

Let's Talk About Sex...ism in Video Games

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by

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## **Abstract**

My thesis delves into how toxic masculinity affects popular video games and their communities. In particular, I explore the extreme sexualization and objectification of women and young girls in video games and how that often manifests itself as violence. Part of my discussion also looks into how these toxic attitudes impact the attitudes that a vocal minority of gamers express within video gaming communities and how abuse in the industry reinforces that behavior. It's not all doom and gloom though! I bring it all back around to the positive representations we see in video games (especially in the indie gaming space).

## **A Note to the Reader: My Philosophy on Academic Gatekeeping**

While in school, I absolutely hated reading academic articles and other texts. They are almost all written in such a clinical and impenetrable fashion that it was always a slog to navigate them and find the valuable information. Even the syntactic structure of a lot of scholars' work is like getting lost in a maze. It's almost as if there is a contest for which scholar can have the longest and most convoluted sentences, and everyone is taking part. This focus on hyper-formality was always incredibly frustrating, and I found myself unable to ever fully read an article. I would become bored or distracted by the over the top formality of it all, and simply give up. The more frustrating part of all of this is that I was expected to mimic this stiff and uncomfortable writing style for my own projects. I would constantly lose points for using more informal, casual language, and some of my professors thought I wasn't taking the assignment seriously when I was, in fact, very interested in my chosen topics.

The way academia expects its scholars to write is gatekeeping<sup>1</sup> in its basest form. Academia is a non-tangible institution that prides itself on its exclusivity and impenetrability for the "common folk." It's almost as if the members of the academic community view themselves as better than most other people. It's true that academics put in a lot of work to get to where they are, and they should absolutely be celebrated for the work that they produce (most of the time). However, it seems like we want to exclusively have our writing appeal to other academics. It's almost like we don't value the opinions of non-academics and don't want them to be able to engage with our writing. I think this is a gross miscalculation.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm defining gatekeeping as a group of people, who are connected by a shared interest, blocking newcomers to that shared interest by making the community toxic or unwelcoming to new participants or the general public that does not fall into that group.

I believe that we need to make some space for a different kind of voice in academic writing, a voice that appeals to everyone, not just our fellow academics. We live in a time of hyper-polarized ideologies and demonization of academia, and I feel like we have no one to blame but ourselves. In academia we pride ourselves on gatekeeping the content we generate by using hyper-formalized language and syntax and by having a general air of toxicity to those who don't want to conform to our standards. We practically assume that people outside of academia won't understand the concepts anyway. However, I think if we were to start using more informal, relaxed language, we could cut back on the gatekeeping and allow people outside of academics to engage with us about issues we deem too important not to talk about. After all, isn't the point of academic work to start a dialogue about things we are passionate about?<sup>2</sup>

There is no reason we can't talk about complex topics in a simpler way. With all of this in mind, this thesis is written informally, in language and structure that most people should understand and be able to follow. I still use content specific vocabulary, but I define terms along the way and include a glossary of important terms people may not be familiar with at the end of the thesis. Pretty much everything else is written in the way I speak (perhaps a bit less clumsy than my spoken word, so maybe it is written in the way I'd like to speak), and follows my natural thought processes.

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<sup>2</sup> I wish I could take credit for this idea, but others have been writing about the problem of gatekeeping in academic writing for a long time. If you're interested, you could check out Holdstein's collection of essays on the topic *Personal Effects* (2001) or Nash's *Liberating Scholarly Writing: The Power of Personal Narrative* (2019).

## Introduction

Before we get into the analysis portion of my work, it's important that you know a little bit about me, my experience with this topic, and why it matters to me. Hopefully, this will help you understand where I'm coming from and why you might want to listen to what I have to say.

### Positionality Statement

The first video game I remember playing was an old Winnie-the-Pooh learning PC game that we could play on our ancient dial-up computer. I was about three years old, and absolutely loved it. My parents really only bought us kids educational games for the first several years of my life like *Jumpstart* (1994) and *KidPix* (1989). They later started buying us adventure games like *Putt Putt Saves the Zoo* (1995), *Freddie the Fish* (1994); sports games like *Backyard Baseball* (1997) and *Backyard Soccer* (1998); and simulation games like *Zoo Tycoon* (2001) and *Roller Coaster Tycoon* (1999).

In 2001, before we moved from Wisconsin, they bought us a PS2. I think they mainly bought it for us to act as our first DVD player.<sup>3</sup> They got us *Lego Racing 2* (2001) and *Hot Shots Golf 3* (2001). We played these games so much we nearly wore down the discs. We then started getting more games that related to our interests. We got several Harry Potter games, *Star Wars Battlefront* and its sequel (2004-2005), a few entries in the *Slugfest* series<sup>4</sup> and so many more. My favorites were always the *Lego Star Wars* games (2005-2006).

By 5th or 6th grade, my parents sort of stopped supporting playing video games as a hobby. They didn't want to buy us a PS3 when it came out, and started to discourage us from playing video games. They told us that there were better ways to use our time, so I stopped

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<sup>3</sup> DVD players used to be insanely expensive whereas the PS2 was relatively cheap.

<sup>4</sup> Baseball Video Games

playing games so often. I would occasionally play *Battlefront* or *Lego Star Wars*, but I mostly focused on other hobbies like music and movies.

In 2015, when I started my freshman year of my undergrad, my roommate had a PS4. I would watch them play *Assassin's Creed Black Flag* (2013) and *Far Cry 4* (2014), but it was when they picked up *Fallout 4* (2015) that I got really interested in picking up the controller again. I completed a whole playthrough of *Fallout 4* (2015) on their PS4, and when I got my own PS4, I did it again. I realized that I had a lot of gaming to catch up on. So, my partner and I would go to the local game shop<sup>5</sup> and pick up anything that caught our attention. I played through *Dark Souls II* (2014), *The Wolf Among Us* (2013), *Journey* (2012), *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014), and so many other fantastic games. I eventually acquired a PS3 to catch up on even more gaming I missed. It was during this time of catch-up that I started to notice problems in the way that women are treated in the games, not to mention issues with racism and obviously a whole lot of violence. But I wasn't ready yet to think very critically about issues in the games and the communities I spent so much time playing in. It really bothered me that a majority of people, especially academics, tend to view video games as immature or unimportant (that is obviously an overgeneralization). My guess is that most people who have a simplistic view of video games most likely have not experienced the depth that many video games of the past two decades have explored and simply are regurgitating information they hear from think pieces about interactive media and the effects it has on a person's psyche.

But over the past several years, I've come to understand that as much as I love playing many of these games, the video game industry and the communities of fans who follow the industry can be extremely toxic through their perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and plot points,

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<sup>5</sup> RIP Hastings



general disregard for marginalized voices, and gatekeeping practices that toxic members of the communities reinforce. Just to be clear, video games are not innately toxic. Just like other forms of media such as movies and books, some of the content that is produced and the people who consume it have deeply toxic perspectives, while others do not.

My main focus in this thesis will be on the discussion of sexism in video games, specifically how video games misrepresent and mistreat women, both in games and in the communities. This does not mean that other groups of people who are underrepresented (or frankly unrepresented) in video games do not also deserve attention; it just simply means that I only have so much time to write this, and I can't write a book right now. So, I will focus on my primary initial observations from my research and experience playing video games and interacting with communities.

Before we get into the nitty-gritty of this discussion of the toxicity that women and so many other marginalized groups of people, face in the world of video games, let it be known that I am a white, agender person who was assigned male at birth (AMAB), so I grew up benefitting from toxic masculinity. The way I generally present means I continue to benefit from some elements of masculinity and how it is treated in our society. There are so many other people writing about this whose voices deserve a signal boost, and I will do my best to discuss as many of them as I can; however, I recognize that my voice is not the most important one discussing the issues of sexism in video games. Since I grew up benefitting from and unfortunately displaying a lot of elements of toxic masculinity, I do feel like I have some insight, or at least personal experience that I can add to the discussion.

## **The Importance of Representation**

So many people today don't seem to understand why representation matters in our literature. Anyone who has to/bothers to read this thesis probably already knows this, but it's so important to me that I need to break it down a bit. Again, I am coming from a place of privilege, and I am not claiming to know others' experiences.

“Stories are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.” (Sims Bishop ix)

As far as I understand it, being able to see people who come from a similar background as yourself in the texts you consume (whether that is books, video games, film, or anything else) allows you to connect more closely and engage with the world of those texts. That does not mean we can't connect with people who are not like us but seeing ourselves represented in literature can drastically improve our cultural self-esteem and help us see that we are “accepted” by society. When there is no familiar representation in texts, it doesn't necessarily mean we don't feel like we should be valued, but society is sending a clear message that it doesn't value our culture.

Therefore, the people creating the texts we consume as a society need to work on creating positive and inclusive representations of the vast myriad of people who make up that society

rather than sticking to the cishet white man taking the lead role in the majority of literature. In some areas of literature, we are seeing a lot of diversity in who is taking the leading role (even though it can always be better and diverse literature is not always recognized as being as important as literature where a cishet white man is the lead). For example, I think I can count on one hand the number of games I've played with non-white characters as the mandatory playable character.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, video games are an area of literature that are kind of behind compared to, say television.

### **A Personal Note**

One more thing I want to add before we begin: I am writing about this topic because I love most of the video games I am going to be talking about. Video games have been an important part of my life since I was little. However, it is important to be critical of the things we love and care about. I can love video games and recognize that they are frequently sexist and misogynistic. I can distance myself from hyper-toxic games and praise games that make strides towards inclusion and realistic representation while still recognizing that they have faults. Along the way, I hope that you, my reader, will consider your relationship to the texts you love and think about whether it's possible to really enjoy them while also being aware of the harm they may do to others.

### **A Few Definitions Before We Begin**

In the following chapters, I will be drawing on my expertise as a player of video games and as a student of literature to describe and critique common issues of gender representation in

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<sup>6</sup> Some games don't let you create a character and have pre built characters for us to play as like *The Witcher's* Geralt or Kratos in *God of War*.

select video games. In order for this analysis to make the best possible sense, it will be important to first establish how I'll be using some of the key terms throughout my work.

Agency has a few different ways it can be defined, and I draw on several of the definitions when I talk about agency. Agency can be a character's ability to make decisions in a story, the effect a person or character has on the story and the storytelling process, or the amount of control a person has over themselves when existing in an environment (Odlund). While I use all three of these definitions, I primarily focus on the idea of people and characters in games having control over themselves in a given context. You will read me say that characters in video games aren't real and therefore have no agency to make decisions for themselves. This is me referencing that definition. I am also making the distinction between characters having and losing agency over the course of the story, and characters never having agency at all.

Assumed Cishet Male Player is a term I use a lot to describe the traditional understanding of who buys and plays video games. This idea is generally outdated because there is such a wide range of people who do play video games today, but there are still publishers and developers who cater to this archaic idea of their audience. A person who is a cishet male is a cisgender (person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth), heterosexual (person who is exclusively attracted to the opposite sex) man. Traditionally, video games were designed for and marketed towards cishet men (especially white men, but that's a different paper). For a long time, video games were considered something for boys and men, and it was considered an oddity when a woman showed interest in video games. Who's to say if that was ever the reality<sup>7</sup>, but it was certainly the perception the games industry accepted.

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<sup>7</sup> I think I was just barely alive as video games really skyrocketed into popular culture with some of the earliest at-home consoles.

Hyper/Toxic Masculinity is the performance of masculinity in a way that can, and does, harm other people. People who participate in toxic masculinity take traditionally masculine traits, like anger, emotional distance, and an attraction to women, and crank the potency of those traits up to eleven. Those traits are not inherently toxic,<sup>8</sup> but a person who participates in toxic masculinity might use those traits to be aggressive and confrontational towards other people who want nothing to do with the toxic person in the first place.

I've provided a glossary of other key terms that you may want to look at if there's a term I'm using in an unfamiliar way. Without further ado, let's get cookin'!

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<sup>8</sup> Well, maybe the emotional distance one...

## Chapter 1: Women as Plot Devices

Using women as mere plot devices to further a man's story is not something that is exclusive to video games. In our patriarchal society, people love telling mens' stories, and women, and people occupying various parts of the gender spectrum, oftentimes drive those male characters' stories. "In the game of patriarchy women are not the opposing team, they are the ball. So, for example, we can think of the Super Mario franchise as a grand game being played between Mario and Bowser. And Princess Peach's role is essentially that of the ball" ("Damsel in Distress Part 1").

It's practically tradition in video games for women characters to have little to no agency. There are obviously exceptions to that idea. For example, Laura Croft is one of gaming's earliest iconic characters. However, her badassery is undermined by her overexaggerated chest and the fact that early gamers were obsessed with trying to see her naked using cheat codes. We'll talk more about the hypersexualization of women in games later. This section will focus on the times women in games have been used as mere plot devices to drive the stories of men.



Figure 1. Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (1996)

## Harmful Tropes

The easiest way to start this conversation is to dissect some of the most common tropes women occupy in video games. TV Tropes defines a trope as “a storytelling shorthand for a concept that the audience will recognize and understand instantly.” They compare the concept of a trope to the idea of idioms or figures of speech. TV Tropes also points out that certain tropes are more prevalent in specific genres of media. This chapter outlines some of the most common tropes in video games that are harmful to women and people who present themselves as more feminine.

It’s impossible to talk about tropes in video games without bringing up the YouTube series “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” created by Feminist Frequency and hosted by Anita Sarkeesian. There is a lot of toxicity surrounding the reception of these videos (mainly proving that they are important works that point out toxic elements of the gaming culture), but I’ll touch on that a lot more when we get to #Gamergate. The important thing to note is that these videos are so compelling that they are essentially the reason I am including this section. They point out a lot of extremely pervasive tropes that are prevalent in most storytelling, but especially video games, and I’ll be covering a lot of the same ones, as well as trying to point out a few other problematic tropes I’ve noticed.

### *“The Damsel in Distress”*

“The Damsel in Distress” is a trope that is pervasive throughout all of our culture and media. This trope is one of the ones that Anita Skarsisian thoroughly covers in her series “Tropes Versus Women in Gaming” and I highly recommend watching that series to hear the voice of someone closer to the issue than I am. Basically, this trope occurs when a character (99% of the

time they are women)<sup>9</sup> is in need of rescue by the main character. They could be captured by the antagonist, in a generally dangerous situation, or in any scenario where their agency has been stripped away and they are in need of rescue. The most well-known example is probably Peach from the Mario games. These games follow the story of Mario as he platforms and battles his way through the Mushroom Kingdom after Bowser captures Peach (Figure 2). Peach never has any agency in the games, and the games, almost without fail, all follow the same formula. Some might argue that the Mario games are classic arcade-style video games that are more for the gameplay than the story, but in a series that just had its 35th anniversary, you would think they could have one game where Peach takes control of her own story rather than simply needing to be rescued.



Figure 2. Bowser Captures Peach in *Super Mario Odyssey* (2018)

Another popular offender is *The Legend of Zelda* series. This is one of my favorite game series, and they come close to getting it right with Zelda several times (*Ocarina of Time* and *Windwaker*), but they always end up putting her in a damsel role by the end of the story. After

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<sup>9</sup> *River City Girls* flips the trope, as do several other games.



all, how on earth would they be able to show Link is the hero of the triform without needing to rescue a princess?!<sup>10</sup>

Sometimes this trope is gender-bent so that the man or men need to be rescued while the women get a chance in the spotlight. Sometimes, this can work and be empowering<sup>11</sup>. However, it can also sometimes just be played off as a humorous thing or as a surprise that the woman in the game could save the man<sup>12</sup>. It also isn't the answer to solving this problem of women constantly being damseled. It would be more beneficial to completely subvert the trope and give the damseled woman agency to save herself.

