Roles of female video game characters and their impact on gender representation.

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Abstract

Due to immense popularity of video games the author investigates the presence of gender portrayal within them. The purpose of this study is to thoroughly analyse a general phenomenon, such as gender, within video games to develop a better understanding of its particularities in this form of media and to expand the general body of knowledge on video games as a research topic. As prior literature shows, gender within video games can be either defined by its biased and sexualized character or by a tendency towards equality and strength for woman. To explain those varied results the author introduces the category of role as an important factor for character representation based on the use of theoretical frameworks of symbolic interactionism, more particularly dramaturgical approach of E. Goffman. She then further proceeds with a qualitative discourse analysis of both protagonist and support characters from 22 different games. The author finds that there is a visible difference within the manners females are presented depending on their role. Lead characters are more likely to be strong, independent and self-sufficient whereas support characters most often require immediate help, are dependent on others and are more likely to be abused. Presented results can account for some of the variety in prior research and they open the field of video game studies to possibly new research topics.

KEYWORDS: gender, video games, content analysis, role, dramaturgical approach, qualitative
1. Introduction

Entertainment is an important part of everyday life. On average, people spend around 20% to 40% of their free time engaging in leisure activities (Csikszentmihalyi 1997). In the 1990s that time consisted mostly of watching television but in recent years video games have substantially altered that situation. Current research shows that 58% of Americans play video games on a regular basis and 51% of American households own at least one dedicated game console. It also highlights that 49% of those playing games in an increased capacity have decreased their usage of TV as well as other forms of media entertainment (ESA 2013). Games have in recent years spread beyond the reach of the households and their introduction to mobile devices has made them available for use at all times without spatial limitations. This sudden growth spur has caused a lot of concern over the possible impact of video games upon their users. Possible immediate effects have been thoroughly studied (Anderson, Bushman 2001, Eck 2010) but there is a certain lack of in-depth social scientific research within the field. Problems such as violence, racism and unequal gender representation have been observed but not much have been said on the particularities of those phenomena within the game format. This paper will focus specifically on further exploration of the issues of gender representation. As it will be shown in the following pages, gender is a prominent field within game studies but its interests are contained within the comparisons of males and females. This project will go beyond those traditional divisions. It will focus only on the representations of female characters and look whether there is any differentiation among them. In its essence it will try to see whether all women in gaming are portrayed the same way or is there a difference based on what role they play. This question will be explored with special consideration towards understanding video games as a new media form with new, particular characteristics. By combining those two fields of interest, this project hopes to expand and improve the knowledge within both gender and game studies.

2. Background Information

What are video games?

Video games, as commonly spread as they are (ESA 2013), remain a largely misunderstood subject. The variety of their content and the large amount of changes they underwent need to be discussed in greater detail. The early productions released in the second half of twentieth century have very little in common with most recent entries in the landscape
of digital entertainment (Wolf, 2008). Understanding the differences in the content is vital for understanding prior research in the field upon which this study will build.

The term video game is commonly used to describe a certain type of virtual entertainment. In everyday life it is assumed to be generally understood and it’s usually not given a second thought. It is heavy with pre assumptions and often invokes associations with child’s play (Chess, 2009). In academia, the situation is much more complicated. Video games are entities placed on the crossroad between traditional concepts of play and technology (Moulthrop, 2004). Due to that fact they have caused some problems to the researchers who were uncertain whether video games should be treated as just another narration oriented media type or constitute a whole new phenomenon requiring new methods and approaches (Rutter, Bryce 2006). The most prolific school in the discussion of this topic has been the ludologists. They have made a strong case for video games as an immersive type of media that requires greater insights and more detailed observations of its significant structures and gameplay features. (Juul 2003, Jarvinen 2003, Aarseth 2003). According to ludologists, video games need to be studied in their entirety, with great focus upon their interaction patterns and rules of engagement. Analysing just the narrative of games without the experience of play is therefore lacking and doesn’t produce the necessary understanding. (Eskelinen 2001) As the player through his actions enables progression of story, the human aspect of video games has to be taken into consideration when one tries to define them (Kirkland 2009). Another important thing to consider is that beyond the technical angle of things, games are also socio-cultural products. The stories they represent, as well as gameplay functions draw upon real cultural and social contexts. This connection to culture can be done explicitly or implicitly but nonetheless games are never created in a vacuum. (King, Krzywinska 2006). This means that to define what video games are, one has to consider not only their physical content but also all the associations made with it.

Based on this short review of concepts this study will use its own video games definition in which games shall be understood as culturally dependent, technologically enabled instances of play that offer their users interactivity through their structure and storytelling practices. That means that any further discussion of video games will have to focus on games in their entirety with equal consideration to their functioning, story content as well as social and cultural background.

An important side note to make is that, due to such a broad definition video games encompass the categories of both console and computer games. Console games are games mediated by home entertainment systems that require being plugged into the TV in order to operate
whereas computer games are uploaded into personal computers and interacted with in form of a computer program. Console games can also be played on certain dedicated portable devices. During the advent of video games, consoles were the dominating force driving video game production but since then the market became more equalized. (Cassell, Jenkins 2000). Additionally, in recent years, most games are released both for PC and consoles which further explains how those two groups can be encompassed and brought together by the term of video games (Gamespot 2014).

**Important terms**

A variety of terms can be used when discussing video games. Some of them have existed for very long and across variety of media and their meaning can be interpreted differently depending on their context. Others are game specific and although they might not be vital to understanding this research project, certain familiarity with them might prove useful. At the end of this thesis a short glossary of terms will be attached to make sure the reader possesses all the useful information without the need to refer to external sources such as dictionaries. With that said, two of the terms require immediate attention as their usage will be a most important research factor.

As already mentioned in the introduction, this project shall take a look at characters in different roles. To be more precise, it will focus on protagonist and support characters. Those roles have first been identified within the tradition of Ancient Greek theatre. They referred to the different functions the actors had to fulfil within a play to construct its plot. Protagonists were the lead personas who traditionally would enter a conflict with an antagonist. Support characters, or deuteragonists, would be characters with a relationship established by cooperation with either side of the conflict. Since then the word has been appropriated in more common context and used for description of a variety of characters in forms such as literature, movie, etc (Stevenson 2010). In this paper they shall be further understood as:

Support characters – characters that play a supplementary role in a narrative and the plot of the story is not focused on them. This means support characters could be of various kind ranging from an active helper to a victim that requires saving.

Protagonist characters – characters that play a leading role within a narrative. In video games, the protagonist is the main playable character.
Evolution of games

The industry of video games changes and adapts at an incredible pace. It means that any research done on the topic has to be at least equally varied. In that light, before any discussion of modern video games can be presented, a short historical background seems necessary. Since as previously implied, the topic of this work will focus on the female presence in the video game realm this account of historical changes will be centred on the concepts of females in gaming. Changes in technology, narrative and styles will be described in pair with changes in gender representation and distribution.

There is a lot of disagreement on what was the first video game in history. Depending on the definition one assumes, there is a multitude of titles that compete for the honour. First one, dating as far as 1947, was made through analogue means in form of a cathode ray tube device (Goldsmith, Thomas, Mann 1948). The first game that managed to become a commercial success and was actually available to general public was “Pong” (Baer, 1998). It started the early arcade era of gaming during which the first game consoles were created. The technology progressed unhindered and the popularity of the new games increased so much everyone wanted become a part of their success. That lead to releases of plenty new consoles, pong devices and their respective illegal copies which eventually led to oversaturation of the market with prices being aggressively driven down by unregistered companies leading to the video game crash of 1977 (Whittaker 2004). The industry managed to shake off the crisis and with the release of a new game called “Space Invaders”, a company called Atari managed to rise as the leading provider of digital entertainment (Kent 2001). What followed was the golden era of the arcade. Well known games such as “Tetris” or “Pac-man” have been created. A new company called Activision has entered the market and game production began to be a competitive endeavour (Rogers, Larsen 1984). It was also the time when gender made its first appearance in video games. In 1981 a game called “Mrs Pac-Man” was released. Initially, it was supposed to be just a sequel to largely popular “Pac-Man” but the developer considered it a chance to address a new segment of the market. A decision was made to make Pac-Man into Mrs Pac-Man, a bow was strapped to the characters head and the colours have been changed to more pastel palette considered to be more appealing towards feminine audience (DeMaria, Wilson 2002). That same year another game called “Frogger” was released. In it, the player takes on a role of a frog crossing the street. One of the possibilities
offered to the player as a source of extra points is the option to carry a female frog on your own back to help her secure her own safety. It was one of the first instances of the “damsel in distress” cliché that would soon appear more prominently in the 1984 “Donkey Kong” (Grayner Ray 2004). The game featured a character called Jump Man whose task was to rescue his girlfriend from being trapped by a dangerous gorilla. In many ways “Donkey Kong” was a ground breaking title as it first featured characters with very visible gender representations. Jump Man (who later evolved to become plumber Mario) was a male identified by the presence of a moustache whereas his girlfriend Pauline actually wore a dress. Furthermore, Pauline played an important role in the games marketing scheme being featured in greater detail on the marketing content as well as the arcade machine itself (ibid.).

The golden age of arcade brought on a lot of technological change. Third generation of consoles was developed, greatly improving visual value of video games as well as introducing new gameplay functionalities. Another crash occurred in 1983 but release of platforms such as Nintendo Entertainment System allowed the industry to recuperate rather quickly. It also introduced Nintendo as a new major actor in the video game competition (Wolf 2008). First gaming computers were also developed, beginning what would later become the trend of PC games. In 1982 Commodore 64 was released, first Apple Macintosh followed not long after. In 1985 Atari ST and Amiga have been released ushering a new era of 16bit graphics (Kent 2001). Those changes did not affect the portrayal of women in games right away. The dominating pattern was to represent women as in need of help or being a trophy for the male character. In 1985 “Super Mario Bros” have been released featuring new identity of Jump Man who became Mario, an Italian plumber. In the game Mario attempts to rescue a kidnapped princess from the hands of a villainous turtle who wants to make her his bride. This scenario has been repeated a multitude of times since till today Mario appeared in almost 200 games of similar character (Sheff 1993). Nonetheless there were a couple examples that were exceptions from this representation and they should be noted. “Leather Goddess of Phobos”, released in 1983 was a rather fascinating title. At the beginning of the game the player finds himself in a bar. After a while the on screen character decides that it’s about time to attend to its more physical needs and head to the bathroom. Depending on the choice of either male of female stall, the player’s gender is decided. If one chooses the female bathroom, they are considered female and their future companion character will be a man called Trent whereas if they choose the male bathroom, they are considered male and the companion will be woman named Tiffany. Change of gameplay depending on this simple decision makes “Leather Goddess of Phobos” first game to include gender in its explicit design (Grayner Ray 2004).
Another interesting exception was a dungeon crawling game called “Gauntlet”. It could be played by up to 4 players and for that reason it offered 4 different playable characters. One of them was a well-rounded female class – the Valkyrie. She was an equal fighter and a popular choice for many players. She was ahead of her time and another character like her would not come quickly (ibid). An interesting twist to the damsel in distress formula was also offered by the famous “Legend of Zelda”. In this game the princess of the land needs her kingdom to be saved from an evil wizard. In order to achieve that goal she scatters treasures around the continent and recruits an adventurer who can willingly find the treasures and ultimately save the people. In a way the game is still about rescuing the princess but in this case the princess knows she needs help and orchestrates her own rescue (ibid).

By the end of 1980s first popular female protagonists started to emerge. The first ever human female lead character was born in 1986 (Guiness Records 2013). In the game “Metroid” the player takes role of Samus Aran, space bounty hunter. The player steers Samus, fully clad in a space suit, on a variety of profession oriented assignments. At the end of the game, Samus finally takes off the helmet and it turns out the character was a woman all along. This surprising reveal has been one of the all-time most discussed moments in gaming (Game Informer 2007a, Oxford 2006). The 1990s for gaming have been a period of possibly the quickest growth ever. In the span of 10 years two more generations of consoles were created, a leap to 3D graphics was made and portable consoles started to successfully emerge. Arcade games started declining in their popularity but home consoles increased their share of the market (Wolf 2008). In 1991 a hit fighting game “Street Fighter 2” was released and it allowed players to choose from 7 possible player avatars, one of which was female. The character was scantily dressed but her fighting skills were on par with her male competitors and she suffered no disadvantage. Complex fighting games were just one of the genres that gained prominence during that time. New types of games kept emerging with entries such as “Resident Evil”, a survival horror game, “Parappa the Rapper”, a rhythm game or “Barbie, Fashion Designer” a pink game. Technical impediments were being consistently removed and female representations started to be present in games on a regular basis (Kent 2001). “Barbie, Fashion Designer” was an exceptionally interesting title since it was the first game targeted specifically at a female audience that became a commercial success. The game offered women options to design clothing, arrange it for the runway and put it on characters from the Barbie universe. It made a head way for new type of games focused on female experience at a very gender stereotypic angle (Cassell, Jenkins 2004). Parallel to this new type of content, new line of strong females was also being born. Already mentioned “Resident Evil” was not
only an important game due to its innovative nature but it also featured a very strong and smart female lead character. Jill Valentine was a member of S.T.A.R.S team Alpha - a Special Force military unit. She survived a zombie outbreak uncovering a corporate conspiracy and saving her friends. She was clad in her field outfit which meant she was equipped with military grade clothing and weapons. She was a non-sexualized female heroine which was still uncommon to say the least (Game Informer 2007b). The year of the release of “Resident Evil”, another very important game was released featuring one of the most discussed female characters of all times. 1996 was the year of the first “Tomb Raider” game and creation of Lara Croft. Lara was a female archaeologist skilled in fighting, exploration as much as history and art. The marketing campaign focused on her beauty paired with her wits. Her unnaturally large breasts became her trade mark and she became the centre of discussion on gender in video games. Some announced her to be an inspiring example of a strong, independent woman while others criticized her as eye candy for men that further added to objectification of females in general (Jansz, Martis 2007). Besides some of those rare occurrences, the females of the 90s were rather continuously represented through their sexualized looks, need for help and rescue. Women were mostly used as objects needed to drive the narrative forwards, offer an incentive for the player to go on and feel rewarded for achieving victory. (Graner Ray 2004).

