

“These Stories Are Not For You”  
Towards an Intersectional Art History of Videogames

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2016

**“THESE STORIES ARE NOT FOR YOU”**

**TOWARDS AN INTERSECTIONAL ART  
HISTORY OF VIDEOGAMES**

## Abstract

The representation of women in videogames often relies on poorly gendered stereotypes in order to generate characters. Female characters in videogames are often one dimensional and overtly sexual – often with the express purpose of providing male players with gratification. These negative stereotypes have at least in part led to a male-dominated sub-culture that rejects any attempt to examine the portrayal of women and gender in games. The reaction to this cultural criticism is often extreme, with threats of sexual violence against the female academics, critics, and journalists looking to examine videogames as a creative medium.

This paper shows that feminist art history methodologies can be successfully applied to videogames as objects of art. The visuals, the stories, the characters, and the creators of the games can all be written about from a feminist ideology that would not be out of place in journals and textbooks on the subject of art history. However this paper also shows that only using a feminist methodology is limiting, and does not do justice to the society that surrounds the sub-culture of videogames. A new way of looking at works of art and writing art history must be formulated that doesn't prioritise just women, but instead looks at the intersectionality between various other forms of systematic oppression that make up the societal kyriarchy.

In order to discover if feminism is an appropriate art historical methodology for applying to videogames this paper considers two case studies, the 1981 videogame *Ms. Pac-Man* and the 2015 videogame *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. These two videogames feature female characters that can be successfully considered as subjects using an art historical feminist methodology. This paper also asks if other intersectional theories should be applied alongside of, or instead of feminism, in order to consider the diverse society that videogames are a part of.

## Acknowledgements

The acknowledgements page of a paper is often used to thank those who have inspired you to follow the path that led you to this point. In the light of that, I'd like to thank those who found themselves embroiled in the #GamerGate controversy in late 2014. Aside from despair at the wide-ranging flavours of misogyny that are currently available in my hobby of videogaming I was inspired by the voices that spoke out against these attitudes. These brave people who spoke up all over the internet and endured threats to their personal safety – they are the people who I must thank first.

Aside from the massed force of #GamerGate, I must also thank my partners. It would have been much harder to write from a queer point of view without living a somewhat queer lifestyle myself. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] I genuinely couldn't have done it without you both.

To Dr Harry Mount for making me realise that looking at the historiography of art history was as interesting as looking at art itself, and of course for taking the time to learn about videogames to help me write this dissertation. And to the rest of the staff in the department for offering a unique perspective each time we have spoken.

And lastly I must thank two teachers from school. Tim Shaw, who piqued my interest in art and made me realise that all art needs interrogating. I might not have been able to draw a picture of a scholar at a desk, but your art classes gave me the foundation I needed to ask questions about what I was looking at. And Merlyn Sturt. Who once wrote in my school report 'Charlotte's confidence far outweighs her competence'. It might have taken me almost fifteen years, but I believe my competence is finally beginning to catch up.

Thank you all - and the many, many others who aren't listed here. I genuinely couldn't have done it without you.

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## Introduction

The arrival of videogames into mainstream entertainment culture prompted much academic and media discourse about the nature of what they are and how they affect those that interact with them. However despite 14 videogames being acquired for the MoMA design collection in 2012,<sup>1</sup> very little art historical discussion has happened. There has been much debate on the subject of whether videogames should be considered art, but a distinct lack of critical discussion and engagement that applies art historical methodologies to videogames. Michael Burden and Sean Gouglas argue that ‘critical engagement with specific videogames is more important to the general acceptance of the medium as art than meta discussions about the potential of the media to be art’.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the question ‘are videogames art?’ should be replaced with ‘how should we analyse videogames as art?’.

Grant Tavinor’s book ‘The Art of Videogames’ is one of the small number of resources that does focus on the art historical – to a degree.<sup>3</sup> Tavinor’s use of Berys Gaunt’s cluster concept<sup>4</sup> is an inspired way of using art to validate and then discuss videogames. Although many of his chapters stray back towards game design and game studies, Tavinor’s take away point seems to be that for many the interactive element of games is what stops us treating them as art. This approach is, as Buden and Gouglas ask us to consider, ‘like pointing

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<sup>1</sup> Paola Antonelli, ‘Video Games: 14 in the Collection, for Starters’, *Inside / Out* (29 November 2012)

[http://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/](http://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/11/29/video-games-14-in-the-collection-for-starters/) accessed on 18 November 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Burden and Sean Gouglas, ‘The Algorithmic Experience: Portal as Art’, *Game Studies* 12:2 (December 2012): 1.

<sup>3</sup> Grant Tavinor, *The Art of Videogames* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Noël Carroll and Berys Gaut, eds., “Art” as a Cluster Concept’, in *Theories of Art Today* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000).

out that painting could be art if only one could get past all the brushstrokes'.<sup>5</sup> If we accept that videogames are a visual medium that can be discussed in ways no different from pictorial, video, or sonic art, then we can apply art historical methodologies and thus begin to build up a critical discourse. Even in the main journals covering the study of videogames (*Game Studies* and *Games Criticism*) there are very few articles published on their websites that deal with topics that could be considered art historical in nature. Instead the published and peer reviewed articles generally focus on the gameplay experience.

There are some exceptions in the archive of the *Game Studies* journal – the article by Burden and Gouglas cited above on the subject of 'Portal as Art'<sup>6</sup> is one clear example, as is the discussion by Alexander R. Galloway on the emergence of a realist gaming aesthetic; however the latter primarily focuses once again on the gameplay experience rather than the look of the game or visual representations within the game.<sup>7</sup> It may well be that examining videogames from an art historical point of view is undesirable and instead interdisciplinary study that focuses heavily on game design and game studies is the appropriate approach for videogames. However if videogames are to be considered art then there must be scope for both approaches.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Burden and Gouglas, 'Algorithmic Experience'.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander R. Galloway, 'Social Realism in Gaming', *Game Studies* 4:1 (November 2004).

<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that architectural students and academics have already found videogames to be rich subject matter.

The main overlap for art historical with videogames discourse is the amount of feminist study of women and their representation in videogaming. Conference papers such as the 'The Representation of Gender and Ethnicity in Digital Interactive Games' at the Level Up – 1<sup>st</sup> International Digital Games Conference in 2003 updated previous studies that investigated the way that gender is presented in videogames.<sup>9</sup> It concluded that characters in supporting roles are now more diverse than shown in those early studies (however it did only look at a study of twelve games). However cultural critics more recently have suggested that the representation of gender and ethnicity in videogames is not always positive (though it is more diverse than it once was). Anita Sarkeesian broke new ground in May 2012 when she launched a Kickstarter campaign to fund a webseries that would analyse the ways that women are represented in videogames.<sup>10</sup> The Kickstarter campaign raised \$158,922 in a month and was backed by 6968 people who wanted to see the webseries come to life. More importantly than the videos themselves, the campaign opened the floodgates for women to talk about how they felt about the way that they were represented in videogames.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Level Up Conference Proceedings', *Issuu* (November 2003) [http://issuu.com/sjorsmartens/docs/binder\\_boek\\_levelup](http://issuu.com/sjorsmartens/docs/binder_boek_levelup) accessed on 18 November 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Anita Sarkeesian, 'Tropes vs. Women in Video Games', *Kickstarter* (17 May 2012) <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/566429325/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games/posts/1115560> accessed 18 November 2015.

### Can Art Historical Methodologies be applied to Videogames?

In this paper I have started from the position that videogames can be discussed as an art form due to the emergence of a critical discourse focussing on what have traditionally been art historical problems. This emerging discourse, although still young, is undoubtedly the most exciting aspect of studying videogames from an art historical point of view. Critical discourse on videogames is not yet predominantly found in the peer-reviewed traditional print journals; instead it is performed on social media, in online lectures and vlogs,<sup>11</sup> and across the critic's columns of daily newspapers. Lively discussion takes place by people passionate about 'their' subject – people who are often unconstrained by the 'rules' of traditional art history. Indeed even where the criticism is structured and informed by academic principles it is rarely based on foundations of art history, but more usually film or media studies. This paper tests if it is possible to apply art historical methodologies to videogames as objects of art.

This cultural discourse on videogames has also been born into a time where feminist and, more recently, intersectional approaches have become highly valued in almost every part of society. Intersectionality (or intersectional theory) is the study of how related systems of oppression interact together in order to understand how social inequality occurs. The term was made prominent by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in their 1989 discussion of how race and gender are often treated as 'mutually exclusive categories of

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<sup>11</sup> A vlog is an informal presentation, usually featuring a single person, which is often disseminated on platforms such as YouTube.

experience and analysis'.<sup>12</sup> Those who use intersectional theory believe that the systemic injustices within society (such as sexism, racism, classism, homo/biphobia, transphobia, ableism, etc.) do not act independently from one other. They instead interrelate and create a system of 'intersectional' oppression and discrimination. More so, those who are not class-, sexuality-, or race-privileged (amongst others) are often routinely excluded from feminist discourse. This dissertation attempts to address how we might discuss videogames as art while considering the experiences of many as opposed to the mainstream few.

