

# Stereotypical Negative Female Gender Roles in Digital Games

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## ABSTRACT:

Digital games represent a new media form dominated by men, either as characters or as players. The perception of digital games as 'Boys' Fun' has been denied by the latest research that points to the fact that women are increasingly accessing this medium. But the analysis of digital games shows that gender roles appear in this media as real-world stereotypes. It means that there is discrimination against women who often have a passive role, whether they appear as victims or as sexual objects. When they are not damsels in distress helplessly awaiting their saviour or playing heroines, then, they are most often portrayed as rebellious beauties with oversized dimensions. The subject of this paper is female representation in digital games. Authors used content analysis of 30 digital games with female protagonists, published at J Station, to examine the female gender roles in such digital games. The aim of the empirical study is to demonstrate that the elements of gender discrimination are present in digital games and that they can lead to the creation of harmful stereotypes against women.

## KEY WORDS:

digital games, discrimination, female, gender roles, stereotype.

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# Introduction

Lately, digital games, which are an integral part of the daily lives of many people, are considered to be the fastest growing mass media in the world.<sup>1</sup> Digital games, with predominantly violent and sexual content, represent one of the most popular forms of contemporary media.<sup>2</sup> It is considered that digital games are primarily intended for men,<sup>3</sup> who appear in a twofold role: as creators of games and as players. Digital games, as a part of contemporary media, often promote incorrect and negative ideas of how a female person should look and behave. Studies indicate that men and women follow the expectations of gender roles within the allegedly liberated cyber space boundaries.<sup>4</sup> With such an approach, digital games are accepting stereotype gender roles, whereby gender stereotype is seen as a set of beliefs about what it means to be a female or a male. "Gender stereotypes include information on physical appearance, attitudes and interests, psychological traits, social relationships and occupation".<sup>5</sup>

The subject of this paper is the representation of female characters based on gender stereotypes in digital games that are supported by the creative game design that portrays women from the position of traditionally negative gender roles. Roles targeted at

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- 1 For more information, see: ROKOŠNÝ, I.: Digital Games as a Cultural Phenomenon: A Brief History and Current State. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2018, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 49-60.
  - 2 MAKUCH, E.: *Best-Selling Games and Systems of July 2021 (US): Skyward Sword HD, PS5, and Switch Top the Charts*. Released on 13<sup>th</sup> August 2021. [online]. [2021-10-15]. Available at: <<https://www.gamespot.com/articles/best-selling-games-and-systems-of-july-2021-us-skyward-sword-hd-ps5-and-switch-top-the-charts/1100-6495131/>>.
  - 3 See also: YEE, N.: Maps of Digital Desires: Exploring the Topography of Gender and Play in Online Games. In KAFAI, Y. et al. (eds.): *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008, p. 83-96.
  - 4 GUADAGNO, R. E. et al.: Even in Virtual Environments Women Shop and Men Build: Gender Differences in Second Life. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2011, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 305.
  - 5 GOLOMBOK, S., FIVUSH, R.: *Gender Development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 17.

women are closely defined and often contain violent scenes in which woman are depicted as victims. Digital games encourage male players to perceive women as hypersexual individuals, so sexualized female characters in digital games portray women with overlapping female attributes (huge breasts, long legs, slim waist ...) and thus degrade female characters to sexual objects. Sexism is a negative stereotype, prejudice or discrimination of one gender that is depicted as inferior to the other.<sup>6</sup> A woman who is portrayed in the digital game narrative as less intelligent and incapable of caring for herself, is perceived as an object fit for sexual violence. This phenomenon is known as sexual objectification,<sup>7</sup> because women are not viewed as personalities but as objects whose value is assessed based on their physical appearance and sexual attraction. Sexual objectification is associated with patriarchal culture that emphasizes male domination, violence and sexism. This kind of 'macho culture' is referred to as 'cultural violence' by D. Gutierrez,<sup>8</sup> and such violence is covertly transmitted in the socialization process, while digital games are contributing to it. All this becomes even more important if we take into account the fact that digital games have a very powerful means of persuasion,<sup>9</sup> and therefore can negatively affect the attitude of male players towards women.

"The media have become the language of our public culture"<sup>10</sup> and in media stories "the body is socially constructed and represents social relations of power, as body is a collection of practices or techniques".<sup>11</sup> When game designers are introducing female characters in digital games, they tend to project gender stereotypes. "Stereotype involves stripping down the totality of a person to the series of exaggerated, usually negative character traits. Stereotype denotes the boundaries between the normal and the rejected, them and us".<sup>12</sup> Gender-based scheme theory reveals stereotypes and sexual interactions that define women as submissive, sexually-orientated and less intelligent than men.<sup>13</sup> Given that, women are 'helpless', they always fall into trouble and male characters are coming to their rescue. But women in digital games are not just damsels in distress, sometimes they get the main role of a heroine, but even then, their most prominent feature is sexuality.<sup>14</sup>

The aim of the paper is to explore the ways of portraying female characters in digital games and to point out that digital games support negative gender stereotypes. The research included an analysis of the content and design of digital games to provide input data on sexual objectification and violence against women that are represented in the virtual space and implemented in the culture of everyday life. The aim is also to point out that digital games represent an expression of existing culture and do not deviate from stereotypes regarding power hierarchy and gender differences. This approach to creating digital games contributes to the gender representation of patriarchal society constructs.

