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**THE EVOLVING FEMALE NARRATIVE IN DYSTOPIAN VIDEO GAMES:
THE CASE OF *BIO SHOCK INFINITE*, *THE LAST OF US*, AND *HORIZON: ZERO
DAWN***

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Introduction

The following study examines the portrayal of three female characters in dystopian games. While Elizabeth from *BioShock Infinite* and Ellie from *The Last of Us* are perceived as characters that mark the 2013 transition in representing women in video games, Aloy from *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) is seen as a representative of a complex narrative design of a lead female protagonist put in a primary role within the game world. The three triple-A video games were chosen due to their focus on the narrative component. Digital dystopias constructed in each of the chosen video games are seen as hostile environments in which it is necessary for female characters to (re)define themselves in terms of narrative agency in order to traverse the oppressive spaces. Within the scope of this article, video games from 2013 onwards are seen as particularly relevant to the examination of the gradual shift in terms of the representation of women in gaming—from a partial subversion of tropes previously established by game discourse to a game narrative representing a fully-realized sole female protagonist.

The gaming community has long been considered a male-dominated and male-oriented environment (Harvey and Fisher 2015). Nowadays, the popularity of the stereotypical image of a gamer constructed as male is increasingly deteriorating. The recent report generated by the Polish Gamers

Observatory (*The Gender of Polish Gamers 2020*) indicates a more equal distribution across gender with women constituting forty-nine percent of gamers in Poland. Despite the fact that gamer demographics are constantly shifting with regard to the involvement of female players, video games have traditionally been “perceived to belong in the male domain, and female players and male players alike experience greater social acceptance by staying within sex-role expectation” (Lucas and Sherry 517). Nevertheless, Linda Kaye, Charlotte Pennington, and Joseph McCann (2018) argue that gaming is largely considered by both men and women as a “masculine pursuit” (2). In fact, female gamers state that they experience marginalization within gaming communities and commonly present themselves as men in “an attempt to dispel gender-related gaming stereotypes” (3). As maintained by Linda Kaye, Charlotte Pennington, and Joseph McCann (2018), empirical research tends to emphasize the negative experiences that female gamers encounter once they engage with “hardcore” forms of gaming including “online multi-player games and competitive and violent videogames” (3). Kaye, Pennington, and McCann (2018) claim that the aforementioned factors have led to the unequal distribution of female gamers in large forms of gaming and the “#GamerGate” conflict, an online harassment campaign aimed at women in gaming which serves as an example of “how social media operate as vectors for public discourses about gender, sexual identity, and equality, as well as safe spaces for aggressive and violent misogyny” (Braithwaite 2016).

In 2016, merely 3 per cent of video games published included female protagonists. As of 2020, the figure rose to 18 per cent (Sarkeesian 2020). Nevertheless, the report states that “the percentage of games shown at E3 that focus on women has hovered around the 7-9% range for the past few years” (*Feminist Frequency 2018*). Because of the observable discrepancy in the number of female and male lead characters, the representation of female protagonists with an actual narrative agency can be seen as underwhelming. In a study analysing in-game content spanning 31 years, Teresa Lynch, Jessica

Tompkins, Irene Van Driel, and Niki Fritz (2016) concluded that even though the overt sexualization of playable female characters has declined since the 1990s, modern-day game narratives may perpetuate the gender-stereotyped female tropes with female characters represented as those of secondary role in story development and game design. As stated by Mildred Perreault, Gregory Pearson Perreault, Joy Jenkins, and Ariel Morrison (2016), the year 2013 marked the narrative transition in the number of female characters in larger (triple-A) video game titles. A growing number of women featured in leading roles: Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite*, Ellie in *The Last of Us*, Jodie in *Beyond: Two Souls*, and Lara Croft in the reboot of *Tomb Raider*. Mildred Perreault, Gregory Pearson Perreault, Joy Jenkins, and Ariel Morrison emphasize the way in which the game narratives of 2013 are fundamentally rooted in “previously established character tropes” (2). At the same time, the authors argue that gender stereotypes were to a certain degree subverted by “diversifying the traditional roles of women” (2) in the aforementioned games and the narratives which they constructed. As was previously mentioned, during the 2016 E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo), a staggering lack of female lead characters was observed. The only triple-A video game with a female protagonist showcased in 2016 was *Horizon: Zero Dawn*. Despite the long-held view that players prefer to play as male lead characters (Burgess and Jones 10), the majority of players (73.3 % of gamers identified as male) perceive Aloy, the female protagonist of *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, “as a distinct identity and persona that [they] controlled during gameplay” (16) as well as a “compelling character” (15) with whom they can relate with regard to her narrative experiences. In this article, the year 2013 is seen as the turning point with respect to representing women within larger (triple-A) video games.

