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## Horizon Zero Dawn

### The Educational Influence of Video Games in Counteracting Gender Stereotypes

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper argues that narrative video games have a potential educational benefit in counteracting stereotypes and promoting gender equality. In particular, the study focuses on a specific video game, *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017). Firstly, this paper analyses the traditional female models promoted in video games and their influence on the construction of gender ideals. Then, *Horizon Zero Dawn* is explored, paying attention to the representation of femininity and masculinity within the game, as it emerges through

its main characters and their interactions within the narrative. The contribution analyses a specific case study in order to investigate the potential influence of non-stereotyped narrative video games on the perception of gender norms.

#### Keywords

*Horizon Zero Dawn*, video games, education, gender identity, gender socialization

## INTRODUCTION

The video game industry has been considered a field dominated by men: female players have often been excluded (directly or symbolically) from the gaming community (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006; Cassel and Jenkins, 1998). Despite this, women are often involved in the consumption and production of video games, but they can rarely find equal and non-sexist representations of female characters. Video games, as well as other media, primarily present a heteronormative and androcentric perspective, with a rare attention to different genders, sexualities, ethnicities and so on. Even if some attempts have been made in order to include and attract female audiences, products addressed to girls and women usually focus on traditional activities linked to femininity (Dovey and Kennedy, 2006, p. 36). Thus, far from being inclusive, video games often contribute to strengthening gender norms and roles promoted by other media.

The present study aims to analyze narrative video games from a gender-sensitive pedagogical perspective and explore video games' potential influence on gender education and socialization through a specific case study. Thus, this paper will build on gender role theory and gender socialization theory. Gender role theory assumes that masculinity and femininity are defined by cultural standards and expectations: many social roles are considered culturally appropriate depending on the individual's gender

(Schimanoff 2009). Consequently, according to gender socialization theory, gender norms and behaviors are learned from an early age through different agents. Mass media and cultural representations are claimed to be influential factors in life-long gender socialization (De Santis, 2013; Grossi, Ruspini, 2007). Gender education will be considered as a life-long process that has its strongest influence at an early age, but is particularly effective for adults as well. Narrative video games are usually appreciated both by young adults and adults, and their portrayal of gender norms has a strong impact on the perception of femininity and masculinity.

This paper will focus on narrative video games, or rather video games presenting a strong, fully developed plot and rounded characters. Through their ability to tell complex stories, narrative video games may be particularly effective in counteracting gender ideals using literary patterns that audiences are usually familiar with (Antoniazzi, 2007). Consequently, these texts can be examined through a narrative approach since they are based on the same literary structures that characterize other narrative media, such as books and films (De Santis, 2013; Antoniazzi, 2007). Literary theory, and specifically narratology, will be used to analyze the selected game (Marchese, 1983). In particular, this paper will focus exclusively on the text, as opposed to the paratext, intended as those elements that surround and accompany the main text, such as covers, manuals, titles, advertisements, etcetera (Genette, 1989). Moreover, the main unit of analysis will be the character. The study will focus on the qualities, skills and personalities of single characters and their interactions.

Although many studies have provided feminist and gender-based analysis of video games, there is still a lack of contributions on gender education and video ludic narration (Shaw, 2014, Cassel and Jenkins, 1998). Gender studies and gender pedagogy often focus on books, textbooks, cartoons, cinema, advertisements, etcetera as media for gender education, but video games are generally neglected. A gender-sensitive research on video games

and their promotion of male/female models from an educational perspective is still lacking. However, video games are extremely influential tools because they address a wide audience: they appeal to different generations in various countries of the world. Their influence on gender roles should be carefully examined in order to highlight positive and negative models in the video game industry. In this paper, the theoretical narrative framework of literature will be applied to video games in order to analyze a specific case study, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, through a gender-sensitive approach. Beyond the choice of a female heroine, the selected video game presents a variety of gender roles and identities, and reconsiders both female and male stereotypes, offering an equal and complex narrative to gamers.

Thus, video games have a strong educational potential that comprehends gender education, a widely debated and controversial topic from a pedagogical point of view. Therefore, *Horizon Zero Dawn* can be viewed as a relevant text from an educational perspective, as this paper will argue through the analysis of the characters and their interactions.

## GENDER EDUCATION

Gender education is a wide and complex process: through socialization, men and women learn what is suitable for their gender in a specific social and cultural context. Gender education builds a determined idea of what is generally considered feminine and what is generally considered masculine. This lifelong process is particularly influential during the early years of a child's life. Gender education is performed in different contexts, at different levels and through different elements (Ulivieri 2007; Biemmi 2012; Burgio 2015; Brambilla 2016).

