RPG:
Role-Playing Gender, and How the Game Industry Has Sustained and Defied Sexism

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Thesis Summary

Despite the wider cultural progress of gender equality, game content which perpetuates sexist beliefs about gender is uncomfortably common. Games have historically used narrative and programmed mechanics to advocate that women are valuable only when performing exaggerated femininity – they must look and behave biologically female, even when playing as non-human races.

Game content suggests that women desire play such as fighting from a distance, healing, and otherwise supporting the masculine, combative role while being denied equal agency. From this viewpoint, women are at their most feminine – their 'ideal' state – when they are objectified, and as cultural artefacts games reveal society's adherence of the same values: sexist content articulates the dichotomy of man=capable, woman=incapable that structures Western culture.

Yet there are signs of change in both games and the industry, and the thesis explores the power of sexist representations and the progress toward inclusive game content. The industry is increasingly representing women and marginalised groups in ways which highlight intellectual solutions over the use of force, explore non-heterosexual sexuality, or feature cooperation that encourages relations of equality beyond gender boundaries, as well as empowered female characters whose stories overcome sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression.

'RPG: Role-Playing Gender' looks at games using a mixed-methodological approach which combines 'close readings' of games as texts alongside other popular culture and art forms, ethnographic surveys of game communities, and interviews with members of the gaming world. What do sexist representations communicate to players concerning female power and gender roles? What specific gender-based characteristics do players adopt for in-game gender performance? How do game communities facilitate player/player interaction, especially those based on assumptions about gender trends, in ways non-virtual spaces cannot? What stories and mechanics might games adopt to represent women and marginalised groups in ways which normalise and celebrate diversity?

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Introduction

Gaming: An Enduringly Sexist Space?

Dragon Age: Origins (2009) is a best-selling role-playing game (RPG) set in a quasi-medieval fantasy world populated by humans, elves, dwarfs, and qunari.[1] The player takes the role of a legendary Grey Warden, who must rid the country of Ferelden of an invasion by demonic darkspawn. It was shortly after beginning the game back in 2011 that I felt an urgent need to expand the field of feminist video game research. This was the first game I played which gave me control over my origin story and character customisation: I was not only able to play as a female character, but one I had modelled after me, down to the dialogue option which best matched my personality. In this experience, there was deeper immersion than I had felt with games I had played previously, in which I had been obliged to take the role of a man or as an invisible avatar. I could not get enough of it, and I was puzzled as to why it had taken me so long to feel this way. It became clearer to me the longer I played: I was not used to seeing *myself* on the screen – a woman with average-sized breasts, a will of her own, and her own story to tell.

Game researcher Adrienne Shaw claims that there is a crucial difference between the kind of identification I experienced in *DA: Origins* and those I encountered in earlier games: in the past, though I could identify *with* characters, I had not yet had the experience of identifying *as* a character.[2] This difference allowed me (and other players) to feel represented in a medium with which I was already in love, but through which I had become desensitised owing to unequal representations of gender, sexuality, and other issues often restricted to the margins. As Shaw reports, an inclusive turn toward representation for marginalised groups does not assume that, for example, LGBTQ players have different in-game desires as cis or straight players, but that they must become more used to seeing themselves on the screen, become more used to being

[1] Dan Tudge, *Dragon Age: Origins* (Electronic Arts, 2009), multiple platforms.
[2] Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 77.

visible for this one single aspect of their identity.[3] Unfortunately, for many players, identifying *as* is not the norm.

Like too many areas of modern society, games are still seen as a 'boys' club'. When it launched in 2014, a new feature of *Grand Theft Auto V* was the introduction of first-person sex with prostitutes.[4] Players no longer needed to watch a car rock back and forth from the outside: rather, in this game they can see through the eyes of the main-playable character (MPC). They can push the prostitute's head down during oral sex as they listen to her lips smacking. They see her breasts up close when she climbs on top of the MPC, manoeuvring around the steering wheel to the 'soundtrack' of an inane looping script of provocative language. The scene feels sterile in its attempt – and failure – at representing genuine sexuality. After I watched these sequences play out in a game released so recently, it became even clearer why the overwhelmingly masculine dynamics of contemporary video games demand further interrogation. As Leena Van Deventer claims, even in games made currently, it is as if 'everyone [is] in on a huge joke, and the punchline [is] me', thanks to recycled stereotypical representations of women through leering cameras, underwear which passes as clothing, and blatant 'boob physics'.[5] Game spaces feed misogyny by presenting female characters as consumable and/or disposable, and real-world women in game communities feel the consequences of these representations through harassment and a pervasive distrust in their abilities as gamers by male players.

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Jennifer is 'Player Two': media and game researcher Shira Chess suggests that she is 'almost necessarily white, middle class, and heterosexual. She plays in ways that often presume a desire for domesticity, for consumer goods, and for Western conceptions of beauty […] using games to fill small gaps of time she can steal away from her busy life.' She is the figure for whom game designers design, based on a misconception by the industry that women are a genre, rather than a market.[6] Through the games which are made for her, especially mobile/casual games, we learn what is expected for female gamers through beliefs about what stimulates them, what makes them feel rewarded,

[3] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, p. 18.
[4] Leslie Benzies and Imran Sarwar, *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2014), multiple platforms.
[5] Dan Golding and Leena Van Deventer, *Game Changers: From Minecraft to Misogyny, the Fight for the Future of Videogames* (Melbourne: Affirm Press, 2016), p. 7.
[6] Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Games and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 28, 31, 39.

and what they desire to consume. When examining Jennifer's games, several assumptions become clear. Firstly, women are expected to have the desire to play in the small snippets of time allowed by two full-time jobs as workers and homemakers. Second, to entice her to play, games must feature aspects of control, emotional currency and reward, and time management. Casual games meet Jennifer's needs for game content in several ways. Firstly, she regains control in hidden object games by finding and removing clutter. She organises business situations – perhaps by preparing and serving food she cannot eat – in games that use emotional currency, measuring her success through the happiness of her in-game customers. Finally, she keeps her environment functional by manipulating her surroundings, not by managing her own time, but that of her avatar, replicating the diurnal monotony of real-world time management.[7]

Casual games build on these templates with women in mind; however, Chess claims that games cannot *look* like they are made for women.[8] Nothing can be visually designed as overly pink or feminine; rather, designers aim for a 'lush' appearance where colours are 'bright but sophisticated' with 'rounded shapes, shiny elements, and soft shadows'. In order to preserve a connection between men and casual gaming, games are designed to be visually pleasing without crossing the line into feminine aesthetics – a consideration not afforded to female players of console games. Beyond bright visual cues, games manipulate women's beliefs about their leisure time, considering *when* women play and what they do while they are playing. According to Chess, women's feelings of guilt vs indulgence concerning their leisure time was harnessed in a 2006 marketing campaign for the Nintendo DS Lite (see Figure I, overleaf). The advert encouraged women to 'Do Something with Your Nothing', showing women using their spare time in waiting rooms or bus stops to play. The impression is that play for women is not done for the sake of leisure, but 'rather to fill snippets of time'.[9] Jennifer's preferences for play are easily quantifiable when analysing games like *Diner Dash* (2004), *Surface: The Noise She Couldn't Make* (2011), or *Polar Pop Mania* (2015), which translate her supposed desires into bright and quick little downloads.[10]

[7] Chess, *Ready Player Two*, pp. 20, 60-1, 69, 72, 78, 90, 97, 105, 146.
[8] Chess, *Ready Player Two*, p. 48.
[9] Chess, *Ready Player Two*, pp. 59-60.
[10] Nicholas Fortugno, *Diner Dash* (PlayFirst, 2004), multiple platforms; *Surface: The Noise She Couldn't Make* (Big Fish Games, 2011), Windows and macOS; *Polar Pop Mania* (Storm 8, 2015), multiple mobile platforms.

Video game scholar Nick Yee discusses the barrier built by marketing around games, which communicates that women's free time is a luxury to be spent prudently:

> Studies have consistently shown that women have less free time and that their free time is more likely to be infringed on by gendered expectations of housework and child care. […] This conflicted sense of leisure is exploited quite effectively by advertisers. […] [P]roducts are often marketed to women as guilt-free indulgences – that just this once, they can indulge in something special without feeling guilty about it. Advertisements for men almost never employ guilt. But this trope reveals an important social message: women are normally expected to feel guilty about leisure and pleasure. The stereotype of gaming as a waste of time likely exacerbates this expected guilt and further lowers women's desire to game.[11]

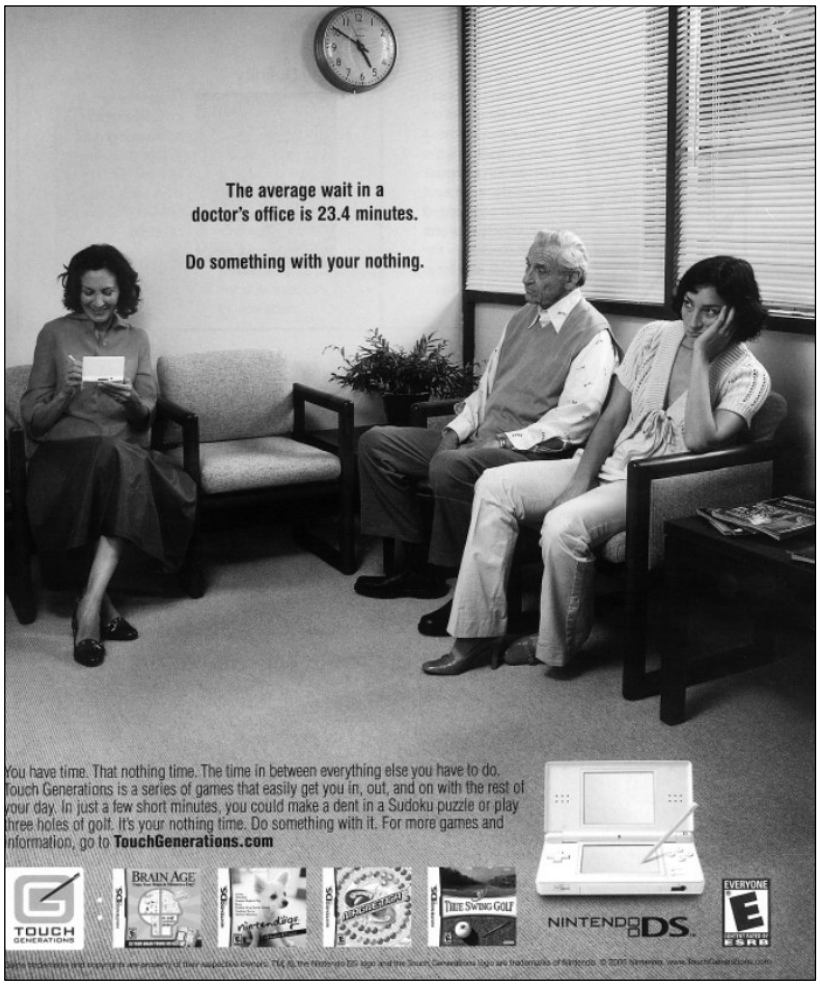

Figure I.1. 2006 Nintendo DS Advertisement Campaign[12]

When an activity in which women engage during their free time is viewed as an indulgence, games – a medium sometimes viewed as a childish time-waster by non-

[11] See Nick Yee, *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us – and How They Don't* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 114-15.
[12] Chess, *Ready Player Two*, p. 60.

gamers – are even less likely to be considered valuable uses of time. Kristen Lucas and John Sherry state that '[c]onsequently, if video games are no longer viewed as a cross-sex stereotyped activity for girls and women, the likelihood of female players being able to meet their needs for inclusion and affection will be increased by engaging in video game play.'[13] This carries over into qualities of many casual games, as they do not demand the same commitment of time as typical console games, in which players are required to develop their stories and avatars over days or weeks.

If pretty, control-based, and quick games are designed for Jennifer, then Jennifer must not belong in a war-based game like *Call of Duty* (2003) which has the 'typical' reputation of competitive first-person shooters designed for young men.[14] Jennifer, however, does not exist. Despite game design being directed toward her preferences, she is a phantom. Why do her games exist if she does not? The answer reflects the society in which her games are created and longstanding cultural beliefs – whether covert or overt – concerning women. Despite feminist critique, the traits projected onto Jennifer are also present in real-world societal pressures that limit women's leisure time or impress a feeling that leisure time must be productive. Representations of the women in games project an image of the 'assumed feminine', with which female players are discursively directed to identify. Despite assumptions by game companies that their typical players are white, heterosexual men, according to the Entertainment Software Association's 2018 report, men only form a majority by 5 per cent, while a PEW study finds that race or ethnicity make no difference in determining who plays games.[15] The emotions that are responsible for a player's love of a game depend on more than just game mechanics or graphics, but also the motivations and dimensions of the characters, plot device, and dialogue. If most games exist for a highly specific target demographic (white, heterosexual men), those in that demographic more easily settle into the role of the MPC, valuing what he values – and he does not value women, people of colour, and so on.

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[13] Kristen Lucas and John Sherry, 'Sex Differences in Video Game Play: A Communication-Based Explanation', *Communication Research*, 31 (2004), 499-523 (p. 518).
[14] Ken Turner, *Call of Duty* (Santa Monica: Activision, 2003), multiple platforms.
[15] Entertainment Software Association, 'Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry', *Entertainment Software Association* (2018), <http://www.theesa.com/about-esa/essential-facts-computer-video-game-industry/> [accessed 17 May 2018]; Maeve Duggan, 'Gaming and Gamers', *Pew Research Center* (2015), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/12/15/gaming-and-gamers/> [accessed 17 May 2018]. The Pew report covered gamers in the United States.

Before I explore the topic of assumptions of player desire in greater detail, it is important to identify four basic game elements. Jane McGonigal writes that games must have: a goal toward which the player works; rules to keep the goal from being too easily attained; a feedback system like a score or progress bar to allow players to know that they are doing well or poorly; lastly, voluntary participation, especially necessary for multiple players so they all understand the three previous traits.[16] It is clear, with the listing of these features, why some 'hardcore' gamers are incorrect in their belief that casual games do not meet 'real game criteria'. Given the clear differences in casual content and marketing, women may picture a gamer to be a white male, sitting alone in the dark with a headset. It is no wonder then that a recent PEW study found that women are less likely to identify as gamers even if they devote similar hours as men to the medium.[17] Prescriptive gender role preference and behaviour are found in multiple aspects of video games, not just casual gaming. Games are similar to film in their adoption of beliefs regarding gender suitability by catering to what Laura Mulvey has identified with regard to the male gaze: men play, men are the MPC, and men make the games.[18]

To set the scene for the findings that will be discussed in my study, this Introduction contextualises the current climate of gaming culture and wider society and locates the thesis among such phenomena and their goals. These imperatives include attempts within popular culture to move toward inclusive practices, as well as their setbacks; how ever-changing game content is fuelled by feminist movements within wider culture; and how game content fuels those movements in turn. This chapter also offers a roadmap of the thesis and what it seeks to achieve in the course of its four chapters. Finally, the Introduction will assess the wider implications of feminist games research and its ability to influence society at large. This thesis therefore balances beliefs regarding whether or not men and women are different, and therefore have dissimilar or similar desires for play. There are traits in games which, by highlighting different aspects of gameplay, attract or distance women more than men and vice versa. However, according to Nicole Lazarro and Nick Yee, gender often does not determine

[16] Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 21.
[17] Duggan, 'Gaming and Gamers', p. 2.
[18] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, ed. by Laura Mulvey, 2nd edn (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 14-27 (p. 26).

preferences for play, which is instead shaped by other traits such as age or personality.[19] Generally, this contradiction is explained in the following manner: gamers of all genders may look for similar content at the end of the day, yet because men and women are socialised differently in wider culture, they are encouraged toward – and thus seek out – particular qualities in their lives, games included.

Despite the recent shift toward inclusion found in game culture and wider society, a perpetuated gender-based cycle maintains game spaces and communities that are often inhospitable for female gamers. For example, women in game spaces face general and sexual harassment, and games are filled with representations of patriarchal ideals which present the ideal man to be heterosexual, virile, and muscular; by contrast, the ideal woman is positioned in most games as a passive character, physically dependent on primarily biological sexual characteristics and the gender norms stemming from them. Keeping this in mind, perhaps it is not that men and women like different aspects of play, but that game content and spaces must try harder to include women, both real and virtual. As the industry stands now, according to Bonnie Ruberg, games allow sexist themes to be 'performed, upheld, and renormalized through play' since representations of women in the game space are a reflection of the culture from which they stem.[20] Games in turn influence that culture by directing player attitudes toward a patriarchal worldview even after the consoles have been switched off.

Before progressing, a distinction in my terminology is necessary. The thesis uses 'woman', 'man', 'male', 'female', 'masculine', 'feminine', etc. quite heavily, and this is done for several reasons. Firstly, modern Western society is still highly dependent on codified gender categories, and this thesis interrogates this dependence and its significance. Such boundaries divide society onto one or the other side, ignoring the nuances of sex, gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity. I use the previously listed terms in the context of gender identity: gendered terms henceforth refer to one who identifies with that particular gender, emphasising femininities or masculinities over a biological category. It is not my opinion that there are only two genders; despite holding the personal belief of a spectrum, this thesis focuses mainly on players who

[19] Nick Yee, 'Demographics, Motivations and Derived Experiences', *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 15.3 (2006), 309-29 (p. 313); Nicole Lazzaro, 'Are Boy Games Even Necessary?', in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, ed. by Yasmin Kafai, et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 199-215 (p. 210).
[20] Bonnie Ruberg, 'Representing Sex Workers in Video Games: Feminisms, Fantasies of Exceptionalism, and the Value of Erotic Labor', *Feminist Media Studies* (2018), 1-18 (p. 16).

identify as male or female to thereby study the distinctions between them. Suggesting a consideration of masculinities and femininities as falling along the *butch–femme* continuum used by Cornelia Brunner can help conceptualise these ideas.[21] By considering gendered words on the continuum of *butch–femme* suggests that, though subsequent analysis depends on masculinities and femininities to contain differing sets of behaviours and preferences, I invite the reader to imagine the continuum as one independent of dichotomous and opposing biological sexes.

Video games are a space in which misogyny reigns, as illustrated especially in Chapters One and Two, which examine game mechanics and narrative, and in Chapter Three through the treatment of women in game spaces – where harassment is as predictable in its frequency as in its violently sexual content. One source of continued misogynistic game content and harassment in game spaces comes from men who feel threatened and angered by female presence and seek to fuel this toxically masculine culture. Such men may identify as 'incels' or involuntary celibates, who, according to psychologist Sam Louie, feel that perceived sexual failure is their greatest source of shame and humiliation, creating a 'perfect storm of not only self-hatred but vitriol, rage, and a desire to inflict harm on others' to balance the suffering they have experienced.[22] Games often present women as sexually promiscuous and available, therefore suggesting that women who reject male advances are doing so because they are frigid, judgemental, or waiting for someone richer or more attractive – not for another reason someone may not desire sexual intimacy. This false assumption encourages feelings of anger toward women or exacerbates sexist views men held regarding women before entering the game space. Whether men are 'incels' or not, in-game presentations of women as ready for sex at any time is absorbed by gamers, inaccurately representing female desire, thus perpetuating misunderstandings men have about real-world women.

Additionally, this environment increases the pressure on women to conform to such models if they have any hope of finding a place – even one with which they are not comfortable – in the game space. Indeed, this was a tactic used by a number of women and minorities in their support of Gamergate – the widespread harassment campaign

[21] Cornelia Brunner, 'Games and Technological Desire: Another Decade', in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, ed. by Kafai, et al., pp. 33-46 (p. 36).
[22] Sam Louie, 'The Incel Movement', *Psychology Today* (2018), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/minority-report/201804/the-incel-movement> [accessed 24 May 2018].

against women and some men in the game industry for their feminist critique of the industry, which will be discussed later in the chapter – despite the community eventually targeting them as well for not belonging to the white, heterosexual male demographic.[23] Gamer and author Todd Harper claims: 'Women in that culture are left with no good alternative. Your options are: stay quiet and preserve the cycle; or speak out and become a target, and neither of those are good options.'[24] In an anonymous online form I created in which gamers could share their experiences of harassment, respondents echoed this notion, recording that they often played dumb to avoid being harassed for out-performing male players.[25] In one comment, a respondent claimed:

> I've reacted [to harassment] mostly by saying nothing. […] Just grit [sic] and bear with it, then move on with a different game/team. Sometimes I do say something, and I've noticed one of two things: either it becomes worse because it becomes targeted towards me, or you get other people who speak up as well, but then you derail the team['s progress] in an argument.

Harassment in the game space spoils the fun for female players who are targeted, but doing the right thing and speaking out disrupts the flow of play. Incel men exist outside the game space, and they cite this identifier when performing real-world violence against women and feminists.[26] Game culture both draws upon and contributes to a wider view of women that suggests they may desire sex, just 'not with you', denying the nuance found in intimate encounters – to say nothing of the assumption that every woman desires sexual intimacy in the first place.

Intensifying the notion of games as a masculine arena, sexist content presents many cases of what I call the 'feminine abnormal': one of the biggest contributors to a 'boys' club' attitude towards women. The feminine abnormal is a type of hypersexualisation specifically exhibited when women are depicted in ways which exaggerate their sexuality to such a degree that removing it from its context reveals it to be an eerie and sometimes laughable representation. Normalisation of abnormal-looking or behaving women for the benefit of a male gaze is rife in many areas of popular culture for consumers of all ages, with games representing only one such environment.

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[23] Golding and Deventer, *Game Changers*, p. 157.
[24] *GTFO: Get the F&#% Out*, dir. by Shannon Sun-Higginson (FilmBuff, 2015), 1:07:57-1:08:09.
[25] This anonymous survey was created in Google Forms and was posted in several general and female gamer groups requesting any and all players to participate. The survey asked players to provide the nature of/reason they felt targeted for the harassment they endured. The form then asked participants to provide examples. The responses from this survey are referred to throughout this thesis. See Appendix One for more information on this survey.
[26] Louie, 'Incel Movement'.

For example, comics are well known for their hypersexualisation of interchangeable female heroes with identical bodies and slightly different facial features. *She-Hulk* Volume 1 number 39 provides such a depiction as the heroine states, 'Don't get the wrong idea…I'm only doing this because it makes a good cover!!' (see Figure I.2 below) Her (likely sardonic) line may be referring to her sexualised pose and dress, or she might more widely be referring to the trope she is currently caught in – one which carries strong connotations of impending rape. *'I don't normally dress this way when fainting while abducted, but it makes a good cover!!'* In this way, the feminine abnormal unabashedly manipulates several of Martha Nussbaum's seven notions of objectification, which will be discussed in Chapter One: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity.[27]

Figure I.2. Cover, *The Sensational She-Hulk* (1992)[28]

[27] Martha Nussbaum, 'Objectification', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24.4 (1995), 249-91 (p. 257).
[28] Tom DeFalco, *The Sensational She-Hulk*, 1.39 (May 1992).

Wider culture also uses representations of the feminine abnormal, such as the advertisement for BMW's Premium Selection, reproduced in Figure I.3 below, the text stating: 'You know you're not the first. But do you really care?' This advert is one of many examples of feminine value in relation to ownership and denial of autonomy. The presumed male viewer may still benefit from the enjoyment of this woman's body, despite her having been someone else's 'possession' first. Her second-hand nature decreases her value, yet the altruistic lover may allow himself to enjoy her body regardless, as 'her eroticism is subjected to the male [viewer] alone' when her sexuality in relation to other men fades to only his, as proposed by Mulvey.[29]

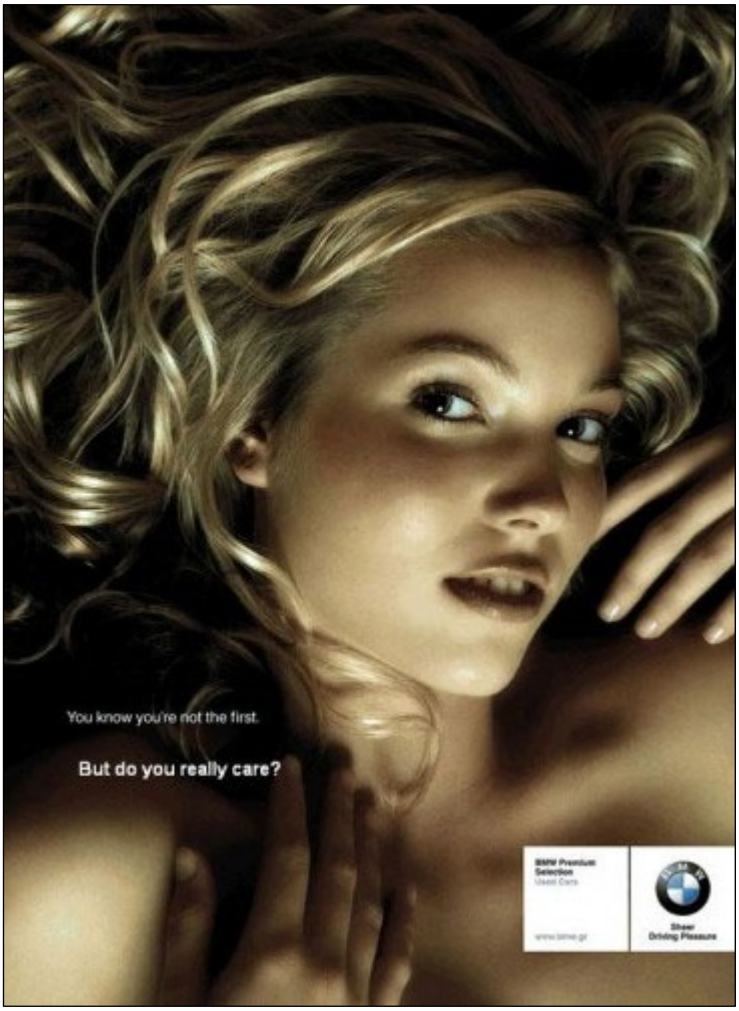

Figure I.3. Advertisement, BMW (2008)[30]

[29] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', pp. 21-2.
[30] Dominic Green, 'The 10 Sleaziest Car Ads of the Century', *Business Insider* (2013), <https://www.businessinsider.com/sleaziest-car-ads-of-the-21st-century-2013-3?r=US&IR=T> [accessed 14 March 2019].

However, the male gaze does not give pleasure to the male viewer alone: hypersexualised women also give female viewers a 'misrecognition as [a] superior' body, seeing an ideal in female bodies that is not attainable.[31] While the more obvious aspect of the advert may cause the viewer to question the relation of used cars with a woman's sex organs and the appropriateness of the comparison, casual viewers likely do not question cases of the feminine abnormal when these images are seen so regularly and in such short timeframes that they are not outstanding images. These are part of everyday life in the West, accumulating sexist capital regarding suitable looks, dress, and posture for women, while consumers are simultaneously discouraged from questioning these images through their very normalisation.

The model Kate Upton's appearance in a series of video advertisements for the mobile online strategy game *Game of War* (2013-) is the perfect marriage of games, advertising, and the feminine abnormal. One such advert opens upon Upton in a luxurious bath as water is poured over her in slow motion by two maidservants in a scene straight out of a heterosexual, male fantasy (see Figure I.4, overleaf). After the eerie display of a bathing woman wearing non-smeared, heavy makeup, she addresses the viewer directly in these adverts, stating: 'You and I will revisit [your enemies] soon enough.' Her language takes an allied stance with the viewer, and while she does more riding horses than fighting – in armour which is constructed to accentuate her body rather than to protect it – she nevertheless gives an impression of playing with the viewer to suggest that a game purchase is an alliance with Upton. John Berger claims that

> [the female body] is arranged in the way it is, to display it to the man looking at the picture. This picture is made to appeal to *his* sexuality. It has nothing to do with her sexuality. […] Women are there to feed an appetite, no to have any of their own. [emphasis in original][32]

In both adverts, the feminine abnormal would not exist without the influence of the male gaze; even if the audience were female, likely the images would be similar. Women have learnt to see their bodies through the male gaze, assigning value as a man would:

[31] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 18.
[32] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), p. 55.

> Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object.[33]

Figure I.4. Opening Scene, *Game of War: 2015 Super Bowl Commercial 'Who I Am' ft. Kate Upton* (2015)[34]

Exaggerated feminine sexuality in games is alive and well, despite much of it occurring after Gamergate, which a video game thesis would be hard-pressed not to mention. The controversy is still raging unofficially, despite the widespread belief that it was restricted to 2014-16.[35] In the events that transpired, misogynistic members of the gaming community horrifically targeted those who spoke out against unequal treatment of women in the industry. They insulted, made death or rape threats, doxed (released to the public addresses, bank details, or other personal information), and performed many other hostile acts against their targets. Attacks were heavily concentrated on several active voices in the feminist community: Zoë Quinn, for the false accusations against her, which claimed that she leveraged personal relationships for favourable reviews for

[33] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, pp. 46-7.
[34] Game of War: Fire Age, *Game of War: 2015 Super Bowl Commercial 'Who I Am' Ft. Kate Upton,* online video recording, YouTube, 1 February 2015, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkaWyrm8EQg> [accessed 14 May 2018], 0:03.
[35] See Golding and Deventer, *Game Changers*, p. 187.

her 2013 game *Depression Quest*; Anita Sarkeesian, for her Feminist Frequency videos, especially her series *Tropes against Women in Video Games*; Brandes Hepler, game writer for BioWare who suggested an option for fast-tracking combat the way dialogue can be fast-tracked; and game journalist Leigh Alexander, for several pieces, including one which claimed that male gamers had no 'ownership' over games.[36] While many attempt to claim, even now, that Gamergate was about ethics in game journalism, this 'disregard[s] the reality of the situation: [it was] a hate campaign versus its targets'. Misogynists have always been lurking in the community, but through their mission with Gamergate they attained 'a unifying tag' for their 'witch to burn'.[37]

Gamergate became immeasurably larger than anyone could have predicted; it was a crusade to identify and torment anyone who aligned with diversity in games, especially concerning issues of gender. This was likely influenced to a significant degree by the desire of male gamers to act as gatekeepers for an area which they felt they could control or was made for them after their perceived rejection by offline society. It brought mainstream attention to gaming and the experiences of gender inequality that were – and still are – to be found there. Luckily, the long-term impact on the industry may have been positive in some ways: according to Dan Golding and Deventer, some developers accepted the criticism and claimed that the gaming industry cannot 'expect gender empathy, equality and respect from our audience when we indulge them over and over with the opposite message'. These game designers further observed that they 'wouldn't be surprised if over the next few years we'll see a trend in games to be less violent, less sexist and yet more diverse, more creative, and just more fun, as long as the discussion and awareness continues in a public way.'[38] Despite such attempts to assume a more active role in presenting inclusive content which reflects lessons learned about the depth of misogyny in the industry, this cannot detract from the occurrence of the event in the first place, the danger these women were – and still are – in, the continued harassment of others, and the role sexist game content plays in perpetuating it.

[36] Golding and Deventer, *Game Changers*, pp. 140-2. Several other women were targeted in addition those mentioned, as well as unknown members of the community who spoke against Gamergate; Zoë Quinn, *Depression Quest* (The Quinnspiracy, 2013), multiple platforms.
[37] Golding and Deventer, *Game Changers*, pp. 143-4.
[38] Golding and Deventer, *Game Changers*, pp. 125-6.

The discussion around these topics within the industry is still volatile, especially if those who speak out are female. Games journalist Breandan Keogh claims that during Gamergate, in which he advocated for the feminist arguments, women 'were called all sorts of names for daring to even talk about the topic. They were attacked for who they were. I simply had my arguments disagreed with.'[39] Movements like #MeToo and #MyGameMyName can do more to be inclusive by finding ways to be more accessible and safer for women, who need the visibility offered by the movement but cannot engage for various reasons: by addressing the diverse needs of more women, the co-operation of technologies can continue the momentum behind bringing gender equality to various areas of popular culture.

The technology that in the case of Gamergate facilitated harassment in game spaces can also be used to promote inclusive change rather than hold it in stasis. The #MeToo movement of early 2018 was originally created by civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006 to give African American girls a way to speak about their experiences with sexual harassment and assault, calling attention to victims' accounts and harnessing empathetic connections between fellow victims to generate empowerment within the community.[40] When the actress Alyssa Milano used the hashtag to encourage solidarity against harassers like Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein, the #MeToo movement showed how technology can be used virally to promote progressive social equality. While the movement initiated change in numerous areas of popular culture and beyond, according to Dubravka Zarkov and Kathy Davis, there are certainly problematic aspects to its 2018 version. The movement mostly made visible wealthy, famous women and some men, while excluding those who do not have a public and visible career on which to fall back, those who do not have access to technology, or those who cannot speak about the harassment or assault they underwent because there is threat of harm.[41] #MeToo must certainly continue its forward momentum, but society must use it as a reminder to acknowledge and empower the women beyond those who most prominently use the hashtag or move in privileged circles.

[39] Golding and Deventer, *Game Changers*, p. 122.
[40] Michelle Rodino-Colocino, 'Me Too, #MeToo: Countering Cruelty with Empathy', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 15.1 (2018), 96-100 (p. 96).
[41] Dubravka Zarkov and Kathy Davis, 'Ambiguities and Dilemmas around #MeToo: #ForHowLong and #WhereTo?', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 25.1 (2018), 3-9 (p. 5).

Peeking further behind the curtain, visibility for victims and especially of the accused, does not translate into a tangible, practicable solution in many cases. Someone who commits sexual assault may be outed on social media, but the justice system of the West does not have a history of siding with victims of sexual assault and harassment and may still fail to prosecute perpetrators.[42] Technology plays a role in making illegal and unethical acts visible as well as connecting users, but it does not necessarily link consequences to behaviour. Twitter has its own gatekeeping mechanisms, but games often make punishing sexual harassment online a long and messy enough process, so that it is easier to let situations go unreported. The misogyny which grows and flourishes in these communities cannot be permitted to stand: the context provided by #MeToo suggests visibility and condemnation for misogyny is growing in all areas of culture, which may shortly herald positive transformation in many areas of popular entertainment, even those as male-dominated as gaming. Society *is* changing, despite attempts to maintain the patriarchal status quo, and the momentum behind #MeToo and cognate movements suggests that the reciprocal relationship between wider and game culture is making leaps toward inclusion for which we might not have previously dared to hope. Finding such change in games is easy to imagine when considering film and Netflix series such a *Black Panther* and *Jessica Jones*, both of which are critically acclaimed and popular among audiences: the former celebrating indigenous African cultures untouched by European colonialism and the latter featuring a sardonic and independent female lead.[43] This diverse content paid off (literally) for its producers, showing that viewers want progressive content, and that games can take similar steps without fearing economic failure as they once did.[44]

Game culture hosts its own movements that actively pursue feminist ideals. The #MyGameMyName project is a response to online harassment, a movement which invited popular male gamers to play with feminine usernames. They found themselves surprised and appalled by the reactions they received, and later spoke out against

[42] Zarkov and Davis, 'Ambiguities and Dilemmas around #MeToo', p. 6.
[43] *Black Panther*, dir. by Ryan Coogler (Walt Disney Studios, 2018) and *Jessica Jones*, created by Melissa Rosenberg (Marvel Television and Netflix, 2015-19).
[44] There are still some lingering misogynistic aspects to new films and their existing, often white, male fandoms. Only one example is Rian Johnson's *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Walt Disney Studios, 2017), whose progressive vision featured a number of female and POC lead characters doing the right thing while white men were the antagonists. There was notable backlash in the fandom, and these representations are a significant contributor, illustrating that there is certainly more work to be done to diversify popular culture.

harassment of women in game spaces.[45] Though #MyGameMyName is less well known than #MeToo, Gamergate focused international attention on the game industry, and eyes are still scrutinising games for signs of feminist change. #MyGameMyName has the power to make visible the frequency and intensity of online sexual violence against women and some men and can help players adopt inclusive beliefs. The active questioning of the patriarchy by male gamers increases the chance that other forms of toxic masculinity will be combatted.

Not all feminist movements are operated on such ethical terms, however. In September of 2016, the clothing brand H&M released an advertisement that ostensibly sought to challenge stereotypes of what femininity looks and behaves like, featuring women with body hair, plus-size women, muscular women, trans women, and other non-conventional models doing non-conventional things. The advert itself was certainly a celebration of fourth-wave feminism, embracing women who were not only cis, white, or professionals. H&M, however, was riding the bandwagon of feminism-as-a-money-maker, because, when looking at their business practice, they certainly do not prioritise women's rights. According to Hamsadhwani Alagarsamy, in late November 2018, female workers in Sri Lanka protested against poor treatment they experienced while working for H&M. Workers are subjected to 'high temperatures, bad air quality, constant pressure, and fainting' in order to make a wage that is neither liveable nor legal. Additionally, when the protest approached the factory, representatives 'interrogated and threatened' the women, signalling a damaging move for the workers whose employment was always precarious.[46] H&M is likely not the only company capitalising on the spread of feminism while not believing in its values. By exploiting hope for a better future, marketing-only feminists meet their bottom line by performatively 'de-marginalising' vulnerable and exploited social groups only when such practices become potentially profitable.[47]

Games and the interactions surrounding them share traits with visual and network culture via digital societies in the above ways, and the connections continue in social media. Social media facilitates access to popular culture and our public

[45] MyGame MyName, *#MyGameMyName: The End of Online Harassment Starts Now*, online video recording, YouTube, 24 January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEO8v1uiCOI> [accessed 22 May 2018].
[46] Hamsadhwani Alagarsamy, 'Why Women Workers Are Protesting against H&M', *Feminism in India* (2018), <https://feminisminindia.com/2018/12/11/hm-workers-protest/> [accessed 20 February 2019].
[47] See Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, pp. 16-17.

discussion within and around it; it is for these reasons that they converge in such intricate ways with the content of this thesis. Just as in the game communities discussed especially in Chapter Three, '[m]edia can amplify or accelerate a movement as long as that movement already exists – has form, substance, momentum', according to Siva Vaidhyanathan.[48] This is a double-edged sword in its applicability to inclusive feminist movements, as much as misogynistic ones which suppress and harm women in various ways: 'Those who wish to do others harm do not have to work too hard to deploy [media] in their plans […] What makes [media] good also makes it bad. What makes [media] wealthy also lets us be cruel'.[49] Social media is only one branch of the popular culture tree, made especially unique for its user-generated content. It plays an equally significant role as the tree's other branches, to allow us to 'create, enact and perform [our] role in society', especially to instigate social inclusion, as noted by Arne Hintz, Lina Dencik, and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen.[50] It is not a coincidence that this is precisely the role which I argue in this thesis that games play. Game content and discussion layer over social media content and discussion, and the intersections across the two fields are emblematic of a wider debate: my work focuses especially on game culture's use of such commonalities.

While I unquestioningly condemn misogynistic behaviour, I have faith that misogynists can change their beliefs toward women and minorities. It is not the duty of feminist players to educate sexist players about the implications of their actions, but harassers' awareness of the consequences of their behaviour – and therefore the prevalence of that behaviour – can improve. One perpetrator of online abuse against feminist writer Lindy West made a Twitter account and several email accounts in which he posed as West's dead father, spewing relentless insults at her.[51] West did not block him but rather sought to know why he was targeting her, as a result of which her harasser became deeply regretful and deleted his accounts, claiming to have done so to combat the feelings of unhappiness he held about his own life.[52] Repentance for their behaviour by harassers does not lessen the repercussions victims face, nor is a victim obligated to understand her aggressor, but genuine shifts in attitudes and behaviour are

[48] Siva Vaidhyanathan, *Anti-Social Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 136.
[49] Vaidhyanathan, *Anti-Social Media*, p. 54.
[50] Arne Hintz, Lina Dencik, and Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, *Digital Citizenship in a Datafied Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), pp. 24, 26.
[51] Zarkov and Davis, 'Ambiguities and Dilemmas around #MeToo', p. 7.
[52] Golding and Deventer, *Game Changers*, pp. 94-5.

possible. I doubt many male gamers will read this thesis, yet its aim proffers a long-term solution: by encouraging the change of content in games, inclusive attitudes will be enforced in place of those which perpetuate the patriarchy. Online harassers may not feel like their actions are real if they are limited to the virtual world, as in West's situation, nor may they not recognise the impact of their behaviour. Regardless, offering understanding to those prone to harass can help to combat their motivations to act out.[53]

Online harassment has similar effects on victims as real-world harassment – for instance, depression and post-traumatic symptoms.[54] Being informed of the immediacy and effect of harassment suffered by victims is a complex task in which harassers must come to understand what their comments, images, videos, and other interventions communicate about themselves, about those they target, and about their beliefs regarding real-world men and women. Some misogynists harass to inflict exactly this kind of pain on their victims; however, many harassers could reform if they realised that virtual worlds and the real world are not distinct universes with different designations of significance to comments and actions, and instead overlap in countless and nuanced ways. As the internet matures, harassers have more tools of the virtual sexual harassment trade at their disposal, but so too do those who refuse to let harassers 'get away with' their actions. This can take many forms, from structured punishment by community moderators or administrators, to all members, whether in casual or authoritative roles and of all gender identities, races, religions, all claiming: 'We will not mitigate anymore.' It is the cooperation of these and other agents that will make online harassment fade away – both because it is universally deemed unacceptable and because harassers can see the relevancy of their actions to the consequences in the real world.

The events of Gamergate and those which instigated #MeToo and #MyGameMyName are happening *now*, in the midst of feminist traction within wider society. Sexism in game culture is not a new mission for feminists, yet sexist content is *still* produced despite protests against it: gender politics in games and the cultures they reflect may be in better shape than they were ten, even five years ago, *but it is not good enough*. Gaming is still a gender-unequal space, and it is incumbent on game scholars,

[53] Golding and Deventer, *Game Changers*, p. 193.
[54] Amnesty International, 'Amnesty Reveals Alarming Impact of Online Abuse Against Women', *Amnesty International* (2017), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/> [accessed 13 May 2018].

creators, and players that they identify and debate sexist tropes and expectations for improvement in order to effect change in the community/industry. #MeToo and #MyGameMyName grew out of sexist foundations, but also from hopes like game creators and players allying for equality. Women should no longer have to feel like games are a place where they are the 'supporting character while everyone else is a protagonist'.[55] Games influence other forms of popular culture, and soon female protagonists across mediums will be commonplace: indeed, soon, young women will not be as surprised to see themselves on screen as I was in 2011.

Thesis Contribution and Roadmap

'In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been spilt between active/male and passive/female', Mulvey claims, and the woman 'is styled accordingly'.[56] My thesis adopts a feminist approach to delve into imbalanced representations in game spaces; these representations will be analysed through a mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative methods. Qualitative methods are applied in several ways, primarily by using close textual analysis of games as agents of narrative, applying feminist concepts such as gender performativity, the male gaze, the rejection of the male gaze through the oppositional gaze, and the pornographic gaze. Analysing games as texts will illustrate common narrative paradigms and their problematic aspects in order to answer the questions: *Where do these restrictive representations come from?* and *How do women – both virtual and non-virtual – negotiate these representations?* As I hope to show, this method is effective because it enables us to label representations of femininity and to disclose revelations about the society in which such representations are constructed. To support this process, I compile and complicate research undertaken by other game scholars, as well as conducting original studies and surveys to measure the engagement of video games with player attitudes and behaviour toward real-world women. Such analysis spans the entirety of the thesis and includes interviews I conducted via Skype, FaceTime, or email. These analyses usefully collate evidence that is measurable and evidence that is not: for example, how measurable are a player's sexist beliefs about sex workers in the real world and how might a researcher quantify them? These methods were chosen to illustrate the numerous ways in which norms around gender may be accepted, negotiated, or rejected by players.

[55] See Golding and Deventer, *Game Changers*, p. 80.
[56] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 19.

This work will be augmented by analysis of studies of players exposed to game content through the lens of body subjectivity, especially in Chapter Two, to highlight the connections between players and their avatars. The chapter discusses how game content plays a significant role in assisting players to 'play' with the 'I' in games through how closely they identify with, and therefore act like and internalise, the character's ideals, especially those asserting toxic masculinity and eroticised female victimhood. The personality which forms the MPC's identity is often based heavily on gender stereotypes, and I measure to what degree sexist behaviour is accepted in game spaces and which traits found in game communities perpetuate sexism. Notions of intersubjectivity will connect the 'I's who make up the game space, as the thesis will analyse the links players share with fellow characters, those of both other players and non-playable characters (NPCs), as well as interrogating how game representations inform relationships and behaviours non-virtually.

Additionally, ethnographic tools are used to make sense of the cultures surrounding games, by assessing how players and characters interact in the unique spaces of game universes. For the most in-depth and specific analysis, the thesis first treats game universes as actual worlds. I explore how gaming cultures – both those created by players and those designed by game creators – reflect sexist stories and mechanics which enhance sexism in the real world. Second, I analyse players after they exit the game space and enter the real world to navigate the culture surrounding physical game communities. As a result, the conversation between sexist content and player attitude becomes clearer in the ways they reflect and influence ideals, providing a wider social context in which to understand why games continuously feature the content that they do.

Though this method has risks of cultures or participants behaving differently when they are observed, my online survey in Chapter Three and the studies performed by other researchers on cognate topics have done the utmost to mitigate those risks. The discussion offers an opportunity to understand the results of the suggestions made by sexist game content, by observing data which propose that games can train sexist ideals. By juxtaposing sexist tropes and mechanics with studies that measure attitudes in players before and after they are exposed to the content, the influence between content and attitudes is identified in an empirical way. Using these tools, the wider story this thesis seeks to tell is rooted in the exploration of sexist gender norms which players encounter while playing, not only to deconstruct existing representations to understand

their meanings, but to improve them. As such, my analysis reveals how stereotypes in games paint a picture of how women are encoded into specific gender roles – and how representations exploit false stereotypes about power and gender suitability that mirror those in the real world. One potential weakness of these methodologies and analyses is my application of them specifically to gender: sexuality is discussed in this thesis, but as gender and sexuality are not always interdependent, some data excludes discussion concerning participants who are not monogamously heterosexual. Additionally, this project seeks to explore gender construction in depth, but it often does so in ways relevant to white women in particular. Future work must expand on the ways that games take advantage of our assumptions of our default character: he is male, but he is also white, able-bodied, straight, cis, and so on. I recognise the necessity to explore these ideas deeply, and indeed these topics are discussed here, but they are ultimately not my main focus. General violence as a result of video games is also not dissected in this thesis, though it is referenced in Chapters Three and Four. I acknowledge that these branches of scholarship are certainly debated in academia, and while the study of violence informs the thesis, none of the chapters focus on it exclusively.

This thesis contributes to existing bodies of work in several ways by seeking to answer the larger question: *How do game spaces and communities perpetuate sexism?* I seek to mix approaches from both narratological and ludological schools of study, highlighting how the analytical approaches work together to endorse sexist ideas. Firstly, I examine narrative tropes that are found in games which dictate distinct traits concerning gender; secondly, I look at game mechanics that limit which physical, personality, and skill traits are available to characters. The thesis then looks at the historical basis of these tropes in other disciplines, like classical art and film, to bring to light the wider sociocultural implications they have long projected about gender within the real world. I will compare similar representations in other forms of modern popular culture to highlight the prevalence of these tropes and how their shared use of specifically encoded depictions work to sustain a sexist culture, in their mediums and out of them.

Chapter One will focus on sexist, restrictive representations in video games that present women in a limited selection of roles, which are chosen to strengthen the male character's story. The chapter seeks to answer the following research questions: *How have past video games physically and emotionally represented women? What are these representations communicating to players concerning female power and gender roles?*

This chapter identifies c/overt elements which make up the broad term of 'sexist representation' when referring to female characters in the game space, especially when compared to the default male character's power and agency. The chapter makes use of studies which measure the altered view players have about women after seeing them sexually objectified, a frequent occurrence in game narrative. By considering both the historical and cross-cultural ubiquitousness of sexist tropes, I provide an innovative new interpretive model to game research: one that labels sexist representations to make clear which aspects of games can be changed into open and fluid representations. I identify traits that may be avoided in the design of future games by detailing the specific elements that train player attitudes toward sexist views. The need to change the perpetuation of these values is paramount, and they are the platform from which misogynists, white supremacists, homo- and transphobic people speak and act. Video games do not directly cause hostile action against marginalised groups, but rather they contribute significantly to the training of *a priori* attitudes and discourses that approve and advocate such hostility.

Chapter Two explores Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing games (MMOs), a genre unique in its multiplayer element. MMOs impress on players a feeling that they must perform for an audience, and the resulting pressure typically directs them toward gendered patterns of behaviour. This chapter seeks to answer the research questions: *What information lies at the basis of assumptions of feminine and masculine preference in MMOs? How does the multiplayer aspect of MMOs guide players to perform gender in front of an audience? What specific characteristics in player appearance and behaviour do they adopt for this performance? What do these traits assume about femininity?* This chapter explores the fantastic elements of games and the limitations, or lack thereof, of imagining worlds beyond our own – worlds which are not bound by traditional human gender markers. Despite assumptions regarding the imaginative freedom of fantasy universes and technology, MMOs like *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) present universes which train players to become more sexist the longer they play.[57] The programming behind these choices sets boundaries that dictates the ways in which players perceive their characters and their gender, thus altering the choices they make and the goals they set in-game. Chapter Two's research builds on the

[57] Rob Pardo, Jeff Kaplan, and Tom Chilton, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-), Windows and macOS.

foundations of past scholarship, which pinpoints how the genre uses sexist mechanics to present male characters in positions of power and agency, while female characters do not have the same opportunities for profession or physical appearance, especially as found through an original analysis of default characters in *WoW*. The discussion locates perceived gender role-dependent behaviour in MMOs and its potential to influence the design of future representations, proposing that it is possible to construct a less gender-conforming game space that gives the same options to male and female avatars that do not exaggerate biological sexuality.

Chapter Three discusses interactions found in game spaces, those both with rewarding and damaging outcomes, and the role gender plays in directing these interactions. This chapter explores the questions: *How do game communities facilitate player/player interaction, especially those based on assumptions about gender trends, in ways non-virtual spaces cannot? How is harassment against women (and marginalised people) maintained in these spaces? How are positive interactions, especially in cases of intimate player/player relationships, supported in these spaces?* The chapter analyses research about gendered attitudes in computer-mediated communication to inform an original survey of players of *Life Is Strange*, in order to determine the possible ways in which player gender is linked to choices of conflict pursuit and avoidance and how assumptions about these preferences may be misguided.[58] It also explores how technology brings users together for intimate, often romantic, interactions in ways that could not happen otherwise. Finally, the chapter observes interactions players have with others – both real and virtual people – considering how the proximity of game communities to their sexist game content influences interactions between men and women.

Chapter Four is informed by past research which finds that young men and women display very gender-prescriptive preferences for play that resemble gender-role conforming cookie cutters. A key example takes into account the fact that boys prefer fast-paced shooting games and girls prefer a chance to evoke significant change in their world.[59] However, when players grow into adults, the lines between gender preferences begin to blur, and it becomes clearer that there is no single way to design an inclusive game. Chapter Four answers the questions: *On what basis have games been*

[58] Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch, *Life Is Strange* (Square-Enix, 2015), multiple platforms.
[59] Diane Carr, 'Games and Gender', in *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*, ed. by Diane Carr, et al. (Cambridge: Polity Press: 2006), pp. 162-78 (p. 171).

traditionally designing content based on stereotypical representations of gender? How does looking at diversity in more than one way direct progressive depictions of women and marginalised groups in games? Which kinds of stories and mechanics might games adopt to represent women and marginalised groups in ways which normalise and celebrate diversity? This chapter uses textual analysis, and ethnographic and anthropological studies to pinpoint traits in games that present inclusive characters and stories that celebrate gender, race, and sexuality. Studies clarify how viewing empowered women while playing can 'undo' damage of harmful tropes discussed in Chapters One and Two. Chapter Four presents an optimistic view of the influence games have over players when used in ways that embrace diversity. Answering these research questions ties together the thesis by presenting a possible roadmap for games' characters, stories, and mechanics to shape progressive game universes and communities.

This project seeks to offer contributions from a variety of backgrounds to game theory and cyberfeminism, and to propose new views that elucidate a history of discursively open and restrictive gender tropes. I seek to build interdisciplinary bridges across the field of game research by utilising varying methods of analysis which I believe to be advantageous for future research in feminist games studies. I hope to benefit to the wall of knowledge that is feminist game studies one brick higher, helping us to learn further 'what it means for players to play *with* and play *along* with cultural attitudes' toward women. [emphasis in original][60]

Wider Implications of Data

My research seeks to establish links between game content and player views toward real-world women, as gender is constructed and negotiated in and around video games. Research by Alessandro Gabbiadini, et al. claim that moral disengagement is influenced by game content: 'a process whereby people shift their moral boundaries and create a version of reality in which reprehensible conduct becomes morally acceptable'.[61] Moral disengagement can be the result of sexist themes, such as those found in *Grand Theft Auto IV* (*GTA IV*).[62] Indeed, Gabbiadini's team measured adolescents' moral standards

[60] See Ruberg, 'Sex Workers in Video Games', p. 4.
[61] Alessandro Gabbiadini, Luca Andrighetoo, and Chiara Volpato, 'Brief Report: Does Exposure to Violent Video Games Increase Moral Disengagement among Adolescents?', *Journal of Adolescence*, 35.5 (2012), 1403-6 (p. 1403).
[62] Leslie Benzies, *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Games, 2008), Windows, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360.

in relation to the game with statements such as: 'It is alright to fight to protect your friends' or '[It is] okay to insult a classmate because beating him/her is worse', to which the students responded with a numerical ranking of how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the questions. Their study determined that there is a gap in moral standards in students who had played *GTA IV*: 'Recency of exposure to *GTA* significantly predicted a greater readiness to resort to moral justification, advantageous comparison, diffusion of responsibility, and distorting consequences for justifying immoral conducts.' In short, game content plays a significant role in shaping player attitudes, to varying degrees of intensity and duration, thus decreasing the participants' levels of moral engagement.[63] Attitudes direct behaviour, comments, and action on the street or in the home, and games are a significant piece of the education popular culture provides about how players should esteem each other and themselves. There is still more to learn about the kinds of content that direct players toward or away from particular attitudes: nevertheless, the influence is as clear as the need to research these topics further.

Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska claim that, though games first and foremost seek to entertain, they also convey meaning: 'The moment any choices are made about what material to include, how to treat it and what kinds of activities are required of players in order to succeed, particular meanings – or the potential for such meanings – are created.'[64] Analysing sexist in-game content is the first step to identifying the meaning of femininity, masculinity, sexuality, race, among other traits, and it provides the foundation upon which to seek change for those representations. As games do not exist separately from wider society, identifying these textual constructions is crucial when they represent the cultures in which they are formed, reflecting their ideals back into that culture. Sexist depictions of women in games sit in dialogue with the wider representation of women in culture, and games paradigmatically represent them as confined to sexually exaggerated characteristics, avatar options, and limited story arcs. These patterns all depend on a broader belief that women are less suitable for empowerment than their male counterparts. What this thesis seeks to highlight, is games' ability to redirect both sexist and feminist ideals into wider culture, either perpetuating or combating the sexism that is to be found there.

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[63] Gabbiadini, et al., 'Moral Disengagement', p. 1405.
[64] Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Tomb Raiders & Space Invaders: Videogame Forms and Contexts* (London and New York: I.B Tauris, 2006), p. 172.

Through my work, I hope to encourage game creators to use the medium as a means to bring light to the under- or misrepresented minorities historically exploited in games. Representations of these groups reveal society's attitudes toward them as (un)suitable for roles defined by patriarchal structures – in the cases where they are visible. Games are cultural artefacts that reveal the prevalence of the eroticisation of female victimhood, tracing intersections of gender and power in a society which presents it as synonymous with femininity. Games present a hierarchy in which men are beings with agency through displays of strength and physical ability – as Berger puts it, '[a] man's presence is dependent upon the promise of power which he embodies [….] A man's presence suggests what he is capable of doing to you or for you'. Meanwhile, women are too often presented as prizes, as hindrances to the male protagonist's story, or as sources of visual titillation with no impact on driving the narrative.[65] This is indicative of what we as a society have tended to regard as valuable traits (men, the masculine, public sphere), and how the value of these traits depends on a character's situation on one side or the other of the gender boundary. Gender is constructed in specific ways in games, and society looks to popular culture to interpret their world, including how they navigate their gender norms and those of others. These representations are found in other areas of culture, revealing the interdependence of similar assumptions about femininity, which exaggerate beliefs that women are at their prime beauty – where their value originates – when subject becomes object. This feedback loop of sexist beliefs shapes game design: it reinforces and continues shaping these beliefs. Female characters who deny these cultural assumptions are considered feminine-deviant, yet these women have potential instead to be viewed as role models and game changers espousing feminist ideals. Female representations in games most certainly should be a part of the wider societal change that is taking place with real-world feminist movements.

My thesis seeks to demonstrate how game culture became increasingly reliant on sexist tropes and how the interactive elements of games can be harnessed instead for feminist values. Games and other forms of popular culture work together to present – even outside of their mediums – that feminine power is limited to and found in specific traits within the stories they tell (not their own) and their programmed restrictions based on gender suitability. Games for which the industry is best known tend to value

[65] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, pp. 45-6.

patriarchal ideals; however, despite the abundance of masculine-leaning characters and stories, there *have* been some commercial considerations which catalyse change. Independent games are taking more risks by deviating from the norms of presentations of women and other minorities, offering unique depictions of sexuality, emotional turmoil, mental illness, and so forth. These games certainly have critics who feel threatened by the change in 'traditional' game play, yet reception of such games has been met with considerable positivity, both encouraging players to ask for more diverse play from game designers and showing designers that changes in minority representations is desired.[66]

Directing bell hooks' oppositional gaze from film to games, game scholars, creators, and players from marginalised groups are allowed to 'look' at problematic representations and hope for better: 'By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality."'[67] hooks was speaking specifically about black women as portrayed in film, yet by shifting mediums, minorities not only can create independent game content that represents blackness truthfully, white male game creators can learn to see their content as racist/sexist/homophobic as well, potentially leading them to choose to write more inclusive characters and stories which better represent the demographics of the real world.

Video games have accumulated many exploitative tropes regarding minorities, especially women, and find themselves as one of the many agents of popular culture which present the real world in varied yet sexist ways. New games are bringing diversity to the industry, yet these games are not the norm. The belief that deviating from misogynistic formulas is a risk because misogynistic formulas have always sold games, cannot be sustained. The academic scrutiny offered by games research into this topic can find tangible ways to incorporate inclusive game design toward gender equality, both in the industry and in the culture from which it grows. While noting the gradual move toward progressive values in the industry is crucial, diversity in games is

[66] Some examples of this are *Dreamfall Chapters: The Longest Journey* (2014-16) discussed in more depth in Chapters One and Four. The game portrays two ethnically ambiguous protagonists, one of whom is homosexual. *Dreamfall Chapters* contains several scenes in which the player must overcome overtly sexist or racist characters. Crucially, the game was majorly funded by fans via Kickstarter. *Undertale* (2015) is another example further discussed in Chapter Four which takes place in a universe in which homosexuality and diverse gender identities are completely normalised. The game was created by only a handful of designers, yet now the game is incredibly well-known and available on major platforms.
[67] bell hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators', in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. by John Belton (London: Athlone Press, 1996), pp. 247-69 (p. 248).

still a long way from being fully harnessed by the medium, but with the contribution supplied by this thesis and the work of scholars before, the game industry can continue toward a space fostering a sense of belonging.

Chapter One
RPG: Role-Playing Gender

Introduction: A Sampling of Tropes

In his article for the *Washington Post*, Christopher Byrd reports Steven Spielberg's feelings that video games will 'prove their worth as a potent story telling art form' as soon as 'somebody confesses that they cried at level 17'. Byrd then directs readers to a subreddit thread called '*Life is Strange* Episode 5: Did you cry?', to which the majority of posters confess to the affirmative.[1] *Life is Strange* (2015) surprised many gamers – as well as the industry – with its steady yet significant growth in popularity rarely seen of a game from a company of a small size. The game was more like a narrative experience than what many gamers would consider a traditional play-through, since most in-game choice consisted of decisions in dialogue rather than physical acts such as climbing, jumping, or shooting. The studio behind the game, DONTNOD, was a relatively quiet company before the release and had produced only two other titles prior to *Life is Strange*. The game maintains an 'overwhelmingly positive' rating on Steam even four years after it was released.[2]

Life is Strange is not reflective of a typical game experience, however, and all too often games recycle similar stories and tropes, especially tropes dependent on sexist, homophobic, racist, and other oppressive representations. This was certainly the case during Cryaotic's Let's Play of *Echo Tokyo: Intro* (2016), in which a side-by-side of two story options reveal a clear difference in the representation of the male and female protagonists.[3] The male character's story is of a young orphan who is abducted from the streets and turned into a soldier. He faces extended physical and mental torture only to overcome those who kidnapped and manipulated him. The female story is different

[1] Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch, *Life Is Strange* (Square-Enix, 2015), multiple platforms; Christopher Byrd, '"Life Is Strange" Passes the Spielberg Test for Video Game as an Artform', *Washington Post* (2015), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2016/01/08/life-is-strange-passes-the-spielberg-test-for-video-game-as-artform/> [accessed 05 February 2016].
[2] Not an abbreviation and said as 'Triple A'. AAA games are made from the highest budgets and are the video game equivalent of a blockbuster. Valve, 'Life is Strange: Episode 1', *Steam* (2018), <http://store.steampowered.com/app/319630/Life_is_Strange__Episode_1/> [accessed 28 January 2019].
[3] A. J. Tilley, *Echo Tokyo: Intro* (Dharker Studio, 2016), Windows. Let's Plays are videos in which YouTube personalities record their play-throughs of games and post them online.

from the start: she wakes up and stands in front of the mirror showing the player her 'sleepwear' – attire fitting comfortably in the feminine abnormal mentioned in the introductory chapter – before taking a shower, which the player watches.[4] Game scholar Nick Yee states that such depictions show players that women are not only sexually exaggerated, but that they exist as a 'digital peep show'.[5] From this point, her art appears more detailed in comparison, illustrated in a stereotypical style highlighting her thighs and breasts. Comparing scenes of near-nudity, the presentations are drastically different in which the woman is sexualised for the benefit of the player while the man is uncovered because it fits the context of his story as shown in Figures 1.1 and 1.2. John Berger states that this comparison is one often seen in art, especially when examining nudity. In this case, the female protagonist's nudity – and other female characters in similar scenarios – 'is not […] an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the [viewer's] feelings or demands.'[6]

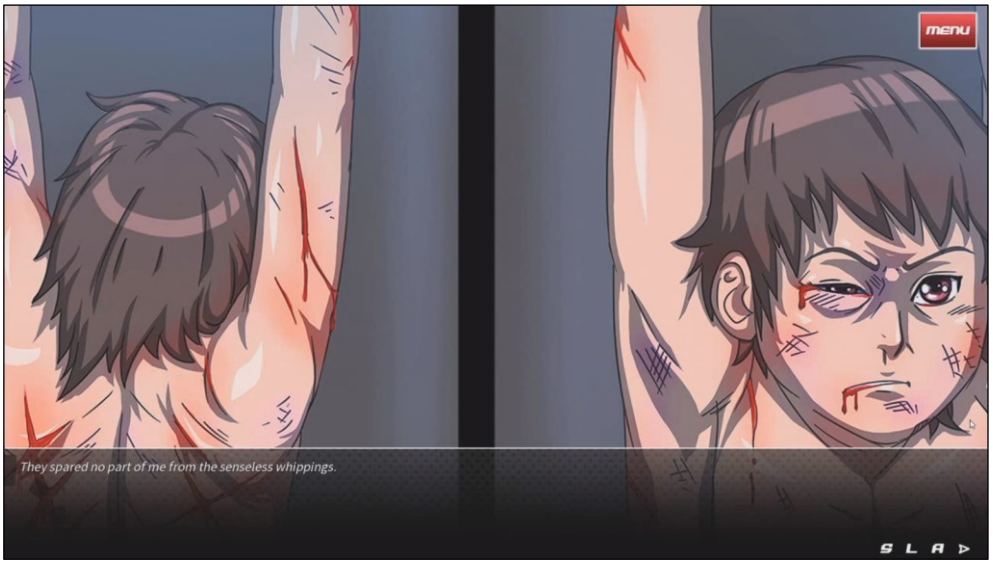

Figure 1.1. Screencap from the Male Plotline of *Echo Tokyo: Intro* (2016)[7]

[4] Discussion of the Feminine Abnormal is in the Introduction Chapter of this thesis, pp. 9-13.
[5] Nick Yee, *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us – and How They Don't* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 105.
[6] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), p. 52.
[7] Draxr, *Does Your Weenie Feel Good? Oh Dear | Echo Tokyo + Who Is Mike [FULL DELETED VOD]*, online video recording, YouTube, 24 September 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RhfPUQaPILg> [accessed 17 April 2018] 17:28, 46:45.

