

**DAMSELS AND DARLINGS: WILL WE EVER SEE PLAYABLE, SEXUALLY-EMPOWERED WOMEN IN VIDEO GAMES?**

by

Kelsea Perry

B.A., Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2015

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

The Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

(Sociology)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

August, 2018

© Kelsea Perry, 2018

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies for acceptance, a thesis/dissertation entitled:

Damsels and Darlings: Will we ever see playable, sexually-empowered women in video games?

---

submitted by Kelsea Perry in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

in Sociology

**Examining Committee:**

Rima Wilkes, Sociology  
Supervisor

Dawn Currie, Sociology  
Supervisory Committee Member

## **Abstract**

Gender stereotypes are a known issue in video games, where female characters are often hyper-sexualized and relegated to disempowering roles. Numerous quantitative studies paint a grim picture of video game communities as hyper-masculine spaces complicit in reproducing harmful gender ideologies. Missing from the literature are qualitative inquiries of the meaning gamers assign to their engagement with a medium that is known for underrepresenting and objectifying women. This study uses qualitative textual content analysis of an influential, popular Internet video game forum—the largest of its kind— where gamers respond to questions posed by members about gender in video games. My findings show that gamers centralize the role of sexual agency and sexual empowerment to construct multiple, nuanced discourses for understanding gender stereotypes in games. These discourses mirror broader feminist debates about the achievability of sexual empowerment within hyper-sexualized cultural contexts. As video games grow in popularity, their ability to generate meaning among increasingly diverse audiences requires continued investigation. By engaging with gamers as they make sense of gender representation in games, researchers can glean insight into the many ways gamers envision change within the video game industry.

## **Lay Summary**

Research and public commentary on video games tends to focus on young male consumers, and the potential harms of exposure to gendered aggression and violence in games as promoting violence in society. However, large-scale polls show that video game consumers are increasingly diverse, with the gap between male and female players closing in recent years and the average age of gamers rising to about 35 years. This research captures the experiences of an increasingly diverse body of gamers as they use Internet forums to discuss issues of gender representation and violence in the medium they consume. The gamers in this study discuss issues of gender representation in video games in a way that engages feminist debates about the hyper-sexualization of women in media, and speculate on what gender equality within video game content could look like.

## **Preface**

The research presented in this dissertation was designed and conducted solely by the author.

Data collection, coding, and analysis were performed by the author, with light guidance from all supervisory committee members. No ethics approval was required for the completion of this research.

# *Table of Contents*

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Lay Summary</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>Preface</b> .....	<b>v</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>vi</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>viii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>ix</b>
<b>Dedication</b> .....	<b>x</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2 Video Games and Gender</b> .....	<b>2</b>
2.1 The sexualization of culture and the role of sexual agency .....	6
2.2 Fan engagement and knowledge production: constructing meaning .....	7
<b>3 Methods</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>4 NeoGAF’s debate over the role of sexual agency in video games</b> .....	<b>15</b>
4.1 Misogyny is alive and well .....	15
4.2 Desexualize games .....	18
4.3 Sexual without sexualizing .....	20
4.4 Horizon Zero Dawn: a case study .....	22
<b>5 Discussion</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>27</b>

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1</b>	<b>Description of discussion threads included in current study .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Table 2</b>	<b>Description of major themes/codes .....</b>	<b>13</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 1	“Fran” from <i>Final Fantasy XII</i> (Square Enix, 2006).....	18
Figure 2	“Aloy” from <i>Horizon Zero Dawn</i> (Guerilla Games, 2017) .....	22



## **Acknowledgements**

My sincerest thanks go out to everyone who read, re-read, edited, and provided support during the research and writing process of this thesis. First, to Dr. Amin Ghaziani, I thank you and my fellow classmates from SOCI 514 for not only “lighting the fire” and inspiring the ideas for this research, but for re-lighting it when needed. To Dr. Rima Wilkes and Dr. Dawn Currie, for their supervision and mentorship. To my partner, William Bolt and friend, Robert Brown— who are both lifelong gamers— for reading massive chunks of my data and discussing it with me into the wee-hours of many nights. To Bolt I owe additional thanks for inspiring and motivating me, for supporting us, our dog and two cats, and for sharing the best memes to brighten the darkest hours. And finally, my heartfelt thanks go out to the many gamers whose love for their medium and industry led to the discussions that inspired this research.

*To the toddler in a now viral internet video who proceeded to eat a raw onion rather than admit it was not an apple. You made me laugh to the point of tears even in the darkest hours of graduate school.*

# 1 Introduction

Gender stereotypes are a recurring theme in sociological inquiries of video game consumption. Extant research explores the prevalence of gendered stereotypes in female characters (Beasley & Standley, 2002), sexism in the gaming industry (Kondrat, 2015), and the gaming community as a site of toxic masculinity (Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer, 2017). It is well established that female video game characters are under-represented as protagonists in AAA games<sup>1</sup>, and are frequently subjected to objectification and violence through game design (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Fisher, 2015; Fox & Tang, 2014). Recently, the number of prominent female characters in newly released AAA games has increased (e.g. *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, *The Last of Us*) accompanied by an upward trend in female and middle-aged gamers (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2015; ESA, 2017). Given these trends, video games illustrate an example of how entertainment media engage themes that can encourage their consumers to examine broader sociopolitical issues (e.g., gender diversity and equality) (Alexander, 2006). Moreover, digital spaces (blogs, fandoms, Internet forums, etc.) are increasingly used by consumers to examine these sociopolitical issues in ways that reify or disrupt existing cultural paradigms. Implicit in the scholarly literature is the assumption that gaming communities are comprised of a homogenous group of predominantly white, male gamers who reify and distribute hegemonic ideals of masculinity. This study explores how online gaming communities respond to newly released female protagonists by engaging discussions of gender stereotypes and diversity. What narratives do they offer to explain or challenge hegemonic gendered stereotypes in games? How do sexual agency and empowerment inform their thinking?

---

<sup>1</sup> AAA games (pronounced “triple-A games”) is an informal way of classifying video games that are produced and marketed with the highest industry budgets. They tend to come from prestigious game studios, and promise a high-quality gaming experience.

