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EDITOR'S PREFACE

For years, many of us invested in games have highlighted the lack of women in nearly every level of game design, production, criticism, and study. While we are far from having solved that particular problem, we believe that one tangible sign of progress in efforts at increasing participation is that the conversation has expanded to include ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, queer and LGBT voices, as well as international perspectives. This collection of essays demonstrates how wide-ranging such considerations of diversity can – and should – be.

We're proud to bring together various perspectives in this anthology, which both charts where we've come from and suggest places to explore further. Our hope is that the variety of perspectives in this issue shows some of the many ways in which we can examine diversity in games—there is diversity in the diversity. The essays cover AAA games and independent games; we also have two different essays on Pokémon showing how the same game can tackle different aspects of diversity. And yet, this is only but a sliver of how diverse makers, players, and critics can provide new and refreshing points of view to making, playing and understanding games.

This volume is part of a general effort in academia, journalism and industry, to making diversity in games visible, which is the first step to give agency to diverse game designers, developers, players and critics. Unlike what some people may argue, this is not so much an attack against games, but rather an attempt

to expand and extend our understanding of games and players. Games should be for everyone, and anyone should be allowed to make them and write about them.

Jane Pinckard and Clara Fernández-Vara

INTRODUCTION

This *Well-Played Journal* special issue emerges at a pivotal time in the videogame industry's long-troubled relationship to diversity. Industry journal *Gamasutra* proclaimed diversity one of the five defining trends of 2012 (Graft 2012). This pattern continues to expand and define where the game industry is going. Game scholarship has been closely entangled with the diversity debate since its inception, particularly the critical design practices coming out of universities, as well as the independent game scene and game journalism. Why should we care about diversity? Aside from the obvious fact that we live in an increasingly diverse and global community, and that diversity is held up as a positive social value, numerous industry and academic studies have overwhelmingly shown that it's good for business. (Weiner 2014)

Although the demographics of the game players have changed radically over the past four decades, the stereotype of the white male "gamer" still pervades the popular consciousness, and remains the overriding marketing paradigm for the mainstream industry. In some ways, the industry has existed within its own bubble, oblivious to a changing world and shifting audiences, as well as evolving values in society at-large. This obliviousness is being challenged on several fronts, including the inclusion of new voices through the indie game scene, more rigorous and critically informed game journalism, and the rapid-growth of game scholarship as both a discipline and an influence on a new generation of students of game design.

The past three years in particular have brought the game industry's "gender trouble" to a crisis to such an extent that the problem has captured the attention of the mainstream media. While this volume cuts a wide swath across several sectors concerning diversity, gender holds a central role in many of these chapters, alongside both broader issues of diversity as a principle, and more focused topics, such as ethnicity and queerness.

Diversity and gender are not new challenges for video games. As early as the 1990s, activists working within the industry began trying to address the gender problematics of digital games content as well as gender disparity within the workforce. The "girl game" movement of the mid-1990s brought us *Barbie Fashion Designer* (1996), *Purple Moon* (1997-1999), *Chop Suey* (1995) and the enduring *Nancy Drew* series (1998-present), among other fare largely targeted at female children. Some of these games have been criticized more recently for relying on design and marketing techniques that may have further reinforced gender stereotypes, but they did break major ground in opening up a pathway for new paradigms of gameplay. *Barbie Fashion Designer,* for instance, was an early example of a game which employed user-created content as well as transmedia, allowing girls to design and print their own clothing onto fabric for physical Barbie dolls. At the same time, a number of mainstream games during this period, such as Cyan's *Myst*, which held the title of best-selling CD-ROM for eight years, and LucasArts' *Monkey Island* series, also had widespread appeal among women.

Alongside the game industry at about the same time, scholars began grappling with the gender problematics of video games. A feminist strain developed within the field of "game studies," a stubbornly cross-disciplinary enterprise that intersects humanities and behavioral science, computer science and engineering, and art and design. As early as 2000, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (MIT Press 2000) devoted an entire volume to

the topic. This set the stage for an ongoing engagement with conversations about gender and diversity among games scholars, as well as more in-depth studies about the broader role of gaming on the sharp decline of women in IT workforce.

Around the time of its publication, a number of trends began to emerge which have brought us to the pivotal moment at which we now find ourselves. *The Sims (2000)*, a game which almost didn't get made due to strong resistance from EA's marketing department (Purcese 2008), demonstrated that girls and women would indeed play games, even if they weren't painted pink and purple. *The Sims*, it should be added, also broke ground by being one of the first games to include the option for same-sex romance. The rapid growth of casual and mobile games, including new platforms such as the iPad, as well as mobile gaming consoles, have expanded the audience for games beyond the traditional "gamer" demographic of young, white males, bridging the gaming divide across gender, race, class and age. Nintendo's classic "Gameboy" even had a gender makeover in 2004 to become the Nintendo DS. Ads from this period showed girls playing with the device, which became available in pink. Mainstream consoles saw a rapid shift in gender dynamics. Games such as *Katamari Damacy, Animal Crossing* and Little Big Planet changed the flavor of console gaming, and new interfaces such as the dance pad, music controllers, Wiimote, and Kinect continued to expand the gender appeal of console games. The Wii marked the first time a console game was featured at a convention of the AARP (Taub 2006). Although exclusion of women and hyper-gendered female representation of characters such as Lara Croft were still the norm, they were being countered by characters that female players could relate to—*Beyond Good and Evil*'s Jade, *Portal*'s Chell, and *Mirror's Edge*'s Faith, all games which have had widespread mainstream appeal. Even Lara Croft herself got a "reboot," as chronicled in Chapter 4 of this volume by Mansari, transforming her from a male action hero in a hyper-sexualized female form, to a solid and relatable

character for both men and women. Nonetheless, in 2014, Ubisoft still managed to release its *Assassin's Creed Unity* with exactly zero female playable characters using the excuse that women were "too hard to animate," despite the fact they had had them in previous games in the series (Farokhmanesh 2014). Critics pointed out the absurdity of this choice given that the historical setting of the French Revolution was rife with notable women troublemakers (Risbridger 2014). As Friman demonstrates in the first essay of this volume with her in-depth study of female game characters, we are still a long way from having anything remotely like gender parity in the representation of women in mainstream videogames.

In Ludica's 2007 paper "The Hegemony of Play," myself and my co-authors (Fron et al.), prefigured current controversies (Alexander 2014) and argued that the stereotype of "gamer" was a marketing construct that privileged certain styles of gameplay and representation over others that no longer accurately represented the gaming audience. From a feminist standpoint, we argued, the video game industry had not caught up with Simone de Beauvoir's 1949 observation of the male subject as the default position of most media and literature. Indeed, the game industry had not even caught up with the Victorian board game industry. We observed that the earliest board games included top-sellers designed by women, including *The Mansion of Happiness*, and *The Landlord's Game*, an activist anti-capitalism game which later – ironically – a became the basis for Monopoly (Pilon 2015). Victorian board game packaging often featured images of women in dominant roles, and a number of games featured women as central characters. One captured the circumnavigation of the globe by infamous pioneering female journalist Nelly Bly; another, published in 1898, celebrated women's basketball. That's right—1898. In spite of the contemporary popularity of women's sports, we have yet to see a video game devoted to one.

Yet in spite of the overwhelming data by the industry itself

showing that nearly half of 2014 video game players were women (The ESA 2015), the "hegemony of play" – the myth of the video game as the exclusive domain of young, white males – still persists. Men still dominate the industry, although a gradual shift has been taking place over the past decade. According to a recent survey by the IGDA (Edwards et al 2014), the percentage of women in the game industry, though still small, nearly doubled between 2005 and 2014—from 11.5% to 22%. What's more, among survey respondents who identified as students, 30% were women. Slight gains were also seen in among different racial groups. Across all demographic groups, 79% of the entire survey pool felt diversity was important to the industry, so it seems curious and frustrating that this "hegemony of play" still dominates, even though the majority of *men* in the game industry think diversity is important.

One way that developers are addressing the disparity is to create their own game industry. In that same IGDA report, 48% of developers identified as independent. The rapid explosion of independent games, the growth of new genres such as activist, documentary, adventure and Twine games, new funding models such as crowdsourcing or grants, and the celebration of new voices and audiences at events such as IndieCade, Different Games, GaymerX, Feminists in Games, and XYZ: Alternative Voices in Game Design, have provided venues for new voices to emerge.

The LGBT community has become a dominant influence in indie game scene, with games such as *Gone Home* and *Dys4ia*, and developers such as Christine Love, Mattie Brice, Merritt Kopas, and many others garnering festival inclusion and awards and finding widespread success. Queer games have opened up new conversations about subjectivity, empathy, embodiment, consent, representation, desire and many other themes of broad importance to the game industry. They are also introducing new tools, such as Twine, which are helping to reframe the very definition of games, as well as who can make games. These

emerging practices work alongside game scholarship to provide new lenses through which to view more traditional video game content, such as Ochsner & Saucerman and Thomét's chapters in this volume. The release of the new documentary *Gaming in Color* (2015), punctuates the importance of the contemporary queer games movement.

While the problematics of gender, and the emerging Queer Games movement have been foregrounded in recent years, equally problematic, yet understudied, are issues of race and ethnicity. Video games have long reified colonization as both a game mechanic and a form of representation, and relied on hackneyed racial stereotyping such as the obligatory "middle eastern terrorist," or the African American hoodlum. In *Values at Play*, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum demonstrate the ways in which different types of values are embedded in gameplay (2015). Indigenous designers and scholars are becoming a growing force in terms of both game creation and criticism. Elizabeth LaPensée is one of a number of artist/designer/researcher/critics who have sought to engage a critical discourse on the treatment of indigenous peoples in games, both criticizing their egregious representation in games, and introducing new genres of indigenous games. She has written eloquently about the poor representation of First Nations peoples in games such Custer's Revenge, in the player is asked to rape a native American woman (LaPensée 2014), as well as developed new models for drawing on indigenous epistemologies and narrative in game design. She is joined by other scholars and game designers such as Skawennati Fragnito and Jason Lewis, in "recolonizing" cyberspace to make way for indigenous voices in video games (AbTeC 2015). *Never Alone*, described in Chapter 7, a game which captures indigenous voices both through its content and its development methodology, is a prime example of the opportunities created by these new avenues. Such critical engagement and critical making is crucial in moving the industry forward.

It is telling that a huge deficit still exists in terms of scholarship on ethnicity in games—Massanari's article at the end of this volume being a rare exception. This is especially disconcerting at a time when race has become a front-and-center issue in U.S. politics. Controversies rage about immigration, as well as the continued violence against African Americans by police. At this writing, the Syrian refugee crisis is coming to a head in Europe. This is an area where we as game scholars need to up our game significantly.

Why is it important for game scholars and critics to engage in conversations of diversity? A principle motivation for the "Hegemony of Play" was our observation that much of video game scholarship at the time seemed to be turning an uncritical eye on the video games and their demographics, to allowing the discourse to be driven by the industry's values and ideologies. Many early papers conflated games and players, taking the white male default position. Much of early game scholarship discourse surrounded highly gendered definition of the word "game," favoring its more agonistic forms. The positioning of "game" as a fixed construct, marginalizing casual games and the people who play them, dubbing games like *The Sims* not games at all (Fron et al 2007), and pushing aside emerging platforms such as Twine, are all used as ways of maintaining a hegemonic control over a changing medium. Today, a cacophonic chorus of reactionary voices attempts to push back against the diversification of gaming, largely through claiming ownership of the "gamer" identity. As scholars, it behooves us to be serve as a critical voice of reason, to unpack and interrogate the representation and values of videogames in a meaningful way through a variety of different lenses to cast light on and perhaps even instigate some shift on how we see their underlying ideologies (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2015). It's important for us to not only critique egregious representational stereotypes, but also to interrogate underlying logics of power that reify Colonialist values, combat-oriented mechanics, and the removal agency from marginalized

groups. And finally, as educators, we need to expand the horizons of our students beyond the narrow scope of what the mainstream video game industry and the hyperbole that reactionary fan culture feeds them, to enable them to become critical makers who move the game industry forward rather than continuing to reinforce the status quo.

Celia Pearce

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FROM PIXEL BABES TO ACTIVE AGENTS – HOW TO FIX THE LACK OF DIVERSITY IN FEMALE DIGITAL GAME CHARACTERS

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Introduction

One of the current gender issues in gaming is the lack of diversity in female character representations in digital games. To find a solution for this problem, first the current female character representations have to be critically examined and analysed to pinpoint the recurrent issues in them. It is not until then that it will be possible to find ways to improve the visibility and diversity of women in games.

In my master's thesis (Friman 2013a) I examined how characters, especially female characters, are constructed in some of the most popular digital games of 2010 and 2011 (1). During the study I found some remarkable recurrences in the ways women are and are not represented in those selected AAA titles in my data. In this essay I will describe my findings on how female character representations are constructed and interpreted in digital games.

For the purpose of gaining a wider understanding on how digital game characters are constructed, I have also developed a model through which digital game character representations can

be examined and analysed. The model is based on five character construction themes: 1. presence, 2. background and role, 3. participation and goals, 4. speech, and 5. gendering. The model also locates the character construction process to the interactions between characters and between the characters and the player. In addition to the recurrent patterns found in female character representations in my study, I will also describe this model and how it can be used to analyse and improve female characters in digital games.

More than Pixels: What Game Characters Are Made of

To be able to examine the lack of diversity and other potential issues in female character representations, we should start by looking at what digital game characters are made of. For the player, they are much more than pixels, sounds and skills. Because of this, they should also be considered more than that from both design and research points of view. Here I will describe the model which I have developed to examine the representations of female characters in digital games, more specifically the five character construction themes it contains: 1. presence, 2. background and role, 3. participation and goals, 4. speech, and 5. gendering. I will explain what each theme means in the context of female characters in digital games, what kind of questions the themes include, and what they can tell about the character representations.

Presence is the first requirement for representation. In my study I measured the presence of female characters in the games in my data with four questions: are there named female characters, are the female characters playable, are there female allies, and are there female opponents. Additionally, I examined if the game had a female main protagonist or a female main antagonist. Exploring the questions in this theme revealed that while every single game contained named female characters and also female allies, playable female characters were not present in all games, and female main characters were significantly rarer than their male counterparts. Out of the sixteen total games

in my data, only two (12.5 %) forced a female protagonist, and additionally a female protagonist was an option in five games (31.35 %). Furthermore, only four games (25 %) forced at least one playable female character, although playing with a female character was also an option in five more games (31.25 %).

It was interesting to notice that female characters working against the player (in 10 games, 62.5 %) were a bit rarer than female characters working on the player's side (in all 16 games, 100 %), and that female main antagonists (in 4 games, 25 %) were similarly a bit less common compared to mandatory or optional female main protagonists (in 7 games, 43.75 %). Even though female characters have become more common than they were for example fifteen years earlier (Dietz 1998, 433–434), women are still not as strongly present in games as men are, and this lack of presence naturally translates to lack of diversity. As such, the first and perhaps the most obvious step to ensuring the diversity of female character representations in digital games would be to make sure there are female characters in games in the first place.

The second theme in my model for character representation analysis is used to examine how female characters in games are defined by the descriptions of their **backgrounds** as well as by the **roles** they are showed acting in during the game. In most cases in my data, the backgrounds of the female characters were defined by their profession or status. The roles I divided in two categories: action roles and relationship roles. Relationship roles referred to the relationships the female characters were shown to have with other characters (e.g. wife, sister, daughter) and action roles referred to the roles in which the female characters were showed acting in (e.g. damsel in distress, victim, assistant) during the game. In this classification, one female character could only have one background (e.g. politician), but she could have several different action and relationship roles (e.g. sister, friend, rescuer). A character's roles may be tied to her background, but it is not necessary. While a character's background defines who that character is through her position and profession, her various

roles are defined by what kind of relationships she has with other characters as well as by what she does.

Examining female characters' backgrounds tells us what kind of professions and positions of power and status women are associated with in digital games. In the games in my data, the female characters most often came from professional fields which were commonly defined as masculine and which were often related to either maintaining security and public order (e.g. police officers, soldiers) or endangering it (e.g. thieves, assassins). It was also interesting to note that even though the female characters were occasionally placed in positions of power and expertise, they were rarely shown as actually using power or acting as experts. In fact, the most common action roles for the female characters in my data were rescuee (in 12 games, 75 %), victim (in 11 games, 68.75 %) and assistant (in 11 games, 68.75 %) – a result alarmingly similar to the study of Dietz (1998, 434–436) from fifteen years earlier. At the same time, the least common action roles for the female characters in my data were expert (in 1 game, 6.25 %), hero (in 2 games, 12.5 %) and rescuer (in 5 games, 31.25 %).

Comparing the backgrounds and action roles of female characters to each other reveals us that placing female characters in positions of power and expertise is not enough to make the characters actually powerful or experts – they have to be able to act in those roles as well. As a rather tragicomical example, in *Starcraft II: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment 2010) a medical doctor and researcher called Ariel Hanson – who is also described as a genius (2) – does not come to think about examining the zerg-infection threatening her colony until the male main character of the game advices her to do so. Unfortunately, this was far from the only case in my data in which the expertise and agency of a formally competent female character was overridden by a man. Fortunately, there were also more positive examples to be found, although those seemed to be rather rare. One of these positive examples can be found

from *Halo: Reach* (Microsoft Game Studios 2010) where another medical scientist Catherine Halsey is seen to show not only real expertise, but also initiative and authority. These contradictory examples show us that positions of power and expertise cannot be stamped on female characters with titles and descriptions, but they need to be seen from their actions and also from the way the other characters relate to them.

Looking at the relationship roles in the games in my data, the most common roles for the female characters were mother (in 9 games, 56.25 %), daughter (in 9 games, 56.25 %) and wife (in 8 games, 50 %). The other, less common relationship roles for the female characters in my data were friend (in 4 games, 25 %), sister (in 5 games, 31.25 %) and lover (in 6 games, 37.5 %). Relationships between characters are important because they make the characters more human. The games in my study were lacking in meaningful relationships between characters, especially such that were based on something else than family relations or romantic interest. In essence, the characters often did not seem to have any friends. These kinds of relationships were especially rare between the female characters, and the female characters were also significantly more often presented as potential targets of romantic interest than as long-term friends or companions.

My third theme for analysing game characters is **participation and goals**. These can firstly be used to measure if female characters are taking part in the events and action in the game – or if they are just following from the sidelines as they mainly were around fifteen years ago (Dietz 1998, 436). Secondly, they tell us if the actions of female characters are motivated by their own goals or if they are dependent on other, possibly male, characters, as was the case in Grimes' (2003) study on action game heroines. To measure participation, one has to find the central forms of character action in a game, as it may vary by genre, for example. In the case of the games in my data, each

of them included fighting, so in my study I chose to measure participation in terms of participating to that.

I examined if the female characters took part in the fights in the game, and if they did, were they fighting alongside or against the player character. It was delightful to notice that the female characters were not simply observers in the games in my data, but instead took part in action in the majority of them (in 12 games, 75 %). In more than half of the games (in 9 games, 56.25 %) the female characters also had some goals of their own, which motivated their actions, independent of any other characters. However, in just as many games (in 9 games, 56.25 %) the actual actions of the female characters had no effect on the game's events or plot. As such, in some of the games in my data, even though the female characters were active agents whose actions were motivated by their own goals, their actions stayed ultimately meaningless in the context of the game's story.

Earlier I noted that presence is the first requirement for representation. Here I will add that participation should be considered the second requirement for representation, as participation turns characters from passive observers to active agents. Furthermore, it is important to examine if a character's actions are motivated by her individual goals, or if the character is only acting dependent on other characters. Lastly, it is worth considering if a character's actions have any effect or real significance in relation to the game's story.

