



The Rise of Complex Female Protagonists: The Portrayal and Reception of Female Characters in a Post-GamerGate Gaming Industry

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The Rise of Complex Female Protagonists:

**The Portrayal and Reception of Female Characters in a
Post-GamerGate Gaming Industry**

Morgane Dugué

Sous la direction de Anaïs Le Fèvre-Berthelot

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Introduction

Literature Review

In the chapter “Où passe le genre ? Les jeux vidéos au prisme des théories féministes du cinéma” from *Genre et Jeux Vidéos*, Mathieu Triclot applies Laura Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze to talk about female characters in video games.¹ This theory that was firstly associated with film studies is here applied to video games, creating a bridge between the two media by comparing them and comparing how gender roles are portrayed in both. Mulvey’s theory, formulated in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) is based on the fact that gendered representations on-screen are rooted in patriarchy. She explains that the world of cinema is dominated by men and therefore most films are made from men’s perspective, this is how she theorized *the male gaze*. This “male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly.”² Mulvey theorizes that the male gaze is what objectifies women onscreen and deprives them of depth and actual storylines. It is what creates the popular dynamic between the passive, sexualized woman and the active, strong male protagonist.³ Men are rarely sexualized the way women are because the targeted audience is male, therefore the male protagonist is a receptacle made for the viewer to project on. “As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.”⁴ Using a theory from film studies on video games is not incongruous, as both media share some similarities.⁵ By observing how gender is represented within games, Triclot transposes Mulvey’s male gaze theory to video games, underlining the fact that the industry of video games is male-dominated and sexist. “From production to consumption and including the figuration and different cultural forms produced, video gaming looks like a medium marked by sexism on every front, produced mainly by men for men.”⁶ He talks about a “dissymmetry

¹ Mathieu Triclot, “Où passe le genre ? Les jeux vidéos au prisme des théories féministes du cinéma,” in *Genre et Jeux Vidéos* (Presses universitaires du Midi, 2015), p.19.

² Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), p.11.

³ Ibid, pp.11-12.

⁴ Ibid, p.12.

⁵ Guillaume Roux-Girard, “Video Games through Theories and Disciplines,” in *The Video Game Theory Reader* 2 (New York: Routledge, 2009), p.350; Triclot, “Où passe le genre ?” p.25.

⁶ Triclot, “Où passe le genre ?” pp.19-20. My translation, original quote: “De la production à la consommation en passant par la figuration et les différentes formes culturelles produites, le jeu vidéo apparaît comme un médium marqué par le sexisme à tous les étages, produit en grande majorité par des hommes pour des hommes.”

of roles”⁷ between genders. Triclot aims to show how important the prism of gender is in game studies (as it is often overlooked even though it is a highly gendered media.) Applying Mulvey’s male gaze theory, Triclot explains how gender roles and patriarchy are maintained “via psychological mechanisms of identification and imitation,”⁸ which are only amplified by the interactive nature of video games.

Similarly, Drenten, Harrison, and Pendarvis present gaming as a highly gendered milieu in every aspect: the industry/marketing, the game content, and the players. “Understanding the significance and role of gender in the gaming subculture is imperative in gaming research.”⁹ For each aspect of gaming, they present an array of research and studies made on the subject, thus establishing a hint of a literature review on gender studies regarding video games, and even suggesting research questions for further studies on the matter. They privilege a cultural approach to the gaming subculture to understand how gender dynamics manifest. “[E]xploring the gendered gaming marketplace (e.g., shopping, advertising), and investigating the systemic, structural, and cultural underpinnings of gaming”¹⁰ are potential leads to look at for research on gaming. The influence of the industry and marketing on the gendering of the gaming experience is a subject I will tackle in this thesis.

The place of women in the gaming world has been debated for decades and started to be studied in the 1990s. Whether it is as gamers, developers, or characters, the struggle to legitimize women’s presence in the video game industry has been the subject of numerous studies. The first noticeable focus on women as a target audience is the Girls’ Game Movement (GGM). As Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins explain in “Chess For Girls? Feminism and Computer Games”, “[t]he “girls’ games” movement has emerged from an unusual and highly unstable alliance between feminist activists (who want to change the “gendering” of digital technology) and industry leaders (who want to create a girls’ market for their games).”¹¹ Until the GGM, the industry created video games with solely boys in mind and therefore did not consider girls as a target audience.¹² The Girls’ Game Movement aimed to change that by conducting numerous studies in order to find out why girls did not play

⁷ Ibid, p.25. My translation, original quote: “dissymetrie des rôles”

⁸ Ibid, p.24. My translation, original quote: “via des mécanismes psychiques d’identification et d’imitation.”

⁹ Jenna Drenten, Robert. L Harrison, and Nicholas. J Pendarvis, “Video Gaming as a Gendered Pursuit,” in *Handbook of Research on Gender and Marketing*, ed. Susan Dobscha (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, (2019), p.28.

¹⁰ Ibid, p.40.

¹¹ Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, “Chess For Girls? Feminism and Computer Games,” in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, The MIT Press, 1998, p.4.

¹² Ibid, p.5.

games as much as boys, what kind of games they played or wanted to play, and if there was a potential for a whole new market. Games like *Barbie Fashion Designer* (Digital Domain, 1996) or *Chop Suey* (Magnet Interactive Studios, 1995) were the first to put girls at the center of the stage, albeit in a very stereotypical way. In pink and purple packaging, girls could find games featuring female protagonists, with plots revolving around clothes, makeup, and boys, with very little action and no violence – as it was not considered “girly.”¹³ However, the movement was criticized for deepening the gender divide in the industry and cementing the already existing gender stereotypes in video games. As professor of critical studies Marsha Kinder puts it in an interview in the book *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, it is a self-fulfilling prophecy: children’s tastes are for the most part socially constructed and therefore not due to biological distinctions, but to the gendered expectations that parents, teachers, or even advertisements instill in them.¹⁴ Kinder criticizes the essentialist nature of the Girls’ Game Movement’s studies and market researches, as “[a]ll you are testing is how effectively kids have absorbed these cultural binaries of gender.”¹⁵ The Girls’ Game Movement failed to see that, hence why it was short-lived. However, it succeeded in putting the spotlight on girls as potential gamers and programmers since gaming can be a gateway to technology-related fields, “[t]he relationship between boys’ comparatively higher interest in computer games and their comparatively larger representation in high-power computer jobs is not accidental.”¹⁶

Gendered representations are not limited to game content only. The way games are marketed is supposed to reflect what is in the actual game. Therefore if women are absent or sexualized in marketing materials, the same is to be expected from the game itself. Video game covers and merchandising like video game-related magazines were used in several studies in order to analyze the lack of women or their sexualized depiction in gaming content. In 2007, Melinda C. R. Burgess, Steven Paul Stermer, and Stephen R. Burgess studied 225 console (Xbox, PlayStation 2 and Nintendo Gamecube) video game covers to see how men and women were portrayed. As covers are generally the first thing players see about the game, their impact and influence are not to be neglected. “[A] cover can provide a powerful first impression of what the game may contain. If female characters are consistently negatively portrayed on the covers, female gamers may not bother going beyond the cover while males

¹³ Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, “Chess For Girls?” p.19.

¹⁴ Kinder, Marsha. “An Interview with Marsha Kinder,” in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, The MIT Press, 1998, p.225.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.226.

¹⁶ Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins, “Chess For Girls?” p.11.

may see this as an inducement.”¹⁷ The authors’ findings on video game box covers demonstrate that men take up the majority of space:

Male characters were almost four times more frequently portrayed than female characters and were given significantly more game relevant action. However, in spite of their less frequent appearance, female characters were more likely to be portrayed with exaggerated, and often objectified, sexiness.¹⁸

Another interesting finding from this study is how female protagonists almost always have to share the cover with a male counterpart and are not represented in an equal manner whereas the other way around is rare. “Even with a primary female character, the presence of a primary male implied that the female was only allowed to be an important part of the game because the male was there with her. The male could serve as protector, guide, or actually perform most of the action while the female serves as a sidekick.”¹⁹ This issue will have some relevance regarding my objects of study’s female characters’ treatment during the marketing campaign (namely Ellie for *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) as well as Evie and Kassandra from *Assassin’s Creed* (Ubisoft, 2015; 2018)). Of course, focusing only on the cover of the game to analyze its content seems to rather limit the perspective of the study, but the cover has a crucial role in the marketing of a game, as it is “the only content to which nearly all buyers and potential buyers are exposed, and thus seems the most likely to widely influence sales.”²⁰

Similarly to Burgess et al, Christopher E. Near studied the portrayal of men and women on video game covers. His study aimed to find out if the way women were depicted, or their absence on covers could influence game sales, as it is a common assumption of the video game industry that women would not sell. “[I]f publishers believe that the marginalization or sexualization of women in games and their box art will improve sales to their target audience, they will emphasize such portrayals, and so the prevalence of these portrayals will persist.”²¹ Using a sample of 399 games, Near coded six traits to analyze the covers and their gendered portrayal. The result of this study showed that 47% of the covers showed men exclusively versus 7% for women.²² Near’s study also showed that the

¹⁷ Burgess et al, “Sex, Lies, and Video Games: The Portrayal of Male and Female Characters on Video Game Covers,” *Sex Roles* 57, no. 5 (2007), p.421.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.419.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.425.

²⁰ Christopher E. Near, “Selling Gender: Associations of Box Art Representation of Female Characters With Sales for Teen- and Mature-Rated Video Games,” *Sex Roles* 68, no. 3–4 (2013), p.254.

²¹ Ibid, p.255.

²² Ibid, p.259.

sexualization of female characters was not the detrimental factor in marketing a “successful” game, but their marginalization. “[S]exualized female characters were positively associated with sales only when they were also marginal—that is, not central in the box art depiction. Female characters that assumed a central position were negatively associated with sales, regardless of whether they were sexualized.”²³

The findings of this study confirm how male-centered the video gaming industry really is, by trying to profit off of the exclusion of women. “[T]he absence of female characters or their depiction as sexualized and powerless help to maintain this gendered space, both by preserving an association between masculinity and privilege and by deterring “invasion” of the space by female players.”²⁴ The studios’ choices related to the depiction of female characters in promotional content will feed the player’s expectations of what the actual game content is. Hence why it is interesting to see how these representations affect the characters’ reception as “male gamers are often looking for a masculinized space in which the politically correct views of society at large need not be voiced.”²⁵

Now, the disruption or affirmation of this expected male-only space created by the game marketing occurs when analyzing the content of the games. The stereotyped representation of men and women in video games has also been subject to numerous studies and criticism. One of the first studies on the matter was made by Tracy L. Dietz in 1998. Dietz examines how gender roles and violence are portrayed in video games aimed at young people. She hypothesizes that the stereotypical gender roles presented in video games could influence the children playing them – mostly by interiorizing these gendered roles and apply them in real life – echoing Marsha Kinder’s interview. Her study rested on a sample of 33 of the most popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis video games of the time. Her study revealed that “traditional gender roles and violence are central to many games in the sample. There were no female characters in 41% of the games with characters. In 28% of these, women were portrayed as sex objects.”²⁶ If this absence of women in the video game landscape can be shocking, the way they are portrayed when present is not any better. Dietz also found common tropes surrounding the female characters depicted in these games. The most common

²³ Ibid, p.262.

²⁴ Ibid, p.255.

²⁵ Ibid, p.256.

²⁶ Tracy L. Dietz, “An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior,” *Sex Roles* 38 (1998): p.425.

was “the woman as the victim or as the proverbial ‘Damsel in Distress.’”²⁷ When she was not the victim, she was sexualized (sometimes both). They are portrayed as “visions of beauty with large breasts and thin hips.”²⁸ And if women were depicted heroically, they were “often depicted as subordinate to male characters or [are] presented in terms of their sexuality.”²⁹ These results seem to coincide with Burgess et al.’s study on video games box covers, making the advertisement faithful to the games’ content.

From 2013 to 2017, feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian expanded on this idea of tropes in her series of *Youtube* videos “Tropes vs Women in Video Games” for *Feminist Frequency*. In this series, Sarkeesian analyzes the common patterns found in video games regarding female characters, and how they reinforce harmful sexist stereotypes. Sarkeesian’s list of tropes will be used in this thesis to examine the storylines from *The Last of Us* and *Assassin’s Creed* to find out if the female characters fall into these tropes or subvert them. The tropes in question are “The Damsel in Distress”, “Ms. Male Character”, “The Woman in Refrigerator”, “Women as Background Decoration”, “Women as Reward”, “Sinister Seductress” and “The Lady Sidekick”.³⁰

Expanding on the idea of sexualization, Downs and Smith conducted a content analysis in 2010 on characters from 60 different console video games. They underline the importance of positive gender representation in media, especially video games, as it could “create or strengthen cognitive scripts about gender roles and sexual objectification.”³¹ Their study aimed to find out if male and female characters were equally represented and if they were sexually depicted in the same way. They examined “sexually revealing clothing, nudity, unrealistic body proportions, appropriateness of attire, breast size, and waist size.”³² Hypersexuality is synonymous with “overtly sexualized characters.”³³ This includes outfits that were revealing or inappropriate for the context (e.g: a female character fighting with an attire barely covering or protecting her body) or unrealistic body proportions to accentuate certain parts such as breasts or buttock. They also underline the fact that women are not the

²⁷ Ibid, p.434.

²⁸ Ibid, p.435.

²⁹ Ibid, p.438.

³⁰ All these tropes are explored and explained in Anita Sarkeesian’s series “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games”. They can be found on *YouTube* or on the website of *Feminist Frequency*. <https://feministfrequency.com/series/tropes-vs-women-in-video-games/> They will be defined again in the second part of this thesis.

³¹ Edward Downs and Stacy L. Smith, “Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis,” *Sex Roles* 62, no. 11 (2010), p.721.

³² Ibid, p.721.

³³ Ibid, p.722.

only victims of hypersexualization or unrealistic body representations. “Portrayals of muscle-bound men may also set standards for male gamers. Such depictions may contribute to body dissatisfaction among some men, as well as such risky behaviors as steroid use.”³⁴ The results of their research are in line with Dietz’s, despite the twelve-year difference between the two studies. Out of the 489 characters identified in the video games used for the study, only 70 were female. This underrepresentation is coupled with the fact that “[w]omen (43%) were ten times more likely to be shown nude (partial or full) than males (4%).”³⁵ Downs and Smith argue that this representation might be a choice made by the industry as it still “recognizes the 30-year-old male as one of its primary consumers”³⁶ and thus objectifies women to appeal to them.

A study published in 2016 aimed to look at how female characters in video games evolved in the last 31 years. Lynch and al’s aim was to look at social responses to the misrepresentation of women in games and the difficulties they faced as developers and see if it influenced their portrayals in-game.³⁷ They analyzed gameplay footage found on *YouTube* of 571 video games published from 1983 to 2014, all featuring playable female characters. The results showed that the sexualization of playable female characters fluctuated over time. Female protagonists from 1983 to 1990 and from 2007 to 2014 were less sexualized than protagonists from games released from 1991 to 2006, indicating a slight decrease in the hypersexualization of female protagonists in recent games.³⁸ Despite this result, women were less likely to be primary characters over time. Games from 1983 to 1990 showed that 52,3% of the sampled games featured a primary female character, whereas games from 2007 to 2014 showed 41,7%.³⁹ Nevertheless, the study seemed to show “a pattern of change in sexualization over time that indicates the industry may be reacting to its critics.”⁴⁰ This change is also coupled with the fact that more women are joining the industry since 1983, and thus “have shaped the portrayals of female characters.”⁴¹

A character’s role in the game also seems to impact the way they are represented, hence my choice to focus on playable female characters and especially protagonists. Jansz and

³⁴ Ibid, p.722.

³⁵ Ibid, p.729.

³⁶ Ibid, p.731.

³⁷ Teresa Lynch et al., “Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years: Female Game Characters across 31 Years,” *Journal of Communication* 66 (2016), p.565.

³⁸ Ibid, p.573.

³⁹ Ibid, p.574.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.576.

⁴¹ Ibid, p.576.

Martis observe the emergence of strong female characters in video games, something they call “The Lara Phenomenon” (a reference to Lara Croft, the first female protagonist to have her very own franchise, *Tomb Raider*).⁴² Through a content analysis of 12 contemporary video games, they found out that “female characters appeared as often in leading parts as male characters”⁴³ albeit more sexualized. The “Lara Phenomenon” implied that “a competent female character in a dominant position”⁴⁴ could exist, as long as she was designed for the male gaze, and thus did not threaten the masculine coding of the gaming space. Of the 12 games studied, 6 had a female protagonist.⁴⁵ Their study also focused on racial diversity, as characters in video games thus far have been predominantly white. This intersectionality in the in-game misrepresentation of women, people of color and minorities such as the LGBT community also stems from the fact that the target audience is supposedly straight white men.

Expanding on the importance of having women in leading roles, a research made in 2014 established that female protagonists or “lead characters”⁴⁶ were presented differently than “support characters”. In her thesis, Paulina Rajkowska aimed to “see whether all the representations within that group [women] are equal.”⁴⁷ Even though I will not focus on secondary characters, my approach is similar to hers in terms of the choice of material:

This paper will only focus on the video games created or marketed for western audiences. Furthermore it will only study games of so called AAA quality. AAA games are high quality productions, created by major game developers with intense marketing programs. Furthermore, they are released by well established companies that to large extent define the current game market. They are considered top of the line and as such usually procure the largest audience and high return of investment.⁴⁸

Using qualitative content analysis on 22 different games, Rajkowska concluded that there is a significant difference in the way women are represented depending on their role in the story. “Lead characters are more likely to be strong, independent and self-sufficient whereas support characters most often require immediate help, are dependent on others and are more likely to be abused.”⁴⁹ The reason why leading roles might be more fleshed out and less stereotyped than supporting characters is to make the character more appealing to the players. But then,

⁴² Jeroen Jansz and Raynel G. Martis, “The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games,” *Sex Roles* 56, no. 3 (2007), p.141.

⁴³ Ibid, p.141.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p.141.

⁴⁵ Ibid, p.147.

⁴⁶ Paulina Ewa Rajkowska, “Roles of Female Video Game Characters and Their Impact on Gender Representation.” (Uppsala, Uppsala University, 2014), p.25.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.26.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.28.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.4.

non-playable female characters are still subject to sexism, contrary to their male counterparts. Now it might be interesting to see what kind of role the female protagonists are relegated to in order to appeal to players. Are the studios making them assume traditionally “male roles” to compensate for the fact that they are women (and therefore not marketable) to be liked by the alleged majority that is male players? Does a female protagonist only need to be strong, independent, and fierce to be liked?

Given the highly interactive and immersive nature of video games, I think it is more relevant to talk about identification rather than appreciation when it comes to studying the player reception of video game characters. In “Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences With Media Characters”, Jonathan Cohen distinguishes identification from other forms of audience reactions to fictional characters such as parasocial interaction, liking/similarity/affinity, and imitation which were often interchangeable in previous studies on identification.⁵⁰ “Within media studies, identification with media characters has generally been understood to denote feelings of affinity, friendship, similarity, and liking of media characters or imitation of a character by audience members.”⁵¹ He defines it as “a process that consists of increasing loss of self-awareness and its temporary replacement with heightened emotional and cognitive connections with a character” and “a response to textual features that are intended to provoke identification.”⁵² He distinguishes between identification with real people and media characters since – according to him – identification with media characters is something that is carefully crafted by people creating the characters:

Unlike identification with parents, leaders, or nations, identification with media characters is a result of a carefully constructed situation. Thus, media studies of identification must account for the production of identification targets as well as the identification of audiences with them.⁵³

Based on such information, one can wonder if the studios’ thought process is based on the premise that gamers are primarily men (perhaps because the industry is dominated by men) and thus not capable of looking past the gender of the character they are supposed to play as and restrain the process of “losing self-awareness” necessary for identification. Cohen’s

⁵⁰ Cohen, Jonathan. “Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences With Media Characters,” *Mass Communication and Society* 4, no. 3 (2001), p.253.

⁵¹ Ibid, p.249.

⁵² Ibid, p.251.

⁵³ Ibid, p.251.

method to measure the process of identification with a sample of female protagonists from the games I selected could be used in an online survey to test this theory.

In “The Female Video Game Player-Character Persona and Emotional Attachment” Burgess and Jones focus on player-character relationship and attachment. Using online qualitative survey questions on the game’s ‘subreddit’, Burgess and Jones examine how players react to female protagonist Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017). Previous studies on the avatar/player relationship tended to focus more on massive multiplayer online video games (MMOs) which is why I found it interesting to have a closer look at single-player games. In such games, the main character mostly has their own personality and backstory and the player has little to no say in it. Burgess and Jones’ choice to study players’ reactions to Aloy in *Horizon Zero Dawn* stems from the same interest. “[M]uch of the Persona Studies’ research has examined massive multiplayer online video games (MMOs), instead of single-player games in which players control and merge their identity with a PC [playable character] and where personality and character are designed by the video game developer, rather than the player.”⁵⁴ They highlight the lack of women-led franchises like *Tomb Raider* or *Horizon* since female protagonists in AAA games are more common in sequels and spin-offs, citing *The Last of Us* as an example.⁵⁵ The *Assassin’s Creed* franchise is also cited among examples of franchises exhibiting reluctance to have women as protagonists since they still include a male option “because they believed that male players would not want to play as a female.”⁵⁶ *The Last of Us* and *Assassin’s Creed* being my objects of study, the issues raised by Burgess and Jones are going to be dealt with more in-depth in this thesis. 120 respondents completed Burgess and Jones’ survey on *Reddit* and they concluded that the fact that Aloy was a woman did not keep the players from being immersed in the game.

In contrast to industry concerns that male players would not enjoy playing as a female PC, participants found Aloy a compelling and enjoyable character through which to explore the gameworld of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, even though the majority of respondents self-identified as a different gender to her.⁵⁷

Coincidentally, when starting to work on this study, I thought about working on *Horizon Zero Dawn* as well, also using *Reddit* as a platform to gather data. However, I think Burgess and

⁵⁴ Jacqueline Burgess and Christian Jones, “The Female Video Game Player-Character Persona and Emotional Attachment,” *Persona Studies* 6, no. 2 (2020), p.7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.10.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.10.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p.16.

Jones' work is self-sufficient. They successfully showed that contrary to the industry's beliefs, the gender difference between player and protagonist was inconsequential to the process of identification or attachment, and this even though the character has a distinct personality and is non-customizable.⁵⁸ However, one game is – I believe – not enough to illustrate the complex gender dynamics happening between the gaming industry and players. The games I chose are also cited by Burgess and Jones to illustrate the industry's limitations when it comes to women as protagonists, which I will elaborate on further in this thesis.

In "Life Is Strange: A Mediated Game Reception Analysis", Leili Mänder examines "the players' meaning-making processes from a gender perspective"⁵⁹ using *YouTube* game recordings (or Let's Play videos) of the game *Life is Strange* (Square Enix, 2015) as an example.⁶⁰ Using specific scenes of the game for analysis, she used six Let's Play videos for her study in order to see the players' reactions as they played the game. *Life is Strange* is a narrative game in which players can make choices that will influence the story and outcome of the game, like *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. Mänder observed meaning-making processes around *Life is Strange* that are "littered with gender discourse."⁶¹

Several players express frustration with the conditioned choices and play mechanics in the game which reflect a female positioning. [...] Some non-male players seemed used to reflect upon the consequences of their actions, and some male players were not at all.⁶²

Contrary to the games I selected, *Life is Strange*, due to its setting and protagonist (a teenage girl in high school), often requires non-violent ways to solve conflicts. This takes me back to my question of whether or not studios purposefully create female protagonists assuming "male-coded" roles in order to be liked. Mänder's method of analyzing potential gendered discourse during Let's Play videos is something I wanted to try with this thesis to analyze a possible gendered reception of female characters from *The Last of Us* and *Assassin's Creed* franchises. However, I discarded the idea due to the lack of material on the games I selected for my research. There were either not enough Let's Play videos available online or they did

⁵⁸ Ibid p.17.

⁵⁹ Mänder, Leili. "Life Is Strange: A Mediated Game Reception Analysis" (Stockholm, Stockholm University, 2017), p.3.

⁶⁰ Let's Play videos are a type of video content commonly found on platforms like *YouTube* and *Twitch*. In a Let's Play video, the creator records themselves playing a video game while providing commentary, reactions, and sometimes even live interaction with their audience.

⁶¹ Mänder, "Life Is Strange: A Mediated Game Reception Analysis", p.37.

⁶² Ibid, p.37.

not cover the entire game which made it difficult to constitute a good corpus out of it for every game.

In conclusion, this review of the literature shows that women's presence in video games is prey to a vicious circle. Women's interest in video games could spur from the presence of strong female protagonists, but representation exempt from the male gaze can only be achieved if women are involved in the process of making games. However, women are excluded from these spaces early on, limiting their access to, and interest in the medium. This led to the prevalence of stereotypical gender representation and hypersexualized female characters. The industry's role in shaping the gaming space as masculine is not to be neglected and might also add some weight to the difficulty of bringing forwards female protagonists exempt from the male gaze. Numerous studies combining qualitative or quantitative methods have been made these past two decades focusing on gender and showed a slightly positive evolution for women. But these changes are rather slow and meager considering women make up 48% of video gamers in 2022 in the United States⁶³ but only 30% of women and 8% of non-binary people are game developers in 2021 internationally.⁶⁴ There was no clear data regarding only the United States, but the *Developer Satisfaction Survey* reported that half the respondents from the survey were from northern America, underlining a "Western bias in terms of ethnicity"⁶⁵ when it came to game development. "Half of the respondents worked in the US (39%) or Canada (12%), followed by 35% who worked in Europe (including the UK) and 6% who worked in Oceania (mostly Australia)."⁶⁶

⁶³ Entertainment Software Association (2022). *Essential facts about the computer and video game industry*, <https://www.thesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/2022-Essential-Facts-About-the-Video-Game-Industry.pdf>.

⁶⁴ International Game Developers Association (2022). *Developer Satisfaction Survey*, https://igda-website.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/15161607/IGDA-DSS-2021-Diversity-Report_Final.pdf.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.11

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.11

Corpus presentation

For this study focusing on female protagonists, I selected games from two high-grossing franchises, *The Last of Us* and *Assassin's Creed*. Each game features at least one female protagonist and was released in the last ten years, thus encompassing the GamerGate, a period during which gender discourses took place in the gaming world. Both franchises are popular amongst gamers and have an active fanbase on social media, making it easier to access and collect people's opinions on them. The games selected are *The Last of Us* (2013), *The Last of Us Part II* (2020), *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015), and *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018).⁶⁷

The Last of Us, developed by the Naughty Dog studio, came out on *PlayStation 3* in June 2013. It was released once again for *PlayStation 4* in July 2014 including the extension, *The Last of Us: Left Behind* which was released earlier that year. It is not a sequel to the first game, but follows some of its events from Ellie's perspective, showing scenes players did not get to see in *The Last of Us*. The sequel and second installment of the games, *The Last of Us: Part II*, also developed by Naughty Dog, came out in June 2020 on *PlayStation 4*. They both are action-adventure survival horror games played from a third-person perspective. *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, developed by Ubisoft Québec, came out in October 2015 for *PlayStation 4* and *Xbox One*, and in November 2015 for *Windows*. It is the ninth major installment in the *Assassin's Creed* series and also an action-adventure game in a third-person perspective. It is the first main game of the series to feature a playable female protagonist.⁶⁸ *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, also developed by Ubisoft Québec, is the eleventh installment of the series. It came out in October 2018 for *PlayStation 4*, *Xbox One*, and *Windows*. Even if, like the other games, it is from a third-person perspective, this game's specificity lies in that it is an action role-playing video game, meaning the game features a large open world and the characters and story are influenced by the player's choices instead of having an already established story and protagonist. This is a novelty for the *Assassin's Creed* franchise.

For practical reasons, I will be referring to the games by their acronyms: *TLOU* for *The Last of Us*, *TLOU2* for *The Last of Us Part II*, *ACS* for *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and *ACOD* for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. This thesis will focus on the representation of the following female

⁶⁷ A plot summary for each game can be found in Appendix I.