## 2 Video games and gender

Video games occupy a prominent cultural position in today's social world, with an estimated 75 percent of American teenagers (ages 12-17) and 49 percent of adults playing games on a weekly basis (Lenhart et al., 2008a; 2008b). In the United States, 65 percent of households boast at least one gamer who logs three or more hours of gameplay a week (ESA, 2017), and estimates indicate roughly 19 million Canadians (or 54% of the Canadian population) are gamers (ESA, 2015). In 2014, global revenue from video game sales reached \$64 billion, more than both the film and music industries combined (McKernan, 2015). This revenue is generated from the sale of computer games, console games (Xbox, Playstation), and mobile games (ESA, 2017). Today, the ubiquity of video games in popular culture is evidenced in several ways, from easily recognizable characters such as Pac-Man and Nintendo's Mario, and the inclusion of gaming 'cult classics' in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, to the publication of video game commentary in mainstream media outlets, and the opening of a World Video Game Hall of Fame in 2015 (McKernan, 2015).

With the rise of the video game industry has come a change in the demographics of gamers. Despite the traditional image of the young male gamer (Shaw, 2010; Kowert, Festl & Quandt, 2014), large-scale polls have consistently shown nearly equal numbers of female and male gamers (Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer, 2017). In addition to an increasing number of female gamers, the same polls show that the average age of gamers is rising (Kondrat, 2015). According to the Entertainment Software Association (2017), the average gamer is 35 years old, with women aged 18 years and older representing a greater portion of the gamer population than adolescent males. Despite these changing demographics and the permeance of video games in popular culture, the content and targeted audience of many major game studios has remained

largely static, favoring young white men (Paaßen, Morgenroth and Stratemeyer, 2017).

Consequentially, efforts to diversify AAA game content by including more female characters have fallen short of achieving gender equity.

Current research on gender and video games paints a grim picture of both the industry and its player-base, and with good reason. Since the 1980s, research shows a consistent pattern of female characters as the disproportionate targets of in-game violence (Dietz, 1998), while they are under-represented in games (Braun & Giroux, 1989), on marketing material (Provenzo, 1991; Jansz and Martis, 2007; Fisher, 2015), and in leading roles (Gailey, 1993). In a content analysis of popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis video games, Dietz (1998) found that 41 percent of games excluded female characters entirely, and that female characters were disproportionately portrayed as submissive, cute, and unthreatening (e.g. the damsel in distress). Attempting to update Dietz's findings in light of newly released games, Beasley and Standley (2002) similarly performed a content analysis of a random selection of video game characters, looking at gender, body type, and clothing choices. Their findings indicate that an overwhelming majority (86 percent) of game characters are male, and that female characters adorn significantly less clothing than males. Beasley and Standley (2002) conclude that female characters are overwhelmingly portrayed in unimportant roles that frequently involve their over-sexualization. Though more recent research (Jansz and Martis, 2007) indicates a rise in female protagonists within AAA games, such studies are limited given sampling strategies that purposefully include games with diverse character casts.

Embedded in video game research are concerns over the socializing effects of games towards harmful gender roles and stereotypes. A long-standing body of research highlights the role of media consumption in the construction of meaning in everyday life, including the

meaning audiences attribute to social relations and personal identities (Brown, et al., 1994; Cohen, 2001; Giles & Maltby, 2004; Dill & Thill, 2007; Jansz & Martis, 2007). For example, Beck and colleagues (2012) explore how the consumption of games that sexually objectify women and/or allow players to engage in violence against female characters encourages rape myth-supportive attitudes in male players. Regarding female players, Fox, Vailenson and Tricase (2013) found that women who embodied overly sexualized game avatars were more likely to adopt misogynistic attitudes, including self-objectification and rape myth acceptance. Dietz (1998) takes a symbolic interactionist approach to argue that video games have become agents of socialization and identity development in children, emphasizing narratives of women as subordinate to men, and of violence against women as a problem-solving mechanism for completing tasks. Socialization through harmful gender roles and ideologies is of particular concern in video games given the highly interactive nature of games where players are encouraged to embody and control their characters.

Misogynist gender stereotypes and ideologies extend beyond game content and into tangential spaces for game-related consumption (such as online gaming forums, blogs and fandoms, gaming magazines, premier expos, etc.). Within gaming magazines, Fisher (2015) notes that visual depictions of female avatars are far less likely to be accompanied by text than male avatars, and those with captions contained provocative, sexist remarks. Magazine articles referencing games with character creators or choose-your-gender options overwhelmingly depicted male avatar options in both pictures and descriptive text. Women are often considered outsiders in gaming communities and are perceived by some men as violating normative gendered behaviours by engaging with these traditionally masculine spaces (O'Leary, 2012). In response, male gamers in these spaces may resort to harassment—both on and offline—to

“socially punish” female players (Fox & Tang, 2014). These tangential gaming spaces are thus constructed as male-only spaces where men can establish their position as “real gamers”, in part by excluding women (Fisher, 2015; Fox & Tang, 2014; Paaßen, et al., 2017).

Given the prevalence of masculine ideals in gaming spaces and the persistence of prestigious gaming studios in marketing to a presumably male audience, it is perhaps unsurprising that shifting gender demographics in games have gone largely unnoticed by both scholars and the general public. These shifting demographics hold considerable weight for cultural sociologists who “should be interested in studying how different social groups use video games, the meanings they attach to video games, and video games’ broader social significance” (McKernan, 2015, p. 225). Despite calls for more nuanced studies on video game consumption, an overwhelming portion of existing sociological research on video games fails to take into consideration the perspectives of gamers themselves (a set of inquiries that requires qualitative analysis). Instead, existing research is primarily quantitative, focusing on game consumption patterns, game content (i.e. the gender of characters, clothing options, and character roles), and game-related merchandise (i.e. gamer magazines, and box covers) (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Beck, Boys, Rose, & Beck, 2012; Fisher, 2015; Fox & Tang, 2014). The limited research on gaming communities themselves is similarly quantitative (though with some notable exceptions, such as McKernan, 2015), utilizing large-scale surveys to gather data on exposure to games and game preferences, as well as general attitudes and personality traits of gamers (Fox and Tang, 2014). Unexamined is a qualitative investigation of the perspective of gamers themselves as they respond to and make sense of gender stereotypes in games.

## **2.1 The sexualization of culture and the role of sexual agency**

The hypersexualized role of women in video games and gaming communities occurs in a larger context that some scholars call the ‘sexualization of culture’ (also referred to as the ‘pornification’ of culture) (Gill, 2008; Levy, 2005; Paasonen, Nikunen & Saarenmaa., 2007; Walter, 2010). The sexualization of culture is used to indicate “a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices, and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; [and] the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay” (Attwood, 2006, p.78). Indeed the popularity of exaggerated bosoms and bikini-clad warriors exemplifies the reach of ‘pornification’ into industries perceived as catering to adolescents (Collins, 2011).