On the waves of that type of representations, first research projects into gender in video games have been made. Projects realised at the end of 90s and early 2000s deconstructed stereotypical gender representations and judged video games to be a biased medium (Dietz 1999, Gailey 1993, Smith 2003). Those studies will be further discussed in the literature review but it is important to note during what time of video game progress they have been made. Since the end of 1990s and the rise of a new century a great deal has changed. Since year 2000 another 3 generations of consoles were released. Video game graphics and technology made a giant leap with development of motion tracking devices, complex sound input, touch technology and even augmented reality capabilities. The modern video games are what some describe as hyper realistic (Wolf 2008). They can emulate the visual values of real life to a movie like degree. With expansion of quick internet connection a whole new layer of games emerged focused on multiplayer experience. That includes the development of Massive Multiplayer Online worlds. MMO games offer a persistent experience of an alternative reality players can fully immerse into. The recent years also shifted focus from traditional experience of play a skill based activity towards a more casual approach. A whole new type of casual games has been taking over all devices including mobile phones and tablets (Chess 2012). All
those technological changes coincide with social change and an increased activity of equality movements. In recent years the audience of video games have changed astonishingly. According to research of the American Entertainment Software Rating Board, females are around 40% of all gamers (ESA 2013). It also seems the representation of women in video games is changing. There is no organized large scale research of it, but certain recent case studies imply that presence of more equally portrayed women has increased (Corneliussen 2011). That increase allows a greater freedom in the research of female representation and therefore it creates a fertile ground for this specific project.

3. Literature review:

Since video games are, as already noted, a fairly young phenomenon, a thorough literature review is necessary not only to show the research done in the field, but to also establish its validity in academia. A broader background of media studies will be provided to build towards the particular influence and role video games play in modern society. As this study’s topic is also related to gender, a short discussion of the term will be provided and expanded into a review of gender research done specifically in the field of digital entertainment.

Media Effects:

The modern world seems saturated with presence of mass media. Channels such as television, radio or press have been sources of information and opinions for decades and they have become an immovable element of our lives. Elliot Aronson wrote about this phenomenon in his book “The Social Animal” already over thirty years ago (Aronson 1972). As the author argued, every day everyone gets bombarded with information that is aimed at affecting their personal judgements and opinions. That constant crossfire of persuasion attempts and vivid imagery actively affects the popular view of the world (ibid.). It also clearly highlights the importance of media studies in the current age. As years progress the media landscape becomes more developed and new types of media that require proper understanding emerge (Manovich 2001). Due to the general phrasings of Aronson’s ideas it seems only appropriate to extend the validity of his claims to those newly emerged types. His ideas are also backed by a number of other studies in general media theory as well as in the particular branch of media effects studies. Research projects such as those of Noele-Neumann (1993) or Lowery&De Fleur (1995) have explored the validity of the claims on how much
media influences individuals and found that particularly identity creation processes and self-worth are highly affected by media consumption. Some studies go even further and claim that based on content analysis of media one can acquire rather detailed information on its audience (Shoemaker, Reese 1990). If media is connected to developments of one’s identity and the direction of that development can be read through studies of media content it becomes apparent how relevant this line of research is. A new urgency should also be observed specifically in the field of video games. As previously mentioned, video games are a new medium that has caused some problems in their classification. They are not commonly understood yet if the presented chain of logic is followed it can be presumed that they also have a rather important impact on one’s identity. As many case studies already proved, they can shape the players self-worth, body image, sexuality and much more (Gailey, 1993; Anderson, Bushman, 2001; Dill, Dill, 1998; Smith, 2006). Thus it’s obvious that any research oriented towards expanding the bulk of knowledge on the understanding of video game should currently be of great value.

The concept of Gender

This paper will further discuss female representations in the realm of video games and as such it is strongly connected to the concept of gender. Since the womanly images this study is concerned with are of a social and not biological character, this term has to be explained in its historical value as well as in its current use in video game theory. The terminology for gender issues was developed primarily in the 1970s by the feminist movements trying to bring to attention the struggles of their own sex (Cassels, Jenkins 2000). Their usage of the word was focused on the distinction in cultural representation of both sexes. It was emphasising the fact that the imagery associated with one’s sex is constructed through social norms and cultural trends (ibid.). It was well formulated by Simon de Beauvoir in the sentence “One is not born a woman, one becomes one” (de Beauvoir 1949, p. 267). The discourse of gender has been present in a variety of sociological as well as psychological studies. Feminist authors such as for example Judith Butler managed to create a well argued for vision of gender as a performative practice (Butler 1990). That means that gender is a concept established in a cultural context but the actions of those identified with it can further affect its imagery and have the potential of changing it. Other authors tried to also address the claims of gender as biologically determined. They did it most noticeably by connection of both biological and social concepts in form of the fluidity theory. It assumes that gender is assigned based on
physical attributes as well as social context that differs from culture to culture. The descriptive
details of what is manly of womanly are based on the biological potential a person holds as
well as the cultural roles ones sex most often assumes (Bomstein 1994). Due to the tight
relationships between biological and social functions words of sex and gender become often
interchangeable but whereas sex is physically defined the gender is fluid and adaptable
depending on the environment and many choices a person might make (Busey Bandura 1999).
The field of gender studies is rich and conflicted. This basic outline ought to serve as a sketch
of what type of open mindset has to be assumed during studies related to gender topics. This
study will not explore deep layers of gender differentiation but it will be connected to the
subject by focus on female aspect of the video game industry. As previously argued in this
type of research, removing attention from the dominating male part of the industry is a
significant mark of gender theory tradition. (Cassells, Jenkins 2000)

**Gender in video games**

Gender in video games has been explored at a variety of angles. Two most prominent
focus points can be pinpointed as:

1. Research that focuses on women as players
2. Research that focus on female imagery within video games

Both of those directions have for years shaped the academic discourse on the topic of video
games and as such they will be both briefly discussed.

**Female Players**

During the early stages of video games, there were very few female players. Their
numbers during the 1980s were pointed out to be around only 5% of the entire gaming market
(Grayner Ray 2004). As such, activating the female population was considered a very
attractive idea for game developers. In combination with feminist groups determined to equal
out the playfield in the area of video games something called “girl” games movement was
conceived (Cassells, Jenkins 2000). One of the effects was as previously discussed creation of
new genres and women targeted products but the creation of said movement had also a great
impact in academia. It led to many studies hoping to understand why the market is so
differentiated. This resulted in once again a strong division of opinions. One side of the
argument would claim that the lack of female users is caused by the technological divide
between genders. Women have less access and contact with new technology such as
computers and consoles and therefore their skills are limited. Lack of skills in turn leads to lack of interest (Kiessler et al. 1985). The other side of the dialogue, which is also the more dominant one claims that computer skills are in this case irrelevant. The reason girls are not interested in video games is because their needs in the area are not addressed. Spaces of computer usage and games in particular, are designed as inherently male oriented (Huff Cooper 1987). Furthermore, playing video games is largely associated with activity for boys rather than girls. That perception has not changed even today despite the fact that the population ratio shifted towards women being around 40% of the audience (Crue, Park 2012). As a variety of studies shows, usage of games varies between men and women (Gailey 1993, Phan et al. 2012, Crue Park 2012, Chess 2009). Women are less likely to identify themselves as gamers and they are less committed to games as a serious hobby (Shaw 2012, Chess 2009). Women play violent games just as often as the non-violent games whereas men play mostly violent games (Phan et al 2012). Women treat their experience of play in a more goal oriented fashion (Cassells, Jenkins 2000) and they like to link their activities with increasing their productivity. Those several general trends can be observed but even with that in mind, the female part of population is just as varied and complex as male. There is no easy way of categorizing female gaming preferences and the gender stereotypic lines of identification are not compatible with the study of female practices of play (Poels, De Cock, Malliet 2012). In light of those findings, game developers began to incorporate a more gender neutral design hoping to attract and increase the comfort of their new audience.

**Females within video games**

One of the earliest studies concerned with content of the games was conducted in 1989. It focused primarily on the problem of violence but it also made some general observation on the gender representation within arcade games. The results showed that 60% of arcade games contained male characters whereas only 2% contained females. (Braun Giroux 1989). Following years showed further interest primarily in violent imagery within games but a constant connection was made with gender issues. Women were identified as the most oppressed group, objectified in their portrayal and serving an inferior role to that of men (Provenzo 1991). It has to be mentioned that those first studies have been conducted on limited content. Provenzo for example only analysed video game covers which due to marketing interest can strongly differ from actual game content (Downs, Smith 2010). Another relevant study took place in 1993 when Gailey conducted a content analysis of most
popular Nintendo games. She found out that women are mostly associated with “goodness” and are shown as cute and unthreatening (Gailey 1993). Her research was limited in the respect she analysed games of only one company. Furthermore, it has to be kept in mind that those first studies experienced games in their initial stage of low graphics and minimal avatar presence. By the time the next known study took place, games already entered their next generation and started becoming more visually descriptive. Study conducted by Dietz in 1998 showed that 30% of games did not contain women at all (Dietz 1998). Even though it seems like a large percentage, in comparison to previous studies increase of female presence is noticeable. Furthermore, the majority of the games that did not contain any women did not contain any human characters at all so the unequal representation can’t be fully associated with gender. Due to mentioned progress of video games, Dietz was also able to comment further on the relation between in-game characters and identified the role of women to be dominantly submissive (ibid.). The pattern of misrepresentation was once again confirmed in 2001 during a study commissioned by the Children Now organization. It stated that 64% of the games featured male characters whereas only 17% featured females. (Children Now 2001). In 2002 the Provenzo study was replicated and once again showed unbalanced division of male vs female characters but it was also one of the first one to notice significant changes. It found that out of all female characters, 50% were in represented in a dominant position. (Ramirez et al. 2002). More changes followed with a study from 2004 showing that 52% of analysed games contained playable female characters (Haninger Thompson 2004).

Since that moment the discourse on video games split into two branches: the research that would further back up previous patterns of sexualisation and that which would focus on occurring changes. The first type has been developed by authors such as Ivory (2006), Miller and Summers (2007) or Downs, Smith (2010). All those studies reinforced previously observed sexualisation and objectification of women. They also made claims on continued underrepresentation of women in digital entertainment. The second type, focused on the aspect of changes, has produced a variety of interesting new observation. A 2007 study, inspired by the early phenomenon of Lara Croft, conducted a content analysis of video game content and found it to be of surprisingly equal nature. Out of 12 studied games, the gender division of playable characters was exactly 50% male and 50% female. Due to a small sample those results can’t be considered representative but they show interesting areas for further investigation. (Jansz, Martis 2007). In 2009 another research project discussed new roles that have been associated with women in recent game releases. Females are increasingly cast in roles requiring wits and cunning. They are allowed to possess equal skills to those of men and
are central to story progression. Gender is also increasingly becoming a matter of choice within video games, especially in the genre of roleplaying games (MacCallum Stewart 2009). Finally a 2011 study of a Massive Multiplayer Game World of Warcraft shows how gender balance can be affected by bold design changes. (Corneliussen 2011) This popular video game has casted quite an impressive amount of females as story relevant characters defying traditional gender stereotypes. It addresses the needs of its varying audience and proves that increased feminization doesn’t mean lowered earnings as another more recent study proposes (Near 2013).

This short overview of research done in the field of video games clearly shows how varied of a field it is. It also highlights what has already been done to understand the media of games. In respect to gender, a lot has been written but many knowledge gaps still remain. Thanks to the presented overview, identifying these gaps will be easier and it will greatly improve the design of this study.

4. Theoretical framework

In this section, a short review of theoretical approaches relevant for this study will take place. A choice was made to include works of two prominent authors namely G. H. Mead and E. Goffman. A short overview of other considered theories will be provided together with the reasoning behind the final decision making process. Afterwards, Mead’s theory is presented first as it contains some basic information on the meaning of communication processes and their function in identity creation. Through introduction of classical games as important communicative practices it opens the way to Goffman’s theory of communication and the analytical terms of his dramaturgical approach. Their two frameworks of symbolic interactionism combined together legitimize the topic of this study as well as provide all the theoretical guidelines necessary for the further progress of the study design.

Considered theories

From the early stages of this project, the author knew that video games have to be approached in a particular way. That knowledge came mostly from the earlier presented chapters on the meaning of the term game as well as its historical development. As the
definition chosen for this project emphasizes the ever changing and culturally dependent character of games first the author narrowed down the possible theoretical approaches by accepting the constructivist paradigm. As discussed already early on, video games are products of certain cultures and concepts and as such they are meanings made by people. This type of thinking directly stems from the constructivist paradigm (Young, Colin 2004) and directly contradicts the positivist approach which assumed that meaning is not created but given within nature (Larrain 1979). The constructivist paradigm was also chosen as its beliefs are closer to the author’s personal beliefs. After that initial process of narrowing down the potential theoretical content was done, another point of interest was considered. The project was meant to focus on possible inner differentiation of a phenomenon within video games. A variety of theories that could pinpoint and explain possible differences was considered. First of all, the school of functionalism was thoroughly investigated. Functionalism is a sociological approach that treats society and social phenomena in terms of systems and parts. By analysing the placement of certain elements within structure and analysing their purpose, one might arrive at broader conclusions about functioning of large scale environments (Giddens 1991). This approach had to be quickly rejected for a couple of reasons. The author learned that in its principal functionalism is traditionally a positive theory (Parsons 1951). Though some authors chose to use it more freely, functionalism focuses mostly on creating broad rules about the systems it has been applied to (Merton 1968). It means it is a practical approach within a macro perspective but its relevancy is lost on smaller scale which in turn makes it unusable for the purpose of this project. Another type of theory that was considered was feminist theory. As the paper is on the topic of gender it seemed appropriate to investigate this line of thought. What the author realized upon closer inspection is that feminism is more of a general knowledge theory than a direct theoretical approach applicable within empirical studies (Harding 1991). Through interactions with those various theories and the development of understanding of the different paradigms, the author began to realize what conditions a useful theory should fulfil. It should be focused on meaning making and the assumptions of importance of communication. It should also contain some sort of claim on what is it that shapes the created messages in order to possibly pinpoint further points of interests for the researcher. Based on those criteria the author became acquainted with the theoretical extension of constructivist paradigm in form of the social constructionist theory of Berger & Luckmann. The theory expanded on all the necessary prerequisite assumptions on the role of interaction but once again it was too broad to realistically apply and guide possible analytical process (Berger, Luckmann 1966). The lecture of Berger & Luckmann opened
another path namely that of symbolic interactionism and more particularly works of G. H. Mead. As in their writing Berger and Luckmann continuously acknowledge the influence Mead had over their work (ibid.), the author of this paper decided to further investigate the field. After a brief introduction to Mead’s writing, it became apparent his theories could be very useful and his idea of “games” as aspects of identity proved quite interesting (Mead 1934). His theoretical postulates have clearly run alongside the ideas earlier presented in this paper about the importance of meaning. They also further allowed for the discovery of an appropriate theoretical approach very clearly applicable on empirical level and relating to the initial interest of the researcher. By logically following Mead’s heritage, the author discovered the theoretical approach of Erving Goffman. His dramaturgical approach provided the author with the idea to make roles the centre of this study and it provided the necessary terms and tools to do so (Goffman 1959). Those two frameworks together have proven to be valuable assets in the research process and shall be further discussed in the following sections.