The Bechdel test (3) is a non-academic popular method used to evaluate if a movie is "feminist". The test bases its evaluation on three things: if the movie contains 1. named female characters, that 2. talk to each other 3. about something other than men. Even though the test cannot be straightforwardly applied to academic research and evaluation of cultural products such as movies or games, the questions it poses and the implications of their answers can still be considered when exploring questions of character representation. In my study I examined if the games in my data included female characters and were the female

characters named. Unlike some of the most popular games fifteen years earlier (Dietz 1998, 433), all the games in my data did contain named female characters. I also examined **speech** as the fourth theme in my model for female character representation analysis. I examined speech from two perspectives. Firstly, I examined if the female characters in the games talked, and if they did, to whom did they talk to. Secondly, I examined if the female characters were talked about, and if they were, how they were talked about.

Examination of speech revealed that the female characters talked in all but one of the games (in 15 games, 93.75 %) in my data, and that the female characters talked to men in all of the games in which they talked. However, only five games (31.25 %) contained discussions between female characters – on something else than the male main character of the game. Additionally, while the female characters were talked about in eleven games (68.75 %), in only three (18.75 %) the talk was about what they actually did instead of estimating their appearance, sexualising them or belittling them. For example, in *Portal 2* (Valve Corporation 2011) the female main character Chell is constantly called fat in various imaginative ways, and in *L.A. Noire* (Rockstar Games 2011) a police detective expresses doubt about the reliability of a female crime witness. Speech is an important element to consider when we examine character representation, as it can tell us a lot about the relationships between the characters. The lack of conversations between female characters further adds to the lack of meaningful relationships between them as well as to the dependence of female characters on male characters. Additionally, speech is not only a question of who has a voice in a game, but also whom are being talked about, and what the tone of the discussion reveals about attitudes towards them.

The last theme in my model for analysing female character representations is **gendering**. It is a theme present in all the other themes and aspects of character representation, but it should

also be examined separately to explore the various aspects of gendering game characters. In the games in my data, I found three ways of gendering the female characters: romanticising them, sexualising them and emphasising their femininity. I examined these different aspects of gendering by asking do the female characters express romantic interest towards the main character of the game, do the female characters flirt with other characters (and if they do, are the targets female or male), do the female characters dress in revealing outfits, are the female characters portrayed from sexualising camera angles, and finally, is the femininity of the female characters emphasised in terms of their personality or appearance.

In the games in my data the female characters were gendered by presenting them as potential targets for romantic and sexual interest for both the main character of the game (who was usually an implicitly heterosexual male) and at the same time for the player (who was also assumed to be a heterosexual male). In half of the games (in 8 games, 50 %) at least one female character expressed romantic interest towards the main character of the game, and in four games (25 %) female characters flirted to male characters in the game (in one of these games also to female characters). In nine games (56.25 %) female characters were portrayed from sexualising camera angles: the image was focused on the female characters' breasts, bottom, or under their skirt, or they were portrayed in sexualising positions. Five games (31.25 %) included female characters dressed in particularly tight or revealing outfits. In ten games (62.5 %) the physical femininity of female characters was emphasised by their feminine faces, body shapes or outfits. On the other hand, there were also a few female characters with practical outfits and less normative body representations, but the less normative bodies were strongly sexualised, as was the case with Isabela in *Dragon Age II* (Electronic Arts 2011) and Jack in *Mass Effect 2* (Electronic Arts 2010; figure 1).

Figure 1. Jack and the male Shepard in Mass Effect 2 (Electronic Arts 2010). Screen capture from a gameplay video by Usva Friman 2013.

In some games female characters were also gendered on the level of their behaviour, by having them act in an overly empathic or panicky manner – in other words in a stereotypically feminine manner. Female characters seemed to show their emotions more often than male characters, and in some games and in some situations the female characters were used as mirrors for the emotions of male characters of the game – and through them, the assumedly male player. For example in *Gears of War 3* (Microsoft Studios 2011) the two female soldiers in the player's team, Anya and Samantha, fight alongside the male soldiers, but unlike their team mates, they are also often seen expressing empathy towards both their team members and civilians.

Examining the various ways female characters are gendered reveals us the contrasts between the typical portrayals of female and male characters as well as how it is common for at least female character representations to emphasise the character gender. Portraying female characters as objects of romantic interest and sexual desire, as well as empathic mirrors for the feelings of male characters, construct the female characters as if they primarily exist for the overly masculine and implicitly heterosexual male characters. At the same time, this process also constructs the expected player subject as a heterosexual male.

A Model for Female Character Representation Analysis

The combined five character construction themes presented above can tell how strongly female characters are present in a game as well as what kind of backgrounds they are given, how they are positioned in relation to other characters through their relationship roles and what kind of roles they are showed acting in. They also tell if and how the female characters participate in different forms of action in the game and if their actions are motivated by themselves or if their actions are dependent on someone else. Furthermore, they tell if the female characters talk, if their talk is directed to only male characters, and also if they are talked about – and what how they are talked about tells us about how other characters think and feel about them. Lastly, they tell how much and in which ways the female characters are constructed as gendered and sexualised characters.

To better understand how digital game characters are constructed, in addition to examining the elements they consist of, it is also important to consider the spaces in which this construction process happens. In my study I found that the interactions between the characters as well as the interactions between the characters and the player form the primary spaces for character and player subject construction. The way characters interact with each other, for example the way they talk to each other and behave towards each other, sends messages to the player about who the characters are and what the player is supposed to think and how the player is supposed to feel about them. Similarly, interactions between non-player characters and the player character send messages to the player about the expectations directed towards her. As such, the game can work as a positive fantasy which enhances the player's experience of her own subjectivity. On the other hand, it can also work against the player by setting the borders of the player subject too tight or by defining them wrong compared to the player's own experience (Richard 2012, 80–81).

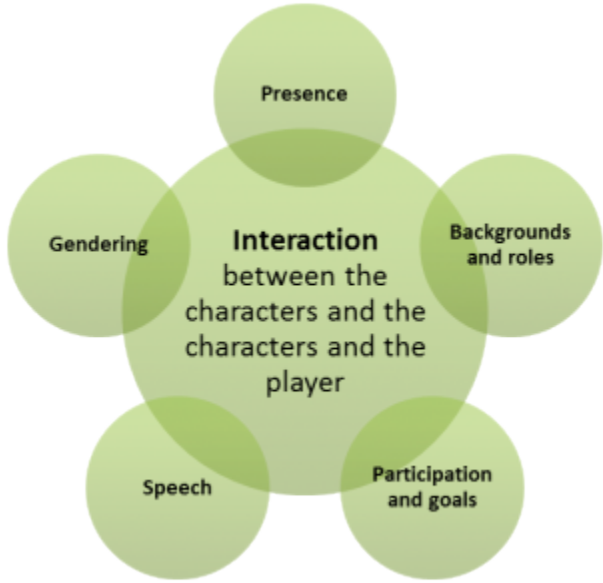

Figure 2: The suggested model for analysing female character representations in digital games.

Based on these findings, I suggest a model for analysing female character representations in digital games (figure 2). The model consists of the five character construction themes presented earlier: 1. presence, 2. background and role, 3. participation and goals, 4. speech, and 5. gendering. It also locates the character construction process to the interactions between the game characters and between the game characters and the player, recognising that the player subject is also constructed in the same process. As seen from the examples presented in the previous section of this essay, the model can be used to pinpoint the recurrent issues in female character representations in digital games, but also to see opportunities for improvement as well as the good practices that have already been established.

Conclusion: How to Make Better Female Characters

Recognising and analysing the recurrent issues in female character representations is the first step on the way towards more human and diverse female characters in digital games. In

conclusion, I describe how the suggested model for analysing female character representations in digital games as well as the findings made with it from the games in my study can be used to form a five point baseline for designing better female characters:

1. **Presence** is the first requirement for representation. There should be a number of female characters present in a game to create opportunities for diverse representation.

2. Examining character **backgrounds and roles** proves that placing female characters in positions of power and expertise alone is not enough to make the characters actually powerful or experts, but they have to be able to act in those roles as well. Additionally, the female characters should have meaningful relationships with other characters, especially relationships based on something else than family relations or romantic interest. The female characters should also have relationships with each other, and not only with male characters.

3. **Participation** turns female characters from passive observers to active agents. In addition to participating in action, it is important to make sure the female characters' actions are motivated by their individual goals instead of being dependant on other characters. It is also worth remembering that the characters' actions are meaningful only if they have an effect on the game's story.

4. **Speech** tells about relationships between characters. Female characters should have a voice in games, and they should not speak only to male characters or only about male characters. Female characters should not only talk, but they should also be talked about, and the talk should not be only about their appearance but primarily about who they are and what they do.

5. **Gendering** female characters by emphasising their

femininity on physical or behavioural level, if practised systematically, reduces the female characters to gender stereotypes. Additionally, portraying the female characters as objects of romantic and sexual interest for the male main character of a game creates an implied demand for a heterosexual male player.

Following these five points helps creating female characters that are not only pixel babes but active agents. Not only are they present in games, but they come from various backgrounds and they are seen acting in various roles and positions. They have meaningful relationships with other characters. They participate in action motivated by their own goals, and what they do affects how the game's story progresses. They have a voice, and they share their thoughts and ideas on various topics in discussions with other characters, who do not always have to be men. Other characters talk about their person and their deeds. They are women, but they are not portrayed primarily as such by overemphasising their femininity. In essence, they are active agents and personified characters who do not only exist for and dependant on the male characters or the male player.

Endnotes:

(1) The study data consisted of 16 digital games published on PC, Playstation 3 or Xbox 360 in years 2010 and 2011. All the games contained personal characters, narrative elements and dialogues. All the games were also included in the lists of Top-20 most sold PC and console games in the USA. The lists were published by the Entertainment Software Association (2012; 2011).

(2) Ariel Hanson's page in the StarCraft Wiki <http://starcraft.wikia.com/wiki/Ariel_Hanson>.

(3) The Bechdel test originates from Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* published in 1985. It measures if a movie (or another work of fiction) has at least two named female

characters who talk to each other about something other than a man.

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I CHOOSE YOU! DIVERSITY IN THE DESIGN OF POKÉMON

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Introduction

There have been many discussions surrounding women in games lately. Or perhaps more accurately, the discourse has focused on why women *aren't* in games. At the epicenter of the conversation is Anita Sarkeesian's (2013) hugely popular and equally controversial *Tropes vs. Women in Games* web video series. In her videos, Sarkeesian reveals the paucity of fully developed female characters in video games. The series also highlights how a large portion of the female characters in games are ultimately relegated to ghettoized roles such as damsel in distress, woman in the refrigerator, or are otherwise represented as insignificant and disposable. In late 2012, the *#1ReasonWhy* Twitter hashtag brought members of game developing and game playing communities together to discuss the myriad reasons why women leave—or choose not to pursue—careers in the game industry (Plunkett, 2012; Ochsner, 2015). More recently with the GamerGate controversy, highly publicized cases of threats and harassment brought against women in the game industry have led some women to question whether it is worth it to pursue a career in games. Quite understandably, most women are not

eager to serve even a short tenure as "the Internet's most hated person," an experience described by game developer Zoe Quinn (Quinn, 2014). In sum, game communities and pop culture circles have been committing a lot of time and talk to discourse around the roles and representations of women in games. These have been, and continue to be, difficult discussions to have, posing problems without straightforward solutions.

With so many legitimate causes for criticism and critique about the issues women in games face, it is sometimes tempting to throw our collective hands up and call the game industry and game culture lost causes. But we think it is sometimes important to also pause to reflect on the games we love and why we love them. We would not be gamers and game scholars if we did not play and enjoy games. While brainstorming possible topics for our submission to this *Well Played* special issue on Diversity in Games, we discovered that there is quite a bit of overlap in our lists of favorite games and game series. After several conversations, we opted to write about *Pokémon*. In *Pokémon*, players do not take up a role as an unconventional character; they do not explore themes that spark discussions on gender or politics; and the battle mechanics are standard for role-playing games. Why choose *Pokémon*, then? In this piece, we argue that the *Pokémon* series serves as an example of how game developers can make design for inclusive for player communication systems, diverse character representations, and player experiences without alienating their core gamer fan bases.

Pokémon Red and *Pokémon Blue* (Game Freak, 1996) were the first installments of what is now widely considered to be among the most successful role-playing game (RPG) franchises of all time (Nintendo of America, 2013; VGChartz, n.d.). As such, the *Pokémon* games have an immense fan base. *Pokémon Red* and *Pokémon Blue* were single-player RPGs in which players took on the role of an adolescent tasked with capturing and battling creatures known as Pokémon. In an ongoing process of capturing and training new *Pokémon*, players battle with non-

playable characters (NPCs) and wild *Pokémon* throughout the course of their journey. There have been minor changes throughout the games, such as different regions, new nemeses, and new Pokémon, but the core gameplay mechanics have remained largely the same across the various new installments in the series.

While there are many design features that allow the *Pokémon* games to appeal to a diverse audience, we choose to focus and elaborate on three in this article. First, Nintendo enforces a rigid structure for how players are able to communicate with one another. There are a variety of social features within the *Pokémon* games, but there are few venues for harassment and other antagonistic practices. Second, *Pokémon* has allowed for increased customization of characters as the series has progressed, but it remains a minimal feature that keeps the character as a relatively blank slate that players can develop—or not—as they play. Finally, the *Pokémon* series supports a variety of ways to approach gameplay, catering to a diverse array of play styles. In this paper, we explore these design features in greater detail. Before we continue, we want to note that we do not claim that the *Pokémon* series is a bastion of perfection among myriad failures. There are features of *Pokémon* that could promote or support diversity better, and many of the design features we outline in this series were likely not designed with inclusivity in mind. However, we argue that as a series that is not overtly concerned with themes of diversity, the *Pokémon* series nonetheless allows for diversity in ways that we believe are worthy of discussion.

Conceptual Framework

Games and gameplay are designed experiences (Squire, 2006). As such, it is important to consider design when analyzing the experiences that players have with a game. Though they refer to physical tools and artifacts as much as digital tools and interactions, we believe that literature on distributed intelligence (Pea, 1993) and on design affordances (Norman, 1988) can be

useful for this discussion. Pea (1993) describes how the mind rarely works alone. Rather, intelligence is *distributed* across other people, tools, and environments. Similarly, we believe that even in a single-player play experience, players never play alone. Tools–or "smart tools," as Lave (1998) has called them–carry intelligence *in* them. They carry the patterns of reasoning brought by the designers and are part of a greater cultural history. Games do this too.

Designed objects and experiences have affordances, which include both perceived and actual properties. A classic example is the properties of a door handle: a horizontal handle on a door affords a user to *push*, while a vertical handle affords *pulling* (Norman, 1988). More recently, scholars have argued that virtual spaces have affordances too, such as online communities (Dalgarno & Lee, 2010) and games (Squire, 2006). Like with the physical artifacts in the distributed intelligence (Pea, 1993) and human computer interaction literature (Norman, 1993), how players engage with a game not only reflects their own intentions, but also the intentions and desires of the designers, which shape how players can, and cannot, interact with the game.

Squire (2006) describes that the actions that take place in a game are a synthesis between the character and the affordances, or capacities for action, that the player has. Through "recursive cycles of perceiving and acting, thinking and doing with the game system" (p. 22), players eventually develop their own unique way of *being* in the world as the game character. Players are not able to do or be anything that they want in the game world: "they are motivated by challenges set up by designers…and are limited by the constraints of the game system" (p. 22). The designers' decisions about what content does or does not go into a game, or about how players are able to interact with their character, are ideological (Squire, 2006) and laden with values. In the following sections, we describe that several features in the evolving design of the *Pokémon* series afford diversity among players. These include a heavily bounded

communication system, a minimal but flexible character representation, and the ability for players to choose from multiple play styles.

Short and Sweet: Restricting Communication Curtails Harassment.

Although it could technically be considered a single-player game, the *Pokémon* play experience is inherently social. What made *Pokémon* game play novel at the time of its debut was that players needed friends to play the complementary game in order to obtain all of the Pokémon in the game's universe. For example, in order to catch all of the Pokémon in the first generation, players with the *Pokémon Red Version* needed to trade with players who owned the *Pokémon Blue Version* to catch every Pokémon in that particular generation. This design feature effectively socialized the game system—the Gameboy—which, due to its small size, generally provided only solitary gaming experiences. Contrary to the prevailing stereotype of gaming and game players as anti-social, *Pokémon* has always required social interaction to complete game objectives, such as collecting all of the Pokémon. It is possible to complete the game as a single-player experience, but players who want to catch all of the Pokémon need to connect with other players to do so.

Despite the social components of the series, Nintendo is known for its prohibitive communication format (Orland, 2013), a design choice that many players have criticized. In the *Pokémon* games on the Nintendo 3DS, players are only allowed to communicate vocally with others with whom they have Friended on their 3DS systems outside of the game itself. There is little to no vocal or textual communication between *Pokémon* players who are not friends, with the exception of "shout outs," a feature new to the *Pokémon X* and *Y* series (Game Freak, 2013). Shout outs are 16-character messages associated with a single player that can be seen by the community at large. Players are warned that they should only post appropriate messages in their shout outs. This system has been considered by some members of the

Pokémon community to be frustrating, as it is hard to coordinate trades and battles with other players when there is little communication between players (Marriland, 2014). To work around the game's limited communication systems, players coordinate in spaces outside the game, such as forums, social media networks, or in local game stores.

Despite some players' complaints about the restrictive communication system, we believe there are definite benefits to the design. Microsoft's player communication platform, *XBox Live*, is notorious for sexism and harassment (Grey, 2013). The types of hate and harassment that many women and minority groups encounter on less restrictive services like *XBox Live* simply are not present in *Pokémon* games. Because there is no way for players to communicate verbally unless they are friends, they cannot be judged, and subsequently punished or harassed, as they are in *XBox Live* (Grey, 2013). Any two players who want to battle or trade must both agree to participate in game-related activities, making it very difficult to engage in prolonged behaviors of abuse or harassment. And because the textual content produced by players is censored, it is exceedingly difficult for players to harass other players by typing offensive messages in their shout outs. That is, the design decision to heavily bound communication among players affords a harassment-free zone for players who typically are the targets of harassment.

Are You a Boy or a Girl?

Unlike recent-role-playing games in which players report spending up to several hours perfecting the appearance of their character, character creation in *Pokémon* has always been minimal. The first five games in the *Pokémon* series—*Red*, *Blue*, *Yellow*, *Gold*, and *Silver*—all featured (ambiguously) white male protagonists—the norm for the majority of games (Williams et al., 2009). In 2000, Game Freak released *Pokémon: Crystal*, which was considered to be an updated release of the second generation of the series (Harris, 2001). This was the first game in which the player could select either a male or female avatar.

The new ability for players to opt to play as a female avatar was well received among critics (IGN, 2000; Gamespot, 2000). It has also been well received among the games' fans, who have often poked fun at the scene in the beginning of the game's narrative where the Pokémon Professor asks the young character if they are a boy or a girl (#are you a boy or a girl, n.d.). We acknowledge that the boy/girl dichotomy in *Pokémon* treats gender as a binary rather than embracing more modern notions that gender is a culturally informed practice of production and performance (Butler, 1990). We hope that in the future, games transcend rather than reinforce gender as a simple binary construct. However, we also want to acknowledge that that giving players the option to select their gender is an improvement on the previous iterations of the series in which the character was male by default.

