a ritual too. In a 2013 *KillScreen* interview Rhianna Pratchett says that because of the heterosexism typical of the damsel in distress trope, "It was interesting that with a female [protagonist] like Lara rescuing a female, people sort of projected that there was more going on to that relationship" (*Tomb Raider Writer Rhianna Pratchett on why every kill can't be the first and why she hoped to make Lara Croft gay*, 2013). Consider this statement in light of Wittig's deconstruction of oppressive heterosexuality (1981), mentioned by Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant (2017) in this issue of *Kinephanos*: the romantic heterosexual pull of the damsel in distress trope is so powerful that many fans reacted to the game by assuming Lara is in love with Sam. On one level, this reading is a challenge to the heterosexual rescue arc: the possibility of

both rescuer and rescued being queer women seems like a powerful subversion of the trope. This reading also potentially integrates (we might say, *domesticates*) a threat to heteronormativity in the form of a strong, non-romantic female friendship, by pulling it back into the heteronormative framework that does not openly acknowledge queer identity or desire. I hesitate to fully endorse either position, but I think the combination of the game's narrative and thematic emphasis on women in peril undercuts the game's positive potential.

In contrast to Sam, the character Hoshi, whose story is told through ancient documents discovered by Lara, presents an alternative model for action as opposed to the inaction available to the sacrificial female. Realizing she is being groomed to be the Sun Queen's next host body, Hoshi commits suicide during the ritual. She traps the Sun Queen's spirit in her dying body, and Himiko spends centuries in Hoshi's corpse, using her power to trap shipwrecked survivors on the island, building her cult, and trying to find another viable candidate for possession. Faced with her role as a female object of sacrifice in a cycle that shows no end in sight, Hoshi uses self-harm as a form of resistance, but one that we need to critique. In another document, one of the Sun Queen's military officers writes, "The princess [Hoshi] knew only death could save her" (Crystal Dynamics, 2013). This begs the question as to whether self-harm is the only expression of agency offered to female characters other than the hero(ine), Lara? What are the implications of positioning self-harm as resistance when it is the only form of resistance available? I hesitate to provide an easy answer, but I question whether the use or enduring of violence as a character's primary or only path to agency is an improvement on the trope of the sacrificial damsel; it may be a lateral move at best.

Gameplay: Lara on the Rocks (Mauled by a Wolf and Impaled on a Branch...)

Lara differs from Sam, Hoshi, and the many female corpses found burned in shrines around the island in the sense that she is never a candidate for sacrifice to the Sun Queen; her sacrificial role, however, is an offering to the very trope Lara is supposed to resist. The gruesome death animations common to the *Tomb Raider* series (particularly this edition) offer a higher-intensity version of the sacrificial female erotically chained to a rock and left for the monster. The game's death scenes use the quick-time event as a moment of peril, heightened by the tension

surrounding attempts to avoid death by pressing the correct buttons, or killing Lara on purpose with the desire of watching various possible deaths. The scenes depict our digital Andromeda not just chained up, but vividly killed in a spectacle offered up to the player.

I would suggest that the player is both observer and participant in these scenes, not just controlling and identifying with Lara, but also participating in her death even when it is unintentional. As previously discussed, Bataille sees the identity of the sacrificer, sacrificed and the sacrificial weapon as intertwined (1955, p. 195). In this edition of *Tomb Raider*, the player is not only given the opportunity to enact Lara's exciting endangerment and potentially heroic survival or grisly death; the player also identifies with Lara in this process. Relating to Lara as avatar while holding the game controller, the player may also become the sacrificer through letting her be crushed by a boulder, experiencing the sacred horror and potential pleasure of either her peril and survival, or her peril and death, as both murderer and victim. I say this not to claim that all players will approach Lara's deaths the same way, but that the text offers up this experience to each player.

Play it Again, Lara: *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015)

Rise of the Tomb Raider presents a post-traumatic Lara Croft; her experiences in the previous game have shaped her into a competent adventurer and killer, but one who is prey to the psychological fallout of the events on Yamatai. This Lara is a less obvious sacrificial female at the level of plot, and the game's fewer thematic connections to female sacrifice reflect this change. However, Lara's death scenes remain both detailed and invasive, showing that her added experience and capability do not exempt her from being offered up to the player to kill or save. The game's reduced thematic resonance with the idea of the sacrificial female is evident from its plot and primary characters. Lara's mission is to locate an artifact that her father failed to find, rather than to avert the newest sacrifice in a long series; from this we can infer that this second game is concerned with inheritance, rather than sacrifice. At the level of character, the more hardened Lara is hurt by the absence of the oft-rescued Sam. In the interquel comics, Sam is portrayed as remaining partially possessed by Sun Queen Himiko, and is housed in a mental institution; the cover of the eighteenth issue depicts the scene where Sam refuses to continue

seeing Lara (Pratchett, 2015, p. 19). Sam's absence and the reason behind it indicate that the final sacrifice of Sam was not successfully averted in the reboot; Lara failed to save her friend, even though Sam's rescue is what fed the scant positivity of *Tomb Raider*'s ending. In the *Tomb Raider* franchise, subsequent media has rendered the rebooted series' most easily identifiable sacrificial female absent. The sequel, however, continues the reboot's treatment of Lara's deaths, which are violent and varied; over the course of the game she can be impaled on spikes, mauled by a bear, stabbed in the throat and drowned, among several other potential ends (Crystal Dynamics, 2015). As in the previous game, the death scenes are often prolonged as Lara's dying spasms taper off and cease. The scenes' intense technical detail and content are very similar across the two games. The greatest contrast between the first and second games' death scenes is that the sequel features fewer incidences of Lara being impaled (particularly through the throat); the sequel also features fewer death scenes that linger on Lara's anguished facial expressions as she dies. These changes seem to place less emphasis on the sexual connotations of the penetration of Lara's body. One potential interpretation is the intention to show a less stark image of Lara's death, though the difference between the two games is small. Despite Lara's character evolution, her deaths remain the same.

Ultimately, both *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2015) present Lara as a figure imbued with vulnerability, positioned to be saved or sacrificed by the player. *Rise of the Tomb Raider*'s post-credits scene encapsulates the promise held out to the player: Lara interrogates Ana, the woman who appears to have betrayed Lara's father; during the interview, a sniper kills Ana, robbing Lara of the answers Ana could have provided. The shot cuts to the sniper's perspective as he reports the kill and asks what should be done with "Croft". A mysterious voice instructs the sniper not to shoot, saying "No. Not yet" as the scope's cross-hairs remain aimed at Lara's face (Figure Three).



Figure 3: "Rise of the Tomb Raider - All Death Scenes Montage" (Youtube)

This typical post-credits scene, meant to present a hook for an upcoming sequel, presents Lara in danger, with her death only deferred - not prevented. The player is invited to solve the mystery of Lara's father's death and either save her from, or condemn her to, a shadowy threat that literally has her in its sights (the sniper's scope circles her face in the final shot). Once again, it is the player's intervention or inaction which will decide her fate. This final image of Lara presents her as endangered and at the mercy of the player, while simultaneously offering a means by which the player can experience the horror of being a sacrificial object; Lara's final twitches and cries can become ours, at least temporarily. Even after the events of the two games, she remains a sacrificial offering to the player's whims and vicarious thrills. We can contrast Lara's erotic spasms with the heroic stoicism of grizzled helmsman Grim, capable mentor Roth, and computer geek Alex, all of whom sacrifice themselves to save Lara at different points in the first game. Their deaths are choices made to protect Lara; admirable, rather than erotic or inviting. Their death scenes are characterized by camera cuts to Lara's anguished reactions, rather than a sustained focus on their dying moments.

Once More, With Bears: Repetition and Sacrifice

The ubiquity of Lara's deaths, starting out with blocky polygonal collapses in *Tomb Raider* (1996) and evolving into slickly detailed cinematics of her death throes in 2013 and 2015, recalls

the repetition of ritual sacrifice in games. The game *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012) seems to confront the criticism that repetition in games renders them meaningless. The game consists of a seemingly Sisyphean set-up and imbues that repetition with meaning. The hooded player-character begins its journey in a desert and proceeds toward the far-off light of a mountain. During the course of the game, the player-character endures difficulty and eventually dies partly up the side of the lit mountain. After dying, the hooded figure appears to be reborn and reaches the light at the summit; as it walks into the light, a shooting star falls back to the desert where the game began, and the player is invited to restart. In a game with virtually no written or spoken words beyond the invitation to play, the idea that the game must repeat is very clear. Instead of making the repetition into drudgery, the game reinforces the meaning of that repetition, highlighting the worth of the journey itself over the attainment of a goal. *Journey* specifically demonstrates how the repetition in games can be part of their strength. In the game *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013), after dying, a new Booker appears to be another called forth from a fractal expanse of universes. The mechanism through which the player-character's death is circumvented is not so much the classic instantaneous respawning, but the replacement of one iteration of the player-character with another. His daughter Elizabeth literally pulls a new Booker out of a 'tear' in the fabric of reality. Booker is repeatedly revived specifically because he must die at the climax of the story. He is a much-replaced player-character, saved only because he eventually has to die at the right time, in the right way. Multiple alternate-universe versions of Elizabeth hold him under water at the site of the religious conversion that turns some versions of Booker into the game's villain Zachary Hale Comstock. Booker's deaths model play as a temporary deferral of death, repeated as needed until death is no longer meant to be avoided.

In contrast to *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012) and *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013), *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2015) do not incorporate the player-character's death and resurrection into the plot; Lara's death scenes are vivid but exist outside the narrative of the game. Instead Lara's deaths preface the opportunity to reload a save, effectively undoing the detailed death throes the player has so recently seen. The potent combination of the death animation's technical detail and prurient content is immediately effaced once players regain the ability to input commands into the game

through the controller, making Lara's deaths more cinematic than ludic. To play Lara in her current incarnation is to constantly stave off bursts of her mortality. The fates of the robed figure, Booker, and Lara seem to literalize "The idea of death in the philosophy of Hegel," which asserts that Man "differs from Nothingness *only for a certain time*" (Kojève, 1947, p. 71). Particularly in the case of Booker and Lara, their existence in between their deaths is a temporary lull rather than a life. But where *Journey* (thatgamecompany, 2012) and *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational Games, 2013) invoke criticisms of repetitive player-character death and show how the repetition of player-character death can actually heighten that death's significance, *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2015) place the worth of Lara's death spectacle outside the field of play as the player becomes both cause and victim of Lara's vivid death. As in the case of fan interpretations of Lara and Sam's relationship, I hesitate to describe this as revolutionary. However, the question arises: is the opportunity to become Lara in death a potentially feminist act, or does it merely recycle the scopophilic pleasure of watching her die? I argue that to some extent, it does both.

Pleasure and Horror in Video Games, Or, The Grisly Fate of Pac-Man

Whatever the worth ascribed to sacrifice by games that contain it, the ritualized killing of an individual is a key aspect of player-character death, fusing the exciting risk of the self and the horrific death of the other. Bataille writes:

The excitement of which I speak, is definable; it is sacred horror: the richest and most agonizing experience, which does not limit itself to dismemberment but which, contrary, opens itself, like a theatre curtain, onto a realm beyond this world, where the rising light of day transfigures all things and destroys their limited meaning. (1955, p. 194)

In Bataille's estimation, the act of sacrifice transfigures the scope of our experience to include a glimpse of the unknowable; namely, death. The sacrifice of the player-character by the player is similarly perspective-altering because it allows the player to enact her own death by proxy in the player-character. It is only half-jokingly that I bring up the eponymous hero of *Pac-Man* as a figure of sacrifice (Midway, 1980). Upon death, Pac-Man's mouth traditionally opens so wide that the black space of his mouth engulfs the yellow space of his being. Looking at this representation closely, it is a horrific figure; in a game about the act of eating, Pac-Man's final

act is to eat himself, performing the kind of auto-cannibalism that Bataille might discuss with glee. Reading the death animation with this level of seriousness may sound ridiculous, but the fact that Pac-Man's self-swallowing is at first glance so banal, yet upon consideration, so horrifying, was one of the earliest inspirations for this article's close look at player-character death as an act of sacrifice performed by the player through the player-character, representing a sacrifice of the self. Pac-Man's death and Lara's death are not so different; both contain pleasure and horror that the player can observe and experience firsthand.

Every player-character death resembles ritual sacrifice to the extent that it contains some combination of pleasure and horror. The ratio of these elements to one another characterizes the particular player-character death, from the cyclic, ritualized deaths of *Journey* to the excruciating spectacle of *Tomb Raider*. Bataille writes that "...sacrifice, like tragedy, was an element of a celebration; it bespoke a blind, pernicious joy and all the danger of that joy, and yet this is precisely the principle of *human* joy; it wears out and threatens with death all who get caught up in its movement" (1955, p. 198). In the ritual sacrifice of the player-character, the player is threatened with being caught up in the dangerous joy of the ritual, imagining her own death as she sacrifices her in-game double. The sacrifice of the player-character is often rather closer to the surface than it may (or may not) be in *Pac-Man* (Midway, 1980). As I have previously claimed, the deaths of Lara Croft in the 2013 version of *Tomb Raider* (and to a lesser extent, in its 2015 sequel) explicitly and implicitly address the theme of sacrifice, specifically ritual female sacrifice. Recurring references to sacrifice, particularly of women, recurs in the work of Bataille; he portrays a female victim in the hands of a male sacrificer that could easily stand in for Lara Croft in her role as victim and proxy sacrifice to a presumed male player in the detailed death scenes of the two most recent *Tomb Raider* games. Furthermore, that the image of a woman in danger and pain functions as a common erotic spectacle unavoidably calls to mind the ongoing public harassment of women in gamer culture, including but certainly not limited to Leigh Alexander, Anita Sarkeesian, and Zoe Quinn by the online hate movement known as Gamergate (Cross, 2014).

Questioning Player Culpability

This leads me to the question of player culpability in the sacred horror of female sacrifice, both in *Tomb Raider*'s player-character deaths and in the broader trope of women in peril. In *The notion of expenditure*, Bataille writes that "...sacrifice is nothing other than the production of sacred things" (1933, p. 120). The ubiquitous trope of the imperiled sacrificial female is both a cliché and a sacred cow of video game culture and history. Its stature is reinforced not only every time Peach is kidnapped by Bowser, but every time Lara's struggles eventually diminish after being impaled on a pipe. I should note here that the prospect of the sacrifice of a non-player-character (as in the case of Peach or Sam) entails a less degree of player identification than the player-character herself being killed by a non-player-character, another player-controlled character or even an environmental hazard (as in Lara's impalements). What unites them is the shared visual spectacle of a woman in pain and peril, even as their degree of player identification differs. Across platforms and genres, these female characters are not just sacrificed to Bowser or the Sun Queen, but to the player's pleasure and the popularity of the trope itself. The many tropes that feature women under threat in less obvious ways are similarly self-perpetuating and damaging, no matter how noble and beautiful the woman is said to be. Wittig writes of the category *woman* that "In order to be aware of being a class and to become a class we first have to kill the myth of 'woman' including its most seductive aspects. (I think about Virginia Woolf when she said the first task of a woman writer is to kill 'the angel in the house')" (1981: 106). Ironically, the many deaths of the damsel and her ilk have only further sustained the trope under which they operate; killing the princess (or angel) has only strengthened the myth. What, therefore, is the responsibility of the player with regards to the proliferation of the trope? Is the responsibility of the player not to play, and in so doing, avoid reiterating the predicament of the sacrificial female? How might player responsibility extend to the harassment of women by the Gamergate movement and its insistence on terrorizing real, living women and non-binary people, offering them up as unwilling sacrifices to toxic masculinity in game culture? I am unsure as to how player culpability must ultimately be negotiated in regards to these issues, but I believe that we, as players, must acknowledge the scopophilic pleasures offered to us by games, admit to what degree we enjoy the thrill of sacrifice of our virtual and real Andromedas (whatever our political and moral alignments), and finally recognize how game culture tacitly facilitates the

spillover of these into everyday life through failing to adequately disavow harassment campaigns like Gamergate.