Throughout this paper I will primarily take an orthodox art historical feminist methodology and apply it to videogames as objects of art. This will test if it is possible to apply art historical theories to videogames and also provide a foundation for further exploration of a new art historical approach based around Crenshaw's principles of intersectionality. This paper is titled *'Towards' an Intersectional Art History of Videogame Criticism* so I have not only attempted to discover the possibilities for talking about videogames as art intersectionally, but also to adopt some methods of actually writing about them from a gender studies discourse. I will, in places, use elements of Queer Theory to push outside the boundaries of feminism, using Noreen Giffney's approach:

'I call for a move beyond using queer theory as a (reductively) another, shorthand name for lesbian and gay studies. How might its tools be

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<sup>12</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 140 (1989): 139–67.

useful for picking apart (and analysing) the categorization of desiring subjects (i.e. the creation of identities based on desire); for making visible the ways in which some desires (and thus identities) are made to pass as normal, while others are rendered wrong or evil?<sup>13</sup>

Queer Theory is particularly applicable to the study of videogames, I believe, because of the way that modern 'geek culture' breaks itself down into separate tribal identities. Queer Theory is a framework designed, at least in part and in Giffney's opinion, to explore tribal identities outside of the 'normal'; 'We as queer theories must [...] expose *all* norms for the way they define, solidify and defend their shaky self-identities by excluding those (dissident others) who fail or refuse to conform.'<sup>14</sup>

In Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell's book 'The language of art history' they discuss in the first chapter the differences between art history and art criticism.<sup>15</sup> They suggest that art history examines the circumstances in which the art object was produced and perceived as opposed to art criticism which they consider 'extratemporal' in nature. This thesis focuses both on the circumstances in society that produced videogames, but also analyses the objects from a more recent standpoint which could be considered 'art criticism' according to Kemal and Gaskell. However it must be considered that there are not centuries between the production of the object and the writing of this thesis – *Pac Man* (which I discuss at length) was released just 36 years

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<sup>13</sup> Giffney Noreen, 'Denormatizing Queer Theory: More Than (Simply) Lesbian and Gay Studies', *Feminist Theory* 5:73 (April 2004): 74.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, eds., *The Language of Art History*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1–10.

ago in 1980, and *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* has only been available in the shops for six months at the time of writing. When writing about videogames as art the lines between art history and art criticism become increasingly fuzzy – but I believe there is no reason to wait until the creators of the videogames have long since retired before writing historical discourse on these objects of art.

Throughout this paper I have tried to abstain from using binary language and gender pronouns where such statements do not serve to further the discussion. As Mimi Marinucci discussed in the introduction to their book ‘Feminism is Queer’ expressions of dominance are frequent in everyday use of the English language.<sup>16</sup> I have also attempted to avoid using ableist language and bodily metaphors that some readers may not identify with. Although this strict adaptation of language might seem like an unnecessary step, when dealing with queer theory and its inherent complication of language it would seem only natural to try and set provenance for good practice. Queer theory by its very nature challenges deeply held assumptions and so incites radical approaches.

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<sup>16</sup> Mimi Marinucci, *Feminism Is Queer: The Intimate Connection between Queer and Feminist Theory* (London: Zed, 2010), xiv.

## #GamerGate and the Rejection of Critical Theory

Feminism has been a prominent methodology in the History of Art and other similar cultural fields of study since the early 1970s. Feminist criticism within art history in particular arrived with some force in 1972 with Linda Nochlin's seminal essay '*Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*'<sup>17</sup> There has never been any real doubt that feminist interpretations of works of art (and other forms of media) are anything but a legitimate form of discourse. Many might disagree with what is being said within the texts themselves, but there are very few who would suggest that there is no space within cultural criticism and the documentation of history for views that primarily consider women, persons of colour, queer individuals, and so forth.

But it is the fans of videogames that often hold all the power to both accept and silence critical discussion of videogames as art, and that power has most often been exercised when it comes to feminist discourse on videogames.

The notable movement against left-wing art cultural criticism of videogames in 2014 was colloquially known as #GamerGate, named after the Twitter hashtag adopted by participants. While there is some disagreement about the extent to which #GamerGate is about ethics in videogame journalism vs harassment of female voices that critique games, several women suffered severe harassment that forced them out of their homes and places of work.<sup>18</sup>

Sarkeesian herself, one of the main cultural commentators that the movement

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<sup>17</sup> Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' *ARTnews*, January 1971.

<sup>18</sup> Keith Stuart, 'Brianna Wu and the Human Cost of Gamergate: "Every Woman I Know in the Industry Is Scared"', *The Guardian* (17 October 2014) <http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/oct/17/brianna-wu-gamergate-human-cost> accessed on 25 March 2015.

was undoubtedly 'against', was forced to cancel a speaking engagement at a university due to the threat of a shooting massacre.<sup>19</sup>

It's often said that there are three sides to every story – your side, their side, and the truth. Nowhere is this more evident than in the reporting of the #GamerGate controversy; truth is variable depending on many factors.

*Re/code* (a reasonably centrist, although slightly left-leaning tech magazine) offered a short summary in October 2014, several months after the movement gained traction:

'Gamergate is a sizeable online community of videogame fans who are upset about growing criticisms of their favourite hobby, especially claims that today's games often depict women in demeaning ways. Complicating the matter further, Gamergate advocates say the debate about women in gaming is being enabled by a weak and corrupt gaming press.'<sup>20</sup>

However the author, Eric Johnson, does point out further through the article that in fact 'gamergaters' aren't battling 'corporate scheming' in the form of corrupt news outlets - they are in fact apparently battling social progress.

It is a challenge to accept inequality of any kind, and those who have been the traditional market for videogames appear to be no exception. Leigh

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<sup>19</sup> Nick Wingfield, 'Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in "GamerGate" Campaign', *The New York Times* (15 October 2014) <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/16/technology/gamergate-women-video-game-threats-anita-sarkeesian.html> accessed on 19 November 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Eric Johnson, 'What Is Gamergate, and Why Is Intel So Afraid of It?', *Re/code* (9 October 2014) <http://recode.net/2014/10/09/what-is-gamergate-and-why-is-intel-so-afraid-of-it/> accessed on 9 March 2016.

Alexander, the former Editor-at-Large and News Editor for the videogaming news and opinion website *Gamasutra* faced severe criticism from #GamerGate supporters over an article published in August 2014 discussing the culture of gaming, and how insidiously toxic it has become for many. 'When you decline to create or to curate a culture in your spaces, you're responsible for what spawns in the vacuum. That's what's been happening to games.' Alexander is referring here to the refusal of major community hubs for gamers to moderate the hate speech that had become common in the #GamerGate movement. Her argument surmises that 'gamer' is an identity label that had been given to 'lonely basement kids' by marketers from videogames companies. The companies had previously made games that sold a 'high octane masculinity' to young people who had previously been considered social outcasts – and told them that they were 'the most important commercial demographic of all time.' Now the industry has changed, and it recognises that the people with disposable income today are different to the people who had disposable income thirty years ago. But as Alexander points out 'it's hard for [traditional gamers] to hear that [...] they aren't the world's most special-est [sic] consumer demographic, that they have to share.'<sup>21</sup> It's this sharing aspect that seems to cause the most friction, with many individuals refusing to acknowledge that there might be space for the games they love alongside the games that other people love – and that people might want to criticise games like we do any other form of media.

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<sup>21</sup> Leigh Alexander, "'Gamers' Don't Have to Be Your Audience. "Gamers" Are Over.' *GamaSutra* (28 August 2014) [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers\\_dont\\_have\\_to\\_be\\_your\\_audience\\_Gamers\\_are\\_over.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_over.php) accessed on 8 March 2016.

The #GamerGate movement has been labelled a ‘culture war’, which is a term often used by the media to describe conflicts that take place between traditionalist and progressive values and has been applied to many debates that have taken place in the United States and other Western countries. The term ‘cultural war’ appears to have first been used in a 1992 speech by Republican Patrick J. Buchanan, where he said ‘there is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the cold war itself.’<sup>22</sup> He used his speech to speak out against pornography, feminism, women’s reproductive rights, and gay rights – amongst other subjects that he felt were attacks on what it meant to be American. This rhetoric was echoed in the words of many of those who supported #GamerGate in 2014 where many believed they had a right to defend what they considered ‘their’ gaming industry against the feminists and their allies who they believe wanted to change the hobby into something unrecognisable.

One of the most incredible parts of the entire #GamerGate movement is the amount of time dedicated to trying to prove feminist critics wrong. For instance Sarkeesian and her *Tropes vs Women* series of video essays have attracted thousands of videos supposedly debunking her feminist rhetoric. One critic in particular had made over sixty YouTube videos about Sarkeesian by the time she spoke at XOXO Festival in September 2014. Some of the videos clock in at over four hours of unedited conspiracy theories about Sarkeesian, cultural

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<sup>22</sup> Patrick J. Buchanan, ‘1992 Republican National Convention Speech’, *Buchanan.org* (n.d.) <http://buchanan.org/blog/1992-republican-national-convention-speech-148> accessed on 8 March 2016.

criticism, and feminist theory.<sup>23</sup> What is most remarkable about all of this dismissing of feminist cultural criticism is that very few critics, including Sarkeesian, are discussing particularly advanced or controversial theories. Most of the concepts brought up in YouTube videos and on internet forums are the kind of ideas that you would be exposed to in a Feminism 101 class, or a basic gender studies course. There is nothing revolutionary about these ideas, other fields accepted them several decades ago – it is only the application of these theories to videogames that seems particularly problematic.

