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# “We don’t want it changed, do we?” - Gender and Sexuality in Role-Playing Games

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In the past few years, there has been an increase in research examining gender issues in games. While there have been quite a lot of studies that concentrate on girls and women as players and emphasize specific preferences and gaming habits (cf. Bonanno and Kommers 2005, Carr 2005), other research underlines that there is no such thing as *the female approach* to video games (cf. Hayes 2007). In addition to concentrating on women playing games, game scholars examine aesthetics, sexualized images and gendered performances of game characters (cf. Schleiner 2001, Richard 2004).

In the field of game studies, discussions have occurred around whether games should be treated as narratives (Murray 2001) or instead as systems of rules that define winning or losing the game (Frasca 1999). Although interaction is a defining element of computer games and players enjoy a certain freedom of choice in the process of playing, most games have both a main story and narrative elements<sup>1</sup> (cf. Newman 2002). This is especially the case with role-playing games, in which the hero must overcome a set of obstacles in order to save the game-world (cf. Consalvo/ Dutton 2006). It is important to take both narrative and ludological aspects of games into account. I consider role-playing games as ergodic texts (cf. Aarseth 1997), being both cultural products and systems of rules as parts of ergodic structures.

Sarah Grimes (2003) analyzed three video games with a female avatar in order to find out whether video games construct an “ideal feminine heroine”. She refers to feminist film theory to underpin her consideration of female avatars. It may be problematic to use a theory that was developed for film analysis for a study on games because games follow different principles than films do. Nevertheless using film theory as a tool for game analysis can produce considerable findings. This article follows a similar approach of utilizing the body of feminist media studies for an examination of computer games. It is a case study on representations of sexuality and gender relations in a role-playing game series with a male avatar. Three questions were addressed in the analysis:

1. To what extent are female identified characters part of the game-worlds as living beings and how are they involved in quests and narrative? How are these characters portrayed?
2. Does the characterization of the avatar challenge hegemonic concepts of masculinity?
3. Are issues of sexual desire part of the game-world? If so, how are they displayed?

To answer these questions, the in-game appearances of female characters and possible interactions with these characters were observed as well as references to sexuality in dialogs and story of the games. All game characters in the first and second part of the game series were categorized by sex, appearance, profession and involvement in quests. Dialogs between the avatar and non-player-characters were scanned for gender-relevant remarks. Furthermore, allusions and remarks related to sexuality were logged and analyzed. In addition to this aesthetic- and narrative-centered approach, the ludic elements were taken into consideration by analyzing the underlying rules, character interactions and quest structures of the games. In addition to “total completion” (Aarseth 2003) of the games and producing gameplay logs (cf. Consalvo and Dutton 2006) along the way, internet resources like walkthroughs and fan sites were included in the analysis. Walkthroughs provide a rich source for overlooked content and an additional perspective on gameplay. Discussions in fan forums were taken into account in order to incorporate some players’ readings of the game content.

The theoretical background for the analysis draws from feminist media studies, influenced by feminist and queer theory as well as by cultural studies. Feminist theorists have developed a critique of prescribed assumptions and attributes that are connected to a specific sex and gender. Second wave feminism focused on oppressive forces in society, which cause subordination and discrimination of the female sex. In media studies Laura Mulvey described how sexualized portrayals of women in cinema are constructed for a male gaze, a voyeuristic perspective of viewing she called “Scopophilia” (2006, p. 344). In the 1980s the focal point for feminist theory was examining the social processes, by which differences in gender roles and identities are produced. Gender is actively produced by the individual, rather than just inscribed into one’s mind (West and Zimmermann 1987).

Third wave feminism and queer theory question the category sex itself. Sex, as a binary category, is not pre-discursive, but a factor that is socially and medically produced, due to social expectations (Fausto-Sterling 2000, p.112). Judith Butler (1990) describes how the dichotomy of sexes is naturalized through performative acts. Through the repetition of norms, the dichotomy of two sexes and compulsory heterosexuality appear to be natural facts. Butler refers to Michel Foucault and feminist psychoanalysts, in order to explain how the concept of sex as a binary category is socially constructed and which psychological processes produce gender identity and sexual desires. The social taboo on homosexuality plays an important role in her theory. Same-sex relationships or changes in the believed distinct biological sex are culturally not comprehensible and therefore outside of the “matrix of intelligibility” (1999, p.24). By parody of- and play with social norms and expectations, the constructedness of binary opposites can be made visible and even be subverted. If, on the other hand, social norms are simply repeated in their original meaning, social constructions are reproduced and affirmed. Playing a video game is grounded on repetitive actions, as the player is being trained to act in a specific way in a game-world that follows predetermined rules. As a result, media products play a significant role in the reproduction of social hierarchies and norms by becoming a point of reference for the player:

although any actions performed on the screen are excluded from real life and are in one way outside it, they induce some emotions in the subject and thus constitute a part of the subject’s life experience. (Filiciak 2003, p. 98)

