

MAKING DADDY PROUD: PRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY IN VIDEO GAMES WITH FEMALE PROTAGONISTS

A Thesis By

SHELBY ABRAHAMIAN
ORCID iD: 0000-0003-1655-5986

California State University, Fullerton
Fall, 2021

In partial fulfillment of the degree:

Master of Arts, Sociology

Department:

Department of Sociology

Committee:

Carter Rakovski, Department of Sociology, Chair
Christina B. Chin, Department of Sociology
Dana Collins, Department of Sociology

DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.5717411

Keywords:

femininity, media socialization, video games, gender norms, violence against women, sexualization

Abstract:

Despite the male dominated landscape of the video game industry, several games featuring female protagonists have garnered wide-spread recognition and acclaim among players of all genders. Existing video game literature suggests that women are underrepresented and hypersexualized across the medium. However, research on this topic faces the challenge of fast-paced, changing trends in the video game industry. Utilizing qualitative content analysis, this research analyzes the construction of femininity in video games with female protagonists from the most recent gaming console generation. By analyzing game narrative and character development, this study offers a critical look at how gender norms are reproduced through video games. Coding analysis revealed the centering of male protectors, lack of sexual agency, character development through suffering, and gendered expectations of morality. Overall, while many of the findings in this study mark a departure from the hypersexualized female characters from previous studies, the male gaze still manifests in these games through the paternal need to protect female characters.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	3
Who Plays Video Games?	3
Representation of Women in Video Games.....	4
Masculinity in Video Games	6
Video Games as Agents of Socialization	7
Femininity	9
Video Game Narrative	9
Theoretical Framework	10
Postmodernist Theory	11
Feminist Theories of Performativity, Intersectionality, the Male Gaze, and Purity	13
Application	16
3. METHODOLOGY	17
Methodological Orientation	17
Sample Selection	18
Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition	19
Horizon Zero Dawn.....	21
Uncharted: The Lost Legacy	22
The Last of Us Part II	23
Data Collection.....	24
Data Analysis	25
Ethical Considerations	26
Reflexivity	26
4. RESULTS.....	28
Daddy Issues.....	28
Male Protectors.....	28
Deaths of Fathers and Sacrificial Male Protectors	30
Adult Women Coming of Age.....	35
Absent Sexuality	35
Character Designs.....	35
Romance and Sex.....	39
A Tale of Two Sex Scenes.....	41
Women and Violence.....	43
Violence Against Women	43
Women Perpetrating Violence	47
Sexual Violence.....	49
Suffering and Sacrifice	49

Gendered Morality.....	50
Main Antagonists	51
Generic Enemies	51
Empathy for Female Enemies.....	52
Racialized Depictions of Gender	53
Flipping the Colonizer Script	55
 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION	 56
Paternal Male Gaze	56
Sexuality	57
Femininity as Suffering	59
Limitations	60
Future Research	61
 APPENDIX: VIDEOS AND GAMES ANALYZED	 63
 REFERENCES	 64

LIST OF TABLES

<u>Table</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Sample Characteristics	24

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure</u>	<u>Page</u>
1. Tomb Raider cover	20
2. Horizon Zero Dawn cover.....	21
3. Uncharted: The Lost Legacy cover	22
4. The Last of Us Part II cover	23
5. Chloe's default outfit along with alternate costume choices	36
6. Aloy character model.....	37
7. Abby character model	38
8. Ellie character model.....	38
9. Lara impaled after a failed quick-time-event.....	45
10. Ellie's wounds after a fight	46
11. Male vs female bandits in Horizon Zero Dawn	52

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my thesis committee. My thesis chair Dr. Rakovski was there every step of the way when I needed her. She provided invaluable insight and resources throughout this process and I am forever grateful for her support and words of encouragement. Dr. Christina Chin and Dr. Dana Collins were also integral to my success. My discussions with each member of my committee challenged me to become a better researcher and sociologist. They helped talk me through my hang-ups and I am so much stronger and more confident as a result. I don't think many people can say that their thesis defense was fun, but mine certainly was. I would do it all again in a heartbeat! Thank you for helping to foster my passion for research, and for all of your time and effort. Because of your guidance, this is a thesis I'm very proud of.

I also must thank my department chair, Dr. Berna Torr. Dr. Torr, you were my first mentor and I would not have made it this far without you. I cannot overstate how important your support has been to my success. Every time I doubted my own abilities, you were there to encourage me. One day a few years ago you told me something that I will never ever forget: "Shelby, quit relying on my confidence in you and get your own!" I remind myself of those words often. Thank you for believing in me, and more importantly thank you for encouraging me to believe in myself.

I'd also like to thank my sociology cohort. I've never met a more amazing group of people and I'm so grateful for the opportunity to learn with you and from you. Special thanks are in order for Catie Storms and Jozef Robles. Thank you for all the encouragement and support you gave me. You both challenged me to look at my research from new perspectives. I was always the most productive after our chats. You are so brilliant and I can't wait to see what amazing things you do in the future.

Finally, I'd like to thank my family for their unwavering support. This quite literally wouldn't have been possible without Mom and Dad. Thank you for believing in me. Thank you for pushing me. Thank you for giving me the resources I needed to be successful. It's been a long, bumpy, crazy ride, and you have been there for me every step of the way, even though I'm a handful. I love you so much.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The video game industry is worth more than \$100 billion worldwide—bigger than the film and music industries combined (Wilson 2019). Given the rapidly evolving nature of this industry, constant research is needed, both regarding the content of games, as well as how consumers interact with this form of entertainment media. Given the power of media as an agent of socialization, it is important to take video games into account when looking at the messages consumers receive and how those messages could contribute to the social construction of reality.

Additionally, the gaming community is a notorious nesting ground for misogyny and toxic masculinity. Incidents in the past decade such as #gamergate, which included threats of violence and rape aimed at female game developers and reporters and even prompted an FBI investigation, have shown that while women play games in equal numbers to their male counterparts, there is still a lot of gatekeeping and violence aimed at women in the community (Marcotte 2019). As a woman in the gaming community, I've experienced this toxic environment firsthand—threats of violence and sexual assault, accusations that I only play video games to attract male attention, and constant belittling are all common experiences among women in online gaming spaces. Despite the persistent issues of misogyny, several of the largest titles of the past decade have featured strong female lead characters. These titles, such as *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *Tomb Raider*, have achieved both commercial and critical success and their female protagonists are heralded as mascots for the entire gaming industry (Metacritic 2013, 2017).

Here lies the disconnect. If the gaming community at large is so hateful towards women, then how are these games featuring female protagonists so popular? This question is complex and multifaceted, requiring study at multiple levels. There is a large body of existing research looking at the potential cultivating effects of video games among consumers, however examination of the actual content within video games also warrants study. The purpose of this qualitative study is to examine the construction of femininity in popular modern video games to illuminate the base on which gamers

engage with gender. The study does not entail investigations into how gamers negotiate gender, which is an important area of future research.

Specifically, this research is guided by the following questions: How is femininity constructed in current generation narrative-based action-adventure video games that are popular in the United States? In an effort to be as thorough as possible, I have broken this down into two sub-questions: (1) How is femininity constructed through the portrayal of female protagonists? (2) How is femininity constructed through game narrative and story choices? Investigation into these questions led to, among other things, the realization that even games with female protagonists find ways to center male characters as father figures who wield immense power over the lives and motivations of the young women at the center of the story. Women may have the leading role in these games, but men are still cast as gatekeepers to womanhood.

I begin with a discussion of the literature surrounding video games, including the target consumer audience as well as the depictions of male and female characters in these games. Narrative structure and previous research on media socialization are also discussed. I then introduce postmodernist and feminist theories, particularly focusing on the work of Jean Baudrillard and Judith Butler. Throughout the analysis, I utilized these frameworks to make sense of the construction of gender as well as the power of media to reproduce norms. Next, I detail my methodological orientation, sample selection, data collection procedures, coding process, ethical considerations, and reflexivity. Finally, I present my results and engage in a discussion of the implications of my findings, research limitations, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

There was very little literature to be found regarding the construction of femininity in video games, illuminating a gap that I aim to fill with the present study. Much of the existing body of work focuses on the link between video games and violent behavior, particularly among men. However, there is still quite a bit of literature that can inform my own work. This review is split into six sections, entitled as follows: (1) Who Plays Video Games? (2) Representation of Women in Video Games, (3) Masculinity in Video Games, (4) Femininity, (5) Video Games as an Agent of Socialization, and (6) Video Game Narrative. This literature review will provide a foundation for the research design and analysis in the study.

Who Plays Video Games?

The term 'gamer' generally calls to mind images of young men. This is often used as an excuse for why there is so little diverse representation in gaming. This lack of diversity is reflected not only in the characters and storylines but also in the writers and developers involved in creating games. Why is diversity needed when the target audience is relatively homogenous? This stereotype of the teenage male gamer could not be further from the truth, however. In a meta-analysis of existing literature, Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer (2017) found that the gaming community is made up of men and women in near equal numbers and that the average gamer is in their 30s. Furthermore, men and women play similar types of games, disproving existing stereotypes. Despite the existence of female gamers, however, men still dominate the online social space, and use gate-keeping tactics to bar women from participating in the community at large (Paaßen, et al. 2017).

This pervasive idea of men as the default target audience exists in part due to the history of video games and video game advertising. Lien (2013) explains that when home consoles were first released in the late 1970s, video game titles were largely gender neutral. These systems were sold as family entertainment, and therefore the games were marketed as suitable for the whole family. However, an oversaturation of poorly made games caused the industry to crash in the early 1980s.

Nintendo released the NES worldwide in 1985 and is largely credited with reviving the video game industry (Lien 2013; Welsh 2017). However, their decision to sell their game systems in the toy aisle is what changed the course of video game marketing. Stores split their toy aisles into two sections by gender. Nintendo's choice to sell their products in the boy aisle meant that all of their advertising would be aimed at that demographic. Since then, the video game industry has been stuck in what Lien (2013) describes as a chicken-and-egg type situation. Video games have been largely marketed towards boys since the 1980s. Those boys have grown up with the medium, and video game advertising has grown up with them. Even though men and women of all ages play video games, the young male gamer remains the enduring stereotype and presumed audience.

Even modern game advertising is overwhelmingly aimed at young men. Several studies have looked at popular video game advertisements, both print ads and television commercials, and found that while some diversity was found in recent years, the archetypal image of the gamer, as well as the game hero, is that of a white male (Behm-Morawitz 2017; Chess, Evans, and Baines 2017; Dill and Thill 2007). When women are the target of video game advertisements, the picture is often very different. Chess (2011) looked at games that are typically advertised to a female audience—particularly fitness and puzzle games. It was found that while games are increasingly marketed to a more diverse demographic, there is still a presumed hierarchy of gender in gaming audiences. The author found that games marketed towards women often “emphasize productivity over play” (230). Moreover, game marketing aimed at women tends to propagate traditional feminine gender expectations, adhering to notions of “beauty, fitness, and family values” (Chess 2011:230). While advertisements aimed at men emphasize the entertainment value of games, those aimed at women promise beauty, youth, fitness, and self-help. They promise that their game is a productive activity worthy of women's time.

Representation of Women in Video Games

Much of the literature on gender and video games largely centers around violence and the sexual objectification of women. In terms of sheer numbers, female characters are systematically

under-represented in video games (Wilberg 2011; Williams, et al. 2009). While researchers note a decrease in unequal gender representation over time, female characters are still most often relegated to secondary roles within games (Lynch, et al. 2016). This has frustrated researchers and fans alike, as the title of one article humorously asks, “Who is the Brown-Haired White Guy who seems to star in virtually every AAA action game—and how can we get rid of him?” (Shaw-Williams 2014). While some games, such as the ones included in this study, do challenge the narrative of male-supremacy in gaming, they are also often used as token examples in defense of the industry against accusations of sexism and inequality.

When women do appear in video games, they tend to appear in very specific ways. One study looked at female body imagery in games and found that more photorealistic characters were systematically thinner than real women (Martins, et al. 2009). An analysis of 489 characters across 60 different titles found that female characters routinely appear more sexualized than male characters. Female characters showed more skin and engaged in more sexual speech (Downs and Smith 2010). These characters’ main purpose is to act as a subject of desire for a presumed heterosexual male audience.

Consumers are also aware of these issues regarding representation. Kondrat (2015) conducted a survey and a series of in-depth interviews to learn gamer’s perceptions of female representation in video games. Respondents indicated that female game characters, when they did appear, were frequently objectified and dressed provocatively, although portrayals had gradually improved over time. Dill and Thill (2007) found similar results, adding that even non-gamers in their study were familiar with depictions of women as submissive, sexual objects in games.

When female characters aren’t just mechanisms to tantalize the male gaze, they are often used as daughter surrogates for a paternal main character, and by extension the player. These characters provide motivation for the male protagonists and a vehicle to demonstrate masculinity and justify violence as “morally correct and vital to survival” (Lawlor 2018:29). These depictions of female characters in video games feed into innocence and purity ideals of girlhood. They are viewed as

innocent and helpless, even when they are shown to be capable of holding their own within the game play and narrative (Lawlor 2018).

Conspicuously, I was not able to find many recent studies that focused on female characters who are the main protagonists in their games. Previous research discusses women in secondary roles, used as tools for the main—male—protagonists. Studies that do focus on female protagonists are often at least a decade old, and focus on the sexualized nature of female protagonists from the late 90s and early 2000s (Jansz and Martis 2007; Rughinis, Rughinis, and Toma 2016). This is a gap that can be filled by the current study.

Masculinity in Video Games

There is a marked absence of literature on the construction of masculinity in video games. Countless studies have established that male characters make up the bulk of video game portrayals, however, there seems to be very little in-depth analysis of exactly how men are depicted across broad gaming trends (Wilberg 2011; Williams, et al. 2009). Downs and Smith (2009) found that male characters in games were generally depicted with realistic body proportions, though another study found that photorealistic characters were systematically larger than the average American male (Martins, et al. 2011). Additionally, male characters are generally not depicted wearing sexy or revealing clothing (Downs and Smith 2009; Jansz and Martis 2007).

