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A Study of Women Discourses on Gender in Videogame Magazines

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Abstract

Video games and their history are mostly seen from a masculine standpoint. Most traces, commentary, workers, communities, significant events or people, etc., are linked to a masculine lens that tends to ignore or marginalize women in video games and their culture. Even if they were clearly minorized in a masculine and sometimes hostile environment, there is a need to observe a part of history that gives us more information on the thought, the production, the influence, and the discourses of women without limiting them to the status of passive victims or to the margins of history. This article uses methods inspired by cultural history and textual analysis to investigate women's discourses about women protagonists present in the game reviews of the specialized press covering video game culture and the video game industry. By doing so, we will observe a complex situation where different, and sometimes contradicting, intentions can be linked to how women characters are described, criticized, or mentioned in the reviews. As such, this analysis will show a cultural context where women's writings are sometime influenced by the masculine hegemonic discourses made by or for a mostly gender restricted definition of the 'gamers', while other women's text openly resist this hegemony by criticizing the way the many protagonists and women are represented. Women, their writing, and traces of their intention, can be seen in multiple magazines from 1981 to 2021. As such these public discourses are a small but important part of a more general and diverse history of video games and their communities.

Keywords

Women; magazines; videogames; representation; reviews; sexism

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Video game history tends to be seen as mostly masculine while other gender identities are marginalized. In fact, numerous researchers have written about the sexism, genderism and misogyny present in video games and their communities (Cote, 2015; Cote, 2021; Fisher, 2015). Whether in player communities, the industries, or its media coverage, video games are shown as having a history and a tendency to be patriarchal, othering and sometimes hostile to anybody who doesn't or

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isn't identified as a white cisgender heterosexual man. This fact is hard to forget in a context following #Gamergate,[1] Sweet Baby Inc.[2] and the numerous articles about the sexism in the industry (De'Angelo 2020; Mercante 2024; Gash and Parrish 2020). This masculine hegemony over the medium is also true of the magazines that are published about games. For example, Consalvo describes how magazines:

> create an average or perhaps ideal gamer that is young, male and heterosexual … the person who is hailed successfully by this discourse has been taught 'how to be a gamer' just as well as women are taught 'how to be feminine' by women's magazines. (2008, p. 22)

As such, the discourses inside video game magazines are primarily written for a public of gamers identified as heterosexual men. These discourses tended to exclude women while including numerous forms of sexism and inequalities in their content. For example, the analysis of *Nintendo Power* by Amanda C. Cote demonstrates that women characters are significantly more sexualized in their representation while the contribution of women is mostly limited to fan sections (2015, p. 16–17).

However, this marginalization of women is a small part of a larger story. While observing how a gamer hegemonic masculinity[3] has been created and enforced in a patriarchal context, it renders the place of women even more invisible in magazines. Many researchers have shown the importance, resistances and voices of women throughout video game's history, may it be in its early years (McDivitt, 2020) or in its industries, its products, and its communities (Gray and Leonard eds., 2018; Chess 2020). However, there is a lack of papers precisely studying these aspects in videoludic magazines, including the places, roles and situations of the women that wrote inside these publications. After all, more general research can only do so much when it comes to observing parts of history that aren't hegemonic in nature. In fact, focusing mostly on how some identities are subject to violence can represent them as mostly passive victims or outsiders. It is necessary to emphasize the participation of these identities and their agency. On the patriarchal characteristic of the history of video games, Laine Nooney has said that it:

> is a patrilineal chronicle, a forward-marching timeline punctuated by sacred litanies of "founding fathers," "hacker heroes," and "game gods." And

[1] "#Gamergate gained media attention through misogynist and racist attacks on women gamers, critics, and developers. Followers of #Gamergate attempted to justify their campaign as a move to restore ethics in video game journalism, resulting in hostile and violent environments for women, queer folk, and people of color" (Gray et al., 2018, p. 3).

[2] Sweet Baby Inc. is a narrative consultation studio that is at the center of conspiration theories and harassment campaigns falsely accusing them of pushing a "woke agenda" in games.

[3] "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connel in McDivitt, 2020, p. 11).

> in the most naïve historical sense, this may, perhaps, be an accurate representation—given that the overwhelming majority of game designers, game software producers, and game hardware innovators have been biologically male. Yet this historical impression is not necessarily transparent to itself. In other words, our sense that videogame history is "all about the boys" is the consequence of a certain mode of historical writing, preservation, memory, and temporally specific affective attachments. (Nooney, 2013)

Our article studies the writing of critics presenting as women inside video game magazines as a way of making their production the main research object. As such, this article has two goals: identifying women video game reviewers and analyzing what they wrote about gender.

Who wrote what?

In this research, we explored 15 video game magazines, in French and English, coming from "Western" countries (Canada, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States). This selection includes *N64*, *Mean Machines*, *Commodore User*, *Official Xbox Magazine*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Québec Playstation*, *Joypad*, *Computer and Video Games*, *Canard PC*, *Edge*, *Computer Gaming World*, *Joystick*, *Crash*, *Nintendo Power* and *Tilt*. Together, they form a corpus covering two languages in multiple geopolitical and cultural contexts. As those publications include too much content to analyze them in their entirety, we randomly selected 33% of the issues from which we manually extracted all their game reviews for a total of 14,836 articles going from 1981 (the earliest publication of our sample) to 2021 (the latest), giving us access to many contexts over a long period of time while still being enough to have redundancy in the content. This corpus was selected in the context of a larger research project on the theme of videoludic critics made by the Video Games Observation and Documentation University Lab (LUDOV). The choice of corpus has been made based on their archives and to study diverse facets of these reviews, including their forms, scoring systems, and reviewer voices. We thus examine only reviews, a type of critical text that evaluates the subjective qualities of games and presents them to readers.