This trope is pervasive throughout the history of video games. It's kind of the default story. It's hard to think of a game series that has not used this trope. It became so common that game development studios had to start tweaking the formula to stand out. As everything did in the 2000's, the approach most developers took to "solve" this problem was to make it edgier. That is when we first started to see a lot of fridging taking place in video games.

### *"Fridging"*

Fridging is the idea that killing off a character (usually women) can motivate the main character in the story to go on either a vengeance adventure or some other sort of quest to solve the unresolved feelings they have about said character being killed. The term was popularized by Gail Simone and originates from a Green Lantern comic in which his girlfriend is killed by the villain and stuffed in the fridge for the hero to find when he comes home. This trope is hyper prevalent in all media including video games.

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<sup>10</sup> Sarcasm

<sup>11</sup> Like in *River City Girls* (even though the River City series has a history of being problematic)

<sup>12</sup> I just played a noir game where the femme fatale (another problematic trope I don't have time for) kills the bad guy when they have the male heroes cornered. It was definitely more of a "wow, I can't believe a woman saved us" kind of way

One example of this trope is the original *God of War* game (2005). Kratos is a powerful Spartan general who calls on Ares to help him in battle. Ares “blesses” him with ferocious bloodlust that allows his armies to win, but he also mistakenly kills his wife and daughter. Kratos, of course, doesn’t take responsibility for his actions and instead blames Ares, so he goes on a brutal, hyper-masculine rampage to kill the gods. In the later games, the gods are definitely assholes, but the fact that the whole series starts because Kratos can’t deal with the guilt of killing his whole family is a little silly to me. He’s essentially throwing a temper tantrum, blaming others for something he did.

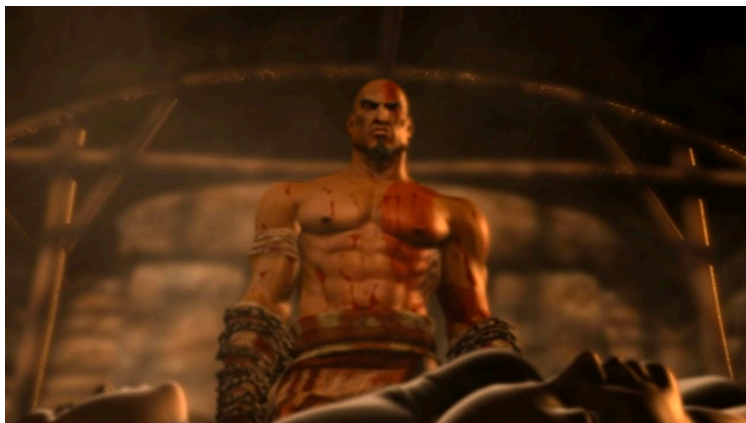


Figure 3. Kratos Standing Over His Wife’s and Daughter’s Bodies in *God of War*

On the other side of that, the 2018 *God of War* reboot shows us a more mature Kratos who found love and rest in Midgard. We start that game after his wife passes away. However, in contrast to the majority of examples in this trope, Kratos is not then motivated to go on a revenge rampage, he just wants to honor his wife’s last wishes and take her ashes to Jotunheim. This stark contrast shows us that games are evolving and becoming more mature. However, this is still an example of killing off a woman in order for men to have adventures, and I’m not a fan of that.

I haven’t played the *Max Payne* games, but I know the first one (2001) starts because of the titular character’s wife and child being killed. He then goes on a hypermasculine revenge

rampage across the city trying to hunt down the people/group responsible. That is essentially the whole plot of the first game.

A blend between the Damsel in Distress trope and the Fridging trope is something Sarkeesian calls “The Fridged Damsel” (“Damsel In Distress Part 2”). This trope occurs when a woman is killed off at the beginning of the story, and the (usually male) protagonist, who is related to them in some way, must try to save their soul from hell or some other horrible situation. This is the whole plot of *Dante’s Inferno* (2010). The protagonist’s wife is brutally killed as she runs away from her assailant ([as seen in this clip<sup>13</sup>](#)). Of course, we can’t just fridge Beatrice, we also need to make sure we sexualize the violence against her by making her breast slip out of her dress as she is running away from the man that will kill her.<sup>14</sup> Her soul is then dragged to hell (still naked of course), and the player goes on a hypermasculine revenge rampage to claim her soul.

Aligning with the Damsel in Distress trope, and most of the other tropes I will be discussing, women who are fridged lose all agency and possibility to impact the story other than through the lens of the, most likely male, protagonist.

### *Disempowered Women*

Here, when I say disempowered, I mean that the character literally has their powers stripped away either by another character in the game, or by the developers as they create the game. This happens in most sequels that feature the same playable character (regardless of their gender). They have to lose all of the powers they gained in the first game. I’m not necessarily talking about those situations. I’m talking more about how the women in a game might be

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WpcCTQ-ronA&t=151s>

<sup>14</sup> More on the sexualization of violence against women later in this chapter.

written as a super powerful warrior or skilled assassin, but they, at some point, are reduced to an agentless trope like the damsel in distress. We see this happen all the time in video games.

Earlier, I talked briefly about how *The Legend of Zelda* series almost saves Zelda from the damsel in distress role by giving her agency. This loss of empowerment is the reason they ultimately fail. In *Ocarina of Time* (1998), Zelda takes on the role of Sheik, a character that assists Link throughout the game. She teaches Link various skills that make the players' time in the game a bit easier. However, almost immediately after Zelda reveals her true identity Ganondorf swoops in and kidnaps her, and he challenges Link to rescue her, as seen in Figure 4. In the later games: *Wind Waker* (2002) and *Phantom Hourglass* (2007), Zelda takes on the role of a pirate captain sailing the seas and assisting Link from time to time. However, towards the end of *Phantom Hourglass*, she is again put in the damsel role.



Figure 4. Zelda Captured by Ganondorf in *Ocarina of Time* (1998)

Lilith was one of the playable characters in the first *Borderlands* (2009) game. In the *Borderlands* universe, there are people with special powers called sirens, and Lilith is one of five in existence. To use the terms of the game, she is a certified badass. However, there are also several instances where she is reduced to a tropey role because she is captured or loses her

powers. In *Borderlands 2* (2012), towards the end of the game, she is captured by the villain, Handsome Jack, and forced to use her powers to charge up a vault key that will unleash a monster Jack hopes to use for his advantage. Until this point in the game, she has been super powerful and one of the leaders of a resistance movement fighting against Jack, but like so many other women who fall into this trope, she loses her autonomy and becomes a damsel the player has to save. In *Borderlands 3* (2019), her powers are literally taken from her by the villains and she is forced to take a side role rather than the more active role she had in the previous games.

In *Life is Strange* (2015), you play as Max, a young girl who has the power to manipulate time. Throughout the game, you use your powers to stop the murder of your old friend Chloe. Chloe is trying to figure out what happened to her friend, Rachel, after she's been missing for several months. Towards the end of the story, Max, unfortunately, finds out. The photography teacher is secretly a psychotic pervert who kidnaps young girls, drugs them, and takes pictures of them. Max finds herself in his creep cave (called the dark room) tied up and drugged. The powers that Max has used throughout the game aren't of much use (even though I believe that is how you escape), and the controls reflect her induced state. Even though she doesn't lose her power, she is placed in a situation where she is nearly helpless and the player just kind of has to watch.

That leads us to the discussion of a different type of disempowerment: loss of agency. This is when playable women in games lose their ability to act in a situation rather than losing actual superpowers. For examples of this structure, we can look at the last three games David Cage has worked on at Quantic Dream: *Heavy Rain* (2010), *Beyond Two Souls* (2013), and *Detroit Become Human* (2018). In each of these games, there's been a scene where the one woman character you play as is assaulted in some way, and the player is nearly helpless to stop

it. The only one of his games that I've played so far is *Heavy Rain* (2010), so I'll focus on that one<sup>15</sup>.

Madison is the only woman you play as in *Heavy Rain* (2010), and nearly every chapter you play as her puts her in a situation where she is either being assaulted or about to be assaulted or killed. Madison is set up as a hard-hitting reporter who is using her journalistic skills to investigate the Origami Killer. For a moment, it almost seems like she is going to be a strong character and have agency. We hardly see her do this at all. In one of the first scenes with her, several men break into her apartment and attempt to kill her. The player must perform quick-time events (QTEs) to run away and evade the assailants. Ultimately, Madison gets cornered in the kitchen and stabbed. Luckily it was all a dream, but it was also completely unnecessary.

Later, Madison goes to a house where she thinks she may find some information to continue her journey to solve the case, but it turns out the guy who owns the house is psychotic and he drugs her and takes her down to his torture dungeon. Madison wakes up tied to a slab with the man about to use power tools to cut her up (Figure 5). The player has to use QTEs again to break out of the situation and fight off the man. During the scuffle, Madison gets thrown over the slab and the man looks down at her butt and decides he should also try to rape her as well. So there are more QTEs<sup>16</sup> and Madison can end up killing the man.

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<sup>15</sup> It's also the one with the most examples of this, so it works out okay.

<sup>16</sup> Which, if the player fails, unspeakably horrible things can happen to Madison, which the player has to watch..



Figure 5. Madison in *Heavy Rain* (2010)

In a chapter of the game that is literally called “Sexy Girl,” Madison is trying to have a meeting with a scuzzball who runs a club. The only way she can get into his VIP section is to look “sexy,” so she puts on makeup, unbuttons some of the buttons on her shirt, and tears her skirt so it's shorter. Then the player is forced to make her dance on a table to get the guy's attention. It works, and the scuzzball asks Madison to have a “meeting” with him in his private room. He asks her to start taking clothes off, which the player can do until Madison is completely naked, or the player can refuse and the guy pulls a gun on her and you have to take off some clothes anyways. You do ultimately knock him out or kill him, but the whole situation is ridiculous. Even though Madison has the ability to get herself out of this horrible situation, the steps that happened to put her into the situation in the first place were imposed upon her by the writers.

Madison has absolutely all agency and potential for character development and growth ripped away from her at every possible junction. I would argue that she is inaccurately presented as a strong three-dimensional character who immediately becomes a flat, or stock character.. The

writers behind this game, mostly David Cage, either only wanted a woman in the game to put her in scenarios where she could be assaulted because they have some sort of fantasy about it,<sup>17</sup> or they just don't know how to write compelling women so they shove her in tense situations they think the players would enjoy<sup>18</sup>. I'll be talking about her a lot because she falls into so many of these tropes and problematic roles.

This trope is clearly problematic. It's one thing to put a character in danger for tension and conflict in the story just to sell games. But when it becomes a trend to use women exclusively for this role, especially when those situations also sexualize the character and imply the risk for sexual violence<sup>19</sup>, it becomes an issue. Why write powerful women into your story and then take all of their power and agency away so a man<sup>20</sup> can come to the rescue? The obvious explanation seems to be that game designers think this is what their players want.

#### *"Victory Sex" and the Lack of Dynamic Relationships*

I love that some video games, especially RPGs (role playing games), allow for the player to build relationships with the NPCs (non-playable characters) and companions that inhabit the game world. However, it's difficult to script a dynamic relationship that feels real because coding situations and dialogue takes a long time, and those situations end up needing to be finite. That's why every game that has romanceable characters follows the same formula. The player meets the romanceable character through the main story or some random sidequest. The character then gives the player a series of other sidequests that develop the character's backstory and life situation (usually including moments of vulnerability for the character that makes us feel

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<sup>17</sup> I wouldn't doubt it given that similar things happen in his other games.

<sup>18</sup> Needless to say most people who play this game think these sections are stupid.

<sup>19</sup> As is the case with Madison in *Heavy Rain*

<sup>20</sup> Not always a man, but someone with power over the character in some way



like we pierced through their outer shell and revealed the person they truly are). At this point, we can usually start a relationship with the character, or we can now start to court the character (including choosing flirty dialogue options and advancing the physical relationship with kisses and sometimes more). After this courtship, the player will finally have the chance to start officially dating the character. Whenever this step happens, there is usually an explicit or implied sex scene (and video game sex scenes can be hella cringy).

My main issue with this formula is that the ultimate goal of building a relationship with the character is to get to have sex with them. I have yet to see a game where being asexual and simply wanting romance is an option. We see this formula time and time again. BioWare RPGs like *Dragon Age* (2009-2014) and *Mass Effect* (2007-2017) were my first forays into this trope, but more recent examples like CD Projekt Red's *The Witcher 3* (2015) and *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) and Bethesda's *Fallout 4* (2015)<sup>21</sup>.

I'm not trying to be prudish. I don't care about including consensual sex in these games, because it's not usually as sexist as most of the other tropes.<sup>22</sup> My main issue is that after the player has sex with the character, they sort of stop being a character. Their questline is usually over, and now all that's left to do with them is be in a relationship. I don't think developers or writers know how to realistically portray that in a video game. Most of the time, the character will have looping dialogue (the same few lines that get repeated over and over until the heat-death of the universe), and there are no other ways to incorporate them into your experience until the end of the story. There's a lot of excitement in building a relationship, so it's understandable

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<sup>21</sup> Kind of. In *Fallout 4*, it's more like you fall asleep next to your partner and receive a health buff for being "Well Rested"

<sup>22</sup> Other than the fact that genitalia isn't really shown, so the women in sex scenes are probably considered more explicit because our society sexualizes women's breasts

why that part of the relationship is included, but after you have an established relationship, your romantic partner tends to lose a lot of agency (we'll look at this a lot more in later sections).

There are some minor exceptions. Usually, like in *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020), when you are coming to the end of your playthrough and story, there might be a reference to the character you romanced worrying about you or trying to get ahold of you, or there may be a brief cutscene where you say goodbye. Not very many games do this though, and when they do, it feels more like an afterthought rather than the emotional moment it probably ought to be.

While I might have some issues with the thoroughness of the relationships players are able to foster in video games, it's honestly nice to see developers trying. It is so rare that games actually feature dynamic relationship systems. Most games that feature "romance" really only feature the objectification of women. There are games like the original *God of War* (2005-2013) games and *Duke Nukem Forever* (2011) that feature sex scenes simply to show naked women and to titillate the assumed cis het male gamer.<sup>23</sup> We'll talk about this more in the next section, but these women are definitely being treated as objects of play and nothing more. In the original *God of War* games (2005-2013), it is literally a minigame to perform the QTEs properly to have sex with the women. That leads us nicely into the discussion of non-playable sex objects.

### *Non-Playable Sex Objects*

The term "non-playable sex object" was coined by Anita Sarkeesian in the "Women As Background Decoration Part 1" video in the series *Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games* published by Feminist Frequency. A lot of this section will be investigating talking points she brings up in the video.

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<sup>23</sup> Specifically their breasts.

There are often scenes that take place in a red light district or at strip clubs in video games where you would expect to see women who sex workers just minding their own business and doing their jobs. However, video gaming being an interactive medium, the player has the opportunity to, and is encouraged to, abuse these women. It is most common to see these situations in open-world sandbox games like *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-2013) and *Saint's Row* (2006-2022), but even more linear games like *The Wolf Among Us* (2013) feature scenes where the main character is in a strip club and is callous and rude to the women working. There is nothing innately wrong with featuring strip clubs in games, but the women who usually occupy these areas have zero agency and often have only one or two lines of dialogue propositioning the assumed cis het (cisgender and heterosexual) male player.