Player perceptions of gender may also shine a light on how masculinity is constructed in video games. Dill and Thill (2007) found that players described the typical male game character as powerful, aggressive, and hostile. Wilberg (2011) describes male video game characters as “pillars of strength-radiating masculinity. Created as virile and stalwart protectors, male characters are programmed with limited emotions and seemingly unlimited heroism” (10). This depiction of the brave hero is not incongruent with the fact that video game technology evolved out of a collaboration with the U.S. military (Kontour 2012). It could be argued that the act of gaming has become a form of masculine performativity given the current climate of the gaming community, and that games provide a space for the reproduction of hypermasculinity that players don’t have the means to perform outside

of the game world. While Kontour (2012) describes this phenomenon in the context of online, player versus player first-person shooters, the theory can easily be applied to any game with a traditionally masculine playable character.

Depictions of masculinity vary, however. As video games have evolved over the years, and as many gamers have grown up, so too have their in-game counterparts. Lawlor (2018) describes the growing trend of what she refers to as “essential paternal masculinity” in games (29). These characters find their motivation and justification through paternal responsibilities. While this depiction of masculinity is arguably softer than the hypermasculine tropes discussed previously, similar themes still apply. Violence in these games is justified as an essential duty to protect vulnerable female characters, in this case acting as daughter surrogates. In this sense, violence is a core element of masculinity and leadership. Moreover, violence in the context of essential paternal masculinity is a display of affection (Lawlor 2018).

However, for all the depictions of hypermasculinity in gaming, as with anything else there will always be an exception to the rule. Kirkland (2009) presents a case study of atypical examples of masculinity found in the Silent Hill survival horror video game series. A far cry from the powerful, cocky protagonists of other games, male playable characters in this series are riddled with shortcomings. Helplessness and failure are built into the script and gameplay at every turn, subverting strict gender expectations for masculinity. While such depictions are clearly not the norm across broader gaming trends, this case study stands as a testament that perhaps video games have the potential to provide more diversity in depictions of masculinity than the commonly held ideal.

Video Games as an Agent of Socialization

There is a considerable amount of debate around video games and their influence over society. Most notable is the moral panic surrounding the effects of violent video games on young people. Public anxiety about video games as an agent for unraveling the moral fabric of society have spawned quite a few studies on the relation between violent video games and violent behavior in the

real world, however results are still mixed (Markey, Markey, and French 2015; Prescott, Sargent, and Hull 2018).

While there is no consensus on whether violent video games cause violent actions, the existing literature does generally agree that video games often lead to other negative effects in consumers. Many of these studies mirror findings from research into presentations of women in other forms of media. For instance, the Geena Davis Institute (2019) found that female consumers are clearly influenced by objectifying and sexualized images in popular media. Similarly, Martins et al. (2009) found that the physical portrayals of female characters in games often distort norms and beauty standards. This also has been shown to lead to self-objectification and negative body image among female players (Gestos, Smith-Merry, and Campbell 2018). Additionally, several studies have found that sexism in video games negatively affects empathy for female violence victims, and aids in the dissemination and belief in rape culture myths (Gabbiadini, et al. 2016; Gestos, et al. 2018). It has also been found that individuals, particularly males, who play games frequently are more accepting of stereotypical images of women (Brenick, et al. 2007).

However, it is worth noting that not all studies have produced the same results. Bruer, Kowert, Festl, and Quandt (2015) conducted a three-year longitudinal study of teenage gamers in Germany. Unlike similar studies, they found no cultivation effect between video game use and sexist attitudes or beliefs.

Shrum, Burroughs, and Rindfleisch (2005) describe the effects of media consumption in broader terms. Those who consume more media are more likely to suspend their disbelief while engaged in the programming. Their proposed model outlines how frequent media consumption alters memory-based judgements and perceptions of reality. They further contend that awareness of media's effects on perceptions and judgements might not be enough to counteract them. They argue that many judgements are automatic and subconscious, and unless viewers are actively aware of media influences, even after consumption, they may still make judgements based of media distortions (Shrum, et al. 2005).

Femininity

Femininity is a broad, complex concept that has been defined in a multitude of ways. One study simply defines femininity as “how a woman should act” within the context of socially constructed norms (Swani and Abbasnejad 2010:685). This definition was then used to identify measurable variables to determine how closely participants adhered to traditional feminine ideology. Meanwhile, Weisgram, Dinella and Fulcher (2011) described femininity using words such as “warm, sympathetic, sensitive, and soft-spoken” (245). The Bem Sex Role Inventory has also been used to measure levels of femininity (Choi, Fuqua, and Newman 2008).

Past research has not always relied on strict, scientific interpretations of gender norms and definitions, however. Toma (2015) used a list of popular media tropes in a content analysis of elderly female characters in video games. While these tropes are typically used for television and film, the author was able to successfully apply them to video game cutscenes. This resource chronicles a near exhaustive list of popular media tropes, character traits, and plot devices, from ‘Femme Fatale’ to ‘Princess Classic’ (Femininity Tropes). This description of femininity outlines the many ways in which women are portrayed in entertainment media and provides a strong foundation for application in media research.

Video Game Narrative

Video games are unique in their interactive nature, and as such tend to have narrative structures that deviate from traditional film or literature cannon. However, there are still some basic structures that are shared across mediums. The present study includes two types of game structures: linear and nonlinear or branching (Ip 2011). A linear game structure can be thought of as a train on a track. Players are led through the game on a fixed path. The most common example of this would be games where the player progresses sequentially through a series of levels. While defined level structure is less common in modern narrative-based games, the basic idea still stands. These games provide a relatively unchanging experience and limit player choice with a fixed narrative (Ip 2011; Picucci 2014).

By contrast, nonlinear or branching narratives foster greater interactivity and immersion. While these games still provide a pre-established story, they often include branching dialogue options or multiple game endings, inviting player choice. They also may offer side quests—parts of the game that branch away from the main story. Nonlinear structures typically reward player exploration and offer an extra layer of interactivity to games by giving the player a sense of control over the story direction and progression (Ip 2011, Picucci 2014).

Similar to film, video game narratives often follow a three-act structure. Namely, they have a beginning, middle, and end (Ip 2011). In screenwriting these acts are often referred to as the set-up, the confrontation, and the resolution (Field 2005). This plot structure is often paired with Joseph Campbell's monomyth or hero's journey—a narrative formula useful for all genres, but particularly utilized in fantasy or adventure (Ip 2011; Vogler 2017).

Both the three-act narrative and the hero's journey devices are found in narrative-based video games. However, Ip (2011) found that the three-act structure deviates slightly, with the second act taking up a considerably larger portion of the story than in other media forms, up to 98 percent of play time. Interestingly, the vast majority of the narrative in video games takes place during cutscenes, video sequences where the player has little to no control (Ip 2011; Picucci 2014). These scenes play like a movie and provide context and important plot points in between playable sequences. It is critical to take these cutscenes into account when analyzing game narrative.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Baudrillard's (1994) postmodern theoretical concepts of simulacra and simulation and Butler's (2007) feminist theory of gender performativity. Additionally, I applied Mulvey's feminist (1989) concept of the male gaze and Valenti's (2009) discourse on virginity and purity culture. This research employs an intersectional framework (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1991), illustrating that femininity and gender are not singular categories but rather always constructed through race, class, and national location. My study shows that video games create femininity by centering whiteness, similar to much media.

Postmodernist Theory

Postmodernism grew out of a critique of modernism, arguing that the modern ideals do not exist in our reality the way the public thinks they do, and that fact and fiction often blend together in the way individuals construct reality (Appelrouth and Edles 2016). Postmodernist theory contends that the last few centuries are markedly different from the rest of human history. This evolution is highlighted by the change in focus from production to consumption (Appelrouth and Edles 2016). It is through consumption that society now constructs symbols and meaning.

A second attribute to this evolution is the rise of interactive media (Appelrouth and Edles 2016). With the introduction and proliferation of interactive technology, the line between production and consumption becomes blurred as common people are encouraged to participate in the creation and dissemination of media messages.

Jean Baudrillard laid the framework for much of postmodernist views with his ideas on consumerism, simulacra, simulation, and hyperreality. Baudrillard (1994) argues that the symbols we derive meaning from in capitalist society are based on copies of copies without any original. By and large, discursive knowledge and the public imagination are made up of interpretations of the world that have no solid basis in reality. Society has left reality behind in favor of fabricated reproductions. Symbols today are not a concrete reflection of reality and are therefore irrational and unstable. The sheer proliferation of these symbols leads to a society that is unable to distinguish between reality and fiction (Baudrillard 1994).

This idea of deriving meaning through the abstract symbolism of consumer goods leads to Baudrillard's conceptions of simulacra and simulation. Baudrillard defines simulacra as copies of objects or ideas for which no original exists (1994). Consumerism and mass media allow for the wide distribution of simulacra. Advertising, television, and video games all copy symbols and meanings for things that never existed in the first place. Wild West movies, 'based on a true story' depictions in the media, video games with 'historical' settings—all of these representations have only ever existed in the imagination, and so, according to Baudrillard, have no basis in reality. Baudrillard goes on to

argue that these depictions and subsequently public discursive knowledge “no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance” (1994: 2).

Simulation, then, refers to when these reproductions seem more real than reality itself. Reality is simulated through mass media, consumerism, and discursive knowledge, threatening “the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false,’ between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’” (Baudrillard 1994: 3).

The final main concept of Baudrillard’s theory that helps to frame the current study on gender construction in video games is that of hyperreality. Consumption, simulacra, and simulations come together, leading to a society that can no longer distinguish between what is real and what is simulation (Baudrillard 1994). Real life starts to mimic fiction, just as fiction is said to mimic real life.

Baudrillard’s focus on media as simulation can easily be applied to video games. Baudrillard argues that simulations often stand in for reality and video games demonstrate this concept quite literally (1994). Since the beginning of the medium, video games have strived to achieve some sort of realism. With modern technology, current-generation titles are often heralded for their realistic graphics and high frame rates. Every year, big budget games look more and more real, making the simulation even more convincing.

More than just the realistic appearances of games, however, the medium is in a unique position to push the simulation further by placing the player in control. This control is limited, as scripts, actions, and story are all predetermined, however, this mechanic can still blur the lines between fiction and reality. Players are not static observers as with other forms of popular media, but active participants in the simulation, which makes it feel all the more real.

The strengths of Baudrillard’s theory for this particular research lie in its connection to media. While the current study only examines content, rather than the thoughts and actions of human participants, Baudrillard’s concepts of simulation, simulacra, and hyperreality illustrate how the construction of gender in media actually appears real.

Feminist Theories of Performativity, Intersectionality, the Male Gaze, and Purity

Feminist theory and feminism as a movement focuses on the politics and inequalities inherent to gender, particularly the marginalization of women and femininity in a patriarchal society. Feminist theory recognizes the importance of women's perspectives and experiences in sociological discourse (Butler 2007; Smith 1974). While feminist theory encompasses discourse from a variety of perspectives, the current research employs the feminist concepts of gender performativity, intersectionality, the male gaze, and purity culture.

Judith Butler redefines modern feminist ideas around sex, gender, and sexuality by calling into question how feminist politics defines the subject of 'women' (2007). For Butler, sex, gender, and sexual desire are all conflated in discursive knowledge and inseparable from one another in something she describes as a heterosexual matrix. Not only are these concepts socially constructed, Butler goes a step further by arguing that they do not exist in any stable or concrete terms (2007).

Butler (2007) argues that gender is not a reflection of the true self, rather that gender is an effect; inhabited in the body and created by sustained, ritualized actions. Gender performativity, then, is nothing but a form of drag. Gender performativity is not a reflection of the self, but rather "an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon it anticipates" (Butler [1999] 2007: xv).

Gender performativity is temporal, ever-changing, and based on cultural norms and practices. As such, Butler also argues that gender is troubled and unstable (2007). Because the actions that create gender are not rooted in any biological or concrete reality, people often trip up and make mistakes while performing their gender. These mistakes cause people to call into question the current public understanding of sex, gender, and sexual desire. This, along with purposely subversive acts, challenge existing norms surrounding sex, gender, and sexual desire (Butler 2007).

The concept of gender performativity is on clear display in video games. Video game characters have no agency, and 'identities' are constructed strictly through action. Not only is this seen in how characters speak and act in certain situations, but it is especially clear in body language. As mentioned previously, female characters in video games are often defined by their presentation as

sexual objects. Meanwhile, men in video games are characterized by their power, aggression, and strength. In this way, these games reproduce gender through action (Downs and Smith 2010; Kondrat 2015; Dill and Thill 2007; Jansz and Martis 2007; Rughinis, et al. 2016; Wilberg 2007).

While performativity is present in all media forms, video games take it a step further as players directly take control of characters in the game. This transportation of the self into the characters on the screen is made even more complete by first-person games and character creation screens that let one customize the playable character down to the most minute detail. There is little separation between the character—whose actions are scripted to perform a certain way—and the individual holding the controller. This brings new meaning to Butler's assertion that gender is inhabited in the body. Not only is gender performativity on display in the scripted actions of the characters on the screen, but those actions are transposed onto players as well, as they inhabit the characters. In essence, players may perform gender through the characters that they control within the scripted confines of the game.

Intersectional feminism arose out of a critique of the way discourse surrounding identity politics often takes for granted the perceived homogeneity of different groups. Ignoring how intersecting identities affect people's experiences effectively stunts any efforts to further equality by treating issues of race, gender, class, sexuality, and national location as mutually exclusive thus preventing cooperation and breeding conflict (Crenshaw 1991; Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012). Experiences are informed by multiple aspects of identity and social structural location. As such, gender cannot be examined without also taking into account how it intersects with other identities such as race and sexual orientation. These intersecting identities work to stratify privilege and oppression, creating what Collins (1990) calls a 'matrix of domination.'

Windsor (2015) builds on this by pointing out the inherent hierarchical nature of femininity in Western discourse. The construct of femininity operates as a set of scripts to define heteronormative gender roles and expectations as defined by Western cultures. As such, notions of so called hegemonic versus any alternative expressions or conceptions of femininity are inherently tangled with

intersecting identities. Variations in gender expression or expectations related to race, class, or sexuality are consistently compared against the idea of a white, heterosexual, middle-class default.

