IN THE GAME OF PATRIARCHY:

THE DAMSEL IN DISTRESS NARRATIVE IN VIDEO GAMES

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis performs a critical narrative analysis of the pervasive "damsel in distress" narrative within two prominent video game franchises, *The Legend of Zelda* series and the *Super Mario Bros.* series. Through a combination of narratologic and ludologic analysis, this study considers the unique elements of video game narrative that sets it apart from other forms of narrative, considerations that are then applied to the damsel in distress narrative in games. Focusing on the gender representations and power dynamics within the storyline, this thesis focuses on the ways in which male empowerment depends upon female disempowerment within the narrative, and the manner in which the female "damsel" is kidnapped in order to motivate gameplay and serve as a reward system for the player. This study also includes an investigation of challenges to the narrative within the popular game titles *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) and *The Last of Us* (2013), concluding that these retellings of the "damsel in distress" narrative disrupt hegemonic masculinity often centered in mainstream games.

Considering recent events of sexualized harassment of women in gaming and tech spaces, this study considers the ways in which narrative influences cultural attitudes, and how the games themselves are critical points of study when concerned with the overt misogyny of gaming spaces. Characterizing gaming culture as a "hypermasculine" space that objectifies, excludes, and is hostile toward feminine performance, this study ultimately concludes that the "damsel in distress" narrative is highly pervasive due to the perception that gamers are overwhelmingly heterosexual men. Within the intimate player-protagonist relationship gaming provides - unlike

any other genre - players *perform* masculinity through the protection and disempowerment of female characters, thus reinforcing heteronormative notions of masculinity, femininity, and the relationship between the two.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my partner and closest friend, Tim Sutton, for supporting me during the toughest times, and knowing just the right time to send a funny dog video.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On August 26th, 2014, feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian fled her home in response to a particularly graphic and detailed threat she received online (Campbell). That evening, she tweeted to followers, "I'm safe. Authorities have been notified. Staying with friends tonight. I'm not giving up. But this harassment of women in tech needs to stop!" This threat, though alarming enough to involve law enforcement, was not the first that Sarkeesian has received. On the contrary, since she gained a significant online presence in 2012, her name has become synonymous with online harassment of women and the overt misogyny of gaming and "geek" internet communities. Sarkeesian has received responses in the form of death threats, sexual assault threats, and bomb threats targeted toward her and her family, friends, and vocal supporters. Her Wikipedia page has been vandalized on several occasions with images of various sex acts, and a flash game entitled *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian* was created and circulated by a Canadian blogger in which players could beat and bloody an image of Sarkeesian's face (Lewis).

Those not familiar with gaming culture may wonder what exactly the blogger and content creator is guilty of to trigger such a long and violent harassment campaign. Sarkeesian herself has been providing online social commentary of pop culture since 2009, long before the harassment began, through her blog and video series entitled "Feminist Frequency." However, in early 2012 her attention switched to video games and game culture when she launched a *Kickstarter* campaign for her ongoing project "Tropes vs. Women in Games." In the videos, Sarkeesian activates basic and accessible feminist criticism of mainstream games. After initial

doxxing[1] attempts, she received overwhelming support by many individuals who donated over $150,000 to her *Kickstarter*[2], far surpassing her original goal of $6,000. It is this criticism and fundraising support that triggered the harassment campaign that remains strong 3 years later (Sarkeesian "Tropes vs. Women").

Though Sarkeesian's experience is arguably the most visible and discussed example of the harassment of women in gaming communities, she is certainly not the only woman who has been subjected to it. In 2013, Jennifer Hepler -- a former writer for the game developer Bioware -- received harassment targeting her weight and death threats toward her family after she suggested in an interview that games should include the option to skip some combat as they often do for cut scenes. She ultimately chose to leave her position to avoid the abuse (Purchese). Similarly, as reported by Evan Narcisse, actress Aisha Tyler was targeted by a vocal group of anonymous gamers after she was chosen to emcee game developer Ubisoft's presentation at the E3 (Electronic Entertainment Expo) gaming conference in 2012. Online commenters claimed that -- because she is both African American and a woman -- she was included for the sake of "diversity" and not because she was a "true gamer," an assertion that Tyler challenged later (Narcisse).

More recently, indie developer of the successful text-based game "Depression Quest," Zoe Quinn, was the victim of a harassment campaign and identity theft after the accusation that she exchanged sexual favors for positive reviews of her game (Parkin). In response to this claim, anonymous online forums executed a wave of rape and death threats toward Quinn and her family, threats such as, "[n]ext time she shows up at a conference we[…] give her a crippling injury that will never fully heal[…] a good solid injury to the knees. I'd say brain damage, but

[1] "Doxxing" is a term used online that refers to the gathering and distribution of personal information without the individual's consent, usually with harmful intent.
[2] Kickstarter.com is a website in which individuals can raise funds for independent creative projects.

we don't want to make it so she is too retarded to fear us" (Parkin). The accusations that Quinn traded sex for increased visibility of her game launched a vocal and ongoing campaign labeled #GamerGate (a wordplay on the "Watergate" scandal of the Nixon administration), an online movement with the premise of uncovering corruption in video game journalism but the practice of mobilizing support for hate campaigns on forums, blogs and social media. These campaigns are disproportionately targeted toward various women in the gaming industry, as well as media sources and corporate entities that promote gender equality in gaming (Mullis).

These campaigns, because they are public in context and target women who are relatively well known in gaming communities, have sparked significant media coverage and ongoing discussions about the contentious role of women in this new and developing culture (Consalvo; Salter & Blodgett 413). However, that is not to say that harassment and misogyny are limited to those in the public eye. Consalvo documents the ways in which the increasingly hostile environment of the gaming community has become a common experience for *most* women who participate in game culture, and argues that this hostility is in response to the "growing presence of women and girls in gaming not as a novelty but as a regular and increasingly important demographic". This harassment tends to be based on two factors: "sexist (as well as racist, homophobic, and ageist) beliefs about the abilities and proper place of female players, and fears about the changing nature of the game industry" (Consalvo).

Those who are active gamers, but who do not identify as male, are confronted with a culture that pushes femininity to its margins and claims its artifacts as possessions intended specifically for men. To understand the root of these pervasive attitudes, it is imperative that we investigate what I would deem the core of this culture: the games themselves. The increasing influence and distribution of video games as a medium, as well as the open hostility toward

women in gaming culture, make these artifacts a critical point of study (Kirkland 167; Jensen & de Castell 80). Gaming culture is marked and defined by the video games played and discussed within it, and the vehemence in which traditional masculine roles are defended can reveal much about hegemonic structures that make it possible. By examining the common narratives, tropes, and representations within mainstream and widely distributed video games, we can then make conclusions about how dominant attitudes of various identities are cultivated and perpetuated.

In this thesis, I investigate and critique a pervasive and perhaps the most common trope used within mainstream games: the "damsel in distress" narrative. The title of my thesis, "In the Game of Patriarchy," is inspired by a quote from Sarkeesian in her discussion of what she calls the "damsel in distress trope" in games, in which she remarks that "in the game of patriarchy, women are not the enemy -- they are the ball" (Sarkeesian, "Damsel in Distress"). Women characters are the figurative and objectified "ball" that is passed back and forth between a male protagonist and (usually) male antagonist. In its common usage, this narrative reinforces regressive notions of femininity and masculinity that support a culture that excludes female participation. Using a combination of narratologic and ludologic[3] analysis that I believe necessary for the consideration of video games, I examine the structure of the narrative itself, the use of the narrative historically and in other forms of media, and the ways in which the damsel provides motivation and story for the countless male protagonists within the medium. I describe the male-centric and "hypermasculine" characteristics of gaming, as well as why this consideration is critical to the study of the damsel distress narrative. I attend to the key differences between video game narrative and other forms of narrative, and the implications that this difference has on the experience and attitudes of players. Finally, I investigate how these

[3] A ludologic approach to game analysis emphasizes the technical rule-based and interactive aspects of video games as setting it apart from other forms of medium, whereas a narratologic approach considers game narrative in a similar way to film or literature (Hess 344-55).

narratives construct male protagonists and villains as "subjects" acting, and the female damsel as the "object" that is acted upon.

Specifically, I analyze this narrative within the *Super Mario Bros.* series and *The Legend of Zelda* series. I have chosen these two series for study because they are both iconic and wildly popular series that have sold hundreds of millions of copies and released games on all major platforms since the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Though these two series differ in setting, tone, and genre they execute the narrative in similar ways. I also include the mainstream games *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) and *The Last of Us* (2013) as examples of direct challenges and counter-narratives to the "damsel in distress" narrative. I examine the structure of the narrative (as well as the counter-narratives) within these chosen artifacts, how it is used to drive the overall game story and mechanics, and the ways in which the female characters of these games are constructed within the narrative.

Within my exploration of this subject, I am concerned with the persuasive power of gaming narrative, how the common damsel in distress narrative reinforces hegemonic masculinity in game culture, how these notions are then projected upon actual participants of gaming, and how those on the margins can use game narrative to transform power operations within the culture. Ultimately, my argument is not only that the damsel in distress narrative reinforces regressive notions about the roles and characteristics of masculine and feminine identity, which is then manifested in cultural attitudes, but also that this is precisely *why* the narrative is utilized so frequently. Because the narrative embodies notions and representations of hegemonic masculinity, combined with the immersion and "vehicular embodiment" that gaming provides, players *perform* masculinity through an intimate relationship with the protagonist unlike any other genre. Thus, with the perception that the lucrative audience of gaming is almost

entirely made up of white, straight men, the narrative persists to sell more games, and to give gamers the space to *prove their manhood* (Burrill 2) through the objectification and "damselling" of women characters.

In this thesis, Chapter 1 articulates the object of study, the justifications for the study, and specific research questions that are addressed in the analysis of the chosen artifacts. Chapter 2 presents a detailed overview of relevant research within both rhetorical studies and game studies, and creates a foundation of previous scholarly work from which I build my own analysis. This research includes characterizations of gaming as a male-centric and "hypermasculine" space, as well as observations on games as a cultural phenomenon and previous feminist scholarship on the damsel in distress narrative.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology of this thesis, and articulates the combined narratologic/ludologic analysis that will be primarily employed in this work. In this chapter, I outline the ongoing debate between the two camps of game criticism and argue that a synthesis between the two provides the most adequate lens for this particular study. Chapter 4 discusses the structure and use of the damsel in distress narrative within the *Super Mario Bros.* series and *The Legend of Zelda* series. Within each artifact, I examine how the narrative is used, how the male protagonist and female damsel are constructed in relation to each other and within the in-game world as a whole, and discuss the implications of the narrative within each the context of each game. I conclude that the male empowerment within the narrative depends upon female disempowerment, and that the objectification of the female damsel serves to both reinforce structures of hegemonic masculinity within game operations as well as to project a masculine ideal to an assumed straight, white and male audience. I investigate the ways in which the narrative operates differently within these games as compared to other mediums, with primary

emphasis on the intimate player-protagonist relationship and the reward system.