**G.H Mead**

George Herbert Mead was an American philosopher and sociologist active during the early twentieth century. His activities included work on social behaviourism, theories of communication, identity creation and socialization (Ritzer 2008). This paper will discuss in greater detail his thoughts on communication patterns and their impact on the emergence of self.

In one of his most known books “Mind, Self and Society” (1947) Mead discusses the structure and role of communication processes in everyday life. He identifies two phases of communication which he calls “conversation of gestures” and language (or “conversation of significant gestures”). During conversation of gestures, one projects signs producing a reaction in their interlocutor that they are not aware of. One transfers information that one can’t control and reveal more about oneself than might have been intended. Conversation of gestures is also a first step towards developing a language. In Mead’s eyes communication is an evolutionary process in which from simple symbols, the society creates a more complex system of exchange. Language is what he calls a system of significant gestures which can be understood in a certain context the same by everyone concerned (ibid). Exchange of significant gestures is a social process since it requires participation of at least 2 people who share the same idea. The importance of this exchange can’t be emphasized enough as Mead claims communication and social interactions are the source of one’s identity. In his
vocabulary, one’s self is emergent and it consists of two layers, the “Me” and the “I”. “Me” is an organized set of internalized social norms. The “Me” is socially created and depends on one’s environment and social groups. The “I” is the observation of one’s me and a reaction to it. “Me” is a set of roles and norms one chooses to adhere to whereas “I” is a set of past reactions towards the expectations of “Me”. “I” is never a part of present experience and can only be observed through reminiscence on past reactions. “Me” and “I” are both integral parts of the Self and they are constructed in the opposition to the “other”. “Other” is a person, group of interest or any social entity one might relate to (ibid). According to Mead to understand what one’s identity is, one has to contrast it with the identity of someone else. Furthermore observation of reaction of others towards different objects allows creation of one’s own reactions. Self depends on the society at large – its values, assumptions, reactions. In Mead’s words: “The self emerges out of a special set of social relations with all the other individuals involved in a given set of social projects” (ibid., 156).

To further understand the emergence of self one has to further explain Mead’s theory of socialization. Socialization is a process in which one develops their sense of self. Its primary stages occur within the family circle and in first friendship based groups. Socialization occurs through three forms of inter-subjective activity: language, play and game. Language is the first instance that teaches children about their own identity (ibid.). Learning the difference between the words “me” and “you” is the first step to understanding the uniqueness of one’s own being. Starting to experience one’s own gestures and observing reactions of others to those gestures is also part of that same process. First exchanges of symbols bring about an awareness of distinction between individuals. The second step, the play, brings the process even further as a child learns to assume a role of another (ibid.). Play involves a child taking on one role at a time and therefore learning something about a “significant other”. One can pretend to be a fire fighter or a ballerina. One develops an understanding of what it means to be that specific person. Finally the game stage involves also play but it puts it in a broader social context. A game is a group activity with a set of rules. It means one has to play a role but one is also connected to others playing their own roles and remaining in a certain relation to them (ibid.). A good example would be a football game where one might take a position of a goal keeper but one also has to understand that on the field there are others who will try to score as well as those that will try to defend. A configuration of all the roles and their understanding manifested by all the participants leads to emergence of a new form of symbolic unity that Mead calls “the generalized other”. By his definition “the generalized other is an organized and generalized attitude with reference to
which the individual defines her own conduct. When the individual can view herself from the standpoint of the generalized other, “self-consciousness in the full sense of the term” is attained (Mind, Self and Society 195)). The game is the stage which allows for full development of the self and it has been an important aspect Mead researched most thoroughly. It’s applicability in research of virtual games will be further discussed in following sections.

**Erving Goffman**

Similarly as Mead’s, Goffman’s work centred on the concept of identity and the self. Both authors are considered to be representative of the school of symbolic interactionism so some of their concepts will be relatively similar to each other. Goffman is mostly known for what is called the dramaturgical model. Outside of academia, one could refer to it as the theatre metaphor (Ritzer 2008). In his book “The presentation of self in everyday life” (1959) Goffman compared everyday life to a performance of an actor. As he states, every person in their lives has to portray a variety of roles depending on the social context they find themselves in. One person can be a mother at home, boss at work and a volunteer at a shelter. Each of those roles bears certain expectations created by society. There are certain standards which can’t be ignored as to what one could consider a good mother or a good boss (ibid.). The social expectations are applied by the constant audience one must face. Every life situation involves people who are there to watch, judge and create their own reactions based on the actor’s actions. The variety of activities that are applied in order to present a favourable image of ones role to a particular set of audience members is called a performance (ibid.). A performance is usually a group effort. It means that the role played by one person remains in a specific relation to another person and each of them has to expect the other to play their part right. It could be in a way compared to Mead’s game. A spectacle is successful if everyone manages to convince the audience that they are truly who they are acting to be. The belief is necessary for the establishment of social order. This Goffman argues in a different aspect of his work on the importance of rituals (Goffman, 1967). He validates the need for role playing and social ritual by saying that human beings need predictability to feel secure. Similarly as Mead, Goffman claims that meanings are established through communication of symbols and what rituals and performances do is they create simple processing schemes that allow shared understanding of situations. The performance isn’t there just for the performer to keep up his or hers face but also for the audience to feel secure and not confused. The audience gets to
interact with the actor on different plains and the actor can control a variety of elements to create the needed impression (ibid.).

All those aspects are vital terms created by Goffman therefore they require a short introduction. A performance always takes place on a stage. There are three types of stages: front stage, back stage and off-stage. Front stage is where the actors formally perform according to the expected norms. The actors know they are being watched and thus they adjust their behaviour to fit in with their role. Back Stage is where the actors can relax and be themselves. It’s a place where an act is dropped and other types of interaction can be attempted. Off-stage means a situation in which an actor meets possible members of the audience in a context different than what they are used to observe of his performance (Goffman, 1959). An example could be workers meeting their boss on a party. An important note to make is that it is difficult to delineate the different stages. What is a back stage in the context of one performance might be a front stage of another performance. For example being home with one’s family could be a back stage to one’s professional career but it is also a front stage for one’s role as the head of the family. Different performances and stages can overlap therefore the terms of the dramaturgical model serve only as an analytical approach to communication analysis. Other important aspects one has to consider while talking of performances are settings, appearances and manners (ibid.). The setting includes the scenery, props and locations. Depending on where the performance takes place, what are the decorations and what is the occasion the potential audiences and expectations may vary. A priest for example usually fulfils his role in a church but the setting of a wedding will require a different approach than that of a funeral. (ibid.) Appearance is another important factor as it is also a part of the message the actor is sending to the audience. Certain roles may require uniforms, whereas others might be more free form but in all cases they show the actors status, gender, occupation or age. Appearance can be used to further reinforce the credibility of one’s roles but if not appropriate it can be a heavy source of dissonance (ibid.). Manner refers to how one shall play the role and fulfil the functions implied in it. For example it might be expected that someone in a military role will be strong and convicted. That same strength isn’t necessary for an actor being a medical professional as that in turn requires helpfulness and kindness. If one approaches a performance with the wrong they might be considered bad at fulfilling their functions and lacking the attributes socially associated with the role. Settings, appearances and manners are all very dependent on the context of the performance (ibid.). Together they create a set of elements that can contribute towards its success or failure. Even though they may not be a part of direct communication on behalf of the actor, their implicit
messages are strong and have to always be considered. Finally, the last element worth mentioning is the actor’s front. The front is part of the performance that helps the audience identify it. Front could be called a socially determined script of what an actor has to do to be seen in a specific role. Some roles can be heavily determined by outside expectations like for example a state official: their clothing, manner of approach, even the words they say are very often decided by their bosses and if they do not follow them, their performance will fail immediately. Other roles are less operationalized and there is a lot of room for personal preference (ibid). For example there are general concepts of what does it mean to be a mother but there is still a great deal that can be decided by the individual playing that role. Goffman claims that in society there is a set of pre-established scripts available to the actors. When in a new role, scripts are what gives guidance and allows an actor to perform accordingly even with minimal knowledge (ibid.).

With all those concepts explained it is easier to comprehend how Goffman understand the bigger picture of social communication and exchange. He describes it in chaining processes of communication based on common creation of meaning. By comparing those processes to a theatre play, he makes the complex ideas more easily approachable. In some of his other work, Goffman decided to look at the dramaturgical model from a micro perspective and understand what does the concept of performances imply for a singular actor. During already mentioned studies of ritual practices, he tried to analyse the patterns of performances in small groups. He focused more on the layers of communication and meaning formulated within one’s minds (Goffman, 1969). Due to the fact this study is focusing on the medium of video games many of those concepts are inapproachable as they require the subject to possess self-awareness. There is one particular concept worth mentioning which is that of expressions and impressions. In a performance an actor uses expressions to affect their audience and produce impressions in their minds. There are two types of expressions: those we give and those we give off (ibid.). The expressions we give are the intentional messages one might produce on purpose such as what is said or a smile. The expressions we give off are the elements beyond control such as body language. A sneeze or a blush can betray a person during certain situations and it largely remains outside of their control. The unintentional messages that come from one’s different actions are what is given off to the audience. There is a possibility this unplanned information may be source of discord between the intended and actual image of the actors (ibid.). The dramaturgical theory together with the concept of expressions will guide the way this study will approach the content of video games. Its impact will be further discussed in the next section.
Applicability of theories within the study

The theoretical frameworks presented above will play a variety of functions within this study. First of all, the discussion of Mead and his theory of socialization will further legitimise the urge for relevant video game studies. The importance of play and games in first stages of socialization highlights the possible influence of video games during early formative years. As video games can be accessed by anyone, knowing what they communicate to their users could be of vital importance. Furthermore both Mead’s and Goffman’s theories are relevant for the methodological side of this study. Both authors emphasize the importance of communication and the effects sent messages can have on its audience. If their assumptions are followed then all communication has potential of affecting its receivers and therefore should be properly understood and studied. That’s why this paper will focus on in-depth analysis of meaning embedded within the medium of video games. Through experiencing their content, conclusions will be drawn about their communicative messages and broader pictures they might be conveying. Video games will be treated as types of performances in which the in-game characters are actors. The characters will be the main focus of the study as through their actions they will be making a cultural statement which can be dissected and analysed. Goffman’s theory will directly guide that process as his analytical terms will be the primary points of focus of the researcher’s observation.

5. Purpose of this study

As it is visible through literature review, the field of female portrayal within video games is rather conflicted. On one hand there is a vast amount of dated research discussing the misrepresentation of women within video games but on the other there are also new studies that argue recent improvements of situation of females. What both types of the studies have in common is the strong focus on the aspect of gender. They look at female characters with the assumption they are all equally important based on the fact they are women and that they need to be constantly compared to men. What this paper will attempt to do is look at the issues of gender representation from a different angle. By applying the introduced theoretical approaches, this research project will focus on role taking practices among female video game characters and see whether a role is indeed an important factor within gender representation. It means that this study will not discuss female representation as a general picture but it will instead divide the female population into groups of lead and support characters and discuss possible differences among them. The purpose of this study is therefore to delve deeply into a
well-established topic of gender representation and find further distinctions within it that might be important for further investigation and development of the subject. The particular choice of pursuing the variety among female roles is a new research angle proposed which might also help in discovering new potential areas of interest within video games studies. It will therefore be a postulate on how research within this field should be done in the future and which aspects of it could be further improved.

6. Research question

By thoroughly examining the available literature on the topic of gender within video games and applying to it the terminology of Mead and Goffman this study arrived at a unique research concept. As games can be perceived as important communication acts and as such can be treated as types of performances, their in-depth analysis has to be approached. This study will look at female characters and inquire whether all the representations within that group are equal. According to the theory, a difference can be expected depending on a role a character might portray. Based on that fact a research question can be formulated as follows:

R1: Are women in video games portrayed differently based on the role they fulfil?

This research question will allow this study to further add to the core of knowledge on gender representation within video games but it will also give the opportunity of critically addressing prior research. The early expectations of this paper are that women are in fact portrayed differently based on their role. Those in protagonist roles are more likely to be strong and independent whether those in support roles are more likely to be stereotypically weak and inferior to men. If this proves to be true it could potentially explain a great deal of conflict within the previously introduced studies. As discussed in the section on evolution of games, early productions did not contain many female protagonists. More recent games have changed that situation and introduced more in-game women. If characters are portrayed differently based on their role, the recent increase of female protagonists could explain the increasing perceived equality of females within games.

