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A Damsel in Distress No More: Shifting the Narrative of Female Leading Characters in Video Games

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ABSTRACT

For decades, women have been the subject of several video game narratives, which relied on "saving the girl" as the main quest for many of these games. Moreover, for years, gender representations in video games were a part of an ongoing debate about gender inequality in video games narratives, which are considered one of the most popular, interactive fields of entertainment that young people currently enjoy. This, however, brings up some pressing questions about how reality is reflected in the content of video games regarding women`s representation. The research at hand is a qualitative analysis determined to examine the shift in the common narrative of women in video games as "a damsel in distress" to be a lead character on a special quest, through tracking changes in female representation in video games in recent years. This was conducted by analyzing how the portrayal and character development of female protagonists evolved across different gaming generations and trends. The researcher relied on Consalvo, and Dutton, (2006) model of critical game analysis to examine case studies of three popular video games: Horizon: forbidden west; Rise of the Tomb Raider and The last of Us. The research underlines how these games feature women as Lead characters of the gameplay. The analysis will examine the character design, game narrative and game interface of the video games understudy to discover the shift in the portrayal of female characters in these gaming experiences.

Keywords: *Videogame, Gender studies, Media portrayals, Women`s representation, Digital games.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1970s, video games have emerged as a powerful medium of storytelling and entertainment, shaping the narratives and experiences of millions of players worldwide. As the industry has grown in both size and influence, it has experienced a transformative evolution in the depiction of the role of female leading characters. Historically, female characters in video games were often portrayed as secondary characters, demoted to passive, one-dimensional roles that perpetuated stereotypes about the role of women and limited their interaction in these discourses.

However, recent years have witnessed a noticeable shift in this stereotypical portrayal of women in video games, where a new challenging discourse about the depiction of female roles in video games has emerged. Hence, the paper at hand delves into this significant transformation in the video game industry. Through a careful examination of previous literature, it explores the historical portrayal of female characters as vulnerable and in need of rescue, which is juxtaposed with the contemporary narrative that showcases female characters as strong, multifaceted, and independent protagonists.

The depiction of female characters in video games narratives often reflects the dynamic relationship between video games, culture, and gender. However, the early days of video games witnessed a limited representation of female characters, with archetypal roles such as the "damsel in distress" or the "sidekick" being predominant. This representation was not limited to the videogame's discourses; indeed, the whole mainstream media relied on presenting females as helpless, existing primarily to serve as an incentive for the male hero's journey. Such depictions contributed to a narrative framework that became the core of many scholarly examination of these discourses including,

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gender studies, gaming, and framing studies.

However, as video game culture grew more diverse and inclusive, a noticeable shift has been apparent in the displayed narratives of women representations in the track of women empowerment, creating a new discourse with strong leading female protagonists who have embarked on their journeys as heroes not sidekicks. Accordingly, this paper seeks to analyze the profound transformation in the portrayal of female characters in video games through the examination of such female characters in videogames like Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* series and Aloy in *Horizon Forbidden West*, in order to exemplify the shift in the common "Damsel in distress" narrative in video games.

The games are categorized as "third person shooter"; in this gaming structure, the body of the avatar is visible to the player throughout the game play. Furthermore, the sample video games featured female protagonists as main players/ avatars in the games; these lead female characters filled the role of the leading hero. For the selected sample, all three ladies acted as the player's mediator to the narratives of the games. These games are all open world games that provide the players with story rich choices in the plot that allow them to make decisions in the game play based on these options.

With regard to the main objectives, the paper at hand aims at evaluating character development of female protagonists through assessing the character design in the sample video games. In addition, it is essential to identify the narrative shifts and how the concepts of female characters in video games have transitioned from prototypical "damsel in distress" roles to empowered lead roles with distinct quests. This is achieved through evaluating game design elements and components, such as narrative structure, and interface, which contribute to reshaping the representation of female characters.

1.1 Proposed Research Questions

- How has the representation of female characters in video games evolved over different gaming generations?
- What are the main differences among *Horizon: Forbidden West, The Last of Us, and Tomb Raider* in terms of character design, narrative structure, and game interface?
- What are the distinguished elements that reflect the design of the character, in terms of clothing, weapons, and avatar interface in representing female protagonists across diverse gaming experiences under investigation?
- What specific narrative and gameplay elements contribute to the transformation of female characters as an empowered lead character in video games?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Damsel in Distress Narrative

According to the Macmillan dictionary (2023), The word damsel is originated from the Latin word "lady" or a young woman who is not married , whereas, the pop culture dictionary (2023) stated that the term "a damsel in distress" is used in cultural contexts as a young woman in danger who is rescued by a male hero". The initial emergence of the term "A damsel in distress" in literature was during the 17th century in 1692, featured in the poem, "Sylvia's Complaint" by Robert Gould, describing "a damsel in distress" who is having an inner conflict between her passionate lust and decent love and that she needs to be rescued by her knight (Mermin 1986). Since then, the term damsel in distress has become a common story line in several literary works during the 18th to the 20th centuries. Subsequently, this narrative of saving the girl has been frequently used in literature, movies, comics and even Disney cartoons, and in recent years, it has been the main story line of several video games. This story line was applied by depicting women as helpless, weak, often-sexualized objects, and needing to be saved as the main quest of the protagonist male hero (Bell 2013; Demarest 2010; Fulop 2012; Lynch *et al*. 2016; Solis 2017).

The apparent reinforcement of this narrative was a result of the early days of Hollywood mainstream cinema, which insisted on including a female character in the movies to create a romantic sub-story line apart from the original story line, even if it was not adding anything to the original story (Bordwell *et al*. 1985; Fulop 2012). As a result, this placed a female character in almost every movie with the sole purpose of being a motive for the male protagonist, whether to save her, to help her achieve a personal errand or even to engage into fights to win her heart.