The Construction of Game Narratives

Whilst the debate between game mechanics-focused ludologists and storytelling-oriented narratologists subsided within the field of game studies,

the study of the narrativity of video games can be seen as inherently related to the interrelation between both the ludic and the narrative elements through which a video game is produced. The consensus proposed by Ryan (2006) is that “some games have a narrative design and others do not” (192). In terms of analysing video game narrative representation, narrative design is understood as “story experience” (Jenkins 6) established by sculpting game spaces, primary and secondary characters, and character-driven story arcs. In *Game Design as Narrative Architecture*, Jenkins (2002) claims that game designers “don't simply tell stories; they design worlds and sculpt spaces” (4). From this standpoint, the virtual environment of a video game is perceived in terms of environmental, “spatial” storytelling. According to Jenkins, storytelling enacted through the virtual environment of a game-world allows for an immersive narrative owing to the following preconditions: spatial stories induced by narrative associations; spaces set up the “staging ground” (6) where the story (narrative) is established; the game environment can “embed narrative information within their mise-en-scène” (6); and spaces enable narratives through the employment of game objects.

In his research on utopian and dystopian spaces in video games, Farca (2018) outlines the perspectives through which the implied player interacts with the elements which construct a gamescape: sensorial perspective, world perspective, plot perspective, and system perspective (6). The concept of the implied player refers to “the empirical player’s participation on all levels of involvement (offering her various roles to perform)” (164). While the sensorial perspective can be associated with the visual filter through which the player “is granted access to gameworld” (26), the world perspective entails the gameworld with “its settings, objects, and topological/labyrinthic structures; the sounds and music of this world; and characters who inhabit it” (26). On the other hand, the plot perspective (“storyworld”) comprises the plot framework with the “official narrative” and “counter-narrative” (resistance to the gameworld). The system perspective is the “ludic” perspective: it is related to

rules of the game, player actions, and playing styles. Particularly relevant in the following case studies is the world perspective due to the fact that it encompasses the gameworld and characters inhabiting its violent and oppressive spaces.

The character is thus embedded in the narrative structure which is oftentimes bound by genre conventions. The idea of a game genre adds another layer to the textual analysis of a given game in terms of gender representation. Whereas role-playing games allow for choosing whether the “avatar” (in-game protagonist) is typified as female or male, other game genres such as action and first-person shooters tend to narrate the story from the point of view of predefined, “default” characters. Even so, video game developers are increasingly tackling multiple genres and thus a substantial number of video games can be classified in terms of a variety of subgenres. Within the space of video games, characters function as both visual and narrative entities. Video game characters can be categorized according to their role within the gameworld and the extent of their interaction with the player (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 211). Simon Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Jonas Smith, and Susana Tosca propose a typology of video game characters inhabiting the gameworld: stage characters, functional characters, cast characters, and the player character (212). Whilst stage characters can be referred to as non-playable characters, functional characters are seen to serve a general in-game function such as attacking the player. Cast characters function in the storyworld as “companion” characters with unique personalities and underlying motives. The player character, on the other hand, can be perceived as the “avatar” controlled by the player; in fact, the player “can usually control [their] actions but [the player’s] motivations and missions are decided by the story” (179). Moreover, the narrative role of in-game characters can be further classified as “primary” (player character, in some cases “companions”) and “secondary” including stage, functional, and cast characters (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2016).

As far as the story (narrative) design is concerned, the games discussed in this article can be classified as belonging to the category of character-oriented and story-driven video games. In this study, story-driven games are understood as video games that incorporate the narrative into the “video game paradigm” by treating narrative as the “central mode of engagement” (Cameron 35). Character-oriented video games imply a strong emphasis on relationships between characters (playable and non-playable) inhabiting the gameworld and “game mechanics changing in parallel with character development” (Vang 2018).