Chapter 5 includes an analysis of challenges to the "damsel in distress" narrative in *The Secret of Monkey Island* and *The Last of Us*. In these titles, the damsel in distress narrative is either flipped or transformed in some way. I characterize this move as a "counterhegemonic act" (Shugart 210) that takes the familiar narrative and makes it unfamiliar, empowers female characters rather than objectifying them, and disrupts traditional hegemonic structures in games that operate through a white, male, heterosexual gaze. Chapter 6 discusses the importance of studying games as texts with particular attention to this study, and articulates gaming as a powerful tool for exploring issues of identity. Finally, Chapter 7 discusses my overall conclusions from the study, describes the findings from my analysis, and proposes space for further research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Masculinity in Game Culture

Before delving into an analysis of the damsel in distress narrative in games, it is imperative to describe the ways in which game culture is gendered as a masculine space in order to conceptualize the frame in which this narrative is frequently executed. Several scholars have argued that video games and game cultures have often been and continue to be spaces characterized by hypermasculinity and heteronormativity, excluding or ignoring those who do not identify as white, heterosexual and male. To clarify, Salter and Blodgett define "hypermasculine" spaces as those that rely upon the exaggeration of masculine cultural stereotypes and subcultures. Through an overemphasis and centering of the masculine-gendered body and behavior, "hypermasculine" spaces tend to dismiss, objectify, or be hostile toward feminine displays (402). Game designers and developers often exclude women characters from game play completely, or place them in supporting roles that are often sexualized, and where they serve as an object to be desired, protected, and rescued. Despite many studies that have debunked the stereotype of the white, heterosexual male gamer (see Williams, Yee, Caplan), developers, writers and publishers continue to create games that appeal to the heterosexual white male gaze[4]. Several scholars have commented on the ways in which gaming continues to be

[4]The "male gaze" in this context derives from Mulvey's use of the phrase, generally used to evaluate how feminine "objects" are constructed when there is an assumed male viewer. Manlove writes that analysis of “the gaze” as developed by Mulvey is used to “help explain the hierarchical power relations between two or more groups or, alternatively, between a group and an ‘object’” (84). When evaluating “the gaze” the critic is tasked with considering how the gaze is activated in and out of the artifact, “whether between the image and the viewer or within the image itself” (Finnegan 254). Barnet argues that critics concerned with the gaze in an image should ask, “What is the relation of the viewer’s (and artist’s) gaze to the gaze of the figure(s)? … Does this Other return the viewer’s gaze, thereby asserting his or her identity and power, or does the subject look elsewhere, unaware of the voyeur viewer-painter?” (58). Ultimately, here I am concerned with what the common gender representations and constructions within game narratives say about the assumed audience, and what that means about gamer masculinity.

conceptualized as a masculine space, which results in the perpetual exclusion of women and femininity from game culture as a whole. In his study of masculine identity in game culture, Burrill writes that video games function as playgrounds for the construction and performance of masculine identity. He labels this phenomenon "digital boyhood," and calls it "a space and experience where the digital boy can 'die tryin',' tryin' to win, tryin' to beat the game, and tryin' to *prove his manhood* (and therefore his place within patriarchy, the world of capital, and the Law)" (2, emphasis mine). He argues that game creators assume that "the player is always already male" (138), despite several studies that have exposed that almost half of gamers as of 2013 were female (Entertainment Software Association). Henry Jenkins contends that, for boys that do not have backyards or woods, gaming has replaced many other outlets of "masculine" play for young Western boys with the modern and urban need for spatial confinement (263).

In this thesis, I consider the ways in which gender is *performative* as outlined by Judith Butler, and the ways in which players perform masculinity in gaming space. Butler emphasizes the ways in which performative discourses are *reiterated* in order to preserve the constructed identity (*Gender Trouble*, 33). Without repetition of performative acts, cultural notions of masculinity and femininity are exposed of their constructedness. This notion is critical when considering common representations of masculinity and femininity in gaming, as well as narrative elements that are presented repeatedly to a presumed heterosexual male audience.

A few scholars have commented on the particular brand of violent masculinity that is prominent within many mainstream games. Although not as relevant to the artifacts chosen for this study, Kline and Dyer-Witherford coin the term "militarized masculinity" to describe the most commonplace form of masculinity offered to players, which involves highly gendered messages and settings of war, conquest, and violence (254). Kellner defines Western hegemonic

masculinity as one that is "associated with military heroism, corporate power, sports achievement, action-adventure movie stars, and being tough, aggressive, and macho" (18, qtd. in Johnson). Despite the fact that gamers themselves may not be engaging in these activities, the male protagonists of games (including the titles considered in this study) are almost always embodying these ideals by being violent, heroic, wealthy, and physically fit with overtly masculine features.

When analyzing gaming, a particular brand of "nerd" or "geek" masculinity must be considered that is associated with technology, technological proficiency, and the exclusion of women. Kendall posits that masculinity becomes dominant in online "nerd" communities "[b]ecause Western culture in general associates computer competence and interest with masculinity, [therefore] femininity can come to be associated with lack of competence and an inability to fit into the dominant social norms" (96). Johnson refers to this phenomenon as "technomasculinity," which he associates with "the hacker ethic and having 'technological edge,' or the ability and pleasure derived from controlling and manipulating information and complex systems" (581).

Part of this perpetuation of masculine gaming culture may be found in the small percentage of women who actually work within the industry, despite the growing numbers of female players. A survey in 2008 found that less than 10 percent of employed programmers and designers in the game industry were women, and the numbers have not changed much since (Kafai, Heeter, Denner and Sun xx). Women who do work in the industry most often occupy traditionally "feminine" roles of reception, marketing, and human resources, whereas content creation is dominated by men (Johnson 578). Although some argue that this contrast is due to the few women who apply to work in the field, Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter argue that, "other

men offered a clearer window into the sexism of the digital play industry, explaining, for example, that 'girls' often do not have 'the right ideas' when it comes to games but that it 'looks good' for a developer to employ 'some girls'" (203). In their discussion of the hegemonies of masculine play, the Ludica Group explains,

> The power elite of the game industry is a predominantly white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated corporate and creative elite that represents a select group of large, global publishing companies in conjunction with a handful of massive chain retail distributors. This hegemonic elite determines which technologies will be deployed, and which will not; which games will be made, and by which designers; which players are important to design for, and which play styles will be supported. (Fron et al. 1)

As the Ludica Group emphasizes here, several layers of cultural and structural influence contribute to the deep marginalization of feminine play in gaming culture. It is not merely gamers, developers, and advertisers who perpetuate this hegemony, but as Chess notes, it is also "a larger culture that ultimately defines video game play as almost inherently masculine" (Chess 232). As Salter and Blodgett argue, the narrow choice of female characters and actions within game titles leaves women and girls with few realistic and non-sexualized options, and even those female protagonists presented under the veil of female "empowerment" (a prime example being Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series before 2013) are often still objectified under and through the male gaze (402-3).

In the past few years, there has been an influx of game advertising targeted toward women, but with a clear implication of a division of interests between male and female gamers: games marketed toward men tend to be violent and story-based, whereas games marketed toward women tend to emphasize productivity with a focus on beauty, fitness, and family values (Chess

231). Taylor also comments on what she calls the "imagined difference" between male and female players, arguing that women are generally associated with "casual" games (i.e. *Farmville* (2009), *Bejeweled* (2001), the *Sims* series, or other simulation and puzzle games) that are labeled as "lesser" by the larger community (119). In contrast, the "hardcore" gaming communities (i.e. *Bioshock* (2007), the *Call of Duty* series, the *Grand Theft Auto* series, and other adventure, role-playing, and first person shooter games) remain focused on male players, and the discourse within them is often highly masculine with little feminine influence (Salter and Blodgett 403). Understanding the culture itself as "hypermasculine" -- and one that *magnifies* hegemonic notions of masculinity, femininity, and the relationship between the two -- is vital in order to fully analyze the production and purpose of the damsel in distress narrative within this medium. By outlining the ways in which the industry targets the male gaze, we can then examine who is creating the narrative, for whom it is meant for, and why it is the common default narrative used to motivate game play. This also helps to illustrate that feminist criticisms of video games are not "reading too much into it" as some may claim, but rather are exposing the gendered power structures that have characterized the medium since its general inception in the 1970s.

Games as Cultural Artifacts

Because the legitimacy of video games as an art form is still being contested in popular culture, it is vital to outline reasons why games are a critical point of study for the modern age (Juul, *Half-Real* 21). As many scholars have illustrated, the image of the secluded and introverted white male gamer no longer reflects the reality of those who are engaging with the medium, as the demographics, uses, and genres of games continue to expand and evolve (Consalvo). Prundaru and Abrudan write that "[u]ntil now the dominant idea was that games operate inside a 'magic circle', limited in time and space, that does not affect the outside world,

but in-game processes give birth to precise narrative, social and psychological meanings" (40). At one time, games were primarily targeted and circulated among middle class, white male youth. With the widening audience and "considerable revenues" (Kirkland 167) of the gaming industry, however, video games have become a critical point of media studies as a reflection of identity and culture. To emphasize this point, Jeff Folkerts writes that "[w]ithout exception [games] are all products of the imagination, and as cultural artifacts are an expression *of,* and reflection *on* the culture they emerge from" (99, emphasis mine). As any piece of media, it is critical to identify common themes and storylines within popular and widely-circulated artifacts in order to guide understanding about power dynamics and ideologies of the culture in which the artifacts are created and consumed.

I began this thesis with an account of recent and public harassment campaigns toward women in the gaming industry, as well as the documented hostility that most women gamers experience on a regular basis. This was not simply to cause alarm, but to illustrate *how* issues of representation and popular narrative within a medium have "real-world" consequences. As mentioned, the union of masculinity and "hardcore" gaming pushes women and girls to the fringes of the culture, leaving them in a precarious position. Within the framework of Foucault's notions of power and discipline, this thesis considers the ways in which empowered feminine performance is made visible and then disciplined for falling outside of accepted behaviors in gaming space (*Discipline and Punish* 189). This work also discusses the ways in which sexualized language is used to punish women for their discourses within gaming space by considering whom is using the sexualized rhetoric, whom it is directed toward, and the purpose for which it is spoken (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 11). In their work on hypermasculinity in

game culture, Salter and Blodgett quote blogger Alexander, who explains how "nerd" or "techno" masculinity becomes intimately tied with the marginalization of women:

> [T]his group, accustomed to being marginalized as "geeks," wants to keep its club pristine… They had to develop their own society with its own laws in order to feel safe and empowered. Now here we are in the democratic internet age, an info-loaded digital world where anybody and everybody gets access to everything and anything, and the boundaries of the secret world get harder and harder to draw. (qtd. in Salter & Blodgett 411)

This preservation of a shared rhetorical identity already characterized by a feeling of victimization can help to understand the violent backlash to what the culture perceives as "outsiders." Rejection by mainstream society and in particular a rejection by women is often a sentiment echoed within these spaces. Salter and Blodgett point to the three roles that women are afforded within the "hardcore" gaming public -- the sexual object, the invisible woman, and the enemy (411). If women fall outside of the sexual object (damsel in distress, booth babes[5], and sexualized game characters,) or the invisible woman (e.g. the "there are no girls on the internet" meme[6]) categories, then they are disciplined and relegated as the enemy.

Folkerts details a different approach to identity creation in game culture, arguing that the games themselves can be described as "meta-cognitive" and "meta-reflexive," meaning that the playing of many games involves "playing with meaning and meaning construction" which

[5] The phrase “booth babes” generally refers to female models that are hired to promote a product or a developer’s booth at gaming conventions. They tend to be white, conventionally attractive, and dressed in revealing themed outfits.

[6] “There are no girls on the internet” is a tongue-in-cheek adage which implies that there are no women actually participating in online spaces, and is particularly prominent in anonymous chatrooms and online forums. It continues with the implication that those who claim to be women online are actually male online "trolls" who pose as women as a joke.

"forces us to look at ourselves" (111). This process, Folkerts argues, leads players to "not only structure (our concept of) the world, but (our concept of) ourselves as well" involving a "stronger emotional engagement [that] is even more thorough and fundamental than in stories" (113). Adopting Folkert's view, one could argue that the level of emotional and personal engagement in games makes the medium particularly influential on ideology. With a surrounding culture that depends on the medium to organize itself, and is also characterized by hypermasculinity and concentrated misogyny (arguably more than any other modern medium), the medium itself becomes a critical point in understanding how these ideologies emerge.

The "Damsel in Distress" Narrative

The "damsel in distress" narrative has been a common trope in Western storytelling since the ancient tale of Perseus, when Perseus slays the beast that has captured Andromeda, rescues her, and claims her as his wife (Lang 105-123). In more modern times, this narrative is told in the form of *King Kong* (1933) and *Godzilla* (1954), many pulp magazines and romance novels, princess stories, superhero comics and films, and even teen novels aimed at young women such as the *Twilight* series. The "damsel in distress" narrative is arguably the most common trope utilized as a motivator for the male protagonist to leave his state of comfort and engage in the epic fight or quest that becomes the center of the film, novel, or other form of media. At times, this storyline appears in films or novels that are indeed about the damsel, as in the case of the *Snow White* (1937) and *Cinderella* (1950) films. However, most often the story that uses the "damsel in distress" narrative is not about the damsel (the object that is acted upon) but the male protagonist (the subject who is acting), especially when this narrative is employed in the interactive, male-dominated, and relatively new medium of the video game.

It is difficult to find recent scholarly work that addresses the damsel in distress narrative and how it operates in various forms of media. Much of the feminist critique of the damsel in distress trope comes from fairytale studies, a genre in which the narrative frequently appears. Even then, work that addresses the narrative specifically often dates back thirty years or more, and more recent scholarship focuses on post-modern retellings of the narrative. As this thesis attests to, the narrative has not disappeared but rather is still used frequently. Perhaps game studies is the space in which we can revisit this conversation and investigate its uses and representations.