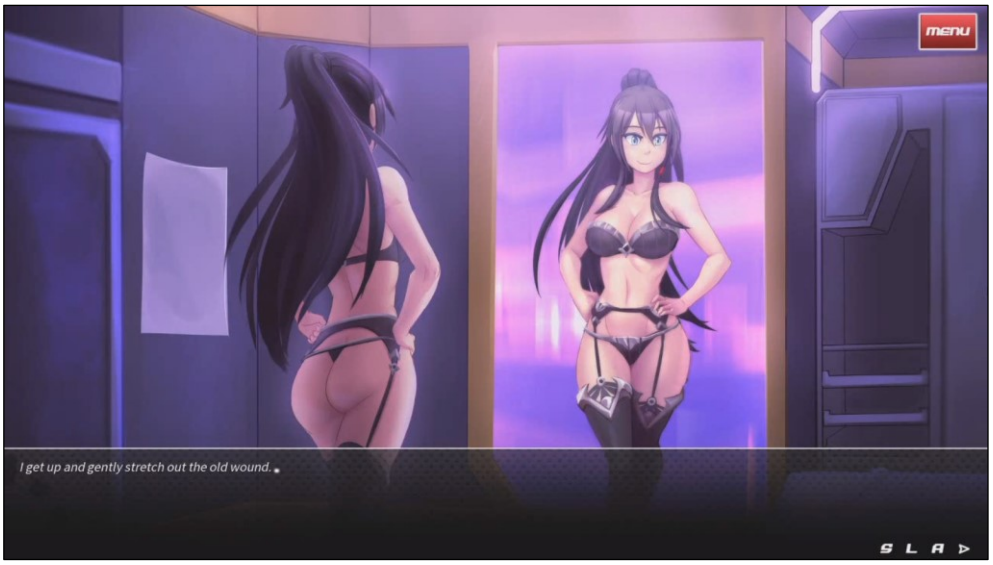

Figure 1.2. Screencap from the Female Plotline of *Echo Tokyo: Intro* (2016)

The female protagonist next investigates the disappearance of a young woman and encounters an all-male group of thugs, one of whom attempts to rape her. The writer of the game may well have been falling back on the archaic trope of using rape as a 'male power-game' – a tactic identified by Jocelyn Catty – because a woman was sent to defeat him, a man who is meant to be in control of his environment. 'Power issues related to women always have sexual connotations' when used in a rape-trope context;[8] however, it is unlikely that the game writer was aware of the history of rape literature. In the end, concerning this and the other tropes discussed in this chapter, it matters less who is informed and to what degree than whether designers, and later players, 'play into' these histories subconsciously. Robert Jensen claims that rape being about power instead of sex is a simplified perception of the reality:

> [R]ape is about the fusion of sex and domination, about the eroticization of control. And in this culture, rape is normal. That is, in a culture where the dominant definition of sex is the taking of pleasure from women by men, rape is an expression of the sexual norms of the culture, not a violation of those norms.[9]

As the protagonist was pinned to the ground, the importance of analysing sexist tropes which flaunt female victimhood seemed suddenly and abundantly clear, as I asked myself: why is rape or attempted rape still being used to summon emotional complexity

[8] Jocelyn Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 29-30, 38.
[9] Robert Jensen, *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007), p. 75.

in games, by quickly and lazily heightening feelings of threat? Despite these tropes, female players play in full knowledge of the sexism they are witnessing in order to get a taste of representation; Adrienne Shaw finds that consumers often 'overlook poor writing, acting, directing, etc.', if it means that they can see themselves represented when they are normally marginalised.[10]

Misogynistic depictions in games may be made within the supposed confines of retro, hipster, or ironic sexism. This kind of sexism is aware of the themes dependent on exaggerated sexual characteristics or victimised and vapid women but can deploy them without guilt. For example, according to Cheris Current and Emily Tillotson, both the designer and the gamer might know that the in-game trope is sexist, so both can laugh it off as a joke poking fun at a sexist past.[11] However, sexism does not stay in the past in cases of ironic sexism; rather, it permeates the culture in which it is used. Players of *Echo Tokyo* may not been aware of the purportedly ironic aspect; therefore, they might assume men acting aggressively toward women is an accurate representation of masculine behaviour – even if the player does not endorse rape. This also applies to how much players believe that the physical build, dress, and action of this and other similar protagonists are features typical of women. Ironic sexism depends on a foundation that both the 'speaker' of the sexist joke and the 'listener' are aware of the irony, and if this is not the case it is sexism, plain and simple. If, however, both parties are aware of the irony, this does not rid it of problematic aspects: Kelsey Wallace claims that ironic sexism 'mocks earnestness'.[12] Creating characters who behave in sexist, racist, homophobic, and other discriminatory ways reflects a culture which, even if both parties understand the irony, still depends on a mutually shared concept of minorities as inferior.

The ideals presented by sexist themes that are unintentionally adopted by gamers from content in games, ironically or otherwise, are often not readily identifiable in their normalisation and can be easily overlooked. However, studies discussed in this chapter reveal that abstract concepts can in many ways be quantified when addressed directly:

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[10] Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 173.
[11] Cheris Current and Emily Tillotson, 'Hipster Racism and Sexism in Charity Date Auctions: Individualism, Privilege Blindness and Irony in the Academy', *Gender and Education*, 30.4 (2016), 467-76 (pp. 467-9).
[12] Kelsey Wallace, '"Hipster Sexism": Just as Bad as Regular Old Sexism, or Worse?', *Bitch Media* (2012), <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/hipster-sexism-is-sexist-feminist-magazine-irony-culture-racism-sexism> [accessed 15 May 2018].

for example, by measuring the degree to which someone believes rape myths after observing a scene depicting violence against a sexualised woman. As discussed presently, the influence of sexist content and attitudes is affected by representations in games, indicating why more careful analysis must be given to game content as a source of sexist thought. If the assumed audience for games is a masculine one, then it explains the pandering to the male gaze in *Echo Tokyo* and many games to follow, in which physical traits and narrative elements favour a heterosexual male perspective. This chapter seeks to find how game spaces represent and perpetuate sexist ideals by answering the following questions: *How have past video games physically and emotionally represented women? What are these representations communicating to players concerning female power and gender roles?* These questions are crucial in evaluating specific scenarios in games which present sexist content and assessing how the abundance of similar representations facilitate the normalisation of misogynistic ideals. The analysis that follows seeks to deconstruct such tropes in order to understand their implications about how gender is designed in game spaces, which will in turn prepare the way for discussion about how such scenarios might be altered to promote gender and sexuality in ways that embrace diversity.

To answer my research questions, this chapter employs a mixed methodological approach that analyses narrative tropes used in games, especially through the lens of literary criticism and close textual analysis. Inspired by and expanding upon Anita Sarkeesian's research on sexist tropes in games, I read games as texts to find content which appears and reappears in games despite feminist movements making progress elsewhere in wider culture.[13] The criticism and analysis uncovers tropes such as the 'Damsel in Distress', in which games rely on the victimhood of women to move a male character forward; the 'Dead Beloved as Muse', a tactic games adopt from other genres through history, in which a dead woman's body becomes a glorious object in death as determined by men around her; 'Woman as Horror', in which women and young girls are parodically portrayed as monsters; and 'Women as Magical Castrators', in which female magic users are considered dangerous for their weaponised sexuality. Further, I analyse depictions of toxic masculinity, and the traits male players are instructed to adopt to reinforce their manhood. Finally, the chapter closes by discussing the lessons

[13] Anita Sarkeesian, 'Tropes vs Women in Video Games', *Feminist Frequency* (2017), <https://feministfrequency.com/series/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games/> [accessed 23 January 2019].

players have been taught and how they go on to perform according to those expectations in real-world conditions.

Within each section, ethnographic methods will be applied to uncover how sexist ideals concerning masculinities and femininities in games influence players in both virtual and real-world cultures by analysing a range of relevant case studies. The focus of this chapter applies theories of the male gaze to analyse game content, its history, and its implications to better understand how game spaces, much like film and other mediums and genres and the similar tropes they use, have become milieus which present women in very specific ways that highlight victimhood or ironic empowerment. Games may be turning toward more diverse representations, but according to Laura Mulvey, the favoured perspective of games that caters to the white, heterosexual male audience is both normalised and overused.[14] This chapter suggests the connection between representations of women and player responses to those representations in that they shape real-world views – views dependent on stereotype.

Evolution of the 'Damsel in Distress'

The 'Damsel in Distress' trope is not exclusive to video games, but it has nearly saturated the game market since its first appearance in *Donkey Kong* (1981), when the plumber/hero Mario began his quest to save Princess Toadstool (later Princess Peach) from the eponymous evil gorilla who kidnapped her.[15] The similarity to King Kong, another primate in popular culture who showed a preference for blonde, white women is undeniable, and, according to Gene Demby, therefore so are the racialised connotations of the great black beast from the jungle as a metaphor for black masculinity.[16] This aspect of gameplay was not under heavy scrutiny at the time of *Donkey Kong*'s original release, one of the reasons being the visual simplicity of games: they featured one screen with no options to scroll in any direction, and the motivations of the blocky characters reflected that simplicity. However, as the industry matured, this fundamental trope was not retired from games, although each new generation of gaming platforms grew in technological and narrative complexity. Samuel Gronseth claims that the

[14] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, ed. by Laura Mulvey, 2nd edn (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 14-27 (p. 15).
[15] Shigeru Miyamoto, *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981), Arcade platforms.
[16] Gene Demby, 'Can You Make a Movie with King Kong Without Perpetuating Racial Undertones?', *National Public Radio* (2017), <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/11/519845882/can-you-make-a-movie-with-king-kong-without-perpetuating-racial-undertones?t=1548240057634> [accessed 23 January 2019].

'Damsel in Distress' can be used in ways which do not encourage sexism, but this opportunity is rarely taken. He goes on to state that, if a woman's role can be filled by, for example, an archaeological artefact without changing the praxis of the game, this is a clear sign of sexism in its instrumentality.[17]

It is worth considering areas of popular culture which critique past tropes like 'Damsel in Distress'. *Wreck-It Ralph 2: Ralph Breaks the Internet* not only tackles prevalent tropes in gaming culture but also the sexist politics behind female protagonists in and outside of games.[18] The film is a sequel to a similarly culturally-critical game, but specifically in *Wreck-It Ralph 2*, is a scene in which Vanellope (one of the two protagonists) is involved in the ironic confrontation with Disneyfied tropes of heroinedom. Vanellope is a princess, just as the other women are, yet the film – notably created by Disney – outlines many depictions we have come to expect from the medium, such as princesses who: possesses magic; have the ability to talk to animals; have been poisoned or cursed; had true love's kiss; and have 'Daddy Issues' among others. The longer Vanellope speaks with the other princesses, the more she is confused and in disbelief at the very abnormal norms that often go unquestioned. Through Vanellope's incredulity as she outlines step-by-step the fairy-tale-based suggestions from the princesses to find her 'dream', it invites the viewer to take a step back from the comfort of the role of consumer and examine these and other representations that warrant closer scrutiny. Vanellope shows a critical presence in both games (as a game character herself) and film – especially children's films which instil lessons and norms.

Returning to the investigation of the 'Damsel in Distress' trope, there are several variations that utilise differing specifications of gender. *Dishonored* (2012) grips players early in the game when playing as Corvo Attano, who has returned from a mission and must report to the Empress and her daughter Emily.[19] The three characters clearly have a bond: Emily wants to play a round of hide and seek before Corvo reports to her mother, and the Empress clearly relies on his presence for comfort as well as protection. They are united only momentarily before supernatural beings appear, slaughtering the Empress and kidnapping Emily. With her dying breath, the Empress

[17] Samuel Gronseth, *Games as Lit. 101 – The Damsel in Distress*, online video recording, YouTube, 1 June 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Azq_fTcbToU> [accessed 2 November 2016] 5:20, 5:45.
[18] *Wreck-It Ralph 2: Ralph Breaks the Internet*, dir. by Rich Moore and Phil Johnston (Walt Disney Studios, 2018)
[19] Raphaël Colantonio and Harvey Smith, *Dishonored* (Bethesda Softworks, 2012), multiple platforms.

bids Corvo to save Emily.[20] In her 'Damsel in Distress' series, Sarkeesian states that this variation of the trope is one in which the wife or significant other of the MPC is murdered and the player must then rescue their daughter. The trope is quite common and is found in games like *Outlaws* (1997), *God of War* (2005), *Kane and Lynch* (2007), *Asura's Wrath* (2012), and *Inversion* (2012), among others.[21]

While the trope can be used to entertain without resulting in moral harm, Andrew Koppelman states that if someone is playing with fire, they will be aware of the dangers of the flame, such as when writers and players understand the sexism of particular tropes. As such, their awareness somewhat protects them from believing that women 'should' be victims. However, most players game for entertainment alone, and because they are not critically analysing their play, they have no such awareness of the flame – making them more prone to absorb the negative ideas of the trope, such as the belief that the victimisation of women is normal or even attractive.[22] Sexist ideas take root in players when games are examined collectively for their habitual representations of femininity – representations showing that female passivity is a starting block for male empowerment, when depictions like rape or 'damsel-hood' exist in the story for the benefit of a man's narrative journey. These tropes could not have the power to influence players were they not a reflection of ideas society already holds regarding women, especially concerning 'benevolent sexism'. While benevolent sexism differs from hostile sexism, it 'provides a comfortable rationalization for confining women to domestic roles', according to Peter Glick and Susan Fisk. They claim that benevolent sexism relies on the assumption of women as 'the weaker sex', not fully competent, even as adults, thus justifying men's interventions to protect them, while cherishing them for their ability to provide them sexual, domestic, and general nurturing duties.[23]

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[20] The representations found in the *Dishonored* franchise are not limited to this trope: in *Dishonored 2*, the player can play as Emily, giving her agency and filling in her narrative arc more fully. In the stand-alone story released after *Dishonored 2*, *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider*, the MPC is Billie Lurk, a disabled woman of colour. Harvey Smith, *Dishonored 2* (Bethesda Softworks, 2016), multiple platforms; Harvey Smith, *Dishonored: Death of the Outsider* (Bethesda Softworks, 2017), multiple platforms.
[21] Daron Stinnet, Stephen R. Shaw, and Adam Schnitzer, *Outlaws* (LucasArts, 1997), Windows; David Jaffe, *God of War* (Capcom, 2005), PlayStation 3, PlayStation 2, and PlayStation Vita; Jens Peter Kurup, *Kane and Lynch* (Eidos Interactive, 2007), Windows, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360; Seiji Shimoda, *Asura's Wrath* (Capcom, 2012), PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360; Sergey Larionov, *Inversion* (Namco Bandai Games, 2012), Windows, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360. See Anita Sarkeesian, 'Damsel in Distress: Part 2 – Tropes vs Women', *Feminist Frequency* (2013), <http://www.feministfrequency.com/2013/05/damsel-in-distress-part-2-tropes-vs-women/> [accessed 2 March 2015].
[22] Andrew Koppelman, 'Does Obscenity Cause Moral Harm?', *Columbia Law Review*, 105.5 (2005), 1635-79 (p. 1658).
[23] Peter Glick and Susan Fiske, 'The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70.3 (1996), 491-512 (p. 492).

Benevolent sexism disempowers to an equal degree as hostile sexism by preserving the hegemonic structures which dictate women remain restricted to these roles.

Video game culture is not the only source of these themes: by using the trope, games, comics, and film were taking cues from a long history of stories which followed this narrative foundation. Catty writes that the first cases of the trope can be found in translations of chivalric romance from the 1580s, in which knights came upon slight variations of a similar scene depicting a woman as a victim of rape or attempted rape before the knight arrives and saves her.[24] The stories continue when, upon her rescue, she is 'overcome with gratitude', and 'shows no further sign of distress', often repaying the knight by giving her body to him. These events may seem obviously sexist in retrospect, but a sexual encounter with a hero immediately in the wake of a rape is found in several scenarios in the game *Ride to Hell: Retribution* (2013), which I discuss later in this chapter.[25] Often in the medieval stories, the knight chooses to rescue the woman owing to her intense beauty – ironically the same feature which entranced her rapist – a motif found throughout games, as attractive damsels are the norm.[26] The 'Damsel in Distress' trope has been rewritten since then with both major and minor adjustments, and even now the trope has a seemingly everlasting shelf-life.

Another variant of the trope is one which Gail Simone calls 'Woman in the Refrigerator', in which a character takes revenge for his lost love. Sarkeesian expands the trope to identify the 'Damsel in the Refrigerator' as a situation in which the character's love interest is murdered but the motive of the antagonist is more than revenge: the soul of the hero's loved one is under the control of the antagonist, and the protagonist must fight to redeem her soul. Examples include *The Darkness II* (2007), *Dante's Inferno* (2010), and *Shadows of the Damned* (2011).[27] Narratologically speaking, the prevalence of this trope alone is problematic, but the sexist representation does not stop there: the trend of sexualisation of these women presents them as desirable, even in death. Additionally, these women are dressed erotically only after

[24] Catty, *Writing Rape*, p. 25.
[25] Tom Smetham, *Ride to Hell: Retribution* (Deep Silver, 2013), Windows, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360.
[26] Catty, *Writing Rape*, p. 26.
[27] Anita Sarkeesian, 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 2 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games', *Feminist Frequency* (2014), <https://feministfrequency.com/video/women-as-background-decoration-part-2/> [accessed 2 March 2015]; Sheldon Carter, *The Darkness II* (Starbreeze Studios, 2007), multiple platforms; Jonathan Knight and Stephen Barry, *Dante's Inferno* (Visceral Games, 2010), PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, and PlayStation Portable; Massimo Guarini and Goichi Suda, *Shadows of the Damned* (EA Games, 2011), PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360.

their deaths, as if their living bodies are incompatible with this brand of desire as seen in Figures 1.3-4.

Figure 1.3. Screencap from *Shadows of the Damned* (2011)

Figure 1.4. Screencap from *The Darkness II* (2007)

Further linking notions of femininity and death is Sarkeesian's 'Euthanized Damsel'.[28] This common trope occurs any time a woman who has been pursued during the game is later found to have been deformed in some way by the antagonist to the point of death or near-death: in *Breath of Fire 4* (2000), Elina has been turned into a monster and begs the player to kill her; in *Gears of War 2* (2008), Dom shoots his wife Maria after she has been found starved and 'tortured into a catatonic state'; in *Tenchu:*

[28] Sarkeesian, 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 2'.

Shadow Assassins (2008), the 'princess meekly asks the hero to cut her down to get to the villain, which he does'.[29] Sarkeesian pinpoints what is most alarming about this particular trope: it not only asks the player to participate in the brutalisation of women, but in these situations the women are quite literally asking for it, showing their murder as 'altruistic'.[30] These actions allow the player to view the 'Dead Beloved as Muse' and achieve the desired game ending in which the antagonist is thwarted, but only because of the beloved woman's sacrifice.[31] When desire is perpetually out of reach, it holds a value that an attained desire does not.

The 'Dead Beloved as Muse'

The trend of believing a dead or incapacitated woman is desirable has pervaded other areas of popular culture such as television, visual art, literature, and fashion. Elisabeth Bronfen states that in death, a woman's body becomes a 'surface for projections', in which the male gaze may convert her to whatever he likes, even to the point of possession.[32] In death, she becomes whatever he wishes her to be:

> Over her dead body, cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured, whether because the sacrifice of the virtuous, innocent woman serves a social critique and transformation or because a sacrifice of the dangerous woman re-establishes an order that was momentarily suspended due to her presence.[33]

Women are often the MPC's goal that guides him through chaos; therefore, the word 'order' is most interesting. He fights for her survival, yet upon her death he is, ironically, liberated. Emotional pain may be the cost, yet stability, calm, and predictability fill the void where his purpose to save her once lay. With women no longer dictating the direction of the hero's life, the game ends or takes a new purpose like revenge. Bronfen quotes the Greek motto from Palladas, 'every woman is as bitter as gall; but she has two good moments, one in bed, the other at her death', and claims that sexuality and death are linked 'since both mark instances of feminine excellence'.[34] In death, the woman becomes a martyr upon whom the hero and player may gaze,

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[29] Hironobu Takeshita, *Breath of Fire 4* (Capcom, 2000), Windows and PlayStation; Rod Fergusson, *Gears of War 2* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2008), Xbox 360; Keisuke Kanayama and Takuma Endo, *Tenchu: Shadow Assassins* (FromSoftware, 2008), Wii and PlayStation Portable.
[30] Sarkeesian, 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 2'.
[31] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 360. The term 'Dead Beloved as Muse' originates in this book.
[32] Bronfen, *Her Dead Body*, pp. 64, 95.
[33] Bronfen, *Her Dead Body*, p. 181.
[34] Bronfen, *Her Dead Body*, p. 183.

placing her upon a pedestal borne of her feminine traits in a way that is not possible while she lives, providing him with a purer, less tumultuous existence despite the loss from which it stems.

Mulvey states that woman is not a maker of meaning but the bearer of it.[35] The 'Dead Beloved as Muse' archetype does more than present a dead woman as a cultural reconfirmation of sexist projections: she is also a distinctly sexualised object. The archetype has a long history, and when considering Jean-André Rixens *The Death of Cleopatra* (Figure 1.5), one gaze makes clear how a corpse is framed as an object of desire in his painting.

Figure 1.5. Jean-André Rixens' *The Death of Cleopatra* (*c.* 1874)[36]

The markers of Cleopatra's death are her closed eyes and the heavy weight of her hanging arm; however, these could also be indicators of sleep. In fact, that which identifies Cleopatra's death is the grief of her maidservant and the title of the painting. There are few other visual indications that the subject of the painting is dead. As in the cases of Paula and Jenny in Figures 1.3-4, her nakedness pulls the gaze to her sexuality, delaying or arresting completely the viewer's investigation into her death. Unmarked even by the snake whose poison killed her, Cleopatra's body is flawless, offered up to the viewer uncomplicatedly, as it cannot intervene and ask the viewer not to consume it.

[35] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 15.
[36] Jean-André Rixens, *The Death of Cleopatra*, *c*. 1874, oil on canvas, 195 x 286 cm, Musée des Augustins, Toulouse.

Johann Heinrich Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (Figure 1.6) is another famous image that mingles eroticism with an ambiguous state that crosses the border between death and sleep. The painting has several interpretations which range from the woman being dead, asleep, or post-orgasm while the demon is cited as a physical representation of a nightmare, suppressed lust, or Fuseli himself, sexually claiming a lost love. The image has inspired numerous gothic narratives (and is aptly the cover of Bronfen's book cited here). The insinuation of an eroticised agency over a passive woman – notably portrayed in bed, an often sexual arena – is unmistakable. In these two paintings, the subject's lifelessness is offered for visual pleasure: while it may be tempting to argue that visual pleasure is the purpose of all paintings, just like the argument that games exist only for entertainment, the representations in each medium reflect the culture in which they are created – cultures which present sexualised female corpses as consumable and arousing.

Figure 1.6. Johann Heinrich Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (*c.* 1781)[37]

Works of literature use variations of the archetype as well. The story of Snow White has been retold many times since its original publication by Jakob and Wilhelm

[37] Johann Heinrich Fuseli, *The Nightmare*, *c*. 1781, oil on canvas, 101.6 x 127 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit.

Grimm in the early nineteenth century.[38] Perhaps the most famous version is that of Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937), in which Snow White is hunted by her evil stepmother, the queen. She meets the seven dwarves, who welcome her into their home, and she becomes a mother-figure to them, until the queen finds her and tricks her into eating a poisoned apple. Snow White dies, and the dwarves are unable to withstand the emotional detachment that accompanies her burial, and so they place her in a glass coffin until the day her prince revives her with 'true love's kiss'.[39] This adaptation tells a narrative often seen: Snow White's beauty is the reason she is never buried, and, while her body is lifeless yet constantly in view, her physical appearance remains untouched by the effects of decomposition. In some adaptations, Snow White is in a death-like sleep, yet the presentation is the same: Snow White is unable to be woken, acted upon and on behalf of, all while on display.

Snow White's story was adapted again in the game *The Wolf among Us*, where, in one scene, the characters analyse a recreation of Snow White's story in a strange context: one of the minor antagonists is obsessed with Snow White and has been visiting prostitutes to sexually participate in her story.[40] In the game, the scene which the antagonist chooses for sexual re-enactment are the moments surrounding her death: care has been taken to set up the right music, the right placement of flowers to resemble those surrounding a corpse, and the right clothes on the prostitute to frame her erotically in death. The game makes clear the obsession with Snow White's perceived perfection, while embodying death and the arousal found in her inability to participate. The juxtaposition of death and sex is the strongest here, though the implications are no less present in other examples.

In contrast, earlier in the game when a male character, Prince Lawrence, is found dead, his representation is framed within the tragedy of his situation and the literal stink of death – the MPC reels when faced with Lawrence's corpse's odour. There is no reference to his sexuality; he is dressed in a plain white shirt and jeans, his face in a slack but neutral expression, body beginning to decompose. Similarly, in the classic horror movie *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), the comparison of monstrous and beautiful in men and women respectively is exemplified: in the film, Frankenstein's

[38] The oral folk and fairy tale was first published as Tale 53 – called 'Schneewittchen' – in an anthology collected by the Brothers Grimm in 1812. The anthology, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, was the first of several revisions before the final version published in 1854.
[39] *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, dir. by David Hand (Walt Disney Productions, 1937).
[40] Nick Herman, et al., *The Wolf among Us* (Telltale Games, 2013-14), multiple platforms.

creature, put simply, looks like a monster; yet, 'Frankenstein's bride' only appears bewildered and overwhelmed by the world, appearing quite child-like in her confusion and inability to speak.[41] She is physically attractive, the only traits which 'Other' her being her abnormal hair and extreme facial expressions when she reacts to other characters. In both game and film, the man is permitted to have traits of putrefaction or monstrosity, but a dead woman is bound to that which gave her value in life: her beauty.

In *The Wolf among Us*, connections to the 'Euthanised Damsel' are clear, bringing feminine death directly into the hands of the player by asking them to participate in a depiction of the glorious ending of a woman. As Thomas De Quincey stated:

> I acknowledge that you can do one thing as well as the best of us men – a greater thing than even Milton is known to have done, or Michael Angelo: you can die grandly, and as goddesses would die, were goddesses mortal.[42]

The American gothic writer Edgar Allan Poe echoed the notion: 'The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world'.[43] Indeed, his fiction and poetry was informed by eroticised representations of female morbidity (esp. 'Annabel Lee', 'The Fall of the House of Usher', 'Ligeia' and 'Morella').[44] The topic is unignorable in its repetition, and female corpses in the industry are not limited to in-game content. Indeed, arousal by a dead woman is used to sell a product widely, and game culture is no different, aptly demonstrated in the advertisements for *Hitman: Blood Money* (2006).[45] Men and women are once again represented differently in death, highlighting aspects of sexism which are manipulated to maximise profits (see Figures 1.7-10 below).

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[41] *The Bride of Frankenstein*, dir. by James Whale (Universal Pictures, 1935).
[42] Bronfen, *Her Dead Body,* title page.
[43] Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', *Graham's American Monthly Magazine of Literature and Art*, 28 (1846), 1-104, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc2.ark:/13960/t6b2 7q96h;view=1up;seq=2> [accessed 05 April 2019] (p. 29).
[44] *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Philip Stern, reprint edn (London: Penguin Classics, 1979), pp. 632-3, 244-67, 225-43, 218-24.
[45] Tore Blystad, *Hitman: Blood Money* (Eidos Interactive, 2006), multiple platforms.

Figure 1.7. Marketing Image for *Hitman: Blood Money* (2006)[46]

Figure 1.8. Marketing Image for *Hitman: Blood Money* (2006)

[46] ComputerMKII, 'The 10 Most Controversial Video Game Advertisements', *NewGAF* (2013), <https://www.neogaf.com/threads/the-10-most-controversial-video-game-advertisements.555148/> [accessed 24 May 2018].

Figure 1.9. Marketing Image for *Hitman: Blood Money* (2006)

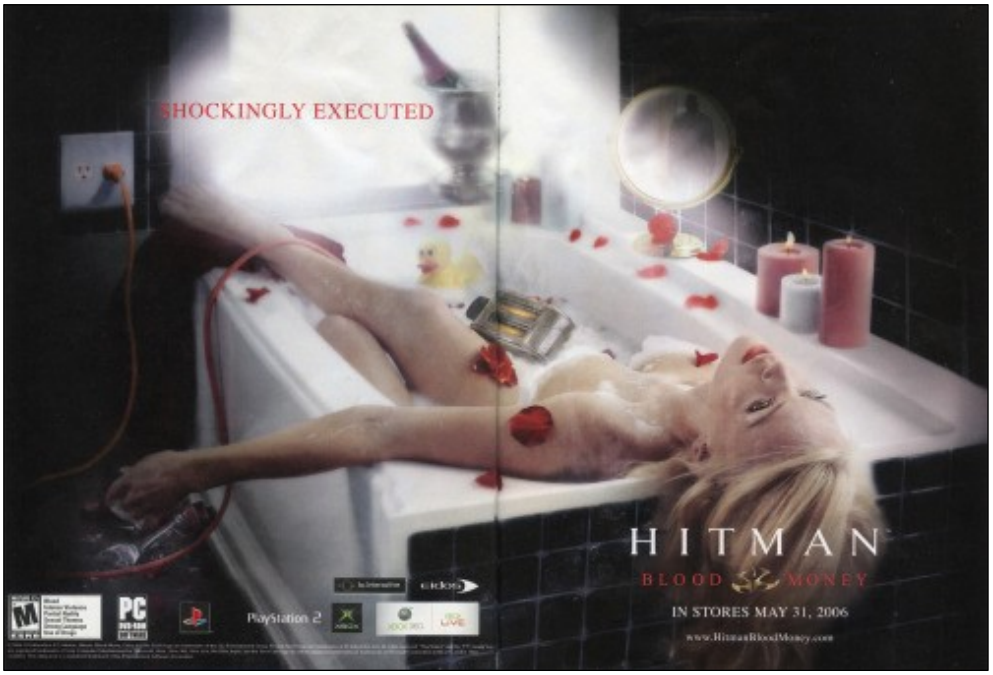

Figure 1.10. Marketing Image for *Hitman: Blood Money* (2006)

Even if Figures 1.7-8 were presented without a side-by-side comparison with Figures 1.9-10, the women undoubtedly embody the feminine abnormal under the male gaze. Both women are young and beautiful, yet the levels of (un)dress are the most prominent: the woman in Figure 1.10 is completely naked, the woman in Figure 1.9 appears dressed for a sexual encounter, yet both men wear a suit and tie. Many players

were critical of the advertisements, yet the discourse surrounding them was nonetheless supportive, suggesting that the community was condoning, even encouraging violence against women despite the images strongly suggesting rape, according to game critic Vladimir Cole.[47] He states that 'it's clear that a semi-naked woman carefully arranged on a bed has clear and prominent sexual connotations and that if rape isn't explicitly evoked, it's implicit in the situation.' This is especially true when the viewer can assume that the MPC, Agent 47, was the man who killed these women. Still, others argued that there was nothing in the advert suggesting rape, rather that 'skin does sell in the gaming community' and being dead while being sexualised can 'be that simple'.[48] Whether or not a viewer recognises such an image as glorifying or beautifying rape and death, the connotations are there. And, even if they were not, the women in the adverts are depicted submissively, sexualised by both their postures and their clothing – the link between sex and violence is as obvious as it is intentional.

Wider culture's obsession with femininity and death was explored by waxwork artist Sigrid Sarda who created a series of pieces which explored death, mortality, and sexuality, with many of her pieces depicting young women sexualised in death. She too recognised a fascination with sexualised women and death in media, and she sought to find out the basis for the response. When interviewing strangers, 'every single male response was "If she's hot she's hot"', illustrating that death does not diminish sexual desire as long as she resembles herself pre-decay.[49] Sarda's overwhelming response from those she interviewed speaks to the wider understanding that dead women are erotic in a way that men are not. Moreover, the wider landscape created by the strategically placed sexualised woman is further called upon to provide setting for the player.

'Woman as Background Decoration'

Non-playable characters (NPCs) can be bystanders, shopkeepers, or other characters who engage with the MPC to help or hinder them along their journey, embodying characters identified by Vladimir Propp's components of folktales. Games further make

[47] Vladimir Cole, 'Joystiq Readers Critique Hitman Advertisement', *Engadget* (2006), <https://www.engadget.com/2006/04/14/joystiq-readers-critique-hitman-advertisement/> [accessed 18 April 2018].
[48] Cole, 'Critique Hitman Advertisement'.
[49] Sarah Chavez, 'Sigrid Sarda's Waxworks of Death and Desire', *The Order of the Good Death* (2018), <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/sigrid-sardas-waxworks-death-desire> [accessed 24 May 2018].

their claim as modes of storytelling by featuring NPCs – like folk characters – according to formalist models of the varying agents of narrative: villains, donors (providers), helpers, princesses (and their fathers), dispatchers, heroes, and false heroes.[50] In filling these roles, women take part in another trope labelled 'Women as Background Decoration' by Sarkeesian.[51] She states that women are pervasively represented in games such as *God of War: Ghost of Sparta* (2010), *Dishonored*, *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), and *Watch Dogs* (2014), in very specific interactions with MPCs: they appear as strippers, prostitutes, or sex workers of other kinds.[52] This is not to say that all or even most NPCs are sex workers, but the number of games which involve meeting a contact in a brothel or using a strip club as a headquarters has become surprisingly high, such as in *Silent Hill 2* (2001), *Max Payne 3* (2012), *Mafia II* (2010), *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), *Metro: Last Light* (2013), *Deus Ex* (2000), and many others.[53] It is not the presence of sex workers in the space that is troubling, rather that they are victimised more often than NPCs who are not sex workers. What makes these characters important to examine further is the way they are often programmed into situations within which committing violent acts against them is justified or unavoidable for progress through the game. The most crucial aspect of these women is their representation as sexualised, disposable NPCs.

These depictions assist in understanding why violence against sex workers is so often swept under the rug: images which present women in scenes of sexual violence makes them seem less human, as noted by Martha Nussbaum. She claims that men are encouraged to think, '[w]hoever this woman is and whatever she has achieved, for you she is a cunt, all her pretensions vanish before your sexual power'.[54] Sarkeesian notes

[50] Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (1928), 2nd edn, trans. by Laurence Scott and Louis A. Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968), pp. 79-80.
[51] Anita Sarkeesian, 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 1 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games', *Feminist Frequency* (2014), <http://feministfrequency.com/2014/06/16/women-as-background-decoration-tropes-vs-women/> [accessed 2 March 2015].
[52] Dana Jan and Ru Weerasuriya, *God of War: Ghost of Sparta* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2010), PlayStation 3 and PlayStation Portable; Josh Sawyer, *Fallout: New Vegas* (Bethesda Softworks, 2010), Windows, PlayStation 3, and Xbox 360; Jonathan Morin, *Watch Dogs* (Ubisoft, 2014), multiple platforms.
[53] See Ben Kuchera, 'It's Time to Leave the Brothels and Strip Club Behind When Real Victims Fuel Your Narrative', *Vox Media* (2014), <https://www.polygon.com/2014/2/27/5453202/its-time-to-leave-the-brothels-and-strip-clubs-behind-when-real> [accessed 18 April 2018]; Takayoshi Sato, *Silent Hill 2* (Konami, 2001), Windows, PlayStation 2, and Xbox; Steve Martin, *Max Payne 3* (Rockstar Games, 2012), multiple platforms; Lukáš Kuře, *Mafia II* (2K Games, 2010), multiple platforms; Steve Martin and David Kunkler, *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games, 2010), PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360; Andrew Prokhorov, *Metro: Last Light* (Deep Silver, 2013), multiple platforms; Warren Spector, *Deus Ex* (Eidos Interactive, 2000), Windows, PlayStation 2, and MacOS.
[54] Martha Nussbaum, 'Objectification', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24.4 (1995), 249-91 (p. 285).

that the trope uses looping dialogue of propositions by these women which cater to the heterosexual male ego. This trope is often used to create the atmosphere of a seedy location by asking players to view or participate in a scene in which violence against a sex worker displays the immorality of the villain. This can take the form of verbal sexual harassment, brutalization, and murder. Putting such scenes into games has two major implications: it subsumes scenes of violent victimhood of women into the context of play and participation, and game designers are using violence against women as an easy command for raising the emotional stakes for the player.[55]

In games like *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (2011), *Fable Anniversary* (2014), and *Shellshock Nam '67* (2004), these sex workers are women of colour.[56] Sarkeesian aptly describes these women as the continuation of 'a long racist tradition of representing women of colour as mysterious and hypersexual creatures who exist as an "exotic spice" to be consumed by the white or western man'.[57] The same theme is in other forms of popular culture, such as *Playboy's Exotic Beauties*, which show the same soft-core porn as other issues of *Playboy*; however, just like in the games listed above, these non-white women are expected to provide a 'spicy kick' to the regular issues.[58] Games which use this trope place sexual violence against women, especially women of colour, into a normalising context. Film exploits women of colour similarly, and the connections found in bell hook's concept of 'the oppositional gaze' exemplify this more fully. The oppositional gaze refuses to identify with either the victim (white women) or the perpetrator (mostly white men) of the phallocentric gaze – as they both experience a privilege denied black women in various forms of media.[59] hooks claims that women of colour regularly do not consume media with the expectation of seeing 'compelling representations of black femaleness': rather, their 'bodies and being [are] there to serve' even to the point of 'enhanc[ing] white womanhood'.[60] Sex workers of colour are considered more Other than their white counterparts – and when white sex workers are harshly exploited for their Otherness, this results in a perfect storm in which to manoeuvre sex workers of colour to minister to the white male gaze.

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[55] Sarkeesian, 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 2'.
[56] Jean-François Dugas, *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Square Enix, 2011), multiple platforms; Peter Molyneux, *Fable Anniversary* (Big Blue Box, 2014), multiple platforms; and Douglas Walker, *Shellshock Nam '67* (Eidos Interactive, 2004), Windows, PlayStation 2, and Xbox.
[57] Sarkeesian, 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 1'.
[58] Koppelman, 'Moral Harm', p. 1657.
[59] bell hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators', in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. by John Belton (London: Athlone Press, 1996), pp. 247-69 (p. 254).
[60] hooks, 'Oppositional Gaze', p. 251.

These attitudes then leave the screen: according to Katherine Koster, sex workers are less likely to be considered victims of sexual abuse though they have a 45 to 75 per cent chance of experiencing sexual violence during their career and a 32 to 55 per cent chance in any given year.[61] Violence against sex workers is a pervasive, real-world issue; yet, representations such as those detailed above foster attitudes that condone such violence, by making it a normative part of the game experience. Representations suggest even more strongly that sex workers are throwaway characters when they are often caught in the crossfire between the protagonist and antagonist. After scenes which depict violence against sexualised women, the MPC moves on to the next location, the woman's death having no consequences, plot value, or options for further restitution toward her. I do not suggest hiding the existence of sex workers in games, as this would force these women further into the margins. However, the blasé mode in which such topics are often presented facilitates attitudes which endorse the interchangability of sex workers as women from a less-than-wholesome lifestyle. These attitudes go hand-in-hand with rape myths stating that they were asking for it or deserved violence against them. This illustrates two of Nussbaum's notions of objectification: fungibility and violability – an 'object lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that […] is permissible to break up, smash, break into […] perhaps because it seems clear that they can be replaced by others of the kind.'[62]

Ethnographically speaking, representations like these are interpreted by gamers, even unintentionally, as less severe violence than that directed at women from other occupational backgrounds. It does not take a video game to encourage society to marginalise sex workers and dissociate them from mind and moral status; they already are viewed this way, according to Steve Loughnan, et al. A 'highly objectified woman [is] denied personhood compared with [a] non-objectified woman', and even 'moderate' objectification creates feelings in a viewer or player toward depersonalisation of the subject, no matter the gender of the consumer.[63] When it comes to video games, it may be that male gamers are more likely to believe these false perceptions: Alessandro Gabbiadini, et al. find that when it comes to video games, character immersion changes

[61] Katherine Koster, '17 Facts About Sexual Violence and Sex Work', *Huffington Post* (2015), <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/katherine-koster/16-facts-about-sexual-ass_b_8711720.html> [accessed 11 February 2016].
[62] Nussbaum, 'Objectification', pp. 257-60.
[63] Steve Loughnan, et al., 'Objectification Leads to Depersonalization: The Denial of Mind and Moral Concern to Objectified Others', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40 (2010), 709-17 (p. 712).

everything. Identification with the MPC – which is significantly more common for male players playing as male characters – is positively associated with 'masculine beliefs' ('"real men" are tough, dominant and aggressive') and was 'negatively associated with empathy for female violence victims'.[64] Scenes in games which require players to observe or participate in violence against women, especially sex workers, lessen players' ability to see these women as equal in value to themselves, including the belief that they are less competent and less sensitive to pain.[65] Even in societies in which sex work is legal, sex workers are viewed as less human and are demonised with false statistics that present misconceptions as fact, such as age entering the industry, life expectancy of workers, and many other topics.[66]

Representations of sex workers would be safer for play if they were not presented in a way that decrees women are available for consumption by the male player *with no consequences*. The clear-cut solution is for game designers not to depend on play that incorporates extreme violence against sexualised women; another option would be to offer game action that empowers these women or gives them a meaningful role in the story. One attempt at mitigating the misogynistic implications of the trope misses the mark somewhat, however, as scenes that humanise these women often present most, if not all, sex workers as victims rather than workers. *Dishonored* features a scene in which the talking heart that guides the player provides back story on three prostitutes. For the first two, the heart claims: 'They thought they would be working in a factory. By the time they arrived it [was] much too late.' And later about another: 'When she was ten, her mother traded her for a bottle of wine. Few enter this line of work by choice'. These lines of dialogue show compassion for these characters and certainly bring to the fore the mistreatment of sex workers occurring in the real world; however, they do not appreciate the legitimate labour of sex work, as Bonnie Ruberg claims.[67] Misrepresentation of sex workers does not stop with this trope, when, for example, *Fable II* (2008) portrays all prostitutes as bisexual: according to Shaw, this

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[64] Alessandro Gabbiadini, et al., 'Acting like a Tough Guy: Violent-Sexist Video Games, Identification with Game Characters, Masculine Beliefs, & Empathy for Female Violence Victims', *PLoS ONE*, 11.4 (2016), 1-14 <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0152121> (pp. 12, 7).
[65] Loughnan, et al., 'Objectification Leads to Depersonalization', p. 713.
[66] Maggie McNeill, 'Lies, Damned Lies and Sex Work Statistics', *Washington Post* (2014), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2014/03/27/lies-damned-lies-and-sex-work-statistics/?utm_term=.cc8965531ebe> [accessed 20 May 2018].
[67] Peter Molyneux, *Fable II* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2008), Xbox 360; Bonnie Ruberg, 'Representing Sex Workers in Video Games: Feminisms, Fantasies of Exceptionalism, and the Value of Erotic Labor', *Feminist Media Studies* (2018), 1-18 (p. 5).

'reproduces a tired and oppressive stereotype about sex workers and bisexuals as those who will screw anything that moves'.[68]

Yet another example of delegitimising sex work is what Ruberg calls the 'fantasy of exceptionalism' in which the MPC, and therefore the player, is 'encouraged to see himself as special […] because he does not need to pay for sex.' This entails claims by the sex worker that the MPC is too attractive or sexually skilled to need to pay a sex worker for the service she has or is about to perform. This trope claims that in these scenarios, masculinity is a combination of being '"a real man" and a "good guy"', in that the MPC is man enough to satisfy a sex worker, and further, that if money is not exchanged for a sexual service, his conscience remains intact from the assumed moral implications of prostitution.[69] Ruberg writes that 'free or discounted sex work [is] part of a larger trend in mainstream video games' when the sex worker finds herself unable to charge the MPC, effectively devaluing the *work* in sex work.[70] Real men do not pay for sex and 'you' are that man.

The crucial aspects of this representation are twofold: firstly, it suggests that sex work is the realm of victimised women whose businesses are invalid; and secondly, that embodying masculinity resembles a man who does not need to pay for sex. The masculinity of these MPCs is measured by 'the amount of money that is *not* paid to the sex worker.'[71] Game worlds may be the only space in which many players, regardless of gender, may partake in a sexual service; therefore, the content supplies players a 'cultural script' which dictates that 'sex work does not deserve to be fairly compensated, that powerful, potent men do not pay for sex, and that those who exchange their sexual labour for money no longer enjoy status as equal human beings.'[72] In these women's role in game content, it is programmed that the player walks in and out of sex worker's lives and deaths undisturbed, linking sexual content and sexual people with disposability.

Concerning both the authenticity of sex work and the violence directed specifically at sex workers in defence of the gamer, developers are often looking for new ways to make players flinch, attempting to be 'innovative with violence'; yet, founder and president of game support company XEODesign, Nicole Lazzaro, claims

[68] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, p. 30.
[69] Ruberg, 'Sex Workers in Video Games', p. 3.
[70] Ruberg, 'Sex Workers in Video Games', p. 8.
[71] Ruberg, 'Sex Workers in Video Games', p. 13.
[72] Ruberg, 'Sex Workers in Video Games', pp. 5, 12.

that these attempts will pass by most boys, who tolerate the violence to experience the other aspects of the game.[73] Men are not necessarily looking for the kind of violence that is presented in this and other tropes; rather, they are being directed to it when games must heighten the explicit nature of violent or sexual content to keep up with its normalisation in popular culture. While audiences may be craving more diversity from game designers, the current formula has been proven to sell, and the industry is hard pressed to take risks with new games, especially those with astronomical budgets. At the time of writing, *Grand Theft Auto V* (2014) was the most expensive game to create at £170 million.[74] While other AAA games do not meet this budget standard, they remain those games with the highest expectations and budgets and therefore are most likely to face a harsh backlash if an attempt to be innovative with representation fails, thus maintaining the most played games as those with the most recycled tropes against women.

'Woman as Agent of Horror'

Not all sexist tropes are of hypersexualised women, however. Horror games allow a unique opportunity for players to (re)conceptualise their assumptions of danger and threat when they employ a specific kind of 'monster'. The market is filled with games featuring a perversion of the innocence and purity of women and young girls, which in turn positions them as the antagonist. These representations of feminine horror are effective, and with their use, the game industry depends on two assumptions by players: firstly, that they have preconceptions about feminine traits; and secondly, that they will be frightened by the severe disparity between their preconceptions and the parody of it, which is now in monster form and pursuing them through the game. If they can be sufficiently motivated by these and other features of gameplay, they explore the woman that Bronfen states 'is constructed as the place of mystery, of not knowing, […] as the site of silence but also of the horrifying void that "castrates" the living man's sense of wholeness and stability'.[75] Woman is born shrouded in the unknown as a blank canvas with potential for projection of sexist values which dictate that she is at the peak of

[73] Nicole Lazzaro, 'Are Boy Games Even Necessary?', in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, ed. by Yasmin Kafai, et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 199-215 (p. 209).
[74] Leslie Benzies and Imran Sarwar, *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games, 2014), multiple platforms; Martyn McLaughlin, 'New GTA V Release Tipped to Rake in £1bn in Sales', *The Scotsman* (2013), <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/gadgets-gaming/new-gta-v-release-tipped-to-rake-in-1bn-in-sales-1-3081943> [accessed 3 May 2016].
[75] Bronfen, *Her Dead Body*, p. 205.

innocence as a child: when a player must examine the circumstances that caused her fall from this perceived innocence of femininity, her mystery turns toward the abject.

The abject has significantly contributed to not only horror games, but gothic literature, wider literature, and general culture. Speaking of abjection, Julia Kristeva claims:

> The abject is not an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an ob-jest, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*. [emphasis in original][76]

In these cases, the 'opposed I' is conventional femininity – in all its limitations – that we have come to expect to represent women and girls in numerous areas of popular and wider culture. The perversion of innocence is a perversion of feminine motivations, as assumed or constructed by wider culture. It is this phenomenon that makes a female antagonist in horror games frightening – more frightening than a male or genderless monster. The context of games provides a noteworthy lens through which to gaze upon monstrousness, as compared to other forms of popular culture that do not require user input: Ewan Kirkland states that horror in video games is unique, because unlike film or literature, the 'game designers can provide horror, but survival is up to you'.[77]

In games like these, the little girl harnesses supernatural abilities and directs them at the player, who must then uncover clues to solve her mystery or simply survive. It may be tempting to see a 'Woman as Agent of Horror' as an empowered feminist icon for her regained agency through her assertion of power over the player. However, her empowerment is subversive to existing gender roles, which configure her as powerless or as a victim and rely on many sexist beliefs – among them benevolent sexism. This type of sexism is at odds with this kind of monster: girls are supposed to be protected, not protected against. Another critical aspect of this trope, and what especially complicates its analysis, is the young-girl-parody's inability to subvert stereotypical assumptions that players have about femininity – as game creators paradoxically depend upon the foundation laid by the very assumptions they wish to subvert. Germane to this,

[76] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (1980), trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p. 1.
[77] Ewan Kirkland, 'Storytelling in Survival Horror Video Games', in *Horror Video Games: Essays on the Fusion of Fear and Play*, ed. by Bernard Perron (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2009), pp. 62-78 (p. 65).

literary theorist Linda Hutcheon's research claims that instances in which game designers are making a parody of a young woman, the 'significance lies in how [she] does *not*' act like a young woman.[78] In these cases, subversion cannot be truly successful because, as Hutcheon claims, 'even with critical difference, parody reinforces'.[79]

In the independent horror game *Emily Wants to Play* (2015), the main antagonist is a little girl whose friendship with hostile dolls began her spiral into insanity, resulting in her unexplained death.[80] The dolls that activated her illness, Kiki, Mr Tatters, and Chester, come out to 'play', as the player learns they are locked in the house with them. Different techniques must be used to survive against them: upon Kiki's appearance, the player must stare at her until she disappears; when hearing Mr Tatter's deep laugh, the player must freeze in place; finally, the player must run away from the pursuit of Chester. Each doll's encounter lasts a matter of seconds, and the dolls respawn multiple times during the game. However, the player is given an identifiable and measurable action to perform for game progress. While interactions with the dolls comprise most of the gameplay, Emily is a unique antagonist. If the player has not found enough clues when they enter the basement – where Emily lies in wait – a chase ensues from which the player has no chance of escape or survival. When entering Emily's domain, the player is programmed to lose. The inescapable pursuit of Emily comes via her inhuman gallop toward the player as the screen is consumed by her leering face, smiling too-widely as she gets what she wanted: to play.

In the final moments of the game, the player is offered a chance to play hide-and-seek with Emily in the main portion of the house; however, the scene in the basement specifically demonstrates a feminine power that is manifested in the player's inability to fight back against Emily. Her role contrasts with assumptions regarding feminine vulnerability and peril: she is the character who exercises authority over the player, a male character. Gender is framed by the culture in which it is produced: in this representation, Emily defies it with agency over male MPC castration (powerlessness), and her autonomy results in the defeat of the player. Emily's parody of non-agency is dependent on player assumption of powerlessness as a gendered stereotype. The game is successful at scaring players because it leverages conventional paradigms of feminine

[78] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* (London: Methuen & Co., 1985), p. 8.
[79] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 26.
[80] Shawn Hitchcock, *Emily Wants to Play* (SKH Apps, 2015), multiple platforms.

weakness through its inversion of the archetype the 'Damsel in Distress'. While young women sometimes feature in video games as companions who need to be protected – sometimes programmed not to fight back against attackers, frozen in place while being repeatedly shot or stabbed – here, Emily opposes this role not only with her unnatural desire to harm the player, but with the difficulty evading her enhanced abilities. When comparing differing representations of companion and antagonist, the parody of young woman in *Emily Wants to Play* reveals the persistent cultural assumptions of vulnerability as inherently feminine and that uncorrupted femininity is non-agential.

Corpse Party (1996) is considerably longer than the previous game and therefore has time to develop characters and motivations – for the villains as well as the protagonists.[81] In this role-playing game, the player controls a group of friends who are trapped in a school existing in the spirit world. One by one, the characters fall prey to vengeful spirits or to a Frankensteinian 'Creature' who was responsible for a series of child murders years ago, which first hurled the school into its state of purgatory. As more clues are uncovered, the player learns what occurred to separate the school from the plane of reality. At the end of the game, the final boss is revealed to be a little girl, a spirit named Sachiko, who has been following the protagonists for most of the game.[82] As it transpires, she was the true perpetrator of the child murders all those years ago and continues to lure children to her lethal spirit world. Perhaps the most eerie quality about Sachiko is how innocent she appears: a beautiful little girl wearing a charming dress. Yet when she kills her classmates, she employs a brutal and violent means to do so – including using scissors to repeatedly stab another child in the eye until reaching a 'soup-like consistency'.

The player encounters two sides of Sachiko with conflicting motivations: her innocent side, which desires to help the children, and her reigning side which thirsts for more death. Both employ familiar traits of the vengeful spirits called *onryō* often found in Japanese horror. These spirits are mainly depicted 'by uncanny female ghosts' and embody traits identified by game researcher Martin Picard: her innocent side wears white, the traditional funeral garb in Japan, while her evil side wears her long, dark hair partially covering her face, originating from Kabuki theatre in which each character wears a different wig to identify them to the audience. Picard notes that this more

[81] Makoto Kedouin, *Corpse Party* (Team GrisGris, 1996), multiple platforms.
[82] Bosses are enemies the player must face that are more difficult than most AI enemies, and are usually involved in the main storyline.

popular variant of Japanese horror is usually resentful of and full of envy for the living, and Sachiko fits in the common class of *onryō*, female spirits coming back to haunt those who have betrayed them.[83] Two of the most internationally successful Japanese Horror franchises feature a version of this trope, *Ringu* (*The Ring*, 1991-) and *Ju-On* (*The Grudge*, 2001-).[84] Without her identity as *onryō* – for the murder of her and her mother – Sachiko would never have cause to linger in the spirit world and trap souls.[85] With vengeful motivation providing narrative direction, Sachiko's parody of an innocent, vulnerable young woman achieves a 'fragmented form [of a young woman], offering an ironic, nightmarish world through distortion'.[86] Her vengeance allows her to gain agency over her environment – the lack of which originally caused her and her mother's victimisation, and consequently their deaths. When Sachiko first began luring children, her motivation was more akin to what players expect from a young woman: to provide souls to keep her murdered mother from the despair of loneliness in the spirit world. That side of her positively interacts with the trapped children, such as when she protects the youngest character from falling prey to a sadistic teen similarly trapped, both exhibiting her desire to preserve innocent life and her authority over those in her spirit world. Sachiko's innocent side represents what society believes to be true about childhood, while her monstrous side provides the contradiction that creates abjection, which manifests through Sachiko's autonomy exercised as violence upon others: while her motivations may have begun as misguided but innocent, she soon finds that violence makes her inherently happy.

The violence performed by girls like Emily and Sachiko may be criticised as inherently sexist in its dependence upon assumptions of powerlessness. However, their actions nevertheless critique a society that assumes young women's victimisation as imminent and inescapable. It depends on the horror of a girl deviating from what she is supposed to be and do, and in the representation capitalises on the fear of feminine agency in thought and action: she despises the player and she has the power to act on those feelings. This kind of power taken from male protagonists and given to female antagonists has potential to be worked in ways that dismantle the patriarchy in game

[83] Martin Picard, 'Haunting Backgrounds: Transnationality and Intermediality in Japanese Survival Horror Video Games', in *Horror Video Games*, ed. by Perron, pp. 95-120 (p. 101).
[84] Both stories were adapted in multiple instalments and in multiple mediums including film, novels, games, etc.
[85] Picard, 'Haunting Backgrounds', p. 105.
[86] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 12.

spaces and other mediums – even as it clearly reflects a deeper misogynistic fear of women.

The clandestine path trodden by the player-turned-detective in which a woman becomes an entity who gains satisfaction from the misery of others is one that remains dissonant in the minds of players to a degree that a male antagonist would not be able to achieve in this context. Games commonly present men as physically empowered with narrative autonomy and agency, and a subversion of these ideas would be a parody that, while capable of warranting its own study, would nevertheless depend on presuppositions, by both wider society and game culture, of fundamental male power. The effectiveness of the parody and the 'ironic inversion' of vulnerability found in 'Woman as Agent of Horror' is further explored by Hutcheon:

> While parody offers a much more limited and controlled version of this activation of the past by giving it a new and often ironic context, it makes similar demands upon the [player], but these are demands more on his or her knowledge and recollection than on his or her openness to play.[87]

Young women cannot be 'Agents of Horror' with the level of potency they have in the above examples if players are not aware of (soon-to-be-subverted) gender roles. The representation destabilises ideas of vulnerability, and if the climate of gender equality in games or in wider culture were in a more progressive state, it could complicate patriarchal values in progressive ways. However, in the present culture and industry, it cannot be an innocent – and therefore not a gender-equal – representation of women, given it depends on the assumption of sexist ideologies that it nonetheless maintains. Sexist ideals created in the game culture are then absorbed by gamers and influence wider culture: they are then reflected into the game culture by players and developers, ad infinitum.

'Woman as Magical Castrator'

Associations of power and femininity are often found in presentations of sorcerers, witches, enchantresses, and the like, which provides gender commentary regarding suitable sources of power for such characters. For men, there are two pervasive models of magic users in popular culture. One trend is the wizened elder 'sage', who stereotypically wears a pointed hat with long silver hair and a beard, like Merlin from

[87] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, pp. 6, 5.

medieval fantasy or Dumbledore from the Harry Potter franchise.[88] Perhaps a lesser known example is one from *Dreamfall Chapters: The Longest Journey* (2014-16): Roper Klacks meets the visual expectations of this trope (see Figure 1.11), and his knowledge of an ancient magic is not understood by other characters, his deep magical knowledge leading into the next trope of the male magic user.[89] Another version of the trope is of the post-adolescent scholar whose power comes from his knowledge as much as his magical abilities. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014) exemplifies this in the character Dorian Pavus (see Figure 1.12).[90] Dorian's magic comes from a nation who uses magic to rule over its citizens, but as he rejects this way of life, he lends his services to the protagonist. He has extensive experience as a magical researcher and his abilities as an archivist instigate several missions, the results of which contribute significantly to the defeat of the antagonist. Additionally, as a Spellbinder, his ability is shown by carrying a book on his belt – the same way a rogue carries their lock-picking set. Spellbinders have the ability to bind spirits to simple objects, and though it could be any common object, the visual cue of a book reinforces the link between magic, knowledge, and power.

Figures 1.11-12. Wizened Mage, Roper Klax, from *Dreamfall Chapters: The Longest Journey* (2014-16) and Post-Adolescent Scholar Dorian Pavus, from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2018)[91]

[88] J. K. Rowling, *Harry Potter* franchise (London: Bloomsbury, 1997-2007).
[89] Ragnar Tørnquist, *Dreamfall Chapters: The Longest Journey* (Red Thread Games, 2014-16), multiple platforms.
[90] David Gaider, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Electronic Arts, 2014), multiple platforms.
[91] Fandom, 'Roper Klacks', *The Longest Journey Wiki* (2018), <http://tlj.wikia.com/wiki/Roper_Klacks> [accessed 17 April 2018]; Fandom, 'Dorian Pavus', *Dragon Age Wiki* (2018), <http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/File:Dorian_promotional_inquisition.png> [accessed 17 April 2018].

These two stereotypes are significant because they challenge the more conventional and sexist forms of hypermasculinity found in games. While these mages are powerful beings who excel in combat, their magical knowledge is the result of their in-depth study of magic and lore, instead of brute force. Klacks is an old man and cannot depend on physical strength, and though Dorian is physically capable, he is a mage who does not charge into battle, but rather controls it from a distance where he can analyse the situation and his effect upon it. His magic often requires a charge before it can be released, and this carefully-timed calculation in the face of threat suggests a different model of masculinity when compared to more drastic and pervasive characters who are programmed to strike first and ask questions later.

