

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF FEMALE GAMERS

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### Abstract

Video games are growing in popularity, with nearly half of all game consumers being women. While there is a change in consumer demographics, the majority of video game content continues to portray females as sexually objectified, victimized, and relegated to roles as tools for use by main characters. This study qualitatively explored and sought to understand the direct experience of females who actively play video games. The lived experience of female gamers was investigated with respect to their participation in the videogame subculture, video game play, and interaction with various portrayals of female video game characters. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, field notes, and document analysis. All data was then coded for emergent and specific themes using open and axial coding and the constant comparative method. Once coding was complete, the data was triangulated to find themes within and between the sources. Findings revealed that representations of female video game characters affect female gamers' self-efficacy, perception of their roles and other gamers' expectations of women and their roles, and their social interactions with other gamers.

*Keywords:* female gamer; female objectification; videogame subculture; video game; gender roles

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## Chapter 1

Video games are growing rapidly in popularity and scope within a billion-dollar video game industry (Burrows, 2013; Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2015). Once available only in arcades or on devices designed with the capability, video games can now be played through mediums such as social media sites, online gaming sites, hand-held devices, and smart phones (ESA, 2015; The Strong National Museum of Play [The Strong], 2015). The first commercially available arcade game appeared in 1971, catering primarily to young male consumers (Sarkeesian, 2014; Smith, 2014). The accompanying advertisements featured adult women in bikinis playing with adolescent boys and the opportunity to view female characters stripping within the game (Smith, 2014). Since the 1970's the popularity of the gaming medium has risen steadily, and marketing primarily to males has diminished as games designed to interest female players have been increasing, especially within the last decade (Harwell, 2014; Lenhart, 2008).

With a larger and broader dissemination of video game content, a wider variety of consumers now regularly engage in game play. For example, in the Entertainment Software Association's annual report on the computer and video game industry, the average age of game players (referred to as "gamers") is now reportedly 35 years, although 26% of gamers are under 18 years (ESA, 2015). Moreover, the percentage of female gamers has risen to 44% (ESA, 2015). According to Llamas (2014) of SuperData Research Inc., just over 50% of people in the United States who play personal computer ("PC") video games are women. Furthermore, 53.6% of gamers who play PC role-playing video games ("RPGs") are women, and women comprise almost 40% of gamers

who play Massive Multiplayer Online (“MMO”) and digital console games (Conditt, 2014; Llamas, 2014).

Due to the notable changes in gamer demographics, video games are reaching larger audiences of males and females from pre-adolescents to older adults (ESA, 2015; Llamas, 2014). Despite the growing number of female gamers, the content, messages, and marketing strategies of video games have received criticism for perpetuating the ideals of privileged males as well as generally catering to the preferences and fantasies of male audiences (Sarkeesian, 2014; Shaw, 2014). Moreover, while females comprise around half of gamers, many games are still highly criticized for their unrealistic and violent portrayals and treatment of women, perpetuating and trivializing objectification and violence against women (Sarkeesian, 2014). Objectification is the use or view of people as objects, or the focus on parts of the body instead of the person a whole, and occurs whenever bodies or body parts “are viewed as a commodity without regard to their sense of self” (Gay & Castano, 2010). Considering the large number of gamers, and the variety of readily available video games and gaming devices, it is important to consider the content of the majority of games, who they are intended to serve, and what they portray. Additionally, when attempting to understand the impact of video games on gamers’ attitudes about themselves and the female body, it is helpful to understand more about how these topics are connected to video games.

### **Background**

In this section, I will review the research literature on female video game usage, the impact of interactive games on body image and relationships with others, and the impact of immersive video games on gamers’ understanding of themselves, others, and

the real world. This information will provide context, history, and clarity for the study. Empirical studies will be used to demonstrate a lack of research into how female gamers perceive and are affected by the portrayal and treatment of female video game characters.

**Gender roles and female portrayals within video games.** In regard to gender roles in video games, the roles and treatment of female characters continues to receive criticism (Miller & Summers, 2007). There are significant differences between the representations of male and female characters, and researchers have found that male characters generally outnumber females in video games (Miller & Summers, 2007). Males also constitute the majority of playable characters, with females mostly depicted in auxiliary roles or used as tools to solve problems in the games (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007; Miller & Summers, 2007). Of the playable male and female characters, males are most often the heroes or protagonists of the story—with more weapons and abilities than the female characters—and are usually portrayed as the saviors or avengers of the females. In contrast, females are typically victims of torture, murder, or rape (Miller & Summers, 2007; Sarkeesian, 2014). For games including a playable female character, the video game box art and promotional materials rarely display this character option. In addition, male characters are depicted as strong and powerful, while female characters are often represented as helpless, innocent, or sexy. Moreover, female characters are generally scantily clothed and shown in revealing positions (Beck, Boys, Rose, & Beck, 2012; Dill & Thill, 2007; Miller & Summers, 2007; Sarkeesian, 2014).

In a 2007 study analyzing a broad range of video game themes, Dill and Thill (2007) found that 83% of male characters were portrayed as aggressive, in comparison with 62% of female characters. In addition, 60% of female characters were portrayed as

sexualized and 39% were scantily clad, as compared to 1% and 8% of male characters, respectively (Dill & Thill, 2007). Finally, 39% of female characters were portrayed as both sexual and aggressive while only 1% of male characters were depicted as such (Dill & Thill, 2007). The researchers also surveyed 49 college freshmen, 20 males and 29 females, and found that stereotypes of female characters as sexual objects were maintained by gamers and non-gamers alike (Dill & Thill, 2007). The survey respondents categorized male video game characters most frequently as “strong,” “muscular,” and “violent” (Dill & Thill, 2007, p. 860). On the other hand, female video game characters were most frequently described using the terms “skimpy clothes,” “naked,” and “big boobs” (Dill & Thill, 2007, p. 860).

Beyond video game content, examples of female portrayal on video game box art and advertisements include women depicted as murder victims in revealing clothing posed in sexually provocative ways (Hitman: Blood Money, 2006; L.A. Noire, 2011; Sarkeesian, 2014). In contrast, on box and advertisement art for the same games, male murder victims were instead fully dressed and often shown sitting or working (Sarkeesian, 2014). Female characters are often displayed on video game box art and promotional art in minimal clothing and provocative poses that simultaneously show their exposed breasts and buttocks. The same inconsistency can be found within video games that portray murdered or maimed characters as a demonstration of the grit and horror of the game environment. In the recent release of a new game in the popular game franchise, Dead Island, gamers who purchased Dead Island: Riptide Zombie Bait Collector’s Edition (2013) received a statue of a mutilated female torso with large breasts clad in a revealing bikini (Dead Island: Riptide, 2013). The decapitated torso was covered in

wounds and spatters of blood, with the arms chewed or sawed off, exposing bone and tissue (Goldfarb, 2013; O'Brien, 2013). The developers claimed they were proud of their unique take on a traditional Roman statue that would make a great conversation piece, and only issued an apology after outcry from some game critics and consumers (Goldfarb, 2013; O'Brien, 2013). However, the torso remained available for sale. While male characters play a role as murder victims, they appear less often, are fully clothed, and are not posed in sexually provocative ways, whereas female murder victims, often prostitutes or girlfriends, are shown in revealing clothing and sexual poses (Sarkeesian, 2014).

Role objectification, or the portrayal of men as leaders, protectors, and heroes and women as tools or sidekicks, is a prominent theme on video game box art, differentiating character portrayals by gender. Burgess and colleagues (2007) found that zero primary male characters and very few secondary male characters are role objectified, compared to over 20% of the female main characters and the majority of auxiliary female characters. Additionally, it was found that 47% of video game covers contain female characters that are sexually objectified, or portrayed in a sexualized way, and over 42% of the characters on those covers are sexually objectified (Burgess et al., 2007). In contrast, male characters are sexually objectified on 13% of game covers and fewer than 6% of male characters are portrayed as sexually objectified (Burgess et al., 2007). While both male and female characters are created with arguably exaggerated physical forms, the representation of male and female bodies significantly differ. For example, the Burgess et al. study (2007) found 49% of female characters were represented as “busty” or “super-busty,” while 25% of male characters were portrayed as “muscular” or “super-muscular.”

Thus, it can be seen throughout various video game genres that male and female characters are represented in vastly different ways. Male characters are depicted as strong, well armored or clothed, and “in charge.” In contrast, female characters are portrayed as victims, scantily clothed, and tools to be used. This role objectification is not only prominent within video games themselves, but is also seen within the video game culture itself.

**Video game culture.** Video game culture has long been dominated by male players and protagonists, with games that have been created to appeal to the male gaze (Cook, 2013; Sarkeesian, 2014). In fact, some consumer polls revealed interest in greater sexualization of women, from larger and more exposed breasts to more women wearing high heels even in soldier and combat games (Cook, 2013). Consumers also wanted authentic combat gear for male characters, but not for female characters in the same combat roles (Ruddick-Sunstein, 2013). Recently, a top video game developer redesigned a male character after complaints from fans that he was “too sexy,” due to a slit that ran from arm to thigh in his otherwise full armor (Williams, 2015). This stands in stark contrast to the female characters’ revealing leather and metal bikinis that were apparently acceptable to fans (Williams, 2015).

Historically, male video game characters are designed to appeal to the hyper-masculine power fantasy of being strong, capable, dangerous, and a depiction of the ideal alpha-male (Burrows, 2013; Dr.NerdLove, 2012; Scharrer, 2004). In contrast, female characters are usually created to fulfill hyper-feminine sexual fantasies that portray them as submissive and sexual, used as a reward, consumable property, or motivation for players to continue in the game (Burrows, 2013; Dr. NerdLove, 2012; Scharrer, 2004).

Scharrer (2005) demonstrated that male college students exposed to television shows featuring hyper-masculinity increased their acceptance of hyper-masculine beliefs, such as the idea that violence is exciting and manly, compared to males who viewed shows without hyper-masculine themes. Although the medium was television rather than video games, the study highlights the connection between media exposure and real-life attitudes concerning self and others.

Within the last decade, playable characters who lack positive or heroic qualities are on the rise. Game narratives increasingly center around a main character compelled to engage in violent behavior, such as murder of non-playable male characters and the kidnapping, beating, sexual abuse, or mutilation of non-playable female characters (Sarkeesian, 2014). In the game *God of War III* (2010), players receive rewards for dragging a topless and chained woman through a game level and using her body to prop open a heavy door. Once the door has crushed the woman, the player can return to her mutilated body and earn a trophy for her murder. Similarly, the top-selling video game *Grand Theft Auto V* (2014) rewards players for murdering prostitutes with whom they have had sex and aiding in the torture and sexual humiliation of female characters.

This culture of female objectification can also be found beyond the boundaries of the video game. Within video game culture, women who speak out about their concern over the commonplace sexualization and brutalization of female characters are threatened with rape and mutilation themselves and labeled “fat, ugly, and slutty” (Hess, 2014; VanDerWerff, 2014). A study of online multiplayer video games revealed that players with feminine usernames received an average of 100 sexually explicit or threatening messages a day, while those with masculine usernames received only 3.7 daily messages

on average (Hess, 2014). Likewise, Kuznekoff and Rose (2013) discovered neutral phrases (e.g., “Hi everybody”) spoken by a female voice elicited an average of three times as many negative and hostile comments during an online multiplayer game compared to player responses to identical language used by male control voices or fellow players with no voice. The responses from male players ranged from calling the female a “whore” and telling her to “shut up” to making sexual advances and asking her out on a date (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013). This was despite equivalent performance of male and female voiced players, demonstrating that the male gamers’ reactions were related to the other player’s perceived gender rather than his or her skill (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013). In fact, according to the Pew Research Center, women aged 18-24 are the victims of disproportionately high levels of online harassment, with 50% of women called offensive names, 25% sexually harassed, and 26% cyber-stalked (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Within the video game industry, women make up only 11% of game designers and 3% of programmers, despite comprising around 60% of those employed in graphic design and 25% in the technology field (Burrows, 2013). According to the 2014 Game Developer Salary Survey, females working within the video game industry earn an average of \$13,000 less than their male counterparts (Gamasutra, 2014). Women within the industry indicate an absence of a fair place and feeling they are outsiders, unwelcome in the boy’s club (Burrows, 2013; Hills, 2013). An example of this is the theme of the 2012 video game industry convention. One gaming company at the convention featured topless models, while other companies sponsored parties with sadism and masochism themes for game developers (Burrows, 2013). Female game designers report feeling unsafe at video game conventions, after being groped by other attendees and met with



blank stares in response to questions about the sexualized proportions and outfits of female characters (Burrows, 2013; Hills, 2013).

To summarize, the gaming audience has expanded greatly since the inception of video games to include more women and adult gamers than ever before. Yet women are most often portrayed within video games as overly sexualized, victims of male violence, or tools to succeed in game play. Moreover, female gamers within the real-world gaming community are often the victims of sexual harassment, violent threats, and demeaning actions from male gamers. Thus, the level of female victimization replete in video games and gaming culture begs the question of how it relates to wider public perceptions.

**Effects of media on male and public perceptions of women.** Researchers suggest that the unrealistic, objectified, and sexualized portrayal of females nurtures the development of negative attitudes about gender roles and the treatment of women (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Burgess et al., 2007; Dill & Thill, 2007; Fox, Bailenson, & Tricase, 2013; Gay & Castano, 2010; Miller & Summers, 2007). Video game characters express morals, societal expectations, and behavioral norms that can shape gamers' perceptions, empathic reactions, and responses toward others (Dietz, 1998; Fraser, Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Nelson, & Stockdale, 2012; Miller & Summers, 2007). In turn, negative attitudes about women are linked to male-to-female violence, raising compelling questions about the role of media and video games in creating and perpetuating harmful perceptions (Beck et al., 2012; Ward, 2002). For example, Beck and colleagues (2012) found that male gamers who played video games featuring the sexual objectification and violent treatment of female characters showed a significant increase in supportive attitudes about rape and acceptance of rape myths.

Additionally, Behm-Morawitz & Mastro (2009) found that playing a sexualized female character led both male and female participants to report less positive attitudes toward the cognitive abilities of women in the real world, with more men believing that males are more mentally capable than females. Male and female participants also reported more negative conclusions about the physical capabilities of women, despite the sexualized characters being physically agile (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Male participants who played a sexualized female also reported more negative attitudes about women than the female participants in a variety of areas, including how women should dress and appear in public, and the choice to have a career instead of staying at home (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Based on their findings, the researchers in this study noted support for the idea that the potential positive effects of portraying strong female video game characters may be negated by the character's overt sexualization (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009).

General media portrayals and consumer attitudes about women and gender roles are also pertinent in understanding the larger environmental context of video games and their potential impact on players. Advertisements for beauty products or feminine accessories, for example, have been shown to activate the female viewer's self-evaluation, causing them to rate themselves against the female ideal portrayed in the advertisement (Trampe, Stapel, & Siero, 2009). In effect, female viewers evaluated themselves based on the ideals portrayed in the advertisements they viewed, and interpreted meaning about themselves based on their evaluations (Trampe et al., 2009).

Body image dissatisfaction is a mounting issue that affects a large number of females and a growing number of males (Harrison & Heffner, 2006; Martins, Williams,

Harrison, & Ratan, 2009). Researchers have found associative learning greatly impacts individuals' preferences for different body sizes, as well as their estimation of their own bodies (Boothroyd, Tovee, & Pollet, 2012; Harrison, 2003; Harrison & Hefner, 2006). Steady exposure to images of thin bodies eventually alters male and female viewers' expectations of body size in the real world, increasing the ideal of thinness and supporting its pursuit (Harrison & Hefner, 2006). For example, females who perceived their bodies as falling outside the ideal range portrayed in the media, and males who accepted the thin body as ideal, are more approving of surgical body-alterations (Harrison, 2003).

Moreover, television viewing in general has been found to heavily influence body ideals as well as eating behavior. Longitudinal research tracking the current and future body ideals of preadolescent females revealed that television viewing predicted more disordered eating and a thinner body ideal in both the present and future (Harrison & Hefner, 2006). Furthermore, researchers conducting a longitudinal study on preadolescent males and females, found that television exposure was a significant predictor of disordered eating for females one year later (Moriarty & Harrison, 2008).