While scholarship on gender traditionally positions femininity in conflict with masculinity, intersectional feminism addresses the nuances of intersecting identities and the matrix of domination that exists within femininity. While it is true that femininity exists in a marginalized space, there is still a hierarchy within femininity that allows white, upper to middle class, heterosexual, and Western women privilege over most other women in the world. When gender issues are allowed to exist in a vacuum, society can overlook how femininity operates to reproduce inequalities in race, social class, and sexuality (Hamilton, et al. 2019; Windsor 2015).

The male gaze, a term coined by film critic Laura Mulvey (1989), describes the idea in popular media that women are meant to be looked at and men are meant to do the looking. This concept is often analyzed as a form of patriarchal surveillance, leading to the control and regulation of female bodies. To this end, female characters are coded and displayed in a manner that prioritizes the pleasure and enjoyment of heterosexual male viewers. This version of the male gaze centers the sexual objectification of women (Mulvey 1989; Glapka 2018).

Another crucial aspect of the male gaze is the effect that it has on women. The male gaze is so pervasive in media that it has become the dominant viewpoint. Women, then, internalize this way of viewing, and see themselves and other women through the lens of the male gaze. While modern media may try to subvert this trope, the male gaze is still prolific in the mainstream (Mulvey 1989; Sassatelli 2011).

Given the presumed heterosexual male audience, the male gaze often presents itself in video games. Previous research argues that women in video games are often created to cater to the male gaze, owing to the hyper-sexualization and objectification of female characters (Ruhginis, et al. 2016; Sarkeesian 2016).

Western cultures centering of female sexual objectification is juxtaposed with its obsession with female purity and chastity. Valenti (2009) explores society's fetishization of female sexuality and

the importance placed on virginity. She argues that women put forth as paragons of chastity and virtue are more often than not “young, good-looking, straight, and white” (Valenti 2009: 44). Women of color, meanwhile, are hypersexualized and rarely portrayed as beacons of virtue. This obsession with virginity, particularly white virginity, places women who conform to these ideals on a pedestal, worthy of admiration, protection, and heterosexual male desire.

Application

Baudrillard’s theories fit my research question and help to frame how video games might act as a form of socialization for consumers, along with the helpful addition of Butler’s emphasis on gender construction. Butler’s gender performativity as well as the notions of purity and the ‘male gaze’ provide a framework for analyzing how gender is constructed through video games. Additionally, by using an intersectional framework, I was able to analyze the interplay of gender with other identities, particularly race and sexuality.

While Baudrillard’s theories might be applied to narrative and setting elements in the sampled content, the idea of gender being inhabited in the body can be applied to the appearances and actions of the characters being examined. By analyzing not only the overarching narratives and character arcs of the video games in my sample, but also the appearances and actions of the individual protagonists, I will better understand the nuances of how gender and femininity are constructed in games. This could inform future research into how consumers interact with and construct meaning from video games.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This thesis uses qualitative content analysis to analyze the construction of femininity in popular video games with female protagonists. This chapter introduces the research methodology and the justification for choosing content analysis to answer the following research questions: (1) How is femininity constructed through the portrayal of female protagonists? And (2) How is femininity constructed through game narrative and story choices? Next, I will explain the sample criteria and selection process, including justification for the final selection. Then, I explain the procedures I followed to code and analyze the data. Finally, I delve into the ethical considerations for this research, as well as reflexivity regarding my positionality going into this study.

Methodological Orientation

Different research designs allow for the examination of social phenomena from different angles and orientations. Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research designs all possess their own strengths and weaknesses for analyzing different research questions. While quantitative research often has the boon of generalizability due to larger sample sizes, qualitative designs sacrifice breadth in favor of depth (Babbie 2014). Qualitative research has the ability to delve deeper into the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of complex issues that are not easily made measurable.

This study utilizes qualitative content analysis to fill gaps in existing research. While it is important to study how media potentially has a socializing effect on consumers, it is also important to analyze the content in question to help create a complete picture of how consumers might construct meaning from existing entertainment media.

Very few studies on video games have looked at the narrative elements. As video games become more cinematic in nature, these narrative elements provide necessary context for well-rounded analysis. Much of the existing literature on video games focuses on single elements such as cover art, and character models, or short segments of gameplay (Downs and Smith 2010; Jansz and Martis 2007; Martins, et al. 2009; Wilberg 2011; Williams, et al. 2009). Furthermore, many of these

studies focus on manifest data. How many female characters appear in the game? How are they dressed? While this form of analysis can help paint a picture of how female characters are represented in games and game media, little has been done to study women in video games beyond physical appearance. Some studies have tackled the ways in which femininity and masculinity are constructed in video games, but the scholarship on this topic is minimal.

This study looks not only at the physical appearance of characters, but also analyzes their personality characteristics, story arcs and character growth, as well as the situations they are placed in and how they interact with other characters in-game. Taking this approach allows me to look at the construction of femininity and the messages that play a role in gender socialization in a way that other approaches do not.

Sample Selection

Purposive sampling was used for this research. This non-probability sampling method is most commonly used when the researcher wishes to select a particular subset of a population based on knowledge of population elements and the research purpose (Babbie 2014). As an insider in the gaming community, my understanding of popular gaming trends and active participation in online discourse allows me insight into the games that would be well-suited to answer these research questions. Under the purposive sampling method, I considered several criteria when selecting the games for this study, namely, year of release, the protagonist's gender, and popularity.

In an effort to keep up with modern gaming trends, I only considered narrative-based, action-adventure games from the last console generation, ranging from the years 2013 to 2020 (Ryan 2020). Video game eras are often delineated by the major consoles available at the time. The era being considered for this study, known as the 'eight generation,' includes games released for personal computers, the PlayStation 4, and the Xbox One. The latter two consoles were released in late 2013, and the 'eighth generation' came to a close with the release of the PlayStation 5 and the Xbox Series X in late 2020. Considering games within a single generation allows for greater continuity regarding technical restraints and gaming trends.

Because the purpose of this study is to look at how gender is constructed through narrative, I only considered games with fixed female protagonists. Some games let players choose the gender and physical attributes of their character, however, the in-game narrative and interactions in these games are often scripted the same, regardless of player gender. Because of this, male and female characters are often nearly identical in presentation. They complete the same actions and say the same things, regardless of gender, rendering analysis impossible beyond differences in physical appearance.

Additionally, I considered both the critical and commercial success of the games when choosing my sample. I only wanted to include mainstream games with wide exposure and popularity rather than niche independent titles that may not be the best representation of modern gaming trends. To this end, I consulted Metacritic, a popular website that compiles and averages a variety of game reviews and ratings from both professional critics and gamers themselves. Additionally, all of the games selected appear on the list of '20 Best Video Games With Female Protagonists' published by TheGamer, a popular video game review website (Harris 2020). Lastly, to ensure variety, only one game from any chosen franchise was selected for the sample.

Four games were selected for the final sample based on the criteria above ($n = 4$). The final selection contains the following games: Tomb Raider, Horizon: Zero Dawn, Uncharted: Lost Legacy, and The Last of Us Part 2 (See Table 1). While I cannot claim that these games are representative of all games with female protagonists, they are a good cross-section of popular, mainstream games from this era.

Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition

Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition was released in 2014 by Square Enix for the PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and personal computers (See Figure 1). It has a Metacritic score of 85 and is rated 'Mature 17+' for blood and gore, drug reference, intense violence, and strong language (Metacritic 2014, ESRB).

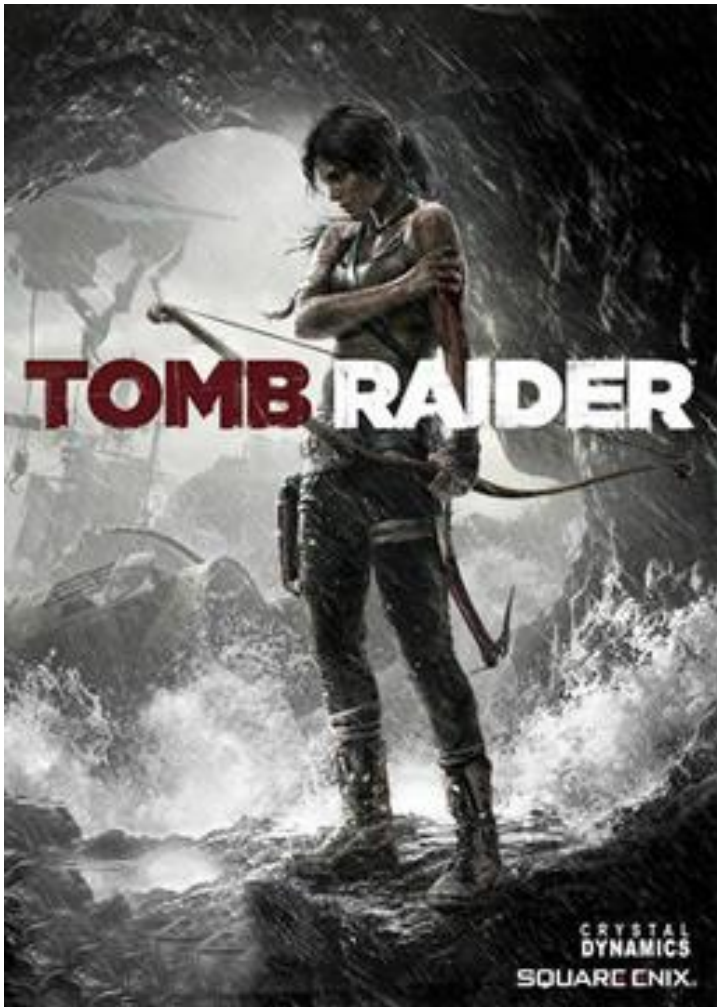


Figure 1. Tomb Raider cover (Square Enix 2014)

Lara Croft is arguably one of the most recognizable and infamous characters in gaming-- female or otherwise. While this game was originally released in 2013 for the seventh console generation, it was rereleased in early 2014 for eighth generation consoles. Tomb Raider quickly made headlines as the best-selling game in the series' nearly 20-year history. It remains the best-selling Tomb Raider game to date, outperforming its two sequels (Engelbrecht 2018).

Tomb Raider was the start of a reboot trilogy for Lara Croft. Even though this isn't the most recent game, it is among the most popular and showcases the bulk of Lara's character development. In fact, reviewers and critics complain that sequel games don't develop Lara's character any further beyond becoming a better killer (Campbell 2018). Because of its popularity and public discourse touting it as an origin story for the main character, Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition was chosen for the final sample.

Horizon: Zero Dawn

Horizon: Zero Dawn was released in 2017 by Sony Interactive Entertainment and Guerrilla Games for the PlayStation 4 (See Figure 2). It has a Metacritic score of 89 and an ESRB rating of 'Teen' for blood, drug reference, language, mild sexual themes, and violence (Metacritic 2017, ESRB).



Figure 2. Horizon Zero Dawn cover (Guerilla Games 2017)

Despite being a Sony exclusive and therefore only available for PlayStation 4 consoles at the time of release, Horizon: Zero Dawn was an immediate blockbuster hit. As a brand new concept in a gaming world full of established franchises, this game came out of nowhere and surprised the entire community. The game won numerous awards and is one of the best selling PlayStation 4 games, with more than 7.6 million copies sold in its first year alone (Arif 2018). Despite the newness of this franchise, the main character, Aloy was immediately touted by community and columnists as 'the next PlayStation icon,' joining the ranks with the likes of Lara Croft and other video game mascots.

This is the game that initially inspired this study. Aloy is universally loved by the gaming community. Her popularity and the critical and commercial acclaim of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* make it a good fit for this sample.

Uncharted: The Lost Legacy

Uncharted: Lost Legacy was released in 2017 by Sony Interactive Entertainment and Naughty Dog for the PlayStation 4 (See Figure 3). This game has a Metacritic score of 84 and an ESRB rating of 'Teen' for blood, drug reference, language, mild sexual themes, and violence (Metacritic 2017, ESRB).



Figure 3. Uncharted: The Lost Legacy cover (Naughty Dog 2017)

Another Sony exclusive, this title belongs to one of the best-selling video game franchises of all time (Davidson 2017). *Uncharted: Lost Legacy* is not considered a main-title game in the *Uncharted* series, but it has still found both critical and commercial success. This game puts two

female side-characters from the Uncharted franchise front and center. Nathan Drake, the series' main protagonist doesn't even make an appearance in the game. Uncharted: The Lost Legacy is also unique in the fact that it is the only game in this sample that features non-white protagonists. Race is an important component to any analysis of gender, and I included this game in my sample to see if there were any differences in the construction of femininity between white and non-white characters.

The Last of Us Part II

The Last of Us Part II was released in 2020 by Sony Interactive Entertainment and Naughty Dog for the PlayStation 4 (See Figure 4). It has a Metacritic score of 93--the highest score of any game in this sample, and an ESRB rating of 'Mature' for blood and gore, intense violence, nudity, sexual content, strong language, and use of drugs.



Figure 4. The Last of Us Part II cover (Naughty Dog 2020)

As the sequel to one of the most acclaimed games of all time, this title was probably the most anticipated game to come out in 2020, and also one of the most controversial (Hernandez 2020). While it has the highest critic score of the sample, the user score averages 5.6/10 (Metacritic 2020). The controversy varies within the gaming community. Some don't like that the game features a non-traditionally feminine lesbian woman as the protagonist. Other discourse takes issue with the amount of violence and abuse endured by women and LGBTQ characters in the game.

The Last of Us: Part II is simultaneously heralded as a masterpiece and derided as a problematic disaster. Given all the controversy and inherently gendered discourse, specifically around the portrayal of female characters and of femininity in the game, The Last of Us: Part II was chosen as the final game for this sample.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Title	Release Date	Rating	Protagonist(s)	Critic Score	Cutscene Length
Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition	2014	Mature	Lara Croft	85	2:21:00
Horizon Zero Dawn	2017	Teen	Aloy	89	5:50:23
Uncharted: The Lost Legacy	2017	Teen	Chloe Frazer Nadine Ross	84	2:34:01
The Last of Us Part II	2020	Mature	Ellie Abby	93	8:54:35

Data Collection

Video game cutscenes are the chosen unit of analysis for this research. As video games often take tens of hours to complete, analyzing games in their entirety would be far too complex in the context of this study. Cinematic cutscenes are non-playable in-game movies that contain the bulk of a game's story and scripted interactions. Analyzing these cutscenes, along with enough gameplay to string them together allows for a well-rounded and comprehensive view of the content without needing to play the entire game start to finish.

