

# Playing as a Woman as a Woman as if a Man

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## Introduction

It's a chilly weekend day, the kind of day I love because I can rationalize not doing anything I know I should be doing, like going to the gym or running errands; instead, it's the perfect day to pop out of bed, run to the Xbox 360 and play one of my favorite RPG<sup>1</sup> titles, or finally get to one of the single-player campaigns I glossed over in favor of competitive multiplayer. While I am a scholar during my work hours, I am also a female competitive online gamer in a female-oriented clan during my leisurely weekday hours where I spend time playing online team-oriented competitive games. However, the weekends and, especially, long holiday breaks, are reserved for lone immersion in fantasylands, particularly those that allow me to play as my personified self in relation to that world.

This pastime can be traced back to my childhood years when I got my first Nintendo game system and spent countless hours playing through, and replaying, *Zelda II: the Adventure of Link*. I had figured out that if I spent hours running around in the grass and fighting bits and bots, I could overpower my character enough to take down most of the bosses with little effort. However, it was later that I discovered the original *Legend of Zelda*, and other fascinating RPGs, like *Final Fantasy* and

*Dragon Warrior*, which extended my imagination, and within which I could spend countless hours solving puzzles, talking to non-playable characters and ultimately slaying enemies in order to save the world... and the princess.

Saving the princess was always an interesting conundrum for me: on the one hand, growing up with feminist-leaning parents made me acutely aware of the problematic stance this took on, but, on the other hand, classic fantasy books, 1980s movies and other media almost made it seem like the natural order of fantasy-themed fiction. While I played my fair share of action adventure games, and later competitive fighting games in arcades, it was always the immersion of the RPG that encouraged my exploration and creativity, and, ultimately, allowed me to transcend reality, in a pleasurable way, at least for a little while. In the early days of gaming, whether it was *Dragon's Lair* in the arcade or *Final Fantasy* at home, playing in a man's narrative was an explicit part of the experience, and playing a man's narrative as a girl felt revolutionary. Not only was I playing through as a girl, but I was making it my own, and defying what others thought I should play, or should be interested in. In essence, exceptionalism was my symbolic defiance of static gender norms. And this sense of defiance was generational: even though I was one of the only girls I knew who played video games frequently and took pleasure in invading boy's spaces, like the arcade and the comic book store, popular expression encouraged this sense of tomboyish reclamation. In particular, the riot grrrl movement was in full swing in the late-80s and early 90s, and it was incredibly common to see women and girls finding empowerment through the rejection of gender norms and the redefinition of gender-based expression. I came to love the empowerment that video games, particularly RPGs, gave me, and spending an afternoon in an open world where I could express that empowerment became part of my escape from the gendered expectations constantly imposed upon me.

These days, that escapism has been primarily reserved for Bethesda<sup>2</sup> RPG titles, like *Fallout 3*, *Fallout New Vegas* or *Skyrim*. For whatever reason, Bethesda has figured out how to recapture the kind of giddy enthusiasm I once reserved for the Christmas mornings of childhood. While I have never quite figured out why journeying through an open wasteland or mythic Nordic countryside has captured my imagination like no other, Bethesda's recent titles have managed to make me spend hours tirelessly exploring, pursuing, and reflecting on who I am in relation to the fantasy world, my character and my real life presence, particularly through explicit and ambiguous moral choices. Maybe this is also precisely why I sometimes feel my fantasy bubble burst when I encounter the popular artifacts around these games: after spending 200+ hours as Rogue, or Myst, or Kitanya (the names I gave each of my characters in *Fallout 3*, *Fallout New Vegas* and *Skyrim*, respectively) journeying through the wasteland or the countryside with my companions (who I carefully protected and made sure had the appropriate amount of stimpacks or weapons), I would spiral back into the real world when I looked at the back cover of my game case, or experienced a game sequence that didn't quite fit my character, or looked up artwork online, or even walked into a GameStop and saw the character I was supposed to be playing in the way "he" was conceived by whatever powers that be. It is during these moments that I become aware of my "womanness" playing a story about a man as a woman.