Let's talk about the "services" these non-playable sex objects can provide the player. Like I said before, these characters have no agency and are essentially there as set dressing. My assumption is that the developers don't expect the player to interact with most of them, so they only have a line or two of dialogue. The rest of the time they are dancing in the weird awkward way characters in video games are programmed to move to look "sexy."<sup>24</sup> The player is also able to pay for a lap dance from some characters. As Sarkeesian points out, in *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013), the player is basically required to play a minigame where the player must fondle the women giving them a lap dance without the bouncer seeing. If the player is successful, they can get the woman to go home with them to have sex.

Then there are the few women the player can actually have sex with from the get go. Usually, like in *Fallout* (1997-2015), the screen will fade to black and the character will get some sort of buff (enhancement to the power and skills of the playable character). Sarkeesian

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<sup>24</sup> If you know, you know. If not, [here is the weirdness](#). Almost every game uses the same/similar movement.

points out that these women are essentially treated in the same way a vending machine might work. You put in a certain amount of in game currency and receive a buff in return. There are other games, like *The Witcher* series (2007-2015), that feature actual sex scenes<sup>25</sup> that serve to titillate the assumed cis het male player by showing off the womens' breasts (and maybe the playable male character's butt), and then the player receives their buff. In both of these situations, the non-playable sex object is just there to titillate the player and serve to cater to the male gaze (which we'll talk about in chapter 2).

Now, let's talk about the way games encourage you to hurt these women. In the *Red Dead Redemption* games (2010-2018) and the *Grand Theft Auto* games, (1997-2013)<sup>26</sup> the player is unleashed on a massive sandbox world where they can essentially do whatever they want however they want. These games both feature brothels and red light districts for the player to explore that feature non-playable sex objects. In both game series, the player can lure women to follow them to their car (in GTA) or they can use their lasso to capture, hogtie, and kidnap the women (in *Red Dead Redemption*. In the first *Red Dead Redemption* (2010), there is even an achievement<sup>27</sup> for capturing a woman, placing her on an active train track, and watching her get run over by a train). In other games, there is little to no penalty for literally just walking up to a woman with your weapon and shooting/stabbing them. We see this most in sandbox games, but RPGs and other action/adventure games are guilty of this as well.

These women are not characters. They have no desires, no agency, no ability to resist. They exist only to be acted upon by the player with sex or violence. They are designed to cater to

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<sup>25</sup> Which are always cringy as video game sex scenes tend to be.

<sup>26</sup> Both series are developed by Rockstar.

<sup>27</sup> A reward the platform someone is playing on gives the player for completing a task in a certain way. For Playstation, they are called trophies.

the cishet male idea of an attractive woman and to help the game reach a certain level of “grittiness” and edginess that so many publishers used to think gamers wanted.

### *Violence Against Women*

Another way game publishers try to increase the edginess of their games is with hyper violence and sexual violence. A lot of this, especially sexual violence, is directed at women. We just talked about violence and sexual violence the player can enact upon non playable sex objects, but this section will focus on examples of violence against any and all women in games. Some will be NPCs that have little significance in the world, and some will be about playable women, but they are all connected in that either the player or developers orchestrate a situation that essentially promotes violence against women.

The *God of War* games are some of the most brutal out there. For example, in *God of War III* (2010), there are several instances of extreme violence against women. One of the instances is when Kratos is exploring the temple of Poseidon. He comes across an enslaved princess who is forced to be Poseidon’s lover. As with so many women in the early *God of War* games, she is left mostly naked, with only a revealing skirt to cover herself with. Kratos is able to get into the room she is trapped in only to find another door that needs to be opened. Kratos can open the door, but it has no counter balance, so it closes before Kratos can get through it. So, he (the player has to do this action) grabs the chained, helpless princess and puts her under the gear to hold the door open. The gear is extremely heavy, and after Kratos goes through the door, she is pulverized by the gear because she can’t hold it up for very long.

Kratos is known for killing gods, and *God of War III* (2010) has the highest body count of members of the Greek pantheon. After killing Hercules, Kratos comes face to face with Hera, portrayed as a wine-drunk alcoholic who, despite throwing insults, is relatively harmless and had

nothing to do with the betrayals that led Kratos on his hypermasculine revenge rampage. In the end, the rage fueled Kratos snaps her neck anyways. That would be bad enough, but Kratos (and the player) proceeds to use her lifeless body to solve pressure plate puzzles to progress through this section of the game.

Another popular game *Duke Nukem Forever* (2011) has a myriad of instances of violence against women. I have not played this game, so most of the information comes from the Eurogamer article by Johnny Minkley. One of the worst instances of violence against women occurs in the game mode called “Capture the Babe.” In this game mode, the player is essentially capture the flag, but instead of flags, the mcguffin is a half naked woman. So, there is a whole game mode around kidnapping women, and it is apparent they do not consent to being captured as they are able to “impede your progress.” How can the player stop them from impeding progress you might ask? Well, there is a designated button to slap the woman’s butt to stop her from stopping you from capturing her. The head of Gearbox, the company who made the game, Randy Pitchford, tried to defend the game and protagonist Duke Nukem as a man who would never harm women. If you are familiar with Duke Nukem’s objectification of women from all of his games, you know that Pitchford is full of it.

I’ve already described several instances of violence and sexual violence against the playable woman, Madison, in *Heavy Rain* (2010) in the “Disempowered Women” section, so let’s talk about some of David Cage’s other games. Again, I have not yet played these games, so most of the information is coming from the Kotaku article written by Heather Alexandra. In *Beyond Two Souls* (2013), there is a scene where the main character, Jodie Holmes, sneaks into a bar. The patrons of the bar objectify and harass her until they eventually slam her against a table and attempt to rape her. She is only sixteen years old. The player is able to avoid this situation

using QTEs,<sup>28</sup> but the scenario will traumatize Jodie and cause her to have panic attacks later in the game.

In Cage's most recent game, *Detroit, Beyond Human* (2018), Kara is our main female protagonist. She is an android. In this world, androids are purchased by humans to work menial jobs as housekeepers, construction workers, and several other jobs humans have stopped wanting to do. Kara has been purchased by a single father named Todd. Todd is an alcoholic who abuses his young daughter, Alice. During one of these situations, Kara gains sentience, and the player can make decisions for her that determine the outcome of the incident. In most of them, Kara and Alice are able to escape either by killing Todd or simply getting past him. However, there are several instances that result in Kara's brutal death, or even more tragically, Alice's death.

Later in the game, assuming Kara survives the first encounter, the player meets a man named Zlakto. Zlakto tells Kara that, in order to help Kara and Alice escape to safety, he needs to remove a tracking device placed in Kara's body. It just so happens that the equipment to do this is in Zlakto's basement! How convenient! When Kara goes downstairs to have the procedure done, she is placed in a device that clamps down her arms and legs so she is helpless.<sup>29</sup> Turns out the device wipes androids' memories making them subservient to Zlakto. It is heavily implied that he intends to use her for sexual purposes. So the player must perform more QTEs to help Kara escape.

One of the strongest women in modern gaming is Ellie from *The Last of Us* (2013) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). Especially in the second game, she is a certified badass, but we'll talk more about her badassery and the potentially problematic nature of it later in chapter 4. In

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<sup>28</sup> Quick Time Events: pressing certain buttons at certain times during a cutscene to get a desirable result.

<sup>29</sup> If this sounds familiar, that is because it is very similar to the scene in Cage's other game, *Heavy Rain*, where Madison is tied down to a slab in a creepy man's basement. Seems like a trend to me.

the meantime, let's talk about David from *The Last of Us* (2013). David is a character that Ellie encounters while taking care of her companion Joel. David introduces himself as a fellow survivor of the outbreak that has turned a large portion of humanity into mushroom zombies.<sup>30</sup> David helps Ellie defeat a group of zombies. Then after some other stuff happens, David ends up choking Ellie until she is unconscious. Uh oh! Turns out David is a cannibal! He offers Ellie a place in their group, but Ellie isn't into it, so they decide to butcher her. Ellie is able to escape and the player has to play a portion of the game where they sneak around David to find opportunities to attack him. If the player fails, Ellie is slaughtered gruesomely. It is important to note that in this game, Ellie is a young teenager. If Ellie successfully strikes David three times, there is a cutscene where she brutally kills him with a machete. Some might view it as a triumphant moment, but I saw it similarly to how I think Ellie saw it, as a traumatic experience for the character. After all, forcing a victim of violence to commit a violent act to survive is still violence against that person.

Another example of violence against women in games is something Sarkeesian calls "The Euthanized Damsel" ("Damsel in Distress Part 2"). This trope occurs when a woman is so damaged by whatever their captors had been doing to her, that the best solution for the male protagonist to take is to kill her. In *Gears of War 2* (2008), the main protagonists are trying to help their squad mate, Dom, save his wife. When they finally find her, she has been processed by the locust and is essentially a husk of a person (see Figure 6). Dom decides that the best thing to do is to kill her. We see this all the time in games where the woman the player is trying to rescue has been infected or damaged in some way, and they ask, sometimes beg, to be killed by the player.

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<sup>30</sup> The virus is actually based on a real life thing that happens to bugs. Pretty neat if you ask me!





Figure 6. Maria Santiago in *Gears of War 2* (2008)

These instances of violence against women, and even against young girls, are found throughout video games. Sometimes they are treated as necessary for the plot or progression in the game, sometimes they are meant to be for sick laughs, sometimes they are the sick power fantasy of the creators, and sometimes they are meant to show the trauma the characters are going through. As shown by the example from *The Last of Us* (2013), violence against characters, when it fits the story, can be powerful. Ellie's experience had lasting impact on her as a character<sup>31</sup> and the relationships she is able to develop. The violence wasn't against her as a woman, but instead as a human in a situation where humans are being hunted and eaten. The other examples mostly fall into the senseless, pointless violence category that does absolutely nothing to enhance the game experience and seems to specifically target women because they are women.

#### *"Sexy Sidekick"*

In several games, women are simply there to be attractive and sexy standing next to their male counterparts. Now, obviously some of these women aren't completely useless mechanically in the game. They might be AI companions who can assist in battle or provide the player with

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<sup>31</sup> Even influencing who she becomes in the second game.

needed ammo or currency, but their primary function is to be an attractive woman the assumed male player can ogle.

One character I will be talking A LOT about in chapter 2 is Quiet from *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015). I'll get into it more later, but Quiet is essentially wearing no clothes other than a tiny bra, a thong, and ripped tights. She is heavily featured in the game, and is simply meant to be an object of desire for the assumed cis het male player. She is one of four companions the player can take on missions with them. "Who are the other three companions?" I hear you ask. Well, there is a dog, a horse, and a robot you can choose to take on your mission instead. Quiet is literally replaceable by animals and machines.

In earlier *Metal Gear Solid* games (1998-2015), one of the companions heavily featured was Meryl Silverburgh. She is a powerful soldier who helps Solid Snake<sup>32</sup> deal with the Shadow Moses Incident in the first game (1998). She is not overtly sexualized in the game. I suppose the fact that she is wearing a tank top could be viewed as sexualization, and given what we're about to discuss, I wouldn't be surprised if the developers were trying to sexualize her with it. In the first game (1998), there is an easter egg where, if players follow a certain set of actions, Meryl will appear in the next cutscene wearing only her tank top and her underwear. This is clearly meant to be titillating to the assumed male player.

In *the Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2015), Geralt has a host of women who act as his companions throughout the game. The most prominent ones are Yennefer, Triss, and Ciri. Let's start with the main two: Triss Merigold and Yennefer. Yennefer is a powerful sorcerer who has been in Geralt's life for the majority of the games' stories. She is rarely, if ever placed in the damsel role, and is often several steps ahead of Geralt. The developers of the game undermine

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<sup>32</sup> *Metal Gear Solid's* playable character

her strength by constantly placing her as an object in the cishet male gaze. A problem *The Witcher* games have is putting their female characters in situations where they're just hanging out naked for no reason. Yennefer is just chilling reading a book naked in the tutorial area, and this sort of thing happens several times throughout the game. On a similar front, Triss is Geralt's companion for several missions in the mid game. She travels with Geralt from place to place in the city, and is often seen wearing revealing outfits.<sup>33</sup> It's not uncommon for the sorcerers in these games to wear revealing outfits, but we hardly see Triss use her magic. She fits into the Disempowered Women trope in that we are told she is super powerful, but the game doesn't do much to show us that. They both also fall into the "victory sex" trope because the player can have sex with them at different points in the story if they make the correct dialogue choices.

Ciri is Geralt's ward. He got her as a child surprise<sup>34</sup> early on in the series, and he has been training her to essentially become a witcher. She is who Geralt is looking for during the majority of the first half of the game. She is not sexualized by Geralt like the other women in the game are, but I think she is meant to be sexualized by the assumed male player. Ciri's main costume is a loose blouse that has a button undone right in front of her chest, so the player can see her bra (see Figure 7). It seems a bit unpractical to be a monster slayer on the run from a band of ghostly elves without a bit more armor. There is also a scene where the player is controlling Ciri and she has to go through a spa. In order to do that, she has to take off her clothes. Again, it is such a shame that she gets sexualized in these ways because she is a really strong character.

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<sup>33</sup> Which could be considered empowering like they are for Yennefer, but Triss isn't shown to be as powerful.

<sup>34</sup> The Law of Surprise in *The Witcher* universe is when someone does something for another person, and, as a reward or payment, they claim something the person they helped has but does not know they have. In Geralt's case, he saved Ciri's father's life, claimed the Law of Surprise, and then they found out Ciri's mother was pregnant, so Ciri is the surprise Geralt accidentally claimed.

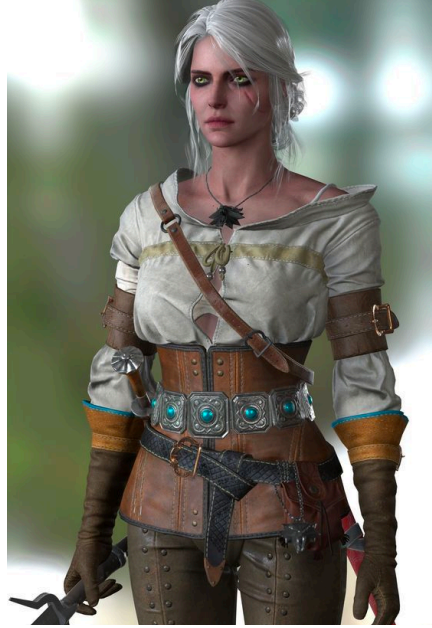


Figure 7. Ciri from *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* (2015)

Unlike Ciri, Cortana from the *Halo* series (2001-2021) is literally always nude. Most AI in the *Halo* universe seem to be wearing clothing of some sort. Not Cortana! As you can see in Figure 8, it's not explicit nudity, since there is something covering where her nipples would be, but there is still a lot being shown for little to no reason other than to be eye candy for the assumed cis het male player. In universe, the reasoning is simply that she chooses to appear this way with little explanation beyond that. This explanation really makes no sense given that Cortana is an AI companion who helps Master Chief throughout his adventures to stop the Covenant from destroying humanity. However, this is a video game where the developers make decisions for what characters in their game look like. We'll talk more about that specifically in the next chapter.



Figure 8. Cortana in *Halo 5* (2015)

When they are not existing as eye candy, the sexy sidekick will most likely be shouting out encouraging remarks to the player about how they are doing in combat or about how well they are doing at solving the mystery of the story. They serve as an ego boost to encourage the player when they are doing well or help them feel better if they are doing poorly. There are also situations where the sexy sidekick's primary function, besides being attractive, is to open doors for the player (or generally help with progression). There are several situations in a lot of games where the player does not have the ability to get through an opening or door, and their sidekick must open it for them.