Before discussing the findings of the analysis the game story of the Gothic-series will be summarized in the following section. Contextualizing the story is quite important for a game analysis that is concerned with cultural issues, because representative gender roles can be differently influenced by a real or a fictional setting.

## Narratives and game-world

Gothic is a series of single player role-playing games for PCs, developed by the German developer crew Piranha Bytes/Pluto 13 and published by JoWood. The Gothic PC-games are among the most successful games produced by German game developers. For the third part of the series more than 500,000 copies were sold (cf. JoWood Group 2007). The games inspired several fan sites and databases on the internet, such as *worldofgothic.de*, *gothic3-game.de*, *gothic3.net* and *mondgesaenge.de*.

The first part of the series, *Gothic I* (Piranha Bytes 2001) was released in November 2001, a sequel followed in 2003 and another one in 2006. The fictional game-internal world is set in a medieval fantasy scenario in which Humans are at war with Orcs. The protagonist of the series is a nameless male hero, who is thrown into a prison at the beginning of the series. While the story unfolds, the “nameless hero” has to solve a number of quests, of which only some are part of the main story. By solving quests and killing creatures the avatar gathers experience points which allow him to ascend to higher character levels. To improve the avatar’s skills, the player needs to spent ability points and utilize the services of several trainer characters in the game-world.

In *Gothic I* the nameless hero and his situation are introduced to the player. In the opening scene of the game, the war between Humans and Orcs is shown. It is the justification for king Rhobar II, political leader of the empire of Humans, to condemn all kinds of criminals to work in the mines and dig ore. The nameless hero is one of these criminals, who is thrown into the prison, a large place with three different settlements in a natural environment surrounded by a magical sphere. But before that, a letter is given to him, which he is expected to deliver to the magicians of fire.

The nameless hero discovers that the magicians of fire are settled in a castle inside the sphere. The access to the castle is restricted and in order to get in the avatar has to join one of three factions the prisoners have formed and advance in his position by carrying out tasks for the chosen faction. The first faction is connected to the “old camp” and lead by Gareth. He organizes the ore-mining and is allowed by king Rhobar II to trade the ore for goods from the outer world. The second faction, a religious group, lives in the “sect camp”. They harvest, consume and sell psychedelic swamp-herbs to other prisoners and pray to an unknown godlike creature they call the sleeper. Their religious leader is Yberion. If the hero joins this group he makes his way from novice to templar and eventually to guru. The third faction is called the “new camp”. The bandits from the new camp plan to put down the magical sphere with the help of the magicians of water. Again, there are three layers of hierarchy in

the new camp. The hero begins as a bandit, can improve and become a mercenary and finally has the possibility to become a magician of water by himself. In the end of the game, the hero has to kill the archdemon worshiped by the sect as “the sleeper”. With the help of the black magician Xardas, the avatar finally manages to destroy the magical sphere.

*Gothic II* (Piranha Bytes 2002) continues the story of the first part of the series. It starts with the reanimation of the nameless hero, who was severely injured after he killed the sleeper demon in the first part. The black magician Xardas tells him that the death screams of the sleeper have woken dark creatures like black magicians, undead and dragons. The nameless hero starts in Xardas’ new tower near the small town of Khorinis, outside of the former prison land. Besides the town, there are some farms and a monastery.

The hero has to again join one of three factions. There are the group of paladins lead by Lord Hagen, the magicians of fire who live in the monastery and the mercenaries at Onar’s farm, including some known characters from the first part of the series. Depending on the players’ choice, the hero develops his abilities as a paladin, magician or mercenary. A hidden thieves’ guild also exists in Khorinis, which the hero can join in addition to his chosen group. In the proceedings, the hero has to warn Lord Hagen about the dragons. In order to accomplish his goal, he must first prove the existence of the dragons which now live in the valley of mines, where the first part took place. Secondly, he has to kill the four dragons and then sail to a mystical island with his companions, where the dragon master, the leader of the evil creatures, waits to be challenged.