However, in any given narrative of those Hollywood movies, even if the female character is the protagonist and fighting crime per say, she was often depicted in a stereotypical portrayal with revealing clothes and high heels reflecting the commonly suggestive hourglass body shape. Although these representations are not reflective of the female character's journey, she is a sexually objectified subject whom the audience would not believe as part of the hero's journey narrative (Demarest 2010; Solis 2017).

The traditional narrative of "Damsel in distress" is not only used in literature or movies, but also scholars

argue the presence of this narrative in famous video games for years (Kondrat 2015; Jansz and Martis 2007; Sarkeesian 2013).

2.2 Female Representation in Video Games

Examining women representations in video games has long been a persistent quest for many scholars, as they agreed on some common characteristics reflecting how women were portrayed in video games over the years. The first common notion was the underrepresentation of women

either in the main player or supporting characters narratives in numerous video games (Beasley and Collins Standley 2002; Burgess *et al*. 2007; Dietz 1998; Dill *et al*. 2005; Downs and Smith 2010; Williams *et al*. 2009). Furthermore, another common depiction technique used in video games for women was the sexualized narrative, through creating a sexualized or hypersexualized body features in addition to revealing outfit for the character`s *avatar*. In addition, female characters are usually displayed as a nonviolent character in comparison to male characters in the same game. Similarly, scholars agreed on the recurrent inhabitation of the "damsel in distress" narrative for female characters in video games through the years (Dickerman *et al*. 2008; Dietz 1998; Haninger and Thompson 2004).

In recent years, a new line of research analyzing the latest portrayal of women in video games as a powerful protagonist having her own quest has emerged. However, these female protagonist narratives were still depicting the female lead character in a sexualized body features and outfits (Jansz and Martis 2007). Lynch *et al*. (2016) thoroughly studied 571 playable female characters in video games from 1989 to 2014; results showed that female characters were contextualized in supporting roles and regarding their appearances, they were often more sexualized than male characters. However, in a notable observation, these aforementioned sexualized contexts for female characters in video games were perceptibly reduced since the 1990s; nevertheless, most video games, especially the ones identified as male genres games which include shooting and fighting, are still depicting female characters in secondary roles and in a sexualized context.

Soukup (2007, 162) mentioned the existence of different representation of women in video games like *"Half-Life"*, *"Radiata Stories"*, and *"Elder Scrolls"*, where these new representations do not rely on the common stereotype of female characters as sexual object. However, these games presented women as skilled, smart, and self-confident characters. Unfortunately, these representations continue to be a minority due to commercial considerations, where the main consumers of video games remain to be young males.

It is worth noting that the "Damsel in Distress" narrative of women in video games did not change much in the past three decades. According to Provenzo (1999), in the 1990s only 8 percent of video games displayed female characters in their narrative mostly as secondary characters and usually in the context of "Damsel in Distress". Furthermore, Grimes (2003) debated that in the early 2000s, more female users started playing video games, which called for character development approaches by gaming publishers, where the narratives of video games started to have lead female protagonists following their own quest and engaging in violent actions to conquer these quests. However, a notable paradox was apparent in this narrative, as female characters were featured with the traditional sexuality in body type and clothing and yet employed a violent behavior in the game play.

In light of the above, Perreault *et al*. (2018) argue that female representation in video games narratives, took a great leap in 2013. The number of leading female characters grew larger in several leading video games with more diversification in their narrative. Such characters include those of Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite*, Ellie in *The Last of Us*, Jodie in *Beyond: Two Souls*, and Lara Croft in the reboot of *Tomb Raider*.

Scholars argue that the declined number of female presentations in video games is related to the gender-role experience of players. Several studies concluded that females perceive most video games with displayed violent behavior as a male game, and sometimes they feel uncomfortable playing these games even if they had female characters in it. (Lucas and Sherry 2004; Williams *et al.* 2009). Others argued that the perceived masculinity of video games forces women to play with male avatars to face the gender stereotyping that woman are incapable of playing action video games (Kaye *et al.* 2018).

Furthermore, Consalvo (2012) and Lucas (2019) argue that the marginalization of female characters in video games has been an organized behavior for years to meet the male consumer needs, regardless of the numerous calls for gender representation equality by many feminists' activists in the gaming industry. Examples include game developers Zoë Quinn and Brianna Wu along with Anita Sarkeesian a game critic and host of Feminist Frequency's series Tropes vs. Women in Games. These voices actually faced a backlash over their public calls for equality and they faced a targeted harassment campaign against them that reached the level of creating a video game titled "Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian" that featured a photo of Sarkeesian's face as a punch bag for players to beat it using several weapons.

Lin (2023) conducted massive research to challenge the ongoing debate about female representations

in video games in recent years, as over 100 games from the 10 highest selling games, released between 2017-2021, from major publishers like Activision, EA, Nintendo, Ubisoft were examined. The results of this detailed research concluded that only 5 percent of the games had female characters as lead characters and almost 32 percent of games displayed male characters only. Similarly, Solska (2022) observed that even though there has been a shift in the number of female lead characters in video games in recent years, a relatively few video games construct a game narrative for these characters to display their journey. For years the dominating frame of the studies of video games as an expressive medium focused on analyzing the highest grossing games in terms of purchase rates and number of players (Murray 2017). Later, the focus was shifted to examine the effect of these videogames as a violent medium that has a negative effect on youngsters and adolescence. This sort of negative impact reached the extent that first shooter video games, like *Doom* for instance, were accused by several scholars of being a catalyst for the mass shootings in schools that infected the societal spectrum in the United States since the early 2000s (Brook 1999; Anderson *et al*. 2003).

As that trend of academic research started accelerating, another research mainstream appeared to rebuttal the arguments and accusation of video games being the stimuli of violence in society. Scholars argued that violent people can be drawn to playing violent games; additionally, some researches point out that the number of violent incidents carried out by youth have dropped to a notable rate compared to past decades (Adams 2010).