Bacchilega argues that modern fairytales (such as the Disney princess stories) have often been "instrumentalized" to reinforce hegemonic structures of masculinity and femininity (7). Women within traditional fairytales tend to be passive, closer to nature than to culture (symbolic of an inferior being meant to be conquered within a patriarchal context), without voice or their own agency, and in need of a male character to assist or rescue her (9). Stone outlines the ways in which feminist scholars have argued that "[t]he passive and pretty heroines who dominate popular fairytales offer narrow and damaging role models for young readers" (230). Lieberman insists that the common "happy ever after endings," in which the passive heroine is rescued by the active hero with whom she falls in love, have "been made the repositories of the dreams, hopes and fantasies of generations of girls" which she sees as a regressive way for girls to define themselves as human beings (385). Lieberman comments that fairytales and damsels in distress shape our cultural understanding of gender roles, reinforcing the stereotypes of the active, heroic male and the passive, beautiful female (395). These scholars imply that these common representations of feminine behavior in well-known fairytales are damaging, limiting, and in need of critical review.

Many postmodern feminist scholars have taken a different approach by rereading or retelling the narrative to center and empower the heroine. These retellings can either work to shift the balance of power, or to expose ideologies within the traditional narrative that are normally taken for granted (Bacchilega 23). Stone mentions the original stories "The Practical Princess" and "Petronella" by Jay Williams as examples of this restructuring of the typical damsel in distress narrative, in which the heroines slay their own dragons and save spoiled princes (Stone 230). Shuman investigates these postmodern retellings of fairytales in whether or not they create a "rupture in the status of proposed and fixed meanings" or if "new interpretations" simply "stand alongside the old ones" (80). Preston explains that "symbolic inversion" of the traditional narratives to shift the balance of power or trivialize hegemonic norms does, in fact, serve to rupture problematic cultural norms (198). Here, the concern is not just that the new narrative changes or transforms the old one, but that it also challenges or disrupts authority in a meaningful way. Shugart contends that appropriation -- which she defines as "any instance in which a group borrows or imitates the strategies of another" (211) -- can sometimes serve as "counterhegemonic acts" that challenge cultural hegemonies. Feminist rhetorical appropriation involves referencing popular stories, fables, narratives, etc. in a way that clearly challenges traditional gender roles and dynamics (211). According to Shugart, stories "constitute hegemony" and "serve as ideological narratives", thus retellings and rewrites of the narrative can make familiar hegemonic norms unfamiliar, and change the balance of power.

Particular to this study, I am concerned with how mainstream games often adopt the popular damsel in distress narrative as a familiar trope to drive game play, as well as how the narrative reinforces traditional notions of the relationship between men and women, and how that can possibly explain the negative attitude towards women in the culture as a whole. This includes

how the damsel operates as a reward system -- a figurative "trophy" for the player who completes the game -- and how male empowerment and character development depends upon the disempowerment and helplessness of the damsel. I am also concerned with the ways in which some developers appropriate or change the narrative in order to challenge hegemonic and heteronormative notions about masculinity and femininity.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Narrative

As mentioned, I have chosen a narrative analysis aided by ludologic analysis for this particular study. Before engaging in this examination, however, it is necessary to outline traditional approaches to narrative criticism across a variety of media genres. The foundation to narrative theory and criticism in rhetorical studies has been the work of Walter Fisher, who coined the phrase *homo narrans* to describe human beings as a species, arguing that we are essentially a "story-telling animal" ("Narration" 1). In his proposal of what he calls the "narrative paradigm," Fisher points to a "theory of symbolic actions -- words and/or deeds -- that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them" ("Narration" 2).

Fisher challenges traditional conceptions of rhetoric as deductive and argumentative in nature:

> The narrative paradigm challenges the notions that human communication -- if it is to be considered rhetorical -- must be an argumentative form, that reason is to be attributed only to discourse marked by clearly identifiable modes of inference and/or implication, and that the norms for evaluation of rhetorical communication must be rational standards taken essentially from informal or formal logic. The narrative paradigm does not deny reason and rationality; it reconstitutes them, making them amenable to all forms of human communication. ("Narration" 2)

Narrative, according to Fisher, is rhetorical because it is a form of public and shared meaning. In this case, a clear and logical argument does not need to be present in order for an artifact to reflect the ideologies and culture of the environment in which the story has been created and perpetuated.

Individuals use narrative as a way of communicating coherent meaning and relating the listener's and speaker's personal experience, and in this way narrative can be highly persuasive. Related to this point, Fisher quotes Goldberg as saying,

> Neither "the facts" nor our "experience" come to us in discrete and disconnected packets which simply await the appropriate moral principle to be applied. Rather, they stand in need of some narrative which can bind the facts of our experience together into a coherent pattern and it is thus in virtue of that narrative that our abstracted rules, principles, and notions gain their full intelligibility. (Goldberg 242)

In short, individuals find meaning and coherence from their experience and the world around them through a recognizable narrative structure (Fisher "Narrative Paradigm" 3).

Klapproth also emphasizes the importance of considering narrative as a highly influential form of rhetoric. She argues that,

> Casting experience into narrative form is one of the most central ways by which human beings attempt to make sense of our lives. By creating stories out of the raw material of our experience we manage not only to establish coherence for ourselves, but also to create meaningful discursive structures that may be communicated and shared. (Klapproth 3)

She describes narrative as the method through which individuals preserve and transmit "cultural, historical, scientific, and social knowledge as well as moral codes and values" (103). Narrative is

highly impressionable on the audience as well as the storyteller, as narrative by its very structure is "fundamentally personal" (Klapproth 117), and therefore individuals "involve themselves cognitively, imaginatively, emotionally, and morally in the creation and sharing of narrated worlds" (127). In this way, a key approach to studying the ideologies and cultural values of a specific group of people is by investigating their commonly shared narratives.

Narrative criticism has become a commonly used tool for rhetorical scholars who are interested in studying "the users of the stories and the state of culture that is revealed in their understanding of symbols" (Sillars & Gronbeck 212). As Riesman remarks, narrative criticism and analysis is not only concerned with what is told within the story, but *why* it is told in such a way (2). In the case of pervasive cultural narratives, such as the one I evaluate in my thesis, important questions not only include those just mentioned, but also *why* this narrative continues to appear in many places, and in many different forms. Narrative is useful for investigating the practices and codes of everyday life, which can be found in common narratives. Riesman notes in relation to narrative analysis that, "[i]t is possible to examine gender inequalities, racial oppression, and other practices of power that may be taken for granted by individual speakers. Narrators speak in terms that seem natural, but we can analyze how culturally and historically contingent these terms are" (5). Ostensibly, through narrative criticism we can uncover cultural ideologies that may not be overt or obvious, but are nonetheless present and perpetuated within each telling of the narrative itself. Narrative criticism is a useful tool for not only identifying popular cultural narratives but "*how* people come to adopt stories that guide behavior" (Fisher, "The Narrative Paradigm" 348).

It is critical to study narrative not only to uncover pre-existing cultural attitudes, but also because pervasive narratives have significant social, societal, and cultural consequences. As

Fisher argues, "a significant feature of compelling stories is that they provide a rationale for decision and action. As such, they not only constrain behavior, they may also determine it" ("The Narrative Paradigm" 364). It is important when engaging in narrative analysis to consider both the implications and representations within the narrative, as well as how the narrative is impacting its captive audience.

Although it is difficult to outline a strict "scientific" method to narrative analysis -- as narratives themselves appear in many different locations and vary in structure and influence -- Fisher provides important elements that the critic should consider when analyzing a particular artifact:

> While the narrative paradigm as a worldview of human communication does not provide a specific method of analysis, it does propose a precise perspective for critically reading texts. Regardless of its genre, a text is viewed as composed of good reasons, elements that give warrants for believing or acting in accord with the message fostered by that text. Good reasons may be expressed by any individuated form of discourse or performance: "argument," metaphor, myth, gesture, and so on… Throughout the interpretation and assessment, values are taken as the principal ingredient of the individuated forms and the message. ("The Narrative Paradigm" 357)

In short, the narrative paradigm does not outline a formal method to analysis, but does provide a critical framework for critics to consider when evaluating a narrative, and helps to explain how narratives become prominent within the cultures they emerge. With the paradigm in mind, the critic should focus her attention on the themes, values, and behaviors common within the narrative. The individual must consider what elements within the narrative may encourage

specific behaviors or attitudes, and how different characters within the story act or are acted upon.

Fisher discusses the ways in which individuals use "narrative rationality" when considering narratives, which involves the two standards of "probability" and "fidelity" (Fisher, *Human Communication* 105). Narrative probability considers whether or not the narrative is consistent with itself. Of particular interest to this study is whether or not the narrative communicates *characterological* coherence, or whether or not the characters are "believable" within the culture in which the narrative is told. Narrative fidelity is concerned with whether or not elements of the narrative reflect the reality of the audience. Narrative fidelity, in particular, considers whether or not the story is relevant to the audience's experiences or interests, if it affirms the audience's previous values, and whether or not the narrative fits within notions of proper human conduct within the culture it is told. Considering aspects of narrative rationality in relation to the "damsel in distress" narrative reveals much about the narrative's intended audience, "coherent" beliefs about the role of men and women in desirable narrative adventures, and heteronormative assumptions about the proper relationship between male and female characters. Considering the ways in which narrative attempts to "ring true" to the audience's experience and views of reality can help to explain why the narrative is incredibly popular within the video game medium.

Video Game Narrative

If humans are indeed the "story-telling animal" as Fisher suggests, then perhaps this is where the mass appeal of video games can be found. Because of its audiovisual presentation, games as a medium most closely resemble film and television (Cassidy 297). However, what sets games apart from other forms of media is the way in which players *experience* game narrative as

compared to how viewers experience film or readers experience literature. Many scholars have observed this important difference, and remarked that it is a vital element to consider when analyzing games as texts. Ruggill and McCallister comment on the uniqueness of games as a medium by arguing that, "the computer game medium is quintessentially *transdisciplinary*; it sits at the nexus of engineering, mathematics, hermeneutics, logic, kinesthesia, narratology, performativity, art, and many other ways of seeing, understanding, and interacting" (3). Sitting at this intersection of many different disciplines, games are a unique and complex medium that call for consideration outside of traditional literary review. Dubbelman comments on the difference between film and games, writing that film and television are "viewed externally, voyeuristically", whereas a game depends on player interaction and the illusion that the individual is "writing their own story as they go, and that their actions are actually having an effect on the ultimate outcome" (1). Interactivity, according to Cassidy, and active participation by the viewer (whether by means of a joystick, controller, keyboard or touchscreen), is not only a feature of the video game medium, but defines the medium itself. Rather than simply observing the narrative, the player becomes an active character within it, and is often given the illusion of telling their own story. Kirkland emphasizes that video games are "played as well as watched; the electronic input necessary for meaningful engagement with a video game… [which] significantly complicates traditional understandings of narrative, genre, representation and the text itself" (Kirkland 168). Folkerts articulates this difference as well:

> While reading we construct a mental picture of the occurrences, the situations and the characters presented in the text, if we watch a movie we imagine the backstory of characters and possible plot turns, if we play a game we not only transfer ourselves into

> the virtual world, but also into our game character, the avatar: we imagine being somewhere else and someone else. (107)

These scholars suggest that player participation, rather than merely the player's presence and audienceship, is vital in understanding how the player experiences that particular narrative.

In order to understand the role of the player, there is an ongoing debate among game studies scholars and rhetorical scholars about whether a ludologic or narratologic approach to video game analysis is more valuable. Juul defines ludology generally as "the study of games" (*Half-Real* 16), although he highlights that ludologists have attempted to distance themselves from narratology, favoring the rule-based systems that are specific to gaming. Generally speaking, according to Kirkland, ludologists "foreground formal gaming qualities, characterizing video games as abstract rule-based systems or interactive simulations" (167) while narratologists regard games as texts to be read, emphasizing the story structure of the game, and often in relation to other forms of media.