⁶⁸ Playable female protagonists were featured before *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, such as Aveline from *AC III: Liberation* and Shao Jun from *AC: Chronicles* but they were not part of the main storyline of the games and were relegated to spin-offs or portable consoles.

characters and protagonists: Ellie Williams (*TLOU*, and *TLOU2*); Abby Anderson (*TLOU2*), Evie Frye (*ACS*), and Kassandra (*ACOD*).

The Last of Us was critically acclaimed and is still considered today one of the best PlayStation games of the decade.⁶⁹ The game sold around 20 million copies on PS3 and PS4 combined in 2019.⁷⁰ The downloadable content (DLC),⁷¹ *The Last of Us: Left Behind* was also very well received by critics, some even saying it contained “the first example of intimacy in a videogame that’s meant anything.”⁷² All these successes made *The Last of Us Part II* one of the most anticipated games once it was announced back in 2016. Naughty Dog, the studio in charge of these games, is renowned for its quality in video games and emphasis on storytelling and complex characters. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* and *Odyssey* also both have fairly positive reviews⁷³ and the history-centered series is Ubisoft’s most popular franchise. Naughty Dog and Ubisoft’s games belong to the category of “AAA” games (pronounced triple-A games) – the video game equivalent of a blockbuster – which means they get to produce their games with a high budget and a significant marketing campaign. “AAA” is not a genre and not necessarily synonymous with high-quality games but simply an indicator of the budget put into making these games. Their popularity was a criterion of selection for this work as such games usually reach a broader audience compared to “indie” games (games with smaller budgets, produced by less renowned studios, and considered more niche).

The first part of my thesis focusing on the production and marketing of the games, my corpus for this part will consist of official and unofficial paratextual elements detailing the developers’ thoughts and opinions in making the games such as interviews and tweets, and marketing elements such as game box covers and trailers. For *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* and *Odyssey*, the corpus will also include two podcast episodes, one featuring one of the lead writers of *ACS* and one featuring Evie’s actress as well as a report from an in-depth

⁶⁹ The game has a score of 95/100 on *MetaCritic* (<https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-3/the-last-of-us>), arrived in 3rd position out of 100 on the Top 100 Games of a generation on *IGN* (<https://www.ign.com/lists/games-of-a-generation/3>), made it to the 1st position out of 100 on *HardcoreGamer* (<https://hardcoregamer.com/2013/11/08/61431/61431/>), 14th out of 100 on *Gamesradar*’s list of “the best games ever” in 2015 (<https://www.gamesradar.com/best-games-ever/9/>).

⁷⁰ Brianna Reeves, “The Last of Us and Uncharted 4 Reach Incredible Sales Milestones,” *PlayStation LifeStyle*, October 14, 2019, <https://www.playstationlifestyle.net/2019/10/14/the-last-of-us-sales-uncharted-4-sales/>.

⁷¹ A DLC, short for Downloadable Content, refers here to additional content for the base game added through the online store.

⁷² Edward Smith, “The Last of Us: Left Behind Review,” *International Business Times UK*, February 17, 2014, <https://www.ibtimes.co.uk/last-us-left-behind-review-1436809>.

⁷³ *ACS* scores 76/100 on *MetaCritic* (<https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/assassins-creed-syndicate>) and *ACOD* 83/100 (<https://www.metacritic.com/game/playstation-4/assassins-creed-odyssey>).

investigation on Ubisoft conducted by game journalist Jason Schreier. For the marketing aspect, the corpus includes the two box-arts of the games and sixteen trailers (eleven for *ACS*, six for *ACOD*).

For *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us Part II*, the corpus will include interviews featuring a cast or crew member involved in the games. The interviews selected were published in different newspapers and all tackle the issue of women's representation in video games and the choices made for the female characters in *The Last of Us* franchise. For the marketing aspect, the corpus will include the three box-art of the games (one for *TLOU*'s original release on *PS3*, one for its *PS4* remaster and *TLOU2*'s) and twelve trailers (five for *TLOU*, seven for *TLOU2*).

The last part of my thesis being about the reception of the female characters featured in the games amongst players, my corpus will mainly consist of answers from a survey I circulated on *Reddit*, *Twitter*, and *Tumblr*.⁷⁴ The survey circulated from March 12th to March 31st 2023 and gathered more than three hundred answers. After simple demographic questions such as gender and age, the questions were focused on the games' protagonists (both male and female, for comparison), using Cohen's aforementioned method to measure the player's process of identification with the characters. I also asked questions regarding the potential influence of the games' marketing on their choice and/or appreciation for certain characters. Additional *Reddit* comments and threads regarding the female protagonists of the games will be added to the corpus. The survey combines both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies, collecting both numerical data and long answers, detailed enough to be interpreted and analyzed.

This varied selection aims to see if the people involved in the making of these games at Naughty Dog and Ubisoft are aware of ongoing issues raised by the GamerGate controversy, and in return, if players are receptive to the female characters created around this period marked by change.

⁷⁴ Survey questions in Appendix IV.

Problematization

The industry of video games being dominated by a certain demographic (straight, cis-gendered white men), most of its important titles are aimed at this same demographic. This is why Laura Mulvey's notion of the "male gaze" is relevant when analyzing female characters in video games since they are often created to cater to a heterosexual white male audience. The poor representation of women in video games and their lack of presence in game development have been ongoing issues for decades but have since been criticized recently, especially with the GamerGate controversy, a turning point in the last decade for the gaming world that will be touched on later. With these recent events in mind, one can wonder if the industry is evolving with the game content and the players, and if so, are the players receptive to these changes? By looking at two AAA franchises like *The Last of Us* and *Assassin's Creed*, this thesis aims to look at what the possible rise of complex female protagonists in a post-GamerGate industry entails in terms of production, representation, and reception. The production and marketing of these games are important aspects to look at since games are cultural artifacts. The gendering of the gaming world (in all aspects), as previously seen, relies heavily on the production of misogynistic imagery. Can games such as the four I selected be good examples of a change occurring in the gaming scene, or is the reality much more complex? *The Last of Us* and *Assassin's Creed* franchises being so popular among gamers made them interesting objects of study as the games chosen for this study were released in a period during which important talks and controversies were happening in the gaming community. Is simply including women defying stereotypes in video games enough to solve the misrepresentation of half the population in the medium? And finally, how do players respond to this phenomenon? Games are cultural artifacts and their contents – as any media – can reflect the society in which they are produced. My aim is to look at the different processes the games are subjected to in order to look at the treatment of female protagonists: the context in which they are created and marketed to gamers, how they are actually portrayed in-game and how players react to them to see if standards could be changing within the gaming industry and community.

To do so, I will first talk in more detail about the context surrounding the gaming community and industry and compare how Ubisoft and Naughty Dog handle the creation and marketing of their female protagonists. Through content analysis, I will then examine the video games themselves, trying to see how the characters selected could defy or give in to the stereotypes around female characters in games by looking at how they appear physically and

how developed and complex they are in the story. And lastly, by examining the answers of a sample of players questioned through an online survey posted on different platforms (mainly *Reddit*), I will analyze the player's capacity to identify with the female characters compared to their male counterparts. The survey combines both quantitative and qualitative approaches by providing statistical data and identifying recurring themes in the respondents' more detailed answers.

PART I

Mapping Sexism in the Gaming Industry and Community

Video games, like any other media, are cultural products. This means that the context in which they are created will influence their content. As established earlier, the gaming industry is prone to sexist bias when it comes to women's representation as characters or even developers. This part will focus on how male hegemony is inherent to the video game world. This ascendancy shapes the way games are made and their content. Examining the key events surrounding the making process of the games selected for this thesis is important to understand the final product. Discussing the way Naughty Dog and Ubisoft marketed their games to the public is the starting point in analyzing the way female protagonists are presented to the gaming world and how the final product represents them in various but positive ways.

A. Placing Video Games in a Cultural Context

Video gaming studies were focused for a long time on the technical aspect of games as well as their effects on people's cognitive functions. The study of games as cultural objects is relatively new compared to other media like films, series, and literature. Nonetheless, video games also bear the mark of ideology. "[V]ideo games provide important insights into the modern nature of digital and participatory culture, patterns of consumption and identity formation, late modernity, and contemporary political rationalities."⁷⁵ Produced by an industry worth billions,⁷⁶ video games, especially AAA are products of a capitalist society. With the number of players increasing each year,⁷⁷ video games are becoming a dominant source of visual culture alongside the film industry. The two media often overlap, adapting games into blockbuster films and vice-versa. Since video games are not created in a vacuum, it is safe to assume that their production influences their content and the messages (hidden or not) they convey to the players. "What do games tell us is normal? What do they suggest

⁷⁵ Muriel, Daniel and Garry Crawford. *Video Games as Culture: Considering the Role and Importance of Video Games in Contemporary Society*. Routledge, 2018, p.iii.

⁷⁶ ESA (2022). *Essential facts about the computer and video game industry*.

⁷⁷ According to the ESA reports, there is a slight increase in the number of players in the US. 64% in 2019, and 66% in 2021.

ESA (2020). *Essential facts about the computer and video game industry*, https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Final-Edited-2020-ESA_Essential_facts.pdf.

should be imaged, and what should not? [...] What do they reveal about where we are now?”⁷⁸ How women are represented in games also stems from how they are treated outside of games.

a. Games by Men and for Men? Gamer Culture and Why Representation Matters

Highlighting the importance of gender in the gaming subculture is crucial when studying video games. If women now represent almost half of the gaming population in the US,⁷⁹ the everlasting cliché according to which gaming is a primary male activity remains. This is mainly due to the fact that most professionals and visible figures in gaming culture are male, thus marginalizing women from the medium.⁸⁰ Video games are products that construct and reinforce masculinity. For decades, they promoted traits culturally coded as masculine, such as aggression, competitiveness, and dominance.⁸¹ The overwhelming amount of male protagonists compared to female ones also reflects that the target audience is meant to be masculine. These hypermasculine models are depicted as strong, powerful, and in control, while female characters are sexualized or portrayed as weak and helpless. This reinforces the idea that men are the dominant gender and that women should occupy subservient roles. Male hegemony dominates the video game world starting up from the production process. According to the International Game Developers Association, 62% of people making games are male, 68% of people making games are heterosexual and 78% are White.⁸²

The lack of diversity in the game-making process matches the dominant model for video game protagonists (straight White males)⁸³ and the typical profile of games’ target audience often labeled as “gamers”. The term “gamer” does not just refer to someone playing video games. It is a social identity that stems from the world of fandoms, which means it is “performed in out-of-game spaces, for example by taking part in game-related online fora,

⁷⁸ Murray, Soraya. *On video games: The visual politics of race, gender and space*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017. p.2.

⁷⁹ ESA (2022). *Essential facts about the computer and video game industry*.

⁸⁰ Paaßen et al. “What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture.” *Sex Roles*. 76. 2017, pp.1-15.

⁸¹ Dietz, “An Examination of Violence and Gender.” pp.425-42; Burgess et al; “Sex, Lies, and Video Games.” pp.419-33.

⁸² International Game Developers Association (2022). *Developer Satisfaction Survey*.

⁸³ Dietz, “An Examination of Violence and Gender;” Burgess et al, “Sex, Lies, and Video Games;” Jansz and Martis, “The Lara Phenomenon.”

visiting video game conventions, or wearing gaming-related clothing.”⁸⁴ Like any identity, it is shaped by social relations of power such as gender, race, class, or sexuality.⁸⁵ The stereotypical gamer is represented as a White heterosexual teen male.⁸⁶ However, the accuracy of this stereotype has been consistently discredited over the years through several studies.⁸⁷ But even if the Entertainment Software Association’s figures about gaming show that women and men play games almost equally, specifications about the platform each group engages with the most, the time spent playing, and the kind of game played are lacking.

The divide between “hardcore” gaming and “casual” gaming seems to be at the heart of the gendering of games and gamer identity.⁸⁸ The main premise is that women tend to be more “casual” players, not playing for extended periods of time and mostly mobile games, while men play longer and mostly console and PC games.⁸⁹ The “gamer” identity is associated with the “hardcore” side of gaming, which is why women playing games are usually not seen as “real” gamers since they do not necessarily fit the definition. Games mostly played by women are not seen as “real games,” and when they indulge in “hardcore gaming”, they often have to deal with harassment resulting in their marginalization.⁹⁰ This gendered division also has to do with how men and women approach hobbies and free time. Historically, women have been disproportionately burdened with unpaid domestic work and caregiving responsibilities, which can impact how they allocate their free time and engage in hobbies, including video gaming. Globally, women spend two to ten times more time on unpaid domestic work than men do. This includes activities such as cooking, cleaning, childcare, and eldercare, which can consume a significant portion of women’s free time.⁹¹ Since men may face fewer societal expectations related to household chores and caregiving it allows them more freedom to engage in leisure activities, including playing video games. Since “[g]aming is no longer physically tethered to spaces with sleek systems and fast Internet

⁸⁴ Paaßen et al, “What Is a True Gamer?” p.4.

⁸⁵ Shaw, Adrienne, and Shira Chess. “Reflections on the Casual Games Market in a Post-GamerGate World.” *Social, Casual and Mobile Games: The Changing Gaming Landscape*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, p.277.

⁸⁶ Shaw, Adrienne. “Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity.” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 1. 2012, p.29.

⁸⁷ Paaßen et al., “What Is a True Gamer?”; Shaw, “Do You Identify as a Gamer?”

⁸⁸ Maclean, Erin. “Girls, Guys and Games: How News Media Perpetuate Stereotypes of Male and Female Gamers.” *Press Start* 3 (2016), p.25; Shaw and Chess, “Reflections on the Casual Games Market.” p.277.

⁸⁹ Maclean, “Girls, Guys and Games.” pp.24-25.

⁹⁰ Paaßen et al. “What is a True Gamer?” pp.2-3; Cote, Amanda C. “I Can Defend Myself: Women’s Strategies for Coping With Harassment While Gaming Online.” *Games and Culture* 12, no. 2 (2017): pp.136-55.

⁹¹ Ferrant et al. “Unpaid Care Work: The Missing Link in the Analysis of Gender Gaps in Labour Outcomes.” OECD Development Centre, 2014; Rodriguez, Leah. “Unpaid Care Work: Everything You Need to Know.” *Global Citizen*, September 13, 2021.

speeds”⁹² due to most people owning a smartphone, it comes as no surprise that “casual” games seem more welcoming and accessible to an otherwise marginalized female population. However, this willingness to separate mobile gaming from the traditional “hardcore” way of doing this might also stem from misogynistic views. “[T]his kind of dismissiveness towards the games, is often dismissiveness of the players, with game columnists referring to casual gamers as ‘middle-aged women’ who play video games when they are not watching Oprah.”⁹³ Redefining what is “casual” and “hardcore” might also be the main issue.

It is perhaps more accurate to say that hardcore and casual refer to the effort required in making the games, than it does players’ approaches to the games. There is, for example, nothing casual about playing *Farmville* on Facebook for hours on end, just as there is nothing inherently hardcore about playing an hour of *Halo* with friends at a gaming party.⁹⁴

Casual gamers can show the same level of dedication and enthusiasm towards their preferred games as hardcore gamers.

Representing marginalized groups in video games frequently revolves around the need to demonstrate that individuals from these groups can also be “gamers”. Consequently, it is argued that the gaming industry should cater to these players by creating targeted content to appeal to them. However, the negative connotations surrounding the “gamer” label can make people shy away from it or the medium altogether. Yet as Shaw argues, “[t]his focus on specific types of identity, and an emphasis on targeted marketing based on those identities, [...] is an ideologically problematic way to approach issues of representation.”⁹⁵ As seen with the Girl Games Movement (GGM) in the nineties, targeting specific marginalized demographics only sets them aside more from the mainstream market. By opting for pink packaging to attract girls into gaming, the GGM created a separate niche market instead of including them in the already established one. “The audience is an industrial construction, and these constructions shape how people approach media; however, simply adding diversity to games will not automatically make the gamer audience more diverse.”⁹⁶

The demographics collected by this thesis’ survey match with the ESA’s figures even if the games under study are console and PC games. In 2021, women made up 48% of players

⁹² Shaw and Chess, “Reflections on the Casual Games Market.” p.284.

⁹³ Ibid, pp.284-285.

⁹⁴ Shaw, “Do You Identify as a Gamer?” p.30.

⁹⁵ Ibid, p.29.

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.39.

according to the ESA report, and 39,6% of the respondents in my survey that took place in 2023. However, the ESA report did not stray from the traditional gender binary, which is something I did with my survey. In addition to this 39,6% of women, 7.1% of my respondents were people identifying as non-binary and 1,5% did not identify with any of these options. (See Figure 1).

What is your gender?

366 responses

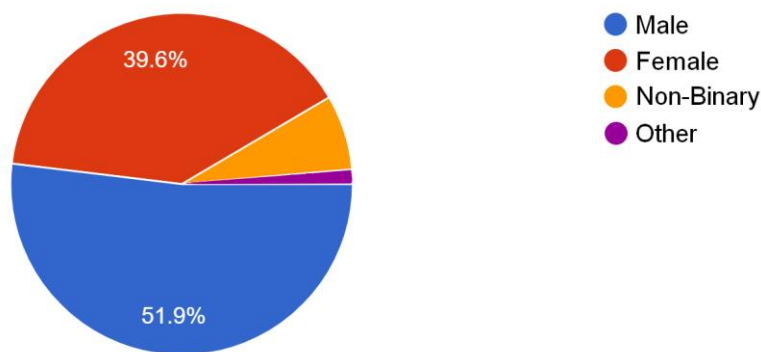


Figure 1: Survey Respondents' Gender Demographics

This means that out of 366 respondents, 176 did not identify as male, in keeping with the almost 50/50 split from the ESA's figures.

In conclusion, despite the “games for men and by men” mentality plaguing the game-making process, products, and community, women and gender minorities make up a big part of the audience and do not only play games that are considered “casual.” The fact that the games chosen for this study include supposedly non-sexualized female protagonists might be the reason, as it is often presented as a solution towards more inclusion in gaming.

b. GamerGate: a Culture War? The Questioning of Male Hegemony in Gaming

GamerGate was a highly controversial and polarizing event that unfolded in 2014 within the gaming community. While it began as a supposed movement focused on ethics in video game journalism, it quickly evolved into a broader conflict that highlighted deep-seated issues related to gender and the representation of women in gaming. GamerGate became a lightning rod for discussions about the representation of women in games, the role of diversity

and inclusivity in the gaming industry, and the treatment of women in gaming spaces. Supporters of GamerGate argued that they were fighting against alleged corruption and ethical lapses in gaming journalism, while opponents saw it as a misogynistic backlash against women who were challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes in games.

In August 2014, several women from the gaming industry were the victims of online harassment (insults, rape threats, murder threats...). Indie game developer Zoe Quinn was one of the first victims after she tried to publish her game *Depression Quest* (2013).⁹⁷ Her ex-boyfriend “wrote a series of blog posts alleging that Quinn had cheated on him with five other men, some of whom worked in games or games journalism.”⁹⁸ These posts implied that Zoe Quinn had to sleep with men in the industry to get her game published and get good reviews. However, it turned out not to be true, and even when her ex-boyfriend backtracked, the damage was done. Quinn became a scapegoat to groups of gamers on platforms such as *Reddit*, *4Chan* or *Twitter*. The hashtag “#GamerGate” was claimed by said gamers to be used for a debate about ethics in gaming journalism, covering their misogynistic attacks.⁹⁹

The fact that “GamerGaters” seemed to only attack women working on independent games which diverged from the “norm” or traditional gameplay and feminist critics denouncing the marginalization and negative representation of women in the industry such as Anita Sarkeesian, reflected badly on the gaming community. “Many #Gamergate participants truly believe that they are fighting an important fight against corruption in game journalism. But to an outside observer, it’s bizarre that they identify the greatest threat as the small, independent, crowdfunded developers, and not the huge profitable game companies that advertise on game sites.”¹⁰⁰ Gaming journalist Leigh Alexander wrote a controversial piece about the “gamer identity” that “GamerGaters” tried so desperately to protect by pushing women and minorities away from gaming spaces. “‘Games culture’ is a petri dish of people who know so little about how human social interaction and professional life works that they can concoct online ‘wars’ about social justice or ‘game journalism ethics,’ straight-faced, and

⁹⁷ Dewey, Caitlin. “The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read.” *Washington Post*, October 14, 2014. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/10/14/the-only-guide-to-gamergate-you-will-ever-need-to-read/>; Hathaway, Jay. “What Is Gamergate, and Why? An Explainer for Non-Geeks.” *Gawker*, October 10, 2014. <http://gawker.com/what-is-gamergate-and-why-an-explainer-for-non-geeks-1642909080>.

⁹⁸ Hathaway, “What Is Gamergate, and Why?”

⁹⁹ Wofford, Taylor. “Is GamerGate About Media Ethics or Harassing Women? Harassment, the Data Shows.” *Newsweek*, October 25, 2014. <https://www.newsweek.com/gamergate-about-media-ethics-or-harassing-women-harassment-data-show-279736>.

¹⁰⁰ Hathaway, “What Is Gamergate, and Why?”

cause genuine human consequences. Because of video games.”¹⁰¹

This “gamer identity” mentioned in Alexander’s article is central to the issue. As the status quo starts to evolve, these self-proclaimed gamers feel threatened by this change. “The hashtag picked up steam as the critiques of gamer identity were deployed by GamerGaters as evidence that gamers, particularly heterosexual, white, cisgendered male gamers, were under attack.”¹⁰² This identity crisis brought forward a dichotomy between “game as products” and “games as culture.”¹⁰³ Echoing Alexander’s comments on GamerGate, Soraya Murray describes the events as “politics of identity at play in games that supersedes the notion of games as consumer products.”¹⁰⁴ Alexander’s harsh criticism of the people behind #GamerGate was not without consequences. A campaign was launched to destabilize Gamasutra – the website on which Alexander’s essay was published – by pressuring companies to remove their ads from the site. The campaign proved successful, as Intel Corporation removed its ads from the website for a while.¹⁰⁵

The GamerGate controversy put into the spotlight the prevalence of a conservative culture and mentality in the gaming community, and if anyone dared to criticize it – especially if it was a woman – then they represented a threat to be eliminated to protect the “gamer identity”. “Culture wars” such as GamerGate underline the political aspects of representation since the questioning of regressive portrayals of women, racial and queer minorities is usually met with vitriol from the alt-right. This was not the first time women’s grim conditions in the industry were addressed. In 2012, the hashtag “#1ReasonWhy” trended on *Twitter* after the following question was asked: “Why are there so few lady game creators?”¹⁰⁶ In response using the hashtag, “female game developers, writers, critics, and journalists shared personal stories of sexism and exclusion — their “one reason why” so few women are leaders in the massive gaming industry.”¹⁰⁷ However, GamerGate led to an unmatched “level of hatred and abuse that is being directed at women”¹⁰⁸ as women like Anita Sarkeesian or game developer Brianna Wu had to move from their homes and involve the FBI as the threats became more

¹⁰¹ Alexander, Leigh. ““Gamers’ Don’t Have to Be Your Audience. ‘Gamers’ Are Over.” *Gamasutra*, August 28, 2014. https://www.gamasutra.com/view/news/224400/Gamers_dont_have_to_be_your_audience_Gamers_are_ov_er.php.

¹⁰² Shaw and Chess, “Reflections on the Casual Games Market.” p.279.

¹⁰³ Alexander, Leigh. “Sexism, Lies and Video Games: The Culture War Nobody Is Winning.” *Time*, September 2014. <https://time.com/3274247/video-game-culture-war/>.

¹⁰⁴ Murray. *On video games*. p.38.

¹⁰⁵ Hathaway, “What Is Gamergate, and Why?”

¹⁰⁶ Isaacson, Betsy. “Why Are There So Few Female Video Game Makers?” *HuffPost*, November 29, 2012. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/1reasonwhy-reveals-sexism-gaming-industry_n_2205204.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Todd, Cherie. “COMMENTARY: GamerGate and Resistance to the Diversification of Gaming Culture.” *Women’s Studies Journal* 29, no. 1 (2015): p.65.

and more violent.¹⁰⁹ This resistance to change is also what kept women from being strong and non-sexualized protagonists in video games, as the industry tried to cater to the people that for the most part contributed to the GamerGate controversy: cis-gendered straight white male.¹¹⁰

The GamerGaters' struggle seems to be "keeping politics out of games", as representing women and minorities would stem from a political agenda. The issue with this premise is that it "implicitly constructs the normative group [straight cisgender White men] as not 'activist', not 'political' and most importantly not practicing a form of identity politics from within their dominant normative position in the mainstream industry."¹¹¹ Defining the norm as neutral is a political stance. If a piece of media is seen as neutral and not political, it might just "mesh with the value system of the larger culture, but our culture is not politically neutral."¹¹² GamerGate brought forward how the misrepresentation of women and minorities is actually an issue of power and not ignorance. "Representation is in fact a frontline of power relations and domination [...] and this is no less true of games than other forms of mass culture and their attendant industries."¹¹³ If the main discourse was to "protect the gamer identity," it was no less than keeping a certain group as the norm, issues about "ethics in journalism" hiding a fear of not being a dominant group anymore. This kind of discourse is reminiscent of supporters of Trump, who became president two years after GamerGate. The online presence of alt-right movements has often been compared to GamerGate, and the connection between the two groups is not far-fetched.¹¹⁴ These ties prove how GamerGaters' claims are in fact, political.

In conclusion, the GamerGate controversy highlighted the deeply entrenched politics of exclusion within the gaming scene, and how gaming culture is subjected to the same misogynistic bias as any media created with straight White men as the default. However, it opened up a range of discussions around diversity in video games and how to defy the status

¹⁰⁹ Dewey, "The Only Guide to Gamergate You Will Ever Need to Read" ; Wofford, "Is GamerGate About Media Ethics or Harassing Women?"

¹¹⁰ Paaßen et al, "What Is a True Gamer?", p.2; Perry, Kelsea. "Damsels and Darlings: Decoding Gender Equality in Video Game Communities." *Feminist Media Studies*, February 2021, pp.2-4; Burnay, Jonathan. "Sexualization and Aggression against Women: A Focus on Sexualized Characters in Video Games." Université de Liège, 2019, p.32.

¹¹¹ Murray. *On video games*. p.38.

¹¹² Petit, Carolyn (agameofme). "Why Political Engagement Is Critical to Games Journalism," *Tumblr*, August 23, 2014. <https://agameofme.tumblr.com/post/95611752882/why-political-engagement-is-critical-to-games>.

¹¹³ Murray. *On video games*. p.39.

¹¹⁴ Fried, Ina. "How the Far Right Borrowed Its Online Moves from Gamers." *Axios*, October 2022. <https://www.axios.com/2022/10/20/gamergate-right-online-harassment-joan-donovan-meme-wars>; Lees, Matt. "What Gamergate Should Have Taught Us about the 'Alt-Right.'" *The Guardian*, December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/dec/01/gamergate-alt-right-hate-trump>; Sherr, Ian, and Erin Carson. "GamerGate to Trump: How Video Game Culture Blew Everything Up." *CNET*, November 2017. <https://www.cnet.com/culture/gamergate-donald-trump-american-nazis-how-video-game-culture-blew-everything-up/>.

quo, starting with the better treatment of female employees. The next part of this thesis will focus on how studios navigated through the controversy to create new and more complex female characters, perhaps challenging the outdated cultural norms and values reflected in video games before.

B. Creating and Marketing Female Characters

From character design to narrative choices, the decisions made during development shape the way gender is portrayed in games. The creative choices, biases, and perspectives of developers can directly impact the gendered representation of characters, storylines, and overall game content. Marketing also plays a crucial role in the success of a video game, as it shapes the perception and reception of the end product. It serves as a bridge between game developers and consumers, generating interest, and influencing purchasing decisions. When asked “How often do you look at promotional material of the games you’re playing?” answers from this thesis’ survey mostly showed it was an occasional occurrence, but only a minority of players did not pay attention to it (see Figure 2).

How often do you look at promotional material of the games you're playing?