Cutscenes were compiled from the verified YouTube account 'Gamer's Little Playground' (2014; 2017a; 2017b; 2020). This account provides comprehensive video cutscene videos,

colloquially referred to as 'game movies' free of charge on the video streaming platform. Not only did this particular account have videos for all of the games in my sample, the videos were also edited in such a way to include just enough player-controlled gameplay to provide context between cinematic cutscenes. As I own all of the games in the sample, I was able to verify that the videos were complete and comprehensive. Altogether, the sample contained 19 hours, 39 minutes, and 59 seconds of footage (Table 1).

Data Analysis

The cutscene compilations were found on YouTube, saved to a playlist, and downloaded so that they could be viewed offline. The videos were watched once through in their entirety so that I could familiarize myself with their content. After the initial viewing, I started the process of coding. On the second viewing of the sample, the videos were analyzed using an exploratory open coding method. Saldana (2009) describes this method as an inductive process using tentative codes upon first review of the data. Using this approach, I coded everything that stood out to me as potentially relevant to the research questions.

I coded for both manifest content, such as how often a character was referred to in a gendered way or instances of physical violence, as well as latent content surrounding character arcs, media tropes, and gender constructs. Latent content was also explored using analytical memos. Analytic memos help researchers start to make sense of the patterns and emerging from the data (Saldana 2009). Using analytical memos aided in the process of connecting the pieces of the latent content present in the data. Analytical memos were also used to connect the codes from the manifest content to latent themes.

After the open coding process was complete, codes were consolidated into preliminary themes and I went back through the data for another round of focused coding (Emmerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011). This analysis resulted in five central themes, explained in the results section.

Ethical Considerations

As this research only analyzes social artifacts and does not in any way contain sensitive or protected information, I do not foresee any ethical issues arising. This research focuses on the portrayal of fictional characters and can in no way be connected to individuals in the real world.

Reflexivity

This research is inspired by a simultaneous love of video games, and the acknowledgement that the industry and community at large are notoriously toxic towards women (Marcotte 2019). Reflexivity is an important aspect of any research and is necessary to minimize biases that obstruct objectivity. Creswell and Creswell (2018) advise that reflexivity requires the consideration of two points: acknowledging past experiences and acknowledging how those past experiences might shape the interpretation of data. This process is particularly important for qualitative research, as these methodologies are highly interpretive. Throughout this study, I remained constantly vigilant and self-critical of my own perspectives and biases.

As a female gamer myself, I am quite close to this subject matter. I grew up watching my dad play classic first-person shooters, and I started playing video games myself in my late teens. Being acquainted with video games and the gaming community is both an advantage and a disadvantage regarding the current research.

Because I love video games, and some of the games in my sample in particular, I had to be sure to constantly check my own biases while analyzing the data to reduce the risk of unintentionally missing or overlooking something potentially problematic. Just because I love the games I play, doesn't mean they're without fault in their portrayal of toxic gender norms.

On the other hand, my familiarity with video games and with entertainment media in general is an asset. Apart from playing games being a general hobby, I also have several years of formal training and experience in narrative storytelling and fiction-writing. I am very familiar with the stages of character development, story frameworks, and narrative devices. These skills allowed me to analyze the data from multiple orientations.

I also must consider how my identity as a white woman plays a role in how I approached the subject matter. I cannot look at gender socialization without recognizing that I myself have been socialized in a specific, gendered way, in no small part thanks to media messages--possibly including the very video games that are the focus of my study. As a queer, plus-size woman, I never really fit the archetypal mold of white normative womanhood portrayed by popular media, however I have spent a good portion of my life struggling to fit that ideal. I have plenty of experience with the low self-esteem as a result of sexual objectification in media as described in existing research (Gestos, et al. 2018). I am not immune from the messages and processes of socialization that this study aims to identify.

Finally, it is also worth noting that in all but one of the games in my sample, the protagonists are white. It is important to recognize that my own experiences as a white woman connecting with these characters might be different than those who are not white. My first-hand knowledge of the white female experience allows me to better analyze latent messages regarding white femininity in the data. However, this construct is also subject to bias. Active awareness of this helped reduce the risk of projecting onto the games content that wasn't actually there.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

While none of these games were universal in their depictions of female protagonists, several themes emerged from the data: 1) Daddy Issues, 2) Absent Sexuality, 3) Femininity and Violence, 4) Gendered Morality, and 5) Racialized Depictions of Gender. For example, I begin by explaining how father figures act as important catalysts for female protagonists. Next, I discuss the lack of romantic and sexual agency afforded to the characters. This is followed by an examination of the women in these games as both the victims and perpetrators of violence. Next, I explain how morality in these games often presents itself in a gendered manner that paints masculinity as evil. Finally, I will discuss how some of these games both affirm and subvert stereotypical depictions of racialized femininity regarding Black and Asian characters.

Daddy Issues

All protagonists in this sample had one thing in common: the loss of a father figure. Whether the death of this character happened on-screen, or was alluded to have happened before the start of the game, the loss proved to play a significant role in the main characters' actions and motivations and in one occasion the death of a father figure acted as a catalyst that set the entire game in motion. This trope was consistent throughout the sample, and there was no variation on the basis of race.

Male Protectors

Father figures in these games were generally depicted as protectors. In *Tomb Raider*, it's established that Roth has known Lara since she was five years old, and it's insinuated that he played a large part in her upbringing after the death of her father. Throughout the course of the game, Roth is shown to be an important source of support for Lara. When the lead archaeologist on the expedition doesn't want to believe Lara's hunches, Roth steps in and vouches for her. Lara also relies on Roth's guidance and approval. After the expedition shipwrecks on an island at the beginning of the game, Lara is separated from the group. She's terrified, cold, alone, and completely out of her depth. When she makes contact with Roth using a radio, she cries and begs for him to come get her. Roth,

in turn, refuses, telling Lara she has to make her way to him on her own. Lara does indeed manage to hold her own and find her way to Roth and the others, but she required his coaxing and assurance in order to do so.

In another scene, Lara, doubting her ability to climb a radio tower to send out an SOS, receives another pep-talk:

“You can do it, Lara,” Roth assures, “After all, you’re a Croft.” Lara shakes her head, exhausted. “I don’t think I’m that kind of Croft.” Her voice sounds near breaking. “Sure you are. You just don’t know it yet.” Roth has no doubts as he hands her a pickax and sends her on her quest.

These interactions happen several times throughout the game. In each, Roth is either telling Lara to trust her instincts, giving her a tough-love lecture about life, or walking her through difficult situations—always her protector.

Tomb Raider isn’t unique in its depiction of a surrogate father figure. In *Horizon*, Aloy, a child born under mysterious circumstances, is cast out by the High Matriarchs of her tribal village—a fate that would mean certain death for an infant left to the elements. Instead of dying, however, Aloy was taken in by Rost, another outcast who lived just outside the village. The first hour of cutscenes establishes Aloy and Rost’s relationship. Rost raises Aloy and loves her as if she is his own daughter, and thanks to his training, she becomes an expert hunter, tracker, and fighter. As an outcast cut off from the rest of society, Rost is Aloy’s sole provider and role model.

The found-family pattern continues in *The Last of Us*, a game that takes place several years after a zombie-style apocalypse. Because Ellie is immune to the zombie infection, she is the key to developing a cure—a process that would ultimately kill her. It is revealed through flashbacks that prior to the events of the game, Joel, Ellie’s surrogate father, couldn’t allow her to be sacrificed. He stormed the hospital where the cure was being developed, killed the doctor in charge and rescued Ellie. Joel’s love for his surrogate daughter is so great that he effectively doomed the world in order to save her. The game includes several other flashback scenes to further illustrate the familial bond between Ellie and Joel.

Father figures in these games are formative in the lives of the female protagonists, and most often play a very active and important role in their development. These women learned to fight, to hunt, developed interests and passions, and even survived to see adulthood as a direct result of these men's interventions. Father figures seem to always be there to hold their daughters' hand, until suddenly they're not.

Deaths of Fathers and Sacrificial Male Protectors

Most of these games go to considerable lengths to establish the bonds between female protagonists and their father figures, leading to a profound sense of loss when these male characters are invariably killed off. The deaths of these characters prove to be very impactful, shaping the actions, decisions, and motivations of the daughters they leave behind.

For Lara Croft, the loss is two-fold. It's established through dialogue with other characters that Lara's father—a great archaeologist—died when she was a young girl. Lara became an archaeologist to follow in her father's footsteps, and she is always trying to measure up. In the game, the man is heralded, more legend than actual character. Lara's numerous insecurities show that she places herself in his shadow. Lara's motivations and her entire worldview were shaped by an absent father, dead long before the start of the game.

However, as discussed above, Lara has a second father figure—Roth, a man who has had a close relationship with her since childhood. While Lara is chasing the legacy of her biological father, Roth's influence is much more tangible in-game. After coaching her through numerous difficult, grueling situations; after providing several pep-talks and reassurances, Roth's last act in the game is to die, shielding Lara from a hurled axe. She holds him in her arms as he dies and is forced to come to terms with the fact that ready or not, her protector is gone and she has to rely on herself.

It's worth noting that in Tomb Raider, Roth is not the only male character who dies protecting Lara. During a segment of the game, Lara is attempting to rescue Grim, the expedition's helmsmen from a group of cult members. The encounter comes to a climax with Grim being held with a blade to his throat. Desperate to save her friend, Lara agrees to relinquish her weapons. Knowing that this

would mean certain doom for the young adventurer, Grim tackles the man holding him and subsequently falls to his death, taking the enemy with him.

In another scene, Lara is trying to save her crewmate Alex, who has ended up pinned down in the wreckage of their ship after venturing there alone to grab supplies. After fighting through numerous armed cult members and solving difficult puzzles, Lara makes it to Alex's side. Her efforts are unfortunately once again in vain. Alex is pinned, and they're surrounded. He convinces her to leave him, and once she's clear, he ignites a gas tank, killing the numerous enemies and himself.

In both of these instances, Lara had set out to rescue these men—men who did not have her skills or her firepower—and instead they ended up sacrificing themselves to save her. Protagonist or not, Lara seems in constant need of saving, and the men around her are all too happy to lay down their lives to ensure her success.

Similarly, Rost in *Horizon* also dies to protect Aloy. In a pivotal sequence near the start of the game, Aloy is permitted to participate in a ritual known as the Proving. This series of tests and obstacles is how young people prove themselves worthy of becoming warriors for the tribe. Passing means that Aloy would be able to join the tribe proper and no longer have to live as an outcast. Aloy comes in first place, but before she can celebrate, her and the other participants are attacked by members of a secretive cult. While Aloy does her best to fight off the waves of attackers, the cult's leader eventually corners her. Aloy is about to be killed when Rost rushes in out of nowhere to save her. After a scuffle, a fatally wounded Rost is able to push Aloy to safety. "Survive!" He croaks, his last words before a dramatic explosion finishes him off.

This incident is the catalyst for the events of the game. Rost had raised Aloy, was her only family, and while he was gone, the skills and lessons he instilled in her remained, allowing her to go on her hero's journey.

However, *Horizon's* presentation of the death of a father figure is slightly different than the other games in this study. While Rost's death is tragic, one gets the sense that Aloy would have gone on her quest regardless. Aloy is not driven to continue any legacy, nor is she consumed by revenge.

Aloy's character and disposition are clearly shaped by her upbringing and by Rost's influence, but his death is more depressing detail than life-altering catalyst. The foreign cult's attack on Aloy's tribe serves as the main driving force for the narrative, not her father's death.

The Last of Us presents this theme as well, albeit with a twist. Both of the protagonists in this game, Ellie and Abby, are driven to revenge after the deaths of their respective fathers. It is revealed throughout the game that Abby is the daughter of a surgeon who was working on the vaccine for the infection that caused the in-game apocalypse. He was the one scheduled to operate on Ellie—a procedure that would kill her—and he was subsequently murdered by Joel. In the years following that encounter, Abby becomes obsessed with revenge, and five years after her fathers' death she gets it. In an intense scene near the beginning of the game, Abby murders Joel by brutally bashing his skull in with a golf club. The scene is drawn out and gruesome, and Ellie is forced to watch the entire thing.

While Joel didn't sacrifice himself in the same manner as the other games in this sample, his death is still the direct result of actions he took in order to protect Ellie. After Joel's murder, Ellie is stricken by grief and rage. The need for revenge is all-consuming. Ellie and Abby are two sides of the same coin: both driven solely by the desire to avenge their dead fathers. They are each willing to sacrifice everything in the pursuit of their goals. Even though their fathers are dead and gone, they still have a vice-like grip on the lives of their daughters—more than any other family, more than friends, more than lovers. They are driven with singular purpose and resolve: avenge dad.

Uncharted continues the trend of the importance of dead fathers, albeit in a far less traumatizing way. The two main characters of this game, Chloe Frazer and Nadine Ross, both have dead dads, and while the deaths happened years before the events of the game, it is clear that they still have a profound, lasting effect on these women.

In the game, Chloe and Nadine travel through India in search of an artifact known as the Tusk of Ganesh—an artifact that Chloe's father, an archaeologist, was searching for when he was killed by bandits years before the start of the game. We never see Chloe interact with her father, or even learn

his name. When Chloe speaks of her father, she clearly holds a lot of anger and contempt toward him for his absence.