Cassidy and Kirkland advocate for an analysis that draws from both approaches, but that prioritizes narrative analysis. Ludology and narratology do not necessarily have to be strictly antagonistic as it has been believed in the past, but in fact have a necessary correlation in the study of games (Bogost 68). According to Cassidy, those deemed "vulgar" ludologists tend to argue that, "traditional narrative theory and semiotics simply cannot deal with [video games]... because these works are not just made of sequences of signs but rather behave like machines or sign-generators" (Frasca 221). Ludologists echo an important element of video games that critics should consider in that the player often has the choice to interact with the text in different ways, and make significant choices in how the narrative will unfold. However, the suggestion that narrative theory cannot approach video games is simply not the case. Rather, the approach

must be altered to consider the complex player-protagonist relationship and reward systems. As Folkerts argues, with the exception of certain puzzle games, "without narrativity, there is no game" (107). Cassidy observes that despite some player choices, the narrative is bound by the game design in many ways, and at the game's end the player has experienced one linear coherent narrative (295).

Beyond this debate, however, scholars who prioritize the narrative approach argue that ludology brings vital considerations to game narrative criticism. In his analysis of the immensely popular war game *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun* (2006), Hess argues that "video games must be recognized as more than just narratives and are deserving of a nuanced theory of ludology" (244) in order to consider the unique interactive and player-controlled perspectives of the video game medium. Juul warns that game scholars should use ludology to consider the unique player interactivity within this medium: "The non-determined state of the story/game world and the active state of the player when playing a game has a huge implications for how we perceive games" ("Games Telling Stories" 1). Juul emphasizes that games are both rules *and* fiction in response to a long-held debate on whether they are one or the other (*Half-Real* 12). Rules are important to the game because a game does not exist without rules, and fiction is the realm in which players engage with those rules (*Half-Real* 55). Juul admits to previously arguing that fiction was unimportant to games, following the logic that games cannot exist without rules, but they can exist without fiction, thus the formal being essential and the latter being arbitrary. However, he has since challenged that notion, arguing that rules and fiction are both governed by formal structures, and each relies on the other in order to create a game that one can interact and engage with (*Half-Real* 8,15). Kirkland echoes this sentiment, arguing that ludology provides insight to how player interactivity may provide multiple routes for the player to experience the

narrative, but that the narrative is ultimately a structured experience (170). In my analysis of the damsel in distress narrative in games, I adopt the approach of Cassidy, Kirkland, and Hess, using ludology to aid understanding of the interactive experience, but ultimately viewing game narrative as a coherent, structured artifact that can be analyzed.

Juul emphasizes that games disturb the relationship between viewer/reader and the story that traditional approaches to narrative require ("Games Telling Stories" 48). He describes the gamer as one who "inhabits a twilight zone where he/she is both an empirical subject outside the game *and* undertakes a role inside the game", thus implicating the player in the story itself. Relying too much on previous narrative theories, Juul argues, "will make us forget what makes games games: Such as rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the player's actions into the game world, the way the game defines the possible actions of the player".

Using this approach, critics can be aware of the specific characteristics that make up the video game's specific brand of narrative interactivity. Perhaps the most critical of these characteristics is the concept of immersion, defined as the "experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place" or "digital swimming" (Murray 98-99). This aspect has become particularly considerable as games have transformed from the 2D to the 3D perspective, and are increasingly more and more realistic. Murray argues that, "[t]he more persuasive the sensory representation of the digital space, the more we feel that we are present in the virtual world and the wider range of actions we will seek to perform there" (125). While immersed in the text, "the player interacts with its limits, borders, and environment" (Hess 344).

It is at this point that Huizinga's observations on the significance of play become relevant. He asserts that play is, "quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly[…] It proceeds within its own proper

boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner" (13). Despite that Huizinga is writing about play over 60 years ago, long before the invention of computer games, his observations are perhaps even more relevant to video game immersion than chess or hide-and-seek. Though gamers enter into the activity with the knowledge that events within game space are "not real", the player becomes deeply immersed within the story and, events, and passing time of the game, its own form of reality.

It should also be noted that even though scholars have argued that video game narrative is linear and organized in a sequential order, many also contend that it is uniquely defined by player interactivity. Cassidy labels games as "hypertextual" because of the player's stake in elements of the narrative, and compares them to the popular *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels of the 1980s and 90s (294). Referring specifically to *Medal of Honor: Rising Sun*, Hess observes that games encourage players to play an active role in the construction of the narrative, but within limits:

> The environment is constrained by impassable borders; the limits of the game force the player to continue on a predetermined narrative path… Interestingly, however, the game does not set time limits on the play in any particular section; this allows for thorough exploration of the digital environment, as does the physical control given to the gamers, which allows them a 360-degree view. (352)

Hess is commenting here on a specific artifact, but these features are also present in many other mainstream games, especially within the last decade. Open-world exploration has become a desired and often required feature of many games, as role-playing games and first person shooter games have become increasingly popular. Atkins coins the term 'game fictions' to describe game narratives that rely heavily on play for development, and argues that that gamers are

simultaneously players, readers, and authors (11). Cassidy explains that interactivity gives the player the illusion of being "player-author", "player-programmer", and the narrator of his own adventure. Despite this illusion, however, the game developer is ultimately author/narrator, as "the *range* of possibilities remains in the hands of the original author" (296).

Related to the previous point, the added emotional investment of the player-character must be emphasized, as the player *becomes* the protagonist through the video game medium. Rather than simply "controlling" the character, it is perhaps more appropriate to see the "player-character relationship as one of vehicular embodiment" (Newman 2). Dubbelman argues that this is particularly true for games that utilize the first-perspective, as then the NPCs (non-playable characters) speak directly to the player and look directly into the player's eyes (166). Gee labels player identification as a "tripartite play of identities", which consists of the player's own identity, the avatar that the player is controlling, and the relationship between the two, which can be described as the individual's projection of his/her identity onto the virtual character that he/she is controlling (58). Juul remarks on how the player experiences time differently in video game narratives than in other forms of narrative:

> It is clear that the events represented cannot be *past* or *prior*, since we as players can influence them[…] In this way, the game constructs the story time as *synchronous* with narrative time and reading/viewing time: the story time is *now*. Now, not just in the sense that the viewer witnesses events now, but in the sense that the events are *happening* now, and that what comes next is not yet determined. (*Half-Real* 159)

Thus, the events of the narrative are happening *to the player*, arguably giving the player more emotional investment in the outcome. Even in games such as *Tetris* (1986), which seemingly lack a "character," a character is indeed always present in the form of the player.

This thesis also considers Bogost's concept of unit operations in relation to the study of video games. Bogost defines unit operations as "modes of meaning-making that privilege discreet, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems" (3). Unit operations make up a larger unit system that is a genre, narrative, game, program, and beyond. The concept of unit operations can be utilized across disciplines, but is particularly useful for the study of games because it considers units of meaning within both narrative and the programmed rules of the game. Unit systems "derive meaning from the interrelations of their components" (4), or the specific units, tropes, archetypes, representations, etc. that make up a narrative or rule-based system.

Moreover, this thesis attends to how specific units -- such as the representation of the female damsel, how she serves the motivations of the male character, how the damsel is utilized as a game reward, and player immersion in the game -- interact to constitute the larger narrative system and video game system. Unit operations can also be used to dispute the claim that games are not narratives, as linear narratives found in television and literature are merely more biased that emergent narratives often found in games. In both cases, there are encoded unit operations -- rules that cannot be broken, characters than cannot be altered or removed, goals that must be met to win the game -- that ultimately lead the player to experience a coherent narrative.

These various elements outlined by previous scholars illuminate games as executing a very distinct form of narrative, and these elements are considered when analyzing the damsel in distress narrative within the artifacts I have chosen. In my analysis, I immerse myself within the game narrative, gather common narrative elements in each game that relate to the damsel in distress narrative, and discuss the implication of those narratives for male empowerment and female disempowerment. Furthermore, I consider particular *game* mechanics that work to

support the narrative, and the ways in which the challenge/reward system of games relies on damselling within these titles.

CHAPTER 4

THE "DAMSEL" IN *MARIO* AND *ZELDA*

Although *The Legend of Zelda* series and the *Super Mario Bros.* series differ in genre and setting, examination of these artifacts reveal similar notions of masculinity, femininity, and the relationship between the two. Both employ the "damsel in distress" narrative in similar ways with similar outcomes, both utilizing the damsel as a reward system and prompting game play with the disempowerment of the main female character. Although both operate from a third-person perspective rather than a first-person perspective, in both cases the player controls the protagonist, and thus an intimate player-protagonist relationship is established and masculine identity becomes intertwined with heroism, athleticism, and saving the damsel in distress.

In *Half-Real*, Juul prefers the term "fiction" over "narrative" when analyzing story-elements of video games, arguing that the emphasis on "sequence of events" in narrative criticism does not apply to most games, and compares the storytelling in games to that of toys and merchandising, not film or literature (16, 158). As I have argued previously in this thesis, I disagree with this assertion, especially as games have evolved to become highly complex in recent years. Unlike toys or merchandising which have fictional elements, games most often have identifiable beginnings, middles, and ends to their story arcs. How active these elements are within the game depends on the title and genre, but they are nevertheless present within most video games.

The damsel in distress narrative discussed here is more often referred to as a trope than a

narrative, but in each case the narrative does follow a specific identifiable structure. In the beginning, the male hero is with or has possession of his female love or family member, but then she is kidnapped, disempowered, or placed in immediate danger in order to set the story in motion. Her capture is the motivation that sets the male protagonist on his epic journey that becomes the primary meat of the game, and in the end, the game is won and the protagonist rewarded when she is saved. There are some variations to the narrative, including the “disposable woman” which occurs when a female character is introduced briefly for the *sole purpose* of being kidnapped or disempowered to ignite passion in the male protagonist ("Disposable Woman"). The narrative can also come in the form of “the mercy killing” when the male protagonist kills his damsel because it is “for her own good” or to save her from a “fate worse than death” ("Mercy Kill"). The narrative also appears in the form of “the woman in the refrigerator” -- a phrase coined by Gail Simone to illustrate that female superheroes are disproportionately likely to be brutalized in comic books -- when the male protagonist completes his journey to find that his damsel has been dead all along ("Stuffed Into the Fridge"). However, each of these variations can be classified under the “damsel in distress” because the primary motivator for the male protagonist is the imprisonment or disposal of a female loved one. Although the "mercy killing" and "woman in the refrigerator" tropes are not employed in the two series considered here, the "disposable woman" trope is found within this examination, and the former two found in many other titles.

Arguably, the most iconic “damsel in distress” in the gaming industry is Princess Peach, the pink-clad princess and love interest of the famous plumber-hero, Mario. Her “damseling” is such a prevalent part of her character that even those who have rarely played video games know the general storyline: in each game, Mario has been invited to Peach's castle, or is interacting

with Peach in some way when he is robbed of the Princess by the giant turtle-monster Bowser. Mario then embarks on a challenging quest through strange worlds and perilous castles to save her. Princess Peach appears in 14 of the Mario Brothers platformer-style games created since 1988, and she is kidnapped in 13 of them. The single game in which she was not kidnapped, *Super Mario Bros. 2*, also serves as the only game in which Peach is a playable character. However, the game was simply a North American rewrite of the Japanese game *DokiDoki Panic* in which Peach was added as an afterthought because the game required four playable characters (Carpenter 96). Newer *Super Mario Bros.* platformer games that include four playable characters, such as those released on the Wii and Wii U, have opted to include an additional Toad character and leave Peach to her "damselled", non-playable status.

Princess Peach embodies the "disposable woman" version of the damsel in distress narrative detailed earlier, as she rarely receives more character development beyond her status as a princess and her imminent kidnapping. In many of the games, such as *Super Mario Bros.* (1985) and *Super Mario World* (1990), "Help me!" or "Help me, Mario!" is Peach's only line throughout the game. Occasionally, in other games, she will have brief lines for herself setting up the scene before she is inevitably kidnapped or imprisoned by Bowser. At times there are variations in the ways in which Peach is taken: in *Super Mario 64* (1996) she is trapped by Bowser in her own castle, in *Super Mario Sunshine* (2002) she his kidnapped in the streets by Bowser's lackey Shadow Mario, and in *Super Mario Galaxy* (2007) her entire castle is unearthed and lifted into outer space. In some reincarnations, such as *Super Mario World* (1990), there is no interaction with Peach at all, merely a beginning message that "Princess Toadstool is missing again!" (Princess Toadstool being another name for Princess Peach). Within each of these titles, Peach becomes the figurative ball that Mario and Bowser pass back and forth to drive game play,

and Mario's reward for defeating Bowser at the end.