In another study, researchers examined the effect on women of exposure to television images of women with an "ideal-body" type comprised of a small waist and large bust. The researchers found that exposure to that ideal female body type predicted the participants' idealization of female bodies with smaller waists and hips, and larger busts (Harrison, 2003). In addition, both men and women who were exposed to the ideal females on television were more approving of breast augmentation and liposuction (Harrison, 2003). In a similar study, women who viewed thin models with an ideal body

type evaluated themselves as larger than the model and experienced more immediate pressured to be as thin as the model (Martin & Xavier, 2010).

Examining how larger societal influences affect individuals' perceptions, researchers studying change in female preference for body sizes found a strong relationship between an individual's visual diet and the social norms of that individual's culture (Boothroyd et al., 2012). The researchers discovered that females who were exposed to images of overweight or low weight women reported a change in their preferences for different body sizes, despite the extent to which the images conveyed aspirational messages of health and status (Boothroyd et al., 2012). Dissatisfaction with one's own body represents another effect of media exposure on body-related perceptions. Women exposed to images of thin models exemplifying the mass media ideal body type endorsed greater feelings of body dissatisfaction in their posttest than they had in their pretest (DeBraganza & Hausenblas, 2010).

Exposure to mass media messages, such as song lyrics, also influences perceptions of sexuality and relationships. Zhang and colleagues examined the relationship between exposure to sexualized music videos and opinions about sexuality (Zhang, Miller, & Harrison, 2008). Males and females who viewed sexually explicit music videos endorsed more permissive sexual attitudes (e.g., approval of premarital sex) and greater acceptance of sexual double standards, such as believing that sexually experienced men are desirable while sexually experienced women are less desirable (Zhang et al., 2008).

Television programming is another potent source of influence on sexual attitudes. Examining the effect of exposure to various television content, it has been found that

males and females who are exposed to television programs depicting different sexual stereotypes report changes in their sexual attitudes and expectations (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Ward, 2002; Ward, 2004). Some of the sexual stereotypes gained from television exposure include: the belief that being a virgin is a negative quality; an over-estimation of how many people divorce, enter into affairs, and have illegitimate children; and the expectation of many opportunities for sexual experimentation early in life (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). It was found that for female adolescents, more frequent and involved viewing of television with sexual content (e.g., lust, infidelity, female objectification, men driven by sexual need) was associated with endorsement of negative sexual stereotypes, including the idea that dating and sexual activity are a game or competition (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Ward, 2002). In addition, the female participants' viewing of sexuality on television was linked to reports of greater dating and sexual experiences before age 18 and the belief that females are and should be like the representations on television (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999).

Viewing television programs with the aforementioned sexual content predicted female adolescents' attitudes about dating, sexual roles, and romantic relationships, including endorsement of statements such as "swearing is worse for a girl than for a boy" and "boys are better leaders than girls" (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Ward, 2002). Increased television exposure was also noted to affect sexual expectations and behaviors, with female adolescents' reporting more experience with sexual relationship and the expectation that their peers would engage in sexual activity on the first date and without birth control (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Ward, 2002). The understanding that individuals' perceptions of females and sexuality are affected by their consumption of

and engagement with mass media raises the question of how other forms of media affect women. In particular, examining how women's attitudes about the female body are influenced by exposure to female bodies in video games.

**Effects of gaming on perceptions of female bodies.** While mass media has been shown to negatively affect perceptions of sexuality and women, gaming may have the potential to affect consumers even more profoundly due to the interactive nature of the medium. Researchers have found that most gamers engage cognitively and emotionally in their games, connecting with the characters and story line (Jin & Park, 2009). Gamers are more than observers of a character, as is the case with television or movies; instead, gamers have an interactive experience that provides a tangible connection between the gamer and the fully controllable character (Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2008). Interactive gamer connection is even more discernible in RPGs, where both the character and the story are determined by the player's moral and practical decisions (Lewis et al., 2008; Smyth, 2007). Gamers often report that the games become very real to them as they emotionally invest in their character and the world created within the game (Bailey, Wise, & Bolls, 2009; Lewis et al., 2008). In addition, adolescent gamers often report idolizing game characters and viewing them as role models (Miller & Summers, 2007).

This cognitive and emotional engagement in video games can affect gamers' perceptions of themselves and others (Martins et al., 2009). For example, in their study of adolescent girls, Funk and Buchman (1996) found that video game usage was predictive of lower perceptions of athletic and academic competence and social acceptance, accompanied by more negative behavioral conduct (Funk & Buchman, 1996).

Attitudes regarding body size, gender roles, violence, and social acceptance are influenced by environmental factors such as media and video games. In particular, exposure to video game characters with certain body types, attitudes, and behaviors can negatively affect gamers' self-concept and self-esteem, impacting how they view their own bodies and the bodies of others (Harrison, 2000; Jackson et al., 2009; Martins et al., 2009; Scharrer, 2005). For example, Lewis and colleagues documented a negative relationship between self-esteem and RPG play for gamers with high levels of attachment to their characters (Lewis et al., 2007). Additionally, exposure to such characters can negatively alter gamers' attitudes and beliefs about gender roles and violence against women (Harrison, 2000; Jackson et al., 2009; Martins et al., 2009). Interaction with unrealistic female characters impacts the personal perceptions of female gamers, including their estimation of and satisfaction with their own bodies, causing them to be more critical of their physique and accepting of surgical body alterations (Harrison, 2003; Harrison & Hefner, 2006).

Researchers studying the portrayal of female characters in video games have found marked differences between the bodies of female video game characters and the bodies of average women (Martins et al., 2009). Female characters in most video games, especially those with realistic game worlds and adult content, are featured with hips and waists significantly smaller than those of the average woman, as well as bust sizes either larger or smaller than average (Martins et al., 2009). Further, realistic games more often trigger body dissatisfaction and a drive for thinness in female gamers and encourage the idealization of significantly thin female bodies in male gamers (Martins et al., 2009). This effect is compounded by the game feature of avatar customization because gamers who

have greater control over their avatar's appearance are more emotionally and cognitively invested in game play (Bailey et al., 2009; Jin & Park, 2009).

The greater the extent to which avatars resemble their creator's ideal physical appearance, the closer the connection to the avatars becomes and the greater the investment in the game world (Jin, 2009; Jin, 2010; Smyth, 2007). In addition, the more gamers report identification with their character, a wish to be like the character, and immersion in the video game, the greater internalization of their character's beliefs and attitudes and subsequent transfer to the real world (Konijn, Bijvank, & Bushman, 2007). For example, adolescent males identifying with the violent character they played in video games have been found to be more aggressive toward their peers, even when unprovoked and told their actions could cause permanent damage to their peers (Konijn et al., 2007). These findings support the idea that gamers feel a tangible connection between themselves and their avatars, increasing internalization of the game norms that may alter their perceptions of themselves and others in the real world (Allison, von Wahlde, Shockley, & Gabbard, 2006; Harrison & Hefner, 2006; Lewis et al., 2008).

Given the level of engagement players experience during gaming and the potential for internalization of game norms, it is important to consider how the unrealistic portrayals of female characters affect female gamers. Equally important is the consideration of interventions or measures that may mitigate any harmful effects. Objectification theory offers a lens for understanding the mental health of women by recognizing that negative, objectifying experiences can compound and contribute to mental health issues (Gay & Castano, 2010). According to objectification theory, females are taught through culture and media to internalize an outside, observing perspective of



their bodies and are rewarded for their self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gay & Castano, 2010).

An observing perspective of self often leads to frequent body monitoring, body shame and anxiety, and a diminished ability to focus, learn new information, perform cognitive tasks, or remain aware of their internal selves (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gay & Castano, 2010). Particularly within American culture, women are more likely to be diagnosed with serious mental health problems such as unipolar depression, eating disorders, and panic disorders (World Health Organization [WHO], 2015). Disorders like these have been noted to occur more frequently during times of female change, such as adolescent puberty and menopause, when the female body may change significantly in size or shape, suggesting that body image and objectification may be a contributing factor (Fornardi & Dancyger, 2003; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Klump, 2013).

Recent research suggests that self-objectification may be fostered via interactive gaming. Fox and colleagues invited women aged 18 to 40 to play in an immersive virtual environment as a female character that was either sexualized or unsexualized based on the character's appearance and clothing (Fox et al., 2013). Some of the participants played characters portraying their own faces, while others played characters with the face of an unknown person (Fox et al., 2013). The researchers found that women who played sexualized characters engaged in more self-objectification and body-related thoughts than the women with unsexualized characters (Fox et al., 2013). They also found that women who played characters that looked like themselves, especially those who were sexualized, were more accepting of rape myths than the women in the other study conditions (Fox et al., 2013). Similarly, Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009) discovered that playing as a

sexualized female video game character with an unrealistic body type had a strong negative effect on feelings of self-efficacy in female participants.

The sexualization and objectification of girls has consistently been found to negatively affect their cognitive and emotional functioning, mental and physical health, and healthy sexual development (Gapinski, Brownell, & LaFrance, 2003; Grose, Grabe, & Kohfeldt, 2014; Impett, Schooler, & Toman, 2006; Thomsen, Weber, & Brown, 2002; Ward, 2004). Furthermore, the sexualization of girls has important and negative consequences on boys, men, adult women, and society at large (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007a; Schooler & Ward, 2006; Ward, 2002; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). The consequences for men include male difficulties in finding a partner they deem “acceptable” or enjoying intimate relationships with a female partner (Schooler & Ward, 2006).

### **Need for Awareness Raising**

Exposure to unrealistic portrayals of females in video games and the general media corresponds to a range of negative consequences for females. Following analysis of merchandising and nearly every media genre, including video games and the internet, the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (APA, 2007b) concluded that there is more than sufficient “evidence that the proliferation of sexualized images of girls and young women in advertising, merchandising, and media is harmful to girls’ self-image and healthy development” (para. 1). For example, media portrayal of the ideal of thinness is related to greater body dissatisfaction and the presence of eating disorders. Moreover, adherence to traditional ideas about female gender roles portrayed in the media and acceptance of cultural feminine stereotypes reinforced through mass media content and

marketing is related to female vulnerability to eating disorders (Martz, Handley, & Eisler, 1995; Tiggemann & Slater, 2003).

Mass media is used to perpetuate female sexualization and objectification by portraying women in a sexual manner more often than men and by showing females in revealing clothing, using provocative body language and sexual facial expressions (APA, 2007a). Females are objectified in the media when they are used as set decorations (the prize models on game shows) or objects to be consumed (the scantily clad females posed provocatively in television and video game bars or night clubs). The sexualized and objectified females in mass media portray the same constricted and unrealistic ideals of physical beauty and female gender roles, which girls and women then accept and emulate (APA, 2007a). For example, Kim and her colleague documented that women and girls who read beauty magazines for advice on sexuality or appearance indicated stronger endorsement that females should be sexually submissive and alluring and greater objectification of their own bodies (Kim & Ward, 2004).

Further exploration of how females interact with mass media reveals that exposure to unrealistic ideals in television and magazines is associated with reports of lower self-esteem, internalization of the thin ideal for female bodies, and disordered eating habits (Tiggemann & Slater, 2003; Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). Regular exposure to sexually objectifying media that emphasizes female appearance and body shape as measures of desirability is positively correlated with self-objectification one year later (Aubrey, 2006). Furthermore, media images of idealized female bodies are shown to increase appearance anxiety, self-objectification, and body shame in females (Monro &

Huon, 2005). This impact is greatly increased in women who report low levels of global self-esteem (Aubrey, 2006).

Media portrayal of female objectification and idealized female bodies can also perpetuate negative attitudes in vulnerable women. Aubrey (2006) noted that women with pre-existing low self-esteem who did not meet the media driven thin ideal attempted to avoid sexualized media content that further exacerbated their feelings of body shame and appearance anxiety. However, women and girls with high levels of self-esteem are less susceptible to being affected by exposure to idealized females (Aubrey, 2006) while those who feel pressure to be thin, are dissatisfied with their bodies, and lack social support are at a greater risk of being harmed by the media images (Stice, Spangler, & Agras, 2001).

Mental and emotional vulnerability can also be seen in women with traditional perceptions of female gender roles. Women open to new experiences who adhered to traditional ideas of gender roles reported decreased self-efficacy and well-being during times of stress and transition (Weiss, Freund, & Weise, 2012). In contrast, women who rejected traditional gender roles, believing in their ability to succeed beyond gender role expectations, experienced an increase in feelings of self-efficacy and well-being following stressful periods (Weiss et al., 2012). While self-efficacy may be strongly connected to beliefs about the appropriate roles for women, perceptions about the possibility of expanded female roles can be a powerful tool for increasing self-efficacy and success during times of transition. Hence, raising awareness about the impact of female portrayals and providing education and therapy for women may mediate the harmful effects of media messages (APA, 2007b).

Sexual education is another area where females can benefit. In a recent study, researchers discovered that school-based sexual education is linked to more positive and open-minded attitudes about girls and women as well as empowerment in females and males (Grose et al., 2014). Both females and males who completed the sexual education program, which included exploration of the connection between gender and sexuality and addressed beliefs about gender, reported less acceptance of traditional beliefs in the dominance of men and subordination of women (Grose et al., 2014). The change in acceptance about male dominance is notable considering its negative relation to safe sex and contraceptive practices (Grose et al., 2014). Hence, education and discussion about healthy sexuality and the roles of females can effect change in the attitudes of both females and males and lead to positive and healthy personal decisions.

Considering the positive effects of educating females and males on gender roles and sexuality, the APA (2007b) recommends that mental health clinicians increase clients' awareness of how the sexualization and unrealistic portrayals of females impacts females and males of all ages (APA, 2007b). Toward that end, mental health professionals working with females should educate themselves on the sexualization and objectification of girls and women. Awareness will enable clinicians to talk competently with clients, provide useful resources, and help clients build the skills and critical thinking needed to understand how women are portrayed, the messages sent by those portrayals, and how females can be affected (APA, 2007b). Further, clinicians are in a good position to help clients develop critical skills for viewing and consuming various forms of media.

**Study Rationale**

Nearly 50% of all gamers are female and that percentage is expected to continually increase, suggesting greater numbers interacting with and potentially internalizing unrealistic portrayals of women as a normal standard for female behavior, treatment, and appearance. Exposure to unrealistic portrayals of women in media has been shown to significantly influence the way viewers think about themselves, leading to acceptance of a warped body ideal, body dissatisfaction, endorsement of body modification, and greater likelihood of eating disorders. At the same time, such exposure perpetuates the acceptance of rape myths and violence against women, unhealthy sexual attitudes, negative beliefs about the capability of women, and victim blaming.

While researchers have found connections between exposure to unrealistic female idealizations in media and attitudes about females, little research has examined how viewing and interacting with female video game characters affects the attitudes and beliefs of female gamers. Given that gamers internalize messages conveyed in media and video games, it is important to examine the relationships between what gamers experience in their game worlds and how that affects what they believe about themselves and others in the real world. Understanding the experience of female gamers will provide crucial information on how females think about their characters and themselves, their roles in society and the gaming culture, and what they tell themselves about the game worlds in which they interact.

Given the importance of education about female and role portrayals in the media (APA, 2007b), this study could provide further information about the experiences of female gamers interacting with the sexualization and objectification of female characters

that would be useful to mental health professionals working with female gamers.

Information on the thoughts and experiences of female gamers may also provide insight into how those females either accept or reject the values of their game worlds, and prove useful in clinical settings when treating female gamers who struggle with body image, disordered eating, violent relationships, and other issues that are exacerbated by media exposure. The information gathered could further be used to inform future video game design, providing rationale for why it is important for video games and media at large to portray realistic women in varied roles and positions.

### **Research Questions**

The goal of the present study was to elucidate the meaning of female gamers' experience of viewing, interacting with, and participating as female video game characters. In particular, I aimed to investigate gamers' perceptions of their gender role and identity related to video gaming and female characters. Thus, the following research questions were used:

1. How are female gamers influenced by representations of female characters in video games, in terms of women's gender roles and their own self-efficacy?
2. How do representations of female characters in video games influence the way female gamers perceive other gamers' expectations about women's gender roles?
3. How do female gamers' perceptions of women's gender roles and of the corresponding expectations of others affect their social interactions within the gaming culture?

**Summary**

The video game industry has increased exponentially in popularity and scope since the first arcade game became publicly available. Video games and game advertising have historically catered to men, with an alarming increase in content that features the sexualization, exploitation, and violent treatment of women. However, the number of female gamers has increased steadily over the years as is projected to continue. Given the increase in female gamers of all ages, and the apparent internalization of messages about the appearance, behavior, and treatment of women, and the roles of females in society, research on the experiences of female gamers would provide crucial information on how internalized game messages are affecting female gamers both personally and societally.