7. Methodology:

In order for this study to be as accurate and convincing as possible the methodological aspect of it was developed in great detail. The care for a proper method was especially strong
due to the previously brought up criticism of prior research and the choice of materials it
concerned itself with. As already discussed, multiple studies on the topic of gender in video
games have been lacking on the ground of their data selection and analysis. The raised
criticism was taken into consideration in the process of designing this project and all
particular choices will be thoroughly presented and argued for.

**Study Method**

The goal of this study is to take a more detailed look at portrayal of female video game
characters. Its main concern is to develop a thorough understanding of in-game women and
look at the communicative messages they send. Since Goffman’s theory is of great
importance in this case, his method of micro scale investigation will also be preferred.
Qualitative approach will be employed as it is known to be used in cases where understanding
and describing a phenomenon is the primary objective (Goertz, Mahoney 2012). This study
will rely mostly on content analysis connected to some basic assumptions originating from
semiotics. Such choice of methods will allow for much more in-depth, culture based
conclusions. It will facilitate answering the questions on how women are represented in video
games but it will also give the opportunity to interpret those representations and understand
the values and connotations their visual content holds.

**Study limitations**

The choice of qualitative content analysis requires some greater limitations in the
choice of source material as well as limits the applicability of the possible results in a more
general context. Qualitative approach is in principle not prone to broad generalizations as very
often it is applied to small samples and very particular phenomena. It allows the discovery of
distinctions but the scale of those distinctions and their meaning in the general population
would have to be established in a different type of study (Berg 2001). This project makes no
claim on the general validity of its claims and its author is aware that no legitimate discussion
on large scale consequences of its finding can be attempted without further research. The
second mentioned limitation is that of cultural context. It is an important factor yet most often
it has not been taken up by other researchers in the same field. This study can only approach
games present in the realm of western culture. Video game industry spans all the continents
and a lot of its content is region specific. Games not released in western countries are not only
physically unavailable to the researcher but they have never been meant to be played in this cultural circle. Interpreting content outside of its intended context could lead to potential misunderstandings and it would not be of adequate quality.

**Choice of Material**

**Cultural Background**

As previously stated, the strong focus on understanding and cultural interpretations requires the introduction of some limitations during the data collection process. This paper will only focus on the video games created or marketed for western audience. Furthermore it will only study games of so called AAA quality. AAA games are high quality productions, created by major game developers with intense marketing programs. Furthermore, they are released by well established companies that to large extent define the current game market. They are considered top of the line and as such usually procure the largest audience and high return of investment (DeMaria, Wilson 2002). Indie games, which are games of independent developers, have been recently gaining quite a lot of popularity but they are still, in most cases, too spread to actually have the necessary impact on their users. They are very often addressed towards very niche audience and should still not be considered mainstream (Martin, Deuze 2009). AAA games represent the gaming industry not only through sheer numbers but also through the fact that their producers have existed on the market for decades and have over the years established the current general perception of the video game industry. Finally, the focus on AAA productions can be explained by findings of Gailey who states in her work: “Games, particularly commercially successful ones are apt to replicate in their structure the values and activities associated with the dominant ideology” (Gailey 1993).

The choice of productions targeted towards western audiences has been made due to the gaping cultural differences between the western and eastern markets (Aoyama, Izushi 2003). Games created strictly for the eastern market have a completely different perspective of gender which by itself should be a separate topic for analysis. Furthermore, the eastern portrayal of femininity and masculinity are rather hard to interpret without the thorough cultural background and can therefore not be attempted just by anyone. Games created solely for Asian audiences include a variety of cultural references that can’t be fully understood without the necessary contextual knowledge. It is important to emphasize that the difference discussed here is that of destination not of origin. Productions that are made in Japan but shipped to USA or Europe, even if they contain certain culture specific representations are
more adaptable to western context. Furthermore, due to their strong influence on the western video game market they become mainstream elements of entertainment industry and as such are subject to application of westernised cultural standards (Wolf 2001). For that reason, games originating from Japan but as previously stated, distributed to the western market are deemed appropriate for the needs of this study.

Choice of media

Video games will be looked upon through a perspective of two different types of media. First of all, the games themselves will be played and their content will be brought up to exemplify female representations. The experience of play will allow not only for visual observations but it will also help in developing a more in-depth and personal understanding of features of gender in play. Playing a game includes empathising with the character one portrays and finding most prominent points one might relate to. Second type of medium will be so called let’s play videos. Let’s plays are recorded pieces of in game footage created by other players. Usually they include some commentary and another person’s perspective on the events of a game. Looking at videos and seeing a game being played from a third person perspective will allow for observations of more detached nature. When one plays the game themself and empathises with a character, one might interpret things differently than they would under different circumstances. Additionally, as a game is a linear experience, to access further parts of the story, one has to go through all the preceding events. This would mean that each and every game should be completed by the researcher in order to have a full grasp of its plot points. Let’s plays’ video format allows free movement between sequences which means for example the ending of a story can be known without the full experience of play. Presence of both methods will allow for greater variety and more accurate conclusions. The strict focus on in-game content has been chosen for previously mentioned reasons. As games have to be experienced and studied within their structure and context, it seems only appropriate to use their gameplay as a source of relevant information. Also, as the messages contained within the games are the main point of interest it seems reasonable to access them in their original form. Relying on secondary sources of information such as user impressions or developer suggestions could potentially lead to a skewed image of the games.
Genres

What is a genre?

To further enhance the quality of data choice for this study the games that will be analysed have been grouped based on the genre they belong to. A genre is a style or a category of a piece of work and it exists in different types of media such as literature, movies and of course gaming. Traditionally a genre would describe content and topic of a novel or a movie. A couple examples could be horror, science fiction or romance (Stevenson 2010).

Same type of thinking applies in video games yet the topic of genre is slightly more difficult. The very definition of the word has not been openly questioned but based on the classifications that exist it is rather clear that the concept is rather ambiguous (Apperley 2006). First instance to look at would definitely be the different video game related websites. GameSpot.com until recently used a list of genres that would include names such as: action, fighting, history, sports, basketball. What should become apparent already at a first glance is that those terms are not all of equal value. Some terms are more general than others and certain categories could be included within each other. Furthermore, genre names such as action or fighting refer to the game mechanics whereas names such as history, basketball or sports refer to the content. They are classes of uneven value which refer to different qualities of a game and therefor do not make for a good classification system. This conflicting system presents two possible ways of organizing genre classifications. One relies on the game mechanics whereas the other uses content as the main guideline. Video game oriented websites seem to favour the first method with major examples such as IGN and GameSpot after its recent redesign. Academia still seems to be more conflicted on the topic. Both manners seem to be in common use and very often the categories get blended together similarly to the previously mentioned example (Wolf 2008). The ones who manage to keep the content and mechanics separate, still very often stumble upon others sorts of problems. Those who choose to categorize the games according to their mechanics often create genres that are on different levels of generality making them overlapping and difficult to use (Heith 2001, Vintetjärn 2008). Content classifications on the other hand are created only based on the studied content which means genres within them might be unique to the cases in question and not applicable anywhere else (Gailey 1993). The concept of a genre is a very practical theoretical filter which has been used in a number of works but its meaning can vary from study to study. That’s why before using it, one has to define its understanding and clearly communicate it to the reader.
Genre classification

Since, as previously pointed out, a variety of genre classifications can be used for research purposes this section will describe what specific categories will be considered in this study. As creating a new classification can cause a variety of difficulties a generally available one, has been chosen instead. The genre list consists of groups prominent enough that they currently serve as organizational guidelines for the topic of video games on Wikipedia (2014). Of course, Wikipedia is in no way a proper source for scientific reference but it nonetheless shows how some of the genres are most commonly understood. Following the explicitly stated general understanding seems more adequate than creating a synthetic list of genres purely for the need of this study.

The key genres that exist are as follows: Action, Action-Adventure, Adventure, Role-playing, Simulation and Strategy

As one can see even from the names, the lines between some of them are rather murky. Action is a genre of games that are focused on fast paced, dynamic action. Their mechanics usually involve a lot of running, fighting, defeating obstacles and ultimately defeating a key villain. Action-adventure games differ from action games as their focus is slightly shifted from the dynamic part towards problem solving, mystery and intelligence. On top of action, they can contain puzzles, moral choices and dialogue driven plots. Adventure games are usually much lower pace with focus on intellectual content. They contain multiple puzzles, require a lot of thinking and information processing. Role-playing games are virtual editions of traditional pen and paper roleplaying. Their mechanics focus on character progression, developing skills and identifying with the hero one plays with. Simulation is a genre of games that are committed to faithfully recreating real life situations. Its main task is to allow the users to practice real life skills or try to see how they would fare in certain life contexts. Strategy games are games in which a player is responsible for planning and introducing behavioural schemes for characters. The mechanics are usually organized in an order driven way where the player commands its own units and is the hidden force behind their success. As we can see, this genre division puts pressure on the way a character within the game is controlled and how he or she needs to behave. It also directly manifests in the way a user interacts with a game.
Genres in this study:

For the purpose of this study not all genres can be used. This study will focus on action, action-adventure and adventure games. The reason for it is that those are the games with actual character representations that can be observed. Roleplaying games also contain character avatars but in recent years they have become a special case that will be further discussed in a separate section. When it comes to simulation and strategy games, they can’t be studied in respect to the characters as they most commonly do not contain any protagonists. In most cases the player represents an abstract force or an invisible operator who does not speak or manifest himself in any observable way. Strategy and Simulation games are a big part of the gaming market but their lack of referable protagonist characters makes them impossible to study under the angle chosen for this work. The analysis of the 3 chosen genres will not allow for comments about the entire gaming market but their presence in the study will assure that the titles discussed within this work remain varied. The variable of genres is a good way of removing some potential bias in the choice of material and even with its limitations it will serve as a powerful content filter.

Roleplaying games

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, role playing games have grown to be somewhat a special case of character representation. This was first implied primarily by one of the articles reviewed previously in the literature section. In her work on World of Warcraft, one of the world’s most popular Massive Multiplayer Role Playing Game, Corneliussen notices that the game she studies is a representative of a particular group of productions called by her “cross-gender”. “Cross-gender” games are not gender neutral but they rather contain both female and male portrayals, acknowledging their differences and shaping them to the tastes of both audiences (Corneliussen 2008). The concept has been one of the driving forces the developers have been trying to use to introduce the female audience into gaming. As recent studies show, the ability to identify with the character one controls increases the enjoyment of the game and makes the user more likely to play it again (Trepte, Reinecke 2010). Since role playing games, as already mentioned, focus on character customization and development they have in recent years introduced equal options for gender choice. This observation was made when a quick overview of possible games have been attempted during the initial study design of this research project. Common RPG titles such as for example
“Mass Effect” series or “Dragon Age” series allow the player to choose their gender but the choice does not affect the gameplay in any manner. The image of the main character and voice change, but the things they say or do remain unchanged. Since both genders behave the same, it is impossible to pinpoint any specific representational features. Corneliussen’s cross-gender concept that could have been interesting to study as a particular type of gender representation was instead introduced in most productions as gender neutrality which is not of interest to this study.

**Particular media chosen:**

**Choice of games:**

Since the titles that will be studied in this research projects are its key components, the detailed procedure of their choice has to be discussed. First of all, it is important to note that on top of previously mentioned genre and cultural criteria, games will be divided into two groups. In order for this study to be as detailed as possible it will take a look at both games with female protagonists as well as those with female support characters. Some of the titles will fit in both categories, but many require additional material to be introduced. Studying both protagonists and support characters will give a great comparison potential and will allow for conclusions based on titles released during the same time period. Initially it was considered to compare just protagonists to the results of previous studies, earlier mentioned in the literature review section but it would have caused possible analytical difficulties. It would be difficult to compare own analysis with that made by someone else since many of the criteria remain well obfuscated. Each game that will be selected for this study has to contain an identifiable and visible female character representation, it has to be of AAA quality and released for any platform. Furthermore, to eliminate potentially biased choices of games a researcher could make, it has been decided to analyse 4 most recent games fulfilling the criteria in each previously mentioned genre, released before the end of the year 2013.

With so much pre-set conditions a game must fulfil, the influence of the person studying the topic has been reduced to minimum. With that in mind, two primary sources of information have been chosen. One is a well-respected video game website called Giant Bomb. Among others it contains a section with a complete list of all recently released games that feature a female protagonist (Giant Bomb 2014). The second source is another video game oriented website called GameSpot. It features a complete list of all recent releases.
Using both of those websites together allows for a very reliable list of newest games already published in chronological order. Also, since both websites are game oriented they provide additional information such as developer, distributor, genre and character cast, all necessary to qualify a game for this study. It also shows whether a game belongs to a long standing series or is a standalone product. In case of series, it has been decided that only one title per series will be taken into consideration within each character group. That decision has been once again made for the sake of variety as multiple games from the same series would contain nearly identical character representations and could therefore skew the results of this research.