Princess Zelda, from the enormously popular *The Legend of Zelda* series, is another widely-recognized "damsel in distress" character in the video game industry, and serves as the motivation for the protagonist, Link, to embark on his adventures. Over the span of more than a dozen games, released over a quarter century, all of the incarnations of Princess Zelda have been kidnapped, cursed, possessed, turned to stone or otherwise disempowered at some point. She does not star in any of her own games, despite her name being in the game titles. At no point does she really become a playable character, except for a few isolated levels in a few of the games. Princess Zelda does illustrate how not all "damsels in distress" narratives create one-dimensional female characters, as she is not completely defined by her role as perpetual kidnapee of the villain Ganondorf. She is also occasionally an active participant by giving assistance to Link's quest in the form of opening doors, providing helpful items, and giving hints.

The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time (1998) is a particularly interesting example of her deviation from the traditional "damsel in distress", as she evades capture for the first three quarters of the game while under disguise as the androgynous sidekick Sheik. However, as soon as she reveals herself as Princess Zelda and transforms back into her more traditionally feminine form, she is kidnapped within three minutes. By the end, Link releases her from her crystal prison and is rewarded with her love. This event then defines the remainder of Link's quest, and he successfully rescues her at the end of the narrative. Similarly, in *The Legend of Zelda: The WindWaker* (2003), Zelda is presented at the beginning in the form of Tetra, a "tomboyish" girl with olive skin and donned in pirate garb. However, once she is revealed as Princess Zelda, her skin is lightened, her hair lengthened, and she wears a pink dress. Zelda is captured by Ganondorf soon after, and Link goes through a series of trials to save her.

If games are rule-based systems propelled by a series of goals and conflicts as Juul suggests (31), then this gives the female damsel the role of being simultaneously important yet unimportant within game play. In both of these games, the conflict that initiates the adventure is the kidnapping or endangerment of the female love interest; without her, the story does not exist, and the protagonist has little reason to leave the comfort of his home. The ultimate goal is to win back the damsel in a final boss battle[7] that is usually difficult and requires a lot of skill and mastery of the game. By "winning" the game, or completing all of the levels and reaching the end, the player not only frees the princess but also wins her love or affection. However, other than a few interactions with Princess Zelda in these examples, the female character is mostly invisible, and does not play a part in the actual events of the game. Peach, in particular, could be replaced with a cherished pet or family heirloom, and the events of the game would largely remain the same. However, a female love interest is chosen, and masculinity in these games becomes tied with the protection and saving of women. The damsel in distress narrative is more comfortable and recognizable, especially in a male-dominated industry, as it perpetuates the assumption that men want to protect women, and women want to be protected.

The female damsel is constructed in similar ways in both of these examples. Princess Peach and Princess Zelda are both traditionally feminine in their audiovisual presentation. They are actually quite similar in their actual appearance, as they are both young white women with long blonde hair and long pink dresses. In commenting on the frequent use of blonde hair on female damsels in fairytales, Warner says "[t]he legacy of the heroine is passed on in the coin of blonde hair; to generations of listeners and readers, it has naturally enciphered female beauty - inner as well as outer" (366). This observation can be applied to these two games as well, as

[7] "Bosses" in video games are generally tough and difficult enemies that players fight, usually in order to progress to the next level or beat the game.

Peach's and Zelda's long blonde hair and feminine dress signify them as kind, vulnerable princesses. Sheik's hair and feminine form are covered from player view while she is an active player in world conflicts. However, once her blonde hair and beauty are exposed and the player knows her as Zelda, she is kidnapped and returned to her innocent, inactive role. Tetra's skin is lightened once she is revealed as Zelda, for at that point her role changes from tough pirate friend to love interest to be protected and saved, an indicator of her purity, innocence, and femininity.

Because their role is essentially that of the object being acted upon by the male protagonist and male antagonist, their characters are defined by that role, and -- with the exception a few scenes and scenarios involving Princess Zelda -- there is not much complexity to their personalities. As mentioned, Peach rarely has much to say beyond cries for help, and both Peach and Zelda exude hyperfeminine characteristics of inner and outer perfection and beauty. Their audiovisual representation clues to an assumed white male audience, as their feminine beauty, light hair and skin, and demure personalities welcome a heterosexual white male gaze.

The male protagonists Mario and Link, on the other hand, all have personalities that are quite different from one another. Mario is a spunky, upbeat Italian plumber with blue overalls and a large, iconic moustache. Link is a young elf-like boy who grows up in various locations and embarks on various adventures from game to game. Very few elements of his story are constant in each installment, other than how he must frequently save Princess Zelda. Unlike Peach and Zelda, Mario and Link are very unlike each other, as the portrayal of masculinity in games gives male players more room for difference and development than femininity. Interestingly, Mario and Link say even less than the female damsels in the game, beyond the occasional "It's me, Mario!" from Mario and yells from Link in the heat of battle. Arguably, this fact leaves the players more connected with the protagonists than it would if they had more

speaking parts, as frequent speaking parts may lead players to view the protagonists as more separate than themselves. Although a short, chubby plumber and a pointy-eared child (as Link is most often in child-form in *The Legend of Zelda* series) may not seemingly embody stereotypical masculinity, they are both skilled, athletic, physically strong and powerful, protective of women, and have control (through the player) over the world around them and the conflicts they engage in. These games are no exception to Burrill's characterization of games as playgrounds for the performance of masculine identity (3), as the completion of these games and the saving of the damsel require mastery of game mechanics and competency with technology, a major characteristic of hegemonic technomasculinity in game culture.

Butler views gender as performative discourse that involves the "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal in time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (*Gender Trouble* 33). With games, there are no actual physical bodies beyond the player, only representations of bodies. Therefore, those representations are often exaggerated in terms of gender, as opposed to a live-action film or television show, in order to clearly mark a character as male or female. Visibly, Mario's large moustache and Link's clothing and weapons clearly mark them as male, whereas Peach and Zelda's long blonde hair and bright pink clothing clearly mark them as female. Butler discusses exclamation of "It's a girl!" when a child is born as a repeated "forcible citation of a norm" rather than a pre-existing reality. Performative norms depend on repetition or their authority is lost and its constructedness is exposed (*Bodies* 226, 237). Beyond the gendered signifiers I have already mentioned, this can be compared to Peach's (and other damsels') frequent cries for help. In every *Super Mario* platformer, Peach yells "Help me, Mario!" at some point. This is a performance of the feminine, a rearticulation again and again that Peach is female, and thus in need of saving

from the male Mario. If Peach were to instead refrain from invoking Mario and instead fight Bowser herself, this would disrupt the player's preconceived notions of Peach's role as the female character, and expose the absurdity of her frequent kidnappings.

In both of these cases, the narrative unit operations are essentially boy has girl, boy loses girl, boy saves girl then girl loves boy. Considering gaming as a hypermasculine culture as I established in Chapter 2, investigating the rhetorical power of this popular narrative can aid in understanding the ideologies of the culture in which this narrative is reproduced and consumed (Sillars & Gronbeck 212; Fisher "Narrative Paradigm" 348). Women gamers are pushed to the margins and gaming culture, and this phenomenon is reflected within the games themselves. The damsels in these two series are often invisible, and when they are visible, they aid the male protagonist in what is ultimately *his* adventure. By being beautiful, kind, and demure, the damsels Peach and Zelda embody what it means to be a "good woman", and by being heroic, athletic and skilled, Mario and Link embody what it means to be a "good man". In this narrative we see the assumptions that men are capable and women incapable, as well as that women do not play games, and that men do not want to play as women. "Objectification" of women is often spoken of in terms of sexual objectification, but in these games women are objectified in terms of being a reward or trophy. They are the figurative ball that is passed back and forth between protagonist and antagonist, rarely acting and frequently acted upon. Women are accessories within the game narrative, not active participants.

If narrative is the way in which we "establish coherence for ourselves" as Klapproth argues (3), then perhaps the communication of what is perceived as coherent is how we can explain the roles of male and female characters within these games. Developer Rockstar was criticized in 2013 after releasing *Grand Theft Auto V*, a game that featured three playable male

protagonists that the player could rotate between. When asked why they did not make at least one of the protagonists female, as well as none of their *Grand Theft Auto* protagonists in the past, they replied that "the concept of being masculine was so key to this story," (M. Williams), implying that a female protagonist in the *GTA* universe would be unbelievable. Rockstar is not the only developer that has echoed this sentiment. Several game developers have excused their lack of female protagonists by asserting that a woman lead would be "unbelievable" or "too difficult to write" within the games they created (M. Starr). Thus, the narrative coherence in many games, including the two examples provided here, of why a player would leave comfort and place themselves in danger comes in the form of a male character trying to save the woman he loves. A woman saving her male love or her female love does not occur as often in games because it does not fit comfortably within our cultural notions of what women do and what men do to/for women. Peach has, in fact, starred in her own game entitled *Super Princess Peach* (2006) for the Nintendo DS. In the game, all three of the regular male heroes -- Mario, Luigi, and Toad -- are captured by Bowser, and the townspeople are surprised to see Peach take up Mario's regular mantle to save them instead. However, Peach's primary power is her emotions, which she uses to defeat her enemies; a more "coherent" manner for women to fight in the Mario universe.

There are some mainstream game series that defy this norm and illustrate that games with a central and empowered female character *do* sell, such as the enormously popular *Metroid* series in which the "big reveal" and the end of the first game is that the protagonist is female. However, the use of the damsel in distress trope continues to be frequent in order to garner attention from an assumed male audience. Ultimately, this repeated narrative reinforces age-old stereotypes of the powerful male and the disempowered female. It is important to note is that it is too simple to equate the damsels in these narratives with "weak". Instead, male (and player) empowerment

within the narrative depends upon female disempowerment. The damsel is objectified in order to subjectify the male character and give him an object to act upon and be rewarded with.

CHAPTER 5

CHALLENGES TO THE NARRATIVE

The "damsel in distress" narrative as I have described it here remains commonplace, with the (perhaps indirect) effect of producing, circulating, and perpetuating ideological "truths" about the relationships between men and women and their respective roles within heroic narratives. This chapter includes two titles that flip or transform the traditional narrative, this disrupting common hierarchies of male and female characters, and providing a space in which players can play and experience female empowerment. They complicate representations of femininity and masculinity found within the artifacts in Chapter 4, and offer women characters with more complex development within their storylines.

Finding wide-released games that flip the "damsel in distress" narrative and place the female character as the central protagonist is a difficult task. Most appropriations of this type exist in the form of fan-created "ROM hacks," in which the players themselves re-code the game to swap the male hero and the female damsel. Despite the widespread circulation of this narrative, however, challenges to the "damsel in distress" model do exist in some video games, appearing in the forms of altered portions of the narrative or complete role-reversals of the male and female characters. The narrative is appropriated and altered in these cases, serving as a "counterhegemonic act" -- as outlined by Shugart -- for the marginalized feminine identity. These are new narratives that appropriate the old ones and retell them in a way that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, challenge hegemonic norms (210). Two highly-regarded

examples of video games that alter components of the narrative include *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990) -- as well as its sequel *The Curse of Monkey Island* (1997) -- and *The Last of Us* (2013). Both of these titles alter the damsel in distress narrative in different ways, thus empowering the main female character.

The Curse of Monkey Island is a humorous point-and-click adventure game by LucasArts that relies heavily on story and riddles rather than fighting or jumping puzzles. In some ways, the game is much like a visual novel, as gameplay involves engaging in different dialogues, picking up items and combining items in order to progress through the story. In the game, male protagonist Guybrush Threepwood meets Governor Elaine Marley of Melee Island in his quest to become a pirate. He's an awkward, unskilled man who attempts various tasks but often blunders. Guybrush and Elaine engage in flirtatious banter, but while he is away Elaine is ambushed and kidnapped by LeChuck, a ghost pirate who is obsessed with Elaine and wants to marry her. Guybrush embarks on a quest to save Elaine, only to thwart Elaine's own clever escape attempt. It is made clear to the player that Elaine would have escaped on her own had Guybrush not intervened. The two then defeat the ghost pirate together and share a romantic moment.