After selecting the corpus, we categorized each author as men, women, ambiguous, anonymous or others[4]. This coding was made on a review basis, making it easier to link each person to their production even in the case where there are multiple authors. The identification of each person's gender was mainly linked to how they were

[4] This category was diverse relating to intersexual, nonbinary, genderfluid, and other gender or sexual identities. As methods didn't reveal any person linked to these identities, they were fused into one to show their absence. It doesn't mean that there were none, but that our methodology and corpus are ill suited for their identification.

identified, by themselves or others, inside video game magazines. We use this terminology as some reviewers use pseudonyms or aren't identified[5]. This could lead to missing some persons or adding false positives, especially in magazines using freelance work where the writers change from one issue to another and may be anonymous even to the editorial team. Some pseudonyms are even used by multiple writers[6]. Even if this analysis is based on the text as it is presented to the readers, we build our knowledge on previous research that investigated a sample of 15 issues per magazine[7]. This observation was made by using keywords (she, her, herself, gender, woman, women, girl, elle, femme, fille, joueuse) and biographical texts (any information that describe the authors). Every first occurrence of a type of information (pronouns, biographical descriptions, photos, or artistic renditions[8], etc.) was noted in a database to favorize compiling the variety more than the number of times each category of information is relevant. These results are then added to our current research that prioritizes the close reading the each review and masthead[9] looking for any of the aspects prioritized in the previous work, while looking for clues that could have been overlooked. We must also mention the use of search engines and LinkedIn if there was a lack of information on someone in the magazines. In these corpora, we prioritize self-identification as seen in the text; however, some critics could only be identified by how others described them, their pronouns and, in some extreme cases that aren't directly analyzed in this article but are part of our general statistical study, the gender commonly associated with their names as seen in databases like names.org. Even if the gender associated with a name or a pronoun may not reflect the real gender of the person depending on cultural associations or for nonbinary identities, this choice was made to avoid a disproportionate number of people in our "ambiguous" category, since most reviewers don't identify their gender in their writing and leave us only with indirect means of identifying them. This is especially the case for men who rarely feel the need to identify themselves in a mostly masculine environment[10]. This would risk rendering invisible numerous

[5] We didn't take into consideration that women may use a masculine identity for protection. Also, our definition of women includes transgender identities that identify as such.

[6] Even if there are probably more inside our corpus, we were able to identify only one case (Paul Sumner). It was decided to not gender this reviewer even if we included them for our stats on the use of pseudonyms.

[7] This selection took the first and last five issues added to five taken in the middle to see the transformations of the review teams over a long period of time while still being able to analyze longer continuous samples. For details, see Heine 2022.

[8] In our case, the persons associated with pictures and artistic rendition could always be linked to other sources of identification (pronouns, presentation, etc.). However, it is important to remember that using only these sources could lead to forms of essentialism based on someone appearance.

[9] The section presenting the numerous people who worked on the magazine.

[10] This is based on our observation. However, the corpus includes reviewers that tend to "defend their masculinity" or "heterosexuality" violently, with the usage of homophobic and misogynistic discourses, in the case of video games including women protagonists. These

women who wrote in those magazines or falsely reduce the overwhelming majority of men writing in those publications. The goal is less of having a perfect statistical representation, as there will be misgendered people, and more giving us a representative portrait of the situation that gives clues on the production of each person, their gender identities, and the critics that necessitate deeper analysis. Evidently, it significantly increases the error margin of the statistical data. However, it let us cover a larger quantity of data that shows the general trends over a long period, while the information on how many different identifying elements are present for each reviewer guided our choice of who to analyze without misgendering them. total, we identified 10,443 articles written with the participation[11] of men (70%), 3532 anonymous (24%), 319 ambiguous, and 0 others. Only 637 reviews (4.29%) were written with the participation of at least one woman (see figure 1).

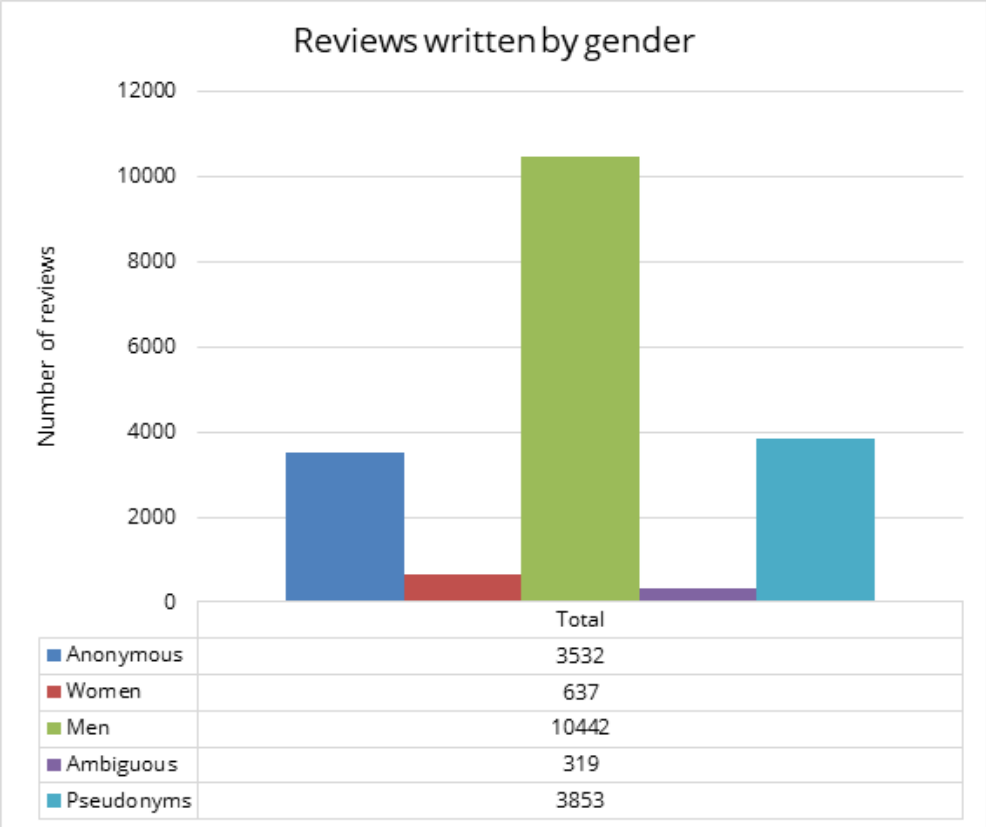

Figure 1. Number of reviews written with the participation of each gender category.

This is a small number that is distributed among 10 of the 15 magazines. Women writers weren't numerous, but the fact that they were present and wrote reviews creates a privileged access point to the history of those women and their discourses

are mostly present in some magazines (Joypad and Joystick). For example, see: Kaaa (1990) and Anonymous (1990).

[11] These statistics can include the same reviews multiple times if they are associated with co-authors linked to different identities.

in a precise context. A context in which their reviews have been seen by many readers over a long period.