This trope is all about reducing women to sex objects even when they are meant to have agency and be “useful” in the game. Whether it's through tricks the player can use to have the character appear in a more sexualized costume or if the characters are sexualized by the people who create them, this trope is extremely harmful.

### *Women Defined by Men*

I'm a huge fan of the *Kingdom Hearts* series (2002-2020), and this unfortunate trope is hyper-prevalent in those games. Kairi does not have an ounce of agency across the games and movies she appears in. She also falls into the “damsel in distress” trope over and over again (not

quite as bad as Peach or Zelda, but slowly trying to catch up to their records) and the “underpowered woman” trope (she’s meant to be a “princess of heart”<sup>35</sup> but we don’t see her use her powers to do anything). She also falls into the “Lolita aesthetic” of being a sexualized young girl, but we’ll talk about that in a bit. Her lack of agency is what the *Kingdom Hearts* fanbase really makes fun of her character for. That sounds harsh. It’s more a general recognition that she should have a character and the writers and developers keep ignoring her or putting her into harmful tropey roles. It’s also clear that the developers know how to make a compelling female character in Aqua, who is pretty much a certifiable badass through and through.

Kairi is unfortunately not alone in the way she is essentially either ignored or put into compromising situations whenever the developers need someone for Sora, Donald, and Goofy to save. Countless women in video games fall into this catch-all category. It’s kind of a blend between the disempowered women trope and the “sexy sidekick” trope with a dash of damsel in distress. However, the biggest issue is that Kairi does not exist beyond her relationship to Sora. So many women in video games are trapped in this cycle. Princess Peach will never be allowed to have agency beyond the occasional racing game or sports game because she is inextricably linked to Mario and his story.<sup>36</sup> The same can be said about Zelda and Link. Zelda is given more agency in some of the games, but she always reverts back to the damsel in distress trope. Even though she is the titular character, she wouldn’t have anything without Link.

This is probably one of the biggest issues in video games. Anita Sarkeesian touches on this concept in the video “Ms. Male Character.” She defines the trope as female characters who

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<sup>35</sup> The seven princess of heart are women who have hearts of pure light (talk about purity culture) that can be combined with the thirteen pieces of darkness to summon the keyhole that opens Kingdom Hearts. The other princess of heart were Alice, Snow White, Jasmine, Aurora, Belle, and Cinderella. All seven of them were also damsels in distress when Xeonort’s heartless, Ansem, captured them all so he could access Kingdom Hearts. (I didn’t make an ounce of this up)

<sup>36</sup> She does have her own game where Bowser captures Mario and Luigi, but it a one-off that hasn’t been revisited.

are “defined primarily by their relationship to their male counterparts via their visual properties [or] their narrative connection” (“Ms. Male Character”). The pinnacle example she uses is Ms. Pacman. *Ms. Pacman* (1981) was created after the original *Pacman* (1980) game, and starred the titular Ms. Pacman, who is meant to be a love interest for Pacman. She is defined by her relationship to and similar appearance to Pacman. She is basically Pacman with a bow.<sup>37</sup> The game plays the exact same way *Pacman* (1980) does, and is virtually indistinguishable from the original. Ms. Pacman has no defining character traits beyond her appearance.

Video games aren’t the only place we see this trope,<sup>38</sup> but it is almost the expectation in so many video games. For the longest time, women were given no agency in games. They served as plot devices to motivate a male protagonist, an object to be fought over and wooed, or an object to brutalize and sexualize. Luckily, based on my own observations, video games are mostly moving away from this trend, but the fact that so many games that abuse women in these ways are looked back upon in a fond light is definitely concerning.

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<sup>37</sup> Even though one of the taglines for the game was “not just Pacman with a bow.”

<sup>38</sup> Looking at Minnie Mouse and Lola Rabbit

## Chapter 2: A General Sense of Hypersexuality

Video games have a general issue with the amount of sexuality they apply to most of their characters, especially women. Sure, men get sexualized too in the sense that most of the men are hunky, cut, or just generally conventionally attractive, but women exist in games sometimes just to be sexualized and abused.

The line between hypersexualization and empowering women through their bodies is a fine line that I have no right drawing. However, I think I can do an okay job identifying egregious examples of unnecessary hypersexualization. If someone with more authority on the matter wants to correct me, I will gladly make concessions. This section, as all of these sections are, is based on my observations and experiences.

### Costume/Character Design

Not to undermine the issue, but at this point, it's almost a meme how ridiculous the situation is with how sexualized womens' costume designs can be in a lot of media, especially video games. Oftentimes, women are left in outfits that are ill-fitted for whatever task they are trying to perform. Let's take a look at an example with the original design for Lara Croft, the protagonist in *Tomb Raider* (1996) (Figure 9). Lara is wearing a tank top and short shorts to explore ruins and fight enemies, including the occasional dinosaur. There are also variations of Lara's costume in later games that leave her with a sports bra instead of a tank top. I don't know what most people would wear to go spelunking and exploring ancient ruins, but my outfit of choice might allow for a bit more protection. Like, I would for sure want pants...





Figure 9. Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (1996)

Lucky for Lara, later redesigns, especially with the modern games produced by Square Enix, she does get pants! Her chest and waist are also a lot more realistic. Bonus, she even gets to wear weather appropriate attire! When she is in the mountains in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015), she gets to wear a coat and warmer clothes!

It's astounding how little it takes to make progress in womens' costumes in video games, but it really is that big of a problem. Hypersexualization of women in video games tends to start with their costume and character design. Countless women in video games wear skintight body suits that conveniently leave the tope zipper undone quite a bit (looking at Catwoman in the *Arkham* games (2009-2015) in Figure 10.) or other outfits that reveal parts of her body. Again, women can own their sexualization as empowerment, but the women in video games do not have that autonomy. Video games are developed by people, and yes some of those people making these decisions are women, but that doesn't validate the argument that it's in Catwoman's character to have her costume be revealing because she doesn't actually have the agency to make that decision.



Figure 10. Catwoman in *Batman: Arkham City* (2011)

This brings us to the hotly debated character Bayonetta. Bayonetta is the playable character of her own series of games called *Bayonetta* (2009). She completely exudes sexual energy and celebrates her own sexuality as often as she can. She is constantly heckling with innuendos and using the power of her sexuality to defeat enemies.<sup>39</sup> Her costume is a skintight body suit that accentuates her curves. Also, her costume is made out of her hair, which also happens to be one of the sources of her power, so when she uses her magic or summons demons to aid her in combat, she is left completely naked.



Figure 11. Bayonetta from *Bayonetta 2* (2014)

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<sup>39</sup> Defeating them with moves that resemble sexual positions and other things like that. We'll talk more about this when we get to "Puff Puff" magic.

We'll talk more about the male gaze later, but the *Bayonetta* games (2009-2022) definitely cater to it. There are several long, panning shots that go over Bayonetta's body and linger on the more private parts of it. This shows me that she is meant to be ogled at by the presumed male players even though she is presented as owning her sexuality. People definitely disagree with my stance. I read an excellent article by Laila Carter that discusses their stance in viewing Bayonetta as a powerful character that takes control of her sexualization. However, I still argue that Bayonetta does not actually have the agency to make those decisions for herself. There are still real-world people making those decisions for her, and even if some of them are women,<sup>40</sup> it can still be problematic to hypersexualize your women characters in a medium that has a long history of sexualization and objectification of all of its women.

#### *Differences In Gendered Costumes*

In several games, the same piece of armor or clothing looks different depending on the sex of the character. The biggest game I can think of that does this is the *Monster Hunter* series. I have only played *Monster Hunter World* (2018), so that is where most of the evidence I will be providing is from. In *Monster Hunter World* (2018) a key component of the game is using monster parts you collect on missions to craft weapons and armor. As stated before, the armor looks different depending on the sex of the character. Most of the time, the armor is more form fitting and reveals more skin on the women in the game while the mens' armor is bulkier and designed to create a large silhouette.

It's not clear exactly why Capcom made the decision to do this in these games, but the effect is problematic. I know one of my friends, who chose to play as a female character, was

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<sup>40</sup> Which I believe one of the main creators behind Bayonetta is

constantly frustrated by the way the armor they had access to looked on their character compared to the male character our other friend was playing as. For clarification, look at Figure 12.



Figure 12. Negigante Armor Sets in *Monster Hunter World* (2018) (left is male, right is female)

This is the armor set for the monster Nergigante, the monster featured in most of the promotional materials for the game. Needless to say, this armor set is one many players want to craft. The full armor set with all of the spikes and orange detailing looks incredible, but when you look at what female characters are given, it's just generally upsetting. Why does she need to show so much skin when fighting monsters? Wouldn't the spikes all around her exposed skin be a hazard? Why is she only allowed a bra and sleeves for a top? It's just generally ridiculous. Not only is it impractical to wear that as armor to fight gigantic monsters who knock the character around quite a bit, it's sexist to give female characters more traditionally feminine outfits or revealing outfits and call it armor.

I've been picking on *Monster Hunter*, but it is not the only game that does this. Unfortunately, I now need to talk about one of my favorite series, the *Dark Souls* games (2011-2016), specifically *Dark Souls II* (2014). For the most part, the *Dark Souls* games (2011-2016) do a pretty good job of not gendering costumes. Sure, some armor sets might be a bit more form

fitting on women characters, but they generally look the same. However, there is one horrible exception: the desert sorceress outfit. As you can see in Figure 13, the male version of the costume (right) is a small chest covering that goes over one shoulder with shin-high boots and a long flowing skirt that exposes one leg. The female version of the costume is a bra that noticeably increases the player character's bust, thigh high boots, and a long flowing skirt that reveals even more of the character's leg. These might be small changes to an already revealing outfit regardless of sex of the playable character, but when seen with all of the baggage behind how women are treated in video games, this definitely comes off as a problem.



Figure 13. Playable Characters in *Dark Souls II* (2014) Wearing the Desert Sorceress Set

Another game I absolutely adore is also guilty of providing drastically different costumes depending on the sex the player has chosen for their playable character, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) (from here on will only be referred to as *Skyrim*). Pretty much every outfit in the game looks a bit different depending on the player character's sex, but as pointed out by the "Gendered Outfit" page on TV Tropes, the Tavern Clothes set is particularly bad about it (see

Figure 14). As you can see, the male character's outfit is pretty standard for what you would expect to see in a medieval tavern. However, the female character's outfit is a lot more revealing. Again, we see the accentuation of her bust and a skirt that doesn't really seem to be covering her left side very well.



Figure 14. Characters in *Skyrim* (2011) Wearing the Tavern Clothes Set

This is nowhere near all of the examples of outfits changing based on a character's sex. This is clearly a problem that is pervasive in video games and needs to be adjusted. When you give male characters outfits that cover their bodies or make them look more powerful while the same armor or clothing sets sexualize the female characters, it is clear that people want to view these women as objects for the assumed male gamer to sexualize. It's basically suggesting that a woman's power is in her sexuality alone.

### *Character Design for the Sake of Hypersexualization*

One of the most egregious examples of hypersexualization in video games comes in the form of character and costume design. From Lara Croft's hyper pronounced chest and short shorts in the original *Tomb Raider* games to Bayonetta's skin-tight suit made of her hair, video games have been guilty of oversexualizing their characters. In this section, I will be talking about the characters who are designed in a hypersexual way, not for empowerment or anything like that, but simply so they can be ogled by the player.

One of the worst examples I can think of is Quiet from *Metal Gear Solid V* (2015). Game director Hideo Kojima has defended her character design using in-universe reasons for her to dress the way she does, but it doesn't really hold up because, as game director, he had to okay the character costume and reasoning. Basically, she was in some sort of experimentation that left her with a condition where she has to breathe through her skin. Obviously, that means that she has to wear as little clothing as possible, and as you can see from Figure 15, they really whittled it down to nearly nothing. She is left with the tiniest bra I have ever seen, and a thong over ripped leggings.

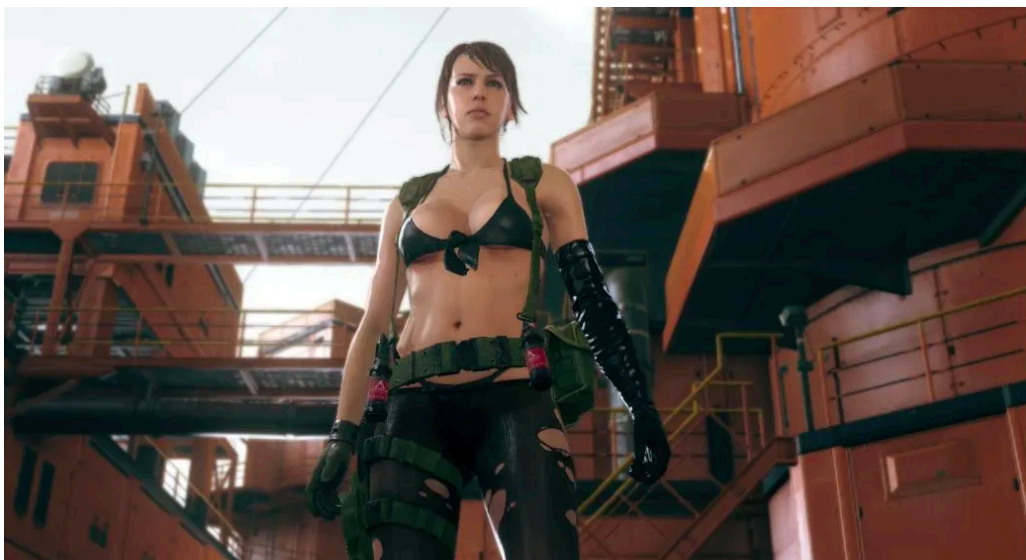


Figure 15. Quiet from *Metal Gear Solid V*

There has been controversy surrounding Quiet since her reveal while the game was in development. Kojima reportedly told the art director that he wanted to have sexier characters to promote cosplaying and figurine sales (Makuch). He also said, “once you recognize the secret reason for her exposure, you will feel ashamed of your words and deeds” (Makuch). I don’t think it’s rational to believe the people criticizing Quiet’s character design are the ones who need to be ashamed.<sup>41</sup>

Next, let’s talk about fighting games, specifically, the *Dead or Alive* series (1996-2019). Now, full disclosure, I have not played these games; however, I don’t need to in order to see the blatant issues with some of the character designs. As you can see from Figure 16, even the default outfits for female characters in the *Dead or Alive* series are hyper sexualized. That’s not to mention the incredibly sexist alternative costumes. All of the women have bikini outfits, and a myriad of other revealing outfits. Just take a look at [this trailer for the “Sexy Bunny Costume Pack.”](#)<sup>42</sup> As you can see, the developers are proudly sexualizing the female characters featured in this game. This series is also very well known for its ridiculous jiggle physics that primarily affect womens’ breasts and butts (as you likely noticed or will notice from the trailer).

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<sup>41</sup> My goal is not to shame game directors, but instead to point out trends and problems I notice in video games and the industry.

<sup>42</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2KYPPnRxKzc>





Figure 16. Kasumi in *Dead or Alive 5* (2012)

The developers tried to defend their decisions by making some of the costumes a bit more modest in *Dead or Alive 6* than they were in earlier games in the series.<sup>43</sup> Yin-Poole writes in their Eurogamer article discussing sexualization in *Dead or Alive 6* (2019) compared to the earlier games, “female sexualization [is] very up front and center.” This is apparent from the original costumes for each character, the types of DLC costume packs, and the alternative costumes that were shipped with the game.