### **Playing In the Backdrop of the Vault Dweller, the Courier and the Dragonborn**

To be fair, most of the newer Bethesda RPG titles have probably offered one of the most authentic experiences of playing as the gender or race of your choice to date, when compared to most games that let you vary those characteristics in your game experience (which I will discuss in more depth later). *Fallout 3* and *Fallout New Vegas* are set in a post-apocalyptic retro-future

American world resulting from a nuclear holocaust that happened in an alternate 2077. Even though *Fallout 3* is a continuation of a classic PC post-apocalyptic RPG, it stands out as an almost complete reimagining of the original series, and can be thought of as the first in a new series<sup>3</sup>. Both games have 1950s-era architecture, design, nostalgia and anti-communist themes, symbolizing references to *A Boy and His Dog*<sup>4</sup> and providing the backdrop of an alternate futuristic world that branched off from our actual US history circa 1950-60s. Within this world, you can freely roam and explore, and you can choose most of your characteristics down to the detail, including your sex, race/ethnicity, eye color, skin color, hairstyle and color, as well as your personality attributes.

*Fallout 3* gives you the unique perspective of experiencing your own birth in a vault<sup>5</sup> (and your mother's subsequent death during birth), going through your toddler years (where you choose your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. attributes<sup>6</sup> from a child's book), and experiencing your childhood and teenage years, all while bonding with your widowed, scientist father, and fellow vault dwellers. Your early interactions with your father and fellow vault dwellers, as well as being immersed in the first person perspective and experience of your early years, helps to weave you into the story of the person you will become and why (though how you become morally good, evil or neutral in relation to this narrative is up to you and your game choices). In essence, you can make an equally skilled young or old, Black, White, Asian or Hispanic, male or female character.

*Fallout New Vegas* allows for the same level of character customization but without a significant back-story (and in many ways allows you to assume you are continuing where the original vault dweller of *Fallout 3* left off). The game begins with you, a mail courier, being shot in the head by a 1940s or 50s-era looking gangster named Benny in the future Las Vegas Mojave Wasteland desert. You are saved by a mysterious robot and healed by a doctor, where you are able to reestablish your traits (by assigning your S.P.E.C.I.A.L. attributes in his office). While

you do not have early memories or attachments to non-playable characters (NPCs)<sup>7</sup> to ground your morality, like in *Fallout 3*, it works with the game's focus on a less rigid ethical character system (there are less clear cut "good" and "evil" characters and an overall more ambiguous moral game play). Furthermore, the game allows you to craft closer relationships with possible companion characters that come into play later on.

In *Skyrim*, you can choose the gender and fantasy race of your character (i.e., Wood Elf, Nord, Redguard, Argonian, etc.). Some of these races actually correlate to modern racial constructs: for example, if you play as a Nord, you will personify a White Nordic character, which corresponds with the racial background of the people of *Skyrim*, whereas if you choose to play as a Redguard, you will look racially Black with an interesting racial back-story. In fact, the game has a strong theme related to race, and while you can also play as a Khajit (a beast race of cats) or an Argonian (a beast race of reptiles), as well as elves, playing as a character other than a Nord will often be met with hostility by some Nord characters, as the game is set against the backdrop of a xenophobic rebellion against an empire that has seemingly sided with dark elves in order to reach a treaty. Given its complexity, a discussion of race in *Skyrim* would be its own essay. However, reflecting on themes of ethnocentrism, racism, and xenophobia in the context of a fantasy world in turmoil over attacking dragons and rebellions in and of itself offered a fascinating reflection, and only furthered my engagement within this complex open-world. In a similar vein as *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*, you could create equally skilled characters regardless of sex (and subsequent in-game gender expression), though there were some variations by race<sup>8</sup>.

The narrative entry points of all three games, overall, offer an open world, full of varying forms of conflict, and morality, which aid in aligning the player to the game. *Fallout 3*, in particular, draws the player into the narrative by aligning the character with his or her family and friends within the backdrop of the struggle in the post-apocalyptic world. *Skyrim*, in particular,

draws you into the narrative through a dragon attack and an ideological rebellion, which can be compelling in its moral complexity. In this sense, all three games successfully introduce playing as the gender and race of your choice in the opening sequence. However, nuances in the ways encounters are experienced by the sex you have chosen or the narrative choices of developers create interesting fodder for determining individual authenticity in the space.