In the sequel, *The Curse of Monkey Island*, the game opens with Elaine defending against a pirate ship attack by LeChuck, with him again trying to force her to marry him. After a banter satirizing typical pick-up lines, Guybrush floats into the battle on a small boat and Elaine saves him from an attack by LeChuck. Guybrush destroys LeChuck's ship and finds a large diamond ring in his treasure cache. Back on shore, Guybrush proposes to Elaine with the ring and she accepts, only to be turned into a golden statue by a curse on the ring. Guybrush leaves Elaine on the beach to consult a voodoo priestess on lifting the curse, and Elaine's statue form is stolen by pirates due to Guybrush's negligence. He then leaves on an adventure to retrieve her body and

return her to normal, loses her statue again after he finds it, and eventually Elaine and Guybrush defeat LeChuck together.

Although the male protagonist is still at the center of the *Monkey Island* games, the traditional damsel in distress narrative is challenged in several ways. The first title satirizes the narrative by having the male protagonist thwart the damsel's own attempts at escape, thus trivializing his role in her rescue and giving the damsel agency and empowerment. The game is clearly referencing previous damsel in distress stories by Guybrush's proclamation that he will valiantly save Elaine, then presents the idea that Elaine cannot save herself as absurd. In the beginning of the latter title, it is not the male protagonist and the male antagonist fighting over the female damsel, but it is Elaine herself physically engaged in battle with LeChuck over the issue. Elaine is then only kidnapped due to Guybrush's negligence, not by the attempts of LeChuck. Although Guybrush and Elaine do fall in love at the end of the titles, it is not due to his saving her, but simply his attempts to do so that capture Elaine's affection. The games give a new representation of masculinity, as Guybrush is neither strong nor skilled, but instead is incompetent, lanky, and fails frequently despite his passion to save Elaine. Guybrush muddles the concept of male heroism in the games, as his role as the protagonist and center of the game make him the hero, and yet his blunders make him an antihero, as well as a problem for Elaine rather than a solution. Elaine's character complicates the portrayal of femininity presented by many games as well, as she is not demure or in need of rescuing but instead assertive and cunning. The character of Elaine complicates the reward system of the damsel in distress narrative in games, as the player is awarded Elaine's love at the end of the narrative, but for being a terrible pirate rather than a skilled one. Elaine is objectified in the second game in that she is

transformed into a literal object, a move that perhaps satirizes the common ways in which women are disempowered in previous games and stories.

The Last of Us confounds the damsel in distress narrative as well, although the new narrative comes in a more literal than satirical form as it does in the *Monkey Island* titles. In *The Last of Us*, there is an outbreak of the mutant Cordyceps fungus that turns human hosts into cannibalistic monsters (referred to as "the infected", and similar to zombies in previous fictional works). The male protagonist, Joel, has a daughter (Sarah) who is killed by military personnel in the initial hysteria. The game fast-forwards twenty years later, and Joel is living in a quarantined compound. Joel and his smuggling partner Tess are tasked with sneaking a young girl Ellie -- who is immune to the virus -- out of the compound and to a fringe group called the Fireflies in an attempt to develop a vaccine. Through many trials and character deaths, Joel reaches the Firefly hideout, only to murder all in the compound upon discovering they plan to kill Ellie to retrieve the samples they need for the vaccine. Joel's affection for Ellie is tied to the loss of his daughter, and he lies to Ellie in the end, telling her the Fireflies no longer needed her assistance.

The narrative in this game is a long and complicated one -- too lengthy to detail in full -- but there are a few notable ways in which it challenges the damsel in distress narrative. Ellie is a smart, vulgar and capable girl, and commits several acts of violence throughout the game in a matter of necessity. She insists on being helpful, and becomes angry with Joel when he is overly protective of her. In the beginning of the narrative, Joel does not allow Ellie to use guns or engage in fights. However, over time Joel sees Ellie less as an object to be managed and more as a person to be valued, and he gives Ellie a gun with which she saves Joel on several occasions. Although Joel is the playable character for much of the game, Ellie is the playable character for a large portion of the second half when Joel is impaled by rebar and Ellie must fend for herself

while he is recovering. During the portion in which Ellie is the playable character, she is captured by a group of men with cannibalistic tendencies and with a leader who has clear intentions to rape Ellie. Ellie fights her way out of the compound and kills the leader in self-defense, after which Joel awakes and arrives to retrieve her. Ellie's fighting style is different than Joel's in a way that emphasizes the limitations of a child as compared to playing as an adult. Face-to-face combat is more difficult playing as Ellie, but she is still effective with guns and bows, and sneaks up behind adult men in order to initiate knife attacks. The narrative concludes with Joel saving Ellie from the people he was attempting to bring her to all along (as it is revealed that Ellie must die in order to retrieve the sample needed for a vaccine), although it is made clear that Ellie would have agreed to die for a vaccine had she been given a choice. That choice is taken from her by Joel, and she is dragged back to the terrible world that she was trying to save.

It is also important to note that there is an expansion to the game, entitled *Left Behind*, in which Ellie is the sole playable character. The expansion covers in detail both events before the main game in which Ellie discovers she is immune to the virus as well as the events directly after Joel is impaled and Ellie searches for medical supplies in an attempt to save his life. The player discovers that Ellie was in love with another young girl before the girl was killed by the infected, and also learns the many fights Ellie had to engage in to save Joel after his injury.

There are numerous ways in which this game flips and complicates the damsel in distress narrative. Although Joel's visual representation is highly masculine as he is a large, strong and rugged man, he finds himself just as vulnerable as Ellie in many situations. The two characters share the role of protagonist and player-character, and in both the main game and the expansion Joel is in distress and must rely on Ellie to save him. In the end, Joel "saves" Ellie from the

Fireflies, but at the cost of the entire human race. Joel complicates typical notions of heroism, as by the end he does not seem heroic, but instead dishonest, selfish and weak. Ellie emerges as the hero in the end, as it is made clear she would have given her life to save others if Joel had not kept her from making the choice. Similar to Guybrush, Joel is the problem for the female character, not the solution.

In her investigation of retellings of traditional narratives, Shugart is concerned with whether or not the new narratives challenge previous authority or hegemony, or if they simply "stand along the old ones" (80). In the case of the damsel in distress narrative, in order to challenge hegemonic masculinity and serve as a counterhegemonic act, it is necessary for the new narrative to grant agency and empowerment to the damsel, to disempower the male character, or to expose the hegemonic structures within the traditional narrative. Both of these examples do this, whether intentionally or unintentionally. These games serve as examples in which "the original meaning [of the narrative], which may pose a threat to the appropriator, is deconstructed, distorted, or destroyed so that the perceived threat is undermined and the agenda of the appropriator is advanced instead" (211). *Monkey Island* takes the original narrative and satirizes it, making the usual helplessness of the damsel seem absurd and highlighting the performativity of masculinity (as Guybrush attempts to "perform" masculine tasks but fails at most of them). Joel is disempowered in part of the main game and within the entirety of the expansion, and Ellie is empowered in the most significant way a character can be given power within a video game: by becoming the playable character, and thus an extension of the player. *The Last of Us* trades empowerment back and forth between the male and female character, making survival the task of both rather than the effort of one.

Monkey Island complicates previous romantic relationships between the male hero and female protagonist, as Guybrush is loved for being caring and not for being heroic. In an even more significant manner, *The Last of Us* denies an assumed heterosexual male gaze altogether, as the game provides a playable character that female players can identify with and makes the only unfolding romantic relationship in the game to be between two young girls. Both complicate the reward system as well, as Guybrush and Elaine work together to defeat their foe, and players of *The Last of Us* are not rewarded at all but instead left with a morally complicated conclusion. Both titles directly challenge or reread hegemonic masculinity that normally characterizes games, and thus provides female characters with agency that women gamers can enjoy.

It is relevant to note the resistance developer Naughtydog received by its publisher over their portrayal of Ellie and Joel on the game's cover and advertising. The cover art of the game reflects Ellie's important role in the story as well as Naughtydog's conceptualization of her as a character. The art places Ellie at the forefront, carrying her gear and gun over her shoulder, with Joel less visible in the background. One might argue that young girls engaging in violence is not a desirable element, but because in games "[n]o characters, male or female, are portrayed as central to a game by stopping violence, or offering peaceful solutions" then "violence connotes power" (Burgess et al. 427) and giving that power to Ellie is a progressive move by Naughtydog. Ellie looks at the viewer with a concerned but defiant stare, and Joel seems to be watching Ellie in a nurturing manner. Joel is pushed to the background of the cover, but his physical appearance and weapon-wielding is still reflective of a masculine ideal. However, it can be argued that the characters both disrupt the heterosexual male gaze, as Joel is not necessarily in control, and Ellie is an "actor" as much as Joel is, rather than an "object" to be saved or protected. This reflects their roles in the game, as Ellie is a courageous child forced to become an adult in a deadly

world, and Joel is a disturbed but watchful partner in her journey who becomes somewhat of a father figure.

Creative director Neil Druckman and voice actress Ashley Johnson (who plays Ellie) claimed that while designing the game's box art, the developer was repeatedly put under pressure to remove Ellie from the box art, or push her to the background and bring Joel to the front of the cover (Cavalli). In an interview, Johnson remarked that,

> I feel like they don't put women on the covers because they're afraid that it won't sell… It's all gamers really know -- and I don't want to be sexist by any means -- but I get the feeling, generally, that they think games won't sell as well with a woman on the cover, compared to some badass dude on the front. (Cavalli)

In the same interview, Druckman echoed Johnson's remarks, and stated that Naughtydog refused to change the cover art because they felt their art reflected the character's relationship and personalities accurately. In a related instance, Naughtydog was asked by the gaming magazine *Gamereactor* to send artwork for a cover story on *The Last of Us*. The art that Naughtydog sent the magazine featured Joel and Ellie standing side-by-side, but Ellie was removed from the final published issue of the magazine, leaving Joel standing by himself with gun-in-hand (Sterling).

Although the creators created a game that did not necessarily target an assumed male audience, it is made clear that the publishers assumed that those who buy and play games are male. This communicates a fear that games that include female characters will not sell, and a narrative of female empowerment is not coherent to game consumers. This is not the case, however, as Naughtydog had successfully sold over 6 million copies of *The Last of Us* as of March 2014 (Karmali). As I mentioned in Chapter 2, although a large percentage of modern gamers identify as female, the conflict over the *The Last of Us* cover art is symptomatic of a

male-dominated gaming industry, and the persistence of gaming as a male-centric space. Despite the lack of "damselling" of Ellie in the game narrative, the visual "damselling" of Ellie on the cover art is believed to attract more buyers.

Overall, games such as these that provide an alternate narrative to the norm is reflective of an changing gamer demographic. Because the culture itself is united by the artifacts it consumes, female empowerment in games can lead to the acceptance of women as gamers, as well as other non-white, non-male, non-straight identities. These games serve as postmodern and counterhegemonic retellings of the narrative, and work to shift the balance of power within the titles and the culture as a whole.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Games as Ideological Texts

Although I have acknowledged the importance of ludologic analysis in this study as "games are a combination of rules and fiction" (Juul, "Half-Real" 197), narrative and textual criticism of games rightfully prioritize games as *cultural artifacts* that reflect ideologies of those who make and consume them. Referring in particular to his interest in the city-building game *SimCity*, Paul Starr asks the questions: "What assumptions were buried in the underlying models? What was their 'hidden curriculum'?" (19) Bogost contends that "games can be noteworthy rhetorical devices" as the intimate player-protagonist relationship leads players to implicate themselves -- albeit safely -- within the fictional world with which they are interacting (119)[8].

Huizinga may characterize games as a "magic circle" that steps outside of "ordinary life," but he is also clearly interested in the effect of the game once the game is abandoned: "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world and rejecting the usual norms, retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game" (10). Games are a "magic circle" in that they are a relatively safe space in which players can explore options: in *Payday 2* (2013), a player can rob

[8] Here, Bogost is discussing the flash game *September 12* that has clear political commentary against George W. Bush's "war on terror". However, this observation can be applied to the less politically-motivated games included in this thesis, as well as many others, for the player-protagonist relationship within these games invites players to participate and implicate themselves repeatedly in the "woman as object," "male as subject hero" representations time and time again within these titles.

banks without risking jail time herself, in *Call of Duty* (2003) she can engage in war without risking her own life, and in *Crusader Kings II* (2012) she can build and destroy monarchies without leaving the comfort of her home. However, as Bogost notes, "it is naive to think that games are safe havens of representation" (136). The "magic circle" is not a space completely separate from reality. Instead, "games provide a two-way street through which players and their ideas can enter and exit the game, taking and leaving their residue in both directions" (Bogost 135). Huizinga's characterization of the "magic circle" as being outside "ordinary life" and clearly "not serious" is echoed by the most common response to feminist criticism; that it is "just a game." But the violent reactions to preserve masculine hegemony seem to prove the opposite, especially when life, safety, and property is threatened in the name of play.