Therefore, the purpose of my study was to understand what female gamers experience as they interact with and play as female video game characters. The study was aimed at exploring how female gamers perceive the representations of female video game characters, how they see themselves and their role in society and the gaming culture, how they perceive expectations on themselves as females, and how those perceptions and expectations affect their behavior as women and gamers. The information gathered from this study may provide useful insights to mental health professionals working with female gamers.



## Chapter 2

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore and understand the direct experience (referred to as lived experience) of females who actively play video games both socially and on their own. The lived experience of female gamers was investigated with respect to their participation in the videogame subculture, video game play, and interaction with various portrayals of female video game characters. While previous research examined the negative effect of the media's unrealistic portrayals of females on consumers, the personal experience of gamers has yet to be explored. Toward that end, female gamers who interact with sexualized, objectified, and dominated female characters were targeted to learn how they perceive, describe, feel about, make sense of, and share their experiences. In particular, these gamers were queried regarding how their experiences affect their views of themselves and others, gender roles, social interactions, and perceptions of their own abilities. In this study, I used a qualitative research methodology with the aim of elucidating the effect of female video game characters on female gamers and providing insights useful to gamers, parents, community leaders, video game developers, and mental health professionals who work with female gamers.

In the following sections, a description of the underlying worldview and research design are discussed. Second, the research questions guiding the study are provided. Next, population characteristics, sampling and recruitment procedures, and data collection methods are described. Lastly, data analytic procedures and enhancement of validity, credibility, and protection of participants are explained.

### **Philosophical Worldview**

A social constructivism perspective comprises the philosophical orientation for this qualitative study. This worldview is based on the idea that individuals use their historical and social experiences to understand the world and their role in it (Creswell, 2009). Individuals interact with others and interpret their interactions in order to create meaning about themselves and others. Individuals' interpretations of self and others, in turn, impact their social interactions, the roles that they accept or deny, their strengths and weaknesses, and how others perceive them (Creswell, 2009; Crotty, 1998; Patton, 2002). It follows that two people can live in the same world but experience the reality of that world in very different ways (Patton, 2002).

Social constructivism is focused on understanding how individuals interpret the world through examining the lived experience of the participants, how they make meaning of their experiences, and how they share that meaning with others (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Within a constructivist view, truth and reality are secondary to the social world that individuals construct and in which they believe (Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan, 2008). Furthermore, constructivism assumes that one person's construction of reality is not more or less "true" than another person's, and may be altered through experience or information (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111).

As this study investigated participants' interactions with their physical, social, and technological environments, social constructivism offered an appropriate lens through which to explore and understand female gamers' experiences (Creswell, 2009). In addition, the constructivist worldview was informed by feminist media theory, which provides insight into gender roles within media and society and how women make sense

of those roles and live with them (Gengler, 2011; Watkins & Emerson, 2000; Zucker & Bay-Cheng, 2010).

Watkins & Emerson (2000) discuss how feminist media theory stresses the importance of understanding how media is created on the basis of “gendered assumptions, values, and beliefs,” (p. 153) including the idea that women should be passive and submissive to men, and that the preferences of women and children are held in lower regard than the desires of dominant males. Gender inequality is also perpetuated in mass media through portraying the notion that women should wear traditionally feminine hairstyles and clothing, enjoy sensational and exploitative plot lines, and prefer domestic settings (Watkins & Emerson, 2000). For example, television programs with lower ratings will employ the above tactics to appeal to a more feminine audience based on a stereotypical assumption of what women enjoy (Watkins & Emerson, 2000).

### **Research Design and Strategy**

A qualitative research methodology was employed in this study to gain greater understanding regarding the meaning of female gamers’ lived experiences. Qualitative research is designed to explore how people “make sense of their lives” through interpreting their experiences, constructing their worlds, and giving meaning to those experiences, with the researcher seeking to interpret that meaning (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). Specifically, I am interested in understanding how female gamers interpret their experiences of viewing, interacting with, and playing as female video game characters. Participants’ gaming experiences were, in turn, interpreted relative to their self-perceptions of gender role and identity, perceived expectations of other gamers concerning female gender roles, and their behavior and interactions with others in the

gaming culture. Whereas quantitative methods limit the worldview and subjectivity that participants may express, qualitative methods explore how participants exist in their natural, daily environments and the feelings, understanding, and meaning they ascribe to their lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Patton, 2002). This study therefore included interacting face-to-face with the participants, either in person or via live video chat, and observing their actions (Creswell, 2009).

Because the aim of the present research is to understand participants through their view points, various methods were utilized to reveal the richest information about their lived experience (Patton, 2002). Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, field notes, and document analysis (Merriam, 2009). I used a phenomenological strategy of inquiry, which “seeks understanding about the essence and underlying structure” of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009, p.23). Phenomenology underlies the methodological approach for this study because it allows for the investigation of participants’ conscious experience of their daily lives and interactions toward the goal of identifying its essence and structure (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Furthermore, the present research inquiry involved a collective case study approach. In this instance, the case being studied was the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015). The video game is rated “M” by the Entertainment Software Rating Board [ESRB], which means that the game is intended for mature audiences aged 17 years and older (Entertainment Software Rating Board [ESRB], 2016). According to the ESRB, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) is rated “M” due to content containing “blood and gore, intense violence, nudity, strong language, strong sexual content, [and] use of

alcohol” (ESRB, 2016). This video game was chosen due to its popularity and the use of a male playable character that regularly interacts with a variety of female non-playable characters. The female characters are also portrayed in a variety of ways, including sexually provocative victims and tools for the player’s use. The playable character cannot be customized to look like the player, which will maintain some boundaries on game-immersion and allow the participant to interact with the game and answer interview questions as both a player and a participant in the game world.

Case studies allow for the purposeful, in-depth study of one particular subject with clearly delimited boundaries (Creswell, 2009), giving the researcher the ability to “capture complex action, perception, and interpretation” (Merriam, 2009, p. 44). In contrast to other qualitative research methods, case studies involve research questions directly related to the end product, gaining qualitative data that is more concrete, contextual, and generalizable to others (Merriam, 2009).

Using a case study approach allowed me to explore the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and the female gamers’ experiences with greater intensity and depth, providing a structure for investigating the interaction between *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and the larger context in which it exists (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The case study was collective in that multiple participants were observed and interviewed while playing the same game. The scope of the approach allowed for a broader investigation of the lived experiences of female gamers (Merriam, 2009).

To reiterate, the central question guiding this research was: How do female gamers experience and make meaning from interacting with and playing as unrealistic female video game characters? In particular, the study focused on clarifying female

gamers' perceptions about their gender roles, self-efficacy, expectations of others in the gaming culture, and interactions with other gamers.

### **Participants or Study Sample**

The participants in this study were six females, aged 29-37, with an average gamer age of 32 years. Eligibility for inclusion in the study was confirmed through a simple questionnaire about their biological sex, length of time the participant has played video games, and engagement in gaming culture (see Appendix A). These qualities were necessary in order to gain rich information on the research topic and best help with understanding the research questions (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). Based on information from the participant questionnaires, two participants reported playing video games an average of 7-9 hours a day; one participant reported playing for an average of 4-6 hours a day; and three participants reported playing an average of 1-3 hours a day. The participants all considered themselves gamers, with two participants reporting that they had been gamers for over 30 years; two had been gamers for over 20 years; one had been a gamer for 16 years; and one for 6 years. All participants considered themselves part of the gaming subculture except for one, who was involved in the subculture but resisted using the label due to her awareness of negative connotations associated with the term "gamer." Lastly, three participants had previous experience with playing *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) at the time of the interviews. One participant had played the game for more than 150 hours; one had played it more than 100 hours; and one had played for over 20 hours.

Purposeful snowball sampling was used to recruit participants for this study (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002), based on their female sex, age, experience playing video

games, and engagement in the gaming culture. Recruitment procedures included word of mouth, referrals from individuals who know female gamers, and connections with other professionals and gamers with whom I have existing relationships. As data was gathered and analyzed simultaneously, I decided what data to collect next and where to find it, developing a theory that emerged through the process (Merriam, 2009).

The study was advertised to possible participants through email (see Appendix E) and participants were given the chance to contact the researcher for further information or to confirm participation. Participants were provided with a consent form that was reviewed verbally with them (see Appendix D). They were also given the opportunity to ask questions and gain clarification before beginning the study. After the study was completed, participants were entered into a raffle in which two participants were randomly chosen to receive a \$15 Starbucks gift card.

### **Data Collection Process**

As mentioned above, my sources of evidence entailed: semi-structured individual interviews (either in person or via live video chat), participant observation, field notes, and audio-visual document analysis.

**Semi-structured interviews.** All participants were interviewed twice: once in a video-recorded one-on-one interview (see Appendix B), and again during a video-recorded game play interview (see Appendix C) in which participants played the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) while discussing their experience. Semi-structured interviews involved open-ended questions flexible in their wording and order, aiming to understand the experience of the female gamers but also allowing for me to respond naturally to situations and subjects as they arose (Creswell, 2009; Merriam,

2009). For the game play interview, scenes from the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) were chosen in order to represent the variety of female characters, portrayals, and interactions within the allotted interview timeframe (see Appendix F). In an effort to ensure a consistent experience, each participant was instructed to choose the same dialogue options, allowing them to hear and see the same character interactions with as little variation as possible.

Half of the participants were interviewed remotely, via live video chat sessions. The live video chats were conducted in a private and secure room. In order to securely video record the live video chat interviews, I used a web application with strict encryption procedures to ensure data security. Participants who used the live video chat option were given information on how to ensure the interview process was private and confidential. They were also instructed in how to ensure the camera was positioned in a way that allowed for most of their bodies to be visible, allowing for nonverbal information to be captured. Participants who used the live video chat option expressed comfort with engaging in online conversations, as gamers often use voice or video chat features to communicate with other gamers. The participants were knowledgeable about the usage of video cameras and seemed to engage with the interview process faster than participants who were interviewed in person. This is perhaps due to the fact that participants who used the video chat option were in their own environment where they were more comfortable. In addition, most gamers talk online often when communicating with friends, as fellow gamers are often in locations around the world.

The limitations of this method included the potential for my presence as a researcher to bias participant responses, and the possibility that some participants may



have been less able to articulate their experiences or less perceptive of their reactions and beliefs than others (Creswell, 2009). These limitations were addressed through building rapport with participants to help them feel comfortable, and the use of semi-structured interview questions to examine their experiences while allowing the flexibility to pursue information leads (Creswell, 2009).

Using a variety of item formats, participants were queried about the following: their knowledge of the game itself; gaming experiences, behavior, and related feelings; self-perceptions; and sensory experiences during game play (Patton, 2002). Relevant demographic and background information was gathered. Follow-up or clarifying questions were also used to ensure understanding of participant experiences (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009).

**Participant observation.** Observation involves the methodical, nonjudgmental recording of “events, behaviors, interactions, and artifacts (objects)” within the setting being studied (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 143). In this study, participants were observed during both the face-to-face interview and the gaming interview (via live video chat or in person), affording further understanding of the setting and participants beyond their articulated experiences. Field observations were taken during the interview sessions. Observational data involved information derived from the senses to note participants’ affect, body language, tone of voice, and any other information conveyed nonverbally (Kawulich, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This method provided a richer level of qualitative data, adding to the thick description essential to a deep understanding of both participants’ interpretation of, and actual experience of, playing the game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015; Creswell, 2009; Kawulich, 2005).

**Field notes.** After each interview, I compiled field notes that included descriptions of the participant and setting, direct quotes, and nonverbal information (Patton, 2002). As the research instrument itself, I also documented my own feelings, reactions to the experience, reflections, interpretations, and working hypotheses about the experiences of the participants and their meaning (Patton, 2002).

**Document analysis.** Written information about the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) was gathered, such as its content and themes. In addition, the video game itself was analyzed as a document including the selected in-game scenarios, dialogue, roles, character appearances, and character clothing (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). Moreover, analysis of other documents was conducted, such as articles and opinion pieces that discuss the video game content, experiences playing the game, and opinions of female character portrayal.

The document analytic method allowed for a fuller conception of the participants' reality, including the text, sights, sounds, and messages with which they were interacting (Creswell, 2009). Specifically, the documents under study provided information about the culture of the setting and participants, as these documents are works created within and for the culture (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Document analysis also offered the opportunity to synthesize the main themes that participants may have experienced.

**Procedure.** I began the data collection process by conducting video-recorded one-on-one interviews (via live video chat or in person), with participants that lasted around 60 minutes. I then conducted an approximately 90-minute video-recorded interview (via live video chat or in person), with participants as they played the game *The*

Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015). I recorded field notes and conducted document analysis throughout the data collection process.

### **Data Analysis**

Once the data from the interviews, observations, field notes, and document analysis was gathered, it was analyzed with the intent to find specific and emergent themes reflecting participants' experiences. The interview data was transcribed by the researcher using the digital recordings of the participant interviews. The observational data included field notes about the nonverbal information presented by participants, a thorough account of the setting and physical surroundings, and a rich description of the participants' activities that were observed (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Kawulich, 2005). The video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and other relevant texts were analyzed with respect to the game mechanics, dialogue, character appearance and roles, and any other pertinent information about the video game to contribute to a thick description of the lived experience of female gamers.

The verbatim transcripts, observational data, field notes, and document analysis data were then coded for emergent and specific themes regarding the experience of female gamers, lending meaning and depth to the data (Altheide & Schneider, 2013; Creswell, 2009; Kawulich, 2005). Coding was done using the constant comparative method, allowing me to systematically examine and refine variations in my emergent themes of female gamers' experiences (Patton, 2002). During this process, I used open, axial, and selective coding to identify concepts and develop categories of related concepts that organize the phenomena related to my data, identifying the core variable among my

themes and creating meaning around the experiences of female gamers (Gallicano, 2013; Patton, 2002).

Open coding involved reading through my transcripts and field notes to find themes that summarized what was within the data, supporting the themes through the use of participant quotes (Gallicano, 2013). After open coding was finished, I began axial coding by identifying relationships and connections among the open codes (Gallicano, 2013). This allowed me to create more precise categories for my data and connect them in a way that provided meaning to the data on the gamers' experiences (Gallicano, 2013; Patton, 2002). I engaged in and documented a systematic search for themes, patterns, and explanations that were divergent or alternative (Patton, 2002). I explored the data by organizing it in ways that may have led to diverse findings, considering the logical possibilities and determining if the data supported them (Patton, 2002). This increased the credibility of the study and helped me find the best fit for the data (Patton, 2002). Lastly, I used selective coding to identify the core variables that encompassed all of my data (Gallicano, 2013).

Once the coding was complete, I triangulated the data in order to find more themes that existed within and between the data sources (Patton, 2002). This process preserved the individual participant data as well as allowed for the emergence of further generalizable findings (Patton, 2002).

### **Strategy for Promoting Validity and Reliability**

**Researcher bias and assumptions.** I am a female gamer who has experience playing the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and feeling a myriad of reactions while playing. I also have a connection to the research topic that comes from

personal experience as well as witnessing the experiences of other female gamers. As a female who actively plays video games, I consider myself a part of the video game subculture and have experienced firsthand the difference between the way male and female gamers are treated. Differential treatment as a gamer personally affects my self-perceptions, interactions with other gamers, and my role in the gaming subculture. Through these experiences and my appreciation of video games, I have come to understand the complexity and troubling nature of female character portrayal. My interest in further understanding and clarifying this issue is rooted in my own experiences, and witnessing the experiences of other female gamers.

**Validity and reliability.** The internal validity of the research was demonstrated through several means. First, the use of participant observation directly captured the participant's reality and experiences, providing a richer description beyond interviews alone and strengthening the internal validity of the measures (Merriam, 2009). Second, member checking was conducted in which initial research results were shared with the participants to determine plausibility and provide clarification of the findings (Kawulich, 2005; Patton, 2002). In addition, data obtained through multiple methods (interviews, observations, field notes, and document analysis) was triangulated and compared (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Reliability of the interview measures was ensured by checking transcripts against the recordings for accuracy. Coding of the data was continuously checked for consistency with the code definitions and the use of a second coder and Cohen's kappa was employed (Merriam, 2009; Zaiantz, 2017). An audit trail documented a thorough account of steps and decisions made throughout the data analysis process (Merriam, 2009).