### **Gendered Experience in an Open World Game: Sex, Love and Combat**

*Fallout 3* and its sequel, *Fallout New Vegas*, offer interesting experiences that vary by gender. In *Fallout 3*, for example, your choices do come with corresponding experiences related to the gender of the character you created. For instance, choosing to play as a female will get you called “Bitch!” by raiders in combat, which is realistic to me as a woman playing a game about a harsh post-apocalyptic world. However, glitches often had the unfortunate effect of reminding you that you were playing in an intended male narrative. For example, game glitches would occasionally have your character referred to as a man (or referred to as “he”) and one of my ending sequence animations featured a male version of my character.

Three early relationships during *Fallout 3*’s game narrative help to influence the kind of character you eventually create: your father, a loving yet mysterious scientist whose disappearance sets off your escape from the vault; Butch, a male bully with whom your initial interactions help you understand the consequences of moral in-game choices; and your female “best friend” Amata, with whom there appears to be a bond bordering on something more (though this never materializes, especially if you play as woman). However, while Butch serves as a constant potential physical threat in the vault, and Amata has to be rescued from harassment by him and his friends, you don’t really

have the chance to engage in meaningful romantic relationships with the characters that define your early life. Moreover, while a case can be made for male bullying of women, particularly through sexual harassment, I often didn't find the kind of physical intimidation and rivalry Butch provided relatable to a female experience. Furthermore, sex seems to almost have no role in the game (which is a bit farfetched in a post-apocalyptic world in a rated mature game, especially one so otherwise strongly tied with *A Boy and His Dog*<sup>9</sup>). The developers seem to have chosen to drop sex mostly from the narrative (possibly to alleviate complication involved in developing dual-gender play, or as a deliberate attempt to avoid controversial subject matter), though very early on in the first town you visit, you meet a female prostitute named Nova, who you can choose to have paid sex with, whether you play as female or male.

Interestingly, the developers do allow you the option of taking on a unique perk called "Black Widow" if you play as a female character in *Fallout 3* or *New Vegas*, which allows you to do additional damage to male opponents in combat and opens unique dialogue choices with some key male NPCs (while it's optional to choose any perk, this perk's strong leverage in game play, and its early availability in the game almost makes it a required perk to play with). While male characters have the option of a "Lady Killer" perk (which is roughly the same as "Black Widow" except allows these advantages over non-playable female characters), there are fewer female foes one encounters in combat in the game, and less key female NPCs to manipulate. "Black Widow/Lady Killer" is the only perk that has strikingly different effects depending on the gender you play as. For example, in both *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*, the "Black Widow" perk can be used as a means of manipulating male NPCs in important or main story quests and consequently ending those quests without as much complication. In *Fallout 3*, for example, one of the first towns you visit is Megaton, which has the possibility of being your home base. You are offered the challenging "Power of the Atom" quest, where you can either disarm the bomb that has never detonated in the center of the

town, as requested by the town sheriff, or you can blow it up, as requested by a mysterious man named Burke (on behalf of, you eventually will learn, an evil character). If you choose to detonate the bomb, it will result in a huge karma hit, the loss of key NPCs, and an almost inevitable evil moral game experience. If you choose not to detonate the bomb, you can still play as good or evil, but you can retain the ability to have Megaton be your home base. However, with the “Black Widow” perk, you can convince Burke not to be concerned with the bomb, which substantially alleviates quest hassles, including killing Burke or dealing with pesky hit men who constantly attempt to kill you (if you refuse detonating the bomb), having Burke involved in killing the sheriff (if you report Burke), as well as several other complex options that have a strong impact on the rest of your game play.

The “Black Widow” perk serves an even greater purpose in *Fallout New Vegas*, where you have the option of seducing Benny, a main character you are pursuing throughout your main quest, in an attempt to find the crucial platinum chip, and discover why you were left for dead by him at the beginning of the game. Ultimately, many of the choices in obtaining the chip from Benny involve additional hassle or additional time, like having the entire casino he is affiliated with turn hostile against you (resulting in a standoff with dozens of armed men, and the loss of several potential side quests), or having to pursue him further in the wasteland. However, the “Black Widow” perk gives you the ability to not only seduce Benny in his private quarters, but quietly remove him from the equation, saving you much time and hassle on a main story quest, and also giving you the option of obtaining some of key valuables, including the chip. Depending on how you play the game, it can also significantly speed up the completion of the main storyline.