Female magic users can fit several moulds, yet one trope which is ever-pervasive is the sorceress or enchantress whose sexuality is one of her greatest weapons. Like the three brides of Dracula – women who entrance men only to feed upon them – Poison Ivy's sexuality is weaponised in the 2009 Eidos Interactive/DC Comics game, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (see Figure 1.13).[93] Ivy's sexuality enslaves men, creating soldiers under her command: her henchmen would sacrifice their lives for her, which she often asks them to do. This representation is not limited to the game – this is her character across all media. This form of sexuality is threatening as it renders even a man with the most upgraded weapons subordinate to the whims of the woman. Magically irresistible sexuality emasculates men, as they are instrumentalised and surrender their autonomy and agency – feminised traits and three of Nussbaum's indicators of objectification. This trope is heavily influenced by the historic belief that female power is related to beauty or sexuality. Since before Heinrich Kramer's holy text, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487), which assisted Inquisitors in the Catholic Church to locate and persecute 'witches', the feminine has been linked with

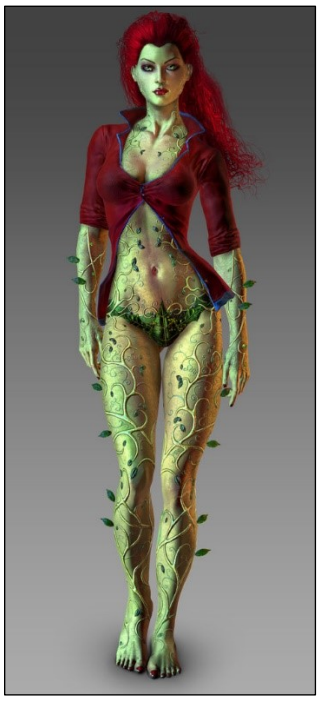

Figure 1.13. Magically Enhanced Sexuality in Poison Ivy, from *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009)[92]

[92] Fandom, 'Poison Ivy (Arkhamverse)/Gallery', *Batman Wiki* (2018), <http://batman.wikia.com /wiki/File:1243008861.jpg> [accessed 17 April 2018].
[93] Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Constable & Co., 1897); Sefton Hill, *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (Eidos Interactive, 2009), multiple platforms.

castration, both physical and figurative, according to feminist critic Barbara Creed. This was one of the most enduring fears men had regarding women at the time, and the Inquisition was meant to protect men from both metaphorical and physical castration by women (many witches 'confessed' to collecting male penises).[94] The *Malleus Maleficarum* additionally notes the carnal nature of women which is enhanced by use of magic: the physical representation and the motivations of Poison Ivy do not deviate from the content of this archaic text.[95]

Morrigan from *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) similarly follows this template (see Figure 1.14).[97] In her first appearance, her physical form is presented differently from other characters in the series. She wears wilderness-inspired clothing, which is more revealing than that worn by prostitutes in the game, and her sultry voice leaves the characters feeling as if they will be turned into toads by a Witch of the Wilds. Later, if a player has Morrigan in their party, it does not take long for her to reveal herself as a sarcastic and cynical woman who fully embodies the wickedness and manipulation of female magic users. Morrigan embodies the threat of magical castration by being a magic user who is both wicked and sexualised. A crucial point about the representation of the magical feminine is that it invites fault upon the woman if she is acted against by a man. Her sexuality serves the double purpose of attracting violence against her because of the threat she poses to masculinity through castration; yet, the preservation of her beauty is the reason a man would choose to save her, should she fall

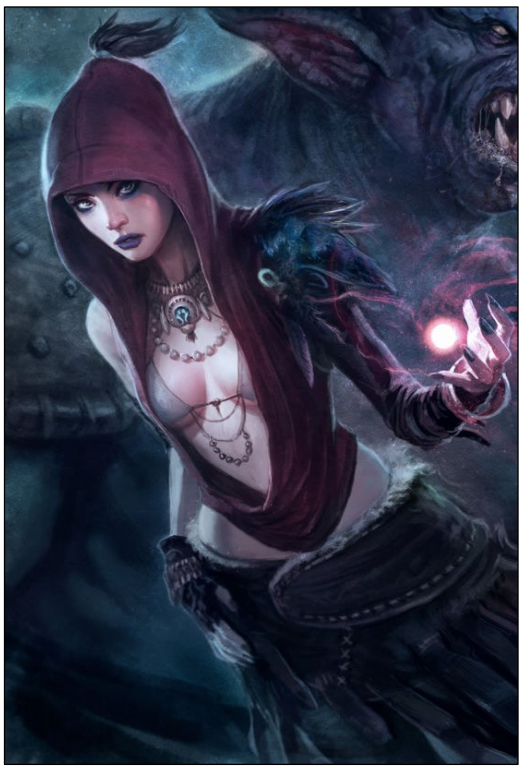

Figure 1.14. Magically Enhanced Sexuality in Morrigan, from *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009)[96]

[94] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 75.
[95] Creed, *Monstrous-Feminine*, pp. 75-6.
[96] Fandom, 'Poison Ivy (Arkhamverse)/Gallery', *Batman Wiki* (2018), <http://batman.wikia.com/wiki/File:1243008861.jpg> [accessed 17 April 2018].
[97] Dan Tudge, *Dragon Age: Origins* (Electronic Arts, 2009), multiple platforms.

into danger.[98] These women's empowerment stems from their sexuality, but it is not true empowerment as it cannot be trusted not to turn against them. Despite this, the trope depends on the archetype of a sexual physicality and malevolent personality of witches whose evil powers are naturally within her as a woman, augmented by her magical power.

Threats from women and magic have their roots in myths, legends and folklore, which make similar claims about female sexuality being weaponisable. Claudia Costin claims that female sexuality that enslaves men is found in Romanian folklore's stories of 'Iele', beings of monstrous beauty who lure men, make them abandon their lives, and wander the woods in pursuit of them.[99] In these stories, the Iele are often 'capricious', with bodies changed into their current form because they were cursed: they are perpetually in love, young, and beautiful. Their beauty drives men to madness, whose 'passion for *Iele* destroys them'.[100] Beauty is power in these myths, and power is used to ravish men physically, mentally, or both. They ruin men's lives with their overwhelming sexuality, but they have no further motivation beyond this: they do not use their beauty to gain status or money. Monstrous sexuality becomes its own motivation, suggesting that male conceptions of women are limited to believing that ensaring men is its own reward as what other goal might she have? Similar beings are found in Greek mythology: Sirens are represented in many physical forms – with wings, mermaid tails, or fully human bodies – but no matter the physical traits they borrow from other species, the beauty of their songs and bodies bewitches men to a multitude of demises depending on the story. They illustrate the passion of *Erōs*, an erotic love most often associated with a one-sided passion brought on as a punishment from an enemy's curse, rather than the affection of *philia*, love which improves the lives of the target.[101]

[98] Catty, *Writing Rape*, p. 26.
[99] Claudia Costin, 'Representation of Feminine Monstrousness', *Journal of Research in Gender Studies*, 4.2 (2014), 1091-100 (p. 1097).
[100] Costin, 'Representation of Feminine Monstrousness', pp. 1096-7.
[101] Christopher Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 49, 120.

Figure 1.15. Frederic Leighton's *The Fisherman and the Syren* (*c*. 1856-8)[102]

In Frederic Leighton's painting *The Fisherman and the Syren* (Figure 1.15), the siren is presented as young, both woman and sea creature, with long, flowing hair, and nudity enough to reveal the human sexual organs of breasts and, presumably, genitals, though they are hidden from view through contact with her victim. At first glance, her arms appear to be wrapped around him in a loving embrace; however, with her fish-like tail wrapped around his lower leg, her position is more reminiscent of pulling him down into the depths. In juxtaposition, his face is unafraid, enraptured even, as he looks down on her with affection while sliding off rubble from a shipwreck. The scene embodies the willing surrender of the man's autonomy to the power of the woman – power which is completely dependent on cues of magically enhanced human-sexuality markers. Sirens do not lure human men with magic alone; rather, their magic couples with their ability to perform human-man desires through the augmentation of the feminine. Though she contains many physical traits of human women, she is *not* human: she is monstrous, Othered. In her power – power to steal autonomy from men, the very castration for which magical women were feared – she is not able to diverge from the human female

[102] Frederic Leighton, *The Fisherman and the Syren*, *c*. 1856-8, oil on canvas, 66.3 x 48.7 cm, Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery, Bristol.

form and, thus, conventional methods of attraction. In this way, mythical roots of female power are reliant on two important beliefs: one, power is linked to a beautiful human form, which may adopt, but not fully embody, physical traits of monsters; two, power is linked to sexuality, whose pursuit causes male castration. It is not the magic alone that enslaves men, but also her human-sexuality aspects – a trait in the real world which is easily vilified.

Feminine power is seen as inherently a physical trait, through the magical woman's beauty – a trait over which she has no control, but with which she is sometimes cursed, as in Romanian folklore. Sexuality is power used for no purpose other than to destroy men. This view is quite limited in scope, however, and female magic users have been revaluated by feminists as a form of protest/rebellion. Hélène Cixous suggests that women explore themselves and encourages them to create work by and for each other, asserting that, with this reclamation of feminine stories, women 'shouldn't be conned into accepting a domain which is the margin or the harem.'[103] Cixous observes that the delay in exploring witches and other ideas limited needlessly by gender were withheld from women by men: 'You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing.'[104] Despite a history spanning centuries, which depicts female sexuality as deadly and in existence for its relation to men, the boundaries of feminine influence upon stories argues the strongest case for changing that representation. This is something that can be achieved by telling previously untold stories, more so now because women are 'holding the pen' to write them. For female magic users, and the endless other tropes which are dependent on the sexuality of women, there is empowerment to be found in navigating within the sexist structures in place. Women can 'work the system' to use sexist assumptions against those who hold them, embodying what Madame de Fer claims in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*: 'A leash can be pulled from either end.' While in many ways, pulling on the leash marks this solution as a temporary one in the journey to gender equality, it does not negate the resulting stumble of he who holds the other end.

The stereotypes for male and female magic users in video games stem from an Othering associated with magic and myth independent of popular culture's exploitation of the tropes. In the case of men, being magical allows them the opportunity to use

[103] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of Medusa', in *The Portable Cixous*, ed. by Marta Segarra (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), pp. 27-39 (p. 33).
[104] Cixous, 'Medusa', p. 38.

knowledge against their enemies and separates them from the limitations of physical strength as a sole means of power. Magic alters possibilities for male characters by giving them a foci for their academic pursuits which they then can direct at any number of objects or people. For female magic users, magical skill gives them power over one limiting realm: men. Magic may not exist outside of the game world, but female sexuality does. The distrust of it can influence real-world attitudes men have about women, in which a sexually liberated woman, without harnessing the supernatural, can conquer a man's autonomy and direct his agency according to her desires. Boundaries of feminine monstrousness is a subject to which I will return to in Chapter Two.[105]

Identifying Objectification

What each of the tropes described in the preceding discussion have in common is their manipulation of objectification to address an implied audience which is ideally, yet not always, male.[106] Traits of objectification have been discussed previously, although it is worth considering them, as Nussbaum defines them, in more detail:

1. *Instrumentality:* The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
2. *Denial of autonomy:* The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. *Inertness:* The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
4. *Fungibility:* The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
5. *Violability:* The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. *Ownership:* The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. *Denial of subjectivity:* The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.[107]

As with other consumer media, sexist physical representations of women in video games undeniably objectify and sexualise women. As far as analysis goes, however, there is a difference between characters expressing themselves sexually and being sexually exploited. Gronseth claims that sexual exploitation is identified by a character

[105] See this thesis, Chapter Two, pp. 100-10.
[106] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 64.
[107] Nussbaum, 'Objectification', p. 257.

being reduced to 'eye candy', and this can be used in games in many ways.[108] An objectified or exploited character may reward the player for a high score with rewards like new outfits for the character to wear: outfits often covering less of their body, like in the armour shown in Figure 1.16. In cases of characters being reduced to eye candy, such exploitation demonstrates the feminine abnormal like those depictions in *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, *Dead or Alive Xtreme 3* (2016), and *Lollipop Chainsaw* (2012) in Figures 1.17-19.[109]

Figure 1.16. Plate Set from *World of Warcraft* (2004-)[110]

[108] Samuel Gronseth, *Games as Lit. 101 – Sex in Video Games*, online video recording, YouTube, 8 February 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywwk77nPtDk> [accessed 2 November 2016] 5:30, 6:00.
[109] Yohei Shimbori, *Dead or Alive Xtreme 3* (Koei Tecmo, 2016), PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, and Nintendo Switch; Tomo Ikeda and Goichi Suda, *Lollipop Chainsaw* (Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment, 2012), PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360.
[110] Graham Randall, 'Glorious Plate Set' (2015), <https://grahranswowgold.wordpress.com/2015/08/17/glorious-plate-set/> [accessed 17 April 2018]; Rob Pardo, Jeff Kaplan, and Tom Chilton, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-), Windows and MacOS.

Figure 1.17. Harley Quinn, from *Batman: Arkham Asylum* (2009)[111]

Figure 1.18. Fortune Honoka, from *Dead or Alive Xtreme 3* (2016)[112]

[111] Fandom, 'Harleyquinnew', *Batman Wiki* (2018), <http://batman.wikia.com/wiki/File:Harley quinnnew.jpg> [accessed 17 April 2018].
[112] Ian Miles Cheong, 'Dead or Alive Xtreme 3 Review: Dead on Arrival', *Gameranx* (2016), <http://gameranx.com/features/id/46382/article/dead-or-alive-xtreme-3-review-dead-on-arrival/> [accessed 17 April 2018].

Figure 1.19. Juliet Starling from *Lollipop Chainsaw* (2012)[113]

Some of these characters significantly contribute to the story, but having a character arc does not lessen objectification. Representations like these are old hat in feminist games research, and yet objectification continues to be designed in games under the dictum that 'sex sells'. According to Rosalind Gill, current media encourages women to see their 'possession of a "sexy body"' as their 'source of identity'. She claims that the ubiquity of sexualisation in media is what facilitates men and women seeing the physical body as the only source of femininity which can be used as a kind of currency. Female bodies are presented as a vessel for empowerment, yet simultaneously remain victims of harsh measures of attractiveness, requiring 'constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending)'.[114] While female bodies are progressively being discussed in popular culture in a positive light as vessels of empowerment, Annabelle Mooney claims that women are increasingly being encouraged to view their bodies in the same way as men, who are conditioned through their consumption of pornographic material: as acquiring value 'entirely for their constituent body parts' and the cumulative attractiveness – and validity of femininity – of those parts.[115]

[113] Ron Duwell, 'Lollipop Chainsaw is Grasshopper's Biggest Game Ever', *TechnoBuffalo* (2012), <https://www.technobuffalo.com/2012/08/27/lollipop-chainsaw-is-grasshoppers-biggest-game-ever/> [accessed 17 April 2018].
[114] Rosalind Gill, 'Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility', in *The Gender and Media Reader*, ed. by Mary Celeste Kearney (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 136-48 (pp. 137-8).
[115] Annabelle Mooney, 'Boys Will Be Boys: Men's Magazines and the Normalisation of Pornography', in *Gender and Media Reader*, ed. by Kearney, pp. 277-91 (p. 281).

The truth is more complex when the male gaze is not only held by men, but women too. Women have been taught to see themselves as men see them, explaining why adverts that target women objectify women to an equal degree as adverts for men do. Berger claims:

> To be born a woman has been to be born […] into the keeping of men. […] And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman. […] How she appears to men, is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life. […] To acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it. […] The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female.[116]

The objectification of women by both men *and* women is more than simply a case of 'sex sells': Caroline Heldman claims that feelings of being a sexual subject sells. Men consume media that shows that they are strongest and happiest when they are in the driver's seat, feeling powerful by acting upon a woman; while women see that their ability to be gazed and acted upon is the source of their value.[117] Naomi Wolf states that these beliefs are rooted in the 'Beauty Myth': a form of social control which deters women from becoming truly liberated from the 'coercion that myths about motherhood, domesticity, chastity, and passivity, no longer can manage.'[118] The beauty myth projects images of traits considered beautiful – as dictated by which aspects of beauty are in style at the time – and claims that '[t]he quality called 'beauty' objectively and universally exists. Women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it.' The beauty myth is just as alive as it once was, sustained by objectification in almost every area of popular culture. It further institutionalises masculine power when various industries which capitalise on beauty 'use, stimulate, and reinforce […] unconscious anxieties' to influence mass culture.[119] The universal adoption of objectification in culture paints a picture of a society which cannot shift its views away from these paradigms. However, given their focus on player agency, games can play a role in representing women in ways that reflect the actual diversity present in

[116] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 46-7.
[117] Caroline Heldman, *The Sexy Lie: Caroline Heldman at TEDx Youth@SanDiego*, online video recording, YouTube, 20 January 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMS4VJKekW8> [accessed 10 February 2016] 5:05-6:00.
[118] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Reading: Cox & Wyman, 1991), pp. 10-11.
[119] Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, pp. 12-13, 17.

the real world. While this may not expel the beauty myth, it can play a significant role in normalising 'normal' women.

Mary Ann Doane claims that acting as an assumed feminine being 'facilitate[s] an understanding of the woman's status as spectacle rather than spectator.'[120] Adopting and conforming to the male gaze reinforces sexism, but it gives control to women to dictate how they are seen by men. Wearing the mask of the beauty myth grants temporary solutions to its wearer, but it sustains the myth in her case and the case of everyone else. Why then, can women not simply reverse the gaze, assume subjectivity over men? Because this confirms and tightens the 'leash' too. More than that, the same rules do not apply to men. Doane states that

> the reversal itself remains locked within the same logic. The male striptease, the gigolo – both inevitably signify the mechanism of reversal itself, constituting themselves as aberrations whose acknowledgment simply reinforces the dominant system of aligning sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy.[121]

Women can do better, can do *more*: we do not have to be restricted to a reversal of a male-centric system. Indeed, we can make new systems entirely, as will be explored in Chapter Four.[122]

Gronseth directs the themes of sexual expression and sexual exploitation back to games, stating that games favour the latter both in frequency and intensity compared to other forms of entertainment.[123] It is certainly not the case that all games handle sexual content in an exploitative way; rather that the abundance of exploitation compared to expression is overwhelming.[124] He discusses the game *Bayonetta* (2009), a hack and slash about a witch with shapeshifting powers, and a game famous for the sexy combat by the protagonist.[125] The game provides an interesting example of Gronseth's points, as it explores both expression and exploitation: 'It's clear that Bayonetta is sexy because she wants to be. She's not doing it for anyone but herself.'[126] She clearly finds joy in

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[120] Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 39.
[121] Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', *Screen*, 23.3-4 (1982), 74-88 (p. 77).
[122] See Chapter Four of this thesis, pp. 183-4.
[123] Gronseth, *Sex in Video Games*, 4:20, 5:13.
[124] This includes depictions of female armour vs male armour and how much skin is shown in each set, of sex workers and brothels in games as discussed in sections 'Women as Background Decoration', the 'Dead Beloved as Muse', and the photos of objectified women in the previous section.
[125] Hideki Kamiya, *Bayonetta* (Sega, 2009), multiple platforms.
[126] Gronseth, *Sex in Video Games*, 5:53.

weaponising her sexuality and sexualising her weapons. When it comes to consent, it is clear that she uses her skill at manipulating sexuality for her own benefit. Bayonetta receives pleasure from behaving this way, and she does not feel the need to use her pleasure for the benefit of anyone else's, especially not a masculine figure who does not prioritise her pleasure. Similarly, her enemies are energised by expressing sexuality in biologically human – and often feminine – ways (see Figure 1.20, below). However, Bayonetta is a fictional character, one programmed to act the way she does, and her expression of sexuality uses stereotypical masculine methods of arousal – heavily featuring aspects of performed, masculine-focused, heterosexual arousal rather than prioritising genuine female pleasure. Scenes focus on 'traditional' aspects of power and misogyny; how could it have ever truly been about authentic sexuality?

Figure 1.20. A Transformed Demon During a Boss Fight[127]

Given that Bayonetta is a witch who is over five hundred years old, it is hard to believe that she would be limited to formulaic depictions of sexuality found in modern mainstream pornography. It is difficult to argue that Bayonetta's expression is feminist, when her gameplay would likely have been criticised by misogynists had she chosen to explore non-conforming sexual encounters which deviated from these depictions. Illustrating this notion, there exists already boundaries defining which expressions of sexuality are acceptable in wider culture. Bodies which do not adhere to conventional displays of sexuality are often unfairly targeted for rejection by society. For example,

[127] The Ultimate Gamer, *Bayonetta Very Sexy Moment Hot!! HD*, online video recording, YouTube, 1 March 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AkdNzuf7Ftc> [accessed 1 April 2019] 1:20.

social media disability activist Alex Dzimitowicz has chronicled cultural refusals to acknowledge the sexuality of people who don't conform to the beauty myth through her Instagram account. Dzimitowicz posted a recreation of celebrity Kim Kardashian's selfie, and uploaded her and Kardashian's photo side by side with a caption encouraging the normalisation of disabled bodies. Dzimitowicz reports:

> Shortly after posting, I received a notification that Instagram had deleted the photo due to it violating 'nudity and pornography Terms' [….] I was not exposing ANY genitalia [….] My photo was the exact same photo as Kim's. If anything, her's [*sic*] was more risqué.[128]

Not only was Dzimitowicz's post unjustly deleted, the message is clear that the censorship of disabled bodies encourages the view by wider culture that able bodies are the default for heterosexual desire. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson similarly states that when disabilities were no longer permitted to be gawked at in unethical 'freak-shows', in a complete and unconsented reversal, they 'have been edited out of the human community like textual errors in the path of automatic spell checkers'.[129] Disabilities and people who are born with or develop them are not just invisible, they are removed. Therefore, the message in social media, games, and the intersections among them, repeatedly claims that female bodies are consumable when they are profitable or exploitable – and that having traits which deviate from the pneumatic, biologically female form disqualifies those very bodies from accessing or expressing sexuality.

Bayonetta's compliance to conventional or mainstream depictions of arousal is problematic in other ways: Gronseth states that,

> aside from the game's obviously leering camera, since the character uses her hair for both clothing and attack, the more effectively the player makes use of combos, the less clothing she's wearing. In other words, the better the player does, the more skin they get to see.[130]

[128] Alex Dzimitowicz, 'Social Media Censorship Bias: Kim Kardashian's Post Left Alone, Disabled Body Deleted', *WheelchairRapunzel & Co.* (2018), <https://www.wheelchairrapunzel.com/news/2018/10/29/social-media-censorship-bias-kim-kardashians-post-left-alone-disabled-body-deleted?fbclid=IwAR0Is60ARjuyqZomxqORMmiwaFOHcfKFm50AX63mvTOn0onLqf6e4UieqWE> [accessed 4 November 2018].
[129] Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'Staring at the Other', *Disability Studies Quarterly*, 25.4 (2005) <http://dx.doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v25i4.610>.
[130] Gronseth, *Sex in Video Games*, 6:04.

Incorporating a mechanic that rewards player proficiency with nudity is a clear example of the player – and the developer through the act of creation – benefitting from Bayonetta's sexuality as currency. In this way, games use sexual content not only to sell games, but also as a means of measuring success within the economy of the games themselves.

With pornography being a heavily debated subject even among feminists, I feel that pornography does not have to be created and consumed solely for the eroticisation of the female subordination. While this thesis does not explore the field of pornography and pornographic gaze in depth, there is still much to be said about its recreation in games. Generally, there are many avenues available for consumers looking for feminist pornographic representation, like that created by Candida Royalle, who claims that 'you can have explicit adult films that are not sexist and not exploitive of women. It's not showing genitals that is exploitive; it is the philosophy behind it, and the acts and images that philosophy fosters.'[131] Much of pornographic game content does not show genitals at all; however, in many ways, it does not matter which body parts are or are not shown, because sexism exists independent of their view. To prove this, Royalle (1950-2015) was an adult film actress who began directing adult films that deviated from patriarchal values found in the industry mainstream:

> Every part of our body is an erogenous zone; so I've taken the emphasis off the hard-core. I don't like to focus on the genitals any more than the face or the hands, but I don't want to hide them either. I don't like to use the terms *foreplay* and *afterplay*, because those terms imply that the only real goal of sex is penetration. What does that mean for women's sexuality? […] I wanted to focus on sensuality, tenderness, and mutual respect – a holistic approach, instead of a collection of body parts.[132]

Royalle illustrates that feminist pornography takes into account many aspects which seek to liberate consumers, especially women, by reclaiming their right to pleasure after mainstream pornography has constantly dismissed it: 'To tell us continually that it is unsafe for us to explore our own fantasies is to keep us out of power.'[133] Royalle's work embodies progressive pornography by presenting safe sex as erotic, as all the performances are clearly consensual: even in a rape fantasy, fantasies are portrayed as best shared in an environment with someone you trust. Additionally, she avoids camera

[131] Candida Royalle, 'Porn in the USA', in *Feminism & Pornography*, ed. by Drucilla Cornell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 540-50 (p. 549).
[132] Royalle, 'Porn in the USA', p. 549.
[133] Royalle, 'Porn in the USA', pp. 541-2.

crew who have experience in pornography because they are 'programmed to shoot things in a [misogynistic] way', and does not use 'cum shots' to signal the end of the encounter to circumvent the insinuation of control the act has over women.[134] Royalle was not the only artist actively making feminist pornographic content in the industry and in wider culture; however, the attitudes behind gender-equal representation are easily adapted into games. On a scale grander than games (on which pornography is already), such attitudes illustrate that the seemingly universal system which prioritises men and their pleasure can be broken if various areas of popular culture make efforts to do so.

Most mainstream pornographic representations in games and wider culture instead maintain a misogynistic view as the preferred one, and the subsequent discussion covers this mainstream material and how it is portrayed within its medium and game culture. According to Robert Jensen, the normalised pornographic content we see in games and other mediums acts as 'a mirror [which] shows us how men see women. Not all men, of course – but the ways in which many men who accept the conventional conception of masculinity see women [….] [W]omen are three holes and two hands.'[135] The conventional conception of masculinity in pornographic content maintains cultural institutions that endorse patriarchal ideals about women. These ideals are reduced to three rules, reinforced by the pornography industry and mediums which adopt the attitudes: 'All women always want sex from all men, […] the sexual acts they want are the ones that men demand, and any woman who doesn't immediately recognize her true sexual nature will understand as soon as sex is forced on her.'[136] At first glance, these rules are unarguably sexist, but beyond the obvious boundaries these rules create, they also make invisible any kind of female pleasure, and especially not the kind of pleasure women dictate for themselves.

Pornography provides one of the highest concentrations of objectification than any other area of culture. More than that, it presents a convincing argument that women are so 'dirty' that they enjoy the kind of domination which hurts them:

> In these scenes, the women appear to the viewer to be in pain. Their facial expressions and voices convey that the sex acts cause physical discomfort and/or fear and/or distress. Given the ease with which video can be edited, why did the producers not edit out those expressions? There are two possible

[134] Royalle, 'Porn in the USA', pp. 544-5, 547-8.
[135] Jensen, *Getting Off*, pp. 14, 64.
[136] Jensen, *Getting Off*, p. 64.

> answers. One, they may view these kinds of expressions of pain by the women as of no consequence to the viewers' interest, and hence of no consequence to the goal of maximizing sales; women's pain is neutral. The second possibility is that the producers have reason to believe that viewers like the expressions of pain; women's pain helps sales.[137]

For women, being dominated into believing their only avenue to pleasure is at the physical mercy of men is not an avenue which promotes individual sexual expression and genuine intimacy. Lundy Bancroft, an abuse counsellor who has analysed over 2000 men, claims that pornography informs men's – especially abusive men's – values of what sex should be, 'shaping their sexuality', leaving them surprised when their partner is not aroused by, for example, a slap in the face. 'His mind-set is: the women in the magazines and videos all like it, so why don't you?' In fact, many abusers 'directly model their sexual interests' on pornography, and demand that their partners to act out scenes which they find particularly exciting but their female partners find 'repulsive, frightening, or violent'. Furthermore, many abusers use pornography to normalise or desensitise their partner to degrading sexual contact, though the attempt increases their repulsion by the acts.[138] Even games, and other areas of popular culture, which do not explicitly show pornographic material adopt the ideals behind mainstream pornography: men internalise and normalise misogynistic attitudes, carrying them into their real-world relationships with women, platonic and romantic.

Games borrow themes of objectification from pornography, but pornography is influenced by games as well. In 2017, Pornhub released a list of the sixteen most searched-for video game characters on their site, and the top three positions were taken by characters from *Overwatch* (2016): see Figure 1.21.[139] It is crucial to recognise that, while games and pornography borrow traits from each other, they differ in significant ways. Pornography that uses game traits and games that employ pornographic traits are produced and consumed in varying contexts. Audiences for porn and games expect a different balance of sexual and non-sexual content, which filters out consumers on both sides based on desires for consumption. Most games with pornographic content would still exist even if such content were removed, and erotic material is included as an addition to an existing story. However, consumers who play games with pornographic

[137] Jensen, *Getting Off*, pp. 74-5.
[138] Lundy Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 2002), p. 185.
[139] Jeff Kaplan, Chris Metzen, and Aaron Keller, *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), Windows, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One.

content are exposed to the same ideals present in mainstream pornography, even if they would not normally consume pornography, increasing the pervasiveness of the attitudes well outside of the adult film industry. While I do not tackle the scope of the complexities of pornography here, it is nevertheless important to observe that the influence of misogynistic pornographic content undoubtedly touches gamers and culture more widely, suggesting the eroticisation of a sexual hierarchy. Feminist pornography certainly exists and does important work in teaching consumers that misogyny is not sexy, but this content is not normalised. The pornography which is, however, is that which highlights women's pain, subordination to men, and constant sexual appetite with masculine preferences. These attitudes exist outside the pornography industry and outside of pornographic content in other industries: it influences game content as much as any other forms derived from popular culture – whether the games show a sex scene or not.

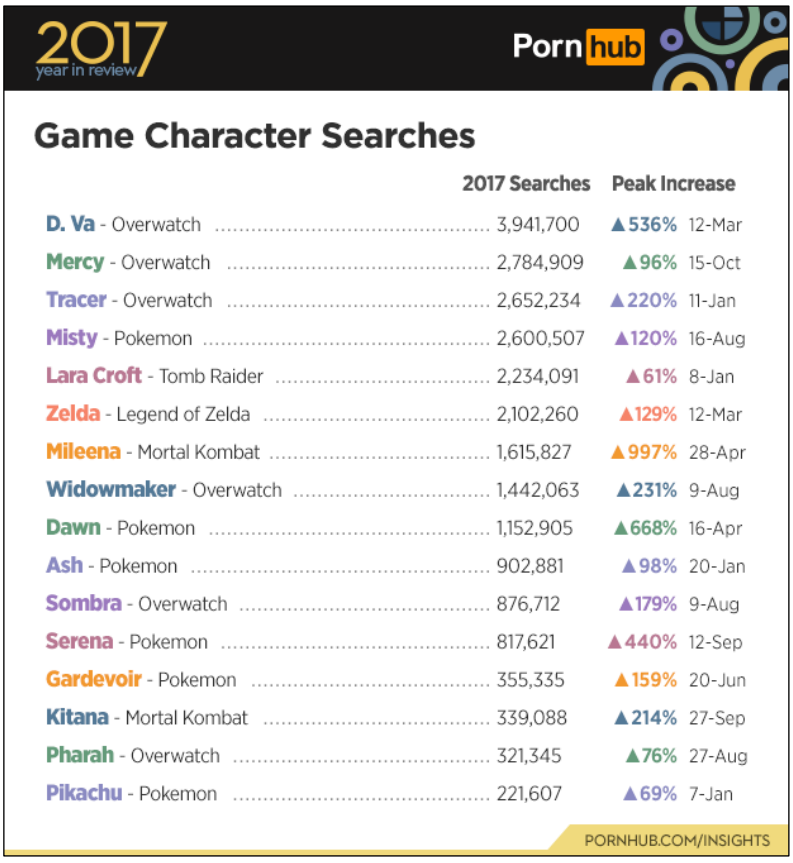

Figure 1.21. Online Pornography Site, Pornhub's Top Video Game-Based Searches[140]

[140] Stefanie Fogel, 'Daily Glixel: People Were Thirsty for "Overwatch", Pikachu Porn in 2017', *Rolling Stone* (2018), <https://www.rollingstone.com/glixel/news/daily-glixel-people-were-thirsty-for-overwatch-zelda-porn-in-2017-w515316/the-top-video-game-porn-searches-of-2017-w515317> [accessed 17 May 2018].

Representations of women interact across mediums, and according to Karen Dill, Brian Brown, and Michael Collins: when men are exposed to sexist representations of women, they are 'more likely to endorse rape myths', which includes ideas like women asking for, having control over, or secretly enjoying their rape.[141] They report a study that exposed participants to 'either promiscuous or non-promiscuous women taken from tapes of the *Jerry Springer Show*', and followed up with a sexual harassment scenario and a rating of the promiscuity of the women. While the women tended to be impassioned by the harassment scenarios, making them more likely to 'advocate for social justice', the male participants viewed the more promiscuous women as less traumatised by the sexual harassment, aligning with research by Gabbiadini, et al., which uncovers feelings of reduced empathy toward sexualised women.[142] Men also decreed that sexual harassment was less severe if the harasser was older than or in a position of authority over the victim, which speaks to men being more accepting about sexual harassment at work or school.[143] Games, popular culture, and wider society depict women as similarly sexualised, and these attitudes permeate society often unchecked.

Even though games are understood by players as fictitious, objectified women are part of non-virtual culture as well, and some gamers may feel a sense of guilt for gaining pleasure from scenes that contain instances of objectification of women. Koppelman explains this phenomenon by comparing it to the feeling of guilt after laughing at a racist joke: with our laughter comes discomfort as we give ourselves a role in a racist culture.[144] Hatred toward marginalised groups is a phenomenon found in many gaming communities – areas where individual members of a group may conform to a consensus despite disagreeing with the direction the group is taking – called 'groupthink'. Michail Tsikerdekis writes that group cohesiveness increases the chance of groupthink, and when group cohesiveness is heavily prevalent in online and gaming communities between misogynistic members, might those members be more willing to

[141] Karen Dill, Brian Brown, and Michael Collins, 'Effects of Exposure to Sex-Stereotyped Video Game Characters on Tolerance of Sexual Harassment', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 44.5 (2008), 1402-8 (pp. 1403-4).
[142] Dill, et al., 'Sex-Stereotyped Video Game Characters', pp. 1404, 1406; Gabbiadini, et al., 'Acting like a Tough Guy', p. 9.
[143] Dill, et al., 'Sex-Stereotyped Video Game Characters', p. 1406.
[144] Koppelman, 'Moral Harm', p. 1646.

believe sexist claims?[145] There are three levels of groupthink which are crucial to consider here:

> At the level of perception, opinions are distorted by the majority view, and individuals are not aware of the conflict; they believe the group to be right. At the level of judgment, individuals perceive a conflict, but still reject their own judgment and follow the group. Finally, at the level of action, individuals are not only aware of the conflict, but they also know that the group is wrong, yet they go along with the group's choice.[146]

When the opinions which community members agree with are phobic responses to minorities – such as content that straddles the boundary between hate speech and teasing – a groupthink which accepts or even engages in sexism is certain to expand such ideas to its members' personal beliefs, especially over time and media. When players are exposed to game, film, advert, and other content which normalises these scenes, then augment their exposure by participating in online communities which do not see such representations as problematic, sexist confirmation bias occurs. This can be shown in individuals viewing sexism as harmless or feeling as if they do not need to speak out against such cases. Sexist ideas do not bleed into the real world as much as they flow freely, and sexism found in games is often exacerbated by virtual communities, only to be found in non-virtual communities as well – concepts discussed deeper in Chapter Three.

Toxic Masculinity and the Role it Plays in Games

It is not only the representation of women which affects players: games often present the muscular, armed, and capable man as an ideal character, suited to the context in which he finds himself. Therefore, representations of toxic masculinity are equally as pervasive as tropes that glorify female victimhood or sexuality, and these attitudes co-ordinate. 'Toxic masculinity' includes many traits, but can be simply defined by claiming that they are traits of 'true men' who are mentally or physically detrimental to themselves or others. Toxic masculinity plays a role in wider society and games, the latter often presenting male heroes as characters who are encouraged to solve all problems with brute strength, forbidden from showing weakness or complex emotion.

[145] Michail Tsikerdekis, 'The Effects of Perceived Anonymity and Anonymity States on Conformity and Groupthink in Online Communities: A Wikipedia Study', *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 64.5 (2013), 1001-15 (p. 1002).
[146] Tsikerdekis, 'Perceived Anonymity', p. 1002.

The game *Ride to Hell: Retribution* serves as an example of assertions about masculinity amalgamated within one title, illustrating several ways through which games offer representations of a hypermasculine norm that feeds back into culture. Upon its appearance, the game displays several problems with inferior sound quality and voice acting, inefficient AI, poor controls, and a subpar soundtrack. However, the main failings (and eye-rolls) of the game came from the missions which comprise the main plot. The MPC Jake returns from the Vietnam War to his small motorcycle gang, which includes his brother, who is soon murdered by a rival gang. Jake wakes after the altercation, and upon discovering his brother's death, the game's plot is revealed: revenge. In his quest to kill every member of the rival gang, one mission entails Jake's need to get inside a factory. Instead of using puzzles to work through the various levels to gain entry, Jake demolishes the fence surrounding the factory by ramming it with a lorry, killing everyone inside, and finally shooting at equipment which explodes the factory. The rest of the game follows this formula of indiscriminate violence to solve any and all problems, as if men can and should simply punch people and things into submission.

The game's designers depended on highly sexual themes to attract heterosexual men; yet, ironically, members of the target audience were uneasy with the display, offering hope for a wider cultural rejection of sexism. YouTube personality Angry Joe (Joe Vargas) described the game's incorporation of 'insulting sexual content' in his review.[147] He shares his disgust at the repeated use of women as 'slutty power-ups', when these women offer sex to Jake after he saves them from a variety of situations such as attempted rape, assault, and domestic abuse.[148] In each case, after Jake murders the men in question, a cutscene promptly follows, providing intercourse as reward. These scenes depict an identical situation to the rape narratives found in the 'Damsel in Distress' romances of the 1570s, in which a rescued woman is 'beholden to her rescuer', with the narrative typically ending in intercourse.[149] In one scene, Jake kills a woman's husband to prevent him from raping and beating her; when the husband dies, a cutscene plays of Jake and the woman having sex in the same room as the dead body of her abusive husband. After playing through this scene, Vargas claims that the portrayal was

[147] AngryJoeShow, *Ride to Hell Angry Review – WORST GAME EVER?*, online video recording, YouTube, 29 August 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a1HTKWX15oo> [accessed 5 May 2016] 22:50-22:55.
[148] AngryJoeShow, *Ride to Hell*, 22:55-23:20.
[149] Catty, *Writing Rape*, p. 26.

'disgusting, awkward, tone deaf, […] creepy, [and] insulting'.[150] Vargas is included in the game's target demographic, yet his reaction mirrors that of other reviewers like The Escapist, who echoed disgust at the sexist representations meant to target male players.[151] The game attempted to play to male power fantasies, by asserting the 'masculinity' of Jake and by extension, the male player. *Ride to Hell* plays like a parody of masculine behaviour, but it suggests an underlying belief that masculinity is a specific and limited selection of actions and feelings toward people and property. Achieving optimal masculinity is not only the player's prime goal: the avenues available to achieve it are restricted to overtly misogynistic action.

Joseph Vandello, et al. state that when men feel that their 'precarious manhood' is threatened, the resulting anxiety urges them to defend their masculinity. Ways of proving masculinity include physical aggression, drinking heavily, driving fast, excelling at sports, making lots of money, bragging about sexual exploits, fathering many children, a decreased liking for atypical members of their gender in-group, projected assumptions of homosexuality onto a male target, and sexually harassing a woman.[152] The need to assert their masculinity may be owing to the fact that, in many modern civilizations, the 'lack of institutionalized rites of passage […] today may make the status of manhood troublingly ambiguous, uncertain, and problematic'.[153] According to Danielle Allen, displays of presumed-masculine traits are seen in other cultures, such as the ancient Greeks who would use public displays of anger as a legitimate means to express the emotion.[154] Vandello and his colleagues' study demonstrates that masculinity requires evidence because manhood is a precarious goal – one which must be achieved via societally defined credentials – and the anxiety over a lack of manhood stems from the knowledge that once it is gained it is not secured.[155]

Games like *Ride to Hell* impart the feeling to men that they are masculine only when they are publicly asserting their masculinity and fighting to achieve subjectivity over objectivity. Performing to masculine behavioural norms is only one way to perform masculinity in game spaces; it can also be asserted through avatar

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[150] AngryJoeShow, *Ride to Hell*, 23:53-24:05.
[151] Escapist, *RIDE TO HELL: RETRIBUTION (Zero Punctuation)*, online video recording, YouTube, 31 July 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWxEwdGpIPQ> [accessed 5 May 2016].
[152] Joseph Vandello, et al., 'Precarious Manhood', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95.6 (2008), 1325-39 (p. 1327).
[153] Vandello, et al., 'Precarious Manhood', p. 1325.
[154] Danielle Allen, *The Politics of Punishing in Classical Athens: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 117-18.
[155] Vandello, et al., 'Precarious Manhood', p. 1329.

customisation. In a study seeking to link threat to masculinity (the perception that one's masculinity is compromised), physical endurance, and avatar muscle definition, Roselyn Lee-Won, et al. found that men who perceive high masculine threat tend to design avatars with higher muscle mass to compensate.[156] Researchers used gender boundaries to manipulate the perceptions of the participants by having them take a 'gender knowledge test', in which they were awarded an 'average man score' or 'average woman score'. For those men who received a woman's score, they used the means afforded to them by the game to push themselves back over the gender boundary: physical strength was an assumed link to masculinity, so players designed their avatars with higher muscle mass. This illustrates not only the need of men to feel as if they fit within the boundaries set by masculine and feminine norms, but it also shows that players are sufficiently linked to their avatars to feel as if their avatars' assertion of masculinity induces their own.

The researchers found that when testing participants' real-world physical strength after avatar design, those who had muscular avatars performed better than those who did not, showing that the avatar/player influence is reciprocal.[157] This study speaks to two crucial concepts: firstly, that masculinity is both fragile and transferable; secondly, that the transferability of masculine traits from avatar to player suggests that players identify with their avatars and view them with aspects of a sense of self. Mulvey claimed the same in relation to viewers seeing the main character as their surrogate – even an enhanced version of the self.[158] The research suggests that players experience the game world as if they *are* the character, thus linking perceptions of MPCs to the players behind them and projections of avatar ideals onto their own. If players adopt the values of their characters, sexist beliefs are at the forefront of what players – no matter their gender – are consuming about what is appropriate for men and women concerning constructions of masculinity and femininity, and the abnormality of anything that falls outside of these binaries.

A patriarchal presence on the web is similarly used to reclaim masculinity, further showing how sexism is believed to be a way to earn one's place in a social hierarchy dependent on gender – and how this belief permeates various areas of culture

[156] Roselyn Lee-Won, Wai Yen Tang, and Mackenzie Kibbe, 'When Virtual Muscularity Enhances Physical Endurance: Masculinity Threat and Compensatory Avatar Customization among Young Male Adults', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 20.1 (2017), 10-16 (p. 14).
[157] Lee-Won, et al., 'Masculine Threat', p. 14.
[158] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 21.

and feeds upon itself across contexts. Manhood is perceived to be under attack by feminists: as a result, men are finding ways to assert their masculinity with technology, especially through Men's Rights Activist (MRA) websites and blogs. In their analysis of twelve MRA sites, Rachel Schmitz and Emily Kazyak report several ways in which MRA members asserted their masculinity after it has been 'stolen' from them. They found these sites used a homosocial policing of masculinity (advice columns, which supply solutions to everyday problems by muscle building, making money, and owning guns); discussing the 'evils of feminism' (equating feminism to Nazism and 'strategically summarizing news stories that fit their agenda' to debunk feminist beliefs); and asserting that women are commodities ('sexual relationships with women are exalted as the primary marker of idealized masculinity', while simultaneously claiming women are unintelligent 'whores').[159] Access to the internet greatly increases the spread of information for MRA groups that highlights the victimhood of men, especially resulting from feminism and the 'privilege' it grants women. Feminism is the greatest destroyer of toxic masculinity, yet members of MRA groups see this not as equality, but a demand for the subordination of men. While misogyny fills online platforms like Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook, these MRA groups are taking an organised and formal approach to call attention to their ideals. As media influence expands, it opens access to new frontiers in which masculinity must be asserted – and games help provide instruction how.

Real-World Dangers of Objectification in Video Games

Scenes of female victimhood, objectification, and sexualisation reveal a relationship between game content and attitudes in wider culture, where pre-existing sexist beliefs thrive. Heldman claims that when women see an objectified woman in a state of being acted upon, there are several reactions such as: self-objectification, depression, habitual body monitoring, eating disorders, body shame, depressed cognitive functioning, sexual dysfunction, lower self-esteem, lower GPA, lower political efficacy, female competition, and spectating during sex (thought to how it looks rather than how it feels).[160] The reactions of body monitoring and spectatorship are discussed by Berger who claims: 'From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey

[159] Rachel Schmitz and Emily Kazyak, 'Masculinities in Cyberspace: An Analysis of Portrayals of Manhood in Men's Rights Activist Websites', *Social Sciences*, 5.2 (2016), 1-16 (pp. 6-8).
[160] Heldman, *Sexy Lie*, 6:30-8:40.

herself continually', owing to the pervasiveness of and training by the male gaze.[161] More widely, popular culture provides sexist representations that replicate and are replicated by game content. The information presented to consumers in these instances assists them in shaping how they negotiate gender within their culture. Resistant forms of spectatorship are certainly as helpful, as they offer a chance to create new texts that deviate from the old formulas. hooks's theory of the oppositional gaze enjoins looking and criticising, so that she who looks can create her own, more representative universe, when identifying with representations in the mainstream is 'disenabling'.[162] While Chapter Four suggests that oppositional texts are necessary for moving social scripts further toward diversity, they, like the feminist pornography previously discussed, are not yet normalised and widely consumed. As such, the influence of 'traditional' games as cultural artefacts often feels crippling in its pervasiveness.

Adoption of sexist attitudes does not look the same across genders. When surrounded by a culture which presents men and women in sexist ways, men who view objectified women in pornographic scenes are often more influenced than women who view the same. Especially in cases in which men view sexualized violence, they are more likely to become desensitised to such content. According to Daniel Linz, et al., under laboratory settings, those who view violent pornography and degrading depictions of women report the content as less violent or less degrading the longer they view such it. Additionally, those in the study 'showed a tendency to be less sympathetic to the victim of rape', especially compared to those exposed to neutral (not degrading) depictions.[163] Gert Martin Hald, et al. echo this view that pornographic content has a deleterious effect on sexist attitudes, especially if there is a history of exposure to such content. They predict that arousal mediates associations between experimental exposure to pornography and sexist attitudes including hostile sexism.[164] The subjects' temperament had more to do with their likelihood to be sexist, with exposure to pornographic content fostering its growth. Consumers may understand the reality of genuine sexual encounters centred around mutual pleasure; however, many do not, and

[161] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 46.
[162] hooks, 'Oppositional Gaze', p. 254.
[163] Daniel Linz, Edward Donnerstein, and Steven Penrod, 'Effects of Long-Term Exposure to Violent and Sexually Degrading Depictions of Women', *Journal of Personal and Social Psychology*, 55.5 (1988), 758-68 (pp. 765-6).
[164] Gert Martin Hald, Neil N. Malamuth, and Theis Lange, 'Pornography and Sexist Attitudes among Heterosexuals', *Journal of Communication*, 63.4 (2013), 638-60 (p. 652).

see misogynistic sexual encounters as a confirmation of the beliefs provided to them by other areas of popular culture.

It must be said that objectification is not indicative of patriarchal ideals in all contexts. Nussbaum suggests that, in fact, it can be a healthy part of a sex life for intimate partners.[165] She observes that a person being 'reduced to their body parts' is not an accurate description in all cases. Rather, it can be an addition, insofar as it is possible to surrender autonomy without embracing instrumentality.[166] These notions are not a pointed indication of sexist attitudes toward women, and pornographic content does not have to be a blight upon society: for some, it is a healthy way to express sexual desires in a realm in which they cannot be judged. The line must be drawn somewhere, however, and Nussbaum claims that sexual objectification can be safe, even helpful, as long as it does not cross into the realm of the commercial – exactly what it becomes when put into games and other areas of popular culture.[167] Koppelman's 'normal men' who are viewing violent pornography are not doomed to become harassers or rapists by viewing this media; however, it is clear that men's and women's steady consumption of images that present women as sexualised objects creates a culture in which viewers are able to project sexist representations and the associated beliefs onto real-world women. Pornographic material in games may not directly lead to non-consensual acts in the real world, but it may significantly contribute to widely held attitudes which circulate ideas of rape culture. This perpetuates these beliefs in wider society, within which violence against women remains an ongoing problem.

The engagement of violent erotic game content with the real world is meaningful, as every 107 seconds, someone is sexually assaulted in America alone, while one in six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape. However, 68 per cent of sexual assaults remain unreported, and 98 per cent of rapists will never spend a day in prison.[168] Various forms of popular culture regurgitate sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and other discriminatory thought, and use it to encourage real-world violence. The far-right German political party Alternative für Deutschland used technology for such a purpose, when their members' anti-refugee

[165] Nussbaum, 'Objectification', p. 271.
[166] Nussbaum, 'Objectification', pp. 275, 267.
[167] Nussbaum, 'Objectification', p. 267.
[168] Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network, 'Statistics', *RAINN* (2009), <https://rainn.org/statistics> [accessed 6 February 2016].

posts on Facebook correlated with attacks on refugees.[169] Video games and their communities can instil hateful lessons overtly and covertly, and ignoring the link between sexualised women in games and real-world attitudes about sexual violence is harmful to game content, players, and wider society.

Sexist representations are created and maintained within in the community of video games, forming a 'Habitus'. Pierre Bourdieu's Habitus is 'a system of *dispositions*, that is of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting and thinking, or a system of *long-lasting* (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception and action'.[170] The assumption of femininity as inherently vulnerable or sexualised, especially in relation to an empowered masculine disposition, is supported by misrepresentations of women in games far beyond the tropes discussed in this chapter. Within a gaming Habitus – and popular culture more generally – such depictions saturate gaming communities and become normalised over time. The Habitus nurtures and accentuates the acceptance of stereotype as true, as suggested by Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby, who state that it binds players to complicity to the internalised and, in this case, sexist structures.[171] Beyond the virile male form and the pneumatic female form frequently found in games, the Habitus acts as a hotbox, circulating and accentuating sexist ideals of disempowerment in its many forms as a natural and desirable trait of women. The habitual use of sexist tropes in games organises players' understandings of their environment to accept gender-stereotypical implications, and sexist themes continue to endure. This repetition of illustrations of women embody a common 'style, like the works of the same painter' in that game culture presents an abundance of 'paintings' in which men and women are opposites in relation to levels of empowerment.[172]

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[169] The Economist, 'In Germany, Online Hate Speech Has Real-world Consequences', *The Economist Group* (2018), <https://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2018/01/daily-chart-8> [accessed 13 May 2018].
[170] Pierre Bourdieu, 'Habitus', in *Habitus: A Sense of Place*, ed. by Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005), 2nd edn, pp. 43-9 (p. 43).
[171] Jean Hillier and Emma Rooksby, 'Introduction to Second Edition: Committed Scholarship', in *Habitus*, ed. by Hillier and Rooksby, pp. 3-18 (p. 7).
[172] Bourdieu, 'Habitus', p. 44.

Conclusion

Berger states:

> [T]he essential way of seeing women, the essential use to which their images are put, has not changed. Women are depicted in a quite different way from men – not because the feminine is different from the masculine – but because the 'ideal' [or *default*] spectator is always assumed to be male and the image of the woman is designed to flatter him.[173]

Given the accelerating growth of the industry, game players and creators need to be aware of games' impact on social cues. According to Suzanne Kappeler:

> The male gender's project of constituting male subjectivity is a serious business that has nothing to do with fictional and playful fantasy. It is the means by which the male subject convinces himself that he is real, his necessary production of a feeling of life. He feels the more real, the less real the Other, the less of a subject the Other, the less alive the Other.[174]

On-screen women hold the potential to become the 'less alive' Other and have a history of doing so, both in games and other media. While this chapter has interrogated tropes used by games to perpetuate sexist notions that idealise female victimhood and male subjugation, the industry also features games which deviate from sexist normalisation. Developers have the opportunity to start conversations about emotionally complex situations, including those concerning gender roles and sexuality, using the technological advances in the industry that mark games as interactive story-tellers. Bancroft claims that men who grow up to abuse women are not those who are deviant, but those who have learnt society's lessons 'too well, swallowing them whole', believing that manhood is a particular path with distinct conclusions concerning women, which consider them inferior and guide men to treat women accordingly.[175] If gamers show with their wallets what they do and do not condone by purchasing games that seek to subvert sexist representations, the responsibility for game representations can be shared, increasing the industry's likelihood to improve.

Examinations of the feminine abnormal in the 'Damsel in Distress', the 'Dead Beloved as Muse', 'Woman as Horror', 'Woman as Magical Castrator', examples of toxic masculinity, and the influence of the objectification of women in games, make

[173] Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 64.
[174] Suzanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 62.
[175] Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That?*, p. 330.

clearer the type of content which constructs gender in sexist ways. The gaming Habitus supports ways of looking at women through the male gaze, creating and reaffirming beliefs that suggest that women are at their most feminine – and therefore most desirable – when they are passive while men actively consume them. According to Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin and Maude Bonenfant, '[s]ince 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.'[176] Though current and past games have exploited the potential of interactive storytelling by presenting similar representations of sexist culture, the power of the medium can be used to present universes that feature characters who are not dependent on the old tropes: as explored in Chapter Four. Before we reach this this discussion, however, Chapter Two will analyse Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMOs), building upon the analysis of the present chapter. The assumptions underpinning a sexist gaming Habitus are to be found flourishing in MMOs especially, as the genre offers a unique opportunity to observe gender performance when players are actively monitored by their peers in the game space. In this context, Chapter Two seeks to discover how MMOs impress a feeling of being watched onto players and how gender influences player choice as a result of this scopic economy.

[176] Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin and Maude Bonenfant, 'Bridging Game Studies and Feminist Theories', *Kinephanos*, Special Issue (2017), 24-53 (p. 41).

Chapter Two
MMOs: Explaining Gendered Motivations

Introduction: The Foundations of Misunderstood Gender Motivations

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs or MMORPGs) belong to a genre of gaming different than others, despite sharing common traits with many single-player console games. MMOs feature unique milieus, whether the game is an action first-person shooter (FPS) or a more traditional open-world/fantasy-based universe. The imperatives that guide players to MMOs are analysed in Kristen Lucas and John Sherry's typology of the six motivations of players of any genre of video game: competition, challenge, social interaction, diversion, fantasy, and arousal.[1] MMOs are best known for two particular traits from this list: *challenge* and *social interaction*, which are central to the genre and take the respective forms of measurable, quick productivity and public spaces. Game researchers Jeroen Jansz, et al. claim that social roles predict competition as an assumed male motivation and socialisation as an assumed female motivation: a distinction which may be crucial to the argument that male and female players prefer different content in their games, and consequently that there are some games made just for men and others for women, sustaining exclusionary attitudes. Yet, just as Jansz, et al. challenge this assumption, the experiences in MMOs qualify them as a genre that can be examined using the following question: *Do MMOs follow these gendered, normative patterns and issues of social dynamics?*[2]

The masculinised motivation is *challenge*, met by MMOs through the ease with which characters harness productivity to level up quickly. Game designer Jane McGonigal explains *World of Warcraft*'s (*WoW*, 2004-)[3] success as 'more than anything else, the feeling of "blissful productivity" that the game provokes', and *WoW*

[1] Kristen Lucas and John Sherry, 'Sex Differences in Video Game Play: A Communication-Based Explanation', *Communication Research*, 31.5 (2004), 499-523 (p. 503).
[2] Jeroen Jansz, Corrinne Avis, and Mirjam Vosmeer, 'Playing *The Sims2*: An Exploration of Gender Difference in Players' Motivations and Patterns of Play', *New Media and Society*, 12.2 (2010), 235-51 (p. 246).
[3] Rob Pardo, Jeff Kaplan, and Tom Chilton, *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-), Windows and MacOS; Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 53.

is perhaps the most well-known example of a MMO.[4] In the game, productivity is embodied when a goal is met, and *WoW* excels at supplying dynamics of goal orientation. The game world is full of non-playable characters (NPCs) looking for help, and when a player decides to undertake an NPC's quest, their character receives a scroll with a clear goal and the concomitant pressure created by the importance of the quest and the expectation of the NPC that it will be fulfilled. The goals are easily laid out and followed: players know 'where to go, [receive] step-by-step instructions for what to do when you get there, and a concrete measure of proof you're expected to gather to demonstrate […] success.'[5] Productivity is undoubtedly satisfying, but the question remains as to *why* is it so addictive that thousands of players come to MMOs to chase the feeling, putting in an average five hundred hours to reach the maximum level?[6] Sonja Lyubomirsky writes that 'having goals […] is strongly associated with happiness and life satisfaction', and thus to improve quality of life, one must 'bestow on [themselves] a specific goal, something to do and to look forward'.[7] This idea of seemingly endless, yet measurable productivity is one of the predominant factors that attracts players to MMOs. The progression experienced in these spaces is not limited to advancing avatar physique or even the personal satisfaction of the players. As players gain experience points (XP) and level up, the world around them, quite literally, changes.[8] According to McGonigal, after leaving a village to complete a quest, upon the character's return the village is often different in some way, whether geographically or by giving the opportunity to speak to an NPC who was not available prior to a dungeon raid.[9] Players 'see different things from someone who hasn't finished the quest or raid [….] It's a very powerful special effect. We're not only improving our characters, we're improving the whole world.'[10]

The feminised motivation is *socialisation* and is satisfied in different ways, such as when players share a physical space to game together or when players cooperate in

[4] 'Blissful Productivity' is a phrase used by Shaowen Bardzell, et al., 'Blissfully Productive: Grouping and Cooperation in World of Warcraft Instance Runs', *Proceedings of the 2008 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (2008), 357-60.
[5] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, p. 56.
[6] See McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, p. 54.
[7] Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The How of Happiness* (London: Piatkus, 2007) p. 67.
[8] XP is rewarded after completing quests, which range from finding an ingredient for an NPC's potion to defeating a monster.
[9] Many quests involve gaining access to lairs to defeat the monsters inside. Monsters that are more difficult to defeat reward greater XP upon their death.
[10] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, p. 59.

team-based shooters. However, unique to MMO play is the multiplayer aspect of the space and the plethora of player/player interactions within it. MMOs cater directly to the socialisation motivation through their use of public spaces in which players may chat among themselves about the game or their personal lives, connecting with other players all over the world. They can casually spend time together the same as they would at a real-world café or a club, but MMOs also offer guilds – groups of players who form balanced teams of differing races and classes – which work together to raid dungeons, defeat monsters and perform other in-game tasks together. In MMOs, players take away their socialisation with them for main quests, and they do not use it only to 'hang out' between missions.

Despite the motivations of challenge and socialisation suggesting a gender divide between them, there are two issues at play: the number of women who have interest in playing – which, as the Introduction has stated, is barely under 50 per cent compared to men – and skewed perceptions of motivations that are based on false stereotypes.[11] MMOs create game universes which depend on a paradigmatic set of gender stereotypes maintained by players who then act out those stereotypes. Gendered understandings within the culture are ubiquitous and dictate player behaviour as much as motivation. They state that male players prefer to play as warriors and fight at close range while female players prefer to fight from a distance or heal. Additionally, to achieve the socialisation motivation, women are assumed to prioritise time with others over working toward their quests, while the latter is true for men. These assumptions remain pervasive in the culture despite being incorrect; as we shall discover, however, MMO content encourages these beliefs rather than disrupts them. Representations which do so may not be intentional, but they instruct players regardless of intent and use default characters, customisation limitations, and professions and lore, which suggest strong divisions between women's domestic roles and men's adventurer roles. Players learn these lessons well, and in this game space in which many male players gender bend as female characters, gender – especially femininity – is performed in exaggerated ways which reinforce sexist views in game and wider culture.

This chapter seeks to answer the following questions: *What information lies at the basis of assumptions of feminine and masculine preference in MMOs? How does the multiplayer aspect of MMOs guide players to perform gender in front of an audience?*

[11] Statistic originally referenced in Introduction of this thesis, p. 5.

What specific characteristics in player appearance and behaviour do they adopt for this performance? What do these traits assume about femininity? The focus of these questions is designed to analyse not only gender representations in MMOs, but also the ways in which gender performance recreates incorrect understandings about what female characters enjoy as their fighting style, character race and class, and other in-game behaviours. The sense players have that they are performing for others provides an opportunity to observe assumptions of gender and the stereotypes on which such assumptions depend. Representations of women as being required to strictly adhere to conventional feminine behaviours and appearance are highly concentrated in this genre, and the reason for this concentration is twofold. Firstly, MMOs are public spaces – spaces in which to project images of the avatar-self. Since MMOs depend heavily on physical biological markers, the chosen gender of the avatar plays a significant role in this performance. Secondly, the genre represents gender boundaries in traditional ways, often limiting players who might try to explore beyond them by presenting game content which fits firmly and predictably on either side. These research questions contribute to the thesis's main argument and clarify how games draw on conventional gender understandings from wider culture to design their characters and environments and how games reinforce these attitudes for players to reflect back into wider culture.

To answer these research questions, the chapter will adopt a mixed-method approach. Literary analysis will pinpoint how MMOs present characters, both MPCs and NPCs, in sexist ways that accentuate physical sexual characteristics and dated gender role beliefs applied to behaviours and professions and the ways these traits determine gender suitability for characters and players. Social communities will be ethnographically examined using empirical data and case studies to identify patterns in player behaviour, especially the ways it changes over time toward a more sexist playing style. By exploring body subjectivity through a feminist lens, the chapter will determine how the desire to present games, which are designed to please the straight, often white, male gaze directs players of all genders to play female avatars in stereotypically sexist ways.

To explore these topics, the chapter will open with discussion of perceived player motivations as determined by gender and how MMOs fulfil these – as well as how they fail to do so. Player motivations are defined in binary ways of masculine or feminine with set preferences characters are or are not permitted to adopt as defined by the programmed rules of the space. These often mutually exclusive preferences are

significant not only because binary oppositions of gender are not stable or definitive – an assumption by the mechanics – but because they are often based on inaccuracies regarding actual player preference. Following this, the chapter will textually analyse the specific game content that incorporates numerous sexist structures in the choices and the limitations offered to players from avatar choice to the behaviour they are encouraged to engage in while in the game environment. These structures may seem justifiable in the game space in individual scenarios supported by the narrative and lore of the game, but they condition and encourage players to behave in gendered ways over time. After this analysis, the chapter navigates the mechanics and predispositions of MMO culture to determine that the name of the game is 'performance'. The sexist content discussed comes to fruition through the enactment of prescriptive gender roles and behaviour concerning fighting and healing styles when men play as women. Hence, identifying the gender-based assumptions MMOs contribute to wider culture is crucial to finding ways to design games which embrace diversity. In-game behaviour in MMOs reveals which actions and appearances women are allowed in game spaces – actions and appearances that players believe to honestly represent each other and themselves.