The external validity of the study was supported by rich descriptive data gained from the multiple methods employed (Merriam, 2009). The particular themes apparent within the context of this research were also described to offer potential extrapolation to assist future research that addresses gamers' experiences (Patton, 2002).

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

To ensure the protection of the participants, the procedures of Northwest University's Institutional Review Board were strictly followed. All participants were presented with a consent form containing information about the study and purpose, time required, potential risks, and the criteria for participation (see Appendix A). The informed consent process afforded an opportunity for participants to ask questions and establish rapport with me, subsequently assisting the interview and observation process (Kawulich, 2005).

Participants' identities remained confidential. A key linking the identifying information with numeric codes was constructed and stored separately from participants' responses. Both the identification key and data (i.e., recordings, transcripts, observations, and other documents) were securely maintained through storage in a locked file cabinet within a secure office located in the Northwest University College of Social and Behavioral Sciences building. Descriptions of participants in scholarly presentations or publications will be presented in such a way as to preserve confidentiality and prevent identification of the participants (Kawulich, 2005).

### **Summary**

The present study utilized a qualitative research methodology grounded in social constructivism toward an understanding of the lived experiences of female gamers

playing the game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and their derived meaning. Given the phenomenological nature of the inquiry, the research design entailed semi-structured interviews, participant observation, field notes, and document analysis. I used a collective case study approach, with the case being the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and the participants being six female gamers. My transcripts, observational data, field notes, and document analysis data were then coded for emergent and specific themes regarding the experiences of female gamers using open, axial, and selective coding.

Being a female gamer, I have experience with the game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and the gaming culture, which gives me perspective into the complexity of female character portrayal. I maintained validity through participant observation, rich description, and member checking, whereas reliability was ensured through checking transcripts for accuracy, ensuring the coding was consistent, and using a second coder, which was documented through an audit trail of the process. Through this process, the aim was to elucidate the experiences of female gamers and investigate how their experiences with unrealistic female character portrayals affect their perceptions of themselves and others.

### Chapter 3

This qualitative study was designed to increase understanding of how female gamers experience themselves and others within the gaming subculture, in relation to their own video game play, participation in the video game subculture, and the various female character portrayals with whom they interact. To explore this topic, data was collected from interviews (either in person or via live video chat), participant observation, field notes, and document analysis. The data was then coded and analyzed for specific and emergent themes that describe the experience of female gamers, as guided by my research questions:

1. How are female gamers influenced by representations of female characters in video games, in terms of women's gender roles and their own self-efficacy?
2. How do representations of female characters in video games influence the way female gamers perceive other gamers' expectations about women's gender roles?
3. How do female gamers' perceptions of women's gender roles and of the corresponding expectations of others affect their social interactions within the gaming culture?

In the sections that follow, a description of the data analysis will be provided, detailing information about *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), the video game used in the study, opinions and observations from video game critics, participant interviews, and participant observations. The findings that emerged from the data will then be explored.

The data analyzed in this study was collected from the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), a sample of video game critiques, and interviews with participants. In order to provide context for exploring the data gathered from participants, as well as



the scenes they experienced during the gameplay interviews, information about *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) will be provided first.

### **Document and Media Analysis**

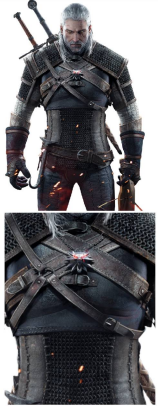

As part of my document analysis, I played *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) for over 130 hours. I saved scenes that were considered relevant to the research questions and appropriate for participants to play through, based on length and content. Scenes were chosen that represented a variety of female character portrayals and interactions found within the game. This was intended to provide as balanced and objective an experience as possible given the time limitations of the gameplay interview. In addition to playing *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), I researched articles written by video game critics from reputable video game news sources who are highly involved in the gaming subculture and familiar with current video games. For the purposes of this study, three articles were chosen for further analysis and coding, based on the critic's knowledge, involvement in the gaming subculture, and balanced, objective viewpoint. The critiques chosen neither vilified or praised the game in the extreme, but appeared to present a range of opinions about various aspects of the game. Using my gameplay research and the articles chosen, what follows is a description of the game's mechanics, characters, objectives, character portrayals, and the gameplay scenes the participants experienced and were interviewed about.



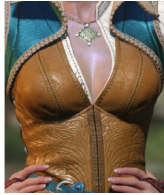


**Mechanics.** *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) is an action role-playing game in an open world environment, which means players have direct control over the main character's actions and can explore the game world freely, choosing how and when they complete objectives or engage in the main storyline. The choices players make within

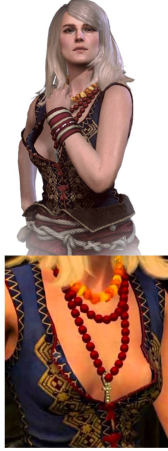
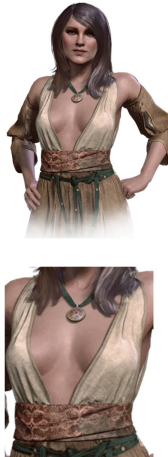

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015) affect the in-game experiences, character interactions, storyline opportunities, and the ending itself to various degrees (CD Projekt RED, 2015; Gies, 2015). For example, early in the game the player can choose to have the main character, Geralt, fight with drunken antagonists in a local pub. If Geralt fights, he will kill the men and anger the owner, who then kicks Geralt out of her bar and refuses him further service (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). There are further consequences later in the game when the owner recognizes Geralt as the murderer from her pub and becomes noticeably agitated, threatening the success of an important mission he is involved in (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

The game is affected by smaller choices as well. For example, if Geralt draws his weapon within a town, the villagers will be frightened or angry and any nearby soldiers will become upset and attack Geralt (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). In addition, there are many women in the game world that the player can choose for Geralt to have sex with, from prostitutes to main characters (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Most sexual encounters do not affect the overall storyline, allowing Geralt to have sex with supporting characters and prostitutes without consequence. However, having sex with the main female characters, Triss and Yenner, does have consequences. If Geralt has sex with just one of the main female characters, and also chooses the correct dialog options (essentially saying what the female character wants to hear), she will become his romantic partner and the two will retire together at the end of the game (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Conversely, if he chooses to pursue and have sex with both leading female characters, they trick him and he ends up alone (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

**Characters.** CD Projekt RED, the company that developed and published The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015), the third video game in the company’s Witcher trilogy, describe the game world as “lively and full of color, home to a broad mix of races, nations and social classes—everything from filth-covered elven beggars to the wealthiest of kings. As an outcast bounty hunter, you mix in all these circles, yet belong to none (CD Projekt RED, 2015).” The world is vast, yet filled with towns and people from every walk of life, as mentioned in the preceding description. The following table provides basic information about main and featured supporting characters within The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015), including but not limited to characters the participants interacted with.

| <b>The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Character Table</b>  |   |  |  |  |  |   |
|--|---|--|--|--|--|---|
| <b>Name</b>  | <b>Profession</b>                                   | <b>Abilities</b>   | <b>Personality</b>   | <b>Primary Attire</b>  | <b>Introduction</b>                              | <b>Picture – Body and Torso</b>   |
| Geralt of Rivia<br><br>*main playable character  | Witcher (Trained monster slayer for hire)           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Superhuman senses, strength, speed, stamina, and lifespan</li> <li>• Sword fighting</li> <li>• Alchemy</li> <li>• Signs (spells)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Solitary</li> <li>• Socially undesirable</li> <li>• Ruthless to those he deems cruel or foolish</li> <li>• Merciful to those in need</li> <li>• Loyal to friends</li> <li>• Flirtatious and sexual</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full-body leather and chain armor</li> <li>• Leather or cloth pants</li> <li>• Leather boots</li> </ul>   | First seen hunting for Yennefer in a battlefield |  <p>(CD Projekt RED, 2014, August 25)</p> |
| Ciri (Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon)<br><br>Geralt’s adopted daughter<br><br>*supporting sometimes-playable character | Witcheress (Trained female monster slayer for hire) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travel through space and time using magic portals</li> <li>• Sword fighting</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Kind</li> <li>• Brave</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cotton shirt fastened at the collar, revealing her bra beneath</li> <li>• Leather pants</li> <li>• Underbust corset</li> <li>• High-heeled boots</li> </ul> | First seen running through the woods from danger |    |

|  |                              |   |   |  |  |   |
|--|------------------------------|---|---|--|--|---|
|  |                              |   |   |  |  |  <p>(CD Projekt RED, 2014, August 13)</p>  |
| <p>Triss Merigold</p> <p>Geralt's love interest</p> <p>*principal non-playable character</p>         | <p>Sorceress and Advisor</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magic</li> <li>• Alchemy</li> <li>• Healing</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kind</li> <li>• Loyal</li> <li>• Brave</li> <li>• Humorous</li> </ul>                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tight silk shirt, open to reveal cleavage</li> <li>• Leather corset</li> <li>• Leather pants</li> <li>• Heeled boots</li> </ul> | <p>First seen in negotiations for the safety of herself and fellow mages</p>   |   <p>(CD Projekt RED, 2014, September 16)</p>    |
| <p>Yennefer of Vengerberg</p> <p>Geralt's love interest</p> <p>*principal non-playable character</p> | <p>Sorceress</p>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magic</li> </ul>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secretive</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Flirtatious</li> <li>• Sexual</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Black jacket</li> <li>• Skin-tight pants or leather skirt</li> <li>• High-heeled boots</li> </ul>                               | <p>First seen laying naked on a couch after a sexual encounter with Geralt</p> |   <p>(CD Projekt RED, 2014, September 14)</p> |

|  |   |  |  |   |   |   |
|--|---|--|--|---|---|---|
| <p>Keira Metz</p> <p>*supporting non-playable character</p>    | <p>Mage</p>                                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Magic</li> <li>• Illusion</li> <li>• Scholar</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manipulative</li> <li>• Resourceful</li> <li>• Flirtatious</li> <li>• Sexual</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Corset-shirt that is open, revealing her breasts and nipples</li> <li>• Long skirt</li> </ul>  | <p>First seen naked in a bath, revealing herself to Geralt</p>  |  <p>(Keira Metz, n.d.)</p>     |
| <p>Corinne Tilly</p> <p>*supporting non-playable character</p> | <p>Sorceress</p>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oneiromancy (Dream interpretation)</li> </ul>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mysterious</li> <li>• Sexual</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sleeveless shirt open to her waist, revealing her breasts</li> <li>• Skirt that is slit on each side, up past her thigh, exposing her underwear</li> <li>• Barefoot</li> </ul> | <p>First seen writhing on a bed during a dream, moaning and exposing her breasts and inner thigh</p>                    |  <p>(Corinne Tilly, n.d.)</p> |
| <p>Ves</p> <p>*supporting non-playable character</p>           | <p>Lieutenant of Blue Stripes, special forces</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharpshooter</li> </ul>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Energetic</li> <li>• Tough</li> <li>• Brash</li> </ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open jacket</li> <li>• Shirt that is untied down to her waist, revealing her breasts</li> <li>• Tight pants</li> <li>• Heeled boots</li> </ul>                                 | <p>First seen in Blue Stipe's hideout, interrupting Geralt's conversation with her commanding officer, Vernon Roche</p> |  <p>(Ves, n.d.)</p>          |

|  |  |   |  |  |   |  |
|--|--|---|--|--|---|--|
| <p>Vernon Roche</p> <p>*supporting non-playable character</p>                                | <p>Commander of Blue Stripes, special forces</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leadership</li> <li>• Sword fighting</li> </ul>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Single-minded</li> <li>• Tough</li> <li>• Cruel to enemies</li> <li>• Willing to sacrifice innocent people for his cause</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Doublet</li> <li>• Long pants</li> <li>• Boots</li> </ul>       | <p>First seen in Blue Stipe's hideout, when Geralt comes to him for information</p>                           |  <p>(Vernon Roche, n.d.)</p>    |
| <p>King Radovid V</p> <p>*supporting non-playable character</p>                              | <p>King of Redania</p>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Politics</li> <li>• Strategy</li> </ul>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ruthless</li> <li>• Cruel</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tunic</li> <li>• Tights</li> <li>• Boots</li> </ul>             | <p>First seen playing chess when Geralt comes to him seeking information</p>                                  |  <p>(Radovid V, n.d.)</p>      |
| <p>Whoreson Junior (Cyprian Wiley the Younger)</p> <p>*supporting non-playable character</p> | <p>Crime Boss</p>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manipulation</li> <li>• Intimidation</li> <li>• Torture</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ruthless</li> <li>• Cruel</li> <li>• Sadistic</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Buttoned coat</li> <li>• Long pants</li> <li>• Boots</li> </ul> | <p>First seen in his hideout amongst the bodies of six women he has just finished torturing and murdering</p> |  <p>(Cyprian Wiley, n.d.)</p> |

**Objectives.** The player will encounter many opportunities and quests during game play, and can choose to accept or deny them. Some quest objectives are part of the over-arching storyline and build on each other with what Gies (2015), Editor and

Reviewer for Polygon, a large online gaming magazine, calls “satisfying quest-to-quest momentum” that eventually leads to the resolution of the game (Gies, 2015). For example, following the trail of his old lover, Yennefer, is necessary in order to unlock the main story quest involving the search for Geralt’s adopted daughter, Ciri, who is in danger (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). However, the game is also filled with side quests that do not affect the overall storyline, such as helping an old, impoverished woman recover her only cooking pan or catching a prejudiced arsonist who burned the town blacksmith’s home because he was a dwarf (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Side quests like those mentioned above can be encountered randomly while exploring the game world or collected at notice boards located in each town or city in the game (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). While they help the player gain levels and discover new areas, “monster contracts, and admittedly, side quests in general start to bleed together” (Gies, 2015). According to CD Projekt RED (2015), “you’ll make unsavory deals with criminals, attend balls with the high-born and listen to the heart-wrenching tales of war refugees. All around you will see signs of gross injustice, wartime atrocities and more—but it’s always up to you to either help or shrug and let the fires rage.”

**Portrayal of women.** The game world of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) portrays women in a variety of ways, from peasants to royalty, prostitutes to priestesses. While Gies (2015) wrote that the principal female characters feel more “fleshed out” and “interesting” than female characters in similar games, he noted that the game world is still “oppressively misogynist” (para. 20-21). Grayson (2015), writer and video game critic for the popular online magazine Kotaku, wrote that in the portrayals of women and sexism the game is “frequently at odds with itself” and that while some of the females are

well conceptualized, the game overdoes the sexualization and treatment of women as “glorified eye candy” (para. 16). The sexualization of female characters is overt, as seen in the many prostitutes and supporting characters Geralt can have sex with, the way women are treated and talked about, and how female characters dress, speak, and move or pose their bodies.

*Playing card portrayal.* Within the larger in-game universe, players can engage in a mini-game called Gwent (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Gwent is a two-player card game, with each player representing an army on the battlefield using cards of various strengths and abilities that represent the people and items used in battle (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Beyond the pertinent game information, each card also has an illustration of the character or item the card represents. Many cards also have what is called “flavor text” on them, usually a quote from the character being portrayed, which gives interest to the card but does not affect gameplay mechanics. Some cards feature soldiers that talk about the rape of women for sport, conquest, or glory, in the name of their kingdom, such as: “I’ve killed for Redania. Hell, I’ve even raped for Redania” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

Other cards feature females with open shirts, revealing clothing, or armor that does not cover their breasts, while males are seen in full clothing or armor (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Text on cards featuring male characters references fighting, killing, raping, drinking, impregnating women, and glory, while some text on cards featuring female characters have quotes about their beauty, wanting to look attractive when they die, or needing a “tight leash” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). One card read “Do politicians murder high-class prostitutes? You Bet” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).



Even cards featuring women in battle or with quotes about fighting often feature exposed breasts and less clothing than shown on the cards of men in battle (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The Witcher series is also known for “romance cards” that the player can collect after sexual encounters (Azraeil, 2013; Cobbett, 2015). In previous Witcher games, once the main character, Geralt, had sex with a female character, the player was rewarded with a pornographic card referencing the sexual conquest (Azraeil, 2013; Cobbett, 2015). The cards feature women naked and posed provocatively or in overtly sexual positions (Azraeil, 2013; Cobbett, 2015).