During a scene in the game that sees Chloe and Nadine reconciling after a falling out, they exchange conversation and Chloe opens up:

“Look...I’m not very good at the whole people thing,” Chloe starts, an attempt at an apology for the fight she and Nadine had in an earlier part of the game. “You’re a selfish dickhead,” is Nadine’s matter of fact reply. Chloe pauses, contemplative. “Yeah. You’re right. I am a selfish dickhead.” Nadine is quick to agree, causing a smile to stretch Chloe’s lips as both women chuckle. After a moment, Chloe pulls out a small Ganesh figurine, a trinket gifted to her by her father. “Well, did you hear that, dad?” she says, addressing the figurine. “Did get something from you after all.” Chloe holds animosity toward her father for choosing his work over his family, over her. She views him as a “selfish asshole.”

Later in the game, when Chloe and Nadine find the Tusk of Ganesh, it is revealed that Chloe’s father had been there, and that the Ganesh trinket he gifted her is a key to access a hidden temple. “He was here,” Chloe realizes, voice soft and thick with emotion. She shakes her head slightly as she tries to make sense of it. She chuckles, in disbelief. “‘Something big,’ all right.” Her brows knit together and her lips tremble. “Why didn’t that stupid bastard tell me?” there’s no anger in her voice, just an aching sadness. Nadine looks contemplative as she says, “He wanted to keep you safe.” There’s a long silence as the music swells. Chloe takes a deep breath and has to sit down. This is all so much to take in. After some time, Chloe finds renewed determination and resolve to complete her quest. “I can’t let Asav get that Tusk,” she declares, vowing to defeat the game’s antagonist. “No.” Nadine responds. ‘No, we can’t.’ The scene is poignant, and marks the first time these two women truly share the same goal. At this point in the game, they’re both tired and beaten down, but this realization is reinvigorating. Chloe can’t give up, neither of them can. Chloe’s father’s absence, the cause of her contempt towards him, is explained away as his way of protecting his daughter. In that moment of realization, all seems to be forgiven.

Nadine, *Uncharted*'s other protagonist also appears to be following in the footsteps of her father. Nadine is the head of a mercenary company that was founded by her father. One of the subplots of the game surrounds Nadine's desire to reclaim the company after one of her lieutenants staged a coup. During another conversation about their respective fathers, Nadine opens up, explaining that the responsibility of running an army comes second nature to her. "It's my father's company. He retired, I took over" she explains, matter-of-factly. Her voice almost seems to carry a shrug. "Family business," Chloe realizes, a bit surprised. Nadine gives a curt nod. "Made a real mess of it," she laments, tone stiff.

Throughout the game, Chloe and Nadine's partnership is tumultuous at best. They aren't used to working together and their strong personalities clash often. Slowly, as the story progresses, they begin to forge a friendship. Upon discussing similar experiences with absent and dead fathers, they find common ground from which their relationship can grow.

All of these games present father figures as singularly impactful in the lives of the female protagonists. Lara Croft became an archaeologist to follow in the footsteps of her father, and she consistently positions herself in his shadow. Nadine and Chloe are driven by personal and familial senses of responsibility to carry on each of their fathers' work. Ellie and Abby are propelled by the all-consuming desire to avenge their fathers' murders, and while the death of Rost is not Aloy's sole motivation, his influences on her upbringing are front and center in the narrative.

Fathers in these stories are not only the singular male figures in their daughters' lives, they're put on a pedestal as being the most important influences. Mothers are rarely, if ever, mentioned—if they exist at all. Friends are few in number and almost always secondary in importance. Even in death, these men still act as authorities in their daughters' lives. These women act as the legacies their fathers left behind, and are compelled to continue on in their footsteps—to make them proud. Even when strong and independent women are the main protagonists in their games, their stories are still controlled by men. Furthermore, it can be argued that these women wouldn't be strong or independent in the first place if not for these men in their lives.

Adult Women Coming of Age

It is fairly common for stories using variations of the hero's journey structure to invoke coming-of-age tropes. Characters in this sample often experience events that trigger a loss of innocence, in most cases the death of a father figure. Once again, the presentations of the coming-of-age narrative did not vary by race. Characters also face identity struggles. Nadine and Chloe struggle with the balance between morality and monetary gain as treasure hunters, while Lara Croft is forced to believe in herself and trust her intuition. As action heroes, these women are also forced to confront challenges that lead to growth. While physical challenges are presented in the form of enemy combat, these characters also must contend with psychological and emotional trauma. After facing these challenges, characters come out the other side with a newfound maturity.

This use of the coming-of-age narrative is undercut by the fact that none of these protagonists are children. This alone would be condescending, but the inclusion of the importance of male protectors further infantilizes these women, asserting that they cannot embrace womanhood, or even adulthood until they are forced to do so without their fathers. Furthermore, this growth is only possible because of the guidance provided by these men, and the paths women in these games take are singularly informed and controlled by male figures. Additionally, this positions these female protagonists to emphasize the importance of their role as daughters.

Absent Sexuality

Female video games characters are notoriously oversexed, however that trope was not present in any of the games in this sample. This section will explore character designs and outfits, as well as the conspicuous lack of romance and sexuality in the sample.

Character Designs

A review of still images of character designs and outfit choices revealed that overall, characters were mostly modestly dressed with outfits that were largely practical for the environments and activities in-game.

Aloy's clothes are form-fitting enough to be practical without drawing attention to her body (See Figure 6). Nadine and Cloe, both women of color, are dressed comfortably, and though a bright red shirt might not be the ideal choice for stealthily traversing a jungle-like setting, their clothes are otherwise well-suited for all the exploring they do throughout the game (See Figure 5). Abby and Ellie are also dressed comfortably and appropriately—changing clothes throughout the game to suit different environments (See Figures 7 and 8). Even Lara is rather modestly dressed, and though her clothes do become progressively torn and tattered as the game progresses, she remains fully covered.



Figure 5. Chloe's default outfit along with alternate costume choices (Naughty Dog 2017)

None of the character designs or outfits in these games prioritize sex appeal over functionality. These women are not hypersexualized or objectified at face value. Even the alternate outfits available in these games are modest, often more so than the default model.



Figure 6. Aloy character model (Guerilla Games 2017)

Even without revealing or sexualized clothing, these characters all still mostly present as traditionally attractive and feminine by mainstream western standards. By contrast, *The Last of Us* presents its characters as far less stereotypically feminine. Abby has a muscular, blocky build, and neither her nor Ellie wear any makeup or particularly feminine clothing. It's arguably realistic that women during the zombie apocalypse might not be particularly worried about presenting themselves in an aesthetically pleasing, feminine way, but both of these characters still possess features and body types that are radically different from any other protagonist in this study.



Figure 7. Abby character model (Naughty Dog 2020)



Figure 8. Ellie character model (Naughty Dog 2020)

Romance and Sex

Romance is conspicuously absent from most of the games in this study. Characters weren't even interested in flirting, let alone having sexual or romantic relationships. The absence of these traits was incredibly apparent, particularly against a backdrop of a culture that loves stories about women finding their prince charming. With one notable exception, the characters in these games were too focused on their adventure to spare any time thinking about love.

Several side characters try flirting with Aloy throughout the course of Horizon, and she brushes off every advance without a second thought. A conversation with a side character named Erend ends with him trying to ask her out on a date: "Look maybe I shouldn't say this," Erend hesitates, "but it's obvious that you don't belong in this...backwater. I mean, you're smart, you're obviously capable, and well, I mean look at you!" The look on his face shows he thinks he's stating the obvious. Aloy's brows furrow. "What are you talking about?" she asks, either oblivious, uninterested or both. Her tone holds the smallest hint of offense. "You know what." Erend replies as though Aloy must be joking. "If you ever visit Meridian, look me up. I'll show you around, make introductions. It'd be a whole new life, if you want it." Erend's romantic intentions are clear, but Aloy easily brushes him off and takes her leave. The two strike up a friendship throughout the course of the game, but any attraction between them is completely one-sided.

Other than Eren, several other minor characters, both male and female, try their hand at flirting with Aloy. Every attempt is rebuffed without a second thought. Aloy has a singular focus. Even in an open world game with dozens of side quests and branching storylines, there's no time for romantic entanglements.

Tomb Raider also includes an instance of unrequited infatuation. The expedition's technician, Alex, is shown to have a crush on Lara. The game doesn't do much to develop this, however. Lara doesn't interact with Alex much and there is no build up to suggest any chemistry between them until the scene where Alex dies. "Finally, I impress you!" Alex pants. He's pinned down by the collapsing ship, but at least he accomplished his goals: getting much-needed supplies and impressing the girl.

They're soon surrounded by enemies, and though Lara is determined to rescue her crewmate, Alex convinces her to leave him. "How often does a guy like me get to be a hero?" Before she leaves, Lara leans in, cradles Alex's face in her hand and gives him a kiss on the cheek that can only be described as sexless—a consolation prize for his sacrifice.

It isn't clear if Lara knew all along that Alex was attracted to her. Their relationship had no narrative groundwork to stand on, and while the scene is sad, the emotional impact isn't that of a devastating loss. Lara's peck on the cheek was painfully platonic. Apart from the half-developed subplot of Alex's infatuation, Lara Croft—infamous video game sex symbol—does not have any romantic or sexual inclinations at any point in the game.

Uncharted also lacks any form of romantic subplot. The only hint at any romantic or sexual relationship, past or present, is a throwaway piece of dialogue the player encounters while traversing the open world of the game. In this scene, Nadine questions Chloe about her past relationship with the Uncharted series' main protagonist, Nathan Drake. "You and Nathan Drake..." Nadine pauses to find the right words, "professional relationship?" Chloe is reluctant as she replies with "mostly professional." It's clear she isn't keen on this line of questioning but she's willing to indulge. Nadine responds with a disbelieving cackle. "God. How...how?" she laughs. Chloe chuckles and goes on to question Nadine's history of dubious business dealings. "They weren't a choice, they were a means to an end," Nadine defends, "but Drake..." she says his name like a curse, almost disgusted. "I mean—eish, he just thinks he's so clever." Nadine doesn't try to hide her contempt for their mutual acquaintance. "Oh, he's incredibly irritating, impossibly so," Chloe agrees, "but he's charming in his own way. And it was fun...while it lasted." Nadine ends the conversation with a final jab: "That's all one can ask for, I suppose. But I have to ask. Did you take turns talking, or did you just talk over each other?"

It's the only scene in the game that mentions any sexual or romantic relationships, and the main purpose for its inclusion seems to be as an easter egg for players familiar with other games in the Uncharted franchise.

The lack of any expression of sexuality in these games was unexpected. One of the most prevalent discourses around video games involves the prolific objectification of female bodies. These games not only dress their characters modestly, but they also portray these conventionally attractive women as almost devoid of sexuality or romantic desires. Women in these games are meant to be seen as strong and independent, but they are not allowed romantic or sexual agency. This furthers the narrative that while women are allowed to be sexual objects, they are not allowed to be sexual aggressors.

A Tale of Two Sex Scenes

There is, however, one game that proves to be a notable departure. In *The Last of Us*, both Ellie and Abby are allowed romantic and sexual relationships that are explicit in the game.

Near the beginning of the story, before the events of Joel's murder, Ellie and Dina are forced to wait out a storm in an abandoned library. They sit on an old couch and coyly flirt while sharing a joint. The playful banter quickly escalates to passionate kissing and heavy breathing before the screen cuts to black. Sex is heavily implied but not explicitly shown. The next scene shows both women cuddled up on the couch in their underwear. Ellie's thumb traces a scar on Dina's side as they pick up conversation again. The scene is soft and intimate and marks the beginning of Ellie and Dina's romantic relationship.

By contrast, the sex scene featuring Abby is anything but soft. After Owen, a friend and fellow member of the Washington Liberation Front (WLF) paramilitary group goes AWOL, Abby goes to find him. It's been established by this point that Abby and Owen used to be romantically involved before the start of the game, a relationship that was cut short by Abby's obsession with revenge. Abby confronts Owen about leaving the WLF. Their frustrated conversation evolves into a heated argument that eventually turns physically violent. Abby pushes Owen against a wall, and he struggles back, pulling on her hair. Caught in a stalemate, the two slowly calm down and the energy between them is redirected into urgent kissing. Unlike with Ellie and Dina, this scene doesn't fade to black. The two

undress each other and the camera doesn't shy away from Abby's nude breasts. The scene continues for a few moments, showing several seconds of rushed intercourse before cutting away.

The two scenes described above couldn't be more different. Ellie and Dina share an intimate, almost shy encounter. The scene plays out like a deep breath, a reprieve from the intensity of the story, full of the hope and optimism that comes with a burgeoning romantic relationship. Meanwhile, Abby and Owen's scene is thick with desperation—two people pushed to the brink, clinging to one another as they claw for an outlet.

Neither of these scenes are stereotypically titillating or pornographic. Apart from neither Ellie nor Abby presenting as traditionally feminine, the characters are dirty and bruised in a way that doesn't come across as sexy in a normative way. These aren't the oversexualized, objectified women created to satisfy the male gaze. The scenes don't sell sex so much as they sell emotion, building on the complexity of already complex situations. It is worth noting, however, that the scene featuring Ellie and Dina—a same sex couple—is cut away from sooner than the far more graphic scene between Abby and Owen.

Interestingly, while both women in these games are allowed to engage in sexual encounters, neither of them are afforded happy relationships. Once again, Ellie and Abby mirror each other, both choosing revenge over love. Dina, Ellie's companion throughout much of the game, finally leaves her when Ellie refuses to give up her crusade to kill Abby, just as Owen left Abby years previous as a result of her obsessive need to kill Joel. Unlike in the other games without romantic relationships, these women's bad luck with love is presented as a punishment for their actions. They choose hate over love, and are abandoned as a result.

While the depictions of sexuality and romance in this game are unique within this sample, they still raise some interesting comparisons. While the most conventionally attractive characters across the sample of games are not shown to have sexual or romantic interests, the two most masculine characters are. In other words, characters who are designed in a way to make them attractive to the male gaze must stay single, abstinent, and almost sterile in their lack of sexual agency, while the

characters who are not designed to entice the male gaze are given no such restrictions. And yet, these characters are also denied happy relationships, even when they are shown to want them.

Women and Violence

Violence is an unavoidable part of nearly all video games in the action-adventure genre and the games in this study are no exception. This section will explore several different facets of the violence present in the data, including not only how women are the victims of violence, but also the perpetrators, leading to a discussion of pain and sacrifice as it relates to white femininity.

