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Women and Video Games: Pigeonholing the Past

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I. Video Games Misrepresenting Women/Women Misrepresenting Video Games

As a student at Scripps much of my compulsory reading over the past four years has dealt with women's representation both in literal and metaphorical spaces. Despite the density and volume of the theories I have read, what I have learned is still just the tip of the iceberg. Similarly, the topic of video games expands each year as technology develops and demands for entertainment broaden. Research regarding games—once perceived as nothing more than frivolous entertainment—has boomed in recent years despite being a very contemporary topic. Both theoretical fields are massive, and only getting bigger as time passes; however, academic work dealing with the overlap between the two fields—video games and the representation of women—is still very limited and under-developed compared to the two fields themselves.

My first formal experience with the overlap of these two studies occurred in ART 183, an art theory class required for my major focusing on art in relationship to women. The class had a very broad range of topics, but one unit was devoted entirely to women's portrayal and role in video games. Despite my initial excitement to see how self-identified feminist writers viewed my favourite past-time as well as hopefully my future career, I quickly found myself disappointed. The readings almost seemed to alienate female gamers and denounce them for enjoying something so chauvinistic and strictly formulated for the male gaze. This year, upon researching even more into the undeveloped realm of feminist studies in relation to video games, I found that this negative trend reached beyond just the scope of the readings selected for ART 183. In fact, every self-identified feminist theorist I could find texts from as well as many other critics of the video game industry had the same opinion —that female characters are consistently represented misogynisticly as titillating vixens, "pink" half-baked attempts to appeal to the female consumer, one-dimensional shoulder-ornaments to hyper-masculine characters, or fetishized victims of violence and bloodied abuse, and that female players are targets of sexual harassment from male players and discriminated against by the gaming community at large.

However, if one can just look past the feminist jargon and unpack the complexity of the academic writing style to get a clear look at source material, the selection of games

and characters not only becomes concerningly redundant from essay to essay, but also appears contrived in relation to the much wider scope of games and characters that the authors omit. Nearly half the texts referenced in this paper mention either Bungie's (now 343 Studio's) futuristic science fiction first-person shooter series *Halo* or Core Design's third-person action-adventure series *Tomb Raider,* and at least half of the essays mentioning these games opt not to bring any other games into their research. While these games have or had a large following, one cannot argue that one or two games define all other games in existence in both the past and present. Though some of these concerns were valid at a time, many of them have been addressed by contemporary games (within this paper, referring to games made in or after 2000) for the sake of broadening their market and attracting a new demographic of consumers, particularly those who wish to play games without being pigeonholed or discriminated against—or simply were never true to begin with.

In short, academic texts regarding the topic of female characters as well as female gamers in the video game space is not only limited in volume, but also in proper research. Thus, utilizing not only more casual research like news articles but also editorials as sources but also games themselves, I intend to demonstrate how many of the concerns these critical papers present either have been addressed and fixed by contemporary games or have a broader, more reasonable explanation that cannot be blamed on video games alone. From the critical texts I have researched, nearly all the problems addressed can be summarized into three fundamental issues:

1. Video games are a "guy-thing" that inherently alienates and excludes female participants and the player-base of video games is misogynistic and makes gaming environments hostile to females.
2. There are no games for girls that are not frivolous "pink" games with themes such as princesses, fashion, shopping, socializing, etc.
3. Female players cannot relate to female characters because they are unrealistic, stereotypical, one-dimensional portrayals of women.

These three main concerns not only summarize the feminist critique of video games, but I believe also cause many women to avoid playing them. In the following sections, I hope to shed some light on these points, not only citing specific games as counter-examples,

but also showing how many of these issues cannot exclusively be blamed on video games, but rather reflect on a larger societal problems. However, throughout this paper, it is important to remember that though counter-examples exist, unfortunately so do examples of these points still exist. We are at a crucial turning point in how women interact with and are portrayed in video games, which is why I believe it is equally as important to recognize the great strides that have been made in addition to the complaints and critiques, for progress is more likely to continue and accelerate if it is encouraged rather than ignored.

II. "It's a Guy Thing:" the Circular Logic that Begets Self-Alienation

"Females and males largely play the same games," author Liz Danforth writes; however, she feels the need to qualify this statement by saying that they do not do so "in equal numbers" (Danforth). The key to understanding why women do not play video games now stems from the question of why they have not been playing video games up until this point. A lot of the reasoning behind women's lack of participation in video games originates from the circular and self-defeating logic of "I don't see other women playing video games, so I will not play video games either." From advertisements to Facebook posts, from editorials to everyday gossip, the out-dated yet "popular perception of gamers [as] either pimply-faced teenaged boys or 30-something males living in their parents' basements" discourages many women from wanting to participate in the gaming phenomenon (Shields). And if this archetype was not discouraging enough, the "[ridiculous] testosterone-swollen, iron-chested men" that stand front row center on many of the games' covers may "remind [potential female gamers] that [the games] were not really designed for [them]" (Edmonds). Even then, if one can overlook these issues, there still exists the problem that a female gamer might simply get lumped in with all the other "[c]heerleaders, booth babes, [and,] *Halo* hoes," invalidating her desire to be accepted by her playmates as an equal competitor and "there for the right reasons—i.e. 'just to game'" (Taylor). While these all serve as valid concerns in regards to how women are viewed in an unarguably "male-dominated site," one has to wonder if some of these problems are self-perpetuated, or else caused by a cultural construct even bigger than gaming itself. In either of these cases, it seems unfair to blame video games alone for the problems that happen to permeate through them but are nonetheless not caused by them.
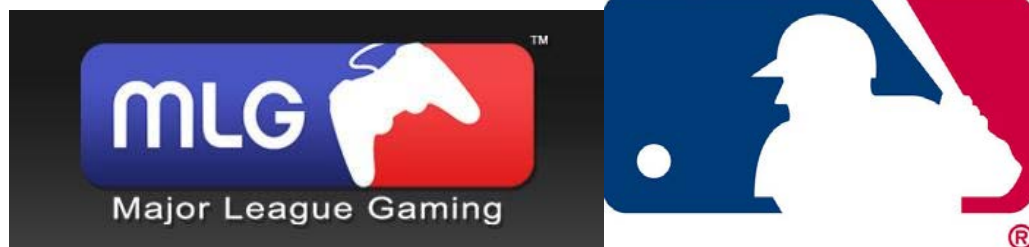
The MLG logo draws obvious aesthetic inspiration from the logos of other major-league sports such as the NBA and MLB, further validating it as "active, 'athletic,' and worthy of (sports) spectatorship" (Taylor)

In comparing Major League Gaming (MLG) to the misogynistic nature of other sports and their communities, Nicholas Taylor believes that he has demonstrated the three aforementioned categories women regrettably but inevitably fall into when they attempt to participate in the "pro-gaming" community of games like *Halo 3:* cheerleaders, booth babes, and *Halo* hoes. He provides examples of each of these archetypes. The first example he gives is the mother of an MLG competitor that attends "'most of [her son's gaming events]'" and "has even taken out an equity loan... in 2007 to fly her son's team to events, emphasizing the lengths she has gone to to support her son and his team" (Taylor). The second category constitutes "young women who... just show up to... tournaments to flirt with and 'pick up' successful or victorious male gamers" (Taylor). The final category is made up of "women who facilitate male participants' engagements

with a range of products at promotional exhibits."

*S*tereotypical "booth babes"

However, in making his argument, he contradicts himself by mentioning the existence of a certain female MLG competitor that goes by the title Fatal Fantasy. He tries to paint a portrait of Fatal Fantasy as a young woman struggling to stay afloat in a misogynistic, testosterone-charged environment by over-analyzing her supposedly "sexualized"gamer-tag (or call-tag when gaming) as "evok[ing] a persona that is at once desirable and unattainable," criticizing her "effort into her [appearance]," emphasizing how much she struggles to prove that she is there "just to game," and questions her positioning of herself as a "desirable heterosexual female" (Taylor). He even goes as far as to purposefully mention that "her teams did not place well" and that she is only "relatively" successful at MLG tournaments (Taylor). As a reader, though, on has to

wonder why dressing nicely at an event that means a great deal to the individual is a deplorable thing, and why embracing one's sexuality is considered a weak point. Fatal Fantasy is certainly no bastion of male-denouncing empowerment, but she also does not constitute a weak, dependent female searching for the approval of her male counterparts. It is almost as if Taylor expects her to be some super-woman breaking down walls for the rest of women in gaming, but that in itself seems like too heavy a burden for one woman. If anything, Fatal Fantasy's casual yet confident presence is a step in the right direction for other potential female gamers to step into similar roles, but this is still not a change that will simply happen overnight. All in all, Taylor himself seems more sexist and critical of Fatal Fantasy's participation in MLG tournaments than her fellow competitors, and the quotes and observations he included about the tournament she participated in seemed to portray her as better integrated than he would want the reader to believe.

Additionally, his criticisms of the "cheerleader" type mother seemed unwarrantedly negative, too. His tone towards the aforementioned mother's support of hes son's dreams came off as disapproving, and he chastised her for the fact that "her cheering has little to no correlation to what is actually occurring on-screen" (Taylor). He uses this chance to draw a comparison between her maternal support of her family to the more misogynistic practice of cheerleading, "a practice linked to male-dominated sports in which women are literally on the margins, capable of only superficially supporting or buttressing the 'real' action rather than participating equitably in it" (Taylor). He also comments that her son and his teammates, "seem neither able nor inclined to pay attention to her, their headphones on and their gazes rarely leaving each other's screens," Again, his analysis of his observations seems overly critical and antagonistic of the mother's desire to express her love for her son by supporting his aspirations. He also fails to realize that her lack of participation may have nothing to do with a "history" of chauvinistic practices but rather explained by a simple lack of interest in playing herself. Finally, the comment about her son's disinterest in her cheering completely neglects the fact that games like *Halo 3* demand a huge amount of attention, and the headphones are indispensable to winning; it is not that he did not care about his mother, he was probably just more interested in winning, as would any competitor would be.