In the wake of #GamerGate and various other instances of toxic misogyny and homophobia in gamer culture, textual analysis of the cultural artifacts that bind the culture together is vital. As discussed in Chapter 2, gaming as a medium has been a highly white male-oriented and heteronormative space since its beginning. Dovey and Kennedy posit that gender itself is a "powerful structuring force upon the distinctiveness of computer game culture" (36), and Rakow emphasizes this point by arguing that "technology is a site where social practices are embedded and express and extend the construction of two asymmetrical genders" (57). As mentioned in Chapter 2, Salter and Blodgett characterize game culture as one that is "hypermasculine" in character, and describe "hypermasculine" spaces as those that rely upon the exaggeration of masculine cultural stereotypes and subcultures (402). The emphasis on masculine participation and the exclusion of feminine and queer participation -- particularly the exclusion of feminism in the development of games and game discussions -- has been the norm within gaming (Kline and Dyer-Witherford 21) and provides framework upon which the repeated

objectification of female bodies in games emerges. Functioning as playgrounds for "digital boyhood" as Burrill suggests (2), developers, writers and publishers continue to create games that prioritize the positive representation of the stereotypical demographic at the expense non-white, non-male, non-straight identities. This thesis has investigated how this phenomenon is then communicated into the common damsel in distress narrative in games, and what the narrative communicates to the critic about common conceptions of masculinity and femininity in gaming space.

The increased participation and criticism of women gamers and game journalists has sparked what Salter and Blodgett refer to as "the new gaming public" (401), or one that uses violence and coercion to preserve hegemonic masculinity within the culture. The tipping point of this new culture has come in the form of harassment in the name of #Gamergate, as well as the highly visual and continual targeting of Sarkeesian. Woodfin describes Gramscian hegemony as "the process whereby one social group achieves and maintains power over subordinate groups primarily through the latter's consent, secured through ideological processes rather than through direct coercion (134). Similarly, Cloud defines hegemony as "the process by which a social order remains stable by generating consent to its parameters through the production and distribution of ideological texts that define social reality for the majority of the people" (117). Both of these descriptions of hegemony emphasize the role of consent rather than direct institutional control within the preservation of power. The primary "ideological texts" in the case of gaming culture are the games themselves, and the central point of criticism for feminist critics of the genre. Consent to the hegemonic structure of game culture comes in the form of players continuing to buy and consume game titles that disempower women and trivialize queer identity, dismiss sexist harassment as the work of trolls that should be ignored, and delegitimize feminist criticism as

being concerned with what is "just a game."

As mentioned, hegemony in game culture operates primarily from a masculine, heteronormative position. Trujillo claims that "masculinity becomes hegemonic when it is widely accepted in a culture and when that acceptance reinforces the dominant gender ideology of the culture" (1). Hegemonic masculinity is traditionally associated with competition, emotional detachment and attraction to/objectification of women (Bird 122). However, when investigating hegemonic masculinity in regard to game culture specifically, this definition of stereotypical masculinity is not enough for true understanding. Wetheral and Edley explain that hegemonic masculinity cannot be understood as a similar strategy across all types of contexts, but specific aspects within specific contexts and cultures should be considered (841). Masculinity has multiple meanings, therefore hegemonic masculinity within game culture will look very different than Southern protestant culture, for example. As mentioned in Chapter 2, when analyzing gaming, a particular brand of "nerd" masculinity must be considered that is associated with technology, technological proficiency, and the exclusion of women. This is reflected in the damsel in distress narrative, as completion and rescue of the female damsel require skill and gaming competency, and female characters serve as accessories and rewards rather than active players. The preservation of a shared rhetorical identity that sees itself *outside* of mainstream culture has led to the violent reaction of those who strive to become a part of it.

Power, according to Foucault, is not the direct coercion and active force of a dominant institution upon its subjects. Instead, power "is everywhere, not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault *History of Sexuality* 93). In this case, power is not an identifiable structure but instead a strategical complex within a particular culture. Phillips discusses Foucault's concept of power as well, describing power as a "set of relations that enable

social interaction and understanding" (331). Developers, programmers, publishers and players do not (usually) outright declare that women shouldn't be allowed to play games or be represented as heroic protagonists. There are no institutions that bar women from playing, no formal censorship of feminist criticisms of games, and no rules that say Princess Peach cannot escape Bowser's grasp herself. However, women are driven from participation and developers discouraged from writing female agency through the rhetoric and negative attitudes targeted toward them from the larger community.

Games and the Female "Body"

Although "physical bodies" are not a common inclusion in online spaces, symbols are still submerged in gendered meaning and are associated with certain types of anatomical bodies. Butler argues that, "the sex/gender distinction and the category of sex itself appear to presuppose a generalization of 'the body' that preexists the acquisition of its sexed significance" (*Bodies that Matter* 372). The "body" in this case is either the female-gendered bodies and how they operate within the game, as well as high voices, and feminine avatars and usernames that are associated with female players themselves. As Butler notes, gendered appearance often comes with an already established set of beliefs on what that means about the individual (Butler "Precarity" 1). In his investigation of women in male-dominated sports, Butterworth concerns his analysis with "the body as the site of cultural inscription, self regulation, and resistance" (259) as well as in the ways the body is "rhetorically disciplined and regulated" (260). Crowley observes that, "our culture seems to do its most rigorous policing around the boundaries of the sexed body as a sign and symbol of social and political processes" (361, qtd in Butterworth).

It is relevant here to note that one of Sarkeesian's public actions that garnered tremendous backlash was her criticism of the common damsel in distress trope in video games. Her gendered

body combined with her outspoken arguments about the roles of women characters in games fueled considerable attempts to rhetorically discipline and silence her speech. In the games themselves -- and particularly within games that utilize the damsel in distress narrative -- male gendered bodies are already inscribed with power, dominance, control, whereas female bodies are already inscribed with weakness, dependency, and subordination. As evidenced through #Gamergate and other harassment campaigns in the gaming community, these attitudes and representations are then projected onto the female players themselves, in the assumption that "girl gamers" have no interest in competition, are incompetent at game play, or are merely engaging with the activity for male attention.

It is not an overreach to use narrative criticism as a way to investigate how ideologies in texts are manifested in its consumers, as Fisher writes that narrative criticism is a useful tool for identifying "how people come to adopt stories that guide behavior" (Fisher "Narrative Paradigm" 348). In fact, it is essential in the study of video games as a medium, as the immersion aspect of gaming implicates the player and involves them emotionally and physically. After exploring how the narrative works to disempower female characters in order to empower male characters, it is perhaps easier to understand why many male gamers view marginalized identities as a threat to the game narratives to which they are accustomed to.

Jensen and de Castell remark that feminine performance occupies a "precarious" space in gaming culture. They rely on Butler's definition of "precarity", which can be summed up as the lived conditions of people who "suffer from failing social and economic networks and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" ("Precarity" 2). They claim that although video game consumers in general are likely sustaining living conditions that do not put them at risk of poor health or starvation, "this industry *has* produced subjects who are not only targets of

violence and aggression, but who are afforded no institutional protection from those harms through the law" (72). Butler explains that precarity is intimately linked with performativity:

> Gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public space; how and in what way the public and private are distinguished, and how that distinction is instrumentalized in the service of sexual politics… [it is] on the basis of this question, who counts as a subject and who does not, that performativity becomes linked with precarity. The performativity of gender has everything to do with who counts as a life, who can be read or understood as a living being, and who lives, or tried to live, on the far side of established modes of intelligibility. ("Precarity" 3-4)

In gaming culture as well as the damsel in distress narrative, it is masculine performance that "counts as a subject", and feminine performance is either objectified or omitted altogether. Gender norms dictate that men control the story and the interaction, and women exist as observers and supporters. When women enter game culture to participate -- and especially if they participate well or offer criticism for the texts or players -- aggression, rejection, and an attempt at domination is the common response. When developers attempt to shift how male and female characters occupy the narratives and artwork of their games, they often experience backlash. Jensen and de Castell observe that the precarity of women gamers and game makers in this space is directly tied to their feminine performance "when they do not conform to being 'good' gamers (liking combat) or 'good' women (conventionally heterosexual and normatively attractive)" (75). If and when they fail to be "good gamers" or "good women", then the sentiment is that they deserve to be ostracized and banished as outsiders.

Butler emphasizes that precarity comes without protection by institutionalized forces ("Performativity" 3). At the present time, the creator of the *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian* video game

(Canadian blogger Ben Spurr) as well as the central location in which many of the violent attacks against female gamers have originated are known (certain internet forums, *Twitter* user names that can be traced to their original sources). One game reviewer took it upon herself to contact the mothers and family members of those who sent her rape threats (Bahadur) -- showing that the identity of many of these harassers can be easily discovered -- and yet no legal action has been taken against any instigators of serious threats or identity theft. Instead, Spurr has more *Twitter* followers than ever before, and sexist, racist, and homophobic hate speech continues to appear and circulate in these spaces. The precarious space that women fill within game culture make them both targets and unworthy of the protection of institutional forces.

Bodies are, as Foucault notes, "invested with relations of power and domination" (*History of Sexuality* 26). The gender binary serves as a structure in which to discipline behavior that does not conform to it, demonstrated by the vehemence in which traditional gender roles in games are protected. Butler suggests that "all social systems are vulnerable at their margins, and that all margins are accordingly considered dangerous" ("Subversive" 375). Whether or not those on the margins are actively agitating the norm, their mere presence is a threat to power and stability. Unlike Sarkeesian, who was actively challenging the masculinist status quo, Quinn was not looking to directly disrupt operations of power beyond simply being a female game maker. However, simply her occupation as a woman within gaming space is seen as a disruption.

Foucault explains that a central mode of control by dominant groups is that of discipline through observation and surveillance (*Discipline and Punish* 189). A primary mode in which this is achieved is through normalizing judgment in order to "qualify, to classify, and to punish" (197). By comparing individuals to an established and agreed upon hegemonic norm, behaviors and performances that fall outside of that norm are met with criticism, ostracization, and often

aggression. The normalizing gaze thus "establishes over individuals a visibility through which one differentiates them and judges them" (197). Examination enhances visibility of those it targets, and disciplines them through that visibility (199).

This phenomenon is illustrated well with the mentioned experience of blogger Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in Games* is primarily a feminist critique of female representation in games, including the common "damsel in distress" trope. In this way, Sarkeesian fell outside of gendered norms of gaming space by challenging masculine hegemony, playing games, and simply by being a female gamer. She was vaulted from being relatively unknown to being discussed across forums, videos, and social media (which then led to discussions of her experiences within mainstream media sources). In a culture that is largely defined by invisibility and anonymity, her name and face became well known, and her personal information was distributed openly. Because of her female identification, sexual exposure and shame became the primary form of rhetoric used against her: she is not a "good" woman, therefore she is a "slut", "whore", and various other sexually-charged terms. As a result, her presence and performance became highly visible.

In his observations on the discussions of sex and sexual rhetoric, Foucault notes the central issue is "to account for the fact it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said" (*History of Sexuality* 11). In other words, when considering discussions of sex, it is important to understand the context and purpose in which it is employed, as well as who is speaking of it and who it is targeted toward. In the gaming culture, verbal sexualized abuse is used by men to banish or regulate female-identified individuals who disrupt gaming space, either by making games, commenting on them,

challenging those who use misogynist speech or simply by playing. It is not generally meant as an expression of sexual attraction but as a form of control and an operation of power of the dominant masculine over the subordinate feminine. It is used to shame, regulate, and punish.