Selecting the playable character remained a simple matter of indicating a preference for a boy or girl until the release of the *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y* games in late 2013. In *Pokémon X* and *Pokémon Y*, players received the added ability to select from a variety of skin tones, haircuts, and outfits. This new feature was not designed to be obtrusive. For players who thought that changing their character's hair throughout the game was frivolous or distracting, there was no need to make any changes to the character after the initial character creation setup at the beginning of the game. However, for players who enjoy the freedom to change their character's skin color, hair, or clothing as they progress through the game, the ability was there. This relatively simple new feature affords players greater freedom to choose who they want to be on their *Pokémon* adventure.

Williams et al. (2009) argue that people who rarely see characters that are similar to them in media may experience feelings of being unimportant and powerless. They further explain that "groups of people who are not represented are slowly rendered invisible by virtue of their relative inaccessibility in the knowledge store" (p. 821). On *Pokémon*

forums and message boards, many players describe having felt this way and express that they are pleased with the new ability to select skin tone and hair color. A long-time female *Pokémon* fan explains on the Marriland *Pokémon* community:

> Think of it this way; I'm a black female and have been playing as a white girl for a DECADE. Now THAT'S unfair. There's never been any blondes either. The light skin/dark hair combo has been in EVERY Pokémon game. I'm happy with the change. (Pocketmaster, 2013)

By making the decision to allow players to select their race and gender, the *Pokémon* developers enable players who are traditionally underrepresented and "rendered invisible" to feel included, consequential, and more powerful. (1)

Gee (2005) observes, "good games offer players identities that trigger a deep investment on the part of the player" (p. 7). There are a great many games that offer players a substantive emotional connection with a well-written, well-developed character. But other games "offer a relatively empty character whose traits the player must determine, but in such a way that the player can create a deep and consequential life history in the game world for the character" (p. 7). The *Pokémon* series falls in this category. The playable character in *Pokémon* is largely a blank slate onto which players can project personality traits and motivations if they so choose. By adding the ability to choose the protagonist's gender and race, the developers afford players additional tools for creating that "deep and consequential life history," but it is fully optional. A deep and well-developed character is not designed into the game—the character actually remains relatively flat—but the game designed for flexibility for players to fill in the blanks to create a personally meaningful character. If the almost 80,000 *Pokémon* stories on the online community FanFiction.net are any indication, many players have filled in those blanks to expand on their character's experience.

Collect 'Em All. Or Don't. *Pokémon* Leaves It Up to You.

Among the greatest strengths in the design of the *Pokémon*

series is the number of play styles the series supports. *Pokémon* allows players a variety of ways to engage with the games, with the ability to shift seamlessly between them at will. Outlined below are just some of the ways that players may choose to approach *Pokémon*:

1. **Play the Narrative.** One way to approach a *Pokémon* game is to quite simply set off from your hometown and have a journey. You make your way from town to town, battling trainers, catching Pokémon, progressing merrily through the game. No wikis required. You need just a player, a system, and the game.
2. **Collect 'Em All**. Players were originally tasked to collect all 151 Pokémon in order to complete their Pokedexes. Now, across all of the games in the series, there are more than 700. With so many possible Pokémon to catch, enthusiasts of the games have endeavored to fill out their Pokedexes from the series' inception.
3. **Breed.** For players interested in maximizing the stats and the effectiveness of their Pokémon's abilities, there is such a thing as the perfect Pokémon, and some will go to great lengths to breed them. These players take advantage of various features in the game in order to optimize their Pokémon's stats by breeding the Pokémon that are likely to produce the perfect battle companion.
4. **Compete**. As the *Pokémon* games have evolved, so too has the stage for competitive play. Pokémon battles take on many forms—friendly competitions between friends, bitter rivalries among siblings, and tournaments that span local, regional, and even international player bases.

None of these play styles appear to be derided either by the game designers or by members of the *Pokémon*-playing community.

In contrast, the developers of the first-person shooter *Borderlands* series announced in 2012 a new skill tree for players who "suck at first-person shooters". Lacking a better term, the

team's lead designer dubbed this trajectory "the girlfriend skill tree" (Hamilton, 2012). Realizing that this way of presenting the new skill tree was offensive to many gamers, the team later clarified that "Girlfriend" wasn't the official title for the tree, but the initial label stuck, evolving into what is now popularly known as the *Girlfriend Mode* of play style in which one player in a team takes a less demanding support role, presumably because this player is less skilled than their partner (Griffiths, 2012).

That the skill tree for less experienced players became known as *Girlfriend Mode* is not exceptional in itself. It is illustrative of a larger trend in games in which the default skilled player is male, and women are often assumed to be less competitive, more novice, or even disinterested and playing for ulterior motives. Female players are often accused of being Fake Geek Girls, presumably playing video games more for attention than because they enjoy playing. Many games offer players different avenues of activity to focus on, but often there are subtle undertones suggesting that there is a *right* way to play, or at least that one way is more elite and respected among the game's aficionados. Additionally, play styles and genres come packed with connotations and assumptions about the people who play them. Genres like puzzle games and social games are often labeled casual and feminine. Individuals who identify as gamers often take condescending attitudes toward players of these games, claiming they aren't *real* games.

Among the greatest strengths of the *Pokémon* series is that it allows for a variety of ways to engage with the games without resorting to unnecessary labels and implied connotations about a player's gender, interests, or abilities. There is no one *right* way to approach *Pokémon* games. Instead, there are many ways to play. Some are elegantly simple. Some are mind-bogglingly complex, requiring a variety of resources to master. Many others fall somewhere between. We argue that this flexibility demonstrates the elegance of design that permeates throughout the *Pokémon* series.

Discussion

In this article, we have outlined how several design features of the *Pokémon* games make affordances for diversity. Rarely do the *Pokémon* games draw explicit attention to themes of diversity and inclusivity. Yet, features like the limited channels for communication, ongoing changes to the character selection process, and the ability to pursue different play styles all speak to an approach to design that does not make presuppositions of who the player is, or should be. The *Pokémon* games invite players to craft their own play experience and to respect others as they do the same.

The smart design of the *Pokémon* series could serve as inspiration for other developers as they explore new features, content, and designs in the future. We do not claim that *all* games should adopt these same design principles, but rather, argue that these features can serve as a point of reflection for how developers can design for diversity. For example, we would not want all player communication systems to be as prohibitive as the *Pokémon* system. However, the design of player communication systems reflects the assumptions, intentions, and values of the people designing them. Designers are responsible for considering how their systems do and do not allow for harassment, particularly more invasive forms of sexist, racist, and homophobic abuse. We welcome a future where developers find creative ways for players to connect without supporting or tolerating abuse and harassment.

We believe that well-established series provide a good opportunity for game developers to experiment with new types of characters. As we saw with the *Pokémon* series, the developers were able to provide their players with more character customization options (e.g., selection of gender and race), which appeared to be well received by the series' player communities. Other popular franchises have seen similar successes. The popularity of AMC's *Walking Dead* television series enabled the developers at Telltale to introduce a cast of characters that is

much more diverse than the average video game. The first season of the series had an African American male protagonist, which was notable because historically, African American males have rarely been featured in games outside of more stereotypical roles in sports games and *Grand Theft Auto*-style gang settings (Williams, 2009). These examples suggest that established game series and studios are able to successfully incorporate new concepts and characters into their content in ways that fans accept, and even celebrate, for their creativity and customizability. Diversity can thrive beyond the indie game scene.

Finally, developers are responsible for the connotations attached to their designs. They should take care to avoid making any of their players feel judged or condescended to based on their preferred play style or experience with the game. The *Borderlands'* "Girlfriend Mode" could—and probably *should*—have been an opportunity for the team to advertise an inclusive new play style that is welcoming to new players. Instead, the team inadvertently offended potential players by attaching a gendered judgment on their new mode of play. You cannot be inclusive if you are being condescending.

Designs inevitably reflect the values of their designers. The very designed nature of games implies that designers make choices and decisions about how to represent the world and characters, about how players can interact with the game, including what kinds of actions the game affords and what kinds of experiences the game allows for. This presents both a challenge and an opportunity for game designers interested in exploring new ways of welcoming diversity and inclusivity in games. As gamers and scholars, we look forward to playing and reflecting on upcoming design innovations and inspirations from the game industry.

Endnotes

(1) The most recent releases in the *Pokémon* franchise *Omega Ruby* and *Alpha Sapphire* did not include the option for players to

select their character's race. It could be because these games were re-makes of previous installments in the series. We hope to see this option in future original *Pokémon* releases.

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ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN HYPERSEXUALIZED PIXELS: A PARTNERSHIP WITH LARA CROFT

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The infamous Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise (created by Eidos Interactive, 1996), was heralded as both a strong female protagonist and a hyper-sexualized, dissocialized trophy-avatar cyber-persona. Lara has been referenced in discussions of the predominance of male producers throughout the history of game development (e.g. LeJacq, 2013) and as an example of the created object of masculine fantasy (Kennedy, 2008). The reboot *Tomb Raider* (2013), developed more than a decade after the original, offers an opportunity to explore the evolution of "the feminine" in a notorious and contentious context. By comparing the narrative archetypes and the player-character relationship of both the original *Tomb Raider* and the 2013 reboot, we examine how the game-play is an experience-driven and highly visceral narrative which opens a door to the possibilities of a greater understanding and inclusion of diverse audiences within the gaming industry.

Evolving possibilities of narrative forms

Lara's original persona and ethos was developed and preserved in three titles released in the late 90s: *Tomb Raider* (1996), *Tomb Raider* II (1997) and *Tomb Raider* III (1998), as well as multiple spin-offs. The responses to the Lara Croft character depended upon the lens through which she was perceived and understood. She was the first video game digital celebrity (Flanagan, 1999). She was a "fetish object of the male gaze" (Schleiner, 2001, p. 222). She was "a symbol of cool, appearing in lifestyle magazines and throughout the media landscape…," "a favorite icon of the era's girl power movements" (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca, 2013, p. 89-90) and a "cyber heroine" (Deuber-Mankowsky, 2005). The complexity of the Lara Croft ethos came, in part, from her capability as the franchise's protagonist combined with her exaggerated femininity; "Lara exudes feminine masculinity, and her role, rather than challenging masculine dominance, feeds it and makes this dominance acceptable through feminine curves, seductive lips, and over-sized eyes," (Lancaster, 2004, p. 88). Deuber-Mankowski (2005) also saw a decisive split between the character's behavior and appearance: "Lara Croft's femininity is reduced, in a very traditional manner, to her oversize female attributes. One sees her femininity by looking at her, even when her behavior is masculine through and through" (p. 47). If the past Lara Croft exemplified extremes of both femininity (appearance) and masculinity (behaviors), what are the gendered possibilities for a Lara Croft re-imagined with a more complex narrative, deeper levels of interactivity, and a more diverse player audience? *Tomb Raider* (2013) contains a robust collection of narrative devices as well as a more cohesive narrative arc than that of Lara's past adventures. By using the classical narrative archetypes defined by both Jung (1947/1981) and Wolff (1956), we can examine gender in relation to Lara's behaviors rather than just her appearance.

As Wolff (1956) observed in fairytales, mythology, literature, and film studies, feminine characters within fictional (and virtual) spaces divide into four feminine archetypes: Queen,

Amazon, Hetaera, and Medial (see Figure 1). The feminine archetypes act as the equal and opposite balance to Jung's masculine archetypes: King, Warrior, Lover, and Magician. These archetypes do not represent or dictate the performance of identity within real spaces but instead represent storytelling mechanics that are recognized and repeated within fictional space as modalities undertaken in the performance of character to push the narrative arc forward (Campbell, 2008).

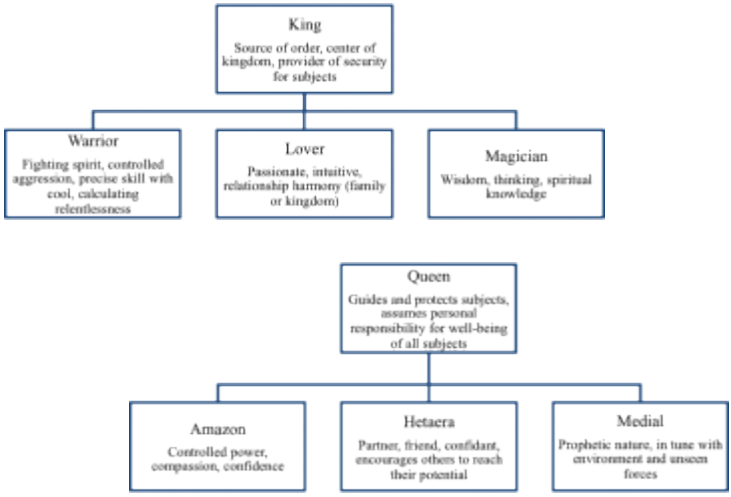

Figure 5: Masculine and Feminine Narrative Archetypes

An observable tendency for Lara's behaviors is evident in the many different narratives of the *Tomb Raider* franchise prior to the 2013 reboot. Both Lancaster (2004) and Deuber-Mankowsky (2005) describe Lara Croft as embodying the masculine archetypes in her behaviors in contrast to her hyper-feminine outer appearance. Most predominant is Lara's representation of the King archetype. The King archetype is the center of his own universe, bringing about a calm confidence and reassurance of his own importance while understanding and controlling the powers of the other masculine archetypes (Moore, 1991). The King acts decisively and calmly in a crisis. When Lara is faced with unbelievable mystic environments, enemies, or events in the

original games, she behaves like the King. For example, during the climax of *Tomb Raider* (1996) the antagonist, Natla, is transformed into a giant mutant abomination against which Lara must battle. Although these supernatural forces, even within fictional space, would shake most people, Lara is at home among them. She acts calmly and decisively in response to the supernatural, which suggests the unflappable mastery of the situation which defines the King archetype. Her role includes an understanding of the supernatural world inherent to the Magician archetype, and the confidence to successfully harness the aggression of the Warrior archetype. Repeatedly, Lara presents an ethos that is capable, knowledgeable, and confident. In her representation of the King archetype, Lara experiences the powerful emotions of the Lover archetype but controls them for the good of the kingdom. For example, in *Tomb Raider: Legend* (2006) Lara searches for her lost mother, Amelia Croft, who disappeared in a mystic portal early in Lara's childhood. Lara as the Lover archetype is highlighted by her fierce loyalty to her mother, and her overwhelming rage when she discovers who is responsible for her mother's disappearance, but as the King archetype Lara controls her impulse to execute the culprit. These repeated patterns of masculine-archetypes-associated behavior throughout the franchise previously make Lara's behavioral tendencies in *Tomb Raider* (2013) particularly interesting.

In the reboot *Tomb Raider* (2013) Lara's behaviors, while still archetypal, reflect a more nuanced interaction between her narrative role and her feminine appearance. The Queen archetype emphasizes more nurturing and less instrumental interactions with other characters in the game. The Queen archetype is motivated to give life, nourishment, and protection to those around her. When the plane is shot down at the beginning of the game, Lara's first initiative is to rescue the stranded pilot. When another character, Roth, tells her to save herself instead, Lara refuses and acts against his directions. While still in the role of leader, Lara's goals and interests shift to

accommodate the needs of those around her rather than continuing the immediate mission at hand. When a pack of wolves injure Roth, Lara bandages his leg and her primary objective immediately changes to become the retrieval of medicine for him rather than escaping the island.

Like the King archetype, the Queen understands and accesses a combination of the other three feminine archetypes. As the protagonist of *Tomb Raider* (2013), Lara must engage in combat with the other characters, typically a Warrior archetypical role; however, the corresponding female archetype, the Amazon, ventures into the unexplored and mysterious spaces, traditionally occupied by men. Unlike the Warrior archetype, which navigates the control of one's aggression, the Amazon represents controlled power and the confidence to be compassionate. Although Lara has always resided comfortably within typically male realms, the difference in *Tomb Raider* (2013) is Lara's retention of her emotional self. While the Warrior archetype stresses the disconnection of emotion to one's work, which we see in Lara's ruthlessness in earlier titles, the Amazon remains connected emotionally, but rejects the need for dependency. The Amazon, through Lara, is expressed throughout the *Tomb Raider* reboot through her remorse toward killing her captors.

In addition to the Amazon's deeper connection between aggression and compassion, the Hetaera archetype comes to light in Lara's interactions with the other survivors on the island. The purpose of the Hetaera is to relate to the psyches of those around her and elevate them to their balanced mature archetypal states. The relationships that Lara maintains with the male survivors underscore this elevation of those around her. Both Roth and Alex sacrifice themselves to save Lara, acting as servants in service to a King/Queen archetype. She does not play the damsel-in-distress, nor does she coldly sacrifice the other characters for the greater good of the game goal. Instead, Lara

insists on protecting them to the best of her ability, inspiring their sacrificial acts.

Similarly to the wise Magician masculine archetype, the Medial archetype represents the 'oracle' or the avenue by which an individual is connected to the spiritual realm. While the old Lara understood the supernatural and manipulated it for her needs, Lara's behaviors in *Tomb Raider* (2013) more closely align to the Medial archetypal role of a seer. She illuminates the unseen or unknown. This can be most clearly defined at the beginning of the game when Lara hears a voice during the storm that causes the plane to crash. She then reveals this knowledge and understanding about the island to her companions later in the story. In addition, Lara's ability to believe in the mystic forces at play on the island and her ability to act on that belief underscores her connection to and understanding of the spiritual realms.

Lara, like the mythological Greek goddess Artemis (Bolen, 1984, Leadbetter, 2005), encompasses the totality of the archetypal feminine as self-actualization: Queen, Amazon, Hetaera, and Medial. Using the lens of narrative archetypes outlines Lara's transformation from a masculine role performed by a feminine avatar, to a more balanced persona. The transformation is not an outer change that can be observed by her physical avatar (aside from her scarring), but instead it unbinds representation of her femininity from her body and connects her self-actualized femininity with her behaviors. Put simply, in *Tomb Raider* (2013) Lara is a woman because she behaves like a woman and not only because she looks like a woman. This narrative contrast opens the door to redefining the relationship between the player and Lara by reimagining the central ethos that lies within Lara as an independent agent with whom the player collaborates.

Collaborating with Lara Croft

Throughout the game-play of *Tomb Raider* (2013) the player experiences the hero's journey (Campbell, 2008) through these feminine narrative archetypes and Lara's consequent growth

through her trials. This makes Lara a powerful and independent hero in her own right. However, when introduced to the system of play the player is immediately immersed in the spectacle of game-play through the cinematic dynamism of the storytelling. The player's first interaction with Lara within the game is to swing Lara back and forth in order to escape her bonds. In doing so, however, the avatar falls and an exposed spike punctures her side. The player must participate by pressing the corresponding button in order for Lara to find the strength to pull the spike from her side. Thus, from this very beginning of game-play Lara is wounded and vulnerable, and she was designed that way. Ron Rosenberg, Executive Producer for *Tomb Raider* (2013) said, "When people play Lara, they don't really project themselves into the character…. They're more like 'I want to protect her.' There's this sort of dynamic of 'I'm going to this adventure with her and trying to protect her'" (in Schreier, 2012, ¶3-4). The producers of *Tomb Raider* (2013) wrote the narrative arc as the origin story of Lara Croft; "…She is literally turned into a cornered animal. It's a huge step in her evolution: she's forced to either fight back or die." (Rosenberg in Schreier, 2012, ¶10). The *Tomb Raider* (2013) Lara Croft has a very real sense of humanity and mortality and her fight with survival is a driving force for the narrative. While her struggle is certainly a mechanic of the narrative, it also complicates the connection between Lara and the player.