It was not until the release of the first *Lara Croft: The Tomb Raider* video game, being remarkably successful among both male and female players, that scholars started to revisit the area of female representations in videogames. With *Lara Croft* supposably introducing the first lead female character in video games to defy the male gazing theory that defined the mainstream representation of female lead characters in video games for so long (Kennedy 2002; MacCallum-Stewart 2014; Mikula 2003).

2.3 Constructing Video Game Narratives

Tekinbas and Zimmerman (2003, 55) discussed the notion of comprehending the structure of any video game, where they stressed that we need to understand games as a system that consists of a set of parts that interrelate to form a complex whole. Similarly, Barthes (2004) proposed a structure for any narrative applied in video games, as he proposed that the narrative of any game consist of several units that interact with each other in a pre-determined time and space structures. These interactions amongst the proposed units construct the meaning in the narrative discourse. Similarly, Carr (2009) argues that analyzing the structure of any video game includes the examination of the whole discourse construction, including game design, typologies of rules or genres in the game, characters and studying the spatial structure and its functions.

Regarding the analysis of video games, scholars argue that video games are a combination of ludology and narrative elements along with storytelling approaches, as some videogames rely on narrative design in their stories whilst others do not apply these narrative elements in their gameplay design. (Jenkins 2004; Rayan 2006; Solska 2022).

Jenkins (2004, 121) for instance, explains the notion of constructing a game narrative as "a story experience established by sculpting game spaces, primary and secondary characters, and character-driven story arcs". In this regard, (Farca 2018) argues that the construction of narratives in video games relies on creating characters and creating special elements the character interacts with, including a spatial environment, objects and other secondary characters that construct the game world, sometimes with no vivid story structure for these characters except for their interactions in these spatial arenas, constructing what is commonly known as the "game world".

Some video games use these spatial arenas as part of the game structure development; for example, some games implement a spatial puzzle as part of the game narrative, where they play the role of game play accelerator, which according to Carr (2009, 4) definition "are areas accessed in turn, and each one comes in a particular arrangement of obstacles, enemies, and potential damage, balanced by a certain number of resources like ammunition, medicine, etc.".

However, some video games do not implement character development much with each new version released of the game; they rather employ new spatial worlds with minimal changes in the storyline if existed; however, it is always the same main character just placed in a new spatial challenge; some notable examples of these games are the *Legends of Zelda, Tomb Raider, Resident Evil and Elder Scrolls.*

The other variable in constructing a game narrative is the characters' design and functionality in the game play. Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al*. (2019) proposed a certain typography for classifying characters in any game narrative; the first character type is "The "player" character, which is the avatar controlled by the person playing the game. The second type is "The functional" characters, which are designed for a serviceable purpose in the game play like attacking the

main player character and hindering their progress. The third type of characters are "The stage characters", which are usually non playable characters. The fourth type is the "narrative/companion" characters. This classification refers to primary characters that aid and support the player characters in their quest without further involvement in the game play.

Other scholars argue the notion that locative is a part of any narrative structure in the game play, where characters can function as a setting or a tool to other characters in the game, where some characters are placed in the narrative just to function as an accompaniment of the main player; others, are engaged in dialogs with the lead characters to reveal a back story for them or a new goal they must unlock (Kress and van Leeuwen 2020; Toh 2015).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Consalvo and Dutton (2006) provided a descriptive critique arguing that analyzing video games received a lot of attention from scholars and has been debated several times regarding the suitable methodological procedures for analyzing video games. In that matter, scholars studying digital video games have been approaching it from two perspectives: the first approach was analyzing the content of the games , whereas as researchers have argued that video games could be analyzed as any another media format, using textual analysis or ideological analysis to its contents by examining the levels of violence and aggression per say , in addition to the ideological assumptions in the game (Juul 2000; Poblocki 2002). Other scholars, however, focused on examining the portrayals of minorities and women representations in the content of video games (Banks 1998; Heintz-Knowles and Henderson 2002; Kennedy 2002; Kinder 1991; Okorafor and Davenport 2001; Provenzo 1991). The second approach of studying video games focuses on investigating the players of these games, through conducting experimental studies, surveys, in depth interviews and analyzing the chat log between players in the games (Oksman 2002; Sherry et al. 2003; Wright, et al. 2002; Yates and Littleton 2001).

Consequently, Consalvo and Dutton (2006) suggested a methodological approach, referred to as the "Critical game analysis", to test the different variables being analyzed in the qualitative examination of video games, which is examining the meanings, the context, and the intertextual connotations produced. These variables include interface study or the games' interface, object inventory, interaction map and character design. In this respect, a model of analysis that applies three variables (game interface, game narrative and character design) is drawn upon in the examination of the video games understudy (Figure 1).

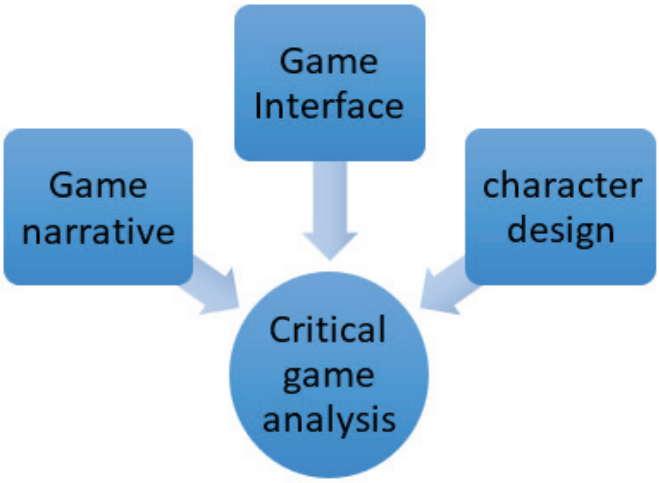


Figure 1: Suggested model of analysis

The proposed model relies on three levels of analysis. The mentioned areas of analysis help better understand the dynamics and interactions within the game, in addition to the positioning and representation of the characters within the game through the analysis of the character design. Furthermore, these areas allow for conducting a comparative analysis across the three games under investigation to identify the similarities and differences in patterns applied in the video games.