For Foucault, power creates intelligibility and understanding within cultures and societies (e.g. "norms" in which others are judged in comparison). Resistance operates within gaps of this intelligibility and thus "short-circuit the system through which sense is made" (Biesecker 361). #GamerGate supporters view their collective as a resistance against journalistic corruption and the feminist and SJW[9] agenda to take games for themselves. However, because it is a movement made up of primarily male gamers and employed for masculine interests, it is instead an extension of the hegemonic masculinity that makes up game culture. In its coercion of and aggression toward female critics and journalists, the movement attempts to move gaming into a state of domination, characterized by Foucault as:

> [W]hen an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all *reversibility* of movement… we are facing what can be called a *state of domination.* (as qtd. in Phillips 336)

Attempted reversibility of the movement as well as active resistances come from the feminist targets themselves, who discuss games as a valued pastime in need of evaluation, as well as games that present counter-narratives that challenge hegemonic norms. In order for a activity or cultural norm to enter the realm of thought, Foucault argues that, "it is necessary for a certain number of factors to have made it uncertain, to have made it lose its familiarity, or to have provoked a certain number of difficulties around it" (qtd. Phillips 338). Feminist critics, female gamers, and counter-narratives bring gaming culture into the realm of thought by challenging

[9] The acronym "SJW" refers to "social justice warriors" in online spaces. It is a derogatory term generally applied to those who actively attempt to change power dynamics within gaming culture and increase diversity in games themselves, although it has been broadened to include other media.

constructions and representations of identities in gaming, as well as by challenging common conceptions of who is consuming the games themselves. Many gamers seek to silence those who attempt to push gaming culture into the field of thought, while attempting to keep gaming in a state of domination in which men and male-interests are placed firmly at the center of the culture. Arguably, however, the harassment of women in gaming has pushed the culture further *away* from a state of domination as it has sparked conversations within mainstream media and various other spaces within and outside of the culture, encouraging a widespread and ongoing public discussion about misogyny in game space. Discussion and analysis of common narratives in gaming, as well as the retelling and satirizing of common narratives in the case of *Monkey Island* and *The Last of Us,* make normative practices uncertain and create a space in which marginalized identities can participate in the culture.

The Role of the Critic

Critics play a critical role in bringing video game norms into the realm of thought, not only to evaluate the games for academic interests but to also help destabilize the misogyny that has become the norm in game culture. Klump and Hollihan argue that the act of criticism itself is a moral action, as it works to expose and demystify language that is in itself inherently moral (90-91). Critics are thus "cognizant of the power and responsibility that accompanies full critical participation in his/her society" (94). Those who criticize texts, attitudes, or norms of a culture take a political positions on the issues at hand merely in the act of criticizing, and can work to make the familiar unfamiliar to enact change. Foucault claims that "the work of profound transformation can only be done in an atmosphere which is free and always agitated by permanent criticism" ("Interview" 34). By criticizing the texts themselves, as well as continuing to question how power operates and who it benefits within gaming space can help to push the

culture into a state of freedom where all are able to speak, criticize, and participate.

Again, Foucault's concept of thought is important in this discussion, as it is the site in which traditional power structures can be disrupted. Phillips sums up Foucault's writing on "thought" by remarking that it, "consists of stepping back from one's own action, turning it into a problem to be probed and questioned. Inherent in this activity is both a sense of transgressing the limits of normal/habitual action in order to constitute such action as an object and a sense of possibility inherent in such reflection" (337).

The frightening harassment campaigns against women in gaming may be unsettling, but the uncertainty they cause have forced scholars and gamers alike to question the power structures in place that allow it to occur. My personal interest in scholarly examination of games and game culture comes directly from my own negative and violent experiences participating within the space, thus the genre has become uncertain and deserving of examination. In summing up Foucault, Phillips explains:

> "Real" transformation occurs only after the emergence of thought -- the moment of disorientation in which the subject is displaced from itself -- and the reflection on the present as a problem. Only by creating the present as a problem, a problem that cannot easily be resolved, can the work of thought begin and with it freedom and dissension. (339)

Acknowledging the frequent use of the damsel in distress narrative as an issue to be investigated and addressed -- both in their limiting representations of women as well as their possible contribution to misogyny in gaming culture -- provides critics and gamers alike the opportunity to expand and enrich the medium. As mentioned in Chapter 3, if gaming is to become the "art form" that it strives to be, the problem of limited representation and scope must be considered. It

is at this point of reflection and examination that education and increased visibility can work to solve the problem. Consalvo argues that this is an important way that scholars can involve themselves in the issue,

> I believe this is an opportunity to demonstrate the usefulness of research and particularly how it can help to give us a firm foundation on which to stand in order to shed light on the persistence of particular issues, point to historical solutions for overcoming similar difficulties, and thereby push for a more welcoming kind of game culture for everyone -- not simply girls and women players. (2)

By expanding the conversation of gendered representations in video games in an accessible manner, game critics and scholars push for safe spaces in which marginalized gamers can play and create games. Jensen and de Castell agree that encouraging education of players and developers alike is important, and can be achieved through activism. They document groups such as Feminists in Games, which brings feminist post-structural analysis of games and game culture to the public, arguing that public pedagogy is a powerful tool for change. They also report that individuals with privilege, such as white male gamers, have a responsibility to instigate change "from that enfranchised speaking position they have, as others less centrally located cannot do" (80) in order to challenge the masculinist status-quo. It is in this way that "privilege" does not have to be a "bad" word, but instead a tool to become a powerful ally for those in precarious positions.

Another effective approach to ending this phenomenon is simply by dispelling the myth of the default male gamer. Shaw remarks that, "if scholars can prove that members of marginalized groups are gamers, the industry will have to offer content that is more diverse" (29). Despite statistics illustrating otherwise, the primary targeting of white, straight male gamers

within mainstream games persists. As mentioned earlier, the notion that women do not play video games is supported by both their lack of visibility, the assumption that a player is male unless stated otherwise, and the fact that many women choose to disguise themselves as men or androgynous in order to avoid harassment and unwanted attention (Eklund 325). However, if women are to become a welcomed demographic of the culture, they must go through the uncomfortable process of making their performance visible. If more women talk about games, make games, and make their gender known while playing games, the visibility will likely lead to a rupture in the hegemonic norm.

Games as a Tool for Exploring Identity

In his study on video game player identity and demographics, Juul found that more than half of those in Western populations play video games ("Games Telling Stories" 46). Therefore, games are not an obscure past time but a powerful medium that affects the wider culture. With that in mind, I argue that by continuing to resist positive representations of women and other marginalized people in games, we are not only reinforcing hegemonic power structures in place, but also missing out on a powerful tool for the teaching and sharing of empathy, identity and diversity.

In Chapter 3, I outlined how games differ from other audiovisual media in that the interactive element of games gives the player a sense of *immersion*, which Murray defines as the "experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place" or "digital swimming" (98-99). This aspect has become particularly considerable as games have transformed from the 2D to the 3D perspective, and are increasingly more and more realistic. As Murray comments, "[t]he more persuasive the sensory representation of the digital space, the more we feel that we are present in the virtual world and the wider range of actions we will seek to perform there" (125).

The player does not merely view the narrative, but *experiences* it, and plays an active role within it. It can be argued that this adds emotional investment of the player, as the player *becomes* the protagonist through the video game medium. Rather than simply "controlling" the character, it is perhaps more appropriate to see the "player-character relationship as one of vehicular embodiment" (Newman 2).

A major hurdle when it comes to issues of diversity is the ability for individuals to acquire *empathy* toward identities that are not their own, or the ability to imagine life from their positionality. The immersion and interactivity aspect of video games can provide this to players better than any other medium. Gee characterizes video games as a semiotic domain -- one that immerses players in symbols and representations -- and writes that "semiotic domains encourage people new to them to take on and play with new identities" (51). Through the protagonist, which is presented as a vehicular embodiment of themselves, games can present digital worlds and experiences to players that deal with issues of race, class, sexuality, gender, ability, and more. *Gone Home* (2012) is a recent independent title that is an good illustration of this possibility. In the game (which is, in many ways, more of a "visual novel" than a "game," but still relies on intimate, first-person control of the protagonist), a young woman arrives home early from her trip abroad to an empty home, and explores the house in order to discover where her family has gone. Through the environment, the main character discovers that her sister is dealing with issues of her sexual identity as she has fallen in love with another girl, and the heartache she is experiencing from her family's rejection of her girlfriend. In this game, the player does not merely view the family's struggle with issues of sexual identity, but *experiences it* through the eldest daughter. The game offers the opportunity for straight men to feel what it may be like to be a young lesbian woman telling her family of her sexuality for the first time.

Several other indie games have also used their platforms to explore marginalized identities. In *Papers Please* (2013), the player can experience the emotional life of an immigration worker in a politically repressed country. In *This War of Mine* (2014), players get the rare opportunity of playing as civilians caught in the middle of a war-torn country rather than as glorified soldiers. In the flash game *Dys4ia* (2012), players take on the role of a trans woman going through her transition. Following these examples, more mainstream developers can create titles in which privileged individuals can glimpse into the lives of the marginalized, and marginalized people could see their experiences reflected back to them. Even the simple incorporation of main characters that are not white straight able-bodied men in traditional game genres could encourage empathy, diversity, and comfort in interacting with identities that are not one's own. However, when games continue to produce the damsel in distress narrative, players are given the same experience time and time again that centers masculinity, dismisses femininity, and ignores non-white and non-heterosexual identities altogether. Eklund notes that online gaming has the potential to be a powerful queer space with "the possibilities for deconstruction, new performances and use of different bodies" but the "[n]orms of gender, heterosexuality and race become clear in a place where users are interpreted against a male, white, heterosexual model" (326). Instead of the medium becoming the full experience of diversity and identity that it could be, games and gamers continue to ignore those outside of the hegemonic norm. Rather than providing a space in which men could experience femininity in a way that female players are continually forced to experience masculinity, the feminine is stereotyped and regulated, and misogynistic attitudes are reinforced.

Summary

Video games, just as other media, do not exist in a vacuum. They are human-made

cultural artifacts, and the common representations and elements within them reflect the culture in which they are created and consumed. The common "damsel in distress" narrative is reflective of a hypermasculine space that does not perceive women as active or valuable participants. The narrative operates through a white, heterosexual male gaze, created by an overwhelmingly male industry that sees its audience as a reflection of itself. Through my critical analysis of the narrative in two popular titles, I have concluded that masculinity is especially performative within the intimate player-protagonist relationship that gaming provides, and thus the performance of masculine identity in gaming becomes intimately tied with the "damselling" of female characters.

I began this thesis with an account of the current state of gaming, characterized by hostility toward feminine displays and female empowerment. This seemed an appropriate introduction to my analysis of the damsel in distress narrative in games because it illustrates the urgency of investigating masculine and feminine representations reproduced in the artifacts that bind the culture together. Scholars of narrative have previously used narrative criticism in other forms of media to investigate the ideologies and attitudes of the cultures that consume them. I find this endeavor to be even more relevant to gaming, as it can be argued that the immersion and vehicular embodiment aspect in gaming makes the medium highly impressionable upon its players.

The damsel in distress narrative in games works both as a storytelling device and a reward system in gaming. The damsel works to give the protagonist motivation to leave on an adventure to rescue her and gives the player an emotional investment in the game. She also works as a reward given to the player for the completion of the game -- an achievement that usually requires skill with game mechanics -- and a heterosexual male player is assumed in this

process. She is not a subject active within the game, but an object passed back and forth between the male protagonist and antagonist, and ultimately serves as a trophy for the player. The masculine characters tend to be powerful, skilled, athletic and capable, whereas the female characters tend to be weak, demure, innocent, and beautiful, thus reflecting age-old stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. In an age when women are working jobs, governing cities and playing games, this common representation does not reflect the experiences of many players engaged in the narrative.

Huizinga claims that games operate within a "magic circle" that is separate from reality, but the real-world consequences that games have manifested shows this not to be the case. Thus, it is necessary for game makers, players, and critics to bring gaming into the field of thought in order to shift the balance of power and help make gaming more inclusive for those who play them. Games such as *The Secret of Monkey Island* and *The Last of Us* challenge the limiting damsel in distress narrative by empowering female characters and satirizing gendered stereotypes, exposing the narrative of its constructedness.

There are many reasons why the "damselling" of female characters in gaming is a critical and pressing issue. The anonymity of the internet allows individuals to target others with relatively no possibility of consequence, and women (as well as trans and gender queer individuals) are disproportionately targeted. As mentioned, there is very little institutionalized protection for these individuals. Thus, by critiquing the games themselves , encouraging new and inclusive representations of identity, and presenting alternative narratives, the critic can work to change the perception of gaming as a male space and making it safer for many to be active gamers. Games themselves have a unique capability to allow players to experience identities

beyond their own. If games expand their scope to include a wider range of audiences and players, they can become a powerhouse of a medium that rivals that of film and literature.

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