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<sup>23</sup> Anita Sarkeesian, 'Feminist Frequency XOXO Festival', *YouTube* (2014) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ah8mhdW6Shs> accessed on 8 March 2016.

## Feminist Theory and Videogames

It could be said that feminism is a discourse on the use of space. 'Women have not been omitted through forgetfulness or mere prejudice' writes Griselda Pollock.<sup>24</sup> It is instead true, as Pollock then explains, that women are actively excluded from the 'ideological schemata' in order to reinforce and maintain the historical kyriarchy.<sup>25</sup> A primary way of maintaining this kyriarchal status quo is through the prevention of women taking up space – either physically or intellectually. It is a problem that feminist artists have tried to address, most notably with works such as Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1974), but even decades after these seminal artworks were produced and feminist art historians (and feminists more generally) had addressed so many of these problems women are still fighting today for the right to be able to take up space in society.

While it would seem that the debate as to the representation of women in videogames is merely small fry in the larger world of feminist discourse, this is an extension of the fundamental argument for women to be allowed to take up more space in their surroundings. In 2014 Ubisoft released *Assassin's Creed Unity* which was set in a vast and extraordinarily lifelike city of Paris that even included a scale replica of Notre Dame.<sup>26</sup> However despite this incredible feat

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<sup>24</sup> Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art* (United Kingdom: London ; Routledge, 1988), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Kyriarchy is a term coined by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in her 1992 book *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* that describes the intersectional relationships of patriarchy that go beyond gender. It encompasses ideas such as racism, homophobia, and class-based discrimination amongst others.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Totilo, 'Assassin's Creed Unity's Paris Is Huge. Really Huge.', *Kotaku* (10 June 2014) <http://kotaku.com/assassins-creed-unitys-paris-is-huge-really-huge-1588817927> accessed on 26 November 2015.

of virtual engineering and design, Ubisoft could not spare the man-hours to design and programme the animations required for a playable female character for the multiplayer mode.<sup>27</sup> This is not a straightforward discussion of money; this is something far more sinister. Jonathan Cooper, a videogames animator with a string of AAA<sup>28</sup> credits on his CV, was quick to suggest that Ubisoft were 'deflecting to a technobabble excuse' (for it would not have taken as much work as Ubisoft claimed) and that this would have been a proactive decision by the design team not to include any female playable characters within the multiplayer mode (as opposed to a primarily financial or technical decision).<sup>29</sup> The restriction of the amount of space that women are allowed to take up in both fantasy worlds made of pixels, and within the physical and intellectual world of the videogames industry is one that must be challenged – and feminist art historical methods may be the best tool.

One of the largest problems faced with trying to use art historical methodologies to examine videogames, and especially feminist methodologies, is that academic debate and criticism is largely not considered a part of the gaming industry – unless it is in the fields of game design or game studies. More so than for many other art forms, the audience challenge any scholarship or criticism that doesn't go along with the existing orthodox ideology. There is an ingrained sense of fandom when it comes to

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<sup>27</sup> Yannick LeJacq, 'Ubisoft Cut Plans For Female Assassins In Unity', *Kotaku* (11 June 2014) <http://kotaku.com/ubisoft-cut-plans-for-female-assassins-in-unity-1589278349> accessed on 26 November 2015.

<sup>28</sup> A classification term in the videogames industry denoting the highest budgets, level of promotion, or positive reception from professional reviewers.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Cooper, 'Women Are Not Too Hard To Animate', *Game Anim* <http://www.gameanim.com/2014/06/21/womenarenottoohardtoanimate/> accessed on 26 November 2015.

videogames, and in many ways reception is the most important critical appraisal of a videogame to the industry. The majority of videogames are made in order to generate profit for the developer and so the reception of the 'fans' (and by extension their willingness to purchase the game) is generally the driving force behind many design choices within the game. But the market is changing – as evidenced by the #GamerGate movement, and it is slowly becoming more receptive to new ideas and new forms of criticism. It is recognised that women are a huge force within the market as they are 50% of frequent game purchasers according to the Entertainment Software Association.<sup>30</sup> This can only mean that scholarship relevant to women as characters, audience, and workers will be both necessary and desirable as we move forward.

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<sup>30</sup> Entertainment Software Association, '2014 Essential Facts About The Computer And Video Game Industry' (2014).

### The challenges faced by women inside the gaming industry

'I'm not asking anybody for a right to say something, because I've already got that. This is more like... I'm in your base killing your dudes. So if you're upset by the idea that women game, well you should be paying more attention. Because for quite some time we've been half the audience.'<sup>31</sup>

Constance Steinkuehler made a vital point during her presentation at GDC (Game Developers Conference) in March 2015. Women in the US (and other western countries) do not any longer have to fight for the right to speak in the same way as they do in many other countries. In fact in the US, that right to speak as a woman has been enshrined in law since the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1920. So it is a mystery why groups of 'alpha males' such as the self-styled leaders of internet forum 8Chan and the wider #GamerGate movement are surprised that women (and other cultural commenters) are making games that they enjoy and that they might criticise games that have been made by others.

Steinkuehler's appropriation of a phrase most typically used by male gamers in various guises ('In your base, killing your dudes') is a smart way of alluding to the fact that while nobody was looking a considerable number of women have manoeuvred themselves into position to start to be able to make a real difference to the culture of the gaming industry. This is a reflection of the wider observation made in a report by the Entertainment Software Association (a US organisation) that women are indeed half the audience – 48%

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<sup>31</sup> '#1ReasonToBe' (Game Developers Conference, San Francisco, 2 March 2015), sec. 27:19, <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1021747/> accessed on 23 July 2015.

according to the 2014 report on sales, demographic and usage data on videogames.<sup>32</sup> In 2011-2012 SteinKuehler served as a Senior Policy Analyst in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy advising on matters relating to videogames.<sup>33</sup>

But despite the fact that senior positions are now inhabited by a considerable amount of women it seems like many self-identified 'gamers', as well as those in the wider circles of similar hobbies, cannot accept that women are genuinely both interested in and capable of discoursing on these subjects.

'Geek misogyny is its own special flavour of bullshit, and it is part of the infrastructure of how gender works online. [...] The idea that women can't ever be proper geeks or 'real' nerds is perhaps the most insidious part of the misogynist's defence of geekspace. It's what leads to terms like 'fake geek girl', to the assumption that women who like science fiction or comics or gaming or technology don't really know what they're talking about.'<sup>34</sup>

Too often women who talk critically about videogames are told that they cannot contribute because they're not really gamers and then asked to prove their 'geek credentials' in a way that men are generally not. Even the American-based business magazine Forbes has run an article in their 'ForbesWomen' section that asks 'How do we separate the geeks from the muck?' and suggests that many women who label themselves as geeks do so

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<sup>32</sup> ESA, '2014 Essential Facts', 3.

<sup>33</sup> 'Constance Steinkuehler | Wisconsin Institute for Discovery' <http://wid.wisc.edu/profile/constance-steinkuehler/> accessed on 23 July 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Laurie Penny, *Cybersexism: Sex, Gender and Power on the Internet* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013).

because they are trying to get ‘guys’ to pay attention to them.<sup>35</sup> We never read articles in major media outlets about ‘fake geek men’ (or even ‘fake geek boys’ if we choose to use infantilising terms), so why is there such an insistence that women prove themselves in order to be taken seriously?

This struggle is not particular to women who create and write about videogames, it’s a struggle that has been seen historically across all subjects – including art. Georgia O’Keeffe famously stated that ‘The men liked to put me down as the best woman painter. I think I’m one of the best painters.’<sup>36</sup>

This is a trend that has not gone away – the encyclopaedic behemoth that is Wikipedia will soon lead you to lists of artists that soon separate women from men, as if they need their own category. We have a list of women photographers,<sup>37</sup> a list of female sculptors,<sup>38</sup> and of course – a list of notable women in the videogame industry (which interestingly Steinkuler does not appear on).<sup>39</sup> The insistence of women being separated into their own category is a double-edged sword; it allows them to be recognised for their work in historically male dominated fields, but also presents them in a way that suggests they can’t compete with their male equivalents. There is also

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<sup>35</sup> Tara Brown, ‘Dear Fake Geek Girls: Please Go Away’, *Forbes* (26 March 2012) <http://www.forbes.com/sites/tarabrown/2012/03/26/dear-fake-geek-girls-please-go-away/> accessed on 8 March 2016.

<sup>36</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society* (United Kingdom: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2012), 303.