Violence Against Women

The 'action' part of the 'action-adventure' genre necessitates that characters must face enemies in some way shape or form. However, the amount and types of violence in these games might vary wildly. The games in this sample ranged from lighthearted action-violence to full on gratuitous gore.

Horizon and Uncharted: The Lost Legacy were the least graphic of the sample. Both games contain some blood, but it's relatively minor. Player death sequences in these games are also fairly benign. In Horizon, Aloy has a health bar at the top of the screen. When that health bar reaches zero, Aloy falls to the ground and the game reloads to an earlier checkpoint. Death in Uncharted is largely the same, except instead of a health bar, low health is denoted by the screen going black and white with a hazy red border. When Chloe dies, she falls to the ground and the game reloads. While Uncharted does contain more violent cutscenes, consisting largely of either firefights or close quarters hand-to-hand combat, the violence is still tame enough to earn it a 'Teen' rating by the ESRB.

While both Horizon and Uncharted are violent, they aren't brutal towards their female protagonists. While these women face their fair share of challenges, the games don't try to break their spirits. The same cannot be said for either of the other two games in this study.

Lara's experience in Tomb Raider is downright grueling from the moment the game begins to the time the end credits roll. The game starts with Lara falling off her ship and into the ocean as it wrecks in a storm. After nearly drowning, she makes it to shore only to be knocked unconscious by a

shadowy figure. She wakes up in a cave, bound and hanging from the ceiling by her feet. She has to light herself on fire in order to free herself, and during her long fall to the ground, the scene switches to slow motion, showing every gratuitous detail as Lara hits the ground, directly onto a rusty pipe that pierces through her side. The camera shakes as Lara struggles to pull the pipe out. She succeeds, and the pain of it makes the screen go to shades of gray and all sound fades to a muffled tinnitus-like ring. Viewers can almost feel how excruciating the ordeal is. As Lara tries to find her way to the surface, she is attacked twice, and nearly crushed several times as she fights her way out in a scrambling panic. All of this happens before the title screen rolls, and our hero isn't given anything close to a break for the rest of the game.

The game does everything it can to break Lara Croft. Her foot gets caught in a bear trap, she's attacked by wolves, she falls often and hard, she's beaten and bruised, the list goes on. At one point Lara is even forced to cauterize her own wound, causing her to scream and sob in excruciating pain. The game design in these scenes goes to incredible lengths to portray the extent of Lara's suffering. The sound goes out, and the screen goes to black, white, and red, Lara can be heard whimpering and gasping for air. The player is meant to feel it.

All of this pain and suffering is unavoidable. These scenes aren't the result of unskilled players, they're part of the script. Lara is brutalized by both man and nature in an endurance trial so chaotic there's no time to even breathe.

While most instances of violence in this game are unavoidable, there are also dozens of incredibly graphic ways for Lara to die as the result of a poor timing on the part of the player. To name just a few, she can be mauled by wolves, strangled to death, stabbed with a pick-axe, crushed by boulders, electrocuted, and impaled no less than seven different ways. These deaths are almost pornographic in their detail and brutality (See Figure 9).



Figure 9. Lara impaled after a failed quick-time-event (Square Enix 2014)

The game is permeated by a sense of chaos—the feeling that Lara is not in control. Most of the sequences in the game are reactive rather than proactive. Things happen to Lara and she can only try to scramble in time to save herself. Once again, she is simultaneously the hero and the damsel in distress. One has to wonder how much of her survival is the result of her skills rather than just dumb luck.

It's also worth noting that this game takes an extra step with its violence against women in the form of environmental storytelling. The island of Yamatai is conspicuously void of any women. If any craft that ventured near Yamatai is doomed to crash, it would be reasonable to expect at least some women wash up on shore every now and again. The absence of women on Yamatai is never outright explained. However, upon closer inspection of the numerous corpses strewn across the landscape of the game, one might notice that quite a few of them are indeed female. Dead women are strung up at altars throughout the game, implying a dark fate for any woman who managed to survive a wreck and make it to shore.

The Last of Us is also particularly brutal in its depictions of violence towards women. The protagonists in this game have to contend with hostile humans, dogs, and all manner of vicious undead. Fights leave Ellie and Abby physically battered and bruised, a lasting effect of some of the

game's most brutal interactions (See Figure 10). The standout fight in this game is the one where Ellie and Abby face each other, both driven by their hatred. The fight is long and grueling as these women do their best to tear each other apart. Again, many of these scenes are an unavoidable part of the script. The brutality is woven into the story.

Death scenes in this game are as grotesque as they are varied. The two protagonists can be mauled by zombies, shot, strangled, or beaten to death to name just a few. Each death is more gruesome than the last and there are countless terrible ways for both Ellie and Abby to meet their demise should the player slip up.



Figure 10. Ellie's wounds after a fight (Naughty Dog 2020)

Overall, the depiction of violence against women seem to place the games in this study in two distinct categories. While there is plenty of violence in both Horizon and Uncharted, neither Aloy, Chloe, nor Nadine are made to physically suffer to such an extreme extent. By contrast, the women in Tomb Raider and The Last of Us are constantly put through a gauntlet of pain and physical, emotional, and psychological suffering. The events of these games can only be described as

unrelenting torture. However, in the case of *The Last of Us*, the violence Ellie and Abby endure is overshadowed by the violence they enact on others.

Women Perpetrating Violence

While these games all contain an air of 'kill-or-be-killed,' that doesn't mean that the violence in these games perpetrated by the leading ladies can be overlooked. Action heroes generally get a pass when it comes to the violence they commit. The narratives in these games generally set up a clear 'good guy' vs 'bad guy' dynamic, thereby justifying the actions of the protagonist. Once again, this pattern presented independent of race as both white characters and characters of color were depicted as heroes.

In *Tomb Raider*, Lara Croft is trying to survive against an evil cult that wants to kill her and sacrifice her friend to an ancient spirit. Aloy is on a mission to stop an evil cult from bringing about a second apocalypse. Chloe and Nadine are determined to stop a warlord from committing an act of terror to ignite a civil war. Trend of evil cults aside, these games all cast their main protagonists as clear heroes. These characters are all presented as completely justified, and even morally right in their decisions to kill. In the context of the medium, this decision makes sense. Players want to walk away from games feeling good about themselves and the decisions they made (or that were made for them) in-game.

Even when the antagonists try to guilt the heroes for their violent actions, the admonishments don't hold much weight. For instance, in *Tomb Raider*, the leader of the evil Solari cult, Mathias tries to antagonize Lara: "Do you think you're the hero, Lara? Everything I've done I did to survive. How many lives have you taken to do the same? There are no heroes here, only survivors." Lara, in turn, brushes off the remark. Even though Lara had killed hundreds of people by this point in the game, Mathias' attack doesn't shake her moral standing. Survival is not her only goal, as evidenced by the fact she spends the entire game trying to rescue other people. Lara is a hero.

While the characters in most of these games are confident in their moral standing, Ellie and Abby from *The Last of Us* flip the script. The protagonists in these games are placed in opposition to

one another—two sides of the same coin. Both are motivated by hatred and revenge, and both are willing to go to extreme lengths in pursuit of their goals, often to the detriment of those around them.

Ellie's actions in particular grow increasingly heinous as the story goes on. She murders almost indiscriminately in her quest to avenge Joel's death. The most despicable of these choices is the shocking murder of a pregnant woman. The game doesn't try to justify Ellie's actions. There's no way to paint this murder as a heroic.

Abby isn't any better. As described earlier, Joel's murder is brutal and graphic, a gratuitous act of pure hatred and rage. Despite being the object of her obsession with revenge, Abby's transgressions don't end with killing Joel. Soon, her hatred is extended to Ellie as well. Throughout the course of the game, Abby kills several of Ellie's friends. The two are locked in a cycle of revenge that leaves them broken and empty.

There is no clear cut 'good' and 'evil' in this game, and both player characters might easily be considered villains. The game goes to great lengths to paint the violence perpetrated by Ellie and Abby as morally detestable. Someone will be killed, often in a brutal fashion, only for the game to later humanize the victim, portraying them as a likeable person with hopes and dreams. As the game progresses, the rage felt by the main characters is matched by a sense of soul-crushing guilt. There are no heroes in *The Last of Us*, only deeply flawed women bound together by a destructive cycle of violence.

This departure from the norm by portraying main characters as villainous in this game is notable given the way violence is portrayed differently by different characters in the story. Joel's decision to save Ellie is portrayed to be an act of love. Even though he dooms the world in the process by obstructing the creation of a cure, his actions are seen as heroic at best, and morally ambiguous at worst. Regardless, the violence Joel commits in this pursuit is justified, despite the consequences he faces later. By contrast, when similar levels of violence are committed by female characters in the game, that moral ambiguity shifts, suddenly becoming evil. The actions of Ellie and Abby are not justified in the eyes of the narrative.

Sexual Violence

The lack of sexual violence was a particularly surprising finding from this data. Rape and sexual assault are common tropes used for the development of female characters. Other than a short scene in Tomb Raider that is reminiscent of a sexual assault near-miss, none of these games contain any form of sexual violence. These games chose not to include rape as a form of character growth. However, they still relied on other gendered tropes in the pursuit of pushing and developing their female protagonists.

Suffering and Sacrifice

While none of the characters in this study were made to endure rape specifically, sacrifice and suffering were still large components of their story arcs. All of these protagonists struggle to cope with the loss of their fathers. Furthermore, they are all expected to endure challenges and hardships as part of their respective quests. Lara, Ellie, and Abby are all constantly beaten and broken down. Whether to carry on a legacy or to enact revenge, all of these women find themselves in these places of suffering as a result of the influence of their fathers. These women are expected to suffer on behalf of the men in their lives, even after those men are gone.

Along with suffering, sacrifice is another tenet of femininity, and the women in these games are all expected to sacrifice something. Sacrifice is a theme throughout Horizon. In the lead up to the apocalypse that happened thousands of years before the start of the game, Elizabet Sobeck, Aloy's biological mother of sorts, selflessly sacrificed herself in order to prevent the permanent erasure of life on earth. Millennia later, it falls on Aloy's shoulders to do the same. While Aloy ultimately doesn't have to sacrifice herself in this pursuit, she still understands the gravity of her responsibilities. At one point in the game, Aloy grows frustrated with an informant who she feels is using her: "You've been getting a free ride [...] risking nothing while I risk everything!" Not only did Aloy have to sacrifice her way of life by leaving her home, she is also expected to risk everything in pursuit of a goal that is largely a mystery to her.

Sacrifice is also brought up in Tomb Raider. After a rescue plane crashes on Yamatai, Lara argues with Roth about whether or not to save the pilot. "We've got our own people to worry about," Roth insists, trying to dissuade Lara from wasting time and energy to save the pilot. Lara argues, "I can't just leave him out there alone! I need to get to him."

"Sometimes you've got to make sacrifices, Lara. You can't save everyone." Lara sounds offended as she replies. "I know about sacrifices." But Roth isn't done with the tough love: "No, you know about loss. Sacrifice is a choice you make. Loss is a choice made for you." Lara remains undeterred. "I can't choose to let him die, Roth."

Lara's efforts are in vain however as the pilot dies anyway. She disobeyed the advice of her father figure, refused to sacrifice the pilot, and is ultimately punished for the transgression of not falling in line. This is one of the few proactive moves Lara takes in the game before Roth's death. Her decision isn't reactive, she's making an explicit choice. However, this choice not only goes against the will of her male protector, it also subverts gendered expectations of sacrifice as a burden of womanhood. Because she refuses to take on this role, her mission of saving the pilot is doomed to fail.

The women in these games are not only expected to potentially sacrifice themselves and others in the pursuit of their noble goals, they also must sacrifice their bodies in the form of physical and mental endurance. These women are in pain, yet all the responsibility falls on them to keep going. They aren't allowed to throw in the towel or pass the torch. It is only through pain, sacrifice, and loss that they are able to prove their strength and emerge as mature women.

Gendered Morality

The vast majority of enemy combatants in these games are all men. This section will discuss how these games tend to position their stories around a battle of the sexes, through interactions with main antagonists, and generic enemy characters, as well as the moral consequences that come with subverting gender norms

Main Antagonists

The majority of the main antagonists in this sample were men. In *Horizon*, Aloy is pitted against Helis, the patriarchal leader of a secretive cult, and HADES, a male-coded AI determined to bring about the end of life on earth. Chloe and Nadine in *Uncharted* are trying to stop a man named Asav, a warlord, from igniting an Indian civil war. Finally, while the most powerful villain in *Tomb Raider* is arguably the spirit of Himiko, the long dead Sun Queen of Yamatai, the main recurring, tangible villain is Mathias, leader of the Solari cult.

With this pattern emerges the insinuation that these women are not only strong, they are strong enough to take on and even best men. By the end of these games, there are no concessions, no pulled punches—daddy’s little girl can play with the big boys. It’s as though these games are out to prove gender equality through characters’ violent interactions with men.

While these stories may try to frame their women as strong and independent, it must also be noted that men still hold a significant amount of control over them. As these women are pitted against their enemies, a struggle pivotal to their growth as characters, these men in turn play a role in controlling their growth and development, taking over where their fathers left off. Men in these games are always the gatekeepers of character growth, and in a coming-of-age story, that makes them gatekeepers of womanhood.

Generic Enemies

While the main antagonists often receive the most attention, the majority of the fighting in these games takes place against waves of generic low-level enemies. Cultists, mercenaries, zombies, etc. are thrown at protagonists in vast quantities as obstacles throughout the stories. These characters are generally nameless and don’t possess many unique features that make them distinguishable from one another. Furthermore, these games have a tendency of making these characters all male.

In *Tomb Raider*, every enemy Lara faces is male, and as previously discussed, the island of Yamatai isn’t home to any women at all. The mercenaries faced in *Uncharted* are also exclusively

male, even though their former leader, Nadine, is a woman. While *Horizon* does include some female enemies, they are hardly distinguishable from the men, and it was only on my third viewing of the data that I realized women were included at all (See Figure 11). Even then, none of the cultists—the main enemies in the game—are women.