While Taylor does bring up a valid point about the questionable practice of "booth

babes," it is interesting to note that more and more companies realize that such a practice loses their female constituency and instead opt for more creative and family-friendly booth attendants. For example, at Penny Arcade Expo (PAX) 2010, Bungie welcomed Jordan Konkel dressed conservatively as Kat (a character from their newest release. *Halo: Reach*) to be their "booth babe." Another company called Good Old Games comically yet endearingly mocked the tradition of "booth babes" at PAX 2011 by featuring a couple of old ladies knitting in a fire-side installation at their booth complete with arm chairs and a large, circular rug. Both booths' "babes" were reported on through heavily-trafficked gaming websites like Kotaku, giving them more media exposure and recognition. While this is not to say that the misogynistic practice of having "booth babes" at conventions and exhibitions has completely died, it is still a pleasant step in the right direction to see some companies toying and even completely rejecting the tradition—and the fact that the gaming community embraces this change is also a good sign.

Not-so-stereotypical booth babe: Jordan Konkel dressed as Kat from Halo:Reach

The perceived misogyny in video gaming culture extends beyond the public realm of conventions and tournaments and into the more private realm of multi-player online

console gaming, too. When describing the sometimes hostile and oppressive environments of multi-player online games like Halo, Call of Duty, and other competitive games that imbue users with the ability to chat and communicate, many people reference the popular "greater internet dickwad theory" coined by the video gaming web-comic series Penny Arcade without even realizing it. Though the comic accredits the theory to John Gabriel, readers of the comic know this character to be a fictionalized characterture of one of the comic's writer, Mike Krahulik (Krahulik). The gist of the theory constituted that when a normal person is granted anonymity and an audience (both of which a player gets from gaming), their behaviour quickly turns from socially acceptable to potentially offensive and scathing. Despite the original comic's intended humour and lack of any real seriousness, the statement actually held a lot of truth, and is referred to frequently within the context of media studies, internet, and gaming communities.
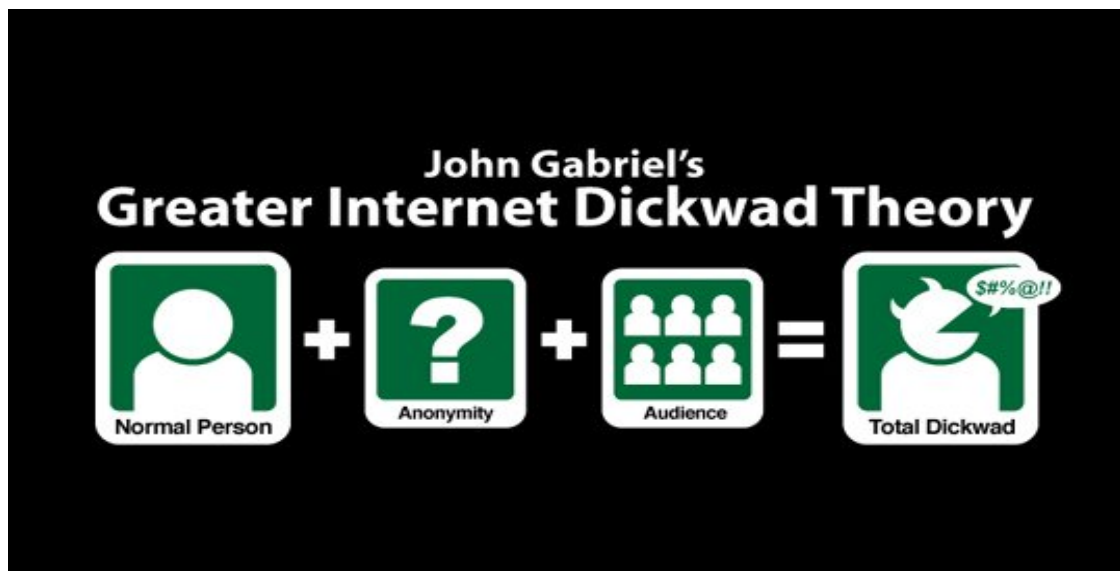
R
e-publication of Penny Arcade's "greater internet dickwad theory"
comic with expletives removed (Penny Arcade)

In accordance with this theory, many female players new to video games observe a lot of unnecessary sexism and insults directed towards them based on what they think to be their gender alone. Comments such as "No girls on the internet!" and "Go back to the kitchen!" predominate online game space and can easily deter newer players, making them feel singled out and terrorized for being a self-perceived minority. However, as unfortunate as this tendency is, it is neither exclusive to just video games nor directed

exclusively at women. In fact, if a female player can look outside the scope of the insults directed at her, she will quickly notice that nearly everyone in the game deals and receives antagonism (oftentimes not even related to the game at hand). This practice of "trash-talking" exists in almost every online game, and targets almost everyone regardless of gender.

Nonetheless, female gamers—as well as females in general—tend to be more offended by "trash-talking" and other scathing forms of humour because it falls into the realm of "male humour" (Kaufman) Unlike "female/feminist humour," which usually constitutes constructive, light-hearted humour or satire criticizing systems of oppression, "male humour" is identified by its outwardly hurtful yet unserious nature (Kaufman). Female players sometimes assume that male humour holds the same serious, heart-felt implications as female humour which leads to the conclusion that the joking yet unkind comments are meant as serious critiques of their character. However, along the lines of a firm punch on the shoulder or a vigorous pep talk, these comments bear neither serious thought nor meaning and are meant simply as instigation for the player to "step up their game." Many gamers believe that insulting or putting down teammates will force them to play better, or else "trash-talking" opponents intimidates them and causes them to do worse, but very rarely are the comments meant to be taken terribly seriously outside of the scope of the game itself. In fact, "players like to think that they are accepting of each other on ludic merit" alone, insinuating that is is not the gender or race or orientation of a player that determines her acceptance, but rather how well she plays the game—another concept that easily explains the acceptance of players like Fatal Fantasy into intense gaming environments like MLG tournaments (MacCallum-Stewart). Nevertheless, this presents a difficult pill to swallow for many new female players and discourages them from continuing to play—especially if they are not particularly skillful at the game to begin with.

No gamer will try to argue that "trash-talking" is nice or meant to make people feel welcome, but the practice seems so ingrained in the pastime that it has become hard to separate from it. Albeit, neither game companies nor online game services such as Xbox Live condone such actions and if a player feels very offended, they can effortlessly find alternatives to accepting and involving themselves with trash-talk (such as private

games, muting offensive players, muting all players, only playing with friends, etc.). For example, the Xbox Live terms of service explicitly prohibits the following actions while using their service (which one needs to play games such as halo and Call of Duty online) and encourages players targeted by such behaviour to report offenders for varying punishments (from temporary suspensions to IP bans) depending on the degree of the offense:

- *Don't harass, abuse, or spam other players, or encourage other players to do so.*
- *Don't scream, yell, threaten, or stalk other players, or encourage other players to do so.*
- *Don't create a gamertag, profile content, Avatar action, Avatar content, or in-game content that other users may be offended by. This includes, without limitation, anything related to or suggestive of: profane words/phrases, topics or content of a sexual nature, hate speech (including but not limited to racial, ethnic, or religious slurs), illegal drugs/controlled substances, or illegal activities.*
- *Don't create a gamertag, profile content, Avatar action, Avatar content, or in-game content that references controversial religious topics, notorious people, organizations, or sensitive current or historical events that may be considered inappropriate.*
- *Don't distribute, post, publish, upload, disseminate or discuss defamatory, infringing, obscene, sexual or unlawful materials in any format (images, audio, video, text, etc.). Prohibited materials include, without limitation, child pornography or illegal drugs. "Sound alike" words or phrases or puns that reference these topics are also prohibited.* (Xbox)

However, as with any system intended to regulate a large community, many infractions go unnoticed, unpunished, and unreported by gamers. The problem is less the system meant to police trash-talk and more the ambivalence of the virtual citizens responsible for reporting incidents.

In the end, it is simply impossible for a company to completely regulate the results of the "greater internet dickwad theory" within such a large community without devoted assistance from community members. While trash-talking may discourage many females from playing, it is not a form of antagonism directed exclusively at them as many

first-time female gamers seem to think; rather, many women tend to only recognize the antagonism directed towards them because it is most relevant to them. Still, this cannot be blamed on the video games as much as the effects of anonymity and audience on people as well as the inherent difference between "female humour" and "male humour."

Even so, it is not fair to say all women are offended by "trash-talking " and feel discouraged from playing, just as it is not fair to say all men support and participate in the practice. Rather, "the perception of the male or female player as a distinct entity" with distinct tolerances and sensitivities "is gradually diminishing" (MacCallum-Stewart). Some women have no problem embracing the "trash-talking," aggressive gaming community. Taylor cites Fatal Fantasy as participating in the practice of trash-talking during MLG tournaments, and the female protagonist of popular the World of Warcraft-based fictional web-series *The Guild* played by Felicia Day also willingly takes part in her fair share of aggressive play-talk (when the series focuses on the characters' online interactions). Though largely unidentified and deliberately anonymous, "there is a growing... group of younger, hard-core female gamers" that embrace traditions like trash-talking and aggressive play "evidenced by the growth of sites like WomenGamers.com and GrrlGamer.com" (Shields). Taking this trend even further, popular all-girls gaming teams like the Frag Dolls have begun to spotlight in gaming communities both online and offline. They "shatter... the egos of mostly male opponents in online matches" while still accepting and fully participating in the cultural phenomenon of trash-talking to their unworthy opponents (Bulik). Morgan Romine, confident leader of the Frag Dolls, haughtily proclaims, "[We] are not just good spokes-gamers... but we can actually kick butt at them too!" (Bulik). She goes on to confirm the overarching point of this chapter by saying, "Anyone can like games, not just the stereotype pale pimply geeks hiding out in the basement" (Bulik). Indeed, the "so-called 'grrl-gamers' are becoming more visible and vocal," and as this trend continues, numbers of new female gamers will most likely rise as the space appears less and less male-dominated to newcomers (Danforth).

Left: Morgan Romine from the Frag Dolls. Right: Felicia Day's character from the World of Warcraft-*themed web-series* The Guild.