<sup>37</sup> ‘List of Women Photographers’, *Wikipedia* [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List\\_of\\_women\\_photographers](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_women_photographers) accessed on 8 March 2016.

<sup>38</sup> ‘List of Female Sculptors’, *Wikipedia* [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List\\_of\\_female\\_sculptors](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_female_sculptors) accessed on 8 March 2016.

<sup>39</sup> ‘List of Notable Women in the Video Game Industry’, *Wikipedia* [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List\\_of\\_notable\\_women\\_in\\_the\\_video\\_game\\_industry](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=List_of_notable_women_in_the_video_game_industry) accessed on 8 March 2016.

the additional problem that influential and encyclopaedic websites such as Wikipedia have an inbuilt systemic bias – their editors are around 91% male, (although that has risen from 4% in 2004), but disappointingly around 22% of female editors reported experiencing some form of harassment.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Wikimedia Foundation, 'Wikipedia Editors Study' (April 2011).

## The Female Avatar as Protagonist and Dueteragonist in Videogames

In the following section of this paper I have attempted to apply a standard feminist methodology to two very different videogames, as well as provide some commentary on the idea of the 'avatar as self' and why that might be problematic. First I will investigate the pixelated protagonist Ms. Pac Man, taking a lead from Sarkeesian's 'Ms. Male Character' video essay,<sup>41</sup> before contrasting her with a more recent portrayal of a woman as deuteragonist from 2015. Set thirty-five years apart these two videogames illustrate different approaches to portraying female characters and the problematic elements that might be encountered when performing a feminist art historical analysis.

Cultivation theory says that the media you consume can affect your ideological worldview and if that is true then we must also accept that videogames, as a form of mass communication and entertainment, are therefore likely to affect our worldviews in similar ways to television (the medium that cultivation theory was first attempting to understand).<sup>42</sup> There is a common theme when it comes to the depiction women in videogames, and that is that they are often less capable than their male counterparts (such as when they are used as a reward or background decoration) or that they are player controlled sexual objects. This sexual objectification is what I will examine in this chapter.

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<sup>41</sup> Anita Sarkeesian, 'Ms. Male Character – Tropes vs Women', *Feminist Frequency* (18 November 2013) <http://feministfrequency.com/2013/11/18/ms-male-character-tropes-vs-women/> accessed on 10 January 2016.

<sup>42</sup> 'Cultivation Theory', *University of Twente* (n.d.) [https://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20Clusters/Mass%20Media/Cultivation\\_Theory/](https://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20Clusters/Mass%20Media/Cultivation_Theory/) accessed on 25 February 2016.

## Ms. Pac-Man

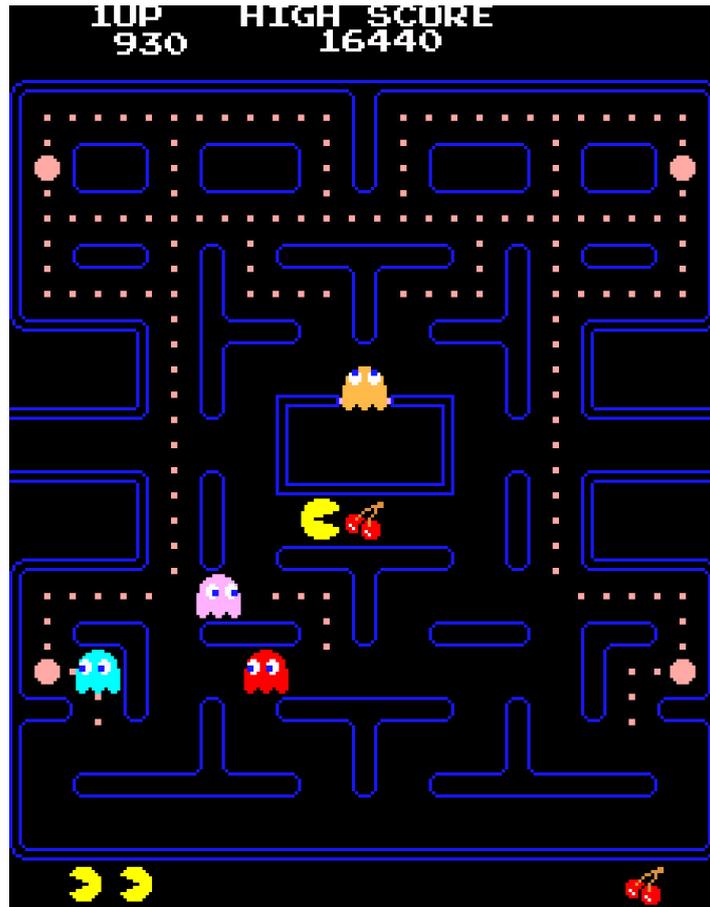


Figure 1: Pac-Man, 1980 (Screen Capture)

The earliest computer games were either abstract representations of ideas or games where you played a gender-neutral spaceship (such as *Spacewar*, 1962 and *Computer Space*, 1971). Pac-Man, released in 1980, was one of the first videogames to feature a humanoid avatar (others include *Gun Fight*, 1975 and *Temple of Ashai*, 1979) as in Figure 1. While other games retained their relatively neutral representational avatars in 1981 gamers were introduced to the idea of a female equivalent of Pac-Man: Ms. Pac-Man, as seen in Figure 2.

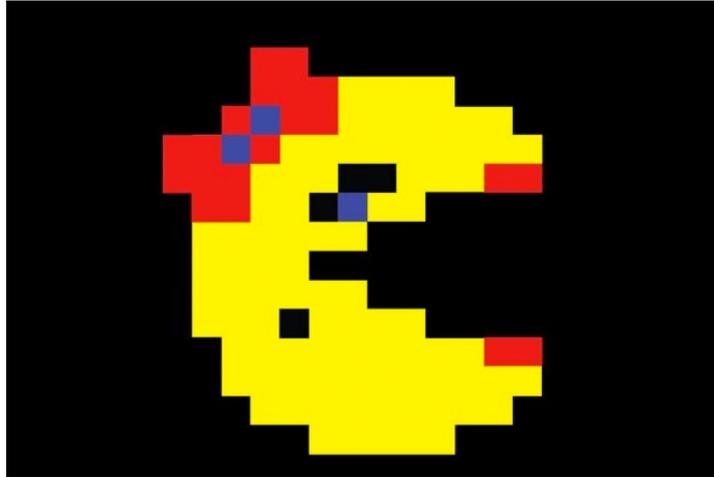


Figure 2: Ms. Pac-Man, 1981 (Digital Artwork)

Anita Sarkeesian coined the term 'Ms. Male Character' for distaff counterparts in 2013 in her *Tropes vs Women in Video Games* series.

Sarkeesian suggests that the Ms. Male Character is

‘a female version of an already established or default male character.

Ms. Male Characters are defined primarily by their relationship to their male counterparts via their visual properties, their narrative connection or occasionally through promotional materials.’<sup>43</sup>

This is not a phenomenon unique to videogames, it can also be seen in animation and comic books long before Ms. Pac-Man is released. Possibly the most famous example is Disney’s Minnie Mouse (Figure 3) who is almost identical to her male counterpart Mickey Mouse except for her mode of dress. In the 1939 advertising short *Mickey’s Surprise Party* Minnie Mouse gained her more familiar hair bow as one of her gender accoutrements. Here Disney sets a standard for marking gender in popular culture that almost certainly the serves as some inspiration for the Ms. Pac-Man appearance over four decades later.

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<sup>43</sup> Sarkeesian, ‘Ms. Male’.

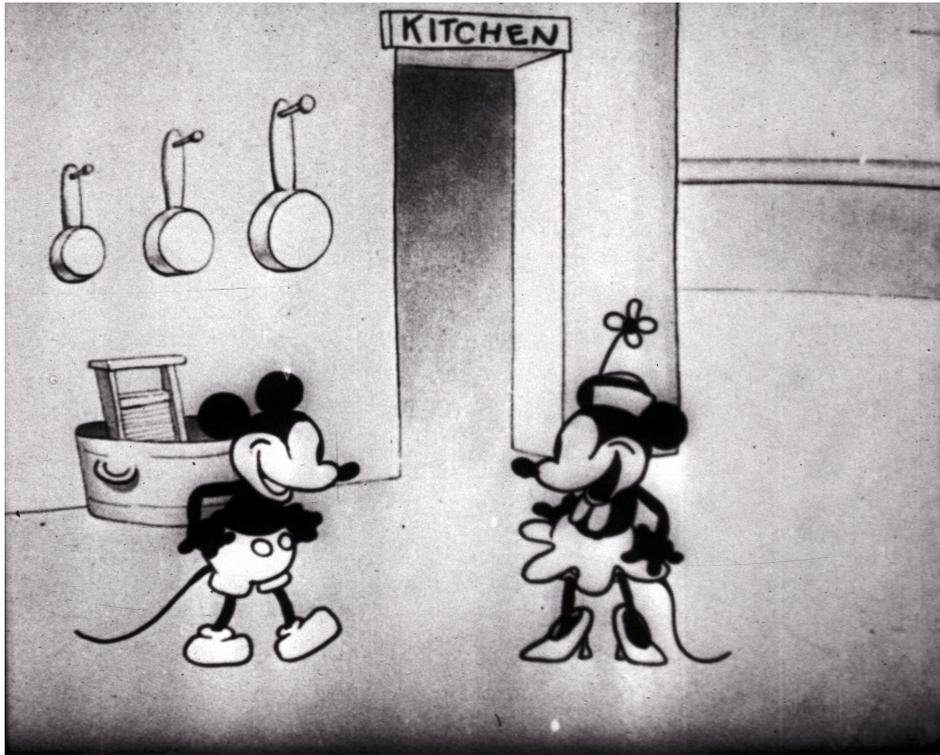


Figure 3: Steamboat Willie, 1928 (Screen Capture)