366 responses

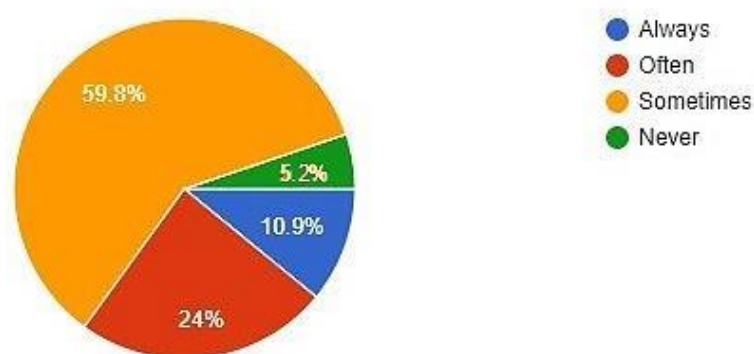


Figure 2: Survey Respondents’ Viewing Frequency of Promotional Material

To the question “What kind of promotional material do you look at the most?” a majority of respondents pointed to trailers (see Figure 3). Box covers, however, came after “Reviews/Critics” and “Let’s Plays/Playthrough”. Considering these are more based on audience’s reactions and not promotional material from the studios themselves, choosing them as objects of studies for this thesis was not an option for this part. Respondants could

choose several answers. Nevertheless, box covers were still an important factor to look at, as nearly 35% of players chose them as “promotional material they look at the most.”

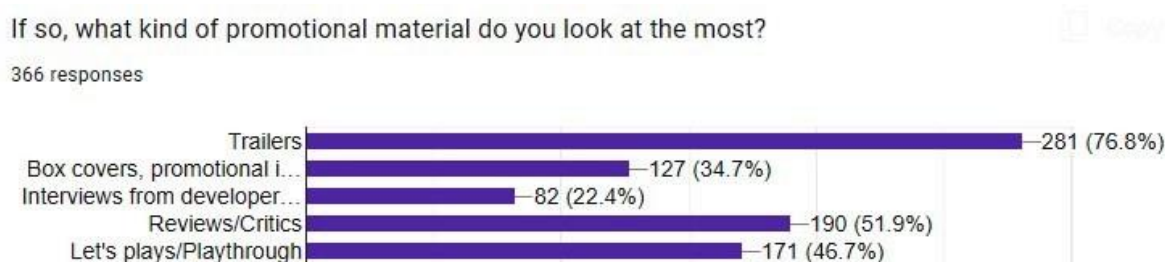


Figure 3: Survey Respondents' Most Looked at Promotional Material

Inclusivity within the production process can deeply impact the way women can be represented in-game afterwards. The way games are produced, marketed, and presented to the public ultimately has the potential to shape the industry's cultural impact and influence on societal perceptions of gender.

a. Ubisoft's Ambivalence Towards Inclusivity

“Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities.”¹¹⁵ This is *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* opening statement appearing at the beginning of the game. Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* series used to open with a similar message, but was changed for ACS to include the notions of gender and sexual orientations, implying a certain acknowledgment of these concepts by the developers, especially since ACS is the first main game of the franchise to include a female protagonist. However, this message can be seen mostly as performative, considering Ubisoft's ambivalence towards inclusivity, especially regarding women. This part will focus on the way female protagonists Evie Frye and Cassandra were presented to the public by analyzing marketing content such as trailers and game covers. In addition to this analysis, a deeper dive into the conditions in which the games were produced might shed some insight into how women are represented.

¹¹⁵ Ubisoft Québec. *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. Ubisoft, 2015.

The former diversity tagline used in previous games read as follows: “Inspired by historical events and characters. This work of fiction was designed, developed and produced by a multicultural team of various religious faiths and beliefs.”

For *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*, a total of 11 trailers were released to the public from May to October 2015 on *YouTube* before the game came out. It is a significant amount, considering most games of the franchise usually fluctuate around five trailers.

The first trailer titled “Assassin's Creed Syndicate Debut Trailer” was published on Ubisoft's *YouTube* channel on May 12th, 2015.¹¹⁶ The trailer features only Jacob Frye, Evie's twin brother and male protagonist of the game. With a dynamic and energetic music, players are introduced to a Victorian London bursting with life and the technical prowess of the Industrial Revolution. Amongst all this, viewers follow Jacob in a series of physical feats as he leads gang members (mostly men), fights in broad daylight, and assassinates his targets in a fight against the injustice of capitalism. “So many clever blokes dreaming up impossible machines. Salting away more gold than Queen Victoria herself. But none of their shillings ever make it into the pockets of the poor devils whose blood is spilled building this glorious Empire. The working class sleepwalks through life unaware of the machine that drives them.”¹¹⁷ Jacob is introduced as this Robin Hood-like figure, fighting the rich to help the poor, taking the creed of his Assassin organization as a means to achieve social justice. Violence is presented as the way to achieve this, the accent on the color red for blood ever present in the trailer. This in itself codes the game as rather masculine, but the fact that Evie is not shown nor even mentioned is also striking. The most viewed trailer for the game was released on June 15th 2015 on Ubisoft's channel. Recording more than 11 million views as of June 2023, the “Assassin's Creed Syndicate E3 Cinematic Trailer”¹¹⁸ also only features Jacob. Framing Jacob as the main character and a leader figure, the most awaited trailer for the game¹¹⁹ still fails to mention Evie's existence.

Out of the 11 trailers, only one features Evie on her own,¹²⁰ while her brother got to shine in four.¹²¹ The remaining six feature both twins;¹²² although two put heavy emphasis on Jacob

¹¹⁶ Ubisoft. “Assassin's Creed Syndicate Debut Trailer [EUROPE].” *YouTube*. May 12, 2015. <https://youtu.be/CtsgzVRB6Tk>.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ubisoft. “Assassin's Creed Syndicate E3 Cinematic Trailer [EUROPE].” *YouTube*. June 16, 2015. <https://youtu.be/WTBbwgsyxvg>.

¹¹⁹ The *Assassin's Creed* franchise is well known for its CGI cinematic trailers, often setting the tone of the game with striking visuals and curated soundtracks. Fans of the games often compile these trailers together on *YouTube* and gather millions of views on these compendiums. Releasing a CGI cinematic for an AC during the E3 is sure to make it gather attention.

The E3, short for Electronic Entertainment Expo is one of the most popular events for the video game industry. Game developers use this event to introduce and advertise upcoming games to the public.

¹²⁰ Ubisoft. “Assassin's Creed Syndicate Evie Frye Trailer [EUROPE].” *YouTube*. June 16, 2015. <https://youtu.be/rT4nEDNmrkk>.

¹²¹ Ubisoft. “Debut Trailer”;

again, only briefly showing Evie in a final sequence.¹²³ On top of this overall exclusion and will to put Jacob at the forefront, the way the characters are presented is also gendered. While Jacob is introduced as brash and reckless, Evie is seemingly more methodical and discreet. The choice in weaponry, also made to acquaint the players with the twins' contrasting fighting styles is also rooted in gendered expectations (see Figure 4).¹²⁴



Figure 4: Evie Holding a Throwing Knife and Jacob a Gun

Knives and daggers are weapons that require precision and close-quarters combat. Though Evie is using throwing knives, the close and intimate nature of small blades can be associated with traits stereotypically attributed to femininity, such as subtlety, agility, and finesse. Guns, on the other hand, are often associated with masculinity, power, and aggression. The idea of using force and asserting control through firearms has contributed to the perception of guns as tools of masculine empowerment. Even if both twins can use each of these weapons in-game, the way they are presented to the players in trailers remains marked by traditional gender stereotypes.

GameSpot. "Assassin's Creed Syndicate - Jacob Trailer." *YouTube*. May 12, 2015. <https://youtu.be/k26qKeJ0fVE>; Ubisoft. "E3 Cinematic Trailer"; PlayStation. "Assassin's Creed Syndicate - London Calling Trailer | PS4." *YouTube*. October 22, 2015. <https://youtu.be/qSE-R-3drxs>.

¹²² Ubisoft. "Assassin's Creed Syndicate - The Twins: Evie and Jacob Frye Trailer [EUROPE]." *YouTube*. August 5, 2015. <https://youtu.be/zMjIUG8Nkaw>; PlayStation. "Assassin's Creed Syndicate - Story Trailer | PS4." *YouTube*. September 24, 2015. <https://youtu.be/Ce8pHDpP4Js>; Ubisoft. "Assassin's Creed Syndicate TV spot Trailer [EUROPE]." *YouTube*. October 8, 2015. <https://youtu.be/HT5Ws-RDUI0>; UbiCentral. "Assassin's Creed Syndicate Cinematic TV Spot Trailer." *YouTube*. October 12, 2015. <https://youtu.be/P4vxYovpAX8>; Ubisoft. "Assassin's Creed Syndicate - Evie Launch Trailer [EUROPE]." *YouTube*. October 22, 2015. <https://youtu.be/bJjzJffAVQU>; Ubisoft. "Assassin's Creed Syndicate - Jacob Launch Trailer [EUROPE]." *YouTube*. October 22, 2015. https://youtu.be/aSM_HzyOWOA.

¹²³ UbiCentral "Cinematic TV Spot Trailer"; Ubisoft. "TV spot Trailer."

¹²⁴ Ubisoft. "The Twins: Evie and Jacob Frye Trailer."

The overall withdrawn presence of Evie can also be illustrated by the game's cover. As Burgess and al suggested, "[e]ven with a primary female character, the presence of a primary male implied that the female was only allowed to be an important part of the game because the male was there with her."¹²⁵ Once again, Jacob takes most of the space, surrounded by members of his gang, Evie beside him in the background.¹²⁶ Judging by the cover alone, players that are not necessarily diehard fans of the franchise could miss the fact that Evie is a protagonist and not just Jacob's sidekick. Another cover for a special edition of the game including bonus content takes it a step further by only putting Jacob on it. Special editions also come with figurines, once again only featuring the male twin. The marketing material for ACS, albeit showing a non-sexualized female character, barely let her shine at all compared to her male counterpart. In an interview for *The Assassin's Den*, (an *Assassin's Creed* podcast often featuring cast members, writers, or other people involved in the game-making process) Victoria Atkin – Evie's voice actress – expressed her annoyance at the dearth of Evie in promotional material. "Honestly, it was quite disheartening [...] I would have loved to see them marketed equally."¹²⁷ As expected, the way Evie was sidelined in marketing campaigns made it difficult to know if she was even playable at all. Atkin shared an anecdote when she came and asked about the game in a store:

I was talking to the game guy there [in a store] and I didn't say who I was or anything and he was "Oh no-no you can't play as the sister in this." And I said "Can I read the back of the box on this?" and literally the whole back of the box he was like "Yeah, you can't, it's Jacob." And then I was like 'Uh, that's interesting.' That's quite sad that they were reading that [...] it was quite worrying.¹²⁸

As for narrative choices, Jeffrey Yohalem – lead writer for ACS – mentions interesting points in writing the game and the dynamics between characters in a previous episode of *The Assassin's Den*.¹²⁹ He talks about the twins' opposite tempers and how it affects their relationship. "They were always going to be separate like that. [...] Evie's perspective of the long game and thinking about society as an organism and Jacob just having fun."¹³⁰ The idea was to incorporate this into the gameplay by having Jacob wrecking amok in London and Evie having to step in and fix everything in order for the game to stay playable. They

¹²⁵ Burgess et al, "Sex, Lies, and Video Games." p.421.

¹²⁶ Covers for the game in Appendix II.

¹²⁷ Loomer. "The Assassin's Den - ft. Victoria Atkin (Evie Frye in Assassin's Creed Syndicate)." *Youtube*. January 19, 2016. <https://youtu.be/9jMPrFE5YPk>. 10:45.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 12:00.

¹²⁹ Loomer. "The Assassin's Den - ft. Jeffrey Yohalem (Assassin's Creed Syndicate Lead Writer)." *Youtube*. November 28, 2015. <https://youtu.be/ZBIkGNJMkaU>.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 33:35.

eventually discarded the idea as it was difficult to incorporate. In the actual game, most missions are assigned to Jacob, and the few times players get to play Evie exclusively is mostly her having to step in to fix the mess done as Jacob but as part of the linear story and it does not interfere with how freely the player can roam in the city. The fact that Evie's missions mostly consist of fixing her brother's mistakes is thus a conscious choice of the game's writers, irremediably tying Evie's story to her brother while he gets to live his own adventure. Regarding positive female representation, Yohalem expressed his wish to portray women's struggle in the Victorian era, but women at Ubisoft were uncomfortable with the idea of incorporating this facet of history for fear it would make the game harder to enjoy for players, especially women.

It was a really tough issue for me because as a writer I'm very committed to pursuing the truth of something. [...] Maybe we should be focusing on this purely from a historical perspective. [...] We had a very long conversation about it with the team and ultimately the consensus was that the video game industry is full of negative portrayal of these issues and so, just because it's historically accurate to make Victorian England an incredibly negative and restrictive place, maybe the game industry doesn't need another game that does that.¹³¹

This paradox between historical accuracy and a progressive version of events is also something that was evoked in the making of *ACOD*.

For *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, a total of 6 trailers were released from June to September 2018 before the game's release. The first trailer, "Assassin's Creed Odyssey - E3 2018 World Premiere Trailer" found on the official *YouTube* channel of *PlayStation* was published on June 12th, 2018.¹³² Showcasing the colorful landscapes from Ancient Greece, the trailer is focused on the story of the game, packed with talks of prophecies and fate like a true Greek tragedy. This first trailer, like for *ACS*, only features the male protagonist Alexios, with no mention of Kassandra. On August 21st 2018, two other trailers were released on Ubisoft's channel. Almost identical, the trailers feature either Alexios¹³³ or Kassandra¹³⁴ on their own. This trailer will be the only one where Kassandra gets to be presented alone, while Alexios gets to be the star in three,¹³⁵ thus getting half the trailers to himself. This unique trailer for

¹³¹ Ibid. 1:23:40.

¹³² PlayStation. "Assassin's Creed Odyssey - E3 2018 World Premiere Trailer | PS4." *Youtube*. June 12, 2018. https://youtu.be/so2SeY_UaeM.

¹³³ Ubisoft. "Assassin's Creed Odyssey: Gamescom 2018 A World of Danger Gameplay Trailer – Alexios." *Youtube*. August 21, 2018. <https://youtu.be/oZCVolxdpfA>.

¹³⁴ Ubisoft. "Assassin's Creed Odyssey: Gamescom 2018 A World of Danger Gameplay Trailer – Kassandra." *Youtube*. August 21, 2018. <https://youtu.be/MFAV2cJdwuI>.

¹³⁵ PlayStation. "E3 2018 World Premiere Trailer"; Ubisoft. "Gamescom 2018 A World of Danger Gameplay Trailer – Alexios"; PlayStation. "Assassin's Creed Odyssey - Launch Trailer | PS4." *Youtube*. Sep 26, 2018. https://youtu.be/ddQqzwH_4.

Kassandra is marked by how she almost does not speak at all even though her voice is one of the attributes that distinguishes her most from Alexios. These two trailers also highlight the egalitarian approach Ubisoft took again in portraying gender. While Kassandra is not sexualized, she and her brother are presented as identical, except for the voice, which does not help to shape their characters as separate entities (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Promotional Pictures of Alexios (left) and Kassandra (right)

The remaining trailers¹³⁶ feature both Kassandra and Alexios, emphasizing the players' choice of protagonists and styles of play. Indeed, contrary to *ACS* where the players get to play both Jacob and Evie, *Odyssey's* premise rests on the choice of protagonist, so they either play Kassandra or Alexios throughout the whole game. The "Power of Choice Trailer" is the only one trying to frame the siblings as separate entities. They highlight compassionate choices with Kassandra and brutality with Alexios, implying this difference might be linked to the characters themselves rather than strictly the players' choices. This framing is also somewhat gendered, associating softness with the female option and cold-heartedness with the male option (see Figure 6).

¹³⁶ Ubisoft. "Assassin's Creed Odyssey: The Power of Choice Trailer." *YouTube*. Sep 10, 2018. https://youtu.be/C_QAC0OT3wA;
Ubisoft. "ASSASSIN'S CREED ODYSSEY: LAUNCH TRAILER." *YouTube*. Sep 25, 2018. <https://youtu.be/gENNqLpefa4>.



Figure 6: “Power of Choice Trailer” Illustrating Peace Options with Cassandra and War with Alexios

The truth in the matter is that neither Alexios nor Cassandra impact the player’s playstyle as one could choose to be a compassionate Alexios or an apathetic Cassandra. Contrasting with *ACS*, action sequences depict Cassandra and Alexios in the same way, both taking part in impressive physical feats and brutal combat typical of Spartan warriors, leaving a trail of exclusively male bodies in their wake. Alexios is then embracing traditional codes of masculinity, whereas Cassandra transgresses gender roles by virtue of being a female warrior in a world dominated by men on the battlefield. Nevertheless, the lack of promotional material for Cassandra can only bias the players’ choices of protagonist, clearly favoring Alexios despite Cassandra being the “canonical” choice. In a Q&A on the platform Reddit, Jonathan Dumont – *ACOD*’s creative director – confirmed Cassandra as being the “canon” protagonist due to her being the hero of the game’s novelization.¹³⁷ Indeed, the *Assassin’s Creed* universe has a very elaborate lore, in which the Animus (the in-game machine used to see the past) cannot be used to change the past, only relive it. Incorporating a choice between characters creates a divergence from the established lore, pushing Ubisoft to select only one

¹³⁷ Dumont, Jonathan (JoDumontAC). “Yes there will be a canon represented in the novel. It features Cassandra and her journey. But in the game you decide your path , there is no right or wrong way.” *Reddit*. June 21, 2018. <https://www.reddit.com/r/assassinscreed/comments/8suomv/comment/e12dt1p/>.

of their characters as the hero for future reference. Either Alexios was not planned and added as a marketing decision, or Cassandra was established as canon for retroactive continuity to appease the fans and get away with her treatment. Curiously, both trailers focusing on the plot of the story only feature Alexios¹³⁸ despite Cassandra officially being the canon protagonist.

As for the box art,¹³⁹ Alexios and Cassandra get to have their own space. The cover is reversible so the players also get to choose who they want to put forward on the box. Cassandra is depicted the same way as Alexios. She is dressed as a Spartan warrior, wearing a helmet and bearing remarkable weapons. By video game standards, she is portrayed as powerful.¹⁴⁰ Moreover, this power does not come with over-sexualization as is usually the case with female characters. “In the relatively rare cases where women were portrayed as central, or wielding the violent power video games offer, this role almost always came with an exaggerated sexuality.”¹⁴¹ In this case, the way Cassandra is portrayed – both in trailers and box cover – defies the traditional stereotypes of women in video games. However, the default side for the box cover is flipped on Alexios, rendering her invisible to the eye of potential customers in stores. The digital copies of the games in the *PlayStation* store also feature Alexios’ version of the box art, rendering the marketing of the game pretty traditional.¹⁴²

If this somewhat asymmetrical presentation of the characters might seem obvious, assistant director and narrative designer for *ACS* and *ACOD* Melissa MacCoubrey assures that the games were designed with a desire for equality. When talking about her experience, she states:

One of my biggest takeaways from my time working on *Syndicate* was that anyone who wanted to play our game should feel comfortable in that environment. It doesn’t matter where you come from or what you look like; if you play the game, the game should be welcoming to you as a player, regardless of how you identify. I felt that the previous opening statement was restrictive to the kinds of players that would pick up this game and restrictive to the developers who were working on this game. It wasn’t just people of different religious backgrounds, it was people of different sexual orientations, different ethnicities, and different genders. I find that the more we open ourselves up to a wider audience, the better.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ PlayStation. “E3 2018 World Premiere Trailer”; PlayStation. “Launch Trailer | PS4.”

¹³⁹ See Appendix II.

¹⁴⁰ Burgess et al, “Sex, Lies, and Video Games.” p.427.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p.447.

¹⁴² Ibid. pp.446-447.

¹⁴³ Maguid, Youssef. “Women of Ubisoft – Melissa MacCoubrey,” *Ubisoft*, July 3, 2018. <https://news.ubisoft.com/en-us/article/5cA54lyJYyKTi5o8rOMkin/women-of-ubisoft-melissa-maccoubrey>.

In that same interview, she also confirms that the egalitarian approach to gender when designing *Kassandra* is not accidental either.

It was important to me that if we were going to let you choose if you are going to play as a woman or a man – which is awesome, because I think that everyone should be equal – it should be an equal experience. I was really adamant that we not make it a bad experience for someone who chose a female character. If their experiences are vastly different, you can make someone feel bad about making a certain choice. When you think of historical fiction, there are a lot of naysayers who say things like, “oh, well this isn’t historically accurate” but I don’t think they realize that it would suck to have people yelling at you because you’re a woman for the entire game.¹⁴⁴

“History is our Playground” is Ubisoft’s tagline for the *AC* franchise. Despite its science-fiction elements, the *Assassin’s Creed* franchise prides itself on being as historically accurate or authentic as possible when it comes to its portrayal of the past.¹⁴⁵ However, it can be hard to reconcile the past and the female experience in a way that can be enjoyable for modern-day players. If Ubisoft did not shy away from complicated facets of history such as slavery in previous games,¹⁴⁶ their tendency to tackle issues of sexism with an egalitarian approach demonstrate the conundrum of gender representation in the video game industry. Two options for the portrayal of women in historical fiction are possible. Either embracing the societal norms of the time in order to be historically accurate, or looking at the past with modern lenses and creating rather transgressive characters.

The incorporation of women into 2015’s *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* directly responded to the issues raised by Gamergate. [...] At the heart of the issue is *Assassin’s Creed*’s position as an historical video game. Depicting a Victorian London with widespread gender equality, *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* tells more about the present than the past. As such, the game is a manifestation of history’s affective turn.¹⁴⁷

The ambivalent discourse of people involved at Ubisoft might certainly stem from the fact that writers and animators are eager to take part in bettering the representation of female protagonists in games but are most likely held back by people in higher positions which impacted the final product. This struggle from within the company was brought to light when

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Rahe, Jake. “How *Assassin’s Creed* Brings History to Life—and to the Classroom.” *EGM*, November 26, 2019. <https://egmnow.com/how-assassins-creed-brings-history-to-life-and-to-the-classroom/>; Webster, Andrew. “Building a Better Paris in *Assassin’s Creed Unity*.” *The Verge*, April 17, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2014/10/31/7132587/assassins-creed-unity-paris>.

¹⁴⁶ Ubisoft Sofia and Milan. *Assassin’s Creed III: Liberation*. Ubisoft. 2012; Ubisoft Québec. *Assassin’s Creed Freedom Cry*. Ubisoft. 2013.

¹⁴⁷ Fishbune, Stephen J. “‘Competent, Capable, and Practically Dressed’: The Representation of Women in the *Assassin’s Creed* Series.” *Midwest Journal of Undergraduate Research*, no. 9 (2018). p.18.

Ubisoft employees were exposed for their misogyny and scandals of sexual misconduct against women. Reporter Jason Schreier published an article detailing Ubisoft's grim attitude towards women. In a *Twitter* thread published on July 21st, 2020 in which he links his article, Schreier states:

Over the past few weeks I've talked to more than 40 current and former Ubisoft employees about sexual misconduct and abuse allegations. Their accounts make one thing clear: Ubisoft has known about these problems for years. [...] Among many details I learned while reporting this piece: the developers of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* wanted Cassandra to be the only playable lead, but Ubisoft's marketing team and creative lead Serge Hascoët wouldn't allow it. Women don't sell, they said.¹⁴⁸

In his article, Schreier describes the situation by reporting that “many employees detailed an atmosphere that was hostile toward women, often describing the Paris headquarters as a frat house [...] and senior executives took part and escalated the misconduct in the form of inappropriate touching or other sexual advances, current and former employees say.”¹⁴⁹ Most of the time, Ubisoft swept these accusations under the rug in several of their headquarters across the world. As this kind of behavior becomes the norm in a studio, it irremediably affects the creation process of their female characters. Several games from the franchise had known changes due to the prevalent sexism of the studio. If Evie being the first female protagonist starring in the franchise's main games after almost ten years since the release of the first game in 2007 is not telling enough, according to Schreier's report, “an early outline of the script gave equal screen time to the twin protagonist [...] In the end, Jacob dominated the game.”¹⁵⁰ Evie being sidelined in most promotional material for the game is not accidental. This occurred over and over again, notably with *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017) *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018), and arguably *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020).

Assassin's Creed Origins, [...] was originally going to injure or kill off its male hero, Bayek, early in the story and give the player control of his wife, Aya, according to two people who worked on it. But Aya's role gradually shrank over the course of development and Bayek became the leading figure. Development of 2018's *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* went much the same way. The game tells the story of siblings Cassandra and Alexios. The team originally proposed making the sister the only playable character, according to four

¹⁴⁸ Schreier, Jason (@jasonschreier). “Over the past few weeks I've talked to more than 40 current and former Ubisoft employees about sexual misconduct and abuse allegations. Their accounts make one thing clear: Ubisoft has known about these problems for years.” *Twitter*, July 21st. 2020, 12:48 P.M, <https://twitter.com/jasonschreier/status/1285527461300711424?s=20>.

¹⁴⁹ Schreier, Jason. “Ubisoft Family Accused of Mishandling Sexual Misconduct Claims.” *Bloomberg*, July 21, 2020. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-21/ubisoft-sexual-misconduct-scandal-harassment-sexism-and-abuse?srnd=businessweek-v2#xj4y7vzkg>.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

people who worked on the game, until they were told that wasn't an option. The final product gives players a choice between the two characters.¹⁵¹

This was not the first time Ubisoft was criticized for their handling of female characters. In 2014 – amidst the GamerGate controversy – the studio was criticized for not including female assassins in the multiplayer version of their latest release *Assassin's Creed Unity* (2014). The studio's response to criticisms was that "women are too difficult to animate."¹⁵² A year later, they released *Syndicate*.

Schreier's report sparked several reactions from Ubisoft's former employees on *Twitter*. Victoria Atkin, Evie Frye's voice actress from ACS tweeted on July 22nd, 2020: "Finally the sexism of this company is being revealed. I certainly experienced it and have kept quiet until now. I pray there will be some major changes moving forward."¹⁵³ Seeing as she already expressed her annoyance at how Evie was handled from a marketing standpoint back in 2016, this tweet is a confirmation of how conscious this decision was. Former designer at Ubisoft Marie Jasmin also reacted to Schreier's report in a *Twitter* thread stating:

I was in the Montréal studio on AC 2 to 10 (origins) and Ubi execs said "women don't sell" EVERY SINGLE TIME. I am in awe of the Ubi Québec staff who fought teeth and claws to get Evie, and later Kassandra, to even exist. Know that, before them, many battles were lost. This ideology is also why the latest AC reveal trailer featured their fantastic woman Eivor 0% of the time. You had to learn of her existence by finding a picture of a figurine on the internet. Some gamers got angry at her existence, are you surprised? Misogyny breeds misogyny.¹⁵⁴

Responding to Jasmin's thread, another former Ubisoft employee came forward on the matter. On July 21st, 2020, writer Jill Murray tweeted "The gentleman from editorial said "the protagonist must be a STRAIGHT WHITE ALPHA MALE" and underlined it in red marker,

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Rude, Mey. "Ubisoft Can't Have Female Characters Because 'Women Are Too Difficult To Animate;' One Million Eyes Are Rolled." *Autostraddle*, June 12, 2014. <https://www.autostraddle.com/ubisoft-cant-have-female-characters-because-women-are-too-difficult-to-animate-one-million-eyes-are-rolled-241278/>; Farokhmanesh, Megan. "Ubisoft Abandoned Women Assassins in Co-Op Because of the Additional Work." *Polygon*, June 10, 2014. <https://www.polygon.com/e3-2014/2014/6/10/5798592/assassins-creed-unity-female-assassins>.

¹⁵³ Atkin, Victoria (@VictoriaAtkin). "Finally the sexism of this company is being revealed. I certainly experienced it and have kept quiet until now. I pray there will be some major changes moving forward." *Twitter*, July 22nd 2020, 2:59 P.M., <https://twitter.com/VictoriaAtkin/status/1285922338622574592>.

¹⁵⁴ This tweet was deleted later for unstated reasons but I was able to retrieve it through the web archive *Wayback Machine*.