The environment of a video game visually informs the world represented by characters and the narrative dimension. Particularly relevant in considering the issue of representation in video games is their interactive, player-focused component. Bodi and Thon (2021) underline that the notion of “narrative agency” or “agency” has been conceptualized within the field of game studies in terms of the “the possibility space for ‘meaningful’ choice expressed via player action that translates into avatar action, afforded and constrained by a videogame’s design” (159). It is argued that interactive narrative games activate narration in such a way that the player agent traverses the spatiotemporal construct of a gameworld so that they can “be in the story as the character agent and also outside the story interpreting and analysing it as a narrator agent” (Joyce 59). Rather than passively observe the events unfolding within a given narrative, video game players assume an active role and experience the storytelling from a point of view of the primary character while interacting with the represented world. The term “agency” can be understood both in terms of the end-user (player) interacting with the storyworld as the playable character and “the perception that characters within a text have the ability to influence their own story and potentially the greater narrative arc” (Cole 2018). As stated by Cole, although the characters are recognized to follow a narrative trajectory pre-defined within game design, the player attributes intentions as well as motivations to given characters (14). In this paper, the

term “narrative agency” is employed in order to refer to the recognized ability of a character to influence the storyworld. Importantly, Farca emphasizes the fact that “playing dystopia” (27) inherently compromises the narrative agency experienced through “play” and embedded within the plot framework due to the disrupted nature of the gameworld and the “imminent cataclysm” (51) underlying the narrative. The narrative focus of dystopian games lies, therefore, to a certain degree in regaining agency.

As stated by James Paul Gee (2015,) discourse is “becoming increasingly ‘multi-modal’, concerned primarily with the interplay of language, image, and sound” (2). In the context of video games, the term discourse can be defined as “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (Gee 29). From this perspective, a “game’s universe of discourse” (45) is viewed as an interaction between different symbols (“modes”) bridging the gap between the narrative and ludic, gameplay-specific aspects of game text. The textual analysis applied to video games “does not involve seeing a game as an isolated, static object. It looks to the game-as-played, to games in culture, and to culture in games” (Carr 2007). Therefore, video games as cultural artifacts are to be considered as texts which reflect and construct socio-cultural discourse.

The Representation of Female Characters in Gaming

A substantial number of academic research has recognized stereotypical patterning of female characters in video game narratives (Dietz 1998; Ivory 2006; Jansz and Martis 2007; Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, & Fritz 2016). In the analysis of gender portrayals in modern game narratives, Jared Friedberg (2015) observes that female characters “fundamentally fulfil different roles than men” (34). Women tend to be presented as the driving force in the gameworld “not by the actions they take, but through the violence or harm done to them or the unconditional support that they offer the protagonist” (34).

From this perspective, female characters can be seen as “secondary” to the protagonist.

Women are included in the storyworld as plot devices, which “limits their agency and identity” (34). Basing upon the assumption that video games can be analysed as comprising ludic (gameplay), narrative (story), and visual elements (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2016), the representation of female and male characters can be divided into physical (visuals of the gameworld), gameplay (game mechanics), and narrative representation. As was previously mentioned, female characters tend to be marginalized or hypersexualized within game narratives.

In addressing the problem of systematic hypersexualization of female characters, Teresa Lynch, Jessica Tompkins, Irene Van Driel, and Niki Fritz (2016) point to how the gaming industry “is realizing it is marginalizing half its audience [by] making women characters pander to the male gaze” (5). In terms of the visual representation of the female body, Lynch, Tompkins, Van Driel, and Fritz (2016) observe the trend towards depicting women with disproportionate body models, particularly focused on enlarged breasts, unrealistically slim waist, and emphasizing the bottom part of the body (7). In third-person perspective games, camera angles are employed to show the full-view of the female body centred around the over-accentuated aspects of female physique, the most notable example seen in the *Tomb Raider* franchise before the reboot in 2013. This type of visual over-sexualized imagery in video games can be viewed as corresponding to the phenomenon described as “sexualization of culture” (“pornification”) which denotes the saturation of mass media with sexualized themes and imagery (Atwood 2006; Gill 2012). When compared to male characters, women are seen to typically wear revealing body armour unsuitable for the actions constructed within the narrative and intended by game mechanics. On the level of visual representation, women tend to be shown as sex objects (Dietz 429) conforming to realistically unattainable ideals and thus further perpetuating the representation of female characters as

having little to no narrative agency but rather included to cater to desires of the adolescent audience.