The first level of analysis consists of comprehending the "Game narrative", which includes analyzing the background story and plot of the game, in addition to analyzing the spatial spaces where the game takes place and players interact. Also, the research examines the narrative design which includes identifying the main characters and the secondary characters in the game. (Carr 2009; Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al*. 2019; Farca 2018; Jenkins 2004). The second level of analysis is examining the "Character design", including the avatar interface, clothing or "the skins" which is a term that is commonly used in the gaming industry as the clothing of the playing avatars and any added accessories or gadgets that can be added to the custom of the character. In addition to analyzing the weapons used by the main playing characters. (Consalvo 2012). The third level of analysis is the "Game interface", which is according to (Consalvo and Dutton, 2006, 4) "is any on-screen information that provides the player with information concerning the life, health, location, or status of the characters".

For the data analysis, three case studies were examined from Console video games. According to Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al*. (2019, 7) "console is an electronic device designed for the sole purpose of playing games and often sold without a keyboard like Microsoft (Xbox), Nintendo (Wii) and Sony (PlayStation)". The three video games selected for examination are *Horizon: Forbidden West (2022), Rise*

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of the Tomb Raider (2015) and The Last of Us (2013). All three games under investigation are combat based games, where the protagonist rely on her fighting skills and using weapons to fulfill her quest. Finally, the sample selection was also constructed on the game's popularity. The analysis will be conducted in a reverse chronological order.

Although this research does not examine players' interactions, the games popularity was considered based on sales statistics and top ten gaming lists provided by a variety of sources. Furthermore, in order to provide a clear, high resolution, photos from the video games under investigation, the online database of IMDB is drawn upon to retrieve still photos and screenshots from videos on the same data base.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 Horizon: Forbidden West

4.1.1 The Game Narrative

As mentioned earlier, the game narrative of a video game is constructed through the analysis of three dimensions: the background story of the main character, the plot of the game, and how characters develop in the gaming sequence and finally the spatial areas which include the missions and events that the player should go through to fulfill the quest of the game.

First, the background Story of *Horizon Forbidden West* is set in a post-apocalyptic world where the land is controlled by animal-like machines, and human civilization has regressed to tribal societies. The protagonist, Aloy, is a female skilled hunter and archer from the Nora tribe who possesses a unique ability to override and control machines. With her skills, Aloy is destined to save her world from these machines and try to restore power to mankind over earth. *Horizon Forbidden West* is the second installation of the first version of the game under the name *Horizon Zero Dwan.*

The plot of this version of the game goes as follows: as Aloy travels a journey through diverse landscapes to reach the mysterious area of the forbidden west, along the way she unravels the secrets of the Old Ones, an ancient civilization that perished long ago during the first apocalypse that destroyed the human civilization. This time, Aloy must walk a new path that takes her to the Forbidden West, a dangerous and unexplored region, where she is trying to save humankind from a deadly plague that could destroy life on Earth.

The third part of the game narrative analysis examines the spatial spaces of the game. As for *Horizon Forbidden West*, the game features an open world with four diverse environments, each with its own challenges and missions for Aloy to fulfill. The first spatial area is in a place called "Redwood Forest", which is a real location in The United States, California, but it was restructured in the game design to feature ancient trees tower overhead and ruins beneath their roots (Figure 2). In addition, Aloy has to go through an icy wilderness of the "Frostreach" Mountains that test her survival skills (Figure 3). On the contrary, Aloy faces another mission in "The Sunlands" which features a vast desert that she must navigate to progress and complete her mission. The game also includes the underwater area of "Coral Highlands", where Aloy can dive into the water depth to uncover sunken cities and ancient secrets as part of her mission (Figure 4). The variety of locations where Aloy is destined to go through are considered challenges that test her different survival skills.



Figure 2: Horizon Forbidden West (2022 Video Game) – IMBD

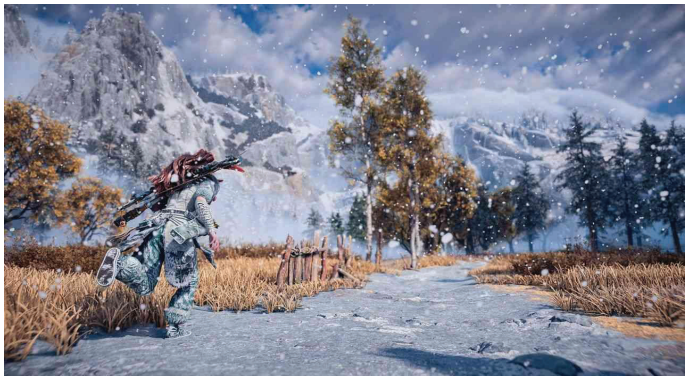


Figure 3: Horizon Forbidden West (2022 Video Game) – IMBD



Figure 4: Horizon Forbidden West (2022 Video Game) – IMBD

4.1.2 The Character Design

The first dimension of the character design analysis is to examine the avatar interface. In that matter, Aloy`s avatar is featured as a young woman with red hair and slightly muscular body (Figure 5). Furthermore, Aloy possesses small facial features that defy the stereotypical image of female characters in video games which depicts them as blond with large, featured bodies as the only way of looking beautiful.

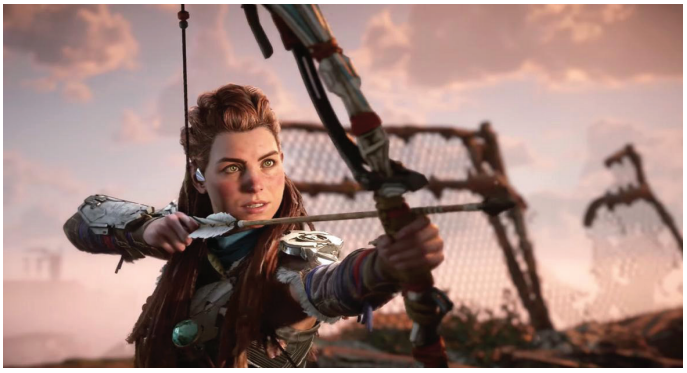


Figure 5. Horizon: Forbidden West (2022 Video Game) – IMBD.