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- 6 ABRAMS, D. et al.: Perceptions of Stranger and Acquaintance Rape: The Role of Benevolent and Hostile Sexism in Victim Blame and Rape Proclivity. In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2003, Vol. 84, No. 1, p.112.
  - 7 FREDRICKSON, B. L., ROBERTS, T.: Objectification Theory: Toward Understanding Women's Lived Experiences and Mental Health Risks. In *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 1997, Vol. 21, No. 2, p. 173.
  - 8 DÍEZ, G.: Video Games and Gender-Based Violence. In *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2014, Vol. 132, No. 1, p. 59.
  - 9 BALTEZAREVIĆ, R. et al.: Political Marketing in Digital Games: 'Game Over' for Traditional Political Marketing Methods. In *Acta Ludologica*, 2019, Vol. 2, No. 2, p. 30.
  - 10 DAHLGREN, P.: Media and the Public Sphere. In RITZER, G. (ed.): *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Malden : Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 2908.
  - 11 TURNER, B. S.: Body and Cultural Sociology. In NELSON, T. D. (ed.): *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*. Malden : Blackwell Publishing, 2007, p. 326.
  - 12 For more information, see: BARKER, Ch.: *Cultural Studies*. London : Sage Publications, 2003.
  - 13 DOWNS, E., SMITH, S. L.: Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2009, Vol. 62, No. 11, p. 723.
  - 14 MIKULA, M.: Gender and Videogames: The Political Valency of Lara Croft. In *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 2003, Vol. 17, No. 1, p. 84.

# Digital Game Players

“The game is constantly present in the life of man and is needed both for the individual and the society, primarily because of the social connections that the participants of the game accomplish. The development of technology and the Internet has empowered the emergence of a new kind of game”.<sup>15</sup> By observing the development of human society, we can conclude that man has never ceased to play certain games. However, the game was changing, as society changed, adapting to changes. “Digital games increasingly replace traditional games and have a direct impact on the way Internet users fill their free time. The availability of platforms and game delivery technologies is an important factor in the phenomenon of mass interest in video games”.<sup>16</sup> Statista gives information that, in 2020, digital games were actively played by 2 billion 690 million players around the world.<sup>17</sup> In the early years of digital games there were few female players. It was registered that in the 1980s digital games were played by only 5% of women,<sup>18</sup> which is why it is not surprising that female players were considered a minority. However, the latest research indicates that female players today account for about half of all players. Data collected in the USA by polling more than 4,000 households in the first quarter of 2020 indicated that 41% of players were female.<sup>19</sup>

The research conducted in Europe by Ipsos Connect in the third quarter of 2018, covered a survey of 4,000 respondents in the UK, France, Germany and Spain. The survey indicated the following percentage of female players by country: in the UK digital games are played by 48% of female respondents; in France 66%; in Germany 52% of female respondents and in Spain 47% of female respondents.<sup>20</sup> However, although there has been an increase in female player participation, disparities are still present when it comes to creating digital games. Data for 2019 indicate that programmers were 71% male, 24% female and 5% transgender.<sup>21</sup>

Widespread changes, as a result of the activities of women's rights activists, have forced the digital game industry to change the ability to control characters and their appearance. Game companies, in order to increase the variety of games, have produced several games in which the main role is played by women. Between 2015 and 2017, several female characters that appeared on the gaming market became classic characters, and gaming companies won a number of awards for those games. A good example of digital games with main female characters are *Life Is Strange*<sup>22</sup> and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*<sup>23</sup>. In recent years, a large number of games have appeared that provide a more diverse choice

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15 BALTEZAREVIĆ, R., BALTEZAREVIĆ, B., BALTEZAREVIĆ, V.: The Video Gaming Industry: From Play to Revenue. In *International Review*, 2018, Vol. 7, No. 3-4, p. 71.

16 BALTEZAREVIĆ, B., BALTEZAREVIĆ, R.: The Impact of Video Games on the Identity of the Players. In *KULTURA POLISA*, 2018, Vol. 15, No. 36, p. 476.

17 *Number of Active Video Gamers Worldwide from 2014 to 2021 (in millions)*. [online]. [2021-06-01]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/748044/number-video-gamers-world/>>.

18 For more information, see: GRAYNER, R. S.: *Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market*. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2004.

19 *Distribution of Computer and Video Gamers in the United States from 2006 to 2020, by Gender*. [online]. [2021-05-16]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/232383/gender-split-of-us-computer-and-video-gamers/>>.

20 WHYTE-SMITH, H. et al: *Game Track Digest: Quarter 3-2018*. 2018. [online]. [2021-05-15]. Available at: <[https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2018-10/techtracker\\_q3\\_2018\\_final2.pdf](https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/publication/documents/2018-10/techtracker_q3_2018_final2.pdf)>.

21 *Distribution of Game Developers Worldwide from 2014 to 2019, by Gender*. [online]. [2021-05-16]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/453634/game-developer-gender-distribution-worldwide/>>.

22 DONTNOD ENTERTAINMENT, DECK NINE: *Life Is Strange (series)*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Square Enix, 2015-2021.

23 NINJA THEORY: *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. [digital game]. Cambridge : Ninja Theory, 2017.

to players, so that in many games players can create their own characters (to choose gender, appearance, skin, and body shape). Regarding the representation of male and female characters in digital games in the period 2008-2017, statistical data show that in the last decade there were fewer female characters than male. Female characters accounted for 27% of the total, while male characters accounted for 73%. Game designers were more inclined to offer male characters to players. Probably the main reason for this phenomenon is that it seems that the designers of digital games believed that female characters could not be the main heroine due to female stereotypes. Compared to men, women are weaker and, in many games, (for example *Super Mario*<sup>24</sup>, *Zelda*<sup>25</sup> and *Final Fantasy XV*<sup>26</sup>) they usually need to be protected. Unfortunately, due to such stereotypes, the designers did not want to give female characters the same abilities as male characters, because they were not sure that the game would be sold. Fortunately, today male or female characters can be chosen at the beginning of the game, and this change increases the number of female characters in the database, but that number is still significantly lower than male characters.<sup>27</sup> In 2015, out of 76 games presented (at the E3 conference), only seven of them had female heroines as the main characters – less than 10 percent. In 2016, the number of games on which women were centred was only 3 percent. In 2019, of the 126 games we collected at E3 events hosted by Microsoft, Nintendo, Bethesda, Ubisoft, Square Enix, and EA, only six games had major female characters, while nearly five times as many games (28) had centred male characters.<sup>28</sup> According to available data, the ratio of male and female main characters in digital games in the period from 2015 to 2020 is as follows: in 2015, the ratio is 32% (male characters) versus 9% (female characters), in 2016, this ratio is at its lowest level, 41% (male characters), versus only 2% (female), in 2017 the ratio is 26% versus 7%, in 2018, 24% versus 8%, in 2019, 21% versus 5%. However, in 2020, there was a significant change in the digital game industry; the percentage of male main characters was 23%, compared to as many as 18% of female main characters.<sup>29</sup> Women still have little involvement in game design and development, which may be one of the reasons why female characters are under-represented as main characters, and because of which they have reserved secondary roles portraying them as sexual objects or damsels in distress.

