

The narrative portrayal of women in video games and how the depiction of women in games contributes to a cultural discourse that idealizes males as heroes whilst affirming negative perceptions about females and their sexuality.

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As learnt throughout the course, It has been challenging to categorize video games as a film/text genre. Much of the humanities literature investigates the classification of games, identifying games as ludology and determining whether or not games are narratology. In ludology studies, video games and board games are studied alongside the mechanics and rhetorics of play rather than as tales that depend on narrative conventions to communicate meaning. As a result, there are few publications that evaluate games as narratives using narrative theories, or that explore games from the perspective of cultural studies. The cultural characteristics, such as representation and identity, present in gaming communities and game narratives are intricate systems that are always important to the construction of games, codes, and technology. For example, games have had a hard time addressing the problem of varied female representation for a variety of reasons, including a shortage of women in development and a hypermasculine narrative norm. When thinking about gender roles and stereotypes in video games, the implications of such may translate to real life consequences and repercussions. Hence, the purpose of this thesis is to analyze the narrative portrayal of women in video games and to demonstrate that the depiction of women in games contributes to a cultural discourse that idealizes males as heroes whilst affirming negative perceptions about females and their sexuality.

Traditionally, female characters in video games have been shown as being physically inferior to or dependent on male characters. Additionally, many of these female characters have been given "hyper-sexual" attributes or clothes or equipment that emphasises these characteristics. According to Shackleford and Thill's content study on character portrayal in video games, they identify one of three predominant stereotypical portrayals of women in gaming as being sexualized (Shackleford & Thill, 2007)¹. Shackleford and Thill define a sexualized female depiction as one in which the female protagonist has a larger breast and a tiny waist, displays cleavage, wears sexually suggestive clothing, or engages in sexually suggestive body language. In addition to their outward look, these physical characteristics have a

¹ "(PDF) Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles." 5 Jul. 2022, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/225733100_Video_Game_Characters_and_the_Socialization_of_Gender_Roles_Young_People's_Perceptions_Mirror_Sexist_Media_Depictions.

tendency to be exaggerated or unrealistic and have proportions that are "Barbie-like," which are almost impossible for the average female to achieve. On the other hand, male characters are often represented as symbols of strength and dominance through their physical depiction by featuring attributes such as a large chest and high muscle percentages.

Despite both physical depictions of male and female characters to be unrealistic, there exists a clear narrative and contextual difference as to why they are displayed in such a way both in terms of the target audience and sometimes the game's storyline. The gendered depictions in video games, which lean heavily towards a heteronormative male-focused hero dream, imply that female characters may look strong and healthy, but they are meant to appeal to the young, male game player. According to Downs and Smith, the female depiction "by design, will arouse interest of physical intimacy from others" (Downs, E., & Smith, 2010)². In the meanwhile, depictions of males are intended to give the impression that men are physically capable, powerful, and dominating. This, in contrast to portrayals of female characters, is beneficial to the interests of male-centric narratives in a number of ways. The issue with the way in which females are depicted physically is that it contributes to the societal and cultural preconceptions that women's main source of power is their sexual worth or their capacity to captivate males. It reinforces the idea that a woman's worth is directly proportional to her attractiveness as well as whether or not she is able to satisfy the sexual urges of her male counterparts whether as a playable character or her audience.

Aside from the stereotypical physical appearances female characters are portrayed as, in games they are severely underrepresented and their narrative options are limited. Female characters are usually only given minor or even unimportant tasks in video games. Dietz discovered in their research that the majority of the time, female characters in video games are portrayed as helpless victims or damsels in distress

² "Keeping abreast of hypersexuality: A video game character content"
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2010-14843-002>.

(Dietz, 2004)³. Female characters as a result play little more than a supporting role; they can't do anything on their own in the game and must be rescued by a man before they can progress. In video games, female characters are often positioned as "damsels in distress," or objects to be saved by the game's male protagonist.

Sarkeesian, the host of Female Tropes vs Video Games, cites the video game Double Dragon as an example of a game that enforces the trop of the damsel in distress.⁴ In this game, the character Marian is kidnapped in a violent manner. As she is being taken away, her dress shifts to reveal her underwear as she is over the male character's shoulder. This conflates her victimhood with her sexuality. In point of fact, a significant number of these damsel characters are shown in sexually compromising positions. The female character who plays the role of the damsel in distress is an object of victimization since she is completely subservient and helpless in comparison to the masculine character. She is reliant on him for her existence, and in certain circumstances, it is necessary for her to be slain in order to move the storyline forward that involves the male character. A cliché like this diminishes the role that women play in video games to that of helpless victims who have no control over their own destinies. In addition, Sarkeesian says that this specific stereotype contributes to the perpetuation of poisonous and paternalistic attitudes, as well as the antiquated notion that males have a responsibility to provide protection and care for women. The use of the trope contributes to the perpetuation of ideas about the superiority of masculine heroes as when the case is that the male character is imprisoned in the same game titles as a damsel character or characters, he is still able to escape on his own using his own abilities and intelligence. In every scenario, the male character is the more powerful and competent one, but the female characters continue to be helpless and dependent on their male counterparts.

³ "An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video"

<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1023/A:1018709905920>.