On the level of game narrative, female characters have been frequently depicted as characters supporting the male protagonist (*The Legend of Zelda*; *Resident Evil* 1998; *Assassin's Creed: Origins* 2017). As stated by Friedberg (2015), women assume the role of "field support" to the male player character; that is to say, female characters "provide them with advice, heal them when they are injured, point them in the right direction, or provide them with the tools (mainly weapons) that they need to overcome narrative obstacles" (34). Women in video games can be presented as secondary characters assuming passive narrative positions rather than active narrative positions of dominant masculine heroes. Female protagonists have been portrayed in gender-stereotyped roles varying from damsels in distress (the narrative of victimhood) to the so-called evil seductresses (Dietz 435).

In her YouTube series *Tropes vs. Women in Games* (2013), Sarkeesian investigates feminine identities constructed and performed within the game narratives. In order to classify tropes present in the representation of female characters, Sarkeesian (2013) categorizes female characters according to their narrative roles as follows: damsel in distress, "Ms. Male Character," women as background decoration, women as reward, sinister seductresses, and the lady sidekick. Within the role of a damsel in distress, the narrative agency of a woman is fringed upon by the "hero" character; a woman is ultimately disempowered and "reduced to a state of helplessness, from which she requires rescuing by a typically male hero for the benefit of his story arc" (*The Damsel in Distress* 2013). While "Ms. Male Character" exists solely as the "female version" of a male counterpart, the role of a lady sidekick perpetuates the notion of women perceived as objects to be protected and men "as the ones in control, who take action and do the protecting" (*The Lady Sidekick* 2013). "Lady sidekicks" function in the gameworld as "glorified gatekeepers, helpless burdens, and ego boosters" (*The Lady Sidekick* 2013). The motif of a sinister

seductress communicates “a false notion of female sexuality rooted in ancient misogynistic ideas of women as deceptive and evil” (*The Sinister Seductress* 2013). Thus, female sexuality and sexual agency are perceived as inherently threatening to the male characters inhabiting the gameworld. The “woman as reward” trope, on the other hand, codifies “female bodies as collectible, as tractable or as consumable, and positions women as status symbols” (*Women as Reward* 2013) to be rewarded for player actions. “Women as decoration” exist in the gameworld “as environmental texture while titillating presumed straight male players” (*Women as Decoration* 2013) and occupying the role of “the perpetual victims of male violence” without any narrative agency.

Although such narrative tendencies have been prevalent in the video game industry, it is crucial to underline that more recent AAA games abandon the narrative of secondary female characters and instead subvert gender stereotyping in narrative design. Citing the pattern of change in the sexualization of women observed by Lynch, Tompkins, Van Driel, and Fritz, Lucas (2019) maintains that recent video games such as *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (2017) and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017) have made an active attempt to give voice to the previously marginalized female protagonists, “increasingly ‘threatening’ the male space games inhabit” (18). As video games are becoming more and more culturally relevant, as a form of media they ought to be examined on the basis of “the ways [in which they] reflect, reinforce, question, or subvert cultural ideas about the categories of masculine and feminine, male and female, transgender and other concepts related to gendered identity” (Salen and Zimmerman 522). Lucas (2019) points to the fact that video games represent by “creating depictions of characters, stories, settings, ideas, and behaviors” (28). In the analysis of the evolving narrative representation of women in games, Lucas argues that video games can have the ability to “converse with and subvert the problematic ideologies of the cultures they exist in” (117). In this sense, games are perceived as “transformative” with the potential of rejecting “heteronormative and masculine power fantasy” (113) by

giving prominence to “what makes the character an agent in their narrative” (115) regardless of their assumed gender. In this paper, the gamescape of video games is understood as the interweaving of the visual, gameplay, and narrative aspects to create meaning.