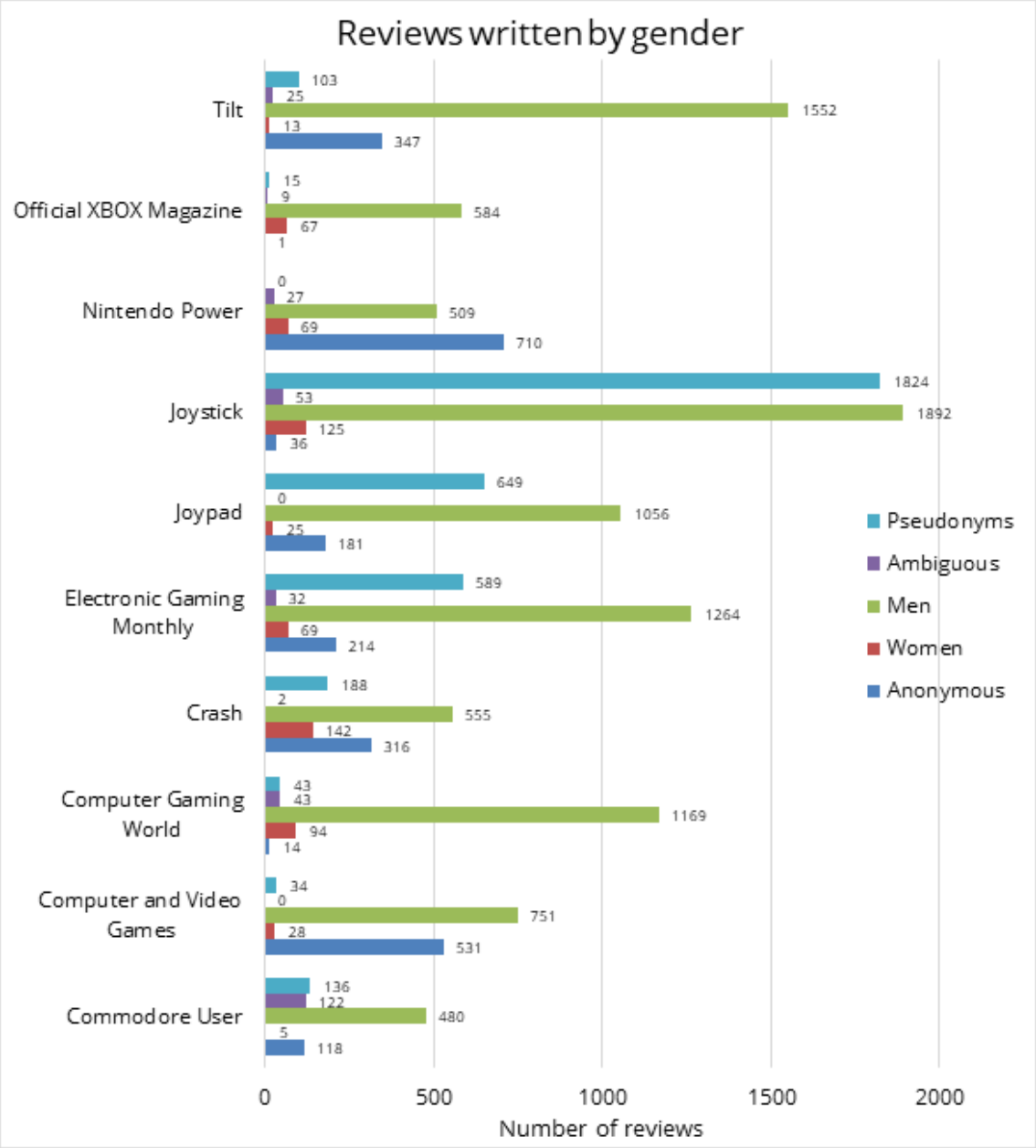

Figure 2. Number of reviews written by magazines containing at least one reviewer identified as women (exclude Canard PC, Edge, Mean Machine, N64, Québec PlayStation).

What do they write?

After the identification of women reviewers, we examined the entirety of what they wrote in game reviews including women protagonists and how some used this opportunity to analyze and position themselves on the broader issues of gender and sexism. This choice reduced the number of reviews from 637 to 51, favoring a type

of article that was observed as containing more discussion about gender. This isn't surprising since women protagonists tend to be more heavily sexualized or linked to passivity while being at the center of many conflicting readings, may it be in the academic or gaming communities (Gray et al., 2018, p. 2–6).

Video game magazines are a useful tool to study some of the discourses that were and are sometimes still present around video games. Examining them helps us analyze the history of some of the perceptions, intentions and receptions linked to games and their cultural circles. To do so, we observe our corpus using a qualitative analysis, inspired by those used in cultural history and textual analysis, and supported by the quantitative analysis presented earlier. Our goal is to study these articles, a cultural artifact of their time, as they were presented to readers to "try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them" (McKee, 2003, p. 1). By analyzing their words with the help of concepts or perspectives developed by other studies, we will form a story of their writings to research and interpret what they said, what they convey and what could have influenced them. Each review was read in their entirety as the languages, regions, type of games, formal aspects of the reviews, etc. limited our ability to use tool-assisted analysis. This has the risk of making the researchers' bias more prominent as more of the conclusions depend on their perceptions. However, most software that could help to visualize the language used have difficulties with recognizing some fonts or artistic text of our corpus. Even more, they would be rendered mostly useless by the formal inconsistency of each magazine. Our sample is too chronologically and geographically dispersed for the use of each word being relevant data. This is especially the case for most women critics, which tend to have their own lexicon.[12] For genders, the same words are often used with different meanings depending mostly on who wrote and in what magazine.

As with any historical research, there will always be unknown parts of a past that exist only in memories and in the sources left behind. Memories can change and written accounts may be false or biased while mostly excluding the perspective of minorities or people from underprivileged classes, forcing historians in a heavily interpretative position (Wainwright, 2019, p. 10). For example, there are many difficulties when it comes to studying the life of women in the Middle Ages as there are a lack of sources about them other than those made by men in a patriarchal society or by women from a higher social class (Goldy and Livingstone, 2012, p. 1–3). There are some links with our subject, as women clearly wrote a minority of the reviews leaving us with fewer traces. We interpret those sources with missing or incomplete pieces. Discarding them would necessarily mean participating in a version of history

[12] For an excellent example of how the use of tools and the choice of corpora can help to understand gendered languages and discourses around and inside a specific type of video games, see Heritage 2021. As their methods and the corpus chosen (fantasy video games) aren't easily adaptable to our research object while giving a look more on the developer side, we choses to prioritize other studies.

dominated by a hegemonic vision, that sees game history dominated by white heterosexual men, and an acceptance of gendered roles and the male gaze: a heterosexual and masculine gaze which sexualizes and objectifies feminine bodies (Mulvey, 1975, p. 12–13).

Using this corpus and these methods, we observed that even in the context of game reviews there are resistances, acceptations and nuances in women's writings. This shows a disparate portrait while adding to the history of women's presence and impact on video games by exposing their discourses even in the overly masculinized world of videoludic reviews. Evidently, the true intention behind their words is lost to time as even an oral history wouldn't necessarily be able to access exactly what was thought as those lines were written, especially when we include the possible changes made by the editorial teams. However, we can interpret what their writing conveys of their meaning in the context of the magazine. This has the advantage of retrieving stories, discourses, nuances and positions from the margins that should already be a part of mainstream video game's history.

