

SURP Proposal: The Mediation of Gender and Gender Expectations in Role-Playing Video Games

Introduction: The History of Patriarchy in Video Games and Current Issues

Since the advent of language, stories have been a mainstay in the human experience. Narratives inform our biases and opinions both explicitly and implicitly, making the story's role in human upbringing across the world undeniable. In the late twentieth century, a new medium of storytelling arose, its appeal entering the global scene with the sound of a plumber descending into the depths of the Mushroom Kingdom through a pipe, or a green-clad hero traversing the plains of Hyrule to an all-familiar triumphant tune. Sharon R. Sherman suggests video games “[appropriate] . . . the folk narrative” (Sherman 249). Inevitably, the advent of this brand of video game fed into the cycle of generational story inheritance. As stated by Sherman, those from “Disney . . . to Nintendo game producers recreate[d] the themes most important to them from their own remembered childhood pasts” (246). Common features gleaned from these narratives include that of the hero, a vehicle through which the player can implement themselves in the game world (244). This revolutionized storytelling as not only is the player a witness to the events unfolding in the fictional world before them, but additionally they become direct participants.

Despite its popularity, issues arose. Sherman hypothesizes that the “mythic” video game “perpetuates gender stereotyping” (245), an unsurprising feat given video gaming's historically male-dominated base. One of the main issues in gaming for decades now has been the exclusion of non-cis het male voices, often to the detriment of various gender identities and sexualities. In her Digital America web article “The Male Domain: Exclusion of Women in Video Games,” Kayleigh Connor writes on the harassment of specifically women in online gaming spaces and highlights the commonality of young boys acting out these aggressions because of peer pressure. The maintenance of masculine spaces in the gaming world is top-down, for, as Sherman noted previously, the stories many gamers live through are gained through generational narrative inheritance, so to speak. Additionally, Connor emphasizes that only “11 percent of game designers and 3 percent of programmers are women,” therefore contributing to the patriarchal gatekeeping rampant in gaming media.

When inclusion is permitted, however, it has usually been regressive. There is a popular joke that while a man in fantasy video games is appropriately covered in armor, his female counterpart barely wears anything at all. In one 2012 study, it was found that women are only featured on a third of game box art, and even when they are, “61 percent of them were sexualized”¹. As stated previously in this introduction, this leads us to both the explicit and implicit ways stories (and, by association, advertisements) impact our perceptions of people in the world. The evidence points not just to gatekeeping in the video game genre, but also to a distortion of the human experience. Some boys’ and men’s greatest exposures to women are through sexualization, thus dehumanizing the feminine experience.

If we look at this issue of gatekeeping and objectification through an intersectional lens, we see patriarchal norms linger. In 2019, game studio CD Projekt RED cultivated controversy through the objectification of trans bodies in a promo for their developing game *Cyberpunk 2077*. While numerous fans offered their criticisms, the combatting voices of those defending the developer’s decision show a continually existing—if not thriving—transphobic sentiment in traditionally masculine spaces.

Despite their controversies, *Cyberpunk 2077* is nevertheless one in an increasing train of role-playing games that have attempted to be more inclusive to non-cis/het male players by permitting players to choose their playable character’s gender, sexuality, and—specifically to *Cyberpunk*—their genitalia. The efforts of *Cyberpunk 2077* to be inclusive highlight an ever-progressing shift in video game culture. As such, the role-playing video game genre has the potential to completely reject, or at least reshape, the patriarchal norms that have dominated the video game industry for decades.

Thesis:

With all that being said, the main question I wish to raise in my thesis is: how do games in the role-playing genre mediate gender and gender expectations? For indeed, while *Cyberpunk 2077* is an example worthy of eyebrow-raising given their insensitivities in some regards, other games, like BioWare’s *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* series, respectively, or Larian Studios’ *Divinity: Original Sin* series contribute to an increasing push by gamers and developers toward

¹ This study was done by Christopher Near and is cited in Kayleigh Connor’s “The Male Domain” article.

more inclusive modes of storytelling. The reason why RPGs are so unique is because the central component of these games is choice², namely the choice to determine the main outcomes in a game's story. Additionally, the concept of choice is also important in regards to the appearance, gender, and sexuality of the playable character (PC). For every bad guy defeated or politician persuaded, there is also a companion charmed or a friendship created.

Furthermore, choice in RPGs gains its in-game implementation mainly through dialogue options. In a game like *Mass Effect*, the player can choose usually between three dialogue options: one being polite (making your PC more 'paragon'), one neutral, and the other rude or stern (making your PC more 'renegade'). As such, research on writing gender in this thesis will be focused on the dialogue options characters are given in-game. By analyzing dialogue/dialogue outcomes both by the PC and by non-playable characters, or NPCs, I will extrapolate how game developers and writers handled the PC's reception by NPCs on the basis of their gender, sexuality, and potentially their race. The goal of this practice will be to examine how a game handles gender in its writing. Furthermore, there will be room for criticism in this thesis, namely the historical and continued exclusion of trans and nonbinary identities for the PC, the potential trivialization of race and gender-based experiences, and society's idea of what gender-neutral writing is.