One of my favorite game series of all time is the *Dark Souls* series. Unfortunately, there is one character in the first game that really falls into this category. Introducing Gwynevere from *Dark Souls* (2011) (Figure 17). She is the daughter of Gwynn and keeper of the Lordvessel<sup>44</sup>, which the player needs in order to progress and complete the game. Interacting with her is

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<sup>43</sup> If skintight bodysuits are modest...

<sup>44</sup> The Lordvessel will hold the four lord souls, after the player defeats certain bosses in the game, so they can link the first flame and restore the Age of Light.

required<sup>45</sup>. She is laid out on a massive couch facing the player, and she has a large chest that is barely covered. These design choices are very clearly meant to sexualize her in several ways.

The game director, Hidetaka Miyazaki, gave a bit of insight into her character design in the interviews featured in *Dark Souls Design Works*.<sup>46</sup> To paraphrase, he wanted to have a giant woman in the game the player had to interact with, and the designers presented him with the design that ended up in the game. The designer was so excited about their concept that Miyazaki felt it would be cruel to tell them no. Whether or not that is how Gwynevere came to look the way she does is beside the point. Someone creating the game wanted to have a sexy woman for players to ogle, and that's exactly what we got.



Figure 17. Gwynevere from *Dark Souls* (2011)

As usual, this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are so many more examples of women in video games who are created to just be objectified and sexualized. We'll talk about more of them as we go on in this paper, but even then, there's no way I can cover them all. This is a

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<sup>45</sup> Being violent towards her is also required in order to unlock a certain world state.

<sup>46</sup> The art book for the first game.

pervasive problem that needs to be addressed. A lot of more modern games are doing better with this, but there are obviously still way too many games that design their female characters to be sexualized by the assumed male player.

### **Catering to the Male Gaze (camera angles)**

The term “Male Gaze” was first coined by Laura Mulvey in her 1973 paper “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (Leonard). Kim Leonard explains the Male gaze as “Men writing the films, men making the films, men being the protagonists, and men being the target audience all combine into a unified — heterosexual male — perspective of female characters.” Like Leonard and Mulvey suggest, the male gaze is the product of a patriarchal society where we have been socialized to normalize the cis het male perspective and in extension their fantasies. Typically, especially in film, the male gaze is represented by the camera. We so often see the camera lingering on women and especially certain parts of their body. Think of the way the camera in so many movies slowly pan up a woman’s body so the viewer sees her curves and other bits before we see her face. This section is talking about this idea of camera angles being a vehicle for the male gaze.

My first experience where I noticed these camera tactics was when I was playing through *Heavy Rain* (2010) written by David Cage and developed by Quantic Dream. First of all, the main female character in this game has about as much personality as a pile of wet cardboard. After our introduction to her as a character when she is nearly assaulted in a dream, we take over controlling her to walk around the apartment and get her ready for the day. One of the things the player is able to watch her take a shower (Figure 18). I’ll leave [a link here to a video here<sup>47</sup>](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwltBSomLLg). It is uncensored, so be warned for blatant objectification as the camera pans over her body. She is

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwltBSomLLg>

fully naked, and the cutscene doesn't stop until there is player input, so it could hypothetically go on until the images are burned into your television<sup>48</sup>. The other fun fact about this scene is that the camera angles shift several times. There is a shot from behind and below her so the player has plenty of time to stare at her but. There is a shot of her leaning against the wall with her arms out so the player can look at the side of her chest.



Figure 18. Madison in *Heavy Rain* (2010)

Another set of unfortunate examples are two of the most beloved game developers in the industry: Yoko Taro and Hideo Kojima. I've already talked about Kojima's character Quiet and the absolute lunatic amount of back bending Kojima tried to do to convince people he didn't just want "sexy ladies" in his game. I'm pretty sure Yoko Taro has admitted to just being a little too horny and wanting sexy women in his games. Specifically, when asked about *NieR Automata's* (2017) main protagonist, 2B's, high heeled boots, he said "I just really like girls" (Nelva). I have only played *NieR Automata*, but that alone shows me what he's talking about.

*NieR Automata* (2017) is a gripping game that tells the story of androids who are struggling with identity and what it means to be sentient. It's a really interesting story with multiple playthroughs that change as you go through them. However, the women androids in this

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<sup>48</sup> Not sure if that's still a thing that can happen with modern TVs

game are sexualized beyond belief. 2B (Figure 19) is your main character in the first playthrough, and she is essentially dressed like a prototypical French Maid. A2, the other woman android who you play as on playthrough 3, is wearing a skintight dress that barely covers anything below her waist. There is also a button the player can hold down to initiate a self-destruct that blows the android up to near death and removes their clothes ([as seen in this video here<sup>49</sup>](#)). After the player has done this, 2B's butt is on full display, and A2 is essentially left with a bikini. This action also sexualizes violence towards women. Clearly, 2B is in a lot of pain, but the imagery we are shown is meant to be titillating. The player also has full access to move the camera around so they can look up the characters' skirts (which the player controlling the camera in the video does a bit too much). It's all pretty gross if you ask me.



Figure 19. 2B from *NieR Automata* (2017)

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmBb4HSXZhw>

Hideo Kojima is a lot more defensive about being horny in his games. I've already talked about Quiet in *Metal Gear Solid V* (2015), but just for a recap: she has a condition where she breathes through her skin, so she needs to have as much skin showing as possible, and that's why she only wears a tiny bra, a thong, and ripped tights. In his 2019 game *Death Stranding*, Kojima doesn't have any blatantly problematic characters like Quiet, but some of the camera angles are questionable. There is one character named Fragile who wears a skintight leather suit that definitely accentuates her curves. So many of the shots of her are from a low angle behind her so that we are almost always looking at her bottom, as seen in Figure 20 [and this cutscene here](#)<sup>50</sup>. I mean, we can also make Norman Reedus shower and see his bare butt, so maybe Kojima just really likes a lot of butts, but it's something I made note of while playing because it became so common it was a trend.



Figure 20. Fragile from *Death Stranding* (2019)

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=328&v=RiK1j2VKDAU&feature=youtu.be>

### The Power of Sex Appeal: “Puff Puff” Magic

One of the most beloved video game series of all time is the *Dragon Quest* series (1986-2021) developed by Square Enix. In these games, you play as a chosen hero who has to save the day from some sort of evil. My only experience with Dragon Quest has been *Dragon Quest XI Echoes of an Elusive Age* (2017). In that game, there are two characters who use “puff puff” magic as part of their moveset. One of them is Jade, a powerful warrior who is unfortunately reduced to “sex appeal” later in the game, and Sylvando, a flamboyant queer-coded person who is skilled at fencing. Puff puff magic is based on a long-running joke in the Dragon Quest series. There are characters stationed in busy townships and cities who can provide your character with “puff puff.” When this happens, the screen goes to black and there is some suggestive dialogue, even though it is often revealed that what was happening had nothing to do with sex. Puff puff magic is essentially charisma-based magic that has to do with sex appeal. The character will do a little dance and shoot hearts at the enemies to charm or damage them.

This wouldn’t be such a big deal if this type of magic wasn’t exclusively for specific characters. I feel like Sylvando only has it because they are queer coded,<sup>51</sup> but Jade is very clearly the character you are supposed to sexualize in this game. I don’t have as big an issue with her default outfit. Yes, it’s considered sexy, but it also fits her strong powerful personality. I do have an issue when, in the story, she becomes brainwashed and is forced to dress in fishnets, a leotard, and bunny ears (Figure 21).<sup>52</sup> She is the only member of the party who is brainwashed, and I feel like it was just so they could throw her in this revealing outfit. That’s not to mention the other costumes she has access to. I believe she is one of the only characters who can dress in

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<sup>51</sup> Which is problematic on its own.

<sup>52</sup> Very reminiscent of a Playboy bunny type outfit.

revealing costumes.<sup>53</sup> That’s all to say, sexualizing a character based on their costume options and then giving them magic based on sex appeal feels like catering to a particular audience.

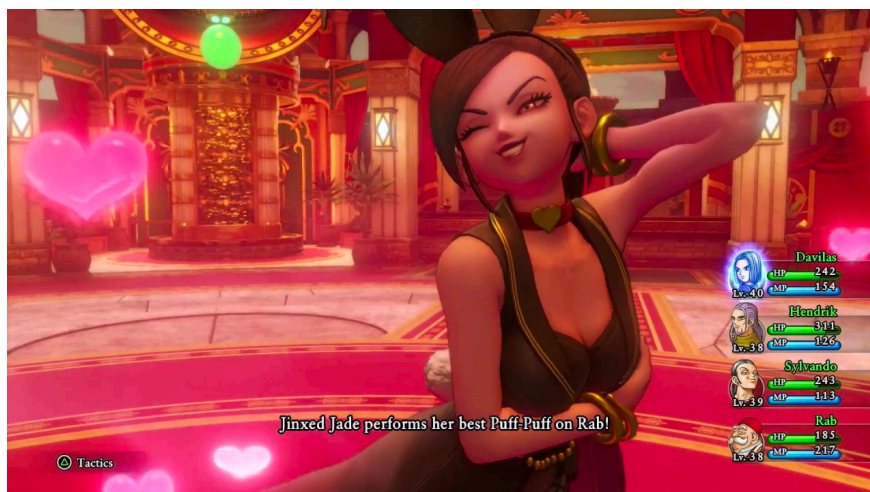


Figure 21. Jade in a bunny costume from *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age* (2017)

This trend is all over the place in video games. I’ve already talked about Bayonetta in this chapter, but she is an obvious inclusion for this trend. If you look at [this gameplay trailer for Bayonetta 3](#)<sup>54</sup> (2022), you will kind of get a sense of what I’m talking about. Bayonetta’s character is meant to have a sort of dominatrix energy, so right at the start of the clip when she stomps on the enemy’s head and says, “bad boy,” that is a great example of the power of sex appeal. Throughout the trailer, we see Bayonetta posing while casting spells, dancing while casting spells, and doing a dance and summoning reddish pink energy<sup>55</sup> as she brings in a demon to help her in the fight. We didn’t see it as much in the trailer, in older games, she also yells out innuendo as she beats her enemies.

Using sex appeal to defeat enemies is not something exclusively women can do. Men can use images of women to distract their enemies and get the jump on them too! In the much

<sup>53</sup> I have not tested it with every costume in the game, and the game may sexualize the other women too.

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUAtX8Ox7eI&t=89s>

<sup>55</sup> Traditionally feminine colors



mentioned game *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015), Venom Snake can use pornography to distract his enemies. Throughout the game, Snake can find magazines that are implied to be porn. They feature a scantily clad woman on the cover. When Snake drops them near an enemy, the enemy will be pleasantly surprised and move towards the pornography and be distracted for a period of time allowing Snake to sneak around them for a kill. This feature isn't new to *Metal Gear Solid V* (2015). It has been featured several times in the previous games. What is new to the fifth game is the ability to put a pinup girl poster on Snake's cardboard box he uses to hide from enemies (Figure 22). This will also distract the enemies long enough for Snake to kill them or knock them unconscious.



Figure 22. Venom Snake's Disguise in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015)

These are by no means all of the examples that exist in video games, nor are they even the most egregious. These examples do illustrate the point I'm trying to make. Women are primarily valued in video games for their sex appeal, and their abilities in combat oftentimes reflect that unfortunate fact. Obviously, not all games treat women as objects, but it is far too common of an issue.

### **The *Lolita* Complex**

If you're like me, then you recently spent tens of hours of your life being horrified at how pervasive pedophilia is in our society while listening to *The Lolita Podcast* (2021). This podcast

opened my eyes to a lot of problems in our society at large, and I've thought a lot about some of the things I see in video games that relate back to those topics. For the uninitiated, *Lolita* is a book by Vladimir Nabokov about a deranged man named Humbert Humbert who sexually assaults 12 year old Dolores Hayes after tricking her mother into marrying him. It is implied he ends up killing her mother, and he essentially kidnaps Dolores and takes her on a cross country road trip where he continually rapes her. Somehow, there are people who misinterpret this book and view it as a love story, even though the titular character<sup>56</sup> is a minor incapable of consenting to any of the things being done to her.

Stanley Kubrik's 1962 film is definitely to blame for a lot of the romanticization of this story in modern society<sup>57</sup>. Kubrik was one of those people who deeply misunderstood the point of the book,<sup>58</sup> and unfortunately, his film had a massive impact on the rest of the world's understanding of the story. Lolita culture became defined by the sexualization of young girls.

Video games are not immune to the pervasiveness of this pedophilic ideology that is ingrained in our culture. Not even beginning to look at the video games that exist to be pornography, mainstream gaming features a lot of young female characters who are needlessly sexualized. While women in western games are definitely still meant to look youthful, I had a hard time finding examples of the sexualization of literal children in western gaming. We do get examples of young girls traveling with older men, but the relationship between them is always fatherly or the older man acts as a mentor.<sup>59</sup> Most of the blatant sexualization of young girls in video games comes out of Japan in what is called Lolicon.

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<sup>56</sup> Humbert decides Dolores should be called Lolita

<sup>57</sup> Don't get me wrong, I like several Kubrik films, but he was kind of a crappy person.

<sup>58</sup> That Humbert is meant to be repulsive to the reader despite his charisma

<sup>59</sup> Looking at Lee and Clementine in *The Walking Dead* and Joel and Ellie in *The Last of Us*.

### *Lolicon Culture*

I am not an expert on Japanese culture, and most of my understanding of lolicon comes from the small amount of research I did prior to writing this paper. Lolicon culture is a part of Japanese culture that describes a certain fashion sense and ideology focused around rejecting adulthood and embracing childhood by wearing laced and ruffled outfits inspired by Victorian era dress (Savage 37). Women who embrace lolicon culture in Japan want to distance themselves from *Lolita* and the sexualization that goes along with it (Savage 38). Unfortunately, the intent of the women participating does not stop them from being sexualized and fetishized in Japanese culture and media which then transfers to other countries for them to participate in the fetishization of young girls.

There are several ways this tends to play out in video games. The first is just directly sexualizing young girls. In *Xenoblade Chronicles X* (2015), there is a character named Lin Lee Ko who is thirteen years old.<sup>60</sup> One of her alternate outfits is a bikini like affair that shows off the underside of her chest as well as a large portion of her pubic area (Figure 23). I honestly don't even know what to say about this other than it's absolutely absurd that the developers felt the need to put the thirteen year old character in a revealing outfit.

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<sup>60</sup> She is fifteen in the US version, and the costume in Figure X is toned down a bit, but it's still not great.

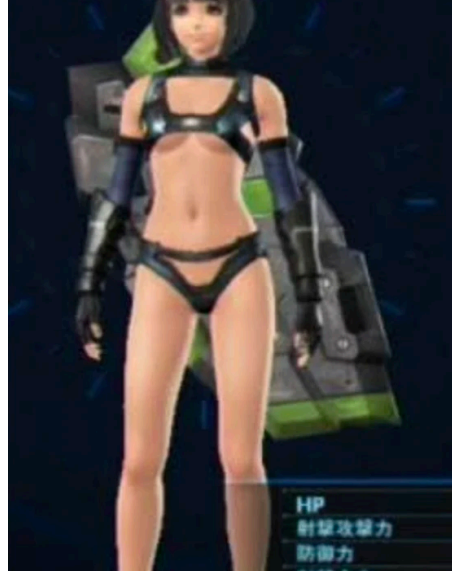


Figure 23. Lin Lee Ko in *Xenoblade Chronicles X* (2015)

Another excuse video games give to sexualize young girls is the trend of adult women being trapped in a child's body. The only game I've played that uses this idea is *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age* (2017). The character in question is Veronica (Figure 24), a powerful sorcerer who just happened to be transformed into a little girl prior to meeting the protagonist. This trend is an issue because it gives the assumed male player the opportunity to think it's okay to sexualize her because she's not actually a child (even though she is literally in the body of a child). Luckily, I don't think she has any outfits that explicitly sexualize her, but the concept is still pretty sketchy to me.