*Clothing.* Patterson (2016), writer and fashion critic for the online news and pop-culture site The Mary Sue, noted that fashion is “an important part of worldbuilding,” especially in a visual setting or when attempting to create a believable world (para. 1). After completing The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015), Patterson (2016) noticed that while the game developers made some “interesting” fashion choices, they didn’t do them well or consistently, especially where the female characters are concerned (para. 2).

This lack of consistent and appropriate female portrayal is seen across the game world. Whether they are main or non-playable characters (known as NPCs), the majority of females that Geralt encounters dress and move provocatively. “When they’re not being murdered, women in The Witcher 3 are comically sexualized. Nudity is everywhere” (Gies, 2015, para. 26). Many women Geralt interacts with wear shirts that seem to barely cover their nipples; even old peasant women wear shirts open to their waist, revealing their breasts.

The three principal supporting characters—Triss, Yennefer, and Ciri—have the most complete outfits (Patterson, 2015). Their bodies are still idealized and emphasized

in skin tight clothing, but with less cleavage and exposed skin than is seen on other NPCs. Triss has a low-cut bodice that shows ample cleavage, while Yennefer shows less cleavage but wears skin-tight black leather pants or skirts. Ciri, Geralt's adopted daughter, is most notable for being trained as a Witcher (and therefore a skilled professional fighter), yet she wears a thin, off-the-shoulder blouse that is undone in the middle and clearly shows her bra—even in colder weather when she dons a fur collar for warmth (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). This is the most uncomfortable portrayal, according to Grayson (2015), because Ciri has been raised by Geralt as a daughter, and yet the player (looking through Geralt's eyes) continues to notice her sexual attractiveness (para. 20). For example, in the scene where Ciri visits an all-female spa filled with naked women, the camera draws the player's eyes to Ciri's body and the bodies of the other women (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). There is also an option for the player to have Ciri flirt with another naked woman, further drawing the player's attention to their naked bodies (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). Grayson (2015) points out that even for these more important women, "their outfits are often designed for lusty, probing eyes. The game wants you to undress characters like Yen and Triss and Keira in your mind long before Geralt ever does it with his hands" (para. 16).

While Triss, Yennefer, and Ciri originally appear with less revealing clothing, that difference is undermined by the availability of sexualized special outfits through a free content download. The downloadable outfits can be applied to the characters and worn throughout the game. Triss' new outfit features a short skirt and a tunic that forms a deep V down her back and chest that is open to her nipple, revealing her stomach and breasts (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). Yennefer, whose original outfits could be argued as

the most conservative, has a downloadable outfit that includes an off-the-shoulder blouse with a removable scarf that reveals a slit in her shirt to expose her cleavage (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Instead of a traditional skirt, she has thigh-high black lace stockings, an underwear-length mini skirt, and three short pieces of black leather that hang from her waist, revealing her thighs (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

Ciri's new outfit is supposed to be her official Witcher armor. However, when compared with the Witcher armor worn by Geralt or any male Witcher (Ciri is the only female trained as a Witcher), the coverage is noticeably different. Ciri's new armor provides coverage for her arms, shoulders, and legs, but her armor is still open at her chest and her midriff is now exposed—two sensitive areas for a warrior to leave unarmored (Patterson, 2016; The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Patterson further stresses the impracticality of a warrior wearing a crop top, and later a female soldier leaving her shirt unlaced to her navel—as well as how obviously intentional those sexualized choices are—by calling attention to other female fighters and soldiers who wear complete armor, including Ciri herself when she was a younger girl (Patterson, 2015). The last interesting point to note about the downloadable outfits is that only the female characters receive them. Instead of clothing, Geralt receives new finishing moves to use in battle. While this may be due to Geralt's ability to change armor at will throughout the game to increase his health, defense, or other statistics, his armor choices all provide full body coverage and are not sexualized or revealing (Patterson, 2016; The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

According to Patterson (2016), male characters, playable or not, have clothing that is well thought-out in terms of their role and needs, yet women often do not. While some women have more sensible, appropriate clothing (thus showing the developer's

understanding of what appropriate clothing is and their ability to create it), the majority of women are sexualized. “The most powerful women in this world, and the way they are dressed almost seems to undermine that power by treating them like sex objects” (Patterson, 2016, para. 6).

Patterson (2016) also answers two common arguments in favor of the game’s female clothing: 1) the sorceresses (such as Keira Metz, whose shirt shows her areola) wear revealing clothing because they are powerful and don’t care about social norms; 2) the women in this world simply wear revealing clothing because that is how they dress (para. 6). While Patterson considered these arguments, she noted that the outfits are not created “consistently enough for that to be the case” and that many women, sorceresses and regular women alike, are not dressed so inappropriately (para. 6). Indeed, Triss and Yennefer (both sorceresses), are not dressed like Keira Metz and as mentioned above, there are female warriors who do not expose their skin. In short, argued Patterson (2016), “the game rarely does anything consistently enough with its fashion for it to feel intentional” (para. 9).

**Sex.** Sexuality is a key feature of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015). From the seductive way that female characters move, dress, speak, and are spoken to and about, to the sexual activity itself, as there are many opportunities for the player to have Geralt engage in sexual activity with female NPCs. For example, female characters often stand with their hands on their hips, thrusting a hip out and twisting their torso as they talk, or they are seen adjusting their hair or the low neckline of their shirt (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). Women who are portrayed as working or examining something are shown bending over at the waist, with their buttocks and hips thrust out, swaying their hips

slowly, as opposed to hunched over their work as one would normally expect, or actively working at their task, as the male characters are (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). There are several brothels in the main cities and the streets are full of prostitutes standing provocatively and calling out to passersby, or women walking by with open shirts or low necklines (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). In contrast, male NPCs who are idle usually stand with their arms to their sides, or they are shown working, and even peasant men wear full shirts (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Patterson (2016) argued that video games tend to depict male and female characters differently, and stated that “this is part of a trend among games: while main female characters are often less sexually objectified than in the past, secondary ones are not” (para. 6).

When Geralt has sex, the women are always featured prominently, with little of Geralt or his body involved. The scenes are created for the male gaze, slowly panning the women’s breasts, thighs, buttocks, and stomach (Cook, 2013; Sarkeesian, 2014). In the opening scene of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), Geralt and one of his love interests, Yennefer, have just had sex. Both characters are naked, but while Geralt is in a bathtub with only his upper torso and feet showing (leading to a comical, non-sexual situation), Yennefer is lying naked on a chaise lounge, with the camera slowly panning over her buttocks and the side of her breasts (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). There is no slow pan of Geralt’s body. In another sexual encounter with Yennefer, Geralt tears off her panties and she spreads her legs, revealing her crotch and pubic hair (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). While Geralt is naked during this scene, his genitalia are not exposed, nor is his body the focus of the camera. In short, every sexual encounter is similar, focusing on the female character’s body parts and highlighting her sexual moaning.

Grayson (2015) clearly stated that he enjoyed how “sexy” the game is: “I like that *The Witcher 3* is so sexy. I think it’s awesome that Geralt is a sexy dude who does sexy things with sexy ladies” (para. 14). He also mentioned that some women in the game seemed “in full command of their sexuality” by using sex to get ahead in a world that actively works against them (Grayson, 2015). However, he took issue with the overuse of female sexualization and the “hilariously impractical” outfits that look like they “belong on a porn set” (para. 17). He also commented on the inappropriateness of women revealing their nipples during important or interesting moments in the game, and noted that “when things get serious or dramatic, it can be a distraction” (para. 18). Gies (2015) stated similar feelings about what he found to be a comically abundant use of female sexualization and stated that the game’s “defiant doubling down on its treatment of women as titillating props for Geralt and the player, even as it tries to flesh out more female leads, is its most disappointing aspect” (para. 28).

The objectification and sexualization of the female characters from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) is also present outside of the game itself, inspired by the female characters. Triss, Yennefer, Ciri, and Keira are the subjects of countless pieces of fan art or videos, in which their bodies are objectified even farther. Their breasts are increased, clothing minimized or removed altogether, and their bodies posed in sexual or provocative ways. While some pictures show the women using their powers, their bodies are still highlighted as the focus of the piece. In contrast, fan art of Geralt shows his different armor choices or depicts him in battle or stances of power. Beyond fan art, before the second game of the *Witcher* trilogy was published, Triss Merigold, a principal supporting character and love interest of the main character, appeared in the Polish

Playboy (Fahey, 2011). Although she is a video game character, she was featured in the Playboy issue posed naked and in sexually provocative, revealing ways (Fahey, 2011).

Many articles and videos have also been created to highlight sexual encounters and help players ensure they unlock every encounter in the game. Women dress up as Triss, Yennefer, Keira, and Ciri (a practice known as “cosplay”) and pose provocatively, often showing as much or more of their bodies than the original characters. While this phenomenon is not isolated to fans of this video game franchise alone, it does give information about the audience that the female characters were created for as well as the objectified expectations and roles that females in the gaming subculture may take on and internalize (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gay & Castano, 2010).

*Women as monsters.* Another notable portrayal of women is found in the monsters of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015). There are dozens of creatures and monsters in the game that Geralt can defeat. Many of the main evil spirits that Geralt encounters in side quests or main storylines are women who have been wronged or murdered and are now vengefully persecuting the living in fits of rage that cannot be assuaged by murder or sacrifice (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015; Gies, 2015). While both male and female evil characters exist, the male characters are predominantly large, foreboding, and powerful, eliciting fear and/or respect from their opponents, such as the severely armored magical soldiers of the Wild Hunt (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). In contrast, the female evil characters use sex or manipulation to get what they want, and are often portrayed as vile, disgusting creatures who still bare their breasts or pretend to be beautiful to trick men (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015).

This is further evidenced in the trailers that aired to advertise the *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015). One trailer entitled “A Night to Remember” depicts a beautiful woman confronted by Geralt (GameSpot, 2015). She begins to undress, revealing her breasts, and then turns into a monster and runs from Geralt (GameSpot, 2015). Her body is hideous and monster-like, but still in the form of a naked woman with wild hair. The fight scene between Geralt and the monster is extensive, and he eventually beats her through a combination of magic and swordsmanship (GameSpot, 2015). The end of the trailer shows the mutilated monster crawling away to die, with Geralt falling beside her, exhausted. She transforms back into a beautiful but mangled naked woman with large wounds in her back and a severed arm, though her buttocks appear perfectly shapely and unmarred (GameSpot, 2015). The shot closes in to show her young, still beautiful face with open, dead eyes and bloody mouth (GameSpot, 2015).

***Female treatment.*** Within *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), the treatment of male and female characters is noticeably different. Grayson (2015) noted the clear presence of gender inequality stating that “women in the game are used, abused, and pigeonholed into ‘traditional’ roles just for, well, being women—sometimes to a point where it started to wear on me as a player” (para. 10). When walking through the streets you can hear men talking about women, from their body parts to what the men would like to do to them (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). For example, “you can learn a lot with two large tits in your hands,” “bitch is in a proper fury; needs a man,” “one wench under my roof is too much already,” and “I swear it on the great mother’s tits” (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). Additionally, the term “whore” is commonly used as an insult or to denote anything distasteful (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015).



One female supporting character, Ves, is scolded by her senior officer, Vernon Roche, for going into battle with her “shirt open” and her “whatnot” exposed (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). This interaction, while demonstrating that the developers understand the impracticality of how they dress their female characters, also points out that if not for facing battle, Ves—the only female soldier in her regiment—would be dressed appropriately as most of the other women in and out of battle wear similar clothing. The scene also stands out because it is a man telling a woman what to wear, scolding her for clothing decisions made for her by a male-driven development company, for a male-driven audience. This is something that Gies (2015) commented on, calling it “truly worthy of eye-rolling” and “really the snake eating its own tail of video game sexism in a game where a significant portion of its speaking female characters are similarly and impractically exposed” (Gies, 2015).

The principal NPCs Yennefer and Triss are both powerful sorceresses that each help Geralt in his quest to find Ciri while Geralt, in turn, helps the women in their own missions (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Yet even these women, with more complete personalities and personal agendas, are treated as sexual objects and portrayed negatively for their emotional responses and weakness (Gies, 2015). For example, Yennefer is harassed by local men in a tavern where she is staying. The men call Yennefer “whore” and “witch” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). They also insult Geralt, calling him a “freak” because Witchers have mutated genes and are generally feared (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). It is notable that while both characters are insulted, the insults directed at the male character refer to his magical abilities and genetic mutations, which the

villagers fear and do not understand, while insults used on the female character are personal and sexual.

Ciri is subject to similar treatment when fighting. She is called “cunt,” “bitch,” and “whore” by the henchmen and told to get “on your knees,” but when Geralt fights the same group he is called a “fool” once and after that not addressed at all (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Even Ciri’s male friend, Dandelion, who is too frightened to fight and much less powerful than she is, makes idle threats like “if they hurt you, they’ll pay” despite his refusal to face the enemy and knowledge of Ciri’s training and skill in combat (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Triss Merigold also receives this treatment, with male characters commenting on her beauty, telling her to be careful in the streets, and feigning protection by telling other men “that’s no way to talk to a lady” despite Triss’ proven bravery, endurance, and strong magical powers (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Other women are told not to cry because “it tarnishes your beauty” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt and other male characters do not receive the same treatment or warnings.

Geralt himself accuses Yennefer and Triss of “showing their claws” on different occasions (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Additionally, if the player chooses to have Geralt profess his love for Triss, she is convinced to stay with him instead of leaving the country with the other persecuted mages. When she surprises him by being on the docks and not on the departing ship, Geralt can say to her “Good thing women are changeable” to which she has no reply and a romantic, sexual scene follows (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). As part of that romantic scene, and depending on the player’s choices, Geralt and Triss dream about their future together. Triss says that Geralt would be allowed to take Witcher contracts every now and then to maintain his skills, but “nothing

too dangerous so I don't need to worry" and further states that "I'd be waiting for you" at home, with a romantic dinner on the stove (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). While there is nothing inherently wrong with the future described, it seems contrary to and inconsistent with the independent character Triss was set up to portray, that she would now tell Geralt what to do, as well as choose a drastically different and sedate lifestyle separate from her interests and skills while Geralt continues to use his.

*Weakened women.* The portrayal of women in sexual or weakened positions is a common theme, even for women with strong powers or skills. One example of this contradiction is a quest entitled "Novigrad Dreaming" in which Geralt seeks help from a very powerful sorceress, Corinne Tilly (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Corinne is a oneiromancer, meaning that she sees the past and future through dreams. When Geralt first encounters Corinne, he finds her incapacitated, posed provocatively, writhing and moaning on a bed, wearing a shirt created to barely cover her nipples and skirt with wide slits up both of her thighs (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Although she is a powerful dreamer by profession, she needs Geralt to end the dream for her. Geralt can then request help from Corinne, where she dreams of his adopted daughter, Ciri (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). During Corinne's conversations with Geralt, she sits with the slit of her skirt open past her thighs, or leans forward showing her breasts, and the camera often shows her from the side, where more of her breasts are visible (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). This is a distracting choice during a scene that is supposed to provide emotional connection and history for Geralt and Ciri.

Another example is Keira Metz, a powerful sorceress who needs Geralt to rescue her from rats only to help Geralt navigate a maze-like underground cave and face down

large, evil enemies a few minutes later (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Aside from the open neckline that almost constantly reveals her areola, Keira's personality and seemingly independent character is often in flux. Keira changes from being ready to explore the cave to afraid of the enemies within, helping Geralt against her will after he ignores her protests and commands her to "hurry up" and do what he told her (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Keira is given power and the appearance of agency and independence, yet in the end she is still used as a frightened tool to help Geralt through the quest (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). She becomes someone who needs to be rescued by Geralt, and even obeys him when she does not want to (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Her strength and abilities are shown to be different from Geralt's or those of other male NPCs. She is placed in a position of power until it is too much for her and she becomes weak, fainting from the strain (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Keira then needs Geralt to hold her, even though her powers in battle were strong (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt, however, does not react in the same way. He can be badly wounded during the same fight, or use his magic, and does not easily tire or faint (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

At various times within the game, the player's perspective and control switches from Geralt to Ciri. The player then controls Ciri and plays through scenes from her story, reenacting them as Geralt learns what happened to her (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). However, her skills and abilities in combat are different from Geralt's. She can teleport across the room, which makes her agile, but her health is lower than Geralt's and she takes more damage when hit, making her much weaker than Geralt (The Witcher 3:

Wild Hunt, 2015). This is an interesting difference, given that Ciri is trained as a Witcher and kills monsters with ease.