⁴ "Feminism And Videogames: A Look At Anita Sarkeesian's Tropes vs" 10 May. 2013,

<https://www.vice.com/en/article/ezaja4/feminism-and-videogames-a-look-at-anita-sarkeesians-tropes-vs-women-series>.

Over the years, we have witnessed the increase of female protagonists however increasing female presence isn't addressing the core issues of female representation. The female protagonists of certain video games straddle a problematic middle ground, existing both as a vehicle for women's liberation and an objectified sex symbol catering only to the male gaze. By using firearms and acting aggressively, female characters enter a traditionally masculine realm. However, this does not make them safer in the eyes of the male gaze.. This is because the male gaze is primarily focused on the physical appearance of women. In the case of Lara Croft, a significant portion of the aforementioned is accurate. She is regarded to be the very first female heroine to appear by default in any console game, an innovation that was groundbreaking at the time. However, the fact that she is a sexualized persona cannot be denied. Salen and Zimmerman provide an explanation for this paradox in their article, which reads as follows, "In one sense, a Tomb Raider player is the spectator of a blatantly sexist picture, even as the player interactively takes on an empowering female character"(Salen & Zimmerman, 2013) ⁵. Any autonomy that Lara has is dependent on the objectification of her body. For example, Lara Croft is shown in a way that overtly highlights her sexual physicality, and her symbolic outfit also exposes a significant portion of her body. When Lara Croft enters a confined place or ascends to a higher position, the camera maintains a specific distance from her from behind and focuses on sections of her body that are revealed. Despite the fact that players are able to direct Lara's actions as a protagonist, determining what they do in her story, the game still focusses the narrative perspective on her sexual appeal. This is problematic because players are permitted to manage an objectified woman, which removes any agency that she may have had in the first place. Because of this, whatever autonomy that Lara would have in the story is undermined by the way that she is portrayed physically.

In addition to overly patriarchal male protagonists or overly sexualized female protagonists, the problematic nature of many games may be contributed to by the presentation of secondary female non-playable characters, both narratively and visually, as well as how these characters are portrayed.

⁵ "Rules of Play - MIT Press." <https://mitpress.mit.edu/9780262240451/rules-of-play/>.

Emotional investment in any female character can have repercussions in the real world. This is especially true in light of a study that found "data cautiously indicated that gender portrayals in video games can, in fact, affect people's beliefs about women in the real world"(Lynch, 2017)⁶. Playing the video game with the sexualized character led to a decrease in participants' confidence in their skills to do tasks. Thus, the degree to which female characters in games are recognisable and present in video games has a degree of repercussions for the social climate that stems from video games and the culture around video games. Research reveals a substantial correlation between media exposure to modeled gender stereotypes and people' stereotyped ideas and expectations about gender roles. Olatz Lopez-Fernandez's study provides an example of a possible cultivation effect, "Video game depictions of the female body, for instance, may be used to help form an individual's social and moral standards regarding gender-appropriate dress, ideal female body type, and even evaluations of female self-worth" (Fernandes, 2019)⁷.

The current "male-hero" coding of video games has a detrimental influence on women's self-esteem in the real world. By excluding characters that may engage female players, games risk alienating women or, at the very least, causing them to be less immersed in the storyline. According to a number of studies cited by Teresa Lynch, female participants consistently preferred games with nonsexualized rather than sexualized female protagonists and reported more interest in playing as the nonsexualized character.⁸ Social identification theory provides an explanation based on its position that "group memberships emerge depending on the self's and others' perceived resemblance" (Lynch, 2016)⁹. Individuals wish to see their groups portrayed well in the media because such depictions promote a good self-concept. Thus, when women encounter repeated unfavorable portrayals of female characters in video games, they may completely abandon the medium. The inclusion of sexualized female characters has the potential to

⁶ "Representation of Women in Video Games: A Systematic Review of"
<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30132695/>.

⁷ "Female Gaming, Gaming Addiction, and the Role of Women Within" 10 Jun. 2019,
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00454/full>.

⁸ "A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31" 29 Jan. 2018,
https://nikifritzphd.com/Lynch_et_al-2016-Journal_of_Communication.pdf.

⁹ "10.1 Understanding Social Groups – Principles of Social Psychology."
<https://opentextbc.ca/socialpsychology/chapter/understanding-social-groups/>.

alienate and exclude women from engaging in video games and culture, contributing to the misconception that video games are a masculine-only arena.

In conclusion, video games contribute significantly to the perpetuation of detrimental gender norms in the real world through socio-cultural discourse by supporting and favouring stereotypically masculine features and attitudes while depicting females in a sexual, submissive, and secondary manner. As a subset of the already marginalised 'geek-culture,' the gaming industry, gaming communities, and the content of video games all reflect an adherence to heteronormative, white, and patriarchal social standards that demand women and minorities to be sidelined. As a result, the hypermasculine male hero has become the typical video game character and female voices are underrepresented across the board. When women see repeated negative depictions of female characters in video games, they may avoid the medium altogether and contribute to the perpetuation of the cycle of having a male hero character as the standard and having sexist and stereotypical female characters who are often secondary or subservient. As a result, communities may view games and gaming culture as a masculine space where women are interlopers or otherwise unwelcome especially when women point out that the accepted norms are fundamentally flawed and exclusive because such depictions reinforce problematic attitudes towards women.

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