Figure 24. Veronica in *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age* (2017)

I am an avid physical game collector,<sup>61</sup> so I follow a lot of companies that produce physical versions of games that only had digital releases at first. One of those companies is Limited Run Games. I love a lot of the games I have bought from them, but they also produce physical copies of games that I find questionable. One of those games was *Tengoku CruisinMix Special* (1995). In all of the promotional material for this game, there is an image of a young girl falling through the sky, and we have to look up her skirt (Figure 25). Luckily, we don't actually see anything, but the fact this is allowed in marketing is crazy. Anyway, when Limited Run Games produced their physical version of the game, they cropped the image for the front cover of the game so that you don't see up her skirt at all. Other fans of Limited Run Games and *Tengoku CruisinMix Special* (1995) lost their shit. For a few weeks all I saw in the limited game collectors groups I am a part of was talk of how upset they were that borderline child pornography was being censored for the western release.

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<sup>61</sup> Specifically for Playstation 4 and 5



Figure 25. *Tengoku CruisinMix Special*

Like I said before, I do not understand the intricacies that go into lolicon culture in Japan. If adult women are reclaiming youthfulness and rejecting sexuality in the name of empowerment, fantastic! Good for them! However, when game designers, mostly men, pervert that idea and use it to sexualize children, I definitely have a problem with that. Similar to video game characters, children do not have the agency to own their sexuality, and anyone suggesting differently is perverse. So then, when children in video games are sexualized, that is clearly not that character's choice.<sup>62</sup> That is the developers being, frankly, disgusting.

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<sup>62</sup> As we established earlier, video game characters are not real and therefore do not have the agency to own their sexuality.

### **Chapter 3: Women in the Industry and Communities**

This chapter will primarily focus on discussing other people's experiences. As I stated earlier, I am a person who passes as male in most spaces even if that's not how I identify, so I benefit from a lot of the same privileges that men do. That means that I am generally accepted into gaming spaces and communities without question. I am interested in exploring the experiences of women who play and make games. I will do my best to do justice to the stories and experiences that I have found in my research, but I won't attempt to be comprehensive.

#### **Gatekeeping in Gaming Communities**

I don't know how outlandish of a claim this is, but I would argue video gaming is one of the most gatekept spaces that exist. First, a lot of men try to gatekeep women out of the space simply because they are women. Also, a myriad of other criteria that people who play video games regularly (a vocal minority) use to keep out people regardless of gender.

One of my favorite game series ever, the Dark Souls games (2011-2016), has a community that are constantly trying to gatekeep gaming in general. The concept of "Git Gud" (that rather than asking for help or advice someone should just be able to suffer through whatever they are struggling with and get good at the game or be labeled a casual) originated from this community. This phrase is trying to gatekeep more casual gamers or gamers who don't have the patience to go through the arduous process of defeating these games. It has also leaked into several other gaming communities beyond the *Souls* games.

There is a whole subsection of gaming that some people consider "too casual" to be considered "real games, and those who play them are therefore not considered to be real gamers. These are usually more relaxed "wholesome" games (see ch 4 for a more in-depth look at Wholesome gaming and the positive impacts that it has) that have the player moving at their own

pace to do tasks with little to no combat involved, thus relieving a lot of the stress that can come with more combat-focused games. These would be games like *Animal Crossing New Horizons* (2020), *Stardew Valley* (2016), *Spiritfarer* (2020), and so many other games.

When the vocal minority of male gamers hear about women playing games, they automatically assume that these are the types of games that they play. They assume women couldn't possibly play *Dark Souls* or *Call of Duty* because those are the "hardcore games" that men play. Here is a comment someone left on IRyS Ch. hololive-EN's (a YouTuber who makes let's plays<sup>63</sup>) recent video where she played *Elden Ring*, "Don't let big media lie to you! She obviously got her big bro/sis to play for her! The truth will be revealed!" (Fritjof Ott) I constantly hear stories on Twitter or TikTok of women being berated for playing more "hardcore" games saying that they must be doing it to get guys' attention or that their boyfriend got them to play it as if women can't choose to play more challenging games if they want to.

“‘Fake’ Gamergirls”

In this section, I make a lot of generalizations about how men act when playing games. I know that it's "not all men," but it is a big enough problem that I feel the need to address it.

There is a notion that when women play video games, they are somehow doing it for the attention of men. There is also the idea that women who play games simply don't exist. Obviously, this is ridiculous. There are just as many women who play video games as there are men who regularly play<sup>64</sup>, but the women who play often feel compelled to hide the fact that they play video games and avoid interacting with other members of the community. This is obviously not the standard, as there are plenty of women who regularly stream and create content for sites

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<sup>63</sup> Video walkthroughs of someone's first experience with a game.

<sup>64</sup> According to an article written by Dustin Tyler in 2021, 48% of people who play video games are women.



like Youtube, but many of the women I know who play video games recognize most video gaming communities as spaces that are toxic to them.

One friend of mine, who was AFAB (assigned female at birth), told me about how, when they used to play MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), they would never use voice chat. If they did, they knew they would get a barrage of harassment or questions about them being a woman playing games (even if they don't identify as such). This is an experience so many women and people who present more feminine have to deal with in online gaming communities. Competitive online gaming communities can be extremely toxic in general. A lot of the time people playing will be calling each other names that I won't repeat here, spewing hate speech at each other, and other vitriolic behavior. When you are a woman in these spaces, things get even more uncomfortable. Male players will try to hit on you, call you sexist names, make sexual comments, and engage in performative sexual harassment.<sup>65</sup> Obviously not all male gamers act this way, in fact it's probably just a vocal minority, but things can be extremely toxic. However, if you are curious about exactly the kind of garbage men say to women who play online games, just take a look at [this video by Spawntaneous](#)<sup>66</sup> where she shows the shit she has to deal with.

A lot of gamers have a very "bro" attitude about video games. It's hard to describe exactly what I mean by that, but the best way I can think of is the concept of "bros before hoes." When men say this, they are implying that spending time with "the boys" is far more important than interacting with the women in their lives. Therefore, when women "invade" their precious

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<sup>65</sup> The idea that sexual harassment is seen as normal in a certain setting, so people feel compelled or empowered to partake in that action.

<sup>66</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jL0aVqVslSE>

video game spaces, it is seen as an affront and something that needs to be dealt with in only the most toxic of ways.

A lot of this toxicity comes from the idea that women are seeking mens' attention when they play games. Women who play games, especially women who stream games on Twitch or upload gaming content to Youtube, are susceptible to a disgusting amount of sexual harassment. Men in stream chats and Youtube comment sections proposition the women who are creating content and requesting things like revealing outfits and nude images of the women playing. It can be powerful if a woman wants to use her sexuality as a part of her gameplay strategy because it is her choice to do so, but for men to request that kind of content unsolicited is disgusting.

Men tend to also make a lot of assumptions about the types of games they expect women to play. People tend to assume action games, MMORPGs, and FPSs are exclusively for men, while women play more casual games on mobile devices and other, more relaxed, games. That brings us nicely into a discussion of these so-called "casual games."

### *Casual Games*

Casual games have seen a surge in popularity over the past several years. I would argue this all started with Nintendo's Wii console. It was marketed as a device families could bring into their home and play together. It featured a lot of unique gameplay with its motion control features and cooperative games that came with the console itself. Then, as technology became more and more advanced, video games started to come to smartphones. It started off with games with simple mechanics and cute/fun gameplay like *Angry Birds* and *Fruit Ninja*, but now you can play popular indie titles and games specifically designed for the phone like a lot of the games featured on Apple Arcade. That's not to mention all of the other phone games that exist like slot machine games and *Candy Crush* clones.

Casual games typically don't take a whole lot of time and effort to play, so they don't come with the same pressures and complexities as more "hardcore" games like *Call of Duty* or *World of Warcraft*. In other words, casual games have a low entry point. This concept of casual gaming is closely linked to the idea that women can't play action-packed games. Therefore, casual games often are thought of as games meant for girls (or at least they are the only games girls can play) due to their simplicity and lack of experience required to play. Casual games are far more docile and domestic. They often feature the player taking care of something, whether that is a home, playable characters, a farm, or a myriad of other possibilities.

For example, one extremely popular "casual" game is *The Sims 4*. In this game, players take control of managing a household. They can create characters, build and design their home, and take care of the day to day functions those characters need to undertake. They can help their characters develop skills and achieve their goals. A lot of management games like this are considered to be a lot more casual, and thus appropriate for women to play.

Treating these games like they aren't "real" video games is toxic and one of the many ways "hardcore" gamers try to gatekeep the hobby. They tend to look down on people who play casual games and treat them like lesser members of the community, if they acknowledge them at all.

### **The Toxic Gaming Industry**

Although the situation for women in the gaming industry is definitely improving, as I'll talk about in the next chapter, where we currently are leaves a lot to be desired. The best example of this is probably #Gamergate. Oh boy. This whole situation was a mess. #Gamergate started in August 2014. The one-sentence summary is that several women in the gaming industry were harassed by a bunch of assholes who threatened to rape and murder them because they were

critical of sexism in gaming and the gaming industry. Basically, it all started with game developer Zoe Quinn and feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian being harassed online with the aforementioned threats of rape and murder (VanDerWerff). But why were they targeted?

The reasons are about as dumb as the #Gamergate movement itself. Before we get too far into it, I filled in a lot of the gaps in my own knowledge using the Vox article by Emily VanDerWerff, so that is where a lot of the information is coming from. Quinn's personal life was put on display in a series of blog posts published by Eron Gjoni who used his privilege as a developer with several fans to get people to get riled up and angry at Quinn. The posts claimed that Quinn cheated on Gjoni with a member of the games publication *Kotaku*. Even if this was the case, Gjoni's public lambasting of Quinn and the subsequent harassment were childish and became something that was absolutely disgusting.

Sarkeesian is a member of the content-creating group Feminist Frequency. Around this time, they had been publishing a series called "Tropes Vs. Women in Gaming" (referenced several times in this paper) that criticized the treatment of women in games<sup>67</sup>. The series wasn't originally met with any more misogyny than would be expected, but with some of the videos premiering around the same time as some gamers were being assholes about the situation Gjoni started, those same gamers latched onto this as another instance of where a woman was stepping out of line and attacked Sarkeesian for it. It got so bad that she feared for her life and went into hiding after her home address was leaked to the anti-Feminist Frequency mob. Just as an example of the vitriolic hate people are capable of, people created a game where the player can beat up Sarkeesian (Figure 26). This horrific display of toxicity and threats of violence got way out of hand, and shows how toxic certain members of the gaming community can be.

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<sup>67</sup> As you can tell, I'm a fan.

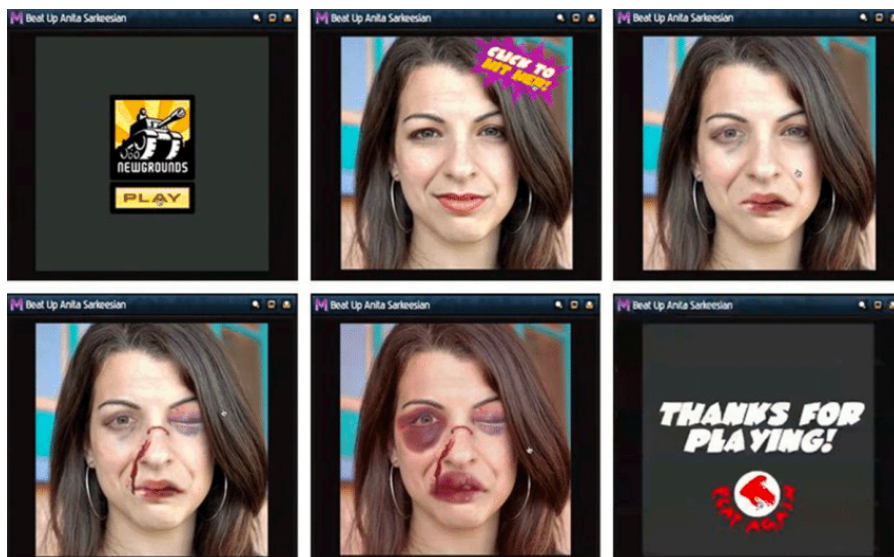


Figure 26. Game About Beating Up Anita Sarkeesian

Gamergaters (as the problematic gamers who engaged in this disgusting display of misogyny are called) would try to argue that this wasn't ultimately about women and more about how the gaming media covers games. There were claims that gaming journalists were focusing too much on social issues when discussing games rather than only talking about the games.<sup>68</sup> But let's be clear: Gamergate was a loud group of misogynists attacking women for taking an interest in making gaming a safe space that everyone should feel safe and comfortable participating in.

### *Harassment in Studios*

Where do these toxic attitudes come from? According to much of what I've read, there is a deep culture of sexism within the studios themselves. As one fairly well-known example, Activision/Blizzard's harassment culture was brought to light by several brave people working there. Most of the information in this paragraph comes from the *Protocol* article by Nick Statt. Activision/Blizzard was reported to foster a "frat boy" culture where women would be forced to deal with a near constant barrage of sexual harassment in the forms of comments and advances

<sup>68</sup> Which is ridiculous because you can't talk about a piece of literature without talking about the environment in which it was created or the social events that may have impacted its development.

by their male coworkers and supervisors. One woman even died by suicide after aggressive sexual harassment. Men were more likely to be promoted and get raises at the company, and they could pass along work they were uninterested in doing on to their women coworkers. The state of California has filed a lawsuit against the company, and it seems like we will see some positive changes come out of their recent acquisition by Microsoft's Xbox branch (Statt). Unfortunately, the CEO of Activision/Blizzard, who allowed this harassment to go on for years, has not been fired or resigned as of this writing.

This was by no means the first reckoning in the games industry. In August 2018, Riot Games, the creators of *League of Legends*, was investigated by *Kotaku* and found to have a “bro culture” that the company described as “core gamer” culture (“Company Behind...”). Included in this “core gamer” culture, were unsolicited penis pics being shown to female employees, an email chain found by one woman of male employees discussing what it would be like to “penetrate her,” and another email chain rating the attractiveness of the women who worked at the company (“Company Behind...”). The fact that they view this as “core gamer” culture is demonstrative of the sexism and toxicity that exist in video gaming. One executive was reported to keep up “running gags” of farting on employees, humping them, and smacking male employees in the testicles (“Company Behind...”). He essentially received a slap on the wrist when he was suspended with pay.

In 2020, allegations against executives at the publishing powerhouse that is Ubisoft were also brought to light. One woman brought forward the actions of one man who would make comments about women's bodies, and when she took it to HR, she was instructed to “talk it out” with the man (Neal). There are also reports of the HR department at Ubisoft having a general mistrust of victims, and a tendency to brush off complaints (Neal).

There are many more reports of harassment and misconduct throughout the gaming industry. From development studios to talent agencies that promote streamers, this issue is pervasive. It's honestly astounding that women in the industry can work and produce the amazing content they do under such trying circumstances. No one should have to deal with harassment and misconduct in the workplace, and the fact that the men making the most money off of the games that are produced are the primary perpetrators of the issues is alarming. Something needs to change at so many companies, and I'm hoping that the publicity surrounding #Gamergate is a big step in the right direction.

## Chapter 4: The Brighter Side

Obviously, I wouldn't love video games the way I do if they were all horrible and sexist. In an effort to recognize some of the positive changes that are occurring, I'd like to talk about improvements the games industry and individual players are making towards inclusivity and positive representation of diverse identities both in the games themselves and the communities surrounding them.