*Violence against women.* Violence against women is used to signify the grit and cruelty of the game world, from sociopaths surrounded by murdered prostitutes, to main female characters being tortured to show their loyalty to Geralt (Gies, 2015; Grayson, 2015). The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015) is set in a medieval world and “meant to be dark, dirty fantasy” (Gies, 2015, para. 24). Yet Gies (2015) argues that given the game designer’s obvious efforts to create a detailed, believable, and distinct game world, “the inclusion of so much violence explicitly directed against women feels like a clear, disconcerting choice. It’s not just present, it’s frequently the focus” (para. 24). Gies (2015) also noted that the characters readily acknowledge the difficulty of being a woman within the game world, stating: “Characters acknowledge again and again that it's hard to be a woman there, that it's a place of violence and terror and that women must work harder to be recognized and respected. Then it kills them, over and over” (para. 21-22).

Grayson echoed the observation that sexual threats and violence are mostly directed at female characters and noted that “many characters in the game use insults and violence against women (or even corpses of women and sex workers) to paint the game world in shades of bloody red” (para. 11). He also discussed his perception that the violence used against women felt puerile and without purpose, as if its presence in the game was “cruise control for ‘edginess’” (Grayson, 2015, para. 11).

For example, Triss Merigold volunteers to help Geralt infiltrate a deadly group of witch hunters by pretending to be his hostage (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). In order for the player to maintain Geralt’s cover and gain information, the player must sit through

dialogue options while hearing Triss scream from the next room as her fingernails are being torn out (Gies, 2015; *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). This seems unnecessary, as Geralt is a powerful fighter and able to kill all the henchmen in the building, which he eventually does. After the henchmen are dead, Triss kills the leader, who had her tortured (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). Geralt then points out that they needed the leader alive, causing Triss to apologize for losing her head. The player can then choose to scold Triss for being emotional or tell her that her actions were understandable given what she'd been through (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). Triss then decides to burn the building down because she needs to "blow off some steam," again making an emotional decision compared to Geralt's rationale of burning the building to destroy the evidence (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015).

Triss and Geralt then find a spy connected to the witch hunters they just killed. The spy refuses to help them, saying that he can resist their "good cop, bad cop" ruse. When he states that Triss is the "good one, full of sympathy and sweet promises" Triss conjures lightning that she uses on the spy's genitalia (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). After receiving the information they need, Geralt chooses whether Triss kills the spy or wipes his mind. Geralt can tell Triss to kill the spy, and after doing so turn and say to her "Really showed your claws today..." (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). Triss is portrayed as making violent decisions out of emotion and targeting male genitalia. Geralt's accusations seem out of place and cruel, considering Triss' willingness to follow Geralt's orders and be tortured to help him, as well as the fact that Geralt himself killed dozens of men earlier that day, and regularly kills men during the game.

“Bloody Baron” is another quest with conflicting portrayals of women and violence (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The player encounters this storyline quest early in the game, agreeing to help the Baron find his missing wife and daughter in exchange for information about Ciri (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). It is a long quest, where the truth of the Baron’s situation is slowly revealed. Eventually, the player learns that the Baron was cruel to his wife, beating her often and chopping up the man she truly loved and feeding him to the dogs (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The Baron accepts some responsibility but also blames his wife, stating that she knew how to rile him up. The Baron is “given an opportunity to explain why she had it coming, complete with a sympathetic conversation response option to go with it” (Gies, 2015).

Geralt can verbally punish the Baron or give sympathetic answers that help excuse the Baron’s behavior and share blame with the wife (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). It is eventually revealed that the Baron’s wife was pregnant but felt disgust at the thought of carrying the Baron’s child. In desperation, she made a deal with local witches to undo the pregnancy, not realizing that instead of the pregnancy simply disappearing, she would miscarry the next time the Baron beat her (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

After this tragedy, the wife is mad with grief and flees with her daughter while the Baron is drunkenly passed out. She is taken by the witches to serve as their slave, becoming mentally unstable and feeding them children (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). This event and other information turns the wife from a victim to a monster, putting the blame on her for everything that has happened. After her mother is taken by the witches, the Baron’s daughter flees to a large city where she joins with powerful friends, the cult of the Eternal Flame, in the hopes of saving her mother. The daughter then tells

her side of the story, recounting a cruel, drunken father who often beat her mother (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

The Baron's story becomes more complicated, as his aborted daughter turns into a grotesque, fetal spirit under a curse that only the Baron can lift (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Throughout the quest, the Baron shows increased signs of penitence for not giving his aborted daughter a proper burial and seems emotional when naming and freeing her (Grayson, 2015; The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Yet the Baron continues to blackmail Geralt into helping him and tries to demand that Geralt return his wife and daughter to him (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Depending on the player's choices, the Baron may be able to help Geralt save his wife from the witches, but there are great losses of life with either outcome (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Gies (2015) commented on the Baron's story and the multiple options for the player to excuse the Baron's actions with "sympathetic conversation responses," and stated that while the story is presented well, "the message I saw it conveying was abhorrent" (Gies, 2015).

In addition to numerous in-game acts of violence against women, there are also theatrical trailers that feature Geralt rescuing beautiful women from danger, further highlighting the decision to demonstrate Geralt's bravery and skill in contrast to the frightened, helpless women who need to be saved (Gies, 2015; Grayson, 2015). One trailer begins by showing a young, beautiful woman who is "sentenced to death by hanging or torment" by soldiers (GameNewsOfficial, 2013). Her clothes are ripped and she looks terrified as soldiers beat her, calling her "cunt" and saying "do you like that, bitch?" (GameNewsOfficial, 2013). Geralt begins a monologue, talking about the types of "evil" in the world, as a soldier grabs a hammer to beat the woman with



(GameNewsOfficial, 2013). Geralt's companion, Vesemir, advises Geralt not to get involved, but Geralt decides to rescue the woman anyway. He tells the woman to "close your eyes" and then kills the soldiers (GameNewsOfficial, 2013). When the last soldier asks Geralt what he is doing, he says "killing monsters" (GameNewsOfficial, 2013).

### **Interviews and Participant Observation**

**Data analysis procedures.** The participants were first interviewed about their experiences as female gamers, their perceptions of female character portrayals, and how those portrayals affect the way that female gamers perceive themselves as well as how they perceive and interact with others (see Appendix B). The participants were then involved in a gaming interview where they played through selected scenes from the *Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015; see Appendix F) and answered questions about their experiences and perceptions of the character portrayals as well as how the portrayals may affect themselves and others (see Appendix C).

Interviews were conducted either via live video chat or in person, and all interviews were audio and video recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions that were flexible in their wording and order. This allowed me to better ask each participant about their experiences as well as follow up with questions that explored any unclear or possibly meaningful statements the participants made.

After gathering data from the document analysis, interviews, observations, and field notes I analyzed the content for specific and emerging themes related to my research questions. Coding was completed using the constant comparative method, which allowed me to methodically inspect and refine my themes as they emerged (Patton, 2002). I used

open and axial coding to identify concepts and categorize related concepts (Gallicano, 2013; Patton, 2002). I then used selective coding to identify the core variables that encompassed all of my data (Gallicano, 2013). After the coding process was complete, I triangulated my data to find themes that existed within and between my data, creating more generalizable findings (Patton, 2002).

**Participant observation.** All participants were audio and video recorded during their interviews, affording the opportunity to further document any notable affect, body language, tone of voice, or other non-verbal information. Although the participants engaged with the interviewer, expressing a normal range of emotions based on the questions or video game scenes they were talking about, some notable observations were made. These will be discussed below.

While five participants were very open about their perceptions and experiences, appearing comfortable and engaging easily during the interviews, one participant appeared more guarded in her answers. This participant would sometimes speak about what she hoped would be true instead of answering directly about her experience, saying “in *The Witcher*’s defense” and stating her intention to “give you another opinion” from those she assumed were being presented by other participants. This participant also stated her resistance to the topic and her assumption that the study was intended to “complain” about female portrayals, stating “I see gender less than other people” and asking “why does this have to be an issue? Why is it females and gaming?” However, despite the participant’s seeming resistance to the overall topic, she opened up as the interviews progressed and provided more elaborate answers.

When viewing the first scene from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), 3 participants made facial expressions of disgust or discomfort while watching Keira Metz bathe naked in front of Geralt, wrinkling their noses and narrowing their eyes. One participant groaned in anticipation of a sexual encounter; when the scene unfolded, she groaned again, saying “Not another escort mission.” She later clarified that she dreads the number of quests that require the main character to accompany and ensure the health of a weaker, often female, character to gain information or access to another part of the quest. Another participant looked confused as she watched Keira bathe, tilting her head and furrowing her eyebrows, and asked “Why?” One participant reported that she did not see anything wrong with the scene. While the scene played and she interacted with the female character, the participant showed no emotion or noticeable facial and body movement. When Keira dressed, and her nipples became apparent for the first time, five participants showed looks of confusion as well as humorous disbelief, tilting their heads in a slightly comical motion.

During the second scene, two participants chuckled when Keira remarked that Geralt would not be her first choice for a Prince Charming, but would have to do, saying “Oh well, any port in a storm” (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*). One participant also chuckled when she first saw the candlelit table in the middle of the woods, as well as when Keira told Geralt to “count to 10” as she went off to undress. The participant later clarified that it was a resigned, sarcastic laugh meaning “of course this would happen.” During the sexual encounter, two participants looked uncomfortable, tensing their facial and body muscles as the sexual encounter unfolded. Another crossed her arms during the scene, and two others looked stone-faced and hardly moved, later recounting their

discomfort in watching the scene and their hope that it would “be over soon.” Lastly, when Keira tricked Geralt and put him to sleep, two participants laughed.

The third scene from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) was the longest and most complicated, taking players from a cave to a chess club to meet a king; from a room filled with mutilated prostitutes to playing and fighting as Ciri, the female trained as a Witcher. When Ves—a female soldier with her shirt undone—first appeared, four participants shook their heads in disbelief and one made an animated thrusting motion over her chest to mimic the deep, open V of Ves’ shirt and then mimicked closing her shirt forcefully with her hands. Another participant laughed shortly, saying “This game just does not believe in shirts without cleavage.” When the participants encountered the room with Whoreson Junior surrounded by the prostitutes he had tortured and murdered, participants were noticeably affected, expressing disgust and concern in their faces. One put her hand over her mouth, saying “Oh my gosh. Oh my gosh.” Another looked nervous, her brows furrowed, as said “Okay, what’s that?!” Later, when Whoreson accused Ciri of attacking him and said that he acted in self-defense, three participants scoffed. Near the end of the scene, when playing as Ciri, one participant paused to look Ciri over, asking “Why is she wearing high-heels? She’s a warrior.”

During the fourth scene, when the participant encounters Ves again, one participant again comically mimicked closing her shirt. When Ves was scolded by Vernon Roche for her open shirt, several participants said “good” while one scoffed, later explaining that she thought it inappropriate for a man to be telling a woman to button her shirt in a game filled with open shirts designed for men to view.

In the fifth scene, four participants jumped in their seats during an explosion that caught them off-guard. At the end of the scene, when Yennefer dropped Geralt into the water using her teleportation, three of the participants laughed.

Participants did not display as many facial expressions or body movements as anticipated, especially during the gameplay. However, they did report a range of emotional reactions during the interview. While unexpected, this lack of expression can be accounted for when considering that gameplay, attending to thematic scenes, controlling the character, and learning the mechanics of playing what was for some participants an unfamiliar game, requires attention and motor control. For this reason, participants may have been allocating attention and cognitive resources to attending to the game as opposed to reacting openly to it.

**Coding.** First, I employed open coding by reading through my data multiple times and creating thematic labels that summarized chunks of related data I saw emerging from the content, supporting my themes with direct quotes (Gallicano, 2013). For example, some open codes that resulted from participant interviews were: image of what a woman is supposed to be; need to be “one of the guys”; harassment; and desensitization. Examples of open codes from the document analysis are: women with personalities; misogynistic world; open approach to sex; and objectifying clothing for women.

After open coding was completed, I began axial coding. I identified relationships between the open codes and created more accurate labels that reflected the connections among my data. These points of connection provided greater understanding of the participant’s experiences in relation to my research questions (Gallicano, 2013; Patton,

2002). Examples of axial codes are: conditional value as a female; no voice; and real-world expectations.

Once the axial coding was complete, I began selective coding by identifying the main variable that could include all my data and read through my transcripts again, purposefully coding data that related to my main variable (Gallicano, 2013).

Lastly, I used member checking by sharing initial, tentative findings with participants to ensure their plausibility (Kawulich, 2005; Patton, 2002). I also employed the use of a second coder, who was trained in the meaning and context of each axial code, and provided with sample quotations that allowed for practice coding and clarifying feedback. I chose a total of 30 participant quotes for the second coder, with three quotes chosen to represent each of the 10 axial codes. The quotes were selected because they typified the data organized under each axial code, thus coinciding with the definition of each axial code (see Appendix G for tables of participant quotes and corresponding codes). The quotes were then arranged randomly and presented to the second coder along with the axial codes.

To increase reliability and validity, I used the Cohen's kappa, which is a formula that measures agreement between two raters, accounting for the percentage of agreement due to chance (Zaiontz, 2017). When using Cohen's kappa, it is recommended that raters should achieve an agreement of .8 or more, which is considered "very good" (Zaiontz, 2017). The use of a second coder resulted in a Cohen's kappa of .91.

**Triangulation.** Once coding was completed, I compared the codes from my data sources—transcripts, observational data, field notes, and document analysis—to examine the themes that existed within and between the data sources. The process of triangulation

ensured that my understanding of the experience of female gamers was comprehensive and well-developed. The results of my triangulation revealed that each piece of data supported the other, adding to the rich descriptive of female gamers' experiences and creating a robust, whole picture that reinforced the previously discussed codes.

The completed data analysis resulted in a rich understanding of female gamers' experiences as well as the meaning, nuance, and complexity of being a female gamer and interacting with the gaming media and subculture that plays an important role in each gamer's life. The following section will discuss the research findings in relation to the research questions.

### **Findings**

In the previous section on data analysis, I described information about the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), provided opinions and observations from video game critics, and discussed the coding of participant interviews and observations. The research questions that guided my data analysis were:

1. How are female gamers influenced by representations of female characters in video games, in terms of women's gender roles and their own self-efficacy?
2. How do representations of female characters in video games influence the way female gamers perceive other gamers' expectations about women's gender roles?
3. How do female gamers' perceptions of women's gender roles and of the corresponding expectations of others affect their social interactions within the gaming culture?

The findings that emerged from the data are presented with the research question, the core variable (selective code) identified within the data related to that question, and

the themes within that variable (axial codes). Interpretations of the data and conclusions will be explored in Chapter 4. Therefore, I will only present the data here, without extrapolation.

**Character portrayals and their effect on perceptions of gender roles.** The first question that guided my research was: How are female gamers influenced by representations of female characters in video games, in terms of women's gender roles and their own self-efficacy? The open codes I found within the data show that participants perceive there is an ideal image of what a woman is supposed to be, and that something is wrong with women, and themselves as women, if they do not live up to that ideal. Participants reject typical, objectified female characters because they do not see themselves reflected in those characters or consider them role models. Participants also reject women who are not obviously strong, seeing them as representations of female stereotypes. Lastly, they reject the term "female gamer" because it is negatively associated with women who criticize female portrayals.