Complicating the Sexism of the Socialisation and Challenge Motivations

Finding the root of the long-standing (mis)understanding that socialisation and challenge are feminine and masculine motivations respectively is often a convoluted process: the structures in place which encourage such beliefs are not only found in games, nor are they limited to a recent span of time. My complication of the assumptions involved in feminine and masculine play begins with some of the first MMOs. In the initial releases in the late 1990s and early 2000s, assisting other players you encountered in-universe was expected: dying had critical and urgent consequences – gear and items could be stolen by other players happening upon your body, as well as the risk that an avatar's spirit would be unable to find their corpse and fully respawn. According to Nick Yee, it was for these reasons that 'even enemy guilds would help each other recover from bad wipes because they knew that there were occasions when they would need help.'[12] The game world of early *Everquest* (1999), for example, was one where surviving alone was an impossibility, and each player's awareness put them

[12] Nick Yee, *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us – and How They Don't* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 182.

often in the complementary roles of those who gave and those who received help.[13] Having a 'social network' in the game was literally a matter of life and death for these players.[14] The social network of guilds are integral to the genre, and bring together players of all backgrounds into communities in which players may team up for dungeon raids. Guilds play a pivotal role in satisfying the socialisation motivation and the cooperation demanded by the genre. As each race and class a character assumes has as many weaknesses as it has strengths, playing with a mixture of character types makes difficult dungeon raids possible when they would not have been in solo play.[15] For example, Chee Siang Ang and Panayiotis Zaphiris explain that '[e]ach class is designed to have some skills and limitations. For instance, a mage has the privilege of ranged attack, but is extremely vulnerable to physical attack. Conversely, a warrior has high defence but can only perform proximity attack.'[16] Working together is the most efficient way to complete quests.

The strengths and weaknesses of each class provide the dynamics needed for player socialisation. As players level up, they increase their statistics and become stronger, faster, and tougher, and are better able to take on more difficult bosses. To balance the need for other players, when a player reaches a higher level, the bosses become similarly more difficult. Yee states that forming a guild is most important for 'high-end' activities which can require up to twenty-five players of unique character class combinations, and for this reason, guilds maintain player participation as a source of addiction and obligation.[17] The commitment and cooperation required to raid a dungeon demands the presence of multiple guild members: if the members of a player's guild are depending on them to log in at exactly 6pm, it makes jumping into the game world even more irresistible.

Being part of a social community is not without its drawbacks, and guilds are a location especially prone to player arguments. Guild leaders witness most of the in-fighting, whether it is because they are the member expected to mediate or because they are often 'in charge' of a raid when a dispute breaks out. It is for this reason that players

[13] Brad McQuaid, Steve Clover, and Bill Trost, *Everquest* (Sony Online Entertainment, 1999), Windows and macOS.
[14] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 182.
[15] Some race examples are orcs, humans, elves, dwarves, etc., and class examples are warrior, rogue, mage, etc.
[16] Chee Siang Ang and Panayiotis Zaphiris, 'Social Roles of Players in MMORPG Guilds', *Information, Communication & Society*, 13.4 (2010), 592-614 (p. 595).
[17] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, pp. 66-7 and Nick Yee, 'The Daedalus Gateway: Addiction' (1999-2004), <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/gateway_addiction.html> [accessed 28 November 2017].

who are leading guilds often distance themselves from MMOs over time. There is a constant responsibility to foresee and intervene when social balance is disturbed. Furthermore, guild leaders experience high-pressured situations where they are expected to assemble and mediate between members of their guild, meaning that their responsibility to the guild overrides their own progress in the game. Even the casual player is susceptible to the game proving to be more work than play and finding the productivity no longer blissful and relaxing. A likely culprit lies with an endless task list becoming overwhelming combined with the time commitment of organising guild members: 'Instead of an escape from the drudgeries of the physical world, many online gamers describe their gameplay as an unpaid second job', Yee reports.[18]

More than other genres of games, MMOs may fall prey to negative attitudes stemming from game-originated responsibilities that result both from the social obligations and the increased demand that coproduction places on players. Nicholas David Bowman claims that games 'insist on our attention and cognition, tapping and triggering our emotions, guiding our behaviors and influencing how we interact with one another.'[19] It follows then that players may need a break from the game world, especially when they are identifiable by their username in public space and can no longer inhabit the game unbothered. Bowman's research summarises past research which reports that players who felt that the game was increasingly demanding withdrew from the more social aspects of the game and focused instead on the challenge motivation. The situation is further complicated if players feel conflicted about taking a break from World of Warcraft's Kingdom of Azeroth, when that is where they went to take a break initially – finding themselves needing a vacation from a vacation. Players may also be real-world friends with their fellow guild members, and similarly to work friends, sometimes the social circles across work/play/life interactions are not able to coexist without practical – such as scheduling – and intra/interpersonal conflicts.

Despite responsibilities, in-fighting, and misunderstanding among players, guilds remain one of the primary reasons to play MMOs. This has as much to do with guild interaction as it does finding one's self – which is sometimes similar and sometimes different than one's avatar-self – in the game. From the moment players

[18] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 4.
[19] Nicholas David Bowman, '"For This Much Work, I Need a Guild Card!": Video Gameplay as a (Demanding) Coproduction', in *Produsing Theory in a Digital World 2.0*, ed. by Rebecca Ann Lind (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 107-24 (109-10).

choose a character, race, and class, and as they continue to level up and focus on their own improvement, they are aware of others' impressions of them. Perception takes an imperative role in the MMO experience, as players' analysis of the game is heavily based on those with whom they play – the MPC's audience.[20] A player's avatar is both the vessel through which they consume the game and a significant influence on how other players experience it. The player's need to consider their avatar as an accurate proxy for themselves is what directs their character design and in-game actions, lying at the heart of socialisation in MMOs. Having exerted this measure of control over one's appearance and skills, players develop a hyper-awareness of these quality's impact on other players.

These aspects of socialisation are not dictated by or limited to one gender over another; therefore, adding gender significance to this kind of gameplay maintains misunderstandings for player preference. When I categorise the games I play, like so many other gamers, I engage with games which highlight both challenge and socialisation aspects. When my little sister and I moved to different cities, *Draw Something* (2015) was an online version of Pictionary that we used to stay in contact in a way that was not dependent on us being online at the same time.[21] The gameplay was entertaining, but our primary motivation to log in was spending time together in a virtual space when we could not do it in person. On the other hand, it is the challenge motivation that drives me to (often obsessively) complete every side quest in *Dragon Age: Inquisition*: I cannot leave the Hissing Wastes until the map is completely clear of quest icons.[22] Players have diverse needs independent of gender, and games provide diverse content to satisfy them. Games naturally combine socialisation, challenge, and many other aspects of play in uniquely immersive ways, and attempting to separate players or game content on one side or another of an either/or boundary creates confines where they need not exist, sustaining sexist beliefs relating to player motivation.

Examining *WoW* advocates for this fact as it brings players to one place where they can play together or alongside each other, but the game also uses productivity to satisfy the challenge that players look for. McGonigal claims, 'from the moment I entered the online Kingdom of Azeroth, I was rich with *goals*. Every quest came with clear, urgent instructions – where to go, what to do, and why the fate of the kingdom

[20] See Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 163.
[21] *Draw Something* (OMGPop, 2015), multiple online platforms.
[22] David Gaider, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Electronic Arts, 2014), multiple platforms.

hung in the balance of my getting it done as soon as possible' [emphasis in original]. The challenge satisfies players in-game and in the real world, and McGonigal continues: 'Players […] level up as fast as they can to reach the [maximum level], because that's where the most challenging opponents and the hardest work – in other words, the most invigorating, confidence-building gameplay – is available.'[23] Neither kind of gameplay is intrinsically designed for one gender over others.

Lucas and Sherry determine that video games being considered a 'boy domain' is not a new concept, but it is a dangerous one; Claire Etaugh and Marsha Liss report that parents and teachers have been shown to 'reward gender-typical play and punish gender-atypical play' based on stereotypical models of performance.[24] This is crucial information for the game industry when part of the supposed reason women are not playing games is that they are not motivated to do so; or, as we have just seen, are having their motivations incorrectly assigned to passive or domestic play. To illustrate the guidance gender pressures give to players, Lucas and Sherry claim that the uses and gratifications of games are, at their core, influenced by social constructs. Players are guided in their motivations by their individual differences in relation to their understanding of gender, yet the other two contributors, *basic needs* and *social influences*, are determined by cultural norms. Even the basic needs of individuals are influenced to an extent by the external world, as they grow within society and there learn what satisfies them – even if they are misguided by the rewards they receive when adhering to sexist structures.

Women being viewed as better suited to domesticity and socialisation is socially constructed; when gamers speak for themselves, their likes and dislikes are not guided by gender norms at all. Being social in game spaces shows higher satisfaction for everyone involved, and this is applicable in several ways. The addition of players whom they know in the real world enhances the game space for women, and this is especially true if they are playing with someone who is inhabiting the same real-world space that they are, according to Jing Wang, et al.[25] Extending this interpretation further, Dmitri Williams, et al. have determined that, regardless of gender, 'players in romantic

[23] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, pp. 60, 54.
[24] Lucas and Sherry, 'Sex Differences in Video Game Play', p. 507; Claire Etaugh and Marsha B. Liss, 'Home, School, and Playroom: Training Grounds for Adult Gender Roles', *Sex Roles*, 26.3-4 (1992), 129-47 (p. 130).
[25] Jing Wang, et al., 'Focused on the Prize: Characteristics of Experts in Massive Multiplayer Online Games', *First Monday*, 16.8 (2011), n. pag. <https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3672/3028> [accessed 17 February 2018].

relationships with other players […] enjoyed slightly higher perceived relationship quality.'[26] In these cases, MMOs are a place both to meet new people and to sustain existing relationships. Another crucial argument for socialisation in games as a motivation not dictated by gender is that socialising is linked to more successful play. Wang, et al. found that socialisation was 'positively associated with higher expertise' in MMOs.[27] As such, players' tendencies to interact and socialise enhances their ability to succeed in the game, so that more social players are more successful players. Socialisation was not distracting players from game quests; rather, that it may have been assisting them in finding fellow players whose cooperation facilitated their advancement in the game.[28] Those players who are most immersed in the game space and best understand its limits and expectations are those who are best equipped to survive in the game world.

Traditionally conceptualised notions of socialisation are certainly considered a feminine domain, yet the most prevalent form of socialisation in MMOs is genderless: the genre gives players a chance to socialise that even the most introverted player can enjoy. Players often take advantage of an environment where, as Nicolas Ducheneaut, et al. claim, they may be 'alone together' with other players. In this situation, players seek out the socialisation motivation differently than those who actively pursue cooperative teams. These players often prefer an ambient socialisation; to play on their own '*surrounded by* others instead of *playing with* them.'[29] Being a guild member takes effort, time, and coordination that many players do not have, but by playing alone together, they can engage in prosocial behaviour without being bound to a timetable dictated by the availability of other guild members. Yee discusses another lure of playing alone together, one which lies in players' awareness of others in the game – other players whose gaze provides a mirror in which the they may see their image reflected: 'Indeed, the other players have important roles beyond providing direct support and camaraderie in the context of quest groups: they also provide an *audience,* a

[26] Dmitri Williams, et al., 'Looking for Gender: Gender Roles and Behaviors among Online Gamers', *Journal of Communication*, 59.4 (2009), 700-25 (p. 714).
[27] Richard R. Bartle, 'Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs' and Nick Yee, 'Motivation of Play in Online Games', quoted by Wang, et al., 'Focused on the Prize'.
[28] Wang, et al., 'Focused on the Prize'.
[29] Nicolas Ducheneaut, et al., '"Alone Together?" Exploring the Social Dynamics of Massively Multiplayer Online Games', *Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (2006), 407-16 (p. 415).

sense of *social presence,* and a *spectacle*' – an expansion upon the attraction found by seeing the image players find of themselves through others [emphasis in original].[30]

After recognising these gender-based restrictions, it may seem as if there is not much hope for gender equality in MMOs or games more widely, but distinctly sexist trends are becoming less pervasive in recent game culture as society becomes more aware of the growing number of female gamers and their desires. Ambient sociability is common and not related to gender at all, and spending time with other players in a game space, even when not interacting with them directly, has multiple benefits for participants. Gaming is often done from home, a typically safe space for players, one that is less risky than venturing into a public space. McGonigal suggests that introverted players benefit greatly from ambient sociability by satisfying their social needs, without others demanding from them what they are unwilling to give. These ambient social situations act as a stepping stone to engagement with other activities that could be labelled as 'aggressively social' – situations within and without the game space introverted players would not have felt capable of handling had they not used MMOs as practice scenarios.[31] McGonigal states that MMOs are the brain's trainers for social interaction. Comparably, she notes fellow game scholar Nicole Lazzaro's ideas that ambient sociability can 'train the brain' to feel rewarded by social interaction when situations such as those found in MMOs offer an opportunity to explore socialisation with little risk. Hence, players who are easily overstimulated by other forms of social interaction may 'create new, positive associations […] about social experience'.[32] MMOs satisfy players' common need to feel included by placing them in positions in which they may interact with others and belong to an in-group with little risk.[33] The misinformation regarding female presence in the virtual game space may be due to societal pressures concerning gender expectations. Consequently, while men and women underreported play time in a study undertaken by Williams, et al., women were found to underreport their play time 'at a rate nearly three times that of the males'.[34] Men and women both underreporting play time may be a result of becoming so absorbed in their play that they lose track of time – a phenomenon called Flow, further discussed in Chapter Four – but it could just as likely be guilt or shame for spending

[30] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 163.
[31] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, p. 93.
[32] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, pp. 90-1.
[33] Lucas and Sherry, 'Sex Differences in Video Game Play', p. 504.
[34] Williams, et al., 'Looking for Gender', p. 717.

'too much' time in a space not taken seriously by non-gamers – which women would feel three times more of that guilt and shame under gender expectations.[35]

Embedded Sexism in MMOs

Sexist beliefs about women span beyond the question of their assumed desires for play, and into game content, which typically portrays them in sexist ways. The male gaze significantly influences the representations of women in MMOs, who often embody the feminine abnormal in their dependence on hypersexualised character design and beliefs in men's and women's work – despite the fantastic worlds in which they take place not being bound by the norms of wider culture. Yee claims that games are worlds that allow players to explore beyond what the physical world can offer us. Yet, the constant and immediate impression given by characters and the limits of their customisation suggests that players and designers are all too comfortable 'preserving the status quo', which in the case of many MMOs – and games outside of the genre – means playing as overly humanly-sexualised monsters.[36] This may be a general frustration to most players no matter their gender, but the influence of these design choices has severe repercussions for particular subgroups within the gaming community.

A study by Kelly Bergstrom, et al. claims that players do not enter MMOs with many of the sexist preferences for avatar choice with which they come out; rather, she argues, the games condition players toward particular preferences and away from others according to the avatar's gender. In the study, the researchers analysed players of *WoW*

[35] One demographic reported their play time more accurately: women who identified as bisexual. Williams, et al. theorise that these women were unique in their self-representation because they were more used to – and therefore more comfortable – in spaces perceived as male-oriented. This assumes much about the bisexual women in the study, the game space, and the influence of gender role theory, such as an assumption that female desire is a male-oriented space which bisexual women can more easily navigate than men. However, this may be in some ways a conflation of sexuality and gender identity. There may be the more apparent matter of bisexual women pursuing other women and aligning their motivations with the more common demographic of 'heterosexual males', but there is more to observe in the comparison. While assuming a similarity between the two distinctions of sexuality and gender identity may be problematic in select environments, in this scenario there may also be benefits to drawing conclusions from both places. Bisexuality is often marginalised even within the Queer community for its perceived liminality by taking traits from two sexual preferences without fully embracing pansexuality or 'not counting' when a bisexual enters a heterosexual relationship. Bisexuals may feel they are in a position of otherness making them more able to thrive in situations typically considered to be abnormal or apart from societal expectations. If bisexual women are more comfortable defying assumed gender-based preferences for play, it may suggest that women who underreport their play time are providing misleading information to a degree. If this is true, then are women underreporting consciously as well because they experience discomfort grouping themselves in a masculinised field? The answers to such questions are unclear, and more research is needed in this area. Results of bisexual participants was found in Williams, et al., 'Looking for Gender', p. 717. For discussion on Flow, see Chapter Four of this thesis, p. 229.

[36] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, pp. 208-11.

for observable gender differences in play. Their results suggest that MMOs construct boundaries between players on the basis of gender: by studying the behaviour of novices, they discovered that there was a sexist learning curve, in that the longer a player played, the more stereotypically gendered their choices became. MMOs use different aspects of game play and lore to impart preferences in players over time; in this context, expert players of MMOs tended to perform gender stereotypes when designing and playing an avatar whereas novice players did not. Bergstrom, et al. also found that among novice players, most played as Warriors, whereas when expert players made the same choice, men chose the Warrior class, while none of the women in the study chose this option. The reverse was true for magic user play (Priest or Cleric), which novices tended to avoid but was more popular among expert players; however, the male players who chose this class were mostly gender bending.[37] In fact, Bergstrom and her colleagues found:

> In looking over the dataset for information about who plays Priests […] [f]emale Priest avatars account for 85.2% of the priests in the WoW dataset, but in terms of the sex of participants, only 51.9% of priests were played by women.[38]

Female Priests and male Warriors make up the majority of each class; yet with male Warriors, expert players are less likely to be gender bending to meet gender expectations, in contrast to men who do so and play a female Priest. Players adhere to stereotypes for play the more time they spend in the game world, because it instructs them how to perform according to gender.

An examination of avatar race and class defaults in *WoW* illustrates this trend. Hilde Corneliussen claims that female character design, especially that of monstrous races, shows femininity 'to be in conflict with monstrous racial features.'[39] When analysing side-by-side comparisons of each race and male/female genders, this is undoubtedly true, revealing 'females of the most monstrous races are *more* female than race' [emphasis in original].[40] Her analysis is ten years old, yet the limitations of

[37] Kelly Bergstrom, Jennifer Jenson, and Suzanne de Castell, 'What's "Choice" Got to Do with It? Avatar Selection Differences between Novice and Expert Players of World of Warcraft and Rift', *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2012), 97-104 (p. 103).
[38] Bergstrom, et al., 'What's "Choice"?', p. 102.
[39] Hilde Corneliussen, '*World of Warcraft* as a Playground for Feminism', in *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity*, ed. by Hilde Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 63-86 (p. 73).
[40] Corneliussen, '*World of Warcraft* as a Playground for Feminism', p. 74.

character selection in *WoW* remain, even as technology advances; however, more nuance can be provided here by analysing character selection. Logging into the game for the first time allows the player to watch the prologue, setting up the universe and the plot. The narrator of the trailer is a man in a position of power, and his most striking aspect is perhaps his chest and shoulders, which have been hypermasculinised to such an extent that his head is dwarfed in comparison. After this initial view of what players may expect in bodily proportions thereafter, they are taken to the screen in which they meet their default characters. 'Default' is quite a loaded term, and the connotations held by the word are certainly applicable here: just as in other forms of popular culture, *WoW* suggests a sexualised, Westernised form of attractiveness as a default to players. These are dictated by archetypes, and these archetypes send signals to players suggesting that even when a race has inhuman skin, they must adopt facial and bodily features of Western culture. The presentation of a default is important, when some players do not customise at all, but even more significant is the limitation to deviate from the archetypes presented by the defaults.

What is clear from default characters in *WoW*, is that while all 'monsters' have been anatomically humanised in several ways, with the women, the transformation goes far beyond an attempt by game designers to make avatars more physically relatable. They are not humanised, but rather, human-feminised. In this portion of the game space, female monster defaults are unwilling to sacrifice the femininity of a character, thus presenting a physical build dependent on biological sexual cues and whiteness. When it comes to the features assigned to the more monster-like beings, they are less monsters who are female, than they are females with varying degrees of monster-like attributes. If given the same level of physical power afforded to their male counterparts, they would lose their hyperfeminine form and rid themselves of the accentuation of biologically-female characteristics. Giving the female characters more physical power in-game with broader shoulders, longer arms, more muscular torsos, yet adding savage facial features would be, in effect, a queering act. Video games are a space in which options to do so could be easily programmed by designers and performed by players, yet the gender divide and consequent gender role expectations carry over from the real world into the game world, preventing such progressive approaches becoming the dominant model.

Default characters hold sway over players' perceptions of appropriateness for the game in accordance to their gender, typically appearing on the second screen players see after logging in, following only after a cutscene that features characters with similar

physical proportions. As players must start at this screen before each playthrough, the influence of default characters and how they address the male gaze is undeniable. Such processes reinforce the perceptions laid out by sexist depictions of women in all forms of popular culture, which present hypersexualisation as normalised and ideal. This is not to say that no players exist who would prefer to play as a feminised Goblin. Rather, offering the option not to be feminine and presenting it as a default would be a single step in removing the manipulation of MMOs – manipulation which insinuates to players that while they *can* deviate from prescribed gender roles, those players who do so are rejecting the norm. In my analysis of character customisation to follow, I could customise my character away from sexualised defaults; however, most customisation focused on facial features, leaving the template of the body unchanged.

When I moved to the character selection screen in *WoW*, I was given the choice between the Alliance or the Horde, my avatar's gender (m/f), and their race and class.[41] It became immediately clear to me that the female versions of each race were designed first and foremost to look feminine, manifested through familiar physical traits dictated by Naomi Wolf's conceptions of the beauty myth – traits identical to those discussed in Chapter One.[42] While many of the men were physically attractive, their attractiveness was not restricted to sex characteristics. By contrast, in the races soon to be discussed, female defaults appear to have been designed primarily to look beautiful: they seem unable to become anything else, voiding the possibility for their bodies to be built for utility over aesthetics. Furthermore, other than otherworldly complexions of green, blue, etc., most human-like complexions were white. There were darker complexions included in the defaults, but a player would more often encounter a white avatar than a person of colour. This lessens the visibility of people of colour in the game defaults and makes implicit connections between skin tone difference and monstrousness. Non-white skin tones are most often shown only in the contexts of the fantastic – in a realm of monstrosity.

[41] For this analysis, I logged into the character customisation screen of *WoW* several times and observed minor changes to the character defaults. Most of the differences are skin tone, hair colour, or similar, rather than anything which drastically changed the appearance of the character. However, the screencaps shown here were of one session, and therefore represent what a player may expect upon logging in. The screencap of the human female was collected separately from the others owing to a fault in recording the initial session.

[42] Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (Reading: Cox & Wyman, 1991) pp. 10-13; see also Chapter 1, pp. 69-72 of this thesis.

Almost every race replicated similar trends of gender ideals, and though each example is significant, in the following discussion some races are not shown or are grouped together owing to their similar manifestations of gender traits. For continuity, each race analysed will be from the Monk class, except for those races which cannot embody this class, who will be analysed in the Rogue class instead. This choice was made because the clothing allowed for an easier analysis of physical body traits than other classes. I use the term 'race' as it is the term used by the game world to describe what the real world would more likely consider 'species': these are independent to real-world conceptions of race.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2. Male and Female Human in *WoW*

Of the thirteen races, humans have been conventionally designed and are, in many ways, the original template to which the other races will be compared. The male default displays chin-length blond hair with a beard, broad shoulders, muscular but not overweight. The female is conventionally beautiful with long hair, large eyes and mouth with symmetrical features. They did however, both have arms, hands, and feet which appeared oversized – which may be part of the aesthetic of *WoW* or simply due to technological limitations – and this observation informed my analysis of the other races and their proportions. On this basis, other races represented significant dimorphism in the appearance of male and female representatives.

Figures 2.3 and 2.4 Male and Female Gnomes in *WoW*

Age and gender are negotiated in interesting ways in the case of gnomes. The male looks aged, but not elderly; in contrast, the female gnome's aged features give her a 'sunken in' appearance, the comparison with her male counterpart embodying the stereotype that men, but not women, are afforded the luxury of becoming 'distuinguished' instead of 'old' as they age. This age comparison is present to different degrees with other races as well, such as dwarves (not pictured). The female gnome is short in stature, yet has conventional, though slightly subtler hour-glass proportions: the combination of her age and shape gives her the appearance of sexual maturity, but her stature and understated curves de-sex her to a degree, allowing both gnomes to present the appearance of a wizened child, enhanced by their fidgeting animation.

Figures 2.5 and 2.6. Male Worgen in *WoW*

Figures 2.7 and 2.8. Female Worgen in *WoW*

The worgen offer an interesting comparison, as a side-by-side reveals a strong trend in those races which incorporate theriomorphic traits in *WoW*: the women are remarkably more anthropamorphic than their male counterparts. Male worgen faces are fully lupine, their only human-like trait being their upright, bipedal pose. His face is that of a wolf, savagely frozen mid-growl; his posture is hunched over, poised to strike. His back and shoulders are large and powerful, exaggerating his hunched posture, emphasising sheer physical power. Conversely, while the female is shown to be snarling when seen in profile, her eyes show no sign of bestial or malicious intent. Her face appears unnaturally shaded as if painted there. She has a canine-shaped mouth and nose but a contoured face, defined eyebrows and lashes, and long hair over shoulders that are exceedingly less animal-like than her male counterpart's. Her posture is upright with her shoulders back, her figure not hidden behind a savage posture, thus preserving her ability to retain an exaggerated human woman's shape.

Figures 2.9 and 2.10. Male Tauren in *WoW*

Figures 2.11 and 2.12. Female Tauren in *WoW*

Like the worgen, the tauren are animal-inspired beings, and, like them, the tauren defaults establish a gulf between the degrees to which each gender physically applies racial traits. The male has overhanging eyebrows, an animation tactic that impresses the viewer with the default's stupidity or beastliness. His head does not seem to come from his neck, but from his upper chest. His biceps are very pronounced, and his hunch is so exaggerated that the implication of beast-of-burden is undeniable. The female has deep shoulders in profile, yet they are not so extreme to sacrifice her posture, which still accentuates her humanly-feminine hourglass figure. Her eyes are sharper and less bovine compared to his.

Figures 2.13 and 2.14. Male and Female Orc in *WoW*

Figures 2.15 and 2.16. Male and Female Troll in *WoW*

Orcs and trolls adopt many manifestations of human features of beauty (human proportions, traditionally beautiful hair and facial features) or masculinity (defined muscles, wide shoulders), yet both genders have a few monstrous quirks. Male orcs (green) are an example in which the male is built to appear all brawn, no brains: he is hunched over with rippling shoulders, arms, and legs, a large bald head and a vacant expression with over-hanging eyebrows. Upon choosing a female orc, her first action is to raise her eyebrow at the player in a gesture suggesting perceptiveness, directly contrasting the male's race-based empty-headedness. Male trolls (blue) look intentionally mischievous with wild hair, pointed facial features, and a wicked expression. His arms are considerably longer than his female counterpart's, while his

posture resembles that of a primate. In contrast, the female is fully upright, her facial features in a relaxed expression. Both female defaults in these examples are not permitted to appear 'stupid' or even wicked, as it would compromise their domesticity: the acceptable way to embody femininity.

Figures 2.17 and 2.18. Male and Female Goblin in *WoW*

In the final example, the male goblin carries the appearance reflecting what a player might expect of the race when logging into the server: he is short, deep green, and aged with drooping skin. His overhanging eyebrows, unevenly growing facial hair, and the malicious set of his eyes all contribute to his monster-like appearance. By contrast, the female has clear eyes arranged in an open, benevolent expression, rejecting the opportunity to appear evil. Her large eyes and lips paired with her voluminous hair, align her appearance with traditional styles of human beauty with only her stature and green complexion setting her apart. While she has shorter leg and longer arm proportions than humans, her torso remains unchanged and femininely proportioned.

The traits in women that are most often exaggerated in these representations are their biological sex characteristics, despite those characteristics not being used in-game for reproductive purposes. The opportunity to imagine an avatar whose form is limited only by technology – which becomes less limiting every year – speaks to cyberfeminist ideals, such as Donna Haraway's claim of non-biologically reproduced reformulations of bodies. She states that bodies must be come to be considered separately from

traditional modes of reproduction.[43] If her theories are applied to avatars as non-original bodies, then players are the organism behind the technology through which they act, as suggested by Constance Penley, et al.[44] However, the boundaries are not set by players for what is possible, but by the game designers – the true creators. Worgens, taurens, goblins, and trolls, and others, are races that provide what designers feel women – or men who play as women – would prefer: that is, to play a monster, but one who is not sexually compromised. Players are presented with a situation in which, if they want to play as a female, the avatar cannot be anything else while assuming that state: she cannot be female *and* fast, strong, or even unintelligent. To give her the physical attributes of her race would strip her of her femininity; therefore, to preserve it, she must remain at a partially transformed state between human and monster. She is female first and foremost, before any racial characteristics come into play.

Traits, such as the head and shoulders of the male tauren and orc growing from the chest instead of the top of the neck, might have little to do with human-female biology; however, the restrictions on female avatars are still so stringent that women must not deviate from the external feminine template. In this way, desirability is constructed through the options and limitations of avatars, through which players observe that the virile man is muscular and titanic in stature, suggesting male potency. By contrast, female avatars are subject to the male gaze, and their passive objectivity is prioritised over power. On the other hand, the sexualised-female model plays on paradigms of femininity that, while muscular, nevertheless emphasise stereotypical female sexual characteristics. Enhancements of biological traits may be an attempt to preserve her ability to bear children, linking the monstrous and the maternal, as feminist scholars Barbara Creed and Sheena Vachhani claim.[45] Through the connection of bearing children as 'disruptive' and the ambiguous nature of the 'dualities' of 'self and other', the worgen and similarly designed races seamlessly join the monstrous and the maternal.[46] This is a phenomenon that wider culture has not missed – indeed, it is

[43] Marina Calloni, 'Interview: Feminism, Politics, Theories and Science', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 10.1 (2003), 87-103 (p. 98). Haraway's model is discussed specifically in reference to cyborgs, but can be applied to other cognate contexts, such as the presentation of non-human species in fantasy video games.
[44] Constance Penley, Andrew Ross, and Donna Haraway, 'Cyborgs at Large: Interview with Donna Haraway', *Social Text*, 25.26 (1990), 8-23 (pp. 17-18).
[45] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993)
[46] Sheena Vachhani, 'Always Different?: Exploring the Monstrous-feminine and Maternal Embodiment in Organisation', *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal*, 33.7 (2014), 648-61 (pp. 649-50).

interrogated extensively on social media platforms, as illustrated in the tumblr post of user madfrisky:

Figure 2.19. Screencap from madfrisky's Tumblr Blog Prior to the NSFW (Not Safe for Work) Ban in December 2018[47]

Defaults are only part of the picture when considering the aspects of MMOs which come together to generate a sexist learning curve: notably, the discursive choices of the *WoW* website define character choices in gendered ways. While exploring the site, Bergstrom, et al. theorise the influence of linguistic manipulation in the explanations of character classes and the language describing them. If we recall that Warriors are perceived as a masculine preference and Priests as a feminine one, then:

> 'Strength', 'leadership,' 'knowledge' and 'protection' describe warriors, while 'devoted', 'serving', and 'support' are used to describe priests […] We found that the artwork on the official WoW website helps reinforce stereotypes: a fierce male Orc is depicted as a Warrior, while a more demure female Dwarf is depicted as a Priest. While occasionally roles are reversed, the vast majority of visual depictions reinforce the stereotype that melee combat (especially tanking) is best represented by male figures, and casters (including healers) by female figures.[48]

These genderings continue in the game lore, and if most gamers do not critically analyse their play, they will inevitably absorb these manipulations, which ultimately accumulate and coalesce into archetypes of the ideal. Bergstrom, et al. further note that while

[47] Madfrisky, 'madfrisky dashboard', *Tumblr* (2018), <https://www.madfrisky.tumblr.com/> [accessed 15 October 2018].
[48] Bergstrom, et al., 'What's "Choice"?', p. 99.

certain classes of magic users, which are mainly known for healing, are also able to perform combat magic, players 'gravitate towards' and 'enforce' the archetypes upon which the gameplay and lore build. Consequently, they ignore the few but nonetheless extant opportunities for deviating from traditional game play, owing to the wider frames of reference in which such choices are offered.[49]

Another aspect which presents gender-based archetypes is 'class trainers' – NPCs who help players along their journey, especially in teaching new skills. These characters serve to further ingrain gender suitability in that Bergstrom, et al. found that class trainers were 60.7% male, 38.7% female, and 0.6% other.[50] Speaking generally, NPCs are crucial in game spaces, as they give samplings of demographics and represent the populations found in the game world, making 'an area seem inhabited, adding an impression of a living society' according to Corneliussen.[51] Therefore, when such a living society suggests that gender dictates skill competence, these attitudes leave impressions on players who enter the real-world spaces that virtual spaces are trying to imitate. In the journey players take in behaving in more sexist ways the longer they play, MMOs offer players the option to pursue professions that include anything from fishing to blacksmithing, enabling them to perform services for others to earn money for remuneration, better gear, or other in-game benefits. Players are encouraged to seek out goods and services offered by others throughout the course of the game through quests which require the help of a professional, yet this feature of MMOs also encourages sexist trends.

Corneliussen claims that especially in *WoW*, the number of female NPCs is considerably lower than those of male ones. This may initially seem an easily rectified fault in the game; however, she determines that adding more women to the game space would not solve the problem. It is not only the quantity of female NPCs present, but the representation of those women in unequal or gender-compliant roles.[52] As with the gender depictions of class trainers discussed previously, this practice extends both to the allocation of women in professional roles and to the difference in the naming of the professions when filled by a male or a female character. Those professions which involve 'activities often associated with femininity' are given gender-neutral names, so

[49] Bergstrom, et al., 'What's "Choice"?', p. 99.
[50] Bergstrom, et al., 'What's "Choice"?', p. 101.
[51] Corneliussen, 'Playground for Feminism', p. 75.
[52] Corneliussen, 'Playground for Feminism', pp. 76-9.

that men may more easily fit into the roles of those professions. One example of professions that have been renamed in this way involves gardening and sewing: these activities are often perceived as feminine, and Corneliussen and Bergstrom, et al. claim that these professions have been renamed to 'herbalism' and 'tailoring' to present them as more attractive to male players. Changing the names of the professions in this way not only de-feminises them: it masculinises them as well.[53] This clearly shows a preference for male players as ideal consumers, since only female players are made to feel discomfort in the labelling of their profession. Additionally, those who pursue the medical field in the game encounter similar gender separations when men and women in the profession are labelled 'Doctors' and 'Nurses' respectively.[54] Not only does this show a clear distinction between male and female characters, it also displays a misunderstanding of the medical field, as doctors and nurses perform different jobs. In the real world, medical doctors must undergo more and different training than nurses do, and the choice for designers to disallow female characters to become doctors is obvious sexism that, contextualised in the real world, would not be permitted in the West. This trend does not stop here; several other professions have sexist undertones when they gender-categorise those who adopt the profession:

> In some cases, female NPCs received feminized versions of a title, such as a female tailoring trainer labeled as a Sempstress or enchanting trainers as Enchantress (female), rather than Enchanter or High Enchanter (male). In the stereotypically feminine pursuit of cooking, WoW has more male trainers (24) than female (12). However, male trainers were given titles such as Cook or Master Chef, and none of the females are given a special title. The lack of female NPC titles also exists among inscription trainers: none of the female trainers have titles, while male NPCs are given titles such as Recorder, Scribe, Booker, or Professor.[55]

Players might argue that it is not sexist if it aligns with the history and culture of the game universe, but even if players have access to and read those parts of lore, it has no effect on the representation's degree of sexism. Context does not remove sexism, it supports it. Bergstrom, et al. claim that a list of NPCs that compares gender to profession shows a clear gap between men and women and the expectations for their competency in a profession (see Table 2.1, overleaf).

[53] Kelly Bergstrom, et al., 'All in a Day's Work: A Study of *World of Warcraft* NPCs Comparing Gender to Professions', *Proceedings of the 2011 ACM SIGGRAPH Symposium on Video Games*, (2011), 31-5 (p. 32) and Corneliussen, 'Playground for Feminism', p. 79.
[54] Bergstrom, et al., 'All in a Day's Work', p. 33.
[55] Bergstrom, et al., 'All in a Day's Work', p. 33.

Occupation	Males	Females	P-Value
Alchemy	21	12	1.0000
Blacksmithing	30	9	0.0958
Cooking	24	12	0.7317
Enchanting	15	11	0.6852
Engineering	25	7	0.0982
First Aid	**14**	**18**	**0.0281**
Fishing	23	8	0.2641
Herbalism	**12**	**21**	**0.0032**
Inscription	10	8	0.6263
Jewelcrafting	9	6	0.7949
Leatherworking	24	16	0.7440
Mining	**24**	**2**	**0.0016**
Skinning	16	11	0.6937
Tailoring	18	15	0.3677

Table 2.1. Bergtrom, et al.'s Chart Illustrating the Spread of Men's and Women's Professions in *WoW*[56]

They further claim that four out of five Grand Master herbalism trainers are female, though male and female characters may pursue the profession. In the case of Grand Master for mining, three of the four trainers were male – only two examples of a trend suggesting suitability of 'men's work and women's work'.[57] This aligns with Tiantian Yang and Howard Aldrich's research on entrepreneurial teams, stating that modern men and women are often placed in professional roles based on gender expectations that organise gender into male suitability over female unsuitability to lead, despite merit differences dictating that women deserve more leadership than they are given.[58] The representation in the game, which suggests enduring and seemingly universally understood ideas concerning women's abilities in professional settings, reflects the social reality that women are considered by men – and sometimes by other women – as less competent as professional leaders. In Yang and Aldrich's study, even when men and women knew each other, attitudes regarding whether women should lead did not change.[59] This is disheartening, as it seems that women are not only understood by wider culture as less incompetent, familiarity with an individual is not enough to change attitudes regarding her professional success.

[56] Bergstrom, et al., 'All in a Day's Work', p. 32.
[57] Bergstrom, et al., 'All in a Day's Work', p. 33.
[58] Tiantian Yang and Howard Aldrich, 'Who's the Boss? Explaining Gender Inequality in Entrepreneurial Terms', *American Sociological Review*, 79.2 (2014), 303-27 (pp. 317-21).
[59] Tiantian Yang and Howard Aldrich, 'Who's the Boss?', pp. 321-2.

Whether a woman is in a game world or the real world, beliefs about her suitability as a professional sentence her to domestic roles – or mark her as deviant for pursuing something different. Professions measure ability and proficiency; showing male faces in masculinised professions and vice versa sends a clear message to players about acceptable occupations for each gender – messages to which they happily adhere. This may be owing to game designers' attempts to give players what they want, which is to see themselves (men) reflected to them in the game space, but now that women fill the game space as much as men, it has yielded the opposite effect. Instead of adapting avatar options to reflect expanding demographics, the same gender-based mechanics are regurgitated, limiting the options for expressions of femininity. Just as importantly, they reinforce sexist beliefs prevalent in wider culture that women may only fill conventional gender roles, and they must look pleasant while they do so. The manipulation of the beauty myth for physical representation and assumptions about professional women operate hand in hand in MMOs, presenting to gamers perfect little boundaries that dichotomously lay out only two genders with acceptable behaviour on each side, which is as unmistakable as it is restricting. These ideological constructs are not based in genuine femininity, yet they suggest that 'real women' must look and act a certain way when they inhabit the game space – and since real women do not fit into these moulds, they had better perform as if they do.

Or they must not belong there.

Constructing the Feminine with Gender Bending

After exploring the ways in which MMOs present and maintain sexist beliefs, my discussion will now consider how players use the performance aspect of games to enact the lessons they have been taught. Research by Rosa Mikeal Martey, et al. reports on the past findings of game scholars and claims that MMO players most often design their characters in two ways: to recreate their own features or to embody idealisations of their gender.[60] Another tactic for avatar choice is to gender bend through an avatar who is a different gender than that of the player. Gender bending is common among players, and MMOs are one of the most popular gaming genres in which to do so. For this reason, MMOs have revealed more about perceived gender traits than other genres as they blend with the status of gender as performative: Judith Butler claims that gender's

[60] See Rosa Mikeal Martey, et al., 'The Strategic Female: Gender-Switching and Player Behaviour in Online Games', *Information, Communication & Society*, 17.3 (2014), 286-300 (p. 289).

performative aspects are often deceptively perceived 'as a sign of its internal or inherent truth'.[61] The performativity taking place in MMOs provides a cultural script of these supposed truths – and the sexist structures in games and wider culture which provide their foundation.

According to Yee and Martey, et al., character gender plays a significantly larger role in gender representations than the gender of the players themselves, and while some players do so experimentally, players who gender bend consistently are quite common: 79 per cent of all players have at least one avatar of the opposite sex.[62] There is likely mixed reasoning behind this choice. For example, as *WoW* is a third-person game, the player may gender bend to watch their feminised character interact in the game, actively consuming their subject. Still, the distance of third-person play does not stop players from identifying with their avatar, as stated in Chapter One's study by Roselyn Lee-Won, et al., in which players used their avatars to assert their masculinity when they perceived their real-world selves as feminine.[63] When players gender bend, they may be attempting to evoke gender stereotypes as a way of breaking into the flawed system of games as anti-female spaces: women are able to participate in the game space without hindrance, and men feel they can harness the perception of women as less adept players to their advantage and receive help from other players.[64] Martey, et al.'s research is consistent with past work – such as Yee's Daedalus Project, an online archive with survey results of MMO players collected over seven years with over 40,000 participants – claiming that men gender bend more often than women: 23 per cent of men and 7 per cent of women in their data sample of *WoW*.[65] Male and female players both gender bend; however, their reasons for doing so are often quite different. As explored further in Chapter Three, women often play 'invisibly' to avoid their avatars or their real-world selves from being 'messed with' in game spaces.[66] Inversely, men more often gender bend to experience aspects of the feminine. Analysing the behaviours of these players

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[61] Judith Butler, 'Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics', *AIBR, Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, 4.3 (2009), i-xiii <http://www.aibr.org/antropologia/04v03/criticos/040301b.pdf> [accessed 18 April 2019] (p. i).
[62] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 112; Martey, et al., 'Strategic Female', p. 286.
[63] Roselyn Lee-Won, Wai Yen Tang, and Mackenzie Kibbe, 'When Virtual Muscularity Enhances Physical Endurance: Masculinity Threat and Compensatory Avatar Customization among Young Male Adults', *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 20.1 (2017), 10-16 (p. 14). Study originally referenced in Chapter One of this thesis, p. 81.
[64] Megan Boler, 'Hypes, Hopes and Actualities: New Digital Cartesianism and Bodies in Cyberspace', *New Media and Society*, 9.1 (2007), 139-68 (p. 149); Martey, et al., 'Strategic Female', p. 289.
[65] See Martey, et al., 'Strategic Female', p. 293; Yee, 'Daedalus Gateway'.
[66] See Chapter Three of this thesis, pp. 160-1, 167, 175.

has revealed that game play and interactions are dependent on stereotypical gender role behaviour.

Martey, et al. state that, when building their avatar, women tend to design their female characters to enhance their real-life physical characteristics; whereas when men create a gender-bent avatar, her physical form strictly adheres to the feminine characteristics replicated in default characters. These choices may be explained by some existing feminist theories, which posit that women and men both believe that a woman is required to be beautiful to depict her gender ideally, while the same is not believed to be true for men.[67] Men have found one way of expressing these aesthetics with hairstyle choice for their female characters. As Figure 2.20 (below) illustrates, a 'non-traditional' hairstyle is less common for men playing as women, since more traditional feminine hairstyles (long, curly, or in a ponytail) better align with stereotypical notions men have about attractive women:

Figure 2.20. The Comparison of Attractiveness According to Gender Assumption Compliance[68]

Yee claims that when men gender bend, they often choose races with female characters who are more likely to be in line with stereotypical notions of attractiveness as their default, such as Humans, the Draenei, and Blood Elves in *WoW*. These races physically resemble human women, adding to their potential appeal, especially in cases of male heterosexual players who may find their avatar an object of desire; however, playing as an attractive avatar is not necessarily rooted in the player's need to satisfy their sexual desire through their avatar. Gamers commonly play as races who are hypersexually represented, especially through characters with exaggerated proportions of sexual characteristics and armour which accentuates those characteristics. Yee states that this

[67] See Martey, et al., 'Strategic Female', pp. 295-6.
[68] Martey, et al., 'Strategic Female', p. 292.

choice is an 'artifact of the sexualized female avatars, rather than an explicit attempt to explore gender roles.'[69] Heterosexual men who gender bend in this way may be using their characters to feel closer to a sexualised woman as she becomes the object of their desire. Of course, this analysis does not consider male players whose sexuality is not heterosexual, bringing to light differences in considerations for sexuality and avatar desire – an area which requires further data and research. While there are options for play as non-hypersexualised races, they do not target the demographic of players who are seeking to idealise the gender of the characters they play. Non-sexualised options are more limited; players are conditioned to move away from such choices unless, for instance, they embrace a play style which actively pursues a fantasy element that a particular race offers – a choice which inadvertently deviates from stereotypical gender ideals.

According to John Berger, 'a woman's presence […] defines what can and cannot be done to her.'[70] Avatar creation offers male players a chance to break into a female presence by becoming her, by imposing actions. There are certainly elements of voyeuristic pleasure in playing as a female avatar, but in this realm she does not define 'what can and cannot be done to her' because the player decides that. He is more than her consciousness, his possession of her dictates her action, her personality, and the way she relates to others in the game. The male player looks, but he also *inhabits*, his proximity to her straddling the line between self and master. In this position, he has the opportunity to enact a femininity that he declares is most comfortable and uncomplicated; well-defined gender boundaries certainly provide comfort and make feminine traits more identifiable. More than that, his proximity allows him to perform femininity in the way he believes it should be. Unfortunately, based on the physical appearance and behaviour of female characters controlled by men, women 'should be' restrictively, biologically feminine.

When men play as female characters, they behave in what they perceive is a feminine way. There are several activities that are universally accepted in the culture as feminine behaviour, and these include long-range fighting and healing as opposed to masculine close-range fighting. Yee states that MMOs are full of opportunities to allow 'false gender stereotypes to be made true' when players act out these stereotypes and

[69] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 112.
[70] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), p. 46.

present to other players – and have the stereotypes presented to them – 'a world in which women prefer to heal'. In a study of players, he found that when they were asked about their perceptions of male and female in-game preference, players answered with very distinct gendered preferences for combat roles as well as other in-game activities. Unsurprisingly, players associated healing with femininity, yet when he compared the log data against the responses, he found that men and women 'had almost exactly the same healing rations – 33 percent for men, and 30 percent for women.'[71] Gender-bent players, as well as non-gender-bent players who share the space nonetheless, are witnessing an altered view of the game space – one which confirms stereotypical views of female players. Perceptions of female preferences are simulated by male players playing women who prefer to heal or fight from a distance. This experience is perpetuated by players through a confirmation bias that permeates MMOs, as men assume women focus on these and other prescriptive gender roles. MMOs focus on player interaction, yet players are not communicating clearly enough to each other that women's perceived game desires are not so different than men's, though this may partially be a product of women playing invisibly to avoid harassment.

Female avatar preferences may be misaligned from real-world female preferences because of the difference between 'feminine' characteristics imposed by male players and those culturally instilled in women more widely. Martey, et al. state that men who gender bend use more emotional phrases in chat than men playing male avatars.[72] Communicating in this way may be an attempt to personify perceived emotional aspects of women to blend in, or they may be genuine feelings of male players, which they do not feel able to show through a male avatar. The researchers claim that gender-bent female characters jumped, moved backward, and played further away from groups significantly more than those who played as men. These behaviours are likely to be conscious and used as a technique to receive help from male players. This is more easily achieved if female avatars can capture the attention of male players, and research suggests that these players may be behaving in this way to 'encourage differential treatment' from other players, such as assistance with a quest or gifts given to their avatar.[73] It could be understood that male players are disempowering themselves into the role of a female avatar to gain empowerment through special treatment from

[71] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, pp. 112-13.
[72] Martey, et al., 'Strategic Female', p. 295.
[73] See Martey, et al., 'Strategic Female', p. 297.

other players by ensuring their avatar is constantly observed by others in the game. Chat is another active area where male players adapt to perceived feminine qualities. Martey, et al. found that women playing as women used the most exclamation marks, emotional phrases, and smile emoticons; men playing men used the least, and men playing as women fell in between.[74] This is a perception of female communication online – a topic discussed in Chapter Three – and displays behaviour correctly aligned with femininity.[75]

Over-performing femininity – manipulating physical traits, healing, fighting from a distance, using feminine language traits, jumping, etc. – takes on a different significance for women than for men, in the game world or the real one. According to Mary Ann Doane, if a woman were to over-perform femininity, it acts as a mask, which, while it may 'fool' men who know no better, resists 'patriarchal positioning […] in its denial of the production of femininity as closeness, as presence-to-itself, as, precisely, imagistic'. Wearing the mask as a woman is an act which identifies it as a cover of 'a non-identity'.[76] For a female player, femininity which is overdone 'foregrounds' it as a symbol for something, which, if it existed, could not be made a mask. There is certainly power in this over-performativity for women, contingent on its ability to identify the masquerade *as a masquerade*, yet for men, the wearer of the mask is more empowered upon removing it. Speaking of wider culture, men do not need to improve their bodies that way, when, were they to remove the mask, they would still be man, an established, defaulted state.[77] Instead, beliefs about femininity as passive and domestic are reinforced rather than subverted when male players play as women.

Another area that incorporates gender bending and may offer some insight, is cosplay. This is another form of performative gender bending as participants costume as characters from animation, film, or video games. Many members of the cosplay community choose to gender bend, and they design their costume by changing the gender of the character to match their own or by changing their own gender to match that of the character's. Joel Gn states that in the latter case especially, gender is determined not by the genitalia of the cosplayer, but the clothing they are wearing – just as player gender does not determine their actions in the game, rather the gender of their

[74] Martey, et al., 'Strategic Female', p. 294.
[75] See Chapter Three of this thesis, pp. 136-8.
[76] Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', *Screen*, 23.3-4 (1982), 74-88 (pp. 81-2).
[77] Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade', p. 82.

avatar – the 'clothing' they wear.[78] In cosplaying scenarios, consuming and modifying together create the liberation of the experience.[79] This is undoubtedly linked to the modifications players make to their avatars, when they mould their characters around the persona they will assume for the rest of the game. Gn states that cosplayers find their own place on the balance of gender representation as they engage in the practice of bringing a character from the virtual to the non-virtual; cosplayers are 'conflating the boundaries between subject and object' using their means of engaging in 'modification and performance.'[80] According to Andrew Mactavish, such practices are similar to video games in their ability to engage in 'psychological transportation' as a means of enhancing immersion for the cosplayer into their role as their character.[81]

Vivian Sobchack claims that bodies 'have the capacity to function both figuratively and literally. They are pervasive and *extensional*': meaning comes not from bodies or depictions, 'but emerges from both' [emphasis in original].[82] However, cosplay introduces a new and complex challenge to some characters' depictions: some characters that are cosplayed include elves, dwarves, animals, and aliens whose genders are not easily defined or do not translate straightforwardly to human gender markers.[83] Regardless, these characters are often sexed through the show/game/etc. or by the cosplayer themselves. However, much like those who gender bend in MMOs, cosplayers 'place a greater focus on the "likeness" and aesthetics of the imitation' rather than a re-enactment and adherence.[84] Many cosplayers depend heavily on the immersive aspects of their character and are devoted to a successful role play, and the same is true of players and their avatars. While they may try to speak and act like as their character would, they are still performing the bases of gender expectations and conforming to a template.

Performative aspects of gender bending in MMOs have the ability to flow into the real world: Williams, et al. reveal that women conformed to stereotypical gender

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[78] Joel Gn, 'Queer Simulation: The Practice, Performance and Pleasure of Cosplay', *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 25.4 (2011), 583-93 (p. 585).
[79] Gn, 'Queer Simulation', p. 584.
[80] Gn, 'Queer Simulation', p. 588.
[81] Andrew Mactavish, 'Technological Pleasure: The Performance and Narrative of Technology in Half-Life and Other High-Tech Computer Games', in *ScreenPlay: Cinema/Videogames/Interfaces*, ed. by Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), pp. 33-49 (p. 40).
[82] Vivian Sobchack, 'What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh', *Senses of Cinema* (2000), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2000/conference-special-effects-special-affects/fingers/> [accessed 5 December 2017].
[83] Gn, 'Queer Simulation', p. 589.
[84] Gn, 'Queer Simulation', p. 589.

roles *if* they played with partners who were gamers.[85] This may be influenced by the perception of other players in the game and intensified by the physically proximate sense of feeling under observation. Women may be affected in this way by unconsciously attempting to satisfy their male partner by conforming to societal norms. The couple forms a microguild, where teamwork is present and roles naturally arise for group cohesion. Where the assumed roles would seemingly follow from the class, and therefore the skills, of the character, gender roles are still able to subconsciously guide gamers' actions. This suggests the power of cultural artefacts influenced by the male gaze as part of the moulding process of female behaviour in social situations, despite its liminality to encounters which take place in the game space. Women and female characters are potentially coerced by expectations in both the game and the real worlds.

The Truth about Gender Preference

In the extensive work he undertook analysing the behaviours of players in MMOs, Yee found that women and men do not play games as differently as the surrounding culture may suggest, stating that similarities in motivations for play overlapped by 82 per cent. Men are assumed to favour challenge, but the similarities between men and women for this motivation were as high as 70 per cent. Yee reports that observing 'statistical *overlap* instead of statistical *difference*' reveals that men and women come to the game space for the same reasons, and differences between gender motivations are often 'inflated'.[86] There is indeed a trait in gamers which plays a role in directing preferences for play, but it is not gender. Game scholars who examine gender without simultaneously examining age misunderstand differences in motivations of players, as, according to Yee, 'on average, women in online games are older than men by almost six years'.[87] If women are already playing MMOs, is the problem not that they are not motivated by the play itself, but rather that they deserve an environment in which they do not have to disguise themselves as a male avatar to avoid negative attention?

Games and game content are not 'for' men or women exclusively. Female players may be aware – and frustrated – by sexist representations in masculine games, but they are still inhabiting the game space. With this in mind, the next question may be: *why change a formula which works?* Many women already see sexist physical,

[85] Williams, et al., 'Looking for Gender', pp. 705-6.
[86] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 109.
[87] Nick Yee, 'Demographics, Motivations and Derived Experiences', *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 15.3 (2006), 309-29 (p. 316).

emotional, and sexual depictions as problematic, but accept them to a degree as part of the culture, *but they should not have to*. The subtlety and prevalence of sexism in games may be hard to 'shake', especially when, as Annabelle Mooney claims, the creation and consumption of content which highlights sexist ideals of women as available for consumption by men is embracing the 'essential nature of men'.[88] These beliefs are not permanent and are socially constructed, however, and games play a role in determining such constructions.

Assumptions of preference for play are not trustworthy signifiers of player desire. Jing Wang, et al. report that the gender designations for expertise in their study of MMO players were not as expected:

> The results from the correlation test were a bit surprising in that neither age nor gender was related to game expertise. […] [M]ale players did not play the most hours, despite being more experienced with the genre. It was the female players who were the most intense and dedicated 'hardcore' players, playing more often (if in smaller overall numbers) and with more dedication than the males (as indicated by lower likelihood of quitting).[89]

Starting with the most prevalent stereotype of women, it is clear that game designers and fellow players understand female gamers incorrectly in their dedication to MMO play. While women are perceived as using public spaces in MMOs to socialise, they are taking their game worlds more seriously than male players. This is almost a direct contradiction of our understanding of male and female desires for play, yet the old assumptions continue. Not only are women more contentious in MMOs, men are more social. In a study by Lucas and Sherry, men were found to be more motivated by socialisation than women. These results are staggering and show not only how misguided society has been in pushing men toward and women away from particular types of game content: it also illustrates how needlessly exclusivist game content has been by focusing on male-based methods of play and arousal. Expanding on these studies, Yee states that socialisation in games has layers, which clarifies but does not explain the insistence in gamer culture that women are more passively motivated. Men and women are equally motivated by social factors, though they seek out slightly different aspects of socialisation: women favoured relationships to be found in the

[88] Annabelle Mooney, 'Boys Will Be Boys: Men's Magazines and the Normalisation of Pornography', in *The Gender and Media Reader*, ed. by Mary Celeste Kearney (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 277-91 (p. 284).
[89] Wang, et al., 'Focused on the Prize'.

space, while men favoured teamwork or general socialisation like ambient sociability.[90] Until wider culture sees women not as passive objects but as active subjects, misunderstanding in game desires and the content to meet them will continue.

Gender roles are dictated by the culture of the time, and only a few decades ago, computers and technology were considered female arenas. Yee discusses the people who were the early 'computers' before digital computers were created: mathematicians who worked on calculations by hand, and many 'human computers […] were women with degrees in mathematics.' During this time, working with computers was considered 'women's work'. Later, when the first computer was built, it was from among these women that the programmers were chosen. 'Thus, the first six professional computer programmers were all female.'[91] In fact, according to Matthew Kirschenbaum, one of the strongest, most ground-breaking word processors of this time was created by a woman – Evelyn Berezin.[92] Women belong in game spaces and game content, and on their own terms – not those dictated by hypersexualisation and incorrect attitudes concerning gender suitability for profession and play.

Pierre Bourdieu's work on the Habitus may shed more light on the tendencies created by MMOs, as discussed in Chapter One.[93] Karl Maton claims that the Habitus is structured, structuring, and a structure.[94] Applied more concretely to MMOs, the formation and the stakes of players who invest in this culture manifest in several ways. For example, players are asked to devote huge blocks of time toward avatar advancement, especially if they are in a guild that depends on them for raids.[95] Players can only play *WoW* free of charge until they reach Level 20, after which they are then asked to pay a subscription to continue, requiring a financial commitment from players. Further, MMO play combats feelings of frustration, in contrast to real-world successes, which are not as easily defined and measured as in the game. MMOs stimulate players in this way, and there are shared experiences across the genre; yet, because MMOs form a Habitus, they are able to sustain sexist ideas as well. The beliefs of a gender divide in game desires is maintained in the Habitus, as it creates and consumes ideas about

[90] Yee, 'Motivations', p. 774.
[91] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, pp. 99-100.
[92] Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2016), pp. 149, 146.
[93] Chapter One of this thesis, pp. 85-7.
[94] Karl Maton, 'Habitus', in *Pierre Bourdieu: Key Concepts*, ed. by Michael Grenfell (Bristol: MPG Books Group, 2012), pp. 48-64 (p. 50).
[95] Raids are quests performed by groups of players who team up to defeat other players, a collection of in-game enemies, or a single but powerful boss.

gender suitability in character traits as well as player motivation. These sexist presentations of gender influence the ways in which players look at real-world women, and games like *WoW* habitually present players with and maintain these ideas while players navigate the game universe.

The exploitation of women and their adherence to the male gaze is certainly not applicable to MMOs alone, but the public nature of the space adds a unique dynamic to representation. When players design characters in single-player games, their choices are only experienced – or consumed – by themselves. In MMOs, fellow players' perceptions play an undeniable role, and therefore, so too do societal preferences regarding which traits in women are most desirable. Applying Dean MacCannell's sociological theories to MMOs alongside Mooney's research, female avatars still retain the power to be presented as a 'construction of the real' and therefore by extension, are considered applicable to 'the real', despite the fantasy aspects of many MMOs. Regardless of the realisation that games are fictional – or are staged or programmed at the very least – the 'staged authenticity' has the ability to present a façade that women 'really are as they are portrayed'. Even though the 'idiosyncratic version' of women is the accurate one, true femininity takes 'moral, esthetic and psychological' inferiority over cultural reproductions.[96]

Conclusion: 'Games for Women' Is a Red Herring[97]

MMOs are not the only spaces in which players are encouraged to believe that representations of women are true, despite their adherence to the male gaze rather than a reflection of real-world women. They are places in which female characters exist for the consumption of players, while simultaneously being inhospitable to actual female gamers. This pattern is explored by Yee, who states that '[p]erhaps the greatest irony of this male fantasy is that women are simultaneously highly desired and shunned'. Female bodies are on display in increasing levels of undress, but when a real-world woman enters the game space, she is idolised only as long as she conforms to the norms of the Habitus and does so silently. She 'is deemed suspect', as male players question her abilities as misaligned with her gender. 'Women are worshipped and idolized as long as they are not real; it is in this sense that online games reveal their function as a male

[96] Mooney, 'Boys Will Be Boys', p. 281; Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 27.
[97] Yee uses this term to describe games for women in *Proteus Paradox*, p. 109.

fantasy.'[98] This may be influenced by the disruption of the mechanisms of male control by the presence of the female subject – an opposition to the voyeuristic performance of the object. The offspring of this notion is one of the biggest inside jokes among those who participate in MMO culture: the armoured bikini. Many players will equip the armour despite their frustration with its sexist implications when its statistics are too high to ignore. Yee discusses the 'insidious logic' that follows this mechanism, which demonstrates a strange contradiction. As male avatars level up, they gain access to armour with higher stats that better protect and cover their bodies against attack. However, the opposite is true for female avatars: while the stats increase on their armour as they level up, the appearance of the armour leaves their bodies 'uncovered and made more vulnerable. Thus, as women gain power, they are disempowered in another way.' Yee claims that this is the result of a space which encourages female objectification: no matter the amount of power a woman holds in these spaces, she will never be able to escape the role of 'vulnerable sexual object'.[99] This reading reinforces Martha Nussbaum's claim cited in the previous chapter: 'Whoever this woman is and whatever she has achieved, for you she is a cunt, all her pretensions vanish before your sexual power'.[100] The mechanics of single-player games often portray a similar cycle: gain experience, level up, get better gear and more opportunities to show more skin. The feedback loop supported by such mechanics undeniably suggests that female characters can expect to be rewarded by becoming eye candy more effectively; players steadily learn that increasing stages of undress are a prize for their skills. Optimistic thinking might view game designers as unaware of such connotations; yet, just as in other sexist representations of women in games, they are interpreted by players as if they were intentional.

One argument forwarded as a means of achieving equality is to present males in similar ways:

> I find it somewhat disturbing that while the female avatars all have very prominent breasts, none of the male avatars have anything visible at the crotch at all. Their clothes are cut in a male style, but there's no 'bulge' where things ought to be. If female avatars are made to approach some 'ideally attractive'

[98] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, pp. 107-8.
[99] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 107.
[100] Martha Nussbaum, 'Objectification', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24.4 (1995), 249-91 (p. 285); see also Chapter One of this thesis, p. 48.