Jasmin, Marie (@mariejasmn_). "I was in the Montréal studio on AC 2 to 10 (origins) and Ubi execs said "women don't sell" EVERY SINGLE TIME. I am in awe of the Ubi Québec staff who fought teeth and claws to get Evie, and later Kassandra, to even exist. Know that, before them, many battles were lost. This ideology is also why the latest AC reveal trailer featured their fantastic woman Eivor 0% of the time. You had to learn of her existence by finding a picture of a figurine on the internet. Some gamers got angry at her existence, are you surprised? Misogyny breeds misogyny." *Twitter*, July 21st. 2020, 1:19 P.M., https://web.archive.org/web/20230227163056/https://twitter.com/mariejasmn_/status/1285565180097761281.

stamping a foot, for emphasis. I was demoted over this issue, and quit. I trust this cannot be interpreted as “disparaging” since the studio was proud of it.”¹⁵⁵ What this situation with Ubisoft demonstrates is that even if GamerGate brought out the issues of sexism and the misrepresentation of women in video games on every level, there is still work to be done. When Ubisoft’s controversy was brought to light in July 2020, Yves Guillemot, CEO of Ubisoft stated that “Ubisoft has fallen short in its obligation to guarantee a safe and inclusive workplace environment for its employees” and that he is “committed to implementing profound changes across the company to improve and strengthen our workplace culture.”¹⁵⁶ However, a report from the French newspaper *Le Télégramme* published in May 2021 shows that there were very few changes and that some employees accused of and complicit in sexual harassment and abuse are still working within the studio.¹⁵⁷

b. Naughty Dog’s Careful Crafting of Ellie

As it has been established with Ubisoft’s case, a good look at the people involved in the making of games might be enlightening as to how their female characters are represented and treated. While players mostly embody Joel Miller in the first game, the story is very much centered around fourteen-year-old Ellie Williams. As for the marketing of the first game, Ellie’s character appears in all five trailers for *The Last of Us* and its bonus content *The Last of Us: Left Behind*.¹⁵⁸ Right off the bat, Ellie is the first character introduced to the public in “The Last of Us - announcement trailer official HD”,¹⁵⁹ the first trailer for the game published in December 2011 on Naughty Dog’s *YouTube* channel. The trailer begins with a quiet scenery, and the camera slowly pans to a bleeding dead body on a bed. Ellie runs past the

¹⁵⁵ This tweet was deleted later for unstated reasons but I was able to retrieve it through the web archive *Wayback Machine*.

Murray, Jill (@disco_jill). “The gentleman from editorial said “the protagonist must be a STRAIGHT WHITE ALPHA MALE” and underlined it in red marker, stamping a foot, for emphasis. I was demoted over this issue, and quit. I trust this cannot be interpreted as “disparaging” since the studio was proud of it.” *Twitter*, July 21st. 2020, 8:01 A.M., https://web.archive.org/web/20200721150401/https://twitter.com/disco_jill/status/1285590827830517761.

¹⁵⁶ Schreier, “Ubisoft Family Accused of Mishandling Sexual Misconduct Claims.”

¹⁵⁷ Mestayer, Thierry. “Ubisoft peine à tourner la page d’un management « toxique ».” *Le Télégramme*, May 5, 2021. <https://www.letelegramme.fr/economie/toute-l-actualite/ubisoft-peine-a-tourner-la-page-dun-management-toxique-3787085.php>.

¹⁵⁸ Naughty Dog. “The Last of Us - announcement trailer official HD.” *YouTube*. December 10, 2011. <https://youtu.be/mJt-mILk10k>; PlayStation. “The Last of Us - 2012 Gamescom Trailer.” *YouTube*. Aug 14, 2012. <https://youtu.be/MX6eqoCLbTc?si=qjbg2EIMyRQbg96C>; PlayStation. “The Last of Us - Story Trailer.” *YouTube*. Dec 10, 2012. <https://youtu.be/W01L70IGBgE?si=X70c3g6kuziDWjr5>; PlayStation. “The Last of Us | Launch Trailer.” *YouTube*. Jun 11, 2013. https://youtu.be/OQpdSVFk_w?si=4ZqOiM0xIsWz_NIw; PlayStation. “The Last of Us: Left Behind Launch Trailer.” *YouTube*. Feb 14, 2014. <https://youtu.be/Fjkm414zZRU?si=iAdjwUZgpWwPGLD>.

¹⁵⁹ Naughty Dog. “The Last of Us - announcement trailer.”

corpse, walking in the puddle of blood paying no mind to the morbid scene. We hear noises of struggle, upstairs, and a slightly annoyed Ellie saying “Oh man...” As she gets to the top floor, we see Joel fighting another man. Ellie hides and reaches for a pocket knife, ready to intervene if need be. The players are introduced to this girl, clearly used to violence and shows she is accustomed to these situations rather than scared of them. In this same trailer, Joel and Ellie fight an infected together, showing that even if Joel is the adult, they are both equally fighters. Similarly to ACS’s trailers, Ellie and Joel parallel Evie and Jacob’s style of combat, depicted through a gendered lens. Joel fights head-on, combining hand-to-hand combat and his gun on humans and infected alike while Ellie hides in the shadows and prioritizes stealth, attacking from behind with her knife. Beyond the gendered expectation, Ellie is still a child, fighting infected and humans through hand-to-hand combat seems very unlikely.

While the trailer shows an abandoned city landscape with plants overgrowing the buildings, Ellie confirms she is used to this life. “This is our routine. Day and night, all we do is survive. It never lets up. He tells me how these streets were crowded with people just – going about their lives. Uh...Must’ve been nice.”¹⁶⁰ Players thus understand that Ellie was born after the outbreak, and only knows what life was like before through stories people like Joel tell her.

In another trailer,¹⁶¹ the focus is more on Joel, confirming he will be the playable character. While his relationship with Ellie is framed as central, players are introduced to this rather stereotypical male protagonist. Indeed, through this trailer alone, Joel is depicted as “the “gritty” white male action (anti)hero.”¹⁶² In this post-apocalyptic setting, the duo is surprisingly seen fighting more humans (seemingly only male) than zombie-like creatures. When questioned by Ellie about his experience, Joel implies it is not his first rodeo. “How did you know?” “Bout what?” “About the ambush.” “I’ve been on both sides.”¹⁶³ While Ellie’s character seems somewhat transgressive, Joel reassures future players of *The Last of Us* that the game is still masculine-coded. Similarly to Sarkeesian with women and tropes in video games, Kreider coined several terms defining male protagonists which Joel easily falls into

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ PlayStation. “The Last of Us - 2012 Gamescom Trailer.”

¹⁶² Kreider, Ash (wundergeek). “Male Protagonist Bingo: A Study in Cliches.” *WordPress*, March 12, 2014. <https://gomakemeasandwich.wordpress.com/2014/03/12/male-protagonist-bingo-a-study-in-cliches-many-images/>.

¹⁶³ PlayStation. “The Last of Us - 2012 Gamescom Trailer.”

from trailers alone. His main traits being “brooding”, “blasé about killing”, “killing spree” and “makes a living being violent”.¹⁶⁴

Ellie’s centrality in the narrative is however highlighted once again in the “story trailer”, as Joel proclaims, halfway through the video that “It’s got everything to do with that little girl.”¹⁶⁵ Even though nothing indicates that players will embody anyone else but Joel, Ellie is depicted as crucial and capable. She is seen wielding different weapons throughout the various trailers¹⁶⁶ (see figure 7).



Figure 7: Ellie Wielding a Knife, a Gun and a Bow in Different Trailers

Despite her young age, she is not depicted as “in distress”, almost putting her on equal footing with Joel. The videos alternate between action scenes and quieter moments showcasing the dynamic between the duo, mostly represented as a team. There was no attempt to hide Ellie from the players or push her to the side. In the trailer for the game’s DLC, *Left Behind*,¹⁶⁷ Ellie gets to shine without Joel. Since the DLC focuses on her anyway, players are introduced to sequences of Ellie simply having fun. However as she is enjoying teenage girlhood with her best friend Riley, they are interrupted by infected people and the reality of the world they live in catches up to them. This trailer sums up Ellie’s character, reminding the player that while she might be strong, she is still a teenage girl.

In an interview from 2012 – before the first game was released – featuring Neil Druckmann (main writer), Ashley Johnson (Ellie’s actress), and Annie Wersching (Tess’ actress) they emphasize how the plot and realistic depictions of female characters were central

¹⁶⁴ Kreider, “Male Protagonist Bingo.”

¹⁶⁵ PlayStation. “The Last of Us - Story Trailer.”

¹⁶⁶ Naughty Dog. “The Last of Us - announcement trailer”; PlayStation. “The Last of Us - Story Trailer”; PlayStation. “The Last of Us | Launch Trailer.”

¹⁶⁷ PlayStation. “Left Behind Launch Trailer.”

issues in the making of *TLOU*.¹⁶⁸ “To realize a truly fearsome world and characters worth rooting for, he [Druckmann] has to make you believe that Joel, Ellie and Tess are real people. The severity of the plot gave Naughty Dog scope to shake-up the perception of women in games, something both he and his studio feel strongly about.”¹⁶⁹ Druckmann underlines that he did not let the poor standards of the industry influence his story when it came to writing his female characters. “I tried not to be mindful of too many outside influences, which is things like the industry, and how women are portrayed. I believe that should not affect a person’s writing. It’s about trying to find core truths in your story, and then letting that be the driving force.”¹⁷⁰ It is worth noting that Druckmann stated this in 2012, a year before the GamerGate controversy.

As for the actresses involved in the games like Annie Wersching, it was “Naughty Dog’s desire to create tangible, believable and unique female leads”¹⁷¹ that drew her to the project. When talking about “The Gender Problem” as Cook (the interviewer) puts it, Naughty Dog’s response seemed pretty clear. “Druckmann, Wersching and Johnson – as well as Naughty Dog at large – are growing concerned with the prevalent issue of gender portrayal in games.”¹⁷² Ashley Johnson is aware of the poor representation of women in games, referring to tropes like the “damsel in distress” or their overall sexualization. She points out *The Last of Us* as a good counter-example. Cook also mentions the issue of women’s representation on video game covers. On the matter, Druckmann stated “I believe there’s a misconception that if you put a girl or a woman on the cover, the game will sell less. I know I’ve been in discussions where we’ve been asked to push Ellie to the back and everyone at Naughty Dog just flat-out refused.”¹⁷³ This statement illustrates how the gaming industry or at least the marketing department was not comfortable with putting women forward (and still is, as observed with Ubisoft), but Druckmann and Naughty Dog pushed through to get Ellie to her rightful place. Though she shares the cover with the male protagonist, as it is with most games featuring female protagonists,¹⁷⁴ she is in the front on the two alternate covers for the game¹⁷⁵ and not hidden or overshadowed by her male counterpart (compared to Ubisoft’s female protagonists) while Joel is pushed at the back. Ellie is still not represented as “in distress” and is in fact

¹⁶⁸ Cook, Dave. “The Last of Us: Acting out the End of the World.” *VG247*, December 12, 2012. <https://www.vg247.com/2012/12/12/the-last-of-us-acting-out-the-end-of-the-world/>.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Burgess et al; “Sex, Lies, and Video Games.”

¹⁷⁵ Covers for the games in Appendix II.

holding a rifle while Joel is holding a gun, showing both characters on equal footing and capable of handling themselves. The cover for *Part II* goes even further, completely letting go of Joel and letting Ellie shine on her own with a close-up of her face covered in blood, merging with her freckles, foreshadowing her descent into violence.

In another interview¹⁷⁶ conducted two months after *TLOU* was released in 2013, featuring Druckmann and Bruce Straley – game director for *TLOU* – Druckmann reveals that making Ellie a strong protagonist was their intention all along. The players actually get to embody two characters, Joel and Ellie. But before the game came out, the fact that Ellie was playable was kept secret, as seen in the trailers. On this matter, Druckmann states: “From a marketing standpoint, something we were very conscious of initially—We said, “Here are things we will lie about in interviews.” If somebody asks, “Do you play as Ellie?” we would say no. Even though we knew from the beginning that we were working toward this climactic moment where the roles of the characters shift.”¹⁷⁷ If this secret can be seen as a way to preserve the plot and surprise of the story, it can also be seen as a way to not scare off players reluctant to embody a teenage girl in a survival horror game. The game also starts with Joel’s daughter Sarah, who is also playable at the beginning of the story. Druckmann states that he also decided to never mention it as well before the game came out. Straley goes on to say that he did not want players to think Joel would have to “babysit” Ellie. “As much as we could, in our PR and so on, we were trying to say that Ellie is very capable from the get-go. She’s always been designed as a capable counterpart to Joel.”¹⁷⁸ When talking about their inspiration for the characters, Druckmann explains that the relationship between the two protagonists was at the core, which is also something illustrated in the trailers. “[B]uild an entire game around this concept of meeting a character really early on and forming a bond that would evolve and shift as you see all the facets that a deep relationship between two people can have.”¹⁷⁹ Emotional depth and authenticity between the characters’ interactions are the backbone of the game. Druckmann also notes “how popular Ellie ended up being says a lot about whether games can sell with a female protagonist”,¹⁸⁰ which is an argument often heard to justify the lack of female protagonists in the video game landscape as seen with Ubisoft. However, early drafts of *TLOU* demonstrate how much more problematic the game could have been compared to

¹⁷⁶ Takahashi, Dean. “The Last of Us Creators React to Critics of Game’s Female Characters (Exclusive Interview).” *VentureBeat*, May 8, 2013. <https://venturebeat.com/games/the-last-of-us-female-characters/>.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

the finished product. In a report from 2020,¹⁸¹ Druckmann opens up about his first ideas for the game:

In an early version of *The Last of Us*, then titled “Mankind,” only women were susceptible to the parasitic fungal infection that brings down civilization. In that version, Ellie was the only female believed to be immune. But that concept, Druckmann said in a 2013 speech, was a terrific failure. “The reason it failed is because it was a misogynistic idea,” he confessed. “A lot of the female workers at Naughty Dog came up and said, ‘I don’t like this idea. I understand what you’re trying to do—it is ultimately a story about the love of a girl—but the way it’s coming off is you’re having a bunch of women turn into monsters and you’re shooting them in the face.’”¹⁸²

There are several notable things in this excerpt. Firstly the early title chosen for *TLOU* “Mankind” – which could have been synonymous with “humanity” or “humankind” – coupled with the fact that only women could be infected with the fungus, the game could have easily turned into another “man’s world”. To some degree, it is still the case in the finished product, since most human antagonists in the first game are noticeably male. Of course, the most striking is the concept itself. What good reason could possibly justify that only women can be infected and thus turn into the biggest threat to humanity and the main antagonists throughout the game? If ultimately, the presence of women’s voices in the process of making the game was crucial in correcting this, the fact that they were heard and understood is as important.

Neil Druckmann and Naughty Dog’s stance should be the norm but as seen with Ubisoft, it is still not the case and thus worth noting, especially since all of this happened before the GamerGate controversy. Furthermore, Neil Druckmann called upon a woman like Halley Gross for the writing of the second game, which can also be acknowledged as a gesture towards inclusion and insurance that female voices are heard in the making of the game. The fact that Druckmann also stood his ground when marketing advised against putting Ellie on the game’s cover is also very telling of his stance on female representation. Halley Gross also speaks about the LGBT+ representation in the *TLOU2*. “I think we’re doing right by the LGBTQ+ community, who have often been drawn with a broader brush.”¹⁸³ Moreover, the fact that Ellie was a lesbian was never hidden from the public during the promotion for *TLOU2*, as one of the first trailers for *The Last of Us Part II* released during the 2018 E3

¹⁸¹ King, Darryn. “‘The Last of Us Part II’ and Its Crisis-Strewn Path to Release.” *Wired*, October 6, 2020. <https://www.wired.com/story/last-of-us-part-ii-sequel-release-pandemic/>.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Expo featured Ellie kissing another female character, Dina.¹⁸⁴ This evolution in marketing between the first and second game is also striking. Ellie goes from a secret second protagonist to an openly gay main character. In his article, King mentions the GamerGate as a turning point in terms of issues of representation in video games. “Not long after the release of *Left Behind* in 2014, the Gamergate controversy erupted, turning questions of representation and gender in video games into some of the most toxic issues in American cultural discourse. Today there are plenty of gamers who proclaim that political correctness has ruined video games, or to quote the title of a discussion of the issue on a gaming forum, “liberal politics infected Naughty Dog.””¹⁸⁵ However, Ellie’s queerness was common knowledge by the second game’s release. In *The Last of Us: Left Behind* (2014) – the DLC for the first game – Ellie gets closer to and kisses her female best friend, Riley, explicitly showing Ellie experimenting with her sexuality. Naughty Dog released this in 2014, in the middle of the GamerGate controversy which can be seen as a form of defiance towards the status quo. However, if it was not new to the players, Naughty Dog cemented their position by reaffirming Ellie’s lesbianism in the marketing of *TLOU2*.

Speaking of *TLOU2*’s marketing, Ellie’s position as the main character is emphasized even more compared to the first opus. As mentioned before, she does not share the box cover with Joel anymore and is presented as the sole protagonist. An interesting point to note before analyzing the trailers as well is that comments were turned off under every *TLOU2* trailer on *YouTube*, except the “Abby Story Trailer”¹⁸⁶ which came out after the game’s release for reasons I will dive into later. The comments were probably turned off due to the harassment and threats *TLOU2*’s team underwent after elements of the game – such as Joel’s death – were leaked online in April 2020.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ PlayStation. “The Last of Us Part II – E3 2018 Gameplay Reveal Trailer | PS4.” *YouTube*. Jun 12, 2018. <https://youtu.be/btmN-bWwv0A?si=TQ5SApIjgfeyoXoN>.

¹⁸⁵ King. “‘The Last of Us Part II’ and Its Crisis-Strewn Path to Release.”

¹⁸⁶ PlayStation. “The Last of Us Part II – Abby Story Trailer | PS4.” *YouTube*. Dec 3, 2020. <https://youtu.be/8x3QL0gOQRU?si=ffxycDo23S8SPI9Y>.

¹⁸⁷ King. “‘The Last of Us Part II’ and Its Crisis-Strewn Path to Release”; Hernandez, Patricia. “The Last of Us Part 2 Leak Seems to Show Massive Spoilers.” *Polygon*, April 27, 2020. <https://www.polygon.com/2020/4/27/21238104/the-last-of-us-part-2-leak-gameplay-spoilers-ellie-joel-naughty-dog-sony-ps4-story-ending>; Webster, Andrew. “Naughty Dog Condemns Abusive Fans Sending Death Threats, Harassment to TLOU2 Team.” *The Verge*, July 6, 2020. <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/6/21314471/last-of-us-part-2-harassment-naughty-dog-abusive-fans>.

Out of the seven trailers¹⁸⁸ for the game, Ellie appears in six, Joel in three. Paralleling the first-ever trailer for the first game, the “Reveal Trailer”¹⁸⁹ for *Part II* starts off with Ellie, surrounded with blood and dead bodies. She seems unphased by this scene like her younger self, unless this time she is the one behind the massacre. Covered in blood, she starts playing the guitar and sings despite the morbid scenery, making the audience question her sanity. Joel enters the scene midway through the trailer, his blurry silhouette surrounded by light, already framing him as an ambiguous figure. Is he real? Alive? A ghost or a figment of Ellie’s imagination? She concludes her song with “I can’t walk on the path of the right because I’m wrong.” While the first game’s trailers depicted the duo as fighting to survive, this first taste of the sequel seems to hint at something darker. When she is done singing, Joel (who remains faceless throughout the teaser) asks her “What are you doing kiddo? You really gonna go through with this?” to which she replies “I’m gonna find...And I’m gonna kill...Every last one of them.” The balance between the protagonists of the first game seems changed, Joel appears as the voice of reason while Ellie is the one on a killing spree.

The “E3 2018 Gameplay Reveal Trailer”¹⁹⁰ introduces the players to new characters such as Dina, Ellie’s love interest in the game. In a much lighter atmosphere than the previous trailer, Ellie and Dina flirt, dance, and kiss, highlighting Ellie’s emotional journey and queerness. When Dina teases her, implying people might be jealous of her because they are together, Ellie says “I’m just a girl. Not a threat.” Although she means what she says, the irony behind this phrase cannot escape anyone familiar with the games, as Ellie is always portrayed as a force to be reckoned with and not be underestimated, especially because she is a girl. The trailer plays with this irony by having Dina reply “Oh Ellie...I think they should be terrified of you” and slowly transitioning to a gameplay sequence where Ellie is stealthily killing people. This trailer is very interesting because firstly, Joel does not appear at all, and the gameplay sequence confirms Ellie will be the playable character. Secondly, it illustrates

¹⁸⁸ PlayStation. “The Last of Us Part II - PlayStation Experience 2016: Reveal Trailer | PS4.” *YouTube*. Dec 3, 2016. <https://youtu.be/W2Wnvj33Wo?si=39gqFoAoWqHOicvu>; PlayStation. “The Last of Us Part II - Teaser Trailer #2 | PS4.” *YouTube*. Oct 30, 2017. https://youtu.be/UzdNECcio54?si=vqPJbPPpH_nYrHWt; PlayStation. “E3 2018 Gameplay Reveal Trailer”; PlayStation. “The Last of Us Part II – Release Date Reveal Trailer | PS4.” *YouTube*. Sep 24, 2019. <https://youtu.be/II5UsqP2JAK?si=leCnsy0eaBCnrNXM>; PlayStation. “The Last of Us Remastered - From The Beginning | PS4.” *YouTube*. Oct 1, 2019. https://youtu.be/JclKytWG9Ro?si=nKObRet_tb7b_6pR; PlayStation. “The Last of Us Part II - Official Story Trailer | PS4.” *YouTube*. May 6, 2020. <https://youtu.be/vhII1qlcZ4E?si=l47shT1OMevep3XX>; PlayStation. “Abby Story Trailer.”

¹⁸⁹ PlayStation. “PlayStation Experience 2016: Reveal Trailer.”

¹⁹⁰ PlayStation. “E3 2018 Gameplay Reveal Trailer.”

Ellie's complexity as a character by combining two opposite aspects of her, gentleness and violence, two things she strives for whether she likes it or not.

The turning point in *TLOU2*'s marketing campaign is most likely the "Release Date Reveal Trailer".¹⁹¹ Emphasizing Dina and Ellie's relationship once again, the trailer builds up to a point where players are led to believe through context clues that Dina got abducted by a group of people and killed. This more plot-focused trailer seems to finally shed light on the reasons behind Ellie's revenge quest: a combination of the "woman in refrigerator" and "bury your gays" trope. The Woman in Refrigerator trope will be explained in further detail in Part II of the thesis. The "bury your gays" trope can be defined as "the presentation of deaths of LGBT characters where these characters are nominally able to be viewed as *more expendable* than their heterosexual counterparts."¹⁹² As Joel's absence starts to become suspicious, he finally appears at the end of the trailer, seemingly joining Ellie on her crusade saying "You think I'd let you do this on your own?"¹⁹³ While trailers are usually created with scenes out of order and context, this one looks like it is telling a story. However, this story is not what actually happens in the game. Indeed, Joel is the one who is killed at the beginning of the game and he is the one whom Ellie is going on a murder spree for. Dina is alive and with Ellie throughout the game, thus subverting the aforementioned tropes the players are led to believe the game falls into. Naughty Dog's misleading trailers are something that was brought up often by respondents of the thesis' survey when asked about the *TLOU2*'s marketing.¹⁹⁴

While the trailers were very much focused on Ellie and the conflicts and moral dilemmas she would face, they very much omitted Abby's character – who is *TLOU2*'s deuteragonist. While Ellie's playability was hidden in the marketing for the first game, she was still presented as central to the story. In *TLOU2*'s marketing campaign before the game's release, Abby only appears in a teaser, which consists of an out-of-context game cinematic where she is tortured and saved by two other characters that remained unknown to the public until the game's release.¹⁹⁵ Nothing hints at her possible playability or her backstory. Abby, who is playable during half of the game is thus another one of Naughty Dog's secret protagonists, except this time players know next to nothing about her, placing her at a disadvantage when it comes to players' appreciation of her character. The fact that she is

¹⁹¹ PlayStation. "Release Date Reveal Trailer."

¹⁹² TV Tropes. "Bury Your Gays." <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>.

¹⁹³ PlayStation. "Release Date Reveal Trailer."

¹⁹⁴ More on this in Part III of the thesis.

¹⁹⁵ PlayStation. "The Last of Us Part II - Teaser Trailer #2."

Joel's murderer did not help either but nothing in the trailers showed her motives, contrary to Ellie with the potential death of Dina. It's only in December 2020, six months after the game came out, that Abby gets to have her own trailer¹⁹⁶ showcasing her character's story, motives and reasons behind killing Joel and how she mirrors Ellie's emotional journey. This trailer obviously spoils major points of the game which might explain why it came out so long after the game. This is the only one where comments were not turned off, and a quick look in the comment section demonstrates that a lot of players would have wanted to see this much sooner (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Most Popular Comments under the “Abby Story Trailer.”

Once again, hiding Abby as a protagonist and Joel's death might look like a will to preserve major story plot points to keep the effect of surprise, however, despite the focus on Ellie it can also be seen as a way to not scare off players and fans of the first game by taking away the male protagonist and making the game 100% about female characters. As the first game was marketed in a way that did not challenge the masculinity of the medium, the marketing for the sequel is rather ambiguous. Ellie and Abby (for the little we see her) are depicted as fighters and independent and Ellie's queerness is presented as something important. Also contrary to the first game, she is seen fighting both male and female opponents. The infected are not the focal point and are mostly there to set a mood rather than part of the actual story. But most importantly, *TLOU2*, while seemingly darker in tone, is still framed as another adventure for both Ellie and Joel.

In terms of production, the turning point is also having a woman as a co-writer of such an anticipated game. What drew Halley Gross – *TLOU2*'s co-writer – to the project was also

¹⁹⁶ PlayStation. “Abby Story Trailer.”

its attitude towards women. Seeing pictures of Abby interested her even more.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, Abby's muscular figure is something rarely seen and unconventional in video games as far as female characters are concerned. "Gross is here because Druckmann needed help: another perspective, a writer capable of crafting believable people."¹⁹⁸ Druckmann also acknowledges the fact that "without that female voice it would have been much harder" to develop complex and layered female characters. Indeed, this second game is particularly female-centered. Gross thought it was important to tackle one of the game's central themes – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – through their female characters. "I want women to see this and if they've experienced some kind of trauma that perhaps they feel a little more seen, a little less alone. [...] This is something a lot of human beings have had to negotiate. And you see in Ellie that while it can kick her butt sometimes, ultimately she finds her way through it...or finds a way to live with it, work with it."¹⁹⁹

On a similar note, the issue of diversity is also something that seemed to be at the heart of many discussions at Naughty Dog, and it looks like the second installment of the franchise tried to challenge the status quo in order to set a new norm for the industry, and not just for women. Druckmann underlined that "Naughty Dog has had a series of commercial successes, so it allows us to take chances. If *The Last of Us Part II* is successful, and someone wants to make a game with a similar cast, at least then marketing teams can look over and be like, 'Well that worked' so it won't be the thing that holds people back."²⁰⁰ Gross also evokes the importance of positive LGBT+ representation. "We want people to feel that they're being seen, that we care, and we think their stories are important. Just as important as anybody else's."²⁰¹ If this type of message can be seen as a way to cater to the LGBT+ community (queerbating), the fact that the game features characters from three of the four letters in the LGBT initialism is impressive for a game of this scale in the industry. However, when someone leaked hours of game footage and key plot points on April 27th, 2020 online

¹⁹⁷ White, Sam. "The Last Of Us Part II: How Neil Druckmann Made a Masterpiece amidst Catastrophe." *British GQ*, September 6, 2020. <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/the-last-of-us-part-ii-neil-druckmann-interview>.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Unfortunately, the interview was deleted from the website for unknown reasons, but I was able to retrieve it through the web archive *Wayback Machine*.

Meredith, Karenn. "The Last of Us Part II's Cowriter Wants Women to Feel 'a Little More Seen' in the PS4 Game." *POPSUGAR*, June 24, 2020. <https://web.archive.org/web/20200625214129/https://www.popsugar.com/entertainment/the-last-of-us-part-two-popsugar-interview-47567645>.