Lara Croft has held a starring role in the debates about how interactive video games incorporate the audience into storytelling, and how players negotiate their experience of narrative through games. Feminist theorists (e.g. Burrill, 2008; Kennedy, 2002) have described Lara Croft as a materialized prosthetic of the self, as an object of masculine gaze, or as merely a pretty instrument with which to effect change within the game. In contrast to cinematic events with passive viewers, games invite active agency in the progress of the narrative arc. Burrill (2008) suggests that the player experiences a simulacrum of the self as an active viewer of his or her own participation and

performance in *Tomb Raider* (1996). The audience jumps into the role of the protagonist and Lara's avatar becomes an extension of the player, a materialized prosthetic (of self), which the player wears in order to participate in the narrative of the game. At the same time, Lara exists as an object of voyeuristic appeal to the gaming audience. She represents the quintessential object of masculine fantasy, fully embodying the masculine gaze and the visual spectacle (Kennedy, 2002). This is evidenced by the plethora of explicit fan art, fan fiction, pornography, and game modifications created to enhance her sexual appearance (c.f. Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001). The visual spectacle of Lara potentially overpowers the (masculine) protagonist behaviors with which the player can connect, but Lara is also a vehicle by which the player navigates the virtual realm, being both an object outside of the player and an extension of the player's self. Burrill (2008) suggests that the simultaneous possession of Lara's female body and the recognition of Lara as the object of the masculine gaze allow the imagined male audience to perform normative masculine behaviors safely while extending into Lara, who functions as the outer-bodied self.

The contrast between Lara's exaggerated feminine appearance and her performance as protagonist reinforces a more definitive separation between Lara and the player. The original Lara persona facilitated this relationship of separation with the player by occasionally disregarding the convention of the fourth wall that separates the player from the story. In *Tomb Raider* (1996), Lara frequently spoke to the player. Throughout the game, Lara retained her autonomy from the player by acknowledging the masculine gaze peering in from outside her defined virtual world, and having both a simulated knowledge of herself and the player (Gee, 2003). In the final cut-scene of *Tomb Raider II* (1997), the game shows the inside of Lara's mansion, floating along the floor of her bathroom, then panning upward to reveal Lara about to disrobe and enter the running shower. She immediately acknowledges the player's presence, saying "Haven't you seen

enough?" and picking up a shotgun resting beside the shower and firing at the player, ending the cut-scene. In addition to this violent act against the player, she consistently recognizes the player as an otherworldly being. She often responds to the player with a disobedient "No" when the player requests an action she is unable to perform. She reinforces the notion that she is not a prosthetic of the player's Self, but instead an object unto herself, recognizing the masculine gaze and gazing challengingly back at the player in return. This notion reinforces the construct of Lara as a vehicle, stagnant by herself, but through whom the player may visually enjoy and manually traverse the virtual environmental puzzle.

In *Tomb Raider* (2013) the Lara Croft persona embodies a new ethos, and she behaves more like a complex cinematic character. The level by which the game-play demands player participation, the vulnerability and humanity given to Lara, and her inevitable deaths, all graft an emotional connection between the player and Lara as equal allies. Examining game-play reveals how her reflection of a more feminine ethos through behavior, and a deeper level of interactivity, contributes to this partnership.

The player does not exist physically within the virtual space of *Tomb Raider* (2013), and so an avatar like Lara is required for the existence of the narrative as well as for the exploration of the island. Alternatively, the player is required to participate within the narrative by manipulating the action of Lara to push the story forward. By caring about Lara as a person unto herself outside of the player, consisting of more than a programmed image, the player is drawn into the game as an invisible character. The player operates not as a passive audience of a cinematic event, but rather as an active force within the virtual space that defends Lara from death throughout the narrative.

Tomb Raider (2013) demands the player's continual active participation and interaction with narrative progression. The player's experience of co-producing the narrative while simultaneously journeying with Lara in partnership exemplifies

the design possibilities of interactive storytelling. Crystal Dynamics, the studio behind the 2013 reboot, took full advantage of modern options for telling a story through a game:

You sometimes hear discussions about whether something is a design-driven game or a story-driven game. For us this was neither, it was an experience-driven game. We wanted to bring to bear the emotional power of story and the engagement and emotional investment of game-play – we wanted you to feel like you were on this journey with Lara.
(Noah Hughes, Creative Director of Crystal Dynamics in Stuart, 2013, ¶12)

The visual cinematic nature of the game creates a more intimate relationship between the player and Lara by bringing the player into closer virtual proximity to her and giving a deeper understanding of her core ethos as it unravels throughout the narrative.

While the player controls Lara's movements and pilots her actions as in the previous titles, the player also has the responsibility to participate within interactive cut-scenes. In gaming these cut-scenes are traditionally used to progress the story arc, but now are being used to engage the player in a mechanical test. By pressing the corresponding controller button or keystroke at the correct time, the player helps Lara meet the challenge of the cut-scene and escape, or be killed if the partners fail. At this point the story continues, or they begin again from the start of the cut-scene.

This event of death, as a mechanic of play, is not unusual. Most game-play structures have a retry-upon-failure model, which returns the player to an earlier instance if he or she fails or the avatar is killed. However, the representation of failure in *Tomb Raider* (2013) is shockingly visceral. If the player fails to perform the mechanic properly or prudently throughout the interactive cut-scenes, then Lara is shown being gruesomely killed in a way consistent with the area and circumstances. When the player fails, the grisly death that Lara suffers reinforces her

vulnerability and is a narrative mechanism used to elicit an emotional response; however, the response is not one of sympathy but of remorse. Lara's life is put into the hands (literally) of the player to protect through proper and active participation. This method of storytelling does not simply invite interactivity and experience, but instead demands it in order for the hero, Lara, to survive. The "fight or die" mentality that Rosenberg underlined previously is not solely Lara's struggle, but a cooperative struggle for both the player and Lara. The player must actively engage in the game or Lara will graphically "die" before the eyes of the player. The negative experience of watching Lara's death due to the player's inability reinforces this emotional commitment.

In a sense, this graphical death construct has existed all along. In the original *Tomb Raider* (1996) for example, if the player fails to pilot Lara over a gap she falls into darkness, presumably to her death. The screen fades to black and the player is prompted to retry. The emotional ties between the player and Lara are separated because, while the player assumes the agency of responsibility over Lara, she is never visibly destroyed and thus exists as an inexhaustible disposable possession that continues to be usable by the player. In contrast, the *Tomb Raider* (2013) visual spectacle of the likable hero dying gruesome and horrible deaths due to the player's own mechanical mistake manifests a more emotionally driven motivation for play.

Lara's complex narrative roles and her vulnerability encourage the player to connect emotionally with the character and the game, but does not necessarily facilitate the familiar heteronormative modality of the strong male hero rescuing the weak female. Instead, the player's initiative to establish a sense of camaraderie with the avatar introduces a new mode of interaction between the player and Lara, namely through the role of partner within the virtual space, with equality given to each party. While the player compensates for Lara's vulnerability, the player is also bound to operate in accordance with the

capabilities and limitations of Lara within the story space. The player's ability to interact with the virtual world increases as Lara's ability increases. Lara's ability to progress through the narrative relies on the player's initiative to participate; likewise, if Lara did not exist within that space the player would have no avenue for interaction to move the story forward.

Without the participation of the player that the video game medium requires, Lara would arguably triumph within the narrative space as the hero. Lara's narrative could be played out as film, entirely without the player's participation. Instead, Lara's vulnerability creates the need for the player's contribution to the partnership, while also inviting the player into the experiential space of the narrative alongside Lara. The injection of mortality into Lara's story does not weaken her or make her a "cornered animal," as Rosenberg claims, but instead facilitates the need for partnership with the player, creating a more balanced relationship and a deeper interaction with the story being told.

Lara Croft as the modern hero

This analysis touches on a few key components of an invested relational partnership created by carefully designed storytelling devices, but the implications of this level of interactivity are much greater than a single game-play experience. The ability to communicate through storytelling has and will continue to change as we uncover and create new relationship structures which enhance and modify the experience of both story and play simultaneously.

In the past, Lara has represented the object of masculine fantasy, as well as being the vehicle for the performance of identity, but now she is pushing back against the predispositions of what (and who) she is supposed to be. *Tomb Raider* (2013) offers a narrative protagonist who promotes an equal partnership between the player and the character in creating the narrative of the game. Through Lara we can explore the conditions by which we experience interactivity within the narrative realm. With her mortality and dependence upon the player, she becomes one

half of an equal partnership, the whole of which comprises the entirety of the role of protagonist. This partnership is inclusive to a wider audience of players and invites an imagined audience beyond the stereotypical gamer identity (c.f. MacCallum-Stewart, 2014).

From a broader perspective, as the technology surrounding game-play improves and allows for increasingly more complex avenues for interactivity between the real and virtual subjects, what new relationships will emerge? How will we differentiate between these subjects and their respective realms when power and sovereignty is shared between artificial and real intelligences cooperatively? How do these concepts redefine the nature in which we discuss, produce, and participate in storytelling? Are contemporary producers concerned that the male audience will reject a powerful female hero unless some partnership is made with the player, or is the gaming culture ready to broaden the scope of inclusion by producing and encouraging games of participation and partnership with a larger audience? Is the partnership with Lara Croft replicable between masculine protagonists and male gamers, or will male gamers automatically slide into the role of power discussed by previous theorists? With Lara's next adventure in production at Crystal Dynamics, *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), further analysis and different perspectives is required to more fully understand the cultural and perceptual implications of these narrative possibilities.

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"THIS IS MY STORY": REPRESENTATION AND CHANGE IN FINAL FANTASY X-2

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In 2003, *Final Fantasy X-2* (*FFX-2*) was released as the first direct sequel to a main entry in the series. It was met with critical praise and fan disdain, due in part to the vast differences between it and its predecessor, *Final Fantasy X* (*FFX*). Also in 2003, I was twelve years old and finding vast differences between elementary and middle school, between the "cool" kids and the "geeks," and between girls and boys. Feeling uncomfortable in my own skin with the different identities I was forming, I played video games frequently, as I enjoyed losing myself for awhile in big, unique, beautiful, sorrowful worlds. Whereas my experiences of *FFX* have been shared with my brother, father, and friends, *FFX-2* has been mostly mine alone. Any additional moments in my weekends were devoted to it, and I loved all 230 hours I spent with my original save file (still the highest hour count I've logged in a single file). The game resonated with me in ways I would not be able to name until much later, until around the game's rerelease in March of 2014, which I have been playing as an adult who has chosen games as a career path. Now I am grateful that I found *FFX-2* when I did, as it is exactly what I needed at the time and perhaps made it possible for me to be where I am now.

As I encountered the awkward trials and errors of adolescence and now as I reflect on diversity, the process of inclusion, and fostering empathy for others, change and difference have been tricky subjects. It is often emotionally easier to note similarities between oneself and others, or between the past and the present, so as to justify and validate one's own way of interacting with the world and preserve times during which one felt comfortable and happy. Yet, change and difference, across both time and people, are crucial to positive social interactions and the growth achieved through making meaning of experiences in the world. These are ultimately essential to the ever-churning, 'forward'-moving innovation that is valued in much of modernity, including in the communities around games. Representation of people, events, and ideas is a large part of how media respond to social change, and thus as deeply seeded structural issues such as sexism and racism are aired and discussed in mainstream society, mainstream games too have increasingly sought ways to represent differences, both real and fictional, from the tired narrative of the 18-25 young white male "gamer" and game character. But, I argue, this is not entirely new. In this piece, I will consider 2003's *FFX-2* through both critical and personal lenses, wrapping my own experiences around Yuna and her story while exploring how change and difference is the potency of the game in all of its facets, from its battle system and mechanics to its world, the characters that inhabit it, and the story told within.

I might have originally ascribed my deep appreciation for *FFX-2*'s characters to story elements revealed through cutscenes, the parts of the game that are the least guided by the player's actions and thought processes and are the easiest to convey to are not as steeped in games. However, having learned more about analyzing games, I now recognize the power of games as systems that, at their most successful as exemplars of the medium, inextricably intertwine narrative, dialogue, and the mechanics–the methods, actions, and responses of inputs that mediate a player's interactions with a game (Sicart 2008). All storytelling in

games can be distinct from other media forms primarily through these mechanics. As characters are a part of storytelling, the representation of personal identities in games is not limited to visual character design or what a character says and instead also includes how the player can directly act upon that character. Or, indeed, the game's world in general, where representation and identity can also lie through the implicit systems at work therein. Mechanics are their own form of argument, one that runs further below the surface by dictating the way a system works on its agents, both characters and player.

In *FFX-2,* the main mechanics serve exploration and the battle system. The latter forms the primary point of interaction, as with most games in the Japanese tradition of the role-playing genre, making battle systems also the primary point of innovative design in such games. *FFX-2*'s unique battle system hinges on the unpredictability that occurs when characters and enemies act concurrently. Rather than continuing with *FFX*'s Conditional Turn Based (CTB) style, which encourages deliberate, strategic planning to optimize your party characters' limited actions in predictable, patterned battles, *FFX-2* marks a return to the series's Active Time Battle (ATB) style that requires quick decisions and coordinated actions from the player. To achieve this unpredictable, swiftly-paced play experience, or what Hunicke, LeBlanc, Zubek (2004) might call the dynamic, ATB moves in real time (adjustable in the settings to allow more time to browse battle menus), with different actions requiring different amounts of time for preparation and recovery before the next turn can be taken. Like in previous *Final Fantasy* games, all player-controlled characters and AI-controlled enemies adhere to this clock.

In another nod to older *Final Fantasy* titles, the characters of *FFX-2* can use dresspheres, or equippable outfits that change a character's statistics and abilities, much like the job system of *Final Fantasy V* and others, in which characters are cast into changeable "job" classes, such as the White/Black/Red/Blue

Mages, Monks, and Warriors, to change how they can interact with allies and enemies in battle. Job systems allow players to customize their game through the specialization of characters to suit individual play styles. However, *FFX-2*'s job system differs in that dresspheres can be changed during battle, thus allowing battles to showcase the player's ability to adapt to changing situations and needs. In addition, *FFX-2* offers particularly robust customization through the availability of three characters, fourteen dresspheres (plus a unique one for each character), and sixteen learnable abilities for each dressphere, with a high likelihood that no two playthroughs will see players making the same choices inside and outside of battle.

As critics at the time noted, *FFX-2*'s battle system works incredibly well and makes for a deep, rich, and unique play experience that melds the pre-, during, and post-battle strategizing of a role-playing game with the need for the quick thinking and precise timing of an action game. For me, I found the most joy in shaping the characters into roles and abilities that I thought suited their personalities and their pasts via *Final Fantasy X*. Sometimes I decided which character would master which dressphere simply because I liked their outfit best of the three. And although the options are there, I never skipped or shortened the dressphere change animations, which are unique to each woman. Instead, I savored each moment of battle, grinding for dozens and dozens of hours for the sake of growing the characters into the multifaceted, multi-talented, and yet individual women I imagined them to be. I think now that it's no coincidence I played this game as I transitioned from obscuring my gendered presentation to presenting much more conventionally femme, as I finally had *fun* playing with different kinds of femininity and how those could fit with my other identities. After all, if Yuna, Rikku, and Payne could save the world while wearing pink, ruffles, or rocking their sexuality, why couldn't I be skilled, taken seriously, and seen as "cool" (a term

loaded to adolescents, perhaps only of certain generations) while doing the same?

Indeed, through my focused and lengthy gameplay, another result arose: I found myself no longer needing the help I had had during other role-playing and action games, becoming skillful in my own right even as I started to wear dresses and hairbows. As I progressed through the game, I took pride in defeating tougher and tougher enemies, and I started to dive into the hidden challenges found in online forums such as those at *GameFAQs*. I would peruse these voraciously, marveling at other users' self-imposed challenges and thinking about how I would work through them. I brought manuals, strategy guides, and gaming magazines (R.I.P. *Official U.S. PlayStation Magazine*) to school, fascinated by the sheer wealth of things in each, along the way memorizing details and relationships that cemented my skills across the role-playing genre. This is still my favorite genre, due not just to the focus on deep, narrative character development, but also to my own feeling of being in control. In turn-based RPGs, I find even failures to be empowering, as I am still confident that my skill in understanding these systems will see me succeed with a certainty that life by no means always affords. In these games, I can contribute to characters' development, inside and outside the narrative canon, without having to lay personal stakes in identifying as a game designer, writer, or artist, all of which I've dreamed of becoming while at times feeling like I will never be qualified enough.

Yet, I have never been interested in asserting full power over a game system through skill and stat maxing; rather, I spend great lengths of time mentally in a game, either playing or not, to simply be in the world it creates. One of the biggest joys of strategy guides (now a budding hobbyist collection of mine) is the vibrancy I find on those pages. My conception of games has always been the bright colors and animations that brought to life the worlds within, due in no small part to the concept art, character models, and screenshots reproduced in the printed

materials I poured over daily and to which I am still drawn. Although I would not have put the same name to it, I identified early on as an explorative gamer (2) a là Bartle (1996), spending large amounts of time in several kinds of games, even fighters, looking around for nooks and crannies where a small secret or fun detail might lie. In the era of much fewer online console games, my play style affected no one but myself and those immediately around me. However, as play has moved increasingly online and I have begun studying games critically, it has become clearer how different people play games for different reasons. Because of this, games are designed by and for different ways of playing, accounting in part for the huge variety of games available today and before.

And for me, *FFX-2*'s rich world proved to be a fitting playscape for my own tendencies. The world is a continuation of *FFX*'s Spira, bearing the changes that one might expect two years after such events. Yuna and her friends had eternally destroyed the calamitous creature "Sin," leaving Spira free from fear of it for the first time in one thousand years. The Spira of *FFX-2* is visually very similar to that of *FFX*; in fact, many of the same assets– character and monster models, environments– were reused in the sequel. Yet, this Spira has replaced the fear it once knew all too well with frivolity, with citizens pursuing fun interests, enjoying rebuilt towns, and engaging with politics. The changes in environmental assets that were applied, such as new areas "discovered" in citizens' free time, suggest that Spira is not just livable, but lived in. Unlike many games, for which sequels are a continuation of mechanics in new settings, *FFX-2* is at once an evolution of and a different experience altogether from *FFX*, a unique way to build a world that can really reward fans. In fact, Spira's rejuvenation is treated as almost a primary character in the game, developing along the same path, in relation to the same events and situations, as the main characters do.

However, as much as *FFX-2* is about Spira, it is truly about Yuna, and her story is certainly one of change and one that

captivated me as an adolescent girl. In *FFX*, Yuna was a serious, dedicated, and altruistic summoner, a clerical figure who is charged with traveling across Spira, praying to and receiving the powers of creatures called aeons, then sacrificing oneself to the aeons to, in turn, defeat Sin for a decade of peace. After she found a way to destroy Sin forever, she also lost her lover, Tidus, who faded from existence along with Sin. In *FFX-2*, Yuna has set out with her cousin Rikku to venture across Spira once again, this time to find a way to bring Tidus back, and to have some fun in the meanwhile. In many ways, Yuna is the same; she cares deeply about others and becomes angry when there is needless violence and injustice. Yet, this Yuna is no longer willing to sacrifice her own dreams for others, nor is she willing to let others dictate her path. If Yuna is successful in bringing Tidus back (a condition dependent on satisfactory player progress), Yuna runs in front of him, nearly bowling him over as they run towards friends after their reunion. He says smiling, "You know, you've changed," to which she responds, "Well, you've missed a few things!" If *FFX* was Tidus's coming of age tale, in which he matured from a self-centered star athlete to a kind, unselfish friend and lover, *FFX-2* is Yuna's, in which she finds herself as a strong, adaptable, and vivacious leader in a world that has changed, is changing, and will continue to change, like she does as well.