Figure 11. Male vs female bandits in Horizon Zero Dawn (Guerilla Games 2017)

While women in these games are sometimes allowed to play high-level villains, as portrayed by Himiko, and arguably Ellie and Abby, women are not used as expendable fodder. Even in female-led games there is the implication that men are soldiers while women must be protected. While *Horizon* tries to defy this trope, how many players actually noticed that death in this game was equal opportunity? These games show no remorse for the men that are mowed down at every turn. It would be harder to position the protagonist as a hero if they were to also indiscriminately kill women.

Empathy for Female Enemies

Just as with several of the other themes in this study, *The Last of Us* sets itself apart in its depiction of good and evil, though the results are no less gendered. In this game, Ellie and Abby are

both protagonists as well as antagonists and the story does not shy away from painting both of them as villains. These characters are pitted against men and women alike throughout the game, and while many of those enemies are the undead, quite a few of them are human as well.

As mentioned previously, many of the 'enemy' characters in this game are given stories and personalities. The narrative goes to great lengths to make Ellie and Abby, and by extension the player, feel guilty for the violence they commit. Because of this, the female enemies in *The Last of Us* are not just random, expendable grunts. They are victims.

This idea is compounded by the framing and presentation of Abby and Ellie throughout the game. Not only are these women masculine in appearance, subverting gendered feminine beauty standards, but they also feature several prominent masculine character traits. Both Ellie and Abby are motivated by unbridled rage and hatred and act with indiscriminate aggression. Their actions in the game are portrayed as morally repugnant. This level of repudiation is not seen when male characters display these traits. The insinuation then is that women are evil when they defy gender norms.

This idea is also echoed in *Tomb Raider*. When discussing Himiko, a powerful ancient queen on the island of Yamatai, Lara made this grim observation: "A woman wields that much power, sooner or later it gets called witchcraft." Power, aggression, rage—all traits associated with masculinity—are maligned as evil when displayed by a woman.

Racialized Depictions of Gender

Whiteness dominates the sample, as the majority of the characters in these games are presented as white. While Chloe and Nadine from *Uncharted* were the only non-white protagonists in the sample, some of the tropes present in the game are still categorized by white femininity. The lack of sexual or romantic agency across the sample aligns with white Puritanical ideals of purity. White purity culture demands that women stay chaste and unsullied by romantic entanglements. In this way, women are able to gain respect and value. This construct further adds to the vilification of Ellie and Abby in *The Last of Us*. By engaging in sexual relationships, these women are no longer pure, and the game narrative maligns them in turn.

While the influence of white femininity is present throughout the sample in the form of purity culture, I also noted a few non-white characters who personified other racial and gender stereotypes.

Across the entire sample, there were only two recurring black female characters, Reyes, a minor character in *Tomb Raider*, and Nadine, a protagonist in *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy*. Both of these women are portrayed as aggressive and antagonistic, fitting the stereotype of angry, black women (Jones and Norwood 2017).

Reyes is disagreeable from the start and is often placed in opposition to Lara. Reyes refuses to listen to Lara throughout the game and doesn't back down until near the end of the story. She makes her contempt for Lara known and at one point she even threatens to leave Lara behind on the island. Even though she is an ally, she is constantly confrontational to her friends, and her aggression often seems disproportionate to the situation when compared with other characters.

Nadine is similarly confrontational. Some of this might be explained away by her military-style upbringing, but aggression and obstinance are salient characteristics in her interactions throughout the game. At one point in the game, Nadine describes breaking the legs of a man in retaliation for a sexist remark. She seems to think her actions were an appropriate response. Like Reyes, Nadine isn't an enemy in the game, in fact she is one of the protagonists, and even though she isn't a playable character, her story is arguably just as important as Chloe's in the game. However, she is still depicted as abrasive, confrontational, and at times, disproportionately violent.

Tomb Raider also includes stereotypical depictions of Asian women with the characters Himiko and Sam. Himiko is largely an absent villain. Her presence is felt, but she's never faced in-game. As the powerful spirit of a long-dead queen, Himiko is less a character and more a personification of evil. Trapped in her decaying body, Himiko controls the weather, summoning storms to ensure that no one who wrecks on Yamatai can leave. Himiko shares many similarities with the 'Dragon Lady' trope, an evil, powerful Asian woman who is as maligned as she is mystified (Lee 2018). She has no agency in the game, doomed to her suffering and rage as punishment for craving too much power.

Sam on the other hand occupies the other end of the spectrum of gendered Asian stereotypes. As a distant descendent of Himiko, she is kidnapped by the Solari cult to be sacrificed in order to appease the evil queen. Sam also has no agency in this game. Even though she is a modern American woman, her Japanese ancestry is used as a plot device to bind her to the only other Asian female in the game. Sam's depiction in this game follows many of the characteristics of the 'China Doll' trope (Lee 2018). While she isn't depicted as stereotypically servile or submissive, she is still a damsel in distress, at the mercy of white men who wish to use her and her Asian lineage for their own selfish means.

Flipping the Colonizer Script

Despite several harmful and lazy racial stereotypes present in the sample, one game does offer a refreshing take on an old classic. There are countless stories of white adventurers traveling to exotic locals and claiming ownership of the treasures they find. *Uncharted* attempts to flip the script on this enduring trope by offering a largely respectful portrayal of India. While the protagonist from the main *Uncharted* series is undoubtedly a white man traveling to exotic locals to plunder priceless treasures, *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy's* protagonist, Chloe, actually has cultural ties to the treasure she's hunting. Chloe is half Indian, and though her family moved from India to Australia when she was a child, she still has strong ties to her Indian heritage. Chloe spends much of the game setting straight misconceptions and stereotypes regarding the history, religion, and culture she identifies with. Throughout the game, only Indian characters are given the authority to speak on Indian issues, and none of the other characters in the game try to overshadow that with their own expertise. Furthermore, the object of the adventure, the Tusk of Ganesh, is relinquished to the Indian government at the end of the game rather than being kept or sold off to a Western museum.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to discern the ways in which femininity is constructed in video games with female protagonists. Four games were chosen based on their popularity and narrative structure. Careful analysis of cinematic cutscenes from these games illuminated several central themes relating to violence, sexuality, and the centering of male influence. While some of my findings align with previous research, the presentations of femininity observed in the sample are markedly different from previous characterizations of female video game protagonists. These findings potentially point to the evolving nature of female video game protagonists. Using postmodernist and feminist frameworks, this chapter will discuss the implications of these results.

Paternal Male Gaze

One of the main findings of this research involves the centering of sacrificial male protectors. Across the sample, paternal figures were positioned to give them singular importance in the lives of female protagonists, so much so that most of these women hardly had any motivations or desires that weren't informed by their fathers. These games seem to almost entirely hinge on the influence of paternal figures.

This finding is an interesting spin on Lawlor's (2018) "essential paternal masculinity," describing the trend of positioning male protagonists as father figures charged with protecting young, vulnerable women. The games in this study almost act as a chronological next step to that trope—now those vulnerable young girls are all grown up and their dads are dead. Without their protectors, these women are forced to find their own way through the trials presented to them.

It is also significant that even when women are the main characters, their stories are still in essence controlled by men. By framing narratives this way, developers still cater to the presumed male audience. Male supremacy is taken for granted in the gaming industry along with the idea white male characters are the most universally relatable (Lien 2013; Paaßen, et al. 2017; Shaw-Williams 2014). By centering strong masculine influences in female driven stories, these games might be seen

as more relatable to male audiences. Additionally, the death of a male protector allows the male player to take over that role. The performative nature of games means that the player quite literally guides the character through the game. In this sense, male gamers don't need to be able to identify with female protagonists. Instead, they are able to perform masculinity in the act of taking on the role of male protector. As a result, video games reinforce the simulacra of both traditional femininity and masculinity, not only through the portrayals of the characters onscreen, but through the active participation of the player holding the controller.

The centering of male protectors points to an interesting twist on the theory of the male gaze. Traditionally, the male gaze hinges on the sexualization and objectification of female bodies for the pleasure of a heterosexual male viewer (Mulvey 1989; Glapka 2018). However, the results of this research paint a picture of female characters who are given worth not solely through their sexuality, but through the willingness of paternal male protectors to die for them. Women in these games are framed as valuable and worthy of protection. The worth of these characters still centers around the male gaze, just a paternal male gaze rather than sexual. Additionally, by framing narratives around coming-of-age tropes, these games infantilize their female protagonists. These women are daughters, first and foremost, and even as adults they require the protection of men—first their fathers, then the player.

Sexuality

This sample also presents depictions of sexuality that are radically different from the hyper-sexuality and rampant objectification found in previous research (Dill and Thill 2007; Downs and Smith 2010; Kondrat 2015; Martins, et al. 2009). Characters were modestly dressed and seemingly uninterested in romantic or sexual exploits. The women in these games aren't treated as sexual objects, but they also aren't allowed to be sexual aggressors.

The lack of romantic interests in these games might be refreshing for some, particularly female players who are fed up with women's stories that position romantic relationships as the ultimate goal of womanhood. Indeed, the absence of sex or romance in these games is not necessarily problematic

on its face. Human beings are complex and multifaceted, and so too are well-written characters. Sexual and romantic desires are not universal experiences and, though it often is, femininity need not be defined by such constructs. However, all together these games show a pattern that aligns with white purity culture.

It's previously been established that women in these games are often stuck beneath the shadows of their fathers. Fathers in these games are presented as singularly important, shaping their daughters' entire world. Introducing another character, particularly a male character, as a romantic interest might mean the father figure has to share that pedestal. The relationships these women have with their fathers are so important that any other relationship might be a threat to that supremacy. Additionally, most of the women in these games are conventionally attractive. Despite their lack of hypersexuality, they are still enticing to the male gaze. While the emphasis of paternal relationships might infantilize characters, these protagonists are still attractive, sexually mature women. The implication then is not that these are just independent women who have no need for romance, but instead they aren't afforded the agency to participate in romance. This chastity makes characters desirable on multiple fronts. Purity not only allows these women to maintain an extra edge in terms of morality (Valenti 2009), but also makes them potentially more desirable to the male gaze. After all, if Lara Croft gets a boyfriend, she's no longer sexually available to the man holding the game controller.

Lending evidence to this is the fact that the only two characters who are allowed sexual agency in this sample are the ones who would not be considered traditionally attractive or feminine. Ellie and Abby from *The Last of Us* are not designed to elicit a sexual male gaze. The romance these characters engage in are therefore not threatening to the sexual desires of a heteronormative male player. Additionally, Ellie is a lesbian, and while lesbian sexuality is often framed to appeal to the male gaze, *The Last of Us* doesn't present this same sex relationship in an objectifying or titillating way. However, as mentioned in the previous chapter, even though these characters are allowed to engage in romance and sex, they are denied successful relationships. Romance in this game is just another tool to punish the female protagonists.

Femininity as Suffering

Pain, sacrifice, and loss were central to the character development of female protagonists across the sample. Though characters are put through different levels of suffering on their journeys, they are all made to suffer. Female suffering is not a new development in video games. Imperiled women have been a staple of games since near the beginning of the medium. However, this trope is usually employed in the service of male character development. The damsel in distress trope, and in turn female suffering, typically provides motivation and character development for male heroes (Sarkeesian 2013).

In these games, women are the heroes, however the suffering still remains. Women in these games have to earn their triumph through physical, psychological, and emotional pain. With the recurring theme of pain, as well as the utilization of coming-of-age narrative structure, these games reproduce the gendered expectation that womanhood can only be achieved through suffering and sacrifice.

Characters in these games are not only punished simply for being female, but they are also punished for subverting gender norms. Women in these games subvert gender norms by their very existence. Aggressive, strong, heroic--these are all traits commonly associated with male video game characters, yet the women in this sample display these qualities in spades (Wilberg 2011). Female characters are allowed to subvert gender norms to an extent, but there is a limit. The most salient example of this is the maligning of masculine presenting female characters. While the traditionally feminine, attractive protagonists in the sample are framed as heroes, the characters with the most masculine traits are maligning as villains. In addition to their masculine appearances, Abby and Ellie are motivated by rage and hatred. The violence they commit is seen as gratuitous and evil. Similar levels of violence are not maligning however when perpetrated by male characters in games. In fact, gratuitous violence perpetrated by male protagonists is often morally justified (Lawlor 2018). In this sense, while feminine women are given a pass with violence excused as heroic at best and

necessary self-defense at worst, masculine women are not afforded the same moral justification.

These women are then punished for their anger and aggression.

Taken as a whole, these games present a 'catch 22' construction of femininity. Pain, suffering, and sacrifice are inherent parts of femininity that all women must endure. Additionally, while women might gain some advantage by adopting masculine traits, such as strength and heroism, taking on too many masculine traits results in harsher punishments--more pain, more grief, and the loss of the moral high ground.

Apart from a few stereotypical representations, presentations of femininity did not vary by race. While the sample was largely white, limiting any comparative analysis, Chloe and Nadine provide a fantastic example of characters who are not defined by their race or ethnicity. Race does not act as a master status for these women. By not prioritizing race, these characters are allowed to exist beyond the tokenism that often plagues popular media. While it is important for media representations to acknowledge social inequality and intra-group diversity in regards to female experiences, it is also important to allow characters motivations and development that are not centered solely on marginalized identities.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study that need to be addressed. As a graduate student enrolled in a two-year program, I only had the time and capacity for a small sample size. Video games are often tens of hours long, and so I had to make some tough decisions in selecting a sample that I thought would best represent female video game protagonists over the last decade. As a result, my sample ended up largely white. While white protagonists still dominate gaming trends, I still chose to prioritize popularity over diversity and left out several games featuring women of color as their protagonists. A larger sample size would have allowed me to include these games. Additionally, the chosen sample also limited my ability to effectively analyze intersections of race and gender. Apart from a few brief examples, femininity in these games did not vary by race.

Another limitation involves the specificity of the genre I chose and the fast-paced nature of changing gaming trends. I excluded independent games because I wanted the sample to reflect mainstream gaming trends. However, in the past few years, independent titles have gained widespread recognition and popularity. In fact, in the 2021 award cycle, an independent game won over a dozen 'Game of the Year' titles, outpacing heavy hitters like *The Last of Us Part II* (Tassi 2121; Zwiezen 2121).