Instead, participants perceive the need to be "one of the guys" and prove their difference from female gamers. Participants believe that their opinions about female portrayals are not heard, and that their desires to see strong, un-sexualized female portrayals do not matter because they are not marketable. Participants are also the targets of harassment from male gamers when they voice an opinion about female portrayals, and they perceive the message that they are powerless and oppressed, in much the same way that female characters are. Lastly, participants are desensitized to the objectification and violent treatment of female characters, sometimes justifying the use of such negative portrayals. From those open codes I identified four themes, or axial codes, which are:



conditional value as a female; feminine traits and labels perceived as negative are rejected; no voice; and internalized sexism. I then found the core variable within the data that united those themes, which I identified as the invalidation of the female experience. Table 1 contains a breakdown of the open, axial, and selective codes, along with participant quotes contained in those codes.

| Table 1  |   |  |                                   |
|--|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Quotes and Codes Related to Character Portrayals and Their Effect on Perceptions of Gender Roles</i>  |   |  |                                   |
| Participant Quotes   | Open codes  | Axial Codes  | Selective Code                    |
| <p>“It's male fantasy and fan service. It's their image of what a woman's supposed to be.”</p> <p>“If you're not skinny or physically attractive then you probably don't matter.”</p> <p>“Women are designed to be weak so men can save the world.”</p>  | <p>Image of what woman is supposed to be</p> <p>Something is wrong with women/myself as a woman</p> <p>Women exist to empower male characters</p>                                   | <p>Conditional value as a female</p>                                 | <p>Invalidation of experience</p> |
| <p>“Female characters are annoying. Their design is really annoying. I don't want to be like that.”</p> <p>“It's toxic-masculine, that masculine is good and feminine is bad. That's why woman is portrayed as weak.”</p> <p>“Female gamer, I kind of hate that.”</p> <p>“It comes back with limitations.”</p> <p>“If you can't prove yourself then you're not one of them.”</p> | <p>Rejection of typical female character</p> <p>Rejection of women who are not obviously strong</p> <p>Rejection of the term “female gamer”</p> <p>Need to be “one of the guys”</p> | <p>Feminine traits and labels perceived as negative are rejected</p> |                                   |

|  |   |                            |  |
|--|---|----------------------------|--|
| <p>“Take female input seriously. . . . [instead of] dismissing it as girls who were whining.”</p> <p>“I’ve been told ‘Your opinion doesn’t matter, because you’re a woman.’”</p> <p>“[Women are] scared to bring their viewpoint up because of what might happen.”</p> <p>“[Gamers] say ‘I’m going to rape you’ and use it as a tool to suppress someone.”</p> | <p>Females are not heard</p> <p>Female ideas and desires do not matter</p> <p>Gamers are harassed for being female</p> <p>Suppression</p> | <p>No voice</p>            |  |
| <p>“You kind of desensitize to the rest of it.”</p> <p>“Maybe because I’ve been playing for a while I get numb to it.”</p> <p>“They know each other so I think it was appropriate, how he treated her.”</p>  | <p>Desensitization</p> <p>Justification</p>   | <p>Internalized sexism</p> |  |

*Conditional value as a female.* The theme of conditional value as a female pertains to the finding that the participants perceive the existence of an ideal image of what a woman is supposed to be. Based on that ideal image, participants perceive that the average woman—and therefore the participants themselves—are unsatisfactory by comparison. Participants interpret the typical female video game character as that “ideal” woman, with properties such as: represents the sexual fantasy of male gamers; has an unrealistic body size and proportions; wears inappropriately revealing, sexualized clothing; and exists to empower male characters.

Conditional value as a female was expressed through the participants’ perceptions that objectified, sexualized, and violating portrayals of females perpetuate the message that, as one participant described it, “everything is about sex and women’s value being in

their bodies.” Thus, if the only women in video games who are valued or special look like what another participant called “Barbie,” with large breasts and hips, small waists, light skin, “perfect” faces and hair, and revealing clothing, then “average women” can never matter in the same way. One participant interpreted the social message as conveying that “normal girls” are seen as not important or special enough to be warriors, main characters, or worth defending from brutalization or other mistreatment.

Participants commented on the unrealistic, objectified portrayal of female video game characters, noting “all the clichés and tropes of women put together.” One participant stated that “it’s male fantasy and fan service. It’s their image of what a woman is supposed to be.” Another participant observed that even tough or muscular women, who seem to be better portrayed than others, “are still not allowed to be a fully butch character.” The participant went on to explain that those women are still “waifu bait” which means they are portrayed as the male ideal of what a loveable and perfect woman would be. She noted that even the more masculine women are “still meant to be sexually appealing to dudes. . . . they’re still not portrayed as real people.”

Several participants also noted that Keira Metz from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) shows light wrinkling on her face but still has the “perfect” body of a much younger woman. Some participants thought the discrepancy between Keira’s facial wrinkles and “perfect” body suggested that she either “had work done or never had children.” Commenting on the same discrepancy, another participant noted that this character also “got prettier and younger” during her romance and sexual scenes. One participant noted the impact, stating “You come to expect something other than what nature actually gives, and I think that robs you of seeing the beauty in real life.”

The participants also discussed their perceptions of the inappropriately revealing and sexualized clothing found on the majority of female characters. While interacting with scenes from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) one participant asked, “Why does the clothing keep showing her nipple?” Another participant commented that the game “does not believe in shirts without cleavage” and stated that “all clothing and girl armor is ridiculous.”

Only one participant reported that she did not have “any problem” with the way the women were dressed in the game. This participant stated that the women in the game showed their breasts and other body parts because it was part of that world’s fashion, appropriate for medieval times, and part of how sorceresses would have dressed.

Participants also drew attention to the differences between armor for male and female characters in the same role (warrior, for example). One participant commented that males “wear cool armor” while females wear armor that exposes key areas, such as their breast and thighs, or as this participant noticed: “It’s missing the stomach part [...] If I’m tanking (fighting in the front lines), I will get stabbed.” Participants also observed that female clothing is usually “skin tight, showing everything.” One participant remarked that female characters with tight clothing could not realistically move or fight without ripping their clothing. She also commented on the lack of brassieres on most female characters and doubted whether their breasts would be properly supported as they fought in revealing clothing.

Another participant remarked on the tendency in video games for developers to use “blatant” excuses for objectifying clothing by giving it a purpose, such as “we’re giving her a sexy outfit because she needs to breathe through her skin.” This same theme

was noted by Patterson (2016) who wrote that fashion within *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) was inconsistent at best, with clothing for females given less care and attention than clothing for males. She also commented on the objectifying choice to give female characters some pieces of armor for battle while still revealing their chests and stomachs, which is not the case for males (Patterson, 2016).

All but one participant described the inconsistency of most female character's personalities. For example, most participants identified how women exist to empower male characters, noting that women who seem powerful and confident, helping the main character in battle, suddenly become, as some participants described it, "scared and in need of saving." One participant asked, "Is she not powerful after all? He has no fear; why does she?" Participants noted that female characters seemed to constantly need "protecting and saving from themselves" or danger, because the women exist "to empower the male character." Participants also noted the association with femininity and weakness, with one giving the example of a character who was a very skilled fighter until she "put on her dress" and suddenly could no longer fight or use her weapons with skill. The participant noted this as a "common story," saying that women become powerless so the male character "can save the world." "Even if you're good," said another participant, "you're still going to be kind of bad. And still primarily a sex object."

There were several characters within *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) that initially appeared powerful to the participants, seeming to behave as women with their own agendas. However, the participants also felt conflicted by each portrayal as they realized that the female characters became "scared" or "needy" in situations where they felt a strong woman, especially one with magic and combat skills, would have been

tough, brave, and independent. Instead, participants felt the women needed men to “talk sense into them” and “save them” from themselves, rats, and other men. For the female gamers, this sent the message that even when women are powerful and skilled, they are still weaker and less skilled than men. In addition, most participants thought the women wore impractical, revealing, or sexualized clothing that highlighted their unrealistic bodies. This felt especially discouraging to some participants who liked the idea of seeing and playing as a strong woman. Most participants noted that even the strongest sorceress was reduced to “a pair of boobs” by her clothing.

Given the above characteristics of typical female video game characters, and the understanding that they represent the ideal woman, participants noted the perception that if they did not mirror the ideal then perhaps there was something unsatisfactory about themselves and “normal” women in general. “If you’re not a white woman, something is wrong with you” said one participant. “If you’re not skinny, you’re big. If you’re constantly told that, you start to believe that yourself.” Participants noted the phenomenon in video games that “If a girl is going to be important, she has to be extra special; and she’s literally ‘The One’ in the universe.” This led participants to notice that “average women can’t drive the plot” and several asked, “can’t normal girls wield swords and be warriors? And be worthy of being cared for?” One participant talked about the difficulty of “being reduced just to your sexual, physical aspects” and described her desire to be recognized for her skills and intelligence instead of only her “big boobs.” For this participant, and others, “non-traditional beauty, or being sexy, smart, and capable is not legitimized in video games.”

Most participants commented that they felt as if “all the women exist to be looked at on some level.” Participants also felt that objectification and sexualization of female characters “reinforced” the idea that “if you’re not skinny or physically attractive then you probably don’t matter.” They recognized that it was difficult to completely disconnect themselves from the “reality” of the game world, and noticed that on different levels they “internalized some nonsense” of an unrealistic standard. Some participants reported the desire to be like the idealized characters in some way, comparing themselves to the characters and wishing they had similar characteristics or features. Some participants also reported a strong desire to be like certain female characters and experience the same fantasy situations. “It’s such a male-driven industry,” noted participants, that women get the message: “this is what people expect.”

Every participant acknowledged that the female characters they see “are not like me.” Instead, the characters are part of an idealized beauty standard that the average female gamer does not see herself reflected in. Participants stated that women in the majority of video games they play are “male fantasy,” “male fan service,” “sex toys,” “throwaway characters,” or “tools” for the male main character, and those messages are something that female gamers, despite their best efforts, “cannot 100% disconnect from.” For many female gamers, recognizing that female characters are valued for their sex appeal instead of their personality or story, and constantly hearing that there is something wrong with them—that they are not special enough to be the main character—can have a negative and unwanted impact.

*Feminine traits and labels perceived as negative are rejected.* The next theme is that of rejecting feminine traits and labels perceived as negative. The theme connects the

participant's aversion to being associated or labeled with certain traits linked to femaleness that are perceived as negative. Participants described the negative connotations they perceived to accompany the term "female" in the gaming world, such as the negativity surrounding the term "female gamer." The participants also discussed the importance placed on being accepted in a subculture that is still "male-driven," with acceptance from male gamers often following the rejection of traits or actions linked to femaleness. Some key properties of this experience are: rejection of the typical female character; rejection of traits associated with females; rejection of the term "female gamer"; and the perception that they need to be "one of the guys."

Participants rejected traits and labels considered traditionally "female" because they perceived that in video games and the gaming subculture at large, there are serious negative connotations often associated with being a female gamer or wanting to talk about the role of women in games or the gaming subculture. When participants described their experiences, all but one expressed clear aversion to the "typical" female character as described in the "Conditional value as a female" section above. All but one participant groaned during the gameplay interview as they watched what they described as the "tropes" and "clichés" of women being portrayed. Participants felt that women who are weak, needy, scared, overtly sexualized, and used as tools for the main player are perpetuating the opposite of what most female gamers desire to emulate. The participants stated a desire to be strong, smart, and confident in their sexuality; to be "the smartest person in the room" and have their abilities weighed more heavily than their sexual attractiveness. Thus, most participants had difficulty accepting characters that embodied and perpetuated what they considered to be "tropes." They expressed annoyance at seeing



so many portrayals of women they did not want to emulate, as well as disappointment in finding few female characters that could act as strong role models.

“I hate ‘needy’ female characters,” explained one participant as she described a strong negative reaction she had to a female character she initially perceived as being weak, insecure, and needy. However, the participant reported that she changed her mind about the character as the story progressed. This change of opinion prompted the participant to wonder why she had felt such hatred for the character in the beginning, and question if she was “brainwashed” to think that a strong woman could not doubt herself or need other people. “What is a strong woman?” the participant asked herself. “Is it physical strength? Is it because they’re masculine? What is it that makes us think a woman is weak or strong, or a male is weak or strong?” Other participants communicated the same question, with one participant commenting that women are portrayed as weak because the culture is full of “toxic-masculinity,” which she describes as the idea that “masculine is good; feminine is bad.”

Participants also identified an aversion to overused female tropes that portrayed women negatively: “There’s the crazy bitch one, the submissive one, the man with boobs/strong one, the sexy librarian one, and the seductive one” said a participant as she listed the tropes. “They’re often evil witches or monsters,” she continued “or abused to their death and it’s fine and dandy.” Other participants noted that women are made weak or abused to elicit male sympathy and protection, driving the story forward and “showing us the female character being nobody.”

Other participants described their irritation with the “really annoying” design of traditional female video game characters, with one participant announcing: “I don’t want

to be like that.” Participants said that they had difficulty seeing themselves in most female characters, or recognizing in those women the positive traits they wanted to embody. “There’s no role model if you’re only seeing yourself in characters that need saving or are not equal to men,” a participant remarked. Participants also discussed their desire to inhabit roles and features traditionally given to men and seen as masculine, stating that they want to be the hero. “Why can’t I save my own boyfriend?” asked one participant. Other participants wondered the same thing, asking “Is that what a woman’s role is? To be rescued? Can I not be like Link? Can’t I be like Geralt?” Another participant talked about the weakening effects of “being told over and over that you’re weak, you’re a side character, you’re not a main character.” Other participants echoed a similar feeling, noting the painful effects of believing such a message, and the desire to reject what makes them appear vulnerable, weak, and “less than” their male counterparts.

Beyond rejecting negative female traits, some participants also took issue with the term “female gamer” due to the negative connotations often associated with women in gaming. For some participants, the term is synonymous with feminist “complaining” and conveys a desire to denounce video games and argue about the roles of women. “Female gamer, I kind of hate that” said one participant, wanting to be known simply as a gamer. “It comes with limitations” said another, “and judgement.” One participant talked about the “stigma that comes with females in gaming,” stating that “when people mention women in gaming and female gamers, [...] it’s default bad. Someone’s gonna complain about a girl in the video game being portrayed wrong.” This participant believed the negative stigma so strongly that she entered the interviews with a determination to give “another perspective” in opposition to the anger and complaining she assumed would be

presented in the study. The participant also stated that she did not see gender as much as other people, and that her perspective was “why does this have to be an issue?” and “let’s just all get along.”

Other issues the participants had with the term “female gamer” came from difficult experiences with other females who called themselves gamers. “There are female gamers who hate other female gamers” said one participant, noting the aggression that can be present amongst females in the gaming subculture. Participants talked about the “fake female gamers” also known as “booth babes” who report on video games on YouTube or Twitch (online video platforms) or work at convention booths selling video games. According to participants, the negative labels originated because the women previously mentioned were chosen, based on their appearance, to sell video games to a male-driven audience and to epitomize the sexualized female characters portrayed in video games. This trend, according to participants, serves to further perpetuate the misrepresentation of real women because the average female, gamer or not, does not look like the objectified, idealized female characters or “booth babes.”

Other participants felt that females used their sexuality to profit financially or become popular online, because “there’s an audience for that.” Some participants discussed women who “use the fact that they’re a female . . . and attractive” by playing video games while broadcasting themselves live on the internet, often using “cleavage shots” by focusing the camera on their breasts, and acting in ways that could attract male viewers and inspire larger monetary donations (a common practice in video game live streams). One participant commented that getting male viewers, and their resulting monetary donations, is “a side effect of being a female in this space.” Participants

described how the actions of sexualized female gamers perpetuate the stereotypes of women already present in video games and reinforce male gamers' perception that attractive women who say they enjoy video games are either lying or manipulating men. One participant discussed the sexualized females on social media sites by noting "the women who talk about [games] are a lot like the women portrayed in the games. . . . but that is not an accurate representation of [women in] the actual gaming culture."

The participants also discussed how the presence of women who benefit from being attractive in the gaming subculture creates stigma for female gamers who are simply interested in games. Some participants note that accusing female gamers of being "fake gamer girls" delegitimizes their passion and dedication to video games. According to participants, male gamers accuse female gamers of only playing video games for internet popularity or financial gain, "especially if you're pretty."

Lastly, participants discussed the pressure to prove themselves as a "real" gamer as well as become "one of the boys." One participant talked about the "instinct" of some females to preemptively "read you a resume" of the games they play and their gaming knowledge in order to gain acceptance. She also talked about the pressure to reciprocate and prove herself as a gamer before she is "tested." Most participants noted that female gamers are expected to only enjoy "girl" games that "look pretty" and have fashion elements. Additionally, participants reported that female gamers are not expected to perform well in combat or competitive games, which further fuels their desire to prove themselves as serious and competent gamers. One participant stated that gamers will "lay into you, asking 'Are you really a gamer? What do you know about all of this?'" which increases the pressure to prove their legitimacy.