The publishing of the third part of the Gothic series, *Gothic 3* (Piranha Bytes 2006), was accompanied by a big marketing campaign and it became the commercially most successful part of the series. The story of the third part takes place after the nameless hero has defeated the dragon master and traveled with his companions to the mainland empire of king Rhobar II. The mainland is divided into three different regions, each with a specific flora and fauna. The starting point is Myrtana, which was under the jurisdiction of king Rhobar II. The Humans have lost the war against the Orcs and now live enslaved in occupied cities and villages. Some of them hid and built rebel camps, waiting for backup to start their counter attack. King Rhobar II is secluded from the rest of the land by a magical sphere his magicians have created to protect him. In the south of Myrtana, the desert stretches across the region Varant. Assassins and nomads live there around several oases. Lots of old ruins with buried treasures wait to be explored by the hero. In the north of the game-world, the region Nordmar can be found. There, the Orcs have their settlements and dangerous animals prevent the hero from advancing deeper into the land in an early phase of the game. Besides the Orcs, the strong and rough people of Nordmar also have a few small camps. Finally the nameless hero meets the black magician Xardas again, who tells him what is going to be the hero’s part in the main story. He can join the Assassins in Varant, the Rebels in Myrtana or the Orcs. As in the first and second part of the series this includes pursuing the interests of the chosen faction, as, for example, liberating orc-occupied villages in the case of the rebels.

## Female stereotypes

Female characters are almost absent from the world of Gothic. The main characters, as most of the characters in Gothic, are of the male gender. Female characters are underrepresented in most computer games (cf. Dietz 1998), but in the Gothic series the amount of female characters is significantly below average - which is, according to a recent study on video game characters (Miller and Summers 2007), about 20%.

A total of 101 named human characters<sup>2</sup> can be identified in the first part of the game series, of which 95 have a male first name and appearance, and six (5,9%) have a female first name and appearance. In the course of the game, the band “In Extremo” gives a concert in the old camp with a female character (Charlotte) dancing next to the stage. Besides this short occurrence of a female (that doesn’t quite fit into the game-world with her lip-piercing), there are only two locations where female characters appear. One of them is the sanctuary in the sect camp with two females (Chani and Natalia), who obviously belong to the harem of the religious leader Yberion. The other three females (Seraphia, Syra and Velaya) live in the castle of the old camp with the political leader Gareth. The women who are in the colony have been traded to the prisoners by king Rhobar II along with goods, in exchange for magical ore. The underlying sexual division of labor is based on a traditional model, with men doing labor and fighting and women exclusively doing reproductive work.

It is not possible to talk to female characters. Every time the avatar tries to begin a conversation, they answer that he is not allowed to speak to them. Interactions with female characters in the Gothic series are clearly limited. The actions of these characters as well as their appearances are highly stereotypical. They fan their leaders (as in the case of Natalia and Seraphia, see figure 1) or sweep the ground of the castle (Syra, figure 2). Velaya takes a daily bath on the upper floor of the castle and is the only character in the game that is shown completely naked, obviously constructed for the voyeuristic male gaze (cf. Mulvey 2006) of the player. The six female characters differ in style from the male characters. They wear less clothing and show more skin than any of the other characters in the game. The scripts for their behavior are poor. Even after the religious leader Yberion dies in the course of the game, Natalia continues to fan his empty chair. Obviously there is no other path for her other than to serve her leaders interests. The same thing happens after the hero has killed nearly every person in the castle. The female characters just continue to mechanically reproduce gender stereotypes.



Figure 1: Give me a life! Fanning the empty chair (Gothic I)



Figure 2: Sexual(ized) division of labor (Gothic I)

It is not possible to hurt the female characters. Although they have neither weapons nor armor, they cannot be harmed, even by the mightiest weapon in the game, and they don't fight back if you try to attack them. This is an interesting fact, since it is possible to hurt all of the characters - apart from the main story-relevant characters - in the game. With this, the rules of the game play their part in reconstructing a gender dichotomy. They convey the image of women as passive beings, who cannot defend themselves. Instead the women need the patronage of a higher power (which is, in this case, the game engine).