With all the conditions in mind the following list was created:

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<tr>
<th><strong>Games with female protagonists:</strong></th>
<th><strong>Games with female support characters:</strong></th>
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Choice of Let’s Plays

When it comes to let’s plays the choice procedure was rather minimalist. Since the only difference between different types of let’s plays is the commentary of the creator, it does not affect this study much. Since as previously mentioned, let’s plays are supposed to serve as a third person source of in game footage, the voice over will not be addressed as relevant information. Because of that, a let’s play will be chosen for each game based on YouTube search. The first relevant let’s play search result acquired for each game will be the material for analysis. One condition that has to be fulfilled is that the let’s play covers the game in its entirety so that any part of the in game footage can be accessed at any time.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is a method that is mainly oriented towards understanding messages within specific types of media. Most commonly and traditionally associated with text, content analysis can be broadened and expanded in application to visual data as well. The scientific procedure of content analysis is characterised by its strong connection to the content it studies and therefore it is the best choice for this study (Rose 2001). Content analysis occurs through the usage of so called codes. Codes are categories created by the researcher in order to describe and group the data according to interesting phenomena. Codes can be created deductively which means they are drawn from prior theory or they can be created inductively which means they emerge from the observation of the content. Those two methods do not have to function separately and are very often mixed and intertwined with each other (Berg 2001). Content analysis can be conducted within two major approaches of quantitative or qualitative studies. Within the quantitative tradition, content analysis focuses on frequencies of certain codes and the likelihood of their appearance. It produces quantifiable information that can be used for drawing more generalized conclusions. Qualitative content analysis focuses on the meaning behind certain codes and their possible associations within the context they are present in. As a method it is limited since it does not allow creation of generalized rules or observations but it is an appropriate tool for in-depth analysis of chosen material (ibid.). Qualitative content analysis can study manifest content, which is the content directly present and visible to the researcher but it can also venture into the field of basic semiotic assumptions with the study of latent messages. Latent messages are the connotative meanings associated with the manifest content (Hsiu-Fang, Shannon 2005). They can be understood only within the context they have been presented in and require from the researcher a cultural
expertise. According to theoreticians of semiotics everything perceived in society is constructed from what it actually is and what it symbolized in social context (Schroeder 1998). Semiotics study symbols and their connotative messages under the assumption that those two factors brought together are vital for understanding of the world. One has to look at both sides of the message placed within a larger context to be fully capable of drawing any conclusions about its true value (Peirce et al. 1960). This assumption is implicitly shared by the theoreticians of content analysis of latent messages and it will be important for this work.

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative visual and textual content analysis will be used. The coding used will be created both deductively and inductively. The previously introduced theory of Erving Goffman will be the outline for the initial coding whereas more detailed sub categories will be created based on the content gathered. Further description of the analytical process will be provided in the following section.

**Analytical procedure:**

Each type of introduced media will be studied accordingly. Each game will be played by the researcher for at least 4 hours and then watched as a let’s play for another 4 hours. The let’s plays will cover a different part of the game than what the researcher has already played. That way the actual game experience will cover around 8 hours of gameplay which would in current conditions mean thorough familiarity with on average 50-80% of the entire game\(^1\).

The unit of analysis for this study is a character. In certain cases more than one relevant female character can be present within a game. If that happens, up to 2 characters from the same game will be considered to eliminate the necessity of arbitral choice on the behalf of the researcher. All the chosen media will be observed with characters as primary focus and it’s the characters representation that shall be coded. As previously mentioned, the coding scheme will be approached both deductively and inductively. Initial categories will be drawn directly from terms earlier introduced within Goffman’s framework and they will look as follows:

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\(^1\) The length of each game chosen for this research has been estimated based on the findings of [http://www.howlongtobeat.com/](http://www.howlongtobeat.com/), a website that aggregates average playtimes of its users, providing detailed information on expected game length.
1. Appearances
2. Setting
3. Manner
4. Role
5. Expressions
   a. Given
   b. Given off

Although all the terms have been previously discussed a connection should be made between them and the medium of video games. The code of appearances will be applied directly to the looks of each character chosen for this study. The setting will apply to the general theme of the game, locations included in it as well as the situation in which the character itself is positioned throughout the game. Manner will be applied to the characters behaviour and the characteristics it brings into the role. A role will consist of observations on what is it the character is meant to do and in what relation its function remains to the other characters. Finally all the above categories will be classified according to the way they were communicated. The expressions given will be the information the developers have directly put into the game such as text messages or outside of the action descriptions. The expressions given off will be the information related through the behaviour of the in game character.

Each of those points will be further developed with new sub category codes focused more on the detailed character representations. Since the literature review did not give any unified expectations towards possible observed manifestations, this study will create its own analytical categories through the inductive process of content analysis. It is expected that points such as body image, nudity or morality may become of focus as they did in prior research, but their relevancy will not be assumed unless the data proves it to be of importance. A complete list of the codes that have been created during the study will be provided in the appendix of this paper.

Such structure of the analytical approach will prove meritorious for a variety of reasons. Through the usage of Goffman’s initial categories, the data gathering process will be well structured and take into consideration all the aspects relevant for a proper description of a character in their assumed role. The addition of inductive categories oriented on detailed content will also allow for discussion of female representation in recent games. Some
parallels might be drawn between this and prior research and further comments can be made about similarities and differences in the observed portrayals. Lastly, the variety of aspects studied will allow for a complex, multi perspective look at a new medium, possibly expanding the knowledge on proper procedures of its understanding.

8. Analysis

The analytical section of this study will consist of two parts. First, all the studied characters will be shortly introduced and their important characteristics, uncovered through interpretation of coded data, will be highlighted. Afterwards, the analysis will cover a discussion of certain themes that became apparent once all the characters have been brought together. This manner of organization has been chosen as a familiarity with the characters is an important factor for thorough explanation and understanding of underlying themes. It will also add to the clarity of the text as character exemplifications will not be continuously mixed with more general conclusions. Presentation of all the characters should allow the reader to create their own insights on the quality and validity of further formed conclusions. The last part of the analysis will be a short discussion on the usefulness of the theoretical approach used in this study. It will discuss how applying the previously chosen analytical terms shaped the research process and whether the specific perspectives used have positively added to the value of the study content.

Character descriptions

Protagonists

*Broken Sword 5 – Nicole Collard*

The events of the game are set in Paris, France. During an art gallery show, the gallery owner gets shot and Nicole is one of the guests seeing the event. As a journalist, she immediately decides to investigate becoming one of the centre actors within the story. Nicole is presented as a young and attractive woman but her body proportions are rather realistic. Her clothing style looks very elegant and does not uncover much of her body. During her investigation she is shown as very smart, professional, sarcastic and witty. She is capable of taking care of herself and she often provides help to her friend George, who is the other protagonist of the game. Nicole seems very persistent and she always tries to get the best story
she can to further her career. If necessary, she is portrayed being manipulative towards other people but she claims to not enjoy that process. She maintains a strong relationship with George whom she’s known for years and with whom she solved similar types of mysteries before. Her actions are very consistent with her direct in-game descriptions.

Walking Dead Season 2 – Clementine (Older)

The game takes place in a post-apocalyptic world infested by zombies. In that universe, everyone strives for survival as the outbreak removed all societal elements such as governments and states. People live on constant run and try to survive another day. Clementine is an 11 year old girl who has survived the outbreak for several years. She is very realistically drawn and she wears practical clothing. As a person Clementine is shown to be hardened and slightly bitter. She is still a child but throughout the years she apparently matured and learned how bad the world has become. She is skilled in self-defence and she can handle guns. She appears to not trust others easily and she primarily takes care of herself. Throughout the story, Clementine develops relationships with survivors she meets on her road but those usually prove to be short and shaky. She does not attach to others in fear of losing them similarly to her previous friends. Clementine is the centre of the story and her survival and misadventures are the sole focus of player’s interest within the game. Due to the fact this game is mostly a visual novel there are no significant in-game references that could explain Clementine’s character.

Beyond Two Souls – Jodie Holmes

The game is set in modern day USA. In this universe, the government has been conducting research on so called Infraworld, which is believed to be the place where souls go after death. Infraworld is also filled with monsters which are trying to find their way to the human realm and bring destruction to the world. In that setting, the story focuses specifically on Jodie Holmes. Jodie has the ability to contact the other world as she is attached to an entity who escaped the realm. The game follows her between the ages of 8 and 24. Jodie has been submitted to a variety of governmental experiments that were meant to serve as research for future military usage of the entities. Over the years, both her appearance and character change drastically. The player gets to observe her in stages such as teenage rebellion where she becomes a fashion goth all the way to her career in the CIA where she becomes part of the military personnel herself. On the beginning Jodie appears really scared, dependent on the entity attached to her and the people who are in charge of the experiments. She resents
everything about her life and environment. She is scared of the violence the entity can cause and at a peak point she even tries to take her own life. Throughout the events of the game, Jodie’s journey towards becoming a new confident and strong person is shown. She appears to embrace her abilities and starts using them even for purposeful violence. She seems to take control of her life, confront her past and move on to live a normal life outside the range of the US government. She learns to establish meaningful relationships with other people that are not caused by her dependency on them. Her weaknesses become her strengths as she rebuilds her environment in her own way. Once again, due to the visual novel character of the game, no in-game descriptions have been available for analysis.

*Ace Attorney: Dual Destinies – Athena Cykes*

The events of the game are set within the Japanese legal system. Athena Cykes is a part of an attorney team that picks up a variety of cases to defend. Their cases vary from random crime to personal stories of the primary characters. Athena is a 17 year old girl. She is dressed in a very modern way including visible technological accessories such as an emotion reading necklace. She is presented as very smart and clever. She has studied abroad and speaks several foreign languages. As stated within the game, Athena is one of the youngest attorneys in history. She seems to be very energetic, friendly and eager. She is also shown to be very loyal to her friends. Athena shows a strong moral compass and absolute trust in the legal system. She also has a darker past which becomes unveiled through the course of the game. Her mother has been murdered when she was just a child and that event traumatized Athena, who for many years believed she was the one responsible for it. The game shows her struggle to overcome her past, ultimately ending with her success and Athena becoming a new, stronger person. In-game content mostly presents the side of the character that is happy, energetic and talented without much focus on her potential weaknesses.

*Resident Evil 6 – Ada Wong*

The game is set in modern day world. Locations vary from places such as USA and China to a fictional country called Republic of Edonia. In those places, an evil terrorist organization has released a strain of a virus that immediately kills people upon contact and changes them into zombies. Ada Wong is a spy who gets involved in the story through the association with one of the main antagonists. The main villain of the game is a genetically engineered copy of Ada. Ada is shown within the game as a young woman of Asian descent. She is dressed in tight clothes revealing some of her cleavage. She always wears visible
weapons, with crossbow being the primary one. Ada is shown to be a cold, sarcastic and calculated person. She seems to have no sense of morality or no loyalty to anyone but herself. She gets involved in events only as far as her personal interest requires her and she does so with frequent usage of deadly force. She is skilled in using guns as well as variety of martial arts. She appears to be manipulative and often uses her personal charm to abuse other people. In Resident Evil 6 she is the only character without a cooperative partner which is interesting and reinforces the fact Ada is self-sufficient and does not care for personal relationship. The only person she holds some appreciation and affection for is Leon, another character from the universe. They show mutual trust towards each other and save each other’s lives on multiple occasions. That said, Ada does not allow herself to establish more personal connections as it would be a complication for her career as a spy. All those characteristics are strongly emphasised by the in-game messages the user can unlock.

*Lollipop Chainsaw – Juliet Starling*

Juliet is an 18 year old high school student. She is also by family tradition a zombie hunter. The game is set on the day of her birthday. One of the students, tired of being constantly bullied, decides to perform a magical ritual that summons the zombie gods into the human universe and causes a zombie outbreak within Juliet’s high school. Juliet and her family try to stop the outbreak and bring the peace back again to their small town all in time for Juliet’s birthday dinner. The game has been created as a parody on most common game stereotypes and clichés. Juliet is a highly exaggerated character. She looks highly athletic, overly thin with large chest. She is light blonde and wears her hair in pigtails tied with pink ribbons. Her favourite snacks are lollipops and her trade mark weapon is a rainbow chainsaw. Juliet is shown as very silly and naïve. When her boyfriend gets bitten by one of the zombies she decides to decapitate his body and enchant his head so that they can stay together forever. Despite her obvious silliness she seems very strong, committed and resilient. She shows great love towards her family and friends whom she tries to protect above all else. Her personal bonds and relationships are what drives her to become better. Juliet presses on even when the conditions continuously worsen and her family members are presumed to be dead one by one. She is the main focus of the game and eventually ends up saving the world. The expressions given about her mostly centre on her funny side but they also highlight the strength and fighting skill she holds.
**Bayonetta – Bayonetta**

Events of the game take place in a fantasy world that consists of two realms: the human one and the metaphysical one. Within the metaphysical realm there are two factions struggling in an eternal conflict: Lumen Sages and Umbra Witches. Bayonetta is an Umbra Witch, who wakes up from a 500 year sleep with no memories. She possesses one of two necessary ancient artefacts that can bring the conflict to an end. The game shows Bayonetta’s effort towards finding the second artefact and its eventual consequences. Bayonetta is a very unrealistic character. Her body proportions are completely off with her legs being so long they could not anatomically function. As a witch she has a variety of magical powers but she also excels in melee combat and shooting. Her hair has magical properties and it can morph into a variety of weapons and living beings. At the same time, Bayonetta’s hair shapes around her body creating her highly sexualized outfit. Bayonetta is portrayed as a sarcastic and proud character. She does not have her memories so one of her main goals is to regain them. Most of them time she acts like she does not care about anyone but over the course of the game she seems to develop more personal relations with other game characters. Regaining her memories makes her remember old friendships and allegiances. Her character becomes more complex as her back story is revealed including details such as the fact she has been born from a mixture of Lumen and Witch blood. Shunned by her society for many years, she was a shy child but outgrew her initial fright and became a strong, cynical woman. She does not concern herself with morality and just does what feels right to her. The expressions that are given by the game creators mostly focus on her fighting side with emphasis on her sarcastic and distanced approach to life.

**Wet – Rubi Malone**

Wet is a game set in modern real world. Rubi is a bounty hunter or as she is referred to within the game “a problem solver”. She will do anything for the right price. During the game Rubi gets hired by a powerful drug lord to find and bring back his son. Upon completing the request Rubi learns her customer not only lied to her but also refused her payment. She sets out to find revenge and she stops at noting to achieve it. Rubi is a young girl who is shown to wear military like clothing. Her arms are covered with tattoos. She is always heavily armed using weapons such as katanas, handguns and shotguns. She is a skilled acrobat and melee fighter. Rubi is portrayed as a very cold and merciless killer. She has no moral compass to guide her and she will do anything as long as she gets paid. She seems to enjoy mindless violence and very often treats others with extreme brutality. She is vulgar, easily angered and
she is shown to despise those surrounding her. She stays in contact with a few people who she considers potential assets and help in her profession. The explicit in-game content highlights her ability to kill and her lack of compassion for others.