As a preteen girl whose interests branded me, somewhat reluctantly, as a "geek," finding my own place amongst my peers was not an easy but an incredibly important task, in the way that such things seem very important to a twelve year old. Unfortunately, the medium I had chosen for my time, allowance money, and an intense emotional connection was nearly barren of anything that may have helped me find that place. I thought many game characters were exquisitely cool, like Sly Cooper, Ratchet and Clank, and Solid Snake, but they are ready-made cool, so to speak; the settings of those game follow these characters as men (anthropomorphized or not) who know what their place are, and everyone else does too. It was the *Final*

Fantasy series for me that told the stories of those who still had growing left to do, and in my experience, it had only been *FFX-2* that had told that of a woman's, or indeed three women's.

And they *are* cool. Yuna's headstrong but compassionate leadership, Rikku's fresh-faced and spunky go-getter attitude, and Paine's brooding but physically powerful ass-kicking were three personalities that I wanted to see in myself. While I was playing games at home, I was drawing a fair amount at school, usually in the anime/manga style of the Japanophile fan culture I had entered. I made up characters that were Yuna, Rikku, and Paine had they existed in my world: skilled in martial arts, fans of the same things I liked, caring friends, broadly liked, and attractive to men, a mix that did not seem possible to me at the time. I drew them and the *FFX-2* main cast through the beginning of high school in awe of women I thought were amazing and in hopes of finding the woman I would be proud to be.

Gender is a huge part of why *FFX-2* was important to me (and was a point of struggle for other *Final Fantasy* fans, as comments strewn about the internet would suggest), but it was not the only part. Less discussed in Yuna's character and background is her race. Spira has several races of humanoid; the most human-like are a normalized one and the Al Bhed. During *FFX* and for centuries before those events, the Al Bhed were blamed for Sin's creation and thus became victims of marginalization and discrimination in Spira. Exiled to the desert, the Al Bhed developed their own language and became the mechanical engineers of Spira's forbidden "machina," a kind of robotics thought to be Sin's harbinger. Main character Rikku is an Al Bhed character, and later in *FFX*, it is revealed that she is Yuna's cousin via Yuna's mother, who was Al Bhed. Thus, Yuna herself is multiracial, half Al Bhed and half the normalized race who had control over Spira's central religious and political institution. It would have been impossible to be an openly partial or full Al Bhed summoner, so Yuna chose to pass as a member of the normalized race. In *FFX-2*, after Sin was destroyed and the Al

Bhed were, to the people of Spira, redeemed, this need for secrecy ended, and Yuna was allowed to be herself racially as well as socially.

If stories about strong women in games were few and far between in my youth, games about any multiracial characters, let alone strong female ones, were not something I would have even thought to expect. But as a multiracial girl in the southern United States (in an area not too far from now infamous Charleston, SC), which continues to writhe in a history of institutionalized racial violence, and whose multiracial mother once needed to pass for white, I was thrilled that in another way, I could be just like Yuna and get out even stronger on the other side of this process of finding myself. It was a powerful experience for me and for my parents as well, who were pleasantly surprised to see these games that I was obsessing over tackled ideas and representations that were important, especially to a person like me, with grace and gravity. It is hardly surprising that my parents have since encouraged me to pursue that passion into a career, which I am now just beginning.

Alas, right as I began graduate school to study games, Gamergate broke out, spilling into the inboxes, social media feeds, and the minds and hearts of those who study, care about, and believe in games as a medium. Luckily, I have not been targeted (yet). However, I have been and still am deeply shaken, and I know I am not alone. It gnaws at me every time I sit down to write about games or to do anything to assert my place as a scholar or even as a gamer. But it is crucial that academics and others who respect games continue to speak on behalf of this medium in ways that many may find difficult and threatening, namely in defense of letting change and difference always be a positive and driving influence of designing, writing, playing, and communing around games.

Much of the research around games have investigated in what ways the medium is capable of powerful impact on players, whether through the good of learning or the ills of violence.

More often than not, researchers have found worthwhile benefits of playing games, from building ever important and marketable critical thinking and problem solving skills to meaningful social interactions and from cultivating intrinsic motivations towards different kinds of success to understanding and enacting ethical, even mindful decision making around the needs of others. Games are a unique medium, and via scholars' rigorous critical work, developers' innovative approaches to design, and the industry's massive revenues and franchises, it is clear that games are here to stay and have been accepted by a wider swath of society than ever before.

Yet, instances like Gamergate set back the cause of all who champion games. The "gamers" oftentimes are not and know they are not the stereotyped marketing demographic of the 1990s: the old narrative of the basement-dwelling, socially inept, 18-25 young white male. However, people being attacked, made to feel unsafe and unwelcome in a field they love and to which they have much to contribute, makes it difficult for a society, struggling itself more broadly with change and difference, to see that this community and indeed the personal identity of a "gamer" should be along for the ride. If the "gamers" cannot deal with people different from them or cannot deal with a medium and a social structure that is changing, how will they contribute to healthy and productive discussions as the rest of the world turns?

Of a bigger threat to gaming than women, people of color, those of non-normalized gender/sexual identities, and other marginalized groups is the inability of some within the gaming community to positively interact with, or even acknowledge the significance of and need for, change and difference. As alluded to above, change and difference are drivers of society, bringing better living conditions to not only those directly affected by movements of change and difference, but ultimately to all members of a society. Media, such as books, films, movies, and games, act as arbiters of such changes and windows into such

differences, able to move people to extraordinary displays of kindness and solidarity or to harmful stereotypes that perpetuate inflexibility, intolerance, fear, violence, and hate. Thus, games are as good a space as any to work through change and difference, and to me and others who value the medium perhaps most in the current media landscape, they are a uniquely powerful space to hear the voices of all kinds of people, including to have one's own voice felt heard, in working towards a better future. And this is why it was and is still so resoundingly important to me– a multiracial, "geeky," femme, and dare I say accomplished woman– to hear Yuna say at the end of her own journey, "I know that I'll keep changing. This is my story– it'll be a good one."

Endnotes:

(1) For clarity, I am quoting the original North American release dates of *Final Fantasy X-2* and *Final Fantasy X* due my original experiences with them, but for the purposes of this paper, I am using and thus citing their remastered release.

(2) Here I use the term gamer as I did when I was younger: to identify myself as someone who plays games as a primary hobby and as a deep enthusiast. I simply do not believe that this term ever has exclusively belonged to the stereotypes that surround it, all of which have been co-opted by Gamergate, the use of which I mark here as "gamer." I endeavor to take the term back.

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HIDING IN THE TALL GRASS: SEARCHING FOR QUEER STORIES IN POKÉMON

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> "Even in the most kind of mainstream games, we're starting to see more sophisticated writing and writing that incorporates different perspectives." Colleen Macklin, Gaming in Color (Jones & Gil, 2014)

This quote from Colleen Macklin highlights a turn in the industry to introduce more diverse voices and stories in industry games. It is situated in a documentary that operates as an outcry of desire to have more representation of different perspectives in games, particularly in the big budget games of the gaming industry. Although, as Naomi Clark points out in the same documentary, independently developed games has made headway in this space, people of marginalized groups want to see this headway make it into the mainstream.

During a talk at the Queerness in Games Conference, Adrienne Shaw (2013) noted that a common argument given towards diversity in games is that if we have more diverse people making games we will get more diverse stories. She points out a key problem with this, that having diverse makers does not automatically mean we will get diverse games. We have to convince the people producing the games that diverse stories and

voices are viable. Working toward this, it is important to find examples of diverse perspectives and voices working in existing, mainstream, well-received games.

One of the more successful mainstream franchises today is *Pokémon* (Game Freak, 1996-2014). The series boasts over 260 million games sold worldwide (Lien, 2014), over the course of 18 years and 41 unique digital titles (1). This ignores various other media offshoots, such as the trading card game and animated show. Going back to Adrienne Shaw, during her talk she said, "Queer reading practices have always found alternative ways of being in the most normative of texts" (2013). Finding queer stories in this series of games would help to further entice the gaming industry to making games that feature more diverse voices and perspectives.

This essay aims to do just that, by providing close readings one particular game in the series, using the lens of queer theory provided by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Before that, though, I intend to give a brief overview of how games in the main series of *Pokémon* operate, and locate some blanket queer representations in one of the more recent games in the series. Following that, I will give a brief description of the theory provided by Halberstam, and use that lens to provide that close, queer reading of two characters from *Pokémon Black* (Game Freak, 2011). Finally, I'll give a brief look into queer ways of playing games in the *Pokémon* franchise, as an insight into more mechanical representation of queer ideals in gaming.

I want to start by making some caveats and an acknowledgment. I am specifically looking at the North American releases of the franchise, and specifically at *Pokémon Black*. Thus, my readings will be informed by the localization team that translated the Japanese games to English. This also means that I am dealing with problems of US censorship and whitewashing that tends to happen when games are so translated. So, when I talk about the gaming industry or mainstream games, I am clearly discussing the US gaming

industry and games in the US mainstream. This is also true of *Gaming in Color*, which this essay opened with, so the problems that this essay addresses are distinctly American ones. This doesn't mean that they are not applicable outside the US, but I would be remiss to not mention this caveat.

Also, I will not be considering media outside the games. The animated show has been going on for over 800 episodes and has a different storyline from the games. The same is true of the manga. Although many characters are shared between the various forms, this essay is only informed by the characters and situations as they appear in the games. With that said, let's discuss the structure of *Pokémon*.

Pokemon

As a franchise, *Pokémon* is structured by generations. At current, there are six generations (2), each with their own games. Within a generation, there are a set of games which all surround one particular region. Typically, two versions of the same game side-by-side, with a third game released later. The first two games are nearly identical, with only minor differences in content and flavor. The third game is similar, but often adds in some bonus content that hints at the next generation. In a deviation, Generation 5, where *Pokemon Black* is located, did not have the third carbon-copy game, but instead attempted to have a direct sequel pair of games.

The basic premise of each game is about finding and obtaining as many "pokémon" as possible. Pokémon are animal-like intelligent creatures that have special abilities that are indistinguishable from magic. The creatures grow and evolve through friendly battles which make up the backbone of the society of the game worlds.

The games follow a typical structure. Players receive a pokémon from a local professor and become pokémon trainers. They are tasked with finding as many pokémon as possible, while challenging gyms, training halls run by a gym leader. The player is often accompanied by one or more companions, one of which

is marked as the player's rival, usually a character who is obsessed with challenging the champion of the region. Along the way, the player will encounter a team of people who are cast as the antagonizing force. These teams are led by an individual who uses an ideology to better the world, usually with them as ruler. Over the course of the game, the player will alternate between challenging gym leaders and solving problems caused by the team. This eventually leads to defeating the team's leader and becoming the strongest trainer in the region. In recent games, the companion characters have had larger stories in the games, and there have been a larger cast of them.

Now, Pokémon has some problems with representation. Only four of the series' major characters are non-white, with only one being in the top-seat of power. The player was always white prior to Generation 6, when a racially diverse option was first presented. Women are surprisingly present in places of power, though the top-seat of power has only twice been filled with a woman. Only one of the professors, who start the game's journey, is female. Gender is also very binary and performative in the games. From *Pokemon Crystal* onward, games begin with the question "Are you a boy or a girl" (Game Freak, 2001). Previously, the player was always male. In Generation 6, *X* (Game Freak, 2013) included a fashion element for the player, but the clothing available to the player was determined by the gender they chose, disallowing any cross-dressing.

Despite these problems, occasionally we find some sparse bits of queer representation. In Generation 2, we find a trainer in a gym who, like all the other trainers in the gym dress up like Janine, the gym leader. Camper Barry remarks after you defeat him, "That's right, I'm a boy! What's wrong with a boy dressing up as Janine" (Game Freak, 2001). Further, in Generation 6, we have evidence of a handful of queer characters. In one instance, a male waiter at a cafe daydreams out loud, saying "I want to work with a handsome manager" (Game Freak, 2013). In another instance, two men are eating at an expensive restaurant. One of

them says, "So we're having a meal together as men. Nothing wrong with that" (Game Freak, 2013). Even one of the player's companions, Shauna, could be analyzed as seeking a relationship with the player's character regardless of gender. Back in Generation 5, there is a couples-only Ferris wheel in one of the cities. Here, you can occasionally battle trainers who will then ride the Ferris wheel with the player. Of the four trainers available, one is the same gender as the player. Interestingly, one of the major characters in *Black* and *White*, N, forces the player to ride the Ferris wheel with him, where he reveals his status as the king of the generation's team. With some inference, one could also say that N admires the player character, just as Shauna does in the next generation, and I would argue that there is more evidence to suggest a romantic plot in this case. Still, this verges on wishful thinking, and would require close analysis of romantic tropes to be made seriously.

These are really just nods to representation. They're in the games, but they aren't foregrounded and generally not a part of the main plot. Further, they take plenty of interpretation to recognize. While it's good that they exist, this essay seeks to find more up-front representations of queer stories in the *Pokémon* franchise. I believe that two such representations are found in Generation 5. To better understand what is going on in my analysis below, I will provide a brief explanation of the events that occur in *Pokémon Black*.

The player is accompanied by two neighborhood friends, Cheren and Bianca, through the Unova region. Cheren is driven by a desire to get stronger and Bianca has no clear objective for going on the journey. Early on, the player is forced to watch a rally, introducing Team Plasma and one of the darker plots in the *Pokémon* franchise. The rally argues that pokémon trainers are essentially slave-owners and that the citizens should liberate themselves of their pokémon.

Through a number of events, the player discovers that the leader of Team Plasma, N, aims to revive a legendary pokémon

in order to liberate every pokémon by force. The player is eventually tasked with using a counterpart pokémon to stop this from happening. The game apologizes for the apparent slave narrative of the pokémon games by suggesting that the pokémon are truly happy with their trainers, which is a thin explanation that allows the series to continue on despite this valid criticism. This plot is eventually ignored when it is discovered that N is only a puppet king for another whose real goal is to rule over the region.

This is only the barest sketch of the plot of the game. Some details are left out entirely, and others will be described below when discussing two major characters' plots as queer stories. First, though, I want to take a detour to the theory that I will be using to make these claims.

Failure

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam (2011) proposes a way of queer reading that identifies success and plots queerness on the side of those who embrace failure. In a talk at Queerness in Games 2013, Halberstam stated that "some of us actually want to fail because we're so dissatisfied with that particular social context" (Juul & Halberstam, 2013). He went on to give the example of capitalism, suggesting that if success in capitalism is making money, then those people who live life not making money are on the queer side of the situation.

Extending this to more traditional queer roles, he says that "the queer fails to be straight, quite literally, the butch fails to be a woman, the sissy boy fails to be a man, the queer adult fails to get married and have children, fails in their socially prescribed role" (Juul & Halberstam, 2014). This is a way for queer people to challenge the hegemony of their society, by embracing that which the society does not value. In the book, Halberstam quotes James C. Scott, suggesting that failure constitutes Scott's "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1987; quoted in Halberstam, 2011). He explains, "As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never

total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 88). Thus, people who seek or lead nonconformist lives, who are unproductive and unsuccessful are pointing out that they find a flaw in the power structure of the system in which they live. By accepting failure, they are refusing the system from operating, announcing that the prescribed outcome isn't for them, and rewriting the system to better include their outcomes (Juul and Halberstam, 2013).

In the following sections, I will be examining two characters that deal with failure in different ways, Bianca and N, who are thus cast as queer characters. They are both major characters in Generation 5, and the two characters' narratives are deeply embedded into the overall plot arc of the game. This is put up against a third major character (the player's companion Cheren) who represents what the expectation of success is in this society. Cheren models the player's prescribed role, and essentially becomes the player's voice, since player characters in the *Pokémon* games are silent protagonists.

The player is required to succeed. There is no state in the game where the player fails. There is no way to "lose" a *Pokémon* game. There is no game over. Thus the player is forced into the normative role, against which these queer stories emerge. As the player is the central character in the games, the other characters all essentially have various narratives of failure, some more prominent than others. Even Cheren fails at his quest to become stronger. For now, though, I want to focus on the other of the player's companions in Generation 5: Bianca.

Bianca

In the opening scene of the game, the player and Cheren are waiting in the player's bedroom for Bianca to show up, in order to distribute three gifted pokémon from professor Juniper. When Bianca arrives, Cheren scolds her for being late. After selecting, Bianca suggests having their first battle, for which Cheren scolds her again, but she does it anyway. Predictably, the battle makes

a mess of the player's bedroom, but Bianca is too preoccupied with her pokémonto notice. Cheren points the mess out to her, and Bianca finally realizes what happened and apologizes. After the apology, Cheren interrupts and tells Bianca, "You…are completely hopeless." This is just the beginning of the many insults Bianca is forced to bear for being different.

Bianca is described as flighty, forgetful, incompetent, in her own world, without direction, weak and irresponsible. In essence, Biance is a failure. She performs it spectacularly. She is everything that Cheren is not, and since Cheren operates as the model of success, this pits Bianca as the model for failure. Even mechanically, Bianca is designed for failure, always choosing the pokémon that is at a disadvantage to the player's own.

In addition to being scolded by Cheren's compass of success, Bianca is also at odds with her father. In a required scene before the journey has begun, we see Bianca's father telling her that she cannot go on a journey through the region because she knows nothing of the world. To Bianca, this journey is an escape from authority, a chance to prove that her way of life is valid.

Throughout the game, Bianca will be portrayed as not taking things seriously, will battle haphazardly and without much attention to the battle itself. She has a severe lack of confidence in battling. In some events, she is told to hang back and wait. In others, she needs a bodyguard. At a certain point in the game, Bianca will begin traveling with a local professor and start on her path towards being a pokémon researcher, essentially failing at being a successful trainer. Up to that point, she never understood her role in life and was constantly worried that she would amount to nothing.

In a pivotal moment in the middle of the game, Bianca is confronted by her father and told to go home where she belongs. After trying to express that where she belongs was different from where her father thought, a gym leader, Elesa, steps in to make a moving speech about the importance of accepting difference:

"My name is Elesa. I'm this town's Gym Leader. I also

> happen to be a model. You know, there are many people in this world. There are people whose way of thinking may be completely different from yours. Sometimes, this means you may get hurt.[…]But it's important to keep trying to learn about the differences between yourself and others… To learn that being different is OK. And you shouldn't worry. Trainers always have Pokemon at their side. Pokemon are wonderful. It's not only how cute they can be, but also how much you can depend on them…" (Game Freak, 2011)

This is a turning point for Bianca, when she starts accepting herself, flaws and all. She embraces failure and chooses to live her life the way she is oriented. In his examination of children's films, Halberstam notes that many of these films center around characters who are unsuccessful in the eyes of society (2011). He describes examples of these kinds of queer narratives: "princes turn into frogs rather than vice versa, ogres refuse to become beautiful, and characters regularly choose collectivity over domesticity" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 119). He goes on to say "Each 'disabled' hero has to fight off or compete with a counterpart who represents wealth, health, success, and perfection" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 120), much like Bianca must do with Cheren, or worse, the player, who can enact no failure.

For Halberstam, it isn't enough for these queer fairy tales to offer a "tidy moral lesson about learning to accept" oneself, but they should tie "the struggle of the rejected individual to larger struggles of the dispossessed" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 120). Near the end of the game, during a critical moment, Bianca is curiously missing and her absence is mentioned by Cheren and very obvious. Although Bianca is missing, the player later discovers that she did not abandon the player. By traveling to each town and rallying the gym leaders, she prevented a roadblock for the player. This shows Bianca discovering what she is capable of, even though it is not the traditional role expected of her.