It seems that women in this game are objects than beings, as they can't be hurt and serve as decorations in some places of the game-world. This interpretation of the decorative function of female characters is supported by the loading screens and pictures that are shown during the installation of the game. These pictures show barely dressed females laying around the thrown of king Rhobar II or standing next to a creature (figure 3). It is obvious that the pictures are not meant to give an impression of the game-world but to attract heterosexual male players, because the characters shown in the pictures do not appear in the game.



Figure 3: Installation screens (Gothic I)

The second part of the Gothic series involves some more female characters. But there is still a significant difference in the amount of female and male characters in the game. The total number of named human characters is 197, of which 18 (9.1%) are female by name and appearance. It is possible to talk to most of them. The gender roles are a little more diverse than the ones in the first part but still quite limited. Most of the women are portrayed as housewives, some work as paid labor, as there is a cook, an herbalist, and some merchants. One of the female merchants is a weapons dealer. The only female character with a higher rank in the game is Cassia, leader of the thieves' guild. However, she is set in a part of the game which is hard to find and therefore most players never encounter her in the course of game play.

Some of the female characters are involved in sub-quests, but it is not necessary to interact with any of them to complete the game. The sub-quests include stereotypical tasks, such as bringing food to Hilda and buying a pan for her, talking to Gritta who spends all her money on clothes, and bringing food to Edda. Another female character is the herbalist Sagitta. She lives outside the farms in a cave. After the hero

has brought her a special herb, she can train him in alchemy, in order to be able to make health and mana potions by himself. She is one of the two stronger female characters in the game along with Cassia, leader of the thieves’ guild. The two of them are the only female characters in the whole Gothic series, who are able to train the nameless hero to improve the avatar’s skills, while all other trainers are male.

As in the first game installment, a clear division of labor can be observed. Nearly all female characters are standing behind a stove most of the time, are cleaning or doing field work. The clothing of the male and female characters is traditional: All women wear long dresses, while men wear working clothes or suits of armor. Concerning body shapes the female characters pretty much look alike and differ clearly from the male models. While the female body models are thin, predominantly young and therefore comply with hegemonic beauty ideals (cf. Grimes 2003), the male models are more muscular and have a greater diversity in their appearance.

In *Gothic II* it is possible to fight with the female characters. Most of them carry a weapon and use it to defend themselves if attacked. Although no woman wears a suit of armor, they are tough opponents in the early game, especially Cassia. In the subquest “Kill the thieves’ guild” the player is expected to kill Cassia and the other (male) thieves. Here, the game discards the policy of the first part, where no woman could fight or be hurt. Regarding gender relations and female characters involvement in quests a little progress was made since *Gothic I*. But still women are strikingly underrepresented and limited in their freedom of action.

While some fans expected this deficiency to be corrected in the third part, the developers chose an opposite path. Due to the large amount of characters in the much bigger game-world of *Gothic 3*, it did not seem to be viable to count the male and female characters for the case study. But even without counting, the disproportion between named human males and females is striking. The group of main characters continues to be exclusively male. There are many fewer named female characters than in *Gothic II* and none of them is able to talk to the hero. Again (like in the first part of the series) they only have a few lines to say and there is no conversation possible between them and the hero. Some players state on fan sites and web logs that, with no children at all and only a small amount of women as part of the society, it seems like king Rhobar II should be more concerned about demographic issues than about the war against the Orcs (cf. Winkler 2006, Henke 2006).

The *Gothic 3* developers explained the lack of women by technical difficulties with the graphic engine and problems with time management during game development. One of them wrote in the “World of Gothic” forum that the graphic engine could not cope with the long dresses and complex hairstyle of the female models (cf. Marczinczik 2006). However, in the final game the women have short hair and some of them wear trousers (figure 4) - while other ones wear nearly nothing at all, like in *Gothic I*.



Figure 4: Female dancers (Gothic 3)

A perception of females as a kind of a rare and special case of humans is also expressed by the game interface. Names or occupational titles of characters are displayed above the visual representations of the characters. Above female characters without names, the word “female” is included in the occupational title (e.g. “female rebel”), whereas above male characters, there is only the occupational title (e.g. “rebel”), tightening masculinity as the norm.

Only one quest could be found where a female character is involved. In the region of Varant, the character Nafalem asks the hero to find and bring back the female dancer Aila, who is referred to as “the pearl of the city”. In Varant all females are dancers, whereas in Myrtana females are a (minor) part of the village population, spending most of their time inside the houses.