## Gender Roles in Digital Games

*There is a good principle that created order, light, and man and a bad principle that created chaos, darkness, and woman.*

Pythagoras (585-507 BC)

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- 24 NINTENDO EAD, NINTENDO EPD: *Super Mario (series)*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 1985-2021.  
25 NINTENDO EAD et al.: *The Legend of Zelda (series)*. [digital game]. Kyoto : Nintendo, 1986-2021.  
26 SQUARE ENIX BUSINESS DIVISION 2: *Final Fantasy XV*. [digital game]. Tokyo : Square Enix, 2016.  
27 LIU, A.: *Gender Representation in Video Games*. [Master Thesis]. Boston : Northeastern University, 2019, p. 46.  
28 SARKEESIAN, A., PETIT, C.: *Female Representation in Videogames Isn't Getting Any Better*. Released on 14<sup>th</sup> June 2019. [online]. [2021-10-16]. Available at: <<https://www.wired.com/story/e3-2019-female-representation-videogames/>>.  
29 *Share of Video Game Protagonists from 2015 to 2020, by Gender*. [online]. [2021-05-16]. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/871912/character-gender-share-video-games/>>.

In digital games roles are designed to meet social expectations. These roles represent gender roles that are fuelled by unhealthy stereotypes, such as a 'strong boy', who is violent and behaves like a playboy.<sup>30</sup> Men and women usually accept characters created on the basis of their gender patterns, even if the characteristics of a virtual character differ from their actual character traits<sup>31</sup> and often assume a "mask of masculinity".<sup>32</sup> Mass media influence the perception of the real world by providing unrealistic, virtual concepts of beauty and moral rules that are formed within cyber space. L. Papadopoulos, who in the capacity of a clinical psychologist deals with this issue, states that the permanent representation of men as dominant and aggressive and female characters as subordinate and humiliating results in the support of violence against women. A discriminatory approach to female characters becomes a gender negative message that is transmitted to digital game players, whose number is increasing every year.<sup>33</sup>

Theorists who deal with this issue, besides the reasons we have already mentioned (that women have little or no involvement in game design and development), also provide other reasons contributing to female subordination to male characters:

1. Economic Motive: It has been proven that digital games with stereotypical gender roles have a large audience contributing to the financial success of placement of such digital games;<sup>34</sup>
2. Male players mostly opt for games where the main characters are male;<sup>35</sup>
3. Digital games support accepted social standards and stereotypes, and such content is expected to be more acceptable to players, especially to male players for whom they are primarily intended;<sup>36</sup>
4. Female characters are too sexualized, as they are intended for younger male players who are predominantly playing these games and to whom such content is more interesting than other content.<sup>37</sup>

Terminology for gender issues was developed primarily in the 1970s by feminist movements that tried to draw attention to the struggles of their own gender. Their use of this term was focused on the difference in cultural representation of both sexes.<sup>38</sup> Gender discourse is present in various sociological and psychological studies.<sup>39</sup> It is assumed that gender is assigned on the basis of physical characteristics, as well as the social context, which differs from culture to culture. Descriptive details of what is male-female are based on the biological potential that a person has, as well as on the cultural roles that gender most often assumes.<sup>40</sup> In situations where women play digital games (such as the *World of Warcraft*<sup>41</sup>), they would rather choose a female character in a female role than a male character in a male role. This

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30 MAHALIK, J. R., GOOD, G. E., ENGLAR-CARLSON, M.: Masculinity Scripts, Presenting Concerns, and Help Seeking: Implications for Practice and Training. In *Professional Psychology, Research and Practice*, 2003, Vol. 34, No. 2, p. 124.

31 GUADAGNO, R. E. et al.: Even in Virtual Environments Women Shop and Men Build: Gender Differences in Second Life. In *Computers in Human Behavior*, 2011, Vol. 27, No. 1, p. 304.

32 EDWARDS, K., JONES, S.: Putting My Man Face on: A Grounded Theory of College Men's Gender Identity Development. In *Journal of College Student Development*, 2009, Vol. 50, No. 2, p. 216.

33 For more information, see: PAPAPOPOULOS, L.: *Sexualisation of Young People: Review*. London : Home Office Publication, 2010.

34 NEAR, C. E.: Selling Gender: Associations of Box Art Representation of Female Characters with Sales for Teen- and Mature-Rated Video Games. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2013, Vol. 68, No. 3, p. 252.

35 Ibidem, p. 265.

36 LUCAS, K., SHERRY, J. L.: Sex Differences in Video Game Play: A Communication-Based Explanation. In *Communication Research*, 2004, Vol. 31, No. 5, p. 517.

37 BEASLEY, B., STANDLEY, C. T.: Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an Indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games. In *Mass Communication and Society*, 2002, Vol. 5, No. 3, p. 289.