Current debates on the severity of and reactions to the sexualization of culture give prominence to concepts such as sexual empowerment and agency (Gill, 2012; Lamb & Peterson, 2012; Murnen & Smolak, 2012), although the centrality of sexual agency/empowerment in these discussions is highly contested (Lamb & Peterson, 2012). On one side are scholars who regard empowerment narratives as empty rhetoric, packaged and sold to women in a “shiny, feisty, postfeminist packaging that obscures the continued underlying sexism” (Gill, 2012, p. 737). They argue that the sexual objectification of women in media has led to a number of ‘disempowering consequences’, such as self-objectification, internalized misogyny, and self-surveillance of their feminine behaviours and appearance (Murnen & Smolak, 2012, p.728). Such studies are consistent with the limited research available on female gamers, who are shown to internalize misogynistic attitudes when embodying a sexualized game avatar (Fox, Vailenson and Tricase, 2013). On the other side of this debate, scholars attempt to mobilize women’s agency and empowerment to celebrate certain sexual depictions (such as burlesque or



recreational pole dancing) as liberating, championing women's unprecedented control over their own sexuality. From this perspective, sexual empowerment involves the successful negotiation of wanted and unwanted sexual acts, and is the culmination of sexual desire and pleasure (Lamb & Peterson, 2012). Embedded within these debates is the underlying issue of whether sexual agency can be achieved in a hyper-sexualized culture, or if that culture must first be dismantled before women can experience genuine empowerment. Such scholarly debates beg the question of how gaming communities make sense of hyper-sexualized game content as they respond to gender stereotypes.

## **2.2 Fan engagement and knowledge production: constructing meaning**

Available research on gender and online gaming communities positions them in terms of toxic masculinity (Paaßen, et al., 2017). The objectification, sexualization, and devaluation of female characters in games is well-established (Burgess, Stermer & Burgess, 2007; Dill & Thill, 2007), but attempts to diversify games has been met with extreme backlash by gaming communities— a phenomenon referred to as “toxic gamer culture” by Consalvo (2012). This backlash culminated in the infamous #GamerGate scandal, a campaign that initially began as a call for ethics in game journalism, but which quickly became dominated by a primarily violent, vocal group of young male gamers who responded to feminist critics of games with online death and rape threats (Huntemann, 2013; Paaßen, et al., 2017; Salter & Blodgett, 2012). Though there is a considerable body of research on the role of gamers in reifying harmful gender stereotypes, little scholarly inquiry investigates how larger gaming communities respond to these individuals and engage with the broader, gendered sociopolitical issues that games elicit.

Online gaming communities who engage in discussions of game content and culture provide an example of “interactive audiences”, often colloquially called fandoms (Jenkins,

2006). The term *fandom* is frequently used to demarcate high-brow from low-brow tastes in media which can stigmatize groups who engage in fandoms, contributing to their dismissal in a majority of media studies (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). Using the works of Pierre Levy on *collective intelligence*, Jenkins (2006) argues that scholars must revisit dominant paradigms in audience studies that conceptualize fandoms in terms of resistance to cultural norms. Instead, Jenkins urges us to think of fandoms as “knowledge communities” where members engage in collective discussions in which they negotiate and develop knowledge about the text. As Alvermann and Hagood (2000) note, when fans engage a text, they do so multiple times. This re-reading allows fans to negotiate character relations, narratives, and broader sociopolitical themes (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000). In this sense, fan communities are capable of privileging other ‘ways of knowing’ about a topic, such that dominant cultural meanings are renegotiated (Jenkins, 2006). It is through the reciprocal, collective, and reflexive nature of communication that online knowledge communities reify or destabilize power narratives and encourage cultural change (Jenkins, 2006).

Fans as interactive audiences form a crucial component of what scholars call “aesthetic public spheres”. Aesthetic public spheres acknowledge the potential for entertainment media (e.g., film, music, video games) to stimulate discussions among consumers about broad sociopolitical matters (Alexander, 2006; Wu, 2011; Jacobs, 2007; 2012). According to researchers, entertainment media’s ability to explore sociopolitical issues such as racism, sexism, and inequality in an engaging manner often results in the public discussion of these concerns in online spaces, such as blogs, fandoms, and online forums (Jacobs, 2007; 2012). Though primarily used to study film and television, McKernan (2015) extends the aesthetic public sphere framework to video games in his analysis of video game commentary in response to a highly

publicised debate over the racial imagery in *Resident Evil 5*'s (Capcom, 2007) promotional material. McKernan found that online gaming forum users constructed competing narratives over *Resident Evil 5*'s racial imagery, effectively engaging with broader sociopolitical issues such as colour-blind racism and recent news coverage of the Ebola panic in West African countries.

Despite a clear link between video games and issues of gender and sexualization, researchers have yet to explore how gamers as interactive audiences respond to gender stereotypes in games by participating in online aesthetic public spheres. Video game content is a compelling illustration of the sexualization of culture; however, the role of sexual agency and empowerment—which are centralized in academic debates—have not been directly explored by scholars in this context. Thus, my research examines how members of a popular Internet video game forum, NeoGAF, respond to gender stereotypes in games with particular focus on the role of sexual agency and empowerment in my analysis. NeoGAF has previously been established as an effective aesthetic public sphere where members construct competing narratives about racism (McKernan, 2015). I expect gamers to construct conflicting narratives about gender stereotypes and the role of sexual agency in diversifying games.

### **3 Methods**

This research uses content analysis to investigate the attitudes and responses of an online community of dedicated video gamers (colloquially known as “gaffers”) to gender stereotypes and objectification in AAA video games. NeoGAF is currently the largest Internet video game forum, with dozens of recent or currently active discussions on gender stereotypes and female characters available to the public. On their website, NeoGAF defines themselves as a community of “hardcore gamers, enthusiast press, and video game industry developers and publishers”.

Though most members do not partake in discussion forums, NeoGAF's influence on the reception, coverage and development of video games is well-established (RPGWatch, 2008; McKernan, 2015). As of October 2017, NeoGAF boasts over 190,000 registered members, and 830,000 unique discussion threads, with the most popular threads eliciting thousands of responses from users.