The second dimension of the character design is the skin or the clothes of the character; Aloy is depicted as wearing a tribal outfit with a primal clothing texture that is not revealing her body; the outfit choices in the game are different formats of these tribal outfit (Figure 6).



Figure 6 : Horizon Forbidden West (2022 Video Game) – IMBD.

Third dimension of the character design is the weaponry of the main player; in *Horizon Forbidden West* Aloy's avatar uses primitive weaponry in her mission. The weapon selection reflects the post-apocalyptic world she is living in, where humans are now living in a tribal like communities with primaveral tools, including weapons. However, as the world is being took over by animal like machines, even the primitive weapons are actually explosive and constructed to takeover these machines. She mainly uses the arrow and bow along with a sack of arrows attached to her back. These arrows are actually diversified according to their shooting range and amount of explosive they shoot; the arrows have several names including (*Legacy's Reach, Riv's Downfall, The Gravesinger's Lament and The Forge Fall*). In addition, there are other weapons including a blast forge which releases explosive bolts used to melt the machines and a laser gun.

4.1.3 The Game Interface

Regarding the gaming interface in *Horizon Forbidden West*, the map of the game very clearly displays the four main spatial areas that Aloy must go through to fulfill her quests, her positioning on the map during the game play, as well as the vivid visual display of the life\health of the character. The game interface also featured a visually instructive inventory that the player could easily select from several options in the game play, including the set of skills for Aloy, weapon selection (Figure 7) and skins (clothing), in addition to gadgets and machine animals that she uses for transportation (Figure 8).

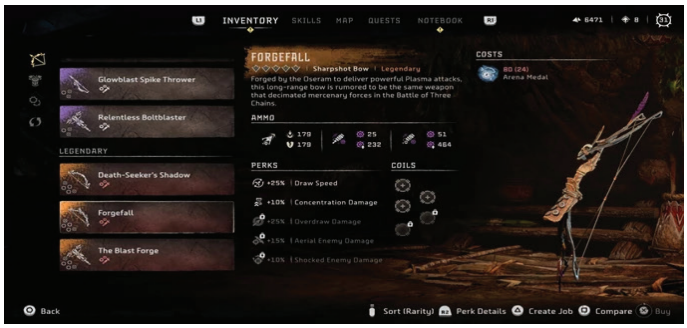


Figure 7: Horizon Forbidden West (2022 Video Game) – screenshot.

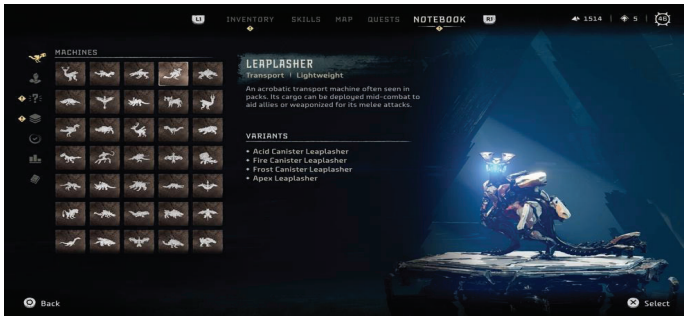


Figure 8 : Horizon Forbidden West (2022 Video Game) – screenshot.

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4.2 Rise of the Tomb Raider

4.2.1 The Game Narrative

The Rise of the Tomb Raider first element of analysis is the game narrative design, that is the background story of the main character. Following the previous versions of the game series, with the main character and player as Lara Croft, an archeologist who is hunting for hidden treasures and secrets while globing the world searching for antiquated tombs. Croft's background story has been always following the paths of her late father, lord Richard Croft, who was a famous archeologist, known for searching for hidden treasures all over the world. This was until he started researching an ancient secret that he lost his life during the search, leaving his daughter several clues that she can follow to continue his search.

Second, the plot of this game demonstrates the journey of Lara croft, where she is following the clues left to her by her late father to find the lost city of "kitzeh", a place that has an ancient tomb that embraces the source of eternal life known as the "Devine source". This time Lara is trying to prove that her father was not a crazy man looking for the source of internal life and that he didn't waste his life on an illusion. In addition, the plot introduces more than one antagonist that she must fight. Essentially the antagonist presented as "Trinity", an evil organization investigating supernatural events and hunting for hidden treasures, has kidnapped her best friend John, so she is racing against time to save him from their hands and reach the Divine source before they get to it. Another antagonist she is combatting is Constantine, who is also looking for the Devine source in order to save his ill sister, Ana. Although he is searching for the source of eternity to save a loved one, he is taking a dark path to fulfill his quest which is trying to kill Croft before she reaches the Devine source before he does.

The third element of analysis in the narrative design is the spatial spaces in the game. For the analysis of this game, the setting was diversified through every stage of the game. At the early stages Lara has to fulfill some missions in a coastal forest. The second stage is in Siberia, which is a place characterized by heavy snow and cold weather, with several mountains and caves she must walk through. The location and weather are with important significance, that they are featured on the main poster of the game, as shown in (Figure 9). This harsh weather and location play the role of some unmatchable odds she has to fight against. Also, the cold weather reflects the emotional status she is in, where she is alone, afraid yet she is embarking on a mysterious journey to defend the lost honor of her father.