Considering the facts, it is indeed hard to deny that the video game community is still a heavily a heavily male-dominated realm, however with the existence of individuals like Fatal Fantasy and Morgan Romine, it is impossible to assert that the community is exclusive to men. What seems to perpetuate women's hesitance to step into the realm of gaming is not so much the community's actual sexism but rather the guise of misogyny that many writers like Taylor as well as casual observers impose on the community and over-emphasize. Shields accurately diagnoses the problem by writing "the assumption that players are more likely to be male, regardless of gender, is more symptomatic of continuing media and marketing representations of the gamer, rather than representative of current trends" (Shields). With "booth babes" still prevalent and MLG tournaments still populated by easily over 90% male competitors, it will take a few more strong individuals like Fatal Fantasy and Morgan Romine to pave the way to a more equal player-base, but it is authors and critics like Taylor who perpetuate the archetype of gamers as sexist, selfish immature young men that really reverse the progress of women stepping into video gaming. Before video gaming can become a level playing ground for women, not only do traditions like "booth babes" need to be weeded out, but also individuals, both professional and casual, need to stop perpetuating myths about gamers—whether they portray them as pimply nerds, basement-dwelling failures, or woman-hating chauvinists.

And herein lies the self-defeating, circular logic: women do not play video games

because they do not believe women play video games. Even if there are pockets of women that *do* play video games, many women "don't actually want to think they are gamers" even if they do play one or two games, because the connotations of being a gamer have become so negative (Shields). Just like with any other negatively-connoted societal label, many women would rather hide their participation in a past time considered "nerdy" and "a waste of time" than project it publicly. Many women are "horrified to use [the word gamer] to describe themselves" (Shields), thus female gaming is forced to hide itself "behind-the-scenes" not because of misogyny or chauvinistic oppression, but partly due to self-inflicted isolationism (Bulik). If more confident, proud female gamers like Fatal Fantasy and Morgan Romine came to the forefront, though, other women would feel more inclined to join in too. Writer and game designer Monica Valentinelli essentially summarized the quickest and easiest solution to cracking the "video games are a guy thing" myth in Danforth's article by saying, "No woman should ever be afraid to admit they play games" (Danforth).

III. "Pink Gaming" is not the Only Option

Even upon breaking through the barrier of the supposedly misogynistic community of gaming, many women still have trouble picking out a game that personally suits their interests and goals for a video gaming experience. The variety of games available to players only continues to expand every year, and sometimes looking at game covers or watching commercials can be more misleading as to the content of a game than making a blind decision. Like any other large market, video game publishers have a broad group of potential buyers, and thus are forced to make equally broad generalizations "in an attempt to conquer a wider... audience" (Fantone). Again, like any other large market, the result tends to be stereotypical portrayals of their target markets, such as assumptions that all females want from a game are princesses, chatting, shopping, dogs, and anything else pink and girly. Critic Laura Fantone calls this phenomenon an "evol[ution] into increasing banality," evaluating the disinteresting and jading effect of making assumptions about potential consumers has on actual consumers (Fantone). She goes on to assert the same belief many other hesitant women use to justify their lack of participation in gaming--"many video games are clearly designed aesthetically to appeal to female players" because the "gendered social divisions in games... are stronger than ever" (Fantone). She supports this claim by citing social games such as *The Sims* that prove popular amongst female gamers and illustrating how they feed off the assumption that women only enjoy games that tap into their supposedly inherent need to chat, shop, follow fashion, and dress up. *The Sims* is not the only game guilty of this gendered assumption-based marketing; other games such as the *Cooking Mama* series and *Imagine!* series directly cater to stereotypical charectures of females that want to become teachers and cook and cheer lead rather than participate in more gender-neutral activities. These games paint a skewed portrait of all female gamers as a gendered extreme existing completely separated from "male gaming." They make their target market disgustingly obvious by wrapping their otherwise basic game play with frills, sparkles, and cute imagery, hoping to appeal to all females with this offensively direct strategy.

Overtly "pink" advertising as evidenced by one of the games in the
Cooking Mama *series*

If games like *The Sims, Cooking Mama,* and *Imagine!* were the only games available, Fantone's hypothesis would hold strong, but the problem with her conclusion is that she ignores well over half the games available to consumers, which explains why so many other authors come to drastically contradictory conclusions. Bulik concisely wraps up the consensus between female gamers and game companies when she quotes vice president of marketing at Midway Games, Mona Hamilton, "Girls who game don't want to necessarily be classified as 'girl gamers' (Bulik), as the above games appear to do. As addressed in the previous chapter, many female gamers simply want to consume, play, compete in and enjoy games on par with male gamers, and more and more game companies are learning that "[w]rapping a shooter game [like *Halo*] in pink isn't going to fool females" (Bulik). "In fact," Bulik muses, "when Sony announced a pink PlayStation2 to debut... it was snickered at online by some female gamers" (Bulik).

The video game companies producing games like *The Sims* and Cooking *Mama* and their advertising departments do not deliberately choose to misrepresent their potential buyers, though; the real issue behind their assumptions is the fact that their games have a market. In the end, the ultimate decision of whether an advertising method or archetypal aesthetic should be used in a video game is how well that strategy worked in the past. Complaints about sexism and stereotyping do not change trends in portrayal of female consumers—sales change them, and as long as a market for "pink gaming"

exists, games to fill that market will exist too. Danforth succinctly explains this trend when she writes, "[c]ompanies play to stereotypes because they would be foolish to ignore existing market data;" in other words, money will always speak louder than activists as long as there is a market to justify it (Danforth). The humour of the pink PlayStation2 lay in the system's general appeal to hardcore gamers less interested in games like *Cooking Mama* and *Imagine!;* however, in the case of a system that knows its primary consumers are fans of "pink gaming," such strategies go less mocked and more welcomed. Evidence of this lies in "tweens [that] have fallen for Nintendo DS... in a co-marketing deal with Limited Too clothing," and the sheer popularity and economic success of games utilizing "pink" strategies (Bulik). "There are a lot of different segments to address [in appealing to female gamers, and gamers in general]" Bulik quotes senior of director-marketing at Double Fusion, Jennifer McLean, as saying. While this supports Fantone's claims about exclusively "pink" games like *The Sims*, it rejects her claims in the case of any other games than the ones she specifically selected to prove her thesis.

Outside of "pink gaming" a range of other female-targeted games exist—more prevalently, though, are games intended to appeal to either gender. Many companies appeal to a mindset or an aesthetic instead of a specific gender, and the fact that one gender or the other is more drawn to that genre turns out completely coincidental. Sometimes, companies will later tap into this information to make future marketing and advertising decisions, however it generally turns out more profitable if a game advertises its content instead attempting to convince the buyer that they are part of a certain "group" that should be consuming their genre of game (i.e. "pink gaming").

One significant yet recent testament to this tendency is the rise of "casual games" – popular amongst female players, yet not explicitly advertised to or played by them. Senior brand manager at Buena Vista Games defined casual games well when she described them as "more into personalization... community... dialogue... aspirational characters... solving puzzles... [and most importantly playable] in shorter time-segments" (Bulik). Shields also observes that casual games appear "clearly escapist" and provide "relief, distraction, and socializing" (Shields). He cites James Belcher as observing that "[casual games] are generally nonviolent" (Shields). Concisely worded by Lisa Sikora,

group marketing manager at Microsoft Casual Games group, "casual games are about bite-sized entertainment" (Shields). Easily identifiable games that constitute "casual games" include card and puzzle games such as solitaire, Sudoku, and mahjong as well as more commercially identifiable games like *Cake Mania, Bejeweled, Angry Birds*, and *Fruit Ninja*. Though some of these games feature female protagonists (*Cake Mania*'s playable protagonist is female) or a somewhat feminine aesthetic (jewels make up the visuals of *Bejeweled*, which could be vaguely argued acts as an appeal to the female consumer), most of the games targeted at casual gamers are largely gender-neutral—less for the sake of appeasing those put off by "pink gaming" and more in the simple interest of making more money.
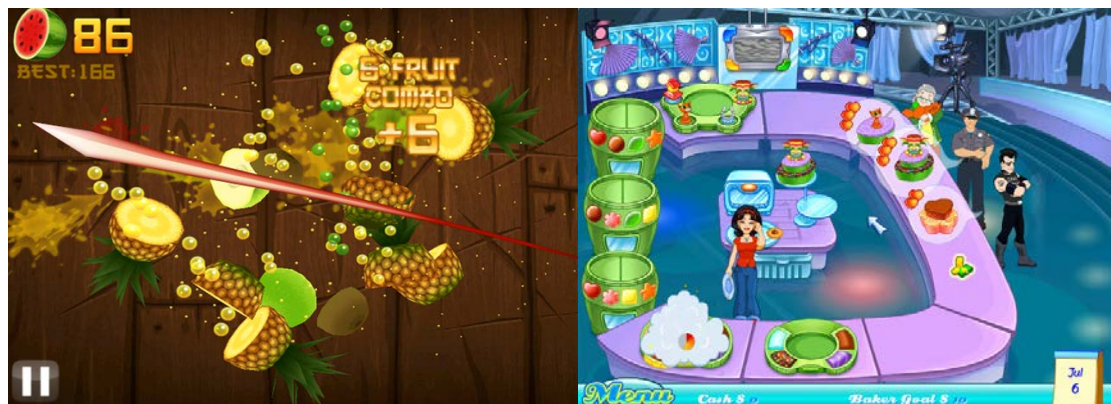
Gameplay screen-shots from Fruit Ninja (left) and Cake Mania (right)

Appearing directly contradictory to the conclusions deduced by the previous chapter of this paper, a study released in 2006 by the Consumer Electronics Association noted that "65 percent of women ages 25 to 34 report playing video games, compared to just 35 percent of men... [and] the report cites casual gaming as the reason why the numbers for women are so large" (Shields). One site alone (MSN Games) "reaches 9 million unique users a month" and "has seen its female audience increase by 10 percent" coming to a total of "70 percent of its total audience."

Casual games do not just exist on online sites, though, and casual gamers both male and female can find entertainment on both hand-held and video consoles alike. The "Nintendo DS [is] a tool which harnesses casual game techniques and hand held play in

new and innovative ways," by delivering gameplay through the form of two screens—one a touch screen and the other a regular display screen (MacCallum-Stewart). This year, Nintendo upgraded its hand-held system (now called the 3DS) to incorporate glasses-free 3D, wireless internet, and tilt and motion sensitivity that allows the system to detect when it is moved or tilted. For fans of television-based gaming, the Wii is also "a very approachable device" that "radically shifts gaming demographics" by offering both casual and hardcore games with the innovation of spacial motion control in addition to the traditional button and joy-stick-based controller (Bulik). Though Nintendo is known for its innovations in gameplay experience, fans of less motion-based games can also enjoy casual games featured on the Xbox 360's Xbox Live Arcade and the PlayStation3's PlayStation Marketplace. Games offered through these services cost significantly less than a full, hardcore game like *Halo, Mario,* or *Call of Duty* ($5 to $15 as opposed to $40 to $60) and usually showcase addictive and cathartic yet "bite-sized" gameplay.