38 For more information, see: CASSELL, J., JENKINS, H.: *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. Cambridge, MA : MIT Press, 2000.

39 See also: BUTLER, J.: *Gender Trouble and the Subversion of Identity*. New York : Routledge, 1990.

40 See: BORNSTEIN, K.: *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York : Routledge, 1994.

41 BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT: *World of Warcraft*. [digital game]. Irvine, CA : Blizzard Entertainment, 2004.

choice is considered to be in line with what social role theory predicts, but personal stereotypical beliefs about gender role have not taken these choices into account. In addition, the male and female 'tanks', available to players in this game, did not differ in the number of negative comments they received, which is contrary to predictions based on role congruence theory.<sup>42</sup>

Games that involve violence against female characters or otherwise objectify female characters can have profound social effects.<sup>43</sup> Digital games and media have the potential to influence how an individual, who experiences them, sees their inner self and the world around him/her. Exposure to gender stereotypes in digital games, as several studies have shown, affects how both female and male players make social judgments, about themselves and others. Significant interaction with such games showed that men, exposed to stereotypical content, made judgments that were more tolerant of real-life sexual harassment, in addition, long-term exposure to violence in digital games is correlated with greater tolerance of sexual harassment and greater acceptance of the myth of rape.<sup>44</sup> Exposure to games that adhere to sexist stereotypes for both male and female characters can affect how individuals construct their socio-cultural frameworks in the real world. This can happen on a personal level, as well as externally. Significantly, studies have found that exposure to gender stereotypes in games leads to effects on player self-perception. It is believed that women's self-efficacy is negatively affected by playing with a sexualized female character and as a result may lead to the adoption of beliefs and standards that are consistent with these sexualized depictions by players, resulting in a desire to be like digital game characters (among women) and to judge themselves and others on the basis of character (both among men and among women).<sup>45</sup> Children are also compared to their favourite characters in terms of strength, height and ability. Due to the lack of these characteristics, they may feel that they are not as "good" as their character from digital games.<sup>46</sup> Studies have shown that games have the potential to encode gender stereotypes in children. And while these special studies address concerns about children's self-perceptions, several others have highlighted the same kind of impact that games and media can have on adults, such as perpetuating myths about gender roles.<sup>47</sup>

Although there is a nearly identical percentage of female players, digital games are still dominated by male characters as main characters, while female characters are, in more than 80% of digital games, shown as sex objects and scarcely dressed.<sup>48</sup> Female characters appearing in digital games are most often presented as victims or as 'promised prizes',<sup>49</sup> or as overbearing sexual creatures and objects of sexual desire.<sup>50</sup> Given that

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42 For more information, see: HEETER, C.: Femininity. In WOLF, M. J. P., PERON, B. (eds.): *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. New York, London: Routledge, 2014, p. 373-379.

43 See also: NEAR, C. E.: Selling Gender: Associations of Box Art Representation of Female Characters with Sales for Teen- and Mature-Rated Video Games. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2013, Vol. 68, No. 3, p. 252-269.

44 See: DILL, K. E., THILL, K. P.: Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2007, Vol. 57, No. 11-12, p. 851-864.

45 For more information, see: BEHM-MORAWITZ, E., MASTRO, D.: The Effects of Sexualization of Female Video Game Characters on Gender Stereotyping and Female Self-Concept. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2009, Vol. 61, No. 11-12, p. 808-823.

46 See, for example: DILL, K. E., THILL, K. P.: Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2007, Vol. 57, No. 11-12, p. 851-864.

47 See also: HAYES, E.: Women, Video Gaming and Learning: Beyond Stereotypes. In *TechTrends*, 2005, Vol. 49, No. 5, p. 23-28.

48 DILL, K. E., THILL, K. P.: Video Game Characters and the Socialization of Gender Roles: Young People's Perceptions Mirror Sexist Media Depictions. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2007, Vol. 57, No. 11-12, p. 851.

49 DIETZ, T.: An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 1998, Vol. 38, No. 5-6, p. 438.

50 IVORY, J. D.: Still a Man's Game: Gender Representation in Online Reviews of Videogames. In *Mass Communication and Society*, 2006, Vol. 9, No. 1, p. 107.

digital games emphasize female sexuality and treat women as sexual objects, there are fears that they may have a negative impact on players' notions of women. Players' respect for women players may be reduced after frequent exposure to sexually portrayed female characters, consequently influencing male gamers to more easily perform sexual harassment in the real world.<sup>51</sup> Digital games have the potential to shape players' attitudes much more than other forms of media because players are actively engaged and interactivity is at a much higher level due to the very nature of digital games.<sup>52</sup> Men who play sexist games are more likely to support the notion that women are the weaker gender and often need male help,<sup>53</sup> but J. S. Aubrey and K. Harrison find that counter-stereotypical views can reduce negative gender beliefs and attitudes.<sup>54</sup>

The virtual space in which digital games are played is a new medium, but, at the same time, it is also a social product. Thus, the media representation of female characters reflects a paradigmatic representation of women in one community, as players enter a game with deeply rooted attitudes that are a part of their existing identity. The first commercial digital game that has focused its action on the form of violence based on gender and race is *Custer's Revenge*<sup>55</sup> designed by Mystique Company in 1982. The game promotes sexual and racial violence. Players control the character of General Custer, who wears only a cowboy hat, scarf, and boots. Custer is the main character, and his job is to rape a naked Indian woman with large breasts who is chained to the cactus. If players successfully score the required number of points, they can rape the tied Indian woman, scoring points for each act of rape. Despite numerous attempts by women's associations to draw public attention to the fact that this digital game is a violation of human rights, around 80,000 copies of the game were sold. The game received negative media criticism and several lawsuits against human rights violations.<sup>56</sup>