Biancs's success in aiding the player is at odds with her

performance of failure, especially when it leads to safeguarding the society that ostracizes her. In a way, this could be seen as a turning point in the society, that, instead, society is beginning to value the necessary role that Bianca played in the events of the game. Without Bianca's societal failure, the player, the one who cannot fail, would have indeed failed. This societal turn can be seen reflected in *Version 2*, where Bianca is happily settled into her role as a pokémon researcher, and no longer suffers any scorn from her peers (even Cheren has nothing but cheerful words for her). Further, many more people in that game talk about accepting difference as positive.

Now let's turn to another major character, the main antagonist of Generation 5, Team Plasma's king: N.

N

Natural Harmonia Gropius, usually called N, is first introduced during the rally in the early game. Here, he reveals to the player that he can speak to pokémon and is deeply affected by what the player's pokémon say. N is portrayed as socially awkward, speaks rapidly and ignores people he isn't interested in. N is set up as the main villain of the game early on, often spouting ideology about separating pokémon from people so that the pokémon will be happy and people will stop relying on the creatures. The standard societal response is that doing so will instead make both people and pokémon unhappy.

Towards the end of the game, the player starts getting the impression that not everything is quite clear about N and his role in the narrative as it stands. N's doctrine seems to stem from a genuine concern for pokémon, and a broad distrust for people that is broken by the player. N constantly makes confused remarks about the happiness of the player's pokémon, and as the game goes on, N's philosophy seems to unwind. At the very end, we get information about N, from two characters up to then unknown to the player. One says that N is too blinded by his childhood to acknowledge that humans and pokémon are happy together. The other character informs the player that

N's situation was manufactured by Ghetsis, the character who delivered the rally speech at the beginning of the game. N is described as innocent and a product of abuse.

There is a curious trend with N. The second time the player meets N, he informs the player of his intention to resurrect a legendary pokémon. There is no reason for N to tell the player this, but it allows the player to be sent forward in the game to gather more information from a specialist. The next time the player meets N, N leads the player to the couples-only Ferris wheel mentioned before, under the pretense of searching for Team Plasma. N takes the player up on the Ferris wheel and in the privacy there, N confesses that he is the king of Team Plasma, information that is again not required of him. N also voices some dissent. When the ride is over, a group of Team Plasma members have appeared, ready to confront the player. N talks doublespeak to save the player from being overwhelmed while convincing the grunts that he is letting them get away. In short, N is protecting the player without losing his status.

This is interesting, because the player is the character who cannot fail. Regardless of what happens, the player will succeed, but N wants to make sure that the player is able to have the chance. In addition, N wants to make the player's success easier. Throughout the game, N finds a way to aid the player's journey, which he knows will eventually lead to taking himself down. N telegraphs how the player should defeat him, tells the player where he is going to be, and even heals the player's pokémon after a fight that is sure to leave the player in a weakened state.

In short, N wields his own failure. He effects his own failure on purpose, because he no longer wholly believes in the society that is being prescribed by Ghetsis. N wants the player to succeed because he knows that if the player succeeds, then the player will free him from the terrible grasp that Ghetsis has over N. It is a short jump to Scott's "weapons of the weak" from here (Scott 1987; quoted in Halberstam, 2011). Even moreso than Bianca, N represents a person who is trying to embrace and use failure as

a way to change a society. In N's case, the society he wants to change is the only one he knows, the one that was crafted for him by the manipulation and abuse of Ghetsis. Even after Ghetsis is removed, N removes himself from society entirely, despite spending much of the game befriending the player. N chooses to remain a failure in society, and will do so until the resolution of the sequel. While Bianca's queerness fades as society changes to include her, N chooses to remain queer, partly because it is all he has ever known.

In this discussion of Bianca and N, there were some casual nods to the mechanics that help preface their queerness. I want to talk next about how mechanics can help inform queer play, and how some people use the mechanics of the game to play in different ways.

Queer Play

In a workshop led by merritt kopas, she called for a movement beyond simple representation of queerness in games (kopas, 2014). I want to second that call, although I know I am one of many standing in that line. This is not to say that representation and queer readings are not important. As I mentioned above, this kind of work can help provide leverage to change a system. merritt, similarly states, "Representation matters, but a focus on what games look like risks missing what games *do*" (kopas, 2014, p. 3). She calls out the need to think of queer mechanics and play, rather than just images.

Pokémon does not have much in the way of queer mechanics, although, recall earlier how, mechanically, Bianca is set up to be a failure by the pokémon she is forced to select. Consequently, the player is always set up with a disadvantage towards Cheren. There are many opportunities for queer play, however.

One such way to do this is in the naming of the player's pokémon. By naming the player and pokémon with themed names, the player can create additional narratives that exist on top of the prescribed narrative. Denis Farr's Pokédrag project (2011) imposed the idea of a drag queen trainer hosting a troupe

of fierce pokémon drag performers. By simply using a themed naming scheme, Farr was able to tell a story that expanded on the (somewhat light) story of *Pokémon Fire Red* (Game Freak, 2004). In particular, this naming scheme subverts the societal traditions of naming and challenges them. Farr's choice to fail to use a normative naming scheme highlights the queerness of his play, on top of the fact that he is attempting to create a narrative that includes queer characters.

Another alternative, queer mode of play imposes restrictions on the player's pokémon team. Players are able to take six pokémon with them on their journey and store many others for later retrieval. Typically, the goal is to create the best team for the player's play style, and this can take many hours of hunting for just the right pokémon to round out the team. In styles of play like Nuzlocke, players' control over their teams is restricted (Nuzlocke, 2010). In Nuzlocke play, players have two restrictions. First, players may only catch the first pokémon they encounter in each area. This removes the ability to hunt for specific team members and develop the "perfect" team. Instead, the player is left with the imperfect team that must rise up to tackle the game.

The second rule, relevant to this essay's conversation, is that if a pokémon ever faints, the player must release that pokémon. Normally, pokémon that faint in battle can simply be revived in a town or with a readily available item. This rule removes the ability to do that, and instead says that when a pokémon faints in battle, it is removed from the team. This harnesses the mechanic of releasing pokémon for a new, queer purpose. One point behind this is to create more of an emphatic link with the creatures, mimicking a more realistic, nurturing situation. When death is no longer a trivial thing, players can put a lot more weight on the survival and care of their pokémon. A side effect of this rule is that it adds something to the game which is completely inaccessible. Nuzlocke adds a way to fail. If the player loses their last pokémon, the game is over. Some people

will start over, and others will accept the failure and abandon the Nuzlocke. Either way, they willfully add a mode that leads towards Halberstam's arguments about failure.

Conclusion

By examining games in the *Pokémon* franchise, I was able to find a number of queer stories, some hiding in plain sight, others a bit below the surface. This essay could have gone into many other examinations, including the romantic analyses of N and Shauna's character mentioned earlier, identifying pokémon as an other, the tranformative properties of certain pokémon evolutions like Gardevoir and Gallade. Queer examinations can be had all over the games.

This isn't to say that *Pokémon* is well represented, or that it represents a queer game. As I said before, *Pokémon* has a lot of problems with representation. The franchise is popular and mainstream, and by finding queer stories in such games, the industry can be shown that these stories can already be found. This does not mean that we should be happy with what we have already. The level of queerness I have uncovered is far overshadowed by the non-queer stories in the games. My mode of analysis, searching for ways in which characters embrace failure, is impossible for the player to enact in these games. As I've said many times, the player is the one character who cannot fail, and the games hinge on this. We still need more diverse voices.

We need more diverse ways of playing. By and large, the irony of my argument is that by showing how some characters in this popular franchise embrace and wield failure, I am showing that queer stories can succeed in mainstream games. They're there, hiding in the tall grass. Run in and catch them.

Endnotes

(1) The game count does not include version differences or remakes, though these are reflected in the statistic for number of games sold across the franchise.

(2) Generation 1 includes *Pokémon Red*, *Pokémon Blue*, and

Pokémon Yellow. Generation 2 includes *Pokémon Gold*, *Pokémon Silver*, and *Pokémon Crystal*. Generation 3 includes *Pokémon Ruby*, *Pokémon Sapphire*, and *Pokémon Emerald,* as well as the Generation 1 remakes *Pokémon Fire Red* and *Pokémon Leaf Green*. Generation 4 includes *Pokémon Diamond*, *Pokémon Pearl*, and *Pokémon Platinum,* as well as the Generation 2 remakes *Pokémon HeartGold* and *Pokémon SoulSilver*. Generation 5 includes *Pokémon White*, *Pokémon Black*, *Pokémon White Version 2*, and *Pokémon Black Version 2*. Generation 6 includes *Pokémon X*, and *Pokémon Y*, as well as the Generation 3 remakes *Pokémon Omega Ruby* and *Pokémon Alpha Sapphire*. A third main game has not been announced for Generation 6 at the time of this writing. When I reference a generation in this text, I am never talking about the remakes found in that generation. When I need to talk about a remake, I will write the name out, rather than referring to generation. Additionally, when talking about Generation 5, I mean *Pokémon Black* and *White*, and will refer to the sequels as *Version 2*.

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NEVER ALONE (KISIMA INᑎITCHUᑎA): POSSIBILITIES FOR PARTICIPATORY GAME DESIGN

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Since August 2014, anyone with even a marginal interest in games has been made painfully aware of some very loud, very annoying, and very angry individuals who have made it their mission to clear up a few things about games using the hashtag #Gamergate. Games, these people whine, do not have politics. Games, they opine, are simply about fun (and fun, in this case, is defined by them); *Gone Home* and *Depression Quest* are *not* games. Gaming journalism, critique, and research, they shout, should not be "biased" or reflect the concerns of "social justice warriors" (SJWs). Gaming culture, their actions suggest, is for men and boys – specifically, young, cisgendered, straight, white males (Dewey, 2014; McCormick, 2014). For many of us, watching #Gamergate unfold has been an unsettling confirmation of what we've already known for a long time: some within the gaming community do not want us to play and make games. We struggle with what that might mean, and more importantly, how to change it. And so we call for more diverse representation within games (and in the gaming industry).

But simply calling for "more representation" of women and

marginalized individuals to solve the problems #Gamergate painfully brought to the fore is not sufficient. As Adrienne Shaw (2014) argues, women, people of color, and gender/sexual minorities *are* playing games despite their current lack of diversity and many do not necessarily even need to feel "see themselves" in their characters to enjoy them. Encouraging diversity in games is not simply about just including more female characters or people of color as playable avatars. It is about a fundamental shift in gaming culture, one that does not presume a class of people called "gamers" (no other medium inspires a class of individuals who call themselves by the names of that medium as a cultural marker; there are no "filmers" or "interneters") (Alexander, 2014; Shaw, 2013). Shifting the culture of gaming requires an opening up in many ways: in terms of genres, characterization, mechanics, *and* representation. And, while encouraging individuals to make the kind of games they would like to play is one way to challenge the status quo, it does not address the very real barriers that may prevent someone from participating in this way (Wiggins, 2014). Instead, we might also consider how shifting design practices could encourage game designers to tell the stories of diverse communities and to tell them well.

During the height of the #Gamergate frenzy, a small but important game, *Never Alone* (*Kisima Inŋitchuŋa*), was released. It suggested new possibilities for what gaming and game design could be. Created by Upper One Games (an indigenously-owned offshoot of the Cook Inlet Tribal Council) and E-Line Media, *Never Alone* represents the first of what is meant to be a series of "World Games" that will be created by the merged partnership (Upper One Games, 2014b). "World Games" are described as a new genre of videogames, "…that draw fully upon the richness of unique cultures to create complex and fascinating game worlds for a global audience" (Upper One Games, 2014a). *Never Alone* uses stories from the Iñupiat as its narrative focus. It tells a story about a young Inupiaq girl (Nuna) and an arctic fox as

they try to find the source of an "eternal blizzard" wreaking havoc on her home – but includes a number of different stories from Native Alaskan folklore along the way. While the narrative may be unfamiliar, gameplay relies on relatively standard puzzle-platformer mechanics. What makes *Never Alone* unique is its not only artistic style (which is also directly inspired by indigenous Alaskan culture) and environmental design, but also its inclusion of unlockable live-action segments ("Cultural Insights") that explain aspects of the Iñupiat culture and the design process by which the game was developed. And so to play the game is to have some encounter with the world (both the "real" and the "imaginary") from which Nuna comes.

Never Alone functions as an implicit critique of the current state of gaming culture in two ways. First, by taking the Iñupiat people and their stories as a focal point, it highlights the lack of representation (and particularly, non-stereotypical representations) of indigenous people in games (Leonard, 2006; Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). Second, by having Iñupiat community members as partners within the game development process, *Never Alone* invites a new way of thinking about how games can be made. It foregrounds the game design process as an iterative, collaborative effort (which, while the reality of most studios, is not reflected in much of the literature written about game design).(1) And because the game foregrounds co-productive nature of the design process, it also shifts the relationship between designer and audience. It suggests an invitation to greater understanding of both the designers' intentions and the stories they are trying to tell. By extension, it implies that games can be created that responsibly and ethically represent marginalized cultures. At the same time, *Never Alone* is not a stale, misinformed attempt at edutainment. It is a genuinely fun game, and some of the ways in which it plays with the standard puzzle-platformer genre are inventive.

While there are many ways in which *Never Alone* could be read (as a cultural artifact for example, or as an example of indigenous

storytelling), it is the ways in which the game reflects a different, more explicitly collaborative approach to design that is the focus of this article.(2) First, I describe elements of the game's design and how gameplay reflect aspects of Iñupiat culture. Second, I discuss participatory design and its relationship to video games. I argue that approaches such as participatory design might shift the problematic aspects of gaming culture into something more inclusive and welcoming to all of us.

Gameplay: You are never alone

A core aspect of *Never Alone*'s gameplay is the symbiotic relationship between Nuna and the fox that befriends her. As Nuna, you are starkly aware of your limitations in the harsh Arctic environment. For the first part of the game, your only option when facing a threat like an angry polar bear is to run. And run you do (Figure 1).

Figure 6. Nuna on the run from a hungry polar bear.

But you also find yourself looking back constantly, checking to see if the bear has gotten any closer. As a player, I was immediately confronted by my own inadequacies from the first scene. How would I survive this kind of blizzard? What would I do for food? For shelter? Would I even been able to run in the deep snow or jump over floating icebergs fast enough to outpace a hungry polar bear like Nuna? The answer was decidedly, "No." In short, as a player I had no choice but to confront my complete

cluelessness when it came to what I would do in the Alaskan wilderness.

But this is not a game about the individual. It is abundantly clear from the first scene that even Nuna will not survive for long if she only has her wits to protect her, no matter how well prepared she is for the harsh environment. And, it is at this moment that a cute white Arctic fox enters the scene. As a player, I had a hard time not letting out an audible "Aww" as soon I saw him darting out of the background to save Nuna. But the game told me I had work to do – the ravenous polar bear was still dangerously close. Switching between the fox and Nuna (you can also play the game cooperatively, which makes some portions a bit easier to time), I drew the polar bear's attention away from Nuna and ran in the opposite direction, causing the bear to fall into the icy waters between icebergs (Figure 2).

Figure 7. The fox saving Nuna as usual.

Breathing a sigh of relief (both as Nuna and as myself) I examined the fox a bit more closely. His fluffy, bright white fur and dark eyes stood in contrast to both the pale blues of the snowy background and Nuna (who is clad in a bulky, fur-lined brown coat).

In keeping with the game's emphasis on the importance of community as a tool for survival, the two have complementary abilities. Playing as the fox you can jump further, scramble up

walls and toss ropes down so that Nuna can climb them, and control nature spirits that function as platforms in the game (more on this later). The fox's smaller size also allows the player access to spaces that are too small for Nuna to get into. On the other hand, Nuna can move crates to access points otherwise out-of-reach and use a bola against obstacles blocking their progress. Moving between playing the Nuna and the fox is easy enough (a one-button action on the PS4), and I often found myself switching between them for no reason. As the fox, I would jump and leap forward, and then run back to make sure the AI-controlled Nuna was safely following. I found myself playing a kind of game of tag, switching back and forth between Nuna and the fox and then circling back around to the other character to make sure they were safely getting past whatever obstacles the game presented.

At other times, I would time a jump incorrectly, and end up dying. Although the game gracefully restarts you at the most recent checkpoint, you must hear Nuna give a wailing cry if you die while playing as the fox. Likewise, if you die while playing as Nuna, the fox whimpers in pain. It is heartbreaking. No matter how many times I died playing *Never Alone* (and I died a lot), I never got over how emotionally hard it was to think about either Nuna or the fox being apart (Figure 3). This resonated for other players as well; comments on Steam's message boards prior to release often included some variation of the question, "This looks like a great game, but does the fox die?" (omegacat, 2014).

Figure 8. Oh the cuteness! Nuna and the fox (cutscene).

But it is not just the fox that helps Nuna. There is the Owl Man who provides Nuna with her only weapon (a bola) after she returns his drum to him from the Little People (see Figure 4).

Figure 9. Cutscene after which the Owl Man gives Nuna her only weapon in the game – a bola.

However, the game is also clear about the relative ineffectiveness of the bola against many threats: while you can easily destroy large sheets of ice to further your progress, using the bola as a weapon against most enemies (such as polar bears or the Manslayer who destroys Nuna's village), is ineffective.

Nature spirits also help Nuna and the fox throughout the game. There are the sorrowful loon spirits who create transparent platforms on which Nuna can stand and (with the

fox's help) move to cross wide bodies of water or access tall ice piles. There are schools of fish spirits that save Nuna and the fox from drowning (Figure 5).

Figure 10. A school of fish spirits help Nuna and the fox cross a large expanse of icy water.

In later scenes, large tree spirits become moveable platforms that allow Nuna to progress further. Playing the game solo becomes tricky here; a number of times, I had difficulty switching between Nuna and the fox quickly enough to avoid dying. When I co-op'd the game later with a friend, these sections were easier. This might be, as some reviewers note, a design flaw (Hindes, 2014; Juba, 2014). Or, it could also be read as a subtle nod to the game's emphasis on the importance of community and cooperation.

At the same time, the natural world is not without its significant challenges. At one point, the game's hazy daytime environment darkens to night as you enter an abandoned coastal village, and the aurora borealis appears. At first, I simply stopped moving, watching these spirits swirl and swoop towards me (as Nuna), admiring their stunning, otherworldly beauty. I quickly learned, however, that these lights were not the friendly loon spirits offering me a ride over the game's uneven terrain. Instead, these anthropomorphized versions of the Northern Lights had arms that would scoop Nuna up, carrying me off-screen into

certain death – punishment, the game's narration notes, for not following the elders' wisdom (Figure 6). This too became a particularly frustrating section to solo, because even if I were able to get Nuna out of harm's way, my fox would often jump right into their arms. As with other aspects of the game, I could not help but reflect on the duality of the environment in which Nuna and the fox inhabit. It is both welcoming and harshly unforgiving, chaotic and predictable. It seems, in other words, intensely human and alien all at once.

Figure 11. The Northern Lights, ready to swoop Nuna and the fox away.