To demonstrate the multiple discourses women critics wrote, we first observe examples that include a tendency to accept gendered norms. This is followed by those including a more "neutral" or ambiguous stance on the subject. We conclude our observation with examples that are more critical about how women are represented in video games. All those elements help us to understand what and how the women of our corpus wrote about gender in the specific context of their reviews.

Reproduction of stereotypes and hegemonic masculinity

The field of gaming has long been rife with stereotypes about women, may it be in how games and accessories are gendered (Chess, 2017, pp. 1–30) or the way of playing is falsely essentialized as linked to binary genders (Chess, 2020, pp. 22–39). In the context of their work and through gendered expectation, some of the reviewers seem to reproduce part of the patriarchal and hegemonic discourse noted by other studies on video game magazines. In fact, two aspects of hegemonic masculinity are particularly interesting for our investigation of this subject. The first one posits the most accepted way of being a man within a precise cultural, social or historical context, which can be used to identify the form of the masculine gamer that may not be hegemonic outside of gaming culture but is still in a position of power inside it (Cote, 2021). The second is provided by Fisher:

> since men have always been the majority in videogame spaces and are assumed to remain the majority in videogame spaces, their leadership or dominance is simply the way things exist, and little questioning of that state of existence needs to happen. (Fisher, 2012, p. 21)

This phenomenon, which we will call masculine hegemony for clarity, also refers to the idea that video games are led by men and are mainly oriented toward a masculine demographic, creating beliefs that are so embedded in society that some games are labeled, explicitly or not, as "games for girls," separating them from "games for boys," creating a gendered and patriarchal system and culture. According to Cote, "Games designed for women relied heavily on traditionally feminine material, such as cooking, dolls, and taking care of families, houses, or pets" (2021, p. 89). In contrast, video games directed toward men prioritize themes centered around adventure, combat and violence (2021, p. 89). These gendered definitions and games are evidently based on stereotypes of what is feminine or masculine. Still, they have an important impact on the writings of many reviewers as:

> games that are deliberately designed for women often repurpose genres, themes, stereotypes, and expectations of feminine styles of play. Additionally, similar to previous forms of media, games designed for women are often overlooked and dismissed as having no importance or value. (Chess 2017, p. 5)

Some game critics manifest a tendency to endorse in part these gender-based stereotypes. Jennifer, a reviewer from *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, writes about *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* (Square Enix, 2003): "Lots of stereotypes work (this game's for kiddies, for girls, for *Final Fantasy*-loving fanboys), but none even hint at how deep this action RPG goes … everyone should try it" (Jennifer et al., 2004, p. 125). The author claims that the targeted audiences are kiddies, girls and fanboys. However, let's concentrate on the specificities of the term "girl" in this context. The author seems to accept that some aesthetic or design choices are linked to girls in a way where this identity seems to be external to that of mostly men gamers. Nonetheless, nuances are to be considered, as Jennifer stated that "none [of the stereotypes] even hint at how deep this action RPG goes" (Jennifer et al., 2004, p. 125). So, even though she claims that the game is of more interest to some identities, she still acknowledges the intricacies of the gameplay. An acknowledgement that doesn't necessarily contradict the "stereotype" but shows a game that can be of interest for "gamers" by being sufficiently "deep" or complex. This mention insinuates that games for "girls" aren't normally deep enough for real gamers. There is a pressure on women gamers to dissociate themselves from the "girl" qualifier as it is different from a more legitimate "gamer" identity that judges those themes as lesser than openly masculine games.

Another way in which there could be an acceptance of the stereotypes directed at women is in the description of the characters themselves. In fact, the official descriptions present in the paratext or sent by the developers and the publishers could have influenced reviewers' perspective on women protagonists. When Kika, a reviewer for *Joystick*, mentions *Meat Puppet* (Kronos Digital Entertainment, 1997), she describes the protagonist as "the sexy heroine [who] runs to save her life" (Kika,

1997, p. 109).[13] The adjective "sexy" directly sexualizes the heroine. Nevertheless, upon an examination of the official description present on the game box, the protagonist is characterized as "A beautiful woman with a big gun." (MobyGames, 2001). This sentence holds a reductive view of the protagonist as an object of desire, to be looked at, where a male protagonist would mostly be linked to its strength or capacity. Such instances are not limited to this singular case as:

> women in games were more likely to be portrayed as partially nude or dressed in a sexually revealing way, with unrealistic body proportions, wearing clothing inappropriate to the in-game activities they were performing (Downs and Smith paraphrased by Heeter, 2014, pp. 373–374).

Heeter also writes about game designers' intentions when portraying characters:

> Game designers at an Austrian game design company … aimed to represent 'the average guy' based on photographs, anatomically correct in proportion, but for a women character they did not use photos as they do in designing men characters, because photos were not 'sexy' enough. (2014, p. 374)

The desire to portray women in an attractive or "sexually revealing" way for the male gaze is therefore prevalent. With this vision of women ending in the paratextual description, it can heavily influence the way reviewers describe those characters especially in shorter reviews, like the one made by Kika, where the presentation of the game is minimal to leave some place for the critique of the gameplay. This situation reinforces a masculine hegemony where the male gaze is at the center of how the characters are described.

Even if those articles tend to repeat a masculine vision of the "gamers", these choices aren't necessarily conscious. Where, later in our article, we will briefly see extreme, but relatively frequent, examples of patriarchal influence in how women are described, we are far from the overt gendered violence and women exclusion of some discourses made by men reviewers. However, there is still a tendency to link gendered descriptions to the protagonist or the players.

The hardcore gamer

Categorization by gender is not the only way to classify gamers. Another Kika article, about *ZanZarah: The Hidden Portal* (Funatics Development, 2002), explains that "Far from any physical or psychological violence, *ZanZarah* is aimed at a public who, before looking for strong sensations, wants to have fun without stress and with the family. But for hardcore gamers, it's a different story" (Kika, 2002, p. 145). The use of

[13] All citations in French were translated by us.

the term “hardcore gamers” indicates that there are casual gamers, who, according to Kika, want a relaxed experience. Even though readers cannot assert with certainty if the author had a gendered view of hardcore gamers, the term is often connected to masculinity. In fact, some types of hardcore games “possess many masculinized characteristics, such as a desire to dominate game environments and other players through one’s skill, and an extreme focus on competitiveness” (Cote, 2021, p. 29).