BioShock Infinite: “The Lamb” and the Narrative (Re)establishment

BioShock Infinite (Irrational Games 2013) is a first-person shooter video game released as the third instalment in the *BioShock* series. The game presents a dystopian narrative set in the airborne city-state of Columbia in 1912. The seemingly utopian gamescape of *BioShock Infinite* is constructed through a distinct blend of religious zealotry and American exceptionalism. The floating cityscape, initially presented as the ultimate expression of Americanism, evolves into a theocratic state overseen by a self-proclaimed prophet, Zachary Hale Comstock. Within the game narrative, Columbia is depicted as a highly nationalistic society run by the Founders, a white supremacist faction whose name further points to the narrative relying heavily on the idea of alternative US history. Throughout the primary narrative, players follow the story’s protagonist, Booker DeWitt. The cityscape of a seeming utopia is explored from Booker’s point of view. Booker, a private investigator, sets on a mission to find a woman named Elizabeth. His main objective within the story is to rescue Elizabeth who is confined in a tower by the Prophet, Elizabeth’s father and “jailer.” Elizabeth is established as one of the primary characters within the narrative alongside Booker and Comstock.

Elizabeth’s narrative role within *BioShock Infinite* advances considerably as the story progresses. At the beginning of the narrative, Elizabeth assumes a passive role fitting into the female video game trope of a “damsel in distress” (Sarkeesian 2013). She is stripped of narrative agency, locked away in a tower by a dominant authority figure embodied by the Prophet. The main objective within the story: “Find the Girl,” further exemplifies the gender-stereotyped trope of having to be rescued by a male character for the purpose of

progressing the story arc. At first, Elizabeth is not even referred to by her name but merely as “the girl,” “miracle child” or “the lamb,” which reduces her narrative position to an object to be “retrieved” by Booker. Due to her inexperience largely caused by captivity, Elizabeth is at first portrayed as a naïve, innocent, almost child-like female character. On the level of game narrative, her role is dependent and established in terms of other characters’ interests. In the space of Columbia, she is seen as a vital element of the Prophet’s ideology by being construed as a future “saviour,” a messiah figure whose main purpose is to cleanse the corrupt world “below.”

In terms of game mechanics, Elizabeth is seen to assume the role of field support to Booker within the combat scenarios. Thus, in terms of mechanics employed by the game Elizabeth’s character is established as that of a companion, a role commonly performed by female game characters. While taking advantage of her powers to manipulate other dimensions, Elizabeth without fail throws supplies such as first aid kits or ammunition that are at the given moment needed by Booker. However, in the later parts of the game, players observe a narrative change in Elizabeth’s character. Upon killing Daisy Fitzroy, the leader of the Vox Populi revolutionary group, Elizabeth takes her narrative agency back. After the initial post-killing shock, she is re-established on the visual level of the in-game representation. As she cuts her hair short and changes the bloodied dress for a corseted attire once worn by her deceased mother, she emerges with a new determination to destroy the Prophet. The change in Elizabeth’s appearance signifies the key stage in her character progression as she fully embraces her identity and recognizes the need to escape the suffocating space of Columbia, putting an end to Comstock’s warped idea of a theocratic society. Despite the fact that the initial segments of the game narrative establish Elizabeth as an archetypal “damsel in distress,” she is ultimately repositioned in the narrative as a character wielding substantial power within the gamescape since she possesses the ability to open Tears that exist in the fabric of spacetime. Manipulating Tears as part of the ludic,

gameplay-specific mechanic, allows Elizabeth to become an active character with the narrative advantage of being able to perceive possible scenarios in the spacetime fabric. Unlike the majority of supporting female characters in first-person shooters, Elizabeth can thus be seen as a formidable character in control of the gamescape in which the narrative takes place.

The Last of Us: Ludonarrative Reinforcement and the Removal of Agency

The Last of Us (Naughty Dog 2013) is an action-adventure survival horror game published by Sony Computer Entertainment as a console-exclusive video game. The storyworld of *The Last of Us* (TLOU) is set in the year 2033 in the post-apocalyptic landscape of the United States of America, a country depicted as a pandemic-ravaged police state placed under martial law. The game narrative takes place twenty years after the outbreak of a highly virulent, fungal-based virus (Cordyceps fungus). The mind-altering and aggression-inducing virus has infected approximately 60 per cent of the world's population and transformed the gamescape through which the player traverses into a hostile environment overrun by "hosts" whose brains have been damaged by the Cordyceps Brain Infection (CBI). The linear narrative of the game is divided into four seasonal arcs ("Summer," "Fall," "Winter," "Spring"). The game follows the story of Joel, a survivor of the Outbreak Day and a smuggler, and Ellie, a fourteen-year-old girl from the Boston Quarantine Zone, whom Joel is to escort. The player observes the developing father-daughter relationship between the two characters as they journey across the country to search for a possible cure for CBI. For the substantial part of the game narrative, the player controls Joel as the primary character. In the "Winter" act of the story, the player assumes control of Ellie established as the character second in importance to Joel, who is the primary player character.