Finally, this research is limited by its use of content analysis. While content analysis is useful in understanding how media presents and reifies social constructs, it cannot speak to how consumers interact with or draw meaning from said media. This research used Baudrillard to frame the importance of media in the reproduction of simulacra that inform public discursive knowledge, however the methods employed in this study limit any claims I can make about any real-world effects this may have.

Future Research

As a continuously evolving form of popular media, video games hold a wealth of possibility for future research. To address the gaps and limits of this study, future content analyses should emphasize intersectionality in regard to race, gender, and sexuality. Additionally, a similar analysis of narrative devices can be used to compare male and female protagonists across different games.

Outside of content analysis, future research should address consumer interaction. Namely, what are the differences in the ways that men and women interact with video games. I suggest in the current research that games encourage men to relate to female protagonists by taking on the role of a male protector. Female players presumably wouldn't need any extra push to be able to identify with female characters, but more research focused on gamers is needed.

Research doesn't have to be limited to the consumer, however. While researching games for this study, I stumbled across several interviews with developers where they address their motivations and intentions behind how they wanted their female protagonists to be perceived by players. Given the male dominated nature of the video game industry, investigating how game developers perceive

gender norms and expectations could provide more context for how gender is reproduced through video games. Research on the intentions of game developers might also shed further light on racialized depictions of gender. I wonder if the relatively homogenous presentations of femininity in my study are due to developer beliefs about femininity or if it's just the result of my small, relatively white sample.

Lastly, future video game research should consider including analysis of story and narrative elements in order to paint a more complete picture of how games construct and reproduce social phenomena. By employing similar techniques to video games that are used with film and television, researchers will gain the context necessary to understand the full extent of the interactivity inherent in games apart from just moving a joystick.

APPENDIX**VIDEOS AND GAMES ANALYZED**

Gamer's Little Playground. 2014. "Tomb Raider (Definitive Edition) All Cutscenes Game Movie 1080p." You-Tube Web site. Retrieved July 23, 2020

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYV29WLphml&list=PLLRsyGydNHc3skVayiMWUeE95ivQEhcla&index=4>).

Gamer's Little Playground. 2017a. "Horizon Zero Dawn All Cutscenes (Game Movie) PS4 PRO 1080p." You-Tube Web site. Retrieved July 23, 2020

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zeNicSgvG0&list=PLLRsyGydNHc3skVayiMWUeE95ivQEhcla&index=1&t=10093s>).

Gamer's Little Playground. 2017b. "UNCHARTED: THE LOST LEGACY All Cutscenes (PS4 PRO) Game Movie 1080p 60FPS." You-Tube Web site. Retrieved July 23, 2020

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gQeS3lrW53o&list=PLLRsyGydNHc3skVayiMWUeE95ivQEhcla&index=3>).

Gamer's Little Playground. 2020. "THE LAST OF US 2 All Cutscenes (Full Game Movie) PS4 PRO 1080p HD." You-Tube Web site. Retrieved July 23, 2020

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zJVrnPeXpY&list=PLLRsyGydNHc3skVayiMWUeE95ivQEhcla&index=2>).

Guerilla Games. 2017. Horizon Zero Dawn. Sony Interactive Entertainment. PS4.

Naughty Dog. 2017. Uncharted: The Lost Legacy. Sony Interactive Entertainment. PS4.

Naughty Dog. 2020. The Last of Us Part II. Sony Interactive Entertainment. PS4.

Square Enix Co Ltd. 2014. Tomb Raider: Definitive Edition. Square Enix Co Ltd. PS4.

REFERENCES

- Appelrouth, Scott, and Laura Desfor Edles. 2016. *Classical and Contemporary Sociological Theory: Text and Readings*. Third edition. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Babbie, Earl R. 2014. *The Basics of Social Research*. Sixth edition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Behm-Morawitz, Elizabeth. 2017. "Examining the intersection of race and gender in video game advertising." *Journal of Marketing Communications* 23(3):220-229.
- Brenick, Alaina, Alexandra Henning, Melanie Killen, Alexander O'Connor, and Michael Collins. 2007. "Social Evaluations of Stereotypic Images in Video Games: Unfair, Legitimate, or "Just Entertainment"?" *Youth & Society* 38(4):395-419.
- Butler, Judith. 2007. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. [1999] 2007. "Preface." Pp. vii-xxxviii in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Breuer, Johannes, Rachel Kowert, Ruth Festl, and Thorsten Quandt. 2015. "Sexist games=sexist gamers? A longitudinal study on the relationship between video game use and sexist attitudes." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 18(4):197-202.
- Chess, Shira. 2011. "A 36-24-36 Cerebrum: Productivity, Gender, and Video Game Advertising." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28(3):230-252.
- Chess, Shira, Nathaniel J. Evans and Joyya JaDawn Baines. 2017. "What Does a Gamer Look Like? Video Games, Advertising, and Diversity." *Television & New Media* 18(1):37-57.
- Choi, Namok, Dale R. Fuqua, and Jodi L. Newman. 2008. "The Bem Sex-Role Inventory: Continuing Theoretical Problems." *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 68(5):881-900.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43(6): 1241-1299.
- Creswell, John W. and J. David Creswell. 2018. *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Fifth edition. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Dill, Karen E., Kathryn P. Thill. 2007. "Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions." *Sex Roles* 57(11):851-864.
- Downs, Edward and Stacy L. Smith. 2010. "Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis." *Sex Roles* 62(11):721-733.
- Emmerson, Robert M., Rachel I. Fretz, and Linda L. Shaw. 2011. *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*. Second edition. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Field, Syd. 2005. *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. New York, NY: Bantam Dell.

- Gabbiadini, Alessandro, Paolo Riva, Luca Andrighetto, Chiara Volpato, and Brad J. Bushman. 2016. "Acting like a Tough Guy: Violent-sexist Video Games, Identification with Game Characters, Masculine Beliefs, & Empathy for Female Violence Victims." *PloS ONE* 11(4):1-14.
- Gestos, Meghan, Jennifer Smith-Merry, and Andrew Campbell. 2018. "Representation of Women in Video Games: A Systematic Review of Literature in Consideration of Adult Female Wellbeing." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 21(9): 535-541.
- Glapka, Ewa. 2018. "'If you look at me like at a piece of meat, then that's a problem' – women in the center of the male gaze. Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis as a tool of critique." *Critical Discourse Studies* 15(1):87-103.
- Hamilton, Laura T., Elizabeth A. Armstrong, J. Lotus Seeley, and Elizabeth M. Armstrong. 2019. "Hegemonic Femininities and Intersectional Domination." *Sociological Theory* 37(4): 315-341.
- Hill Collins, Patricia. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Ip, Barry. 2011. "Narrative Structures in Computer and Video Games: Part 1: Context, Definitions, and Initial Findings." *Games and Culture* 6(2):103-134.
- Jansz, Jeroen and Raynel G. Martis. 2007. "The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games." *Sex Roles* 56(4):141-148.
- Jones, Trina and Kimberly Jade Norwood. 2017. "Aggressive Encounters & White Fragility: Deconstructing the Trope of the Angry Black Woman." *Iowa Law Review* 10(5): 2017-2069.
- Kirkland, Edwan. 2009. "Masculinity in Video Games: The Gendered Gameplay of Silent Hill." *Camera Obscura* 2(71):161-183.
- Kontour, Kyle. 2012. "The Governmentality of Battlefield Space: Efficiency, Proficiency, and Masculine Performativity." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 32(5): 353-360.
- Kondrat, Xeniya. 2015. "Gender and video games: How is female gender generally represented in various genres of video games?" *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 6(1):171-193.
- Lawlor, Shannon. 2018. "Your Daughter Is in Another Castle: Essential Paternal Masculinity in Video Games." *The Velvet Light Trap* 81(1):29-42.
- Lee, Joey. 2018. "East Asian 'China Doll' or 'Dragon Lady'?" *Bridges: An Undergraduate Journal of Contemporary Connections* 3(1): 1-6.
- Lien, Tracey. 2013. "No Girls Allowed: Unraveling the story behind the stereotype of video games being for boys." *Polygon*. Retrieved on May 1, 2020 (<https://www.polygon.com/features/2013/12/2/5143856/no-girls-allowed>).
- Lynch, Teresa, Jessica E. Tompkins, Irene I. Van Driel, and Niki Fritz. 2016. "Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years." *Journal of Communications* 66(4):564-584.

- Marcotte, Amanda. 2019. "Gamergate is back, because it never went away: Zoë Quinn faces new round of attacks." Salon.com. Retrieved March 1, 2020 (<https://www.salon.com/2019/08/28/gamergate2-0-zoe-quinn-accuses-game-developer-alec-holowka-of-abuse/>).
- Markey, Patrick M., Charlotte N. Markey, and Julia E. French. 2015. "Violent Video Games and Real-World Violence: Rhetoric Versus Data." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 4(4):277-295.
- Martins, Nicole, Dmitri Williams, Kristen Harrison, and Ratan. 2009. "A Content Analysis of Female Body Imagery in Video Games." *Sex Roles* 61(11):824-836.
- Martins, Nicole, Dimitri C. Williams, Rabindra A. Ratan, and Kristen Harrison. 2011. "Virtual muscularity: A content analysis of male video game characters." *Body Image* 8(1):43-51.
- Metacritic. 2011. "Portal 2" Retrieved March 1, 2020 (<https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/portal-2>).
- Metacritic. 2013. "Tomb Raider" Retrieved March 1, 2020 (<https://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/tomb-raider>).
- Metacritic. 2017. "Horizon Zero Dawn" Retrieved March 1, 2020 (<https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/horizon-zero-dawn>).
- Mulvey, Laura. 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Paaßen, Benjamin, Thekla Morgenroth, and Michelle Stratemeyer. 2017. "What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture." *Sex Roles* 76(7):421-435.
- Picucci, Marcello Arnaldo. 2014. "When Video Games Tell Stories: A Model of Video Game Narrative Architectures." *Caracteres. Estudios Culturales y Criticos de la Esfera Digital* 3(2).
- Prescott, Anna T., James D. Sargent, and Jay G. Hull. 2018. "Metaanalysis of the relationship between violent video game play and physical aggression over time." *PNAS* 115(40):9882-9888.
- Rughinis, Cosima, Răzvan Rughinis, and Elisabeta Toma. 2016. "Three Shadowed Dimensions of Feminine Presence in Video Games." *DiGRA/FDG '16 – Proceedings of the First International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG* 13(1): 1-16.
- Ryan, Jackson. 2020. "Xbox, PS5 and the climate crisis: Next-gen video games could be worse for the planet." Retrieved March 30, 2020 (<https://www.cnet.com/features/xbox-ps5-and-the-climate-crisis-next-gen-video-games-could-be-worse-for-the-planet/>).
- Saldaña, Johnny. 2009. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Sarkeesian, Anita. 2013. "Damsel in Distress (Part 1) Tropes vs Women." *Feminist Frequency*. Retrieved May 1, 2021. (<https://feministfrequency.com/video/damsel-in-distress-part-1/>).
- Sarkeesian, Anita. 2016. "Body Language & The Male Gaze." *Feminist Frequency*. Retrieved May 1, 2021. (<https://feministfrequency.com/video/body-language-the-male-gaze/>).
- Sassatelli, Roberta. 2011. "Interview with Laura Mulvey." *Theory, Culture & Society* 28(5): 123-143.

- Shaw-Williams, Hanah. 2014. "Why Are Game Developers Obsessed With 'Average' Heroes?" *GameRant*. Retrieved May 1, 2020. (<https://gamerant.com/average-video-game-heroes/>).
- Shrum, L. J., James E. Burroughs, and Aric Rindfleisch. 2005. "Television's Cultivation of Material Values." *Journal of Consumer Research* 32(3):473-479.
- Smith, Dorothy. 1974. "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology." *Sociological Inquiry* 44(1):7-13.
- Swani, Viren and Ayda Abbasnejad. 2010. "Associations between femininity ideology and body appreciation among British female undergraduates." *Personality and Individual Differences* 48(5): 685-687.
- Toma, Elisabeta. 2015. "Powerful elderly characters in video games: Flemeth of *Dragon Age*." *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology in Sociology* 6(2):51-65.
- TVTropes.org Contributors. n.d. "Femininity Tropes." Retrieved May 1, 2020 (<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FemininityTropes>).
- Valenti, Jessica. 2009. *The Purity Myth: How America's Obsession with Virginity is Hurting Young Women*. Berkley, CA: Seal Press.
- Vogler, Christopher. 2017. "Joseph Campbell Goes to the Movies: The Influence of the Hero's Journey in Film Narrative." *Journal of Genius and Eminence* 2(2):9-23.
- Walby, Sylvia, Jo Armstrong, and Sofia Strid. 2012. "Intersectionality: Multiple Inequalities in Social Theory." *Sociology* 46(2): 224-240.
- Welsh, Oli. 2017. "A complete history of Nintendo console launches: And what they can tell us about Switch." *Eurogamer*. Retrieved May 5, 2020 (<https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2017-02-24-a-complete-history-of-nintendo-console-launches>).
- Weisgram, Erica S, Lisa M. Dinella, and Megan Fulcher. 2011. "The Role of Masculinity/Femininity, Values, and Occupational Value Affordances in Shaping Young Men's and Women's Occupational Choices." *Sex Roles* 65(3): 243-58.
- Wilberg, Heather M. 2011. "What's in a Game? Race, Gender, and LGB Representation in Video Games." Master's thesis. College of Arts and Sciences, Roosevelt University, Chicago, IL.
- Williams, Dimitri, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory. 2009. "The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games." *New Media & Society* 11(5):815-834.
- Wilson, Jason. 2019. "Newzoo: U.S. will overtake China as No. 1 gaming market in 2019." Retrieved March 1, 2020 (<https://venturebeat.com/2019/06/18/newzoo-u-s-will-overtake-china-as-no-1-gaming-market-in-2019/>).
- Windsor, Elroi J. 2015. "Femininities." *International Encyclopedia of Social & Behavioral Sciences* 8(1): 893-897.