The separation between “games for boys” and “games for girls” seems to be ingrained at a conscious and subconscious level in many discourses through the history of games and can even be affected by gendered expectation over their content and type (Drisscoll, 2017, pp. 182–184). This situation seems strange when we compare it to the competitive scene around games like Pokémon, which was advertised for kids while presenting visuals that could be considered “girly”. More than a real sense of playing harder, longer or competently, “hardcore” is often linked to men, whereas “casual” is associated with women. In fact, “authorized forms of feminine play are often marginalizing, and at the same time often decoded as ‘frivolity’” (Chess 2009, p. 2). By being “frivolities”, “games for girls” are implied as lacking the serious component that “games for boys” possess. When Kika writes that *ZanZarah* is “a different story” for hardcore gamers, her assumption on the question may come from cultural perceptions where the game theme (fairies) and easier gameplay are associated with women more than mostly masculine “hardcore gamers”. We could adapt the concept of straightwashing, “a symbolic wiping away and subsequent painting over of a work's LGBTQ aspects” (Ruberg 2018), to affirm that there is also a manwashing of the hardcore gamer where all genders, other than cis men, are rendered invisible and/or disconnected from it. For our subject, women, and any characteristic associated to their gender, are erased from the idea of the “hardcore”. Concepts judged as feminine are thus considered to be more casual without necessarily implicating things commonly linked to the “hardcore gamer” concept. This tends to confirm the five design categories (thematic, game-play, visual, character and excluded) identified by Chess while interviewing game designers (2017, pp. 42–52). Each of these categories is linked to a set of characteristics that are seen as the preference of an all-inclusive women identity designed and influenced by industry convention, textual constructs and audience placements present in the largely corporate and masculine video game industry (2017, pp. 31–52). These perceptions aren’t limited to the creative and marketing side, but tend to influence how games are interpreted and gendered depending on their content. They influence the people partaking in the medium and its culture, including the reviewers who judge games in a mostly masculine work environment.

'Neutrality'

While reading through the reviews written by women, we came to realize that most of them (30) have a 'neutral' stance.[14] This mainly includes articles that don't discuss gender matters and focus on game features. That is how Maura Sutton handles *Final Fantasy VIII* (Square, 1999) in *Computer and Video Games*. When describing the protagonists of the game, she uses neutral qualifiers that do not tend toward the oversexualization of characters. They are described by their personality, role and competences without directly discussing their gender. For example, Rinoa Heartilly, is described as "the leader of the Forest Owls. She's headstrong, rebellious and idealistic. She gets herself in trouble when trying to prove her worth as a rebel fighter. Be prepared for a few surprises" (Sutton, 1999, p. 102). The characters are defined by their personalities and their social status, not their gendered traits. Even if this can seem like an amelioration compared to our previous section, this isn't necessarily the case as the question of gender is merely not touched in a meaningful way. This represents most of our corpus as video game reviews tend to briefly describe the story and the gameplay without doing an in-depth analysis of each theme. This absence can sometimes erase important questions about how the protagonists are represented or linked to femininity. As David J. Leonard said in the context of colorblindness in games: "The cost and consequence is not just the reification of stereotypes but legitimizing, normalizing, and sanctioning state violence, inequality, and despair" (Leonard, 2006, p. 87). Evidently, this doesn't mean that women should always write about their gender, but touch on a more encompassing situation where these questions are rarely in the reviews that are written by people of any gender identities, limiting the importance of the criticism on the representation of women in games.

Even if this isn't the intention, not criticizing can mean participating in the normalization and crystallization of hegemonic visions present in the culture, thus reflected in the media while going far beyond one game or even one medium. Our point isn't to judge these articles in themselves, marginalized people don't have to always discuss the representative problems linked to their identities. However, the larger absence of importance associated with the subject can be linked to manwashing and straightwashing. Bo Ruberg explains that:

> the vast majority of reviews of *Undertale* do not talk about queerness … A survey of these materials reveals a key set of recurring themes that, though they may not appear at first to relate to gender or sexuality, in fact work to establish *Undertale* as a heteronormative game. (2018)

[14] We use the word 'neutral' to indicate that they don't fall easily in other categories. It doesn't mean that they have no position, especially with the masculine hegemony in magazines.

Adapting this analysis to our subject, we see that most reviews of games including women protagonists chose to prioritize other elements of the criticism while ignoring discussions on the role and representation of women in story or gameplay. In a more general context that includes the reviews made by other identities, it creates a void in the discourses, leaving more space and visibility for othering, womens' erasure, or misogynist comments and the male gaze. Even queer women characters are mostly invisible. For example, there is no mention of LGBTQ+ characters in the Official Xbox Magazine review of Dragon Age II (Bioware 2011) (Reys 2011, pp. 70–73). In a context of masculine hegemony, part of this silence could be explained by the heavy social cost and the taboos associated with those types of absences (von Münchow 2018, pp. 225–226). There is a big difference between acceptation of something as "normal" because of the influence of your context and protecting yourself from the consequence (harassment, lost jobs, etc.) of openly discussing a subject. Our methodology can't differentiate between them.

In other reviews, the 'neutrality' is more ambivalence caused by double discourses and our inability to link some elements to the author. For example, Francesca Reyes, who worked for *Official Xbox Magazine*, reviews *Tomb Raider: Legend* (Eidos Interactive, 2006) by mostly describing visuals and gameplay (Reyes, 2006, p. 84–85). Outside the text, many images tend to sexualize the protagonist, Lara Croft, with a mention of: "Long pants? Is this really Tomb Raider?" (2006, pp. 84–85). There is a clear difference in how the subject is seen between the review and the accompanying pictures and comments. As with many magazines, there is a possibility that the editorial team added or changed some aspects, especially when it comes to the aesthetic representation and the comments outside the main text. In most cases, readers may never have the luxury of knowing the author's real intentions versus those of the editorial team.

However, we can still see that *Tomb Raider: Legend* is reviewed quite differently when some men reviewers tackle it in specific magazine, showing their hegemonic culture. Jeremy from *Electronic Gaming Monthly* writes in the second sentence of his review: "Since then she's gotten herself a new wardrobe, some new moves, a little, ah, reductive surgery…" (Jeremy, et al., 2006, p. 96). His colleague Crispin begins his review by describing her as "relic-hunting hottie Lara Croft is still just a sports bra away from suffering severe head trauma" (2006, p. 96). These reviewers rapidly objectify Lara by insisting on her sexual attributes even before talking about the game itself. However, in the same review, Dana, a woman, doesn't mention Lara's chest. She does explain that she "expected to have a girl fight with Lara to get her to do what I wanted" (2006, p. 96), but we are far from the overt sexualization of the other two reviewers. As such, our corpus tends to show a more neutral and less objectifying view of women protagonists in reviews made by women, especially when compared with their men cowriters in magazines where there are tendencies to sexualize and objectify women in video games. Even the review of *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball* (Team Ninja 2003), a game with many hypersexualized characters, shows an article from Francesca Reyes that mainly focuses on the gameplay with one of the

most objectifying (and heteronormative) sentences being: "think of it as an opportunity for male gamers (and female ones with a sense of humor) to do resource management shopping, and Barbie-style dress up for only slightly naughty, but very silly rewards" (Reyes *et al*. 2003, pp. 72–75). For comparison, the editors have a small section where they describe their favorite characters and swimsuits, even adding some comments like "not enough … hot girl-on-girl smooching", "my camera skills have improved dramatically" or "I was never allowed to play with dolls" (Reyes *et al*. 2003, p. 74). These mentions are more sexually explicit, the character is clearly seen by them as an object of desire for heterosexual men, even if they take a similarly humorous tone in the face of the game themes.