²⁰⁰ Powell, Steffan. "Last of Us Part 2: Creators Say Diversity in Games 'Essential.'" *BBC News*, June 17, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53080982>.

²⁰¹ Meredith. "The Last of Us Part II's Cowriter Wants Women to Feel 'a Little More Seen.'"

“homophobia and transphobia became rife around the discussion of *Part II* as players learned of its diverse cast and narrative direction. Druckmann received a deluge of anti-Semitic messages in the following weeks. Writing, drawings, all the stuff you’d associate with fascism’s greatest hits. Gross eventually gave up deleting the abuse she was receiving on Instagram.”²⁰² This reaction, akin to GamerGate, could be telling about Naughty Dog’s position on the matter, as such a virulent response is usually reserved for people working against the status quo.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that Naughty Dog’s approach is not devoid of flaws. Indeed, Naughty Dog is somewhat infamous for its “crunch” culture.²⁰³ The term “crunch” is used in the video gaming industry to describe an extensive period of time during which employees are working harder and beyond their work time to meet the deadline in time, often resulting in burn-outs. Ending such practices could also be one of the keys to maintaining diversity among a studio’s ranks. As Mia Consalvo puts it in “Crunched by Passion: Women Game Developers and Work Place Challenges”, crunch time is one of the biggest challenges women have to deal with when developing games.²⁰⁴ Of course not only women suffer from the crunch culture established in the video gaming industry, but when crunch periods require more than seventy hours of work per week, it is even “more difficult for women, who still shoulder the bulk of the responsibility for managing family life.”²⁰⁵ As far as sexism and misogyny are concerned, contrasting the point of view of the two studios encountered, one can be hopeful when it comes to the female protagonists of *The Last of Us* franchise.

²⁰² White. “How Neil Druckmann Made a Masterpiece amidst Catastrophe.”

²⁰³ Schreier, Jason. “As Naughty Dog Crunches On The Last Of Us II, Developers Wonder How Much Longer This Approach Can Last.” *Kotaku*, December 3, 2020. <https://kotaku.com/as-naughty-dog-crunches-on-the-last-of-us-ii-developer-1842289962>; Yin-Poole, Wesley. “Crunch Once Again in the Spotlight after Damning Report on The Last of Us 2 Developer Naughty Dog.” *Eurogamer*, March 14, 2020. <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2020-03-14-crunch-once-again-in-the-spotlight-after-damning-report-on-the-last-of-us-2-developer-naughty-dog>.

²⁰⁴ Consalvo, Mia. “Crunched by Passion: Women Game Developers and Work Place Challenges.” In *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, The MIT Press. Cambridge, 2008. p.182.

²⁰⁵ Kafai et al.,. “Girls and Women as Game Designers.” In *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*, p.127.

PART II

Analyzing Game Content: Subverting Tropes and the Male Gaze

The concept of the male gaze, as coined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, refers to the way in which visual media often presents the world from a heterosexual male perspective, objectifying women and positioning them as objects of male desire.²⁰⁶ This objectification and sexualization of female characters have been prevalent in video games for many years, perpetuating stereotypes either through physical representations or relegating women to certain types of roles and narratives in games to elevate the male protagonists.

One way to subvert this male gaze is through the creation of complex and well-rounded female characters that defy or reshape traditional gender stereotypes. These characters are often portrayed as capable, independent, and empowered individuals with agency and depth, rather than simply serving as eye candy or damsels in distress. By providing a range of diverse and realistic female characters, game developers can challenge the limited and objectified representations that have dominated the medium. Arguably, the subversion of the male gaze extends beyond the portrayal of female characters. The dominant group in question being heterosexual white men, challenging the status quo also encompasses the representation of other marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, people of color, and individuals with disabilities. By actively including and centering the narrative around these identities in games, developers can challenge the dominant cultural norms and create more inclusive gaming experiences.

A. Subverting the Male Gaze?

Subverting the Male Gaze in video games involves deliberately challenging the traditional perspective that often portrays female characters as objects of sexual desire for a presumed male audience. This can be achieved through various means, including non-sexualized visuals and avoiding common tropes associated with female characters. This non-sexualization entails presenting female characters in a way that emphasizes their agency, complexity, and depth rather than reducing them to sexual objects. This can involve clothing choices that prioritize

²⁰⁶ Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema."

functionality and practicality over revealing attire, as well as portraying characters in a wider range of body types and appearances that reflect real diversity. Avoiding tropes means steering clear of overused and limiting character and narrative clichés that often reinforce gender stereotypes. Subverting the male gaze through non-sexualization and trope avoidance could challenge the traditional power dynamics between genders presented in games and foster a more inclusive and representation of female characters in video games which can contribute to a more diverse and enriching gaming experience for all players.

a. Desexualization and Practicality

As previously established, the physical appearance of female characters in video games is an indicator of whether or not they are subject to the male gaze. Using Downs and Smith's methodology, this section will focus on observing how the women of *ACS*, *ACOD*, *TLOU* and *TLOU2* are physically represented compared to their male counterparts. In their study, Downs and Smith focused on primary and secondary characters. They define primary characters as "those that a video game player could actively manipulate and control onscreen",²⁰⁷ usually the protagonist "or the person around which the plot and successful completion or failure of the game's objective centered."²⁰⁸ Secondary characters were those "that were immediately tied to game play or related to the primary character (i.e., they aided or deterred the primary character from fulfilling his or her quest)."²⁰⁹ Considering this thesis is focused on protagonists, the sample of characters chosen for the study only includes playable characters. For *Assassin's Creed* the characters selected are Evie and Jacob Frye from *Syndicate* and Cassandra and Alexios from *Odyssey*. As for *The Last of Us*, the selected characters are Joel Miller and Ellie Williams for *TLOU* and *TLOU2* adding Abby Anderson for *TLOU2*.

Regarding hypersexualization, Downs and Smith coded eight variables: sexually revealing clothing, nudity, body proportion, sex talk, sexual behavior, appropriateness of attire, breast size, and waist size.²¹⁰ As this section will only focus on physical appearance, I chose to take away the "sex talk" and "sexual behavior" variables, keeping six out of the eight variables.

The variables are defined as follows:

²⁰⁷ Downs and Smith, "Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality." p.724.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. p.724.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. p.725.

²¹⁰ Ibid. pp.725-726.

- Sexually revealing clothing refers to “any garment that was worn in order to enhance, exaggerate, call attention to, or accentuate the curves or angles of any part of the body (from the neck to above the knee) and which, by design, would arouse interest of physical intimacy from others. The presence of sexually revealing clothing was coded as yes, no, not applicable, or cannot tell.”²¹¹
- Nudity refers “to the amount of exposed skin a character displayed. The levels were none (i.e., body was covered in such a way that there was no visible skin from the knees to the neckline about the shoulders as by an unaltered crew-neck, t-shirt, or tank top), partial (i.e., exposed midriffs and/or cleavage for women, shirtless males, exposed thighs, and/or buttocks for men and women), full (i.e., human character’s body did not appear to be covered by any clothing, save shoes or a hat, or if a covering of any sort as by a towel or such was transparent in nature), not applicable, or cannot tell.”²¹²
- Body proportion is defined “as the harmonious relation of parts to each other or to the whole as it applies to a human body. This variable was gauged by the propensity of characters to resemble an average male or female human. The variable character body proportion examined all aspects of the body including feet, legs, waist, hips, breasts, head size, and so forth. [...] Coders were trained to consider whether they thought the average person could look like the character without the aid of augmentation, plastic surgery, or chemical injections. Specifically, they were instructed to look for comic book or “Barbie-like” proportions in women (which would be coded as unrealistic, e.g. Lara Croft) and over-bulging musculature on men (which would be considered unrealistic, e.g. The Incredible Hulk). By definition, any woman or man with an overly exaggerated chest-size, extremely long legs, or a disproportionately small waist would be coded as having an unrealistic image. The codes for this variable were realistic, unrealistic, not applicable, or cannot tell.”²¹³
- Appropriateness of attire refers to “the degree to which garments worn by a character were suitable and functional with respect to the task at hand. For example, if a woman beside a pool wore a swimsuit, this was considered appropriate. However, if the same woman wore a swimsuit while competing in a

²¹¹ Ibid. p.725.

²¹² Ibid. p.725.

²¹³ Ibid. p.725.

dirt bike race, then the swimsuit was considered inappropriate. This variable was coded as appropriate, inappropriate, not applicable, or cannot tell.”²¹⁴

- Breast size is defined only for female characters. It “was coded as flat, average, voluptuous, or cannot tell.”²¹⁵
- Waist size “examined the waistline of characters in proportion to the rest of the body. The codes for this variable were disproportionately small, average, disproportionately large, or cannot tell.”²¹⁶

To examine all these variables, I worked on how the characters appeared in-game and not on promotional pictures. Since players can change outfits in *Assassin’s Creed* games, I chose the default outfits as reference.²¹⁷

Table 1: Results for *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* (2015)

| | Evie Frye | Jacob Frye |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Sexually revealing clothing | No | No |
| Nudity | None | None |
| Body proportion | Realistic | Realistic |
| Appropriateness of attire | Appropriate | Appropriate |
| Breast size | Average | x |
| Waist size | Average | Average |

Table 2: Results for *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* (2018)

| | Kassandra | Alexios |
|-----------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Sexually revealing clothing | No | No |
| Nudity | None | None |
| Body proportion | Realistic | Realistic |
| Appropriateness of attire | Appropriate | Appropriate |
| Breast size | Flat | x |
| Waist size | Average | Average |

²¹⁴ Ibid. p.726.

²¹⁵ Ibid. p.726.

²¹⁶ Ibid. p.726.

²¹⁷ Pictures in Appendix III.

Table 3: Results for *The Last of Us* (2013)

| | Joel Miller | Ellie Williams |
|-----------------------------|-------------|----------------|
| Sexually revealing clothing | No | No |
| Nudity | None | None |
| Body proportion | Realistic | Realistic |
| Appropriateness of attire | Appropriate | Appropriate |
| Breast size | x | Flat |
| Waist size | Average | Average |

Table 4: Results for *The Last of Us Part II* (2020)

| | Ellie Williams | Abby Anderson | Joel Miller |
|-----------------------------|----------------|---------------|-------------|
| Sexually revealing clothing | No | No | No |
| Nudity | None | None | None |
| Body proportion | Realistic | Realistic | Realistic |
| Appropriateness of attire | Appropriate | Appropriate | Appropriate |
| Breast size | Flat | Flat | x |
| Waist size | Average | Average | Average |

Discussing the results:

As shown in the different tables, no characters in both the *Assassin's Creed* and *The Last of Us* franchises are hypersexualized based on Downs and Smith's criteria. Men and women of different backgrounds are represented in an equal manner.

Women of *AC* are dressed in practical clothing suitable for assassinations and combat. As one of *Syndicate's* concept artists affirms about Evie's outfits, there was "the added challenge to balance more decorative and feminine elements of the era's [Victorian] fashion with the functionality of climbing and fighting as an assassin. Big dresses with tons of volume just would not work with her combat and navigation animations."²¹⁸

²¹⁸ Hillier, Grant. "Evie Frye." In *The Art of Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, London: Titan Books, 2015. p.22.

Throughout both games, Evie and Cassandra express their discomfort when forced to wear dresses at parties, preventing them from navigating comfortably or bearing their weapons (see Figure 9).

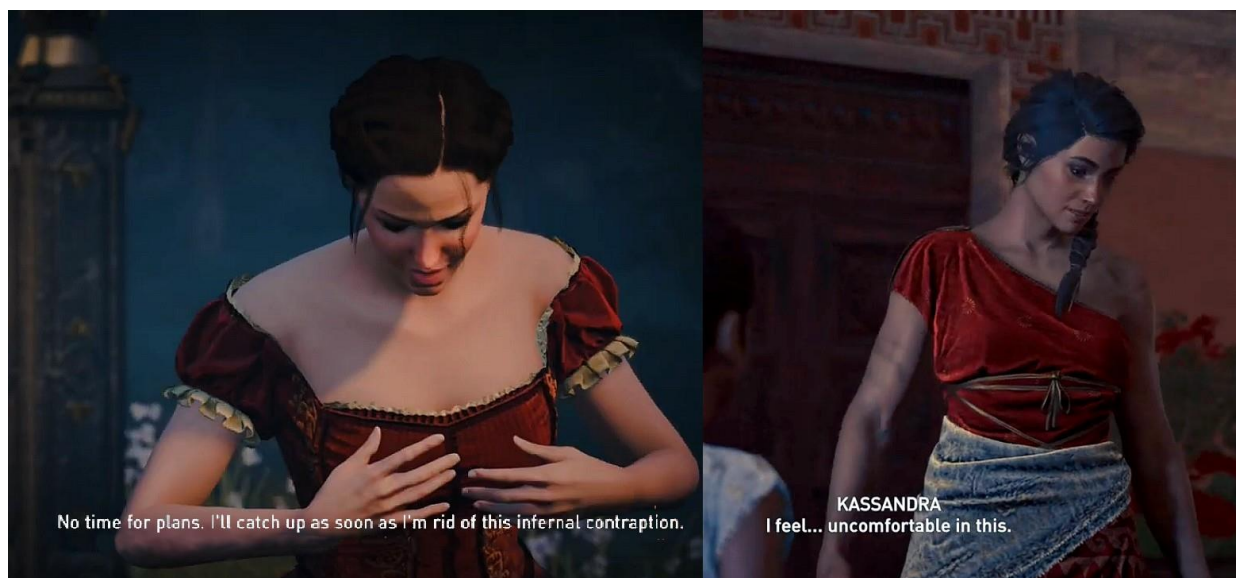


Figure 9: Evie (left) and Cassandra (right) Expressing Their Discomfort Wearing a Dress

Kassandra wears the same armors as Alexios, with no exaggeration towards her curves which is a common trope in RPG games.²¹⁹ Her only exclusive outfit, the Amazon Armor set does not sexualize her either even though it is a different than Alexios'. The only time Kassandra (as well as Alexios) is seen almost bare is in the context of the Olympics. Then again, while almost naked, she is not sexualized as the camera does not linger on her body and the emphasis is more on how toned she is – as she is participating in a sporting event – than her being objectified.

In *TLOU*, a teenage girl like Ellie has body proportions corresponding to average girls her age: no curves and little to no breasts. Ellie even jokes about it in *Left Behind* when she asks a fortune-telling Halloween prop “Am I ever getting boobs or what?” Every character is dressed accordingly to a post-apocalyptic world. They are seen wearing worn-out clothes, some having holes and tears in them, showing the characters less than ideal living conditions and how most of these clothes must be old and hand-me-downs. In “Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an Indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games” Beasley and Standley study how clothing in video games is coded by gender. This study established that female characters

²¹⁹ Sarkeesian, Anita. “Lingerie is not Armor.” *Youtube*, uploaded by Feminist Frequency. 2016, https://youtu.be/jko06dA_x88?si=Bkuf7sOfuqthCtS.

are usually less clothed than male characters.²²⁰ “The majority of female characters are dressed in such a way as to bring attention to their bodies, particularly their breasts.”²²¹ Lara Croft is often cited as an example of a female character whose outfits and figure are meant to be more titillating than practical.²²² Wearing short-shorts and low-cut tank tops to explore jungles and dangerous wild locations, always skinny and not very muscular despite her physical prowess, Lara is the epitome of “competent but sexy”, a protagonist subject to the male gaze. The women of *Assassin’s Creed* and *The Last of Us*, on the other hand, are always wearing attire adapted to their environment. It is a subject addressed in the games themselves. In a scene in *TLOU2*, Ellie says to Dina “It’s patrol you know... We’re here to kill infected, not look fancy” when the latter teased her on the fact that she was wearing the same clothes as the day before.

Kassandra and Abby’s muscularity is also something not often seen in video games as far as female characters are concerned. Kassandra is a mercenary trained to fight since she was a child and had to do so to survive. Abby is part of a paramilitary organization and expresses an interest in weightlifting. Her physique is thus styled accordingly. Both women’s hair is tied in a long braid for practicality, they have a muscular frame (Abby even more so than Kassandra), and have small breasts. They do not correspond to the typical design players are used to seeing in action games as women are usually portrayed as not muscular and thin despite their physical activities (The Lara Phenomenon). Abby and Kassandra’s demeanor can thus be coded as more traditionally “masculine” while still clearly being presented as female.

As for the male characters, they are also shown with realistic body proportions. Most characters are fit due to the physicality required to either fight and/or survive in a hostile environment. In *TLOU*, Joel is not presented as overly muscular and his outfits are not there to underline his fitness. Most characters in the franchise, men or women, are wearing jackets, shirts, and coats that are loose and not close-fitting. Jacob does not show much of his muscular body either, unless the player engages in the “fight club” mini-missions, where Jacob (if the players chose him over Evie) is seen shirtless in this context only. Alexios might be the most muscular of the bunch, as (when players chose him over Kassandra) he was

²²⁰ Beasley, Berrin, and Tracy Standley. “Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an Indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games.” *Mass Communication and Society* 5.2002. p.287.

²²¹ Ibid. p.289.

²²² Downs and Smith, “Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality.” pp.721-722; Jansz and Martis, “The Lara Phenomenon.” p.146.

trained to fight in Sparta as a warrior and comes from a godly lineage. Nevertheless, while muscular, his body is mostly covered with practical gear most of the time.

While I chose not to include the “sex talk” and “sexual behavior” variables from Downs and Smith’s methodology, I think it is also relevant to talk about the sexual content present in *TLOU2* and *ACOD*. *TLOU2* contains two sexually suggestive scenes, one between Dina and Ellie and one between Abby and her former partner Owen. Interestingly, the one which is not shown and only implied is the one between Ellie and Dina. While this could be seen as a form of censorship regarding LGBT content, elements from Halley Gross’ interview²²³ points more towards a way for Naughty Dog to avoid the fetishization of a lesbian relationship, as it is a common occurrence in media’s representation of lesbianism.²²⁴ Showing the scene between Abby and Owen on the other hand is a way to reconcile with the preconceived notion that Abby’s physical strength translated through her more masculine-coded physique could prevent her from being subjected to heterosexual male desire. However, while Abby’s character is subjected to Owen’s desire during that one scene, it is not shown in a way pertaining to the male gaze.

The male gaze manifests when the camera takes on the perspective of a stereotypical heterosexual man. An indisputable example of this is when the camera lingers, caresses, or pans across a woman’s body— although it’s not always that obvious. In games, it can be as simple as the in-game camera resting so that a character’s butt or breasts or both are centerline, it can be cutscenes that rest on a woman’s butt, it can be clothing that they are wearing or the way they talk, or it can be as basic as the way a female character moves around the game world.²²⁵

During the intimate scene between Owen and Abby, the camera does not linger on Abby (or Owen for that matter) but is centered above the chest, focusing on their facial expressions. The scene was not included to please the players but to show the emotional shift between the characters.

Kassandra’s sexuality in *ACOD* on the other hand is up to the player’s choices. She has different romance options throughout the game, both male and female. The player can thus define Kassandra’s sexuality – if they choose to even make her interact that way with

²²³ King. “‘The Last of Us Part II’ and Its Crisis-Strewn Path to Release.”

²²⁴ Jacobson, Emily. “The Fetishization of Queer Women in Cinema.” *Film Daze*, June 2020, <https://filmdaze.net/the-fetishization-of-queer-women-in-cinema/>; Morris, Hayley. “The Fetishization of Queer Women in Modern Media.” *The Revival Zine*, 12 Feb. 2020, <https://therevivalzine.com/2020/02/13/the-fetishization-of-queer-women-in-modern-media/>.

²²⁵ Sarkeesian, Anita. “Body Language & The Male Gaze – Tropes vs Women in Video Games” *YouTube*, uploaded by Feminist Frequency, 2016, <https://youtu.be/QP0la9SEdXQ>.

characters anyway. Anyhow, if Cassandra seduces or when she is seduced by someone, the outcome is only implied and the deed is done off-screen, thus not sexualizing her.

b. Subverting Tropes?

The moment video games became a medium including storytelling, stereotypes were not only conveyed through visuals, but also narrative devices. In her web series *Tropes Vs. Women in Video Games*, feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian establishes a list of tropes – or common narrative patterns – which female characters often fall into. This list of tropes sums up the stereotypical role women in video games often incarnate, usually negatively representing them. The tropes cited by Sarkeesian are not new, and some even date back to antiquity (eg. Damsel in Distress) and are not exclusive to video games. Here are the ones selected as most relevant for this thesis: “The Damsel in Distress”, “Ms. Male Character”, “The Woman in Refrigerator”, “Women as Background Decoration”, “Sinister Seductress” and “The Lady Sidekick”.

The Damsel in Distress

The Damsel in Distress trope disempowers female characters and robs them of the chance to be heroes in their own rite. [...] As a trope the damsel in distress is a plot device in which a female character is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing a core incentive or motivation for the protagonist’s quest.²²⁶

In *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate* and *Odyssey* the trope is subverted completely. Evie and Cassandra are presented as capable and independent protagonists, who even surrounded by men, do not have to rely on them to get by and it is actually quite the opposite. In *Syndicate*, Evie is the one rescuing her male counterparts, completely reversing the overused narrative device for female characters. In Sequence 7, Memory 6, Evie has to rescue Henry a male assassin who also happens to be her love interest. In the game’s DLC²²⁷ Jacob is hurt and kidnapped by Jack the Ripper and Evie is tasked to stop the killer and rescue her brother as well. In *Odyssey*, when playing as Cassandra, Alexios becomes the game’s antagonist (renamed Deimos) and vice versa. Alexios/Deimos was abducted by a cult as a child and violently brainwashed into being a weapon, stripping him of his humanity. As players make their choices in the narrative, Cassandra can try to save her brother and bring him back to himself. Furthermore, the damsel in distress trope is also made fun of in the game through a

²²⁶ Sarkeesian, Anita. “Damsel in Distress: Part 1 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games” *YouTube*, uploaded by Feminist Frequency. 2013, https://youtu.be/X6p5AZp7r_Q.

²²⁷ Ubisoft Québec. *Assassin’s Creed Syndicate: Jack the Ripper DLC*. Ubisoft. 2015.

scene in the mission “Doing Time” where Cassandra is imprisoned by Kleon and Deimos. As she fights her way through the guards to escape, her friends Barnabas and Sokrates barge in to “save” her. These characters are in no shape or form “fighters” but still came through to rescue Cassandra though she clearly did not need it as they arrived after Cassandra took everyone out on her own. “At least you tried.” Cassandra tells her friends with an amused tone. “Surely it’s the thought that counts!” Barnabas replies, defensive but relieved she is alright. The scene is presented as humorous, as it is expected of Cassandra to succeed without anyone’s help.

In *The Last of Us*, this trope is rather ambivalent. It definitely is there for Sarah, Joel’s daughter. But as for Ellie, it is a bit more complex. At the beginning of the game – the day of the virus’s outbreak – the player controls Sarah, a twelve-year-old little girl. The player sees the events unfold from her perspective. She has the role of a witness, and the gameplay is accordingly passive as we incarnate her (no fights, looking at the car’s window). When she, Joel, and her uncle Tommy have a car accident in the first ten minutes of the game, she is injured and cannot walk on her own. The gameplay then shifts to Joel for a more active role. Joel (and the player) has to carry her in order to protect her from the chaos and infected people coming their way until she eventually dies at the end of the prologue.

As for Ellie, her “distress” role is translated by her lack of agency in the game. She is far from being a “damsel” however. She has a strong personality, curses a lot for a fourteen-year-old, is capable, and challenges Joel multiple times throughout the game. But ultimately, Joel is still the figure of authority in the duo, and this ascendant makes it difficult for Ellie to make her own decisions. It is in fact Joel’s paternalistic tendencies that hold Ellie back from her true potential. He refuses to give her a weapon multiple times in the game (a bow and then a gun) despite Ellie insisting she can handle it and therefore be more helpful. This situation leaves her defenseless and dependable on Joel for a good chunk of the game. It is not until Joel is about to be drowned by a man during their trip that Ellie steps up and kills the man with a gun, saving Joel in the process. Until then, Ellie only carried a knife and was passive during gameplay, hiding while Joel took out enemies (human and infected alike). After Ellie’s first kill, Joel allows her to carry a gun “for emergencies only” and she becomes more active in gameplay, killing enemies alongside Joel, illustrating the shift in their dynamic. Later on, he gives her his rifle and asks her to cover him from afar while he crosses a road full of men looking for them, showing he trusts her to have his back.

The biggest shift, however, is when the player is finally able to control her. It happens during the “Winter” section of the game. Joel is severely wounded and on the brink of death, and Ellie is left alone to take care of him and herself. In this segment of the game, Ellie hunts on her own and meets two other men. She does not trust them and gets them to give her their rifle and ask for antibiotics so she can give it to Joel. When one of them goes to get it for her, she is left alone with the other, David. They are attacked by a bunch of infected and he and Ellie have to fight them. It is the first time the player gets to fight as Ellie and sees the slight differences in gameplay compared to Joel. She is not as strong in hand-to-hand combat, probably due to the fact that she is a teenage girl. If the player improved Joel’s statistics beforehand, it is not taken into account for Ellie, the game reminding the player it is not the same character. She does not possess Joel’s weapons as well. But these differences do not mean she is less efficient or needs more assistance from other characters. The player gets to kill several infected as Ellie and she manages to get penicillin from these men and give it to Joel, saving his life and speeding his recovery.

Later in the section, she gets chased and kidnapped by David’s men, and she discovers they are cannibals. As Ellie, players need to reach David before he gets to her in a cat and mouse situation. Ellie manages to escape, showing she does not necessarily need Joel or another adult to survive. This is especially striking when David catches up with Ellie and pines her down to the ground. The chase gameplay sequence ends with a disturbing cutscene where it is heavily implied that the struggle between the two could eventually turn into David raping or sexually assaulting Ellie. Joel, who woke up alone a few moments prior, is looking for Ellie and understands that she is in trouble. He arrives just after Ellie managed to escape David’s grip and brutally killed him with a machete. By alternating Joel and Ellie’s points of view during this segment, the narrative frames Joel as Ellie’s potential savior, fulfilling his role of protector. However, Ellie saves herself before he arrives, subverting the “Damsel in Distress” trope for this part of the game. Showing this brutal and violent side of Ellie is a way to show that she is strong and capable. As Burgess et al. state in “Sex, Lies, and Video Games: The Portrayal of Male and Female Characters on Video Game Covers”, violence in video games is often synonymous with power, and thus almost always associated with male characters.²²⁸ Showing a character like Ellie – who, as a teenage girl, could be mistaken as soft and helpless – to be brash, impulsive, and violent sure breaks the status quo of “excluding

²²⁸ Burgess et al, “Sex, Lies, and Video Games.” p.427.

women from the action roles, [...] relegated to groupie status.”²²⁹ However as previously stated, Ellie’s case is rather complex in the first game, as she has little to no say about her own fate. Indeed, she is the only known person to be immune to the fungus responsible for humanity’s downfall. This immunity making her the key to creating a vaccine, she and Joel travel across the country to find the people able to make the cure. When they reach their destination, she is sedated and ready to go under surgery. In the meantime, Joel learns she would have to die in order to extract what it needs to create a vaccine. Ellie was not aware of this fact before being put to sleep, but the player (and Joel) already knows she wants her immunity to mean something. Joel is having none of it and murders his way across the hospital to save Ellie, ready to doom humanity for good. After he gets to her and is about to escape, holding her unconscious body, he stumbles upon Marlene (leader of the Fireflies, a rebel group trying to find a cure). They discuss “what Ellie would have wanted”, while she is right there, unconscious and not able to speak her mind. The fact that no one bothered to ask her directly and withdrew information from her robs her of making this crucial decision on her own terms. In that moment, she is either seen through her immunity or as Joel’s surrogate daughter, caught between the two like an object to be tossed around. Joel kills Marlene and eventually escapes with Ellie. When she wakes up a few hours after the events, Joel lies to her, saying that others were also immune and that the Fireflies already tried and failed to make a vaccine, robbing her of what made her “special” for his own sake. His selfishness once again keeping her from having an active role in her narrative.