Representations of female characters in the Gothic series are clearly limited in qualitative as well as in quantitative terms. The portrayals of these characters lack diversity and narrative depth and conform to the traditional concept of sexual division of labor. The role models presented in the Gothic series are consistent with the findings of Tracy L. Dietz’ study on gender role portrayals in video games (1998). Regarding the characters visual representations female models are sexualized by clothing and behavior.

### Compensatory masculinity

After discussing female non-player-characters we will now have a look at the main avatar himself. The three Gothic games don’t allow the player to choose the avatar’s gender, as is possible in other famous role-playing games like *Neverwinter Nights 1 & 2* (Bioware 2002; Obsidian Entertainment 2006), *Morrowind* (Obsidian Entertainment 2002) and *Oblivion* (Obsidian Entertainment 2006). Of course the avatar’s gender doesn’t tell anything about the players’ gender. Especially in MMORPGs it has become usual that male players choose female avatars and vice versa. As McCallum-Stewart found out by conducting interviews with players of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), many of these gender swapping players make quite an effort to reaffirm their own heterosexuality and normative concepts of gender identity in real life (cf. McCallum-Stewart 2008, p. 32-37).

In the Gothic series, however, the player is meant to be a male hero. While some of the fans criticize the limitation to the player’s choice on the avatar’s gender, others defend the medieval Gothic world as being more authentic without so many important women (cf. forum.worldofplayers.de, Threads “why cant you be a girl in gothic 3?” and “Female Characters in G3 YES/NO”). This is a questionable argument, as for a medieval world, it is also not authentic to have orcs and magicians. Likewise, other medieval fantasy game-worlds such as *Oblivion* or *Neverwinter Nights 2*, construct worlds where it is not unusual to place women as story-relevant characters and/or as fighters.

While the avatar follows the Gothic game story he is presented in third-person-view. The Player has to solve most of the quests on his own, rarely with the help of a short-term companion. Therefore the avatar resembles the lone warriors in 1980s action movies. He becomes acquainted with some characters in the course of the game, which reappear in the sequels, but these are more casual acquaintanceships than close friendships. Important decisions are to be made by the player on his own, with insignificant influence by the avatars friends.

The avatars body is portrayed as muscular and athletic. He thereby is equated with the “hard bodies” Susan Jeffords has observed in the 1980s action movie heroes (2002). Jeffords describes how the movies *Terminator* (James Cameron, USA 1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, USA 1991) exemplify a shift in the portrayal of male heroes. While movie heroes have changed since the early 1990s to less toughened and more faint-hearted characters that care about family issues (cf. Tasker 2004), it seems the hero of the Gothic series is stuck in the 1980s conceptions of masculinity. The grasping at traditional masculinities can be found also on fan websites of the Gothic series. Some players seem to like the game-world as a traditional gender regime, where gender roles are clearly defined. One forum member in World of Gothic states:

One of the main issues about Gothic that makes it what it is, is the fact that women have a very well-defined place in society, as well as men. We don't want it changed in a Xena's or amazons's world, do we? IN TIMES LIKE THOSE, THE WOMEN'S PLACE WAS AT THE STOVE AND THE MAN'S PLACE WAS WITH THE SWORD. and, let's admit it, women are inferior to men in terms of physical capabilities. SO NO WARRIOR WOMEN IN GOTHIC! (Sybilla 2006).

This reinforces Thomas Morsch’s thesis of the overreaching masculinity of the action hero as a symbolic compensation (cf. 2002) for the deprivation of the certitude and simplicity of the traditional construction of hegemonic masculinity.

In the second part of the series, the town of Khorinis is introduced. Khorinis has a brothel in the waterfront area. It contains two female sex workers and the male owner of the brothel. The nameless hero can utilize the services of the sex worker Nadja upon payment of 50 gold pieces. If he does, she asks him to follow her to one of the rooms. A video sequence follows, in which both of them can be seen in an intimate embrace. This video serves as an assurance of the hero’s heterosexuality. In the fan forums, many players write about the brothel and about how it would make the Gothic world authentic.

The nameless hero lacks a biography, family and name. He can choose between completely different ways of life but when it comes to his gender, no uncertainties are left: he is a heterosexual male. It is as if this is enough to be said about him, as in all other aspects the player has certain freedoms to influence the development of the character. The hostile reactions towards forum members who complain about the impossibility of playing Gothic as a heroine show that the hero's gender remains something important for many players, an assurance of clear circumstances in a fictional game that can serve as a place of refuge from a complex postmodern world.