Beyond the realm of casual gaming, industry veteran Kirsten Forbes notes an "increase in 'Killer Betties'-hard-core women gamers that play games like Grand Theft Auto and Assassin's Creed" (Bourgon). Unfortunately, "game developers [still do sometimes] make appallingly sexist assumptions and choices in marketing and design decisions," but now companies are "actively seeking out female creators" as "female players become more numerous and more vocal" about their demands (Danforth). Again, change in the video game world comes down to supply and demand—as female gamers emerge and use their ability to consumer (or not consume) to show video game companies what they want (and do not want) from games, "the market will rise to meet their dollars" (Danforth). At this time, the female gamer's relationship to games is in a constant state of flux. Frag Doll's leader Romine could not be more accurate when she stated, "we've seen a tremendous change in attitude towards women gamers, and that's just going to continue" (Bulik). Change has occurred and will only continue to occur more as brilliant examples of games that appeal to both men and women equally without relying on assumptions or stereotypes slowly overtake the more "appalling" examples of sexist game design.

Explicit examples speak louder than theoretical assertions, though. One example of this gradual change lies in Bungie's (now 343 Studio's) popular first-person shooter

series, *Halo*. The first installment of the original trilogy, *Halo: Combat Evolved* for the Xbox hit shelves ten years ago (and is receiving a ten-year anniversary re-release to the Xbox 360 in November of 2011), and told the story of a green-armoured super soldier referred to simply as "Master Chief" from a future where humans are at war with a super-advanced yet devoutly religious alliance of aliens called the Covenant. Players were forced to play as Master Chief, characterized as hyper-masculine due to his super-soldier augmentations, and explore a mysterious space ring created by the Forerunners, a race of long-extinct yet unrivaledly technologically advanced beings. The Covenant, enraged by the player's "desecration of the sacred ring," attack attack the humans for setting foot on what they consider to be a sacred artifact, and a good amount of the combat within the game is against these aliens. Additionally, Master Chief releases the parasitic race that caused the extinction of the Forerunners and all life during their time called the Flood, adding a new and far more threatening enemy into the fray. *Halo 2* (Xbox) dealt with the crumbling of the Covenant religion, the alliance of the humans with a former-Covenant exile alien called the Arbiter, and the united struggle against the threat of the Flood. Finally, *Halo 3* (Xbox) oversaw the re-constitution of the Covenant's race and class-based power structure, the full alliance of former-Covenant aliens called the Elites with the humans, the defeat of the flood, and the loss of contact with Master Chief (setting up for a sequel that is scheduled to be released in 2012). Each game's story became deeper and less centrally focused on violence, showing a gradual movement from the unappealing, one-sided concept of games as a cathartic killing frenzy. As the story expanded and deepened, the fan base grew and demanded even more of the story and characters. Female characters such as Miranda Keyes and Cortana received more screen time and played bigger roles as the story went on, and overall the games became less about generic humans-versus-aliens slaughter and more about killing for fighting for the survival of one's race. This trend continued into a follow-up game that overlapped with the timeline of *Halo 2* called *Halo ODST* (Xbox 360) which followed the story of a separated troop of Orbital Drop Shock Troops who witness the fall of an important human colony called New Mombasa to the threat of the Covenant. The game experimented with the role of women by not only putting a woman named DARE in the highest position of power in the game, but also for the first time allowing the player to

take the role of a silent and ambiguous protagonist simply known as "Rookie." Though DARE's role did not go over well with the female fanbase, who complained about not only her role as a veiled "damsel in distress" who requires saving the male characters, but also the insubordination that her male underlings demonstrated in flirting and disobeying her. Additionally, the fact that the player did not have the option to choose the gender of the Rookie was a disappointment; however, the portrayal of his/her character as less hyper-masculine and more ambiguous was a step up from the Master Chief example. Bungie excelled most in their final installment of the *Halo* series before passing the baton to 343 Studios, *Halo: Reach* (Xbox 360). Not only did the game feature a number of powerful, influential female characters both within the player's troop and outside the group of people one plays with, but also the player himself/herself chooses the gender (conveyed through voice and variation in body type) and armour permutation of the character they see as himself/herself in the game. The game was met with praise from both female and male gamers who enjoyed the immersive nature of being able to project oneself on his/her own protagonist, and the predominant female characters Kat and Dr. Halsey as well as the female-voiced AI Auntie Dot were also celebrated.

The story was not the only facet of the *Halo* series that saw gradually more appeal to both male and female players, though. Another feature of the games was the ability to play outside the canonical story with one's friends, and in *Halo: Combat Evolved* players were restricted to play offline via linked Xbox consoles as generic soldiers that maintained the same appearance as Master Chief but re-skinned with different colours. *Halo 2*'s innovation was its connection to the Xbox Live service, allowing players to play with each other online, but player models still appeared as re-skinned versions of Master Chief and the newly introduced alien allies, the Elites. Up until that point, the multi-player characters' voices were always male, but in addition to adding the ability to customize the basic appearance of one's multi-player character, players of *Halo 3* also could choose the voice of the character, making it male or female without actually altering the body of the model. *Halo: ODST*'s system diverged a bit from the norm, forcing the player to play in the guise of one of the game's characters and use the voice of one of the characters, which allowed for both female and male players to see and hear their character as the sex they desired them to be. However, this detracted from the

players ability to project himself/herself on the character as a blank slate, so *Halo: Reach* introduced the visual and audio connection between the character one plays in the story and the character one plays in multi-player. In other words, the character one saw himself/herself as in the story cinematics and game-play was the same model one played as in on line multi-player, adding a deeper connection between the player and the character. Armour was customizable to a whole new and more expansive level, and the fact that the model and voice actually changed depending on the player's choice reflected Bungie's attempt to reach out to all players regardless of gender. While multi-player remained mostly non-canonical and purposeless throughout all the games, *Halo: Reach* excelled again as far as appeal to both males and females, demonstrating a real improvement in the company's efforts to appeal to not only male gamers, but also hardcore first-person-shooter-enjoying female gamers.

The *Halo* series is not the only game to make great strides in appealing to female players. The *Asssassin's Creed* series also started out as a largely male-dominated series with a male protagonist, a focus on violence, and nearly no female representation in the first installment, *Assassin's Creed* (Xbox 360). The next game, *Assassin's Creed 2*, skips ahead centuries, abandoning the original rash and violent protagonist of the first game, Altair, and focuses on a new character names Ezio, whose appearance is far more appealing to the female gaze. Video games are often known for their portrayal of women as overly sexy for the sake of enticing the male gaze, but more and more in an attempt to reach out to female players, designers are creating characters like Ezio that attract female gamers, too. Liz Danforth accurately assess this phenomenon when she observes, "adult women can find the muscled heroes attractive the same way the guys enjoy Lara Croft's athleticism" (Danforth). Still, *Assassin's Creed 2*'s female population primarily constituted prostitutes that Ezio could hire to hide from and distract enemies, so *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* attempted to remedy the misrepresented feelings of many female players by introducing stronger, more influential female characters. For example, Ezio's sister Claudia plays an important role in the story not only by commanding a courtesan house, but also by using her power to influence many of the people Ezio interacts with. Despite the sexist restrictions of Renaissance Italy, she still asserts a lot of power over Rome through her trade (though she herself does not participate in the

courtesan business), and eventually becomes an assassin alongside her brother despite his objections. The game also included the ability of the player to recruit apprentice assassin's who's names and identities were randomly generated. Developers deliberately gave the apprentices the potential to be female, though, pleasing many female players to see Ezio assisted and occasionally saved by female characters. The most notable improvement could be seen in the multi-player of *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood,* which was the first online multi-player experience that the series had to offer, but made a stupendous impression upon the fan-base. Unlike *Halo*, which took many installments to give female players proper representation, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* allows players to pick from a roster of pre-set characters that include both males and females of all walks of life. Each character has a brief description and role that the player can read, but no one character seems too unbelievable or appealing to either the female or male gaze. This change was impressive considering the last installment of the game had such appalling and lacking representations of females despite the attractive male protagonist. Although not much has been revealed about the coming *Assassin's Creed: Revelations* (Xbox 360)*,* the final installment of the series wrapping up the connection between Altair and Ezio, the company has shown some of the new multi-player characters, and demonstrated a continuation of the fair representation trend they set in *Brotherhood*.

Screen-shot from Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood focusing on
Claudia's initiation as an assassin. Characters from left to right:
Machiavelli, Claudia, and Ezio.

The examples do not stop there. Even games known for their "hyper masculine" characters such as *Gears of War* recently introduced a powerful female main character in light of female's demand for representation of women outside of "baby-birthing" side characters). The list goes on, but the ultimate point is that video game companies will rise to the demand of players—both female and male—if the demand means more sales. In this sense, video game companies are really no different than any other entertainment franchise such as literature and cinema, and as long as women keep demanding more out of their video games—whether they be casual, hardcore, or something in between— progress will continue. On the flip-side, "pink gaming" will continue to exist as long as there is also a demand for it, but one must wonder if the option to purchase such games is really such a detriment. When it comes down to it, there will always be consumers that want to play princess games and cooking games, and to deny them that is no more fair than denying hardcore gamers their ability to play as a hardened, powerful female soldier. If anyone is to blame for the state of video game's appeal to the female market (for better or for worse)--it is the consumers who determine the marketability (or lack there of) of certain tropes, assumptions, stereotypes, and representations with their choice to consume (or not consume) certain games that suit their interests. How successfully (or unsuccessfully) a game appeals to both males and females should be reflected in the game's sales, and if one wants to make an impact on the adoption (or abandonment) of a certain trope or trend in one game in future games, the best way to foster that is to buy the game and support it through forums and message boards.