When criticising the gendering of early videogames such as *Pac-Man* it is important to remember the artistic limitations that the artists were working to. Fundamentally Ms. Pac-Man as an avatar had to fit into the design of the mazes since the sequel did not change the underlying codebase of the game. The addition of a bow, red lipstick, long eyelashes, eye makeup, and a beauty spot marked Ms. Pac-Man out as undeniably 'female' because they are recognised gender signifiers and are a part of our culture's visual vocabulary. As Germaine Greer said in her book *The Female Eunuch*; 'When the life of the party wants to express the idea of a pretty woman in mime, he undulates his two hands in the air and leers expressively'.<sup>44</sup> Adding a bow and lipstick to a character is quick shorthand to make viewers understand that these yellow pixels are female in a similar way to how we understand the aforementioned undulating hand gestures.

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<sup>44</sup> Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006), 38.

Although it is somewhat problematic to portray a female game character in this way because it plays into gender stereotypes, the real problem is that creating a female 'other' with characters such as Ms. Pac-Man and Minnie Mouse means that the default is to consider characters 'male'. Up until the point where Ms. Pac-Man was added to the Pac-Man canon, Pac-Man was relatively gender-neutral – assuming the word 'man' means 'person' rather than 'male'. It is only our own culture, and that of the designers, that confers gender onto an amorphous, yellow circle with a mouth. This othering of characters who are not male, combined with the 'geek misogyny' culture discussed by individuals such as SteinKuehler<sup>45</sup> and Penny<sup>46</sup> means that the stories that videogames tell, even when they have a female protagonist such as Ms. Pac-Man, have the (hopefully unintentional) feeling that they are not for anyone other than white, heterosexual men.

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<sup>45</sup> '#1ReasonToBe'.

<sup>46</sup> Penny, *Cybersexism*.



Figure 4: Ms. Pac-Man Flyer (USA Region) (Promotional Flyer)

To the game designers in the late 1970s this iconic gendered makeover was almost certainly not malicious towards women – the designers were not trying to send out subliminal messages in their games that all women should adhere to certain gendered stereotypes. The images of the ‘femme fatale’, as the Ms. Pac-Man character was referred to in the advertising literature (see Figure 4), were simply a continuation of an established stock-character in Western culture. The anthropomorphized Ms. Pac-Man figure in the advertising literature appears to be based largely on the romantic film noir Hollywood Starlet of the 1940s. The fur wrap, pearl necklace, opera gloves, the 1930s styled vehicle, and even the pose are a familiar sight from old black and white photographs of ‘The Golden Age of Glamour’. However many theorists do believe that advertising does subconsciously reflect ingrained patriarchal

attitudes in society and the Ms. Pac-Man flyer is no exception. In Lucy Komisar's 1970 article *The Image of Woman in Advertising*, a decade before the release of Ms. Pac-Man, it is suggested that

'Advertising is an insidious propaganda machine for a male supremacist society. It spews out images of women as sex mates, housekeepers, mothers and menial workers – images that perhaps reflect the true status of most women in society, but which also make it increasingly difficult for women to break out of the sexist stereotypes that imprison them'.<sup>47</sup>

Similar adverts released to promote the Pac-Man arcade cabinet in 1980 did not feature sexualised versions of the character. Instead they released flyers that simply had photographs of the cabinets and screen shots of the game itself (see Figure 5). It is apparent that Midway Manufacturing didn't feel that they could treat male and female characters the same way in their advertising literature, choosing to sexualise the female characters both on the flyers and on the artwork appearing on the arcade cabinets (visible in both Figure 4 and Figure 5).

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<sup>47</sup> Lucy Komisar, 'The Image of Woman in Advertising', in *Woman in Sexist Society*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972), 304.

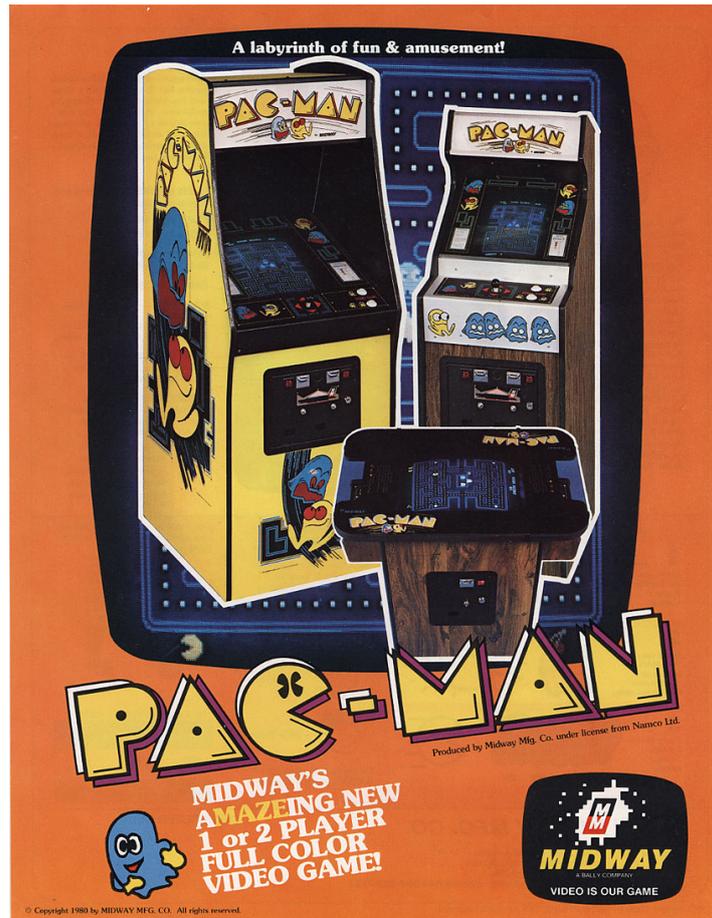


Figure 5: Pac-Man Flyer, USA Region (Promotional Flyer)

In fairness to Walt Disney and the designers of Pac-Man (along with numerous other videogames since), the use of a distaff counterpart is not new within the artistic canon. In the Abrahamic Religions God created Eve in Adam's likeness, creating her from a rib taken from him in some stories. Eve exists as a counterpart to Adam in order to provide companionship to him. These stories are woven into our Western narrative; they surround us while growing up, and as adults, because they are the foundation for so much literature, art, and media.

Ms. Pac-Man is very much a product of her time – although a rather unkind one. The honorific title 'Ms' can be assumed to be a dig at the newly liberated women of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when women using the title 'Ms'

Were often considered to be difficult women who were stepping out of line. Although not listed as a designer for *Ms. Pac-Man*, it's worth considering that the original Pac-Man was designed by Toru Iwatani who said in an interview that Pac-Man was designed to appeal to women, because women like eating dessert.<sup>48</sup> One would hope that with advances in society and technology progress had been made in the portrayal of women in videogames, however thirty five years later with the release of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*, not much appears to have improved.

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<sup>48</sup> Chris Kohler, 'Q&A: Pac-Man Creator Reflects on 30 Years of Dot-Eating', *WIRED* (21 May 2010) <http://www.wired.com/2010/05/pac-man-30-years/> accessed on 10 March 2016.

### She Breathes Through Her Skin; Quiet from Metal Gear Solid

In *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* a female deuteragonist called 'Quiet' can accompany you on missions.<sup>49</sup> It is hoped that Hideo Kojima, the games designer, chose to name her 'Quiet' as a riff on her specialised role as a deadly sniper and that it doesn't actually reflect the gendered assumption that women talk too much or have nothing interesting to say. This assumption that women talk too much is discussed in Mary Talbot's book on language where she explains how women's speech has been historically controlled by men; 'Women are perceived as over-garrulous, because preferably they shouldn't be saying anything at all. Women's contributions to talk are measured against silence; any talk is too much'.<sup>50</sup> It is somewhat frustrating to have what could have been a strong female role-model in a leading AAA videogame utter no words (other than 'uh' and 'ah'), however it's worth noting in the interest of equality this has been going on with male videogame protagonists for many years. Male protagonists are often the 'strong but silent' types (for example Tommy Vercetti from the 2002 *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*) and so in a way it's refreshing to see a female character take this role. However this argument for equality breaks down when you consider that Quiet is not 'strong but silent' by choice, but rather the parasite that has made her a super-soldier has the side effect of making her unable to speak English anymore. With this action she has had her agency taken away. She is no longer choosing to not speak, but rather has been silenced by her creator.