Conclusion

The game industry's reliance on the female sacrifice's presumed appeal should be critiqued and resisted. *Tomb Raider* (2013) appears to do just that, but the game's use of Sam, Hoshi and Lara as sacrificial victims undercuts its subversive potential. Its sequel, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), lacks the overt trope of female sacrifice, but retains the same type of death cinematics and emphasis on Lara's vulnerability as its predecessor. This continuation suggests that the mainstream game industry may not be able to resist relying on the potential pleasures of enacting the damsel's peril and rescue/death. As a result, the game industry may continue to eroticize the figure of the woman in peril even in ostensibly feminist games.

If players continue to be offered pleasure via observation, enactment, and (through the proxy of female player-characters like Lara) identification with sacrifice, the next step in this research is to look more deeply at player participation in this trope at narrative, ludic and cultural levels. How do players of various identities respond to being offered these pleasures, and how can players resist or critique these tropes? These are the questions we must ask, even/especially if mainstream game developers cannot, or will not.

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Résumé

Cet article s’articule autour d’analyses textuelles détaillées des jeux *Tomb Raider* (2013) et *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), à la lumière des textes de Georges Bataille portant sur le rôle du sacrifice rituel, afin de mieux comprendre les représentations de la demoiselle en détresse véhiculées dans l’industrie du jeu vidéo. Le jeu *Tomb Raider* (2013) et sa suite présentent la mise en danger, le secours et la mort des femmes comme une source de plaisir pour le joueur. De plus, le joueur peut à la fois expérimenter le rôle de sacrificateur et celui de sacrifié. Ultimement, cet article cherche à interroger la culpabilité du joueur par rapport à la prolifération du stéréotype de la femme sacrifiée dans les jeux vidéo.

Mots-clés : *Tomb Raider*, sacrifice rituel, demoiselle en détresse, jeux vidéo, culpabilité



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The Witcher, or The End of Masculinity (as We Know It)¹

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Abstract

In the present article, I describe Geralt of Rivia, the eponymous protagonist of both *The Witcher* novelistic cycle written by Andrzej Sapkowski and the computer game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). My analysis offers a comparative examination of Geralt in the novels and the video game(s), with the intent of tracing the inner workings of deconstruction within his character, and how these dynamics are brought to bear on Geralt's gender identity. To this end, the game – to a much greater extent than the novel, but also in parallel with it – turns the trope of a heroic, paternalistic, and withdrawn masculinity inside out, by means of feminine corporeality, and through feminine politics (which can be simply defined as politics practiced by women and with women's interest in mind, and set to undermine masculine hegemony). The above leads to an examination and rejection of the masculine trope, which is replaced with an identity located between femininity and masculinity (and different variants thereof).

Keywords: Witcher, masculinity, gender, psychoanalysis, Sapkowski, Lacan

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*What can you know about saving the world, silly? You're but a Witcher.
This is my story, not yours. You must let me finish telling it.*
– Ciri

Introduction, or The Death of an (Anti)Hero

In the present article, I describe Geralt of Rivia, the eponymous protagonist of both *The Witcher* novelistic cycle written by Andrzej Sapkowski and the computer game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). My analysis offers a comparative examination of Geralt in the novels and the video game(s), with the intent of tracing the inner workings of deconstruction within his character, and how these dynamics are brought to bear on Geralt's gender identity. To this end, the game – to a much greater extent than the novel, but also in parallel with it – turns the trope of a heroic, paternalistic, and withdrawn masculinity inside out, by means of feminine corporeality, and through feminine politics (which can be simply defined as politics practiced by women and with women's interest in mind). Let us, however, start at the very beginning – that is, the moment of our protagonist's death.

September 25, 1268 a massacre of non-humans takes place in Rivia⁴, during which the Witcher, Geralt, also perishes. In a final attempt to act out his role of “the protector of the oppressed” while trying to disperse the blood-thirsty, feverish mob, he is stabbed with a pitchfork by a “disheveled youngster”: “The Witcher, unable to repress a cry of pain, bent forward, stuck in his belly, the pitchfork unbalanced him and he fell to his knees, and slid onto the pavement. Blood spilled with a murmur and a splash worthy of a waterfall” (Sapkowski, 2001, p. 503). The bloodshed does not stop until the sorceresses intervene. A magical hailstorm puts an end to the frenzy and cools down the hot-headed mob. As peace is restored in Rivia, “the weeping willows reflected in the clear mirror of the water, the birds sang again and the grass smelled wet. Everything looked idyllic. Even the Witcher who lay in a pool of blood”⁵ (Sapkowski 2001, p. 512). These are the final words of the novelistic cycle featuring the Witcher, created by Polish fantasy writer Andrzej Sapkowski. All that transpires afterwards is shrouded in the mists of a dream (or a video game) capturing the players' senses.

⁴ The date according to *Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (CD Projekt RED, 2011).

⁵ Many years later, in the video game that brought him back to life, Geralt will recall: “It was in Rivia. The second war with Nilfgaard has just ended. There was still tension in the air. For the gods know what reason, race riots erupted in the town. I tried to do something, but... Couldn't stop a riled crowd. A boy with a pitchfork. He ran it right through my gut” (CD Projekt RED, 2015).

After Geralt ceases to exist (more of a convention, rather than an actuality) in the realm of literature, the control over his “resurrected” virtual existence is seized on by gamers.

Part one of *The Witcher* Trilogy was released by the video game developer CD Projekt RED in 2007, with the sequel, *Assassins of Kings*, released in 2011. However, what interests me most in the following analyses is the more widely recognized and artistically developed third instalment – *Wild Hunt*. At this point, it is worth noting that *The Witcher* (2007) features a Geralt who can best be characterized as a “collector of women,” as every potential sexual encounter is rewarded with an emblem showing the likeness of a “scored” female lover. Conversely, in *Assassins of Kings* the Witcher himself becomes a much sought-after trophy, a device to fulfill the sexual desires and ambitions of powerful women. In contrast, *Wild Hunt* (2015) begins to problematize the sexual identity of the Witcher, hinting at an ambiguous relationship with masculinity and femininity, undermining the legitimacy of their very opposition (male/female). Therefore, *The Witcher* Trilogy avails itself to critical scrutiny concerning awareness of gender constructions (especially in the context of the Polish game developers and some players, but due to space limitations, I must omit this thread of my analysis) and the “evolution” thereof; from blatant, primitive sexism to a re-evaluation of the status of women, and finally towards a vicarious, yet evocative, deconstruction of masculinity, all of which I will trace in the following arguments.

Obviously, sexism is still present in *Wild Hunt*. However, its prevalence in the game is less characteristic of, or attached to, the protagonist, but is more an endemic feature of the world depicted. Sexism, much like racism, institutionalized religion, or industrial livestock production,⁶ is addressed in *The Witcher*’s latest instalment as a problem to be solved. It also seems worth mentioning that the team of creators did not pursue a comprehensive adaptation of the game’s literary prototype; while preserving the specificity of the novel’s world – by retaining the plethora of characters, as well as by utilizing some of the narrative solutions – they put forward a peculiar, authorial and “non-canonical” interpretation of a universe that the audience is already well-acquainted with. Their rendition turned out to be so powerful and compelling that it has unwillingly establishing a new canon. The latter, however, does not belittle (let alone nullify) the complementarity of the novel series and *Wild Hunt*, while the

⁶ In the expansion to *The Witcher 3 – Blood and Wine* (CD Projekt RED, 2016).

two versions remain thought-provoking in their divergence (and hence, they are best read side-by-side). The game entirely inspired by Sapkowski's novels is paradoxically destined to transcend its literary source. It should be mentioned here that the CD Projekt RED developers are always ready to emphasize their "indebtedness" to the writer, while the writer is often derisive, if not openly hostile, towards the video game.

In any case, due to the scope and peculiarity of the video game medium, Geralt the Witcher and his step-daughter Ciri (the moving spirit of the game), and not their literary forerunners, have entered the collective (un)conscious, in addition to impacting modes of self-identification among the wide spectrum of players. Reading the game *Wild Hunt* – understood as a complex process of reception, participation, and potential transformation – hereafter organizes the imaginations of players, and may incline them to ponder the particularities of the virtual world they inhabit, and/or instill in them the yearning to try to "reprogram" it. The game's narrative architecture facilitates a situation in which, at some point, it must (or at least, it may) reach the player's consciousness that it is neither him/her nor his/her "character" that is in the foreground, but the bleak, dog-eat-dog, suffering-laden, and unjust reality; the reality one cannot transform, let alone accept as it is. The game's depicted world, and not the hero's ego, becomes of paramount importance.

Returning to our protagonist, Geralt the Witcher is a believable, distinctive, and fully-developed character firmly embedded in pop culture. Players are not given much leeway in customizing the character's image and are unable to shape him according to their whims; the developers have not left much room for role-playing. "My Geralt" will obviously differ from "your Geralt," yet only to the degree that "my Batman" would from "your Batman." At times he may seem cynical, at others surprisingly principled and conscientious, but only within the strict limits of institutionalized knowledge about the franchise, and with clearly defined reference to the complete cultural baggage that *The Witcher* alludes to. In the case of *The Witcher*, we are therefore dealing not so much with the process of shaping the virtual protagonist through negotiating variants provided by the game's creators on one hand, and the player's desires on the other, but rather we proceed by means of acquiring and reproducing (or discarding) the ready-made identity patterns. What occurs between the gamer and the character appearing on the screen is an exchange based on mutual interdependence, embedded

in performative misunderstanding and ceaseless negotiating between the two. The said confused relation, paradoxically, constitutes not only a prerequisite for, but also the ultimate obstacle to the intercourse that both the player and the character take part in (and consent to). As Bob Rehak claims: “The video game avatar, presented as a human player’s double, merges spectatorship and participation in ways that fundamentally transform both activities. [...] But the crucial relationship [...] is not between avatar and environment or even between protagonist and antagonist, but between the human player and the image of him- or herself encountered onscreen. [...] We already exist in an avatarial relation to ourselves” (Rehak, 2003, pp. 103, 104, 123).

One cannot find any traces of the developers from CD Projekt RED referring in a critical way to the relationship (feedback loop) that persists between the player and the character. Instead, what is called into question (not undermined, but rather compromised) is the gender identity of the character. The role-playing occurs not on the part of the gamer, but rather on the part of the avatar (the Witcher). The player, in turn, becomes a reflective participant, less a co-perpetrator than a witness implicated in ongoing events. Over the course of the game, the player becomes more and more alienated from his “double,” while at the same time he/she grows emotionally closer to the unwelcoming, yet captivating depicted world; the world that, in turn, the Witcher would now gladly retreat from. Therefore, it appears that desires of the gamer and his “proxy” have had to bifurcate somewhere along the line. The overwhelming and engrossing digital landscape conjured by the game’s creators plays an essential role in this – we are easily swayed by this land, become thoroughly immersed in it and come to believe in it. What follows logically is a mismatch between the emerging desire of the player (“Let us transform this hideous world!”) and the disappointing, passive withdrawal of the character (“I should simply adjust to the way things are”). To quote Rehak:

Where, then, is the space of resistance in the video game? The answer is in the relationship between player and avatar – a relationship that, because of the intersubjective mechanisms on which it is predicated, is an always-already ‘contested space.’ In addition to games’ preferred meanings, players derive pleasure from avatarial instability. On the most basic level, avatars enable players to think through questions of agency and existence, exploring in fantasy form aspects of their own materiality. (2003, pp. 122–123)

Creators’ efforts to intensify the player’s immersion in the game (coherence of the world’s architecture, causally related events, psychologically believable motivations) paradoxically

may work to free players from the game's world and direct their attention towards "real" reality, with its plastic rules and open "source code" – a reality which may need to be altered or "re-written". Thus, it is not ironic distance or, to use a theatrical metaphor, breaking the "fourth wall," that most efficiently nullifies immersion. Quite the contrary, in fact; the most effective means seems to be to escalate it to the point when it has implications beyond the game. The greater the level of immersion in the game world, the greater the desire to influence the real world.

Geralt of—, or Description of the Witcher

"Mutant. Monster. Freak. Damned by the gods, a creature contrary to nature" (Sapkowski, 2008, p. 52). According to the game's numerous dwellers of its medieval European-themed world,⁷ the Witcher is a monster that hunts and slays other monsters for profit. One of the (anonymous) information brochures entitled *Monstrum, or Description of the Witcher* (appearing in Sapkowski's *Blood of Elves*) states that:

Verily, there is nothing so hideous as the monsters, so contrary to nature, known as Witchers for they are the offspring of foul sorcery and devilry. They are rogues without virtue, conscience or scruple, true diabolic creations, fit only for killing. There is no place amidst honest men for such as they. (Sapkowski, 2008, p. 43)

There is no place for the Witcher. He does not belong to a natural world. He is supernatural and uprooted; a construct, a cultural hybrid composed of various forms and meanings, drawn from Arthurian legends, Don Quixote, Don Juan, and Man with No Name, constituting not only a literary, but also a corporeal hybrid. A victim of bodily abuse (*hubris* in Greek designates also sexual abuse, which points to the fact that every hybrid has its "roots" in the act of rape) as a child, he was subjected to mutations, stuffed with hormones, and injected with viruses. To be transformed into an emotionless machine programmed to kill, he had to undergo a series of experiments. As he explains in his self-description:

I'm called Geralt. Geralt of— No. Only Geralt. Geralt of nowhere. I'm a Witcher. My home is Kaer Morhen, Witcher's Settlement. It's ... It was a fortress. Not much remains of it. Kaer Morhen... That's where the likes of me were produced. It's not done anymore, no one lives in Kaer Morhen now. No one but Vesemir. Who's Vesemir? My father. Why are you so surprised? What's

⁷ The architecture of Novigrad, the game's largest city, refers among others to the 15th- and 16th-century city of Gdańsk (Danzig).

so strange about it? Everyone's got a father, and mine is Vesemir. And so what if he's not my real father? I didn't know him, or my mother. (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 115)

The Witcher has no family or dwelling. He is never at home and has no room of his own: "Geralt of Rivia spares no time for being a private person,"⁸ remaining exclusively and completely a public individual; however, at the same time, he is entirely alienated. Even before coming into "being," he had already been ill at ease with himself; this is why he invests so much energy in inventing (or buttressing) foundations for his identity – through persistent assertions that Vesemir is his father, through his attempted recovery from being a "freak of nature", and in neutralizing the "freakishness" that lies heavily on his shoulders.

Following Rossi Braidotti's perspective on the subject, it could be concluded that the Witcher is a nomad, and as such is neither completely masculine nor completely feminine – he rather incessantly becomes "some-one," an individual "in-between," not homeless, but rather capable of creating his home everywhere, immersed in a network that also includes non-human factors.⁹ He remains a nomad who attempts, at any cost, to free himself from his/her nomadic condition, for a nomad's way of life negates patterns that are widely-held in society and commonly condoned in politics. He is free and indifferent to political, economic, and social determinants. Based entirely on his own principles, his ways are often incomprehensible to others. He roams freely, showing total disregard for state borders and distances. The Witcher is a nomad "involuntarily," as he comes from elsewhere and always remains on the outside, keeping his distance from the current sociopolitical situation. Unfortunately, he is also (unknowingly) instrumental in maintaining the preexisting religious, political, and economic order. He is "rather the protector of the existing bastions of culture, culture which is constantly pushed by untamed forces of nature – Geralt is an agent of governance and moderate harmony, his main task is to eliminate the factors causing chaos" (Majkowski, 2013, p. 362). At the same time, the Witcher remains an integral part of untamed nature and nature is, in turn, a part of him. This nature is represented as an unbearable perversion with radical unnaturalness (exuberant "hypertrophy" of life, captured so perfectly by Lars von Trier in *Antichrist*). This surplus of vitality can, traditionally

⁸ Sapkowski (2002, p. 118). The English translation here is imprecise ("Witchers do not undertake personal business" (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 72)), so I translate it from the original.