*Remember me – Nilin*

The game takes place in the setting of post-apocalyptic France. Technology progress allowed for creation of software that allows people to extract or continuously relive their own memories. In that way memories can be shared with others and issues one might want to forget can be easily removed. That invention led to new types of addiction and a significant shift in power. It also opened a lot of potential for abuse and manipulation. A group of opposition has been formed trying to destroy the memory industry and bring back the balance in the world. Nilin herself is a so called memory hunter. She has the power to access people’s memories within their heads and alter them according to her own will. On the beginning of the game she is trapped in a memory testing facility from which she escapes. She decides to join the opposition and get to the bottom of the abuse caused by the memory owning corporation. Nilin is rather young and presented in a balanced way. Her body proportions are realistic and her clothing is tight but covering. She looks weary futuristic as her outfit is enhanced with technological appliances expanding the range of her movements. Nilin is a very skilled melee fighter and she is good at climbing and acrobatics. As a person she is very self-sufficient. She appears to be committed to the cause she decided to follow and consistently pursue the goals she set for herself. She seems to be cautious as she does not trust people immediately and second guess their true intentions. As a memory hunter she manifests rather dubious morality as she can easily manipulate people and turn them on their side with unfair methods. Her social links are very limited as she has only one friend whom she actually trusts. She also cooperates with the leader of the opposition called Edge, but their relationship is rather distant and questionable. In the end Nilin manages to overturn the world order, but she learns that she was also the origin of it. The in-game content seems to mostly emphasise Nilin’s memory hunting talents and fighting proficiency.

*Tomb Raider – Lara Croft*

Events of the game take place in modern day world. Lara Croft is a young archaeologist on her first adventure to discover an ancient civilization that has been considered lost for centuries. During her travels her ship sinks stranding her and her crew on a strange island. It’s inhabited by all the other people who crashed there previously and who
have formed a cult focused on human sacrifice. Lara has to save her friends and find a way to escape the seemingly cursed island. Lara is a young girl who just graduated from University. She wears casual clothing appropriate for exploration. Throughout the game her looks change as all damage she sustains affects it. Lara is presented as a smart, thoughtful and kind person. She seems to have a lot of knowledge on history but also survival and fighting. She always wears visible weapons most notably a bow, a handgun and a climbing hook. She can be vulnerable at times but she never stops despite all her weaknesses. She is portrayed as a good person who goes through a lot of emotional trauma when she is forced to kill others. In the end, she does what it takes to survive and to help her friends. The bonds she has with other characters are very important and seem to be a strong driving force behind her actions. During the course of the game multiple friendly characters die and Lara continuously blames herself for that. Her adventure makes her grow as a person and the player gets to observe the changes in her as due to her experiences she hardens and becomes more effective at what she does. The in-game messages put a lot of emphasis on Lara’s knowledge and talent but they also attempt to show her softer side which can’t be directly accessed through her actions. Through materials such as letters or old video footage Lara is shown as a friendly, caring and thoughtful girl. As the character evolves, the given impressions change a lot as well. Most significant change can be observed in the game’s ending sequence where an announcement is made that “a survivor was born”, referring to Lara’s new found confidence and ability.

Assassin’s Creed 3: Liberation – Avaline

The game is set in a French colony in Northern America in the late 18th century. Main character, Aveline de Grandpré is a daughter of a white noble man and a slave. She was granted her freedom upon birth but she still lives in an environment where slave labour is prominent. As a young lady of a noble home Aveline is expected to behave appropriately for the polite society but she secretly joins the brotherhood of Assassin’s who among other things, oppose slavery and try to help those in need. Aveline appears in 3 roles. She can choose to either be a Lady, an Assassin or a Slave. Depending on the role chosen at the moment her looks and clothing change. Each role has also different skills and capabilities. As a lady, Aveline is dressed in a traditional corseted gown and she has skills such as bribery, flirting and influence. As an Assassin she is dressed in a traditional hooded garb, covering her entire body and she has the abilities necessary to kill her eventual targets. As a slave she wears a set of badly damaged rags but she gains the capability of blending in with other slaves, talking with them and investigating the lands of their owners. Aveline’s personality
seems to be rather ambiguous. Depending on her persona she can be charming and polite or
dauntless, brave and powerful. In all her forms, she seems to have a fierce sense of justice and
order. Her loyalties belong to those she considers right and they can change as new facts are
revealed. She has a tight relationship with her father and she dearly loves her mother who was
kidnapped when Aveline was a child. Other than that, Aveline puts her mission in life first,
refusing to marry or form other more permanent attachments. Within the game she is
described on one hand through her sense of justice and the righteousness of her acts but on the
other she is also commented on for her constant refusal to conform to common societal
standards.

Alice Madness Returns – Alice Liddel

The game takes place in two worlds. On one hand, some segments take place in the
real world but on the other the majority plays out in the world of Wonderland, inspired by
“Alice in Wonderland” by Lewis Carrol. Alice, is a young girl who is a patient in an asylum.
Her entire family has died in a fire and this event traumatized her. To protect herself, she took
refuge in the previously visited space of Wonderland but due to the negative thoughts she was
trying to escape the entire universe have become twisted. It is infested by monsters and all
creatures and environments have become disgusting and dangerous. Alice has to save
Wonderland in order to finally deal with her past trauma. The whole universe is drawn in a
very grotesque manner with only Alice looking fairly normal. She wears the traditional outfit
from the book, but it is bloodied and it adapts to the environment. Furthermore, Alice carries
weapons such as for example a vorpal blade which is a big kitchen knife. Alice is portrayed as
a very strong yet unstable person. She is persistent in her struggle against her past and she
does not back down when the events become challenging. She has a very vivid imagination
which helps her deal with reality. She can be very sarcastic at times and interestingly
enough, she is aware of the entire extent of her own madness. By the end of the game, she
realizes her main psychiatrist has been the one behind her family’s deaths, she confronts him
and kills him, saving her own sanity and memories. The in-game commentary on Alice
reveals further details about her childhood, her stubbornness and problems she has always
been causing. It also emphasizes how crazy she is becoming.
**Support**

*Walking Dead Season 1 – Clementine*

The first season of Walking Dead begins on the day of a zombie outbreak. The game follows a convict who due to a car accident caused by zombies manages to escape his time in jail. His fight for survival is accompanied by a small girl whom he accidentally finds hidden in a tree house. With her parents presumably dead he starts taking care of her, making sure she survives. The girl’s name is Clementine and she is 8 years old. She is wearing a white dress and a baseball cap given to her by her father. She seems to not understand what is happening around her and she continuously believes her parents are still alive. Clementine appears to be very trusting, sometimes naïve and often childish. She gets easily scared and she needs to be protected by others. Her safety is the priority for a variety of characters which usually meet an untimely death trying to protect her. Despite all the bad events, Clementine tries to keep up a simple world view, believing in most people and their good intentions. She never loses hope and she easily befriends people.

*L.A. Noire – Elsa Lichtmann*

The game takes place in 1947 in Los Angeles. The main character is an officer of the LAPD who is tasked with solving a variety of crime investigations. Through them he uncovers a greater conspiracy and becomes personally involved in it. Elsa Lichtmann is a love interest of the protagonist Cole Phelps. She is a cabaret singer who becomes acquainted with Cole during one of his cases. Despite the fact Cole is married, they begin a romantic relationship. Elsa looks rather realistically and dresses in a variety of manners. During her everyday time she wears classical conservative clothes of the time era but her signature outfit is her scene costume which is a low cut, tight purple dress. Elsa appears to be a very conflicted character with many problems. She is addicted to drugs and very dependent on her patrons at the club she works at. She is often abused and mistreated by others including being slapped by high end guests she has to work with. She is also continuously offended due to her German nationality. If she wants, she can be smart and helpful during some of the investigations. She uses flirting and sexuality as her weapon. She is limited by men in her environment and doesn’t step outside of the lines they set for her. Her relationship with Cole becomes central for her wellbeing and allows her to deal with her drug problem. Upon his death she once again becomes shunned by society as the illegal lover and she is left with nothing. Within the game Elsa is mostly described through characters other than Cole and
those descriptions are very offensive and aggressive. Words such as for example “German slut” are used repeatedly.

*Professor Layton and the miracle mask – Emmy Altava*

The game takes place in a real world setting in the imaginary city of Monte d’Or. It focuses on Hershel Layton who is a known professor specializing in solving puzzles. He is tasked to help the Scotland Yard in discovering the truth behind a recent spree of crime in the little city founded by one of his childhood friends. Emmy Altava is the professor’s assistant. She accompanies him during his investigations, trying to unearth extra information and make sure he takes proper care of himself. Emmy is a young woman who is dressed in rather elegant clothes. She always wears a suit with a bow tie. She seems to be a smart and talented woman. She can solve puzzles on par with the professor. She appears to be quite rash and she gets involved in events before thinking everything through. She also seems to be a motherly figure taking care of the professor and his young apprentice, Luke. She has a tight bond with both of them and she is usually the one thinking about their well-being. In-game Emmy is also described as a capable fighter and fit person but none of that is visible in her actions.

*Portal 2 – GLaDOS*

The game takes place in a futuristic testing facility. The main character is trapped in a science centre built from a variety of chambers meant to test her puzzling skills and agility. GLaDOS is the AI running the facility. Due to the events of the game, her position in charge is overtaken by another character and her consciousness gets transferred into a potato. GLaDOS is an AI but her initial physical form greatly resembles that of a bound woman. Furthermore, as the player learns throughout the game, she used to be one of the women helping out at the facility. GLaDOS has therefore a rather dual personality. On one hand, as the head of the facility she is evil, mean spirited and cruel. She spends a lot of time trying to offend and kill the player. When she becomes her potato form, she discovers the person she used to be. She is shown to have been in love with the founder of the facility. She was his assistant and he never noticed the love she had for him. Eventually when the founder died and a new system of control was being developed, a need arose to use human consciousness to create the perfect AI. That’s how GLaDOS, who’s human name was Caroline, became what she is within the game. Through the course of the game, the player helps GLaDOS retrieve the control of the facility. As soon as she is in charge again, she makes a decision to erase all the human memories she regained as they make her weak and would not serve her job well.
Within the game GLaDOS is a character which terrifies everyone and drives the test subjects crazy. As Caroline, she is presented to have been a caretaker and a person committed to the cause of bettering society through science.

*BioShock Infinite – Elizabeth*

The events of the game take place in a fantasy utopia called Columbia. It is a city floating in the sky after its leader prophet Comstock decided to detach it from the corrupted world of below. The player takes on a role of Booker DeWitt, a person who is tasked with infiltrating Columbia and freeing a girl called Elizabeth. Elizabeth is a young woman who has lived in the city her entire life. Due to her uncommon abilities of opening tears in the time-space continuum she has been locked away in a tower since she was a child. She grew up alone spending her time reading, sewing and learning to play musical instruments. She is guarded by Songbird, a monstrous mechanical bird that won’t allow her to ever go out. Booker eventually manages to break her free and the majority of the game consists of their travels together. Elizabeth changes significantly throughout the game. On the beginning she has long hair, balanced clothing consisting of a white shirt and long blue pants. She is carefree and eager to explore the world. She is enthusiastic, happy and open to people. All that changes after she witnesses Booker kill one of the guards pursuing both of them. She becomes terrified of him and runs away. Booker chases her across the city and when he reaches her, he is jumped by several guards who almost kill him. Elizabeth comes to his help killing a person herself. This event changes her completely. She cuts of her hair, she changes her clothes to remove the blood and wears a blue corseted deeply cut dress. She understands why she has to escape the city which is spiralling out of control. Her escape has motivated the oppressed minorities to rebel and the whole island is on fire. Elizabeth begins using her ability to open tears and aid Booker’s fighting efforts but she never kills another person. Ultimately it turns out, that Elizabeth is Booker’s daughter whom he sold as a child. Through very complicated plot twists the game arrives at the point where Elizabeth explains to Booker how to save the world and all the events reset to the time before the two of them separated. In-game Elizabeth is mostly referred to as an object necessary for the survival of the city. Her main purpose is to be a symbol for the citizens and her personal happiness is of no concern to anyone.
GTA V – Amanda de Santa

GTA is a game set in a universe resembling modern world. It takes place in the city of Los Santos which was created based on Los Angeles. The events of the game follow three main protagonists as they commit their crimes and try to become rich. Michael de Santa is one of the characters. He used to be a bank robber but after striking a deal with a government agency called FIB, he entered the witness protection program. Due to the events of the game he begins the life of crime again which greatly affects not only him but also his family. Amanda de Santa is Michael’s wife. When they first met she used to be a striper. They married young and after Michael entered the protection program they moved together to Los Santos to live a wealthy life. Amanda is a mid-aged woman. She always wears revealing clothing and her cleavage is rather big. As mentioned in game, it is the effect of plastic surgery. Amanda seems to have a lot of anger issues and frustration built up because of her family. She lives a life of a socialite spending her time playing tennis or practicing yoga. She continuously has affairs which she uses to purposefully annoy her husband. She is also a shoplifter. After one of Michael’s friends visits his home and threatens his family, Amanda decides to leave him for a younger lover. Together with the kids, she moves out. After a while, she starts showing the care she still has for Michael. In the end the family reunites and gives each other a second chance. That leads to their kidnapping and near death. After being rescued by Michael, she seems to realize how important he is to her and they agree to try family therapy. Within the game, Amanda is most commonly referred to offensively and in anger with words such as for example “dumb bitch”.

GTA V – Tracey de Santa

Tracey is the daughter of Michael and Amanda. She is a teenager but she dresses a lot like an adult. Her breasts are rather large and all her outfits are very revealing. She also has a tattoo on her back, a so called “tramp stamp”. She is very frustrated as her dad is trying to control her life. She is trying to make a carrier in the entertainment industry mostly through undressing and being inappropriate which drives her father crazy. She seems highly sexualized but she is still very naïve. She has a difficult relationship with her brother, whom she claims she hates. After her family moves out from their house, she is the first one to show some care and worry for her father. She tries to keep in touch with him through emails and text messages, making sure he is alright. After the kidnapping she also changes her ways and promises to be more committed to the family. Also, she begins to strengthen the bond she has with her father and brother as they attempt to help her actually achieve the success she wants.
In-game the way Tracey is most often referred to is through words such as “bimbo”.