While *Fallout 3* mostly avoids experiences that involve sex or love (beyond a few peripheral references), *Fallout New Vegas* offers interesting narrative around sexuality and relationships<sup>10</sup>. *New Vegas* offers you the opportunity to meet an array of NPC companions, who all have their own set of perks,



skills and even side quests (if you pursue them). While there isn't enough room to talk about all of the characters, their corresponding abilities and storylines at length, Veronica, Cass and Boone are three potential companions with whom you can have incredibly interesting interactions. Veronica is a member of the Brotherhood of Steel<sup>11</sup>, who is not completely sold on their isolationist, xenophobic and technology-worshipping ways. In some sense, her disillusionment may have started as a result of her sexuality: she had a romantic relationship with another female Brotherhood member (who appears in a later DLC<sup>12</sup>), which was discouraged and subsequently severed, due to the isolated Brotherhood's insistence on procreation. Her lover left the Brotherhood due to their narrow-minded ways, though Veronica's relationship becomes personal (at least for me) when you meet her former lover in a later DLC. Cass is a brass and sassy former-caravan owner and driver, who can be found in a NCR<sup>13</sup> bar, drinking incessantly. If she becomes a companion, she will openly express distaste for the misogynistic nature of Caesar's legion, a band of mostly evil slavers who attempt to take over the Mojave wasteland. Cass gave my character comfort during a difficult quest: Caesar's Legion is downright hostile to women, using them solely for sex slavery, yet, as a female character, I am the only woman to freely walk in Legion territory due to Caesar's need for my potential assistance. Legion soldiers make sure that I am aware I am a woman they would freely and violently have their way with if not for Caesar's orders, and Cass' companionship and witty commentary actually served as solace as she accompanied me through an often difficult path in meeting Caesar. Finally, Boone is a hardened yet sad former NCR military sharp-shooter, who lost his wife to Caesar's Legion and a complex tragedy he is not willing to initially reveal. You can spend a significant amount of time interacting with Boone, eventually learning about his wife and healing his past wounds related to her, and his actions during the war, but, once again, companions are limited to combat-based companionship, even while divulging their deepest secrets.

Each of the NPCs offer you a glimpse into the complexity of relationships in the post-apocalyptic world, even taking you on incredibly intimate quests or storylines, but this level of familiarity is shut down just as quickly as it's introduced, which is a bit disheartening. For the most part, once their key storyline or quest is over, dialogue is limited, though they can continue to fight by your side. Veronica's story openly discusses an intimate homosexual relationship, though exploring one yourself with her seems off-limits, even playing as a woman. Of particular frustration was the inability to talk to her lover about her in a later DLC, even though I had developed close relationships with both of them as companions. Cass' witty assurance and banter about handling her men, and her consoling presence during my harrowing journey amongst slavers and rapists, made her seem like a potential best friend. Furthermore, I appreciated her dialogue, which echoed my resistance and provided depth to the female experience in the wasteland, though beyond being a fighting companion who occasionally asks for whiskey, she doesn't pursue a deeper friendship. And, even though you spend a significant amount of time unraveling and healing Boone, who has been widowed for quite a while, you are not offered the ability to pursue anything more with him, whether it be a possible romance, or a very close friendship.

In juxtaposition, however, you can have sexual exploits out of gained admiration with women who admire and are grateful for your assistance, but with whom you otherwise share no level of close companionship, like the kind you fostered with those that fought by your side and revealed their lives to you. *Fallout New Vegas* features two possible NPCs that you can have sex with after going on mini-quests for items they require. Red Lucy is a strong, confident character who runs an underground fighting pit called The Thorn, where people can bet on gladiator-like fights featuring men and beasts from the wasteland. After finding various beast eggs for her as part of a side-quest, she will give you the honor of being her "hunter" and offer to sleep with you out of admiration whenever you request. Sarah Weintraub, who runs Vault 21 (now being used as a less expensive hotel on the New

Vegas strip), will sleep with you if you gather enough vault jumpsuits from nearby vaults for her giftshop and pass a speech option. While both women are intriguing characters to a certain extent, you never learn much about them, nor are you allowed to develop a level of social intimacy, as with your companions.