Entertainment media— such as video games— often engage with themes examining broader sociopolitical issues (Alexander, 2006). Digital public spaces for entertainment industry commentary (blogs, fandoms, Internet forums) are frequently used by consumers to engage with these sociopolitical issues in ways that reify or disrupt existing power dynamics (McKernan, 2015). As we have seen, gendered power dynamics rooted in hegemonic masculinity dominate the literature on video games with little to no research on the disruption of these power dynamics within gaming communities. In this study, I explored how a community of avid, dedicated gamers conceptualize and make meaning of gender diversity through discussions of sexual agency and female game protagonists.

The data in this study consist of four purposively sampled NeoGAF discussion threads on the topics of gender diversity and sexual agency in video games. Using site-specific Google search commands (i.e.: ["sexual agency" site:www.neogaf.com]), I utilized six keywords related to my research question to find discussion threads: AAA games, female protagonist(s), gender diversity, gender stereotypes, sexual agency, and sexual empowerment (for keywords methodology see Williams, 1976; Ghaziani and Venstresca, 2005). I used three criteria to narrow my search results: all threads were selected from the first page of results (based on Google's keyword database and PageRank algorithm); threads were from the NeoGAF "Gaming" forum, as opposed to the "Off-Topic" forum to eliminate discussions unrelated to the gaming industry or

game content; and threads must have at least one full page of responses (50 posts) to ensure nuanced discussion among multiple users.

Initially, I used only the first four keywords to find my sample (AAA games, female protagonist(s), gender diversity, gender stereotypes) based on recurring themes in the literature. After an initial open-coding of qualified threads, the recurrence of themes pertaining to sexual agency and empowerment led me to inductively extend my search to include these terms. In total, four discussion threads met my sampling criteria (see Table 1), with all four threads collectively spanning a three-year period between December 2014 and July 2017. Though most of NeoGAF’s traffic comes from the United States, individuals from all over the world can register to participate in discussions.

Table 1: Description of discussion threads included in current study

	Discussion Title	Time Frame	Total Posts (N)	Page views <sup>2</sup>
Thread #1	<i>“Female Sexualization vs. Empowerment in Games- How do you determine which is which?”</i>	December, 2014	491	61,896
Thread #2	<i>“Will we ever see playable, sexually-empowered straight women in games?”</i>	May- November, 2016	383	51,874
Thread #3	<i>“Female characters and sexual agency”</i>	March, 2017	358	32,914
Thread #4	<i>“The lack of Romance options in Horizon Zero Dawn is tragic”</i>	July, 2017	603	57,723

The NeoGAF threads included in this study ranged from 358 posts (Thread #3) to 603 posts (Thread #4) in length and encompassed text responses, visuals (such as game screenshots,

---

<sup>2</sup> As of November 7, 2017

or concept art), as well as external links to videos and articles on topics of gender diversity in games. Once discussion threads were converted into Word documents, I used NVivo to analyze the texts line by line. Qualitative content analysis allowed me to identify the “patterned ways in which interpretive communities render a topic meaningful by contextualizing the topic and placing it in an evaluative framework” (McKernan, 2015, p. 233; see also Altheide, 1987;2000). To accomplish this, I employed a retroductive coding strategy alternating between theoretically grounded (deductive) codes, and inductive codes based upon recurring themes during a close reading of the texts (Ragin, 1994). The evaluative frameworks constructed by gaffers to discuss gender diversity and sexual agency in video games became my dependent variable. The use of analytic memos allowed me to track patterns in my data and follow-up on hunches of theoretical importance.

The combination of keywords and frame analysis is well-suited for understanding how social structure, action, and culture interact to create social change (Ghaziani and Ventresca, 2005). Female protagonists are increasingly common in AAA games, mirroring shifting gendered demographics among gamers (with an estimated 40/60 ratio of female/male gamers). Such changes are perhaps reflective of a cultural shift in understandings of gender diversity and sexual agency among gamers. To detect frames constructed by gaffers, I ask two questions of each thread: (1) What core concept(s) unify the central ideas of gaffers? (2) How do the concept(s) encourage meaning making and/or the application of keywords in my study (e.g. “sexual agency”, “gender stereotypes”, etc.) (adopted from Ghaziani and Ventresca, 2005, p. 534). For example, I used the code “*sexual without sexualizing*” to demarcate the importance gaffers assign to building female characters that exert agency over their sexuality without falling prey to well-known tropes and stereotypes that objectify women.

Qualitative coding schemes lend themselves to concerns of reliability and reproducibility (Cambell et al., 2013). To ascertain the reliability of my coding scheme, a second coder was employed. Given Cambell et al.'s (2013, p. 15) assertion that “simpler coding schemes are better than complex ones” I simplified my codebook to include only the broader, “global” themes I encountered in my data. These global themes correspond with the overarching narratives constructed by gaffers when discussing issues of gender equality in games. The three major themes I trained my second coder on were: *misogyny is alive and well*, *desexualize games*, and *sexual without sexualizing* (Table 2). After my coder was trained on these three codes, I randomly selected a portion (10%) of my data for reliability testing, which was repeated until we reached proportional agreement of .80 or higher (Campbell et al., 2013).

Table 2: Major themes

Code Name	Brief Description	Intercoder Reliability Score
<i>Misogyny is alive and well</i>	Includes the normalization of sexualization, the naturalization of the male gaze, homophobic or sexist excuses not to diversify games, and an expressed enjoyment of objectified characters.	.84
<i>Desexualize games</i>	Conflating sexualization with objectification, this theme acknowledges the male gaze, and sex as an undesirable standard in games. This code denotes gamers who feel that out-of-context sex in games runs counter to gender equality.	.90
<i>Sexual without sexualizing</i>	Promotes a higher focus on sexual agency in games, and the inclusion of sexual narratives where they contextually make sense. This code also includes discussion of how to create space for ethical sexual relationships to exist without objectifying female characters.	.82