In *Grand Theft Auto*<sup>57</sup>, one of the best-selling digital games in the world, players can have sex with women and then kill them. Male characters are depicted as hyper-male, dominant and aggressive men. By contrast, female characters, which are peripheral in these games, are shown as sexual objects – their only purpose is to please the main male characters. After paying a prostitute for sex, players can kill her and get their money back. Instead of being punished for such behaviour, players are often rewarded. This behaviour of players is expected because the female characters are presented as objects in the narratives of digital games, and people feel empathy for other individuals, and not for objects. The fifth sequel of this *GTA V*<sup>58</sup> game, which promotes gender-based violence culture, has reached 1 billion USD in earnings.<sup>59</sup>

As for female gender stereotypes in digital games, it is important to note that many female characters represent weak victims protected or rescued by powerful men.<sup>60</sup> Visual representations of women tend to emphasize physical characteristics (e.g., through clothing)

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- 51 YAO, M., MAHOOD, C., LINZ, D.: Sexual Priming, Gender Stereotyping, and Likelihood to Sexually Harass: Examining the Cognitive Effects of Playing a Sexually-Explicit Video Game. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2010, Vol. 62, No. 1-2, p. 86.
- 52 MILLER, M. K., SUMMERS, A.: Gender Differences in Video Game Characters' Roles, Appearances, and Attire as Portrayed in Video Game Magazines. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2007, Vol. 57, No. 9-10, p. 735.
- 53 STERMER, S. P., BURKLEY, M.: SeX-Box: Exposure to Sexist Video Games Predicts Benevolent Sexism. In *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 2015, Vol. 4, No. 1, p. 52.
- 54 AUBREY, J. S., HARRISON, K.: The Gender-Role Content of Children's Favorite Television Programs and Its Links to Their Gender-Related Perceptions. In *Media Psychology*, 2004, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 111.
- 55 MYSTIQUE: *Custer's Revenge*. [digital game]. Northridge : Mystique, 1982.
- 56 PRAGER, J.: *The Worst Video Game in Gaming History*. Released on 17<sup>th</sup> February 2020. [online]. [2021-10-15]. Available at: <<https://screenrant.com/worst-video-game-in-gaming-history/>>.
- 57 ROCKSTAR NORTH et al.: *Grand Theft Auto (series)*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Rockstar Games, 1997-2021.
- 58 ROCKSTAR NORTH: *Grand Theft Auto V*. [digital game]. New York, NY : Rockstar Games, 2013.
- 59 FOX, J. et al.: Sexualized Avatars Lead to Women's Self-Objectification and Acceptance of Rape Myths. In *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 2014, Vol. 39, No. 3, p. 359.
- 60 For more information, see: McCROSKEY, J. C., McCAIN, T. A.: The Measurement of Interpersonal Attraction. In *Speech Monographs*, 1974, Vol. 41, No. 3, p. 261-266.

or exaggerate female sexuality.<sup>61</sup> Female characters fit into common gender-dominated stereotypes, for example by exaggerating the characteristics of the female body or sexually revealing clothing (mostly made of leather).<sup>62</sup> Among the gender stereotypes that can be observed among female characters in digital games, characteristics such as a flirtatious person in trouble, who pays too much attention to her physical appearance and is often presented as a person with large breasts also predominate.<sup>63</sup> Also, in recent years, gender – non-traditional female characters have emerged, who are portrayed as male characters and represent female lesbians (known as 'butch'), and such characters differ from the normative female characters we often see in video games.<sup>64</sup> Most digital games have been shown to contain negatively stereotyped gender images.<sup>65</sup> Among these depictions, the characteristics of men in dominant roles stand out, who are presented as overly masculine and violent heroes, while women in submissive, sexually exploitative roles are mostly portrayed as busty victims of aggression, for whom intelligence is not a strong side.<sup>66</sup>

## Virtual Space as Reality Replica

Lara Croft from the digital game series called *Tomb Raider*<sup>67</sup> was one of the first featured virtual female characters. This first heroine of the virtual space often stands out as an example of how female characters as storytellers in digital games are also possible. Lara Croft fights her own battles and accepts the greatest challenges. She is educated, intelligent and capable, but all this was not enough to diminish criticism of the visual representation of her character. Although this character defies the stereotype of weak, helpless female protagonists, because she possesses enviable intellect, independence and strength, she is also reduced to the traditional terms of female sexuality and is subjected to the stereotype of sexual objectification.<sup>68</sup> The criticisms have affected the redesign of Lara Croft from a person of over-dimensioned physical attributes to a more realistic representation.

Technology, as part of a part of modern life, contributes to the formation of parallel online and offline spaces. "The social interactions of millions of people around the world, along with the creation of their virtual identities, social relationships and communities, lead to the scenario in which the computer technology and virtual communication are

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61 See also: DOWNS, E., SMITH, S. L.: Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis. In *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 2009, Vol. 62, No. 11, p. 721-733.

62 See: BRYCE, J., RUTTER, J.: Killing Like a Girl: Gendered Gaming and Girl Gamers' Visibility. In MÄYRÄ, F. (ed.): *Proceedings of Computer Games and Digital Cultures Conference*. Tampere : University of Tampere Press, 2002, p. 243-255.

63 For example, see: PRENTICE, D. A., CARRANZA, E.: What Women Should Be, Shouldn't Be, Are Allowed to Be, And Don't Have to Be: The Contents of Prescriptive Gender Stereotypes. In *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 2002, Vol. 26, No. 4, p. 269-281.

64 For more information, see: RIFKIN, L.: The Suit Suits Whom? Lesbian Gender, Female Masculinity, and Women-In-Suits. In *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 2002, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 157-174.

65 See: DILL, K. E. et al.: Violence, Sex, Race, and Age in Popular Video Games: A Content Analysis. In COLE, E., DANIEL, J. H. (eds.): *Featuring Females: Feminist Analyses of Media*. Washington : American Psychological Association, 2005, p. 115-130.