### Modern Women Characters in Games

There are countless examples of strong women in modern gaming that I want to make sure we take the time to celebrate. Video games, especially in indie spaces, are creating strong, independent, and powerful women that players are allowed to team up with and go on adventures with. Oftentimes, stories starring these women are more complex and compelling than a lot of games that feature exclusively male protagonists.

For example, in *Hellblade Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), you play as the titular Senua as she travels into Helheim to find the soul of her lost love Dillion.<sup>69</sup> This game is built around the idea of playing with both Senua's mental wellbeing and the player's. Senua hears voices constantly as she travels through the realm. [The way the voices are conveyed<sup>70</sup>](#) is best experienced with headphones or surround sound speakers because the voices are designed to sound like they are coming from all sides around the player. This creates a sense of immersion in Senua's world. The game also tells the player that Senua has some sort of rot caused by being in Helheim that will spread each time she dies until she is consumed by the rot. There isn't actually any number of times the player can die that will trigger this, but the threat is enough to keep players on edge. Senua is a fierce warrior who overcomes the trials of Helheim through combat and her wit.

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<sup>69</sup> Reversed Euthanized Damsel

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=43&v=rob7C11CYEI&feature=youtu.be>





Figure 27. Senua in *Hellblade Senua's Sacrifice* (2017)

Another similarly complex character is Madeline, the protagonist in *Celeste* (2018). She has decided that for the sake of her mental health, she is going to attempt to climb Celeste Mountain. She is strong and determined, but also struggles with self doubt and panic attacks. Throughout her journey, she faces a troubled version of herself, lovingly dubbed Badeline. In the end, after several scuffles and rude remarks, Madeline learns to love all parts of herself, including the elements she manifested into Badeline. The game is as much about coming to terms with her mental health struggles as it is about the tight precision platforming she uses to conquer the mountain.



Figure 28. Madeline and Badeline in *Celeste* (2018)

We get an even deeper sense of character development in the character of Clementine (Figure 29), who we meet in the first entry in Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series (2012-2019). At the time we are introduced to her, she is just a child. The protagonist of the first game, Lee, takes her into his care to protect her from the walker-infested world they now inhabit. After Lee dies, we see Clementine venture out on her own, join up with different factions, and develop into a really strong character. She grows up in a dangerous world that hardens her and forces her to make impossible decisions. By the last game, she is watching over a small child of her own (not her child, but she treats him like it).



Figure 29. Clementine and AJ in *The Walking Dead Final Season* (2019)

Aloy is the protagonist in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022). She is a clone of one of the founders of a program that was designed to re-terraform Earth after the apocalypse. She was banished by her tribe, and lived a lot of her life in exile, forcing her to develop the skills she would need to survive. In the games, she is tasked with going into the old world's ruins to try to salvage the remainder of the AI programs to save humanity from a second apocalypse. She is powerful and skilled with a bow, and makes quick work of the enemy cults and machines that stand in her way.



Figure 30. Aloy in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017)

Maybe more than any other gaming franchise I have experienced, *The Last of Us* games give players strong, complex women whose stories we get to experience. In *The Last of Us* (2013) and *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), Ellie (Figure 31) is one of the most important characters. I'll be talking more about *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) more because I think Ellie is a stronger, and more complex, character in that game. We learn in the "Left Behind" DLC (downloadable content) (2014) that Ellie was bitten by an infected person, but she never turned into the fungus zombies we see throughout the games, so she is immune to the infection. The first game showed us her adventure with Joel<sup>71</sup> as they travel across the country to help a group known as the Fireflies come up with a cure for the infection. They find out that they could create a cure using Ellie, but the process would kill her. Joel isn't a fan of that, so he goes on a murder rampage to save her without consulting Ellie and taking her desires into consideration. This act is not celebrated by the game, but rather, seems to be condemned.

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<sup>71</sup> Joel is the playable character of the first game.



Figure 31. Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020)

In the second game, someone kills Joel, and Ellie is seeking revenge.<sup>72</sup> She travels to Seattle to find the people responsible, and goes on a bit of a murder rampage herself. It starts off with her and her girlfriend, Dina, going around Seattle trying to find the group responsible for Joel's death. After Dina gets hurt and has to sit things out at a theater they have taken refuge in, things take a bit of a turn. One by one, Ellie hunts down the people who were there when Joel was killed. As the game goes on, we see Ellie becoming more and more brutal and violent, kind of like Joel in the first game. We see the downfall of her moral compass to the point where she shoots and kills a pregnant woman because she was there when Joel was killed. All of this comes down to finding the woman responsible for actually killing Joel, Abby.

Abby (Figure 32) is the second playable character in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). She is unique in that she represents a body type for women that we don't often see in women characters. She is jacked. She is a member of the Washington Liberation Front (WLF), the group responsible for killing Joel. We take over her story after playing up to a certain point in Ellie's story. As Abby explores the city, we see the wake of destruction Ellie has left behind her. We see

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<sup>72</sup> Yes, Joel is fridged

the mutilated bodies of Abby's friends who were killed by Ellie. It then becomes Abby's mission to stop Ellie.



Figure 32. Abby in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020)

*The Last of Us II* shows us the consequences of the hyper violence that has existed in gaming for so long. Ellie and Abby are forces of nature that go head to head in the world of the game. The game examines the cycle of violence that started in the first game when Joel massacred the Fireflies. It shows the player that responding to violence with violence is a battle that has no winners and leaves nothing but destruction in its wake.

### **Queer Representation**

Another area of gaming that is thriving is the queer gaming space. It all starts with canonically queer characters in video games, especially in the AAA<sup>73</sup> space. I tend to notice this the most in games where there are romanceable characters. For example, in *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014), Dorian is a male identifying character who can only be romanced by male

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<sup>73</sup> AAA games are comparable to blockbuster Hollywood movies. They are the biggest and most well funded games that get released. AA games are typically bigger games that have a lot of marketing and buzz around them, but they were made by smaller studios. Indie games are smaller games that are made by smaller studios. This is where a lot of the experimentation in video gaming takes place.

player characters. Sera is a female-identifying character who is only romanceable by women protagonists. There are also several characters that are canonically bisexual or pansexual because they can be romanced by any player character. *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) also features characters that can only be romanced by player characters of the same sex. A lot of RPGs feature canonically gay characters. Ellie in *The Last of Us* (2013-2020) games is an example of a gay person in a non-RPG series. We learn she likes women in the “Left Behind” DLC for the first game, and we see her start a family with Dina, a woman she meets at the survivor camp she is living at. Then you have games like *Dream Daddy* (2017) (Figure 33.) that are specifically about gay culture. *Dream Daddy* (2017) is a game where you play as a widower daddy who is ready to move on and meet someone new. So you go around the neighborhood where you and your daughter just moved to meet other daddies and find the daddy of your dreams.



Figure 33. *Dream Daddy* (2017)

Not only is there gay representation, but all flavors of queer are represented. One of my favorite characters in games is The Bard from *Wandersong* (2018) (Figure 34). They are a nonbinary character who uses they/them pronouns and is tasked with learning the Earthsong and

saving the universe. FL4k from *Borderlands 3* (2019) is also nonbinary and sports a nonbinary pride pin on their jacket. They are one of the four playable characters in the game, and as far as I can tell, they are one of the more popular choices! Krem is an AFAB man in *Dragon Age Inquisition* (2014) who leads one of the main companion's band of mercenaries called The Bull's Chargers. One of the daddies in *Dream Daddy* (2017), Damien (second from the left in figure X), is an AFAB goth daddy who has to balance his eccentric "Victorian" aesthetic while taking care of his troubled son. All of these characters are queer and in positions where they have agency, and in some cases, a lot of responsibility.



Figure 34. The Bard in *Wandersong* (2018)

There are other games where there is no restriction on who you can romance or marry. That includes both gender identities of either the NPC or the playable character, and the number of partners a person can have. In the wonderful farming sim *Stardew Valley* (2016), the player can work on building their relationships with the eight eligible characters in the game. None of the other characters really care if you are dating all of them at once. One limitation is that the player can only marry one person. One of the cohabitation partners is in a platonic relationship with Krobus, the character who initially lives in the sewer (Figure 35). It is implied that Krobus is asexual, which is why the player can only cohabitate with them rather than marry them.

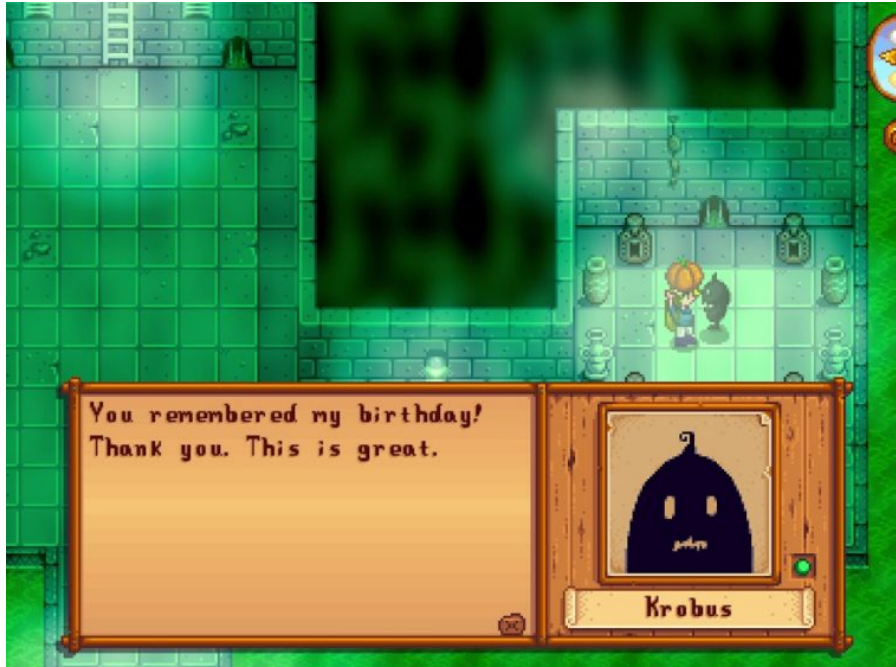


Figure 35. Krobus in *Stardew Valley* (2016)

All of these examples go to show that the gaming world is slowly becoming more and more accepting of queerness in general. Even the producers who brought us the toxic masculine nightmare that is *Duke Nukem Forever* (2011) could bring us a wonderful nonbinary character like FL4K who shows off their pride. This is obviously an area where I would love to see more representation and games like *Dream Daddy* (2017) that specifically focus on queer culture, but the advancements that have been made since the early days of gaming, when queerness was exclusively used as a joke, are very exciting to me, and I look forward to seeing where we go from here.<sup>74</sup>

### Online Content Creators

There are now more women playing games and creating content based on video games than there has ever been, and that content is readily available via YouTube or VODs (videos on

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<sup>74</sup> There are so many people writing about queerness in video games that I didn't have the time to include, but I highly recommend looking into Bo Ruberg, but there are also so many other wonderful people working in the field of queer games studies!



demand). My experience interacting with content creators is definitely limited. Obviously, I'm a fan of Feminist Frequency. They are not exclusively a channel devoted to content about video games.<sup>75</sup> However, the series they do produce about video games are phenomenal. They have the "Tropes Vs Women in Video Games" series, which has two seasons, and another similar series that breaks down queer tropes in video games. Unfortunately, that series is only three videos long, but they are a phenomenal three videos.

Black Girl Gamers is a content creation group that frequently streams a myriad of different games on Twitch, and occasionally uploads content to YouTube. Their YouTube content mainly consists of let's plays (videos of people playing through a game) and discussions breaking down the Eurocentric view that a lot of video games, especially western games, tend to focus on. They are very active and have a number of different members of the team who take turns streaming and creating content. Their focus on social justice and thinking critically about video games is one of the main reasons I am drawn to them.

Girlfriend Reviews is a YouTube channel that reviews mostly mainstream games on what it's like to be an observer or backseat gamer. I was initially wary of their channel content when they first started because I thought it was reinforcing the idea that women should just watch their boyfriends play video games. However, as the channel has developed over the years, they have proven me wrong, and the titular girlfriend, Shelby, has started including videos where she plays the games or at least plays the games in co-op (cooperative play). They are a wonderful channel that reviews mostly AAA games, but occasionally will review indie titles too.

Shirley Curry, also known as *Skyrim* Grandma, is an older lady who solely posts let's plays of her adventures in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011). She builds characters with

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<sup>75</sup> In fact they really don't have much on video games compared to their other content.

elaborate backstories that she can roleplay, and boy does she get into the roleplay. She is an expert on inhabiting her created characters and making decisions in the game based on how she thinks they would if they were real people. I don't know how many times she's played *Skyrim*, but her acclaim and unique style has even gotten her a cameo role in the next *Elder Scrolls* game.

LudiXP is also a very niche content creator. One of the things I enjoy most about gaming, especially on Playstation, is collecting trophies/achievements. Lucy's channel focuses on her trophy hunting journey. She is regularly posting updates of her trophy collection and videos of her working on specific trophies that can act as entertainment or a sort of guide on how to unlock it yourself. She also posts the occasional review.

This isn't even scratching the surface of the number of women who are a part of the gaming community creating content on YouTube and other platforms. These are just a handful of women whose content I regularly view. However, there is another up and coming place where people are creating content about video games and really getting into the theory and intricacies of what they have to offer.

### *TikTokers*

As many others have done during the Covid-19 pandemic, when we were all tasked with staying inside and having minimal contact with others in person, I downloaded TikTok. One of my favorite things to do on TikTok<sup>76</sup> is to find people talking about indie games they love playing. The majority of the people I found talking about the games I enjoy have been women or people in the Queer community.

One of my favorite Youtubers Cozy K. Kennedy got her start on TikTok as Cozy.games, creating videos about the types of games she enjoys playing when she wants to cuddle up with a

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<sup>76</sup> Besides all of the videos of cats.

warm cup of tea and a blanket and just relax. I think she started around when *Animal Crossing New Horizons* (2020) was blowing up, but she continued to cover more and more cozy games and now posts let's plays of games like *Stardew Valley* (2016) and *Spiritfarer* (2020) on her YouTube channel.

Elderberrybat is someone I found relatively recently when she posted a TikTok talking about womens' costumes in video games.<sup>77</sup> Beth does a lot more critical analysis of video games and talks a lot about what it's like being a queer woman who is a "hardcore" gamer. She also makes a lot of content about just the general concept of video games and which games she prefers. She covers everything from art style to music to whether she prefers physical or digital games.

Similar to Cozy K., Cutieindierecs creates content about her favorite games (that are typically cozier) and what she likes about them. In 2021, Amanda played over a hundred video games, so for a long time she was going through different genres and talking about her favorite three games in each genre. She has also started a YouTube channel that focuses on fitting new players with games that would be fun for them to try next.

Again, I'm not even scratching the surface of all of the amazing women creating content and pointing people in the direction of all of the games they love and care about. Tiktok has proven to be a surprisingly good platform for talking about video games, especially indie games, and critically discussing the challenges of being a woman gamer.

### **Wholesome/Cozy Games Movement**

One area of gaming which consistently produces positivity and representation (in both the games and the community) is the wholesome games movement. Spearheaded by the Wholesome

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<sup>77</sup> I found the video after I wrote that section.