⁹ See Braidotti (2011, p. 45), Braidotti (2002, p. 122).

speaking,¹⁰ be linked to femininity – and the Witcher tries to ignore the very fact that the feminine is at the heart of his subjectivity. By wielding and thrusting his sword, slaying monsters, and engaging in casual sex, he only perpetuates his dream of potential masculinity. One of the sorceresses, Fringilla Vigo, says: “Your monster hunts are foolish and pointless. What do you want to prove by killing another monster from some cave? Your manhood? I know a better way. Come back to bed” (Sapkowski, 2001, p. 110). Yet even the heroic “killin’ monsters business” contains some kind of flaw, some obscene and spectacular excess, that unmasks his “femininity”: “Come with me,” says Stregobor the wizard, “rather than rot here. These people don’t know anything, they’ve only seen you killing. And you kill nastily, Geralt” (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 112). This dialogue recalls a scene at the beginning of *Wild Hunt*: Following Geralt’s exaggerated (and very violent) reaction to a couple of men assaulting a woman, one half of the inn’s guests drop dead, whereas the other half vomit out of fear and disgust. To his mind, Geralt’s response seemed both noble and righteous.

The most helpful and insightful illustration of what kind of living things Witchers may seem to be (especially to bystanders) is provided in the novel by an old book serving as a source of practical knowledge to the local citizens:

The etching showed a dishevelled monstrosity with enormous eyes and even larger teeth, riding a horse. In its right hand, the monstrous being wielded a substantial sword, in its left, a bag of money. “A witchman,” mumbled the woman. ‘Called by some a witcher. To summon him is most dangerous, albeit one must; for when against the monster and the vermin there be no aid, the witchman can contrive. [...] But careful one must be to touch not the witchman, for thus the mange can one acquire. And lasses do from him hide away, for lustful the witchman is above all measure [...] though the witchman greatly covetous and greedy for gold be. (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 180)

Witchers display exaggerated lasciviousness and attachment to economic matters. So, in accordance with the “local tradition,” the Witcher is a peculiar mixture of unrestrained sexual drive, strictly material exigencies, and a specific set of skills; a fear-inducing bogeyman who belongs nowhere, and who is located at the intersection of what is male and female. Children immediately recognise these traits, and do not hesitate to point them out:

Geralt: “I’m looking for the witches of Crookback Bog”.

Boy: “You looks like a witch you’self.”

¹⁰ See, for example, Ortner (1974, pp. 68–87).

(CD Projekt RED, 2015)).

In the realm of language, we are inexorably reminded that there is no Witcher without the witch. The original Polish word for Witcher, *wiedźmin*, derives from the feminine *wiedźma*, so “witcher” is a masculine witch or, simply speaking, a male equivalent of *wiedźma* (originating in Proto-Slavic reconstructed verb *věděti* which means ‘to know’). On one hand, the witch possesses knowledge relating to healing, magical spells, and forces of nature, yet on the other hand and in some mysterious physiological way, she taps into impure, primordial and destructive forces. From a cultural perspective, she is wayward and uncontrollable, and therefore represents a threat to public order, which quite rightly evokes fear. Geralt is clearly reluctant to acknowledge his femininity, his total immersion in the nature, and that is why he is so meticulous in battling his “impure forces,” instead of simply embracing them.¹¹

The feral life permeating the world depicted seems tame in comparison with the ferociousness of the Witcher’s world, characterized by medieval feudalism and filled with destitute people, inequalities, exploitation, humiliation, and intolerance. It may well be that the monstrosity of nature echoes atrocities from the social milieu, in which a small highly privileged group (noblemen, generals, clergy) wields all the power, knowledge, and material wealth, while the rest of the population is forced into slave labour. In this sense, nature’s excess (in the form of the occasional passing monster) unfortunately constitutes a compounding variable, as it serves to further reinforce the repressive order by effectively diverting attention away from the real political problems of the Continent (war, being transient, seems the least of these).

Geralt remains cynical in the face of this deprivation by convincing himself that such an attitude – aloof professionalism, disillusioned with humanity – is a sign of his (imaginary) manhood; it seems as if John Wayne’s character from *True Grit* (or similar) has served as his primary role model: “I do not care about politics, or the successions to thrones, or revolutions in palaces. I am here to accomplish my task. Have you never heard of a sense of responsibility and plain honesty? About professional ethics?” (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 23). He does his job, reaps the reward (from a king or a pauper, all the same) and carries on with his business,

¹¹ The dark pages of the history of patriarchy, related, for instance, to sentencing women to death “for the witchcraft” are also amongst topics included in *Wild Hunt*, but due to limitations of space, will have to be discussed on a different occasion.

uninvolved with the consequences of his (always superficial) actions. At a certain point in the game, Geralt is a witness to an unpleasant situation in which a couple of racists tease and harass a she-elf. The Witcher easily chases them away, because as one of the attackers puts it: “Killin’s like battin’ an eye for wichmen.” What follows, however, is quite an interesting exchange:

Geralt: You can breathe. It’s over.

She-elf: Over? For you, perhaps – you will go your merry way... But I may stay here. And they will, too.

Geralt: Nothing I can do about that.

She-elf: Then why get involved at all? You didn’t scare those boors off for my sake, but for your own. To feel just and noble. A knight on a swiving white steed. Or do I have it all wrong? Go, vatt’ghern [witcher]... And remember – we neither need nor want your pity.

(CD Projekt RED, 2015)

The she-elf accuses the Witcher of having only shallow, egocentric motives, and of acting solely in his own interest, in the interest of his own fantasy (the function of fantasy relies on filling out inconvenient gaps in a story which the subject tells of and to himself/herself). The woman points to the fact that what the world needs is not another embodiment of a “real man,” an unblemished knight or selfless avenger. What the world needs, rather, is a revolution, or at least radically different politics, leading to changes in society, for the present world is uninhabitable. It is this world that must be transformed by eradicating economic and cultural oppression, rather than a defense of the symbolic framework that currently exists, with perseverance worthy of a better cause. The Witcher does not seem to understand, or worse, perhaps understands perfectly yet abstains from any real action, perpetuating the circumstances in which he acts out his masculine role, thereby reaffirming the status quo.

‘It’s incredible,’ the Witcher smiled hideously, ‘how much my neutrality outrages everybody. How it makes me subject to offers of pacts and agreements, offers of collaboration, lectures about the necessity to make choices and join the right side. [...] It’s not my game. [...] I won’t choose. I’ll respond to events. I’ll adapt to what others choose. That’s what I’ve always done.’ (Sapkowski, 2013, p. 146)

There may be times in which *not* making a decision is the only authentic act of choosing that remains; this is not one of those times, however. Geralt, instead of becoming politically

engaged, chooses the role of “father-protector”, refusing to acknowledge that his “daughter” no longer needs help.

At the beginning of his journey as a Witcher, he held an idealistic point of view about being a “real man” that was composed entirely of cultural clichés. His conception of masculinity is brutally transformed by an event resembling the Freudian “primal scene,” compounded by a (not quite) sexual “first time” that later defined his being in the world and shattered his infantile ideals:

My first monster [...] was bald and had exceptionally rotten teeth. [...] he'd stopped a peasant's cart and pulled out a little girl, maybe thirteen years old [...]. His companions held her father while the bald man tore off her dress, yelling it was time for her to meet a real man. I rode up and said the time had come for him, too – I thought I was very witty. [...] I hit him twice – not clean cuts, but spectacular, and only then did he fall. [...] My first noble deed. You see, they'd told me again and again in Kaer Morhen not to get involved in such incidents, not to play at being knight errant or uphold the law. Not to show off, but to work for money. And I joined this fight like an idiot [...]. And do you know why? I wanted the girl, sobbing with gratitude, to kiss her saviour on the hands, and her father to thank me on his knees. [...] the girl, drenched in the bald man's blood, threw up, became hysterical and fainted in fear when I approached her. Since then, I've only very rarely interfered in such matters. (Sapkowski, 2007, pp. 115–116)

Early on, Geralt realizes that this is not a world designed for heroes, nor for knights-errant and protectors of damsels in distress.¹² Consequently, he becomes an anti-hero playing roles that would pass as typically male.¹³ The women close to him, however, are able to see through this kind of attitude with ease; Triss: “don't play the unfeeling mutant” (Sapkowski, 2008, p. 106), and Yennefer: “don't act out a farce for me” (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 241). Thus, Geralt becomes a puppet vulnerable to manipulation by his political superiors, and a sex toy in the hands of sorceresses – a handy device to fulfill their sexual desires and ambitions, and a desired and prestigious trophy to adorn their bedrooms.

The position of Geralt in relation to women is best described by a scene from *Wild Hunt* which takes place after the card game tournament (the quest “High Stake”). Geralt is invited

¹² The entire narrative of *Blood and Wine*, an expansion of *The Witcher 3*, is focused on parodying those “models.”

¹³ In *Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*, Geralt wants to compliment a female soldier Ves, a member of the Kingdom of Temeria's elite unit, and says: “you are very manly,” or even more manly than any man he knows. Ves laughs him off and ends the conversation. This signifies that in the Witcher's world, the category of masculinity or “being manly” is compromised – Geralt's tragedy is that he seems the only one to not know it yet.

to a dinner by Cantarella, a mysterious female spy, during which he tells her a variety of stories. The female replies in monosyllables (“Oh my”), finally interrupting him as she indulgently proceeds to the “main course”: “Fascinating story... Shall we go upstairs? You can show me exactly how it ended” (CD Projekt RED, 2015). Of course, at this point the player may still reject the sexual offer, but this option hardly seems significant here. Interpreted through the theory of Jacques Lacan, the enjoyment of speaking is specifically female, suggesting that Geralt has unveiled his femininity more completely than ever before during this brief scene. The excitement inherent in speaking or the excessive “identifying oneself” with one’s speech – which constitutes complete immersion in the Other (or, simply, in the symbolic world) – is, for Lacan, intertwined with feminine enjoyment (*jouissance féminine*).¹⁴ Therefore, the Witcher is most genuinely feminine not when (after a night of binge-drinking) he runs around a castle dressed in female underwear (quest: “No place like home”), but when driven by the story like a small-town gossip he chatters away to a female spy about an “adventure” he has had. Interestingly, the implicit conclusion of this story-telling by Geralt is nothing else than a sexual orgy.¹⁵ It must remain implicit, for a defense against the (in)expressible enjoyment, against the unbearably sexualized speech, must be silence. Or, the sexual intercourse “proper”: “Fascinating story... Shall we go upstairs?”

In *Blood and Wine*, the highly auto-thematic and self-referential expansion of *Wild Hunt*, the Witcher is given an analogical proposition by Syanna, a fascinating character, who is the driving force of the entire narrative: “I need a man, Geralt, and I’m not afraid to say it. [...] Treat it as my last wish.” Following intercourse she obviously ignores the Witcher, who remains enchanted by her and consequently instigates the following dialogue imbued with bitter self-reflection: Geralt: “Just gonna go our separate ways? No parting words?” Syanna: “Did you wish to tell me something?” Geralt: “Actually, that would probably be best.” Syanna: “Oh, my! No woman’s ever treated you this way...In that case, at last you’ve felt what so many women in this world feel at times” (the quest: “Beyond Hill and Dale...”).

¹⁴ See Lacan (1999).

¹⁵ However, to learn about it, we must play *The Witcher* (2007), because Geralt tells Cantarella about the contents of the quest “Blue Eyes,” which is to be found in part one of the game. The final words of this quest, spoken right before the orgy, are uttered by a female pander: “Come, dear daughters, time to show the Witcher the source of all legends about the House of the Night.”

Dreams of castration

Geralt's relation to sexuality appears to be not so much "non-normative" as non-normalized. His indecision is that of a child who has not yet adjusted to the surrounding world, a failing which does not escape one of the sorceresses, Keira Metz: "I'm so pleased the world's still able to astound you, Geralt. I actually envy you that sense of wonder – common in children, knights errant, and morons" (CD Projekt RED, 2015). Geralt is therefore more boyish than manly; and for boys, "unlike for girls and women[,] there is a constantly recurring notion that real manhood is not something that develops naturally through biological development, but that boys must win their manhood 'against powerful odds'" (Karlsson, 2014, p. 254). "Real manhood" is something to aspire to, something to be attained. The Witcher (in his own eyes) has not yet "manned up"; he is and will remain the embodiment of a persistent "not yet"; obsessively delaying, wrestling, trying out, and rehearsing in his hunt for imagined manhood.

Geralt is a child. Not a witch-man, but a witchy lad. On the level of discursive subterfuge, he was "castrated" by his greatest love, Yennefer, when they first met (and yet again, we are speaking of a type of love that is both a cliché and a distortion of the courteous chivalric romance):

'Don't struggle, my little Witcher [in original *wiedźminku*, a diminutive of *wiedźmin*].' She smiled spitefully. 'It's pointless. [...] And don't act out a farce for me, don't try to charm me with your hard and insolent masculinity. You are the only one to think you're insolent and hard. You'd do anything for me [...]. You'd pay any price. You'd lick my boots. And maybe something else, too, if I unexpectedly wished to amuse myself.' He remained silent (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 241).

Geralt kept silent, even though, from a psychoanalytic perspective, castration should indeed loosen one's tongue. Corporeality has no right to be heard: It may appear as "hard and insolent masculinity," but first and foremost it must be silent, and when it finds expression, it is through affect. Symbolic castration consists in cutting off bodily excess. Language, belonging to the symbolic register, allows one to make connections and be open to others. Thus, in accordance with Jacques Lacan's famous dictum, *jouissance* (enjoyment; in Geralt's case his "denaturalization") is to be "forbidden to the one who speaks," for it is incommensurable with social life. It is not until one's symbolic castration occurs that one can communicate comprehensibly; one is no longer gagged by corporeal excess. The singular, untranslatably immense enjoyment (*jouissance*) not so much thwarts the message as distorts it

from time to time. Castration, however, is aimed at neutralizing impulsiveness and relinquishing the somatic frenzy. The subject becomes domesticated, successfully adjusted to familial and social life. At a very basic level, castration marks the intervention of the Law (of the Father) in an incestuous relation of a mother and child. It is a result of castration that the child is no longer consumed by desire for its mother, and can start to notice the surrounding world. As the result of castration, the word no longer is merged with the flesh – it introduces the necessary distance between the word and the thing, between symbol and reality. The Witcher, in fact, wishes to be tamed, but he is unable to yield to castration completely, thereby remaining “sort of” and “not quite” castrated (which is mentioned by a character in the first instalment of the game, who utters in an off-hand way: “...Witcher is a worse kind of wizard. – A worse kind? – Yeah, with his balls withered” (CD Projekt RED, 2007)). Geralt stands with his legs perversely astride, with one foot in the royal social order, and the other in the monstrous “savagery of life,” understood as a drive that is bigger than himself in every way.