In the game’s DLC – *The Last of Us: Left Behind* – players get to follow more of Ellie’s adventures during the “Winter” section of the first game, coupled with flashbacks of her and her best friend Riley the night she was bitten. In this extension from the first game, Ellie is on a mission to find a first aid kit in order to stitch up a dying Joel. The roles are reversed and Ellie is the one Joel depends on to survive. Players barely see him during the section, leaving room for Ellie. During that time alone, the player gets to embody a slightly younger and more innocent Ellie in flashbacks. Living in a quarantine zone in Boston, she sneaks out with her best friend Riley and explores an abandoned mall. These scenes contrast with the present, where we see a hardened Ellie, fighting and killing men and infected on her own to keep Joel safe. This whole DLC subverts the “Damsel in Distress” trope by putting forward Ellie in the role of the savior and making Joel the secondary character in need of assistance.

²²⁹ Ibid. p.427.

In *The Last of Us: Part II* (2020), the trope is completely forgotten. While Abby gets to save two kids to clear her conscience, it does not have the same impact as a man saving a woman because she is helpless. Moreover, said kids, Lev and her sister Yara, are the ones who saved Abby in the first place. The game is a succession of characters saving each other in different ways, Dina with Ellie and vice versa. Jesse and Ellie helping each other, Lev and Abby saving each other in more ways than one. The game is rather balanced in terms of who does the rescuing and who requires assistance.

Ms. Male Character²³⁰

Sarkeesian describes the “Ms. Male Character” as “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.”²³¹ While this trope is popular in fighting and racing games, it is not relevant for *The Last of Us*, as every character in the games is its own, not a feminized version of an already existing male one. For the *Assassin’s Creed* games, it is slightly more nuanced. While Evie is Jacob’s female twin and counterpart, she is not designed as a female version of her brother. If anything, she was created to be his complete opposite, in terms of looks as well as personality. Her contrasting personality with Jacob has already been addressed, but it is also important to underline the design choices made to present the twins as separate entities. As seen in Figure 10, the twins’ personalities contrast from a simple look at them. Evie has soft features, her hair held back in braids to keep them out of her face, and dressed neatly but still stylish and feminine. Jacob wears plainer clothes and a hat to keep his messy hair out of the way. His face is sharp and angular covered with multiple scars as a reminder of his brawling persona.

²³⁰ Also called the Distaff Counterpart trope.

²³¹ Sarkeesian, Anita. “Ms. Male Character – Tropes vs Women in Video Games” *YouTube*, uploaded by Feminist Frequency. 2013, <https://youtu.be/eYqYLfmlrWA>.



Figure 10: Jacob's Simpler Demeanor Contrasting with Evie's Poise

As for *Odyssey*, the situation is more ambiguous. If we believe what was said about Ubisoft's plans for the game, Cassandra was originally made to be the only protagonist. If anything, Alexios' design is based on a female existing one, reversing the trope. Furthermore, contrary to the Ms. Male Character premise, Cassandra does not match Alexios as a female counterpart through stereotypical gendered signifiers. As Sarkeesian explains, gendered signifiers in games can appear this way:

The most commonly used gendered signifiers or feminizing accessories are bows, lipstick, long eyelashes and the color pink, but there are a whole host of other design elements that, in combination, serve the same purpose. Other signifiers used to differentiate women from men are pigtails, high-heeled shoes, painted nails, pronounced makeup (especially blush and eyeshadow), midriff baring outfits, exaggerated breasts with exposed cleavage, and a heart motif in their design or powers.²³²

Aside from her longer hair and absence of a beard, Cassandra wears the exact same armors and bears the same weapons as Alexios as illustrated by Figure 5.²³³ Qualifying Cassandra as a female "skin" for Alexios would be a disservice to her character, as she was designed to be the sole protagonist of the game. "One repercussion of constantly relying on feminizing signifiers for character design is that it tends to reinforce a strict binary form of gender expression. [...] And within that strict binary women are "marked" while men get to remain largely "unmarked.""²³⁴ The "unmarked" aspect of male character designs also frames them as the "default" gender. This can also extend to the marketing of the game. Indeed, Alexios was more heavily marketed than Cassandra and she might appear like a gender-bent version of Alexios to the average player. As seen in the previous part, he features in more trailers and

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Except for Cassandra's exclusive Amazon armor set which is countered by Alexios' Achillean set.

²³⁴ Sarkeesian, "Ms. Male Character."

is the default in the game's box cover reinforcing the premise that all characters are assumed to be male unless stated otherwise despite the fact that they have different names to help distinguishing between them. For instance in Ubisoft's latest entry, *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*, the players can also choose between a male and female option. However, the character's name (Eivor) remains the same for both options. Players and marketing had no other choice but to refer to Eivor's female option "Female Eivor" or "Lady Eivor" to distinguish her from her more marketed and visible male counterpart, setting the male option as the "unmarked" gender and the default. Nevertheless, the fact that Cassandra's design does not rely on stereotypically feminine traits to distinguish her from her male counterpart can also be seen as transgressive, and even a gateway to queer representation, redefining the concept of femininity.

The Woman in Refrigerator

"The Woman in Refrigerator" trope, as Sarkeesian explains is a term coined by comic book writer Gail Simone and named after an issue of *Green Lantern* in which the superhero finds his girlfriend who had been murdered inside his refrigerator. This trope corresponds to "characters who are routinely brutalized or killed-off as a plot device designed to move the male character's story arc forward. [...] In each case, the protagonists' wife and daughter are brutally murdered and their deaths are then used by the developers as a pretext for their inevitable bloody revenge quest."²³⁵

This trope is notably absent in ACS, which is worth noting since the trope is used a lot throughout the franchise.²³⁶ It was such a recurring issue that some fans expressed concern for Evie before the launch of the game, predicting she would be killed off to fuel Jacob's motives.²³⁷ However, this did not happen. As for *ACOD*, the trope can be illustrated by the death of Phoibe, a young girl who serves as a friend and kind of little sister figure to the protagonist, whether as Cassandra or Alexios. By definition, the trope might remain ambiguous as Cassandra, since the "Woman in Refrigerator" usually fuels male narratives. Nevertheless, her death is used as a pivotal moment in the game, influencing the protagonist's decisions regardless of whether it is Alexios or Cassandra.

²³⁵ Sarkeesian, Anita. "Damsel in Distress: Part 2 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games" *YouTube*, uploaded by Feminist Frequency, May 28, 2013, https://youtu.be/toa_vH6xGqs.

²³⁶ Maria Thorpe in *AC Revelations*; Kanietí:io in *AC III*; Mary Read in *AC IV Black Flag* and Elise de la Serre in *AC Unity* to name a few examples.

²³⁷ Notably in comments for the Evie launch trailer where several commenters expressed their wish for Ubisoft to not kill off Evie.

The trope is however rather prominent in *The Last of Us*. The death of Sarah at the very beginning of the game is a textbook case, her death doing nothing more than fueling Joel's story and serving as a motivator for what he will do for Ellie later on. The same can be said for Tess, Joel's partner in the Boston quarantine zone. Both of these deaths impact Joel's story, depriving women of having an active influence on the story although Tess is considered Joel's equal. This absence of women (except Ellie) is also noticeable through the lack of mother figures in the game. Sarah's mother is absent, and we do not know her name or what happened to her. Ellie's mother is mentioned twice in passing (and the audience understands that she is dead), Tess is killed off too soon to share this sort of bond with Ellie, and Marlene, Ellie's caretaker thus far, is barely present in the game and ends up killed by Joel at the end. All of this to make Joel the sole guardian of Ellie, for him to fill the void caused by Sarah's death, and not really for Ellie to fill the void caused by the death of her parents or other parental figures.

As for *The Last of Us: Part II*, the trope is completely reversed and subverted. Joel, the former main protagonist, is playable for only a couple of minutes at the beginning of the game, similar to Sarah in *TLOU*. He is then brutally killed off by Abby in front of Ellie. If "The Man in Refrigerator" were a thing, it would certainly fit the trope, but this role reversal being usually non-existent, *TLOU2* strayed from common narrative patterns. After witnessing Joel's murder, Ellie goes on a rampage against Abby and her friends who participated in the slaughter. Abby's motives are revealed halfway in the game, as the player gets to be her. Abby is the daughter of the surgeon who was supposed to operate on Ellie to get the vaccine in *TLOU* before he was brutally murdered by Joel at the end of the game. As both girls are bloodthirsty for revenge, the whole narrative rapidly becomes more of an "eye for an eye" situation, leading to many deaths to further their stories, men and women alike. With this in mind, it is safe to say *The Last of Us: Part II* successfully avoids this trope.

Women as Background Decoration

The "Women as Background Decoration" trope is defined by Sarkeesian as:

[T]he subset of largely insignificant non-playable female characters whose sexuality or victimhood is exploited as a way to infuse edgy, gritty or racy flavoring into game worlds. These sexually objectified female bodies are designed to function as environmental texture while titillating presumed straight male players. Sometimes they're created to be

glorified furniture but they are frequently programmed as minimally interactive sex objects to be used and abused.²³⁸

As Sarkeesian underlines here, this trope is mostly used for NPCs (Non-Playable Characters). Sarkeesian cites the *Assassin's Creed* franchise as an example (before ACS's release) as it often used this trope by using prostitutes as distractions for guards, helping the male protagonists avoid direct conflict to access restricted areas.²³⁹ Even though prostitutes were common in Victorian London, they are absent in *Syndicate*. They are however somewhat central in the *Jack the Ripper* DLC. Howbeit contrary to the previous games they are not used as a sweet distraction to help a male protagonist. While victims of the infamous serial killer, they are presented as resilient and resolute in their wish to capture the Ripper. A 40-year-old Evie is at the center of the DLC, she is set to protect these abused women and has dedicated side-missions whose aim is to publicly shame men willing to hurt them. While not lower-class herself, the fact that Evie – an older woman – is the one interacting with them institutes a sense of sisterhood. Moreover, “Evie isn’t rescuing these women *from* a life of prostitution—only from those who would seek to exploit them or do them harm.”²⁴⁰ Therefore, these women are not used as “Background Decoration” but are treated as a central part of the story and gameplay, subverting the trope. Lastly, this trope is not present in *Odyssey* or *The Last of Us* franchise.

Sinister Seductress

The “Sinister Seductress” trope occurs a lot in horror games.

With these female characters, their grotesque nature is inextricably tied to their gender. Elements that are often presented as titillating in other contexts are twisted and made repugnant so that their femaleness itself is what serves to make them disgusting. [...] While grotesquely female characters are designed to make femaleness repugnant by blending sexuality and repulsiveness, temptresses make femaleness threatening because of their sexuality and attractiveness.²⁴¹

In *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*, two mythical creatures could have fallen into that trope, the Sphinx and Medusa (see Figure 11). However, their design does not combine femaleness and

²³⁸ Sarkeesian, Anita. “Women as Background Decoration: Part 1 – Tropes vs Women in Video Games” *YouTube*, uploaded by Feminist Frequency, 2014, <https://youtu.be/4ZPSrwedvsg>.

²³⁹ Notably in *AC II*, *AC Brotherhood*, *Revelation* and *Black Flag*.

²⁴⁰ Totilo, Stephen. “The Good, New Assassin’s Creed Expansion’s Unexpectedly Bold Depiction Of Prostitution.” *Kotaku*, December 21, 2015. <https://kotaku.com/the-most-interesting-things-in-assassins-creed-syndicat-1748968672>.

²⁴¹ Sarkeesian, Anita. “Sinister Seductress – Tropes vs Women in Video Games.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Feminist Frequency, Sep 28, 2015, <https://youtu.be/1oXzWzMqarU>.

monstrosity. In fact, neither is sexualized to begin with nor uses their alleged beauty to allure or manipulate Cassandra. In the game, the Sphinx is depicted as a highly intelligent and enigmatic being, focused on posing riddles and testing the acumen of those who approach her. Her portrayal emphasizes her wisdom and knowledge as she engages Alexios or Cassandra, in intellectual challenges rather than relying on allure or deceit to achieve her goals. As for Medusa, she is depicted as a tragic figure cursed by the gods. Formerly called Ligea, she transformed into Medusa by picking up a cursed artifact, resulting in her change of appearance. Cassandra stumbled upon her in Lesbos by helping Bryce, Ligea's partner, who was looking for her. Instead of being a seductive and malevolent force, the narrative explores the human aspect of her story, highlighting her vulnerability, pain, and the tragic circumstances that led to her becoming a feared creature.



Figure 11: Cassandra Confronting The Sphinx (top) and Medusa (bottom)

Regarding *The Last of Us*, the body horror elements present in the games could have easily led this trope to be present. The virus transforming the infected's bodies into something completely horrendous, Naughty Dog avoided the trope when they discarded their plans for "Mankind", their version where only women were victims of the fungus. They also kept the infected clothed, and for those in a more advanced stage, it becomes impossible to determine their gender.

The Lady Sidekick

TLOU is directly cited by Sarkeesian as an example of "The Lady Sidekick" trope.

Damsel escort missions occur when a female character joins the male player character, but is largely helpless, and rather than being a clear benefit to the player, she feels more like a burden. [...] Whether they're presented as capable or helpless, female companions often encounter situations in which they just can't proceed on their own. Ellie in *The Last of Us*, for instance, is hardly a Yorda-like damsel, but when she encounters a body of water, she may as well be, and Joel has to go out of his way to get her across.²⁴²

While it is true that Ellie is helpful and expresses her desire to not be considered a burden to Joel, she has moments where Joel has to be here to make her go forward. Sarkeesian underlined the fact that Ellie could not swim and therefore depended on Joel to cross bodies of water. This happens around five instances throughout the game, and Joel has to look for wooden planks for Ellie to climb on and make her cross. However, while I agree that it may look like Ellie is dependent on this aspect, it is important to remember that Ellie grew up in a quarantine zone in Boston, and never went outside the walls before meeting Joel, which makes it difficult for her to learn how to swim. During the game, the duo meets a boy around Ellie's age, Sam, who also does not know how to swim. Children born during the pandemic probably did not get the chance to learn due to a lack of access to safe bodies of water. With this in mind, Naughty Dog's decision to integrate this shortcoming into the gameplay might just be out of realism. Both Ellie and Joel acknowledge this flaw in the game and Ellie eventually asks Joel to teach her how to swim after they make the cure. (She ends up learning, as she can swim in *TLOU2*.) However, as important as Ellie is in the first opus, she is only playable for a short amount of time, thus giving her more the role of a sidekick than a protagonist. Allowing the players to control Ellie in *Left Behind* allows her to take the spotlight and be a true protagonist. The story is centered on her and her past and she is the one

²⁴² Sarkeesian. "The Lady Sidekick – Tropes vs Women in Video Games" *YouTube*, uploaded by Feminist Frequency, Apr 27, 2017, <https://youtu.be/4BrKqEtG-2w>.

in action. This extension frames her as more than Joel's sidekick, successfully subverting the trope.

In *The Last of Us: Part II*, players are given the opportunity to embody not one, but two strong female protagonists. Ellie and Abby are both adults who can handle themselves. They get help from their friends from time to time but it is mutual and several instances of the game remind the player that they can manage on their own. However, removing Joel from the equation does not mean he is not as important as he used to be in the first game. Joel is the link between the two protagonists and his ghost is a constant reminder of why these women do what they do in the game. While Abby's vengeance is fulfilled at the beginning of the game, her purpose for the remaining is more centered on self-discovery and moving forward. Allowing her to move on and go past the death of her father and what she did to Joel. Ellie is the opposite, which is unfortunate considering this game was supposed to let her shine on her own, similar to *TLOULB*. While she is playable, her whole storyline revolves around Joel, aborting any attempt at self-discovery and properly dealing with what Joel took from her in the first game (her agency). She is not Joel's sidekick anymore, but Joel's ghost is still holding her back from her true potential as he did in *TLOU*. When she has a chance to move on and raise a child with her girlfriend Dina, Tommy – Joel's brother – arrives with leads about Abby's whereabouts. When she chooses revenge over a stable life with the family she has with Dina and her son, players are reminded that she is Joel's daughter before she can be anybody's mother.

B. Intersectionality as a Way to Shape Fleshed-Out Female Protagonists

Introduced by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s, the concept of intersectionality recognizes that various aspects of a person's identity, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and more, intersect to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression.²⁴³ It could provide a valuable framework for shaping fleshed-out female protagonists in video games by not looking at women as a monolith and considering the various facets of a character's identity and experiences. By doing so, game developers can

²⁴³ Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum*. 1989. pp.139-167.

create more authentic, relatable, and multi-dimensional female characters. Subverting the male gaze involves challenging and reshaping the portrayal of characters and narratives from a predominantly male perspective, but also a white, heterosexual, and cis-gendered one. It could be interesting to look at how the identity of female protagonists as women intersect with other social factors.

a. Evie Frye – The Gendered and Classed Paradoxes of Victorian London

Evie Frye is the female and second protagonist of the game *Assassin's Creed Syndicate*. As a twenty-year-old assassin, Evie evolves in the incredibly gendered and class system of Victorian London. She grew up in the countryside of Crawley and was brought up within the rather egalitarian Assassin Brotherhood. As an assassin, she did not grow up knowing the class issues she tries to dismantle in London and is not considered inferior as a woman despite the social restrictions imposed on women at the time. When she arrives in London, her education, skin color, and overall skills place her on a higher class level than the people she tries to help and frame her as an overall privileged person. She and her brother are outsiders, fighting oppression they themselves are not suffering from and when players conquer the borough of London with Jacob's gang, the overall premise of fighting capitalism seems to serve as a pretext to just overthrow the Templars for the sake of the Brotherhood, not common folks.

As an assassin, her physical strength and prowess challenge traditional gender norms and expectations. Evie is a highly skilled Assassin, and her combat abilities are on par with her brother. She engages in intense hand-to-hand combat, wields a variety of weapons skillfully, and employs stealth techniques to take down her targets. This proficiency in combat and her physical strength are not often associated with traditional femininity, especially in the historical setting in which the game takes place. Evie's physical strength also translates into her parkour skills, typical of assassins in the franchise. In one of her missions, she is tasked by Alexander Graham Bell with planting fuses on top of Big Ben, which she can climb almost effortlessly. To accomplish all of these physical feats, Evie's attire is made to be practical and adapted to the task at hand. The most striking part of her outfits is that she is wearing pants and no restricting corsets, transgressing the gender expectations of women of her time. However, while transgressive in some aspects, Evie remains traditionally feminine to modern players. She has soft, round features, is thin, wears makeup, and is not that muscular despite the physical dimension of her activities.

While physical strength is a significant aspect of Evie's character, her intelligence and strategic thinking are equally important. She is a master of stealth, using her intellect to outmaneuver enemies and complete objectives. Her ability to strategize and adapt adds depth to her character beyond just physical prowess. Evie possesses attributes historically associated with masculinity such as rationality and a liking for intellectual activities. "Don't let personal feelings compromise the mission" is her father's philosophy and a motto she lives by. Contrary to her brother Jacob, Evie is shown to be a strategic thinker who approaches missions and challenges with careful planning and consideration. Her decisions are driven by rationality, and part of her character's arc is to let go of her father's tendency to repress emotions, a trait typically associated with male characters. In contrast, her brother seems to be the more "emotional one", leaving Evie to pick up after him.

b. Cassandra – Female Masculinity and Queerness

Kassandra is the female option and protagonist of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*. She is a Spartan mercenary during the Peloponnesian War. Growing up as an outcast as a female warrior, Kassandra's story is already queer-coded from the start. Her main quest revolves around self-discovery and found family, something queer people can resonate with. Kassandra defies traditional gender roles of her historical context by actively engaging in combat, displaying physical prowess, and taking on leadership roles. Her character design combines feminine traits (long hair, soft features) and more masculine attributes (a muscular frame, multiple battle scars). She challenges societal expectations that confine women to passive or supporting roles. This portrayal expands the definition of femininity within the game's narrative, showcasing that strength, agency, and independence are not exclusive to male characters. The game introduced a significant departure from previous games in the series by offering players the ability to choose romantic relationships regardless of the protagonist's gender. This includes same-sex romance options for Kassandra, allowing players to explore queer relationships. This representation reflects a more inclusive approach to relationships and sexuality, acknowledging and validating diverse identities and orientations. Set in ancient Greece, the game offers Kassandra a platform to defy historical limitations often placed on women in historical narratives.

c. Ellie as the Quintessential Lesbian Protagonist

The post-apocalyptic setting of TLOU removes characters from societal structures, leading to intense struggles for survival. Both male and female characters face danger, emotional trauma, and moral dilemmas. Gendered expectations give way to the shared human experience of vulnerability. With the fall of society as players know it, one can wonder how Ellie grew up learning about sexuality, as her loving women is always introduced as something natural to her. When a man says something homophobic to her and Dina in *TLOU2*, his outdated views are immediately perceived as ridiculous, especially in a context such as a post-apocalyptic world, where lesbianism might not be something to worry about, these are issues from another time. Therefore, while Ellie is undeniably queer to the players, she is only pursuing love and genuine connection in her world. Ellie's lesbian identity is a central element of her character. Her romantic relationships with Riley in *Left Behind* and Dina in *TLOU2* are a prominent aspect of the narrative and not just thrown in as a "token" representation. These relationships explores themes of love, acceptance, and the challenges of maintaining a connection in a harsh world. Ellie's identity as a lesbian also contributes to the game's representation of LGBTQ+ characters and relationships, highlighting the importance of diverse and authentic portrayals in gaming.

The post-apocalyptic setting of the game demands acts of violence for survival. Ellie is exposed to and engages in violent actions, challenging her moral compass and impacting her mental and emotional well-being. The second game delves into the psychological toll of violence, exploring how it can desensitize and traumatize characters, including Ellie. The emotional weight of her past and present actions in both games manifests in her psychological struggles, impacting her relationships and overall mental health. Her journey throughout the series reflects the complexities of coping with PTSD and the challenges of reconciling past trauma with the need for survival. The intersection of these themes creates a rich narrative that emphasizes the complexity of Ellie's character, something not granted to a lot of female protagonists. Her lesbian identity is just one part of her multifaceted persona.

d. Abby – Gender Expectations in a Post-Apocalyptic Society and the Death of the White Male Protagonist

Abby's character challenges traditional gender expectations of female characters in more ways than one. She is a skilled warrior, physically strong and looks like it, and participates in combat and survival activities typically associated with male characters. She is

part of a paramilitary group called the WLF. Military is strongly coded as masculine, but no one questions Abby's status here as the post-apocalyptic scenario seems to strip society of its gendered expectations in favor of survival. There are interesting differences in gameplay between the characters, which shows Naughty Dog's dedication to making Ellie and Abby different individuals. Ellie has a smaller frame and her movements favor stealth and agility. Abby being bulkier, her fights rely more on brute strength and are more confrontational. These differences are particularly striking when the two women fight against each other, Ellie favoring quick slashes of her knife and Abby powerful punches. This attention to detail is also a good way to show how diverse women in video games can be, and that "fighting like a girl" holds no meaning in the universe of *The Last of Us*.

Abby's motivations are fueled by her desire for revenge, killing former protagonist Joel to avenge the death of her father. She serves as both protagonist and antagonist in the game, complexifying her position in the game's narrative. This complexity challenges the idea that female characters must fit into narrowly defined roles. The most controversial part of Abby's role in the story is the departure from the traditional white male protagonist. By killing Joel, a beloved character of the franchise, but also a typical example of a brooding male character, Abby triggers a shift providing an opportunity to explore stories from perspectives that are often underrepresented in video games. Abby's role challenges the notion that a game's protagonist must always align with a specific demographic.

PART III

Player Response and Identification to Female Characters

The reason why female protagonists are so scarce to begin with is due to the common assumption that a presumed male majority of players would not be able to identify with them enough to sell. The representation of female characters in video games has often been characterized by sexualization, objectification, and stereotypes, which can hinder players' ability to relate to them on a deeper level. These depictions may limit their ability to connect with female characters beyond surface-level attributes, perpetuating gender biases and reinforcing the notion that games are primarily designed for and by men. However, as previously established, female characters from the games studied in this thesis are neither hypersexualized nor reduced to tropes. Furthermore, with a survey entitled "Character Identification Survey" that circulated in March 2023, people who played these games were able to express their opinion about the protagonists for the sake of this study.

A. Identifying with Female Characters

The process of identification is difficult to define or quantify. As Jonathan Cohen argues in "Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences With Media Characters", the way the concept of identification is defined in previous studies is rather nebulous. "Identification is often related to audience perceptions of liking, similarity, and affinity to characters. However, these latter concepts describe attitudes or judgments that people make about characters based on their perceptions of the characters and of themselves as people."²⁴⁴ In order to find out if players were able to identify with Evie, Kassandra, Ellie, and Abby, I needed a clear definition of the concept that I could incorporate into the survey's questions and quantify it. Cohen underlines the loss of self-awareness as a central part of identification. "Identification requires that we forget ourselves and become the other—that we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of

²⁴⁴ Cohen, Jonathan. "Defining Identification" pp.253-254.

our identification.”²⁴⁵ “Becoming the other” is central when playing video games since players get to perform as someone else when they play. They control the character but most importantly immerse themselves in the story in a way no other medium can compare to due to its interactive nature. To measure people’s degree of identification with characters, Cohen came up with four core principles. They are defined as follows:

In attempting to operationalize and measure identification, four dimensions are central. The first is empathy or sharing the feelings of the character (i.e., being happy; sad; or scared, not for the character, but with the character). The second is a cognitive aspect that is manifest in sharing the perspective of the character. Operationally this can be measured by the degree to which an audience member feels he or she understands the character and the motivations for his or her behavior. The third indicator of identification is motivational, and this addresses the degree to which the audience member internalizes and shares the goals of the character. Finally, the fourth component of identification is absorption or the degree to which self-awareness is lost during exposure to the text. Because identification is conceived as temporary and fleeting, it should be measured both in terms of intensity and frequency. The more someone is absorbed in the text, empathizes with and understands a character, and adopts his or her goals, the more he or she may be said to identify with that character.²⁴⁶

Following this guideline, Cohen generated possible questions to ask people to get a sense of how they identified with characters. The questions of this survey²⁴⁷ are tweaked versions of Cohen’s, modified in order to fit the context of this thesis. On a scale from 1 to 10, players were asked different questions to assess their degree of immersion in the story as well as how they resonated with the characters’ actions and feelings portrayed on screen. A high level of identification would be evaluated from 7 to 10 on the scale, 5-6 would be medium and 1-4 low. When the game was shared with a male protagonist (*TLOU* and *ACS*), the questions were also asked for the male protagonist in order to compare with their female counterpart. I chose to exclude these questions for people who chose Alexios in *ACOD* since the main focus of the study was *Kassandra*, and their choice prevented them from showing their insight on her character.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p.247

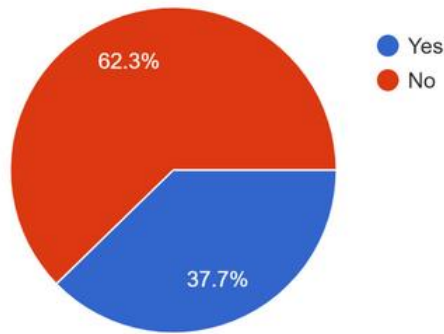
²⁴⁶ Ibid. p.256.

²⁴⁷ Found in Appendix IV.

a. *The Last of Us* Characters

The *Last of Us* games were not the respondents' most played games. Out of 366 respondents, 138 played *The Last of Us* and 82 played *The Last of Us Part II* (see Figure 12.)

Have you played *The Last of Us* (Part I) (2013)?
366 responses



Have you played *The Last of Us Part II* (2020)?
366 responses

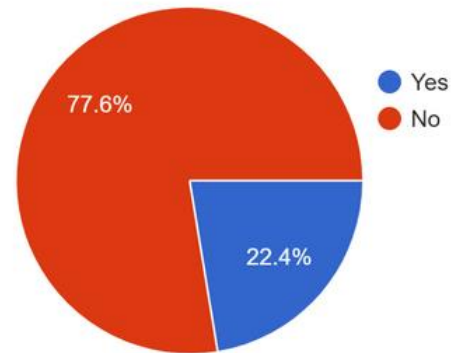


Figure 122: Percentage of Respondents Having Played *TLOU* and *TLOU2*

I interpreted these numbers as a result of more interactivity within the *Assassin's Creed* community. Of course, while *The Last of Us* players could also have played *AC* games and vice versa, I received more engagement on my survey on the *AC* subreddit than *TLOU*, which could explain this discrepancy and why I gathered more data for the *AC* games.