The game's chapters are separated by moments of audio narration that offer greater context to Nuna's journey, and are visually depicted using animation influenced by Native Alaskan folk art. These line-based drawings are rendered on a simple background, and they stand in stark contrast to the lush backdrop that characterizes the game's environmental design. The muted grey-blues that characterize the snowy scenes in which Nuna and the fox must brace against blizzard winds (or, alternatively, harness them to jump across wide crevasses) stand in contrast to the sepia-colored scrimshaw art which set the scene for each playable segment (Figure 7). In an AMA (ask-me-anything) session on Reddit's /r/indiegaming subreddit, art

director Dima Veryovka articulated the game's unique art direction and how it connected to traditional Iñupiat art, writing,

> The overall goal was to create this game with a very atmospheric, soft looking feel that captures Arctic beauty. *Never Alone* was rendered using a lot of pastel, desaturated colors, which helped us create very moody, dreamlike visuals, while still portraying an authentic and believable Arctic world. The characters, themselves, were inspired by Arctic dolls. We tried to give them a very authentic hand crafted feel to make them look like somebody had sewn them using fur, skin and ivory. (IndieGamingMods, 2014)

I found it impossible not to be overwhelmed and completely enchanted by the beauty of *Never Alone*. Likewise, reviews of the game were united in the accolades they heaped on the art direction and environmental design, with outlets like *Kill Screen* calling it a "diorama of nature" (Carmichael, 2014).

Figure 12. An example of the game's scrimshaw art featuring Inupiatun narration and English subtitles.

The game's sound design is also subtle but effective. Nuna's boots make a satisfying crunching sound in the deep snow. The sound of the wind is a constant presence in most scenes, but gets louder right before it blows against Nuna and her fox, offering an auditory signal to the player that she must get ready to brace against the wind or face being blown backwards. In scenes

involving water, the sounds of waves lapping and icebergs crushing up against one another replace the sounds of Nuna's footsteps. Gentle, if somber, ambient music accompanies some narration and playable segments. These all work together to make for an immersive environment in which Nuna and the fox must use their wits to survive.

As I mentioned in the introduction, while representation alone may not solve gaming's diversity problem, I would be remiss in not discussing how remarkable *Never Alone* is in not only including Native Alaskan voices, but making them primary. Even the trailer on the game's website features a voiceover from James Nageak, a male Iñupiaq, articulating the importance of storytelling to the Iñupiat community over cut-scenes and gameplay. At one point the subtitles read, "But what good are old stories if the wisdom they contain is not shared? That's why we're making this game." I was struck by its acknowledgement of the game's overarching purpose – to share and preserve aspects of the Iñupiat culture – as well as how directly it addresses the collaborative nature of the game's design process. As the trailer foreshadows, voiceovers throughout *Never Alone* are also in Inupiatun and subtitled into English. Thus, the game highlights both the importance of storytelling as a way of conveying Iñupiat values and simulates the experience that one might have listening to this story as it was originally told by elders.

Previews, reviews, and commentaries about the game also highlight the collaboration between the Cook Inlet Tribal Council and E-Line Media, making it unlikely that a player would not have some awareness of the unique circumstances of the game's creation. This kind of explicit discussion of the game's design also suggests two possible audiences. For the Iñupiat community and other Alaskan Natives, the game is an artifact of cultural heritage as it preserves and retells stories for a new generation (Oppenneer, 2014; Tannous, 2014). But the "Cultural Insights" segments also provide additional context for other players – explaining fundamental aspects of Iñupiat life for those

who may be unfamiliar with it. Regardless of who is playing, it is clear that the goal of the game is to reflect the Iñupiat experience accurately, rather than to simply appropriate Native culture and repackage it for a non-Native audience.

Participatory design and games

Never Alone's gameplay is a direct result of its design process by which it was created – one that upends the design approach most of the mainstream gaming industry relies upon. In Richard Rouse's (2004) foundational design text, for example, starting points for brainstorming game ideas include gameplay, technology, and story. Noticeably absent from this list is the "user" or audience or those communities inspiring the story being told.(3) Instead, fun, enjoyment, and challenge become primary concerns. Implied in this approach is that "fun" is in the eye of the beholder – in other words, game designers often use themselves as a barometer for what is fun. This often serves as an unspoken proxy for determining the game's audience: people like those who are creating it. If autobiographical design (Neustaedter & Sengers, 2012) becomes a primary tool by which game designers create games, then the stories they tell will often reflect the relatively limited diversity of the mainstream gaming industry. And, as others have noted, the lack of traditional user-focused approaches, which might work to address the shortcomings of autobiographical design, also echoes the relative paucity of interactions between the HCI (human-computer interaction) and game design communities (Jørgensen, 2004). This may be in part due to a mismatch between traditional HCI approaches and the uniqueness of the gaming medium (Barr, Noble, & Biddle, 2007).

While not explicitly mentioned by the game's developers, *Never Alone*'s approach to design – deep and long-term engagement with the Iñupiat community around how to tell the Kunuuksaayuka (eternal blizzard) story, continual consultation with elders like Minnie Gray, whose father originally told the story, and Iñupiat artisans to ensure that both the narrative and

artistic style were appropriate – is reminiscent of participatory design approaches used in other settings (Oppenneer, 2014). Participatory design (PD) was originally developed as a result of Scandinavian codetermination laws that emphasized the need for labor to be actively involved in the design and deployment of workplace technologies (Ehn, 1992; Spinuzzi, 2005). While it is often viewed as a loose approach to design that simply includes user participation in the design process, when robustly employed PD focuses on users' tacit knowledge as an object of inquiry and shifts the designer-user relationship so that designers are facilitators, rather than "dictators" of the design process (Spinuzzi, 2005). Thus, PD is an explicitly political, pluralistic approach to design.

Participatory design as a methodology and epistemic approach has found the most traction in the worlds of CSCW (computer-supported cooperative work) and HCI, but most video game design outside of the educational/serious games realm rarely incorporates PD as it is framed here. This is not to suggest, however, that the audience is not consulted or considered during the gaming design process. Modders, for example, participate explicitly in a kind of co-design with game developers (Postigo, 2010). Likewise, fan communities often have important input into the design process, offering feedback on new features, serving as beta testers, offering user support, etc. through gaming forums or through direct communication with game designers (Duncan, 2011). And game studies scholars have noted the way that certain social network games remain in "perpetual beta," effectively enlisting users as uncredited co-designers (Jacobs & Sihvonen, 2011).

That being said, few games are as explicit and transparent about the ways in which non-designers participate in game creation as *Never Alone* is. For example, *Never Alone's* lead designer Grant Roberts emphasized that collaboration was a fundamental principle of the project, noting, "we had no interest in making a game like this if we couldn't directly collaborate

with the Alaska Native community. It wasn't enough to just get someone from Alaska to sign off on the game, or for us to just lock our doors and emerge years later with a finished product that may or may not reflect the values of the culture" (IndieGamingMods, 2014). In addition for the potential benefits such an approach might offer a community hoping to preserve its cultural heritage and share it with a broader audience, participatory design can also offer developers and designers a new infusion of creative energy. As Sean Vesce, a creative director for E-Line articulated, "'Being able to get out of our cubes, which are typically a bunch of white guys talking about a fictional fantasy world, to be able to go into a community, learn more about a culture and then try to infuse their values and mythologies into a game that's fun and entertaining as well as thoughtful was something that seemed like an amazing challenge to us'" (de Matos, 2014). Both sets of comments imply that the *Never Alone* developers are well aware of the gaming industry's whitewashed reputation and the way it limits the kinds of stories told and player experiences on offer. And Roberts' comments suggest that merely telling the stories of Alaskan Native communities was not enough; the game required a deep collaborative environment in which the design would be driven by those whose stories were being told.

The results of such a design approach become obvious during gameplay. There is the emphasis on Iñupiat life: their stories, the gifts and challenges the Arctic environment presents, and their shared values – particularly the importance of interdependence, rather than independence (Tannous, 2014). Even the choice of placing a girl at the center of the game, a potentially controversial decision, was one not out-of-character for the Iñupiat. Researchers have noted that the Iñupiat do not maintain "…European notions of femininity or women's work…" and that, "…women's relationship to hunting is not necessarily limited to the standard roles, and traditionally, women's standard roles are not considered secondary or auxiliary to the role of animal

slayer" (Cuomo, Eisner, & Hinkel, 2008, p. 7). While the original tale of the Kunuuksaayuka featured a young man at its center, the development team in interviews noted that Iñupiat stories feature all kinds of individuals and downplay specific character traits to focus the listener's attention to the values and knowledge the story is conveying (Holthouse, 2014; Oppenneer, 2014). Likewise, Nuna is portrayed as fundamentally capable of overcoming the many challenges she faces – with help, of course.

Implications

Never Alone works as both a cultural artifact and an introduction to the Iñupiat community, values, and stories for non-Native audiences. Its success lies in not trading in superficial stereotypes and is a direct consequence of the collaborative nature in which the game was designed. However, the entire notion of a "world games" genre using participatory design requires a willingness of developers to engage with communities over what can be a long period of time (a commodity in short supply in larger gaming studios). Importantly, it also requires outside communities to be willing to engage with game developers – to share their knowledge and stories, as well as participate fully in the design process. While *Never Alone* was received well by most reviewers and fans who appreciated the game's unique narrative and the story behind how it was made, I wonder what the response would have been were it an AAA title produced by a major studio. Would it have been characterized as further "proof" of an SJW agenda within gaming by #Gamergate? Is *Never Alone* deemed acceptable because it is a low-key indie game that is unlikely to be noticed by those who decry the increasing diversity within games as merely an attempt to be "politically correct"?

As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) argue, games are often exploitative tools of imperialist and hegemonic forces; they are, in their words, games of Empire. But they are also potential sites of resistance, and effective ones at that. *Never Alone* is one such game. It is not that the gameplay itself is

particularly inventive or that its goals are particularly grandiose (in fact, its success, I would argue, is due to its subtle, quiet impact), but that it places at its center a community whose culture is relatively unknown and marginalized in contemporary American culture. But even more than that is *Never Alone*'s inversion of the typical received design process and that it telegraphs this fact to players. Instead of positioning the developer/designer as sole dictator of a fictional universe, it suggests that designers can also be students of culture; they can learn from and be guided by those whose stories and experiences they are telling. They can engage and do so honestly and from a place of empathy. And perhaps by modeling this idea – by being willing to listen and learn instead of speak and tell – game designers will help sow the seeds of broader change within gaming culture. Opening up the design process by using participatory design techniques might be one way to start.

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(1) Many game design texts discursively position the designer

as a kind of "god" of the world in which s/he is creating, downplaying the reality that game design often involves large interdisciplinary teams of individuals, each of whom is responsible for only a small fraction of the player experience.

(2) I felt some trepidation writing a piece about a game that portrays a culture so unlike my own knowing that I could not possibly explain what this game might mean for the Iñupiat community or other Native or First Nations individuals who share Nuna's cultural heritage. I have chosen to focus on the unique design approach used to create the game, and let others from within the community analyze and critique *Never Alone* as a cultural text.

(3) I am not suggesting that Rouse does not consider the user/audience unimportant; in fact, the first chapter of his text specifically addresses user needs and desires as being at the center of game design. However, Rouse emphasizes that both technology and gameplay usually take center stage.

DEATH OF THE GAMER SLAYING GENDERED POWER FANTASIES IN LEGENDARY AXE II (VICTOR MUSICAL INDUSTRIES, 1990)

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"'Gamers' don't have to be your audience. 'Gamers' are over", claims the title of a Gamasutra feature published in the midst of a particularly disheartening episode for the gaming community (Alexander, 2014). The same market probing tools that have greatly contributed to the hegemony and overrepresentation of the male adolescent "gamer" figure in game production and marketing now show that, beyond this common reference point, many audiences are waiting to be engaged. In spite of the bias for male gamer preferences in mainstream video game production, women now represent approximately 50% of the audience in many age groups (ESA report, 2013). While gender related stereotypes are slow to evolve in mainstream game production, more and more voices in the community are echoing feminist critiques that have emerged from the 1990s onwards (Consalvo, 1997; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). In this paper, we will lend our ears to an early critique that sought to put an end to the tyranny of the gamer. Most surprisingly, this voice emerged from within the gaming community, at a time – the early 1990s – understood

to be the heyday of heteronormative male power fantasies, and in a fictional scene – the final confrontation of a hack 'n slash game – designed to provide a peak of gratification to the stereotypical gamer. At the end of *Legendary Axe II*, in the throne room, the gamer is put to death.

Anatomy of a cut-scene

On the surface, this little known game from a platform whose significance is often dismissed in Americano-centric histories (the PC Engine/Turbografx-16) is anything but original or subversive. The introductory sequence presents a duel between two similar figures: the prince wearing a heavy golden armor dominates the swordfight, which ends abruptly as the lightly covered prince is thrown off a cliff. As a final humiliation, the weak prince's short sword reaches the ground moments later. But soon the sword rises again, held firmly while the thundering skies echo a vengeful scream. Throughout seven levels, the player takes control of this figure, and gains power and proficiency to confront the evil brother in the throne room. The final fight is especially difficult. Once he has defeated his monstrous other, the player loses control of the good prince and enjoys victory while his score explodes with emphatic sound effects. The next few seconds of this ending sequence break all the rules. The prince proceeds to climb on the throne; once seated, his gaze seems to look beyond the fourth wall, right into the player's eyes. In one frame of animation, he raises his fists arrogantly in the air, then sits and starts to laugh while holding his victorious pose. As the two frames of animation are repeated to insist on this overly satisfied attitude, six monks approach the throne slowly. The new king isn't celebrated for long: an unknown heroine unmasks herself and jumps in the air. The king is caught off guard, and as he tries to protect himself from the scimitar coming down to slay him, the screen fades to black (Figure 1). The sinister musical score that lingered throughout the whole segment becomes even darker as the credits start rolling.

Figure 3: Slaying the player avatar at the end of Legendary Axe II

In the upcoming sections, we seek to explain the significance and emotional charge held by these peculiar frames of animation. In order to reconstruct the potentially critical experience of *Legendary Axe II*, we will move away from this extremely specific object and perform a historical analysis. In his seminal effort discussing the integration of user reception in art history, Hans Robert Jauss provided useful guidelines on how to reconstruct "horizons of expectations". He suggests that such constructs should account for the generic norms and conventions associated with the work, and the interactions between this object and other cultural productions likely to be part of the user's repertoire (1978:52). In the case of our object, it is necessary to document not only the inner workings of the game, but also the development of hack 'n slash game mechanics, the gratifying structures of these games, and how this gratification is encapsulated in the wider realm of media consumption at the time. Our historical analysis also builds on the theoretical framework proposed in *Digital Play* (2003): in order to understand *Legendary Axe II*'s peculiar ending and its potential

effect on gamers, we need to expose how the dominant male power fantasy it appears to slay was progressively constructed through a complex series of interactions between cultural experiences, technological innovations and industrial imperatives. In "aiming for the gold", we will explain how the game emerged concurrently with a shift in the industry's target audience towards adolescent players; the reintroduction of violence and sexuality clashed with a corporate culture of censorship and political rectitude championed by Nintendo in the mid-1980s. In "loaded guns", we will reflect on the gendered nature of gratification in games and its interactions with major technological developments occurring at the time.

Aiming for the gold

From the onset of the video game industry, corporations understood the benefits of targeting a broad demographic. In *Before the Crash*, Erkki Huhtamo discusses the rise of family oriented entertainment in Victorian times; optic toys played a key role to keep bourgeois children at home in an increasingly chaotic urban context (2012:41, 44). Early printed ads for the Magnavox Odyssey prolonged visual marketing strategies that were widely used to sell their television sets: the whole family is portrayed sharing common leisure time in the living room (Burnham, 2003). Under Warner Communications and its massive TV campaign, the Atari VCS was sold with the idea that there was a game for everyone, all the way to odd members of the extended family: Uncle Frank helps his niece take on invaders from space, a young boy plays *Berzerk* with his competitive grandmother, and even the family dogs gives in to the addictive new craze. Outside of the "safe spaces" of the bourgeois homes and of family-oriented marketing, video games made their first breakthrough in arcades that emerged in part to avoid the age restrictions of bars and appeal to teenagers. As Carly Kocurek notes, the presence of women in these venues might have been underestimated (2012:196, 201). Nevertheless, arcades were largely populated by young men, and typical male fantasies /

gender roles proliferated throughout the first major expansion of the video game industry.

Stereotypical gender roles have expanded way beyond the enclave of chivalric literature, diffracted in a variety of media practices and thematic genres. However, the factors that lead a cultural industry such as video games to rely so strongly on these stereotypes are specific and must be understood in their historical context. In this section, we will expose some of the corporate practices that work to reinforce problematic gender biases in game culture, and the attempts to control and regulate the production of content in order to avoid controversy. As we will see, the despotic attitude of Nintendo created a context that effectively discouraged the kind of radical expression seen in *Legendary Axe II*. At the same time, we will explore the specific context of the PC Engine/Turbografx-16 that made it easier to subvert gender stereotypes in mainstream games.

In *Digital Play*, Stephen Kline, Greg de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Whiteford strive to understand the formation and dynamics of video game culture; "militarized masculinity", as they call it, refers to "a young male subculture of digital competence and violent preoccupations" (2003:257). One of their first reference points is the Tech Model Railroad Club at MIT, a group who hacked a PDP-1 to create *Spacewar!* in 1961/1962. Or course, prior experiments such as *OXO* and *Tennis for Two* were not associated so clearly with military scenarios, and the "military entertainment complex" can be traced back to non-digital games (Huntemann & Payne, 2009), but armed violence would soon be at the forefront of the game industry's expansion. Following the 1978 invasion from space critters (*Space Invaders*, Taito) and the 1984 assault from organized crime (*Kung Fu Master*, Irem), the shoot'em up and beat'em up genres proved to be the most prolific in the arcades. As in *Spacewar!*, navigation mechanics were mostly used to align an avatar-weapon and neutralize the enemy. Reading through Stephen Kent's journalistic account of this "golden age", one can sense how pivotal the issue of violence

had become during the creation of many classics. Already in 1976, Exidy's *Death Race* had triggered some concern about violent games in the media (see Arsenault, 2008:277). Tomohiro Noshikado reportedly chose alien antagonists for *Space Invaders* in order to avoid controversy. It is well documented that the frantic shooter was largely responsible for the expansion of the arcade business. According to Kent's research, more than 300 000 *Space Invaders* machines – originals or clones – were exploited worldwide (2001, chapter 9). It led to many spiritual clones such as Nintendo's *Radar Scope* (1979) and Sega's *Space Tactics* (1980), to name a few.

The connection between violent entertainment and teenage boys, long established in other media, cemented quite early in the history of video games. At the same time, these genres inherited traditional gender stereotypes from other forms of popular fiction. In Vladimir Propp's narrative model of traditional Russian folktales, the penultimate function couldn't be defined in more heteronormative terms: the hero is given both land and wife by the king after annulling the misdeeds performed by the antagonist (1965 [1928]). The video game format imposed even more brutal simplification of common figures such as the damsel in distress, the action hero and the vixen (Buchanan and Lipinski, 1999). Surprisingly, the rejection of violence became a creative catalyzer at the height the invasion; Toru Iwatani designed *Pac-Man* (Namco, 1980) in response to the onslaught, consciously integrating elements that would appeal to the female demographic. By contrast, *Miss Pac-Man* (1981), the most successful arcade game at the time, was clearly designed to target male audiences: Midway somehow managed to give erotic overtones to a pizza, sculpting the abstract shape with make-up, and adding limbs for the sole purpose of mimicking the classic pin-up pose on the cabinet art. In the flyer, she is presented as "the new femme fatale of the game world".