This gameplay is sexist!

The sexism present in many games seem normalized and not even considered as a part of a game review, despite its inclusion in the narrative and visual aspect of many games. However, even with the influence of a gamer hegemonic masculinity, some reviewers still use the medium to convey comments on how women are represented in games, whether in relatively subtle ways or in a more direct acknowledgement of the problems. Samara, a reviewer for *Crash*, mentions the text adventure game *The Jade Stone* (1987) made by Linda Wright. She explains that:

> Success depends on a strange mixture of feminism and femininity. Unlike Amanton, Amora [the protagonist] isn't afraid of a little sword-play (she can more than hold her own when it comes to fighting a battle) but she lives in a world where (quite realistically) brain is as important as brawn: she often has to fall back on qualities of intelligence and compassion — what some people might call feminine intuition! Suffice it to say that it's a good idea to take a needle as well as a sword on your travels… (Samara, 1988, p. 48)

As adventure games link story and gameplay, a relation between narrative and puzzle isn't surprising. After all: "Adventure games are story-driven videogames, which encourage exploration and puzzle solving … Their challenges usually appear in the form of concatenated puzzles, which are integrated in the fictional world" (Fernandez-Vara, 2009, p. 13). The narrative elements can help to consolidate the form and solution of the puzzles, notably by giving hints or justifying their form. The story and its representation of the protagonist has become an important part of the gameplay as it justifies the series of actions that must be taken to progress.

We can also see an opposition between feminism, in this case a protagonist that performs aggressive actions traditionally linked to men, and femininity, performing activities traditionally linked to women like sewing or showing compassion. While analyzing this aspect, we must remember that the meanings of words are affected by a person's experience and cultural or social circles. It would be easy to consider

that the author saw feminism as incompatible with being feminine. Even if it's a possibility, the general meaning and context are more important than each isolated word. Samara seems to use those concepts to differentiate between performing gendered roles or going outside them. The "…" at the end of the quote could convey her disapprobation of the way in which a mostly feminist protagonist is sometimes reduced to her gender in the action necessary for progressing.

Some examples are more direct in their critique of gender roles in adventure games. This is sometimes made by referring directly to the sexism that is perceived in the actions required of the player character. While writing on *King's Quest IV* (Sierra On-Line, 1988), Scorpia, an adventure and roleplaying game reviewer for *Computer Gaming World*, explained: "You will also have to sit through some tedious animation in the dwarf's house. This is a puzzle in the game, the solution to which is rather sexist, although obvious" (1988, p. 20). While not giving more detail about what is sexist about the puzzle, she insists on how long and boring this sequence is. These sentences are linked to a puzzle where Rosella, the heroine, needs to clean a house and prepare food for "seven dwarfs" like in the story of Snow White. This is a small comment inside her longer review. Still, she explicitly describes the puzzle as sexist forcing the Rosella to replay traditional gender roles to progress, sharing with the readers her opposition to this type of representation. After all, even if there are stories and contexts that could justify it in other games, it is ironic to require that the heroine of an "adventure" game perform housework for a group of men to progress the story. However, *King Quest IV* is seen by Angel R. Cox as having a more "feminist turn" as it:

> frequently puts Rosella into stereotypically feminine situations, it often subverts them—while she kisses a frog to transform him into a prince, he rejects her and she him; Edgar, whom she has rescued, proposes marriage to her at the end of the game, and she freely declines his proposal without penalty even while acknowledging that he is conventionally suitable for her. For a fantasy text published in 1988, having a princess rescue her family and reject (multiple) princes is a conventional feminist move, a response to stereotypical fairy tale princess roles … However, it sets up a dichotomy … for men, marriage is a reward for success that carries no impediment; but for women, marriage is an imposing, threatening impediment to success. In a way, though, this seems to reflect the reality of living in a patriarchal world, in which institutions such as marriage are likely to benefit men more than women, and as such critiques those institutions (Cox, 2018, p. 29).

While this analysis demonstrates the complexity of the game's feminist discourse, it also highlights the importance of the criticism made by Scorpia that point at some of the stereotypes still present even in a context where they permeate the general culture, and where the game tries to counter some of the more overt ones. It reveals a desire for more equality or a more systematic erasure of essentialized gender roles

even in the face of a story that tries more than most fantasy mediatic production of its time, showing a resistance that could appear anachronistic if we only observe the majority discourse present in gaming communities.

Statistical determinism of gender

Roleplaying games were another source of critical positioning on the question of sexism and, more specifically, its essentialization of physical and mental statistics. In the same publication, Tracie Forman Hines, "an experienced adventure gamer" (1988, p. 60), describes how *Pool of Radiance* (Strategic Simulations, 1988) character creation has "apparent sexism in one area and … complete disregard for gender in another." (Hines, 1988, p. 62). This use of the term "sexism" is linked to how women characters have less strength with no other bonus, making them the worse option. Hines explains that: "It may be realistic, but … there is no corresponding increase in charisma (as in Basic Dungeons & Dragons)" (1988, p. 62).

In one paragraph, we have multiple takes on the inequalities of the character creation system that sometimes appear as contradictory. On one hand, she clearly states that the game includes some form of sexism. However, the mention of "realism" and of the lack of charisma (a statistic mostly linked to beauty, leadership, or persuasion) need to be considered before making any assessment. Other than the fact that talking about "realism" in terms of statistics in a fantasy game where warriors can accomplish inhuman feats doesn't make sense, the context of the review makes it so it could be normal for Hines to accentuate the impact of those choices on the gameplay more than the social aspect.