> or 'sex-specific' model, then male avatars ought to be the same, rather than being de-sexed.
> (*World of Warcraft*, female, 31)[101]

Yee claims that equal physical depictions are a complicated matter, especially when male players have no control over the design of their character models. He states that one common defence is that male avatars are similarly exaggerated, and that unequal physical treatment is present for men as well. However, the exaggerations are quite different in their nature: while male bodies are overly muscular, the message is that men are most empowered when they are physically fit. For female avatars, the exaggeration is of a sexual nature, suggesting that women are most empowered when they are sexualised; an over-enhancement of breasts, thighs, and hips are then poorly covered to facilitate their viewing.[102]

Gender equality in the games industry has begun, yet there is still some resistance to a female presence there through social labelling of video games as 'boy's toys'. Mia Consalvo states that game research is still missing crucial information about male players' motivations in rejecting and harassing women and minorities. Women joining game culture is not new, but it is becoming an increasingly hostile environment for them. This results from beliefs regarding the suitability and ability of players in the space and fears that the industry is being negatively affected by so-called encroachers.[103] This is why Consalvo's suggestion to discover more about the motivators of hostile players is so important: these players value specific aspects of the game space, and if those are identified, the ever-illusive possibility for discussion becomes greater, even if such principles are revealed to be based in misogyny. Many female gamers may not see sexist representations as inherently harmful or may feel like their place in the culture, however volatile, has been hard won. When Anita Sarkeesian released her video series 'Tropes vs. Women in Video Games' – the main reason she was targeted during #GamerGate – men were not the only ones up in arms at her critique. Female gamers spoke out against her as well, claiming that she was incorrect in her analysis or that she was turning players against good games. 'Feminism' is a dirty word in wider culture and in games, and some female players feel it necessary to separate themselves from

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[101] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 105.
[102] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 105.
[103] Mia Consalvo, 'Confronting Toxic Gamer Culture: A Challenge for Feminist Games Studies Scholars', *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, 1 (2012), <http://adanewmedia.org/blog/2012/11/11/issue1-consalvo/> [accessed 4 November 2018] (paras 5,7).

feminists who are seen as disrupting the status quo – even in progressive ways – so that they may continue to operate in a male-dominated space. Effort is needed by the game community, from moderators to game designers to players-as-consumers, to make game worlds more welcoming to real-world women, and not only concerning the hypersexualised women found in much of game design. McGonigal suggests that in MMOs, the key is not cooperation but *collaboration*. While these traits seem similar, she claims that there is a clear difference between them. Collaboration goes beyond 'other collective efforts: it is a fundamentally *generative* act': to achieve this, collaboration uses co-operating, co-ordinating, and co-creating, a unique blend which supplies the heart of the difference.[104] What might game content look like if feminist ideals were collaborated upon and applied to representation of women, of people of colour, of homosexual relationships?

According to Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus, profit is best made by catering to a large audience, an audience which has very clear preferences in advertisements that conform closely to masculinised and feminised ideals.[105] These attitudes are not isolated to the game space: therefore, designers' increased awareness is necessary to help players become more aware of the attitudes they may be perpetuating regarding game spaces as boys' clubs. These ideals spread into wider culture, which already sustain the same beliefs that women, whether virtual or real, are performing their gender suitably only when conforming to misogynistic codes. Games have so much potential to play a role in changing these attitudes toward female empowerment: removing the glass ceiling for female characters in MMOs could play a vital role in nurturing progressive ideas about gender into wider culture – and culture may be ready for that change.

The discussion of this chapter has articulated MMOs as spaces in which players are encouraged to test the limits of what they can achieve through blissful productivity and satisfying challenge – previously assumed to be a masculine motivation. McGonigal claims that this measurable forward motion is equal in satisfaction to that of the end goal. 'The process of leveling up is easily as important, if not more important, than the endgame.' She suggests that paying for a subscription for a game like *WoW*

[104] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, p. 268.
[105] Katherine Sender, 'Selling Sexual Subjectivities: Audiences Respond to Gay Window Advertising', *Critical Studies in Media and Communication*, 16.2 (1999), 172-96 (pp. 180-1, 183); Robert Alan Brookey and Robert Westerfelhaus, 'Hiding Homoeroticism in Plain View: The *Fight Club* DVD as Digital Closet', in *Gender and Media Reader*, ed. by Kearney, pp. 192-207 (p. 197).

gives players access to the 'privilege of higher in-game productivity'. Players who are motivated by challenge, race to the most difficult higher-level bosses 'because that's where the most challenging opponents and the hardest work – in other words, the most invigorating confidence-building gameplay – is available.'[106] The connection between avatars and the socialisation they experience is unique in MMOs and makes possible the combination of virtual communities and player achievement. Socialisation is an equally motivating aspect of MMOs for men as for women, and while guilds are an obvious means for socialisation, it is takes more than guilds to make MMOs social. There are public areas that allow players to learn new skills, to buy and sell items, and to learn more about the game world. *Star Wars Galaxies* (2003) sought to highlight the social aspects of MMOs, creating a game space that thrived on social environments more than challenge motivation.[107]

> *SWG* was explicitly designed to emphasize the more social aspects of multiplayer gaming but was also widely criticized as having one of the most intensive 'grind' of the genre. […] [I]n other words, a player's progress was nowhere near as smooth as in WoW. And SWG, targeting the same audience as WoW, never reached the massive number of subscribers WoW attracted within the first few months of its launch.[108]

According to Nicolas Ducheneaut and Robert Moore, this shows that MMOs exist for players of diverse motivations: players motivated by challenge and those motivated by socialisation – games use both to attract players.[109] MMOs depend on multiple aspects to attract gamers, but as I have argued, these motivations are certainly not dictated by gender.

Sexist game mechanics and characters in MMOs are socially significant owing to their applicability to the non-virtual. According to Wang, et al.:

> Researchers have argued that the complex, immersive, and socially interdependent nature of persistent online worlds make [*sic*] them sufficiently similar to 'real life' that we can gain insights into social, behavioural, and economic phenomena by studying games as a proxy for offline arenas.[110]

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[106] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, p. 54.
[107] Jeff Freeman, *Star Wars Galaxies* (LucasArts, 2003), Windows.
[108] Ducheneaut, et al., 'Alone Together?', p. 413. 'Grind' is a repetitive action or routine that is required to level up.
[109] Nicolas Ducheneaut and Robert J. Moore, 'The Social Side of Gaming: A Study of Interaction Patterns in a Massively Multiplayer Online Game', *Proceedings of the 2004 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (2004), 360-9 (pp. 367-8).
[110] See Wang, et al., 'Focused on the Prize'.

MMOs are considered accurate simulations of real world interactions, and the analyses within hold truths about the non-virtual as well as the virtual. This resemblance to the real world reveals the value of games as cultural artefacts, showing us the current values of our society. However, it also shows that the habits in game cultures which embrace diversity could be adopted into the real world. The medium exhibits lingering sexist trends, such as those found in male gender bent players and in the limitations programmed for female characters. False perceptions of women in the game space show that game worlds are not yet gender-equal: using sexist professions, default characters, and other sexist mechanics, women, both in-game and in the real world, are clearly misunderstood by fellow players. Game design continues to incorporate sexist traits in a repeating cycle which instils sexist attitudes in players who then reflect sexist attitudes into wider culture.

Chapter Three
Interactions in Game Communities

Introduction: Online Behaviour towards Friends and Enemies

Games influence existing relationships and create new ones, both in the game space and the physical spaces inhabited by players. In team-based online shooting games, these personal relationships are even more important than loyalty to the team. In fact, if young players who are friends – in either the virtual or real worlds – are put on separate teams, they will betray (kill) their teammates in favour of their friends. These players seem to be exhibiting anti-social behaviour when betrayals lower the team score, but they are actually behaving in the opposite way. 'The implication is that players actively adjust their play based on their friendships – the motivation to maintain these relationships is greater than the motivation to maintain harmony within the current team or to win the current competition', report Winter Mason and Aaron Clauset.[1]

Games have also been shown to strengthen connections between players, like those between adults and children. According to Shira Chess, the 2007 'My Wii Story' advertising campaign celebrated players who used the console to bring their family together. In this campaign, users were encouraged to write in to share how the Wii had changed their lives for the better. Most respondents were women, typically sharing stories of how the Wii was moved 'from my son's room to the living room' and the connections that the Wii facilitated between members of their family.[2] In this public feeling in a private setting, games were satisfying more than one player at a time but also served as a congregation tool. This is a stark comparison to the norm of the mid-1990s, in which the PlayStation 'was perceived as the preserve of teenage boys and men in their twenties with spare income and loose family ties'.[3] Deborah Chambers claims that the Wii console advertisements featured 'party fun', often giving the impression of

[1] Winter Mason and Aaron Clauset, 'Friends FTW! Friendship, Collaboration and Competition in *Halo: Reach*', *Proceedings of the 2013 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work* (2013), 375-86 (pp. 379, 383).
[2] Shira Chess, *Ready Player Two: Women Gamers and Designed Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. 89.
[3] Deborah Chambers, '"Wii Play as a Family": The Rise in Family-Centred Video Gaming', *Leisure Studies*, 13.1 (2011), 69-82 (p. 72).

enjoying a physical game space rather than the game content itself.[4] Games certainly have been and continue to be shared in physical spaces, but, since early MMOs, games have also brought complete strangers into real-world relationships. Some of these interactions bring players from opposite ends of the world together, even into marriage, exploring the boundaries of romantic and sexual expression – and how players move beyond them.

This chapter explores online spaces, and virtual and physical game communities – examining how they differ in content and interactivity to one another, as well as which traits they borrow from each other – to reveal how navigations of gender are unique in public spaces online. The methodology used in this chapter applies ethnography and anthropology to game spaces more heavily than the others in this thesis. Gender exposes itself online, even when users assume themselves to be anonymous: I analyse computer-mediated communication (CMC) to explore particular kinds of gendered behaviours that users assume online, which reveal them as masculine or feminine. After defining the CMC tendencies for gender determinants, I apply the actions found in gender-based trends to ethnographic studies conducted by myself and by other game researchers to measure how players perform gender, how they do not, and how they are treated by other players when succeeding or failing at this performance. This is done by analysing responses to my survey of players of the game *Life Is Strange* (2015) to determine if their level of discomfort with intrapersonal conflict can be predicted by gender tendencies.[5] Following from this branch of thought, this chapter will examine how CMC findings can facilitate understanding of other player/player relationships, both the rewarding and the painful. Applying anthropological readings to game spaces reveals how game content and their tropes work in tandem with gender expectations in wider culture to produce a particular exclusionary mood for game spaces – and how this mood is weaponised against marginalised groups. I read games as texts and combine the close analysis with ethnographic studies on interactions online, which find that sexist, racist, homophobic, and other discriminatory tropes in games support the formation of communities that endorse stereotypical ideas about such demographic groupings.

As the previous chapter has noted, online games offer unique opportunities for players to share the game space with others, and the interactions which arise are distinct

[4] Chambers, 'Wii Play as a Family', p. 73.
[5] Raoul Barbet and Michel Koch, *Life Is Strange* (Square-Enix, 2015), multiple platforms.

compared to other genres. Sexist tropes in games present femininity in specific ways, and the skewed image male players may have of their female counterparts manifests in interactions and relationships online – from romance to harassment, and anywhere in between. Online game communities and non-gaming online communities may discuss different subject matter, but the interactions within them are incredibly similar, and often based on gendered behaviour – in who does the talking, what they are saying, and to whom they choose to say it. Online spaces are dependent in many ways on differing behaviour and the stringent boundaries placed between men and women, which dictate behaviours that conform to gender expectations. Thus, learning about 'general' online spaces informs discussion about online game spaces and vice versa. Online spaces, especially game spaces, both *maintain* the misogynistic Habitus as much as they *exhibit the consequences* of a history of sexism in game narrative and mechanics. I compile my own and other scholars' work to describe the ways in which technology brings players together and allows them to perform stereotypical behaviour that they have learned from both game and wider cultures. In identifying specifically which ways they do so, this chapter seeks to answer three questions: *How do game communities facilitate player/player interaction, especially those based on assumptions about gender trends, in ways non-virtual spaces cannot? How is harassment against women (and marginalised people) maintained in these spaces? How are positive interactions, especially in cases of intimate player/player relationships, supported in these spaces?*

To answer these questions, I first outline some common gendered behaviour in online spaces to illustrate that users behave in distinct ways which rely heavily on aggressive/male-passive/female dichotomies when they interact online. My discussion then focuses specifically on one common set of behaviours: men pursuing conflict and women avoiding it. I will elaborate upon this pattern by discussing an original survey of 156 participants that attempts to measure whether or not gender can predict conflict-prone or -avoiding tendencies in video game play. The survey reveals unexpected results which suggest that players do act differently from each other, but not in ways dictated by gender.

Next, I examine relationships that players have online in fictional worlds. In these relationships, some players play as their avatar while others play as themselves; crucially, even if relationships occur solely in the virtual, they are equally as genuine as those from the real world. In many cases, players use online worlds to simulate

stereotypical male and female behaviour, even as they use the space for unique sexual expression: I consider what this reveals about our understanding of physical bodies in relation to gender. This kind of dating aligns closely with behaviours and expectations of online dating between real-world people; in an interview I conducted between a couple who used online dating to begin their relationship, I discover that some sex-based tendencies arise in these arenas. There are some aspects of gender performance that threaten the legitimacy of this type of online space, such as men using the space to harass women; however, we will see how technology nevertheless improves peoples' real lives and enhances their happiness within relationships.

Finally, my discussion turns to harassment in online game spaces, analysing the tendency for men to comprise the largest population of harassers. I explore which behaviours they adopt to harass women most efficiently, which motivations drive their behaviour, and how women react to harassment. The assumptions under which harassers operate suggest a strong need to protect games from women and the stereotypes about them which would presumably alter the space toward feminine, and away from masculine, preference. The crucial connection between these points is the sexism that permeates game culture (and culture more widely), thus normalising the objectification of women. As an interview in the conclusion notes, game spaces can be navigated in ways that mitigate exposure to sexist harassment, but too often this is not the case. More importantly, women and players from marginalised groups should not have to play in ways that take into account anything other than the missions of the game and their immersion in the space. Game worlds *and* online spaces are simulations of the real world, yet the simulations online have a crucial distinction: they are full of virtual people controlled by real-world humans – a fact that changes everything.

Gendered Tendencies in Computer-Mediated Communication

According to the cyberfeminist Rhiannon Bury, female cyberspaces should never have formed. After all, the initial lure of cyberspace was the lack of identity users could enjoy, shedding their profession, home life, and gender. It was initially a surprise, then, when women were assembling in a space assumed to be anonymous and becoming cyberfeminists – even if they were not aware that their participation in the community

was creating 'cyberspaces of their own'.[6] Many forums were run by and for women, and fandoms are one example of these spaces: online groups that discuss the culture surrounding fictions, television shows, movies, video games, or celebrities. Fandoms are spaces where participants can discuss topics and behave in ways traditionally aligned with femininity, which many of them had been criticised for enacting in other spaces – especially in other types of online forums.

Sharon Cumberland claims female-run cyberspaces assembled as naturally as they did because '[t]he Internet offers women both privacy and access to like-minded people.'[7] This suggests a connection between women and their desire for the formation and exploration of relationships, both within the forum and in cyberspace representation: this is one of the main attractors of young women to game content, as will be discussed in Chapter Four.[8] Fanfictions are a practice in which writers manipulate established fictional universes to create new stories, and writers often use their work to expand upon the interpersonal relationships of the characters. Because of the tendency to focus on these relationships as much as – sometimes more than – plot, fanfictions are 'unquestionably a gendered practice', according to Bury.[9] She discusses one of the subgenres of fanfictions called 'slash fiction': so named because it is often male/male (m/m) and of a sexually explicit nature. The debate continues whether slash fiction can be a feminist practice as m/m fiction directly excludes women. However, many claim that these relationships portray relationships of partners on equal grounds regardless of their gender.[10] One argument for m/m relationships in slash fiction states that though many scenes explicitly describe male bodies, when closely examining details, they often deploy female-focused methods of arousal. In her examination of a slash piece concerning two characters from the television show *Due South* (1994-9), Bury highlights the focus on the character's nipples and buttocks, areas typically associated with female arousal.[11] Similarly, Joanna Russ addresses common acts performed in fanfics and the unlikelihood that these descriptions would be present in a fanfic created by a man or for a male audience: 'extraordinary amount[s] of frustration

[6] Rhiannon Bury, *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), p. 3.
[7] Sharon Cumberland, 'The Five Wives of Ibn Fadlan', in *RELOAD: rethinking women + cyberculture*, ed. by Mary Flanagan and Austin Booth (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 175-94 (p. 182).
[8] See Chapter Four of this thesis, pp. 186-95.
[9] Bury, *Cyberspaces of Their Own*, p. 72.
[10] Bury, *Cyberspaces of Their Own*, pp. 76-7.
[11] *Due South*, dir. by George Bloomfield and Steve DiMarco, et al. (CBS, 1994-9).

and delay' for emotional intimacy, gender-role compliant personality traits shifting between characters, anal intercourse with clear vaginal intercourse in mind, and multiple, often simultaneous orgasms.[12]

A running award since 1996 is the 'Bad Sex Award' in fiction led by the *Literary Review*.[13] As an avid Tumblr user (prior to the NSFW ban of December 2018) and fanfic creator myself, a good portion of my social media time is spent virtually surrounding myself with other content creators of fanfics and fan art. When the 2018 shortlist was announced, my feed filled with discussions of the awful depictions of sex in these mainstream works, many of frustration that fanfiction is often seen by outsiders as an unskilled craft when erotic content of this calibre was available for purchase to the wider public. Just as frustrating was the list comprising of all-male authors – and the lack of female pleasure or orgasm in the entries themselves. My experience in the world of fanfiction had not prepared me for the misogynistic content in these passages. I was too used to depictions by female creators, in which sex was not only realistic but was equally stimulating to both or all parties involved – not to mention it was infinitely better written. Even if it were believable that the writers of these entries were parodying erotic literature, this does not explain the lack of female pleasure, reflecting a culture inspired by mainstream pornography, which often provides representations of sex that 'look good' from a masculine and heterosexual perspective, but are devoid of feminist themes of equal stimulation and satisfaction.

Cyberfeminism has taken more overt social stands on this topic, according to Austin Booth and Mary Flannagan. Where fanfictions may be popularly dismissed as the 'indulgent' work of super-fans, many cyberfeminist fictions (both of original content and of fandoms) address feminist issues on a scale grander than sex, and they do so in ways that do not simply inflect the opposite attitudes of misogynistic structures. More widely, these fictions 'portray imaginary cultures in which women are politically or socially dominant, alternative familial and social structures [–] such as matriarchy [–] developed, and a marked emphasis was placed on women's feelings, particularly female desire.'[14] Furthermore, many original short fiction pieces found in collections such as

[12] Joanna Russ, *Magic Mommas, Trembling Sisters, Puritans & Perverts: Feminist Essays* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1985) pp. 81, 83.
[13] 'Literary Review's Bad Sex in Fiction Award', *Literary Review* (2018), <https://literaryreview.co.uk/bad-sex-in-fiction-award> [accessed 4 December 2018].
[14] Mary Flannagan and Austin Booth, 'Introduction', in *RELOAD*, ed. by Flanagan and Booth, pp. 1-24 (p. 4).

Booth and Flannagan's *RELOAD* (2002) use science fiction as a medium to combine femininity and technology. This notion, which represents woman and machine as cognate, has fascinated cyberfeminists since Donna Haraway's major feminist intervention, *A Cyborg Manifesto* in 1985, an essay which encouraged feminists to move beyond the boundaries imposed by the current rhetoric and what those boundaries implied about the limitations surrounding understandings of gender (among a vast many other ideas). Zoë Sophia provides a possible explanation for an agreement of the two entities of woman and machine: she claims that 'feminine associations' of tech include their user friendliness, making women 'structurally equivalent' to machines. Within the bodies in which human and machine are combined lies a prophecy of wider societal admission for real-world women: 'if these artificial second selves can be loved and accepted as powerful, resistant, speaking subjects, so too might women, long acclaimed as monstrous to conventional categories of self and other.'[15]

Unlike feminine cyberspaces, CMC studies from business or personal – yet not fandom-based – discussion forums do not reflect an impulse toward gender equality. The results of these studies are significant for two reasons: firstly, they clarify gendered responses in players and other virtual users online, especially in cases of harassment against women; and secondly, this information measures inclination toward or away from certain behaviours according to gender, specifically in relation to dis/comfort with conflict, which informs the original survey in the next section. Susan Herring was one of the trailblazers who studied gender and CMC decades ago, and she continues to research strategies used by men and women as they connect virtually. She conducted her first study in 1992, but, well before that, she was researching topics such as male and female participation, their interactions, and the content people post while they are online. Herring and Sharon Stoerger claim that if 'equality is defined as equal in principle access, women in the United States have caught up with men.'[16] The question remains whether female representation in CMC has been able to improve the quality of women's treatment, especially in relation to the content which they post and in which settings they feel safe to do so. Past research has explored these questions and defined

[15] Zoë Sophia, 'Virtual Corporeality: A Feminist View', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 15 (1992), 11-24 (pp. 14, 16).
[16] Susan Herring and Sharon Stoerger, 'Computer and (A)nonymity in Computer-Mediated Communication', in *The Handbook of Language, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. by Susan Ehrlich, Miriam Meyerhoff, and Janet Holmes, 2nd edn (Chichester: Wiley & Sons, 2014), pp. 567-86 (p. 569).

clear differences in the ways in which men and women post. Herring states that, in environments such as forums,

> males and high-status participants in the group dominated the interaction, both under normal conditions and under conditions of anonymity. Other research reported the use of aggressive tactics by men in online discussions, sometimes explicitly targeted at female participants. Women and participants suspected of being female also received a disproportionate amount of (unwelcome) sexual attention.[17]

With this revelation in mind, one must ask: in cases of anonymity, how do fellow posters perceive the gender of the author?

Men and women use specific language habits online, and the difference in male and female posts, even when they do so anonymously, accord closely with Herring's previous statements. Men and women act and *re*act in discourse differently, she states, and some 'tells' of gender exist – especially men tending to post aggressively and women passively or in nurturing ways. Her work summaries her own work and that of other scholars and claims, for example, '[m]ales were more likely to post longer messages, begin and close discussions in mixed-sex groups, assert opinions strongly as "facts," challenge others, use crude language (including insults and profanity), and in general adopt an adversarial stance toward their interlocutors.' Yet, '[i]n contrast, females tended to post relatively short messages, and they were more likely to qualify and justify their assertions, apologize, express appreciation, support others, and in general, adopt an "aligned" stance toward their interlocutors.'[18] Additionally, men and women differed in their attitudes toward attention: Amy Bruckman claims that men especially enjoy the attention given to them when they post 'as' women in cyberspace, often performing to gender norms to encourage sexual advances.[19] Sabine Koch et al. claim that not much has changed since Herring's first studies in the early 90s, reporting similar conclusions: that male participants tend to be more assertive, while female participants are supportive; and that participants could correctly identify the gender of anonymous posts (to a degree).[20] Speaking specifically of game spaces, according to Nicholas Palomares and Eun-Ju Lee, when attempting to embody another gender, online

[17] See Herring and Stoerger, 'Gender and (A)nonymity in CMC', p. 570.
[18] See Herring and Stoerger, 'Gender and (A)nonymity in CMC', p. 570.
[19] Amy Bruckman, 'Gender Swapping on the Internet', in *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*, ed. by Peter Ludlow (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 317-25 (p. 320).
[20] Sabine Koch, et al., 'Constructing Gender in Chat Groups', *Sex Roles*, 53.1-2 (2005), 29-41 (pp. 38-9).

players will (often unintentionally) employ discursive practices that are gendered, such as women behaving less apologetically and tentatively when playing as a male character.[21] This behaviour is undoubtedly a liberating experience, but it nevertheless illustrates, even if done subconsciously, that women believe themselves to be bound to domestic behaviours when men are not, even in fictional scenarios.

Similar gender divisions are found in gameplay for young people, and the space remains gender-boundary dependent in many ways. This is especially true when studying preferences for play of young boys and girls, as clear trends have arisen – trends which contain undeniably stereotypical gender-based tendencies, as I discuss in Chapter Four.[22] As much as wider culture and game culture are coming to adopt feminist viewpoints, reactions by masculine users toward feminine content or feminine-toned content is often antagonistic to the creator/player/poster. The question remains: is this a rejection of feminist ideals or do online spaces exacerbate existing sexist beliefs in male users? The answer to such questions may explain some of the sexist behaviour female players and users experience in virtual spaces. An explanation for such behaviour is crucial in taking long-term action against harassment for women and minorities. To begin exploring this question, I narrow down the broad term 'aggression' to 'conflict' and consider varying degrees of dis/comfort with conflict, as dictated by gender. This is only one channel of aggressive behaviour, but it is one which is present in exchanges between players, whether they are face to face or not.

Dichotomous Attitudes Tested on Gameplay

Gendered tendencies may be applied to gameplay; one conclusion may be that, in some forms of technology, men are more comfortable with conflict than women. This idea led me to test the theory on *Life Is Strange*, because the game play is a far cry from that of others which have made the industry well known: the mechanics do not include shooting, dodging, or jumping, but rather choices toward or away from various diverging plot paths.[23] Players are encouraged to explore Arcadia Bay, the home of Max Caulfield, as she learns she can rewind time and must harness her powers. Max reunites with her best friend from childhood, Chloe Price, who has become involved in drugs

[21] Nicholas A. Palomares and Eun-Ju Lee, 'Virtual Gender Identity: The Linguistic Assimilation to Gendered Avatars in Computer-Mediated Communication', *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 29.1 (2010), 5-23 (p. 14).
[22] See Chapter Four of this thesis, pp. 188-94.
[23] See Appendix Three for survey questions and a link to the results.

and violence in the years Max has been gone. They uncover hidden plots from other residents of Arcadia Bay to find the connections between a missing student and the abuse suffered by one of Max's friends, Kate. Players explore the high school and the city, finding clues and asking questions; much of the gameplay consists of a series of dialogue options or decisions on how to progress the story along varying branches. The game thus performs a balancing act between the role-playing and interactive novel genres, as many of the acclaimed aspects centre on building relationships and connecting sub-plots as much as they do on the mysteries of the game's main narrative.

Players must often choose the course of the story along paths which favour two options: conflict or peace. While not all situations offer a definitive choice in one direction or the other, almost all main quest options tend to offer this binary choice. Nicholas Bowman claims that this mode of in-game decision-making is not a new trait of games, and that offering a moral versus amoral dichotomy in games often consists of 'either moral *gut* reactions or strategic and playful *game* decisions'.[24] Building on Herring's work, which states that in CMC women tend to behave more passively while men behave more dominantly, might these inclinations extend to gameplay? In an attempt to answer this question, I conducted a public online survey in 2017 to which 156 players responded, asking for players' choices in their playthrough of *Life Is Strange* to determine several hypotheses, the first of which was inspired by Herring's work: *H1: Male players choose dialogue/actions in-game which pursue conflict while female players avoid conflict.*

Gender may not be the only determinant for the degree to which a player is conflict-prone, as age may play a significant role. As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, Nick Yee states that age accounts for more difference in desires for play than gender, and his findings are easily adapted and applied to conflict choices.[25] They lead to the question: might younger players more readily use the game space as an environment in which they role-play and deviate from their real-world personas more than older players? Accordingly, this directed me to my second hypothesis: *H2: Younger players are more likely than older players to pursue conflict.*

[24] Nicholas David Bowman, '"For This Much Work, I Need a Guild Card!": Video Gameplay as a (Demanding) Coproduction', in *Produsing Theory in a Digital World 2.0*, ed. by Rebecca Ann Lind (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 107-24 (p. 116).
[25] Nick Yee, 'Demographics, Motivations and Derived Experiences', *Presence: Teleoperators and Virtual Environments*, 15.3 (2006), 309-29 (p. 321); see also Chapter Two of this thesis, p. 121.

Similarly, players who spend more time in virtual spaces may feel more comfortable immersing themselves in the game and seeing the medium as an opportunity to behave differently than their real-world personalities would allow. If players are regular gamers, they may be less troubled by feelings of guilt or responsibility for consequences in-game. It is possible that frequency of immersion in these virtual worlds constitutes an escape from the social and moral obligations demanded by reality. Frequent players may be more able than infrequent players to make the distinction between the real and game worlds. This is especially true with the common gamer practice of using multiple playthroughs to play from different perspectives to explore different outcomes and the players' associated understanding that decisions are not permanent. They may feel more at ease making conflict-prone choices than a less frequent gamer. This idea focused my third hypothesis: *H3: Players who spend most of their leisure time playing games are more likely to pursue conflict than those who spend less time gaming regularly.*

There were some limitations of the survey, in that scores may be affected by other aspects of player background. Future research would need to consider interviews after calculating scores to determine what kinds of background or personal experiences (if any) directed a player towards or away from specific in-game choices to reveal a fuller picture of responses. Additionally, there may be some issue of self-selection in the choice to play this game over others games that contain more aggressive game play – a question I explore further in the discussion of the responses. Future work should also investigate a wider range of games from differing genres, as *Life Is Strange* is a borderline niche game, and further analysis is needed concerning the degree of similarity and difference in actions taken by players toward or away from gendered in-game behaviours.

Methodology

Sample and Procedure

An online survey asking players which choice they made at each in-game crossroads in *Life Is Strange* was created via Google Forms. The survey link was posted to several online forums including the game's wiki page, the *Life Is Strange* subreddit, and several online fan groups on Facebook.[26] The survey was anonymous, and each participant was

[26] The game's wiki page: http://life-is-strange.wikia.com/wiki/Life_is_Strange_Wiki

asked for consent for their data to be used for analysis before proceeding. The total participants numbered 156, though not all participants were analysed for each test. For example, when testing gender-based hypotheses, participants who identified as gender-fluid were removed from the data set.

After asking demographic questions including gender, age, and percentage of leisure time spent on games, the survey asked about the participants' background using a seven-point Likert scale to measure the degree to which respondents identified with the question (for example: 'In real-life situations, I tend to avoid conflict when I can'). In these cases, a score of 1 indicated 'I Strongly Disagree' and 7 indicated 'I Strongly Agree'. The remaining questions asked respondents to select their in-game choices from a list of options taken directly from the gameplay. These were measured on a 5-point scale in which 1 signified a conflict-avoiding tendency while 5 signified a conflict-pursuing tendency. For example, a question such as 'When Frank Bowers Corners Chloe and Max in the Junk Yard, Did You a) Try to Shoot Him b) Not Try to Shoot Him', choice 'a' would receive a conflict score of 5 while choice 'b' received 3, a neutral score (choices of hiding from or otherwise actively avoiding conflict with another character received a score of 1). Though not every choice presented by the game clearly measured conflict inclination, I included those situations so that participants would be less likely to guess the topic of the survey and bias their responses. I removed those questions and responses when I conducted the analysis. An example of a question removed from analysis was: 'When Given the Choice of Resisting Surveillance Cameras at Blackwell, Did You … A) Sign Ms Grant's Petition or B) Not Sign Ms Grant's Petition?' For the final form of the survey, there were five background questions and twenty-one main quest questions.

I gave each response a *conflict score* and re-coded the responses so that the Likert-scale and the in-game questions carried the same weight: the responses were assigned a conflict score between 0 and 1. Questions were re-coded and reverse polarity applied as needed. I added up each participant's score and ran tests on the totals, using a *t*-test (to measure significance of distribution) for my gendered hypothesis and

The subreddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/lifeisstrange/
Facebook group 'Life Is Strange (GAME)': https://www.facebook.com/groups/1578433839080885/
Facebook group 'Life is Strange: Fan Community': https://www.facebook.com/groups/lis.fans/

Spearman's Rho test (measuring rank correlation) on the age and play time hypotheses to test correlation.[27]

Demographics

The participants consisted of 91 self-identified women and 57 men, analysed for their choices on main quest milestones. Ages were distributed in five-year increments from 16 to 50 with the median age range as 31-35; yet interestingly, the largest group of participants comprised those who reported being 16-20 years old (n=59), thus creating a long right tail. The amount of leisure time participants spent on gaming was measured in 25 percentile increments. A slight majority reported their play time as less than 50%: 30% reported 0-25% of their leisure time was spent on games, 32% at 26-50%, 27% at 51-75%, and 16% at 76+. Age range and reported leisure time spent on video games for all participants is reported in Figures 3.1 and 3.2 respectively.

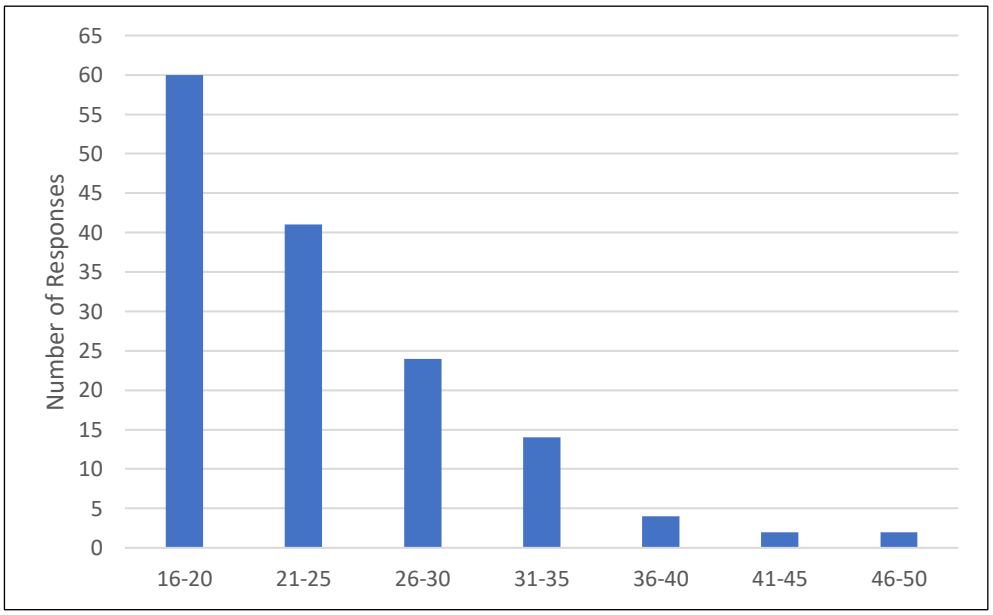

Figure 3.1. Age Range of Respondents

[27] *T*-tests and Spearman's Rho tests were chosen as they were the most reliable and appropriate for the context of my methodology. *T*-tests depend on the comparison of t-values under the null hypothesis to measure significance. A high p-value result signifies the data are likely with a true null, and a low p-value signifies the data are unlikely with a true null. Spearman's Rho is a non-parametric test measuring strength of association between two variables, where the value of r = 1 means a perfect positive correlation, and the value r = -1 means a perfect negative correlation.

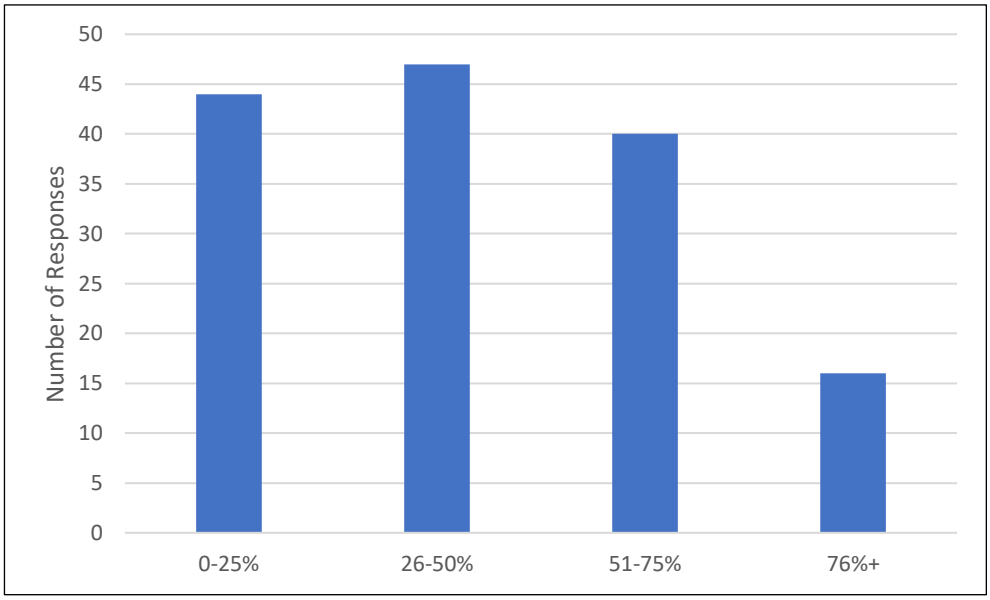

Figure 3.2. Percentage of Leisure Time Spent Playing Video Games (n=156)

Results

H1 suggested that men would be more likely to pursue conflict than women, and I discovered interesting results for this hypothesis. I split the in-game decisions into two categories: main quest choices and choices that were significant yet could not neatly be measured and labelled as conflict-prone or avoiding. The latter group consisted of all the side-quest options to pull non-playable characters (NPCs) from danger by warning them about what was about to happen in each situation. I labelled these the 'Warn' quests.

For main quest choices, the *t*-test found the difference between men and women to be statistically insignificant, as illustrated by Figure 3.3.[28] While the spread for women was greater than that for men, most scores for men and women ranged from approximately 14 and 15.5. For men, the median was 14.25 and the mean was 14.27, while the mean and median for women were both 14.58. In this instance, gender was probably not a determinant of conflict pursuit and avoidance.

Inversely, when I calculated the scores of players who 'Warned', I reversed the polarity so a higher score indicated a higher likelihood of conflict-avoiding player intervention. The *t*-test found the differences between men and women to be significant.[29] Again, the spread of female responses was greater, yet the median for men

[28] *t*-value at -1.677, *p*- value at .956.
[29] *t*-value at 7.978, *p*-value at <.00001.

was 6.792, and the mean was 6.807; the female mean was 5.667, and the median was 5.69.[30] Figure 3.4 shows the spread and concentration of the data. In this instance, gender may have been a determinant of player choice.

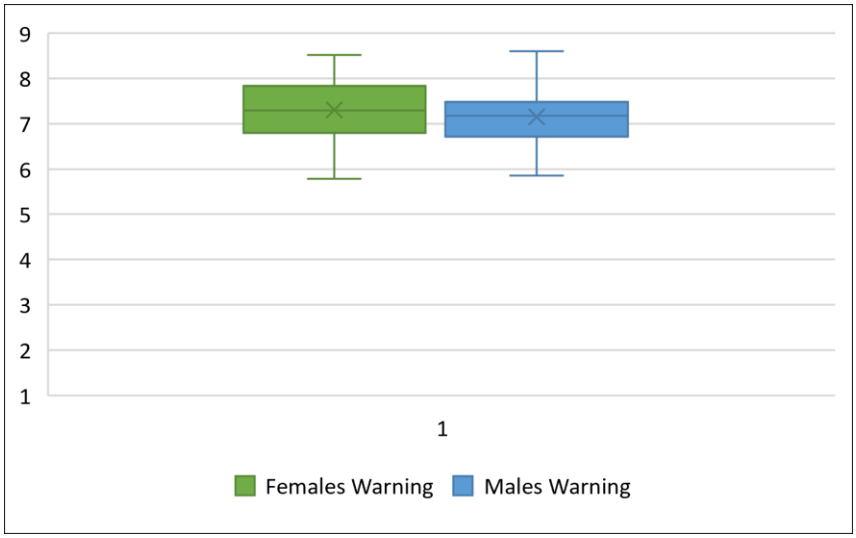

Figure 3.3. Warnings Scores, with Y-Axis Beginning at 1 (n=148)

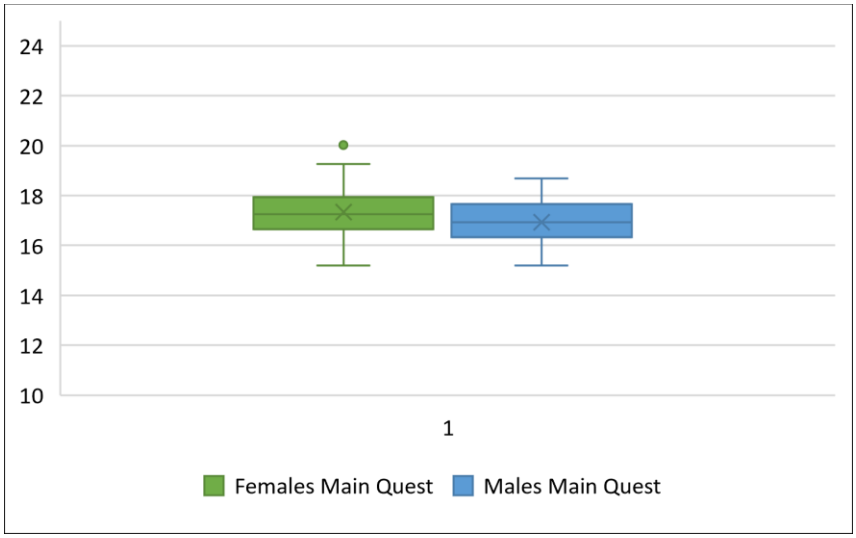

Figure 3.4. Conflict Scores, with Y-Axis Beginning at 10 (n=148)

H2 stated that younger players would be more likely to pursue in-game conflict. The groupings of ages were tested for correlation with a Spearman's Rho test, but the association was not found to be significant.[31] In this instance, age did not seem to be a determinant of conflict pursuit and avoidance.

[30] The overall scores are lower owing to there being fewer side quest choices (n=16) to 'Warn' than there were main quest choices (n=26).
[31] The value of r at .034 and the two-tailed *p*-value of .685.

H3 stated that players who spend greater amounts of their leisure time on video games would be more likely to pursue conflict. A Spearman's Rho test was also applied here, and the association was found to be significant.[32] In this instance, the percentage of leisure time spent on games may have been a determinant of conflict pursuit and avoidance.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between gender, age, and play time on conflict pursuit and avoidance. The results of the gendered main quest scores were surprising in that gender seemed not to be significantly connected to conflict scores in this case. The results challenge the evidence presented by patterns in CMC, which suggest that women are more likely to feel discomfort when engaging in conflict.

The difference between my hypothesis and the responses may result from the game industry's transformation into a less gender-divided space, although I would argue there may be more to the results than this optimistic interpretation. *Life Is Strange* is driven by character and plot, and within the industry, its reputation for this content precedes it. As such, the game attracts players who are looking for a story-driven experience, creating a cohort of players who deviate from typically gendered gaming behaviours *a priori*. Men who play this game – with a slower pace, more intrapersonal interactions, and less physically led actions by the main playable character (MPC) – would more likely adopt an introverted playing style than typical male gamers, who would prefer a fast-paced first-person shooter (FPS). The story and the mechanics are considerably less likely to encourage players to behave in 'macho' ways, especially when compared to more aggressive games. Therefore, women who are attracted to this genre are not engaging in gender-role deviant behaviour, while men may be perceived by peers as doing just that. This may influence the demographic of male players by supplying a pool which is either unintentionally entering a feminised game space or uninfluenced by societal pressures concerning gendered expectations for games.

Despite this potential weakness in the data, the survey is nevertheless useful because, even within possibility self-selection, there was still difference in gameplay according to the various demographic traits that were tested. Additionally, though the game play does not incorporate 'traditional' aspects like quick-time events or aiming

[32] The value of r at .166 and the two-tailed *p*-value is .044.

and shooting, its subject matter is mature, with a rating of PEGI 16 (for language, drugs, and violence). The content is often customarily aggressive, just not in the same way an FPS might be. One further explanation may be based in most respondents' ages falling between 16 and 20. These players may be from a 'new generation', with less ingrained gender roles or more inclined to resist beliefs about gender boundaries.

Inversely, women reported higher conflict scores than H1 suggested, which could derive from several factors. Firstly, Max has most of her encounters with Chloe at her side (sometimes peer-pressuring her), and Chloe's punkish influence on Max proves quite effective on Max's attitudes. The game depends heavily on player immersion, and when playing as Max, Chloe's influence and rebellion against authority may create a sense of 'us against the world' between the player and Chloe. This may be encouraging players to act more like Chloe, which is to say, behaving in a more conflict-prone way. This may also be supported by the previously mentioned observation regarding women who play as men tending to behave in more conventionally masculine ways, which may be extended to Chloe's and Max's influence on the player. While both characters are identified as female, player immersion may be encouraging players to act as Chloe and Max would, rather than from their own perspective, and therefore as more conflict-prone (as suggested by Palomares and Lee).[33]

Secondly, the game presents two romance paths: one heterosexual and the other homosexual. Even if the player chooses actions which take them down the heterosexual romance path, the story makes clear references to bi/homosexual culture, most notably in the options available for Max to pursue a romantic relationship with Chloe. In this way, the game content may be encouraging more conflict-prone behaviour in women as a result of their embracing homosexuality – a choice sometimes viewed by wider culture as deviant. This is especially true considering the forced dichotomy of normal/deviant behaviour in wider culture, reported by Anbjørg Ohnstad. This view rejects gender identity and sexuality as spectrums and rather restricts them as either heteronormative or queer, with little space for nuance between these poles.[34] *Life Is Strange* defies social norms with the celebration of same-sex relationships, harnessing the assumed hetero/queer dichotomy to liberate and therefore encourage players – especially female players – to similarly defy the traditional masculine/feminine

[33] Palomares and Lee, 'Virtual Gender Identity', pp. 15-16.
[34] Anbjørg Ohnstad, 'If I Am Not Straight or Gay, Who Am I?', *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 37.4 (2009), 357-67 (p. 364).

dichotomy and behave in more conflict-prone ways. Thirdly, it may be that my original hypothesis was incorrect simply because text-based CMC is not similar enough to in-game behaviour. CMC relies heavily on the perception by posters that their exchanges are being read and judged by others in a social setting. This best explains the behaviour of women and their arguments' assumed significance to others. *Life Is Strange* offers players the chance at the end of each episode to compare their choices to those of other players and offers a percentile division of players next to a thumbnail of each choice (see Figure 3.5). While this gives players a sense of their standing compared to others, it does not impress a feeling of being observed by those players. If players felt that their game behaviours were being watched and analysed by other players, they may have behaved in ways more aligned with my hypothesis. The survey may have been its own form of social judgement, and I therefore attempted to mitigate this influence on responses by assuring participants of complete anonymity.

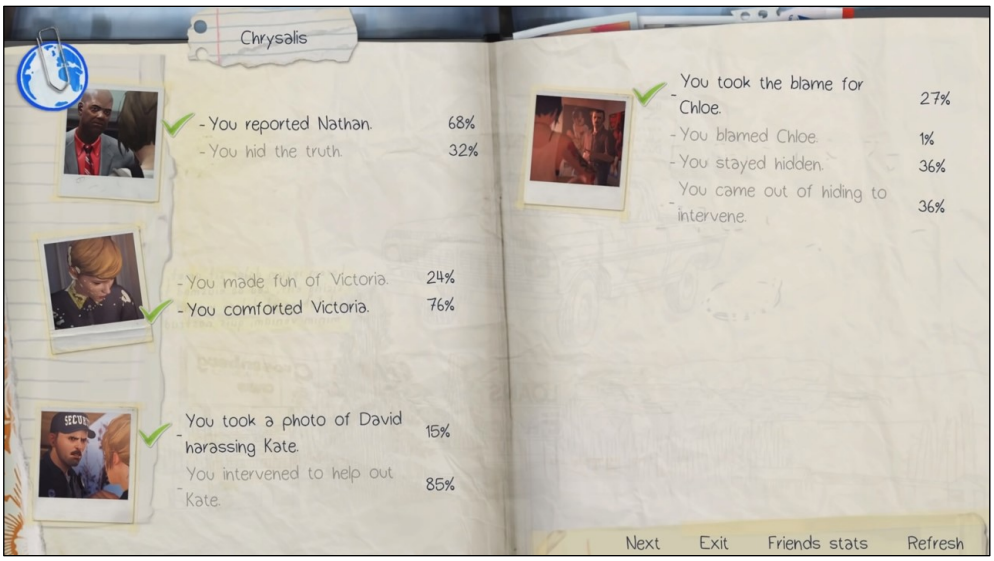

Figure 3.5. Screencap from *Life Is Strange* Illustrating the Player's Choices in Relation to Others'[35]

Any combination of these explanations may justify the lack of gender difference for main quest scores. They may also be applied to the unexpected results for the likelihood of players warning characters of danger. When examining this result specifically, there may be additional variables in play. For example, one in-game choice allowed Max to warn a character before they were hit in the head with a football. While this instance did not impact on the main story, several other Warning scenarios held

[35] Cryaotic, *Cry Plays: Life Is Strange [Ep1] [P3] [Final]*, online video recording, YouTube, 12 February 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HIOMBT_K9c4> [accessed 20 November 2018] 43:40.

more significance. In one scene, Max is fighting her way through a tornado to gain access to a tool which allows her to go back in time. As she makes her way to this location, she passes several characters who are pinned by debris or otherwise stranded or wounded by the storm. The player may assist these characters and save their lives or ignore them and head straight for the main quest location.

Two possible explanations for character behaviour may be applicable here. Firstly, players who chose not to Warn may be aware that once they reach their destination, they can go back in time and the scene in which those characters are endangered will never occur. Effectively, there is 'no point' in saving these characters if the player is going to undo the action as soon as their destination is reached. The game laid out such a scenario prior to this scene, therefore many players would reach this conclusion – regardless of whether or not they chose to act on it. The survey asked the question 'I often rewound choices I made in the game' to which 57 per cent of participants agreed to some degree. This certainly acknowledges players' awareness of the effect rewinding had on the universe and the permanence of their choices, yet the scenario with the storm is quite different than the majority of the options that can be rewound. In most instances, a rewind would take Max back a few seconds to minimally change a decision, while the situations to pull NPCs from debris are 'undone' by Max going back in time several hours or even days. Because of this, those respondents were likely picturing the more minimal scenarios when they claimed to rewind often, and the applicability of those responses to this scenario should not be inflated.

Secondly, players who have this knowledge and choose to save characters nonetheless may be focusing on the established game space and their influence upon it. Those players choosing to save and warn characters may be intentionally exploring the full boundaries of the game. Max's powers are designed to provide her with control over her world and that control is almost always used to help NPCs. Main quests move the story forward, but side quests exist in games to allow players a chance to explore game content in its entirety – whether that opens additional dialogue options, more areas of the map, or in this case, greater chances for Max to exert her rewind power. Frequent gamers (H3) are aware that games encourage them to push the boundaries of virtual universes, and players may find side quests too compelling to ignore the opportunities behind them. Players who engage in such behaviours probably do so for their higher inclinations toward conscientiousness, according to Yee. He states that these players

'enjoy collecting things in the game […and] enjoy the self-discipline required to advance'.[36] Higher conscientiousness supports the possibility that men are exploring the game space more than women in the instances of Warning other characters. This may be true for many players, but not all experiences occur in the same Habitus; this fact could potentially skew my analysis, when not all players play with the same context of experienced game-play and further research is needed to this end.

One final explanation may shed light on contradictory results. Finding no significant difference in main quest scores for conflict pursuit and avoidance may be due to incorrect perceptions in player motivation. Even now, game spaces are full of gender misunderstanding, but research suggests that the majority of players are playing for the same reasons. According to game designer Nicole Lazzaro, adult players look for four traits in their play no matter their gender: 'the opportunity for mastery (Hard Fun); aspects that inspire curiosity (Easy Fun); a method to change how they think, feel, or behave (Serious Fun); and an excuse to hang out with their friends (People Fun)'.[37] When analysing adult gamer preferences, it becomes clear that players are not so different, at least not in ways dictated by gender. As noted previously, according to Yee, 'almost twice the statistical variance' for player preference is explained by age, and game scholars who examine gender without simultaneously examining age 'exaggerate the observed difference' in motivations of players (as women in online games are almost six years older than men).[38]

Alongside existing research, this survey suggests that desires for play may be guided by various demographic factors, but gender is likely not one of them – at least not in the ways we are inclined to believe, according to influences of sexism in gaming and wider culture. From childhood and beyond, women and men are certainly guided toward and away from different behaviours, and those influences guide the beliefs we have about ourselves and how we relate to each other. Nevertheless, my survey suggests that there may be more to the story: that games, bi/homosexual content, pacing for play, and many other factors can encourage players to deviate from gender norms – especially when women are conditioned to feel uncomfortable with conflict, while men are not. Games are limited less and less by technology, and designers no longer need to choose

[36] Nick Yee, *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us – and How They Don't* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 173.
[37] Nicole Lazzaro, 'Are Boy Games Even Necessary?', in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, ed. by Yasmin Kafai, et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 199-215 (p. 210).
[38] Yee, 'Demographics, Motivations and Derived Experiences', pp. 322-3; Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 110.

between action and storytelling. Though games are like other forms of popular culture and embody tropes which misrepresent the characters that players control and encounter, many players are ready for games which are not dependent on supposed gender-based play. If adult players are all enjoying the same game traits, their behaviours in game spaces may be more similar, especially as the industry evolves toward accurate and gender-equal representations.

Virtual Interactions, Their Consequences, and Their Adoption of Gendered Behaviour

Now that we have determined that gender preferences are definable, yet subject to nuance, intrapersonal interactions can be examined in more clarity, as virtual relationships have been shown to be of greater emotional intimacy than real-world relationships at the same stage. For example, according to Amanda Lenhard et al., teens are more open with their feelings online than in person, using technology to flirt and show interest when they would not do so in person.[39] Anonymity online is not an on/off switch, but rather a flow of information managed by users, allowing control over how much information participants reveal about themselves and how accurate these details are. Players meet through a shared interest while other social interactions may not offer a baseline similarity; rather than using their screen as a curtain behind which they may hide, many use it as an occasion to socialise without the pressure of social norms and their expectations. If a player can walk away from the game world and other players as easily as walking away from their computer, social consequences for awkward habits feel less threatening. A regular MMO player claimed that the distance between players encourages greater intimacy despite the paradox of the statement:

> I believe you get to learn more about a person's feelings when you meet them online, because it is easier to talk to someone whom you originally think you won't meet IRL, and thus won't be embarrassed to tell them secrets about you. (*Ragnarok Online*, male, 23)[40]

Yee determines that when people are faced with a computer rather than a person, they are more honest with personal content. He reports that studies consistently reveal that 'potentially embarrassing' information that patients need to convey to their

[39] Amanda Lenhart, Monica Anderson, and Aaron Smith, 'Teens, Technology, and Romantic Relationships', *Pew Research Center* (2015), <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/10/01/teens-technology-and-romantic-relationships/> [accessed 4 December 2017].
[40] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 128.

psychologists is more easily collected when the patients input their data to a computer rather than face to face with their doctor. In other studies, online users found that they felt very close to their fellow users, claiming that they could 'confide in this person about almost anything'. Further, in his own studies on MMO users, Yee discovered that 24 per cent of players had confided in their fellow players information that they had not shared with real-world friends. These habits foster '"hyperpersonal interactions" – interactions that feel much more intimate than typical face-to-face exchanges.'[41] Hyperpersonal interactions are the foundation of intimate relationships found online. While these qualities of MMOs assist players in making virtual friends whose relationships continue beyond the game space, online games have long proved hospitable for romantic relationships as well.

Yee claims that, in many of these romantic relationships, those who find love online believe that if they had met their partner in real life, the relationship would never have formed.[42] Despite not being able to hear the other person's tone of voice or facial expression, players have discovered that, even when text on the screen is the only connection between them, less is more. These interactants perceive that they have the potential of pursuing a more honest relationship than one begun in the real world.[43] For both platonic and romantic relationships, players are finding deeper and more reliable companions: for example, 41 per cent of online gamers stated that their relationships with people they had met in the game were 'comparable to or better than those with their real-life friends'.[44] While gaming is often considered by those outside of the industry to be an anti-social endeavour, this reflects a distrust of games and technology that has been seen through the decades with novels, film, horror comics, and 'video nasties' causing 'full-blown moral panic', according to Steven Eggermont and Keith Roe.[45] While MMOs offer players a space to be entertained, social, and productive, they are also a genre which fosters intimate and genuine relationships between players. Games may be casually viewed as a childish attempt to live out fantasies, yet Yee claims that '27 percent of online gamers indicated that the most rewarding or satisfying

[41] See Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, pp. 128-9.
[42] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 132.
[43] Katelyn McKenna and John Bargh, 'Plan 9 from Cyberspace: The Implications of the Internet for Personality and Social Psychology', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 4.1 (2000), 57-75 (p. 62); Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 132.
[44] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 28.
[45] Steven Eggermont and Keith Roe, 'Television and Risk Behavior: Contemporary Perspectives', *Journal of Children and Media*, 8.1 (2014), 1-4 (pp. 1-2).

experience they had in the past week occurred in the game world.'[46] Players feel more productive in the virtual world than the real one, and now, more gratifying relationships can be added to the list of the allure of game spaces.

Tingting Liu studied the Chinese online dancing video game *QQ Xuan Wu* (1998-2017), which facilitated, even encouraged, players to explore romantic relationships in the MMO.[47] Different modes of play were available, such as a Romantic Mode, which paired one man and one woman who take turns leading; Dancing Party Mode, which also paired one man and woman; and Free Mode, in which players can use dance moves to kiss each other. There is another mode that can be unlocked by two avatars getting married to earn more points for their dance sessions. While there are a few mechanics that must be satisfied for the latter event (purchasing rings, etc.), the game only allows heterosexual pairings. In this way, the game conveys a specific message about what are acceptable relationships, yet players have found ways around this – as they find ways to 'play' the system. Lesbian players often play as male avatars and can post on notice boards that 'I am a T [butch lesbian], seeking a wife.'[48]

Mainland China does not have a history of embracing LGBTQ communities, therefore the choice to explicitly forbid such relationships is incredibly meaningful. As I argue across this thesis, game worlds are simulations of our world, both what it is and what it *could be*. A game that intentionally programs its players to be unable to explore non-heterosexual relationships is a reflection and a reinforcement of the belief that such behaviour is unsuitable – even in an imagined universe – and disruptive to a functioning society. While many LGBTQ players must find loopholes for matching themselves with players of the same gender, most still consider *QQ Xuan Wu* a safe space. In fact, many players of all sexual orientations are not bothered by the stringent mechanics, which allow for some relationships and not others, and see them just as mechanics, rather than a deliberate attempt to alienate players. Liu noted that most players with whom she spoke – and who had online relationships through other avatars – were not able to determine the 'realness' of the interactions they had, but even these players who felt the

[46] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 28.
[47] Tingting Liu, 'Video Games as Dating Platforms: Exploring Digital Intimacies Through a Chinese Online Dancing Video Game', *Television & New Media*, 20.1 (January 2019), 36-55 (p. 43); *QQ Xuan Wu* (Tencent, 1998-2017), Windows.
[48] Liu, 'Video Games as Dating Platforms', pp. 43, 47.

validity of the relationship was ambiguous claimed that 'heartfelt affection and real sexual drive did exist' within the game.[49]

It follows, then, that users are consenting to relationships contained strictly within the virtual, and that these relationships can easily be identified as healthy and real. However, while anonymity facilitates satisfying relationships that allow users to liberate themselves from social expectations, such liberating anonymity can also harm them. By not being forthright with their virtual partner, lack of what I call 'informed sexual play' facilitates deception, whether intentional or accidental. For example, if players – and real-world partners of players – do not understand the virtual relationship to the same degree, then genuine, but strictly virtual, relationships may complicate real-world relationships. Virtual scenarios can often promote misunderstandings about how 'real' the relationship is: when one user believes they are talking to an avatar, while the other believes they are talking to the player behind her.

More widely, but applied to in-game relationships specifically, consent is the name of the game when exploring the validity of romantic relationships. There are three possible perceptions concerning dating online: firstly, that in-game relationships are not real and are simply play, which does not 'count' as interactions between players, but between their avatars; secondly, that in-game relationships take place in the game space and operate separately from real-world relationships and are thus able to coexist with real-world relationships harmoniously; and thirdly, that in-game relationships are as real as those in the physical world, with identical rewards and consequences for attitudes and behaviours in each arena, and flow into the non-virtual. These arguments can – and should – exist together with equal validity. However, the validity is determined by those in the relationship, and two options cannot be simultaneously true. If a player chooses to enter a relationship with another, informed sexual play is required: they must agree which of the three perceptions their relationship embodies to insure that they, their in-game partner, and their non-gamer partners are supported and protected. All forms of romantic and/or sexual expression are equally legitimate in game spaces; however, the level of personal significance can vary among the three arguments, even if the in-game interactions are identical in each instance. Informed sexual play is a demand for authentic sexual expression between players, and arguments about whether or not online interactions are *genuine* are not in question. I believe informed sexual play is about

[49] Liu, 'Video Games as Dating Platforms', pp. 47, 45.

more than the enjoyment of the space: it is necessary to maintaining virtual worlds. If deception between players became commonplace, the fun of the space would deteriorate, and virtual spaces would cease to be inhabited. However, the fact of the matter is that they have not deteriorated. These aspects of play, which make interactions genuine, are not something I propose we need to bring to virtual spaces: they are already there, and by their presence legitimise non-tangible yet authentic sub-cultures, whose interactions carry significance in the real world owing to their simulations of society.

Second Life (SL) offers a myriad of experiences relating to gender and sexuality as exhibited in player/player interactions.[50] Game scholar Tom Boellstorff reports that residents of SL spoke of their experiences as '"sex in virtual spaces" rather than "virtual sex"', indicating the genuineness of experience when entering this type of virtual relationship.[51] SL is particularly known for its BDSM culture: Boellstorff claims that 'forms of BDSM and edgeplay […] *were* forms of sexual expression for many residents, leading to orgasm and even long-term relationships'.[52] The relationships found in SL are possible in part because of the hyperpersonalisation unique to interactions across technology. Regardless of the fact that technology bridged the space between real-world people, relationships that exclusively take place online must be understood as genuine relationships within the space, parallel to, if not necessarily intersecting with, the outside world. Players considered the attraction in SL to be authentic, claiming that it was 'worse to cheat in Second Life than in [real life]. In [real life] it's a physical thing, but here it's your mind.'[53] Such beliefs subvert our general prioritizing of physical bodies over the cognitive or affective aspects of relationships or interactions. This distinction reinforces the genuineness of relationships found virtually, and, when considering terminated relationships, feelings of loss *feel* the same whether online or in the real world. One player reported her heartbreak at the disappearance of her SL partner out of the blue, when he had to travel out of the country owing to bereavement and had no way to contact her. She panicked, desperately searching for a sign of him, certain that the player behind the avatar had met an accident. In their particular case, both users understood their boundaries of real-world and virtual and both saw the other as their romantic partner only in SL, yet in the relationship's genuineness 'found the gap

[50] Philip Rosedale, *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003), Windows, macOS, and Linux.
[51] Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 160.
[52] Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*, p. 165.
[53] Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*, p. 172.

between virtual and actual undesirable or even painful'. Not all online relationships seek romantic intimacy, but rather relationships on familial ground, seeking to provide a different kind of emotional support. Legitimate relationships and satisfaction move further than romance: for example, one player role-plays as a father to adult players playing as children. He claims that 'both never had a father figure in RL and I am happy to give them what they need from that type of bond.'[54] Intimacy that results from online interactions cannot be dismissed as insincere, even when the result is not a relationship which enters the real world, if the significance and outcome to players' emotional well-being is real.