While in real life concepts of masculinity are, as with all kinds of identity, contested and are subject to constant changes some players seem to use fictional role-playing games to perform archetypical versions of masculinity.

Mirosław Filiciak refers in his essay on "Hyperidentities" to the term escapism, a pleasure derived from playing video games that is based on "getting away from everyday life worries" (2003, p. 99). He argues against the notion of considering new media as tools of escapism and points out that with MMORPGs "avatars are not an escape from our 'self', they are, rather, a longed-for chance of expressing ourselves beyond physical limitations" (p. 100). But while it is true that games offer a possibility to perform a hyper-identity this possibility may as well be taken to perform a hyper-masculinity.

### **Homophobia in an asexual society**

Apart from the brothel scene mentioned in the previous section, visual sexuality is absent in Gothic and there are not even sexist remarks regarding women or the lack of them by the characters, nor are there any references to the sex lives of any of the characters. The religious and political leaders in the first part seem to like the proximity to barely dressed female slaves but are never shown or referred to as having intimate relationships with these females. Female characters appear merely as ornaments in their masters' houses. While already many games with sexual encounters and sexualized portrayals of women exist (cf. Schott 2005), allusions to homosexuality are quite rare. The heterosexual romance plot that occurs in most games that deal with possible romantic encounters tends to reinforce the concept of compulsory heterosexuality (cf. Consalvo 2003, p. 180-191). Considering this, references to gay characters in games are remarkable. In this chapter I will discuss some aspects of the Gothic series that deal with potentially gay characters.

An early example for a hidden hint to homosexuality in a video game is the Easter egg a programmer built into the game *Sim Copter* (Maxis 1996). When game producer Maxis found out the programmer had inserted male characters that would kiss each other on predefined days of the year he lost his job at Maxis immediately (Consalvo 2007, p. 19). By now there are some adventures and role play games that contain gay characters, like the character Juhani in *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Obsidian Entertainment 2003), but still none with an openly gay main character.

An interesting aspect of the first Gothic game is the character Mud. Mud is one of the inhabitants living in the old camp. But while nearly every named character in the

game that the hero can talk to plays a role in a sub or main quest, Mud’s only function seems to be to annoy the player. He follows the hero and periodically starts to talk to him, which in some situations, such as fights, becomes a danger to the hero’s life. The only way to get rid of him is to kill him or have him killed by animals outside the camp. Mud defends himself, but his fighting skills are poor and he is no real challenge to the players’ avatar.

The Mud character is read by many players as a gay character. In several lines, he proposes to look for a nice place to get comfy with the hero. Some of his lines are “Are you looking for a quiet place where we can talk, for a bit ... or something?”, “Where do you sleep anyway? You can come to my place, no problem!” and “(...) shouldn’t we look for a cozy place, and ... get comfy somewhere?” Mud also says that he was thrown into prison because of his relationship with animals: “How they put you in anyway? Do you like animals as well? ... they are not into that one bit, that’s why they locked me in here”. Thereby a connection between homosexuality and non-normative kinds of sexual activities is drawn. In the gothic-related forum threads about Mud, his affection for animals is considered as just another indication of Mud’s gayness.

In fan forums there are threads where people complain about Mud and converse about how they killed him, an example of this being the thread “Who killed mud, or how did he die?” (cf. forum.worldofplayers.de) in the “World of Gothic”-forum. The combination of a character that has no function in the game story and thereby evokes violent reactions on the one hand and a character that makes gay-related statements on the other is at least problematic, as it calls on the players’ potential homophobic tendencies and allows them to commit unprovoked violence on a character that is read as gay. In the rules of the game, there is no benefit in protecting Mud - even worse, if he stays with the hero, he endangers the hero’s life.

In the second part of the series quite a different way of dealing with homosexuality is found. Around a place in the game-world that is called Bengar’s farm are characters that are to be seen as gay. There are no women on the farm and in a dialog the nameless hero makes a remark to the farmer Bengar about the lack of women. Bengar answers: “Well you got that right, this is a men’s farm so to speak. It works quite well.” Inside the farm, there is a double bed. It is the only one in the whole game, in all other houses there are only single beds. These supposedly gay characters are not displayed in a negative manner like Mud in the first part. In most aspects Bengar’s farm doesn’t differ from the other farms in the game-world.