In particular, masculinity and femininity can be assimilated through different tools that indirectly build gender identity, such as toys, magazines, advertisements, literature, cinema, cartoons, video games, and so on. Most of these tools – and specifically

literature and cinema – work on storytelling and indirectly promote specific gender models through the narration of archetypal stories. Although many studies have been conducted on literature or cinema and gender stereotyping, the video game has not been considered a specific form of narration promoting different gender roles. Nevertheless, video games work similarly to literature and cinema, and encourage specific gender standards, following analogous patterns.

To begin with, narration is a particularly influential tool in endorsing gender ideals. From a very early age, children deal with different kinds of stories – textbooks, picturebooks, novels, cartoons, films, and so on. Thus, children and young adults' narrations may be defined as one of the most effective tools in promoting specific roles for boys and girls. Young girls and women are rarely represented as characters in works for young audiences, while boys and men are particularly common and are often the main characters of the story (Biemmi 2012). From a qualitative point of view, boys and girls are described as opposite extremes in literature for children. For instance, they are characterized by different adjectives, different career opportunities, different spaces where to act, and so on. All these elements work together and create a specific gender ideal that will shape young readers' perception of masculinity and femininity. Although texts for children are often considered harmless, their influence is indirect but constant. Books or films representing traditional roles promote an archaic and rigid division of gender roles, and foster gender-based stereotypes.

Likewise, video games participate in the construction of gender identity of young boys and girls, and in strengthening adult values. Though most of the video games present stereotyped gender roles and identities, some of the most recent products of the video game industry reconsider gender standards and foster modern ideals. For this reason, video games – and narrative video games in particular – may be considered a stimulating educational instrument; they

counteract stereotypes and gender norms, and involve various audiences, from teenagers to adults.

## VIDEO GAMES AND GENDER EDUCATION

In this paper, I hypothesize that video games may be effective tools in reconsidering gender norms and standard identities through their characters. Moreover, video games may be particularly helpful in promoting empathy and identification with characters that differ from the player. Tal-Or and Cohen define identification as “the experience of shifting identities” (2011, p. 403). They also argue that identification is usually considered a more involved form of readership, since people are more likely to be emotionally engaged in a text if they identify with a character. This may be true for video games as well. As highlighted by Nardone, the player and the avatar are correlated: video games create a “complicated, multi-dimensional relationship, which involves me and the other me” (2008, p. 4). One of the consequences is a distinctive feeling of responsibility: as stated by Veale, “players become invested in the outcomes of the decisions required to engage with the game, and thus feel responsible for the consequences of their actions within that context” (2017, p. 130). Therefore, some video games may develop empathy and/or identification, since they allow the player to wear someone else’s shoes and experiment with different realities, but also to reflect on the player’s own experience. As with literature and cinema, video games work as *mirrors* and *windows* (Bishop, 1990). On the one hand, the player may deal with a series of events that resemble his/her own personal experience; on the other, it offers the possibility to get familiar with new experiences and points of view (e.g. people of different ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation and so on).

With the increase of female characters in video games, it is now more and more common to have a male player who interacts and feels involved with a female second self. In this case, traditional gender standards are dismissed and the game allows male players

to virtually (and safely) experience a female identity, regardless of social norms (Schleiner, 2001, p. 223). In Kennedy's opinion, this leads to a blurry, queer identity:

[...] having to play *Tomb Raider* as Lara, a male player is transgendered: the distinctions between the player and the game character are blurred. [...] This new queer identity potentially subverts stable distinctions between identification and desire and also by extension the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity (Kennedy 2002).

Video games also offer specific models and create specific expectations in the real world (Kondrat 2015; Felini 2012; Beasley, Collins Standley 2002). For example, considering gender dynamics, in Beasley and Collins' opinion there is "a strong correlation between consumption of media content and attitudes toward acceptable gender-related clothing and behaviour [...] Video games are just one source of many for information about what is masculine or feminine" (2002, p. 281). In particular, video games promote gender roles and ideals. When playing games, we can reflect on our identity and wear someone else's shoes, which is one of the main features that makes role-playing so fascinating for both children and adults (Cassel, Jenkins 1998, p. 81).