Wild Hunt begins with (a metaphor for) the cutting off the male genitalia. Geralt is taking a relaxing bath in a large wooden tub, when a crab-like creature suddenly slides into it. The expression on the hero’s face suggests that the crab’s claws have clutched onto his manhood. Later in the scene, the crab’s pincers appear to be remotely controlled by Yennefer. Although this humorous depiction is incorporated into Geralt’s dream, one must not forget that dreams and jokes are sites for the fulfillment of unconscious desires. Even if the scene never occurs “in reality” it can be understood as possibly more real than reality itself. It seems that Geralt does not desire anything more desperately than castration, which would erase from his unnatural being the perverse drive-like “excess” (of enjoyment), allowing him to fully enter the realm of language and submit himself to the law of desire founded on lack and prohibition. The Witcher unconsciously desires to be castrated, because what he really wants is to live a normal life as a normal man (and there is no “normal life” and/or “normal man” without symbolic castration). He wants to stop being a nomadic machine whose default mode is acting blindly. He wants to be charged with a symbolic mission: that of protector, guardian, husband, and father. He desires to be a male subject, renowned and sanctioned by the Other and others. In his conservative imagination, it is masculinity that conceals and alleviates the

savage side of violence. Consequently, the Witcher's masculinity seems a continuously actualized but unfeasible project. In this context, the following distinction is useful:

Masculinity should not be understood in terms of identity, one should rather tie it to an ideal or the term that I have preferred here, a 'project'. The term 'project' indicates that masculinity is a striving for a possibility which is not yet realized and, I venture to suggest, never will be realized since this project essentially concerns a denial of our existential conditions (Karlsson, 2014, p. 256).

Geralt denies the excesses of his own sexuality, and to reinforce this renouncement, he invents for himself and others various principles and codes of conduct:

I keep to my principles. No, not the code. Although I have at times hidden behind a code. People like that. Those who follow a code are often respected and held in high esteem. But no one's ever compiled a Witcher's code. I invented mine. Just like that. And keep to it. Always—Not always. (Sapkowski, 2007, p. 117)

One of the things prohibited under his code of conduct is killing humans or engaging on either side of political dispute. However, there are some exceptions to these rules, and he does not always remain neutral, sometimes even contradicting himself outright.

Since the subjectivity of the Witcher is based on the interplay of rules and exceptions, it seems justified to invoke the formula of sexualization elaborated by Jacques Lacan during his XXth seminar. For Lacan, sexual difference is based on logic and disappointed expectations. What is at stake here is the difference between a masculine exception to the rule (founded on a belief that even though I am close to being impotent myself, there is someone out there who surely is omnipotent) and the feminine rule composed solely of exceptions (I am all but powerless, yet in principle, I create conditions to facilitate the happening of almost everything). In other words, the masculine position is defined by "universal function" along with its "constitutive exceptions": always yes, although sometimes no (therefore sometimes yes), whereas the feminine position can be expressed in the following way: not always yes, but never no (and therefore...). In line with this logic, femininity signifies openness to exceptionality of excess and perversion, and masculinity pertains to the faith that everything is in order, provided the exception is expelled outside, and it shall be used to establish the law. Slavoj Žižek writes in this context:

In short, what sustains the difference between the two sexes is [a] way of coping with the necessary inconsistency involved in the act of assuming one and the same universal symbolic feature (ultimately that of “castration”). It is not that man stands for logos as opposed to the feminine emphasis on emotions; it is rather that, for man, logos as the consistent and coherent universal principle of all reality relies on the constitutive exception of some mystical, ineffable X (“there are things one should not talk about”), while, in the case of a woman, there is no exception, “one can talk about everything,” and, for that very reason, the universe of logos becomes inconsistent, incoherent, dispersed, “non-all.” Or, with regard to the assumption of a symbolic title, a man who tends to identify with his title absolutely, to put everything at stake for it (to die for his cause), nonetheless relies on the myth that he is not only his title, the “social mask” he is wearing, that there is something beneath it, a “real person”; in the case of a woman, on the contrary, there is no firm, unconditional commitment, everything is ultimately a mask, but, for that very reason, there is nothing “behind the mask.” (Žižek, 1998, p. 84)

Geralt’s predicament comes down to the fact that he is trapped in an everlasting deadlock between femininity and masculinity, as understood in the preceding discussion. “But perhaps you’re really a woman?” – he is asked revealingly by Keira Metz – “Perhaps you’re only pretending to be a man?” (Sapkowski, 2013, p. 130).

He pretends, for he still hopes to be entirely castrated (hence his attachment to Yennefer, that is, to the Woman). He knows perfectly well that it is impossible, yet he still believes on some level that he is determined by the feminine element (which implies being immersed in the world completely); he accepts all the ramifications of this immersion, including the eventuality of remodeling this world from the inside out. He nevertheless chooses passivity, and holds on to a boyish faith that behind the mask of the “freak” hides the “real man”. This belief is so overwhelming that it paralyzes any attempt at developing or reclaiming individual subjectivity. The Witcher simply cannot accept that his “social mask” (the Witcher) is intertwined with, and indistinguishable from, his “real face.”

To sustain his project – unfeasible, since real masculinity is purely a fantasy, that was and is never to be fulfilled (for masculinity is never what it is presently; it either is what it used to be, or what it is going to be) – Geralt needs Yennefer, as well as Ciri, a step-daughter whom he has “invented” for himself. Of course, he did not do this for her sake; she is an independent and strong person of flesh and blood. He invents Ciri in the role of “step-daughter” for her symbolic function alone – a “daughter” legitimizes the existence of “father”. Through the prism of Geralt’s relationship with Ciri, *Wild Hunt* may be read as a deconstruction of the entire genre of narrative games based on paternalistic masculinity. A prime example of this

can be found in the moment when Ciri unceremoniously interrupts a trivial conversation between two men (Avallac'h and Geralt): Avallac'h: "[Ciri] possesses a great power she cannot control. ... Until she learns to control it, she should remain isolated." Ciri: "First of all – bollocks. Second – if you're going to speak of courage, at least address me directly, and not through Geralt. I'm gone." (quest: "Blood on the Battlefield").

In the case of *Wild Hunt*, the Witcher's mission starts with the hunt for a lost object, wrapped up with an endeavour to find and rescue his daughter (Ciri). Jaskier [Dandelion], responding to Geralt chastising him over the insufficient assistance he's provided to Ciri, says: "Why would I ever worry about her? You have any idea how she fights?! The girl can take care of herself, believe me" (CD Projekt RED, 2015)). He maintains this patriarchal attitude until the final and most absurd moment when the "step-father" attempts to convince his "daughter" to allow him to physically annihilate the world, just so she can come back home. Thus, to protect the last bastion of his illusory masculinity (that is, his alleged paternity), Geralt tries to persuade Ciri to destroy civilization...Ciri does not ridicule this proposition, but she turns, perhaps more towards the player than to Geralt, and says with both an empathetic and indulgent expression on her face: "What can you know about saving the world, silly? You're but a Witcher. This is my story, not yours. You must let me finish telling it"¹⁶ (CD Projekt RED, 2015). Her request for permission is the final courtesy shown towards all masculine archetypes that hereafter become obsolete. Ciri declares that from the very beginning, we have been playing only a supporting role in the story, and that the genuine and substantive events have been taking place alongside us. We were too silly, too busy acting out our roles, to be introduced to adult matters. And maybe this is the reason CD Projekt RED will not create another instalment of *The Witcher* – compromised in this way, our hero would no longer be able to play his part.

The ending of *Wild Hunt* can be treated as an indirect polemic against *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). In this game, Joel, a father-figure, truly sacrifices the existence of

¹⁶ What best demonstrates the differences in position and self-awareness of the characters in the game, as opposed to their counterparts in the novels, is the way Sapkowski portrays how Ciri and Yennefer think of themselves in relation to Geralt, which is simply submissive: "We understood – both she [Yennefer] and I – that we can laugh and talk together about him. About Geralt. Suddenly we became close, although I knew perfectly well that Geralt both brought us together and separated us, and that that's how it would always be." (Sapkowski, 2008, p. 300). In the game, quite to the contrary, the Witcher is entirely (existentially) dependent on Ciri.

humanity on the altar of his own egotism. His step-daughter Ellie is all he has ever cared for; at the same time bringing humanity back to existence is dependent on her dying. This is why, despite the entire world and against her will, he saves her life. We may even venture to say that Joel is the last representative of masculinity as we know it. To quote Žižek:

a man in love is ready to give everything for it, the beloved is elevated into the absolute, unconditional object, but, for that very reason, he is compelled to sacrifice her for the sake of his public or professional cause; a woman is entirely, without restraint and reserve, immersed in love, there is no dimension of her being that is not permeated by love—but, for that very reason, “love is not all” for her, it is forever accompanied by an uncanny, fundamental indifference” (Žižek, 1998, p. 84).

Joel gave the entire world (literally) for his “daughter,” but at the same time, he betrayed both her and her desire. True love moves one away from egotism and consists in fundamental indifference towards the fate of the loved one, as in the case of Ciri, who destroys Geralt (along with his fantasies) out of love for him. The epilogue of the game seems to constitute the final blow to the Witcher’s identity.¹⁷ After luckily surviving, Ciri leaves Geralt and renounces her “career” of a she-witcher, departing for the capital of the empire. She symbolically hands off her sword to Geralt and chooses to be politically active: “I realized I had to stop fleeing. Realized that if I wish to change anything, I cannot do so hunting monsters round forgotten villages. I must do so from there. From Nilfgaard” (CD Projekt RED, 2015). This is how the part three of *The Witcher* concludes – discarding boyish delusions of paternalistic masculinity which is self-sustaining and (for)ever-suspended (despite the impoverishment of the world), and transitioning to subject-empowering politics aimed at genuine social change. To fix the world, one must join the feminine side of the force.

In a relatively short time the Witcher has come a long way – from a trivial “collector of women” (in *The Witcher*) to an almost “nomadic subject,” persisting in-between masculinity and femininity, and remaining conflicted within himself over his identity towards the end (*The Witcher 3*). The conflict leaves him defeated, and from that moment on everything seems to be in the hands of Ciri. Let us hope that in a few years’ time (thanks to the CD Projekt RED developers), she will be the one to entangle gamers in gender dynamics and more subject-

¹⁷ There are, in fact, three possible endings, dependent on the player’s actions, but the one quoted seems to be the most appropriate (in another Ciri becomes a she-witcher, and in yet another – “literally” the most interesting one – she dies).

empowering politics. In this sense, *The Witcher* series appears to be an intentional, albeit perhaps not entirely effective, attempt to undermine masculine hegemony in video game representations.

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Résumé

Dans le présent article, je décris Geralt of Rivia, le protagoniste éponyme du cycle littéraire *The Witcher*, écrit par Andrzej Sapkowski, et du jeu vidéo *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015). J'effectue une analyse comparative de Geralt dans les romans et le jeu vidéo, avec l'intention de retracer la déconstruction inhérente au personnage qui contribue à définir son identité de genre. À cette fin, le jeu – à un plus grand degré que le roman, mais en parallèle à ce dernier – renverse le trope de la masculinité héroïque, paternaliste et introvertie, au moyen d'une corporalité féminine et d'une politique féminine (pouvant être définie simplement comme une politique pratiquée par des femmes, en fonction des intérêts des femmes, et visant à saper l'hégémonie masculine). Ceci mène à une analyse et un rejet du trope masculin, qui est remplacé par une identité se situant à mi-chemin entre la féminité et la masculinité (et leurs différentes variantes).

Mots-clés : Witcher, masculinité, genre, psychoanalyse, Sapkowski, Lacan



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FemShep : féminité sexualisée ou subversive? **Analyse du personnage féminin de la série *Mass Effect***

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Résumé

Le personnage FemShep de la série *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007-2012) est souvent considéré comme un personnage féminin particulièrement intéressant et apprécié par les joueuses et les joueurs. Toutefois, les discours l'entourant sont souvent contradictoires : alors que certains la perçoivent comme une copie féminisée et sexualisée du personnage masculin Shepard, qui lui, serait le personnage par défaut, d'autres voient en FemShep un potentiel de subversion puisqu'elle se différencie de plusieurs personnages féminins de jeux vidéo. Cet article propose plusieurs interprétations possibles de FemShep, en analysant les représentations du personnage dans la publicité et dans la série de jeux *Mass Effect*.

Mots-clés : jeu vidéo, personnage féminin, *Mass Effect*, FemShep, performance de genre, héroïne d'action, sexualisation

Abstract in English at the end of the text

Introduction

La série *Mass Effect* de BioWare a beaucoup fait parler d'elle, notamment en raison de l'effet considérable des choix des joueuses et joueurs sur le déroulement de l'intrigue dans le jeu. Cette trilogie de science-fiction, parue entre 2007 et 2012, permet aux joueurs et joueuses de sélectionner le genre du personnage principal, en optant pour l'avatar Jane Shepard (que les fans appellent affectueusement FemShep) ou John Shepard (parfois surnommé BroShep), afin de sauver la galaxie d'une menace extra-terrestre qui veut éliminer toute trace de vie. Ce mélange de jeu de tir à la troisième personne et de jeu de rôle donne également la possibilité de choisir la classe à laquelle son personnage appartient (soldat, technicien, infiltrateur, etc.) et de personnaliser légèrement son apparence. En 2012, BioWare a publié des statistiques montrant les différentes façons dont le jeu a été joué, les choix que les joueuses et joueurs ont faits à quelques moments clés (sauver ou tuer la reine d'une espèce insectoïde, ce qui signifiera leur extermination dans toute la galaxie, ou encore devoir sacrifier un membre de son équipage pour en sauver un autre, par exemple), le pourcentage d'entre eux ayant choisi le parcours moral Paragon (conciliant, loyal, diplomate, etc.) ou Renegade (brutal, intransigeant) ainsi que plusieurs autres choix. On peut ainsi constater que seulement 18 % des joueuses et joueurs ont choisi d'utiliser FemShep plutôt que l'avatar masculin. Dans les forums de discussion et les articles journalistiques, on remarque pourtant une très grande appréciation du personnage féminin par les joueuses et joueurs, souvent considéré comme plus intéressant, plus développé et plus attachant que le personnage masculin. L'une des raisons souvent évoquées pour justifier l'attrait de FemShep est la performance de Jennifer Hale, l'actrice interprétant la voix du personnage (Cobbett 2012 ; Escapist Forums 2012, 2013 ; Polo 2011). Néanmoins, bien que la performance vocale de FemShep soit plus marquante que celle de BroShep, cela ne semble pas entièrement expliquer les préférences des joueuses et joueurs pour le personnage féminin.

Certains et certaines considèrent que FemShep est l'un des personnages féminins les plus intéressants dans l'univers des jeux vidéo. D'autres croient qu'elle n'est qu'une reproduction féminisée de BroShep, le personnage par défaut de la série. Plusieurs lectures du personnage sont donc possibles, et il est envisageable de voir FemShep comme une simple copie féminisée de BroShep, ce qui la rend moins intéressante, ou comme une figure subversive. Nous verrons

comment le marketing et le design du jeu semblent démontrer qu'elle n'est que le double féminisé de Shepard, mais nous défendrons l'idée qu'elle incarne une nouvelle forme de féminité en s'inspirant de la figure de l'héroïne d'action pour former une nouvelle variante, qui s'éloigne du stéréotype classique de la femme forte et sexualisée, dont Lara Croft est l'exemple parfait. FemShep, dans toutes ses contradictions, représente une performance alternative de genre, ce qui pourrait expliquer en partie la réception favorable que le personnage a reçue parmi les joueuses et joueurs.