*New Vegas* further expanded the perk options by allowing males to have the “Confirmed Bachelor” perk, which enables someone playing as male to do additional damage to same-sex opponents in combat and opens dialogue choices with the same-sex (females had a similar perk called “Cherchez La Femme”). While it had the potential of being just as powerful as “Black Widow,” it was limited in that it didn’t offer the same interactions with key male NPCs (though it did open up newer options with more extraneous NPCs<sup>14</sup>). Furthermore, while there are many more prostitutes in *New Vegas* than in *Fallout 3* (including an entire hotel devoted to the practice), paid sex is still primarily reserved with women. In the hotel, you are only offered the option to have sex with two female prostitutes, regardless of gender, despite the variety of male and female homosexual and heterosexual prostitutes. One extraneous, optional side-quest called “Wang Tang Atomic Tango” allows the player to recruit a sex-bot, a female ghoul (who dresses like a dominatrix), and a “smooth talker” male prostitute. However, only one of the men you can potentially recruit will have sex with the player, regardless of gender.

Consequently, sexuality is used in both *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas* as a means of manipulating men, if and only if, you play as a woman, while unpaid sex for pleasure without manipulation is reserved only with women. *Fallout New Vegas* begins to open up avenues that explore sexuality, with the addition homosexual characters, and the potential for male homosexual interaction, though limited. As a heterosexual woman, having sex with a woman as a woman within the fantasy space doesn’t turn me off or cause me to be uncomfortable, but it does remind me that I am operating in the fantasy of a man. While a case can also be made for operating in the fantasy of a

homosexual or bisexual woman, the use of femme characters (with essentially interchangeable sexuality) reinforces a male perspective. As Ciasullo points out in her analysis of lesbian bodies in popular media, the popularity of the femme lesbian (and the consequential absence of the “butch” or otherwise not femme lesbian) is partly due to her ability to be “de-lesbianized” (Ciasullo, 2001). In other words, the women you sleep with in *Fallout* can be lesbian or straight, but ultimately will be pleasing to male attraction, as well as attainable and consumable by men.

*Skyrim* on the other hand works in many ways as a continuation on the theme of gender and sexuality in role-playing, even though it branches from another game series. *Skyrim* allows you to play as the gender and race of your choice, resulting in equally skilled characters regardless of race or gender (for the most part). Additionally, there are several more possible companions you can interact with, as well as a dizzying amount of other NPCs involved in a dizzying amount of quests, which I don’t have time to discuss at length here. However, the developers make sure to include a wide array of NPCs that cover all possible gender and race combinations, and female NPCs are prominently featured as strong, capable and equally skilled at taking on any job a man could do, including being a blacksmith or “housecarl” (*Skyrim*’s word for bodyguard). One of the earliest potential companions afforded through gameplay is a tough, capable female Nord named Uthgerd the Unbroken, who appears in a tavern in Whiterun, the first major city you venture to in the game. If you speak to her, she will challenge you to a fistfight, and if you win, she will offer to fight at your side through the game. What I found particularly fascinating was her fearless nature and her butch demeanor. Despite her disposition, a male or female can marry her.

While your companions don’t have significant back-stories or side-quests, as they do in the *Fallout* games, you do have the option of marrying your companions, who can later continue to fight by your side or tend the household. This option is extended to you by wearing an “Amulet of Mara” and having

people recognize it and proposition you. Despite whom you eventually marry, most interactions with your spouse will be the same. For the most part, *Skyrim* attempts to give the player a fair and mostly authentic playing experience whether you are playing as male or female, despite your sexuality. There appear to be both heterosexual and homosexual options for marriage and a variety of capable choices. Since there isn't a significant back-story associated with potential spouses, I didn't feel a strong sense of being shafted by not being able to choose someone I came to grow closer to through their story. However, it should be noted that marriage serves more of an economical than intimate purpose in *Skyrim*: while your spouse will open a store and generate revenue, you never get the option to share the marriage bed.

Inauthenticity was mostly a problem when it came to the race you played, as one of the main storylines involves fighting for or against a xenophobic Nordic cause, though one could make the case that fighting against this cause could resonate with one playing as a different race (this was the case for me). However, the presence of this plot device, along with popular representations of the game, brought up interesting dilemmas related to being able to choose your own character. In particular, I often wondered whether my experience was authentic when I confronted popular imagery and representations around my game, which didn't include my in-game experience.