IV. "Shut Up About Lara Croft:" Representation of the Female Character

In addition to supposedly having a misogynistic player base, video games often find themselves demonized by non-gamers for misogynistic fictional characterizations. Many women complain that female characters are forced into an off-branch of the virgin/whore dichotomy—except in this case, it seems more like the princess/killer dichotomy. The former category usually constitutes either cute or sexy female characters, helpless without the aid of a male counterpart. When not crying out for help, they function simply as eye-candy or shoulder-decorations for the male characters in the game's story. Examples of this sort of character include Princess Peach from the *Mario* series or any number of popularly dubbed "fanservice characters" such as Ivy from the *Soul Caliber* series and Chun Li from *Street Fighter.* Fantone calls the latter breed of characters "a hybrid between the action hero and the Barbie doll" (Fantone). They represent "a perfect, post-human 'Female Man' beauty' that mixes "the classic gender stereotypes of femininity... with the novelty of computer interaction and adventure" (Fantone). Though visually appealing, oftentimes these females are robbed of what makes them seem "human." They become sexless, emotionless, story-less super-humans. Over half the texts cited in this thesis make at least a passing mention of Lara Croft, who stands as the most definitive example of the "killer" archetype. Though she has a back-story, the actual details of her history seem largely unimportant to the actual content of the gameplay, and her career as an archeologist seems more a joke than something the player is expected to take seriously. Instead, her supposed job serves as more of a impetus to throw her into the winding corridors and caves that comprise the game's adventure under the reasoning that she must explore these environments for her research. In other words, her career is about as believable as Indiana Jones', and the purpose of casting her in that role seems to be about the same, too—for the sake of instigating an interesting and adventurous story.

*From right to left: Princess Peach (Mario series), Ivy (*Soul Caliber *series), Chun Li (*Street Fighter *series), and Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider *series)*

However, the main difference between Jones and Croft is that Jones' outfit and overall design seems to make sense in relation to what he does, while Croft's design seems more explicitly tailored to the male gaze. Even Lisa Edmonds remarks that "it seems an odd choice to wear revealing shorts in the midst of blizzardous weather" (Edmonds). Croft's choice of attire is not the only anomaly, though—in fact, her body tends to receive far more criticism from non-gamers and feminists alike than her uncannily revealing clothes. Even during the nineties, an era when gaming technology limited graphics, designers included cumbersomely large breasts on *Tomb Raider'*s supposedly athletic body. The story behind this choice may seem surprising considering how mainstream highly sexualized, large-breasted characters became in coming years. And IGN article on the history of *Tomb Raider* reveals that "a slip of [the designer's] mouse turned an intended 50% increase to [Lara Croft's] breast size into a 150% gain" (McLaughlin). Originally an honest mistake, "[the accident] met with instant approval from the team," and thus a strong trend in female video game character design was born (McLaughlin). Croft's breasts are not the only element of her body up for criticism, though. Her figure also raises some questions, as Edmonds describes her thin waist and unnaturally long legs as "a body that makes Barbie look plain" (Edmonds).

Considering the character's appearance, it seems nearly impossible to argue contrarily to the claim that characters such as this cater almost exclusively to the male

gaze. Thus, the argument must be viewed from a different angle—not one that tries to disprove obvious plays to the male gaze, but rather one that unearths and reveals a good number of counter-examples that balance out characters such as Lara Croft, Ivy, and Chun Li. As discussed in the previous chapter, video game companies function like any other entertainment industry, and create characters like this not because they wish to perpetuate misogyny or sexism, but rather because no one can deny that it makes profits. The supplier does not perpetuate misogyny; the demander does, and as long as the demand remains, the supply is economically obliged to remain as long as profits are the primary interest. Instead of ignoring and refusing the market that demanded overly sexualized female characters, many game companies recognized the alternative yet not mutually-exclusive demand for characters that female players as well as male players, sick of having their sex drive appealed to could relate to, and thus began catering to an entirely new market of previously unnoticed gamers. Like any market, the gaming market evolved, and demands for deep, believable, relate-able characters became higher and higher as gamers realized they enjoyed the long and convoluted plots of games like *Final Fantasy*. Eventually, the demand for over-sexed characters and more realistic and average-seeming characters reached an equilibrium, no longer fighting for consumers but rather finding they could easily coexist within the same economic frame. Some game companies even tried to overlap over-sexed female "fanservice" character with deep, relateable female with varying degrees of success.

In the end, female gamers unfortunately cannot expect to see the market completely devoid of misogynistic representations of women as long as there are sex-hungry male consumers willing to buy them; however, that is as far as this myth's factuality extends. In this sense, this section's brevity can somewhat be attributed to its similarity to the previous section, and the solution to completely dissipation this myth lies in the consumer, not the companies. Female gamers, both veterans and new-comers, should feel some comfort in the fact that a new breed of characters tailored to their desire to see women portrayed realistically and equally to men have been born, and as long as gamers continue consuming games populated by this sort of character, similar games will continue to be released. Still, instead of focusing on offensive, somewhat outdated examples such as Lara Croft, a celebration of new, enlightened attempts to portray

female characters realistically and believably is more likely to make new female gamers feel welcome and attracted to continuing their gaming hobby. Focusing on the negative only serves to drive curious female gamers away and confirm preconceived myths that hurt gaming's appeal, which is not the purpose of this essay. Rather, the overarching goal here is to question why many women refuse to play games, and show how those myths are not entirely true. Simply put, as long as a number of games exist that demonstrate not every female character is a large-breasted, sexualized arm-accessory to a macho male counterpart, it is not fair to claim that "all female game characters represent an unattainable, misogynistic ideal of femininity that real women gamers cannot relate to."

V. My Art Project: A Celebration of the Most Empowered Female Characters

Evidence speaks louder than theory, though; the chapter dealing with "pink gaming" already began to unravel the variety of female characters that no longer perpetuate the archetype many women are so offended by. Finally, here is where the content of my art project and my thesis paper overlap. Since I believe that the myth that there are no relateable, believable, and non-sexualized female characters in video games is the most off-putting of the three, I felt debunking it in text alone was not enough. My art project solidifies the aforementioned "celebration" of relateable female characters and attempts to glorify a select few female characters that I feel epitomize the ideal future of female characters in gaming.

I achieve this by ornately illustrating the characters I feel are most empowered in a manner that harkens back to 16th and 17th century portrait painting. My intentions parallel those of portrait painters in the 1500s and 1600s in the sense that I use technical aptitude and a composition that centers and focuses on the face to create a sense of ethreality and importance. Historically, portraits were commissioned by royal families to create a piece that artistically froze their social status and preserved it in a timeless, almost other-worldly style. I attempt to make this style by executing it digitally in Photoshop. I draw inspiration from the concept artists who help design the very games that feature the female characters I am celebrating. These artists serve as more than just an inspiration for me, though; they are also role models to me as my art matures. They provide me with a sense of what the entertainment industry demands out of their artists, and the competitively high standards I will be facing in the future. For this reason, I felt obliged to include some of their work in my thesis, not only to illustrate where my inspiration is coming from, but also to give a taste of what I intend my future work to look like.

Some of the artists I found most inspiring included Craig Mullins, who has done art for the both the *Halo* and *Assassin's Creed* series and Lisa Keene, who did a lot of the concept art for Disney's 3DCG film *Tangled,* live-action/animated film *Enchanted.,* and full 2D animated film *The Princess and the Frog*. Craig Mullins' work is almost hyper-realistic in its rendering, taking completely fictionalized subjects and bringing them to

photo-realistic believability. His sheer technique is breath-takingly skillful, seducing the viewer into believing that the content is real and bringing life to a world that otherwise cannot exist outside of the technological restraints of the video game world. As gamers desire more and more of a sense of immersion from their games, concept artists such as Craig Mullins become more and more important in their ability to convince the viewer— if not only for a second—that their worlds of futuristic or romanticized political brotherhoods of assassins are real things.

Art by Craig Mullins. Left: Master Chief from Halo *series. Right:*
Ezio Auditore from Assassin's Creed: Revelations

Lisa Keene's work is less realistic, but I find the warmth and emotion that fills her illustrations to be equally as entrancing. When creating art, many people get tied up with the contour or the colours of their subject, but I believe lighting also has a lot to do with determining the piece's mood. Keene's adept handling of lighting almost seems to flood her work with a saccharine emotion not quite achieved in a photo-realistic style like Mullins'. She uses what almost looks to be excessive amounts of coloured light to sweeten the mood of her works, or create other emotions when she deems necessary—a technique I too would love to master in time. I hope that in my portraits, I also can use lighting to convey another layer of characterization in my portraits.
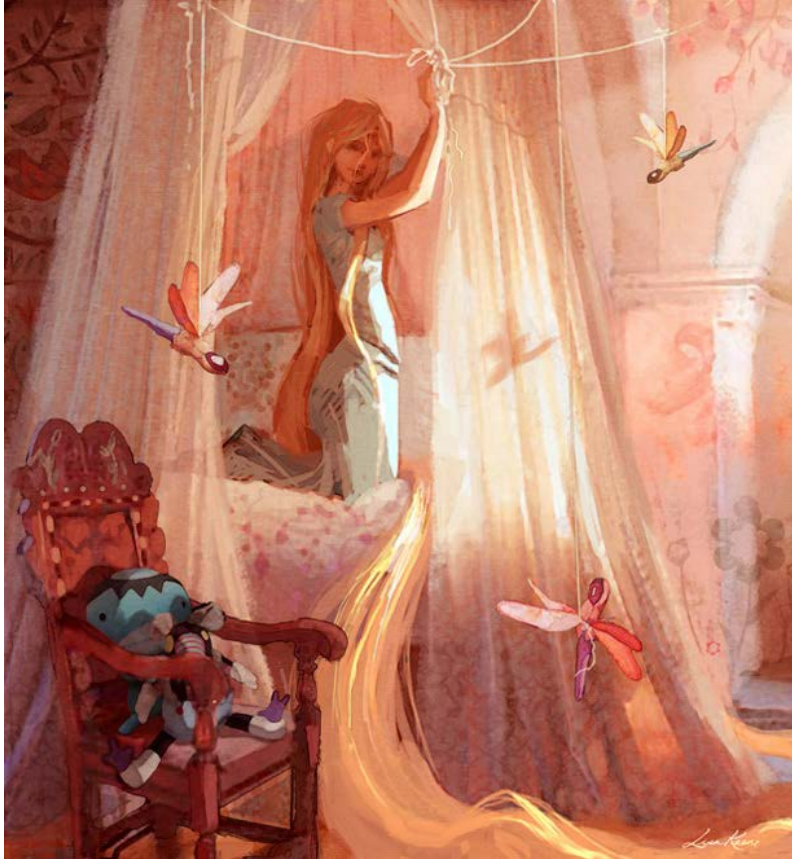
Art by Lisa Keene. Top: concept art from Enchanted.. *Bottom:
concept art from* Tangled.