Although Adrienne Shaw's research showed that many players belonging to a minority group do not specifically care about textual representation – most of them perceived sexism and homophobia in gaming communities as a much more worrying phenomenon – equal, realistic and stereotype-free representations of different identities may bring several benefits. Some of them may be promoting inclusion, gratification, empathy and knowledge of different ways of living. As Shaw explains, "representation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible" (2014, ch. 1); it allows different people to be part of the collective imagining created by some video games. Moreover, Shaw states that identification is rarely the main aim of the game. Yet, even if players do not always need and look for self-representation and identification, personal involvement may enrich

the game experience, mostly in narrative video games. Besides, Shaw asserts that “players with specific identifiers do not necessarily connect with characters who have those same identifiers” (ch. 1); although identification may take place even with characters with different features, allowing minority players to identify with characters that partially resemble their own experience might widen video game audiences and improve the players experience from an emotional, personal perspective. This may be particularly true for narrative video games, where the player gets closely in touch with the main character, empathizing and, in some cases, identifying with him/her. Indeed, Shaw highlighted that “narrative was identified as the key ingredient in helping players identify with their on-screen proxy” (2014). Subsequently, diverse representations in narratives may widen our involvement in the story and help audiences to imagine the world differently.

In relation to this, it is fundamental to represent not simply minorities, but intersectional identities that go beyond “fixed notions of reality” (Shaw, 2014 ch. 2). For example, a gender-based approach may consider a pluralistic perspective, taking into account intersectional identities and multifaceted aspects of an individual (age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, queer identities, disabilities, and so on). Representations should be articulated and not limited to canonical characteristics; they should avoid “cleanly defined, marketable identity groups”, highlighting “the complexity and intersectionality of identity” (Shaw, 2014, ch. 1). The same idea is supported by Tal-Or and Cohen, who argue that identification “describes how people are moved by fiction and how fiction can help people understand the world and their own lives” (2010, p. 403).

This cultural phenomenon is not limited to video games, but video games may be a starting point to overrule gender norms and present different, intersectional identities to a wide audience. In this specific section, I presented a gender-based analysis of the game; however, *Horizon Zero Dawn* offers challenging



intersectional identities as well. Many female characters are related to other minoritarian characteristics concerning sexual orientation, age and ethnicity, as will be analysed in the following chapters.

Although video games are usually particularly stereotyped in the representation of gender roles and gender identities, some works, such as *Horizon Zero Dawn*, reconsider gender structures and offer new possibilities for the gamer. As stated in the previous section, video games offer specific models, and contribute to educate the player, shaping his/her idea of what is suitable for males and what is suitable for females. Video games offering new and complex models of masculinity and femininity allow the player to widen his or her concept of gender in real life too.

## AN OVERVIEW OF FEMALE MODELS IN VIDEO GAMES

The video game industry is usually considered to be a male-dominated field: games are – or are thought to be – produced by men for a male audience (Chess-Shaw 2015). Chirchiano and Tuselli defined this process as a “machismo videoludico” [videoludic machism] (2016, p. 302). However, lately an increasing trend in the number of female players has been recorded; nowadays, girls and women constitute a significant section of video game consumers (Kondrat 2015, p. 173). Consequently, it is essential to enhance non-stereotyped models and offer players variegated female and male characters. The presence of multifaceted identities in games played by men and women may influence gender socialization and players’ perception of gender norms in real life.

Historically, a turning point in the representation of female models was the release of *Tomb Raider* in 1996. The video game series has been one of the most influential but controversial since the nineties: critics and players have been discussing whether its main character, Lara Croft, is a positive role model for female players or an object of sexual desire created for male players’ pleasure

(Cassell and Jenkins 1998; Schleiner 2001; Kennedy 2002; MacCallum-Stewart 2014). Unquestionably, Lara Croft disrupted the canonical female role in computer games: not simply a supporting character, but a heroine that represented and also appealed to female players (Kennedy 2002). Lara could be interpreted as a “stunting body” (Mary Russo, 1994): a female figure that undermines the canonical ideal of the female body through astonishing performances in traditionally male spaces (tombs, urban landscapes, deserts, etcetera) and in male genres (action narratives). Quoting Kennedy’s analysis of Lara:

The transgressive stunting body of the action heroine is replicated in the figure of Lara. Her occupation of a traditionally masculine world, her rejection of particular patriarchal values and the norms of femininity and the physical spaces that she traverses are all in direct contradiction of the typical location of femininity within the private or domestic space. If women do appear within these masculine spaces their role is usually that of love interest (often in need of rescuing) or victim. Lara’s presence within, and familiarity with, a particularly masculine space is in and of itself transgressive. By being there she disturbs the natural symbolism of masculine culture.

Lara presents a contraposition of positive and negative qualities: she is strong, active, powerful, but she is also a flawless body to desire, “a fetish object of the male gaze” (Schleiner 2001, p. 223). Lara promotes contradictory values to players: on the one hand, empowerment, courage, independence; on the other, a perfect body ideal that many critics perceived as problematic. This dichotomy has not been completely overcome in contemporary video games too, where many female characters still tend to be represented through sexual overtones.