### **Popular Representation of Your Character...“as if a Man”**

While each of these games isn't built upon a static character linked to the narrative (like the male hero, “Link,” in *Legend of Zelda*) or a named character that personifies the franchise (like “Sheppard,” who can be male or female, in *Mass Effect*), there appears to be external pressure to personify the character as if it defined the game. Each of the titles tried their best to hide any association with a static character: *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*’ covers both had fully armored individuals who could

be claimed to be male or female (though I will later argue that as an entry point, the male would be assumed). *Skyrim's* cover only contained the symbol of the dragonborn (or "Dovahkiin"), which the main character is referred to throughout the game, despite the race (i.e., fantasy race associated with *Skyrim*) or gender chosen. However, a careful examination of the back covers of all three games erodes the fantasy: each of the titles features a male player in action (even though each game's default play style is first person, meaning that they didn't have to show gender at all to demonstrate game play). Further, the popular representation of *Skyrim's* dragonborn is a very pronounced Nord male character, as if reinforcing the default option of playing as a Nord. This version of the Dovahkin is present in all forms of media used to promote the game, including popular game magazines, fan websites, and a promotional memorabilia. Since you are often spoken to and treated as if you are a Nord throughout the game anyway, it serves to erode the authenticity of your experience if you played as another race. And, while gender doesn't seem to matter either way in game play, the use of the male Nord in marketing and imagery erodes the authenticity of choosing to play as female. More importantly, it limits the entry point into the game for many players that wouldn't otherwise see themselves enjoying this kind of storyline, even though the ability to customize your experience would actually make it enjoyable to a wider audience.



Figure 1: Fallout 3 images. Left: Front and back cover of the Fallout 3 game. Photo Credit: Bethesda Softworks. Right: close-up of your main character, as a male, reinforcing associations with *A Boy and His Dog*. Photo Credit: Bethesda Softworks, <http://fallout.bethsoft.com/>



Figure 2: Left: Front and back cover of *Fallout New Vegas*. Right: Close-up of a back cover photo of your character, as a man, in action. Just as with *Fallout 3*, the use of a fully-armored and gender ambiguous character on the front cover allows one to maintain the illusion of playing as the gender of your choice, while the use of action pictures of your character as a male on the back cover can assist in eroding that illusion. Photo Credit: Bethesda Softworks.





Figure 3: Front and Back cover of the Skyrim game. Note that the front cover doesn't reinforce a static character. Photo Credit: Bethesda Softworks.





Figure 4: Popular representation of the Dragonborn (“Dovahkiin”). Left: image associated with the game, which was promoted in *Game Informer*, a popular gaming magazine. Photo Credit: *Game Informer*. Center: The cover of a game magazine promoted in Europe. Photo Credit: *Bethesda Blog*, <http://www.bethblog.com/>. Right: Human-scale promotional statue of the dragonborn: dozens were shipped as collectables and featured in many game retail stores. Photo Credit: *Bethesda Blog*, <http://www.bethblog.com/>.

## The Evolution of Choosing Your Gender

In recent years, it appears that developers and game companies are becoming progressively more sensitive to gamers’ desires to develop their own unique characters, with gender and race being increasingly offered as characteristics that can be individualized. For example, two other major RPG titles have allowed you the ability to choose whether you want to play as male or female: *Mass Effect 1, 2 and 3* and *Fable 2 and 3*. Interestingly enough, the shift for most major titles seems to have occurred around 2007-2008. The original *Fable* game, released in 2004, would only allow you to play as male, though this changed for *Fable 2*, which allowed one to play as a male or female character, and was released in 2008. *Mass Effect 1* was released in late 2007, and featured the ability to play as the male or female captain Sheppard; the later titles of *Mass Effect 2 and 3*

were released in 2010 and 2012 respectively, and had expanded options for sexuality in relation to the gender chosen. Similarly, *Fallout 3* was released in 2008, *Fallout NV* in 2010, and *Skyrim* in late-2011.