Both the Mud character and Bengar’s farm offer allusions to gay characters in the game series which can be overlooked by an inattentive audience. This is comparable to the way movies and television dealt with gay themes up to the 1990s. The advertising industry used the term *gay window advertising* for their approach to including a second layer of meaning in TV spots that was meant to be read as gay-related themes by a solvent gay audience but would be ignored by a heterosexual audience (Clark 1993). But different from this method gay-related themes in the examined video games do not seem to be meant to develop a new market. At least in the first part of the Gothic series the gay bashing is too obvious to be read as an open minded offer to gay players. Exceptions to this observation are to be found mostly in other game genres as Mia Consalvo has argued in her case study on *Final*

*Fantasy IX* (Scare Co. 2000) and *The Sims* (Maxis 2000). She introduced the term “gay window gaming” (2003, p.186) to describe the wide range of possible sexual relationships the Sim-characters are able to perform.

It seems while television companies discovered the potentials of the gay market in the mid 1990s for the video game industry this step still has to be made. Most virtual environments continue to be a wasteland of sexual diversity.

## Conclusion

The examination of the Gothic series is clearly limited in its explanatory power for role playing games in general, for only one game series with a narrow space of distribution was analyzed. But it is a small contribution to the greater project of mapping the area of video games as vehicles for concepts of role behavior and sexual stereotypes. It goes without saying that there is no direct relation between narrative elements of a given game and the meanings a specific player produces by playing the game (cf. Hall 1980). But the images and structures a game offers decide upon the freedom a player has to interpret the game elements and to the range of meanings he may produce in the act of playing.

On the previous pages it was shown that the Gothic series reproduces traditional gender roles and normative sexuality. In the first part of the series the absence of women indicates the male-dominated society that the game takes place in. Women are treated as trading goods and slaves, who are not allowed to live a life of their own. To the male characters in *Gothic I*, they seem not to exist, since no male character ever mentions any of the female ones. They are merely ornaments in the game-world with no function or possibility of reasonable interactions. Instead of showing male-to-male relationships in the magical sphere, the whole prison society is asexual, with one exception. The character Mud is not just portrayed as possibly gay, but also portrayed in a negative manner. He allows the player to channel potential aggressive homophobia to a non-player-character without having to face negative consequences.

Compared to the first part, in *Gothic II* some advancement considering representations of gender and sexuality could be observed. Here, the female characters are able to talk and are involved in minor quests. But again, they do not play much of a story-relevant role. Gender roles stay disappointingly stereotypical, as reproductive work is nearly always done by women, while fighting remains a virtually exclusive male activity. Then there is Bengar's farm, a not too subtle allusion to a gay community living outside the town of Khorinis. Here the gay-bashing attitude from the first part is not continued and instead a starting-point for the inclusion of sexual diversity is offered. But this farm is not vital to the game story and the player can finish the game without ever visiting it.

*Gothic 3* is a step backwards into the male-dominated society of the first part. Obviously the all-male developer team of Piranha Bytes didn't expend much effort on including female characters in the game. Without any reference to sexual desire, no children and only very few women in the game, the game-world is neither an adequate implementation of a fictional medieval society nor an outright

representation of any living society at all. While on Gothic related websites and forums some players complain about sexist prejudices and disproportions in the game, most of them defend the traditional division of labor and the marginalization of females in the game-world.

To answer the questions asked at the beginning of this article, gender roles remain stereotypical in the examined game series and female characters serve a decorative function rather than being vital for quests or story. The male avatar predominantly reproduces a traditional concept of masculinity and is in some aspects comparable to the tough 1980s action heroes. He allows players to perform fantasies of an archetypical masculinity. Besides sexualized portrayals of women, sexual desire is nearly absent from the game-worlds. The allusion to a gay working collective is an example of the inclusion of characters in games that can be read as gay without evoking prejudices. If this develops as a trend in recent video games, it must be further analyzed. Altogether, by the interactions in the in-game society and the portrayal of characters, sexual division of labor, traditional gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality are not challenged but affirmed by the Gothic series.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The first two parts from the Gothic series manage to pretend that the player has great freedom of choice, while in fact (s)he does not (cf. Wesener 2004, p. 89).
- <sup>2</sup> Besides the characters with names, there are lots of characters with only an occupational title like “bandit” or “guard”. All of these are males by their appearance.