A female analysis of video games was initially promoted by Anita Sarkeesian, media critic, in 2013. She founded a website – Feminist Frequency – and created a crowdfunded video series called *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* where gender tropes in video games are analyzed. Because of her intervention, Sarkeesian became a target of sexist harassment through the Gamergate

campaign. Moreover, academic research has been focusing on a gender-based analysis of video games with a quantitative and qualitative point of view (Funk, Buchman 1996; Dietz 1998). Studies tend to agree in stating that the male-dominated perspective brought two main consequences. Firstly, male characters are more common than female characters in video games (Beasley, Collins Standley 2002). Secondly, specific gender models are portrayed concerning both males and females. In particular, this tendency led to two different main models of female characters: damsels in distress and moving bodies (Chirchiano, Tuselli 2016, p. 304.).

To begin with, the damsel in distress (Dietz 1998; Kondrat 2015; Chirchiano, Tuselli 2016) is a passive and innocent girl – often a princess – who has to be rescued by a male hero. The female protagonist is the ultimate aim of the game, it is usually unseen, neither playable or explored in depth as a character. Some examples could be Peach in *Super Mario* (1985) games, but also, Zelda in *The Legend of Zelda* saga (1986).

In other circumstances, female characters are represented as moving bodies. These characters are observed through a male gaze and their physical and sexual characteristics are strongly highlighted (Mulvey, 1975). These women are objectified, sexualised, physically pleasant, and usually keep most of their skin exposed: they have large breasts, wide necklines, tight trousers, and bodies that are both skinny and well-shaped. For instance, *Metal Gear Solid 5* (Kojima Productions, 2015) presents a female character, Quiet, who rarely speaks and wears a bikini and fishnet stockings. The player can watch her showering or having a lap dance for no particular reason except captivating male players (Keller 2017, p. 5).

Moving bodies may be both playable and non-playable. Non-playable characters usually present a superficial personality and are introduced into the game without adding further details to the plot. They appear in the background and their main role is

to be seen and appreciated by male players. Playable characters follow Lara's pattern: they present opposite characteristics and, for this reason, are particularly complex to define. They are often the heroines of the game, and for this reason, they need to be active, brave, intelligent, strong, determined, and so on. Without these features, the characters would not be interesting enough to be played, and the adventure would not take place. Their activeness may equate them to male heroes that share the same psychological characteristics. However, female heroine's bodies seem to portray their gender and their "inferiority" through a strong objectification. Despite their active personality, these playable characters are overly-sexualised, extremely female in their physical appearance, provoking and winking. Their positive characteristics seem to be diminished by the process of sexualisation. They are strong, but they are still the object – and victims – of the male gaze (Schleiner 2001). Their femininity is underlined in order to distinguish them from male heroes and their strengths are lessened by a constant male approach that reduces them to sexual objects to be seen. In Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's opinion, the objectification and sexualisation of strong female models keeps them vulnerable and non-threatening. Their powerful and leading role is diminished by the emphasis on their bodies (Behm-Morawitz, Mastro 2009, p. 810). Some examples could be *Tomb Raider's* (Core Design, 1996) Lara Croft or *Drakan: Order of the Flames'* (Surreal Software, 1999) Rynn. In particular, Lara Croft has often been identified as "the monstrous offspring of science: an idealized, eternally young female automaton, a malleable, well-trained techno-puppet created by and for the male gaze" (Schlider 2001, p. 222).

Thus, female playable models are highly complex and present opposing features: on the one hand, they promote counterstereotypes thanks to their strength, dynamism, courage, and so on; on the other, they also offer longstanding stereotypes, since they cannot surpass male-dominated perspectives through their appearance. Quoting Grimes: "the female protagonist must reconcile traditional ideals about beauty and body type with the decidedly untraditional gender roles and actions she engages in"

(2003, p. 12). In addition, Grimes noticed a possible correlation between physical appearance and gender stereotypes. She argues that the more the female character is sexualized, the more she adheres to traditional gender norms (2003, p. 13).

Although these models are still particularly common, some of the contemporary video games are trying to reconsider gender norms. New tropes have been presented by the video game industry, such as the non-sexualised heroine or the inquisitive child heroine (Grimes 2003). These new models may be a helpful and an effective tool to educate both young people and adults to counteract social norms and gender-based stereotypes. Moreover, as argued by Kennedy: “If we are going to encourage more girls into the gaming culture then we need to encourage the production of a broader range of representations of femininity than those currently being offered” (2002, online).