Mostly, however, I find myself more inspired by specific series moreso than specific artists. The entertainment design world is much different than the world of fine art in the sense that many artists' work get lumped in with the company they happen to be working with, or else with the title or series they happen to be working on. For this reason, I am more aware of titles and companies than I am specific people's names. Nevertheless, the series the titles I derive the most inspiration are *Halo, Assassin's Creed,* and *TRON*. I respect the amount of research put into the first two series as well as the amount of effort and technique devoted to the execution of its art. These series do not only strive to appear visually believable, but also logically and mechanically believable. In the world of entertainment design, an artist is expected to know nearly everything about anything when asked to create a creature, vehicle or prop from scratch. Simply looking aesthetically pleasing is not enough; artists must understand the mechanics of their creation down to a creature's anatomy or a prop's inner cogs and pistons. The profession is as much a science as it is an art, and as I begin to grasp this in my own studies, I find myself admiring works like *Halo* even more as I try to imagine creating a whole science-fiction universe and its workings on my own. The *Assassin's Creed* series uses research in order to inform a completely different product. As a work of historical fiction, the creative team behind *Assassin's Creed* must make sure that characters in their narrative are historically accurate to their real-life counterparts. Though the main story of the series is entirely made-up, they involve many well-known historical figures in the plot such as Leonardo DaVinci and Cesare and Lucrezia Borgia.

Research is required not only to make characters like Cesare, DaVinci, and Lucrezia accurate, but also to make sure environments, weapons, vehicles, etc. do not conflict with the time period the games are set in. Again, the artists are expected to be as much historical scholars as they are artists. Finally, my appreciation for *TRON* lies more in my respect for its consistent, overarching aesthetics. Though less emphasis is put on the believability of the world, designers strive to keep a particular kind of aesthetic consistent throughout the whole series. Even the first iteration kept a fairly consistent style despite massive technological limitations, and with the release of the recent *TRON: Legacy*, artists took the idea of a digital world with a very particular aesthetic and blew it

out into something stunning, vast, and immersive. Another key element of entertainment design is consistency, which is something I feel the *TRON* universe exemplifies and epitomizes. Everything that emerges from that world is clearly discernible as part of that world, which is what makes the series such a success, and thus, such an inspiration to me. I hope that someday my work will be able to embody the principles I feel these three series demonstrate, and within the scope of my project, I hope that their technical strong points inform my own execution of my work.

Concept art for TRON: Legacy *by Steve Jung. Bottom is an environment design, while top three are costume studies—all exemplifying a consistent aesthetic.*

The female characters I chose to portray are as deliberately chosen as the style I illustrate them in and the artists and series I choose to be inspired by. Prior to the walk-through, I completed my first portrait of Dr. Catherine Halsey from the *Halo* series. At

first glance, Halsey is fairly unassuming, avoiding the title of "sexualized arm-accessory" from the get-go. Her appearance is believable—she is not overly attractive, her clothes primarily consist of large jackets and coats due to the cold weather, and unlike many characters, she visually ages in a logical way instead of staying eternally young and sexy. Briefly addressed earlier in this paper, Halsey is an integral character in the lore of *Halo*, reversing the tides of battle when things were just beginning to look bleak for the human race in a war against an alien alliance called the Covenant. Her title as "Doctor" Catherine Halsey alone warrants some merit, demonstrating that Bungie (the company in charge of *Halo* up until *Halo 4*, which will be released in 2012) had no problem with casting a woman in a position of intellect and power. However, Halsey is hardly one-dimensional, unemotional or inhuman in her power as many females tend to become when given power or strength by their designers. Partly what makes her read as so believable and real is her moral conflict regarding her research. In order to save humanity from the Covenant threat, she faces an important crossroads in her scientific career— either kidnap, biomechanically alter, and potentially destroy the lives of a select group of children to become the future super-human force known in the series as "Spartans," or watch her entire species die. Though the former choice logically makes the most sense, the novel *The Fall of Reach* released at the same time as the first *Halo* game, *Halo: Combat Evolved* and a journal released with special copies of *Halo: Reach* document her moral conflicts with the process she is forced to put the future Spartans through. Some of the children never make it through the augmentation, while other soldiers go on to die in training or combat.

Left: "self-portrait" of Halsey at age 18 scanned from journal included in special editions of Halo: Reach. *The notes supposedly written by Halsey sardonically read, "Yes, that's a parka. It's damned cold in here. Need a haircut." Right: Halsey around age 60 (*Halo: Reach*). In both images, she is wearing her signature parka.*

This was not Halsey's only notable contribution to the story, though; *Halo: Reach* focuses largely on Halsey's creation of the advanced AI, Cortana, and the AI's delivery off the planet Reach before it is destroyed by Covenant forces. Though Halsey dies in the destruction of the planet, her legacy lives on throughout the next three games through Cortana, who almost ceremoniously takes the visual form of Halsey. In fact, Cortana herself was a strong candidate for a portrait prior to my decisions as to who I planned to illustrate, but the more I thought about it, the more I feel Cortana and Halsey are one in the same spiritually. Thought Cortana is technically not Halsey, her appearance, her voice, and her commanding yet considerate and calculated attitude very much reminds me of Halsey herself. As an advanced AI, she is capable of thinking and making decisions on her own, and her deliberation, intelligence, and sometimes playful sense of humour when speaking with Master Chief, who she travels with in the *Halo* trilogy makes her almost human. Even more interestingly, both characters are essentially "un-sexed"—Cortana being an AI and Master Chief having his sex drive more or less removed in the Spartan augmentation. This androgynous relationship really allows

Cortana's character to shine, making her even more relateable and believable to a gamer. However, Halsey seemed a more appropriate character for this exact reason—even though Cortana takes the form of a female and speaks in an empowered female voice, she is technically a human female. Halsey, on the other hand, shares the empowered traits of Cortana while still being a human female character.
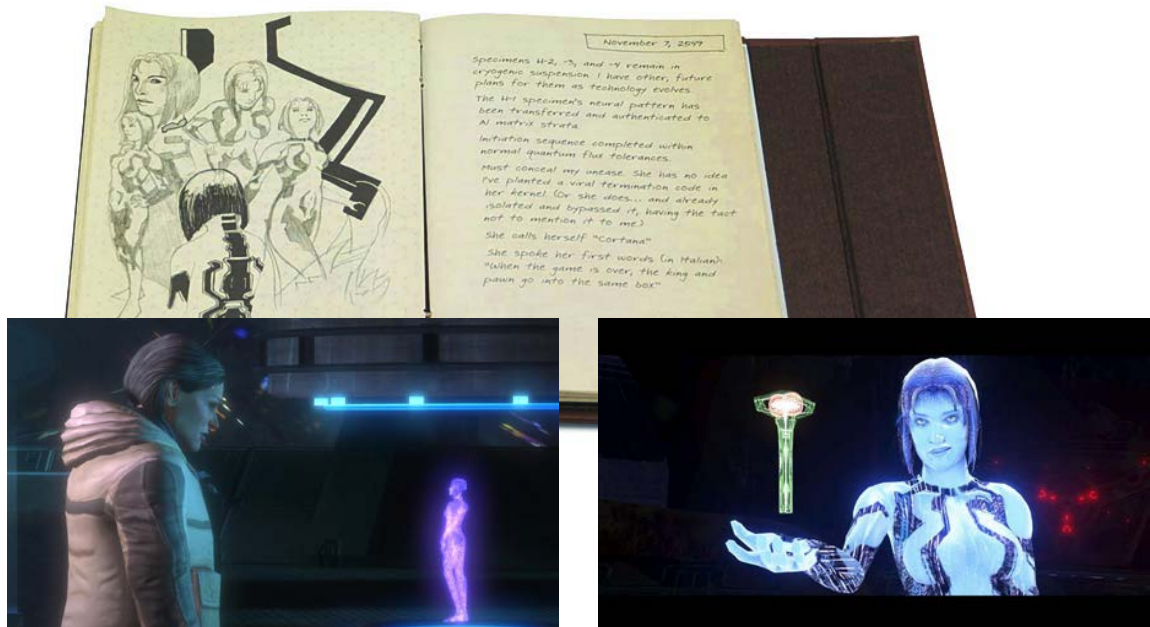
Top: another couple of pages from Halsey's journal, included in special copies of Halo: Reach. *Images include sketches of Cortana. In the last paragraph of the text on the page opposite, Halsey muses to herself, "She spoke her first words (in Italian), 'When the game is over, the king and pawn go in the same box.'" Bottom-left: Halsey takes one last look at her creation, Cortana, before sending her with a group of Spartans to escape the planet Reach (*Halo: Reach*). Bottom-right: Cortana shows Master chief an important key (*Halo 3*)*

Thus, one can see how Halsey is a hugely empowered female, not only in role, but in her characterization also. She is believable, both visually and emotionally, and a role model for female players to relate to both in her morals and also her strengths. Of the two women I intend to do portraits of—and the many more I could illustrate had I the time—Halsey was the dearest and most important character to me. I wanted to illustrate her first not only for this reason, but also because she was the largest inspiration for this project in its entirety. Over the summer, when I was trying to come up with ideas as to what to do, I had played a lot of *Halo: Reach,* and after re-experiencing the story a couple of times, Halsey's role and character inspired me to under-take this project. I hope

that her portrait conveys the same sense of strength and empowerment to the both gamers and non-gamers alike as she does as a character to me. The pose she is in is supposed to convey these sorts of feelings and at the very least kindle a feeling of respect for the portrait's subject, even if the viewer does not know who she is. The more one knows about the series, the more layers of meaning can be unlocked, but at face value, I want to instill a sense of power, confidence, and empowerment.