Even online fictional worlds are subject to gender expectations, however, and the habitual objectification of women by games and wider culture often presents women as consumable by men – to say nothing of the rampant harassment women often undergo in online spaces. Female players and avatars can use technology to mitigate the risks associated with these types of sexist assumptions. In addition to these advantages, according to Cynthia Jones, virtual dating explores fantasy in creative ways that are not possible in real-world relationships. It also makes for less expensive dates, safety from physical abuse, potentially less emotional pain, and anonymity to protect participants while they engage in sexual activities that are socially discouraged or illegal in the real world. However, while these perks are attractive, they also have fewer 'payoffs' than real-world relationships that take place in shared physical spaces.[55] Distance between users plays a significant role here, and with distance comes the lack of assurance that both people are who they say they are and that they intend to keep the virtual and real worlds separate. Boellstorff's research found similar reactions in residents of SL, who claimed: 'It was not an issue of trusting that the person told the truth about their actual-world gender, age, marital status, or occupation […] but it was honestly about one's words and deeds in-world that was paramount.'[56] If game narratives present sexist representations, these are the representations players will recreate, perform and perpetuate those attitudes in online spaces.

These spaces reproduce real-world relationships, but they can initiate them as well. Balancing the flow of information entails the willingness to tell the truth online

[54] Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*, p. 175.
[55] Cynthia Jones, 'Lying, Cheating, and Virtual Relationships', *Global Virtue Ethics Review*, 6.1 (2010), 3-12 (pp. 7-8).
[56] Boellstorff, *Coming of Age*, p. 170.

and the pressure to appear attractive to a partner in more than appearance. Lies can be easily manipulated online and may be more likely for men if they perform masculine stereotypes of subject over object – the object being a woman they can 'swipe left' as often as desired while scrolling through a series of interchangeable profiles. Nicole Ellison and Jeffrey Hancock apply signalling theory to dating profiles online. The theory states that attributes that cannot be observed directly are open to the possibility of lies, both big and small. They discovered that eight out of ten participants lied on dating profiles, though most were minor lies about height or weight. Signals serve to add value to the profile creator and can range from lies about size to those about profession: 'cheap' lies are those which are presented with low cost (wearing a university sweatshirt as proof of education) while an 'expensive' lie would be obtaining a ring which is only given to graduates. However, unlike in SL, dating profiles have higher risks, and therefore present hindrances to lying: the purpose of online dating is to pursue a real-world relationship, and that demands face-to-face meetings which would confirm or deny information in a dating profile.[57] This leads me to believe that dating online demands the truth if the couple has any hope of taking their relationship out of the virtual. Lying is easy to do in a profile with 'cheap' signals, but lies cannot be maintained; therefore, any lie in a dating profile may damn the relationship.

I conducted a personal interview to explore these dynamics with Rhys and Evangeline who had met through an online dating app and were happily cohabiting.[58] I found immediately that neither had considered lying on their profile. Evangeline stated:

> I was genuinely looking to meet someone, hoping that they would be as true and open as I was, because I wanted an experience where I would meet someone who liked me for actually being me. For not having to put up a mask and not be myself. You would do that if you were meeting someone real life […] where you would probably leave out the points that you are a geek anime lover, gaming lover. With the app, I was like 'Look, this is what I like, either you're into it or you're not'.

When asked why he had not lied in his profile, not even a small lie, Rhys claimed: 'If I really want to get to know a person and I really like her, why should I lie? Later in the relationship, she'll get to know everything, so it makes no sense to lie in the beginning.'

[57] Nicole Ellison and Jeffrey Hancock, 'Profile as Promise: Honest and Deceptive Signals in Online Dating', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34.8 (2008), 84-8 (p. 85-6).
[58] Interview with 'Rhys' and 'Evangeline' (FaceTime, 9 November 2017). 'Evangeline and Rhys' are false names to protect the identity of the participants; see Appendix Four for the questions used for this interview.

Evangeline reported similarly, but with an added consideration of consequences: 'I see no point in selling something that I cannot uphold at the end anyway. That's only promising misery.' Although Evangeline did amend her answer:

> I did lie about one thing – well it was a half-lie. When I put the pictures on my profile, I chose 50% pictures of me with glasses and 50% of me without glasses, because at the time I was way too broke to afford contacts [….] I gave that illusion of a glasses-less woman which I really wasn't at that time. That was a lie I told because I knew it was only going to be temporary anyway.

Her response aligns with the acceptable lies being those which, like a small difference in height or weight, do not make a difference in the end, or for Evangeline, were only temporary.

Being lied *to* was a different matter. While Rhys reported having never been the victim of a lie, Evangeline reported she had been – and within minutes of launching the app. This is likely men and women performing to gender expectations in that men have been trained to normalise objectification and see Evangeline as an object. This opposes Rhys's experience, likely because women have no such normalised behaviour to enact. When Evangeline found a potential match, she began a conversation using information from the man's profile stating that he had gotten his degree in London. She sought common ground having done the same and asked him about his experiences there. His 'cheap' signals were exposed quickly, unable to withstand scrutiny. 'He was just a jokester who thought it would be so funny and ridiculous to have that degree on his profile. Like "Oh, it would be so impossible for anyone in this area to have been to London and gotten a degree from there."' Evangeline was angry at the lie and blocked him, finding herself much warier after the incident. In this instance, lies in profiles aborted the chance for a relationship. To prevent this, at least in part, Evangeline claimed to value online dating for its archival features and reported using them to prevent such exchanges in the future. She could look back on old messages to make sure that everything 'added up' and people seemed to be who they said they were.

Evangeline found that online dating was a unique platform, and used it to filter out what she called 'stupid idiots'. To take advantage of the online medium, she added large amounts of text to her profile, knowing that superficial users would not read them in their entirety, allowing 'losers' to eliminate themselves. She used her profile photos similarly: in one photo she posed with an enormous pizza. 'I knew that people who were

just looking through my pictures would respond to the pizza, whereas people who were like-minded would read the text, and Rhys was the only one who responded to sentences in the text. I was strategic about it.' She appreciated online dating's ability to refine the people she wanted to respond to, regretting she did not have the opportunity to use its features in the past. She said if she had been able to use the filtering provided by online dating with her ex-boyfriends, her 'moral insights would have said "pass" regardless of how charming he was'. As she explained her strategy, it became clear that Evangeline was expecting men to objectify her. She knew that entering the online dating world was putting herself under the male gaze as passive object, and by manipulating the platform she could prevent being matched with a man prepared to cast himself as a dominant subject over her.

Echoing previous points, Evangeline and Rhys claimed that they could not have met each other if technology had not brought them together. They recalled two instances when they were at the same place at the same time: once on class trips to the same tourist attraction and once at the same rock music festival in 2007, Rock Am Ring. Evangeline said:

> There would have been no point where I would have been able to meet him [without the app] to be honest. The things we have in common are gaming and listening to rock music and enjoying eating good food at home. So for the most part, all our interests keep us at home. You don't meet people at home.

This was not the first time she had used the internet to find people who could satisfy her social needs in ways real-world relationships could not, and the interactions made 'returning' to the real possible for her. She visited an online forum often when she was fifteen – the only place she could talk about heavy metal music while living in a small village with 'small-village-minded people'. As such, Evangeline has taken full advantage of online interactions, allowing them to provide her both platonic relationships she has maintained since secondary school and a romantic partner. Too often however, online interactions end in disaster and hate speech against women: a subject to which my discussion will turn next.

Virtual Harassment and the Sexism It Enforces

Anonymity is not common in online dating profiles, but as discussed in previous sections, anonymity meant to keep users safe is not always assured when language habits offer hints about the demographics to which users belong. Partial anonymity may

still be present in some areas of cyberspace; however, it is often used to protect harassers instead of liberating users from the constraints of their real-world identity. Herring states that online communities which enable anonymity may more often 'reduce […] social accountability, making it easier for harassers to engage in hostile, aggressive acts.'[59] It is not a surprise, then, that harassment in online spaces is uncomfortably commonplace. Perhaps even less surprising is that women are three times more likely to face harassment in an online environment than their male counterparts.[60]

One case is that of Stephanie Brail, who experienced harassment on Usenet when the internet was still young in 1993, especially via obscene threats in emails she was unable to trace. A fellow poster wanted to talk about Riot Grrls (a punky postfeminist music movement) and was targeted for harassment, since male users 'didn't want to talk about those stupid girl bands; the girls couldn't play anyway'. When Brail jumped to the other poster's defence, she gave an articulate response which infuriated the sexist posters rather than educated them. However, those involved, especially one harasser in particular, were unwilling to let Brail go without paying a price for her intervention. She received countless threatening emails, some claiming 'I know you're in Los Angeles'. The resulting paranoia controlled her life: she obsessed over the security of her home and practised self-defence. She eventually found the man who was endlessly harassing her and spreading her information online, but the ordeal took a toll:

> I don't trust this is the last I'll ever hear from [him], or anyone else, for that matter. I'm careful what kind of information I give out online now [….] I certainly know how easy it is to make an enemy on the internet, and I've stopped participating in [Usenet groups] long ago [….] And that's the true fallout: I've censored myself out of fear. [61]

Unfortunately, harassment is a common response to female input on many online platforms. In gaming especially, harassment changes the way people behave and react – and whether they continue to play. In my anonymous online form I posted to several gaming forums asking players of all genders about their experiences with harassment in game spaces, several respondents claimed that online harassment caused them to leave a

[59] Herring and Stoerger, 'Computer and (A)nonymity in CMC', p. 576.
[60] See Jeffrey Kuznekoff and Lindsey Rose, 'Communication in Multiplayer Gaming: Examining Player Responses to Gender Cues', *New Media & Society*, 15.4 (2012), 541-56 (p. 549).
[61] Stephanie Brail, 'The Price of Admission: Harassment and Free Speech in the Wild, Wild West', in *wired_women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*, ed. by Lynn Cherny and Elizabeth Reba Weise (London: Airlift Book Co., 1996), pp. 141-57 (pp. 143-7).

game space permanently, or at the minimum to avoid using text or voice chat, even while knowing that it compromised their team's cohesion.

Online video games are an active part of cyberspace, and although the gaming community is taking steps to become more inclusive, many online gamers actively resist new members joining their in-group. Depending on the game, players log on and join a server or are assigned to a team and are automatically sent to join other players. If a female player logs on and is not familiar with those with whom she is grouped, she may have no allies in a space notoriously unfriendly to female players. Even when playing as part of a familiar group with whom they feel comfortable, female gamers encounter harassment when they play as female avatars, have a gamertag which sounds feminine, or talk on their headset with a recognisably feminine voice. All too often, when female players choose to leave the game space because it is too hostile, they assert that it was the game culture that pushed them away from playing, rather than the game itself.[62] To combat harassment, many women choose to play invisibly, playing as a male avatar to hide their femininity. However, as explored in the Introduction, movements like #MyGameMyName encourage women to make their presence known in online game spaces while calling on allied male gamers to take part actively in making the game space hospitable for female gamers.[63]

Many female-run cyberspaces were hard fought for, yet cyberspace is known as a potentially unfriendly space for anyone, with women and minorities as favourite targets. Alison Adam states that even in business-based forums, where female users are often tech-savvy and comfortable in cyberspace, numerous stories emerge concerning harassment on newsgroups and bulletin boards.[64] This may be because users can become invisible online, freeing harassers from punishment associated with hate speech. In fact, when reporting on avatars who become the 'face' of a faceless user or online gamer, Jyanni Steffensen claims that, whereas reinventing new virtual realities for ourselves in games may be a good idea in theory, 'it is likely that old identities will continue to be more comfortable, and thus more frequently reproduced.'[65] Though

[62] Jesse Fox, 'Sexism in Online Video Games: The Role of Conformity to Masculine Norms and Social Dominance Orientation', *Computer in Human Behavior*, 33 (2014), 314-20 (p. 318).
[63] See Introduction, p. 19.
[64] Alison Adam, 'The Ethical Dimension of Cyberfeminism', in *RELOAD*, ed. by Flanagan and Booth, pp. 158-74 (p. 167).
[65] Jyanni Steffensen, 'Doing it Digitally' in *RELOAD*, ed. by Flanagan and Booth, pp. 209-33 (p. 216).

avatars offer opportunities for a new persona, users often replicate or amplify their real-world personality – one which typically normalises sexist, racist, or homophobic beliefs.

A significant contributor to sexism in the community are games that promote stringent gender roles and promote gaming as a 'macho' arena – traits outlined in Chapter One relating to precarious masculinity.[66] Behaviours which assert masculinity are recognisable in tropes, mechanics, and game content and work their way into gaming communities as witnessed through countless accounts of online harassment. Despite inclusive initiatives in the industry to combat macho spaces, virtual harassment against women is still too prevalent; comments female players receive range from questioning her gender (her boyfriend is playing in her place) or even death and rape threats, and they weave in and out of the line between hostile and benevolent sexism as discussed in Chapter One.[67] Even in cases of benevolent sexism, men are often incapable of contextualising damage to their victims. This plays a role in the discourse they use while harassing – why *this* threat feels more degrading than *that* threat and which kinds of language wider culture has taught them to use as weapons against women – but it also prevents them from recognising their actions as harmful to the mental, emotional, and other wellbeing of their victims. According to Fox and Tang:

> Online games also represent the myth of the offline/online dichotomy, wherein people believe online interactions cannot have a 'real' impact because they do not take place in the 'real world.'[68]

While players may adopt new identities and personas separate from their real-world identities, the exchanges between them happen in real time; as such, sexism often leaves players feeling personally attacked, evoking feelings similar to those of a face-to-face interaction, like being catcalled on the street. In my anonymous form regarding harassment in game spaces, responses confirmed this fact: many participants reported prolonged anxiousness after an incident, and one participant even sought psychiatric help and began medication to deal with the resulting anxiety.

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[66] Joseph Vandello, et al., 'Precarious Manhood', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95.6 (2008) 1325-39 (p. 1327); see also Chapter One of this thesis, pp. 80-2.
[67] Peter Glick and Susan Fiske, 'The Ambivalent Sexism Inventory: Differentiating Hostile and Benevolent Sexism', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70.3 (1996), 491-512 (p. 492); see also Chapter One of this thesis, pp. 37-8, 54.
[68] Jesse Fox and Wai Yen Tang, 'Women's Experiences with General and Sexual Harassment in Online Video Games: Rumination, Organizational Responsiveness, Withdrawal, and Coping Strategies', *New Media & Society*, 19.8 (August 2017), 1290-307 (p. 1294).

I do not play online games for these very reasons, but I do believe in the game industry and in female gamers: for these reasons, I cannot ignore the sexism found there. Fortunately, I am not alone in seeking to expose misogyny in games: Jenny Haniver found herself unable to remain silent and created the website NotInTheKitchenAnymore.com. Here she posted the harassment she received when playing online in competitive FPS. Reflecting on her experiences to date, she claims, 'I started getting these bizarre reactions that ranged anywhere from "Hey baby, you wanna have sex" to "I hope you get raped and that you and your entire family are killed."'[69] Her status as a female gamer is identified by her gamertag which includes her name, yet Haniver refuses to change it. Being a female gamer puts a target on her back for sexist players, especially those angered after losing to her. Below is a transcript from her website of an incident in which Haniver is falsely accused of using a lag switch – a piece of equipment which would unfairly advantage her over other players, insinuating that Haniver's in-game success is the result of cheating, not her own skill.

RMP = **R**andom **M**ale **P**layer

RMP1: *[singing]* Turn on your hack light! Ol' Jenny the hacker.
[final kill replays; the connections lags]
RMP1: LOOK AT THAT LAG SWITCH!! *[giggles]* LOOK AT THE LAG SWITCH!!!
RMP2: Say Jenny, are you a *[unintelligible]*?
RMP3: You fucking piece of shit.
RMP4: Hacker! Nice laggin'.
RMP3: You suck some fuckin' nerd motherfucker's dick to get that hack, you dumb cunt?!
[laughter]
RMP3: Nice lag switch, whore. Lemme back out so I can report the **fuck** outta you.[70]

Similar experiences are reported on a website run by a woman who goes by 'gtz', called Fat, Ugly or Slutty (fatuglyorslutty.com), which welcomes submissions from the public. gtz did not have to wait long to find the title of her website, once she learned more about the experiences of others: the most commonly regurgitated insults to female players are that they are fat, ugly, or slutty. The tendency of so many men to fall back upon these insults is certainly not restricted to games. Lundy Bancroft claims that

[69] *GTFO: Get the F&#% Out*, dir. by Shannon Sun-Higginson (FilmBuff, 2015) 46:40-52.
[70] Jenny Haniver, 'Not in the Kitchen Anymore', *NKA* (2014), <http://www.notinthekitchenanymore.com/> [accessed 28 May 2018].

men use this tactic to maximise the objectification and depersonalisation of their targets. 'They reach for the words that they know are most disturbing to women, such as *bitch*, *whore*, and *cunt*, often preceded by the word *fat*.'[71] According to Naomi Wolf's concept of the Beauty Myth discussed in previous chapters,[72] women's value comes predominantly from their ability to attract as many appreciative looks as possible: if they are fat and ugly, then they cannot be as effective an object of the male gaze. On her website, gtz posts examples of this kind of discourse submitted by female players, where other players can laugh together at the outlandish harassment. Those who post do so in the hopes that humour can assist them in feeling that their experiences do not have to result in the end of their enjoyment of games. gtz states:

> Fat, Ugly, or Slutty is all about the idea that women aren't gamers. Or if they are, it's because they are failing somehow looks-wise or sexually because they're fat and ugly, can't get a man [or] [b]ecause you're feeling slutty so you go to where the guys are, on xbox.[73]

This sentiment is intensified through gatekeeping strategies of male players, as illustrated in Figures 3.6-9 below. These kinds of responses are not only text-based, but also come as audio files. Both Haniver and gtz created their sites not only to poke fun at harassers in order to relieve the emotional impact which accompanies virtual assault, but also to give control back to the players who have been harassed after gaming platforms fail to stop or punish the behaviour. Looking for the motivations behind this behaviour reveals several factors based in various aspects of misogyny and/or male entitlement in gaming and wider culture.

[71] Lundy Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2002) pp. 77, 63.
[72] See Chapter One, pp. 69-72 and Chapter Two, p. 102 of this thesis.
[73] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 46:19-38

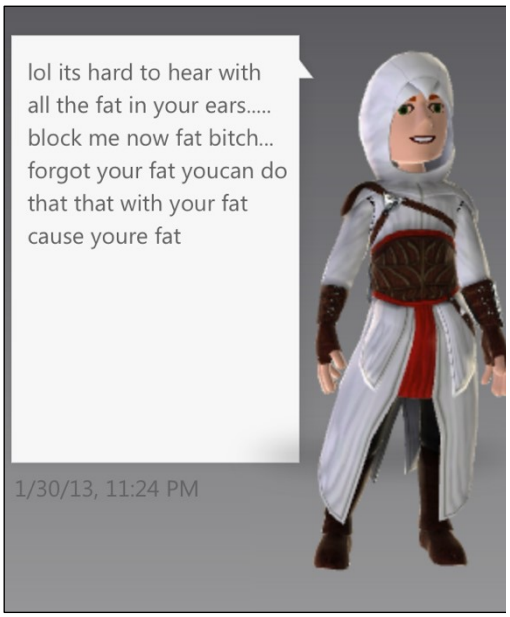

Figure 3.6. Submission from Female Player to Fat, Ugly, or Slutty[74]

Figure 3.7. Additional Submission from Female Player to Fat, Ugly, or Slutty[75]

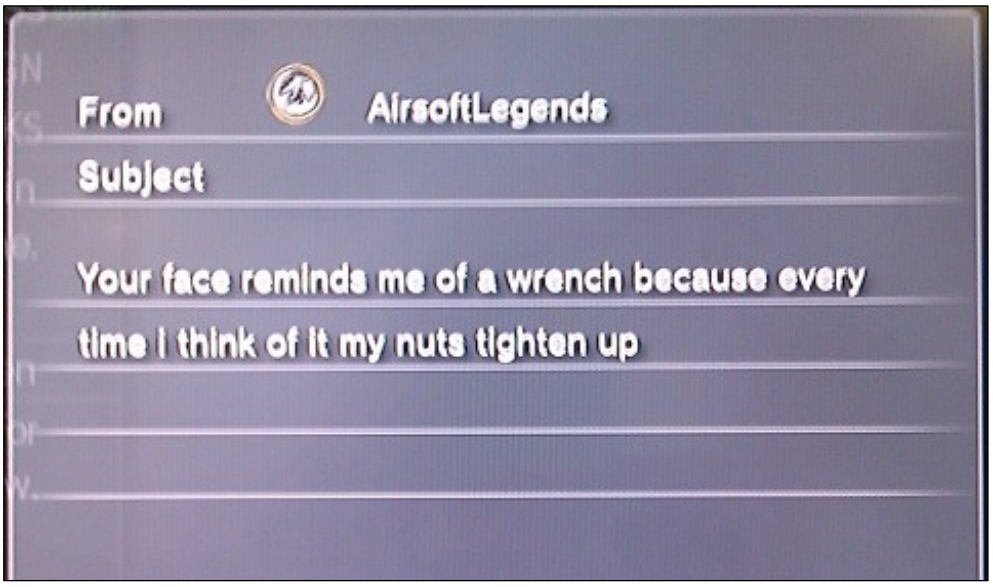

Figure 3.8. Additional Submission from Female Player to Fat, Ugly, or Slutty[76]

[74] gtz, 'Fat', *Fat, Ugly, or Slutty* (2013) <http://fatuglyorslutty.com/category/fat/> [accessed 7 October 2015].
[75] gtz, 'Slutty', *Fat, Ugly, or Slutty* (2013), <http://fatuglyorslutty.com/category/slutty/page/3/> [accessed 7 October 2015].
[76] gtz, 'Crudely Creative', *Fat, Ugly, or Slutty* (2013), <http://fatuglyorslutty.com/category/crudely-creative/> [accessed 7 October 2015].

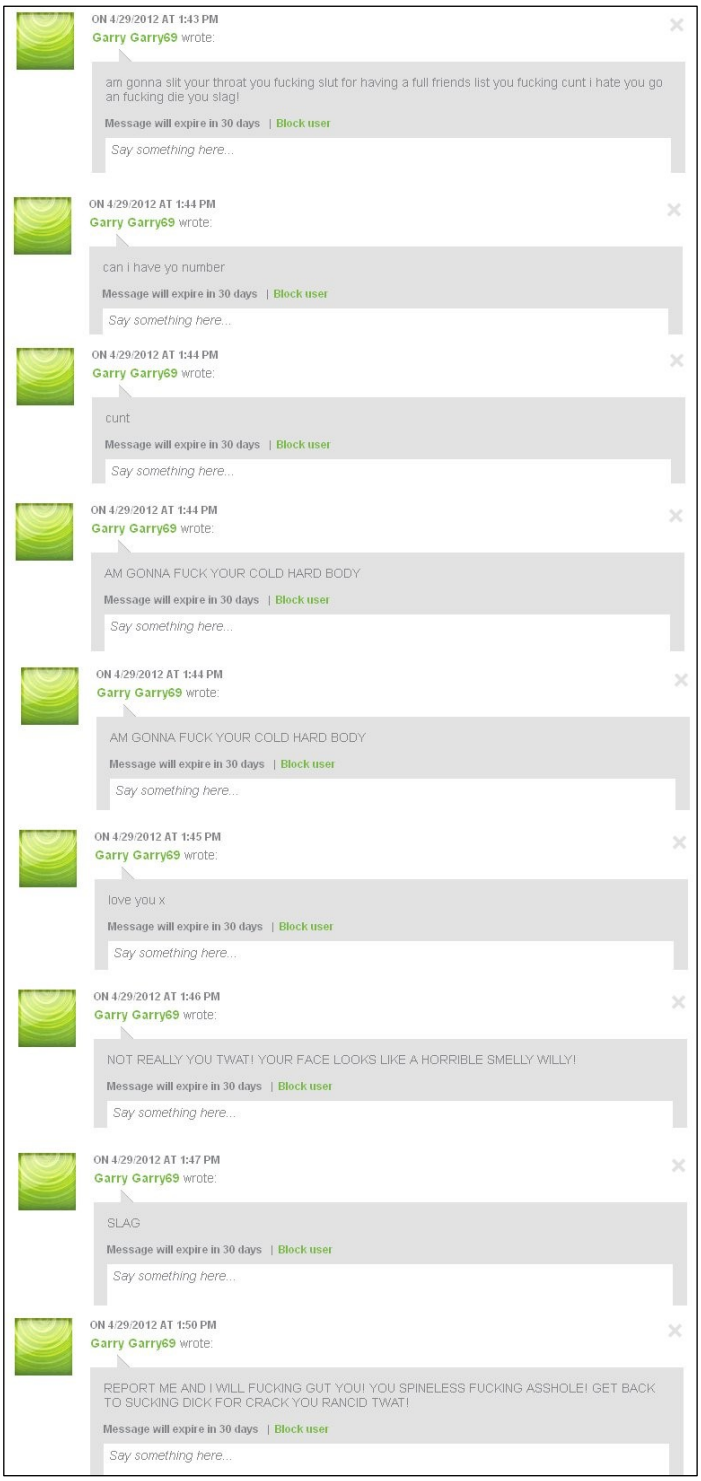

Figure 3.9. Additional Submission from Female Player to Fat, Ugly, or Slutty[77]

[77] gtz, 'Unprovoked Rage', *Fat, Ugly or Slutty* (2013), <http://fatuglyorslutty.com/category/unprovoked-rage/page/2/> [accessed 7 October 2015].

Masculine Motivations and Feminine Responses to Harassment

According to John Suler, anonymity may be the biggest motivation for hostile online behaviours, owing to its lack of authoritative cues to stop, punish, and prevent further harassment, as well as the absence of face-to-face social cues.[78] Fox and Tang report that 'people then feel they can engage in deviant behaviour online without consequence, leading to *toxic disinhibition* such as uncivil or hateful speech, threats, and other forms of harassment.'[79] They further claim that *deindividuation* is 'a loss of a sense of self' which continues such behavioural tendencies when users feel separated from the context of their life – notably, a separation from their place in a society which rejects hate speech.[80] This is especially pointed when it comes to women, given how our culture already objectifies them habitually and presents images of women as devoid of or separate from consciousness. The distance felt by anonymous harassers from their targets has long been documented; yet, when online harassment goes unpunished, the belief that players may harass others with no consequences is legitimised, implicitly condoning such behaviour in its continuance.

A study by Tang and Fox investigated the motivations behind sexual harassment online and uncovered several factors additional to toxic disinhibition and deindividuation. Online games often merge violence and competition, a combination which leads to aggression for players regardless of gender. These and further aggressive aspects of online gaming environments condition players, normalising and perpetuating harassment, while ensuring the continuation of such behaviours to a significant degree.[81] For this reason, harassment in online games may be considered an aspect of the gaming Habitus; therefore, witnessing or even engaging in the behaviour will be perceived by some as using the vernacular of the environment. Notwithstanding this reading, harassment is most often targeted too predictably to ignore. If players are inexperienced in the game and performing badly or otherwise labelling themselves as an outsider – via demographic characteristics not aligned with heterosexual, white men – feelings of hostility are 'exacerbated', as the addition of players with these characteristics 'may threaten the legitimacy of their gaming space as an exclusive

[78] John Suler, 'The Online Disinhibition Effect', *Cyberpsychology & Behavior*, 7.3 (2004), 321-6 (pp. 323-4).
[79] Fox and Tang, 'Women's Experiences', p. 1292.
[80] Wai Yen Tang and Jesse Fox, 'Men's Harassment Behavior in Online Video Games: Personality Traits and Game Factors', *Aggressive Behavior*, 42 (2016), 513-21 (p. 514).
[81] Tang and Fox, 'Men's Harassment', p. 518.

group'.[82] Shunning players who are perceived as out-group may make them less likely to re-enter the game, maintaining notions of exclusivity.

The motivation behind many male players' maintenance of their sense of in-group membership is documented by Anita Sarkeesian:

> For decades, the games themselves (and the marketing around games) have been telling boys and men that games belong to them. And this has led to a deep sense of entitlement and ownership over the gaming community. I think it's the combination of the cover of anonymity and this deep sense of entitlement that all works together to create a space where men feel like they can attack women. One reason for these attacks could be because the industry is actually at the beginning stages of transforming and changing into a more inclusive space. And I think that that's a transformation that's long overdue, but there are some men and boys who are lashing out against that, who are terrified of this change.[83]

So, while this arena is hostile toward women, this may be a case in which sexist experiences may be a sign of change occurring as well as that to come. Women are increasingly inhabiting game spaces, and players displaying lingering sexism are registering the influx of the female population, panicking, and performing a last-ditch effort to preserve what they perceive as their space. Game content and marketing of female characters with disproportionately sized breasts and thighs alongside a history of empowered male protagonists and passive female characters has created a legacy dictating heterosexual masculinity as default. This is further supported when online game spaces are full of characters controlled by 'invisible' female players, so the game server falsely appears to be full of men. Jennifer Brandes Hepler, writer for the *Dragon Age* franchise, articulates an ideal for a homogeneous culture:

> We should be working toward a time where 'gamer' as a label doesn't exist anymore. You don't identify yourself as 'I'm a movie-goer' because everybody sees movies because it's just so pervasive in the culture. […][F]or somebody whose identity revolves around 'I'm a gamer, and that makes me different than you' that's a very threatening thought.[84]

According to the Entertainment Retailers Association, games may already be at this stage of popular consumption: as of 2017, the total revenue from the game industry was

[82] Tang and Fox, 'Men's Harassment', p. 516.
[83] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 29:58-30:37.
[84] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 33:58-34:22.

nearly as high as the totals of both music and video revenues combined. Nevertheless, attitudes persist which suggest that games are a niche market.[85]

Multiplayer FPS is a space known for being aggressively masculine – even by those who have never participated in games. Brandes Hepler states that

> the hardcore first-person shooters and real-time strategy games are the last refuge of those teenage boy gamer[s] who [are] sitting in [their] room[s], angrily playing video games. And they want to keep the name 'gamer' to themselves as 'this is a club that I belong to'.[86]

For many of these gamers, their identity is conferred by the game space when they are seeking or are unsure of another identity in their lives. According to games journalist Patrick Klepek, in these hostile communities:

> People feel threatened that the thing they love is being taken away from them [….] [T]here is definitely a perception that 'if all of these feminists come in, our games are gonna disappear.' [There's] the sense that the thing they love is changing for a reason that they don't value.[87]

Exacerbating gatekeeping attitudes, in-group members feel that interlopers are undermining their space – a space which was meant to serve as an escape from the influences and pressures of the real world which rejects them. Games journalist and critic Leigh Alexander's work focuses on feminism and unheard voices in games, and she states, 'I think that people see my work and the work of people similar to me as threatening a status quo that makes them feel comfortable and that continues to privilege them.'[88] She claims that one reason men continue to fight the gender shift is the feeling of control that they have over the game space – control over the story and their characters and outcomes – being distributed to out-group members.[89]

This is something that the industry desperately needs in order to change representations toward diversity: Kishonna Gray claims that marginalised people's involvement in game creation not only changes representation by making marginalised groups more visible, but it also adds their voices to discussions of preferences for play.

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[85] Entertainment Retailers Association, 'Streaming Boom Powers Entertainment Market to New All-Time-High of £7.24bn in 2017', *Entertainment Retailers Association* (2018), <https://eraltd.org/news-events/press-releases/2018/streaming-boom-powers-entertainment-market-to-new-all-time-high-of-724bn-in-2017/> [accessed 17 March 2018].
[86] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 32:19-39.
[87] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 35:25-55
[88] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 31:20-33.
[89] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 31:50-06.

These additions would be a leap forward in the industry for the inclusion of minorities – exactly what Klepek and Alexander claim harassers are afraid of: it 'reflects the mobilization of marginalized communities in virtual and real spaces, reflecting a systematic change in who controls the narrative.'[90] Men are likely assuming that additional voices will drown out their own and thereby become prioritised, bringing the threat of change to mechanics, characters, and stories away from the comfortable, sexist tropes discussed throughout Chapter One. Therefore, the communities surrounding games themselves would be transformed, altering the defining characteristics that have created the clear boundaries of their in-group.

Many male gamers – and other male-dominated groups with high levels of 'incel' members, a topic discussed in the Introduction – identify themselves more widely as out-group members: 'good guys' rejected by mainstream society, especially heterosexual romance, despite the privileges of their often white-maleness.[91] As a result, according to Laurie O'Brien et al., feelings of betrayal are often a result of an in-group member prioritising the needs an out-group member over those of in-group members. This chimes with one of the most fundamental fears of male gamers: that designers will privilege feminist content over patriarchal ones.[92] Feelings of betrayal layered with fear that game content is changing 'for the worse' encourage gate-keeping in various forms, not least of which is gender-based harassment online, and certainly not only in game communities. One gatekeeping strategy is the use of games to further spread hate against minorities: in *Angry Goys II* (2018), for instance, players murder LGBTQ people, Jewish people, and journalists in a white supremacist's paradise, complete with Swastikas filling the screen.[93] The game not only promotes mass shootings against marginalised groups, it also uses in-game posters to spread false propaganda, including the equating of homosexuality with paedophilia.[94] While this conclusion illustrates the

[90] Kishonna Gray, 'Race, Gender, and Virtual Inequality: Exploring the Liberatory Potential of Black Cyberfeminist Theory', in *Produsing Theory in a Digital World 2.0*, ed. by Lind, pp. 175-92 (p. 175).
[91] See Introduction, p. 10.
[92] Laurie O'Brien, Brenda Major, and Stefanie Simon, 'Why Did You Choose that Person over Me? Ingroup Rejection and Attributions to Discrimination', *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48 (2012), 1225-33 (p. 1226).
[93] Christopher Cantwell, *Angry Goys II* (Wheel Maker Studios, 2018), Windows; Out.com Editors, 'Disturbing Alt-Right Video Game Encourages Mass Shootings Against Gays, Jews, and Other Marginalized Communities', *Out* (2018), <https://www.out.com/news-opinion/2018/11/13/disturbing-alt-right-video-game-encourages-mass-shootings-against-gays> [accessed 20 November 2018].
[94] Out.com Editors, 'Disturbing Alt-Right Video Game'.

flawed logic upon which the homophobic message was formed, it reinforces beliefs held by a particular groups looking for confirmatory messages regardless of their factuality.

The perceived threat of an expanding in-group is further explained by the theory of social dominance orientation (SDO). SDO is related to both sexual and general harassment, according to Tang and Fox, who report that '[s]ocial dominance orientation […] reflects individuals' endorsement of inequality among social groups, resulting in prejudice and the belief in one group's superiority over other groups.' They claim that members of an in-group with high SDO are likely to 'take action' if they feel they must compete over inclusion in the group.[95] SDO helps create in- and out-group boundaries, and when players feel as if they are part of the in-group, they feel a stronger need to differentiate themselves to 'maintain or achieve superiority', especially if a subordinate group attempts to join the superior group, according to Henri Tajfel and John Turner.[96] A flawed but common argument in defence of online harassment is that players 'don't act like this in real life.' Haniver responds to this claim with justified frustration: '*Bull shit.* If you're ok with acting like this on the internet, chances are you're still thinking those same thoughts' and expressing them offline.[97] Her short-tempered response is warranted: harassment surpasses 'trash-talking' and ventures into the personal domain. General harassment can be hurled at any player, but the frequency and intensity of online rape threats alone occur in very immediate ways in the real world. The targeting of women reaches its peak in cases of 'doxxing' – the leaking of victims' home addresses and other personal data so that harassment against the victim will spread to the non-virtual. More importantly, Tang and Fox's research confirms Haniver's assessment that harassers do not need a game space to harass women, and by extension, marginalised groups: 'Individuals high in SDO and hostile sexism may be prone to sexually harass women across contexts, regardless of their relationship with an existing game.'[98] Additionally, in my anonymous form, one participant insightfully claimed that there is little point in trying to argue with harassers if they are set on the act – and high in SDO: 'These kids only need something to rage about, if it makes sense or not is not important to them.' Bancroft's work with abusive men supports these findings: she

[95] See Tang and Fox, 'Men's Harassment', pp. 515-16, 517.
[96] Henry Tajfel and John Turner, 'An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict', in *Intergroup Relations: Key Readings in Social Psychology*, ed. by Michael Hogg and Dominic Abrams (Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 2001), pp. 94-109 (p. 102).
[97] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 47:22-33.
[98] Tang and Fox, 'Men's Harassment', p. 518.

states that external stimuli have little to do with the way a man high in SDO will act toward a woman when he abuses or harasses her. If, for example, an abusive man and a non-abusive man are faced with the same situation in which they become angry, anger will not cause the non-abusive man to hurt his partner while it will for the abusive man. A man's environment or his anger toward it does not turn into his abuse against women – his beliefs about women and their 'place' in society does: 'Perhaps his loudest, most obvious, or most intimidating forms of abuse come out when he's angry, but his deeper pattern is operating all the time.'[99]

Being sexually harassed online goes hand in hand with male gamers proclaiming their doubt over the skill of female gamers. Many respondents to my anonymous form expressed anger that their abilities as gamers were questioned when it was revealed they were women; many also experienced demands that they prove themselves as members of the gaming community. This can be shown in many ways, such as 'testing' female gamers either in observing their performance in-game or by trying to 'stump' them with questions about game content one would only see if they had completed the game. One respondent summarised the feeling:

> It is prevalent when I'm speaking to other geeky men […] where I always have to PROVE that I beat this game. It's less of a question of how I liked something and more interrogation-y where they are trying to catch me in a lie about loving games or geeky things.

Similarly, one respondent received a comment from another player stating 'the game must be easier now if you leveled up this quickly'. This happens even when female players are more skilled than the male players who harass them. One respondent claimed:

> I was playing competitive Overwatch with my friend, both of us girls, and lost a game. The other members of the team were a group of four boys, and they decided to blame us for losing the game because we were girls, even though me and my friend together had all of the gold/silver medals for kills/healing/etc. They said a lot of horrible things and that 'girls can't play video games because they try to use their vagina to play'.

A general perception of female incompetence for video game play is even more pervasive. For example, the game *Borderlands 2* (2012) released 'girlfriend mode', in which players could engage in a multiplayer mode even if the new player was a newbie

[99] Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That?*, pp. 37-8.

(see Figure 3.10, overleaf).[100] The avatar for Player 2 created for this instance was female, but the difference did not stop there: Player 1 played on hard difficulty while Player 2 played alongside on easy difficulty. 'Girlfriend mode' was not the official name of the skill tree, but was so named by John Hemingway, one of its designers, according to journalist Mary Hamilton.[101] Even if the name choice was an innocent colloquialism, the assumptions about gender suitability for game play are just as problematic. Hemingway depended on the industry's agreement with – or at least knowledge of – women as less proficient gamers. Portraying and referring to the inept player as female has two primary harms: firstly, it alienates female players with a label which insinuates that they cannot keep up with the seasoned, presumably male players; secondly, it alienates newbie players by equating their inexperience with femininity, a trait which is used to signify weakness or inability in this and other contexts. Common attitudes toward female participation in games are explained by the study of pornography and the dichotomous hierarchy of male domination over female subordination. Suzanne Kappeler states that '[w]hen the male is subjected to oppression, he is emasculated, feminized.'[102] This statement is underpinned by the notion that men are considered to be 'brought down' to the level of a femininity after failure. Games play a role in preserving or complicating gender boundaries and consistently perform the former, by employing clearly demarcated understandings of what is feminine and masculine.

The doubt concerning the skill of female players moves beyond the gaming world in other areas of STEM which become less attractive to girls as they grow up for various cultural and industry reasons discussed further in the next chapter.[103] These sexist structures are fortified by layers of male-targeted marketing, sexist in-game portrayals, and communities surrounding games (such as online chats and forums), all of which provide a space in which the 'male gamer default' stereotype thrives. This manifests in game communities, claims Sarkeesian, when some men 'allow' women in the game space in restricted forms. If female gamers are going to invade the safe space

[100] Paul Hellquist, *Borderlands 2* (2K Games, 2012), multiple platforms.
[101] Mary Hamilton, 'Borderlands 2 "Girlfriend Mode": Why a Casual Misstep Matters', *The Guardian* (2012), <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/gamesblog/2012/aug/14/borderlands-2-girlfriend-mode> [accessed 23 November 2018].
[102] Suzanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 155.
[103] See Chapter Four of this thesis, pp. 196, 213.

of misogynists, then they must do so compliantly: '"I own this, […] how dare you? If you're going to participate, then you better shut up."'[104] One anonymous respondent to my survey reported that when she began playing online, she ignored most harassment because she assumed it was 'just what dudes did on the internet'. Only later did she decide that she wanted more from online communities.

Figure 3.10. The Mechromancer with Whom Players Can Play 'Girlfriend Mode'[105]

Most female and other marginalised gamers have also experienced the evolution of their expectations for their experiences as those expectations migrate from trusting other players to the loss of personal safety – both online and virtual – that can never be restored. One participant's trust was betrayed through the treatment of their character and themselves by their Game Master (GM). However, when they switched to a male character, the harassment did not stop:

> [The GM] would constantly subject my female [character] to overt sexual innuendos, flirting, and the like. I was uncomfortable but just dealt with it. Then I retired [that character] and created a new one, a guy. Within 30 minutes of the first session with him the GM described a sexual assault in detail that was happening to another player even though I had explicitly told him that it was a trigger for me. I asked for the game to stop and all he did was complain that he felt underappreciated and like the group wasn't having

[104] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 31:42-51.
[105] Valve, 'Borderlands 2: Mechromancer Pack', *Steam* (2018), <https://store.steampowered.com/app/213230/Borderlands_2_Mechromancer_Pack/> [accessed 23 November 2018].

> fun anymore and utterly disregarded my trauma. Immediately I left the group and blocked them wherever I could and had severe panic attacks on and off
>
> for the following week or so. Even now, I'm cautious when interacting with new people and groups. My trust was utterly betrayed, and it has made me more cautious and afraid of the world around me.

This player's personal trauma was treated as a hindrance to the play of other (male) players. A sexual assault plot point, as well as the behaviour of the GM after the scenario, bears out Sarkeesian's previous comment: it is clear that female players 'better shut up' if they want to inhabit a male space where sexual assault in placed in the context of fun.

Harassment is not dependent on characteristics found only in virtual environments, according to game journalist Maddy Myers. She meets with others to play and states that in these physical environments, players still harass her:

> When people are most uncomfortable with me is when we are fighting in a game. Those are the situations where problems start to arise and people say that I don't belong there [….] Playing with someone, they will often be uncomfortable and try to make fun of me. Often times I'm the only woman there because many other female players that I know just aren't comfortable going and gaming in person. It's often times not pleasant, but as a result of that unpleasantness, I don't know how to recommend that other women do it. In general, I recommend that they don't.[106]

'Making fun' of Meyers is a light description for the harassment that occurs, but it is not only a reaction of gatekeepers: as she stated, it is a result of gamers being uncomfortable with her presence in the game space. Tang and Fox found that after an online match, researchers who sent friend requests to players they had just encountered in the game responded to their requests according to their obedience to gender-determined boundaries: 'They found that when the voice [of the researcher playing the game] demonstrated gender-stereotypical behavior (i.e. women were supportive and men were hostile), significantly more players accepted friend requests than when the voices were counter-stereotypical.'[107] The choice to accept a request demonstrates that players are perpetuating gender stereotypical behaviour that makes them feel safe, and they are enforcing it by rewarding it with friend acceptance. In the cases of men who harass

[106] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 33:44-58, 34:23-45.
[107] Adrienne Holz Ivory, et al., 'Sex Role Stereotyping is Hard to Kill: A Field Experiment Measuring Social Responses to User Characteristics and Behavior in an Online Multiplayer First-Person Shooter Game', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 35 (2014), 148-56 (p. 153).

women, many of the misconceptions about acceptable behaviour stem from the belief in wider (misogynistic) culture which states that women must listen and not talk: expressing themselves even a little is 'too much'.[108]

The feeling that those with the authority to stop harassment are unwilling to do so further alienates women from game spaces. Fox and Tang report: 'Women who experience sexual harassment also perceive gaming organizations as not taking sufficient steps to address the issue. When gaming organizations are unresponsive to complaints, this apparent indifference leads to women quitting their games.'[109] Zoë Quinn and her partner at the time of Gamergate, Alex Lifschitz, formed the support group Crash Override to help victims of Gamergate who were let down by the institutions that could or would not support victims. She claims: 'Filing reports on the platforms that you're being harassed on is useless. Nobody is doing anything, but we were sort of informally helping people, showing them how [to] get their passwords up to snuff' and other security enhancements.[110] Leaving game spaces entirely is a momentous and outrageously unfair step away from gaming culture, yet it is a common response when it is the only way to completely assure that harassment will stop – assuming of course that the player has not been or will not be doxxed. While no one can fault them for their choice, Fox and Tang point out that by leaving or

> choosing to mask their sex or gender in play, women are inadvertently reinforcing the idea that they are in a small minority of players and that gaming is solely a masculine space. In this way, harassment has created a spiral of silence in which women – and the men who support their presence in games – have been silenced by a perceived majority of hostile, hypermasculine players.'[111]

However, there are tangible steps to combat harassment, as suggested by Dan Golding and Leena Van Deventer:

> [These] include clearer community guidelines, better reporting systems on social media, platforms that are quick to respond to reports, and explaining the reasons why someone was banned from a platform [….] In 2014, Facebook announced Rooms […] The moderation tools are excellent –

[108] See Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That?*, p. 62.
[109] Fox and Tang, 'Women's Experiences', p. 1298.
[110] Dan Golding and Leena Van Deventer, *Game Changers: From Minecraft to Misogyny, the Fight for the Future of Videogames* (Melbourne: Affirm Press, 2016), p. 202.
[111] Fox and Tang, 'Women's Experiences', p. 1304.

> moderators can ban devices from re-entering a Room, which means a harasser can't just create a new account and log back in.[112]

These measurable steps can be used for immediate action against harassers, and having examples and a way forward offers the best defense against administrators who claim that moderating harassment is too difficult to maintain or impossible to execute.

Sexual harassment online is more than an irritation to those who are harassed: many victims suffer post-traumatic symptoms. Fox and Tang state:

> Consequences of sexual harassment include emotional distress, diminished self-esteem, anxiety, sleeplessness, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder. One reason sexual harassment is so devastating is that victims often ruminate about these experiences, reflecting on them long after a particular incident occurs.[113]

The lasting mental harm suffered by victims is reflected in a culture which too often adopts sexist attitudes – just as sexism itself is reflected by and into wider culture. The mental distress that results from harassment is just as real as the harasser and the victim are: harassment in the non-virtual and the virtual share the same consequences. Amnesty International further documents the influence of online harassment, including refusal to express opinions online in the future, lack of focus in everyday tasks, and a confirmation of Fox and Tang's conclusions (see Figure 3.11, overleaf).

Victims of online sexual harassment 'ruminate' on their experiences, and when the time spent thinking about an instance of harassment exceeds the time taken by the event itself, it is little wonder that these players leave the game space and refuse to come back.[114] Regardless of the partial anonymity – and the illusion of distance it creates between harasser and victims – and despite forums like Haniver's and gtz's, which exist for victims to 'laugh at' at harassment, online sexual harassment is an immediate experience.

[112] Golding and Van Deventer, *Game Changers*', p. 100.
[113] See Fox and Tang, 'Women's Experiences', p. 1293.
[114] Fox and Tang, 'Women's Experiences', p. 1298.

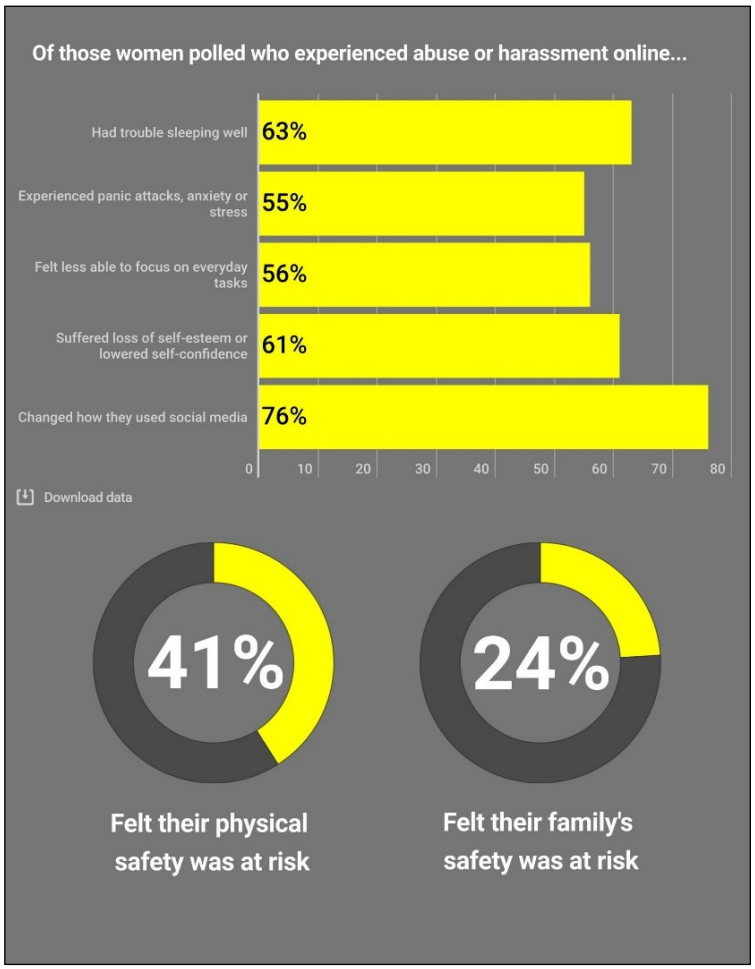

Figure 3.11. Statistics Concerning the Consequences of Online Harassment[115]

Todd Harper claims that society's preference to let gaming dogs lie is a choice that does not stay confined to game spaces:

> The deal is that gaming is not a separate universe. It's not a place with its own separate and completely distinct set of rules and laws when it comes to culture. The way that women are treated in gaming culture is a reflection of how women are treated in culture *full stop*. So, if you think that the way women are treated in gaming has no impact on you if you're not a gamer, you're wrong.[116]

'The way women are treated in gaming' does not stop at harassment within that specific sub-culture: it is sustained through player identification with MPCs who are motivated to assert dominance over their environments and the people inhabiting them, whether other players' avatars or NPCs. Player perspective is influenced by character

[115] Amnesty International, 'Amnesty Reveals Alarming Impact of Online Abuse against Women', *Amnesty International* (2017), <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/amnesty-reveals-alarming-impact-of-online-abuse-against-women/> [accessed 13 May 2018].
[116] *GTFO*, dir. by Sun-Higginson, 1:10:35-11:03.

perspective – even in altering feelings of empathy men have toward female victims of violence.[117] Men, more than women, tend to identify with the male character whom they play regardless of first- or third-person play, and when they do they are more likely to agree with traditionally masculine, 'macho' beliefs. In their study, Alessandro Gabbiadini et al. report that when men play violent-sexist games, masculine beliefs guide them to feel less empathy for female violence victims.[118] Crucially, they find this to be the case only with violent-sexist games, not games which were 'generally' violent, suggesting the internalisation of the relationship between masculine dominance over women and its enactment through physical violence. Ideals are transferable from character to player, such as players who were found to agree with 'military-related concepts' after playing a war game, while other players who played a racing game 'had stronger associations between racing-related concepts and the self.'[119]

Multiple studies report similar lingering attitudes dictated by avatars. Yee finds that even when players turn off the game, some attitudes induced by an avatar's actions persist. In his studies, Yee tested avatar height and physical attractiveness in relation to confidence, assertiveness, even friendliness. He reports that players allowed themselves to be absorbed into the avatar, being more assertive with a taller avatar and behaving in more friendly ways toward attractive avatars. In cases when participants were given attractive avatars, their beliefs about their attractiveness translated to the real world, showing more confidence after leaving the virtual space.[120] Similarly, in a study by Fox and Jeremy Bailenson, participants were shown a digital doppelgänger over which they had no control, and watched them run on a treadmill or stand idly. The researchers discovered that those participants who had watched their digital double exercise were more likely to exercise in the next twenty-four hours than those whose doppelgänger had been idle.[121] These studies illustrate the influence avatars have over our assumptions of ourselves after we play, establishing clear correlations between sexist tropes in game content and players' attitudes. When players are asked to witness and

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[117] Alessandro Gabbiadini, et al., 'Acting like a Tough Guy: Violent-Sexist Video Games, Identification with Game Characters, Masculine Beliefs, & Empathy for Female Violence Victims', *PLoS ONE*, 11.4 (2016), 1-14 <https://dx.doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0152121> (p. 10).
[118] Gabbiadini, et al., 'Acting like a Tough Guy', p. 7.
[119] See Christoph Klimmt, et al., 'Identification with Video Game Character as Automatic Shift of Self-Perceptions', *Media Psychology*, 13.4 (2010), 323-38 (pp. 330-1), and Gabbiadini, et al., 'Acting like a Tough Guy', p. 2.
[120] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, pp. 151-2.
[121] Jesse Fox and Jeremy Bailenson, 'Virtual Self-Modeling: The Effects of Vicarious Reinforcement and Identification on Exercise Behaviors', *Media Psychology*, 12.1 (2009), 1-25 (p. 16).

participate in actions that victimise female characters, especially in sexual contexts, they do not emerge from the experience the same as they entered it. Games and sexism already go hand in hand in narrative mechanics, so where better to exhibit the sexist attitudes players have just learned – or have just seen confirmed in accordance to attitudes in wider society – than in game communities immediately within reach?

Conclusion: Navigating Beyond Harassment

John Berger claims that '[m]en survey women before treating them' – that the way women appear to men influences the way they act toward them.[122] This statement references images specifically, but because of stereotypes surrounding gender suitability for technology, an image of the female user exists even when no visual of her is available. Gender divisions found in CMC may not always be smoothly transferred to in-game choice, as dictated by my survey on players of *Life Is Strange*; however, the sex-based behaviours upon which such assumptions are drawn are still alive and well in the realm of online games. For example, in an interview I conducted with gamer [NAME REDACTED TO PROTECT INTERVIEWEE IDENTITY], she stated that she makes time to play three to five times a week alongside her full-time job.[123] While she plays RPGs, strategy games, FPS, and MMOs, her experiences of harassment online are mild in comparison to many others. Limited exposure to online harassment was not a result of avatar choice, as she claims she 'usually [plays] females: tall, skinny-muscular'. She states that, despite toying with the character-building aspect of playing games, her characters 'tend to look rather cute'.

Despite her propensity toward making physically attractive characters, her most impactful experience of sexism took place outside the game universe. She recounted the following story:

> Today I can laugh about it, [but] when playing League of Legends with my flatmate and his friend for the first time, they forced being a healer on me [...] [A]fter a few battles, they'd usually say I'm a great healer, but despite them praising me for it, I still didn't like [it] […] [I]t kinda killed the fun for me by being responsible for healing others. Like anyone, I'd prefer being a more active warrior.

[122] John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1972), p. 46.
[123] ReBecca Compton, Interview with [NAME REDACTED TO PROTECT INTERVIEWEE IDENTITY] (email, 16 April 2017); see Appendix Two for interview questions and responses.

This experience is similar to many of my anonymous respondents, who claimed that, upon being outed as a female gamer, male players would make comments such as, 'oh so you're a healer-main then'. Though she was happier playing in a different class, [REDACTED] took on a different role than the warrior she preferred for the benefit of those in her guild, embodying the cooperation upon which MMOs are so heavily dependent – despite performing duties she did not value. In another interaction – which was echoed in my anonymous survey – she reported that she was followed around 'for a long time' by a male player. To leave him behind, she logged out of the server, then logged back in. However, when she approached the area where her character had left him behind, his avatar was still there, waiting for her. The oppressive presence of this clingy player 'was seriously creepy'. However, she plays both to de-stress and for of the enjoyment of immersion and refused to allow a single player to push her out of the game space.

When asked for her guess as to why she had had such a comparatively positive experience in online games, other than the assistance stemming from her lack of headset, she claimed that part of it was intentional: 'if there were negative people in a group running around calling people names, I would simply avoid them.' [REDACTED]'s 'luck' may also have been a result of the MMOs she chose to play. The games she most often chooses are not competitive FPS, which facilitate aggression; as such, her games' content lessened the pressure on players to feel compelled toward aggressive tactics. Rather, [REDACTED] claimed that no one questioned her or her status as a gamer since they 'were all playing to have fun'. She stated, '[w]e discussed other things, like this and that cave and exchanged tips', with players' conversations focusing on the game and its features, rather than the gender of she who holds the controller.

While the stories of [REDACTED] are indicative of a milder interaction with other players based on the games she chose to play (and not play), her time spent gaming with low levels of harassment may still be symptomatic of an optimistic step forward for female gamers and the dissipation of the misogynistic aspects of the Habitus of game spaces. This chapter has used original interviews, surveys, studies, and analyses to connect the dots between the sexist content that exists in games and in wider culture and its facilitation of sexist behaviour between players and users of similar technology. While online games remain one of the most common arenas in which hostile sexism is

alive and well, misogyny is increasingly facing its death throes. The realisation may be setting in to game creators and players that 'male gamer' and 'female gamer' are not 'types' of gamers, and the label is indicative of neither desire for characters and stories nor a sense of belonging to the game space and community. Despite clear differences in behaviour found in CMC as applied and extended to game communities, my survey results establish that players are not so easily identified by gender-determined play. Male and female in-game choices are not as predictable as I had initially anticipated, and if game creators and researchers find that we cannot so easily identify and separate players by gender, then games and gamers' desires for play may be facilitated by motivations extrinsic to gender, as I discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter Four
Continuing Diverse Trends in Game Culture

Introduction: An Optimistic Approach (despite Sexist Game Communities)

Considering my previous chapters, we might easily adopt a pessimistic view of games and their representations of women. However, despite the prevalence of the sexist tropes in game content and the attitudes in wider culture that they sustain and reflect back, an increasing number of games are incorporating narrative and mechanics which normalise diverse topics and encourage players to re-examine tropes of the past. For example, in *The Secret of Monkey Island* (2009), the developers mock the 'Damsel in Distress' trope.[1] In the adventure role-playing game, the protagonist Guybrush Threepwood must complete a series of tasks to become a pirate. While working towards his goal, he meets and falls in love with Monkey Island's governor, Elaine Marley. Before they can be united, Elaine is abducted and taken to the secret hideout of Ghost Pirate LeChuck. Threepwood learns of LeChuck's plans to marry Elaine and conducts a plan to stop the wedding, yet his untimely arrival to the event thwarts Elaine's own escape. She scolds him by claiming she had the matter 'well in hand'.

The game was created by LucasArts, a company with a recognisable brand that is known for its parodies, and this game follows the trend. It subverts antecedent tropes by presenting Elaine not only as a political figure, but as capable of regaining control when it is taken from her. This embodies Elaine's de-objectification of herself with her reclamation of her autonomy, activity, and subjectivity, as articulated by Martha Nussbaum.[2] Not only does the commentary highlight Elaine's self-reliance, it also rejects common tropes found in the genre: the hero must gain skills throughout the game so they may be applied to defeat the villain in the final boss fight. However, *Monkey Island* undermines those expectations by suggesting that the damsel does not need the assistance of the male protagonist nor that of the player themselves.

[1] Ron Gilbert, *The Secret of Monkey Island* (LucasArts, 2009), multiple platforms.
[2] Martha Nussbaum, 'Objectification', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 24.4 (1995), 249-91 (p. 257).

Similarly, in *Braid* (2008), the main playable character (MPC), Tim, searches for a princess who has been taken by a monster.[3] This game rejects the 'Damsel in Distress' trope as it discloses hints to the player that the male MPC is not the hero of the story: players learn that the Princess has been laying traps for Tim in her attempt to escape from him. Later, when her traps fail to stop him, she is aided by a knight who spirits her away from Tim. Using intentionally dated music, story, artwork, and the use of pixelated graphics, the game presents a medieval world which encourages the player to presuppose traditional themes of the genre: knight in shining armour faces a series of dangers that lead him toward the final state of heroism and subsequent reward, the damsel. The subversion of these assumptions is the foundation for the turning point and the disruption of the 'Damsel in Distress' trope: Tim does not win the Princess. Rather, she escapes as the player learns that the MPC was the 'monster' from whom the princess was running.

While both games oppose conventional deployments of gendered roles and behaviour, these are not the only ways to move the industry toward gender equality. Games with narrative and mechanics that show enthusiasm for diverse representations separate from those specifically concerning gender are also on the rise. As we have seen, there are traits in games which can attract or disinterest players, but these are not based on gender determinants. Nicole Lazzaro claims that designing a game around stereotyped ideals only succeeds if the strongly gendered aspects are what players find the most fun about playing games.[4] Rather than following feminine game design, which directly opposes the default of masculine game design, feminist content in games does not have to follow this template at all. True, many aspects of the masculine formula – like sexist representations in previous chapters – need to be addressed in feminist game design, but by creating new ways to design games, diversity can be examined and explored according to gendered aspects and beyond. The proposal of games being culturally aware in more ways than those dictated by gender justifies its study within the broader subject area of women's studies through the examination of feminism and diversity's intersectionality with other social orientations.

[3] Jonathan Blow, *Braid* (Number None, 2008), multiple platforms.
[4] Nicole Lazzaro, 'Are Boy Games Even Necessary?', in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, ed. by Yasmin Kafai, et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), pp. 199-215 (p. 208).

Helen Jøsok Gansmo suggests the use of 'I-methodology' in game design: the process of making games that 'I' would like to play. The designer visualises themselves as the player, making content they would enjoy: by diversifying the demographics of game creators, the content they make will reflect that balance of representation.[5] In 2014, despite the leap in female representation in game development since 2009, only 22 per cent of developers were women, still sustaining the imbalance to a significant degree.[6] Even if the percentage climbs, it is just as important for these areas to be a space in which women feel comfortable speaking against sexism in the industry and its content; this is a goal that demands cooperation of all game creators, no matter their gender. The demographics in the industry being used to guide representation in game content adheres to bell hook's theory of the oppositional gaze. I recognise that the oppositional gaze is meant exclusively for women of colour, and I certainly do not presume that the need for the oppositional gaze is the same in this instance as it was and is in the context in which hooks wrote it. Nonetheless, by recognising traits of the oppositional gaze without attempting to appropriate women of colour's reactions to sexist, racist media, we may borrow some of hook's ideas for game creation. She claims that in using the oppositional gaze, those who look 'do more than resist. We create alternative texts that are not solely reactions. As critical spectators, black women participate in a broad range of looking relations, contest, resist, revise, interrogate, and invent on multiple levels.'[7] Just as women of colour use their gaze to transform, I-methodology can be adopted to change game content in more ways than 'reacting' to sexism in the industry, but to create something new entirely – content which embraces gender, sexuality, race, religion, and so on. Feminism celebrates the inclusion of people who have been marginalised in numerous, unique ways, such as according to disability, race, gender identity and sexuality, and a wealth of other traits, all of which must be better represented as complex and nuanced. When we deviate from existing modes of thought that suggest gendered content is the best way to attract players, it is clear that

[5] Helen Jøsok Gansmo, 'Towards a Happy Ending for Girls and Computing?' (doctoral dissertation, Norwegian University of Science and Technology Trondheim, 2004, <http://hdl.handle.net/11250/244091>), p. 183.
[6] Eddie Makuch, 'Percentage of Female Developers Has More than Doubled since 2009', *Game Spot* (2014), <http://www.gamespot.com/articles/percentage-of-female-developers-has-more-than-doubled-since-2009/1100-6420680/> [accessed 12 February 2016].
[7] bell hooks, 'The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators', in *Movies and Mass Culture*, ed. by John Belton (London: Athlone Press, 1996), pp. 247-69 (p. 261).

diverse content – whether based on empowered representations of gender or those of marginalised groups – can greatly benefit and satisfy players.