Personnages féminins et héroïne d'action

Pour comprendre la représentation des personnages féminins dans les jeux vidéo, il faut remonter aux origines de la culture masculine vidéoludique. L'ouvrage *Digital Play* (Kline et al., 2003) présente une revue de littérature sur les personnages féminins dans les jeux vidéo. Ces recherches en viennent toutes à la conclusion que la sexualisation et l'exploitation des personnages féminins reposent sur une construction hégémonique de la masculinité militarisée. Afin de comprendre pourquoi les jeux vidéo sont profondément phallocentriques et ne mettent presque pas en scène de personnages féminins, les auteurs de l'ouvrage remontent aux origines du jeu vidéo et démontrent comment la masculinité militarisée est née et a perduré dans la culture vidéoludique, notamment grâce au marketing. Les jeux vidéo sont nés dans des laboratoires financés par le complexe militaro-industriel et technologique (*high-technology military-industrial complex*) (Kline et al., 2003, p. 248) et mettaient ainsi l'accent sur les jeux de guerre, comme *Spacewar* (Russel, 1962). La culture des jeux d'arcade était majoritairement masculine, selon Kocurek (2015). Le marketing des jeux de maison a prolongé cette culture de violence et de masculinité militarisée en visant les garçons (Nintendo) et les adolescents masculins (Sega) avec des publicités qui glorifient la puissance et qui utilisent des sous-entendus sexuels. La violence présente dans les jeux serait en corrélation directe avec l'exploitation des corps féminins afin de répondre aux prétendues attentes des joueurs masculins. L'industrie tiendrait à conserver des valeurs sûres en créant des jeux où les personnages féminins sont réduits à des trophées ou des demoiselles en détresse et où la masculinité militarisée y tient une place d'honneur.

Burrill (2008) étudie lui aussi la culture masculine dans les jeux vidéo. Dans son livre *Die Tryin': Videogames, Masculinity, Culture*, Burrill tente de comprendre l'évolution de l'imaginaire masculin et en vient aussi à la conclusion que la masculinité est hégémonique dans les jeux. Selon lui, l'une des conséquences de la culture masculine hétérosexuelle des jeux vidéo est la surreprésentation des personnages masculins et des thématiques culturellement perçues comme étant masculines et viriles (comme la violence ou l'hypersexualisation des femmes). Les personnages féminins demeurent sous-représentés et incarnent souvent des rôles stéréotypés. La vidéoblogueuse Anita Sarkeesian a justement publié plusieurs vidéos, depuis 2009, qui vulgarisent les rôles et stéréotypes des personnages féminins vidéoludiques. D'après elle, les femmes endossent souvent des rôles de demoiselles en détresse, de femmes-trophées, ou encore d'objets de décor sexualisés. Plusieurs recherches universitaires se sont également penchées sur la question des représentations des femmes dans les jeux vidéo, constatant fréquemment la sexualisation de celles-ci.

Dietz (1998) a réalisé une étude de cas, en analysant 33 jeux populaires de Nintendo et Sega, qui démontre que les rôles usant de stéréotypes de genre sont fréquents et centraux dans les jeux vidéo. D'après Dietz, les rôles genrés traditionnels contribuent aux constructions sociales théorisées par Simone de Beauvoir (1949) et sont largement représentés dans les jeux vidéo. L'auteure affirme que, même si dans quelques jeux, les femmes sont représentées de manière positive, elles incarnent la plupart du temps des rôles de demoiselles en détresse, d'objets de désir, d'ennemies ou de trophées, alors que les personnages masculins sont plutôt associés à des actes d'héroïsme ou de violence.

MacCallum-Stewart (2008) a fait une étude de cas qui se penche sur plusieurs jeux et a noté que les représentations et les rôles féminins ont peu à peu changé depuis les précédentes études. L'auteure croit que, même si le milieu du jeu vidéo est centré sur les joueurs masculins, les joueuses et les personnages féminins sont plus acceptés que ce que laissent penser les médias. Si les femmes demeurent assujetties au regard masculin, les stéréotypes de genre, autant masculins que féminins, deviennent impopulaires et les jeux présentent des modèles plus diversifiés. L'étude de Kondrat (2015) a sondé quelque 234 joueuses et joueurs en leur posant des questions

sur leurs habitudes de jeu ainsi que sur leur opinion à propos des stéréotypes genrés. Kondrat en est venue à la conclusion que l'image des personnages féminins demeure négative selon la majorité des joueuses et joueurs : les femmes sont représentées de manière stéréotypée puisqu'elles sont souvent sexualisées, ne portant que très peu de vêtements. De plus, peu de jeux mettent en scène une héroïne, les femmes étant souvent reléguées aux rôles de demoiselles en détresse ou d'objets sexuels, bien que ces représentations tendent lentement à changer. D'après les participants à l'étude, les raisons pour lesquelles la situation des personnages féminins demeure négative seraient liées à la publicité des jeux, qui met l'accent sur l'aspect érotique du corps féminin, ou encore au peu de femmes qui jouent ou travaillent dans l'industrie vidéoludique.

On peut cependant observer la naissance d'une certaine figure féminine dans cet univers de masculinité militarisée et de femmes-objets : l'héroïne d'action. S'inspirant du cinéma et des séries télévisées (notamment Ripley dans les films de la série *Alien* et Xena de la télésérie *Xena : Warrior Princess*), l'héroïne d'action taille peu à peu sa place dans les jeux vidéo, en particulier depuis quelques années. L'héroïne d'action a toutefois une nature ambiguë : bien qu'elle se trouve à des années-lumière du personnage féminin passif qu'est la demoiselle en détresse, elle perpétue des idéaux de beauté et de féminité mis en place par la société patriarcale (Inness, 2004; Brown, 2011). Même si elle est forte physiquement et émotionnellement, intelligente et en contrôle de sa destinée, elle correspond aux canons de beauté conventionnels en plus d'être objectifiée et fétichisée par le regard masculin sexualisant (Mulvey, 1993).

Lara Croft est l'exemple emblématique de la figure de l'héroïne d'action : elle correspond à la fois au fantasme masculin de la femme féminine et sexualisée et à la figure alternative de femme forte et active possédant des caractéristiques typiquement masculines (Kennedy, 2002). L'héroïne d'action remet néanmoins en question la thèse essentialiste, selon laquelle la biologie détermine le genre d'une personne, en renégociant les règles du genre, en s'appropriant des caractéristiques culturellement construites comme masculines et en performant des rôles traditionnellement réservés aux hommes (Brown, 2011, p. 24). Que ce soit au cinéma ou dans les jeux vidéo, l'héroïne d'action renverse la traditionnelle division des rôles entre les hommes et les

femmes. La subversion qu'effectue l'héroïne d'action opère à même sa performance de genre, alors qu'elle s'approprie les codes de la masculinité militarisée tout en demeurant féminine. FemShep emprunte pour sa part des caractéristiques de la figure de l'héroïne d'action, comme l'appropriation de codes masculins, sans toutefois l'incarner totalement puisqu'elle n'est pas objectifiée comme peut l'être Lara Croft, par exemple, du moins dans le contenu des jeux *Mass Effect*. Ce traitement pourrait être expliqué par le fait que FemShep semble, à première vue, une copie féminisée du personnage original de BroShep.

FemShep : un BroShep féminisé ?

À première vue, le personnage de FemShep semble correspondre au stéréotype vidéoludique qu'Anita Sarkeesian (2013) appelle le « *Ms. Male character* » et que Trépanier-Jobin et Bonenfant (2017) expliquent plus en détails dans le présent numéro de *Kinephanos*. L'existence de FemShep ne serait alors due qu'à celle de BroShep. Même si les premiers tests d'animation du personnage de *Mass Effect* furent réalisés avec l'avatar féminin¹, il est facile de constater, lorsqu'on s'attarde au design des jeux de la série, que ceux-ci ont été conçus en fonction du personnage masculin et que le personnage féminin est relégué au second plan. En effet, BroShep est le personnage par défaut du jeu, alors que FemShep est une option secondaire qui doit être sélectionnée par les joueuses et joueurs. En ce qui concerne les animations des personnages, les designers n'ont pas pris la peine d'adapter la démarche de l'avatar féminin à son genre et à sa corpulence. La démarche lourde et masculine de FemShep peut d'ailleurs donner lieu à des situations cocasses, voire incongrues. Une vidéo sur le site YouTube, *Mass Effect 2 – Blonde Femshep dress wearing FAIL*, rend compte d'une de ces situations qui témoignent de l'animation masculine de FemShep. Lors d'une soirée mondaine dans *Mass Effect 2*, par exemple, FemShep porte une robe courte et moulante, mais s'assoit quand même les jambes écartées dans une pose très masculine qui découvre entièrement son entrejambe (plongé dans l'ombre). Comme le titre de la vidéo le souligne, cette combinaison de vêtements et d'animation apparaît, pour les fans,

¹ C'est ce qu'a indiqué sur Twitter Jonathan Cooper, un des animateurs ayant travaillé sur *Mass Effect 1* et *2*, avant de préciser qu'il avait réutilisé les captures de mouvement du jeu *Jade Empire* et qu'il avait toujours été prévu de créer une version masculine et une version féminine de Shepard.

comme un accident vestimentaire (« *dress wearing fail* »), plutôt que d'être un moment voulu par les créateurs du jeu ou une référence intertextuelle à une célèbre scène du film *Basic Instinct*.

L'absence de différenciation entre les deux personnages sur le plan narratif témoigne également du modelage de FemShep à partir de l'avatar masculin. Les interactions que FemShep entretient avec les Krogans sont révélatrices à cet égard. Même si ces soldats extraterrestres perçoivent les femmes comme des corps servant à la reproduction de l'espèce, leurs échanges verbaux avec FemShep portent davantage sur ses prouesses militaires que sur ses capacités reproductrices. Les Krogans traitent FemShep exactement de la même façon qu'ils traitent BroShep : c'est-à-dire comme un soldat. Bien que les différences sexuelles existent dans l'univers de *Mass Effect*, elles ne semblent pas affecter l'attitude des personnages secondaires envers FemShep. Un contraste apparaît alors entre FemShep et les autres femmes qu'elle côtoie et qui, elles, semblent vivre des situations basées sur leur genre.

Le fait que le jeu offre peu de différences entre les avatars masculin et féminin, autant dans les animations que dans la narration, renforce l'idée que FemShep est modelée sur le personnage de BroShep. Comme l'expliquent Layne et Blackmon, l'absence de féminité² chez FemShep témoigne du fait que les concepteurs ont pris BroShep comme un étalon de mesure à partir duquel ils ont moulé le personnage féminin.

The female Commander Shepard does not seem to be different in any way from BroShep. While one would not expect (or want) a female character that was essentially different or downgraded from the male version of Commander Shepard (BroShep), the lack of acknowledgement of her femaleness reinforces the idea that the standard, default character is male and that developers are unwilling to make essential changes to the (male) commander based on biological sex. (Layne et Blackmon, 2013)

Au lieu de créer deux versions d'un personnage ne possédant pas de caractéristiques genrées ou possédant à la fois des caractéristiques masculines et féminines, le personnage féminin est celui qui adopte les caractéristiques masculines sans que l'inverse soit réciproque. En plus de renforcer

² Par féminité, nous entendons ici des caractéristiques socialement construites pour être associées au genre féminin, et non une « essence féminine ».

l'idée que le joueur et le personnage par défaut devraient être masculins, l'approche des concepteurs laisse croire que l'égalité entre les genres passe par une duplication des caractéristiques masculines sur le personnage féminin. En calquant l'avatar féminin sur l'avatar masculin, les concepteurs se protègent contre d'éventuelles critiques sur la façon dont ils représentent les femmes, mais omettent de broser un portrait positif de la féminité.

The lack of female qualities in FemShep both exposes the fact that the gaming industry believes the default player, and thus the default character, is and should be male and indicates a perspective that gender-blindness is the key to equality. By making the female characters exactly like the male characters, developers can sidestep any accusations of stereotyping or misrepresenting women. The problem with this, as with most times a gender-blind defense is invoked, is that the default rarely incorporates any female attributes, but is solely based on traditionally, historically, and contextually male characteristics. (Layne et Blackmon, 2013)

Layne et Blackmon (2013) ne croient pas que le *gender-blindness*, une tactique de design qui consiste à ne pas prendre en compte les genres mais plutôt à créer les personnages de la même manière, permette l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes. Le personnage par défaut, sur lequel est calqué le personnage d'un autre genre, est traditionnellement masculin et n'a pas d'attributs féminins. Le contexte du jeu pourrait toutefois justifier en partie la représentation de la masculinité : *Mass Effect* se situe dans un environnement fictionnel militaire. La masculinité militarisée devient donc un état naturel, ce qui peut expliquer que FemShep est un calque de BroShep. Néanmoins, ce contexte renforce le stéréotype que le domaine militaire relève du masculin (et de la masculinité militarisée plutôt que simplement du militaire), et que la féminité n'y a pas sa place. De plus, on peut voir le contexte militaire comme un choix des concepteurs afin de vendre et de plaire à des joueurs considérés comme masculins, dans des cadres et des environnements hétéronormatifs.

Certaines différences notables existent toutefois entre BroShep et FemShep. L'une d'elles réside dans les options romantiques des deux personnages et semble particulièrement révélatrice du seuil de tolérance des sociétés occidentales. Dans le premier *Mass Effect*, BroShep a la possibilité de courtoiser deux femmes (Ashley et Liara), alors que FemShep a le choix entre une romance hétérosexuelle avec Kaidan ou une romance homosexuelle avec Liara. Dans *Mass Effect 2*, BroShep se trouve encore limité aux relations hétérosexuelles avec un choix de six

femmes (trois humaines et trois extra-terrestres)³. Encore une fois, les options sont plus ouvertes pour FemShep dans le second titre de la série : en plus d'avoir la possibilité de courtiser trois hommes, elle peut également séduire trois femmes. Ces options romantiques sont-elles la preuve d'une plus grande tolérance envers l'homosexualité féminine qu'envers l'homosexualité masculine en Occident, ou sont-elles une conséquence du calque du personnage féminin sur le personnage masculin? Quoi qu'il en soit, l'impossibilité de créer des romances homosexuelles avec BroShep a soulevé beaucoup de critiques. Les fans ont réclamé la possibilité d'établir une relation homosexuelle entre hommes, comme dans le jeu *Dragon Age : Origins*, également développé par BioWare. À ces critiques, le cofondateur de BioWare, Ray Muzyka, a rétorqué qu'il s'agissait d'un choix narratif fondé sur l'idée d'avoir un avatar à la personnalité prédéfinie :

Dragon Age is a first person narrative, where you're taking on an origin and a role, and you are that character at a fundamental level. It's fundamentally about defining your character, including those kinds of concepts. In *Mass Effect* it's more a third person narrative, where you have a pre-defined character who is who he is, or she is. But it's not a wide-open choice matrix. It's more a choice on a tactical level with a pre-defined character. So they're different types of narratives, and that's intentional. (Muzkya, cité par Smee, 2010).

Selon Muzyka, Shepard est hétérosexuel parce que cette orientation cadre mieux avec sa personnalité. Dans son explication, Muzyka semble toutefois oublier que FemShep peut être hétérosexuelle ou lesbienne depuis le début de la série et parle de BroShep comme étant le vrai Shepard.

BioWare a pris en compte les critiques et a offert plus d'options pour le troisième *Mass Effect*. On constate néanmoins que les choix de partenaires masculins pour BroShep demeurent limités, contrairement à FemShep, qui a, encore une fois, autant sinon plus d'options lesbiennes qu'hétérosexuelles.⁴ Ces indices suggèrent que FemShep ne serait en fait qu'une version féminine de la masculinité militarisée souvent présentée dans les jeux vidéo. Au premier regard, le fait que FemShep ait une orientation sexuelle plus variable et plus d'options que BroShep

³ Avec la possibilité d'une septième dans une extension du jeu.

⁴ Les options hétérosexuelles de FemShep sont encore plus limitées si les choix des joueurs et joueuses ont mené à la mort de Kaidan dans le premier *Mass Effect* et que Garrus n'a pas été courtisé dans le deuxième; ce sont deux options hétérosexuelles sur quatre qui disparaissent, laissant toutefois les quatre options homosexuelles.

paraît réfuter la thèse qu'elle n'est qu'une copie féminisée de BroShep. Il faut toutefois garder en tête que les personnages féminins pouvant être courtisés par FemShep sont les mêmes que ceux qui peuvent être séduits par BroShep, alors que l'inverse n'est pas vrai.