66 PROVENZO Jr., E. F.: Computing, Culture, and Educational Studies. In *Educational Studies*, 2000, Vol. 31, No. 1, p. 5-19.

67 CORE DESIGN et al.: *Tomb Raider (series)*. [digital game]. Tokyo, Redmond : Eidos Interactive, Microsoft Game Studios, Square Enix, 1996-2018.

68 KENNEDY, H. W.: Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis. In *Game Studies*, 2002, Vol. 2, No. 2. [online]. [2021-06-05]. Available at: <<http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>>.

actually forming the parallel society and the new virtual cultural space".<sup>69</sup> The virtual space opens up a platform for building identity pluralism, that is, 'identities of many selves', as referred to by S. Turkle,<sup>70</sup> which are being implemented into computer culture. Computer culture cannot be seen as a completely new creation immune to existing cultural patterns, because virtual space is exposed to the influence of dominant/primary culture from which it takes over the learned hierarchical patterns. Identity migration from the offline world to the online world does not mean complete freedom of identity formation, because modified identities are "still determined by existing roles and established norms".<sup>71</sup> This further means that gender stereotypes are present in the virtual space and the computer culture considering that every identity is viewed as "[...] a product of society represented by the environment, as the cultural and behavioral contexts of an individual are the consequences of the society and the culture that person was born into and is living within".<sup>72</sup>

The representation of female characters in the virtual space represents a segment of the existing relationships of power and hierarchy of dominant groups in relation to marginalized ones.<sup>73</sup> Media representation is a form of social practice in which the stereotypical image of a woman implies that she is passive, always young, cheerful, and inferior to man. Such a definition of women is based on media matrices that frequently display sexism, violence and stereotypes. The media replicates the culture of power formed on patriarchal foundations, and virtual space loses its neutrality in relation to gender, race, or class. In this context M. Castells emphasizes: "We live in a culture of virtual reality, but real virtuality because our virtuality, meaning the internet networks, the images are a fundamental part of our reality".<sup>74</sup>

Female characters in digital games are constructed in relation to the already established social relationships, which have already defined the position of women, but also of other disadvantaged groups, as the position of the *Other*. The *Otherness* is a mark of minority and marginalized groups, and "reality becomes the reproduction of its reproductions, which are prepared with media matrices".<sup>75</sup> The theme of otherness refers to all groups that view accepted cultural values as marginalized: women, mentally ill, racially or religiously unacceptable, or minorities. However, when dividing into one and the other, as a product of culture, the second-order female otherness is determined by birth, so that all other characteristics of a woman as an individual being are neglected. The woman is the *other* sex, the object, the limited, inauthentic being. She is not a 'man' (a male gender noun) because a man is always a male being and she is his 'otherness'. "He is the Subject, he is the Absolute, she is the Other".<sup>76</sup>

"The network does not abolish the sexes, it has, in social terms, been determined by the body, sex, economics, social classes and race"<sup>77</sup> and this determination is based on offline social practices. "It is of the utmost importance to realize that new media exist within a social framework that is already established and embedded in an economic, political and cultural environment that is still deeply racist and under male domination".<sup>78</sup> The process of media

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69 BALTEZAREVIĆ, R., BALTEZAREVIĆ, V., BALTEZAREVIĆ, B.: *Media Law, Ethics and Society*. Saarbrücken : Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2018, p. 67.

70 For more information, see: TURKLE, S.: *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York : Simon and Schuster, 1995.

71 KELLNER, D.: Popular Culture and the Construction of Postmodern Identities. In LASH, S., FRIEDMAN, J. (eds.): *Modernity and Identity*. Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1992, p. 141.

72 BALTEZAREVIĆ, B., BALTEZAREVIĆ, R., BALTEZAREVIĆ, V.: *The Internet as Medium of Communication and Knowledge Sharing*. Saarbrücken : Lap Lambert Academic Publishing, 2018, p. 11.

73 See also: MURDOCK, G.: Citizens, Consumers and Public Culture. In SKOVMAND, M., SCHRODER, K. (eds.): *Media Cultures, Reappraising Transnational Media*. London : Routledge, 1992, p. 17-41.

74 MASON, P.: *From Networked Protest to 'Non-Capitalism'*. Released on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2012. [online]. [2021-05-15]. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-19932562>>.

75 ANDERS, G.: *Svet kao fantom i matrica*. Novi Sad : Prometej, 1996, p. 47.

76 DE BEAUVOIR, S.: *The Second Sex*. New York : Vintage Books, 2011, p. 15.

77 VAJDLING, F.: Gde je feminizam u sajber feminizmu. In *Genero: časopis za feminističku teoriju*, 2004, Vol. 3, No. 4/5, p. 88.

78 Ibidem.

socialization accepts already defined gender roles and thus promotes inequality that slows the transformation of media platforms into equal opportunities platforms. New technologies are defined as new, but present gender differentiation is old, taken from existing cultural patterns, so “women have never been equal in the online public sphere, and it seems that social media forums remain firmly grounded in the material realities of women’s everyday experiences of sexism in patriarchal society”.<sup>79</sup> Media texts are not neutral but play an active role in creating and distributing male/female roles and their ultimate product is discrimination. Based on the considered theory, we have developed the following research questions:

- RQ1: In which digital game genre are female characters represented?
- RQ2: To what extent are female characters in digital games positioned as main/secondary characters?
- RQ3: Is sexism present in digital games narratives, as well as the negative application of gender stereotypes aimed against the female characters? (For the purpose of this research we accepted the definition that “Sexism is belief that the members of one sex are less intelligent, able, skillful, etc. than the members of the other sex, especially that women are less able than men”.<sup>80</sup>)
- RQ4: Do narratives in digital games contain elements of violence against women?
- RQ5: Does the genre of narrative influence the positioning of female characters (main/supporting, or sexual object)?
- RQ6: Are sexistically depicted female characters accompanied by violence against women?