NeoGAF forums come with several limitations. First, I do not have access to the demographic information of users (such information volunteered within forum discussions is uncommon). Secondly, NeoGAF is a heavily moderated website where membership is neither automatic, nor guaranteed. To request membership, individuals must register using an Internet Service Provider, workplace, or educational email address. The use of institutional emails potentially skews the demographic composition of users towards educated and working-class individuals. Users are then waitlisted pending approval by NeoGAF staff. Only approved members have access to forum archives, and can create, or respond to, active discussions. This presents a significant barrier when accessing older discussion posts, limiting the ability to examine how gaffers' attitudes change over time. NeoGAF moderators also remove posts that are openly derogatory, inflammatory, or incite hate-speech, and bans members who engage in such discourses. Therefore, the narratives constructed by NeoGAF users may differ greatly from other online forums with less moderation. Despite these limitations, NeoGAF forums present a unique opportunity to address an overlooked empirical case in sociological understandings of gender stereotypes in video games by giving voice to a community of active and highly influential gamers. NeoGAF's closed membership policy diminishes anonymity and ensures a higher level of personal responsibility among users. As such, NeoGAF forums are highly organized, stay on-topic, and lack much of the "trolling" and spam that exists on open membership forums. NeoGAF's industry influence positions it as a compelling site for examining the broader social significance of video games and sociopolitical issues they elicit. I now turn to the results, which are organized based on the dominant frames employed by gaffers when conceptualizing gender diversity and sexual agency among female protagonists.



## 4 NeoGAF's debate over the role of sexual agency in video games:

Conversations on NeoGAF of sexualization and gender stereotypes in video games largely fall within three themes: *misogyny is alive and well*, *desexualize games*, and *sexual without sexualizing*. The narratives associated with each theme construct different ways of understanding the impact of media on culture, the prevalence of gendered power dynamics, and the path forward for disrupting those power dynamics (and if they should be disrupted at all). Together, these three narratives unpack some of the root causes of sexism and gender inequality in the video game industry and communities. To explore the nuances of the *desexualize games* and *sexual without sexualizing* narratives, I introduce a case study of a recently released AAA game, *Horizon Zero Dawn*.

### 4.1 Misogyny is alive and well

The theme *misogyny is alive and well* encompasses a narrative produced (or recognized) by gaffers that is largely consistent with existing literature on gender stereotypes in games (Beck et al., 2012; Dietz, 1998; Fox & Tang, 2014). For these gaffers, the sexualization of women in games is both normalized, and expected in an industry that is traditionally dominated by men: “mostly males play these games... and so it makes sense to appeal to their strong sex drive; ‘sex sells’ as they say.” This justification highlights the importance some gaffers place on traditional ideals of masculinity, and the prioritization of these ideals over ensuring an inclusive environment.

Inherent in this narrative is the naturalization of the male gaze in the video game industry (Mulvey, 1975). For these gaffers, including “good” female characters will come as a result of efforts to create better video game characters, overall. As one gaffer notes, “the problem with one dimensional female characters with no character traits other than boobs isn’t that it’s

sexist... but rather [it] makes for a bad character.” Thus, these gaffers cite lazy writing by developers who rely on overused tropes to sell female characters, effectively shifting the blame from gamers to the industry itself. The same gaffer goes on to note that “good female characters will naturally come about as a result of demanding better characters, which debates about boob size and sexualization completely dilute from and miss the point entirely.” Rather than problematizing the male gaze in the gaming community as contributing to the sexualization of female characters, this gaffer “passes the buck” onto developers to simply create better characters. Such narratives do little to challenge the power narratives embedded in game production, and provide no concrete solutions for how to desexualize women in games.

Gaffers who do not consider sexual images of women in games to be problematic are often quick to note that the sexualization of female characters is in fact *enjoyable* to many players: “the only thing that the sexualization of a female actually means in a game is how much the creator felt like making a hot chick in a game because his audience is mostly made up of other people also like hot chicks.” This quote demonstrates how gaffers downplay the role of sexism in video games by denying the ability of media to embed powerful, harmful messages about gender roles and stereotypes (Collins, 2011; Murnen & Smolak, 2012). Here, feminist criticism of games is met with dismissive remarks: “I like to think most women are not brainwashed idiots who need to be empowered by video games, or any other media.” Encouragement of sexualized women in media can lead audiences to accept sexualized female roles as both normative and ideal (Smolack & Murnen, 2011; 2012), an issue that is compounded upon when male pleasure is prioritized over nonsexual female representation. Along these lines, some gaffers project this sense of male pleasure onto female gamers. Comparing the video game industry to adult videos, this gaffer notes “the audience isn’t all male, but the female audience

somehow seems to enjoy male empowerment and female humiliation.” This gaffer goes on to conclude that “women [are] a cruel lot, they basically hate each other and love seeing other women suffer.” Though this gaffer notes issues of self-objectification, and internalized misogyny among women, they fail to construct these problems as *symptomatic* of large-scale sexism, and instead position women as contributing to sexism.

Though several gaffers displayed misogynistic attitudes in discussions of gender diversity in games, other gaffers discuss this theme in terms of the issues such attitudes pose. These gamers reference problematic narratives (such as those explored above) as an obstacle to more inclusive games. These attitudes might be individual-level, or industry-level. For instance, gaffers who are critical of the *misogyny is alive and well* theme are quick to criticize individual-level claims akin to “it’s just a video game” that dismiss the experiences of female gamers who feel marginalized and express concerns on discussion threads. On a macro-level, they recognize the role of gendered power imbalances that elevate the male audience in games, and discourage game developers from creating heterosexual female leads: “it’s because straight men find it gross to play a straight woman hooking up with a guy. I’m not kidding, it’s so incredibly fucked up, self-centered, and possessive.” These gaffers note that even if female protagonists have romantic plotlines, they are most likely to be written as lesbian characters in such a way that maintains sexual appeal for a straight male audience. Until the video game industry ceases pandering to this audience, these respondents note that it will be difficult to diversify gender representations in games.