Six years later, Petra Schlunk, while reviewing *Disciples of Steel* (Megasoft Entertainment, 1993) explains that "Female Characters have a lower strength potential than males, although they make up for this deficit with correspondingly higher values for intuition and charm. (It's okay, myths are important)" (Schlunk, 1994, p. 64). Without using the word sexism, she explicitly points, sarcastically, that the gendered statistical difference is based on myths. In fact, the bonus in "charm" shows a heterosexual and masculine perspective (male gaze) that essentializes women and presents them as "naturally" more attractive or charming. There are similarities in the comments made by Hines and Schlunk as they both point at the sexism of those games while not making it the central argument. Hines wrote it in two small paragraphs while Schlunk used only one sentence. This is the main disadvantage and advantage of our corpus. The reviews of most games will be more general than editorial or thematic articles. Discussions about genders are restricted to a small percentage of our sources, limiting the length of comments on the subject. However, it also renders even more important to note what made those critics write about gender and how they do it. In this case, we can easily link it to the tendency of many roleplaying games, especially those of the period, to give statistical description for everything, either to make the character creation choices important or as an attempt to simulate

actions and worlds. What statistics are associated with what choice can help us understand the potential bias of the game makers, and make them a highly visible target to criticism when it comes to their representation of genders or even races and cultures. Some researchers have highlighted the misogyny present in popular tabletop RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons*, and the use of "female monsters that simply embody misogynistic patriarchal tropes" (Stang, 2021). The gendered difference was noted by the above reviewers, who criticized the statistical sexism of the game. They even found it important to mention it in a context where the space was limited, forcing her to choose what part of the games are more important to write about.

The absence of statistical discrepancy could even be stated in some reviews. While writing on Might and Magic (New World Computing, 1986), Scorpia explains: "The sex of your character has no effect on attribute scores or abilities, but there is a point in the game where it will be extremely important whether the character is male or female. So, have both in the party" (1987, p. 24). The first part of the sentence gives some importance to the absence of difference between the two choices available as it is mentioned even when the game doesn't include any statistical discrepancy between genders. The second part refers to a location in the game (Portsmith, which is inhabited by a succubus queen) where men in the party get negatively affected while women have no consequences, favoring a party of women or temporarily changing the gender of characters at a magical fountain. Even if the context is ambiguous and raises some legitimate questions on the lack of LGBTQ+ characters representation (even with the addition of the possibility of transgender characters with the fountain), it is still one of the rare cases where women characters of the time are clearly advantaged without relying on a "capacity to seduce" or a similar concept.

Even if gendered difference still exists in some roleplaying games, the erasure of their importance in statistics is visible in some popular tabletop games, like *Dungeons & Dragons*, influencing the video games that are based on their rules and those that are inspired by them. In a context where gendered statistics were more prevalent, the above reviewers show that there were early discussions about statistical differences, based on conceptions of genders, that were and are still present in many cultural representations or discourses, and their deterministic nature that favor or disfavor some roles for women. By extension, it shows forms of resistance to the bioessentialism that is often still linked to gender in fiction. In games that are based on playing a role, these statistically act as deterministic limitations to what type of character should be played. As we have seen, these limitations were the target of explicit rejection. Without being the only influence, the fact that these rules have long been eliminated from Dungeons & Dragons demonstrates that these types of discourses and resistance can help change the perceptions of sexist rules and their transformation in gaming practices. There is power in those public discourses that can at the very least be one of the cogs that bolster movements and actions for cultural changes. That's without adding the influence of independent

takes on these systems in the form of house rules, homebrews, or competing games.

Sexualization and criticisms

How the protagonists are visually represented can sometimes lead to straightforward rejection of how women are characterized in games. In a *Joystick* review of *Hand of Fate: Kyrandia 2* (Westwood Studios, 1993), Maria Dao (using the pseudonym Calor) has a positive outlook about the game protagonist even going as far as complimenting her beauty and her tendency to have a variety of clothes for special occasion or vanity (1994, pp. 90–93). All the while, she also explains that "The main character is a woman that doesn't content herself with wiggling her butt. This is something to celebrate, right?" (1994, p. 91). When we compare this aspect to some of the other articles of our corpus, it may seem like an antithesis as there is a positive view of her beauty and her clothes collection, which can reflect gendered stereotypes, while celebrating a character that isn't here just to be objectified. It is important to keep in mind the period in which this article was published. Women protagonists in video games were rare and, when they were present, were frequently oversexualized, ridiculed, and objectified. Recent quantitative analyses of the subject have shown that popular games still tend to exclude women as protagonists or even as characters in general, while sexualizing them more frequently (Geena Davis Institute, 2021; Harrisson et al., 2020; Wilberg, 2011, pp. 42–43).

The lack of representation, plus the tendency to show passive and sexualized women, explain in part why a more active protagonist is seen as a positive even if she performs in a way that other reviewers would find stereotypical. The problem is more the lack of media going outside those representations, reinforcing them as gendered stereotypes, and the relative absence of masculine characters having those traits, than the representation in itself. We also need to compare her discourse with those of others, especially when it comes to sexualization. There are examples of this sexualization being used as an excuse for negative and sexist comments in numerous reviews made by men. For example, in *Joystick*, we can see some critics using terms as "honor to the weaker sex" and comparing, in a demeaning way, changing the equipment of the heroine of *Soldier 2000* (Artronic Products Limited, 1989) to playing with Barbie dolls (Kaaa, 1990, p. 129). This tendency continues even later as an anonymous reviewer criticized the sexualization of Lotus, one of the protagonists of *Deathtrap Dungeon* (Asylum Studios, 1998), while openly objectifying her as a "synthetic girlfriend" with numerous insinuations, sexualizing images and even a homophobic defense of the writer heterosexuality (1998, pp. 150–151).

In a context of hostility toward feminine protagonists, having a reviewer reacting positively to a character, whose main gimmick is her magical wardrobe, is an interesting perspective, where the masculine hegemony present in other articles could

have led to a categorization of the game as Barbie-like or people pointing at a sexualized heroine to be ridiculed. We mustn't forget what the researchers in our introduction said about the exclusion and the violence against women that are present in many magazines. We are analyzing magazines that are thought of as mostly for men, encouraging a patriarchal perspective that tends to judge women as an "other" that can be made into an object of desire to be controlled. Valorizing a feminine heroine is understandable as opposed to showing hostility at anything that doesn't enter the realm of "manliness".

Stereotypes, simplifications and 'girly'

Some critics wanted a detachment from gendered roles and personalities that were considered 'girly'. This is the case of Arinn Dembo from *Computer Gaming World*. In her review of *New Horizon* (Koei, 1993), she explains:

> The game has six characters you can play, including a token female. I played her, naturally, since I recognized her name: Catalina de Erantzo (Erauso in some texts), la Monja Allarez— "The Nun Ensign". She's one of the great folk heroes of Latin America. ... they did geld her character, assigning some kind of insipid, girlie-type motive for her piracy, which is too bad. But still, seeing her in the game was a high point. (Dembo, 1995, p. 178)

When reading the story of Catalina in the game, we could question the hostility against a character that becomes a pirate to avenge the death of her husband and her father. However, a more thorough reading on the history of her inspiration shows an erasure of many aspects linked to genders and LGBTQ+ history. Catalina de Erauso is the birth name of Antonio de Erauso. They were linked to many mantles by studies—going from being a violent criminal, a colonizer and an example of resistance to gendered roles to a lesbian or a transgender man—while being used as an interesting example for discussion around identities, genders, and their frontiers throughout history (Velasco, 2009, p. 1–11; Aresti, 2007, p. 401–418; Goldmark, 2015, p. 214–235). Their story is very different from a revenge plot that is centered around the men in their life, removing their independence and complexity. In this case, the character is recognized by Dembo as a heroic woman. Still, the limited reference to the real history of de Erauso is perceived as lackluster. Moreover, the in-game character is seen as less independent from the patriarchal society of their time. Therefore, Dembo points at the "girly-type motive" of this "token female".