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<sup>49</sup> Deuteragonist is the literary term for the character that is second in importance to the protagonist. 'Companion' is the more usual term within videogame storytelling, however I feel it has sexual implications when used to describe a female character who is accompanying a male player's avatar.

<sup>50</sup> Mary M. Talbot, *Language and Gender*, 2nd ed (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 43.



Figure 6: Quiet from Metal Gear Solid V (Digital Artwork)

But the biggest problem with Quiet for many gamers is her attire. There is, apparently, a rational explanation for her lack of sensible clothing for a top sniper who would most likely spend her working hours tactically lying in bushes. The explanation is that Quiet breathes through her skin and uses photosynthesis to stay alive. This happens due a complex plotline involving parasites being used to heal Quiet, but they prevent her speaking in English or wearing normal clothing afterwards. During the game a group of soldiers put clothing over Quiet's bikini, which leaves her body unable to function and sees our protagonist almost suffocating. A physical weakness related to a character's lack of clothing? It could only happen to a female videogame character! In addition there is a particularly unpleasant cut-scene during the game where Quiet is tortured by her captors.<sup>51</sup> With a hood over her head and her hands tied behind her back, her overtly sexualised outfit and body make this cut-scene more like a scene from hard-core BDSM pornography than light

<sup>51</sup> AFGuidesHD, 'Quiet Torture Scene', *YouTube* (1 September 2015) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KijfRuSYPP8> accessed on 25 February 2016.

gaming entertainment. While some may argue that this makes the game feel 'gritty' or 'realistic' the reality is that it uses sanitised sexual violence as nothing more than lazy character development for the bad guys and sexual titillation for the viewer. As Sarkeesian points out 'women and their bodies are sacrificed in the name of infusing "mature themes" into gaming stories. But there is nothing "mature" about flippantly evoking shades of female trauma. It ends up sensationalizing an issue which is painfully familiar to a large percentage of women on this planet while also normalizing and trivializing their experiences.'<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Anita Sarkeesian, 'Women as Background Decoration (Part 2)', *Feminist Frequency* (25 August 2014) <http://www.feministfrequency.com/2014/08/women-as-background-decoration-part-2/> accessed on 25 February 2016.



Figure 7: The End from Metal Gear Solid V (Digital Artwork)

It would have been possible to suggest that Kojima's motivations weren't based on old-fashioned sexual objectification but for one thing – an equivalent male character. 'The End', as he is known, is also a sniper infected with a parasite (see Figure 7). Within the game it is alluded to that the parasite has similar properties to the one that has infected Quiet, but the biggest difference seems to be that The End can breathe perfectly fine through his bald head and is permitted to wear a practical and camouflaging ghillie suit. The explanation for the difference in clothing is apparently down to the fact that Quiet can phase in and out of visible spectrums and camouflage her own skin.<sup>53</sup> That doesn't quite explain why Quiet wears tights or even retains her underwear though.

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<sup>53</sup> 'Quiet', *Metal Gear Wiki* <http://metalgear.wikia.com/wiki/Quiet> accessed on 22 February 2016.

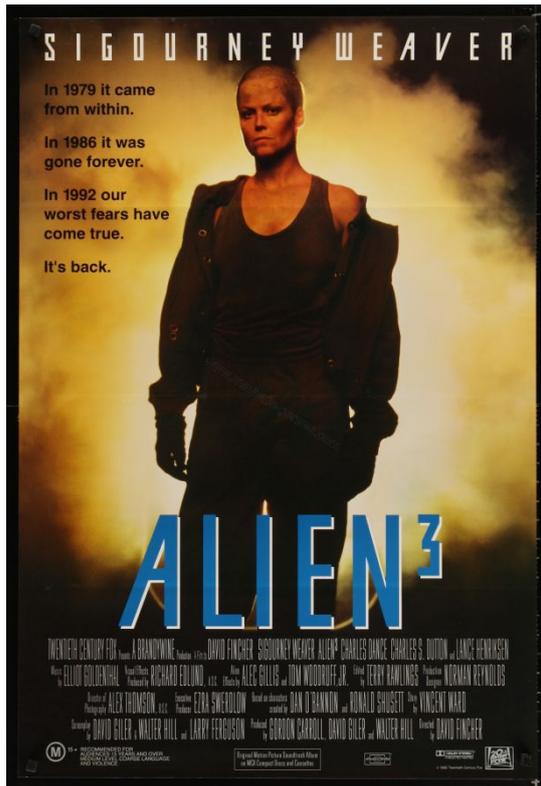


Figure 8: Alien 3, 1992 (Promotional Poster)

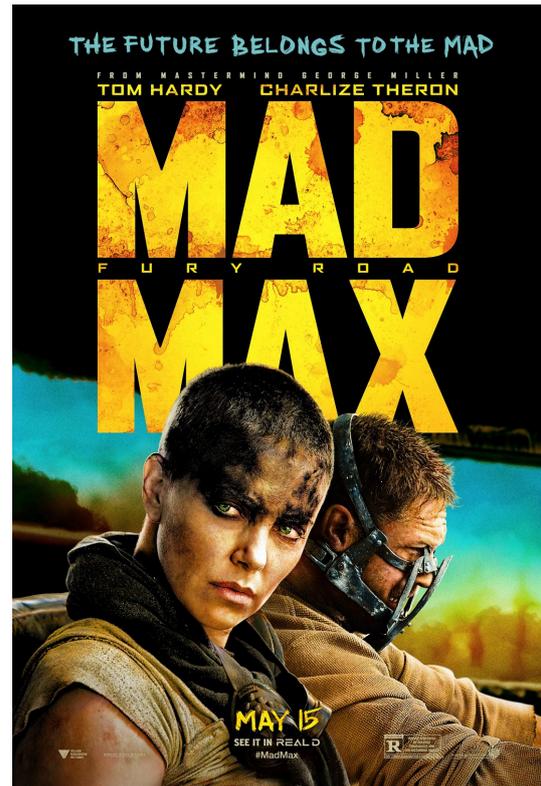


Figure 9: Mad Max: Fury Road, 2015 (Promotional Poster)

Ellis is correct in this respect; the videogames industry does try and explain its sexism away with far-fetched backstories and situations that make little sense once they are examined critically. What is worse is that there's often no need to eroticise female protagonists in order to garner popularity for the franchise. If Kojima had wanted to treat Quiet more like The End, putting her in a ghillie suit and shaving her head instead of putting her body on show then there's no reason to assume that fans would have rejected her as a sidekick to the player's avatar. In fact the science-fiction story telling of the *Metal Gear Solid* videogame franchise could quite reasonably be compared stylistically to the *Alien* movie franchise (although *Metal Gear Solid* doesn't deal with aliens, the narrative and style are somewhat reminiscent). Sigourney Weaver plays Warrant Officer Ripley in the *Alien* franchise – a strong female protagonist who feels no need to take her clothes off or be overtly erotic in order to capture the imagination and loyalty of heterosexual male fans. Indeed in *Alien*

3 Ripley even appears with her head shaved and still manages not to alienate her fans with a strong portrayal of masculine femininity (see Figure 8). In addition in 2015 the *Mad Max* franchise found success with Charlize Theron's portrayal of Imperator Furiosa, another protagonist that exhibited strong traditional masculine qualities including leadership and a shaved head (see Figure 9).



Figure 10: Metal Gear Solid V (Screen Captures)

Animated mannerisms within *Metal Gear Solid V* also reveal a certain gendered stereotype of how women might behave in a fantasy military situation. Often videogames contain random sets of animations that play if no input has been made to the game for some time. They are usually there simply to add colour to the world, or sometimes to encourage you to pick the controller back up and continue playing. Figure 10 shows a series of screen captures that activate if you make no input into the game while spending time with Quiet. These are overtly sexualised mannerisms – and they would be even if she were wearing more clothes. The implication is clear – these actions are those of a highly sexed character who is designed to be seen as a nymphomaniac, a woman who has abnormal and uncontrollable levels of sexual desire. The flaunting of her body, the showing of her breasts and crotch to the player character, and the coquettish looks she gives the camera forces the viewer to see her in a certain way. These vignettes are more reminiscent of pornography than any other form of reality, indeed If a woman behaved in this sexualised way in normal society she would be most likely be considered negatively by those around her.

This scene is particularly ‘flippant’, as Sarkeesian would suggest, when considered in the context of the Deepcut suicides (and numerous allegations of sexual assault) that are currently being relived in news reports in the UK twenty years after their occurrence.<sup>54</sup> If the popular entertainment media insist on showing poor stereotypes of female soldiers (and women in general) then

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<sup>54</sup> ‘The Secret Shame of the Barracks from Hell’, *The Independent* (15 January 2016) <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/deepcut-allegations-reveal-culture-of-cruelty-where-sexual-assaults-and-rape-were-widespread-at-army-a6815266.html> accessed on 10 March 2016.

how can we expect their ideology to involve treating women equally? Worryingly the Office for National Statistics released a report in 2015 revealing that 44% of people believed a woman was partially responsible for being sexually assaulted if she had been flirting previously with the perpetrator, with 9% believing she would be 'completely' or 'mostly' responsible for her assault.<sup>55</sup> If it was just one videogame that portrayed women this way then it would just be an abnormality, but this is such a regular occurrence within videogames that it has almost become a kind of background noise. We voraciously celebrate brilliant female protagonists in videogames who aren't portrayed as sexual objects because they are simply so rare.