## Methodological Framework

For this quantitative content analysis data were collected from samples of narratives from the list of 30 games with female protagonists in 2018 published at J Station X-Inclusive gaming news and reviews (Table 1).

Table 1. List of digital games used for research

Game title	Developer/Publisher	Platform(s)	Genre
Monster Hunter: World	Capcom / Capcom	PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Microsoft Windows	Action role-playing game
The Inpatient	Supermassive Games / Sony Interactive Entertainment	PlayStation 4	Survival horror
Sea of Thieves	Rare / Microsoft Studios	Microsoft Windows, Xbox One	Action
Far Cry 5	Ubisoft Montreal; Ubisoft Toronto / Ubisoft	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	Action game
Darksiders 3	Gunfire Games / THQ Nordic	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	Adventure
Code Vein	Bandai Namco Studios / Bandai Namco Entertainment	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	Action

79 MEGARRY, J.: Online Incivility or Sexual Harassment? Conceptualising Women’s Experiences in the Digital Age. In *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 2014, Vol. 47, No. 1, p. 49.

80 *Sexism*. [online]. [2021-10-18]. Available at: <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sexism>>.

Crackdown 3	Sumo Digital / Microsoft Studios	Microsoft Windows, Xbox One	Action
Indivisible	Lab Zero Games / 505 Games	PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, Linux, MacOS, Windows	Action
Battle Princess Madelyn	Causal Bit Games Inc. / Causal Bit Games Inc. / Hound Picked Games	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	Adventure
Anthem	BioWare / Electronic Arts	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	Action
Bloodstaine: Ritual of the Night	Art Play / 505 Games	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch	Action
Bloodstaine: Ritual of the Night	Ubisoft Singapore / Ubisoft	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	Action
Attack on Titan 2	Omega Force / Koei Tecmo	Microsoft Windows, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Xbox One	Action
State of Decay 2	Undead Labs / Microsoft Studios	Microsoft Windows, Xbox One	Survival game
Detroit Become Human	Quantic Dream / Sony Interactive Entertainment	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4	Adventure game
Greedfall	Spiders / Focus Home Interactive	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	Action
Dauntless	Phoenix Labs / Epic Games	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch	Action
Conan Exiles	Funcom / Funcom	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	Survival
Fortnite	Epic Games / Epic Games	Windows, macOS, Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, iOS, Android	Survival game
The Darwin Project	Scavengers Studio / Scavengers Studio	Microsoft Windows, Xbox One	Survival
Overkill's The Walking Dead	Overkill Software / Starbreeze Publishing	Microsoft Windows	Action
We Happy Few	Compulsion Games Inc. / Gearbox Publishing	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One	Survival
Griftlands	Klei Entertainment / Klei Entertainment	Microsoft Windows	Adventure game
Telltale's The Walking Dead: The Final Season	Telltale Games (ep.1-2) and Skybound Games (ep. 3-4) / Telltale Games; Skybound Games	Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch	Adventure game
Ooblets	Glumberland / Double Fine Presents	Microsoft Windows, XBox One	Life simulation
Iconoclasts	Konjak / Bifrost Entertainment	PlayStation 4, PlayStation Vita, Microsoft Windows, macOS, Linux, Nintendo Switch	Action
Forgotton Anne	ThroughLine Games / Square Enix Collective / Hitcents (iOS)	macOS, Microsoft Windows, PlayStation 4, Xbox One, Nintendo Switch, iOS	Adventure game
Pathfinder: Kingmaker	Owlcatt Games / Deep Silver	Linux, macOS, Microsoft Windows	Role-playing game

The Swords of Ditto	Onebitbeyond / Devolver Digital	PlayStation 4, Windows, Linux, macOS, Nintendo Switch	Action
Mineko's Night Market	Meowza Games / Humble Bundle	Windows, macOS, Nintendo Switch	Adventure

Source: own processing; HENRY, J.: 30 Games With Female Protagonists in 2018 You Should Be Excited For. Released on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2018. [online]. [2021-05-02]. Available at: <<http://jstationx.com/2018/01/02/30-games-with-female-protagonists-2018/>>.

The research was conducted over the period from December 2018 to February 2019. Data were analysed using the SPSS 20 IBM Statistical Package. The first four research questions were analysed through descriptive statistics. Digital games narratives were analysed in relation to the genre represented in the narrative, while the analysis of the presence of female characters was analysed in relation to the positioning of the female figure in the game, as well as in the representation of the female characters. Research questions RQ5 and RQ6 were transformed into three hypotheses:

- H1: The female narrative affects the positioning of female characters (main/supporting).
- H2: The narrative genre influences the sexual objectification of female characters.
- H3: If female characters in a digital game are sexistically depicted, the given narrative includes violence against women.

In the analysis of the hypothesis, we first checked the normality of the distribution using the Shapiro-Wilk normality tests because we have a sample less than 50 games. The result showed that we had a deviation from the normal distribution and we applied non-parametric techniques Chi-square test and Spearman's rank correlation coefficient. The results regarding the proportion of original content to aggregated content in legacy and new media may be limited in applicability because of the sampling method.

## Results

- *RQ1: In what genre of digital games are female characters represented?*

Of the total of 30 digital games posted on the J-Station X-Inclusive gaming news and reviews Games with Female Protagonists, in relation to the genre represented in the game narrative, we obtained data that female characters appear in Action genre  $n = 15$  (50.0%), Adventure genre  $n = 7$  (23.3%), Survival genre  $n = 6$  (20.0%), Life simulation genre  $n = 1$  (3.3%) and Role Playing genre  $n = 1$  (3.3%),  $M_{\text{genre}} = 1.87$ ,  $SD_{\text{genre}} = 1.074$ .