## 4.2 Desexualize games

The theme, *desexualize games* is embedded in a narrative among some gaffers that the video game industry, as a whole, contains too many sexually explicit themes. This narrative is consistent with current academic and political debates about the “sexualization of culture” (sometimes called the ‘pornification’ of culture), which denotes the proliferation of sexualized images and themes in mass media in recent decades (Gill, 2012a; 2012b). This narrative conflates sexualization with objectification while acknowledging the male gaze, and out-of-context sex in video games. For example, when debating the clothing of a female character, Fran, (*Final Fantasy XII*, Square Enix, 2006) one gaffer notes that “every single aspect of her design is aimed at appealing to men, right down to the ridiculous stiletto heels she wears... they’re just there to elongate her legs and make

her look appealing to men.” This same user also goes on to note that Fran’s clothing is ill suited for the context of the game; she is a member of a forested, tree-dwelling tribe where stiletto heels serve little functionality (see Figure 1).<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the argument that sex is often out of place in games dominates this narrative. Gaffers note that sexual narratives in games

Figure 1: “Fran” from *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix, 2006)



---

<sup>3</sup> (source: <http://www.game-art-hq.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Fran-Final-Fantasy-XII.jpg>)

are often shallow, confusing, and used to perpetuate harmful ideas of sex as a “reward” one earns and is thus entitled to:

I'm still totally confused as to why it became a normal thing to have sex in games when the game's story doesn't have anything to do with sex. Even the best love stories in other mediums generally don't have their characters going for a random romp mid-plot. Gratuitous sex is the stuffs [*sic*] of mindless hollywood garbage, where we need to see an explosion or an ass every 10 minutes to keep us interested. I'm all for depiction of sex in games if it is meaningful to the plot in some way, but I'm really not a fan of having sex be the "loot" at the end of a sidequest, regardless of the genders involved. It often comes off as tacky even if the intentions are good.

This perspective is consistent with existing literature on the over-representation of females as sexual objects in games (Kondrat, 2015; Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2017). Further, this narrative challenges underlying gendered power dynamics by problematizing the use of sexual themes to cater to the male gaze, socialize compulsory heterosexuality, and encourage harmful gender roles.

The *desexualize games* narrative is linked to discourses of empowerment in games. Current debates on the “sexualization of culture” center on the role of empowerment and choice among audience members (Levy, 2005; Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2012b). For these gamers, “empowerment” is unattainable until broader issues of sexism and representation are addressed: “I’ve often heard that until female representation is fixed then it doesn’t matter what the authorial intent is, [sexualization] is still contributing to a larger issue.” Consistent with some scholars (Winship, 2000; Levy, 2005), these gaffers are critical of empowerment narratives (i.e. empowerment through sexualization) as naturalizing and obscuring continued underlying sexism: “after all, this problem is a larger trend and these larger trends are what shapes a culture’s views.” This view challenges gamers who opt to dissect female characters and games on a case-by-case basis to discern whether each character or game is empowering or oppressive,

such as the gaffers who discussed Fran's clothing above. One gaffer notes that the prevalence and frequency of oversexualization in games leads to "explanations [that] sound more like excuses. Oh she looks like that because of x, y, z backstory- well, why is it that the backstory always makes women reveal more skin?" This macro-level approach to understanding oversexualization in games problematizes micro-level justifications as largely failing to combat underlying power dynamics and sexism.

### **4.3 Sexual without sexualizing: enter sexual agency**

Gaffers who encourage the *sexual without sexualizing* narrative note that to combat sexism, AAA game developers have largely begun to exclude sexual and romantic narratives altogether from games featuring female protagonists. These gamers are quick to acknowledge the strides made within the AAA game industry to diversify characters: "games are much more diverse now than they were years ago" and "Sony's three current biggest franchises (Uncharted, TLoU, Horizon) all have women protagonists." Though these gaffers praise new female leads as being dynamic, complex, well-rounded characters, they are also quick to note the lack of sexual themes overall, and specifically a lack of heterosexual romance options for female protagonists: "it's a broad observation that female protagonists almost never seem to have straight male love interests." Although not overly critical of newer, nonsexual female protagonists themselves, these gaffers *are* critical of developers' choices to exclude heterosexual plot lines in games as pandering to a straight male playerbase. As one respondent notes, "I just see it as the publishers don't want to make their target demographic uncomfortable by having the character they play as fuck or kiss a dude." Thus, within this theme games with nonsexual female leads can be good, but should not be the standard for game developers anymore than should hypersexual female

leads. Until a balance is achieved, users note that “video games [have not] reached good/diverse female representation, they’ve just created this one type of character.” Thus, perhaps ironically, these gaffers advocate for the inclusion of *more* sexual themes in AAA games featuring female protagonists.

These same gaffers also argue that the inclusion of sexual themes in new games must be articulated carefully to avoid objectification. The creation of sexual plots for female characters must, according to gaffers, coincide with a clear depiction of sexual agency: “it’d be nice to see a game with a female protagonist who actually enjoys sex, has it with who she wants to and on her own terms, and does not pander to the male gaze while doing so.” In meeting this vision of sexually empowered female characters, gaffers note that sexual agency can be written into various aspects of gameplay, including the narrative and character development, as well as clothing and animation options. In discussing Morrigan, a female character from the *Dragon Age* series (BioWare, 2009) one user notes that her sexualized appearance is justified because it “fits her character and she owns it.” This is demonstrated by Morrigan’s outfit design which aligns with her character’s theme, and her personality which “makes it evident that she approaches the question of sex casually, and can tend to use her sexuality as a tool at her disposal.” Ultimately these gaffers attempt to mobilize choice, agency, and empowerment to defend and even celebrate certain depictions of female characters involved in sexual plots. Such a perspective embodies the argument that “sexualized culture” (such as pornography, burlesque, or pole dancing) can be liberating for women whose sexuality has been oppressively catered to male satisfaction (Holland & Attwood, 2009; Smith, 2007).

#### 4.4 Horizon Zero Dawn: A case study

*Horizon Zero Dawn (HZD)* is an action role-playing game released for PlayStation 4 in February, 2017 (Guerrilla Games, 2017). The game takes place in a post-apocalyptic world set far into the future, in a land populated and ruled by robotic creatures. In the game, human societies have largely died off in an unknown calamity set before the game’s time, though a few tribal societies remain. A mysterious phenomenon is causing the robotic creatures to become increasingly hostile towards humans and threatens humanity’s continued existence. *HZD* features a female protagonist, Aloy, a hunter who was outcast from her tribe as an infant and whose quest to find out her backstory becomes enmeshed with saving what is left of humanity from these increasingly aggressive creatures (see Figure 2).<sup>4</sup>

Figure 2: “Aloy” from *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerilla Games, 2017)



*HZD* is mentioned in three of the four threads included in this study. Two threads (#3 and #4) began after *HZD*’s release, and thus discuss the game and Aloy in detail. Thread

#2 occurs before the game is released, though both the game and Aloy are mentioned in anticipation for being an example of a “good” female protagonist. One thread (#4) is dedicated

---

<sup>4</sup> (source: <https://media.playstation.com/is/image/SCEA/horizon-zero-dawn-screen-04-us-15jun15>)



entirely to discussions of Aloy and the lack of romantic options available to players. In many ways *HZD* caters to the *desexualize games* narrative produced by gaffers: “[Guerrilla Games] wanted to create a non-sexualised female main character. The ability to sex her up would probably detract from their goal a lil bit.” The choice not to sexualize Aloy is defended by gaffers who note that the game’s narrative and context leave little room for realistic portrayals of sex and romance. For these gaffers, Aloy’s decisions are based on her quest to “[discover] the secrets of humanity’s past and [save] the world from extinction”, not on discovering romance. As another user notes, “[Aloy] is the typical game heroine, no time to waste.” These users celebrate Aloy as both an outstanding female protagonist, and as a nonsexualized character more generally. The choice to exclude romance and sex from *HZD* is thus fully justified by the game’s narrative and overall context.