## *HORIZON ZERO DAWN AND GENDER IDENTITIES*

*Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) is an open-world video game played in third-person view. It was developed by Guerrilla Games and published by Sony Interactive Entertainment for the PlayStation 4. The story is set in the 31st century, when humanity has regressed to tribal organizations after an unspecified apocalypse. The protagonist is Aloy, a young girl who was outcast by her tribe, the Nora, and adopted by Rost, another outcast. The main character explores the post-apocalyptic world, trying to figure out why she was outcast as a young baby and what happened to the Earth. Aloy explores the environment and deals with a variety of quests and side quests in order to discover the secrets of the past.

The game had a good reception and positive rankings: *Horizon* was mainly acclaimed for storytelling, gameplay, visual aesthetics and character development. The game sold millions of copies worldwide and was awarded the Gold Prize and Users Choice Prize at the 2017 PlayStation Awards, Best Story Award at DICE

2018, and Best Original Property at the BAFTA Awards in 2018, among many other honours.

In order to analyse the game, the present paper will build on Irene Biemmi's research framework (2012). The research explores gender stereotypes and counterstereotypes that typify different characters. The method is based on a research form where different aspects of the characters' construction are investigated, such as the physical aspect, personality, clothes, abilities, interests, and so on. The aim of the methodology is to explore gender patterns and (counter)stereotypes in the construction of the characters, their interactions and influence on gender socialization. The present study draws on some elements of the framework that could be applied to *Horizon*, such as clothes, adjectives, social roles, interactions concerning gender, and so on. Specifically, the study focused on characteristics that promoted a non-traditional approach to gender norms and ideals concerning both male and female characters.

### **Reconsidering Femininity**

*Horizon Zero Dawn* is a complex and compelling video game from different points of view. First of all, it presents a wide variety of genders, ethnicities, classes and ages. Playing *Horizon*, the gamer is offered the possibility to meet several characters with different personalities and characteristics, such as old women and warriors, kings and tailors, young boys and girls.

In particular, female characters perform different actions and roles that are not necessarily linked to their gender. Women may be heroines, helpers, villains, and so on. In *Horizon*, each woman – even secondary characters with minor roles in the storyline – has specific characteristics and is explored in depth. Consequently, the player is not acquainted with a single female model, but becomes familiar with different kinds of femininity. Therefore, Aloy, the protagonist, does not symbolize all women: she is just one of the various models presented in the game and she does not have the

responsibility to represent a wide and heterogeneous category by herself. So, the gamer may choose which character feels closer and empathize with secondary personalities too. Moreover, women act in open spaces. These elements may seem obvious for video games, but in works of art presenting female characters, women and young girls are usually portrayed indoors, as previously stated. In *Horizon*, most of the women act outdoors. Specifically, Aloy has the possibility to explore a wide open-world, an opportunity that is not common in other media that portray women.

Furthermore, the leading members of the tribes presented in the game are also a relevant element, since they provide different visions on the societies' organization. Some of the tribes are ruled by patriarchy (Oseram and Carja), others by matriarchy (Nora). This gender-based management allows the gamer to reflect on limits and potentialities of gendered power in real life as well. The final message is that both matriarchy and patriarchy present various limitations. Despite this, the presence of a matriarchal system, which is uncommon both in video games and in other works of art, leads to many opportunities. For the first time, the gamer is familiar with women that have important roles. In the Nora tribe, women are powerful, respectable, determined, authoritative, wise; they make significant decisions, hunt, fight, and rule their society. In addition, even religion is reconsidered from a gender-perspective: the Nora believe in a goddess called Mother. The tribe is deeply religious, but the traditional Christian system of a male god is reconsidered from a feminine point of view. In this case too, the player is led to reflect on traditional values, which are overturned.

Considering the main female character, Aloy, we can easily find some differences in the models we analyzed in previous paragraphs: damsels in distress and moving bodies. First of all, Aloy is physically pleasant, she conforms to the beauty ideals found in other Western mass media, but she is not objectified and sexualized. For example, her clothes and armor are quite realistic and rarely show her body. As argued by Beasley and

Collins Standley, clothes are one of the prime indicators of sex roles in a specific society and also in video games (2002, p. 283). Aloy wears clothes that may appear comfortable and authentic in the context in which she is acting, and their main aim is not to sexualize her body. This is an uncommon trend, since female characters in video games are usually less clothed than men, and they are often shown with no sleeves, low necklines or wearing halter tops, tank tops or bathing suits (Beasley, Collins Standley 2002, p. 287). As Schleiner argued in analysing Lara Croft's character, Aloy too does not fit the 'bimbo' stereotype: Aloy and Lara, as adventurous and self-confident woman may promote more positive role models for players, and thereby advance new gender ideals (2001, p. 224). However, in contrast to Lara Croft, Aloy shows almost no sign of sexualization: the character goes beyond the model of the playable moving body. Therefore, Aloy offers a less sexualized physical ideal that may encourage other qualities in women, apart from physical appearance (Lopez, 2017).