It might seem indulgent to spend so much time talking about a female deuteragonist in a single videogame, but Quiet embodies many of the problematic elements that are found to a lesser degree in other videogames. Most female characters in other games will display some of the problematic traits of Quiet – they might be inappropriately dressed, have a backstory that promotes their vulnerability, or have overtly sexualised animations amongst other things. It's not that game designers shouldn't ever portray their female characters in this way, but rather that these things are too often the de facto way to present women in videogames. This is problematic because it treats women as if they only exist as these stereotypes, and if we take cultivation

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<sup>55</sup> 'Chapter 4: Violent Crime and Sexual Offences - Intimate Personal Violence and Serious Sexual Assault', *Office for National Statistics* (12 February 2015) <http://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/compendium/focusonviolentcrimeandsexualoffences/2015-02-12/chapter4violentcrimeandsexualoffencesintimatepersonalviolenceandserioussexualassault#attitudes-to-sexual-violence> accessed on 10 March 2016.

theory as our analysis methodology we can see that this is likely to have a detrimental affect on the way that women are treated both within the videogaming sub-culture and also in wider everyday life. Problematic language and sexual objectification in videogames undoubtedly contributes to the continuation of traditional roles and rigid gender-based stereotypes in wider society and this view is no different to the mainstream scholarship performed by feminist art historians regarding the way that women in art are viewed.

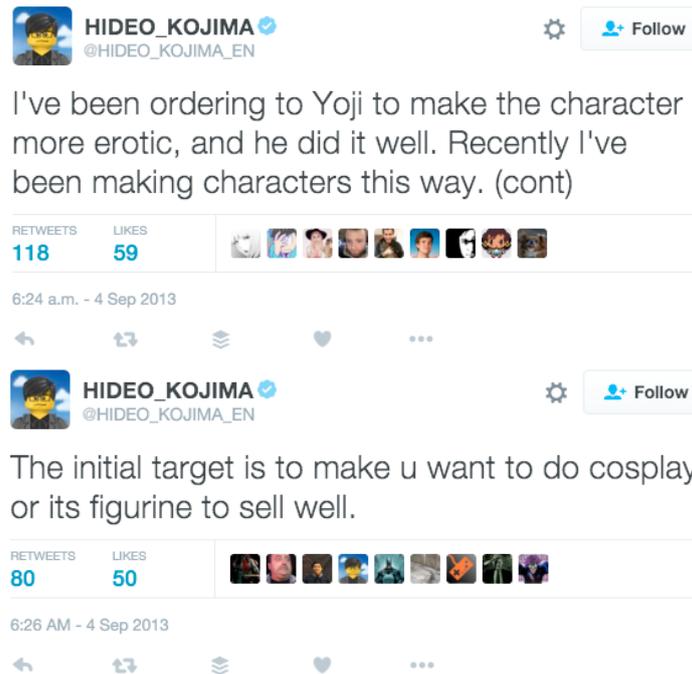


Figure 11: Tweets from Hideo Kojima's Twitter Feed (Screen Capture)

In the run up to *Metal Gear Solid V* being released, game designer Kojima revealed that he was trying to make the female characters in the game more erotic (see Figure 11). The justification behind this approach seemed to be that it makes the character more appealing for cosplayers to imitate, or for sales of merchandise.<sup>56</sup> Both of these arguments seem fine on the surface; cosplay is a huge area of economic growth in Japan, and has a large impact on the Japanese economy – it's logical for a videogames developer to be considering how they can monetise their game in cosplay circles. However actually these reasons are reflective of the casual sexism in wider society. For instance when it comes to cosplay, there's no requirement for a film, television, or videogame character to be 'sexy' or 'erotic' in order for a cosplayer to portray them this way.

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<sup>56</sup> Cosplay is short for 'costume play', which is a form of performance art that involves dressing up as characters from videogames, films, books, etc.



Figure 12: Greedo (right) from Star Wars Episode IV (Screen capture)



Figure 13: 'Sexy Greedo' by Corinne Alexandra (Cosplay / Photograph)

Take for example Corinne Alexandra's clever take on Greedo, the Rodian bounty hunter from *Star Wars: Episode IV - A New Hope* (see Figure 12 for the inspiration and Figure 13 for the finished cosplay costume). In a blog post written on her personal website Alexandra states 'The costume is meant to be funny, it's a play on the current sexualisation of Star Wars'.<sup>57</sup> Alexandra isn't wrong about the trend for sexualisation a cursory search on Google for terms such as 'sexy Wookiee cosplay' or 'sexy Stormtrooper' will reveal the endless creativity of fans when it comes to turning seemingly innocent characters in practical, non-revealing outfits into something extraordinarily sexualised. However the rest of Alexandra's blog post touches on a very serious subject; 'Women are not pieces of meat for your visual consumption. [. . .] You don't

<sup>57</sup> Corinne Alexandra, 'I Have More To Offer Than My Naked Body: A Rant About Sexism in Nerd Culture', *Stuck With Pins* (19 November 2013) <http://blog.stuckwithpins.com/2013/11/i-have-more-to-offer-than-my-naked-body-rant-about-sexism-in-nerd-culture.html> accessed on 21 February 2016.

suddenly gain authority over our bodies or permission to make comments about it simply because we choose to show it.<sup>58</sup> But while Alexandra makes a very worthwhile point about the objectification of women in Geek culture which is echoed on many other cosplay blogs, her words seem hollow due to the fact that her previous Star Wars creation was indeed a 'sexy Wookiee' Halloween costume - the very thing that she is apparently poking fun at in her Greedo cosplay.<sup>59</sup>

By eroticising a videogame character Kojima believes it will make more cosplayers want to imitate that character, which means more scantily-clad women at cosplay conventions. It seems easy to understand the motivation here (although I am making the assumption that Kojima is a heterosexual man), but what about the motivation behind selling more figurines – as he states is the other objective in his Twitter post. That would seem to depend on the notion that the fans of a videogame would prefer to buy an eroticised character's figurine over a non-eroticised character's figurine.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Corinne Alexandra, 'Chewie and Han', *Stuck With Pins* (27 October 2010) <http://blog.stuckwithpins.com/2010/10/chewie-and-han.html> accessed 21 February 2016.

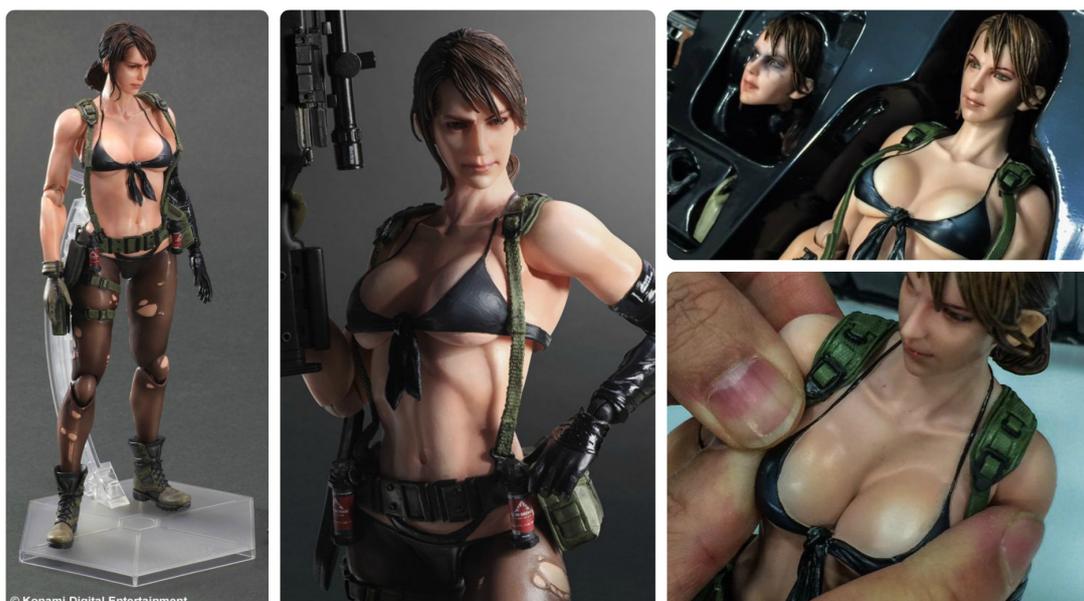


Figure 14: Quiet from Metal Gear Solid V (Action Figure / Photographs)

In May 2015 the pictures in Figure 14 of the yet to be released Quiet action figurine were revealed via the Twitter account of Kojima.<sup>60</sup> The highlight of the action figure for Kojima seemed to be that the breasts were moulded from a softer material that allowed them to be ‘pushed and lifted’. This isn’t the first time that this has happened in the world of action figurines – ‘Black Cat’ from the Marvel comic-book universe was moulded with extra large breasts that were also made from a softer material than the rest of the figure.<sup>61</sup> Apparently Kojima and his team decided that eroticised figurines would sell better than a non-eroticised version. The reasons you might need breasts that can be ‘pushed and lifted’ on an action figurine are beyond the scope of this paper.