Bref, FemShep ne se différencie de BroShep que par ses options romantiques, qui, par ailleurs, nourrissent les fantasmes des joueurs masculins présumés hétérosexuels. Le fait que les joueuses et joueurs aient l'option de choisir le genre du personnage ainsi qu'une relation hétérosexuelle ou homosexuelle n'encourage qu'à un certain point la subversion des rôles de genre. Il faut faire la distinction entre la diversité (le fait d'imposer aux joueuses et joueurs des groupes marginalisés) et la pluralité (définie comme le choix des joueuses et joueurs d'incarner des groupes marginalisés). Comme l'explique Shaw,

[p]luralism gives players the option of seeing marginalized groups represented only if a player so chooses, and therefore, it cannot fulfill the socially progressive goals of media representation. Diversity in video games necessitates that all audiences are confronted with different types of characters. [...] While pluralism further differentiates between norm and other, diversity promotes difference without fetishizing it. (2014, p. 225)

La pluralité n'est qu'une option : certains pourront décider de ne pas jouer de groupes marginalisés, alors que la diversité fait la promotion de la différence en la normalisant. Pour Lavigne, le choix d'utiliser FemShep plutôt que BroShep promeut la pluralité plutôt que la diversité en donnant le choix aux joueuses et aux joueurs d'avoir du contenu progressiste dans leur jeu. La série *Mass Effect* est construite dans la pluralité, ce qui en fait son attrait, au détriment de la diversité. L'aspect progressiste de FemShep, au plan romantique, ne sera possible que si la joueuse ou le joueur a décidé de jouer son personnage comme étant homosexuel. Il est alors facile de passer à côté d'une expérience subversive en incarnant un personnage masculin hétérosexuel, comme il est possible d'en voir dans une majorité de jeux vidéo.

Publicités : sexualisation du personnage

Les campagnes publicitaires entourant la sortie des jeux de la trilogie *Mass Effect* démontrent également à quel point le personnage féminin est accessoire par rapport au personnage masculin. Malgré la réception favorable du personnage féminin, FemShep était totalement absente des

images publicitaires et des vidéos promotionnelles. Le fait que BroShep soit le seul avatar à apparaître dans les publicités a mené plusieurs joueuses et joueurs à penser qu'il était la seule option de jeu possible. Sarkeesian (2013) croit d'ailleurs que l'absence de FemShep dans les publicités est l'une des causes du faible taux d'utilisation du personnage féminin. Après plusieurs critiques de la part des fans, BioWare a finalement rajouté FemShep dans les bandes-annonces ainsi qu'au dos de la pochette réversible du jeu, lors de la promotion de *Mass Effect 3*.

Une autre différence notable entre FemShep et BroShep concerne la féminisation et la sexualisation du personnage féminin dans les campagnes publicitaires autour des lancements des jeux. Tel que mentionné plus haut, les *Ms. Male characters* ne sont jamais que de simples copies d'un avatar masculin. Elles sont le résultat d'une série de transformations visant à rendre leur genre évident. L'une des stratégies marketing de BioWare fut de lancer, en 2011, un concours afin de décider du physique par défaut de FemShep. Le concours orchestré par BioWare se prêtait bien à la série *Mass Effect*, dont la narrativité repose sur les choix des joueuses et joueurs, mais seul l'avatar féminin a subi un tel traitement. Sur sa page Facebook, BioWare a présenté six FemShep possibles avec la même corpulence et les mêmes teintes de peau pâle (à une exception près, où la peau était un peu plus foncée). La forme de leur visage, la couleur de leurs yeux ainsi que la coupe et la couleur de leurs cheveux étaient les seuls éléments qui les différenciaient. Parmi ces six possibilités, la gagnante fut la Shepard blonde aux yeux bleus, qui a récolté près de 30 000 votes, soit environ 18 000 votes de plus que la FemShep qui est arrivée en seconde place.

Ce concours a suscité beaucoup de réactions négatives, autant de la part des journalistes que des joueuses et joueurs. Plusieurs ont mentionné qu'une Shepard blonde n'était pas originale, considérant l'utilisation abusive du stéréotype de la femme blonde aux yeux bleus dans les médias. Les journalistes ont attribué la victoire de celle qu'ils ont nommée BlondShep aux préférences des joueurs masculins, qui semblent avoir intériorisé ce stéréotype :

This is the 80 % male fan base that plays this game choosing the one they think is the most appealing, not the one that they think reminds them of Shepard, or even a soldier saving the galaxy. The voting had no story behind it, just looks, of course BlondeShep won in a pool that [sic] saturated with people that play MaleShep. (Conrad, citée par Hamilton, 2011)

En réaction au mécontentement des fans, BioWare a décidé de créer un deuxième concours afin que les joueuses et joueurs décident de la couleur de cheveux de FemShep, en conservant le reste des caractéristiques du premier choix voté (Fahey, 2011). Parmi les quatre choix disponibles, la Shepard rousse est finalement ressortie gagnante du concours de beauté.

Une forte critique a été formulée à l'endroit de cette stratégie de publicité. Bien que conséquent avec l'esprit de la trilogie *Mass Effect*, où l'on peut personnaliser les caractéristiques de l'avatar, le vote s'est transformé en véritable concours de beauté et de popularité. On peut en effet remarquer, dans les commentaires du concours, que les joueuses et joueurs ont principalement voté pour celle qu'ils considéraient comme la plus attirante. Cette instrumentalisation du corps féminin dans une optique commerciale a souvent lieu dans l'univers des jeux vidéo, tout comme dans celui d'autres produits culturels. Les héroïnes sont fréquemment mises en scène afin de plaire aux joueurs masculins hétérosexuels plutôt que pour incarner un modèle positif auquel le public féminin pourra s'identifier. En positionnant FemShep comme un objet agréable à regarder plutôt que comme un sujet actif, les deux concours viennent ébranler son statut fragile de rôle principal féminin.

L'absence réelle de choix donnés aux joueuses et joueurs est également problématique. Leur demander de choisir entre des corps quasi identiques, dont la seule différence réside dans une couleur d'yeux ou de cheveux, renforce l'idée qu'il n'y a qu'un seul type de silhouette acceptable (jeune et mince) et qu'une seule manière pour une femme d'être séduisante⁵. L'alignement des versions similaires de FemShep, lors du concours, n'est pas sans rappeler la figure de la fille en série théorisée par Martine Delvaux et mise de l'avant par Trépanier-Jobin et Bonenfant (2017) :

Les filles en série sont ces jumelles dont les mouvements s'agencent parfaitement, qui bougent en harmonie les unes aux côtés des autres, qui ne se distinguent les unes des autres que par le détail d'un vêtement, de chaussures, d'une teinte de cheveux ou de peau, par des courbes légèrement dissemblables... Filles-machines, filles-images, filles-spectacles, filles marchandises, filles-ornements... elles sont l'illusion de la perfection. (Delvaux, 2013, p. 10-11)

⁵ BroShep, tout comme FemShep, ne peut avoir qu'un seul type de silhouette. Toutefois, alors que la figure de FemShep est conforme aux standards de beauté, le physique de BroShep représente plutôt la puissance et la virilité.

La sérialité des corps féminins donne une illusion de ce que devrait être ce corps féminin idéal, qui tend à remplacer l'image de la « vraie » femme. Bref, il semble plausible de croire que le personnage de FemShep est un calque féminisé et sexualisé du personnage de BroShep qui n'échappe pas au phénomène de la *Ms. Male character*, largement répandu dans le monde vidéoludique. C'est du moins ce que les discours des concepteurs et les publicités entourant la sortie des jeux laissent croire. Rien n'empêche toutefois les joueuses et joueurs de formuler d'autres interprétations à l'égard du personnage féminin et même de la concevoir comme une héroïne d'action forte et libérée.

FemShep comme figure subversive

On pourrait en effet voir FemShep non pas uniquement comme une copie féminisée de BroShep, mais comme une héroïne d'action qui performe un nouveau genre, empruntant des codes socialement construits à la fois comme masculins et féminins. Elle détiendrait alors le potentiel d'ébranler les modèles et les stéréotypes de genre dominants (Kotsiовos, 2013). Dans cette optique, bien que FemShep soit inspirée de BroShep, sa performance de la masculinité, alors qu'elle possède un corps socialement construit comme étant féminin, permettrait de subvertir son genre, de résister aux conventions et de dénaturiser la féminité.

La théorie sur la performance du genre de Judith Butler, également présentée par Trépanier-Jobin et Bonenfant (2017) dans ce numéro de *Kinephanos*, peut ici être utile pour comprendre sur quels aspects repose le potentiel subversif de FemShep. Dans son texte « Performative Acts and Gender Constitution : An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory » (1988) et son ouvrage *Trouble dans le genre* (2005), Butler avance l'idée que le genre et le sexe sont des constructions sociales. Selon elle, l'identité sexuée d'un individu est construite à travers les structures de genre et se manifeste dans les actions, le comportement et le langage. La reproduction des conventions de genre se fait donc par l'interaction entre les corps, qui performent ces actions et ces comportements pour se conformer aux attentes de la société. Ainsi, le genre n'existe qu'à travers les performances des sujets sociaux et constitue une source d'oppression. Comme l'explique Trépanier-Jobin (2013), il existe toutefois deux types de performance chez Butler :

Il ne faut donc pas confondre la performance « ordinaire » du genre avec la performance « parodique » du genre ayant lieu lorsqu'une personne imite intentionnellement les conventions de genre de manière exagérée. Même si l'une et l'autre des performances consistent à reproduire des pratiques corporelles culturellement valorisées, la performance « ordinaire » du genre contribue à naturaliser ces pratiques corporelles, alors que la performance « parodique » du genre est susceptible de mettre en évidence leur artificialité. (2013, p. 199)

Performer autre chose que les conventions de son genre d'appartenance ou performer les conventions de genre du sexe opposé de manière exagérée (comme le font les drag queens ou les drag kings) ouvrirait la porte à une subversion de l'identité sexuée. Pour Butler, « [e]n imitant le genre, le drag révèle implicitement la structure imitative du genre lui-même – ainsi que sa contingence » (Butler, 2005, p. 261). L'imitation amplifiée d'un genre et le mélange des attributs féminins et masculins sur un même corps dévoilent l'artificialité des genres. Selon Trépanier-Jobin, les espaces numériques offrent la possibilité de modeler les corps des avatars avec une liberté partielle, sans toutefois totalement échapper aux conventions de genre : les joueuses et les joueurs sont contraints, dans une certaine mesure, à performer les normes de genre conventionnelles liées à leur avatar. Il est également possible de performer le genre d'une autre manière. Ces performances sont « réalisées par des avatars dont la physionomie s'éloigne des modèles dominants, dont les attributs ne correspondent pas à leur sexe d'appartenance ou dont l'imitation exagérée des conventions de genre met en évidence l'artificialité de leur performance » (2013, p. 219). Bien que FemShep soit inspirée de BroShep, sa performance de la masculinité, exécutée avec un corps socialement construit comme étant féminin, permettrait d'offrir une nouvelle performance subversive de genre.

On peut affirmer que les performances de genre des personnages non-joueurs de *Mass Effect* restent traditionnelles, alors que FemShep possède plusieurs caractéristiques de l'héroïne d'action : elle est un personnage qui agit et qui prend possession du pouvoir et de caractéristiques masculines. Si FemShep se comporte de la même manière que BroShep parce qu'elle en est son calque, alors l'interaction entre FemShep et les personnages secondaires permet d'accentuer le renversement des rôles traditionnels et renforce l'idée qu'elle subvertit son genre en incarnant une nouvelle forme de féminité. En observant certains personnages féminins secondaires de la

série *Mass Effect*, on remarque en effet que leurs performances ne se distancent pas des performances de genre traditionnelles. L'un des exemples les plus frappants est le cas de Liara. Bien que le personnage soit une Asari, c'est-à-dire une espèce extra-terrestre asexuée ou monogénée, ce qui revêt en soi un caractère subversif par rapport aux normes de l'hétéronormativité et au système binaire de genre, elle a une apparence féminine et un comportement considéré comme féminin. Dans le premier *Mass Effect*, Liara explique même que les Asaris sont un peuple au tempérament calme et paisible, qui possède en plus un instinct maternel. Bien que le peuple Asari soit non genré, l'apparence physique de ces extra-terrestres est similaire à celle du corps humain biologiquement féminin (des seins et des hanches, une taille fine, etc.) et les caractéristiques qui lui sont associées sont celles traditionnellement perçues comme étant féminines, comme la douceur et la maternité, par exemple. Ce qui aurait pu être subversif (la maternité qui n'est pas associée à un genre) ne l'est finalement pas puisque certains codes dits féminins sont utilisés pour représenter les Asaris, qui ressemblent finalement plus à des Amazones domestiquées, fantasmées par des créateurs masculins hétérosexuels. Bien que le jeu affirme que les Asaris sont neutres, on se rend rapidement compte que la neutralité semble plutôt associée à la féminité et à une exhibition des corps féminins pour le plaisir masculin hétérosexuel. Les Asaris utilisent des pronoms tels que *she* et *her* plutôt que des pronoms neutres, ainsi que des titres comme *matriarch* et *daughter*. Elles sont aussi dépeintes comme des chasseuses (*huntress*), des diplomates et, à de nombreuses reprises, des danseuses nues dans des boîtes de nuit. Elles représentent une sorte de fantasme dans la galaxie, des sortes d'Amazones lesbiennes avec une grande libido, toujours disponibles pour des relations sexuelles. Même Liara, qui a une attitude plus conservatrice, est sexualisée. Sa tenue met ses formes en valeur et ses manières, son comportement ainsi que ses habiletés contribuent à son érotisation. Liara marche de manière gracieuse et féminine et elle s'assoit les jambes croisées. Ces éléments visuels contrastent avec la démarche masculine de FemShep. Sur les plans narratif et ludique, Liara est dépeinte comme étant une chercheuse plutôt qu'un soldat et elle agit plus souvent en diplomate que de manière agressive.

Quoique différente de Liara, le personnage d'Eve, qui appartient à l'espèce des Krogan, performe également son genre de manière traditionnelle. Puisque ses vêtements la couvrent

comme pour contrôler son corps, elle semble correspondre au fantasme orientaliste de l'Autre, dont la féminité est réprimée par des mâles violents et opprimants. Eve est une figure exotique qu'il faut libérer, une figure typique de l'orientalisme (Saïd, 2015). Elle lutte contre cette oppression pour que les femmes Krogan aient plus de pouvoir, mais essentialise la dichotomie mâle-femelle en disant que les femmes sont plus paisibles et attentionnées que les hommes. Elle apparaît donc comme une sorte de suffragette⁶ qui défie le statu quo. La performance de la féminité d'Eve est différente de celle de Liara, mais non pas moins conventionnelle et sujette à l'oppression. Les autres personnages féminins de la série *Mass Effect* offrent des performances de la féminité qui se retrouvent souvent dans les jeux vidéo. EDI est perçue comme figure réconfortante et sexuelle, Tali comme figure timide et douce et Miranda comme figure sexuelle. Puisqu'elle est une figure forte, Ashley se rapproche un peu de Lara Croft et de FemShep, mais son physique demeure objectifié pour le regard masculin : habits et armures ajustés, décolletés et maquillage ne sont pas des artefacts généralement associés aux soldats. De plus, Ashley, Tali et Miranda ne peuvent être courtisées que si Shepard est un homme, ce qui renforce l'aspect hétéronormatif de ces personnages. Bref, la féminité de tous ces personnages secondaires contraste avec la masculinité de FemShep et rend cette dernière plus évidente, ce qui renforce par le fait même son potentiel subversif.