In addition, the spatial areas in the main location of Siberia include several locations for various missions in the gameplay. First, she goes through an old Nazi facility, structured as cliffside bunker, and connected Research Base (Figure 10). This area reveals that the "Devine source" was in quest for several years where many groups, including the Nazi, were searching for it, like her father was. The following assignment, she has to go through a mission in an old Soviet research facility, this spatial dimension, like the previous one is highlighting the construction of the "Evil Other". Most American media mainstream signifies the fact that Nazi Germany in the 1940s and the Soviet Union during the 1950s and 1960s are considered the sources of all evil during these times (Bather 2007). For the *Tomb Raider* game, the construction of evil is not different, although there are no Nazi or soviets in the game, their old buildings are still holding and being used by the evil Trinity organization. This manifestation of evil is reflected by highlighting that they are using the old sites of what was considered as the enemy one day. Henceforward, for Croft, this organization with all its members are considered the enemy and she must conquer these locations as a metaphor of conquering those evil countries.

As for Raider's final destination, her mission this time is based in an ancient monastery exhibited in a circular structure with snow covering everything. Moreover, the last spatial area she has to go through is the ancient, buried city of "kitzeh" to fulfill her final quest of finding the divine source. These two locations specifically, reflect the core idea of the *Tomb Raider* game plot, which is invading unknown and mysterious places to find some hidden ancient secrets or treasures. This time her quest is not just for finding a new treasure, she is trying to find a secret that will restore her father's reputation as an honorable archeologist not just a crazy man chasing an illusion.

These remarkable spatial areas and cold weather depicted in *Rise of the Tomb Raider* create a challenging environment for Lara which forces her to constantly adapt to them and manage her resources wisely. In addition to having to fight her enemies for conquering her quest, she is constantly facing the utmost challenge of survival in these harsh surroundings, although her survival skills are still to be tested.

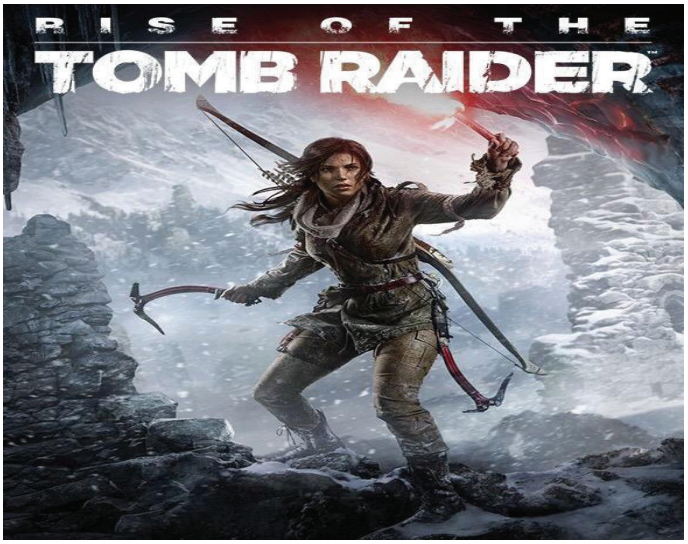


Figure 9: Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015 Video Game) - Photo Gallery - IMDB



Figure 10: Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015 Video Game) - Photo Gallery - IMDB

4.2.2 Character Design

As per analyzing the avatar interface of Lara croft, the avatar design of this gaming series went through some remarkable changes across the different releases of the game throughout the years. In the early versions of the tomb raider game, Lara's avatar was sexualized with revealing clothes and a glass hour body shape (Figure 11). Although Croft was characterized as breakthrough in the gaming industry being a female lead protagonist in a combat action/ adventure gaming series, she was also considered a sexual object that can be appealing to the male gaze (Kennedy 2002; MacCallum-Stewart 2014).



Figure 11 : Tomb Raider: Anniversary (2007 Video Game) - IMDB

However, with latest versions of the gaming series the avatar interface of Lara Croft started to appear with full body clothes or unrevealing outfits. The avatar now appears with brown hair, black eyes, and slightly muscular body (Figure 12). The focus of the character's design is on the various skills of croft, her intelligence and resourcefulness during the gameplay.



Figure 12: Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015 Video Game) – screenshot.

http://dx.doi.org/10.21622/ILCC.2024.04.2.1093

As per the second level of analysis of the character design in considering the avatar's clothing, the player can select from 19 available outfit selections for Lara's avatar; the colors are all dark: grey, black, green, blue, red, brown and teel (Figure 13). Most of the outfits are covering Lara's full body; she wears a climber outfit that does not reveal her body and the outfit choices in the game are different formats of very practical combat outfits. In addition to the clothes, the avatar is using some gadgets to help her in her missions, such as a glow stick and climbing Axe (Figure 14).

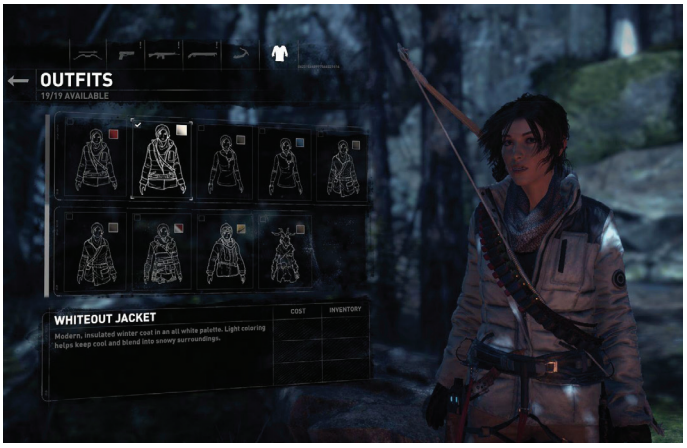


Figure 13: Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015 Video Game) – screenshot.



Figure 14: Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015 Video Game) – screenshot.

As for the weaponry, the main weapon of this avatar is the arrow and bow along with a sack of arrows attached to her back; there are other weaponry she relies on including a blade and a combat knife. The selection of these weapons is mainly because they are silent weapons used in combat to avoid alerting her enemies, because she is mainly sneaking on people without being seen. These weapons are useful in other close encounters when the ammo is not available with her. There is other weaponry she relies on including rifles, shot gun, handgun, and bombs she uses in the game play for long range combats because of their high shooting range as well as their suitability for holding a large number of ammos when she is fighting a large group of enemies (Figure 15).