Moreover, Aloy's character also deserves an analysis from a behavioural point of view. Observing the adjectives used by the other characters in the game to describe her, we can notice that few of them refer to her physical appearance. In some cases, the characters appreciate her beauty, but this is uncommon: the girl is usually admired for other qualities, such as strength, restlessness, courage, cleverness and being headstrong. For instance, Avad, the Sun-King, defines her as "strong, shrewd, capable". Likewise, Elisabeth Sobeck, describing the daughter she wished to have, states she would like her to be as "wilful, unstoppable, compassionate", as Aloy. When some characters are trying to offend or attack her, the adjectives they select rarely focus on her femininity. She is criticized as a person or as an outsider, not because of her gender. As a matter of fact, Aloy goes beyond gender: she is a woman, but her main characteristic is not to be female. She is simply represented as a human being with incredible skills and an extraordinary personality. Thus, Aloy clearly represents the emerging pattern of the *contemporary heroine* identified by Grimes (2003, p. 12): she adheres to Western beauty



ideals, and her body is slight and toned, but not necessarily sexualized; she occupies a profession that is usually considered male (she hunts and fights); she uses weapons and she engages in acts of aggression and self-defence. If Schleiner stated that Lara Croft could “present for women and girls a possible entry point into the male discursive domain of computer games” (2001, p. 224), Aloy may present an equal and non-stereotyped entry point in popular narrative video games.

Besides Aloy, secondary characters also contribute to reconsider gender roles and educate about different possible femininities, offering new models and ideals to the players in real life as well. For example, Petra Forgewoman is a secondary character and member of the Oseram tribe. She is an artisan and an inventor: she created the Oseram cannon, one of the most powerful weapons in the game. Moreover, the roles she fulfils are not typical of female characters. However, her femininity is clear: although her temper and her manners could be considered ‘typical’ of male characters, her physical appearance highlights her feminine traits without sexualisation. Petra mixes male and female qualities, and for this reason her character goes beyond traditional roles and stereotypes. In addition, her personality is complex despite her secondary role: she is easy-going, self-confident, direct, but in some cases she shows a bad temper, although she is mostly friendly. Furthermore, Petra seems to flirt with Aloy on some occasions: her remarks about the girl are quite clear, as are her innuendos. Thus, *Horizon* offers not simply different female models, but also different sexual orientations in the most natural way possible. Moreover, although Petra could be considered more masculine than Aloy, her gender and sexual identity do not provide a caricature of the queer character.

Similarly, Sona is another secondary female character that reconsiders gender identity and the feminine ideal. First of all, she is the war chief of the Nora tribe and commands all the braves, giving them a precise military strategy. So, she fulfills two traditionally male roles, the leader and the warrior. She is a strong

woman, revengeful, determined, responsible, and serious; she is respected by her group and by her son. She is a mother that wishes to avenge her daughter, whose life was taken during a battle, but her maternal role is not canonical. Sona is not grieving passively and silently; on the contrary, she actively seeks revenge. Therefore, her character offers a new, elaborate maternal model to the players.

Finally, Elisabet Sobeck is another unusual character that counteracts female stereotypes. Elisabet is a woman from the past, the XXI Century, and is the genetic 'mother' of Aloy. She is a scientist and an engineer, two professions that nowadays are generally considered male. Many academical studies show that women are influenced by an educational segregation and, therefore, are not usually keen on science and engineering since they perceive it as a male-dominated field, far from their female perspectives (Biemmi, Leonelli 2016). Elisabet Sobeck has a brilliant career in the scientific and robotic field, and for this reason she could be a captivating model to overpass educational segregation. The character clearly shows that women can also be interested in science and, most of all, can be extremely good at it. Thus, Elisabet reconsiders gender norms by excelling in a profession that is not traditionally related to women. Moreover, the team where Elisabet works is not oriented to a specific gender: women and men work together in order to save the Earth. In contrast with the traditional representation of women and science, Elisabet is the leader of the project she is working on. Elisabet is extremely talented, generous, intelligent and resolute, and for these reasons provides a positive model for young players. One of her most fascinating inventions is GAIA, an artificial intelligence capable of empathy whose aim is to safeguard life on Earth thanks to her terraforming techniques. GAIA is a peculiar character as well: although she has no specific gender, her image and voice are feminine, and her aspect is that of a middle-aged black woman. Gaia personifies the homonymous Greek deity that is usually considered the mother of life and of all mythological deities. Thus, the artificial intelligence represents a sort of Mother Nature, but

this icon standards are strongly reconsidered through her characterization.