La possibilité de rendre FemShep lesbienne contribue à son potentiel subversif. Tel que mentionné par Trépanier-Jobin et Bonenfant (2017), l'hétérosexualité, pour Monique Wittig, est hégémonique et étend sa domination grâce à la pensée *straight*, c'est-à-dire l'ensemble des discours (comme les films, la publicité et le langage) qui normalisent l'hétérosexualité et qui discréditent toute autre forme de sexualité. D'après Wittig, la figure de la lesbienne détient le potentiel de renverser le système hétérosexuel et de mettre en évidence le caractère artificiel de la catégorie femme, parce qu'elle fournit la preuve que les femmes n'ont pas toutes pour unique fonction de désirer les hommes. Monique Wittig cherche d'ailleurs à provoquer et à déconstruire certaines idées préconçues en affirmant que :

⁶ Les suffragettes font partie de la première vague des mouvements féministes. Ce groupe tentait principalement d'acquiescer pour les femmes les mêmes droits que les hommes, tels que le droit de vote, et s'inscrivait dans un féminisme libéral, qui ne niait pas les différences entre les sexes (Bourcier et Moliner, 2012 ; Surprenant, 2015).

le sujet désigné (lesbienne) N'EST PAS une femme, ni économiquement, ni politiquement, ni idéologiquement. Car en effet ce qui fait une femme, c'est une relation sociale particulière à un homme, [...] relation à laquelle les lesbiennes échappent en refusant de devenir ou de rester hétérosexuelles (2007, p. 54).

Selon Wittig, la lesbienne met en évidence le caractère artificiel de la femme, car elle ne correspond pas à l'image traditionnelle de la femme telle que vue dans la plupart du temps dans la société. Pour Trépanier-Jobin, les choix amoureux que l'on peut faire dans certains jeux vidéo remettent en question l'hétéronormativité : « En incitant constamment l'utilisateur à expérimenter des sexualités homosexuelles ou bisexuelles, le jeu [The Sims Social] remet [...] en question l'idée que l'hétéronormativité est le seul modèle de sexualité naturel et viable » (2013, p. 219). Pour Consalvo (2003), cette option rappelle aux joueurs et joueuses l'existence de sexualités hors norme et peut en troubler certains. Les joueuses et joueurs ont le loisir, avec FemShep (et avec BroShep, uniquement dans *Mass Effect 3*), d'expérimenter des sexualités hors du cadre normatif. Toutefois, la possibilité d'expérimenter des relations homosexuelles demeure optionnelle. Comme Shaw l'exprime, « if the player need [sic] to push a “gay button”⁷[...] to see same-sex relationships in games, then anyone who doesn't or is unaware that button exists can continue to consume the heteronormative dominated texts » (Shaw, 2013). Pour celles et ceux qui choisissent de ne pas explorer les options homosexuelles du jeu, leur expérience restera dans un cadre hétéronormatif. La subversion de la sexualité de FemShep n'est donc qu'optionnelle.

Les performances de genre des personnages masculins sont aussi importantes dans la construction de la féminité subversive de FemShep puisqu'elles servent de point de comparaison et de contraste. Les personnages féminins et masculins performant leurs genres respectifs de manière conventionnelle, ce qui ne permet qu'à FemShep d'être une figure réellement subversive. À l'exception de Cortez⁸, les personnages masculins de la série correspondent à ce que l'on attend de la masculinité militarisée. Le Lieutenant James Vega, dans *Mass Effect 3*, en est l'exemple parfait. Fort, audacieux, héroïque, à l'apparence physique typiquement militaire

⁷ Le « gay button » est un terme inventé par la *game designer* Anna Anthropy et utilisé pour désigner l'option queer dans un jeu, option qui peut aussi être ignorée, laissant la possibilité de subversion aux joueurs et joueuses plutôt que d'offrir d'emblée un contenu diversifié (Adams, 2015 ; Shaw, 2013).

⁸ Steve Cortez est le seul personnage ouvertement et officiellement homosexuel du jeu, qui performe quant à lui une masculinité considérée faible, qui se rapproche de la féminité. Il ne démontre pas sa force physique et ne prend pas réellement part aux combats. Il est un personnage plutôt passif, qui pilote la navette plutôt que le vaisseau principal.

(musclé, cheveux rasés, etc.), il apparaît comme le personnage classique de jeux vidéo, tel que décrit par Dietz (1998) et Kline (2003).

Les performances de genre de FemShep n'entrent toutefois pas dans l'un des moules de la masculinité ou de la féminité, mais passent plutôt outre la question du genre. Son apparence physique n'est pas sexualisée comme celle d'un personnage typique de jeu vidéo, comme Lara Croft. Contrairement aux concours de beauté et à la publicité entourant les *Mass Effect*, FemShep n'est jamais dépeinte, dans les jeux, comme un objet sexuel pour le regard des joueurs masculins hétérosexuels. Son armure et ses vêtements n'accentuent pas ses formes, contrairement aux personnages féminins secondaires de la série. Par ailleurs, sa voix est plus dure et plus grave que celle des autres femmes et elle arrive à s'imposer face à des hommes considérés comme virils, par exemple Vega. Bien qu'elle arbore quelques traits masculins, elle est dépeinte comme une personne sensible et maternelle, notamment lorsqu'elle réconforte Steve Cortez et lorsqu'elle discute avec Garrus de la possibilité d'avoir des enfants⁹. FemShep rejette les signes traditionnels de la féminité, sans toutefois être entièrement masculine, ni réellement sexualisée dans les jeux.

Conclusion

En comparant les performances de genre effectuées par FemShep à celles des autres personnages, féminins et masculins, ainsi qu'en les comparant à la figure de l'héroïne d'action, on peut voir comment *Mass Effect* crée une héroïne complexe basée sur un amalgame entre un leader militaire fort et une sensibilité qui se rapproche des constructions sociales de la féminité. Les stratégies marketing de BioWare n'ont pas semblé prendre en compte le potentiel subversif de FemShep, en ne la traitant que comme un objet de désir pour le regard masculin. Il en va de même pour les concepteurs du jeu, qui semblent considérer le personnage comme une pâle copie de son alter ego masculin. En tant que joueuse ou joueur, il est facile de passer à côté du personnage de FemShep et de rester dans la masculinité militarisée hétéronormative que l'on retrouve dans beaucoup d'autres jeux, puisque BroShep est le personnage par défaut. Cependant, les joueuses et joueurs peuvent participer à la subversion du genre en incarnant une Shepard plus

⁹ Une telle conversation n'est pas possible en tant que BroShep : le personnage masculin ne peut pas courtiser Garrus, la discussion sur la possibilité d'avoir des enfants n'existe pas. BroShep, par ailleurs, ne mentionne pas vouloir des enfants à ses éventuelles partenaires.

complexe, pleine de contradictions, qui possède des caractéristiques de l'héroïne d'action tout en dépassant les limites de cette figure grâce à ses préférences sexuelles. Les possibilités autour de sa sexualité permettent également de dépasser les normes hétérosexuelles habituellement présentes dans les jeux vidéo. *Mass Effect* ouvre la porte aux représentations diversifiées des personnages féminins, mais pour qu'un jeu défie réellement l'hétéronormativité, il doit être conçu dans ce but plutôt que de donner une simple possibilité aux joueuses et joueurs. FemShep se démarque de la figure de l'héroïne d'action en n'étant pas sexualisée dans les jeux. Ceci révèle à quel point l'identité de genre de FemShep est complexe, parfois contradictoire et singulière, ce qui fait d'elle une figure féminine forte et mémorable dans le paysage vidéoludique.

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Pascale Thériault est doctorante en études cinématographiques au département d'histoire de l'art et d'études cinématographiques à l'Université de Montréal. Après avoir préconisé une approche féministe des jeux vidéo en s'intéressant à la figure de l'héroïne d'action vidéoludique dans le cadre de sa maîtrise, elle étudie maintenant les enjeux féministes dans les jeux vidéo. Plus précisément, elle s'intéresse aux diverses tactiques que les femmes mettent en place pour se réapproprier les jeux, ce que soit dans la création ou dans habitudes de jeu. Dans le cadre de ses recherches pour le groupe LUDOV, elle s'intéresse aussi à l'histoire discursive des jeux d'aventure.

Abstract

The female version of the main protagonist in the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007-2012), named FemShep, is often considered as a particularly interesting female character, and is appreciated by many players. However, the discussions surrounding her identity are often contradictory. While some people only see her as a feminized and sexualized copy of the male avatar Shepard, others see FemShep as a potentially subversive female character, because she differs from the usual portrayals of women in video games. This article proposes several possible readings of FemShep, analyzing the character in both advertising, and the series of games.

Keywords: Video games, female character, *Mass Effect*, FemShep, action heroine, gender performance, sexualisation



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Is Game Design for Everybody? Women and Innovation in Video Games

Brie Code

Tru Luv Media

Abstract

Video games are a relatively new form of entertainment allowing for unprecedented interactivity, which has vast, untapped potential. Although an increasing number of gamers are now women, they are underrepresented both within games, and in the industry workforce. Diverse workforces show measurably increased innovation and a better understanding of new markets. Drawing on 13 years of experience in the industry, the author gives examples of how gender diversity has beneficially influenced games she has worked on, and makes the case that the industry needs more women to reach its full potential. Finally, she outlines four barriers that may contribute to keeping women out of the industry, and suggests potential solutions for overcoming these.

Keywords: video game, game development, gender diversity, diverse workforce, innovation

Résumé en français à la fin du texte

Introduction

I have been making video games for over 13 years, and playing video games all my life. Many of the games I have worked on do not represent my own morals, values, or interests - so why have I spent so many of my waking hours on them? I have come to understand that I make and play games more for what I wish they were, rather than what they are. Since that realization, I have been thinking more about what games could be. Video games are, by far,¹ the most interactive form of entertainment ever produced. We are only beginning to discover what we can do with this interactivity.

About half of all gamers are now women (*Entertainment Software Association*, 2015). Women, however, are underrepresented both within games, and inside the industry workforce. In this article, I will demonstrate that diverse workforces show increased innovation and a better understanding of new markets. I will explain how the benefits of gender diversity have influenced games I have worked on, and I will make the case that the games industry needs more women to reach its full potential. Finally, I will discuss from an insider's perspective some hypotheses about what might be keeping women out of the games industry, and what we can do about it.

Why Make Video Games?

I asked a diverse group of my colleagues why they make games and discovered that, regardless of gender, they have similar passions and motivations. Some spoke of games as new ways to tell stories: “J’aime l’idée de créer un espace contrôlé dans lequel existe un nombre infini de scénarios, d’entrées, de sorties, de chemins de vie, d’expériences. Un espace libre qui invite, propose, métamorphose” (Salome Strappazon, Big Bad Wolf). Others mentioned interactivity as something that offers new ways to play with identity, and described games as a medium that can “represent a profound innovation in human culture” and “allow the audience to discover for themselves who they truly are, or perhaps who they would like to be” (Jason VandenBerghe, Ubisoft). The action of games extends one’s sense of identity: “Games have vast potential [...] They have the potential of transforming the way people view themselves and others” (Marc-Olivier Bouchard, Ubisoft). Some of my colleagues spoke specifically about new forms of

¹ Film is often considered to be the closest medium to games, but in terms of interactivity, perhaps theatre bears a better resemblance.

communication and collaboration, about games “hav[ing] the ability to bring strangers together in a collaborative experience” and “inspir[ing] others to make their own creations based on what they experienced” (May Ling Tan, WB Games; Liam Wong, Ubisoft). For example, *Far Cry 4* (Ubisoft, 2012) inspired one woman to post instructions for a manicure she designed based on the game to *YouTube* (Frag Dolls, 2014). Some mentioned the process of making games as providing new ways of viewing the world, and a platform for sharing that understanding: “I make games to understand the underlying systems of the human condition”, and to give players “new ways to interpret and enjoy life” (Jill Murray, Discoglobe Interactive). Others referred to the untapped potential of the medium that has yet to be fully actualized: “I want to push what entertainment means... Art, science, psychology, math, and any person’s background and interests will influence the games of tomorrow” (Aleissia Laidacker, Ubisoft). “Making games is like creating magic. We confront unique problems that require each ounce of our creativity and technical knowledge in order to surround the player in a beautiful illusion.” (Chris Goossen, indie developer). Some of my colleagues invoked immersive game worlds as having the potential to dramatically influence culture: “It is easy to change the world. Just create a new one and show it to children. If they fall in love with it, that is the world they are going to build” (Marie Jasmin, Ubisoft).

Game developers, regardless of their gender, refer to the same themes - innovation, new ways of storytelling, identity exploration, communication, collaboration, potential, and even new worlds. In her book, *Gaming at the Edge*, Adrienne Shaw (2014) explains that changing games and diversifying representations should not fall only on the shoulders of underrepresented game developers; rather it should be a responsibility shared by all stakeholders in the video game industry. I would add that creating innovative games with the potential to change the world is not only a shared responsibility, it is also a shared motivation. It is my motivation as well.

Diverse Teams and Innovation

The *Catalyst* organization publishes a report entitled *Why Diversity Matters* that looks at the links between diversity and corporate performance. This report is updated as new studies are released, and at the time of my retrieval, it was 15 pages in length and summarized 71 studies that, taken together, make a strong case for diversity in business. A few key points from that report are

relevant to the video game industry: 1) Collective intelligence in groups is greater than the sum of individual intelligence. 2) Highly diverse teams perform better on highly complex tasks than homogeneous teams, possibly due to a wider range of thinking processes and increased creativity. 3) Diversity in cultural backgrounds, education, and demographic characteristics is a proven and important source of innovation (Catalyst, 2013).

Basically, diversity is essential for innovation. The evidence for this ranges from mathematical models to lab experiments, analyses between teams within a single organization, and analyses between different organizations. For example, Hong and Page (2004) ran a mathematical simulation to investigate whether diverse problem solvers outperform groups of high-ability problem solvers; in their simulation, the diverse groups became stuck less often. They also found a group's performance in making predictions depended as much on the group's diversity as on the ability of its members to predict. Higgs, Plewnia, and Ploch (2005) looked at how team composition and task complexity influence team performance in a German company. Diversity was found to be positively correlated to performance for complex tasks, and negatively correlated for straightforward tasks. Miller and Triana (2009) looked at how racial and gender diversity relates to firm performance in a sample of 500 boards. Racial diversity was positively correlated with firm reputation and innovation, while gender diversity was associated with innovation (2009). In short, and to emphasise the importance of these findings for the games industry, there is a phenomenon called "group intelligence"; when tasks are complex and innovation is the goal, such as it is in the games industry, a diverse team can ensure a better outcome.

When I joined Ubisoft to work on the *Assassin's Creed* brand (about five years into my career), it was the first time I had the opportunity to work with other women programmers. Our team was comprised of people from around the world, and more women were represented here than in any previous situation I had encountered in the industry. Diverse perspectives created a dynamic that led to many new developments, including the way crowds came to life in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* (Ubisoft, 2010), which carried over to other games produced since that time. Thanks to the efforts of one woman on the team, we had women assassins in *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*, which came out a few years ahead of the conversation around the lack of women characters in mainstream video games. While that team included more women than I had

previously worked with, and manifested a different dynamic because of this composition, women were still greatly outnumbered in terms of the group; we represented only 12% of the gameplay/AI/presentation programming team (Moby Games, 2011).