The marketing of arcade machines in the 1970s is a fascinating indicator of the gender dynamics taking place in arcades and

bars. As opposed to national TV campaigns and magazine ads, arcade flyers were hidden from the public eye; corporations targeted venue owners specifically with high quality full color printouts. In this closed marketing circuit, the figure of the sexy bystander could be disseminated without attracting negative attention and judgement from the community. Even before the well-known *Computer Space* flyer (1971), Nutting Associates adopted this figure for electro-mechanical games such as *Computer Quiz* (1968) and *Astro Computer* (1969). Atari's *Gran Trak 10* (1974) featured a very supportive young woman, fascinated by the exploits of the driver. While the *Jungle King* cabinet marquee highlighted a damsel in distress figure in a suggestive outfit, the flyer was much more risqué: it made good use of the multiple page format to create a somewhat literal and participatory "effeuillage" experience: as he opened the flyer, the venue owner also removed the lush jungle foliage that covered the exotic beauty. The *Gotcha* flyer (Atari, 1973) proposed an elaborate visual rhetoric: the sexy female figure pursued by a man is made translucent as it overlaps the arcade machine, which is presented as a kind of substitute for the real object of desire thanks to its spherical pink controllers (Figure 2). Jaakko Suominen recently documented how such fascinating fetishistic displacements became commonplace in Finnish computer culture from the 1950s onwards (Suominen, 2011).

Figure 4:The Gotcha arcade flyer. Source: The Arcade Flyer Archive

On the surface, violence and sex didn't play a major part in the 1983 crash; most accounts focus on the proliferation of lackluster products, and consequently, the loss of consumer / distributor confidence (Kent, 2001; Wolf, 2008; Donovan, 2010). In order to restore faith in the video game industry, Nintendo decided it would need to maintain a tight grip on production and develop a more "inclusive" corporate image. This operation involved a pro-active marketing campaign, along with an invasive expansion of "self-censorship" (Wiemker, 2012). Building on the Famicom's success in Japan, the company negotiated licensing agreements with major third party developers. By the time Nintendo adapted its operation to conquer America, licensees had to comply with a production code that laid out specific restrictions in terms of content: no sex or nudity, no excessive violence, no drugs or alcohol use, no foul language, no politics (Schwartz & Schwartz, 1994). The construction and enforcement of the Nintendo brand image

resulted in the proliferation of innocent child heroes and whimsical protagonists, inviting a younger audience to "play with power" (Kline *et al.*, 2003, chapter 5).

In theory, the American industry was revived in the very safe spaces of Nintendo's fantasy worlds, where nothing terribly wrong ever happens (unless, of course, you belong to a group that would judge the stereotypical Proppian plot to be immensely offensive). In practice, most of the major arcade successes based on violent premises found their way to Nintendo's platform. Along with shoot'em ups, the beat'em up and hack 'n slash generic enclaves – the same design moulds that were used for the creation of *Legendary Axe II* – were major players to foster profitability at the time, and Nintendo couldn't ignore the numbers. Technos Japan adapted the popular *Nekketsu Kōha Kunio-kun* (1986) on Nintendo's platform and went on to create the *Double Dragon* series; the three titles became best sellers on the NES..It might appear impossible to reconcile the production code's regulation of violence with games that generically signal the necessity to beat, hack and/or slash anthropomorphic or downright human figures. In a paradoxical turn of events, these games were allowed as long as they didn't portray the physical consequences of such violence in a realistic way. Thankfully, in a technological economy with so many processing limitations, slayed bodies were instantly wiped out of the screen, or removed from the ground after a few seconds, detaching the mediated violence even further from its real-world referent. In *Legendary Axe II*, as in *Golden Axe* (Sega, 1989) or *Double Dragon* (Technos, 1987), the most convenient way to deal with violence, both technologically and culturally, was to erase its most visible consequences immediately.

In 1988, Namco released *Splatterhouse*, one of the first arcade games marketed with much emphasis on gory elements. In this visceral hack 'n slash, the player neutralizes an army of undead creatures with the help of his trusty 2×4 or golden cleaver. Zombie bodies splatter on the walls and bleed abundantly when

sliced. The game, on such terms, would never have passed Nintendo's approval process. But NEC and Hudson were ready to accommodate this type of content. In fact, sex and violence were more than welcome on the platform, for the duo had envisioned their production environment as a direct response to Nintendo's overly restrictive policies (*La bible PC Engine*, 2009). They were not on a mission to condemn censorship and promote free speech, but simply trying to reach out to the frustrations of game developers. In 1987, Namco publicly criticized Nintendo, and decided to adapt its latest arcade titles on the little console; *Splatterhouse* was ported to the PC Engine/Turbografx-16 in 1990. Technological excellence and the absence of royalty fees were the main incentives for third party developers. Nevertheless, many studios ended up exploring adult themes without having to worry about the wrath of a monopolistic corporation obsessed with its brand reputation.

Legendary Axe II would not have been possible in Nintendo's protected enclave. Certainly, the graphical integration of violence is similar to many hack 'n slash games released on the Famicom/NES at the time. In contrast to the saturated visuals of these platforms, the PC Engine's palette certainly allowed the developers to create darker levels and enemies, tapping into the somewhat more mature imaginary realm that had already been developed extensively in literature, visual arts and cinema. The overall audiovisual ambiance of the game is not far removed from *Splatterhouse*, and the fourth level – the insides of an unknown creature – is downright horrific. Of course, it is the seemingly perverse ending that clashes with everything the Nintendo brand stood for. In a player repertoire dominated by child heroes and whimsical creatures, following the company motto – play with power! – in order to slay the forces of evil and rescue damsels in distress, the rise of the evil avatar at the end of *Legendary Axe II* marks a loss of innocence, and a passage to the adult world. Following such a powerful strike at the player's

habitus, any classic Proppian tale and its simple dualistic morality appears positively boring.

Interestingly, *Legendary Axe II* doesn't specify any type of "damsel in distress" scenario in the manual or printed ads. Victor censored part of the original Japanese ending for the American release; in the original ending, the unknown female figure is completely naked, while she is covered in the Turbografx-16 version. The irony of getting a full frontal pixel art naked woman, only to see one's avatar slain and the whole thing fade to black moments later, must have been shocking for Japanese gamers. As we will see in the next section, the console they bought was at the forefront of technological developments that reflect the gender dynamics we have presented in this first section.

Loaded guns

Long before Ralph Baer's passing in December 2014, the brilliant mind had been presented as the father of TV games in numerous journalistic accounts and history books (Kent, 2001; Burnham, 2003). Historical accounts of technology often set out to refine our answers to the "paternity question". In his foreword to Roberto Dillon's *The Golden Age of Video Games*, Ted Dabney goes further back in history to uncover other forgotten fathers, while reasserting his own legacy in the industrial exploitation of the technology (2011:ix). Such focus on great fathers and grandfathers constructs a peculiar biological metaphor: the "birth" of gaming technology inevitably appears "immaculate" in historical accounts where women are remarkably absent. While the immaculate conception of computer technology has been complemented by edifying features on Ada Lovelace or Grace Hopper, it is hard to "fix" the founding chapters of video game history when it comes to gender (Nooney, 2013). The following section seeks to explore the consequence of this gender disparity on the modes of engagement with technology.

As the others of *Digital Play* pointed out, *Spacewar!* brought together two very powerful attractions working in synergy: the excitement towards a new type of audiovisual representation,

and the feeling of direct control in navigating the ship through the switches (2003:87). We pointed out how this "real time" navigation was meant to complicate a shooting contest. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, the prevalence of shooting mechanics is motivated in part by the underlying technology itself: the easiest state transition to represent in this binary medium is to wipe out depictions from the screen, and the action most easily evoked by the press of a button is to pull a trigger (2006:118-119). In return, as shoot'em ups and beat'em ups became lucrative forms in the arcades, these popular game designs led to the refinement of technological component, most notably the multiplication / visual grandeur of on-screen enemies; game systems in the 1980s competed in part though the integration of evermore luxurious sprite architectures (Therrien & Picard, 2015).

Mediated violence isn't pleasurable for a specific gender only. Writing about the inherent psychological gratification of games in 1983, Elizabeth and Geoffrey Loftus noted the pleasure of destruction and audiovisual fury as core components. More recently, gratification in video game play has been defined as the pleasure of progressively gaining mastery/control over the gaming apparatus (see Grodal, 2000; Weinbren, 2002). This motivation is often echoed in the fictional scenarios proposed by the games: players are invited to annihilate a threat, rescue loved ones or to save humanity altogether. While the feat of overcoming obstacles and gaining proficiency is pleasurable in itself and for most individuals, the integration of actual rewards in games became a clear indicator of gender biases from the 1980s onward. From this perspective, the "damsel in distress" trope can be interpreted as a promise of something good to come: saving the day is connoted with the idea of sexual gratification – an aspect that was already obvious in Propp's model. In the generic enclave leading up to *Legendary Axe II*, this script is commonplace: Pauline in *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981), the "Jungle Princess" in *Jungle King* (Taito, 1982), Peach

in *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo, 1984), Sylvia in *Kung Fu Master* (Irem, 1984), Princess Guinevere in *Ghosts 'n Goblins* (Capcom, 1985), Marian in *Double Dragon* (Taito, 1987), all the way to the "beautiful red-haired Flare" in the first *Legendary Axe* (Victor Musical Industries, 1988) can all be related to such a motivation. Here again, this cultural bias interacted with the development of video game technology.

In the mid-1980s, many technological refinements – from audiovisual affordances to constantly improving data storage abilities – sought to implement richer depictions and cut-scenes. The integration of data-intensive elements in games shouldn't be seen in contradiction with the interactive nature of the experience, for it plays an essential role in the dynamics of gratification we have presented above. In 2002's *Screenplay*, Tanya Krzywinska and Geoff King noted how the audiovisual mastery exhibited by cut-scenes (in comparison with gameplay) acts as a technological attraction (2002:12). In the same book, Sacha Howells implicitly conveys this observation when he theorizes the main functions of cut-scenes: before they start providing narrative exposition, cinematics function as a "come on" to incite consumption; after competent players have successfully completed portions of the games, cut-scenes act as a form of "reward" (2002:112-13). "Damsel in distress" scenarios have been exposed through cinematics very early on in the history of the medium (Klevjer, 2013). The opening of *Donkey Kong* shows the angry ape taking Pauline to the top of a construction site. While the arcade flyer for the game was much more arousing than anything the game could offer at the time, soon technological innovation implemented these detailed – and arousing – depictions right into the digital object. In the few years that separate this title from *Legendary Axe*, video game systems developed their graphical and storage abilities in a way that made it easier to remediate such arousing images. In doing so, the gendered regime of vision that became prevalent in other

visual forms of entertainment – the "male gaze", as Laura Mulvey named it – was quickly carried over.

Along with the Commodore Amiga and Atari ST, the PC Engine/Turbografx-16 was championing an era where graphical depictions could be more realistic. Speaking of the multimedia ambitions of Cinemaware games on the Amiga, Jimmy Maher highlights the emergence of these detailed depictions as a sign of the "future aesthetic possibilities for the videogame as an artistic medium" (2012:209). He discusses extensively one of the "winning sequences" of *Defender of the Crown* (1986). Following a castle raid, the player character "frees" a noble lady, which eventually falls in love. "Then, late one night…", by the fireplace in the castle, romantic love is animated with cinematic flair (2012:211-13). Towards the end of the 1980s, countless demo disks featuring digitized pictures of women were circulating in the community. While the PC Engine/Turbografx-16 had a more limited color palette (512 colors), digitized pictures of young women were integrated early on (*Kagami No Kuni No Legend*, Victor Musical Industries, 1990), and one can already sense the prevalence of the male gaze in the close-up of the beautiful princess used extensively in the marketing of *Ys Book I & II* (1989). Game makers intentionally nurtured erotic connotations with idol games (*No.Ri.Ko*, Hudson, 1988), beautiful fighting girls (the *Valis* series) and raunchy hypermedia experiments (the *Dragon Knight* and *Cobra* series).

As we have noted above, the development of visual attraction remediated a previous regime of vision with obvious gender implications. Writing about the development of interactivity in artistic practices at the end of the 1980s, Bill Nichols proposed that "a (predominantly masculine) fascination with control of simulated interactions replaces a (predominantly masculine) fascination with the to-be-looked-at-ness of a projected image" (1988:31-32). Using the central concept of Roger Odin's theory of cinema consumption (*mise en phase*, or "synching"), we could say that the desire for mastery over the game as an artefact

echoes the fictional desire oriented towards a female "reward", much like the scopic drive of moviegoers synchs with the desire towards female figures in the diegesis of popular movies (Odin, 2000). In her seminal study of surrealist cinema and the fetish function of moving images, Linda Williams even suggested that "the entire cinematic institution – considered especially in its technical prowess – becomes erotegenic" (1981:218). Both apparatuses can be related to the voyeuristic mode of consumption theorized by Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey and Noël Burch (among others); video games complicate this relationship through the dynamics of player effort and reward systems.

Now that we have exposed some of the prevalent cultural dynamics and their interaction with technology in the 1980s, we can better understand the expectations many players carried along with them all the way to the end of *Legendary Axe II*. The medium was largely built on the paradigm of mastery: the player progressively gains proficiency with the game apparatus, and much of this process is mapped to a fictional scenario which is itself about gaining power. As we have seen, this synching effect is also echoed by the technological mastery of a system that is able to provide richer – and potentially arousing – depictions as a reward for player effort. But in a context where the fictional reward is so gender specific, the actual gratification that is the ultimate goal of this "synching" process can only operate fully in the case of male heterosexual consumption. While *Legendary Axe II* refrains from using the female reward trope, it doesn't seek to create a gender-neutral experience. On the contrary; the final scene that we have described above violently attacks the gendered paradigm of mastery. The player loses control completely, only to realize that he was the pawn of an evil ploy, "manipulated" by the avatar who proves to be another evil prince in the end. The gaze beyond the fourth wall becomes another signal of this 'de-synching' operation. Moreover, the scene doesn't seek to function as a technological attraction; it is

technically trite, reusing assets from the game for the most part. When a lady is finally uncovered, it is in order to restore morality to this world corrupted by fratricide between the wealthy and entitled. The final gesture put forth by the game is, almost undeniably, a castration.

Reviving the evil avatar

In this paper, we have exposed how the gender bias in the technological and industrial circuits led to the creation of heteronormative power fantasies, and how many successive phases of commercial success for specific products have cemented the male adolescent gamer as the core audience. Following the arrival of Mikael Katz as CEO in America, Sega decided to put the adolescent male at the center of its brand image and marketing operations for the Genesis, gaining a significant portion of the market along the way (Kent, 2001, chapter 24; Donovan, 2010, chapter 17). Under the regime of 'testosterone marketing', objectification of women proudly came out of the arcade flyer closet, onto the pages of the specialized press and on the packaging of the games. The moral combat over gory bits in 1993 led to content ratings regulated and overviewed by the industry. In the end even Nintendo could target the "core" audience with violent entertainment (Kent, 2001, chapter 25; Donovan, 2010, chapter 18). Since then, whenever the industry faces uncertain profitability, corporations tend to focus on established successful cultural formulas and paradoxically try to distinguish themselves by providing 'more of the same', "multiplying rates of 'fragging' and ever-more vivid splatterings of 'giblets'" (Kline *et al.*, 2003:251).

Nowadays, corporations oscillate manically between their two-faced brand image: a seemingly inclusive call to "everyone" through family-friendly marketing and entertainment, and a more juicy, "we know what gamers really want" form of customer address. We have briefly exposed how Atari was already struggling with the same tension during the first expansion of the medium; Nintendo and Sega refined marketing

strategies that were already in place. Through these recurring bits of history, a damaging association has been cemented: adult entertainment in video games is equated with "hardcore", while mature audiences in other media practices can be engaged through a variety of thematic explorations. Moreover, the overrepresentation of hyperviolence and hypersexualization lead to constant worries and even calls for censorship, which is counter-productive; a severely restricted production environment, such as Nintendo's protected enclave, or even a hypothetical regulation geared towards inclusivity and positive demonstration, would likely prevent the kind of radical expression that we have studied in this paper.

In *Critical Play*, Mary Flanagan explores the fascinating history of critical expression in game design and game play, from dollhouses and board games all the way to contemporary digital art games. The chapter on computer games opens with a few bleak observations that sum up the historical context we have presented in this paper; "as gaming drives the development of new technology, and new technologies are made by a consistently similar demographic, the cycle of technological innovation and games entertainment remains fairly consistent" (2009:251). Brenda Laurel sums up the creative context at the turn of the 1990s in similar terms: "The video game business was totally vertically integrated around a male demographic – from designers and programmers to marketers and distributors to retailers and customers" (quoted in Donovan, 2010:270). Stagnation of the production environment works against the emergence of critical expression, and it is not surprising that Flanagan chose to focus most of her chapter on art games produced outside of the main commercial circuits.

In light of this critique, the evil avatar introduced in *Legendary Axe II* appears as an essential conquest of video game culture. Just like unreliable narrators and problematic anti-hero figures in other media practices, it tests our inclination to gullibly adhere to a fictional proposition, its characters and its values. It can

act as a powerful reflector, making us turn a critical eye back to ourselves, inciting us to question our consumption of power fantasies, and how this consumption alienates other groups of human beings along the way. It proposes a truly adult experience. The ending of the game slices open a virtual body which felt so comfortable, much like the cinematic male gaze was metaphorically cut open on movie screens in 1929. While it would be far-fetched to confer on *Legendary Axe II*'s shocking ending the same significance that Surrealist cinema gained in the history of movies, obvious parallels between our analysis and Linda William's conclusions can be drawn: "when the cinema ruptures the identification between spectator and image, the fetish function of the institution crumbles as well. This crumbling is replaced by a new awareness of the fetish in the mind of the spectator" (1981:218). Of course, video game technology doesn't *have* to reflect violent preoccupations and male fantasies, and has been used to explore many other thematic realms in spite of any *a priori* biases we might perceive in technology. Such a transgressive ending can help us reflect on the "fetish function" that emerged and came to dominate video game culture. In rupturing the fetish, it effectively tries to emasculate technological tools – the movie camera, the game joystick – whose existence in culture could otherwise be crudely equated with male sexual appendages (Williams, 1981:218).

The ending of *Legendary Axe II* proves that, within the right context, critical play is accessible to mainstream game production. Hyperviolence and hypersexualization need not be such an alarming issue, if creators are able to produce expressions that question the human need for these representations. This active exploration of inner representations and desires, and specifically our paradoxical stance towards violence, represents a great potential of the interactive medium according to Janet Murray (1997:146-147).

Since *Legendary Axe II*, the evil avatar found a receptive audience in indie games such as *Braid* (Jonathan Blow, 2009) but

also in purely mainstream ventures such as *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Bioware, 2003), *Heavy Rain* (Quantic Dream, 2010) and *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager, 2012). One might wonder if, at the time of *Legendary Axe II*'s release, there was an actual audience for such a bold ending. Few traces of the game's reception are available, save for a few reviews from game journalists who focussed on the typical concerns (graphics and gameplay). One can doubt that anyone in the game community had received the necessary education to interiorize such a critique and get gratification out of this self-referential moment. But it is only fair to assume that even at the turn of the 1990s, 'gamers' were not the uniform mass of entitled phallocratic little monsters we tend to imagine in light of all the sexism and harassment in the community. Such a finale, in the golden age of heteronormative power fantasies, should be revered and given as an example: even under the normative weight of globalized cultural industries, a few discordant voices can still find their way to the public. While the community continues to reflect on the ways to educate itself, lending an ear to these voices might provide enough hope to feed the dedication of all those who strive to bring different images, and different gratifications, to the video games that we already know.

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