The Last of Us (2013)

Out of the 138 *TLOU* players, 81 were male (58,70%), 48 were female (34,78%) and 9 (6,52%) either identified as non-binary, transgender (who deliberately separated themselves from their cisgender peers) or other labels outside the traditional gender binary. Overall, players found the game to be very immersive, on scales from 1 to 10, 126/138 (91,3%) of players answered between 7-10 to "While playing the game, I felt as if I was part of the action" and 120/138 (86,96%) to "While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed." Making the average percentage of players finding the game very immersive to be M=89,13%.

A large majority of players highly identified with both Joel (M=90,94%) and Ellie (M=90,76%). Women tended to identify with both protagonists almost equally, with a very slight preference for Joel. The average scale rate is 8.69 for Ellie and 8.71 for Joel. As for male players, the average scaling for Ellie was 8.64 and Joel 8.81. While both genders identified with Joel a bit more, women still identified with Ellie more than men. However,

non-binary and other gender non-conforming people tended to identify more with Ellie, as the average scaling for her is 8.93 for Ellie and Joel is rated 8.40. Compared to the other groups, a small gap a noticeable between the two. Ellie's queer status might contribute gender non-conforming people identifying more with her than a typical straight white male protagonist. However overall, these numbers being so close are really significant given the fact that Ellie is playable only during a slight portion of the game and the marketing did not introduce her as a playable character. Despite these differences, players regardless of gender still managed to identify with both almost equally.

The Last of Us Part II (2020)

Out of the 82 *TLOU2* players, 45 were male (54,88%), 31 were female (37,80 %) and 6 (7,32%) were either non-binary or transgender (who deliberately separated themselves from their cisgender peers). Overall, players found the game to be immersive, on scales from 1 to 10, 63/82 (76,83%) of players answered between 7-10 to "While playing the game, I felt as if I was part of the action" and 51/82 (62,20%) to "While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed." Making the average percentage of players finding the game very immersive to be $M=69,51\%$. From these percentages alone, we observe a clear shift between players of the first and second games, noting a decrease of almost 20% when it comes to immersion.

A majority of players highly identified with Ellie $M=77,74\%$. Abby, on the other hand, was very polarizing $M= 52,13\%$. Moreover, the degree of identification to Ellie compared to the first game has also significantly decreased. The questions where Abby got the lowest ratings were "While playing, I felt I could really get inside Abby's head," "While playing the game, I wanted Abby to succeed in achieving her goals," and "When Abby succeeded I felt joy, but when she failed, I was sad" where only 46,34%; 35,37% and 32,93% of players answered between 7 and 10 on the scale.

Men identified strongly with Ellie, the average rate on the scale being 8 out of 10, and moderately with Abby, her average rate being 5.7. Women identified with Ellie slightly more than men, her average rating being 8.14. As for Abby, the average rate is 6.65. Women seemed to identify more with Abby than men, despite a preference for Ellie. Overall women identified with both more than men. Non-binary and transgender folks still identified with Ellie (7.04), but less so than the other groups and not as much as in the first game despite

Ellie's open queerness in this game. As for Abby, they rated her an average of 5.6, which is even less than the men's group even though Abby's narrative revolved a lot around Lev, a transgender boy who she helps escape his abusive group. Overall, despite the diverse groups and themes of the game, players had a harder time resonating with it. There are significant gaps between the characters, and the fact that Abby's character was introduced as Joel's killer, a character players identified strongly with in the first game, did not help players to identify with her. Especially when it came to Cohen's third indicator: the motivational aspect, which is when the player internalizes and shares the goals of the character. Abby was positioned as Ellie's antagonist, seemingly causing a conflict in the players' minds when they had to play her and fight Ellie. The back and forth between the opposite protagonists might also be the cause as to why players struggled more to immerse themselves in the game's story, as they are led to play contradictory actions (fight Ellie as Abby and kill Abby as Ellie). However, as far as the gender factor is concerned, it seems it only plays a minor role in the identification process, as seen with Joel and Ellie. Abby's character started with a disadvantage, as she also was not marketed towards the players as a playable character and the first we see of her in the game, she is after Joel, a former beloved protagonist.

b. *Assassin's Creed* Characters

The *Assassin's Creed* games were the respondents' most played games. Out of 366 players, 133 played *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* and 316 played *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (see Figure 13). Notably, *Odyssey* is the most popular pick and is the only game where players get to play a woman for the whole game that was marketed as such.

Have you played Assassin's Creed Syndicate (2015)? 366 responses Have you played Assassin's Creed Odyssey (2018)? 366 responses

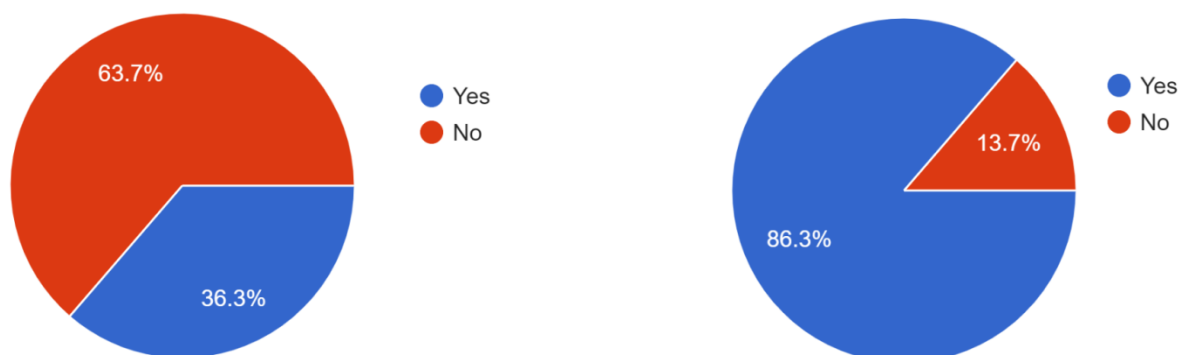


Figure 13: Percentage of Respondents Having Played ACS and ACOD

Assassin's Creed Syndicate (2015)

Out of the 133 ACS players, 73 were male (54,89%), 49 were female (36,84%) and 11 (8,27%) identified as either non-binary or other labels outside the traditional gender binary. Overall, players found the game to be very immersive, on scales from 1 to 10, 101/133 (75,94%) of players answered between 7-10 to “While playing the game, I felt as if I was part of the action” and 93/133 (69,92%) to “While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed.” Making the average percentage of players finding the game very immersive to be M=72,93%.

When the game did not impose a character, respondents played with Evie (52,6%) more than Jacob (14,3%) while the remaining switched somewhat equally between the two (33,1%). However, they identified with both Evie M= 82,62% and Jacob M= 67,25 %. While both characters appealed to a majority of players, there is a significant gap between the level of identification to Evie and Jacob. Evie resonated with players more even though a majority is male and she was featured less in promotional material and had fewer missions than her brother in-game. This is a good counter-example to the false assumption that male players would always prefer male characters over female ones, especially if they are not sexualized.

Women tended to identify with both protagonists with a preference for Evie. The average scale rate is 8.38 for Evie and 7.41 for Jacob. As for male players, the average scaling for Evie was 7.16 and Jacob 6.87. While both genders identified with Evie a bit more, women identified with both more than men, with more than one point of difference for Evie. Non-binary and other gender non-conforming people also had a tendency to identify more with Evie, as the average scaling for her is 8.13 but their group is the one who identified the most with Jacob whose average rate is 7.86. The fact that they are the ones who identified with Jacob the most is curious considering the fact that none of them chose to play as him when they could.²⁴⁸

Assassin's Creed Odyssey (2018)

Out of the 316 ACOD players, 161 were male (50,95%), 129 were female (40,82%) and 26 (8,23%) were either non-binary, transgender (who deliberately separated themselves from their cisgender peers), or other labels outside the traditional gender binary.

²⁴⁸ Out of the 11 non-binary and gender non-conforming people, 7/11 chose Evie and 4/11 chose the “Both somewhat equally” option.

Out of the 316 players, 235 chose Cassandra over Alexios (81) as a protagonist (see Figure 14). Alexios not being my focus and not playable if people chose Cassandra, questions about immersion and identification were only available for those who played as her, therefore 235 respondents.

Which character did you play with on your first playthrough?

316 responses

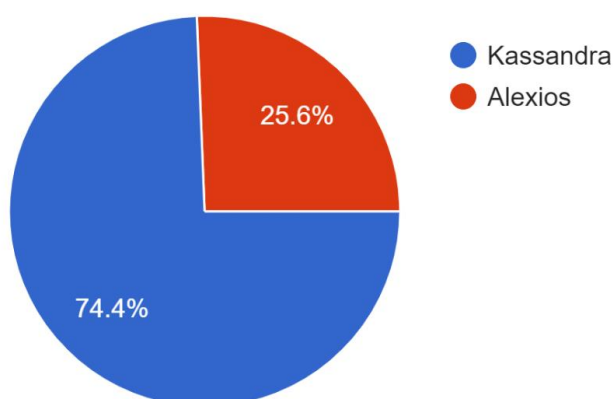


Figure 14: Percentage of Players Choosing Cassandra or Alexios in ACOD

Overall, players found the game to be very immersive, on scales from 1 to 10, 215/235 (91,49%) of players answered between 7-10 to “While playing the game, I felt as if I was part of the action” and 201/235 (85,53%) to “While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed.” Making the average percentage of players finding the game very immersive to be $M=88,51\%$. According to the numbers, it is the second most immersive game after *TLOU*, its RPG elements and accents on the player’s choice could be a reason why.

A majority of players highly identified with Cassandra $M= 89,26\%$. Out of 129 women, 119 (92,25%) chose to play her and highly identified with her, their average scale rate is 8.88. As of male players, 94/161 (58,39%) chose her. Cassandra was the most popular choice with both genders, but people who chose Alexios were mostly men. Men’s average identification rate with Cassandra is 8.38, which is slightly less than women but still high. Most non-binary and other gender non-conforming people chose Cassandra over Alexios as well (22/26, thus 84,62%). Moreover, they were the ones who identified the most with her with an average rate 9.15. This high level of identification with gender non-conforming people can be the result of a combination of RPG elements (that emphasize players’ choices in the narrative) and the fact

that *Kassandra* can be a queer figure based on these elements, enhancing the process of identification. *Kassandra* has no defined sexuality and she herself does not conform to traditional gender roles, resonating more with this group of players than a typical straight white male protagonist. Overall, these numbers prove once again that despite a majority of male players (whose number is even more balanced with *ACOD*), players manage to highly identify with a female lead who does not share the narrative with a male protagonist (unlike *Ellie* in *TLOU* and *Evie* in *ACS*).

As a way to bring everything together, I also consulted the results of respondents who played all four games. There was not a lot, which is why I let people who played any of the games answer so I could gather enough data about the characters. Out of the 366 respondents, only 24 (6,56%), played *TLOU*, *TLOU2*, *ACS*, and *ACOD*. 10/24 (41,67%) were female, 12/24 (50%) were male and 2/24 were non-binary (8,33%). This gender breakdown also reinforces the fact that men and women can engage in gaming equally, and women not just being relegated to mobile and casual play. Moreover, it also underlines the need to include gender non-conforming people in gender statistics as well as they are often erased in this debate, even though they contribute to the fact that gaming is a 50/50 split between men and other genders, not just women. This smaller sample of players found *ACOD* to be the most immersive game with an average rate of 8.38/10. It is closely followed by *TLOU* (8.35), *TLOU2* (8.27), and *ACS* (8.16). The character they identified with the most is *Kassandra*, with an average rate of 8.59/10. This can be explained through the RPG elements of the game. *Kassandra* is then followed by *Joel* (8.37), *Evie* (8.35), *Ellie* from *TLOU* (8.29) and *TLOU2* (7.84), *Jacob* (7.42) and lastly *Abby* (6.6).

In keeping with previous studies,²⁴⁹ this thesis' study shows with a bigger sample of games and a broader sample of players that firstly, the gender split in the gaming community is tighter than what the industry seems to assume, and secondly, players of all genders are able to identify with female characters as much as male ones, thus rendering their misrepresentation unjustified.

²⁴⁹ Burgess and Jones, "The Female Video Game Player-Character Persona and Emotional Attachment"; Hanus, Michael, and Ted Dickinson. "The (Faulty) Assumption That Male Players Prefer Male Characters: How Character Desirability and Likability Influence Video Game Purchase Intentions and Enjoyment." *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 8 (2018).

B. Female Protagonists and Identity Politics

Identity politics refers to the ways in which individuals' identities, particularly those pertaining to marginalized groups, shape their political beliefs and actions. In the context of gaming, identity politics has become an important framework for understanding the representation of diverse identities within gaming and the efforts to challenge dominant narratives and power structures. The fact that women were misrepresented or overly absent is not accidental, and served the purpose to code the medium as masculine. "Representation is in fact a frontline of power relations and domination, within particular spheres of influence, and this is no less true of games than other forms of mass culture and their attendant industries."²⁵⁰ Representation is a powerful tool, and even if players of different genders managed to identify with the female characters from this thesis, a lot of respondents expressed their thoughts – whether positive or negative – on how impactful this kind of imagery can be.

a. Feeling Represented

Since women were often at the margins in terms of video game representation, I expected a lot of feedback regarding the four female characters present in this thesis. When not scaling their degree of identification from 1 to 10, players were also asked to elaborate on their appreciation of certain characters or simply on what impacted them the most while playing. If "[i]dentifying with media others allows us to experience social reality from other perspectives and, thus, shapes the development of self-identity and social attitudes,"²⁵¹ for marginalized individuals, seeing one's self through a lens not distorted by stereotypes can serve as role models, promote self-acceptance and serve as an "important first step toward reducing societal prejudice."²⁵² The masculine coding of the medium served as a self-fulfilling prophecy that seemingly drew women but also other marginalized groups (people of color, sexual and gender minorities) away from it by only representing a certain demographic. However, this past decade since the GamerGate controversy has been marked by a shift in the way women are portrayed in games.

Under my post on the *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* subreddit (r/AssassinsCreedOdyssey) for the survey, user u/RambullShona expressed how grateful she was for Cassandra to exist.

²⁵⁰ Murray. *On video games*. p.39.

²⁵¹ Cohen. "Defining Identification." p.246.

²⁵² Gomillion, Sarah C., and Traci A. Giuliano. "The Influence of Media Role Models on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity." *Journal of Homosexuality* 58, no. 3, p.351.

For my little girl to finally have a truly powerful female equivalent to the traditional male hero brings me to tears. She sees herself in Cassandra in a way she doesn't with other sexualised [sic] or softer female leads. I wish I had had a character like Cassandra that I could play as a kid.²⁵³

What this comment highlights is how positive representation allows women to reconcile with the medium, not having to experience it from the margins, but also a promise for future generations of female players not having to deal with that issue. Moreover, the fact that femininity was often associated with hypersexual representations and behaviors did not help players from any gender to connect with such characters but also led female players to see themselves more in women breaking the traditional gender mold like Cassandra. Of course, it also meant that women who already did not identify with concepts associated with femininity (here being "soft"), were better represented. The lack of diversity when it comes to representing female bodies is also an issue. As one female respondent underlined, "[*Kassandra*] looked strong too but it was realistic. She had scars from her fights etc and was still beautiful. It was just so nice to see a more realistic character instead of a super thin, skinny girl who would supposedly be super strong." On the other hand, another respondent thought "*Evie* s [sic] a little too tall and skinny" considering she is able to do the same things as her brother, who in comparison was more muscular.

This lack of diversity in the way women are physically portrayed also comes with issues of ageism. Indeed, male protagonists of all ages are more easily represented in the medium compared to their female counterparts. Joel and Jacob – being respectively in their fifties and twenties, and looking like it – are prime examples of how wide the age range for male protagonists is while women in their thirties is as old as they generally get. One respondent highlighted this issue by emphasizing their struggle to picture Evie being older in *Syndicate*'s DLC compared to her brother Jacob (see Figure 15). "*In Jack the Reaper* [sic] DLC of *Syndicate*, Evie and Jacob reappear 20 years after the events of the base game. Both are about 40 at the time. While Jacob looks realistically aged, Evie has the appearance of a much, much older woman to the point of her being rather unrecognisable. [sic] I remember wondering whether this was a mistake by the developers, or if it reflected a somewhat

²⁵³ RambullShona. "Good luck with this. I relished the opportunity to talk about Cassandra in particular so apologies for my rambling.

For my little girl to finally have a truly powerful female equivalent to the traditional male hero brings me to tears. She sees herself in Cassandra in a way she doesn't with other sexualised or softer female leads. I wish I had had a character like Cassandra that I could play as a kid." *Reddit*. March 13, 2023. https://www.reddit.com/r/AssassinsCreedOdyssey/comments/1lq3kz5/comment/jc1z6ns/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3.

distorted view of how women age.” This “distorted view of how women age” is also due to the fact that older women as protagonists barely exist in video games, and when they do, they are often depicted as youthful still (often through magical means), meaning players are left with women being hundreds of years old but still looking thirty at most.



Figure 15: Forty year old Evie (left) and Jacob (right) in the *Jack the Ripper* DLC

Another noticeable element with people’s choice of protagonists is that for those who chose Alexios or played with Jacob more (mostly men), the character’s gender is more a question of habit than opportunity. Men are used to having male protagonists they can project onto, which means choosing the male option comes naturally. *“I’m a male, so I just thought it would be better to use the male character”* is one of male players’ most recurring answers when asked why they chose Alexios or Jacob over Cassandra and Evie. By contrast, female players who chose Cassandra or played with Evie more did it because they finally had the opportunity to do so and experience the adventure with a character that matched their gender. *“I just connected more to Evie I think. I think that especially the era that this game was set in, it’s important to have a character like Evie. [...] I also have an easier [sic] time connecting to game characters that are women. I can absolutely connect with male characters as well, but I feel like representation of women is very important in such a male dominated industry.”* The overwhelming presence of male leads forced female players to embody them without many alternatives, thus the rise of other options comes with what looks like a sense of relief and validation. *“When given a choice, I always choose to play with a female character. I can connect with characters of all genders, but I feel most at home playing women.”*

Another recurring theme that was often brought up by players was that – on top of how well-represented women were – it intersected with good representations of queerness, especially with Ellie and Cassandra. When asked if they wanted to add anything they liked about the game (certain scenes, characters that impacted them in any way...), one player said *“Thank god ellie is a lesbian.”* LGBT+ protagonists – much like women – are still scarce in video games. Having these two experiences combined in one through Ellie and Cassandra was also a way for queer women and queer people, on a broader scope, to also see themselves or part of their experience portrayed on screen in a way that did not feel stereotyped. *“I really loved having the ability to be with female partners in the game [ACOD] too. There is barely any lgbt main characters in games. Even less in AAA. I feel so underrepresented as a woman and as a lesbian in gaming.”* *“I just really loved having lesbian representation as a main playable character [Ellie in TLOU2]. Who even managed to have a partner in it. There are barely any lgbt main playable characters in games. Even less in AAA and even less still in games where it isn’t just “choose a partner to sleep with once or twice” or where there’s actual story involved. Which, I’m grateful for those types but we also need more representation.”* These kinds of testimonies were raised by many players of different genders and also go beyond female figures. Indeed while less frequent than for the female characters, some players also associated queerness with Jacob and Alexios: *“Jacob resonates due to being the first canon bisexual assassin”* and *“[a]s a trans masculine AFAB²⁵⁴ non-binary person, I like to identify with male characters [in this case Alexios]”* were a few examples mentioned by respondents. This also illustrates the importance of reshaping the way male characters are also portrayed in games since they are often only represented through hypermasculine straight white cisgender men.

b. Challenging the Male Protagonists as the Default

Beyond gender and queerness, something players emphasized in their answers are the protagonists’ emotional journey and depth, which contrast with the industry’s otherwise shallow portrayal of women thus far. *“I loved the fact that this game [TLOU2] showed female characters without any filter, whether emotionally or physically (especially in the game industry where women tend to be over sexualised [sic] or a bit washed out).”* “Female characters without any filter” as this respondent puts it, mostly refers to a way of representing women as complex human beings and not sexual objects or reducing them to tropes. For

²⁵⁴ AFAB: Assigned Female at Birth.

instance, putting Cassandra and Alexios on an equal footing when it came to the game's narrative also challenged the idea that a woman's story cannot be told with the same ease as a man's story. On *Odyssey*, a respondent explains:

"I really loved [...] how the game writing was the same for both characters. It allowed her to be a strong warrior and other characters to see her as a strong warrior. Her character wasn't written any weaker, any less funny or any less crude because she was female and that is something that very rarely happens. Sometimes it is obvious, sometimes subtle in games how it is written different for women but I just feel like I haven't found a game like Odyssey before that really doesn't change anything like strength, crudeness, their humour because she's a female."

While a lot of players relished this authentic portrayal of women, some (mostly men), questioned the presence of women in leading roles – especially in the AC games which take place in historical settings. Some expressed their discomfort in seeing Cassandra as a warrior – an otherwise traditionally masculine figure – as it would allegedly make the game less authentic and historically inaccurate. When asked why they chose Alexios, a few players (all men) argued that *"a male is more realistic both as a warrior and as a historical protagonist in that time period"* or that *"[t]he time period depicted as well as an overview of the kind of character the protagonist would be (a warrior and a mercenary) made a male lead make more sense/feel more realistic and believable."* People were less inclined to argue about Evie (who appears more feminine than Cassandra) being an assassin though one player preferred Jacob over her because *"[h]e was also more historically accurate as a man leading a gang in 19th century London."*

Much like gaming, history has often been recounted with men being at its center, relegating women to more passive roles. Introducing women having a more active role in historical settings might shake up this common preconception, but it does not mean the game is any less historically accurate.

This phrase was and is currently used by gamers under the belief that, until recently, women were confined to domestic and passive roles. Therefore, it has been a common belief that female participation in anything other than domestic roles is factually incorrect and has no place in games set in classical time periods. This misconception results in outcry when historical games involve female combatant, with players complaining that doing so is historically inaccurate and interrupts their immersion.²⁵⁵

²⁵⁵ Manning, Claire. "Expectations vs. Reality: Perceived Accuracy When Women Are in Historical Video Games." In *Women in Historical and Archaeological Video Games*, 80–99. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2022. p.80.

Female warriors existed, but their stories were often forgotten due to the sexist bias of archeology.²⁵⁶ Furthermore, Cassandra and Evie's status as a mercenary and a member of the assassin brotherhood respectively already labels them as outcasts, which could justify why they are transgressive female figures in the first place, emphasizing the authenticity of this "anomaly" in the games' narrative. Moreover, if "[i]n a game about machines that let people relive their ancestors' memories, befriend and murder famous historical figures, and interact with gods, the inclusion of women is what makes believability problematic,"²⁵⁷ then the issue is not about historical accuracy in the first place, it is about representing women as men's equals, challenging the male coding of video games as a medium. Similarly, Abby having a muscular physique as a woman was met with complaints. A male respondent wrote:

"As far as how it [TLOU2] portrayed female characters - insulting. It fell into a troubling cliché - in order to make a strong woman, you have to give them masculine characteristics. They basically wrote Abby as if she were a man, then called her Abby and said she was a woman. I'd much rather they make a strong female character by showing the strengths of femininity and stop saying that only masculine characteristics indicate strength."

While to some extent, questioning the association between masculinity and strength is relevant, especially in action-driven games, denying that Abby is a woman solely based on her physical appearance seems reductive, especially since strong feminine-looking women are very common in the video game landscape. If anything, this comment shows how Abby is challenging the default male protagonist in action games, firstly through her role in the narrative: killing Joel (the traditional archetype) both literally but also figuratively by taking his place as a protagonist, and secondly by challenging "the binary logic of our society that continues to engender adventuring as masculine and erotic spectacle as feminine."²⁵⁸

C. The Importance of Marketing

As previously studied, studios put great care into how they present their protagonists to future players. While the previous part showed that players of all genders managed to identify somewhat equally to male and female protagonists, it was also proven that male and female characters were not marketed the same way. Players reacted to this uneven treatment, emphasizing how important the marketing aspect of gaming truly was.

²⁵⁶ Manning. "Expectations vs. Reality." p.90-95

²⁵⁷ Fishbune, "'Competent, Capable, and Practically Dressed.'" p.27.

²⁵⁸ Brown, Jeffrey A. *Dangerous Curves: Action Heroines, Gender, Fetishism, and Popular Culture*. University Press of Mississippi, 2013. p.111.

a. The Noticeable Monopoly of Men

Many players of all genders expressed their annoyance and disappointment when noticing discrepancies in the way female and male characters were introduced to them. When asked about their thoughts on the marketing of the games, a lot of players pointed fingers at the *Assassin's Creed* franchise for the way they seemed to set aside their female leads. *"I found there was little to no marketing for Evie, except for maybe 1-2 trailers pre-launch. I was pleasantly surprised to learn more about Evie in-game, but wish we had seen more of her before launch."* The lack of promotional material for Evie even made some players think she was not even playable. *"I didn't look at the marketing besides one poster where I saw the setting. Originally, I thought you only get to play as Jacob."* Respondents did not seem to resonate with the industry's conjecture that "women don't sell." *"It was really cool to see that you could play as a female in the trailer [for ACOD], and the voice acting sounded really good. I was disappointed that they mainly showed alexios though and put him on the cover. There was a lot of controversy over how kassandra was meant to be the only main character but management in ubisoft thought that a women main character wouldn't 'sell as much.'"*

For the respondents, Ubisoft might be wrong to shy away from their female protagonists, especially in elements as crucial as marketing elements, as several of them expressed enthusiasm when it came to the promise of incarnating a female protagonist: *"advertising a female character made me want to play this game [ACS] more"* is one of the many answers I have received about this matter in the survey. The fact that the AC games were dominated by male protagonists in previous opuses allowed *Syndicate* to appear like a breath of fresh air for some fans: *"There being a female character made me buy the game as I was losing interest in the franchise."* Some even approach the issue with defiance, choosing the female option out of spite, trying to prove to the studio that pushing the female option aside is a mistake: *"Again, they only really marketed Alexios, then marketed Kassandra near release. The default cover art was Alexios, you have to turn it inside out for Kassandra. When they push it in my face I want the other option"; "The marketing focus too much on Jacob and not enough on Evie, but it made me appreciate Evie more."* The aggressive marketing of the male protagonists can also turn people away from the franchise altogether, the same way the gaming world being coded as masculine turned women away from the medium for a while. The annoyance expressed by the players shows how outdated this way of thinking is.

b. An Influence on Character's Appreciation

The uneven marketing of male and female protagonists is bound to disadvantage the female leads. When asked if they thought that the marketing of the game (trailers, box covers, merch...) influenced their appreciation of certain characters, many players answered in the affirmative. Players of *The Last of Us Part II*, expressed how the marketing framing Ellie as the protagonist impacted them and built their excitement to play the game. *“Compared to the first game, it really had an impact, everything being focused around Ellie (and her well depicted rage) making me even more eager to play the game.”* On the other hand, as predicted, the absence of marketing for Abby also set her up for failure, especially given her role in the story. *“I think falsely advertising Joel’s presence in the story generally annoyed me. I think completely hiding Abby annoyed me, as I bough [sic] the game to play largely as Ellie.”* While some simply said it made them dislike Abby more, others had a more nuanced approach: *“Having Abby more hidden definitely made me feel like I needed to understand her during her section of gameplay.”* The fact that Ellie was central to the marketing campaign and Abby was absent pushed the players towards empathizing with Ellie more before the game was even released.

“In one of the earlier trailers we see ellie singing and playing the guitar while she is in a house full of people she has killed. She says ‘I’m going to find, and im going to kill every last one of them’. And I feel like at that point alot [sic] of people had respect and empathy for her, and in this trailer and the other trailers as well, I feel like we only see things from ellies point of view. Which gives her an advantage over abby in that regard. Because we only saw ellie in the trailers and art, we built up this expectation and support for her over a course of several years.”