Upon its release in 2013, *The Last of Us* was widely acclaimed for its "revolutionary treatment of women imagery within the game" (Atrio 2018). The bond between Joel and Ellie, with each informing the character

development of the other, places Ellie as a female character vital to the main narrative and not a mere extension of the player character. Within the gamescape, due to her apparent immunity to the virus, Ellie as the sole character holds the cure to the infection which decimated the human population. While the ability gives narrative power to her character, the immunity she possesses in the pandemic-ravaged spaces puts her in a position of an “asset” to be obtained.

Ellie functions within the storyworld as the second most important character accompanying Joel. Naughty Dog’s Dyckoff points to how the gameplay design of Ellie establishes her as an active companion, not a burden to the player in combat scenarios: “If she’s just staying close to you [player character], she’s just going to be an escort quest” (Farokhmanesh 2014). In the initial part of the game, in terms of game mechanics, Ellie’s survival and combat skills are largely limited due to her inexperience and age. Her inability to swim proves to be a ludic obstacle in game locations with bodies of water as players have to find a way to get through the water. Since Joel does not readily entrust her with a weapon, she is forced to rely on a switchblade, and Joel’s survival skills are presented as superior in nature. Rather than engage proactively in a fight, she alerts the player character about the nearby enemies and stays in cover.

In this sense, her role gameplay-wise can be perceived as that of a “lady sidekick” and to a certain degree a “damsel in distress” (Sarkeesian 2013). This analysis of Ellie’s character in terms of game narrative and gameplay is, however, not an exhaustive one and does not take into consideration the autonomy Ellie gains throughout the progression of the story. As the story develops, Ellie is seen to take on more survivor qualities. Even though male characters may have an upper hand in terms of brute strength and hand-to-hand combat, Ellie adapts to the environment by stunning her opponents with objects and knifing them with a switchblade. As she is recognized to be able to hold her own, she is handed a gun by Joel after saving him from a hunter.

Although Joel can be seen as the “protector,” a paternal figure to Ellie portrayed as the one to be defended, the roles are later reversed within the narrative. In the third story act called “Winter,” Ellie provides for Joel after he is injured and virtually immobilized. Sporting a bow, she hunts for food and sets out to find medicine for him. In “Winter,” the player assumes control of Ellie as an evolved character. Despite the fact that Ellie is captured by David and his group of cannibalistic survivors, the narrative gender-stereotyped expectations are subverted with Ellie escaping from her captor and implied almost-assaulter without Joel’s direct intervention. Although the player switches between Joel’s and Ellie’s perspectives in-game, it is Ellie who rescues herself and kills the antagonistic man. The game narrative and gameplay mechanics help to portray both protagonists as equal partners with their own advantages.

Nonetheless, the ending to the game can be seen as reinforcing the idea of taking away female narrative agency. In deciding to kidnap Ellie from the hospital in which she was to have a surgery to find a cure for the fungal-based virus, Joel “takes the ultimate choice away from Ellie—the choice to live or die” (Benkert 50). In the end, Joel in a self-serving act does not let Ellie decide about her own fate. When Ellie asks about what had transpired, Joel lies to her while coming to the realization that Ellie might have wanted to sacrifice herself for the cause. The ending to the game, however, is not intended to be readily identified as an act of heroism undertaken by Joel as the ultimate “protector,” but it is left ambiguous and open to a discussion on gender norms within the game narrative.