Still other gaffers argue that *HZD*’s lack of romance options is not necessarily indicative of a lack of sexual agency. Quite the contrary, countless gaffers note that several NPCs (non-playable characters) in *HZD* attempt to flirt with Aloy, and show affection that is indicative of sexual intentions: “she actually does show affection and even flirts back with a few characters.” The same user goes on to note that “she also shoots down several people hitting on her that she has no interest in or are doing it in a cheesy or lame manner.” In this way, gaffers argue that Aloy embodies sexual agency in her consistent, firm, no nonsense method of turning down advances from NPCs. This way of understanding sexual agency is consistent with scholars who note that the agency to say ‘yes’ must correspond with the agency to say ‘no’ (Lamb & Peterson, 2012).

Though the *desexualize games* narrative appears to dominate discussions of Aloy, respondents in Thread #4 (which is *HZD* specific) are not wholly opposed to romantic plotlines

in games like *HZD*. Many gaffers who express support for Guerrilla Game's decision not to include sex in *HZD* also note that they would be open to romantic narratives in future installments of the game (such as a sequel): "I don't mind it happening in the sequels as long as they introduce characters who are truly matches to Aloy." These gamers are not opposed to sexual plot lines in games, but only insofar as they do not detract from the integrity of Aloy's characterization as an independent, strong-willed, and determined heroine. The nuances of this argument indicate that the two themes *desexualize games* and *sexual without sexualizing* are not always mutually exclusive, and that game content can benefit from an acknowledgement of both sides of the argument by developers.

## **5 Discussion**

NeoGAF's response to gender stereotypes in video games reaffirms that video game commentary in interactive audiences is capable of functioning as an aesthetic public sphere. Gaffers construct multiple, competing narratives of gender and sexism, effectively tying these issues into broader debates over the social significance of video games. Gaffers who do not problematize gendered imagery in games often provide essentialist views of sex and sexuality by naturalizing the idea that game developers are right to cater to the strong sex drives of men (and, to a lesser degree, women). Those gaffers who problematize hyper-sexualized images of women in games link objectification and stereotypes to real-world consequences, including cultural beliefs that reinforce patriarchal power dynamics. Still others opt to unsettle gender stereotypes in games by advocating for narratives that promote sexual agency among female protagonists. These competing narratives are contextualized within broader feminist debates over the

sexualization/pornification of culture, and the ability for women to embody sexual agency in a culture that reproduces stereotypes rooted in the objectified female body.

Similar to McKernan's (2015) findings regarding racism in gaming promotional material, interactive audiences such as NeoGAF may serve to reify existing power dynamics. Just as some users in McKernan's study employed colour-blind racism to explain and excuse the racially problematic imagery in *RE5*, a number of gaffers in this study reinforce hegemonic gendered ideologies by prioritizing the male gaze over female inclusivity. These gaffers are dismissive of feminist concerns over gender stereotypes and are quick to reject these concerns, often claiming it is "just a game". Such users fail to connect the power of media to influence cultural understandings of gender and sexuality.

However, contrary to McKernan's findings, a large body of gaffers in this study *challenged* existing gender dynamics by engaging with debates over sexualization and empowerment. These gaffers take a nuanced stance by recognizing the complexity of achieving sexual empowerment in a culture that places little value on de-objectifying women. Rather than dismissing feminist concerns, these gaffers elevate the voices of women in discussions of gender diversity. This finding is perhaps surprising given the large body of research connecting gaming communities with toxic masculinity. Future research is needed to assess the ideologies of gaming communities, and the ways in which those ideologies are disrupted over time. This type of research is especially timely given the changing demographics of gamers to include more women, and the increase in AAA games featuring female protagonists.

Most research on aesthetic public spheres engages with "professional" entertainment commentary, such as media outlets, and journalistic enterprises (Jacobs, 2007; 2012). NeoGAF's less-formal position as a gaming forum lends consideration to the need for scholars to investigate

how peripheral “interactive audiences” give meaning to texts and the issues they elicit. NeoGAF presents a unique case as an interactive audience given both its informal positionality, and its well-documented influence among game developers and journalists (Lenhart, Kahne and Middaugh, 2008). Future research is needed to investigate the way such spaces work to mediate the negotiation of meaning-making between fans and producers. Applying the framework of aesthetic public spheres to such spaces may aid scholars investigating these phenomena. Moreover, not all Internet gaming forums will produce the same discussions and narratives. NeoGAF’s highly moderated structure and zero tolerance policy for inflammatory speech undoubtedly influences the way users discuss issues of gender and sexism. Other, less moderated forums (such as GameFAQs, or Reddit) with open membership policies need further investigation to see if they as well operate as aesthetic public spheres.