*Resident evil 6 – Sherry Birkin*

In the zombie infested world of Resident Evil 6, Sherry is a young government agent tasked with escorting one of the protagonists, Jake, back to USA. Jake, is believed to have a gene in his blood that could lead to a development of an effective vaccine. Sherry is a well-proportioned character. Her clothing changes depending on the environment. Usually she wears a set of comfortable military clothing with visible weapons. During the game she also becomes captured and imprisoned in a science facility. She is then stripped of all her weapons and she wears very revealing clothing revealing somewhat large breasts, not visible otherwise. Sherry is shown as a shy and insecure girl. She has already survived one zombie outbreak as a child which was caused by her parents. She became infected with another strain of the virus and it made her develop immunity and extreme healing abilities. She is trained in knife combat and shooting. With all that experience she still second guesses most of her own choices. Even though she is supposed to help Jake, he ends up being the one in charge, continuously saving her from danger. She never takes initiative and relies on others to make decisions for her. She seems to trust people easily and gets as easily deceived. She can be emotional but she can be also reasonable. She has strong bonds with other survivors she met before. She trusts them unquestionably and follows their order above those of her superiors. Within the game she is mostly described through her prior experience with the outbreaks, often being referred to as the survivor.

*Resident Evil 6 – Helena Harper*

Helena Harper is a Secret Service agent, tasked with protecting the president. Due to her actions, one of the outbreaks takes place, infecting the president and sending the country into havoc. Helena is dressed rather elegantly but her breasts are largely on display. She always wears a visible handgun. Her actions in the game seem to be driven mostly by personal agenda. She agrees to help the terrorists to save her sister who was kidnapped as leverage. Despite her actions, her sister is still infected and Helena sets out to avenge her. She appears to be very emotional, rash and acts on impulse. She is unable to make decisions in critical times and she relies on her partner to choose what to do. She seems bad at acting in high stress situations. She is skilled in shooting and fighting but can get easily distracted by her environment, putting herself and others in danger. She does not trust people and she wants to attain her goals at all costs. She does not hesitate to abandon her duties and pursue her
personal interest. Over the course of the game she develops a trusting relationship with her partner Leon and learns to face consequences of her own actions. In-game she is mostly discussed through her intense relationship with her sister and the emotional responses her death triggered.

*Max Payne 3 – Giovanna Taveres*

Events of the game are set in modern time Brazil. Max Payne is a bodyguard for hire. He is tasked with protecting a famous family. Due to local conflicts his task becomes harder than planned with multiple kidnappings and death among the family members. Giovanna Taveres is one of the family members. Her sister married the head of the family entering its closest circles. Giovanna has lived with her sister ever since. She is a young, elegantly dressed woman. She is in early stages of pregnancy which is the result of her secret affair with one of the other bodyguards. She is a socialite but also a charity worker who cares about her community. She gets in trouble while delivering the ransom money for her sister. The sister dies in the process and Giovanna needs to be rescued by Max. During their escape she appears scared, easily stressed and unreasonable. She is very emotional and acts irrationally. She can’t take care of herself often requiring Max’s assistance and putting herself in unnecessary danger. Other than that she can be also persistent and wilful. She shows the will to survive and ultimately always pushes through. After her escape, she is rescued by her lover and they run away together. She is portrayed as a caring person who has strong relationships with her sister and her love interest. She develops a solid friendship with Max who she respects for the commitment he made to her family.

*Assassin’s Creed 4 – Anne Bonny*

The game takes place in a historical setting of the Golden Age of Pirates which happened in the 18th century in the Caribbean Sea. The player controls Edward Kenway, a privateer who left his hometown to find fortune as a pirate. During his adventures he becomes involved with the associations of Assassins and Templars who are opposing forces in a secret conflict. Anne Bonny is a character the protagonist first meets as a tavern wench. She is young and dressed in uncovering clothes. She appears distanced and sarcastic. She was married young but she became estranged from her husband rather quickly. She falls in love with another pirate and they elope together and start a common life of piracy. She becomes pregnant with his child but not long after, their ship is attacked by the British and the entire crew is imprisoned and sentenced to death. As in those times, killing pregnant women was
banned by law, her death is postponed and she is rescued by the Assassins. She gives birth shortly after, but due to harsh conditions her child quickly dies. She joins forces with Edward and becomes the quartermaster on board of his ship. During that time more insight into her character is available as she is shown to be more emotional than initially portrayed. She is depressed due to the death of her child and she has trouble dealing with continuing fighting for the assassin cause. She usually avoids combat and stays behind when Edward needs to kill someone. She develops a tight, friendly relationship with him and they both learn to rely on each other. After Edward quits his life of piracy, Anne resigns from continuing to help the assassin’s and sets out to find her own way of life, not knowing where she will go. The character is loosely based on a historical figure of the same name who was a pirate as well. The game has taken a lot of artistic freedom altering her biography to fit with the game universe.

Assassin’s Creed 4 – Mary Reid

Mary Reid is another female pirate. Most of the game, she actually pretends to be a male under the alias of Captain James Kidd. She is associated with the brotherhood of Assassin’s and follows their creed. Mary is a strong and dedicated woman who decided to cover her gender to further her pirating career. She reveals her identity to Edward, but besides him and Anne Bonny, no one else knows her true identity. She is a guide and equal partner to Edward, whom she believes capable of joining the brotherhood. She takes a stand for him, protecting him from death orders that have been put on his head. She is a capable fighter and leader. She is fully committed to the assassin cause and willing to die to protect it. After the ship on which both Anne and she sailed gets captured, Mary is also sentenced to death but she is also pregnant. She gives birth in the prison but soon dies from infection. Her body is retrieved by Edward, who promises to avenge her death. Mary Reid is also based on a real life pirate. Historical accounts mention her habit of disguising as a man as well as her capture. She and Anne Bonny were the only two female pirates ever convicted to the death sentence. It is difficult to say how much of her video game representation was created by the designers and how much was directly drawn from history.

Tomb Raider – Samantha Nishimura

In the mystery island setting of Tomb Raider, Samantha joins the adventure as a film maker. Her task is to document the entire trip and produce a documentary based on it. She is a young girl of Asian descent. She is dressed in comfortable, every day clothes. She is
supposedly related to an ancient queen of the civilization Lara Croft is investigating. Due to that fact, upon their crash she is kidnapped by the local cult who believes she is the key to restoring their old queen to power. Samantha seems to be easily scared and relies heavily on Lara. They have been university friends for many years and developed a sisterly bond. After being rescued the first time, the player gets to experience Sam in her more casual self. She appears to be very friendly, easy going, caring and trusting. She has always been the one trying to make Lara experience life and relax once in a while. She gets kidnapped again which shows her inability to fend for herself and react to dangerous situations. She almost gets killed in a ritualistic sacrifice but is saved by Lara at the last moment. During that time she is shown to be wearing a long white gown and a wreath on her head. In-game she is primarily described as her carefree and cheerful self. Pictures and letters of her from her time in Harvard are a prominent form of describing her.

_Last of us – Ellie_

The game is set in a post-apocalyptic world where a fungal infection killed most of the population. The infected are raised from the dead and become zombie like creatures. Societal organization changed and old governments took control and forced people into quarantines killing everyone who might be infected or who might oppose the system. An opposition movement was created called the Fireflies. They fight for freedom, free access to information and to find a possible cure. Ellie is a young girl who is associated with the fireflies. She is casually dressed and carries no visible weapons. She is believed to be immune to the infection and be a possible solution for the cure. She is to be escorted to the firefly headquarters in another city by a hired muscle called Joel. Ellie is shown to be an inexperienced child. She does not possess any significant survival skills but she is rather mature for her age. She has been taught caution and she seems very careful who to trust to. She appears to be very hopeful and she wants to help people whenever possible. She develops a mutual bond of trust and care with the main character. She is shown as very caring and emotional about things happening around her. She learns to take better care of herself and to fight. She is scared and not that skilled but she tries her best. Within the game she is often referred to as possible hope, but also as a possible annoyance for the main character. That changes as the story progresses and their friendship strengthens.
The game is set in a fantasy modern world that is controlled by demons. In this universe, demons and angels have fought and the demons have won. They control the modern human society by the comforts of consumerist lifestyle such as addictive sugar drinks and media entertainment. The demons normally appear to be human but there is a parallel pane of existence called Limbo in which they show their true form. Dante, the main character of the story, is a Nephilim, born of a union of an angel and a demon. He can access both planes and he has the power to kill the demons. As he poses a threat, he is continuously tracked by the demons. Kat is a young girl who warns Dante of another impending attack. She helps him escape and introduced him to his long estranged brother. Kat has psychic and witch powers which allow her to open portals between the planes of existence but she can’t cross them herself. Kat wears very revealing and modern clothing. Her chest and her legs are constant points of focus of the camera. She is shown to be a very scared and insecure person. She does not trust others easily due to the traumatic events of her childhood. She had an abusive father she eventually killed to be able to run away. With help of Virgil, Dante’s brother, she committed her life to fighting demons. Her most significant drive is the love she has for Virgil, who saved her from her old life. Despite her impressive skills, Kat often requires assistance of others and is fully dependent and controlled by them. She only speaks when allowed and takes action when told to do so. She is easily deceived and can’t handle herself well in face of danger.

Themes

The short summaries of character information provide a general overview of the meaning and interpretations of character representations this study arrived at. By themselves, those observations are of purely descriptive value as to gain the proper scientific merit they have to be interpreted in combination with each other. Through the comparison of the protagonist and support characters, a variety of trends within character representation has been identified. They will be further presented and discussed in this section. The themes together with the character descriptions will create a solid ground towards the drawing of further conclusions and the final attempt of answering the initial research question.
Appearances

According to Goffman’s theory, different performances might require changes in appearances. Based on that fact it could be expected that there will be some differences between how the protagonists and the support characters look like. Surprisingly, there is also more similarities than one might expect.

What should become apparent in all the character descriptions is the youth and beauty of all the women. There is not a single character that would be portrayed as old or even aged. It was impossible to establish the exact age of all the characters but based on the information acquired through playthroughs it seems the study includes characters that range from 8 to around 40 years old. The oldest one shows no signs of aging and looks younger than some of the others.

In terms of body proportions it is hard to draw definite conclusions as misrepresentation of those is present among both protagonist and support characters. Most of the characters are represented rather realistically in that respect but that doesn’t change the fact all of them are thin and athletic. There is not a single character that would possess any visible flaws. There are some significant differences in the way the characters dress depending on their roles. One of the most interesting changes would be that of Clementine. As she changes from a support character to a protagonist her clothing goes from a flowy, white dress to jeans and a t-shirt. That metamorphosis explains well the differences of clothing between the roles. With some exceptions protagonist characters most often wear covering, comfortable clothing whereas support characters are more prone to wearing revealing clothes emphasising their sexuality.

Similar setting, different behaviour

If we refer back to Goffman’s theory, different settings require different manners of behaviour. Based on that logic we could assume that similar settings should require similar manners. Any eventual differences can be therefore more strongly related to the impact of the role. Despite the variety of games within the sample, several similar settings have been observed. Interestingly enough, they are rather evenly distributed among both support and protagonist characters. The settings can be described as: mystery in case of Broken Sword and Professor Layton, crime in L.A. Noire and Ace Attorney, island escape in Tomb Raider and Bioshock Infinite and finally eternal conflict between light and dark within Bayonetta and
DmC: Devil May Cry. All of those sets of games share a similar approach to the world, similar plot goals and story mechanisms.

With all those resemblances within the setting, looking at character behaviour can allow further conclusions on the significance of the role. In the games themed with mystery both women play a similar yet different role. They are both parts of an investigation but where Nicole takes charge and helps out George, Emmy is dependent on the professor and requires his assistance. It seems to function similarly in the comparison between L.A. Noire and Ace Attorney. Both Elsa and Athena have their shortcomings and dark events in their pasts but where Athena makes sense of her life and becomes a successful attorney within the justice system, Elsa just stands by her man being only as useful as he decides her to be, taking the abuse of others. In Tomb Raider, Lara starts off as an inexperienced young woman who is terrified of killing people but she eventually matures to take charge of her own escape whereas Elizabeth even after her metamorphosis still remains dependent on Booker and can’t handle her own safety. In this case one could say, Lara had more personal connections at stake than Elizabeth which could partially explain her will to fight but in the latter part of the game Elizabeth becomes equally committed to helping the opposition yet she still can’t do it by herself. In Bayonetta, the main character directly acts within the conflict and chooses her own path whereas in DmC Kat is fully dependent on the men around her and does not take any initiative. Both women command magical powers but even those are differently distributed as Bayonetta has immense fighting skills whereas Kat’s skills only allow her to partially assist others. This short comparison shows that even in similar situations, women can behave differently if the role they are cast in is different. In lead positions they can stay brave and hold their own whereas in support roles they become immediately overpowered and need assistance of others.

**Independence – dependence**

Within what Goffman would call the manner of the characters a variety of features such as their personality traits, skills and tendencies have been identified. The most prominent characteristic that has been already hinted at in the previous paragraph and that has been observed in all characters is their degree of independence. It is very clear to see that all protagonist characters manifest a rather strong sense of independence whereas support characters are often in need of assistance and can’t survive on their own. Characters such as Rubi, Bayonetta, Nicole, Alice, Nilin, Avaline or Ada Wong manifest the strongest sense of
self sufficiency acting somewhat as lone hunters. They prefer to spend their time away from others and even if they do develop certain relationships, they do not consider them necessary for their well-being. They most often interact with people who are useful to them and can somehow add to their assets. Jodie and Clementine (Older) are still very independent but they have a few relationships they care about. They want to form lasting bonds with others but they know they can only count on themselves when it comes to survival. They are skilled and can make it on their own. Lara, Athena and Juliet need others to be able to continue their fight but they need them mostly on an emotional level. They have enough skill and knowledge to take care of themselves but others are important to them and drive them towards constant self-improvement.