Horizon: Zero Dawn: Landmark for Female Protagonist Design

Horizon: Zero Dawn (Guerrilla Games 2017) is an open-world action role-playing game published by Sony Interactive Entertainment as a console-exclusive title. The game narrative is set in the 31st century in a post-apocalyptic world in which humanity has reverted to its tribal state. Four tribes are of interest to the development of the game narrative: the Nora (a

matriarchal, hunter-gatherer tribe), the Carja (an economy-oriented, monarchical tribe), the Oseram (a metalwork-oriented, mechanism-revering tribe), and the Banuk (a nomadic, mountain-based tribe). The gamescape of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* is dominated by “machines,” robotic creatures which become increasingly more hostile towards the tribal-organised human population due to a phenomenon known as the “Derangement” corrupting the creatures. The narrative world of the game emerges as the result of the actions of “Old Ones,” technologically superior predecessors of the humans of the 31st century, whose advanced military-automated Faro robots, due to a “glitch,” became independent entities and were able to consume the biosphere in 15 months. Within the game narrative, the player assumes control of Aloy as the sole playable character, at first known in the gamescape as a “motherless outcast” from the Nora tribe. The story revolves around Aloy’s character arc and her development from an outcast to the anointed “Seeker” who embarks on a quest to discover the truth about her origins and the cause of the machine-corrupting phenomenon. Shuhei Yoshida, the President of Sony Interactive Entertainment at the time when *Horizon: Zero Dawn* was released, pointed to the larger issue of having a female protagonist as a monetary risk in the gaming industry: “She’s a female lead character,” he said. “That has always been the vision by the team, but we had a discussion. Is it risky to do a female character?” (Crecente 2015). Therefore, the creation of Aloy as the default protagonist in itself contends the market practices observable within the industry.

As a video game character, Aloy is to be recognized as “an unequivocal landmark of gender equality in AAAs” (Williams 2020). Hulst, the managing director at Guerrilla Games, underlines how the developers, above all else, wanted to design a fully fleshed-out, complex character: “It’s really important that we didn’t look for a woman and that turned out to be Aloy. We had Aloy and one of her very many attributes is that she is a woman” (Loveridge 2017). Thus, Aloy is not established as a “Ms. Male Character,” a “female version” of a

male hero, but rather she is narratively designed as a complex character going beyond the rigid categories of gender as perceived by the video game industry. Within the game narrative, gender-stereotyped tropes are subverted from the very beginning of the game. Guerrilla Games wanted to design a non-sexualized female character, a trend discernible within more recent video games (Lynch, Tompkins, Van Driel & Fritz 2016). In the first place, Aloy's hunting outfits are practical and not unnecessarily revealing in terms of game mechanics in order to cater to the player's gaze. While the previously discussed characters of Elizabeth and Ellie were seen as companions to the male protagonist, Aloy is the sole protagonist in the storyworld of the game and her character can be seen as the focal point of the storyline. Aloy does not serve as a "tool" used to further the primary protagonist's story arc, but it is her who is supported by a male character, Rost, at the beginning of the game. Male-stereotyping is deconstructed by the character of Rost, Aloy's "adopted" father and guardian. Whilst male characters tend to be associated with virility and violence in gaming, Rost is established as caring, understanding, and supportive of Aloy's decisions.

Rost goes against the domineering and overbearing male stereotypes in gaming and does not take away Aloy's narrative agency. In fact, he encourages her not to feel obliged to him and join the Nora tribe. The father-daughter relationship between Rost and Aloy is depicted in a way that the paternal figure's masculinity does not limit Aloy's agency. Within the game narrative, Aloy is established as a self-reliant character who actively engages with the gamescape. When as a child she falls down into the ruins of the "Old Ones," a space forbidden to the Nora tribe, she explores the underground complex and claims a Focus device, an augmented reality device from the dreaded "Old Ones" as her own. In no way does Aloy adhere to the trope of a passive female character. Indeed, such character-building narrative sections emphasize her proactive, curious, and brave nature. McCaw, narrative designer for *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, indicates the significance of the representation of femininity as

“womanhood and motherhood are woven into the story at every level” (Sarkar 2020). Aloy’s quest to find her origins, her mother, is at the forefront of the game narrative. With the story progression, it becomes apparent to the player that Aloy was created by a scientist, Elisabeth Sobeck, and the AI named GAIA after the Greek personification of Earth, two female entities who exemplify “life positive” technologies. Playing as Aloy, the player, in turn, brings to fruition Elisabeth Sobeck’s wish to save life on Earth by destroying the antagonistic HADES and its corrupting virus, an AI seen as the opposite of GAIA designed to preserve life after the Faro Plague.