## Bibliography

- Alexander, J. C. *The Civil Sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Altheide, D. L. "Ethnographic content analysis." *Qualitative Sociology* 10 (1987): 65-77.
- . "Tracking discourse and qualitative document analysis." *Poetics* 27.4 (2000): 287-299.
- Alvermann, D. E. and M. C. Hagood. "Fandom and Critical Media Literacy." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 43.5 (2000): 436-446.
- Attwood, F. "Sexed up: Theorizing the sexualization of culture." *Sexualities* 6 (2006): 77-94.
- Beasley, B. and T. C. Standley. "Shirts vs. Skins: clothing as an indicator of gender role stereotyping in video games." *Mass Communication & Society* 5.3 (2002): 279-293.
- Beck, V. S., et al. "Violence against women in video games: A prequel or sequel to rape myth acceptance?" *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 27.15 (2012): 3016-3031.
- Braun, C. and J. Giroux. "Arcade video games: Proxemic, cognitive and content analyses." *Handbook of visual analysis* 21 (1989): 92-105.
- Brown, J. D., et al. "Teenage room culture: where media and identities intersect." *Communication Research* 21 (1994): 813-827.
- Burgess, M. C., S. P. Stermer and S. R. Burgess. "Sex, lies, and video games: The portrayal of male and female characters on video game covers." *Sex Roles* 57.5-6 (2007): 419-433.
- Cohen, J. "Defining identification: A theoretical look at the identification of audiences with media characters." *Mass Communication & Society* 4 (2001): 245-264.
- Collins, R. L. "Content analysis of gender roles in media: Where we are now and where should we go?" *Sex Roles* 64 (2011): 290-298.
- Consalvo, M. "Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* (2012): 1.
- Dill, K. E. and K. P. Thill. "Video game characters and the socialization of gender roles: Young people's perceptions mirror sexist media depictions." *Sex Roles* 57 (2007): 851-864.
- Entertainment Software Association. "Essential Facts about the computer and video game industry." 2015. *Entertainment Software Association*. 18 April 2017. <<http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/ESA-Essential-Facts-2015.pdf>>.
- Entertainment Software Association. "Essential facts about the computer and video game industry." 15 April 2017. *Entertainment Software Association*. 2 October 2017. <[http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EF2017\\_FinalDigital.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EF2017_FinalDigital.pdf)>.

- . "Essential Facts about the Canadian Video Game Industry." 15 November 2015. *Entertainment Software Association of Canada*. 3 October 2017. <[http://theesa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESAC\\_2015\\_Booklet\\_Version02\\_14\\_Digital.pdf](http://theesa.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESAC_2015_Booklet_Version02_14_Digital.pdf)>.
- Fisher, H. D. "Sexy, dangerous- and ignored: An in-depth review of the representation of women in select video game magazines." *Games and Culture* 10.6 (2015): 551-570.
- Fox, J. and W. Y. Tang. "Sexism in online video games: The role of conformity to masculine norms and social dominance orientation." *Computers in Human Behaviour* 33 (2014): 314-320.
- Fox, J., G. N. Vailenson and L. Tricase. "The embodiment of sexualized virtual selves: The proteus effect and experiences of self-objectification via avatars." *Computers in Human Behaviour* 29.3 (2013): 930-938.
- Gailey, B. "Mediated messages: Gender, class, and cosmos in home video games." *Journal of Popular Culture* 27 (1993): 81-97.
- Ghaziani, A. and M. J. Ventresca. "Keywords and cultural change: Frame analysis of business model public talk, 1975-2000." *Sociological Forum* 20.4 (2005): 523-599.
- Giles, D. C. and J. Maltby. "The role of media figures in adolescent development: Relations between autonomy, attachment, and interest in celebrities." *Personality and Individual Differences* 36 (2004): 813-822.
- Gill, R. "Empowerment/sexism: Figuring female sexual agency in contemporary advertising." *Feminism & Psychology* 18 (2008): 35-60.
- . "Media, empowerment and the 'sexualization of culture' debates." *Sex Roles* 66 (2012): 736-745.
- Huntemann, N. B. "Introduction: Feminist discourses in games/game studies." *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* (2013): 2.
- Jacobs, R. N. "Entertainment media and the aesthetic public sphere." Alexander, J., R. Jacobs and P. Smith. *Oxford Handbook of Cultural Sociology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. 318-342.
- Jacobs, R. N. "From mass to public: Rethinking the value of the culture industry." Reed, I. and J. Alexander. *Culture, Society, and Democracy: The Interpretive Approach*. Boulder: Paradigm Press, 07. 101-128.
- Jansz, J. and R. G. Martis. "The Lara Phenomenon: powerful female characters in video games." *Sex Roles* 56 (2007): 141-148.
- Jenkins, H. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.

- Kondrat, X. "Gender and video games: How is female gender generally represented in various genres of video games?" *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 6.1 (2015): 171-193.
- Kowert, R., R. Festl and T. Quandt. "Unpopular, overweight, and socially inept: Reconsidering the stereotype of online gamers." *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 17.3 (2014): 471-479.
- Lamb, S. and Z. D. Peterson. "Adolescent girls' sexual empowerment: Two feminists explore the concept." *Sex Roles* 66 (2012): 703-712.
- Lenhart, A., et al. "Teens' gaming experiences are diverse and include significant social interaction and civic engagement." 16 September 2008. *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. 9 September 2017. <[http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2008/PIP\\_Teens\\_Games\\_and\\_Civics\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2008/PIP_Teens_Games_and_Civics_Report_FINAL.pdf)>.
- Lenhart, A., S. Jones and A. MacGill. "Adults and Video Games." 7 December 2008. *Pew Internet & American Life Project*. 9 September 2017. <<http://www.pewinternet.org/2008/12/07/adults-and-video-games/>>.
- Levy, A. *Female chauvinist pigs: Women and the rise of raunch culture*. New York: Free Press, 2005.
- McKernan, B. "The meaning of a game: Stereotypes, video game commentary, and color-blind racism." *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 3.2 (2015): 224-253.
- Murnen, S. K. and L. Smolak. "Social considerations related to adolescent girls' sexual empowerment: A response to Lamb and Peterson." *Sex Roles* 66 (2012): 725-735.
- Paasonen, S., K. Nikunen and L. Saarenmaa. *Pornification: Sex and sexuality in media culture*. Oxford: Berg, 2007.
- Paaßen, B, T. Morgenroth and M. Stratemeyer. "What is a true gamer? The male gamer stereotype and the marginalization of women in video game culture." *Sex Roles* 76.7-8 (2017): 421-435.
- Provenzo, E. F. *Video kids: Making sense of Nintendo*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.
- Ragin, C. *Constructing Social Research: The unity and diversity of method*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1994.
- Salter, A. and B. Blodgett. "Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The contentious role of women in the new gaming public." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 56.3 (2012): 401-416.
- Shaw, A. "What is video game culture? Cultural studies and game studies." *Games and Culture* 5.4 (2010): 403-424.
- Walter, N. *Living dolls: The return of sexism*. London: Virago Press, 2010.

Williams, R. *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.

Wu, J. "Enlightenment or entertainment: The nurturance of an aesthetic public sphere through a popular talent show in China." *The Communication Review* 14 (2011): 46-67.