Figure 15: Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015 Video Game) – screenshot.

4.2.3 Game Interface

The last level of the narrative analysis in the matter of The Rise of the Tomb Raider is the game interface which contains a very clear display of the character on the map, in addition to displaying the set of skills (Figure 16), weapon selection (Figure 17) and skins (clothing) (Figure 18) for croft' avatar in a very informative visual inventory displaying all the options of the avatar, clothes, weapons and skills for the player to choose from.



Figure 16 : Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015 Video Game) – screenshot

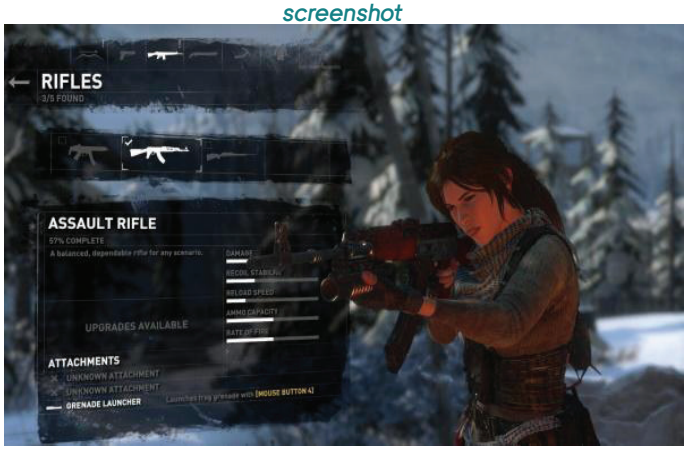


Figure 17: Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015 Video Game) – screenshot

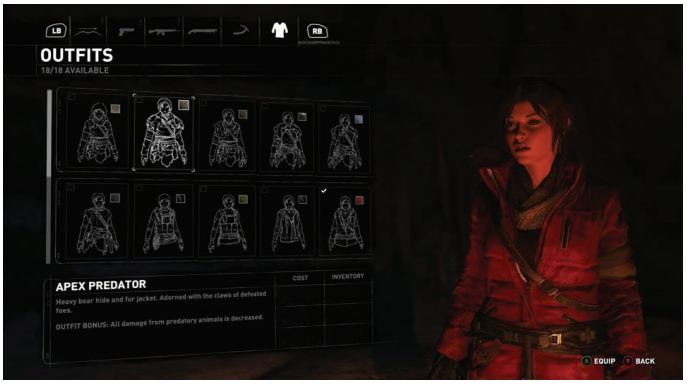


Figure 18: Rise of the Tomb Raider (2015 Video Game) – screenshot

4.3 The Last of Us

4.3.1 The Game Narrative

The second game under investigation, *The Last of Us*, the first level of analysis examines the narrative design of the game, which includes the background story of the game, the main plot of this version of the game and finally the spatial spaces where the events of the game are unfolding.

Regarding the background Story of the game, the main story is set in a post-apocalyptic world that has been destroyed by a fungal outbreak that turns humans into zombies. The main characters of this game are actually two players that have to embark on a journey and fulfill the head quest of the game, which is staying alive by joining their forces and acquiring survival skills. The first protagonist, Joel, is a survivor of this outbreak who has lost everything and now lives as a smuggler in a quarantined zone. The other protagonist is Ellie, a young girl who has not been infected by the fatal disease, she is the only human immune to this disease and may hold the key to a potential cure for it. Their main quest is for Joel to escort Ellie across the country to a group of scientists who are trying to find a cure for this outbreak. During their dangerous journey both protagonists form a father daughter bond that would later become the emotional core of the game.

The plot of the game follows Joel and Ellie as they navigate a treacherous world filled with infected humans who turned into zombies and ruthless survivors. Along the way, they encounter various factions and individuals, each with their own agendas. The plot mainly explores the theme of survival, as Joel and Ellie travel through different spatial areas to reach their final destination. Through their journey, they face numerous challenges, fighting not only infected zombie like creatures, but other hostile survivors who are struggling to eke out a living in such a dystopian world.

The analysis of spatial areas in the game features a variety of spatial areas that serve as both settings for gameplay and storytelling. Ellie and Joel have to travel through cities that have been previously populated and have a counterpart in real life like the cities Boston and Pittsburgh. However, for the game design they are now full of abandoned buildings and deserted areas, where players can use these spaces to hide or collect survival gadgets and weapons, or even engage in a fight with the zombie creatures spreading all over these towns (figure 19). These abandoned areas of once very crowded and lively cities reflect the status of the main characters, where they have to go through the cities, they once lived a normal busy life with people they once knew and loved. They are now forced to walk again through these places, but this time they are trying to survive this dark post-apocalyptic world filled with zombies and aggressive survivors who are trying to kill them as well. Throughout their quest, the two main protagonists take their journey through rural areas, including forests and mountains, where they are isolated and relying on each other to survive this wasteland. These spatial areas reflect the theme of isolation the characters are facing; they only have each other against not only their enemies but against the harsh environment. These spatial area plays a role constructing the main relation between them as they both need each other to survive and complete their journey.



Figure 19: The Last of Us (2013 Video Game) – IMDB

4.3.2 Character Design

With regards to analyzing the character design of Ellie, the protagonist of *The Last of us*, the process will focus on examining the avatar interface, the avatar clothing's or skins and the weaponry she is entitled to use in the game play.

The first level of analysis is the avatar interface; Ellie ` Avatar is a teen aged girl, which is not the common age of protagonists in most video games, especially combat-based games; they usually depict a young lady that suits the male gaze as the main protagonist, but this game is defying this norm by having the main character as a child. Ellie ` Avatar is depicted with brown hair and small facial features and no muscular body which defies the image of the strong women

in video games although she is the key player of a combat game (Figure 20).