Games account on Twitter and YouTube. They collect information on video games with a more wholesome vibe. The best way I can describe the types of games they typically talk about is games with minimal violence/combat, a cuter art style, gameplay mechanics that revolve around exploration, caretaking, crafting, or resource-gathering, and just generally relaxed low-stress situations. Some of the games I love that have either been featured within the movement or would fit are *Stardew Valley* (2016), *Spiritfarer* (2020), *Wandersong* (2018), *Coffee Talk* (2020), *What Remains of Edith Finch* (2017), *Gris* (2018), and *Untitled Goose Game* (2019). All of these games and all of the games featured by the movement, are games that feel cozy. Almost like you want to bundle up in a blanket with a warm cup of tea while you play.

To be clear, “wholesome” doesn’t always mean happy. In fact, several of the games I listed are so emotional that they make me cry every time I experience them. Now, obviously, you have some games like *Animal Crossing* that are pretty much free of conflict and all about building and island design, but one of the staples of the wholesome gaming movement is finding stories that are worth emotionally investing in. For example, 2021’s *Moonglow Bay* was heavily featured in the Wholesome Directs that Wholesome Games puts on and is about a person whose spouse fished for a living before their untimely death. Now the player character has to carry on without them and keep their dream alive. In *Gris* you play as a woman who is grieving some major loss in her life and we watch as she goes through the five stages of grief and finds eventual acceptance of how the world has changed after her loss. In *Spiritfarer*, Stella (you) takes over after Charon<sup>78</sup> passes through the Everdoor.<sup>79</sup> You then are tasked with taking care of the souls of people you knew in life and ensuring they are able to make it to the Everdoor. In *Wandersong*

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<sup>78</sup> The ferryperson in Greek mythology who transports souls to the afterlife

<sup>79</sup> *Spiritfarer*’s version of going on to the afterlife

you find out that the universe is being reset and the bard (your) goes on a quest to find the song that can save their universe. While doing so, they meet an eclectic cast of characters who need the bard's help and positivity to fix their problems. All of these games are emotional and tearworthy, but it is so worth it to experience the stories told.<sup>80</sup>

Video games have become so much more complex than they were even just ten years ago. We obviously still see a lot of problematic tropes, but we also see so many games leaving those tropes behind to empower their characters and tell compelling and interesting stories. In addition to the many positive developments I've already discussed, we're also seeing important evolutions in classic "bro"/"hardcore" games. 2018's *God of War* is a perfect example of this. It took one of gaming's most hyper-masculine and toxic characters, Kratos, and turned him into a relatable and compelling character. In the game, he reflects on his hyper-violent past and comes to the conclusion he would rather not be drawn back into that world. So, when he is drawn back into violence by the game's primary antagonist, Baldur, we feel bad that Kratos is regressing. It's incredibly complex storytelling that is really fun to experience. It's great to see games like *God of War* create more complex representation while also keeping the core qualities players have always loved.

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<sup>80</sup> The gameplay is generally pretty fun too!

## Chapter 5: The Point

Okay so clearly, there are a lot of issues with games and gaming communities, and there are also great changes taking place in gaming. But why does any of it really matter to the average player? Well for one thing, video games are so beneficial to so many people. One of their major benefits, has to do with mental health. I use video games as a means to escape from the troubles I face in my day to day life or to blow off steam after a long day. They provide such a safe and resourceful way for people to process emotions and be reflective on their lives by experiencing the lives of the characters that inhabit video game worlds. Plus, allowing players to take an active, participatory, role in the storytelling process is empowering.<sup>81</sup>

When video games take the time to represent the world's vast diversity, playing them can be really beneficial to a lot of people who don't normally see themselves represented in popular media. Unfortunately, in gaming's history, that has included women as well as people of the global majority, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, and people with disabilities. However, we are starting to see more and more positive representation of diverse identities and experiences in video games. Those aforementioned underrepresented groups are starting to take leading roles in games (even if inclusion and representation is coming slower for some groups' than others). It's true we still see regression from time to time,<sup>82</sup> but things are generally moving in a progressive direction in most aspects of gaming.

However, a lot of changes still need to happen. Though we are seeing it less often, video games need to stop sexualizing women and putting them into situations where they are powerless. We need to stop glorifying violence against women as compelling storytelling. We

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<sup>81</sup> If you are interested in the positive impacts video games have on mental health, this article by Kowai et al dives into the subject <https://games.jmir.org/2021/2/e26575>

<sup>82</sup> Looking at *Horizon Forbidden West's* appropriation of indigenous garb for white characters

also need to stop celebrating old games that employed those harmful tropes, or at least recognize that some classic and beloved games are problematic and should not be the groundwork for where games are heading.

The online video gaming community at large needs to work on becoming a more welcoming space. In general, people who play video games are just in it to have a good time and help other people have a good time, but there is still a large portion of the community that is toxic and that tries to gatekeep new players and players who don't play the same games as them. These people become the face of what video game communities look like to the outside world of people who don't play video games. One way to address this problem is for the more positive sides of the gaming community to become more vocal. Those of us who are non-toxic gamers need to drown out the vocal minority that gives us a bad name. We are starting to see this with TikTok and the Wholesome Gaming movement, but I think we gamers can be doing more to spread our positivity.

The other element to solving gaming's toxic traditions is to expunge the executives at studios that foster sexual harassment, discrimination, and other toxic behaviors. It doesn't matter how influential a person has been in an industry if they are allowing or participating in a culture of toxicity and violence against the people actually making the games and fostering their communities. The executives that allow or participate in this behavior will ultimately see that their legacy will be not the games they have and could have created, but their reputation for standing idly by as their employees are assaulted and harassed. Plus, a lot of people look to gaming developers and producers as part of the influence on how gamers should act. If we see the people in charge of giant gaming companies like Activision/Blizzard or Ubisoft treating

women and other marginalized groups like shit, it becomes okay to do so in our online communities.

I think the biggest, and honestly easiest change that needs to happen is with representation. I talked a bit about how we are generally moving in the right direction, but there is still a long way to go. I am so tired of seeing hyper-masculine dude-bros going on adventures to see how big of explosions they can create or how big their guns are, and I don't think I'm alone. Gamers in general have matured past this. Take a look at 2020's *Serious Sam 4*. It stars the titular Sam, who is a typical dude-bro protagonist with the white t-shirt, sunglasses, and tight haircut who has an obsession with seeming "cool." That game was critically panned and generally disliked by players. Part of the reason was that it was repetitive and boring, but I think some element of it was that gamers are tired of these worn out tropes. It's an immature representation of toxic masculinity that we really don't need in our games anymore.

It goes without saying that we still need better representation of women in our games. Again, this is getting better, but it could be even better still. We don't need agentless women who serve as mere plot devices or barely interactable objects in the game that serve to titillate and excite a presumed playerbase. We don't need women wearing armor or clothing that oversexualizes them and seems ill-fitting to the myriad of tasks they are participating in, no matter what kind of insane in-universe reasoning someone makes up to justify it.

It ultimately all boils down to respect. Game developers need to show more respect to all of the characters they are creating by giving them dignity and agency in the games. They also need to show more respect to the players by giving us more inclusive representation and well-rounded characters whose stories we can explore and experience. Executives need to show their employees respect by taking claims of harassment and assault seriously, purging the problem,



and fostering a positive environment to work in. Players in online gaming spaces need to show one another more respect in the ways they interact with each other while playing and in online spaces like forums, Twitch chats, and comment sections. If people start treating each other and characters in games with a bit more respect, I think gaming could dispel the idea that a lot of outside observers have that video games and their communities are toxic and not worth the time or effort. And ideally, if more people see diverse identities positively represented in games and feel welcome in gaming communities, the positive changes in the industry will continue to evolve, driven by those who game for fun and connection. I will definitely stick around to see what that looks like!

### Glossary of Key Terms<sup>83</sup>

**AAA (Triple A)-** Games with larger budgets and marketing ability. The blockbusters of the video game world.

**Achievement/Trophy-** A digital unlockable that is rewarded for doing specific things in certain video games.

**Action/Adventure Game-** A game that focuses on a character's adventure while also focusing on action packed gameplay. Usually there will be some sort of combat system that acts as the primary way the player communicates with the game world.

**Adventure Game-** A video game that focuses on problem solving and storytelling. Usually thought of as point-and-click adventure games where the controls are moving your cursor to specific things on screen and clicking on them.

**Agency-** A person's or character's ability to choose how they interact with the world.

**AMAB/AFAB-** Assignes Male or Female at Birth. Gender is a societal construct that not all people fit into, so this is a way to refer to the experiences people had while growing up in contrast to their gender identity.

**Assumed Male Player (AMP) -** white cis het male, teens-twenty-year olds, presumed to have ability to identify with hypermasculine/toxic masculine attitudes/behaviors

**Buff-** Making the character or object more powerful in some way.

**Cis het-** Cisgender (identifying with the gender assigned to you at birth) and Heterosexual (being exclusively attracted to people of the opposite gender).

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<sup>83</sup> If you are interested in more video game terminology, here are a few sites that have definitions of video gaming terms: <https://www.makeuseof.com/tag/learn-the-lingo-common-gaming-terms-you-should-know/>, <https://www.cybersmile.org/what-we-do/advice-help/gaming-help-centre/terminology>

**DLC-** Downloadable content released after the full game's release. Usually expansions to the game with new story or game modes.

**FPS-** First-Person Shooter. A game whose gameplay is primarily running around and shooting weapons while being from the first-person perspective.

**Gatekeeping-** A group of people, who are connected by a shared interest, blocking newcomers to that shared interest by making the community toxic or unwelcoming to new participants or the general public that does not fall into that group.

**GTA-** Grand Theft Auto. A video game series developed by Rockstar.

**Hypermasculinity** - absurdly exaggerated flat male character where the traits of toxic masculinity are overblown to the point of almost being funny

**Looping Dialogue-** When an NPC in a game repeats the same line or lines over and over again because they are not programmed to say anything else at a certain point in the game's story.

**Male Gaze-** The idea that the camera in a film or video game is catered towards what cis het male people would want to see. Usually referred to when the camera lingers on a woman's body.

**MMORPG-** Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. A video game with role playing elements that has thousands of people occupying the same game world at the same time.

**Nerf-** Making the character or object less powerful in some way.

**NPC-** Non-Playable Character. A character that exists in a video game that the player has no control over. They can be a part of worldbuilding (just populating the spaces of the game) or they can be important characters the player interacts with.

**Non-Playable Sex Object-** An NPC in a video game that is purely designed to exist for the assumed cis het male player to oggle and engage in sexual activity with.

**Open World-** A game world that is a lot more open than traditionally designed levels. Players usually have a lot of freedom (similar to sandboxes) and have a lot of tasks and activities that can be found and completed in the game world.

**PS2, PS3, PS4, PS5-** Playstation 2, 3, 4, and 5. Just different generations of the Playstation console.

**QTEs-** Quick Time Events. Parts of a video game where the player needs to push specific buttons at specific times in order to successfully do a task.

**Representation-** Including a diverse mix of characters in a text so that people feel like they can find themselves in the characters, regardless of their identity traits.

**RPG-** Role-Playing Game. A game where the player is allowed to build their character (often in appearance and skill) as they see fit. This allows them to role-play as if they are that character in whatever world the game takes place in.

**Sandbox-** A game world that is very open-ended, essentially allowing the player to do whatever they want within the boundaries of reality set by that world.

**VOD-** Video on Demand. A way to refer to the recorded versions of a content creator's live stream that get posted to YouTube or other similar sites

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Figure 14. Characters in *Skyrim* (2011) Wearing the Tavern Clothes Set.

<https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/elderscrolls/images/0/01/SkyrimTavernClothesMaleFemale.png/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/250?cb=20120124125321>

Figure 15. Quiet from *Metal Gear Solid V*. [https://www.denofgeek.com/wp-](https://www.denofgeek.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/metal_gear_solid_5_update_quiet.jpg?fit=1039%2C561)

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Figure 16. Kasumi in *Dead or Alive 5* (2012). [https://images.gnwcdn.com/2019/articles/2019-01-](https://images.gnwcdn.com/2019/articles/2019-01-25-15-11/doa6.png/EG11/resize/473x-1/quality/75/format/jpg)

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Figure 17. Gwynevere from *Dark Souls* (2011).

<https://static1.thegamerimages.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Gwyneveres-Chambers.jpg?q=50&fit=crop&w=2000&dpr=1.5>

Figure 18. Madison in *Heavy Rain* (2010).

<https://static.wikia.nocookie.net/heavyrain/images/6/6a/MadisonShower.jpg/revision/latest/scale-to-width-down/180?cb=20110201035601>

Figure 19. 2B from *NieR Automata* (2017). [https://m.media-](https://m.media-amazon.com/images/I/51ShuQ9NSbL.AC_SX425_.jpg)

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Figure 20. Fragile from *Death Stranding* (2019).

<https://preview.redd.it/00asb723alr51.jpg?auto=webp&s=7595dcae07582b4e15dfcd6025b78ec5037bdd50>

Figure 21. Jade in a bunny costume from *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age* (2017).

<https://i.ytimg.com/vi/E8d5rt1mgA8/maxresdefault.jpg>

Figure 22. Venom Snake's Disguise in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (2015).

[http://s3.accelerated-ideas.com/generic/images/metalgearsolid5/mgs5\\_cardboard\\_box\\_poster\\_header.jpg](http://s3.accelerated-ideas.com/generic/images/metalgearsolid5/mgs5_cardboard_box_poster_header.jpg)

Figure 23. Lin Lee Ko in *Xenoblade Chronicles X* (2015).

<https://images.nintendolife.com/915233a982e23/xenoblade-chronicles-x-10-30-15-2.900x.jpg>

Figure 24. Veronica in *Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age* (2017).

<https://cdn.staticneo.com/ew/thumb/1/1a/VeronicaDefaultDQXI.jpg/662px-VeronicaDefaultDQXI.jpg>

Figure 25. *Tengoku CruisinMix Special*. [https://d289qh4hsbjw7.cloudfront.net/degigamesus-](https://d289qh4hsbjw7.cloudfront.net/degigamesus-official-assets/product_sales/preview_images/original/gameten-special-hero-q84-444.jpg?1544147415)

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Figure 26. Game About Beating Up Anita Sarkeesian.

<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Jennifer-Eickelmann/publication/325092088/figure/fig2/AS:923258975178752@1597133501779/Browser-game-Beat-Up-Anita-Sarkeesian-Source-https.png>

Figure 27. Senua in *Hellblade Senua's Sacrifice* (2017). <https://cdn.wccftech.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/WCCFhellblade2.jpg>

Figure 28. Madeline and Badeline in *Celeste* (2018).

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Figure 29. Clementine and AJ in *The Walking Dead Final Season* (2019).

[https://media.gq.com/photos/5b71bdf86515980b722b55e1/16:9/w\\_2560%2Cc\\_limit/the-walking-dead-final-season-telltale-gq-1.jpg](https://media.gq.com/photos/5b71bdf86515980b722b55e1/16:9/w_2560%2Cc_limit/the-walking-dead-final-season-telltale-gq-1.jpg)

Figure 30. Aloy in *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017).

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Figure 31. Ellie in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). <https://www.denofgeek.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/The-Last-of-Us-Part-2-1.jpg?fit=1280%2C720>

Figure 32. Abby in *The Last of Us Part II* (2020). <https://static2.srcdn.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Abby-is-the-main-protagonist-of-The-Last-of-Us-2.jpg?q=50&fit=crop&w=960&h=500&dpr=1.5>

Figure 33. *Dream Daddy* (2017). <https://i.ytimg.com/vi/7jlQbAKsLJc/maxresdefault.jpg>

Figure 34. The Bard in *Wandersong* (2018).

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Figure 35. Krobus in *Stardew Valley* (2016). <https://gamexguide.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/maxresdefault-10-760x567.jpg>