The players’ overall consensus about *TLOU2*’s marketing campaign is that it should have been more truthful about the source material, notably about Joel and Abby’s status as playable characters.

On a similar note, people playing the *AC* games felt they were pushed towards the male leads more due to the lack of content about their female counterparts. Some admitted they chose Alexios over Cassandra because of his prominence in marketing material: *“The fact that Alexis [sic] is on the cover and not Cassandra may have very slightly influenced my decision”*; *“Clearly, yes. [...] choosing Alexios as the playable character was influenced by the box cover”*; *“Absolutely, I only saw alexios in the trailers, so playing as kassandra dont [sic] feel natural to me.”* Alexios being featured more than Cassandra on promotional material also framed him as the “canon” protagonist before the game release which also pushed some

players towards him more. Upon learning that Cassandra was the canon character, several players said they regretted choosing Alexios over his female counterpart. *“I though [sic] it was the canon choice, since Alexios appears on the front cover of the game. If I had known that Ubisoft had made Cassandra canon, I would definitely had chosen her instead.”* Several players also expressed similar sentiments when it came to Jacob and Evie, players being more inclined to play him because the marketing of the games pushed towards him. *“Yes, definitely. Ubisoft’s tendencies to put women in the shadows or even just ignoring them may have made me more inclined toward playing Jacob at first.”* A lot of players also underlined the fact that the game itself put heavy emphasis on Jacob being “more important” since he has more missions than his sister.

All of these issues raised by the way characters are marketed proves its undeniable power of persuasion, and how it needs to be taken into account when studying players’ habits and preferences when it comes to choosing a protagonist, especially when they are of a different gender. If women are less visible than men from the marketing phase, then they are already set to be less popular by design. There is a bias favoring male protagonists and Alexios’ popularity shortly after *Odyssey*’s launch is an example of that bias,²⁵⁹ and should not be taken as a true example of players preferring male options, knowing that a majority of the survey’s respondents chose Cassandra over him. By sabotaging their female protagonists pre-game-launch, the industry creates a bias that apparently remains unseen enough to justify the lack of female protagonists in the gaming landscape.

²⁵⁹ Carter, Chris. “Assassin’s Creed Odyssey Director ‘surprised’ at Alexios/Cassandra Usage Split.” *Destructoid*, December 14, 2018. <https://www.destructoid.com/assassins-creed-odyssey-director-surprised-at-alexios-kassandra-usage-split/>.

Conclusion

The GamerGate controversy which happened ten years ago shook up the industry and the gaming community by bringing to light issues of sexism and the poor portrayal of women in game and out of games. While the industry is still dominated by men, video game players are more evenly split than what the popular assumption lets on. However, this split does not only include women but also people identifying outside the traditional gender binary who need to be taken into account more. This thesis also contradicts the myth that this alleged majority of male players tend to identify with male characters more, justifying the exclusion of female protagonists in AAA games. While issues of representation matter to players, especially from marginalized groups, people tend to resonate more with narrative elements and character depth than only the protagonist's gender, which is why it is important to give complex narratives to female protagonists and not just relegate them to sexual objects and tropes as it prevents players of all genders to identify with them. As seen with characters from the games studied here, the industry might have learned from their mistakes to some extent, as neither Ellie, Abby, Evie nor Cassandra are oversexualized and manage to subvert common tropes which favored their overall good reception.

However, there are still issues when it comes to marketing them. Marketing can impact the way players perceive certain characters and thus influence their opinions and choices before even playing the game. This study shows that female characters are at a disadvantage when they share the game with a male character. This raises two issues: first, a need for more franchises with only female characters, and second if there are dual protagonists, the industry should market them equally. Moreover, further studies could include more parameters to this area of research such as including genders outside the binary, race, and age. As seen in this study two out of four characters are queer, which shows an increase in games featuring non-straight protagonists. However, they are all young and white, demonstrating issues of ageism and a reluctance to put people of color, especially women as protagonists in AAA productions. Moreover, *The Last of Us* and *Assassin's Creed* are well-established franchises that are each strongly associated with white male protagonists – Joel for *TLOU*, and mainly Ezio for *AC*. It would be interesting to see more female-led franchises à la *Tomb Raider* (minus the hypersexualization), or more recently *Horizon Zero Dawn*. This study shows that, in the ten years since the GamerGate controversy, there have been

improvements and players are receptive to complex female protagonists when the industry is willing to give them to us. This ambivalence, as illustrated by Ubisoft's case comes from a struggle from within, with developers wanting to innovate, but are being held back by outdated ideas ruling the industry. Moreover, in parallel with creating more fleshed-out female heroines, redefining the codes of masculinity within the medium, and especially the action genre that prevails in AAA productions could be a good starting point to help get rid of the stigma associated with toxic masculinity in gaming.

The heroines of this thesis are transgressive in the sense that they do not necessarily conform to traditional femininity in favor of masculinity, but finding male protagonists that also transgress and reshape gender norms could also be interesting objects of study, as focusing on improving only one aspect of representation will only let things stay uneven. There is also a need to question the prevalence of violence in AAA titles, violence often associated with masculinity and power, thus used to appeal to male players and codify the medium as a male space. Contrary to what the gaming industry seems to believe, I hope one can cater to a male audience through something else than violent hypermasculine models and hypersexualized female figures. If anything, the industry needs to let go of the gendering of the mainstream gaming space altogether.

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Appendix I

Game Summaries

Assassin's Creed Syndicate (2015)

Released on SONY's *PlayStation 4* and Microsoft's *Xbox One* in October 2015, the game follows two protagonists, twins Jacob and Evie Frye, as they attempt to liberate a Victorian-era London from the control of the Templar Order during the Industrial Revolution.

In 1868, the twins arrive in London with the intention of freeing the city from the control of the Templars and restoring power to the people. Jacob is a brash and impulsive Assassin who focuses on combat and direct action. He aims to establish a gang called the Rooks to overthrow the oppressive rule of the Templars, led by Crawford Starrick, who controls London's criminal underworld and the city's industries. Evie, on the other hand, is more cautious and strategic. She seeks Pieces of Eden, powerful artifacts that have been a central focus of the conflict between the Assassins and Templars throughout history. She believes that acquiring these artifacts is crucial to defeating the Templars once and for all. The twins' efforts lead them on a series of missions across various London boroughs, each controlled by a Templar ally. Throughout the game, Jacob and Evie encounter various historical figures, including Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens, and Alexander Graham Bell, who aid them in their quest. They work to undermine the Templar influence by sabotaging their operations, liberating child laborers, and recruiting allies to their cause. As the story progresses, Jacob and Evie's differing approaches cause tensions between them. Jacob's focus on immediate results clashes with Evie's long-term strategic thinking. However, they eventually come to realize the value of each other's perspectives and begin to work more closely together. The climax of the game sees Jacob and Evie confronting Starrick, who came to possess a powerful Piece of Eden, the Shroud of Eden, which grants immortality. After an intense fight against the Templar, the twins manage to defeat Starrick and dismantle the Templar hold on London. After ensuring that the Piece of Eden is safeguarded, the twins are knighted by Queen Victoria herself for aborting an attempt to her life and protecting the city. The game showcases a dynamic open-world representation of Victorian London, allowing players to navigate iconic landmarks and engage in both stealthy and action-packed gameplay.

In the "Jack the Ripper" DLC for ACS the game takes place 20 years after the events of the main storyline. The DLC delves into the infamous Jack the Ripper murders that occurred in London's Whitechapel district in the late 19th century. Players take on the role of Evie Frye once again as she returns to London to track down and confront the elusive serial killer. Evie, now an

experienced Assassin, returns from India to London upon hearing about the gruesome killings and her brother missing. She teams up with Inspector Frederick Abberline, a historical figure who was involved in investigating the real-life Jack the Ripper case. The two form an uneasy alliance to put an end to the Ripper's killings and bring him to justice. Evie is determined to save her brother Jacob, who had been investigating the Ripper's identity before his disappearance. Evie's journey takes her through a series of gruesome crime scenes and tense confrontations with Jack's followers. The climax of the DLC leads to a final confrontation between Evie and Jack in an asylum. After a fierce battle, Evie manages to defeat Jack and bring an end to his murderous spree. The twin's storyline is wrapped after Jacob is found by Evie, seriously injured but alive in the basement of the asylum.

Assassin's Creed Odyssey (2018)

Released on SONY's *PlayStation 4* and Microsoft's *Xbox One* in October 2018, the game is set in ancient Greece during the Peloponnesian War. It follows the journey of a Spartan mercenary (either *Kassandra* or *Alexios*) who becomes embroiled in a larger conflict involving the secretive Cult of Kosmos and the power struggle between Athens and Sparta. *Kassandra* and *Alexios* are siblings separated at a young age due to a prophecy foretelling of the downfall of Sparta by one of *Leonidas'* grandchildren (*Kassandra* and *Alexios*). As a baby, *Alexios* was taken to Mount Taygetos to be killed and *Kassandra* tried to stop the elder from doing so, but inadvertently pushed the two off the mount. *Alexios* survived the fall and was taken in by the Cult of Kosmos (a secretive organization seeking control over Greece) because of his potential as a descendant of the First Civilization (the one behind the creation of Pieces of Eden). Before this tragic event, *Kassandra's* mother gave her the Spear of *Leonidas*, a powerful weapon known as a Piece of Eden. This artifact draws the attention of various factions, including the Cult of Kosmos. As the *Kassandra* travels throughout Greece, she encounters a variety of historical figures and engages in quests that shape the course of the Peloponnesian War. Additionally, she discovers that her brother *Alexios* is still alive and now called *Deimos*. Now working for the Cult, he was brainwashed to be a fearsome warrior with no empathy. The game features a branching narrative with multiple choices and consequences, allowing players to shape *Kassandra's* relationships, alliances, and outcomes of the story. With the help of historical figures such as *Socrates* and *Herodotus*, *Kassandra* discovers clues about the identity of the members of the Cult of Kosmos and works to eliminate them, ultimately uncovering the true leaders behind the organization. Depending on the choices made throughout the game, *Kassandra* can save her brother and reunite with her long lost family while learning more about

her exceptional lineage. It provides players with a vast open world to explore, numerous quests to complete, and the opportunity to shape their own unique story within the rich tapestry of ancient Greek history and mythology.

The Last of Us (2013)

Released on SONY's *PlayStation 3* in June 2013, the player gets to follow the story of Joel Miller, a rather cynical and withdrawn man, and Ellie Williams, a headstrong 13-year-old girl. They live in a world riddled with zombie-like infected, victims of a Cordyceps fungus that mutated and turned the infected into violent and bloodthirsty beings. The game starts with Joel's daughter Sarah in 2013, right before the outbreak. They soon have to flee their house as people infected by the fungus start attacking them and wreaking havoc. On their way out of the city, Sarah is injured in a car accident, and as Joel and his brother Tommy look for assistance, they stumble upon a military officer. Instead of helping them, the officer shoots in their direction, fatally wounding Sarah – who dies in her father's arms. The game is then divided into four sections, one for each season, starting with Summer and ending with Spring. The player gets to incarnate Joel twenty years after the outbreak and his daughter's death. The country is ruled by martial law, the World Health Organisation has failed to find a cure and the government has given up. Living as a smuggler with his friend Tess in Boston's quarantine zone, they are tasked by Marlene – leader of a rebel group called the Fireflies, in search of a cure – to smuggle Ellie out of Boston to one of their facilities. On their way to escort Ellie, the smugglers discover that Ellie has been bitten by an infected a few weeks ago, and is in fact immune to the Cordyceps, which means she might be the key to develop a vaccine. Tess gets bitten and military officers are about to reach them on their way out of Boston, so Tess sacrifices herself to buy some time for Joel and Ellie. From there begins a journey across the United States, during which a bond will form between Ellie and Joel. Joel will start to see his lost daughter in Ellie. When they eventually reach Salt Lake City, where they are supposed to meet the Fireflies that can create a vaccine, Joel discovers that Ellie has to die in order to extract the mutated fungus required to create a cure. Unbeknownst to Ellie – who is already anesthetized for the surgery – Joel kills everyone in the hospital to save her, including the surgeon who could create the vaccine, and Marlene, Joel being afraid that she would try to find Ellie. When Ellie wakes up, Joel lies to her by saying that they found other people who are immune and that despite this, the Fireflies failed to create a cure. The game ends with Ellie, a few weeks later, making Joel promise that what he said was true, to which he agrees.

The game's DLC, *Left Behind*, follows Ellie's past, revealing how she got bitten and exploring her relationship with her best friend Riley in flashbacks. The flashbacks are coupled with scenes from the "Winter" section of the main game – taking place while Joel was injured during a fight on their way to the Fireflies – and Ellie has to find a first aid kit in an abandoned mall in order to save him from imminent death. The player gets to discover her life before meeting Joel. She was training to become part of FEDRA – the military organization supervising the country – while she was still in Boston. Her friend Riley comes back to her after being absent for weeks and takes her on an adventure in a deserted mall. She tells her that she has become part of the Fireflies and has been asked to leave the Boston quarantine zone. The two girls have fun taking pictures, playing with water guns, Halloween props, and dance to loud music, enjoying life as teenage girls in this world full of violence. Ellie eventually kisses Riley and asks her to stay in Boston with her. Riley is about to accept when many infected barges into the room, lured by the sound of music. After a long chase and fight with the infected, they both get bitten. Ellie does not know yet that she is immune, and both girls decide to stay together until they lose their minds. In the present time, Ellie faces men and infected trying to kill both her and Joel. She manages to defeat them, patches up Joel and leaves the mall.

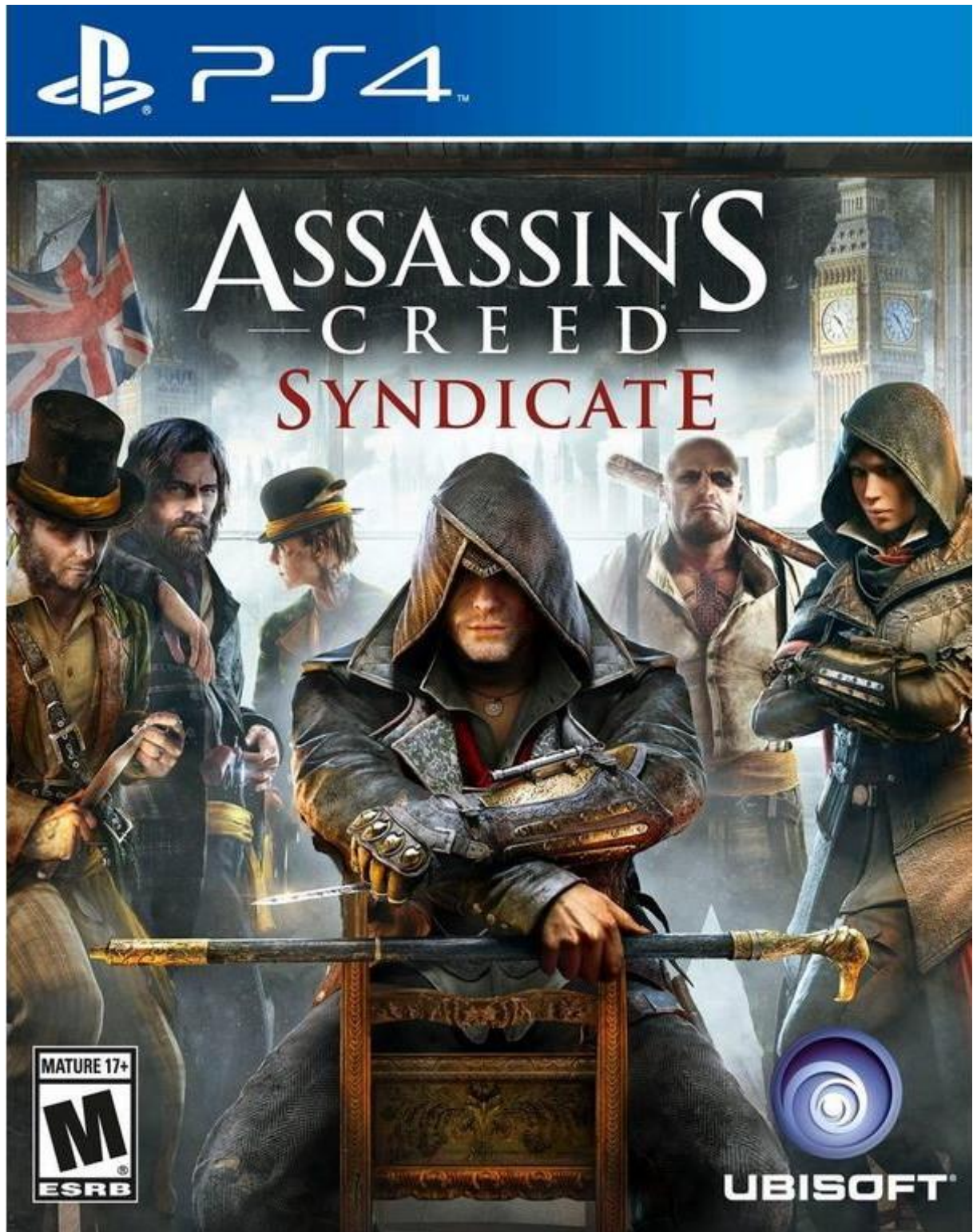
The Last of Us: Part II (2020)

Released on SONY's *PlayStation 4* in June 2020, *The Last of Us Part II*'s main events take place five years after the events of *The Last of Us* (2013). Ellie and Joel live in the relative safety and comfort of Jackson, a community led by Maria and her husband Tommy (Joel's brother). Ellie's tranquility is shaken when Abby Anderson – the game's other protagonist – kills Joel in cold blood in front of her. Abby is a former Firefly and is the daughter of the surgeon charged to create the vaccine Joel killed in the first game during the massacre in the hospital. The game is divided into three parts. A prologue in Jackson, a part in Seattle where most of the action is taking place in the span of three days, and a last chapter in Santa Barbara. The player gets to spend these three days in Seattle with both Ellie and Abby, allowing them to see the story from the perspective of both girls. The action is also coupled with a few flashbacks, during which the player learns that Ellie discovered the truth about what Joel did in Salt Lake City, creating a rift in their relationship. Despite this tension, Ellie is devastated and traumatized by Joel's murder and is bloodthirsty for revenge. She goes after Abby and her friends in Seattle, accompanied by her girlfriend Dina, her friend Jesse and Tommy. In the meantime, Abby having fulfilled her revenge, deals with a faction war between her clan, the WLF (nicknamed the Wolves), and the Seraphites (nicknamed the Scars). The Washington Liberation Front (WLF) is

a paramilitary group that took over FEDRA and is based in Seattle. They are going through a territory war with the Seraphites, a cultish group who believes the Cordiceps pandemic to be a divine punishment and want to ensure a world better than the old one, free of technology and closer to nature. In her pursuit of Abby, Ellie is often caught in the crossfire between the two factions each believing she is part of the other group. During her adventures, Abby meets Lev and his sister Yara. They are former Seraphites on the run, their clan condemning them for disobeying the rules. The player and Abby learn later on that they were banned because Lev came out as transgender, and Yara defended him. In the meantime, Ellie catches up to Abby, killing many of her friends trying to make them talk about Abby's whereabouts. When Abby discovers what happened, she finds Ellie and they confront each other for the first time. Abby gets the upper hand, killing Jesse, injuring Tommy and Ellie. She is about to kill Dina when Lev stops her and convinces her to let them go. Abby being considered a traitor by the WLF for helping Seraphites, she leaves Seattle with Lev to go to Santa Barbara, where there were rumors of remaining Fireflies being here. Ellie gets to raise a child with Dina on a farm near Jackson. However, a bitter and crippled Tommy comes back to Ellie and convinces her to go after Abby and finish what she started. Ellie chose revenge over her love, thus Dina breaks up with her as she goes after Abby in Santa Barbara. Once there, she is attacked by another group of people who happen to hold Abby and Lev captive along with other prisoners. When she makes her way there, she finds a weakened Abby and Lev on the brink of death. She frees them but stops Abby before she gets to leave with Lev, making her understand that only one of them gets to walk out the beach. The fight is not as passionate as the one in Seattle, both women being weakened by their wounds and not really willing to go through it. Ellie is about to drown Abby to death when an image of a smiling Joel stops her from going through it. Remembering her last conversation with him – a promise of reconciliation – she lets Abby go with Lev on a whim, ending the cycle of violence. The game ends with Ellie at hers and Dina's farm that she finds empty, as Dina left with her child. Ellie leaves behind Joel's guitar, a symbol of their bond, and leaves for an unknown destination.

Appendix II

Box Covers



Box art for *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015) for *PlayStation 4* featuring Jacob (center), Evie (far right) and a few members of the Rooks, Jacob's gang.



Box art for *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015) Special Edition for *PlayStation 4* featuring only Jacob and a few Rooks (left).



Box art for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) for *PlayStation 4* featuring Alexios.

PS4



Box art for *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) for *PlayStation 4* featuring Kassandra.



Box art for *The Last of Us* (2013) on *PlayStation 3*, featuring Ellie (right) and Joel (left).



Box art for *The Last of Us* – remastered version (2014) on *PlayStation 4*, featuring Ellie (right) and Joel (left).



Box art for *The Last of Us: Part II* (2020) on *PlayStation 4*, featuring only Ellie.

Appendix III

In-game characters' appearances



Evie Frye (ACS) in her default outfit.



Jacob Frye (ACS) in his default outfit.



Kassandra (*ACOD*) in her default outfit.



Alexios (*ACOD*) in his default outfit.



Kassandra in the “Mercenary” armor set (the most used in promotional materials and often used as default design).



Alexios in the “Mercenary” armor set (the most used in promotional materials and often used as default design).



Ellie Williams in *TLOU*.



Joel Miller in *TLOU*.



Ellie Williams in *TLOU2*.



Abby Anderson in *TLOU2*.



Joel Miller in *TLOU2*.

Appendix IV

Survey Questions

Character Identification Survey

I'm a postgraduate student at the University Rennes 2 in France and my research is based on female characters in video games. The answers to this survey will remain strictly anonymous and the data collected will only be used for my research thesis.



[Redacted text]



* Required

What is your gender? *

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Non-Binary
- ☐ Other: _____

How old are you?

Your answer _____

Have you played *The Last of Us (Part I)* (2013)? *

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

The Last of Us (2013)

This can also include the *Left Behind* (2014) DLC

While playing the game, I felt as if I was part of the action *

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Strongly disagree | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Strongly agree |

While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed *

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Strongly disagree | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Strongly agree |

I was able to understand the events of the game from Ellie's point of view *

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Strongly disagree | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input checked="" type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Strongly agree |

I was able to understand the events of the game from Joel's point of view *

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|----------------|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Strongly disagree | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | Strongly agree |

I think I have a good understanding of Ellie's character *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

I think I have a good understanding of Joel's character *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

I tend to understand the reasons why Ellie does what she does *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

I tend to understand the reasons why Joel does what he does *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

While playing the game, I could feel the emotions Ellie portrayed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree



While playing the game, I could feel the emotions Joel portrayed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

While playing, I felt I could really get inside Ellie's head. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

While playing, I felt I could really get inside Joel's head. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

At key moments in the game, I felt I knew exactly what Ellie was going through. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

At key moments in the game, I felt I knew exactly what Joel was going through. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree



While playing the game, I wanted Ellie to succeed in achieving her goals. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I wanted Joel to succeed in achieving his goals. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

When Ellie succeeded I felt joy, but when she failed, I was sad. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

When Joel succeeded I felt joy, but when he failed, I was sad. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☒ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

Do you think the marketing of the game (trailers, box covers, merch...) influenced your appreciation of certain characters? If so, explain. *

Your answer

Anything you would like to add about the game? Certain scenes, characters that impacted you in any way?

Your answer

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Next

Clear form

Have you played *The Last of Us Part II* (2020)? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

The Last of Us Part II (2020)

While playing the game, I felt as if I was part of the action *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I was able to understand the events of the game from Ellie's point of view *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I was able to understand the events of the game from Abby's point of view *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I think I have a good understanding of Ellie's character *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree



I think I have a good understanding of Abby's character *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I tend to understand the reasons why Ellie does what she does *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I tend to understand the reasons why Abby does what she does *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I could feel the emotions Ellie portrayed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I could feel the emotions Abby portrayed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree



While playing, I felt I could really get inside Ellie's head. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing, I felt I could really get inside Abby's head. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

At key moments in the game, I felt I knew exactly what Ellie was going through. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

At key moments in the game, I felt I knew exactly what Abby was going through. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I wanted Ellie to succeed in achieving her goals. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I wanted Abby to succeed in achieving her goals. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

When Ellie succeeded I felt joy, but when she failed, I was sad. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

When Abby succeeded I felt joy, but when she failed, I was sad. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

Do you think the marketing of the game (trailers, box covers, merch...) influenced your appreciation of certain characters? If so, explain. *

Your answer

Anything you would like to add about the game? Certain scenes, characters that impacted you in any way?

Your answer

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Next

Clear form



Have you played *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015)? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

Assassin's Creed Syndicate (2015)

This can also include the *Jack the Ripper* (2015) DLC

Which character did you play with the most? *



☐ Jacob

☐ Evie

☐ Both somewhat equally

Why? *

Your answer

While playing the game, I felt as if I was part of the action *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I was able to understand the events of the game from Evie's point of view *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I was able to understand the events of the game from Jacob's point of view *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I think I have a good understanding of Evie's character *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I think I have a good understanding of Jacob's character *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I tend to understand the reasons why Evie does what she does *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I tend to understand the reasons why Jacob does what he does *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I could feel the emotions Evie portrayed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I could feel the emotions Jacob portrayed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing, I felt I could really get inside Evie's head. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing, I felt I could really get inside Jacob's head. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

At key moments in the game, I felt I knew exactly what Evie was going through. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

At key moments in the game, I felt I knew exactly what Jacob was going through. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I wanted Evie to succeed in achieving her goals. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I wanted Jacob to succeed in achieving his goals. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

When Evie succeeded I felt joy, but when she failed, I was sad. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

When Jacob succeeded I felt joy, but when he failed, I was sad. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

Do you think the marketing of the game (trailers, box covers, merch...) influenced your appreciation/choice of certain characters? If so, explain. *

Your answer

Anything you would like to add about the game? Certain scenes, characters that impacted you in any way?

Your answer

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Clear form



Have you played *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018)? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

Assassin's Creed Odyssey (2018)

Which character did you play with on your first playthrough? *



☐ Kassandra

☐ Alexios

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Clear form

Kassandra

This can also include the *Legacy of the First Blade* (2019) and *The Fate of Atlantis* (2019) DLCs

Why did you choose Kassandra? *

Your answer

While playing the game, I felt as if I was part of the action *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I was able to understand the events of the game from Kassandra's point of view *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I think I have a good understanding of Cassandra's character *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

I tend to understand the reasons why Cassandra does what she does *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing the game, I could feel the emotions Cassandra portrayed *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

While playing, I felt I could really get inside Cassandra's head. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree

At key moments in the game, I felt I knew exactly what Cassandra was going through. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Strongly agree



While playing the game, I wanted Cassandra to succeed in achieving her goals. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

When Cassandra succeeded I felt joy, but when she failed, I was sad. *

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Strongly disagree

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

Strongly agree

Do you think the marketing of the game (trailers, box covers, merch...) influenced your appreciation/choice of certain characters? If so, explain. *

Your answer

Anything you would like to add about the game? Certain scenes, characters that impacted you in any way?

Your answer

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Clear form

Alexios

Why did you choose Alexios? *

Your answer

Do you think the marketing of the game (trailers, box covers, merch...) influenced your appreciation/choice of certain characters? If so, explain. *

Your answer

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Clear form

Game Marketing

How often do you look at promotional material of the games you're playing? *

- ☐ Always
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Never

If so, what kind of promotional material do you look at the most? *

- ☐ Trailers
- ☐ Box covers, promotional images
- ☐ Interviews from developers/writers/actors...
- ☐ Reviews/Critics
- ☐ Let's plays/Playthrough
- ☐ I don't look at promotional material
- ☐ Other: _____

If I were to need further precisions on your answers and you were willing to reply, you can leave an email below! Thank you.

Your answer _____

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Submit

Clear form