I chose to limit this narrative to the *Fallout* series and *Skyrim* because, unlike *Mass Effect*, they allow you to fully customize your character down to the name, in addition to race and gender. *Mass Effect* primarily enforced playing as “Captain Sheppard,” a male default character who could be customized to be female. While in the first game, this seemed tacked on, later titles allowed for enhanced experiences playing with the gender of your choice. Furthermore, *Mass Effect* mirrors similar progressions in playing as the gender or sexuality of your choice by increasing the amount of characters you could be intimate with: in the original *Mass Effect*, there were only three characters which you could be intimate with, which included a male NPC if you were playing as a woman, a female NPC if you were playing as a man, and a female alien NPC which either could be intimate with, reinforcing the heterosexual male experience. Later titles, particularly *Mass Effect 3*, created more variation. *Fable 2*, on the other hand, attempted early on to create a female experience that was equal to that of a man, allowing female characters to get as large and bulky as male characters as they grew stronger. While there was a lot of controversy around allowing females to play with what would come to look like a masculine-defined female body, I felt more personally disconnected from the types of sexual interactions allowed in the game: the men with whom you could marry often came across as rather effeminate in their demeanor and interaction, which wasn’t appealing to me as a heterosexual woman. In other words, in an attempt to create equality, the developers (perhaps mistakenly) allowed you to play essentially as the female version of a man, complete with an eventually masculine-looking body, and feminine-acting male lovers. However, the use of more inclusive gender and sexuality options in recent years, particularly in 2011 and 2012 is encouraging, though the marketing around these games can be a barrier to entry points for gamers and non-gamers alike.

## Entry Points to the Narrative Game World

The industry and popular media continue to assume that women are not playing games as much as men are, and it is implied that there are barriers to this participation that include the ways characters are portrayed, or the kinds of content in games - in this sense, entry points are crucial. If we are starting to see more games that allow players to craft a dialogue that relates to them and the way they want to experience gender and race in relation to that particular game world and quest line, I find it also crucial for individuals to know what those games are about. Entry points are the points at which potential players become familiar with the game: but if the marketing and the memorabilia are not consistent with the game possibilities, then there is a potential population being missed.

Recently, I was explaining the experiences I had in *Skyrim* to other gamers and non-gamers alike: what was striking was that there were just as many hardcore male and female gamers as non-gamers that were initially uninterested in playing *Skyrim*. Its use of the male Nord, while appealing to some gamers, was completely alienating to others, particularly many black and Latino male gamers, in addition to female gamers. One lifelong Latino male gamer confided in me that he loved Bethesda titles, but couldn't get into that "bow and arrow and dragon-related mythological playing," which, to me, speaks to a larger cultural disconnect. However, many of us were Bethesda supporters, having played *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas*, which ultimately led us to experiment with the game, and others eventually followed once they became aware of the array of options. Nevertheless, the entry point was limiting in the sense that a potential population would have been missed, especially for non-gamers, who I often speak with related to my own research.

## The Unique Experience of Female Gamers

As females occupying the gaming spaces, we are often thrilled to have new choices in interaction so much so that we may miss the other nuance of our experiences within the context of playing as a woman. Part of what drew me to video games was my rejection of static notions of female experience and expression: I liked power and violence in how it allowed me to define myself outside of traditional female roles. One of my earliest movie icons was Ripley from *Aliens*, who was, in many ways, the 80s personification of Rosie the Riveter. Growing up with feminist parents probably furthered my association with Ripley who was as capable as a man, but was also in touch with her femininity as a mother figure and a love interest. She could be strong and powerful, sexy and brave, dependent and dependable: she could save all of the men and children and still be the sexual interest of a respected, strong and capable man.

However, we didn't get to play as Ripley – we got to play as a man as we imagined being her. Our games didn't pass the Bechdel test<sup>15</sup>; in fact, they didn't come close. As women's presence in gaming spaces is increasing, video game companies are beginning to allow for a variety of gendered experiences, at least as long as they relate to a narrative that often starts around a man. However, the move toward increased sexual expression and equal capability despite gender, suggests that the gendered nature of the narrative is breaking down. The last barrier, it appears, is increasing the access to that narrative and that expression: the longer that games continued to be marketed as boy's spaces, the less likely those that don't see themselves inhabiting those spaces will take part in that narrative. While I love the *Skyrim* male Nord, I also love my female wood elf, who bravely fought against a xenophobic cause, saved *Skyrim* from dragons and dark elves, and married a male mage who cooks her a home cooked meal once a day. I want her story on the cover of Game Informer too.