In this chapter, I first identify the reasons that designers feel compelled to create games specifically for female audiences by exploring preferences for play in children which closely align with gender role stereotypes. The chapter then explores why the presence of women in games will shift representations toward diversity, through an examination of case studies which quantify the ways that players apply inclusive attitudes in their non-virtual lives. In this section, I will apply literary analysis to games that represent some of the instances players may come to expect when harnessing I-methodology. Next, I analyse the evolution of Lara Croft, and how her most recent roles in 2018 manifest examples of feminist ideals in a AAA game.[8] At this point, it may be tempting to wonder why, if representations like Croft's are successful, are games still being designed according to stereotyped templates. The chapter addresses this reasoning by questioning when stereotypes can help and hurt game design – when they can be used to encourage inclusive play, and when instead they provide sexist representations. Finally, I examine the benefits of varied role-playing no matter the gender of the player, by highlighting some traits games have which encourage players to use immersive aspects to explore the lives of those who come from diverse backgrounds. In this section, I evaluate representations in several games that intersect with gender and other social dynamics, and how such representations can normalise non-stereotypical characters.

This chapter addresses the questions: *On what basis have games been traditionally designing content based on stereotypical representations of gender? How does looking at diversity in more than one way direct progressive depictions of women and marginalised groups in games? Which kinds of stories and mechanics might games adopt to represent women and marginalised groups in ways which normalise and celebrate diversity?* The answers are the last aspect of this thesis's narrative, bringing discussions of representation full circle. The analysis in this chapter reveals how games alter attitudes players might have about real-world people in distinct and identifiable ways, exploring once again how video games feed into wider culture, which in turn reflects back into games. In this chapter, I will explore how the intersections of gender

[8] Not an abbreviation and said as 'Triple A'. AAA games are made from the highest budgets and are the video game equivalent of a blockbuster.

and other areas of social positioning can and should work together to change the ways that players view their world. By disrupting the cycle of sexism, homophobia, and other exclusionary content in games and game spaces, games may continue to direct players toward equality by revealing the personal and societal benefits of this choice, working to rectify the exploitive representations explored in the previous chapters.

Children's Stereotypical Preferences and How They 'Ghettoize' Girls

One way to ensure that girl gamers become adult female gamers is to encourage their play as children. Game creators know that girls are influenced by culture toward and away from certain desires, and though urging girls to pull the game off the shelf during this time is crucial, the industry has a history of exploiting the gendered traits that girls often want to rehearse. By adding feminine traits to girls' games, they may appear more attractive to them, but they are training young players, no matter their gender, what girls are supposed to – and are allowed to – enjoy. Therefore, the next step is pinpointing these supposed feminine traits and their masculine counterparts. When analysing tendencies in young boys and girls, clear trends have arisen: trends which contain undeniably stereotypical preferences of children for content and how that content is presented. Game design which caters to these stereotypes manifests differently in children's and adults' content, and they both feed into the maintenance of a gender divided culture – one which is too often centred around a white, heterosexual male persona.

Men and women are guided toward constructed gender boundaries and their associated desires by wider culture; in many ways, games are designed to cater to the traits found within those boundaries. When speaking specifically of gameplay, male players tend to favour scorekeeping because, according to Carrie Heeter and Brian Winn, it 'tells them clearly where they stand in relation to others. Women are often uncomfortable with scorekeeping because it segregates people into winners and losers' and this causes anxiety within the game community.[9] Additionally, Cornelia Brunner et al. posit that changing the activities which are rewarded in the game are one key to attracting girls. They claim that many early games tended to appeal to boys by focusing on conquest, winning, scoring points, assertion, and domination – privileging 'victory over justice, competition over collaboration, speed over flexibility, transcendence over

[9] Carrie Heeter and Brian Winn, 'Gender Identity, Play Style, and the Design of Games for Classroom Learning', in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, ed. by Kafai, et al., pp. 281-300 (p. 284).

empathy, control over communication, force over facilitation.'[10] By encouraging play which supports the latter activities, girls are more often satisfied by their play since they want 'to make a difference in a social situation, to right an injustice, save a whale or two, or discover a cure for cancer.'[11] These propositions contradict my survey in the previous chapter concerning men and women's comfort with conflict, but these preferences are for children, not adults – and age plays an enormous role in these preferences.[12] Children are in their prime for social conditioning, and culture's guidance into gender-conforming play is not a new development in culture.

Barbie Fashion Designer (1996) directly addressed gender-stereotyped play and was celebrated for it, despite its success with its audience stemming from gender-role performing behaviour. The game illustrated girls' desire for games to prompt them to set their creativity free. Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia Greenfield articulate these traits:

> [The game became an] accessory in girl's pretend play, which tends to be based on real-life models and roles and is usually more person-oriented. Here creation is in the service of nurturance, a popular play theme for young girls. [...] The emphasis is on combining existing elements to create uniquely new creations that appeal to the player.[13]

These factors combined with the game 'lack[ing] aggressive content', provide a space in which girls can easily observe their progress from beginning to end and gain acute satisfaction from that process. Play that celebrates these desires is adopted by Barbie.com's games. This game content makes tangible girls' creativity with cooking, dress-up, or perhaps a veterinarian activity; each step clearly builds upon the next to create a finished product – even if the 'product' is a satisfied friend who benefitted from the work of the MPC.

[10] Cornelia Brunner, Dorothy Bennett, and Margaret Honey, 'Girl Games and Technological Desire', in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, ed. by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), pp. 72-88 (pp. 81-2).
[11] Brunner, et al., 'Girl Games', p. 85.
[12] See Chapter Three of this thesis for the survey results and discussion, pp. 138-50.
[13] Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia M. Greenfield, 'Computer Games for Girls: What Makes Them Play?', in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, ed. by Cassell and Jenkins, pp. 46-71 (p. 65).

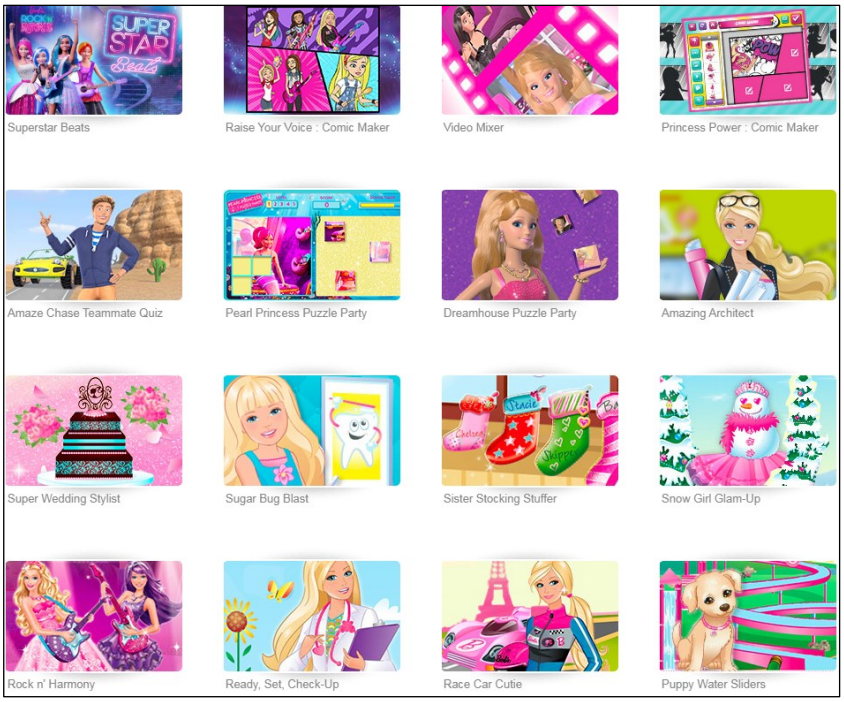

Figure 4.1. Screen Capture of the Website Barbie.com on its 'Games' Page[14]

Lazzaro and Nancie Martin observe that these types of games are based in a sense of accomplishment and being able to say, 'I made this happen'. Games like these foster relationships between players and games via a 'dialogue between them and the product' and create valuable links between games and emotions.[15] Despite this connection, most of these games are visually gender-marketed in the choice of colours, music, and in-game sound effects. This is a feature that may be somewhat 'ghettoizing' young girls – separating them as a distinct group of gamers, thus dissuading them from playing in many ways: a phenomenon that will shortly be discussed.

Stereotypically male or female tendencies in children resemble the play theories *ludus* (rule-based, often arduous play) and *paidia* (imaginative, uncontrolled fantasy play), articulated by Johan Huizinga (1938) and Roger Caillois (1958). These traits in play and the activities themselves are coded as feminine/female or masculine/male, and though *ludus* and *paidia* are not explicitly designed for masculine or feminine play, the traits of these types of play and traditionally feminine/masculine coding more widely, are eerily similar. 'Boyish' desires for play discussed above tend to incorporate aspects of *ludus*, so that play gives participants cultural significance or esteem when they win a

[14] Barbie, 'Games', *Mattel* (2018), <https://play.barbie.com/en-gb/games> [accessed 19 October 2018].
[15] Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, 'Interview with Nancie S. Martin (Mattel)', in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, ed. by Cassell and Jenkins, pp. 136-50, p. 148; Lazzaro, 'Boy Games', p. 213.

game in a calculable way. *Ludus*, for its use of strict rules, is often considered a type of play that 'risks turning into an obsession for the isolated fanatic who would dedicate himself to it absolutely and in his addiction would increasingly withdraw from society' – resembling the stereotype of the male recluse playing in his basement.[16] Conversely, the traits that young girls value have affinities with *paidia*, play of a creative sort, 'as if' there are no rules.[17] *Paidia* is not play that is easily measured, but valued for its own purposes. It is used for 'calm, patience, and idle speculation', often simulating real-world scenarios. *Ludus* and *paidia* can be labelled using several categories including reward-/non-reward-based or measurable-/non-measurable play: thus, the gendered tendencies toward or away from goal-oriented success is not surprising. However, crucial to games and wider culture, Huizinga claims that 'play is to be understood here not as a biological phenomenon but as a cultural phenomenon'. As this thesis argues, the preference for play which favours *ludus* or *paidia* is neither inherently male nor female; rather, it is encouraged (or discouraged) in young people by others in their environment or by the media they consume, just as other assumed-gender-dependent preferences in wider culture are.

Examining these preferences in children, it is difficult to identify ourselves in the strict divisions provided by the data. It seems self-evident that deep gaps between genders are due in part to expectations placed upon boys and girls, and their subsequent desire to fill the gender roles of adults. In youth, boys and girls may be forced to trust society when it defines gender roles, as they lack the life experience to tell them that these are not compulsory. Popular culture plays a significant role in training behaviour by both confirming and complicating what we are taught as children concerning gender-based behaviour. Imagine game traits applied to social scenarios in which boys are encouraged to conquer and girls are encouraged to create; these are not so different than attitudes already held in wider society. Game content can negate our gender expectations rather than affirm the content discussed in previous chapters that construct, one game at a time, a Habitus which rejects marginalised groups.

In 2018, popular Let's Player on the platform Twitch, Tyler Blevins, exemplified the consequences of taking gender-based stereotypes as definitive. Blevins,

[16] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games* (1958), trans. by Meyer Barash (1961; Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 32-3.
[17] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (1938, trans. 1949; London and New York: Routledge, 1980), pp. 1, 49; Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, pp. 8-9.

who plays as 'Ninja', claimed that, in order to protect his family from online harassment, 'the only way' to prevent rumours of his being unfaithful to his wife with fellow players was to refuse to play with women.[18] His choice reinforces several problematic points in relation to gender: it supports a general mindset that women in the game space are firstly heterosexual and secondly 'thots' – women who navigate the game space using their sexuality as a tool or a weapon against male players who, in comparison, take gaming seriously. Blevins, of course, has no control over his viewers' pre-existing beliefs about women; however, by presenting his choice as a solution to a problem, he legitimises the assumptions. Additionally, Blevins has a platform which could be used to address and condemn online harassment instead of hiding from it – hiding in his own case and encouraging the harassment of women in other cases. Rather, his decision appears a childish reaction in its exclusion of an entire gender from an environment in which they are fighting tooth and nail for equality. Further, it insinuates that a man is the authority who decides in which spaces women are permitted to participate. The 'punching-down' nature of his statement disqualifies it from being a practical solution, let alone the attempt it could have been to speak out against something that haunts women and minority groups daily in gaming. Blevins's choice to forbid women from his game space reinforces ideas that exist in rape culture: female players are blamed for harassment of a white, male player and punished for an action they did not perpetrate. In gaming communities, figures like Blevins have a tremendous amount of power over fellow gamers' intentions; as such, one thing that pushes female players away from games are the well-known faces within the community imparting exclusion of female players as acceptable, even admirable.

Another aspect of games that discourages female participation is 'punishment mechanics'. In an interview with Yazmin Kafai, game designer Sheri Graner Ray reports on research in which she allowed children to design their own games, addressing an often-overlooked aspect of gaming. She reports:

> The boys used **punishment for error** rather than forgiveness for error. In other words, when you [did] something wrong, they punished you for it; in one case they sent you flying to the moon and in another one they sent you flying into hell. The player was stopped, and there was irretrievable loss of

[18] Kamilah McInnis, 'Fortnite: Ninja Won't Play with Female Gamers', *BBC News* (2018), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-45169157> [accessed 25 September 2018]..

> progress. The girls typically used a **forgiveness for error** model. Your progress was stopped or slowed, but nothing was irretrievably lost.[19]

This may be an attempt on the part of the female designers to strive for an approach which favours uninterrupted play, yet it is equally likely that they do not want to be 'too mean' to players, even if they make a mistake. *Ludus* play would dictate the masculine choice in this instance: breaking the rules must result in a measurable consequence; *paidia* would advocate a less restrictive approach.

The industry contains games on both sides of the punishment spectrum. A game like *Dark Souls* (2011) is exasperating because mechanics dictate that players can only save their game at a checkpoint.[20] However, checkpoints are few and far between, and the volume of gameplay that goes on between checkpoints often causes players to 'rage-quit' – abandon the game in frustration. If death occurs in a boss fight, a substantial amount of content must be replayed in the event of the character's death. These methods of saving contrast the design of those such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), in which autosaves (when the game automatically saves in designated areas) and save slots (when the player may save the game at any time, often exclusively while not in combat) are both available to the player – all the more encouraged by dialogue boxes asking players if they would like to 'Quit to main menu? Any unsaved progress will be lost.'.[21] With these games, there is less risk during play, allowing the player to make more dangerous choices with less fear of losing progress if they choose incorrectly. *Dark Souls*' save mechanic is less common and presents a specific brand of game that purposely employs difficult save functions; yet, for many players, the added challenge is what gives the game additional allure, resulting in an especially dedicated fan base that prides itself for having succeeded despite the rigorous *ludus* mechanics. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the preference for different save mechanics/player punishment in either game is not actually based on gender – and it shows, given that *Dark Souls* is not considered solely a man's game, while *Skyrim* is not perceived to be aimed primarily at women.

While it would appear that another agent of distance between girls and games is the overuse of violence, Lazzaro claims that when that violence is contextualised, the

[19] Yasmin Kafai, 'Interview with Sheri Graner Ray, Longtime Game Designer', in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, ed. by Kafai, et al., pp. 318-28 (p. 323).
[20] Miyazki Hidetaka, *Dark Souls* (Bandai Namco Games, 2011), multiple platforms.
[21] Todd Howard, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks, 2011), multiple platforms.

game becomes more appealing for women. Lazarro and Brunner suggest that the best explanations for violence are those which improve society and the environment, placing the action within the framework of social and environmental enhancement.[22] *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013) takes the opportunity to explore this attribute by encouraging the player to consider an unethical action as more ethical than a conventionally ethical choice.[23] After a boss fight with the character Slate, the player is posed with the choice to spare or kill him with the knowledge that if the player shows mercy, Slate will be captured by the authorities. If the player chooses to kill Slate, he is grateful for being granted a soldier's death; and if the player spares him, Slate is later found in a cell, tortured and lobotomised. Slate is completely unresponsive, and the companion NPC Elizabeth remarks: 'You were right. Sparing him was no mercy'. With this in-game scenario of choosing to kill or spare an enemy, players are presented with killing as an altruistic, more ethical option. This complicates gendered expectations based in the forceful/nurturing dichotomy: the player does not want to hurt Slate, a character whose mental state and beliefs may have justified his actions; however, the game suggests that the forceful action is actually the more charitable one.

Figure 4.2. Choosing Slate's Fate in *BioShock: Infinite* (2013)[24]

[22] Lazzaro, 'Boy Games', p. 211.
[23] Ken Levine, *Bioshock Infinite* (2K Games, 2013), multiple platforms.
[24] NiZZULiVe, *BioShock Infinite Slate Spare and Kill Both Options SPOILERS*, online video recording, YouTube, 4 April 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RiyOERh4IRw> [accessed 26 September 2018] 0:25.

When manoeuvring around context for violence is not an option, there are alternative means of presenting it less harshly. Morgan Romine, member of the Frag Dolls, an all-woman competitive gaming team, states that girls can and do enjoy violent games, especially if violence is presented in a way that removes elements of malevolence. Romine claims that in such games it is 'rare for me to feel like these games are violent in a realistic way and therefore relevant. I often don't really conceive of it as violence; it's more like a tag game.'[25] Here she talks about games like the *Halo* franchise (2001–), which depart from reality in many ways, and are enjoyable because of the competition and fast pacing.[26] She states that she is unable to dismiss the same level of graphic violence in games which do not present the world as the product of fantasy: '*Halo* has this very fantastical side: all the physics are very un-natural because no person could really move like that. Everybody's wearing brightly colored suits, and seems very detached.'[27]

Stepping away from in-game violence, there are further characteristics found in game content which ghettoize girls. Many of the tropes discussed in Chapter One of this thesis are abrasive to girls in varying degrees: hypersexualisation and the feminine abnormal expressed as empowerment is one of them. Kuljit Brar discusses *Batman: Arkham City* (2011):

> In this game, the character Catwoman – one of the two playable characters – wears skintight clothing zipped down in front to reveal her ample cleavage, while the game persistently presents camera angles that pay close attention to both her bust and posterior. The game's transgressions only begin here, as every time Catwoman encounters a male character (which occurs frequently, making up a majority of the gameplay), they call her 'bitch' or make sexual advances, to which she coos provocatively [….] Arkham City has very definite ideas about femininity [...] with adolescent males as its explicit market, the vast majority of video games, and thus the industry, clearly states a degrading and dismissive opinion of female gamers.[28]

She adds that these female characters 'remind gamers exactly why [women] exist in the game space at all – to be looked at'.[29] This echoes Mulvey's claims that the male gaze

[25] Yasmin Kafai, et al., 'Interview with Morgan Romine, Ubisoft's Frag Dolls', in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, ed. by Kafai, et al., pp. 311-18 (p. 314).
[26] Hamilton Chu, *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2001), Windows, Xbox, and macOS.
[27] Kafai, et al., 'Interview with Morgan Romine', p. 314.
[28] Kuljit Brar, 'Level Up: A Case for Female Gamers', *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture*, 12.2 (2012), no pag. <http://reconstruction.eserver.org/Issues/122/Brar.shtml>; Sefton Hill, *Batman: Arkham City* (Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 2011), multiple platforms.
[29] Brar, 'Level Up'.

exists as an 'active/passive heterosexual division of labour [which] has similarly controlled narrative structure[s]': these representations present women as visually and narratively consumable.[30] Conversely, Brar juxtaposes Catwoman with female MPCs who are depicted in more empowered ways. She compares Catwoman to Rubi from the game *WET* (2009), whose strapped-on guns, accurate proportions, tattoos, and battle-ready clothing are constructed as if to say: 'Look what I'm going to do', rather than 'Look at me'.[31]


Figures 4.3 and 4.4. Side by Side of Catwoman's and Rubi's Representations of Empowerment[32]

Hypersexualised physical portrayals remain one of the final acts of alienation for girls. Graner Ray argues that designers may have begun with good intentions, that what they look for in physical portrayals is a character who communicates, 'I'm young, I'm strong, I'm fertile'.[33] The first two traits demarcate health, yet the third trait, fertility, is paramount for female characters. Accentuation of biologically female sex characteristics demonstrate a woman's adherence to normative structures of motherhood and femininity, even if they are presented in a context which has nothing to do with reproduction. Beyond the deeper significance of women's objectification in this way, problems consistently arise when representations cross the line and communicate

[30] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, ed. by Laura Mulvey, 2nd edn (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 14-27, p. 20.
[31] Antoine Charreyron, *WET* (Bethesda Softworks, 2009), PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360; Brar, 'Level Up'.
[32] Fandom, 'Catwoman', *Arkham City Wiki* (2018), <http://arkhamcity.wikia.com/wiki/Catwoman#Arkham%20Knight> [accessed 19 October 2018]; Giant Bomb, 'WET', (2009) <https://www.giantbomb.com/wet/3030-21984/> [accessed 19 October 2018].
[33] Kafai, et al., 'Interview with Sheri Graner Ray', p. 325.

instead a readiness and even an eagerness for immediate sex. Even female designers, Graner Ray says, will make a character with an hour-glass shape to embody the young, strong, fertile persona. When they become hypersexualised, the problem becomes abrasive and makes players feel uncomfortable:

> But our male characters aren't designed that way. No! We would never do that for male characters. When I talk about this, I actually have these wonderful photographs of the Calvin Klein underwear models, the guys. I put them up on the screen and I say, 'There you go, guys, ready? Give him a sword and send him into *Diablo*.' Are you ready for that to be your avatar? Every guy in the room wants to crawl under his chair. Now you understand! Now you understand why I'm uncomfortable being given these hypersexualized females to play, to represent me. Because you wouldn't want these guys representing you.[34]

Female characters are not only disadvantaged by hypersexualised representation, but by physical inferiority to their male counterparts. Brar examines *Resident Evil* (1996), in which the main character Chris shines in comparison to his partner Jill.[35] According to Brar, 'Jill is blatantly constructed as the weaker one. Compared to Chris, Jill runs slower, takes less damage, and carries more ammo and weapons to compensate for the apparent shortfalls of being female'.[36] This example presents a clear dichotomy – man = capable, woman = incapable – which reflects and recites the same dichotomy in wider culture. Traits in games which ghettoize girls are narratively easy to remove, and in the games discussed below, they already have been. Progressive female representation in games demands the outlooks of progressive game creators, enacting I-methodology.

I-Methodology: Designing Inclusive Content

Jøsok Gansmo's theories of 'I-methodology' – making games that 'I' want to play – can change the content of games; however, it can only do so with more balanced representation in game creation and in the culture surrounding it. Heeter and Winn claim that women thrive in social spaces surrounding play.[37] If women are encouraged to permeate virtual spaces with fan-fictions, mods, and other virtual content, this would provide a strong foundation on which to make their way into the industry early,

[34] Kafai, et al., 'Interview with Sheri Graner Ray', p. 325.
[35] Shinji Mikami, *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 1996), multiple platforms.
[36] Brar, 'Level Up'.
[37] Heeter and Winn, 'Gender Identity', pp. 284-5.

facilitating their entry professionally as adults.[38] More women are needed in all levels of tech industries, using their positions to direct discussions of gender and other issues relating to inclusion of marginalised groups. Wider society need only cultivate the inclinations already present in women and their desires for technology. Susan Herring and Sharon Stoerger claim that equality in various forms of technology can only be achieved if more women 'become computer network designers and administrators, giving them real influence – both numerical and technical.'[39]

There is an existing and expanding cohort of women who have made progress toward representation despite gender-based hindrances. Even so, ideal representations of diverse characters are not where they should be. According to Lize De Clercq, there are several barriers to women who may be attracted to IT, including game development: she suggests that one way to increase the numbers of women in these subjects is to provide access to technology when they are young. If girls have experience with computers, for example, they are more likely to show interest in computing when they are older. Additionally, as the female cohort grows, it can only increase exponentially: seeing female role models in tech will disrupt the tendency to picture a man when discussing a game programmer.[40] Game editor and journalist Keza MacDonald is a part of this emergent cohort of women in the industry, and her experience has taught her that, if the pool of applicants for a job is staggeringly male, women are not reaching out to these companies. She argues that there are things companies can do to change this, especially by making women more visible, such as making a Staff or About page on their website that looks like an inviting environment for women as opposed to a 'sea of beards'. On a foundational level, she suggests that companies should talk more often to women in the industry rather than sticking with familiar male peers. Finally, there is a positive outlook for the future, as women gain more experience in the industry, making them as employable as men – those who have traditionally filled design roles – for executive positions.[41]

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[38] Mods are ways of 'hacking' a game to have access to different character skins, stories, etc.
[39] Susan Herring and Sharon Stoerger, 'Computer and (A)nonymity in Computer-Mediated Communication', in *The Handbook of Language, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. by Susan Ehrlich, Miriam Meyerhoff, and Janet Holmes, 2nd edn (Chichester: Wiley & Sons, 2014), pp. 567-86 (p. 578).
[40] Lize De Clercq, 'Why Are So Few Girls Attracted to Study IT?', *uniteIT* (2014), <http://www.unite-it.eu/profiles/blogs/why-are-so-few-girls-attracted-to-study-ict> [accessed 25 September 2018].
[41] Keza MacDonald, 'Why the Games Media Has a Diversity Problem – This Website Especially', *EuroGamer* (2018), <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2018-04-11-why-the-games-media-has-a-diversity-problem-this-website-especially> [accessed 25 September 2018].

Diverse representation in the industry is crucial in directing progressive attitudes towards women, as illustrated in a study by Christopher Ferguson. He determined that even if sexist portrayals of women have influenced the attitudes of real people, the impact can be mitigated by situating empowered women more firmly in media and pop culture. Ferguson sought to test if oppressive views of women are influenced by viewing obscene or detrimental media about them.[42] He conducted a study in which he showed violent pornography to two groups consisting of one hundred and fifty students in a university in the Southern United States (the average age was 21.2 years, 50.7% of the respondents were men, 94.7% were Hispanic). One group was shown empowered depictions of women and the other oppressive depictions, while the third group viewed neutral depictions. Ferguson reports that the depictions of pornography in which women were oppressively portrayed induced anxiety responses in female participants.[43] Inversely, the pornography that depicted empowered female representations in the violent pornography reduced moods of depression and anxiety in female participants. Similarly, when women were portrayed in roles of sexual dominance, men showed higher anxiety, and when women were portrayed as submissive, men experienced lower anxiety. The study also found that depictions of empowered women can greatly influence sexist attitudes in men and women alike. Ferguson claims that 'it may be that negative depictions of women reawaken negative stereotypes that some men hold about women' – stereotypes like those maintained by 'Ninja's' choice not to play with women.[44] Women in Ferguson's study responded with approval when viewing women in sexually dominant roles even when the paired material was 'difficult' viewing in its violent nature.[45] Inversely, though women suffered anxiety or depressive responses based on the oppressive representations they viewed, their sexist attitudes toward other women did not change as much as men's did.

Women may have been distressed by sexist representations which portrayed women as victims of sexually violent acts, but it did not make them believe that women are inherently subordinate to men in sexual or other contexts, whereas men were found to believe just that. Though this is a terribly pessimistic outlook to hold, perhaps those who are not women themselves are less able to humanise virtual or real-world women

[42] Christopher Ferguson, 'Positive Female Role-Models Eliminate Negative Effects of Sexually Violent Media', *Journal of Communication*, 62.5 (2012), 888-99 (p. 890).
[43] Ferguson, 'Positive Female Role-Models', p. 895.
[44] Ferguson, 'Positive Female Role-Models', p. 895.
[45] Ferguson, 'Positive Female Role-Models', p. 896.

after culture has trained them so well to dehumanise women, especially those who are sexualised. Regardless, representations of sex-themed oppressive content is in close conversation with real-world attitudes toward women, and though this is seen in multiple areas of popular culture, games can participate in this conversation to suggest themes which promote diversity. Ferguson's study proposes that it is not only representations in sexual situations that determine sexist views: attitudes about the real world are influenced depending on whether women are presented as empowered or oppressed, no matter the context.[46] Players are aware of sexist beliefs even if they do not personally condone them, though, as discussed in previous chapters, they certainly have a history of doing so. As in Ferguson's study, games can either confirm or contradict sexism: the industry has too often chosen the former. Stereotyping depends on categorical gender boundaries; therefore, might a route toward surpassing those boundaries be refusing to draw them? In the first of a handful of literary analyses of games in this section, an androgynous approach provides one option to bypass media which confirms sexist stereotypes: an MPC who is beyond gender markers may offer a solution to some of the depiction imbalance.

Undertale (2015) contains a gender-neutral MPC who, by having no gender or sexuality, is free to use the game space to explore the mechanics and storyline outside of gender-based themes or content (see Figure 4.5 below).[47] The player is referred to as a neutral 'they' and has creative freedom to pick the name of their character. The pixelated MPC has no discerning gender attributes nor a voice actor to confirm or deny a gender-implying voice. In the few instances where the gender of other characters may be inferred, the implications are as frequently of same-sex relationships as of opposite-sex ones. The game presents relationships that do not adhere to gendered stereotypes in which women are nurturing and romantic, while men are sexually assertive with many women. At one point, a male NPC states, 'Mettaton looked really … Really cool in that dress. It sort of makes me feel like I could wear one, too!'[48] The game not only directly addresses men wearing traditionally feminine clothing but illustrates the argument of this thesis: that the media we consume teaches us what behaviour is acceptable. The MPC builds friendships in a comedic playthrough that involves romantic, familial, and

[46] Ferguson, 'Positive Female Role-Models', p. 897.
[47] Toby Fox, *Undertale* (2015), multiple platforms.
[48] Cryaotic, *Cry Plays: Undertale [P8]*, online video recording, YouTube, 21 October 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3opvxIn5gQE> [accessed 20 March 2019] 1:28-37.

platonic relationships between characters of the same gender or characters with no discernible gender. The MPC's omitted gender effectively detaches the game from discussions of sexist stereotyping and allows an opportunity for the story to draw the player's full attention. Genderless MPCs allow players to project any and all gender-based attributes into their play, yet empowering representations which directly defy gender norms are already filling the industry.

Figure 4.5. The Genderless MPC of *Undertale* (2015)[49]

Undertale's MPC celebrates diversity in the way they interact with NPCs and their quirks. One character is a ghost who claims: 'after a great meal i like to lie on the ground and feel like garbage … it's a family tradition … do you want … to join me?' The player can choose not to, but an adherence to the themes of the game, which encourage the player to put on another's shoes and walk around in them, suggests they should do so. The ghost and the MPC lay on the ground and the screen fades to a dream-like outer space background. Neither character speaks until the player moves and 'brings them back' to the present. The ghost then thanks them, and the exchange – like previous ones with other characters – is over after a simple indulging of the characters in habits that make them happy, no matter how simple yet strange. The NPCs feel rewarded after these encounters, happy to share an activity they enjoy with someone else. Such scenes contextualise 'quirks' as interesting and fun to share with others – and that indulging in them, even if they are not an activity that the player valued before meeting this person, is interesting and fun. The game teaches players that triumph is not the result of violence – the player learns at the end of the game that XP stands for 'execution points' and work against the progression of the player – but of caring, encouraging, and loving others. The MPC either has no prior expectations according to stereotypes or ignores those expectations, and therefore does not hold their friends to those expectations and critique them according to the associated prescriptive behaviour. These accumulated traits and others of *Undertale* represent the unique passions we each hold that span far beyond stereotypes, gender-based or otherwise.

[49] Crunching, 'Who is the Strongest Character in Undertale?', *Amino* (2018), <https://aminoapps.com/c/undertale/page/blog/who-is-the-strongest-character-in-undertale/1jJS_6u1Kw6w8q8VQaM3kPkaDPz4mgk> [accessed 17 October 2018].

Games are more often considered a storytelling art form and are becoming more frequently identified as interactive works of literature: their creators are working hard to subvert preconceptions that games are mindless toys only for children. Virtual worlds present adventures through emotionally rich stories like *To the Moon* (2011), which portrays cooperative and loving relationships despite hardship in a text-based storytelling game.[50] Players follow the entwining stories between the pairings of Drs Eva Rosalene and Neil Watts and Johnny and River, which both demonstrate healthy, equal relationships in ways that gamers did not encounter when the industry was new. In the game, the two doctors are asked to fulfil Johnny's dying wish to go to the moon. They must sift through his memories to figure out how best to grant his wish, and in so doing they explore the relationship between Johnny and his dead wife, River. In their quest, the two doctors collaborate successfully because their relationship is based on a mutual goal that requires an equal contribution of skills and (often peculiar) personality traits. Neil is not portrayed as the hardened, logical male medic, as he might be expected to behave according to stereotype; in fact, it is the opposite. Neil is the fun-loving, at times less objective side of the duo, while Eva is the stricter scientist. She is also slightly cleverer than Neil, being the one who figures out the endgame before Neil – and the player – do. Protagonists are not meant to teach players that strength is embodied by refusing to seek help from others, and the cooperation and banter between the doctors is representative of mutually dependent relationships between male and female colleagues who operate as equals.

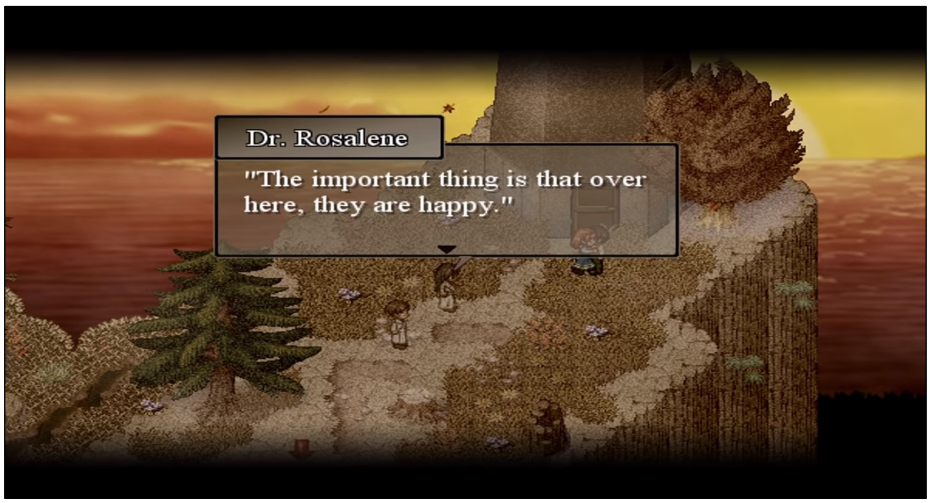

Figure 4.6. Working through Relationship Dynamics in *To the Moon* (2011)

[50] Kan Gao and Laura Shigihara, *To the Moon* (Freebird Games, 2011), multiple platforms.

The complex relationship between Johnny and River is a stunning representation of love and growth among social disorder and memory loss. Their marriage is full of hardship and joy, and the game depicts this balanced relationship as one rich in communication, patience, and a genuine desire for understanding. Johnny and River do not embody stereotypical male and female characters: they are nuanced with unique, well-developed personalities and experience struggles that are not based on feminine or masculine norms.

This is not to say that games with sexist representations may not simultaneously propose empowered options or that an empowered protagonist will not face sexism. Depiction does not equal endorsement in many cases, and in-game sexist content can be subverted, as in *Dreamfall Chapters: The Longest Journey* (2014-16).[51] The game is rich in characters with diverse backgrounds: one MPC is Kian Alvane, a gay man of colour, and the other is Zoë Castillo, a well-rounded female character who outmanoeuvres her enemies. Many of the important NPCs do not conform to traditional gender norms: there is Queenie, the female leader of a gang; Mira, an Indian IT designer and engineer; and the Mole, the female leader of a criminal underworld. These characters may do feminine things – like Queenie embodying the feminine trait of being nurturing by asking Zoë to check in on a young woman who was formerly her charge – but for these NPCs, their feminine characteristics are only one aspect of their complex personalities and goals, and their feminine traits are not exaggerated to impress compliance to gender expectation.

Zoë uses humour, cleverness, and compassion in equal measure to surpass obstacles. For example, one character endorses the oppression of the exploited Magical Races and gives multiple political speeches against them and women, mixing his speech with sexist discourse. In one of these speeches, he fulminates: '"Goddess" this "Goddess" that. Leaves a bad taste in my mouth, sucking up to their feminine deity. […] Give me a world […] by and for man, with the woman in her rightful place. At home.'

[51] Ragnar Tørnquist, *Dreamfall Chapters: The Longest Journey* (Deep Silver, 2014-16), multiple platforms.

Figure 4.7. Zoë (Right) and Hanna (Left) from *Dreamfall Chapters* (2014-16)

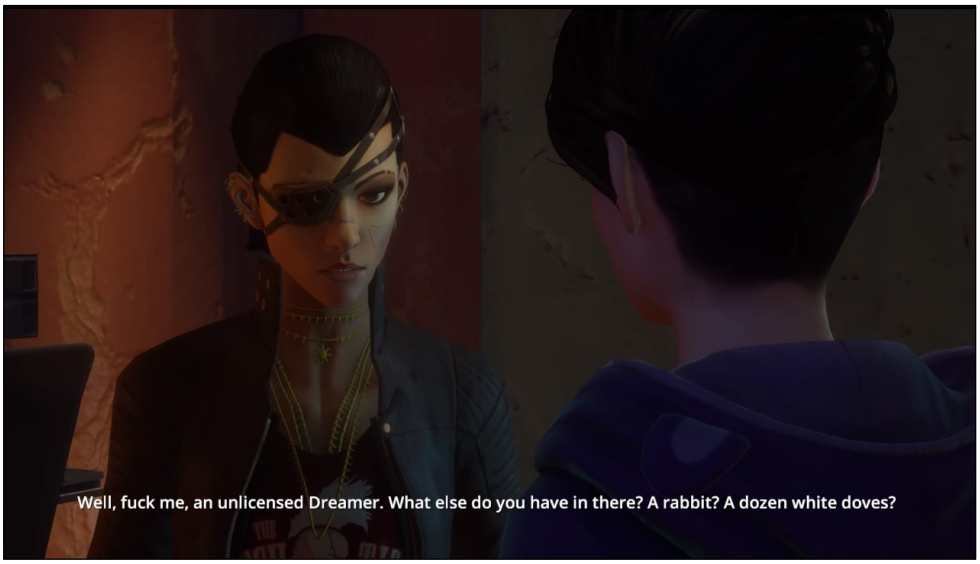

Figure 4.8. Mira is Unique and Empowered in *Dreamfall Chapters* (2014-16)

Later, his language – as hate speech so often does in the real world – intersects race and gender:

> As you well know, the current commissioner, a person of the female persuasion, has failed to maintain order in the city in these dark, trying times. […] it's understandable. She's weak, She's sentimental. She's merely a woman, and she's not been able to properly inspire the men of the Watch to take appropriate action against our occult immigrants.

Zoë faces this character and must react: she does not hide her frustration, yet she does not turn to violence, instead using resourcefulness to expose his limited ways of thinking and outplay him. Zoë is not the only game protagonist who finds herself

surrounded by ignorant world views, but what makes characters like her exemplary is the way in which they handle the situation – such as when they stand up for themselves or others and rectify the wrong they see in the world. Zoë is not one to turn a blind eye to the political upheaval which exploits Magicals. They are targeted for horrific abuse and a secret genocide by Azadi soldiers, which Kian, the other MPC, interrupts later in the game. During the Azadi's occupation of the city, Zoë says: 'The Azadi remind me of the EYE. Fascist soldiers are the same everywhere, even across parallel dimensions.' It is more than representation of diverse characters that makes a game culturally aware: it is the recognition of hateful behaviour for what it is, and the opportunity for the MPC to address and defeat it – Zoë portrays racism and sexism as ridiculous through her actions. Games which contain difficult material such as these can occupy the realm of play without making players racist or sexist; however, the depictions of such material are not progressive, until and unless they are addressed and subverted. The next section will further explore juxtaposed sexist and feminist traits, focusing on one franchise in particular: the best-selling *Tomb Raider* and its protagonist Lara Croft.

Lara Croft's Feminist Evolution

The culmination of many stereotype-based game design characteristics is to be found in the iconic adventure heroine, Lara Croft, demonstrating that even mainstream games can be modulated within a feminist framework. Given the contraditions inherent in her presentation, analysis of Lara Croft is not as straightforward as it has been for previous games; however, it is for that reason that the *Tomb Raider* franchise supports a thorough analysis of the progression of games from sexist to empowered representations. The *Tomb Raider* protagonist was the first female protagonist to be taken seriously in the gaming world, allowing for many female gamers to see themselves on the screen for the first time. Croft entered the gaming scene as a young, rich, beautiful archaeologist, whose dual-wield guns could defeat any natural or supernatural force that came between her and ancient treasures. Since her appearance in 1996, discussions about her relationship to feminist representation have bounced back and forth between empowered and sexist, with scholars and players arguing either that she is a female character who is capable of defeating any enemy or that she is an empty shell in the shape of a male fantasy.

Early designs of Croft were undoubtedly hypersexualised, particularly her exceptional physical ('pneumatic') proportions and the sexual nature of the noises she

uttered when sustaining a blow or straining while climbing. There cannot be much doubt that past versions of Croft depended on sexist beliefs about women both in her creation and the level of comfort players have viewing objectified women, no matter their gender. However, Croft has – or, in some cases, came to have over time – other characteristics which must also be examined to understand her fully as the icon she was and still remains. When looking at her sexist past and into her feminist future, Croft is a character who, like the industry as a whole, is on the upswing toward gender-equal depictions.

Figure 4.9. Lara's Physical Representation in *Tomb Raider* (1996)[52]

Croft is more than her appearance, according to game and digital researcher Esther MacCallum-Stewart, who defends Croft as well as her audience: 'To portray all of these men as heteronormative, misogynist neanderthals, slobbering for the next shot of a breast, is incredibly offensive, not to mention sexist and disrespectful'.[53] She claims that male players will happily cross gender for reasons other than sexuality, appropriation,

[52] Toby Gard, *Tomb Raider* (Eidos Interactive, 1996), Sega Saturn, PlayStation, MS-DOS.
[53] Esther MacCallum-Stewart, '"Take That, Bitches!" Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives', *Game Studies*, 14.2 (December 2014), no pag. <http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart> [accessed 18 August 2017].

or gender preference, as Croft does not 'reject' players who use her body for genuine role-playing, especially when the game does not offer another choice. MacCallum-Stewart argues that it is 'horribly unfair' to hold Croft's physicality against her, and that Croft's sexuality has been taken from her and transformed in the following way:

> What is so striking […] are the ways in which the authors directly refute Croft's potential as a feminist icon because of her body [….] [A]uthors ignore or are ashamed of their responses to Croft, and work hard to negate any impact she might potentially have on the female player. Her appearance is used as a weapon against any meaningful influence her insertion in gaming culture might represent, and her huge popularity amongst gamers is dismissed as ultimately futile.[54]

For men, becoming Croft may be no different to the experience and reaction of becoming any other MPC. Especially in the *Tomb Raider* reboot (2013) – in which Croft took a much more realistic physical form – players are encouraged by her strength and wisecracks or they sigh in relief with her when she escapes danger.[55] MacCallum-Stewart claims that 'emotional and physical learning takes place throughout the game', enhanced by 'a rich narrative and complex plot'.[56] Croft becomes increasingly humanised as more titles are released: therefore, MacCallum-Stewart argues, it is irresponsible to consider Croft as an empty portrayal or one that dissolves feminist progress in the industry. Croft was designed to be enjoyable to look at, certainly, but she can still be an empowering character, and this is proven even truer in recent years.

The new *Tomb Raider* (2018) film broke through some of the representation expectations created by Croft's physically-exaggerated past.[57] The movie was adapted from the 2013 game, and there are certainly scenes in the film which reference game play – such as Croft saving herself from rushing rivers below by using a wrecked plane as a makeshift bridge, or a scene in which she has to land her speeding parachute in the middle of a forest. The physical proportions of Alicia Vikander, who portrayed Croft in the movie, were similar to those found in the game as well, with her realistic shape and lack of hot pants; in fact, the skin that she shows makes sense in the context of the story and is often covered in blood, sweat, and mud, opposing the expectation for pristine, touchable skin. Unsurprisingly, misogynistic fans were not happy with the new

[54] MacCallum-Stewart, 'Take That, Bitches!'.
[55] Noah Hughes, Daniel Chayer, and Daniel Neuberger, *Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2013), multiple platforms.
[56] MacCallum-Stewart, 'Take That, Bitches!'.
[57] *Tomb Raider*, dir. by Roar Uthaug (Warner Brothers and MGM Studios, 2018).

interpretation of Croft by Vikander. According to Ryan Parker and Katie Kilkenny, most notably was YouTube personality The Amazing Atheist (TJ Kirk) whose tweet about the film stated: 'Do I have to be the asshole who says her tits are too small for me to see her as Lara Croft? Do I have to be that guy? Do I have to be the one who fucking says it? I guess I do. Sorry.'[58] This response was only one of many however, and the discourse surrounding the release of the game was equally sexist.

Beyond her physical depictions, the film's fight scenes are physically believable, highlighting the power held by women through fights which 'made sense with the female body', according to Inkoo Kang.[59] Her fight choreography contrasts with the 2000 and 2003 versions of Croft, in which Angelina Jolie performs feats that defy physics with graceful, sexy movements of her body, which often do not show exertion for the risk of contorting her features away from stereotypical attractiveness.[60] The new film also conceptualised vulnerability in complex ways. The 2013 game often stimulated responses in players of benevolent sexism, portraying Croft as a woman whom players wanted to protect more than they wanted to embody, according to Parker and Kilkenny.[61] In contrast, the new film presented Croft as a character who did not have to be solely physically dominant, and not in ways which suggested a violent solution to problems as the only option. The embodiment of various aspects of feminist thought by the film industry – and popular resistance to it – illustrates the interdependence and repetition of ideals in film, games, other forms of entertainment, and wider culture, as well as these industries' progress toward empowering marginalised groups. Despite the implied advancement, even in the film's supposedly impartial IMDb (Internet Movie Database) page, none of the top five keywords for the film's plot address a single plot point; they are: hard body, b cup, feminine hair, thin

[58] Ryan Parker and Katie Kilkenny, '"Tomb Raider": Fans Slam Criticism of Alicia Vikander's Body', *The Hollywood Reporter* (2018), <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/tomb-raider-fans-slam-criticism-alicia-vikanders-body-movie-1094440?fbclid=IwAR3x758Aek_qsTAWcFjREJPiHHkJ4KgHKMXCppGgRmDHhuYNzrfs9s4CJh4> [accessed 20 February 2019].
[59] Inkoo Kang, 'The New *Tomb Raider* Finds a Different Way of Admiring Female Bodies', *Slate* (2018), <https://slate.com/culture/2018/03/the-new-tomb-raider-movie-starring-alicia-vikander-reviewed.html?fbclid=IwAR1i2WOhuUQlbeq6B9uhyeo_eF7NQM8LkAl3qxavJ4dVi34lCl3LAEsWNNU> [accessed 20 February 2019].
[60] *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, dir. by Simon West (Paramount Pictures, 2000); *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider – The Cradle of Life*, dir. by Jan de Bont (Paramount Pictures, 2003).
[61] Parker and Kilkenny, '"Tomb Raider" Fans Slam Criticism of Alicia Vikander's Body'.

girl, and cleavage.[62] Stumbling upon these keywords was as disappointing academically as it was personally.

In the same year, a new game in the franchise was released: *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*.[63] The game is the conclusion of the story that commenced with the 2013 reboot, and it is notably feminist in its representation.[64] In this game, Croft fights against the paramilitary organisation Trinity to locate a precious Incan artefact. When she finds it, Croft confiscates it to keep it from Trinity's grasp and sets in motion a series of cataclysms which will eventually destroy the world. While searching for an additional artefact to stop the cataclysms, she follows a series of clues which lead her to a hidden city, Paititi, untouched by colonisation. Together with her allies, Croft battles against Trinity, led by Doctor Dominguez, a man who wants to remake the world.

Despite the praise the game deserves for its feminist iconography, there are a few sexist aspects of Croft's design which must be examined before continuing: it is a refreshingly short list and mostly pertains to her physical presentation. When Croft is first introduced to the audience, her skin is mostly covered: she wears long pants, tall boots, and a long-sleeve shirt rolled up to the elbows, showing no cleavage. Later in the game, the player has the option to craft different outfits for her, many of them with short sleeves, but these do not present her skin in a way which encourages ogling. Despite her practical clothing, it is worth noting the tightness of the clothing against her skin, hugging her conventionally feminine form. This is the case even in her long-sleeved button-up, the style suggestive of that which an explorer would wear specifically for its loose fit and freedom of movement. Additionally, there are no back pockets on her trousers, accentuating and facilitating the view of the shape of her body. Though her skin is usually covered other than bits of arm or leg depending on the outfit, because of the tightness of her clothes, there is no question where one body part ends and the next begins. By preserving the choice for players to dress her this way, it shows that clothing design has not fully deviated from default female expectations.

It is more than her clothing that suggests hints of sexist design: her arms are toned, as they should be resulting from the amount of climbing she does, yet the width of her arms are too thin to portray realistic proportions, as if the game designers were

[62] IMDb, 'Tomb Raider (2018)' (2018), <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1365519/> [accessed 20 February 2019].
[63] Daniel Chayer, *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2018), multiple platforms.
[64] The second game, *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, was published by Square Enix in 2015.

unwilling to 'masculinise' her despite the realism of muscular arms in this instance. Equally impractically, her hair is in a ponytail for the game, but it is perpetually blowing gently across her face: while this is a striking image, it is not a logical one for a character who jumps off ledges and hangs from cliffs – someone who needs to see her surroundings in detail at all times. Through the design of these physical characteristics of Croft, she is not overtly hypersexualised as she was in the past, but she has nevertheless been designed to be enjoyable to look at. Croft's creators may have made these choices to retain their loyal male audience, an audience which might have stopped playing if the designers had led with the feminist themes found later in the game.

Croft's physical appearance contrasts that of her companion Jonah, who accompanies and supports her throughout the game. Jonah is overweight and casually dressed, and his design conveys his personality from his ponytail, to his tattoos, to his sense of humour. As the male companion, he is 'allowed' to be designed without sexual attraction paramount to his other features. Despite allowances for his appearance, Jonah is a feminist character and defies masculine norms in various ways. For example, in one scene, when Croft and Jonah are moving through the jungle, they must walk along a ledge, a fall from which would be fatal: as Jonah moves along the ledge, he moans and groans in fear, not hiding his feelings from Croft, his female (and unafraid) companion. The game's depictions of empowered female characters builds on this foundation, and Croft's feminist credentials are shown in complex ways throughout the narrative. While she has been an archaeologist since the 90s, in this game, the depth of her knowledge shines through as she solves puzzle after puzzle, translating complex murals without hesitation, and recognising the breadth and width of history addressed by the many figures across the centuries who had a hand in hiding the treasure she seeks. At the same time, Croft has not been separated from the physically demanding aspects of her design – rappelling from cliffs, jumping, and climbing mountains. One of her most striking attributes in the 2018 game is how she embodies brain and brawn to an admirable degree not seen previously in her own games or many outside the franchise.

While Croft is designed with weaknesses, they are not gender-stereotyped, exaggerated, or used as a means of gender-compliance. Jonah gets along with almost every NPC in the game, and his social skills are used more than once to get them out of a bind. Croft seems anti-social in comparison, her representation favouring an 'academic shut-in' approach more commonly seen as a trope for male characters. This

portrayal sits in direct opposition to tropes which would have presented Croft's sexual confidence as a tool to manipulate weak male characters to get out of a tough spot.

Figure 4.10. Lara is More Realistically Covered in *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (2018)[65]

In one of the most noteworthy scenes in the game, the player is put through a memory/dream sequence in which they control Croft as a little girl. In this portion of the game, Croft, for the first time, is de-sexed. She is of pre-pubescent age and innocent of both her current troubles and the tragedy about to befall her family. This humanising aspect contextualises Croft not just as an avatar whom the player watches from behind as she scales mountains, but as a complex individual with dreams and feelings – which she shares aloud so the player cannot miss them.

Shadow of the Tomb Raider complicates players' assumptions by extending progressive gender representation to female NPCs as much as to Croft. Women in the game are not sexualised, and this choice by the designers of the game forces players to see them as people instead of objects. One character, Abby, has short-hair, a cap, and a loose-fitting t-shirt and jeans, eschewing the overly feminised model that players may have come to expect in earlier titles (see Figure 4.11, overleaf).

[65] Charles Tyldsley, 'Shadow of the Tomb Raider Coming in September', *Gaming LYF* (2018), <https://gaminglyf.com/news/2018-03-15-shadow-of-the-tomb-raider-coming-in-september/> [accessed 15 October 2018].

Figure 4.11. Abby, an NPC in *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (2018)[66]

At one point in the game, Abby gives Jonah and Croft important information, on which the latter leaves to follow up. When Jonah moves to go with her, Croft insists he stay with Abby, for whom it is becoming clear he has feelings. Croft is supportive of Jonah's feelings for Abby, despite the stereotype asserting that women are catty or jealous when they have to share the attention of a friend, especially a male friend. It is perhaps a bit sad that this is considered a progressive representation, but in comparison to representations of women in this franchise and beyond, it is indicative of advancement toward presenting women as individuals, not as representative of stereotypes about them. Nevertheless, Jonah and Croft are two of the main characters between whom there is never a forced romance to satisfy a sexual sub-plot, even when they share a considerable amount of screen time alone.

Perhaps the most strikingly feminist character in this game is Unuratu, the ruler of Paititi. Unuratu defies a multitude of sexist tropes discussed in previous chapters. She is an attractive female character, but her features are non-traditional in their departure from Western ideals and instead comply with facial expectations of the indigenous people of the region. Unuratu is a mother, a queen, a warrior, a nurturer, and a strategist among many other attributes her designers have given her.

[66] Mike Williams, 'Shadow of the Tomb Raider Highlights Lara's Moral Struggles, but Tombs and Puzzles Reign Supreme', *US Gamer* (2018), <https://www.usgamer.net/articles/shadow-of-the-tomb-raider-preview> [accessed 15 October 2018].

Figure 4.12. Unuratu, Ruler of Paititi, in *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (2018)[67]

Using her power to improve the lives of her people, Unuratu's rule is unquestioned by those who follow her, her gender never mentioned. She is given respect and consideration and shown in the game as strong and capable but never proud or power-hungry. When faced with the antagonist, her abilities are highlighted when Dominguez asks her to join his movement by genuinely claiming that he 'needs' her intelligence and resilience to remake the world. She and Croft save each other multiple times from enemies and traps with a combination of cleverness and physical power, their partnership presenting two empowered female characters joining forces against the antagonist. This is only one of several instances in the game which present women supporting other women.

This game ends the narrative journey of this and the previous game, in which Croft claims that she needs to get away from tombs – the game implies forever – to spend time among the living. The last scene is of Croft happy in her childhood home. The shot opens deceptively on a child's playground, but Croft's finale is not portrayed as motherhood; rather, she is thriving by working at her desk, surrounded by artefacts. The designers thankfully did not force a relationship and children upon Croft to illustrate her success, instead playing with our gendered expectations and beliefs about which endings are regarded as happy. In this last scene, Croft gets her ending without her narrative bowing to traditional gender roles. Croft's feminist progression indicates undeniable appetite for change in the industry. Over time, she has been transformed

[67] Paula Thomas, 'Shadow of the Tomb Raider Gives the Past a Voice – Review by Paula', *Coin-Drop* (2018), <http://coin-drop.com/shadow-of-the-tomb-raider-review-paula/> [accessed 15 October 2018].

from a controversial sex object with little background to an undeniable feminist icon in her most recent portrayal. It was a risk for the game designers (Crystal Dynamics) to take such an approach with this game, and as a AAA company they certainly could have hypersexualised Abby and Unuratu – or even changed them to male characters – and still met their bottom line. However, they chose to make a feminist *Tomb Raider* game with an empowered female MPC and similarly empowered non-playable women of colour, suggesting that, even for games with colossal budgets, the industry is progressing toward equality from the top. These ideas echo Adrienne Shaw's claim: 'What womanhood means, what blackness means, what queer means are contextual and malleable', dependent on the influence of popular culture.[68]

The Significance of Stereotypes and How Game Design Should Apply Them (or Not)

Lara Croft's recent redesign supports non-stereotypical representations of women, yet the question remains: Why are stereotypes restrictive in game design and in other areas of popular culture? Stereotyping suspends diversity – in games and elsewhere – for a number of reasons. In the generalisation of any group, an enormous amount of individuality is lost, but beyond this, the traits which arise as representative of a group are often outdated, and even if not, they are exaggerated to a degree of falseness. Picking a handful of definitive traits for an entire group is not only outrageously restrictive: when considering the stereotypes of women in games, it has historically not been women choosing those very traits assigned to their demographic. Rather, the dominant group in games – the dominant group in many other areas of wider culture – are white, heterosexual men: they are the ones who decide how women are represented. When this demographic is responsible for writing female characters, it is little wonder why similarly regurgitated hypersexualised, shallow characters fill game content, cinema, comics, and many other forms of entertainment.

Children's desires within play heavily depend on gendered stereotypes, and it is for this reason that scholars must determine when discussion of stereotyping is helpful: when might a stereotype be a representation of genuine tendencies within a demographic, which can be used to improve society, and when might it be used as a weapon against marginalised groups? Stereotypes can be considered by, for example,

[68] Adrienne Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture* (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 20.

games designers trying to make games which encourage women to play them, as indicative or definitive, yet maintaining the latter is problematic. When game creators consider stereotype to be indicative and nuanced, they may take helpful attributes associated with gender-based desires for play in children and add them to game content (for instance, women enjoying social-reasoning techniques). Designers cannot rely solely on these traits to create game content, however, especially because doing so would be considering the stereotype as definitive. It is the belief of stereotypes as definitive that dictates which types of play are rewarded and punished in wider culture according to gender and its intersections with other demographic traits. This is especially crucial when, as Kelly Bergstrom notes:

> Feminist scholars have demonstrated that it is simply not by choice that many women do not gravitate towards these [STEM] subjects. Instead, women's access is impeded, and this barrier works to reinforce stereotypical gender roles that assume that women are 'naturally' less interested in particular forms of technology.[69]

A forced man/woman dichotomy is problematic, creating boundaries where they need not exist. Yet such dichotomies are virtually unavoidable, according to Sandra Lipsitz Bem. She claims that children 'cannot help but observe, for example, that what parents, teachers, and peers consider to be appropriate behavior varies as a function of sex; that toys, clothing, occupations, hobbies, domestic chores – even pronouns – all vary as a function of sex.' When applied to games, gender representation 'teaches that the dichotomy between male and female has extensive and intensive relevance to virtually every aspect of life', causing the gender schema to take priority over other schemata.[70] Women enjoy challenge, progress, and 'epic fails' to the same degree as men: motivations for play are shared by gamers no matter their gender: the differences in perception is shaped by cultural forces. As children mature, they continue to adopt role-playing as a means of play, and it is the core of most non-puzzle-based activities. Therefore, play is an area within which stereotypes manifest, offering an opportunity for us to analyse boys' and girls' adherence to preconceived assumptions. When a young girl acts as mother to her doll, she embodies a character with nurturing attributes

[69] See Kelly Bergstrom, 'Virtual Inequality: A Woman's Place in Cyberspace', *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2012), 267-9 (p. 267).
[70] Sandra Lipsitz Bem, 'Gender Schema Theory: A Cognitive Account of Sex Typing', *Psychological Review*, 88.4 (1981), 354-64 (p. 362).

compiled from the social cues which her environment has provided her: the beliefs of those who raise her, the media she consumes, the products bought for her, and so forth.

While many adult women possess a desire to nurture, not all have this desire, so where does the foundation for this stereotype (and others) lie? According to Lee Jussim et al., this relies heavily on one's definition of stereotype.[71] One definition is the belief that stereotype strives to indicate, as nearly as is possible, all-or-none – or the most all-encompassing representation as possible. Charles Taylor claims: 'Our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves.' [emphasis in original][72] That which is included and excluded in the stereotype shapes our belief of the group being discussed: this is why even the ironic sexism discussed in Chapter One distorts the view of real-world women toward sexist beliefs about them, even when presented as a joke or as pointedly untrue.[73] Richard Dyer clarifies the functions of stereotype by juxtaposing it with *social types*:

> Types are instances which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those whom the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes). For this reason, stereotypes are also more rigid than social types. The latter are open-ended, more provisional, more flexible, to create the sense of freedom, choice, self-definition for those within the boundaries of normalcy.[74]

Stereotypes do not only serve to restrict the behaviours, desires, or appearances of those who fall into the discussed demographic, but the rules which define their boundaries are similarly restrictive. This is likely why, when someone has a single trait of a stereotype, their other qualities which reject that stereotype are not considered equally valid – and likely why the gamer stereotype is still assumed to be white, male, and heterosexual despite statistics like those in the Introduction suggesting otherwise.