The next portrait I intend to do is one of Ezio's sister, Claudia Auditore, from *Assassin's Creed*—also mentioned earlier in this paper. When taken out of the context of her game's time period and story, her role might seem actually very unempowered , but when analyzed from the perspective of the society she resides in canonically— Renaissance Italy—her role takes on all-new implications. In *Assassin's Creed II*, she is introduced as protagonist Ezio Auditore's rather meek and weak-spirited little sister. She is introduced to the player in a scene where she is fuming about her current boyfriend's unfaithfulness, and instead of facing him herself, asks Ezio to beat him up for her. She spends a lot of time waiting for Ezio with their mother to help them and save them, making her almost a sort of "princess" archetype, and it is not until the next game, *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* that the player really sees an empowering transformation in her character. Nonetheless, these unempowered traits only serve to strengthen her later power as a character and make her more relateable and believable.

Ezio and Claudia's power relationship in Assassin's Creed II *is exemplified in this still from an early game cinematic. After the death of their father, Claudia is emotionally devastated, unable to do much of anything and depending on Ezio to protect her and their mother.*

In *Brotherhood*, she begins to support her brother as equally as he supports her, and their relationship becomes more symbiotic than one-way dependent. As the anti-Borgia, truth- and peace-seeking organization of the Assassins grows and Ezio eventually becomes the master of their guild, Claudia also begins to build up her own source of power over the city of Rome. At the time these games take place, women are not provided with very many rights or abilities outside of marriage, but Claudia finds a loophole in this oppressive societal construct and creates a niche mode of power for herself by running a brothel the Rosa en Fiore. Through this enterprise, she controls large parts of the city and bends the wills of antagonists and other oppositional forces through the charm and seduction of her company. Many times, Ezio relies on her business to accomplish tasks and missions, demonstrating a reversal in the aforementioned "princess" archetype. Claudia no longer is in constant need of saving, but oftentimes comes to her brother's help when he needs it, as well as directing and managing her own life and business. In one scene, she shows her self-sustainability when Borgia soldiers infiltrate her Brothel and attempt to sabotage her company. When the player enters the scene as an exasperated Ezio, the guards lay dead on the floor, Claudia above them with dagger in hand. She looks up at him with a skeptical "What?" and Ezio sardonically comments, "My own sister knows how to wield a knife..." Claudia smiles, spinning the knife in her hand and claiming, "I am ready to do it again," foreshadowing her later ascension into the Assassin's Brotherhood. Ezio smiles proudly, and responds, "Spoken like a true Auditore," referencing their family's Assassin heritage (*Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood*). Her resourcefulness and power only increased my respect for her while playing the *Assassin's Creed* series.

*Claudia stands around a ring of fallen guards, dagger in hand—her brother astounded before her (*Assassins' Creed: Brotherhood*)*

Her initiation into the Brotherhood marks another important benchmark in her transformation from mild "princess"-esque archetype to empowered female character. Historically, Assassins were obligated to cut off their ring finger in order to operate their hidden blades, but much time has passed since those archaic days, and now Assassin's merely have to ceremoniously burn their ring finger as part of the initiation into the guild. During the initiation ceremony, Claudia participates in this tradition, with her brother (now the head of the Assassins) and Machiavelli leading the ceremony. They repeat the mantra of the creed: "Nothing is true; everything is permitted," and Claudia is led to the roof to take her first leap of faith into a hay bale below (a technique Assassins use profusely throughout the game). I believe this initiation to be the climax of Claudia empowerment, for at this point in the story she has broken all pre-conceived notions of what femininity constituted in Renaissance Italy and transcended the societal barriers of her sex. Considering her meekness when she is first introduced to the player, this transformation is both astounding and satisfying to see.

*Claudia being initiated into the Brotherhood or Assassins (*Assassin's
Creed: Brotherhood*)*

      Though Renaissance Italy was never known for its particularly risque dress (at
least in comparison to the outfits of characters like Ivy and Lara Croft), Claudia's outfits
in particular never make very strong or deliberate grabs at the male gaze. While she is
undeniably pretty, she refrains from partaking in the same garb as her courtesan
employees, and for the most part appears to abstain from letting the opposite sex get the
best of her. She holds her own around men, and rarely seems afraid to offer her input into
a male-dominated conversation or environment. She does not deny her sex as much as
she embraces it, uses it to her advantage, and yet never lets it hold her back in any way.
When choosing which outfit to draw her in, I quickly decided to feature her in the clothes
she wears during her initiation. This outfit is very conservative, and yet not ugly by any
means. The red brings into question the confusion of passion with violence, which speaks
of the Rosa en Fiore and her role in the game's story, since both concepts are deeply
intertwined with her business. Also, this is the outfit marks the moment she sheds her
usual feminine dresses and takes in a symbol of masculine power—pants. Up until this
point, Claudia always wore dresses, but during her initiation, she is clothed in an ornate
tunic, pants, and heavy boots as well as the signature hidden blades of an Assassin. For
these reasons, I believe this outfit symbolizes her empowerment at its peak.

      Thought Claudia's portrait is currently only in thumbnail form, I intend to begin
working on it if I am accepted into the senior spring show. In addition to her portrait, I

have many other thumbnails of other characters I feel deserve the title of "empowered female video game character." These characters include Chell (*Portal* series), Samus Aran (*Metroid* series), and Jade *(Beyond Good & Evil)*. These three characters represent a slightly different kind of video game empowerment I may explore some time in the future, for instead of being side characters, they themselves are the protagonists of the games they star in. For this reason, they play a slightly different thought no less empowered role than the aforementioned female characters. In video games, protagonists are often quieter and less developed than side characters, for the player is expected to project himself/herself into the character. If the character becomes too developed or too specific, gamers may have a hard time relating to them, which is why characters such as Master Chief seem so one-dimensional and under-developed at times. This trope is common between both female and male protagonists.

What makes Samus, Chell, and Jade empowered, though, is what I call their "unabashed femininity." Not unlike Claudia or Halsey, their sex never impedes their goals, and they view themselves as no more or no less due to their sex. Again, this is not to say they or the game completely ignores their sex, it is simply not seen as a flaw or problem. These characters are strong and respectable while still being believable and relateable. They have goals of their own and set out to achieve them like any other real person would, regardless of the fantastical nature of their environment or story.
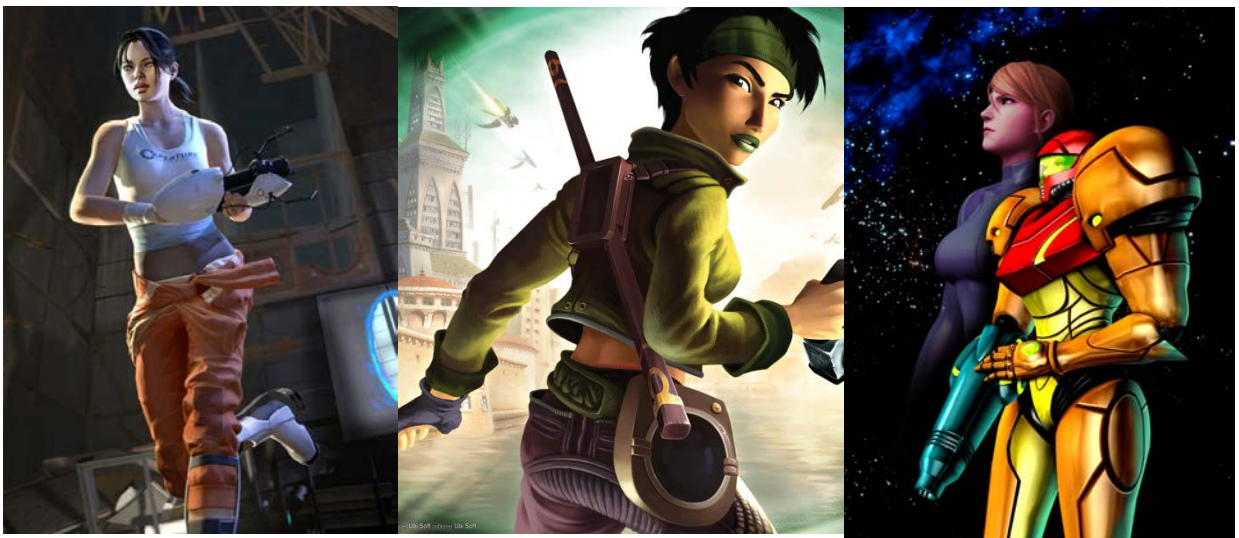
*From left to right: Chell (*Portal *series), Jade (*Beyond Good & Evil*),*
*and Samus Aran (*Metroid *series)*

The list of empowered females does not end here, however. These five women are what I feel to be the "cream of the crop" as far as empowered female characters go, but there are even more where that came from. Obviously, I myself have not played every game out there, but even I have experiences a plethora of other empowered female characters that made me feel welcome and accepted in the realm of video games. As mentioned in the prior chapter, examples of misogynistic portrayals of females still exist—both intentionally and in (failed) attempts to create empowered characters—but at the same time there are many counter-examples to these unfortunate instances that can make a potential female gamer feel inclined to further delve into the world of games if their presence is known and acknowledged. For this reason, I celebrate and glorify who I feel to be the pinnacle of empowered female characters in video games, hoping to spark maybe one or two curious gamer's interest in their sex's role in video games outside of the over-discussed Lara Croft example.

VI. The Game is Not Over Yet: The Future of Female Gamers

Insofar, three big myths that largely discourage women from playing video games have been debunked to the point of at least proving that these preconceptions are not entirely the fault of the games or the companies creating the games. Even considering the flaws of the gaming community, the advertising of games, and the content of the games itself, video games still have a lot to offer to both female and male players alike. If anything, the discussion and analysis of these myths has brought to light the unfairness of much of the denouncement video games receive. Many negative comments regarding their misogynistic nature or effects on people are based on lack of evidence or experience, and if one can just break through these misconceptions, a whole world of imagination, adventure, role-play, community, and competition will be opened.