## Endnotes

(1) RPG – Role Playing Game. RPGs are typically defined by having open-ended, or even exploratory worlds or quests. In particular, the ability to craft your experience through your actions and choices (i.e., role play) is central.

(2) Bethesda Softworks is a game development and publishing company.

(3) Since the creation of *Fallout New Vegas*, which is in many ways a sequel to *Fallout 3*, *Fallout 3* actually stands out as if it is a first game in a new series, though it does draw from much of *Fallout 1* and *Fallout 2*'s original story and concept. However, *Fallout 3* and *New Vegas* were developed and published by Bethesda Softworks, respectively, using new game mechanics, a new interface, and more complex interactive possibilities, setting it apart in many ways from the original games, which were developed by Interplay Entertainment Corporation, a different development and publishing company.

(4) *A Boy and His Dog* is a 1974 film based on short, science fiction stories by Harlan Ellison. It features a wayward boy and an intelligent, telepathic dog, who attempt to survive in an alternate post-apocalyptic, futuristic world that branched off from our current world by the unsuccessful assassination of John F. Kennedy. Many parts of the *Fallout 3* narrative (as well as the narrative of the original series) are strongly associated with this movie.

(5) You are born in a vault used as a sustainable fallout shelter in case of nuclear holocaust, which your predecessors were able to escape to and survive in before the bombs dropped over a hundred years before.

(6) S.P.E.C.I.A.L. is a complex attribute system where you determine your underlying physical, mental, learned- and luck-based attributes that correspond with your skills, which range from combat based skills (like how good you are with weapon types), to medicine, speech and sneaking skills.

(7) NPC - non-playable characters who usually have interesting clues, stories or side quests

(8) Some races in *Skyrim* did have underlying attributes that set them apart but not overwhelmingly against the attributes of another race.

(9) The main character in *A Boy and His Dog* is constantly on the lookout for females to have sex with (or even sexually assault).

(10) Of course, most of this depends on how you play, as with any other open world RPG. If you happen to meet and choose certain companions, as well as engage in extended dialogue choices with them, you are more likely to foster stronger bonds of intimacy. Each of the following characters were not essential to game play, but had fairly prominent roles with key in-game factions, and could strongly assist in determining more advantageous outcomes in the game.

(11) The Brotherhood of Steel is a faction that has appeared since the original series (*Fallout 1 & 2*). Though they consist of several regional groups (with different ideologies), they tend to focus on preserving ancient technology, as well as creating advanced technology. They have sometimes been shown to do this while helping people in the wasteland, and sometimes portrayed as doing so at their expense. In *Fallout New Vegas*, the Mojave faction of the Brotherhood has isolated itself from the outside world, though they send scouts to occasionally spy on what's going on.

(12) DLC – Downloadable Content. Each of these games has downloadable content, which adds onto the original games' stories with new quests, side quests and characters.

(13) NCR – New California Republic. They are a federation which tries to spread democracy, liberty and many of the “old” American values. They also have a military and specialized rangers.

(14) One possible companion is Arcade Gannon, a member of the Followers of the Apocalypse (a group dedicated to bringing free knowledge, technology and assistance to the people of the wasteland). He is presented as medically knowledgeable, incredibly intelligent, yet not the strongest in combat. It is also implied he is homosexual, though, while he can be recruited by male players with the “Confirmed Bachelor” perk (and comments to females that he would not be interested in them), he does not present a narrative around his sexuality.

(15) The Bechdel Test was popularized by the famous, long-standing comic strip, *Dykes to Watch out for*, by Alison Bechdel. It is a popular

test that measures a film's gender bias by determining if it, at minimum, has (1) at least two women in it, (2) who talk to each other, and (3) about something other than a man (this man doesn't have to be a romantic interest). Surprisingly, many films even to this day do not pass the test, and *Aliens* was originally cited as one of the few that had at the time the strip came out in the 1980s. Similarly, many games titles, even to this day, do not often feature more than one woman, if a woman is featured at all, especially one that interacts with another.

## References

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