Many children unintentionally draw from and experience personal satisfaction by performing stereotypical behaviour – even as they are unable to discern what

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[71] Lee Jussim, Clark McCauley, and Yueh-Ting Lee, 'Why Study Stereotype Accuracy and Inaccuracy?', in *Stereotype Accuracy: Toward Appreciating Group Differences*, ed. by Lee Jussim, Clark MacCauley, and Yueh-Ting Lee (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1995), pp. 3-27 (pp. 4-5).
[72] Charles Taylor, 'The Politics of Recognition', in *Multiculturalism*, ed. by Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 25-73 (p. 25).
[73] See Chapter One of this thesis, pp. 33.
[74] Richard Dyer, 'Stereotyping', in *Columbia Reader on Lesbians and Gay Men in Media, Society, and Politics*, ed. by Larry Gross and James Woods (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp. 297-301 (pp. 298-9).

stereotype is, much less identify their actions as stereotypical. Academics must not discredit outliers concerning gender trends; however, acknowledging stereotypes as indicative can have benefits when examining trends in play for gender-based data sets. Forcing stereotypes upon a gender group can be oppressive, but some – those not based on biologically sexed physical characteristics – can be manipulated to help players. Giving women more feelings of control over the game space by adding more attributes which attract them may encourage them to enter the space. Women are already finding activities in games which stimulate play, and suggesting game content additions does not imply subtractions elsewhere. For example, competition is commonly viewed as a masculine motivation for play, and though men enjoy competition, so too do women. An attempt to cater to female players by removing competitive aspects of play would not only be an exaggerated response, but one which would have 'serious long-term implications' and fail to satisfy female gamers, according to game research by Kristen Lucas and John Sherry.[75] Instead, games that vary aspects of play which cater to more subtle gender preferences can be easily programmed. Lucas and Sherry suggest:

> Games could focus on landmark memory, object displacement, and perceptual speed. A game designed in this way may look more like a mystery to be solved, rather than a land to be conquered. As female players return to landmarks for clues, identify items that have mysteriously disappeared, or decipher rapidly flashing messages, they will gain a sense of control and mastery of the video game environment. At the same time, they also will be reaping the benefits of increasing their mental rotation skills, their navigational ability, and their confidence in managing a complex and competitive virtual world […][76]

Feelings of control can be programmable for marginalised groups as well, but speaking of gender specifically, game design can address these aspects which satisfy female players without marketing them as overly feminine and ghettoizing female players. Women like to play games: they do not need to be convinced to do so.

Making games less sex-stereotyped does not only improve games for women, but for everyone else. A game which combines non-sexist stereotypes for play is exemplified and further explained through a franchise with which I grew up: *Nancy Drew: Legend of the Crystal Skull* (2007).[77] The games are marketed to young women;

[75] Kristen Lucas and John Sherry, 'Sex Differences in Video Game Play: A Communication-Based Explanation', *Communication Research*, 31.5 (2004), 499-523 (p. 519).
[76] Lucas and Sherry, 'Sex Differences in Video Game Play', p. 519.
[77] Mike Paganini, *Nancy Drew: Legend of the Crystal Skull* (Her Interactive, 2007), Windows and macOS.

however, the content is satisfying to players across genders. In one example, the game uses social reasoning when the player must act as Nancy to interrogate suspects. The player must navigate social cues since some dialogue options offend or insult NPCs, resulting in their refusal to speak with Nancy, while being kind or doing favours for them results in their assistance in solving a case. Additionally, *Crystal Skull* is not unique in its use of in-game puzzles, and just as with the other games in the franchise, the player must use cognitive abilities like spatial reasoning such as when they are asked to fit irregularly-shaped books onto a shelf. Equally crucial is the task of making game spaces less aggressively anti-woman by not assaulting them with sexist representations when they play. According to Nick Yee, we can give female players what they have been culturally encouraged to enjoy in play through non-explicitly gendered themes like cognitive abilities and social reasoning, and we can use game content to present preferences for play as nuanced and not based on sexist factors.[78] I do not propose that making games less sexist is an easy task, nor one that would be integrated in the industry with no resistance, but it is certainly possible and well worth it.

The existence of stereotypical desires for play in children insinuates some measure of trust in the society which dictates their preferences. According to Shaw, stereotyping is not only risky in regard to assumptions of desires for play for children, but it also dictates representations in games by determining who gets to '"count" as a marginalised group'. Further, she claims that when a character from a marginalised group is placed in a game, even in an empowered context, their role often forces them to be portrayed as 'other' or as '"model minorities" […] never changing the status quo'.[79] A handful of diverse characters cannot change beliefs held by wider culture and are more like to be 'token' characters, satisfying a checklist that not every character is able-bodied, white, straight, and so on. Shaw claims that youth is where most of the difference between male and female gamers lies; yet, as adults move away from the trust and influence of society, new trends in preference arise and the lines between gender preferences blur. These preferences are identified by Lazzaro, as mentioned briefly in Chapter Three and state that men and women are attracted to the same traits in

[78] Nick Yee, *The Proteus Paradox: How Online Games and Virtual Worlds Change Us – and How They Don't* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), p. 97.
[79] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, p. 19.

games, and none of the aspects players provided required strongly gender-stereotyped themes or gameplay.[80]

While a multitude of trained attitudes linger into adulthood, adults more than children are able to identify and to choose intentionally RPGs which provide a space to explore choices that come from sides of oneself that often feel forbidden or best left unexplored. More frequently, these narratives are found in graphically advanced games which are viewed as art, such as: *We Happy Few* (2018), which plays with feelings of paranoia amidst the emotional sterilisation of a society in which the MPC attempts to conceal their motivations; *Until Dawn* (2015), a horror game with an overwhelming amount of character choice, which affects the overall narrative and the survival of the characters; and *The Path* (2009), in which the player follows the journey of six sisters who are told to 'Stay on the Path', but by deviating, the player learns their complex histories which explore substance abuse, self-harm, and sexuality.[81]

Figure 4.13. A Constable in *We Happy Few* (2018), Who Chases the MPC if They Do Not Take Their 'Joy'[82]

[80] Lazzaro, 'Boy Games', p. 210. See Chapter Three of this thesis, p. 149.
[81] Guillaume Provost, *We Happy Few* (Gearbox Publishing, 2018), Windows, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One; Will Byles, *Until Dawn* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2015), PlayStation 4; Auriea Harvey and Michaël Samyn, *The Path* (Tale of Tales, 2009), Windows and macOS.
[82] Microsoft, 'Buy We Happy Few' (2018), <https://www.microsoft.com/en-ca/p/we-happy-few/bpr2tbs2kmqj#activetab=pivot:overviewtab> [accessed 25 September 2018].

Figure 4.14. Sam Hides from a Wendigo in *Until Dawn* (2015)[83]

Figure 4.15. Robin, the Youngest Sister, in *The Path* (2009)[84]

Mulvey recognised film for its ability to oppose capitalistic motives and instead embrace artisanal ones, and games are no different.[85] Now more than ever, games manipulate design, dialogue, and plot to a depth they could not achieve when the

[83] Adam Dodd, 'Supermassive Isn't Working on "Until Dawn 2"', *Bloody Disgusting* (2016), <https://bloody-disgusting.com/news/3396342/until-dawn/> [accessed 25 September 2018].
[84] Valve, 'The Path', *Steam* (2018), <https://store.steampowered.com/app/27000/The_Path/> [accessed 25 September 2018].
[85] Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', p. 15.

underlying technology was limited. Video games are only one aspect of role-playing to which children are exposed, and the responsibility for empowered representations of gender and beyond may be inconvenient to recognise, but they remain necessary nonetheless. Games play a significant role in reinforcing stereotypes which are either subtle (suggesting that women more than men enjoy forming and maintaining personal relationships in-game) and obvious (women are only feminine if they are scantily-clad and have large breasts and men are only masculine if they punch anyone who disagrees with them).

There is no biological reason why men and women should not enjoy the same games. As discussed in Chapter Two, Yee called the problem of making games for female players a 'red herring'.[86] Female players may certainly feel repelled by sexist content, but many male players find it offensive as well, especially as feminism takes hold in various areas of mass culture. Feminine games *are* a red herring: the industry does not need to reconsider motivations for play, but it does need to change game content that celebrates the patriarchy. Games and play are not inherently masculine or feminine, but the industry's content has a history of satisfying a misogynistic heterosexual male persona. By removing sexist content based on false stereotypes that are heavily dependent on strict and oppressive gender norms, designers can address many reasons why women avoided games or left game communities they once enjoyed. Society is full of richly diverse minorities, those dependent on gender and otherwise: that wider cultural presence must be reflected in the media we consume, especially in the games we play.

Progressive Attitudes Replacing Sexist Ones

Just as *Tomb Raider* embraced a non-sexualised MPC and NPC women of colour, other game designers appear to be increasingly aware of the desire for games which feature progressive representation. The video games discussed earlier in this chapter incline toward diversity and gender equality through complex stories and characters that do not depend on the sexist tropes covered in previous chapters. In these game spaces, players of any gender can conceptualise diverse themes at a level of intimacy unattainable by other mediums, because they allow players to immerse themselves in the characters. In addition, more games are being developed, which, according to Brunner et al.,

[86] Yee, *Proteus Paradox*, p. 109. See Chapter Two of this thesis, pp. 124-6.

encourage girls to 'take their own side, act out, throw caution to the winds and watch what happens'.[87] These ideas are not meant exclusively for girls, of course: this is the heart of all RPGs. Girls are encouraged by wider culture to be 'both frail and enduring, helpless and competent, fun loving and sensitive, emotional and available, needy and nurturing, vain and moral', and games are a safe place in which to defy those norms actively.[88] When gamers shed the sense of caution that accompanies decision-making in the real world, it expands the possibilities role-players may take in-game. Games are attractive for their ability to distort or reinvent reality by offering players virtually inhabitable fantastic universes and communities. This recreation of reality can present real-world sexism as ever more believable (as discussed in previous chapters), but just as importantly it can be used to combat and reverse these same effects.

Games provide opportunities not only to defy gender norms, but to manipulate and explore what Joan Riviere termed the 'masquerade of womanhood' nearly a century ago.[89] This masquerade is the wearing of femininity as a mask, flaunting it to simulate 'the missing gap or distance' between a woman and femininity, according to Mary Ann Doane.[90] In this case, wearing the mask is over-performing femininity, since the depictions of women in games are often overly and stereotypically feminine: the gap between the femininity of the player and that of the character has historically been programmed to be quite wide. Masquerading can label women as feminine if they perhaps do not feel they successfully perform femininity in real life, and it can hide the divide between the player and whichever form of femininity evades her. Furthermore, the masquerade labels the representations of women in games *as* performed femininity, for they could not be masquerades of womanhood otherwise. The existence of such performance bolsters the argument that games hypersexualise women to a significant degree, but in its exaggeration and improbability it also has the power to separate players from gender boundaries and to delegitimise the associated behaviours quarantined in each set of suitable conventions. Currently, players are overwhelmed with sex-stereotyped representations that not only dictate action available to female characters through the game's programming, but also dictate the level of gratification to

[87] Brunner, et al., 'Girl Games', p. 87.
[88] Brunner, et al., 'Girl Games', p. 87.
[89] Joan Riviere, 'Womanliness as a Masquerade', *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 10 (1929), 303-13, (pp. 306-8).
[90] Mary Ann Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator', *Screen*, 23.3-4 (1982), 74-88 (p. 82)

be found in 'looking' at female characters. According to Doane, if a female player sought to identify with a female character – a character who, according to the previous chapters, is often depicted as an object – the player would be forced to assume a role of a 'passive or masochistic position, while identification with the active, typically male hero necessarily entails an acceptance of what Laura Mulvey refers to as a certain "masculinisation" of spectatorship.'[91] If progress within the industry continues to move toward feminist ideals, the mask may soon be unnecessary (at least in this context).

For men, the masquerade is not only unnecessary owing to the abundance of empowered male characters, but it also could not achieve the same result as a masquerade of womanhood. There are several alternative ways in which men are increasingly able to question or defy gender roles, however, such as performing in emotionally complex roles as father-figure characters. Lazzaro asserts that boys want to grow up to be more emotionally open than their fathers were and have deeper relationships than they themselves had.[92] *The Last of Us* (2013), *The Walking Dead* (2012), *Beyond Two Souls* (2013), *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013), and *Heavy Rain* (2010) are examples of games that utilise father-figure characters, almost all as MPCs.[93] Frequently, these games portray adult men who are initially hesitant to embrace their role (*Bioshock: Infinite*, *Beyond Two Souls*, *The Last of Us*). The MPCs are often suddenly and unwillingly saddled with responsibility for a young person, often female, and the disdain held by these surrogate fathers toward their wards allows room for the player to observe the realistic progression of the relationship. This portrayal has a problematic aspect of portraying those female companions as passive or needing rescue; however, the progressive capability for male characters in fatherhood roles in indicative of change toward inclusivity. The above list of games containing father-figures is by no means exhaustive, and the increasing popularity of this trend in games may be more common owing to the ages of the game developers. Many game creators likely immersed themselves in video games as children and have grown to adulthood, becoming fathers themselves. Games explore inclusive themes further, addressing such trends which intersect with gender yet span far beyond it as well.

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[91] Doane, 'Film and the Masquerade', p. 80.
[92] Lazzaro, 'Boy Games', p. 207.
[93] Neil Druckmann, *The Last of Us* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2013), PlayStation 3; Sean Vanaman, et al., *The Walking Dead: A Telltale Games Series* (Telltale Games, 2012), multiple platforms; David Cage, *Beyond Two Souls* (Sony Interactive Entertainment, 2013), Windows, PlayStation 4, and PlayStation 3; and David Cage, *Heavy Rain* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2010), Windows, PlayStation 4, and PlayStation 3.

In-game development is put into the realm of play via the emotional turmoil in *Papo & Yo* (2012), whose topics defy themes associated with toxic masculinity. Quico, a young boy in Brazil, is hiding from his abusive father when he discovers a world inside his closet in which he can move and control objects around him.[94] As Quico explores his relationship with his companion Monster, the player soon draws connections between Monster, Quico's alcoholic father, and the simultaneous yet complex emotions involved in each relationship. *Papo & Yo*'s use of whimsical fonts and music suggests a light-hearted playthrough, yet the revelation of the deeper, emotionally damaging themes presented are a beautiful tool for the development of young people dealing with similar issues. For players who have not experienced domestic abuse or substance addiction, this game provides a heart-wrenching and artful way of gaining insight into another's world, legitimising the exploration of emotion as a male character – a gender traditionally discouraged from emotional expression. While there is no happy ending, the game provides a means to facilitate possible peace for victims of real domestic abuse and understanding for those who are not.

Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014) offers fresh views on relationships by allowing players to explore sexual preference and other topics related to expectations of gender and sexuality.[95] The mechanics behind the multi-tiered romance options exist in all the games in the *Dragon Age* franchise, and in *Inquisition*, the possible romance options for the MPC are numerous and flexible: Commander Cullen Rutherford (heterosexual human), Cassandra Pentaghast (heterosexual human), Ambassador Josephine Montilyet (bisexual human), The Iron Bull (bisexual qunari), Warden Blackwall (heterosexual human), Dorian Pavus (homosexual human), Sera (homosexual elf), and Solas (heterosexual elf).[96] With each of the relationships, dialogue options become available as the player progresses, giving a satisfying evolution of both characters involved and their dependence on each other (or not). The game balances casual and committed relationships along with the responsibilities and consequences that come with choice: for example, if the MPC is in a committed relationship with one character, they can lose approval points for choosing romantic dialogue options with someone else. This design choice is in opposition to a game like *Fable II* (2008), in which 'all heterosexual-coded

[94] Vander Caballero, *Papo & Yo* (Minority, 2012), multiple platforms.
[95] David Gaider, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Electronic Arts, 2014), multiple platforms.
[96] The qunari follow the strict teaching of the Qun, and their physical appearance (taller and more muscular than the average human, oftentimes with horns) is believed by some to be indicative of the interbreeding of humans and dragons centuries ago.

male NPCs can fall in love with my female character, and all gay- and bisexual-coded male NPCs and all heterosexual-coded female NPCs can fall in love with my male character', Shaw states.[97] This problematic design in *Fable II* insinuates that all lesbians, bisexual men and women, and heterosexual men could fall in love with someone only because they identify as female when, naturally, in real life, this is not the case.[98] Moreover, Shaw observes that NPCs who are not able to be seduced by the player have no listed sexuality, so that 'sexuality exists only as it impacts *me*'. [emphasis in original][99] The player is the only real person in the game, so it may be argued that everything that occurs in the universe, even content the player does not see, happens only in relation to them. However, as simulations of our realities, when games employ a 'me-centric' labelling of others' sexuality they function as echoes of existing notions in the real world. This is why depictions such as those in *Inquisition* are so crucial: players may enter the game with little or no prior experience with the LGBTQ community, but playing such games will expose them to explorations of sexual preference as normalised – giving them the potential to broaden their world view in this way.

Inquisition examines diverse ideas of sexual intimacy further in the optional romance with the character The Iron Bull. If the player pursues this romance, they quickly discover that the relationship is unique as it quite different from other romance options and represents BDSM culture (bondage & discipline/domination & submission/sadism & masochism). The presentation of the relationship is a healthy incarnation of such: when Bull defines the relationship to the MPC, he says 'I will never hurt you without your permission. You will always be safe. If you're ever uncomfortable, if you ever want me to stop, you say "Katoh." And it's over. No questions asked.' This point is emphasised by the ever-present dialogue option for the MPC to change their mind (see Figure 4.16, overleaf). The romance narrative continues outside of the scenes with the MPC and Bull, explaining further the dynamic of the relationship. During party banter, Bull has the following conversation with Cole, a spirit of compassion who can read others' thoughts:

[97] Peter Molyneux, *Fable II* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2008), Xbox 360.
[98] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, pp. 29-30.
[99] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, p. 30.

> Cole: You act like you're in charge, The Iron Bull, but it's really him/her.
> Cole: S/he decides when, and you measure it carefully, enough to enjoy, to energize, but never to anger.
> Cole: S/he is tied, teased, tantalized, but it's tempered to what s/he wants. S/he submits, but you serve.
> Bull: Do you mind, kid? If you take away all the mystery, it's not quite as hot.
> Inquisitor: Bull? Yes, it is.
> Bull: Right. Carry on, kid.

BDSM is a taboo subject in some circles, and this game allows players an opportunity to experiment with such content when they may not have non-virtual resources with which to do so. A relationship with The Iron Bull was carefully and respectfully handled in a time when the popular *Fifty Shades of Grey* series was permeating popular culture and presenting BDSM relationships as a means of partner abuse.[100] As noted by Ferguson's study above, The Iron Bull's romance is crucial because it has the power to direct players' attitudes away from the sexist models represented by Christian Grey and towards more progressive behaviour in wider culture.

Figure 4.16. The Dialogue Option to Stop is in Each Sexual Encounter, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014)[101]

Inquisition further represents the LGBTQ community with their character Cremisius Aclassi (Krem), a transgender man and The Iron Bull's lieutenant. After a cutscene introducing Bull's team, Krem's gender identity is discussed and dialogue

[100] E. L. James, *The Fifty Shades Trilogy* (New York: Vintage Press, 2011-17).
[101] Vaelen, *Dragon Age Inquisition: Complete Gay Iron Bull Romance (Male Lavellan) and Background Story*, online video recording, YouTube, 1 February 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iquCLZQGstY> [accessed 20 October 2018] 49:19.

options are triggered to allow the MPC to ask about his past and his transition in a world without gender reassignment surgery. No one in the game questions Krem's ability or status, especially not The Iron Bull, whose treatment of Krem both supports and normalises his decisions. While Cole, the aforementioned spirit of compassion, is unable to socially understand the world around him, from the start, and without being instructed to do so, he refers to Krem as 'he': as a character who can read the minds of others, this declaration legitimises Krem's identity. Many aspects of fantastic worlds in games do not exist in real life, but transgender people do, and the representation of Krem as male, not as a woman trying to or pretending to be male, is essential in turning wider culture's beliefs about gender identity toward inclusion.

Those on the design team created Krem with respect and consideration for the LGBTQ community, and head writer Patrick Weekes speaks of their journey toward making a natural-feeling transgender character who was not presented as either a monster or a joke, and one who did not exist in the game beyond 'being there to be a genderqueer person'.[102] Weekes worked with all departments to overcome what he discovered to be a game engine based on 'set gender assignments', ensuring that Krem would be progressively represented in all stages of creation and in all languages.

> I wrote Krem as best I could, and the editing team looked at every line and cleaned up dialogue and paraphrases that could give the wrong impression. I then passed him to two friends in the GQ community… at which point they showed me where I was absolutely messing things up and gave me constructive feedback on how to improve.[103]

Games have the capability to present intricate characters and stories like Krem's in a medium that is considered interactive literature which encourages complex, intimate expressions of diverse ideals. The presentation of relationships and characters who do not conform to prescriptive gender roles does more than give players a look into the lives of others: it is required as part of normalising, in a nuanced manner, the backgrounds and subjectivities of diverse people. These characters are not presented as exploited, nor are they punished for embracing their qualities which defy norms. As a result of such representations in these games, people around the world are increasingly

[102] Patrick Weekes, 'Building a Character: Cremiusius "Krem" Aclassi', *BioWare* (2014), <http://blog.bioware.com/2014/12/04/building-a-character-cremisius-krem-aclassi/> [accessed 20 September 2016].
[103] Weekes, 'Building a Character'.

consuming content which represents gender and other aspects of human identity in ways that embrace diversity.

Conclusion: Games to 'Fix Reality' according to Gender and Beyond

Games have immense power and scope to encourage specific attitudes, and for this reason they have not always been trusted in wider culture. Despite this legacy, games are working toward inclusion and diversity. Still, they remain an easy target for blame about real-world aggression, as illustrated by Texan Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, who dubbed it simply 'the video game issue'.[104] This 'issue', of course, is the belief that violence in games breeds real-world violence, like that found in school shootings – although another cause of such violence was, Patrick claimed, abortion, illustrating the level of credibility which should be afforded to his statement. In contrast, research by Paul Adachi and Teena Willoughby has determined that levels of game-induced aggression are significantly lower than those suggested by Patrick. While players sometimes act more aggressively after playing a violent video game, attitudes do not manifest as physical violence, and the results are temporary and also dependent on other in-game factors like competiveness and pace of action. One example to measure aggression is through a test in which researchers inform 'participants that they are to create a hot sauce for a confederate to eat, who does not like hot or spicy food. The level of hotness and the amount of sauce given is indicative of aggressive behaviour.' After leaving a fast-paced, competitive game, players are more likely to give more hot sauce; this is an aggressive act, but it is not the same as physically harming someone, and the penchant toward aggression only lasted a few minutes for participants.[105]

It is not likely that players will walk away from their game to harm someone physically on the street; rather, according to game designer Jane McGonigal, games can fix our broken reality in varied ways, even beyond inclusive representations.[106] For example, in their examinations of video games' influence on the brain, Daphne Bavelier

[104] Darran Simon, 'Texas Lieutenant Governor Blames Abortions and Violent Video Games for School Shootings, but Not Guns', *Cable News Network* (2018), <https://amp.cnn.com/cnn/2018/05/20/us/texas-lieutenant-governor-dan-patrick-reasons-for-school-shootings/index.html?__twitter_impression=true/> [accessed 5 October 2018].
[105] Paul Adachi and Teena Willoughby, 'The Effect of Violent Video Games on Aggression: Is It More Than Just the Violence?', *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 16.1 (2011), 55-62 (pp. 57-9, 61).
[106] Jane McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), pp. 13-15.

and C. Shawn Green found numerous exercises that enhanced players' mental capacities:

> Individuals who regularly play action games demonstrate improved ability to focus on visual details, useful for reading fine print in a legal document or on a prescription bottle. They also display heightened sensitivity to visual contrast, important when driving in thick fog. Action gamers also mentally rotate objects more accurately – and so are able to judge how an oddly shaped couch might best fit in an overpacked moving van. The multitasking required to switch back and forth between reading a menu and holding a conversation with a dinner partner also comes more easily.[107]

Their studies established that with regular play, these characteristics as well as others – like increased mental stamina and quicker decision making – became more prominent.[108] These traits derived from the mechanics of games, such as quick-time responses and a constant awareness of surroundings – not necessarily from narrative. Thus, even a gamer who turns on their console with no intention of critically analysing content may still reap the benefits of play.

In their examinations of video games' influence on the brain, Douglas Gentile et al. do not neglect the capability for sociality to influence gamers. They found that when young people played 'prosocial' games, especially those that include character assistance and cooperation, players were more likely to help others in the real world or cooperate more with peers.[109] FPSs use these traits with team-based cooperative play, and even as players enter the space to have fun, they are still learning to be better at working in teams once they step away from the controller.

[INTERVIEW REDACTED TO PROTECT INTERVIEWEE IDENTITY]

[107] Daphne Bavelier and C. Shawn Green, 'The Brain-Boosting Power of Video Games', *Scientific American*, 395.1 (2016), 26-31 (p. 28).
[108] Bavelier and Green, 'Brain-Boosting Power of Video Games', p. 28.
[109] Douglas Gentile, et al., 'The Effects of Prosocial Video Games on Prosocial Behaviors: International Evidence from Correlational, Longitudinal, and Experimental Studies', *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35.6 (June 2009), 752-63 (p. 760).

[INTERVIEW REDACTED TO PROTECT INTERVIEWEE IDENTITY CONTINUED]

Whether using tactics found in an FPS, mobile, or exploratory narratives, games have the ability to make players happier people, according to McGonigal:

> When we're depressed, according to the clinical definition, we suffer from two things: a *pessimistic sense of inadequacy* and a *despondent lack of activity*. If we were to reverse these two traits, we'd get something like this: *an optimistic sense of our own capabilities* and *an invigorating rush of activity*. There's no clinical psychological term that describes this positive condition. But it's a perfect description of the emotional state of gameplay. A game is an opportunity to focus our energy, with relentless optimism, at something we're good at (or getting better at) and enjoy. In other words, *gameplay is the direct emotional opposite of depression*. [emphasis in original][110]

She states that *eustress* is good stress, a tool which games use to bring emotional rewards to gamers. Activities like watching TV or browsing the internet are passive relaxation, which makes us feel worse than when we started, because the underlying inactivity makes us depressed.[111] 'From a physiological and neurological standpoint, *eustress* is virtually identical to negative stress: we produce adrenaline, our reward circuitry is activated, and blood flow increases to the attention control centers of the brain. What's fundamentally different is our frame of mind.'[112] That which makes the work within a video game different, is that it is work that we have chosen for ourselves: hence, we are optimistic, motivated, and engaged within our choice of *eustress*, and happier when we are working hard rather than being entertained.[113] Linking *eustress* and diverse representations as games do offers an intensive way in which to similarly link feelings of contentedness with progressive social education, encouraging players and wider culture to view diversity as not only normalised but exciting.

[110] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, pp. 31-2.
[111] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, pp. 31-2.
[112] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, p. 32.
[113] McGonigal, *Reality Is Broken*, p. 33.

Eustress entwines with what Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls Flow: 'the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it.'[114] In 1890, the psychologist William James anticipated theories of Flow, despite a term not yet having been assigned to the experience. When speaking of attention, he noted:

> It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatterbrained state which in French is called *distraction*, and *Zerstreutheit* in German.[115]

Ironic, then, that many critics of games describe them as a distraction in a best-case scenario, yet the feelings they evoke in gamers is the 'opposite condition'. Game designers layer characteristics in games which evoke feelings of Flow: QTEs or mini-games are an immediate way to evoke this experience in players, but immersive, interactive stories and main- and side- quests maintain it.[116] Flow is a significant causal factor in the popularity of the video game industry: it is because of this popularity that representations must challenge the sexist tropes interrogated in my previous chapters. Still, inclusion is a bigger goal than gender alone, and as feminists and social members of communities in games and beyond, we must push for not only the acknowledgement but the celebration of diverse constituencies. Judith Butler claims that '[p]erformativity has everything to do with "who" can become produced as a recognizable subject [….] Precarious life characterizes such lives who do not qualify as recognizable.'[117] Representations considered visible enough to be a celebration of diversity are, in some ways, lucky: at least they are seen, even if in a context which presents them as other. Therefore, what is crucial to remember here – and beyond this thesis – is that the work of making marginalised groups visible will likely never be finished. Games will always

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[114] Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness* (London: Random House, 2002), p. 4.
[115] William James, 'Attention', in *The Works of William James: The Principles of Psychology*, ed. by Frederick Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis, 3 vols (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), vol. 1, pp. 380-433 (pp. 381-2).
[116] Quicktime events (QTE) are timed scenarios in which the player must successfully press a button or series of buttons.
[117] Judith Butler, 'Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics', *AIBR, Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, 4.3 (2009), i-xiii <http://www.aibr.org/antropologia/04v03/criticos/040301b.pdf> [accessed 18 April 2019].

need to push precarious demographics into the realm of the recognised, and away from stereotypical traits that exploit them.

In this final chapter, I have examined the behaviours and preferences in children, which suggested to game creators that female players are interested in stereotyped content. However, as we have seen, these stereotypes are not trustworthy, as the behaviours which define them are typically dictated by gender performance impressed upon children who must behave – and play – in gender-compliant ways. In response to this, I have analysed inclusive traits in game content that challenge hypersexualised female characters and hypermasculinsed characters, exploring how these representations intersect with different aspects of social orientation. The exploration of these topics through case studies and personal analysis reveal that, despite still deploying tropes which portray women in overused, sexist roles, games are nonetheless changing in ways that must continue to bring the industry into further inclusion – gender-based and beyond.

The games-as-texts discussed here offered examples of progressive trends, but they only represent a small portion of the breadth and depth of inclusion that is being increasingly embraced by the industry. Not only must progressive representations become more common: they must also address further challenges relating to diversity that lie beyond gender. Games are unquestionably cultural artefacts that shape players – at any stage of life and development – toward or away from gender norms by rewarding and punishing gender-conforming or deviant behaviour. As sexist trends in games are tolerated less and less and as equality-rich depictions are increasingly desired by players and designers, my hope is that equal representation in the industry and in game content will become not just the norm, but the preferred style of play. Representation does not look like a multitude of minority characters in games, but an array of personalities within those roles. As Shaw notes, characters must have the freedom to 'look like the me I think of', rather than be a reused stereotype attempting to represent a single set of personality traits paired with a minority group.[118] When there is a myriad of female characters, people of colour, LGBTQ characters, and so on, there appears more opportunity to give those characters detailed identities. These identities will no longer be dictated by the traits which have located them within a marginalised group: instead

[118] Shaw, *Gaming at the Edge*, pp. 140, 220.

they will show, in one character, someone who is transgender *like the player is*, who loves football *as the player does*, and whose favourite colour is red *as the player's is*.

Please Continue for Coda.

Coda: The State of Game Content, Communities, and Looking Forward

Following the discussion of this and previous chapters, which have highlighted good and bad representations in the industry, it may be moot now to feel either satisfied with games' progression towards equality or disappointed with how deeply sexism permeates the industry. Both reactions are based in empirical truth, but what I want to impress most strongly is that despite both outlooks being legitimate, I am not yet satisfied. Equality in game spaces must sustain the progressive trajectory for the future of technological, aesthetic, and cultural representations of women and marginalised groups in inclusive ways. Games have continued to claim that, to play a substantive role in our stories, men must be physically powerful and aggressive, while women must be beautiful and vulnerable. If games deviate from such norms, they risk becoming a topic of outrage by misogynists in games and wider culture. Across this thesis, I have analysed these representations, pinpointing specific tropes and their claims about gender and what players, and more widely members of society, expect from men's and women's behaviour. Expectations regarding gender roles limit characters' actions and desires according to stereotypes, ignoring those who do not – or choose not to – identify with a single category. Game designers are coming from increasingly diverse backgrounds and experiences, however, and game content is slowly but inexorably reflecting this shift. We can and should have genuine hope that in-game representations will expand across a wider and deeper span of demographics, enabling diversity to become a norm rather than a curiosity.

Game content which presents an inclusive range of characters and options for dealing with challenges will continue to normalise people, behaviours, and orientations that deviate from the privilege of white, able, heterosexual, cis, male perspectives. Gender-equal game content benefits games by making them more engaging, more emotionally complex, and broader in mechanics and perspectives. More than this, players can and do benefit on a personal level when games are able to 'fix their reality'. Even more significantly, women, who have so often in various areas of popular culture been exploited, are able to see themselves on the screen as more than male-sanctioned projections of assumed-femininity. Giving women characters who inspire and represent them in honest and believable ways provides a reliable means of fostering their passion for games, which will in turn foster increased female participation in game communities, continuing the current momentum. This is certainly the case with

marginalised groups as well, and progressive representations of diversity-rich cultures further enhances the industry in terms of participation in game communities and design. The growing rejection of misogynistic content influences, and is reciprocally influenced by, the representation of marginalised cultures in games and popular culture. Games direct progressive change in their own industry, but they also play an enormous role in popular culture's influence over the values of people all over the world – whether they play games or not – and can steer attitudes toward the normalisation of diverse cultures in digital spaces and the real world.

Owing to representations in games and other areas of popular culture, society dictates clear, prescriptive models of behaviour that must be followed. By venturing into various milieus of games and other digital cultures, users 'consent' to engage with certain behaviours that will be directed toward them dichotomously as hostile or supportive. One's adherence to a particular stereotype often determines the kind of treatment they will receive, and how much. It is clear how this dichotomy affects women when examining the ways that they are treated in digital culture in comparison to men, for example in the comment section of YouTube. Lindsey Wotanis and Laurie McMillan discovered that harassing comments are predictable by the gender of the channel's host in volume and themes. The researchers examined personalities Jenna Mourey (Jenna Marbles) and Ryan Higa (Nigahiga), with the following results which quantified the scope of interactions found in comment sections.[119] While these results are crucial to collect, they register a reality for the medium that many women have known to be true all along. While the majority of comments for both are mostly positive, Higa's negative comments are mostly commenters claiming his videos are offensive. The remaining 1 per cent of comments follow racist themes directed at Higa's Asian physical features and/or his accent. In Mourey's comments, hostile feedback is almost five times more common and tends to include 'hater remarks and inappropriate sexual comments'. Half of her negative comments pertain to her content, while the other half are sexually explicit or aggressive, as noted in Table 4.1.[120]

[119] Lindsey Wotanis and Laurie McMillan, 'Performing Gender on YouTube', *Feminist Media Studies*, 14.6 (2014), 912-28 (p. 919).
[120] Wotanis and McMillan. 'Performing Gender', p. 920.

Types of Comments	Jenna Mourey's Videos (N=919)	Ryan Higa's Videos (N=888)
Critical/Hostile comments (total)	18%	4%
content or personality	9%	1%
sexist/racist or sexually aggressive	9%	3%
Supportive comments (total)	82%	96%
content or personality	75%	94%
physical appearance	7%	2%

Table C.1. Recreated from Wotanis and McMillan's Original Findings (2014)[121]

There is yet more subtle sexism to be found in these comments. As noted, negative comments about Higa's content are claims that it is offensive, but Mourey's comments on her 'content' tend to address her personality: 'No [*sic*] even remotely funny' and 'she's not much to look at and she's not even funny'. The emphasis on her appearance is sexualised – and sexist. Some of the comments are not explicitly sexual, yet they reflect the personal and immediate nature of the consumption of a female YouTuber by her viewers when compared to her male counterpart. These comments combine with the (nine times more common) sexually explicit comments Mourey receives, revealing that 'the value of the performer is in her status as a sexual object or potential sexual partner for the viewer, effectively ignoring the content of the video performance'.[122] What female YouTubers and sexist-represented female characters in games have in common is the perception by their audience that, upon their entry into the online community, they are firstly, consenting to be criticised by the public; and secondly, members of that public may be as harsh as they like, when their 'distance' from her protects them from social accountability.[123] Games and popular culture reflect and adjust our expectations for women and men by dictating which traits are and are not acceptable. Female YouTubers are not fictitious, even if they may be acting in their videos: they are women who are objectified in ways that affect the real world, even if the objectification takes place in the virtual one.

The subsequent anger that I, and many others, have experienced as a result of this sex-based unfairness is of course, distressing; however, it is also contingent upon

[121] Wotanis and McMillan, 'Performing Gender', p. 919.
[122] Wotanis and McMillan. 'Performing Gender', p. 920.
[123] This false notion of 'distance' is explored in Chapter Three of this thesis, pp. 161, 166.

the will to fight, according to Dan Golding and Leena Van Deventer. This will is often too exhausting to maintain, and, speaking specifically of Gamergate, comes with little reward:

> Is it really worth the hassle for us to talk publicly about Gamergate? Of course the answer should be yes […] But there's a cumulative effect here. You fight once, twice, three times, maybe more, and each time it gets harder and less rewarding.[124]

This notion is certainly not only applicable to discussions of Gamergate, but in speaking out against the treatment of women in game communities more generally. Our passion, even our anger, must be maintained to direct change in the world: Lundy Bancroft states, 'there is *power in your anger*' as it resists misogynistic authority. [emphasis in original][125] For me, this not only revives that will to fight, but it also suggests the importance of a broad collective movement, so that activists in all areas of culture are not required to carry the fight separately or in isolation.

Games navigate these themes in unique ways by dipping their metaphorical fingers into the minds of players, and it is for this reason that resisting exclusionary thinking is paramount in making a difference. Games would not have as strong a capacity to direct attitudes of players if they did not function as a mixture of hot and cool media, as theorised by Marshall McLuhan:

> A hot medium is one which extends one single sense in 'high definition'. High definition is the state of being well filled with data [….] [The cool medium has] very little visual information […] provided [….] little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener.[126]

His categorisation of some current technology is outdated, as he was focusing on the advent of broadcast media (primarily television) in North American households. McLuhan posited that cinema was a hot medium, as audiences sat silently in the theatre, their senses loaded with a plenitude of primarily visual data, resulting in little active engagement from the viewer because of the focused media load. Despite ostensible similarities, television was by contrast a cool medium, as it was of much lower resolution and ranged across multiple senses, as well as competing with other

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[124] Dan Golding and Leena Van Deventer, *Game Changers: From Minecraft to Misogyny, the Fight for the Future of Videogames* (Melbourne: Affirm Press, 2016), p. 183.
[125] Lundy Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That? Inside the Minds of Angry and Controlling Men* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 2002), p. 60.
[126] Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (London: Routledge, 1964), pp. 24-5.

distractions in the living room. Thus, a cool medium like television demanded more cognitive participation from the viewer. Over time, as the quality of television has improved, it has become 'hotter', more like cinema, so these terms are relative; but nevertheless, distinctions remain. Similarly, internet browsing is a form of cool medium, where the user must parse information actively from a mass of piecemeal and unfocused textual and visual artefacts.

Interestingly, video games crucially find themselves in a uniquely hybrid position, taking qualities from both hot and cool media. Games demand, first and foremost, the participation of the player to move through combat, dialogue choice, action sequences, racing, QTEs, and so on: hence, the requirement of player input is a cool media trait. However, games also contain many attributes of 'high definition', hot media: some instances in games (for example, narrative direction) require passivity from players. Cutscenes occur without the player needing to 'fill in' what is missing from the story, marking it as hot media that continues without input: during a cutscene, a player may put down the controller, surrendering the control they had over the game space. Games are not strictly user-generated content like social media; they cannot exist without the player actively engaging with and agreeing to direct the continuation of the narrative through the assigned mechanical input. Players both do and do not move the game forward by their own desires, as they may choose from branching narrative paths, but the designers dictate the range of results that underlie such player choice. Games, therefore, complicate hot and cool media theories; yet, by recognising both theories as applicable, the duality of games legitimises them as interactive media (and literature) and thus, their ability to play players as much as players play them, swaying gamers toward and away from ideals.

Popular culture shapes beliefs consumers have about the world: in gaming, the identification of the player with the MPC assists in internalising their beliefs by the player, as I have investigated throughout this dissertation. Game creators can harness games' hybrid position as hot and cool media to direct players toward progressive themes relating to gender and marginalised groups, and they have already done so in many ways. The argument that inclusion in games will foster an inclusive culture is not merely an optimistic hope: it is an attainable and realistic proposition. Bancroft claims that 'words like *unrealistic*, *naive*, and *impractical* come from voices of superiority who

use them to get people to stop thinking for themselves'. [emphasis in original][127] True, the remaining misogynists, white supremacists, homophobic people, etc. may resist the inclusive representations put forward by games, but through their immersive and interactive potential, those representations can instigate game – and other – cultures to see diversity in ways previously unconsidered.

Games contribute criticism against sexism and ignorance relating to the experiences of marginalised groups, and what I have proposed in this thesis can contribute to ethical games and ethical gaming not only to alter the attitudes of misogynists, but to give women and marginalised groups a space where they can expect to be honestly and progressively represented in a medium they love. People's attitudes can and do change for the better: I have seen it myself after growing up in the Bible-belt Midwest where we were encouraged toward all those stereotypes which dictated norms such as condemning homosexuality and distrusting people of colour. It was in seeing diverse cultures normalised which taught me that we really are all the same – even, maybe especially, in our differences. We must push for the creation of games which defy or reinvent past templates which have portrayed femininity and masculinity according to rigid stereotypes. We must allow players to be who they want, whether that adheres to or diverges from societal norms; and for players who want to express themselves by adhering to norms, games can help them do so for personal satisfaction, not because they fear the negative consequences for not doing so. When addressing gender specifically, I do not suggest that MPCs must be androgynous nor must every woman be a martial arts master to be empowered; rather, games can suggest to players that there is more to women than their conforming to stereotype. According to game designer Nancie Martin, female players do not have to 'have a problem with high heels and lipstick. […] [A]ll of that works. Feminism and glamour – is there a contradiction? I think not.'[128] Women can celebrate femininity and men masculinity that does not hurt them or others, but there should be no cultural punishments for choosing to express oneself outside these behaviours. Women should be proud that they are women, but no one and no industry should tell them that womanhood is a set of restrictive personality traits.

[127] Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That?*, p. 388.
[128] Cassell and Jenkins, 'Interview with Nancie S. Martin (Mattel)', p. 138.

This thesis has explained ways that games have impressed upon players the cultural and in-game rewards for looking and behaving in conventionally feminine or masculine ways. To do so, I have explored ways in which women tend to be portrayed which suggest they are most valued in roles which objectify them under a male subject. The discussion has examined a range of games, spanning from those for single players to those aimed at masses of online participants. These games promote expectations for play that depend on particularly scripted gender roles, whether those that frame narrative praxis (as explored in Chapter One) or character/avatar creation (as examined in Chapter Two). It becomes clear that such templates need to be challenged, particularly those which encourage beliefs that women are better suited to particular roles (healing or fighting from a distance) and that men are suited to others (taking and dealing massive amounts of close-quarters damage). Ranging further, we have seen (in Chapter Three) how the communities that grow around games operate in reciprocity with them, directing the ways in which people behave in those spaces. The interdependency between the game and real worlds can manifest itself positively in nurturing relationships, both platonic and romantic, and negatively in the relentless culture of harassment directed towards women who are seen as 'interlopers' in gaming milieus by their male inhabitants. My study has concluded with the ways in which games are changing for the better and the potential they have to improve our worlds. Despite the gendered preferences children have for play, we have seen how innovative approaches (like I-methodology) suggests that diversity in game creation by diverse designers drastically improves both game content and the experiences players have in them – even in the case of AAA properties like *Tomb Raider*. This discussion has diagnosed game content, its industry, and wider culture as sexist in many c/overt yet normalised ways; however, crucially, it has highlighted ways that each of these realms can make large and small adjustments to support equality of women and marginalised cultures through content creation and the conversations regarding it.

Sexism in games is a solvable problem. In this thesis, I have sought to interrogate specific assumptions about gender that games call upon – and expect players to believe, or at the very least to be aware of – in order to influence attitudes about women, men, and marginalised groups. Wider culture often desperately endeavours to maintain orthodox gender boundaries, which are then duplicated in game tropes or mechanics, but the change toward diversity and its acceptance is becoming a reality. Players, like consumers of other forms of popular culture, must 'vote with their wallets'

to show designers what they want to see in games – and what they will not tolerate. I have argued that games do and will continue to dictate how certain behaviour, appearance, profession, activities, and so on are normalised, but, speaking colloquially, they also dictate what is 'cool'. Physically dominating one's environment by shooting a fuse box in order to reach the next checkpoint is the kind of 'cool' that has tended to be portrayed in games. By contrast, using social reasoning or solving a puzzle to overcome an obstacle proposes cooperation or cleverness as superior to conquering, and offers another model of 'cool'. Exclusionary game design affects everyone, even if they are in the statistical minority that does not play games. Sexism, homophobia, racism, xenophobia, ableism, and a multitude of other forms of discrimination stem from and bolster cultures which suppress social opportunities more widely. In cases of gender, solutions are not only rooted in inclusive game design, but in the inclusion of women, no matter the context, and no matter how stereotypically feminine they look or behave. We can keep our games and remove the sexism; we can design games that appeal to women simply by making their empowerment as normal and normative as men's.

So how do we direct social values to create a world in which women are not targeted for not behaving feminine enough? The answer is bigger than this thesis, but the topics presented have added, I hope, another piece to the puzzle of harnessing games' role in popular culture to direct the way we see our world and the other humans with whom we share it. Creating spaces, virtual or not, in which empowered, inclusive thinking is paramount, and being explicit in our boundaries concerning what we will tolerate in a conversation, a joke, a song, etc. is equally a part of that. It does not take a designer of a AAA game to impress upon society that women deserve agency, autonomy, and subjectivity. Change in individual attitudes is important – and can certainly be catalysed by diverse content in games – but the most imperative outcome of this thesis must be the focus on changing *norms* and *structures* in society to accommodate the breath-taking diversity in our world. Bancroft claims that '[s]ome people feel threatened by the concept that [sexism] is a solvable problem, because if it is, there's no excuse for not solving it.'[129] Video games have given us incredible, immersive worlds that allow us to act out our fantasies, but by teaching us how to imagine each other as complicated, different, and diverse beings, they can improve our lives in reality as well.

[129] Bancroft, *Why Does He Do That?*, p. 388. The original word inside the brackets was 'abuse'.

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Appendix One

Online Harassment Survey

To see the results in a reader-friendly format, see this link (the webpage for the responses):

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1WVClcnnjkLfNkaGhUodax8uKn9ywm7ad7RJLXfg312Q/edit#responses

Experiences with Harassment in Game Spaces

Your Personal Anecdotes and Responses

*Required

1. **Thank you very much for participating! By doing so, you are agreeing to submit your responses for analysis contributing to a doctoral thesis about gender and video games. This form will ask a few contextual questions then provide space for you to detail a scenario or a series of scenarios in which you experienced harassment in game communities. You do not have to answer any questions you are not comfortable with; the answers you choose to give are still very valuable! Your responses are anonymous. For any questions, please contact videogamesurveyda@gmail.com. If you found the content of a game or the community around it compromised your mental or emotional well-being, please contact a mental health professional. Do you understand that you may exit the survey at any time and that your responses will be recorded for analytical purposes?** *

Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Yes

Context for Responses

Theme image from Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014)

2. **For what reason do you feel you were targeted for harassment?**

Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Gender
- ☐ Ethnicity
- ☐ Gender Identity/Gender Non-conformity
- ☐ Sexual Preference
- ☐ Disability
- ☐ In-Game Skill
- ☐ Other: _____

3. **How often do you feel targeted for harassment in game spaces (virtual spaces or those in the real world)?**

Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	
Never	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Always

4. **Do you often take steps to avoid harassment when entering a game space? If so, what do you do to avoid it?**

_____

Harassment Scenario(s)

5. **Finally, could you give, in as much detail as you feel comfortable, a scenario or a series of scenarios in which you faced harassment and include your reaction (in the moment as well as after the scenario had passed)? (You may include which game you were playing and when, the details of what the harasser did/said, the reactions of other players, and whether or not this changed the way you navigate game spaces in the present.)**

Appendix Two
Interview with [REDACTED TO PROTECT INTERVIEWEE IDENTITY], Gamer

What types of games do you play (roleplay, MMOs, FPS…)?

I´ve played all sorts of games from RPG, MMO´s, strategic and FPS. I find enjoyment in all sorts of games.

What is your favourite game, and what about it do you love best?

-

My favourite game by far is Dragon Age: Inquisition, as it allows me to explore npcs and a society from various angles, depending on what choices I make. Reactions from my companions can differ from praise to even calling me out on my actions and threatening to leave my party, which resulted in me reflecting on my own actions in gaming but also in irl. Plus some of the npcs are ridiculously snarky and funny.

How often do you usually play?

Depending on my job it comes down to 3-5times a week. I usually play couple of hours after work. I don´t really play on weekends, because that´s when I go out and meet friends.

How did you first get into gaming?

I suppose it was my parents, who got me games at an early age of 6 or 7years. My mum would try and get me to play strategy games and my dad would get me games, such as Halo, Need for Speed, Lara Croft, Prince of Persia just to name a few. Later on I would still play games now and then, but I was really focussing on school and studies. After graduating my then boyfriend had a console, so when he was working the night shift at a bar I´d play games. It wasn´t long after, that I got my own console.

What motivates you to play?

I consider myself an escapist, the typical binge watching a series person. So after a long day there´s hardly anything as relaxing as playing a game, because it´s capable of catapulting me into a different world immediately. All in all a great way to release stress from work.

Which MMOs do you play and why do you like them?

I´ve played WoW, League of Legends and Final Fantasy XIV, which I like best out of the three. They tend to have a good story line and since there are other people at different levels it gets an interesting dynamic. As a designer myself I can really appreciate when the settings are made with a lot of love for details.

Have you ever been doubted/challenged over claiming to be a gamer (especially because of your gender)? This can be while playing a game, or IRL.

Personally I was never challenged over my claim as a gamer, on the contrary it was other people telling me I was a gamer. It was not really important to me to be honest. In

MMO´s there are a lot of female gamers, too. In real life my boyfriend would watch me play and my approach to solving a quest would confuse or irritate him sometimes. For example Fallout 3, he would just walk in there and try to take a fortress by force. I use stealth and hiding though, like I would irl. But regarding my gender I never encountered problems.

Have you experienced sexual harassment for being a gamer (in face to face conversation)?

No, I haven´t. For many things, but not for being a gamer.

Have you experienced sexual harassment/hostile sexism in a game space by players you were sharing the game space with? Can you share some of those experiences?

There was a guy in WoW once who would follow me around for a long time. I logged out and back on and when I passed by the bridge where I left he was still there. It was seriously creepy.

Can you discuss some of the other challenges you have faced in the gaming sphere due to being a woman in a perceived 'male space'?

Today I can laugh about it, when playing League of Legends with my flatmate and his friend for the first time, they forced being a healer on me. Despite having been recommended by several players, it kinda killed the fun for me by being responsible for healing others. Like anyone, I´d prefer being a more active warrior. (added later after asking for clarification:) After a battle, other players can comment whether you suck or if you're good, and after a few battles, they'd usually say I'm a great healer. Despite them praising me for it, I still didn't like being a healer.

Can you elaborate on people telling you that you were a good healer? The people who said that, were they strangers or friends?

[…] People on MMOS never questioned whether someone was a true gamer or not since we were all there to have fun. We discussed other things like this and that cave and exchanged tips.

What would you say is your typical character? What does he/she look and act like? What is their race, class, etc.

They're usually females; tall, skinny-muscular. I like trying all the appearance options, anything from white to dark-skinned. They tend to look rather cute.

If you had to guess, why do you think you've had such a comparatively positive experience in regards to harassment in online games?

Probably because I was lucky enough. If there were negative people in a group running around and calling people names, I simply would avoid them.

Appendix Three

Life is Strange Survey

To see the results in a reader-friendly format, see this link (the webpage for the responses):

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1LD5NRtAnwY5T1ohzEWBi92sVVLHS09jI5KEu-cNhR44/edit#responses

Life Is Strange In-Game Choices

Consent Form

*Required

1. **Thank you for participating! By taking this survey, you are agreeing to submit your responses for analysis contributing to a doctoral thesis about choices made in-game. 'Life Is Strange' has a rating of 18+, and the creator of the survey is not encouraging underage participants to play the game. Your responses are anonymous. For any questions, please contact videogamesurveyda@yahoo.com. If you found any content of this or any other video game compromised your mental or emotional well-being, please contact a mental health professional. If you would like to see the results of the survey, they will be posted here (but please allow time for the data to be collected). Do you understand that you may exit the survey at any time and that your responses will be recorded for analytical purposes?** *
   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Yes (Continue to Survey)

Background Information

2. **What is your age?**
   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ 16-20
   ◯ 21-25
   ◯ 26-30
   ◯ 31-35
   ◯ 36-40
   ◯ 41-45
   ◯ 46-50
   ◯ 51-55
   ◯ 56-60
   ◯ 60+

3. **What gender do you identify with?**
   Mark only one oval.

   ◯ Male
   ◯ Female
   ◯ Other: _____

4. **What is the highest degree you have completed?**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Secondary School
- ◯ Some University
- ◯ Bachelor Equivalent
- ◯ Master Equivalent
- ◯ Doctoral Equivalent
- ◯ None of the Above

5. **Where are you from?**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ North America
- ◯ South America
- ◯ Africa
- ◯ Europe
- ◯ Asia
- ◯ Australia
- ◯ Other: _____

6. **How often do you have access to a console/other platform?**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ All the Time
- ◯ Only When Borrowed
- ◯ In the Home With Restricted Access
- ◯ Other: _____

7. **What are your top 3 preferred games?**
Tick all that apply.

- ☐ Roleplaying
- ☐ Tabletop
- ☐ First/Third Person Shooter
- ☐ Simulation
- ☐ Interactive Novel
- ☐ MMO
- ☐ Strategy
- ☐ Mobile Games
- ☐ Horror
- ☐ Sport
- ☐ Point and Click
- ☐ Other: _____

8. **How many hours per week do you spend gaming?**
Mark only one oval.

- 0-4
- 5-9
- 10-14
- 15-19
- 20-24
- 25-29
- 30-34
- 35+

9. **What percentage of your leisure time is spent on games?**
Mark only one oval.

- 0-25%
- 26-50%
- 51-75%
- 76%+

10. **How many games will you play simultaneously? (Starting a game before finishing another)**
Mark only one oval.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7+

11. **In real-life situations, I tend to avoid conflict when I can.**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
I Strongly Disagree								I Strongly Agree

12. **I will engage in conflict if it will benefit a friend or a loved one.**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
I Strongly Disagree								I Strongly Agree

13. **I will engage in conflict if it will benefit me.**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
I Strongly Disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	I Strongly Agree

14. **When playing video games, I interpret interactions with characters as if it was happening to me (with my personality and life experience up to this point).**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
I Strongly Disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	I Strongly Agree

15. **My decision-making choices in real life tend to be nurturing to those around me.**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
I Strongly Disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	I Strongly Agree

16. **My decision-making choices in real life tend to be assertive or aggressive.**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
I Strongly Disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	I Strongly Agree

17. **When making decisions, I am influenced by the expectations of those around me.**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
I Strongly Disagree	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	I Strongly Agree

18. **On a scale of 1-7, one being very masculine and seven being very feminine, I view my personality as:**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Very Masculine	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Very Feminine

19. **In the game Life Is Strange, I would make a game choice I did not plan to keep because I knew it could be rewound.**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Almost Never	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Almost Always

20. **I often rewound choices I made in the game.**
Mark only one oval.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Almost Never	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	Almost Always

In-Game Choices

In the following scenes of Life Is Strange, which choice did you select (and keep ie. not rewind and undo)?
If the scenario was optional and you did not encounter it, select 'N/A'.
Chapter 1: Chrysalis

21. **After discovering Nathan had a gun in the girl's bathroom, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Report Nathan
- ◯ Hide the Truth
- ◯ N/A

22. **When given the choice of resisting surveillance cameras at Blackwell, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Sign Ms. Grant's Petition
- ◯ Not Sign Ms. Grant's petition
- ◯ N/A

23. **When bully victim Daniel DaCosta asks Max if he can draw her portrait, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Allow Him to Draw Max
- ◯ Not Allow Him to Draw Max
- ◯ N/A

24. **After Victoria is splashed with paint as Max tries to enter the dorms, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- ◯ Make Fun of Victoria
- ◯ Comfort Victoria

25. **After seeing insults on Kate Marsh's slate outside her dorm room, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Erase the Message
- Ignore the Message
- N/A

26. **Seeing Victoria's photo collection in her dorm room, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Reorganise
- Not Reorganise
- N/A

27. **Upon finding Dana Ward's pregnancy test kit, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Interact with the Test Kit
- Not Interact with the Test Kit
- Interact and Rewind
- N/A

28. **When Alyssa Anderson is hit with a stray football, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Warn Her
- Not Warn Her
- N/A

29. **During Kate Marsh's and David Madsen's confrontation, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Take a Photo
- Intervene

30. **When seeing Chloe's snow globe in her room, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Break the Snow Globe
- Didn't Break the Snow Globe
- Break It and Rewind
- N/A

31. **When looking around David's workshop in his garage, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Look through Files
- Not Look through Files
- N/A

32. **When the files show signs of damage done by Max, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Leave the Evidence
- Cover up the Evidence
- N/A

33. **When Chloe gets caught with weed, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Blame Chloe
- Take the Blame
- Stay Hidden
- Hide, Then Reveal to David

In-Game Choices

In the following scenes of Life Is Strange, what did you choose?
If the scenario was optional and you did not encounter it, select 'N/A'.
Chapter 2: Out of Time

34. **When Alyssa is hit with thrown toilet paper, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Warn Her
- Not Warn Her
- N/A

35. **When seeing Victoria share Kate's link of the shower room mirror, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Erase the Link
- Ignore

36. **When giving Kate advice in her dorm room, did you tell her to**
Mark only one oval.

- Go to the Police
- Look for Proof

37. **When talking to Taylor Christensen outside the dorm about her mother, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Rewind Conversation for Options to Be Friendly
- Behave in a Neutral Way
- N/A

38. **When Warren Graham invites Max to go to the drive in with him, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Accept the Invitation
- Reject the Invitation
- N/A

39. **When Kate calls you in the diner, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Answer the Call
- Ignore the Call

40. **When Frank Bowers corners Chloe and Max in the junk yard, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Try to Shoot
- Not Try to Shoot

41. **When talking to Warren about his science experiment, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Help Warren
- Not Help Warren
- N/A

42. **When given the choice to tell Mark Jefferson about David's confrontation with Kate, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Inform Mr. Jefferson
- Not Inform Mr. Jefferson
- N/A

43. **When Kate is on the dorm roof, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Save Kate
- Fail to Save Kate

44. **When given the choice of who to blame for Kate's suicide/suicide attempt, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Blame David
- Blame Nathan
- Blame Jefferson

Skip to question 51.

In-Game Choices

In the following scenes of Life Is Strange, what did you choose?
If the scenario was optional and you did not encounter it, select 'N/A'.

Chapter 4: Dark Room

45. **When the Chloe from the alternative universe asks for her last wish, did you**
Mark only one oval.
- Accept Her Request
- Refuse Her Request

46. **When breaking into Nathan's dorm room, did you**
Mark only one oval.
- Break Open the Door and Leave
- Break Open the Door and Rewind

47. **When Warren beats up Nathan, did you**
Mark only one oval.
- Intervene
- Not Intervene

48. **In the meeting with Frank to get the codes for his log book, did**
Mark only one oval.
- Chloe Kill Frank
- Chloe Wound Frank
- No One Was Hurt

49. **When Alyssa is pushed into the pool at the Vortex Club Party, did you**
Mark only one oval.
- Warn Her
- Not Warn
- N/A

50. **When encountering Victoria at the Vortex Club Party, did you**
Mark only one oval.
- Warn Victoria
- Not Warn Victoria

Skip to question 57.

In-Game Choices

In the following scenes of Life Is Strange, what did you choose?
If the scenario was optional and you did not encounter it, select 'N/A'.
Chapter 3: Chaos Theory

51. **When given the choice to steal the Handicapped Fund money in Principal Well's desk, did you**
Mark only one oval.
- Steal the Money
- Not Steal the Money

52. **When faced with Chloe's dare, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Kiss Chloe
- Not Kiss Chloe

53. **In the confrontation with David in Chloe's home, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Side with David
- Side with Chloe

54. **When breaking into Frank's truck, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Throw the Dog Bone toward the Road
- Throw the Dog Bone into the Parking Lot

55. **When Alyssa is splashed by a bus driving through a puddle, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Warn Her
- Not Warn
- N/A

56. **When you find the Homeless Woman outside the Two Whales Diner, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Warn Her about the Storm
- Not Warn Her about the Storm
- N/A

Skip to question 45.

In-Game Choices

In the following scenes of Life Is Strange, what did you choose?
If the scenario was optional and you did not encounter it, select 'N/A'.
Chapter 5: Polarised

57. **After David finds Max in the Dark Room and he asks about Chloe, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Tell David the Truth about Chloe
- Tell David Chloe Is Safe

58. **As Max makes her way to the Two Whales Diner in the heart of the storm, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Save the Trucker from being Pinned under Debris
- Not Save the Trucker from being Pinned under Debris
- N/A

59. **As Max makes her way to the Two Whales Diner in the heart of the storm, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Warn Evan about Falling Debris
- Not Warn Evan about Falling Debris
- N/A

60. **As Max makes her way to the Two Whales Diner in the heart of the storm, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Help Alyssa get out of the House
- Not Help Alyssa get out of the House
- N/A

61. **As Max makes her way to the Two Whales Diner in the heart of the storm, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Save the Fisherman from Shock and Electrocution
- Not Save the Trucker from Shock and Electrocution
- N/A

62. **When speaking to Joyce in the diner, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Help Joyce Believe in David Again
- Not Change Joyce's Mind
- N/A

63. **When speaking to Frank in the diner, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Tell Him the Truth about Rachel
- Not Tell Him the Truth about Rachel
- N/A

64. **When faced with the choice to show affection to Warren in the diner, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Kiss Warren
- Show No Affection to Warren
- Hug Warren

65. **When faced with the final decision of the game, did you**
Mark only one oval.

- Sacrifice Chloe
- Sacrifice Arcadia Bay

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Appendix Four

Interview between ‘Rhys’ and ‘Evangeline’

Responses Were Audio-Recorded and Transcripted Only as Needed

Did you ever feel for yourself that the medium you chose was anonymous or could have been anonymous if you had designed your profile that way? As in using the profile for something other than genuine dating?

Did you ever experience a 'hyper personal interaction' (explain definition) online in this or another space?

Signalling is this idea of portraying something in your profile that cannot easily be observed on an online dating profile: that attributes of the potential date enhance their value. For example: to make yourself seem smart you could have a 'cheap' signal (saying you're smart on your profile), a better one (having a university sweatshirt), or an 'expensive' one (having a ring they only give to graduates). A simple reading of signalling theory would suggest that online dating users would lie a lot—as much as possible—because most cues associated with fabricating profiles are 'cheap'.

Were you worried about being lied to?

About which topics were you most worried about being lied to?

Were you lied to? When did you find out about it? Did it feel like a big deal or a small one when it came to light?

Did you lie?

What did you lie about and how much did you lie?

Did you regret lying/did it come back to bite you?

Did you selectively omit?

If you didn't lie, can you tell me why you did not?

Was there anything else you were nervous or worried about with this online interaction/relationship?

Do you feel your results were typical?

What were your concerns/excitements for meeting face to face?

How would you compare your interactions online with other interactions (face to face, messenger)?

Would you and your partner have met without the input of technology?

Appendix Five

Interview with [REDACTED TO PROTECT INTERVIEWEE IDENDITY], Game Designer

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