As a child, I played many games, and as I went through junior high and high school, I was persuaded by these notions of video games "not being for girls." I thought I saw misogyny, bias, and oppression, but really what I was seeing was excuses to follow the example of those around me. Video games were not "cool," and though I knew deep down that I enjoyed them, I was afraid to admit to being a "girl gamer." More female friends and mentors discouraged me from playing games than males did. These myths of games being intended for "sweaty nerds" and "unintelligent basement-dwellers" were perpetuated by the community around me and kept me away from something I realized in college that I really loved. For this reason, I wished to defog the smoke and mirrors surrounding the truth of video games and perhaps inspire some one or two people to reach the same epiphany that I came to when I realized that video games could be as much " a girl thing" as they are "a guy thing"--if I just let them be that. The biggest barrier between that acceptance and me was not misogyny, not offensive character design, not male peers putting me down—but actually my very own misconceptions about games.

Still, despite all these perks about gaming, women still have a long way to go before they attain full empowerment. Already I have mentioned the continuing existence of "fanservice" games wherein women are dressed in outfits clearly tailored to appeal to the male gaze. I do not know if these games will ever disappear completely, for as long

as the content of gaming is primarily directed by profit and people are willing to buy games with this sort of theme, companies will continue to produce this offensive material. Also mentioned in this paper, the problem of "trash-talking" will also continue to pervade online gaming as long as there exists no better way of monitoring and policing it. In these respects, gaming can still do to improve in great strides.

Additionally, the issue of race has gone unaddressed by this paper, not out of neglect, but simply out of lack of material. All of the empowered women illustrated in my portraits are either white or ethnically ambiguous; however, no overtly non-white characters are talked about here. While some companies have made an effort to include non-white characters in their games, including non-white females has proven particularly problematic for some reason. One article observes, "in video games, black women are victims, [and] Latinas don't exist" (*Off Our Backs*). At first, this statement might seem odd, but a seasoned gamer will realize after a few seconds that it is almost completely true. A few games have included black female characters, but companies either skirt around the character's ethnicity by "whitening" them to the point of looking ethnically ambiguous (lightening their skin pallor, making their features more European, straightening and thinning their hair, etc.) or the characters meet a lot of fan criticism. One example of the former is Sheva Alomar from *Resident Evil 5*, who's skin is so light and hair is so straight that it seems like the designers were almost afraid to make her "too black." In addition to this, her face has been given what I call the "*Final Fantasy* treatment*" (a facial stylization prevalent in nearly every Square Enix *Final Fantasy* game that has become popular amongst other Japanese companies) which flattens out her face to look more like an *anime* character's, lengthens her nose, tightens and shrinks her mouth and lips, and simplifies her face overall. In the end, Sheva's character appears to be more of a dark-skinned European than a black female character. An example of the latter case is Rochelle from *Left 4 Dead 2*, a zombie survival game. The character herself is in no way visually offensive or a charactertures of blackness—she simply appears to be another survivor of a terrifying zombie epidemic that happens to be black. She also is not the only black character in the game; players have the option to play as either her, two white men, or a large, muscularly built black man named Coach. Nonetheless, many players, given the option, refuse to play as Rochelle (leaving her to be controlled by the

computer), but happily opt to play as Coach. Also, the fan community largely ignores or jokes about Rochelle, revealing an unfortunate, previously hidden strain of deep racism that has yet to be directly identified or addressed in the gaming community. Other than these sorts of instances, "the few black women who appear in games [are] overwhelmingly portrayed as victims of violence" the article goes on to say (*Off Our Backs*). In 2002, 86% of black female video game characters "are violently harmed in the games," again demonstrating this oddly unaddressed thread of specifically female-targeted racism pervading throughout the video game world (*Off Our Backs*). "No Latina characters appear in the most popular video games" at all; of anything, the most prevalent non-white discernible race in video games are variations of Asian, but even then, companies usually opt to describe their Asian-looking characters as "ethnically ambiguous" then officially declare the character anything but white (*Off Our Backs*). The solution to this underlying racism is hard to pinpoint, because these problems seemed to be more interlinked with other systems of oppression a la bell hooks than one might realize at first blush. Similar problems exist in Hollywood, and attempts to remedy them have met similar opposition to what is experienced in the video game realm. While it is good that some companies attempt to experiment with the inclusion of non-white characters in their games, some attempts are legitimately offensive, while others lead to unforeseen yet prejudiced reactions.

*Left: concept art of Rochelle (*Left 4 Dead 2*). Right: Sheva Alomar (*Resident Evil 5*).*

Another problem insofar unaddressed by this thesis is the difference between female representation across borders. Most of the women discussed in this paper herald from games created in America and Europe, and much of the progress made towards female empowerment in video games occurs in Western-based games. While there are some exceptions such as Samus Aran from the *Metroid* series, most Eastern-based games (primarily from Japan, since other Eastern countries do not specialize much in mainstream game production) feature conversely unempowered women. As decades pass, the gap between Western female video game characters and Eastern video game characters continue to widen.

Not much research has been done on this ever-expanding gap, mostly because it has only begun to become apparent in the last five or ten years. For this reason, not much space in this paper could be devoted to the issue simply because not much evidence or support exists for any particular justification of the problem. Some might argue that the unempowered, somewhat chauvinistic portrayal of women in Eastern games like the *Tales* series, *Final Fantasy*, and even newer games like *Catherine* (released for the Xbox 360 in mid-2011) can be attributed to historical and cultural oppression of women in Japan. Women's suffrage is a fairly modern concept even in Western society, but in countries like Japan, women saw even less rights 20 or 30 years ago than an American woman did. Looking back centuries, women were arguably even more oppressed in Japan than in America, rarely even being let outside their rooms, much less their houses.

Polygamy and adultery was culturally acceptable, even openly talked about in feudal times, and rape was barely a recognized concept. Rather, many women were expected to go along with sexual harassment and rape instead of fighting. Prostitution was a government-sponsored industry, and women were not even permitted to learn kanji, the "language of men." I suspect these culturally historical origins may have something to do with the acceptability of sexual harassment (constant panty shots, non-consensual advances, unwanted touching, etc.) as well as the denouncement of female power (female characters relegated to the sidelines, female characters unable to access their power without a male counterpart, overly apologetic or submissive female characters, the berating of aggressive/bold/strong female characters, etc.) in Eastern games, but I personally have another theory regarding the subject.

The video game industry, as well as many other industries in Japan, fall under a drastically different power dynamic than they do in Western countries. Japan is very much a "role-based society," in the sense that citizens are expected to accept a role based on their age, sex, career, choices, and other factors and stick to it. For example, business men, or *sarariiman* in Japanese, have a very strict yet unspoken social code they are expected to adhere to. If their boss asks them to go drinking after work, they feel obliged not to decline, even if they have other plans. Many businessmen perform cathartic rituals together after work such as yelling, standing in a circle or singing, and thought the act might seem bizarre to outsiders, to those in the know, not participating in the act is really the odd choice of action. Also, if one's boss holds a pizza party or some other snack, attendance is mandatory, no matter how optional it may sound or seem. Halfway through the day, business men tell each other, *"otsukaresama/gokurosama,"* a phrase that literally means something along the lines of "you look like a tired worker," but really no longer mean anything beyond something to say in passing to one's co-workers. Businessmen are not the only individuals subject to blurting out phrases that have lost their meanings over time; shop-keepers will yell, *"irasshaimase!"* to incoming buyers—a phrase that literally means something along the lines of "please come in my store and shop!" but nowadays has lost any real specific meaning at all. Sometimes, students and youth will step outside of socially acceptable barriers, participating in practices that seem culturally odd in Japan though perfectly acceptable in Western countries—thing such as putting on make up or

eating in trains, sitting on the floor, wearing loose, baggy socks, and dying one's hair. Older citizens often scoff at young adults doing these sorts of rebellious acts, remarking that in time they will find their role too and stop acting strangely. Simply put, Japan is a country of traditions and adherence to roles, and stepping out of those roles is reason for criticism and teasing.

For this reason, the power dynamics between consumer and producer are very different in comparison to how they exist in Western markets. Consumers are expected to consume, while producers are expected to produce. Other than the exchange of money in payment for a good, not much interaction goes on between the producer and the consumer, which is a huge difference from how the game market works in Western countries. Many large Western game companies such as Bungie, Valve, and Ubisoft have forums or other modes in which consumers can communicate what they like and dislike about the game, and companies usually make an effort to address the concerns of their fanbase. Such practices are less prevalent in Eastern countries like Japan, often resulting in production of games with the same flaws or similar plots r characters to pre-existing games. Nevertheless, consumers still feel obliged to buy the games simply because that is what they have always done, and as long as cranking out the same problems and the same ideas is still profitable, the cycle continues until the money stops exchanging hands.

When consumers and buyers start crossing borders, though, cultural differences become more apparent and problematic. Western gamers are beginning to realize that Eastern game companies ignore much of their fan input, and refuse to make changes that Western companies would be more inclined to implement. One of these unaddressed problems happens to be the role of women in games, and as the gap between female representation in Eastern games and Western games continues to grow and go unaddressed, Western consumers—particularly consumers put off by the underlying chauvinistic themes of many Japanese games—will buy Eastern games less and less. While money does some talking on behalf of the consumers wants and needs, not consuming Eastern games has had different effects than one might expect. Instead of Eastern game companies changing their ways, many companies simply refuse to translate and localize their games for fear that they cannot profit in Western markets. Whether or not this technically qualifies a solution to the problem of biased female representation in

Japanese and other Eastern games is hard to say, and like the problem of ethnic representation in video games, there really is not catch-all solution to this issue.

Video games have made great strides in the past decades towards fair and equal representation of women. Compared to how long it took women to gain rights to vote, obtain birth control, get jobs, and other rights some women may now take for granted, women in games have gone from being just sex symbols and damsels in distress to strong, empowered, independent individuals in a fraction of the time it took women to gain those same abilities in reality. Just in my lifetime, I have seen huge strides in female representation in the gaming community as well as pleasantly large influxes of women into the gaming community, and I can only hope that all these trends continue and eventually gaming reaches a point where there is no more bias, oppression, mis-representation, or hostility. However, some issues remained ties down to larger societal constructs, and as long as those problems still exist on a larger scale, they probably will not see a solution in the smaller realm of video games. Nevertheless, I find it hard to believe that trends towards full female empowerment in video games are even capable of regressing at this point. So much progress has been made that it seems like the ball has already started rolling—it is simply a matter of providing a clear and even path for it, now.

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