As far as the ludic aspect of the game is concerned, Aloy is shown as a capable fighter who uses the environment and technology of the “Old Ones” to gain the upper-hand in combat scenarios. Unlike a considerable number of female video game characters, Aloy’s fighting and survival skills established by the employed game mechanics are comprehensive in nature. As the sole playable character, Aloy does not require assistance from a companion character to traverse the landscapes. She is able to gather necessary resources, craft ammunition as well as hunt down and tame the hostile robotic creatures in the wilderness of the post-apocalyptic landscape. Within both the game narrative and game mechanic, Aloy can be seen as a fully realized female character—exemplifying complex narrative game design rather than following narratively confining stereotyped female tropes.

Conclusion

This paper sought to analyse the ways in which stereotyped female tropes are perpetuated within game narratives by examining narrative game techniques and taking into consideration the ludic, gameplay-specific aspect of video games. In this paper, video games were described with regard to the interplay between narrative, visual, and ludic game elements contributing to the creation of a given video game discourse. Although the gaming industry is largely perceived through its male-oriented market, the approach towards the

representation of women characters can be seen as evolving, gradually shifting away from the tropes of over-sexualization, subjugation, and marginalization. The games investigated in terms of gender-stereotyped tropes may indicate the emergence of positive trends in female character design.

While video games are widely recognized as tending to establish female characters as narratively subjugated which is exemplified by the tropes of a “damsel in distress,” a “lady sidekick,” or a “woman as background decoration,” the female characters from the three video games can be perceived as narratively evolving and to a varying degree subverting gender expectations for female characters in gaming. Elizabeth (*BioShock Infinite* 2013) at the beginning of her journey can be categorized as an archetypal “damsel in distress” with no narrative agency and established as secondary field support rather than a fully-fledged character. Nonetheless, traversing the storyscape, Elizabeth re-establishes herself as a narratively competent character next to Booker. In *The Last of Us* (2013), Ellie is coded in the game narrative as second in importance to the overarching story, with Joel established as her “protector” and a parental figure. In this sense, Elizabeth and Ellie share similarities on the level of game narrative design which places them both as companions to the male character. Despite the ambiguous nature of the ending, Ellie’s character throughout the narrative does not feel like an extension to the player character or “an escort mission,” but rather as a complex character who evolves with regard to narrative agency by learning how to operate in the post-apocalyptic environment on her own.

As the sole playable character of *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, Aloy can be seen as a protagonist least informed by traditional female narrative tropes. Unlike Elizabeth and Ellie, she does not share the space of the storyworld with a hyper-masculine character. On the contrary, she is placed as the primary narrative agent who uses the game environment to her advantage. Within the storyline, the issues of womanhood and motherhood are entrenched into the gamescape, further subverting gender norms observable in video game

narrative design. In this sense, *Horizon: Zero Dawn* can be perceived as a breakthrough in terms of female character design and storytelling from the point of view of the game industry practices.

While the primary focus of this study was to examine the representation of women, other representation and diversity concerns should not be disregarded within Game Studies. Male characters as narrative agents tend to be coded into the gameplay and narrative through hyper-masculine gender norms infringing upon female agency. In discussing the detrimental portrayals of gender-stereotyped characters, female and male characters alike should be given attention in order to achieve a more comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural discourse constructed in gaming. Further investigations into video game representation can examine in more depth the treatment of other groups silenced by the game discourse, particularly LGBTQ+ and racial communities.

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Ludography

Bioshock Infinite. 2013. 2K Games.

Horizon: Zero Dawn. 2017. Guerrilla Games.

The Last of Us. 2013. Naughty Dog.

Abstract

This article aims to explore the representation of three female characters in triple-A dystopian video games and the way in which female protagonists are constructed by the video game discourse and situated within the game world environment. Video games are cultural artifacts described in terms of the interplay between narrative, visual, and ludic game elements that contribute to the creation of video game text and its discourse. The following study attempts to investigate female narrative tropes perpetuated within the game text dimension and video game industry as such. *BioShock Infinite*, *The Last of Us*, and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* are analysed both on the basis of the game narrative and employed gameplay design. One of the main objectives of the study is to examine whether gender stereotypes are subverted in the chosen video games or whether the female protagonists are codified as confined, subordinate, and marginalized characters informed by gender-stereotyped narrative tropes varying from the damsel in distress to the secondary field support to male protagonists.