Another article from Dembo uses the term "girly". Her review of *Phantasmagoria* (Sierra On-Line, 1995) includes a section titled "Gender difficulties" (Dembo, 1995, p. 64). She points to the fact that the game's designer Roberta Williams continued "work with female protagonists is unusual in a business where even the most brilliant female designers devote their best work to male characters" (Dembo, 1995,

p. 64). However, Dembo also explains that some of the women protagonist in games linked to Williams (Laura Bow, from the series of the same name, and Adrienne Delaney, the heroine of *Phantasmagoria*) "are traditional girlie-type girls, despite their good qualities" (1995, p. 64). For her, those protagonists tend to act in a manner that's considered "girly", which she sees as a negative trait. She explains that she was forced to watch Adrienne looking at herself in mirrors going as far as writing: "When I tried out the 'hot cursor' spots in the bathroom, only to see Adrienne brush her hair, rub her hands with lotion, and put on make-up, all without advancing the plot at all, I actually let out a squawk of outrage—mortally offended, both as a woman and as a player, at this interjection of pointless 'chick stuff'" (Dembo, 1995, p. 64). Moreover, she adds that:

> I would certainly agree with anyone who said that there need to be more female characters in computer gaming, and that male players should have less trouble identifying with female protagonists. But I don't think that end will be accomplished by exaggerating the feminine in a character, and hammering up the differences between men and women. Even female players are turned off by that kind of thing, and rightly so. (Dembo 1995, p. 64)

In our corpus, this is the most engaged and voluminous critique of how women protagonists are represented. Where other reviewers, like Lucy Hickman, did use the term "girly wimps" to describe how most heroines are represented (1992, p. 55), Dembo explains her position in great length. She shows an industry that needs to add more women in games. However, this addition mustn't come at the cost of limiting those characters to performing a stereotypical femininity that essentializes gender.

Stereotypes are an important control tool that has power as a producer of meaning and in social reproduction (Dyer 2002, pp. 11–12). After all, "How we are seen determines in part how we are treated" (2002, p. 1) and there is a tendency for stereotypes to mark the difference between the "us" and the "other" (Shaw, 2015, pp. 19–20; Dyer, 2000, p. 250; Hall, 2003, pp. 258–259). By discussing this subject in her article, Dembo points at those constructions, explains how and why they are a problem for her, and helps to deconstruct a type of representation that is normalized in many narrative media. However, *Phantasmagoria* can also be seen as a game where "Williams was allowed an unprecedented budget and artistic control, and which plays out as a feminist allegory concerned with the nature of domestic abuse and its impact on women" (Cox, 2018, p. 31). The criticism of Dembo isn't unwarranted as the media tends to limit women to roles or stories that are linked to gender stereotypes. In the context of her review, she doesn't reject the overall story or the horror of the domestic abuses that are represented. She is mostly critical of the choice linked to the optional actions of the character that are interpreted as reinforcing a

form of femininity (self-conscious of their appearance, taking time to be presentable, etc.) in the context of a horror game where masculine characters wouldn't do these actions.

The criticism of the representation of women as linked to traditionally feminine personality traits is important, especially inside a review published in 1992. Even if they are relatively few, criticisms of gender stereotypes are an important part of video game history as a sign of resistance to influence including patriarchy or the men's hegemony over games and gamer identities.

Still, there is a visible lack of those types of articles after the year 2000. The progressive closure of some magazines and the change in teams, format, editorial rules and advertisers are some aspects that could explain this, without including broader social influences and the popularization of gaming websites. However, we mustn't forget that our research is focused on reviews and that many comments are also available in the other sections of those magazines like the reader's letters or the articles and reports about the gamers' communities. That's without including the fact that we only evaluated one third of the magazines and may have missed other examples. Moreover, some more general takes on gender outside the context of women protagonists are also present. For example, Noëlle Béronie writes: "Who said that girls didn't like wargames? I loved Cannon Fodder" (Béronie and Feroyd, 1993, p. 123), thereby going against stereotypes in gendered gaming interest. There are many ways to talk of or criticize the representation of women in games, the industry or in gamers' communities and the limitation of one study can't represent a complex phenomenon by itself.

Conclusion

Video game magazines are a space dominated by men and their discourses. This patriarchal influence and the masculine hegemony tend to limit the presence of women and can affect in part the discourses produced and the work culture by influencing the importance or cost associated to some subjects. As we saw in our study, this influence can be seen even in the production of women. On the other hand, most of our corpus is 'neutral' when it comes to gender. As we have seen, they either don't write significant comments on the subject or can't be clearly categorized without more information. These restrictions on gender critiques aren't limited to women and some magazines did have more of those texts than others.

The most interesting aspect remains the presence and the form of resistance to sexism in video games. Whether the essentialization of statistical differences that insinuate a male gaze, the gendered nature of the actions or the stereotypical way in which women are represented, there are discussions and critical stances on the subject as early as the late 1980s. This joins the historical and cultural research on other parts of the gaming community, reception and production to show that even in a

mostly masculine environment and in a context limiting the opportunity for this type of discourse, there is a clear presence of women who discussed, criticized or supported a more inclusive and less stereotyped presence of women in video games. This adds to studies on magazines (which tend to limit their analysis of these signs of resistance and their impacts), while adding more fuel to the numerous stories that describe a history of gaming where women, feminist thought and counter-hegemonic discourse were present despite limiting factors. It shows the importance of exploring more forms of discourses and the fact that these discussions were considered sufficiently important to be mentioned by some.

As scholars, we need to add nuance to a general history that mostly limits women to the role of outsiders or passive victims, even with many studies proving their active role (Gray et al. (eds), 2018; Nooney, 2013). Despite their relatively few numbers in reviews, we can bring back from the margins a history of video games that is more diversified and complex than what hegemonic discourses tend to describe in a patriarchal context. After all, the number of women is less important than the fact that they were present at different times and that their opinions and writings were published and read by many. A story that still needs to be completed by exploring even more sources and mediums with a diversity of methods and perspectives until each smaller research combined give us a new and more inclusive historical vision, as with other parts of gaming history.

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