To conclude, socialization between women is another key aspect in our analysis of gender roles within *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Some studies focusing on intra-gender conversations in films have shown that differences between women-to-women talk and men-to-men talk are significantly higher than inequalities in character presence (Rughinis 2016, p. 11). In order to apply this aspect to video games, many researchers used the Bechdel-Wallace test with video games (Rughiniş 2016). The test first appeared in Alison Bechdel's comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1985). The Bechdel-Wallace test focuses on three main points in order to determine if a film is viewable or not: firstly, the film should have at least two women; secondly, they need to talk to each other; thirdly, they have to talk about something other than men. *Horizon Zero Dawn* would perfectly pass the test: there are several women, they often talk to each other, and they scarcely discuss male-related subjects. Additionally, some critics felt the need to revise the test in order to make it suitable for video games. For example, Nixon (2013) created a different version where playability and influence on the plot are considered (Rughiniş 2016). This adaptation of the test would be passed by *Horizon* as well: most of the female characters have names, and influence the story plot; the playable main character is a woman; women often interact and they rarely talk about men.

### **Reconsidering Masculinity**

*Horizon Zero Dawn* is also a peculiar video game regarding elements of masculinity. Not only female models are counteracted, but also male gender roles are reconsidered. Video games often present “a masculinity that appears rooted in the traditional iconography of action, guns, and violence” (Kirkland 2009, p. 165). However, few academic studies focus on masculine ideals in video games, while most of the attention was and is focused on female aspects. Diane Carr highlighted this paradox, arguing that

“While the majority of players are reputed to be male, most of the critical attention directed at questions of gaming and gender has focused on girls and women” (2006, p. 5). Thus, further studies should carefully consider both a female and a male perspective in order to promote gender equality and deconstruct both femininity and masculinity.

In *Horizon*, some male characters differ from traditional gender norms linked to masculinity. For example, not all men are necessarily strong, brave, powerful, dominant, virile, aggressive, self-confident, and so on (Alloway, Gilbert, 1998). So, male stereotyping is partially reconsidered as well. One of the clearest examples of male counter-stereotypes is Rost, the main male character who adopted Aloy when she was a baby and looked after her. Despite his traditional physical appearance – Rost is a chunky, strong man who wears animal skins and has a long, wild beard – his personality is not particularly virile. He is kind, patient and wise, and respects Nora rules (his daughter Aloy is much more of a rebel than he is) and loves his family. He is mainly defined by his paternal role: he is labeled as Aloy’s father and he is extremely affectionate and caring. Despite his stereotypical aspect, Rost does not represent the traditional absent, affectless or detached father that often characterizes fiction. For example, some of the first episodes of the game show him nurturing baby Aloy with tenderness. When the girl grows up, he teaches her how to hunt and survive in a wild world, but also has values such as respect, love and altruism. In addition, the relationship between daughters and fathers is not so common in video games and art in general: father-son and mother-daughter relationships are far more represented. Rost’s and Aloy’s relationship is shown to be a positive exception to reconsider male stereotypes and the paternal role.

Another character that reconsiders male ideals is Teb. The boy is particularly weak, and for this reason he works as a tailor instead of fighting for his tribe, the Nora. Teb looks fragile and shy, but demonstrates bravery and honesty when his group needs him. His

life choices redefine gender stereotypes: while Aloy, a girl, starts a journey as a brave, fighting in order to survive and save her tribe, Teb does not abandon his land, where he feels safe, and creates armor, clothes and ornaments. Right at the beginning of the game, Aloy saves Teb when he is attacked by a group of Machines. In this case too, gender stereotypes are counteracted: a girl is saving an older boy who cannot defend himself.

### **Beyond Video Games: Gender Socialization and Education**

From the analysis of masculinity and femininity in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the narrative of the video game offers a balanced representation of both femininity and masculinity: several characters are anti-stereotyped and most of them accept non-stereotypical norms, considering them as a natural part of their society. Characters that do not present standard gender norms are not criticized and are usually integrated into their society. When they are not integrated, it is usually due to reasons that are not gender-based. Therefore, *Horizon* not only counteracts gender stereotypes, it also renegotiates the notion of gender. The video game goes beyond male and female ideals and represents gender as a social construction that should be reconsidered. In doing so, *Horizon* does not just portray ‘uncommon’ and diverse characters in order to be politically fair, but it also involves intersectional multifaceted characters that demonstrate the complexity of identity in a mixed and tolerant setting.