The division between protagonist characters and support characters is also a division between degrees of independence and degrees of dependence. Most independent women among the support characters are the pirates Anne Bonny and Mary Reid. They have skills that have allowed them to live their lives successfully but they eventually require help and assistance as they can’t always survive on their own. Anne takes up a position of a helper voluntarily and is capable of fulfilling it appropriately and by her own accord. Emmy is a character who is smart and skilled enough to achieve her goals but as an assistant she never acts without the professor. Sometimes she takes action on her own behalf but that usually ends with her needing assistance and deciding it was a wrong choice in the first place. She is slightly more dependent than the pirate women as she mostly doesn’t act without a request from the professor. Helena as well and Sherry are fully dependent on the men they accompany as they are unable to make their own decisions. They always look for guidance and are too insecure to make binding choices. Despite their large variety of skills they often misuse them, act rashly and put themselves in danger that they need to be helped from. Elizabeth should be counted in the same category although her skills are of a different kind. She is not capable of physically fighting but her super natural control of time and space makes her more than fit to survive on her own. Despite that fact, she is unable do so and her life is fully dependent on Booker. As we go the characters become more and more dependent on others with examples such as Clementine, GLaDOS, Giovanna, and Ellie. They are simply characters too weak to be on their own and as such they require help of someone else. It is especially visible in case of GLaDOS who is stripped of her power and does not appreciate being in the position of dependency she is forced into. In the case of those characters the dependency can be called justified as two of them are children, one is a pregnant woman and the last one is forced to spend the majority of the game as a potato. Finally, the last group
would consist of Elsa, Kat, Amanda and Tracey. They are characters that are not only fully dependent on men but they are also abused by them. Elsa is called offensive names, slapped and disrespected. She passively accepts all of it and does nothing to improve her own situation. Kat does not even dare to speak without permission and during her kidnapping she is a victim of violent torture. Amanda and Tracey are referred to as “bitches” and “bimbos” and have to go through all the drama of Michael’s live. They are treated poorly and most of the time they can do nothing about it.

The issue of dependency takes a prominent place in each and every game creating a very strong distinction between support and protagonist characters. It is important that this issue has been analysed based on the manner with which the characters behave towards others and the not events they participate in. Lara Croft has survived attempts on her life as well as possible rape scenarios but it is her behaviour during those times that had been discussed and not just the presence of those events within her story.

**Violence**

Another theme that also seems to logically follow is the usage of violence. In the previous paragraph it became visible, that the degree of independence is very often connected to the amount of skill the characters possess. Those skills most often refer to the characters survival and fighting abilities. Possession of such skills naturally changes the character’s approach to violence. Both types of characters engage in violent activities but the protagonists are the only ones that sometimes enjoy the idea of violence against other living beings. Rubi is a rare example of a woman who enjoys mindless violence and is especially cruel to those she kills. She has no respect for human life and ending it is her form of entertainment. There are also characters that kill in a cold, manipulative manner to achieve their goals. Examples of such behaviour would be Ada Wong, Nilin or Alice. Other characters that engage in violence do it either to survive or to somehow fulfil their own moral code according to which death of certain people might be a good deed. In case of some of the other analysed characters declaring their attitude towards violence is problematic as the creatures they fight are supernatural. It is difficult to say whether the joy with which Juliet kills zombies should be considered mindless violence as zombies are considered to be soulless monsters that pose a threat to humanity. Ada Wong, Nilin and Alice all have at one point or another killed human beings and that’s what this section comments upon. Another interesting angle of discussion of violence is the fact that it seems that both support and protagonist characters are equally often
subject to it. All the females are often physically attacked or abused. Furthermore, almost all the games studied featured violent content in some explicit manner. Even though this point is of no direct interest to this study it seems an important remark for future research possibilities.

**Character development**

Another observable theme is that of character development. Personal change is an important process in the life of many of the characters. It applies almost exclusively to the protagonists. Bayonetta and Nilin take a journey of discovering their memories and their source of origin. They are tasked with solving a mystery and resolving a conflict in which they discover they are central actors themselves. The journey explores different layers of their characters and presents them as more complex personas. Athena is presented in a similar situation with her attempts to deal with past traumas and revisiting events of her past. The user learns more of her darker sides and accompanies her as she becomes a stronger and more aware person. Jodie, Lara and Alice are also submitted to a path of discovery. They start as weak and inexperienced characters which throughout their adventure learn their true strengths and finally take their own destiny into their hands. The development of all those characters is most commonly a very important plot point and experiencing it is what drives the players forward. In case of support characters the only ones who experience some type of change are Elizabeth and GLaDOS. In case of Elizabeth the change of her appearance and conviction doesn’t change her dependency on the protagonist and moves her approach from passive resistance to active support. The change she goes through remains obscured and is not focused on so much. The example of GLaDOS is even more interesting as during the game the player has an impression that the character is really changing her outlook on the world yet at the end it becomes apparent that all of the change is discarded and it never truly occurred. This difference in character development can be explained through usage of game design theory which gives some space to specifically this topic. Character development is a tool used for immersing the player deeper into the story and since the main experience of the user focuses on the playable character it is obvious that expanding the story of specifically that person is most important. Support characters have to be believable and interesting but their role is to complete the main character and not overshadow it (Adams, Rollings 2010).
Expressing given vs. given off

The entirety of behaviour analysed in this study can be identified as the expressions given off by the actions of the characters. Most of the productions also contain explicit developer created descriptions of the characters which can be treated as expressions that were meant to be given to the player. The differences and inconsistencies in these messages are therefore important to look at. In case of the protagonists both type of messages seem fairly consistent and positive. The female characters are praised on a variety of their features such as fighting capabilities, knowledge or general amiability. Same does not apply to the support characters. As already previously discussed, they are sometimes targets of offensive content. Elsa, Amanda and Tracey are continuously described with swear words and all their negative features despite the fact the game also shows them in positive situations. In the expressions given emphasis is put on their shortcomings. Characters such as Elizabeth or Ellie are very commonly described as objects. They are keys to solving a problem and they are referred to through their usefulness. Finally Kat, Emmy, Anne and Sherry are described as having a variety of skills and talents which on the most part are not shown or not as good as described. Kat’s abilities which are highlighted by the expressions given prove only partially useful. Emmy is praised on her agility and fighting skills which she never uses in this particular game. Anne is a successful pirate yet during most of the important events she is not present and the user doesn’t get to see her pirating abilities. Sherry is constantly called a survivor and a talented, young agent but as previously discussed she proves to be vulnerable and often needing assistance of others to pull through.

Assessment of the theoretical approach:

The theoretical model presented in the early sections of this paper has been consistently used on all the levels of this study and as such its observed benefits should be discussed. The work of G.H. Mead served mostly as a guideline towards understanding and approaching games. His descriptions present games as communicative acts focused on multiple characters fulfilling a variety of roles yet functioning as one system. This observation has served as an important analytical cue for treating games as entire systems and drawing character conclusions based on interactions and relations between the different in game world elements. Mead’s theory has therefore been present in principle with its explicit results not being immediately accessible to the reader. Its input has proven invaluable as it allowed for the complex understanding of video games desired through various scholars described in the
background information section. Basic principles of semiotics have also been present in a similar manner. They allowed the study of both manifest and latent content therefore expanding the area accessible to the researcher. Study of latent messages was not an easy task but it was limited to simple observations such as personal characteristics and values. Finally, the most prominently and visibly used theoretical approach was that or E. Goffman. His dramaturgical approach and terms associated with it have shaped not only the methodological side of things but also the analytical process. By looking at the data gathered through his scope, this study managed to focus on points related to role playing without floating off topic. Furthermore, as it can be seen in the structure of the themes section, each of the analytical terms suggested by Goffman has been a key element to uncovering connected elements of character representation. Gofman’s framework proved to be useful during all the steps of the study design, data gathering and analysis process and despite its traditional character it turned out to be fully applicable within the realm of video games.

9. Discussion

Based on the material presented in the analytical section, the research question of this study can be finally answered. The initial prediction of this paper has been shown to be correct as the gathered material shows that women are portrayed differently depending on the role they fulfil. To be even more specific, women cast as protagonists are more likely to be strong and independent whereas women cast as support characters are more likely to be weak and dependent, sometimes even stereotyped. A lead role can be associated with greater interest in the character’s story development as well as their increased skills, capabilities and tolerance of violence. Support characters are of less importance and as such they play an inferior role, being often objects of rescue or continuous assistance on behalf of the protagonists. This is best exemplified by the discussed cases of games which show different character behaviour within similar settings. The differences in expressions given and given off by the characters in both positions seem to further the idea of role distinction. The exposition of support characters is less favourable than that of protagonists which might mean that the role given to a character changes the perception connected to them by the game’s developers. The study also shows that there are some factors that connect all female representations such as appearances or being subject to violence but even with those features the landscape of character portrayal is, as initially assumed, internally differentiated.
As earlier discussed, the applicability of this research is limited by its method and sample but it is nonetheless important in a variety of ways. First of all, the results of this study show that gender representation in video games is potentially affected by other factors than just gender. Some of the variety in modern study results can be therefore explained by the type of characters that have been studied. A project relying on a sample consisting of many protagonist characters and one with a sample consisting of many support characters will arrive at completely different results despite their similar subject of study. Similar logic can be applied to older research. As the historical background has shown, women have always been cast less often as lead characters. That means that previously observed bias might have originated from the lack of consideration for strong female protagonist, which due to their small number might have been omitted in data collection processes. As some of the studies discussed in the literature review notice, the amount of women in relevant roles is increasing and together with findings of this study it might mean that a significant change has already begun within the video game industry. That same change might very soon occur in relevant academical research with a shift of focus towards the new type of female portrayals and the patterns of its development. With the awareness of such alterations occurring, one might actively observe them and attempt further critical commentary on the topic.

Another interesting field, this study could open is that of investigation into other factors that could possible affect character representation within games in general. Based on this research projects it appears that the way characters are portrayed is dependent on the role they play therefore it is possible it can be further affected by features such as genre, audience, age limit, violence or a variety of other factors. One of the goals of this study was to further the understanding of how video games should be studied and through showing the importance of role it has shown the necessity to explore new areas which have been previously left untouched. Same type of conclusion could also be extended into the field of gender studies which should perhaps broaden the spectrum of its focus and try to identify the instances where other factors than gender are at play. Opening up to such possibilities could improve the possible quality of results and make them applicable in other fields of study.

Last important impact of this study is its potential significance for shaping proper procedures of game research. As discussed multiple times, prior research in this field, especially that connected to gender, has been somewhat lacking. By taking many terms for granted, previous studies have not been very clear on their most principle assumptions and as such potential comparisons and improvements to them have been made difficult. This study has tried its best to be strongly grounded within theory and to clearly discuss all the choices.
that have been made through its course. By featuring discussions on common terms such as video game or genre it aimed to be easily communicable and understandable by all potential readers despite a possible lack of prior knowledge of the subject. Furthermore, by introducing well established sociological theory it hoped to bridge a gap between more traditional body of knowledge and new media studies. The concepts created by Mead and Goffman have been meant for usage within different context but their broad applicability proves that they can be still relevant and used in new, creative ways. In a way, this paper was an attempt towards improvement of some potentially problematic trends within game studies and if considered as such, it could perhaps incline other researchers to work more on their own study designs.

To sum it up, this research set out to prove whether female representation in video games is somehow affected by the role a character might play. It confirmed that in fact, there is a connection between those two points of interest creating a lot of potential for further research. The conclusions of this study can affect fields such as gender studies and video game studies plus they can further add towards reinforcing video games as an important type of media for consideration within sociological research. This project is an original proposition on how games should be studied, what aspects of them should be discussed and what concepts around them should be defined. By questioning even the most basic ideas used in prior research this thesis has tried to create a more complete vision of video games which can be understood even by people disconnected from that type of entertainment. Hopefully, in the future, this work can be further expanded upon through another larger scale research project which could potentially eliminate some of the present study limitations.
Glossary:

Arcade - a coin-operated video game machine, usually installed in public places. It was most common in the 1980s and 1990s. Some still exist till today but their popularity has severely decreased since the spread of home based entertainment systems.

Casual Game - a video game targeted at or used by a mass audience. They are typically recognized by their simple rules and lack of commitment required. They do not need long-term time commitment or special skills to play, and there are comparatively low production and distribution costs for the producer.

Console – a home entertainment system that requires being plugged into the TV in order to operate. Console games can also be played on certain dedicated portable devices.

Console Generation – a grouping of consoles released during the same time span, resembling each other with similar type of technology and technical capabilities.

Gameplay – the content of a video game the player gets to experience while interacting with it. It is usually defined by opposition to marketing materials which are higher in visual quality and often display game in a different light than in-game material.

PC – short for Personal Computer. It is a general purpose computer which can be used by a single user without the need for a professional operator.

Playthrough – a complete experience of playing and finishing a game. Most commonly a video game consists of main story content as well as additional goals. Many games also contain multiple choice options. That means a playthrough is an experience of gameplay that can be different based on the choices made by the player. Some games also give the player new options in their consecutive, multiple playthroughs.

Support characters – characters that play a supplementary role in a narrative and the plot of the story is not focused on them. This means support characters could be of various kind ranging from an active helper to a victim that requires saving.
Visual Novel - interactive fiction game, which is constructed mostly from static graphics, very commonly using anime-style art or occasionally live-action stills.

Protagonist characters – characters that play a leading role within a narrative. In video games, the protagonist is the main playable character.

Appendix: code list

1. Appearances: body proportions, clothing, weapons, physical look
2. Setting: locations, theme, relevant events
3. Manner: personality, morality, independence, motivation, skills
4. Role: function in the story, relation to others, roles assumed
5. Expressions
   a. Given: through files/extra content, within gameplay
   b. Given off
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