Child of Light (Ubisoft, 2014) was another game created by an international team of designers, this time 25% of whom were women - the greatest proportion I have ever worked with at a major studio. A different atmosphere accompanied working on this team, which I attribute to the gender balance; this atmosphere encompassed the whole team, not just the women. It is interesting to note that much of the technical innovation on that project revolved around bringing the main character, Aurora, to life, and was associated with conveying mood and emotion rather than the creation of detailed locations or any kind of realism. We focused on movements for her animation and her hair, coming up with a mixed 2D/3D solution that would make her appear to be moving in a liquid, surreal environment, almost as if she were underwater. We also created the character of Rubella, a jester, whose inclusion ensured that half of the partner characters were female, and who does not resemble typical feminine stereotypes. I see Rubella mentioned on *Twitter* perhaps more than any other character besides Aurora.

If game developers of all genders share similar passions and motivations, and if game developers of all genders want to change the world and create better representations of women, then why do we need more women on development teams? Women and men are not so different from each other; there may be some differences in average traits which could be attributed to biology or society, or both. But for traits that exhibit difference, the bell curves often overlap (Ferro, 2013; Carothers and Reis, 2013). So why more women? Over my career in the industry, I have observed that each game developer tends to have their own vision of the world they want to build, based on individual experience and personal ideologies. When a team is staffed primarily by white male gamers who resemble each other in tastes and values, and who have gravitated to working in the industry because they like the way it is, they go on producing more of what they like.

Diverse teams can also alter group dynamics; in diverse teams, it is not only the atypical members of the group who suggest/import new ideas. In a homogeneous team, there is a natural

pressure on team members to conform with the stereotype of the most typical group member. In a diverse team, this pressure is broken, and people are freed to be themselves and share weird talents or unique ideas they may have previously hidden (HBS Press, 2009). When I have been on teams where women were grossly outnumbered, women have often been the ones pushing for change; in this situation, men may feel more pressure to conform, whereas the women in these groups already stand out and therefore may be driven to seek out and express new ideas. On the *Child of Light* team there was a more even ratio of women to men, and both were more likely to push for new ideas. Having more representative and diverse teams may take the pressure off members from underrepresented groups to always be the ones pushing for change; this is what we should strive for.

Four Barriers to Entry Facing Women in the Video Game Industry

If diversity leads to innovation, why are diverse teams not taking over the tech and games industries? Why is this problem, in fact, getting worse (Henn, 2014a)? In the following sections, I will identify barriers that women specifically may face when trying to enter the games industry, and suggest potential solutions for overcoming them.

Barrier 1: Computer Science Was Marketed to Boys

In 1984, the percentage of women majoring in computer science in America started to fall dramatically. This was around the same time that home computers began to gain popularity, and these were marketed almost entirely to boys and men. A series of 1980s movies also linked computers with geeks who were predominantly boys. Once these messages began to appear in the media, boys were more likely to access computers in the home than girls, even in families where the girls were more interested in computers (Henn, 2014a; Margolis and Fisher, 2002). In addition to negative stereotypes that became attached to women majoring in computer science, this media bias also led to the simple fact that many men in introductory computer science courses had significant experience with computers, while most women did not. Women were expected to already know things they had not yet learned (Margolis and Fisher, 2002).

In the 1990s, Carnegie Mellon University increased its enrollment of women from 7% to 42% over 5 years. They did this through creating multiple points of entry for students with various

levels of prior experience, breaking the geek stereotype, and showing women concrete, real-world applications for computer science (Margolis and Fisher, 2002). More recently, Harvey Mudd College took a similar path, splitting their introductory course into two streams; one is a true introductory class, and the other is for self-taught experts. They also send promising women in computer science to the Grace Hopper Conference, exposing them to potential role models. In addition, the College offers a summer research institute where women can work on concrete projects and see real-world results of what computer science can do. Within 4 years, they have increased the number of women enrolled in computer science majors from 10% to more than 40%. This is a dramatic result; the program is now being rolled out in 15 other universities (Henn, 2014b; Zomorodi, 2014; Klawe, 2009).

The solution may be as simple as offering a welcoming environment, providing visible role models, and showing concrete applications for coding. This suggests that groups who reach out to girls and women to introduce them to coding and to women who code, such as *Pixelles*, *Dames Making Games*, *The Code Liberation Foundation*, *Ladies Learning Code*, *Black Girls Code*, and *Girls Who Code*, are extremely important. In my own experience, and from a rough survey of the women programmers at Ubisoft Montreal, I found that most of us were lucky to have had someone close to us who knew programming; my father was a programmer and we always had computers around. I think that there would be more women working in the tech and games industries today if a larger number of women had grown up with programming demystified.

Barrier 2: Rarity of Women Avatars

As demonstrated by Anita Sarkeesian (2015) on her website *Feminist Frequency*, most games feature male protagonists, and women non-player characters tend to be cast in stereotypical roles such as damsels in distress, rewards, a background decoration, or sexy sidekicks. My favourite game growing up was *The Colonel's Bequest* (Sierra Entertainment, 1989), designed by Roberta Williams and Jacqueline Austin, which starred a young woman sleuth named Laura Bow. Without that game to inspire me and provide me with a female role model, it is conceivable that I would not be working in game design today.

When asked, the majority of high school girls want to play as women or girls in games. In response to which gender they preferred for their avatar, 60% stated female, 34% stated no preference, and 6% stated male. However, high school boys do not seem to care either way: 46% stated no preference, 39% stated male, and 15% stated female. Moreover, this trend of boys not having a stated preference while girls clearly do seems to increase with age (Burch and Wiseman, 2015). Without women protagonists, these girls may lose interest in gaming.

These results contradict those of Adrienne Shaw (2014), who found that marginalized audiences (women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, ethnic minorities) are not that concerned with being represented in games.² According to Shaw, identification is a complex process, relying on game mechanics and narrative elements, rather than solely one's resemblance to the game character. Even if this is the case, the video game industry still needs to diversify its representations; if not to address marginalized audiences' desire to identify with video game characters, then because depicting marginalized groups validates these identities and make people more tolerant towards diversity. The results of Burch and Wiseman, however, confirm another idea brought up by Adrienne Shaw: the video game industry should diversify representations because most players – including their target (male) audience – say they would gladly play as a woman character.

This seems to be a chicken-and-egg problem: if we had more women in the games industry, we would be telling more women's stories, and if we had more women's stories in games, we would likely see more women in the industry. Since the Electronic Entertainment Expo *E3* put more emphasis on women protagonists in 2015 than in previous years, there is reason to believe that this trend may be changing.

Barrier 3: Gender Bias in Recruitment

There are barriers in the video game industry for women who do not fit the computer geek and/or gamer stereotype. In the game and tech industries, we often see job ads boasting phrases such as “We work hard but we play hard!”; studies have demonstrated that women are less likely to

² The results of these studies may differ due to participants' ages, or the sampling methods used. Adrienne Shaw (2015) acknowledges in her book *Gaming at the Edge* that marginalized people's lack of concern with representation could be a coping mechanism; having never been adequately represented, they may have learned to not care (or to say that they don't) as a way of dealing with the problem.

respond to job ads with this masculine tone (Gannes, 2015; Peck, 2015). In addition, women tend not to apply for jobs unless they meet 100% of the required criteria, whereas men tend to apply when they meet at least 60% of the criteria (Mohr, 2014). Job interviewers also have biases; they tend to hire based on similarities between themselves and the candidate, even though this is not a predictor of future performance. The questions asked in interviews may not accurately reflect the requirements of the job (Miller, 2015). Especially in games and tech, people may tend to look for the “gamer” or “geek” identity as much as they look for ability to perform the day-to-day job.

During the past year at Ubisoft Montreal, I helped design an initiative to increase diversity in our workforce. We built a team of 8 people called the Ubiversity Team/L'équipe Ubiversity to run this initiative, comprised of qualified applicants that represented as many dimensions of demographic diversity as possible (ethnicity, language, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, level of experience, field of work). Taking part in this exercise helped me to realize some of my own biases; the applicants I would have chosen based on gut instinct were not the same applicants that we chose in the end, yet I am fully convinced that we chose the best applicants. This experience made me more aware of factors I was not considering, aspects of candidates I did not account for, and people whom I overlooked; as an example, I tended to choose English-speaking applicants while my francophone colleague chose francophones. In brief, we all have unconscious biases and should find ways to overcome them.

There are tools that have been developed to help counter biases during recruitment. *Textio* is a tool that analyzes job ads and recommends changes to help attract more women (or more men depending on who is being targeted). Simply including a sentence about valuing diversity can go a long way; at *Nordic Game 2015*, *Paradox Interactive*'s chief operating officer Susana Meza Graham shared the job ad she replied to when she joined the company. It was three lines long and the third line said something like “More women applicants would be nice”. That piqued her interest. *Google* has, for its part, switched to structured interviews, where each applicant is asked the same series of questions. Structured interviews are proven to better predict future performance when compared with unstructured interviews (Bock, 2015; Schmidt and Hunter, 1998). Finally, it can be helpful during the hiring process to think in terms of hiring the best team,

rather than a collection of the best candidates, since it has been proven that diverse teams perform better. (Code, 2015).

Barrier 4: Gender Bias at Work

It is not enough to entice more women to work in the video game industry; we also need women to remain (St. Fleur, 2014). Minority groups face many obstacles in the workplace such as unconscious biases, favouritism, assimilation, differentiation, and sidelining (HBR Press, 2009). As I mentioned earlier, we all have unconscious biases. Much of our processing is unconscious, and our thinking suffers from incorrect assumptions that are a product of the culture in which we are raised. These assumptions, which often persist beneath the influence of conscious opinions, may be why both women and men in North America display the same level of bias against women, regardless of individual convictions (Welle, 2014).

As a manager, I have noticed that we often focus on, and identify with, our top performers – our “best candidates”, our “superstars”. We may even pick a favourite who reminds us of ourselves. Favouritism leaves out potentially talented individuals who may be different than the manager. Assimilation is also a frequent phenomenon, based on the idea that we as people are all the same, putting pressure on employees to downplay differences (HBR Press, 2009). When I was the only woman programmer in my company, for example, I would wear ratty t-shirts and no makeup, in order not to stand out. Differentiation, on the other hand, is the idea that diverse employees are different, and as such, they may be more suited to certain tasks (also known as pigeonholing) (HBR Press, 2009). As an example of this, someone brought up in a performance evaluation that women program differently, and stated that the guys on the team could learn something from me. On another occasion, I was asked in a job interview about whether I would make a better manager than a man would. As mentioned earlier, for all traits where we find generic differences between men and women, the bell curves predominantly overlap. For any given trait, an individual may be more masculine or feminine than average, regardless of their gender (Ferro, 2013; Carothers and Reis, 2013). Increasing diversity has team-level effects that are likely to improve performance, but this does not guarantee specific approaches from certain individuals.

When a team has a predominant group in terms of representation, team members in the minority are more likely to experience sidelining and stereotyping. There seems to be a threshold: if a group is composed of less than 30% women (or less than 30% of men), sidelining and stereotyping is likely to occur (Catalyst, 2013, Joecks et al., 2012). I witnessed this dynamic during the early days of the diversity initiative at Ubisoft Montreal. When there was only one man in the room, women spoke over him the same way I have seen men talking over women in meetings; I found that I, too, was guilty of this until I noticed I was doing it, and even then it was a struggle to stop.

There are many steps that can be taken to counter unconscious biases, favouritism, assimilation, differentiation, and sidelining. Harvard's *Project Implicit* provides *Implicit Association Tests* that help to expose unconscious biases (Greenwald et al., 1998), and Harvard Business Press ~~has~~ published a short comprehensive book on building inclusive workplaces and leveraging diversity called *Managing Diversity* (HBS Press, 2009). *Google* also provides excellent training on unconscious bias (Welle, 2014). Based on my experiences working in a field full of people who are different from myself, exposure to diversity has forced me to become a more inclusive and open person. Managers should periodically go to lunch with someone they may not spontaneously choose to spend time with, and should avoid focusing their attention solely on the superstars on their teams. The 80% who fall between the perceived top and bottom performers stay on teams longer, building expertise and improving performance through experience. The superstars tend to develop on their own, without attention, and they also tend to leave (Aleissia Laidacker, Ubisoft).

Pressures of assimilation on a team may be converted by valuing differences. Diverse backgrounds and perspectives are keys to success and should be celebrated. Countering assimilation without creating an atmosphere of differentiation involves thinking in terms of inclusion. An inclusive workplace is one free of assumptions, where ideas can come from anywhere, and open discussion is encouraged. It is walking a fine line of acknowledging differences, while not assuming them based on unfounded assumptions (HBS Press, 2009).

To counter sidelining and stereotyping, balance should always be maintained on a team. A team comprised of minority groups that amount to less than 30% of the whole is at risk of having problems (Catalyst, 2013). When problems occur, structural interventions, such as restructuring the team to break up bully groups, are more effective than managerial interventions (HBS Press, 2009). Leaders of balanced and diverse teams may need to adjust their management style. Cultural differences in communication and norms can be challenging, and everyone involved should strive to be open and flexible (HBS Press, 2009).

It should also be considered that conventional team building activities may not suit everyone. While I enjoyed going to a hockey game once or twice to learn about why my colleagues enjoy it, it is still not my preferred activity. Managers should ensure that team building activities truly foster understanding between groups. To build connections between people who do not have much in common, team members can agree on a few important character traits that would help the team achieve its objectives, and in small, safe groups discuss their own strengths and weaknesses in relation to these traits and give each other feedback. This gives the team experience engaging in difficult and open conversations that help to build relationships (Bregman, 2015).

Finally, managers should offer to sponsor employees who are not in the dominant group. Sponsorship is a more effective form of mentorship; sponsors go beyond giving feedback and advice, using their influence to advocate for the mentee. High-potential women are over-mentored and under-sponsored in comparison with men. Without sponsorship, women are less likely than men to be given top roles, and also more reluctant to take them (Ibarra et al., 2010). People who are not part of the dominant group should seek sponsorship and mentors that are not necessarily part of the same minority group(s), in addition to being aware of issues surrounding bias. Following these steps can help create a more inclusive environment that encourages members of underrepresented or marginalized groups to remain.

Conclusion

Despite having spent the past year engaging with research that generalizes personal experiences and challenges I have faced during my career in games, I still cannot imagine working in any

other industry. I love video games; I am obsessed with them, and I want to find out what video games can become if they are made by a more diverse workforce with a wider range of backgrounds and interests. Making video games is culturally important work. Video games are the future of entertainment, and entertainment contributes to the unconscious biases we all hold. Diverse voices in our entertainment industries could help diminish unconscious biases in our culture.

The barriers and disadvantages faced by women and other minorities in the tech and games industries are worth dismantling. Video game developers do work that is creative, challenging, and for the most part, well-paid. The video game industry is stable, and jobs are relatively easy to find. For these reasons, I encourage women to join the industry despite the challenges involved. To make the most of their experience, I encourage them to choose both the organization and team wisely, and to actively seek out sponsors who can support and promote them in this field.

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Résumé

Les jeux vidéo sont une nouvelle forme de divertissement qui permet une interactivité sans précédent et qui détient un vaste potentiel inexploité. La majorité des joueurs sont désormais des femmes, mais ces dernières demeurent sous-représentées à l'intérieur des jeux et dans les équipes de conception de l'industrie. Or, il fut démontré que les équipes diversifiées font preuve davantage d'innovation et comprennent mieux les nouveaux marchés. En se basant sur ses 13 ans d'expérience au sein de l'industrie du jeu, l'auteure se sert de divers exemples personnels pour montrer les bénéfices d'une équipe diversifiée en termes de ratio hommes/femmes. Elle défend également l'idée que l'industrie du jeu a besoin de plus de femmes pour atteindre son plein potentiel. L'auteure met enfin en évidence quatre barrières qui empêchent les femmes de percer dans l'industrie du jeu et suggère des solutions pour les surmonter.

Mots-clés : jeu vidéo, conception de jeu, genre, diversité, équipe de travail, innovation