Figure 20: The Last of Us (2013 Video Game) – IMDB

The second aspect of analyzing the avatar interface is the clothing of the character; in that matter, Ellie wears a pair of practical jeans and a sweater not revealing her body; the outfit choices in the game are different formats of these practical outfits in different colors, mostly dark colors. In addition, the outfit she is wearing seems to be a little bit dirty and her hair is rather messy, which fits the story line of a girl trying to survive a dying world and doesn't have the time or the resources to dress according to her age. Furthermore, the character is always carrying a backpack where she places her personal stuff, along with her weapons (Figure 22).

Finally, the weapons which the avatar is using during the game are diversified; however, the main weapon she uses is the arrow and bow, along with a sack of arrows attached to her back, in addition to a blade that she uses in combat. These weapons are mainly silent weapons which are used in combat to avoid alerting enemies and other close encounters when the ammo is scarce. Also, there are other weaponry she relies on including a pistol and a sniper which are perfectly used for long range encounters and can hold a large number of ammo (Figure 21).



Figure 21: The Last of Us (2013 Video Game) –IMDB



Figure 22: The Last of Us (2013 Video Game) –IMDB

4.3.3 Game Interface

Analyzing the gaming interface in *The Last of Us* relies on examining the map of the game, where characters appear on the different spatial areas during the game play. In that matter, the map and the location of the main avatars, Ellie, and Joel, are very clear and display the main spatial areas, both the cities and the rural areas, where they have to go through to reach their final destination. In addition, the game play features a clear visual display of the life/health of the characters. The game interface featured a visually instructive inventory, for the weapons sections, clothing/skins of the avatars (Figure 23) and skills acquired by both avatars during the game play.



Figure 23: The Last of Us (2013 Video Game) – screenshot

5. DISCUSSION

For years, female representation in media has been the core of many academic efforts. For most, these representations would reflect the notion of saving the girl. (Dickerman *et al*. 2008; Dietz 1998; Haninger and Thompson 2004). Hence, the main purpose of the research at hand was to analyze the female representation in video games, particularly the transition from the traditional "damsel in distress" narrative to empowered lead roles, which reveals a significant shift in the gaming industry's approach to gender portrayal. In order to challenge that notion and examine the shift in this narrative, this research has employed a qualitative analysis, concentrating on the examination of character design, narrative development, and game interface elements in the three video games; *The Last of Us, Horizon: Forbidden West and Rise of the Tomb Raider* to explore the changing landscape in female representation in video games.

The evaluation of character design of the game protagonists in "The Last of Us" as Ellie, and Aloy in "Horizon: Forbidden West" and finally Lara Croft in the "Rise of the Tomb Raider" illustrates a notable difference from the stereotypical portrayal of the female characters in video games. Meanwhile, the previously employed character designs of female avatars in video games depicted women in revealing clothes, a sexualized body shape. In addition, these female characters were usually engaged in the game as a secondary character or representing the main quest of the game, where the male character must save her (Bell 2013; Demarest 2010; Fulop 2012; Lynch *et al*. 2016; Solis 2017).

Nonetheless, the examination of Ellie, Aloy and Lara Croft, who are the main players of these games, demonstrates a shift in the character design, reflecting a more powerful, slightly muscular avatars, with choices of wardrobe or clothing that fits the environment they are placed in, in addition to equipping these characters with very advanced weaponry and skills to use fearlessly, along with a set of survival skills that reflects their resourcefulness and power.

Furthermore, examining the shift in the narrative design of these games was also an indicator of the shift in the previously mentioned narrative of the damsel in distress. Through analyzing the plot, background story and spatial spaces of the game, the research points out a shift in the story line of the gameplay, where most previous vidoe game narratives displayed the female charters as someone who needs to be saved. (Dickerman *et al*. 2008; Dietz 1998; Haninger and Thompson 2004). However, in the research at hand the game narrative is displaying complex and multifaceted background stories, where both games *The Last of Us and Horizon: Forbidden West* are set in a post-apocalyptic world, where the fate of the main character, who happens to be young resourceful women, obligates her to save the earth from another dooming fate. In addition, the "Rise of the Tomb Raider" story line reflects the journey of another young women who is following a hidden secret to save her late father's reputation and save her best Friend. Moreover, the spatial spaces in the games were very challenging diversified environmental spaces, from a harsh forest and deserted wilderness to cold mountains along with deserted cities with no resources. These spatial areas examined the survival skills of the main characters and challenged their welfare, by placing them into these wildernesses fighting the harsh nature along with fighting for their lives from other hostile creatures, or even fighting malicious humans to remain alive and fulfill the ultimate quest of the game, the narrative of the damsel in distress is now shifted to the damsel is actually saving the day.

6. CONCLUSION

It is worth noting that this research contributes to the ongoing discourse on gender representation in video games, emphasizing the importance of the employment of more diverse and empowering narratives of women. Moreover, the research at hand illuminates a progressive transformation in the representation of female characters within the video game medium. The transition from passive roles to empowered leads signifies a departure from traditional gender stereotypes. The analysis of *The Last of Us, Horizon: Forbidden West* and finally *Rise of the Tomb Raider* exemplifies the industry's commitment to showcasing diverse narratives that transcend gender norms.

The comparison of case studies of female characters in the video games under examination emphasizes the wide shift towards portraying female protagonists with depth and agency. As the results suggest, the

portrayal of female characters is becoming more reflective of the diverse experiences and narratives of women, reflecting how young women would like to see themselves, as strong resourceful human being defying the male gaze complex.

While progress is evident, it is essential to acknowledge that challenges persist; that is why it is recommended for future research to delve into the ongoing developments in video game narratives, examining how the portrayal of women continues to evolve in response to societal shifts and player expectations. For future recommendations for the gaming industry, it is important to point out the potential for more inclusive storytelling and character representation, which offers a promising path towards promoting a gaming environment that resonates with a broad spectrum of players.

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