- *RQ2: How often do female characters position themselves as main/supporting characters in digital games?*

The representation of female characters in relation to positioning in a game is: Main character  $n=9$  (30%) and Supporting character  $n=21$  (70%),  $M_{\text{character}} = 1.70$ ,  $SD_{\text{character}} = .466$ .

- *RQ3: Is sexism present in the digital games narratives as well as the application of gender stereotypes aimed against female characters?*

Sexism in the narrative in relation to gender differences and the application of gender stereotypes aimed against female characters is recorded in  $n = 18$  (60%) of analysed digital games,  $M_{\text{Sexist female characters}} = 1.40$ ,  $SD_{\text{Sexist female characters}} = .498$ .

- RQ4: Do narratives in digital games contain elements of violence against women?

Violence against women is present in  $n=13$  (43.3%) of analysed digital games,

$M_{\text{violence against women}} = 1.57$ ,  $SD_{\text{violence against women}} = .504$ .

## Analysis of Stated Hypotheses

- H1: The narrative genre influences the positioning of female characters (main/supporting).

Testing whether there is a correlation between the game genre and the female main/supporting role in the digital games narratives, showed that the correlation does not exist because  $c_2(4, 1) = 6.054$ ,  $p > 0.05$ .

The first hypothesis was not confirmed because the results showed that the narrative genre had no influence on the positioning of female characters as main or supporting.

- H2: The narrative genre influences the sexual objectification of female characters.

For the correlation between the game genre and the representation of a woman as a sexual object, the result of Chi square test shows that  $c_2(4, 1) = 2.302$ ,  $p > 0.05$  which means that there is no statistically significant correlation between the examined variables.

The second hypothesis is not confirmed because the results showed that the narrative genre had no effect on the sexual objectification of female characters.

- H3: If female characters in a digital game are sexistically depicted, the narrative includes violence against women.

Regarding the correlation between sexist female characters and the prevalence of violence against women, the obtained result  $c_2(1) = 5.792$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , shows that there is a statistically significant correlation of the examined variables, while Spearman's correlation  $Rho = .439$  indicates a positive moderate correlation.

The third hypothesis is confirmed since the results obtained confirmed that the narrative of digital games, in which female characters are sexistically presented, contain elements of violence against women.

## Discussion and Conclusion

In the initial years of digital games, they were considered 'fun' for male players and the contents were adapted to male audiences. Recent research indicates that today players' distribution in relation to changes is almost balanced, which is not the case with the content and accepted stereotypes that are difficult to change. Female characters are minimally represented, while patriarchal gender stereotypes are prevailing, suggesting that digital games are media in which gender stereotypes and discrimination against women are being applied. Women are most often represented as side characters, exposed to violence, helpless and unintelligent persons awaiting help and support from male characters, or are reduced to sexual objects. Even if they have a rare opportunity to be represented as main characters, hypersexual attributes are also included, and they are often portrayed with unrealistic bodies by design.

Sexism in digital games is based on social-structural and cultural-institutional practice as well as gained attitudes and beliefs, and is justified by existing gender stereotypes as accepted social behaviour. By adopting this discriminatory approach to gender roles, digital games are contributing to the promotion of negative gender stereotypes that are applied not only within the virtual space, but are also transferred as a model of behaviour to the real world.

In addition to the numerous negative implications, which can be caused by negative stereotypical depictions of female characters in digital games, it is necessary to mention the positive sides of this phenomenon. One study suggests that the powerful characters of women's digital games can have a positive impact on male players, regardless of sexuality, because they represent much stronger and more powerful representations of women than is typical of many other popular media products. It is thought that exposure to such powerful images may reduce the propensity for a gender stereotype based on appearance. Although digital games have had a negative impact due to negative portrayals, there is the potential for games to overcome such limitations and begin to show positive perceptions, which can lead to positive effects. In recent years, the gaming industry appears to have become, at least partially, aware of the social climate surrounding gaming and has taken steps to increase the fair representation of both male and female characters within digital gaming. There are several organizations and nonprofits, such as *Pickelles*, *Girls Make Games* and *iThrive Games*, which have been launched in recent years with the goal of involving women and girls in the gaming industry, by nurturing and providing a community of support. A recent survey conducted by digital gaming company EA found that 56 percent of 2,252 survey participants (ages 13 to 54) felt it was important for companies to make their games more inclusive, and 45 percent of respondents said they would likely play a game that incorporates these characteristics, which shows that digital games have the potential to cause positive effects.

This content analysis, of selected digital games, has shown that female characters are represented in all genres of digital games but are most prominent in action games. Representing female characters as main characters, in a third of the analysed digital games, indicating that digital game developers still give a significant advantage to male characters for key positions. Sexism in the narrative and the application of gender stereotypes aimed against the female characters, or representation of female characters with pronounced sexual characteristics and representation of women as sexual objects is represented in 60% of analysed digital games, while violence against women is present in nearly half of the games (43.3%) which indicates the high prevalence of gender discrimination that can lead to harmful stereotypes against women.

The research has also shown that the genre of digital games does not affect the positioning of female characters, but it indicated that sexist depiction of female characters is followed by violence against women. However, with the minor involvement of women in designing and producing digital games, and demand for such content resulting in significant monetization, no significant change is expected in the approach to creating characters in digital games that are continually depicting women from the unfavourable male perspective, as sexual objects and minor characters. The main limitations of this research refer to the fact that the research covered the position of female characters in digital games, without researching players 'perceptions' of the negative representation of female characters. Practical implications can be expected in applying the results of this research to further research work whose ultimate goal should be to draw the attention of both theorists and the public to the need to change the sexist approach to female characters in digital game narratives.

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