Through my research, I hope to better understand nontraditional forms of storytelling, how stories impact a community, how patriarchy informs the stories we tell, and finally how patriarchy can be subverted by RPGs. This research is important because I can better understand ways in which western patriarchal standards influence communities through storytelling. In addition, I can acquaint myself with ways storytelling mediums like RPGs successfully subvert these limiting standards and I can also learn from their failures. Furthermore, as an English major, trying to interpret literature through an untraditional medium like video gaming will be a challenging exercise that will ultimately enhance my critical thinking skills. I firmly believe that researching gender in RPGs will enhance my own ideas of storytelling and patriarchy and I hope to add to the literature that will inform my work.

² Kayleigh Connor writes on choice in her article, though more in reference to "forceful . . . objectification."

Research Approach:

As this is a project concerned with several different fields, I will be dividing my research according to schools of study. The most important for this project will be literature on video games and gender specifically. With my mentor's help, I have narrowed down my beginning research to the following: Shira Chess's *Ready Player Two* and *Play like a Feminist*; a collection of essays in the book *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*; and the *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* series comprised of various essays. I will place particular emphasis in my research on the books that deal with intersectional feminism. Of course, these are just starting points and my reading list will grow through the summer.

The previous texts will help me build a foundation with which I can analyze both literature on and the actual writing in video games themselves. This brings us to the next area of study I will look to in my research, which is literature on specific game series. I will look at scholarly articles on gender in the *Mass Effect* trilogy, *Dragon Age* series, *Cyberpunk 2077*, and the *Baldur's Gate* series in an effort to expand my understanding on previous research on these games. Looking at articles on these games will aid my research in two ways: firstly, it will further acquaint me with research that has already informed the topics I wish to analyze and secondly, it will help me narrow down which of the aforementioned games I will devote to intensive study.

This takes us to the next aspect of my research: playing the games themselves. As was just said, once I have compiled enough foundational research from the sources above, I will narrow down one of the aforementioned game series to play through for my analysis. My goal with playing a game/game series is to examine the dialogue options, story beats, and reception of the PC by NPCs. The preliminary research I will be conducting prior to studying a game is vital because it will help me eliminate those options that will not offer the greatest substance for my thesis. As such, this phase of my research will take place in July or August so I am given ample time earlier in the summer to collect foundational knowledge.

Because I am seeking an honorary award, I am not requesting any funding.

Schedule and Responsibilities:

June Session: June 10-June 21:

- Research 5 days a week
- Regularly consult with mentor
- End of June Session: Compile notes and categorize into relevant groups

[JUNE 22-JULY 6 = VACATION]

- Will research when time permits, likely will bring book(s) for plane/intermittent travel

July Session:

- Research 5 days a week
- Regularly consult with mentor
- Finalize what specific game series will be played for intensive research
- End of July Session: Compile notes and categorize into relevant groups, resort notes from previous session if necessary

August Session:

- Research 4-5 days a week
- Regularly consult with mentor
- End of August Session: Compile notes and categorize into relevant groups, resort notes from previous session if necessary

September Session:

- Research 4-5 days a week
- Regularly consult with mentor
- End of September Session (week before school begins): Compile notes and categorize into relevant groups, resort notes from previous session if necessary
 - o Review entirety of notes, possibly write reflection essay

Works Cited and Informing References

- Connor, Kayleigh. "The Male Domain: Exclusion of Women in Video Games." *Digital America*, <https://www.digitalamerica.org/the-male-domain-exclusion-of-women-in-video-games-kayleigh-connor/>.
- Doty, Gene. "A Toss of the Dice: Writers, Readers, and Role-Playing Games." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 14, no. 1 (53), [Brian Attebery, as Editor, for the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts], 2003, pp. 51–67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43321454>.
- Przybylski, Andrew K., et al. "The Ideal Self at Play: The Appeal of Video Games That Let You Be All You Can Be." *Psychological Science*, vol. 23, no. 1, Sage Publications, Inc., 2012, pp. 69–76, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41416995>.
- Rattan, Aneeta, et al. "Tackling the Underrepresentation of Women in Media." *Harvard Business Review*, 6 June 2019, <https://hbr.org/2019/06/tackling-the-underrepresentation-of-women-in-media#:~:text=and%20perpetuate...- ,Around%20the%20world%2C%20women%20are%20far%20less%20likely%20than%20men,of%20reporters%20telling%20stories%20globally>.
- Sherman, Sharon R. "Perils of the Princess: Gender and Genre in Video Games." *Western Folklore*, vol. 56, no. 3/4, Western States Folklore Society, 1997, pp. 243–58, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1500277>.
- Tardini, Stefano, and Lorenzo Cantoni. "A semiotic approach to online communities: Belonging, interest and identity in websites' and video games' communities." *Proceedings of the IADIS International Conference e-Society*. 2005.
- Waskul, Dennis, and Matt Lust. "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and

Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing.” *Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 27, no. 3, [Wiley, Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction], 2004, pp. 333–56,
<https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.3.333>.