While I pass no judgement on if someone would like to dress up as an eroticised videogame character, or even buy a figurine of them that has

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<sup>60</sup> Hideo Kojima, Twitter Post, May 11 2015 0758GMT, [https://twitter.com/HIDEO\\_KOJIMA\\_EN/status/597687270284468224?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/HIDEO_KOJIMA_EN/status/597687270284468224?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw) accessed on 11 March 2016.

<sup>61</sup> Michael Crawford, ‘Marvel Select Black Cat: Review of the Week’, *Captain Toy* (2003) [http://www.mwctoys.com/REVIEW\\_052103a.htm](http://www.mwctoys.com/REVIEW_052103a.htm) accessed on 10 March 2016.

squishy breasts, it does to me suggest that this trend is something that might be thought of as problematic when cultivation theory is considered. There is no similar pressure to eroticise male videogames characters. Indeed in Sarkeesian's 'Strategic Butt Coverings' episode of *Tropes vs Women in Video Games* we can see the lengths that many designers go to make their male characters as non-sexually objectified as possible.<sup>62</sup> It is also not considered that men would want to dress up as sexy male characters, nor that people would want to buy figurines of male characters that are eroticised in a sexually objectifying way. However male characters fit a different stereotype – they are the ones doing the objectifying. They are the ones that hold the male gaze, viewing characters like Quiet as sexual objects. Male characters are powerful, while female characters are vulnerable.<sup>63</sup>

Many would argue that videogames simply reflect the world around us, and we certainly do live in a world where women are encouraged to dress in a way that could be considered objectifying, and where men are not considered 'erotic' beings in mainstream society. However the other side of that argument is that videogames reinforce these particular worldviews, potentially making those who are exposed to them feel it is ok to continue stereotyping women and men in the same way that some videogames do.

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<sup>62</sup> Anita Sarkeesian, 'Strategic Butt Coverings', *Feminist Frequency* <http://feministfrequency.com/2016/01/19/strategic-butt-coverings/> accessed on 22 February 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Gerald Mast, Marshall Cohen, and Leo Braudy, 4th ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 746–57.

Kojima's comments about making videogames characters more erotic are particularly relevant because he is credited as the director, producer, writer, and game designer on the September 2015 release of *Metal Gear Solid V*. This game notably won 'Adventure Game of the Year' at the annual DICE Awards in February 2016, organised by the Academy of Interactive Arts and Science, implying that it must at least be a good example of what a great game should be like.<sup>64</sup> Arguably, to a feminist art historian, a game that sexually objectifies a main character to the extent that Quiet is objectified is at least problematic, if not an outright poor example of a game. However that raises the question as to what makes a videogame 'good' – is it gameplay, graphics, or an adherence to a set of liberal values?

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<sup>64</sup> Brian Crecente, 'Fallout 4 Named Game of the Year during DICE Awards', *Polygon* (19 February 2016) <http://www.polygon.com/2016/2/19/11057096/dice-award-winners-announced> accessed on 19 February 2016.

### Reinforcing the Bigender Paradigm

Examining new media forms for their attitudes to gender is more important than ever, however it does not go far enough. Feminist critique of gender representation in new media almost always leaves out those who do not fit into the bigender paradigm. Transgender and genderqueer people have been largely left out of videogames and this is a tendency that requires close examination as to the reasons why. It also introduces the way that self-identification with avatars can be problematic for many, with options not being given for those who fall anywhere outside of what the videogames industry considers 'normal'.

In most videogames the 'default' character is male. He is usually also Caucasian (or at least light-skinned) and assumed heterosexual (often due to a female love interest, or simply as a reflection that society at large is mostly heterosexual). John Berger said that 'The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe'<sup>65</sup> and this is true in the case of the original Pac-Man. We see a humanoid avatar with no gender accoutrements so therefore the player will usually assume he is male – a fact further backed up by the release of the Ms. Pac-Man game a year later.

The problematic aspect of having 'male' and 'female' characters is not that these characters and videogames exist, but rather that no other options exist. This strict adherence to the traditional Western gender binary reinforces that only male and female options exist and that everyone else is somehow not worthy of having avatars that represent them in videogames. As stated

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<sup>65</sup> John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC, 1990), 8.

previously similar arguments have been had over the inclusion of female protagonists in many AAA games, the most high profile of which was *Assasin's Creed Unity* where no female protagonist was offered in gameplay.<sup>66</sup>

Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk may claim that 'feminist art history is not a rigidly demarcated field of theory, but a continual debate about the relationship between gender, ideology, and culture',<sup>67</sup> but largely this seems like an ideological stance within feminist art criticism rather than one that is actually applied. Many feminist theorists reject the notion of intersectionality, the most famous of these working with art history is possibly Greer – already mentioned for comments about how men describe women in her seminal book 'The Female Eunuch'.<sup>68</sup> Greer set out her opinions on those who live outside of the bigender paradigm when she participated in the 'outing' of Rachael Padman, a transwoman who was elected to a fellowship at Newnham, Cambridge's last all-women college. Already a fellow of the college herself, Greer didn't make a secret of the fact that she was unhappy with a transwoman being elected into such a position. Padman's status as a transwoman was leaked to the national and international press, with the Daily Telegraph commenting 'there are plenty of mixed-sex colleges for distinguished mixed-sex physicists!'<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> LeJacq, 'Ubisoft Cut Plans'.

<sup>67</sup> Michael Hatt and Charlotte Klonk, *Art History: A Critical Introduction to Its Methods* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 150.

<sup>68</sup> Greer, *Eunuch*, 38.

<sup>69</sup> Rachael Padman, 'Rachael's Story', *University of Michigan* (2001) <http://ai.eecs.umich.edu/people/conway/TSSuccesses/RachaelPadman.html>, accessed on 14 January 2016.

Greer is not alone in her views, although most theorists don't express views that could be considered transphobic quite so openly. The vast majority of feminist scholarship, including within the discipline of art history, does not address those outside of the bigender paradigm. There are plenty of options for videogame developers to be more inclusive when it comes to those who lie outside of the bigender paradigm. For instance why can't a game like *Fallout 4* (2015) where you can choose between a male or female character as your avatar, allow the player to choose a male body with female pronouns and a female voice? Speech directed towards a character could even be recorded with gender-neutral language, which would cut production budgets. Does it really make a difference to most people if your character is addressed as 'they' within a videogame rather than 'he' or 'she'? Most players wouldn't even notice – but it could make a huge difference to those who find themselves regularly excluded from traditional gendered storytelling in videogames.

## Conclusion

The representation of women in videogames too often relies on poorly gendered stereotypes in order to generate characters. Female characters are often one dimensional and overtly sexual – often with the express purpose of providing male players with gratification. In other instances female characters rely solely on their male equivalent for their identity. It's doubtless that these negative stereotypes have at least in part led to a male-dominated sub-culture that rejects any attempt to examine the portrayal of women and gender in games. The reaction to this cultural criticism is often extreme, with threats of sexual violence against female academics, critics, and journalists looking to examine videogames as a creative medium.

This paper shows that feminist art history methodologies can be successfully applied to videogames as objects of art. The visuals, the stories, the characters, and the creators of the games can all be written about from a feminist ideology that would not be out of place in journals and text books about art history. However I believe that this paper has also shown that only using a feminist methodology is limiting, and does not do justice to the society that surrounds the sub-culture of videogames. Our society is more diverse than ever before and our critical and historical methodologies must reflect that change.

To examine new media using a multi-causal stance that presumes that there is no neutral view of history it take into consideration more than just the state of being male or female as it's starting point. Women are routinely left out of the history and theoretical examination of art – but so are those who don't fit

into the bigender paradigm, those who identify with sexualities other than heterosexual, those who are disabled, and those who have an ethnic background other than Western Caucasian.

Feminist art history is too often primarily concerned with the treatment of middle-class, white women from developed countries. It has become a tool of patriarchy in many ways – just another power structure that keeps other oppressed individuals under control. If we are to bring equality to videogames, art objects, and wider society then we need to take heed of Audre Lorde and her suggestion that ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’.<sup>70</sup> A new way of looking at works of art and writing art history must be formulated that doesn’t prioritise just women, but instead looks at the intersectionality between various other forms of systematic oppression that make up the societal kyriarchy.

I hope that this paper provides a platform for thinking further about both videogames as art and for the next set of art historical methodologies that will attempt to dismantle the previously constructed artistic canon. A new medium demands new approaches – and videogames are a medium that might be perfectly suited to bring about changes to art history in the twenty first century.

(Words: 10,244)

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<sup>70</sup> Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110.

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