Thus, what influence may (non)stereotypical video games have on players? Behm-Morawitz and Mastro’s study (2009) demonstrated that video games have significant effects on beliefs about skills and abilities linked to gender. For instance, playing games where women are sexualized or objectified negatively affects women’s feelings of self-efficacy and their judgement of female physical capabilities. Also, playing sexualized characters engenders less favourable attitudes about female cognitive capabilities, both for males and females. On the one hand, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro explored the immediate effect of video games on gender

perceptions; on the other, cultivation theory (Williams, 2006) proposes that long-term media consumption can affect consumers' view of the world. Consequently, video games have an indirect influence on the perception of what is male and what is female:

...a video game landscape where women are represented infrequently and as passive, sexualized beings can precipitate a similar *Weltanschauung* among video game players who consume the message through long and frequent bouts of game play. (Ivory 2006, p. 105)

Fortunately, video games are slowly changing and are now promoting new gender standards that reconsider roles and stereotypes. If stereotyped video games negatively affect the players, we could hypothesize that video games that counteract gender norms may have a positive effect on both male and female gamers.

Firstly, the presence of complex and non-sexualized female characters may allow women to be part of the video game world. Women would feel represented through non-objectified characters and will appreciate video games more and more. For those women that are already fascinated by video games, non-stereotyped characters will make them feel represented equally and not just as objects of the male gaze. 'Real' characters – with normal bodies, complex personalities and a deep background story – increase identification, empathy and gratification (Kennedy, 2002). In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, female players are given the chance to identify with many different female characters. The process of identification is encouraged by a wide spectrum of personalities to empathize with. Moreover, female players internalize multifaceted models that reconsider gender ideals in real life too, considering intersectional issues as well.

Secondly, the representation of well-rounded female characters may have positive effects on male players as well. First of all, male gamers performing a female character can explore a new point of view and have a new experience in someone else's shoes.

Moreover, they can empathize with real female characters: not simply beautiful bodies to be seen, but girls or women with feelings and complex backgrounds. Consequently, the perception of feminine figures in video games and the real world may be positively influenced. Playing as Aloy enables engagement with an active female fantasy figure, providing opportunities for exploration of alternative versions of themselves or identification.

Both for male and female players, the reconsideration of gender standards may affect their perception of gender roles in real life as well. As stated in the first section of this paper, video games are an important part of indirect gender education: they promote specific gender standards and often reinforce traditional gender ideals. Video games with non-stereotypical characters help in counteracting gender norms. Moreover, the presence of different characters that reconsider masculinity and femininity may lead to many causes for reflection on gender identity and social norms. Video games promoting different identities are potential tools to endorse gender equality.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper considered video games and their potential in counteracting gender norms. The introduction offered an overview of studies on gender education, its main tools and contexts of research. Even though video games are rarely considered by teachers and educators, some of them could be stimulating texts in promoting gender equality. Video games could be one of the most influencing and recent media to promote gender standards to children, young adults and adults. Despite this, research on the portrayal of gender identity in video games, and their influence on gender education, is still in its early stage. For this reason, some of the pedagogical potential of video games has been explored in this contribution, focusing mainly on gender socialization.

Thus, the study addresses the urgent necessity of counteracting gender stereotypes through popular media. The article offers a

contribution which might help future studies on the subject in examining gender (counter)stereotypes in narrative video games, and to consider their impact from a pedagogical point of view. This paper focuses on a specific kind of video game – the narrative video game – and explored it through its dialogues and character interactions. For example, much of the attention was reserved for the analysis of the characters, and followed a gender-sensitive and pedagogical perspective. The main videoludic female models were analyzed and two main archetypes were found: the damsel in distress and the moving body. However, I argued that a new model is becoming more and more common: the non-sexualized heroine. The present paper focused on a specific case-study, *Horizon Zero Dawn*, and aimed to analyze the evolution of female and male stereotypes within the game, and to consider their educational benefits. The main characters of the video game have been explored through a gender-sensitive approach, considering both their femininity and masculinity traits. The study examines the characteristics and qualities that were reconsidered in a game with non-traditional gender norms. Therefore, this paper offers an interrogation of the game construction of femininity and masculinity.

Finally, I have been investigating the influence of video games on gender socialization, highlighting the benefits of non-stereotyped video games both on male and female players. Far from being simply a recreational medium, video games' influence on the perception of identity is informal but strong and constant. For this reason, video games should carefully embrace different realities, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, disabilities and ages, and include complex identities that need to be represented to become an active part of our society.

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