Another facet of rejecting “female” traits and labels is seen in participants’ reports of attempting to fit in with male gamers. “A lot of female gamers are brainwashed to be one of the guys,” says one participant. Another stated that if a female gamer cannot “prove” herself as a gamer, then “you’re not one of them; you’re shunned.” Being “one of the guys” is the key to having a lot of gamer friends, reported one participant. “If you start saying something like, ‘You shouldn’t be treating a woman like this,’ [male gamers] are like, ‘What? You’re no longer fun.’” Participants acknowledged that it is difficult to overcome the opinions and stigma, even amongst fellow female gamers. “Hopefully women can be more social and inclusive,” said one participant “because they know it’s harder for us than it might be for men who are doing the exact same thing.”

The idea that females who play video games are not “real” gamers was invalidating for many participants. Participants noted that female gamers have a strong desire to prove themselves as true members of their community, which originates from harassment by male gamers and the expectation that female gamers will not perform well. Given that the video game industry is male-driven, with advertisements and video games designed to appeal to the “male fantasy,” participants noted the desire to be “one of the guys” and fit in. However, according to some participants, being part of the boy’s club means not voicing opinions about female portrayals that could upset or anger male gamers and result in being harassed, threatened, or shunned.

*No voice.* The next theme that emerged from the data related to the invalidation of the female experience was that of having no voice. The theme of “no voice” relates to the participants’ experiences of not being heard or experiencing a sense of agency within the

gaming community or subculture. Key properties of this experience are: females are not heard; female desires and ideas do not matter; and gamers are harassed for being female.

The participants, as female gamers, have reportedly consumed a large variety of video games and found that the majority of stories and characters were designed for men. Participants noted that sex scenes focus on female bodies and vocalizations, female armor is created to display breasts, stomach, and thighs, and females are both eager to sleep with the main character and in need of saving by him. These features create what participants viewed as a clear message that what women want to see in games, the female perspective or female fantasy, is not important because it is not marketable. One participant working in the gaming industry discussed how women's ideas are often rejected for not being marketable enough to the male audience they are told to accommodate. For many participants, this signals that women are to be looked at and used, but otherwise ignored.

Participants talked about their understanding that "female characters are marketing tools" because "sex, male fantasy, and male fan service sells." Yet the participants, as female gamers, expressed a desire to see stories written from their perspective and point of view. "I don't want to sleep with other females," said one participant while watching the sexual scene in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015). "They keep showing a lot of her. What about the female gamers here? I see her butt; where's his butt?" While most video games have disproportionately more male than female characters, participants noted that "even the dudes are not necessarily for women" but are instead made to "empower the male player." Participants discussed their frustration that

male armor is not created for the female eye, but is intended to appeal to male players, while female armor is also meant to appeal to males.

Despite perceiving that they have no voice in a male marketplace, most participants discussed a slow shift in video games and the attempts by some developers to create more authentic and nuanced female characters. Many participants commended the efforts while noting that the majority of large developers have not noticeably embraced creating new and better female characters. The participants also noted that developers are “still falling into a lot of old tropes” and often putting forth a “face value effort versus really hiring people that know what the hell they’re talking about.” One participant mentioned the controversy that resulted when developers of the video game *Assassin’s Creed: Unity* (2014) decided not to include women as playable characters because “they’re too hard to animate” and discussed the accompanying message that women did not matter enough to bother with.

When reacting specifically to women portrayed in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), one participant noted that there were some positive aspects, such as interactions that normalized women as “just being people.” However, this participant also stated that she saw “wildly bad” portrayals as well, referencing how bothered she was by the many instances of female objectification and violation that she interacted with. Other participants felt similarly, liking some aspects of the female portrayals but on the whole describing their disappointment that, as one participant mentioned, “It almost feels like the things they did right were accidental and unintentional. Because the other stuff that they did wrong was absolutely intentional.” Participants again echoed the sentiment discussed in the section above, that if they give their opinion concerning the way a female

character is portrayed or treated, they are seen as angry, complaining, prudish, or no longer fun. Based on their past experiences, and the experiences of female gamers they know, the participants expressed the possibility that they would be shunned from their group, threatened, or harassed.

Another important factor contributing to participants' perceptions of being unheard is their experience of harassment. For some gamers, especially those playing popular cooperative online competitive games, harassment for being a woman is "constant." Participants discussed the abundance of female harassment on the internet and well as in online games, including threats against the family and lives of female gamers and developers who challenged the portrayals of women. One participant admitted that "fear keeps some women in the gaming industry from speaking up," including herself. The participant said she was scared to share her point of view "because of what might happen" while another referenced recent examples of male gamers singling out and threatening female developers when new games have issues such as graphics that do not load, poor-quality character animations, malfunctions in gameplay, or confusing user interfaces. One participant, who works in the video game industry, stated: "Gamergate is scary. Part of me is kind of afraid. If there's something wrong with your game, then they'll target the female staff."

During online gameplay, participants reported being harassed when other players discovered they were women. Harassment by male gamers has taken the form of sexually aggressive comments, questioning their skill as gamers, and accusations of using sexual favors to get ahead. Some participants reported that male gamers ask them to prove they are female by showing their breasts and continuously attempt to have cybersex with the



participants, despite having just insulted them. Several participants mentioned the fear that accompanies such harassment, noting that the internet provides anonymity for the harassers. Gamers do not use their real names or give their locations when creating online or gaming accounts. Therefore, participants perceive that they have no true means of protecting themselves or reporting the harassment.

Some participants discussed their experiences in competitive online gaming, a platform where human players fight on teams and the primary goal is to play and win against other human players. In this mode, players become more aggressive with each other, and there is a high emphasis on winning and contributing to the team. For the study participants who enjoy and excel at competitive play, being a woman is difficult. “There is more aggression toward women in high-skill competitive games” said one participant, who is ranked in the top 10% of competitive players within the games she plays and has worked hard to become a team leader and best in her class. “Teammates call me an e-whore, say that I showed my tits to guild leaders and that’s how I got there” she said. “I’ve been told ‘your opinion doesn’t matter because you’re a woman.’”

Participants who use the voice chat feature to speak with their teammates online during gameplay are harassed for being female, and notice that even males with more feminine voices are harassed. One participant reported male gamers being cruel in the game’s voice chat to “demoralize” her and other gamers who the male gamers identified as being either female, transsexual, or gay. The participant discussed the powerlessness that comes from being demoralized, especially in public, as well as the power that the male gamer has in those situations. She noted that when a popular male gamer insults a less popular gamer for being female, transsexual, or gay, “hundreds of people from that

[male gamer's] stream will come to their stream and harass them in chat." Another participant stated that she is "constantly called a faggot or asked to show my tits." One participant stated that she receives comments such as "Why the fuck is there a girl here? Did she get carried? Did she suck someone's dick?" While this participant knows that she is one of the best competitive players in the game she plays, the constant harassment still impacts her: "I will get nervous and anxious [...] I will perform less well and will feel assaulted [...] I just keep my head down. I won't speak unless I absolutely have to." Participants also talked about the "rape culture" within the gaming community, referencing how commonly gamers use the phrase "I'm going to rape you." While a participant noted that the phrase is meant to intimidate both male and female players, she also discussed the changing implication of in-game rape threats given the real-world threats that women in the gaming culture increasingly receive. As one participant stated, rape threats are used by many gamers as a "tool to suppress someone." This treatment culminates in some participants stating that they are reduced to sexual objects of aggression and feel powerless to make a difference.

Participants were quick to note that not every player they interact with will harass them. However, harassment is prevalent enough that one participant reported that she receives comments about being a woman during every game, and feels that she is "reduced to being a pair of tits, and then harassed for it." Participants pointed out that even if the harassers are in the minority of total players, their seemingly constant presence and forceful anger means the "minority is so impactful and scary." Such harassment is not only painful for participants, it is reductive and silencing. "There's so much fear as a woman in general, but also on the Internet, of bad shit happening to you"

said a participant. “Getting harassed, and the anonymity of it, there’s not really anything we can do.” Their fear, coupled with the powerless feeling of being harassed by players who seem anonymous, untouchable, and unstoppable, “causes a lot of women not to say anything. They don’t wanna be harassed; it’s supposed to be an escape for them too.”

Participants note that for many female players, the desire to “hide inside of a realm that is supposed to be an escape” is unmet, because their game community becomes another unsafe space where other members “bully you out.”

Women who work in the video game industry, said participants, are often targeted when there is an issue with a game, to the exclusion of male developers who worked on the same project. Additionally, a participant in the gaming industry reported that the ideas of women are often rejected or dismissed for not being “male” enough and women are asked to create content that fits the narrow idea of what sells to a male audience. A participant working in the gaming industry discussed how games that featured female characters were given a smaller marketing budget than male-driven titles, resulting in less representation and fewer sales. She added that female friends in the industry who present new projects with their male assistants find that male audiences talk only to the male presenter. Additionally, several participants noted that female developers and gaming executives continue to face accusations that they traded sexual favors in order to gain their positions.

Participants also feel silenced in their community because their opinions or problems are often dismissed, noting that “Female voices are not valid in the community.” When participants express a critique or problem, it is dismissed as “female whining” instead of taken into consideration; including opinions on the creation of female

characters and interactions. As one participant stated: “If women are saying ‘This is creepy; you’ve written this conversation wrong,’ take that female input seriously. It is important.” A similar issue exists in competitive or online games. When participants voice an issue with their characters or gameplay, male players say the participants do not know enough about the game, are whining, or have made a mistake. One participant noted that even male friends who do not harass her express disbelief when she discusses issues with her character. The participant noted that her teammates often assume she does not know what should be happening, is complaining due to a low score, or is imagining the issue because they “haven’t had that problem.”

Many participants discussed the perception that they are not “validated” in their skills. “I know what my numbers should look like. Just trust me!” stated one participant as she recounted a conversation with her male teammates regarding issues with the game not giving her the correct boosts and scores. The participant was eventually validated when the game company acknowledged and corrected the scoring issue. However, she noted that it “took a while” because many female gamers happened to play the character in question and many complaints were dismissed before the problem was researched.

If the participants show any emotion during a game or in an argument, they receive accusations that they are “emotionally compromised” and unable to think or act rationally. Participants perceive that their feelings are often trivialized and not respected, with one participant reporting that males have said to her: “You’re mad, so you’ve already lost this fight.” As mentioned previously, many participants eventually decide to stay quiet, choosing not to express their feelings or concerns in order to avoid negative attention and harassment.

When playing Scene Three of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015; see Appendix F), some participants reported perceiving the message that justice for the mistreatment of women is not realized unless a male becomes invested in the women personally. Participants noticed that the king within the game, as well as many NPC males and the main character, Geralt, were not upset by the regularly occurring torture and murder of dozens of women. Neither did they punish the perpetrator, a character called Whoreson Junior. Instead, the king regularly supplies the perpetrator with “fresh women” (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*). Participants noted that Geralt only expressed anger when he thought his adopted daughter, Ciri, was treated in the same manner as the other murdered women. As one participant noted, Geralt stated only that he was upset about his own daughter and not the fact that Whoreson Junior had “done these horrible things to these women.” This is not an isolated incident. Across the over 100 hours of playing the game, it was found that the overt instances of torture and murder of innocents (people who are not violent or criminal) were perpetrated against female characters, with one exception of a male character who was rescued from torture. Another participant noted: “There’s all these women just sort of scattered about, and nobody cares.” This belief that “nobody cares” when women are hurt or harassed can become internalized with repeated exposure, as seen in the next theme.

***Internalized sexism.*** The last theme I identified was that of internalized sexism. This includes the internalizing and acceptance of the male, objectifying perspective and seeing oneself as an object to be viewed. Two key properties of this theme are: desensitization to the objectification or violent treatment of female characters, and the justification or defense of such treatment. The data is connected through the theme of

internalized sexism and misogyny. This theme emerged from most participants reporting that when they interacted with video game content that objectified, violated, or demeaned female characters, they felt a mixture of negative reactions, desensitization, and the desire to defend or excuse negative behavior.

One participant in particular reported the most explicit examples of discrepant perceptions. She reported that she did not have “any problem” with how any female characters are portrayed, while also speaking about the negative impact that female portrayals could have. She then expressed concern for how male gamers’ self-esteem could be negatively impacted by hearing “judgmental” female characters state the male physical appearances they prefer. She also recognized the positive impact that playing as an “empowered male character” could have on male gamers. The participant additionally stated that games like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) are “so realistic” that people could use them as social lessons in how to treat, or not treat, people in the real world. She then stated that she did not understand why other people become upset by certain female portrayals, as all games are fantasy.

Participants directly and indirectly addressed desensitization in their interviews. When discussing the personal effect of interacting with sexualized, objectified female characters or objectifying situations, some participants admitted “I get numb to it.” They asked themselves “should I be bothered with this, as a girl?” and questioned whether they responded to the idea that a “modern woman” should not be bothered by objectification or violence against women in games. “Is it okay for her to be treated that way because she is the trope?” wondered one participant. The participants also discussed taking on the main male character’s view of the situation: “If he doesn’t react, should I react? How

horrified should I be?” Other participants discussed the tendency to “take on the attitude of the hero you’re playing” and noted that if the hero is portrayed as “in the right” then what he does to others, including women, is “probably not questioned.”

When viewing the prostitutes who were murdered and tortured in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), some participants had initial reactions of horror or discomfort but also reported that once the initial shock of the scene subsided, “You kind of desensitize to the rest of it.” Many participants noted that the women quickly became “just props” to them, no different from “barrels” or any other background object in the game. They also noted that seeing objectified and violated women in games has become “such a normalized thing” that the predictability of seeing such violence decreases the personal impact.

The participants also noticed a passive acceptance of the male viewpoint or role as being dominant. One participant recalled her reaction to the first video game she ever played, which only had male playable characters: “I remember . . . being like, ‘well, I guess I’m playing a dude.’” Another participant recalled that she often felt disappointed when she couldn’t be a male, or when she saw female characters being objectified or violated. However, she also noticed thinking “this is just the way it is, so I have to play it this way.” Most participants reported understanding that if they want to continue the gaming that they love, they are almost forced to play objectifying, male-driven games, “or there is nothing left to play.” Participants stated that to enjoy the game they are playing, they attempt to ignore negative content until the impact becomes less noticeable.

Beyond desensitization, the participants also engaged in various degrees of justification when discussing the portrayals and treatment of female characters. Several participants vacillated between critically examining the issues of female character

objectification to defending certain objectified characters. Some participants used statements such as “Yes, her poses show gratuitous T&A (a slang term for breasts and buttocks), but there’s a reason in the story for that.” When watching a scene from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) in which a female soldier is scolded by her superior officer for having her shirt unbuttoned and breasts exposed, some participants reported being happy to see the interaction, stating “It’s nice to see that a male figure wanted her to cover up.” Another participant commented that “at least they’ve addressed it, so they know it’s a thing.”

However, two participants had difficulty with the interaction, stating that creating a scene where a man reprimands one woman for her exposed breasts did not excuse the game developers’ overall choice to dress women sexually. Those participants also thought it “felt wrong” for a male character to scold a woman for her dress when it was created for the male gaze, noticing that “if she wasn’t going into battle he would have no problem with her shirt.”

Another example of justification, touched on earlier in this chapter, came from a participant who had played *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) extensively prior to the interviews. She stated that Keira Metz, the sorceress whose shirts exposed her nipples, was dressed appropriately, as “that was how sorceresses dressed.” One participant stated: “I don’t have any problem with how females are portrayed, personally. I consider all video games fantasy. If you don’t like to see a female portrayed that way, then don’t play that game.” She went on to state that the idea of female roles is a “social stereotype” and that video games need “damsels in distress” to move the plot forward. This participant also discussed her annoyance with women who “complain” about female roles in games,



saying “I don’t understand” and “it’s not real life.” However, the participant also commented that characters in games like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) are “so real and life like” that she emotionally connects to the characters and feels sympathy or sadness for them. She then stated her belief that realistic emotional interactions in video games could be social lessons for players, by “preparing” and teaching them how to treat each other in real life.

When interacting with the tortured and murdered women in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), the same participant stated that torturing women felt appropriate and realistic for a “medieval fantasy setting.” When commenting on her initial discomfort with how a male character demeaned, objectified, and mistreated a female character, the participant defended the actions, stating: “They have a history and they know each other so I think it was appropriate, how he treated her.” She continued to explain that if players did not know from previous games or books associated with *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) that the characters had met before, they would think the female character was being mistreated. Since the participant knew they had met in a previous game, she did not see an issue with the male character objectifying or demeaning the female character.

Other participants echoed some of the same ideas, commenting that the male character’s mistreatment of a female character was negative but “fine.” They also noted that some women who are mistreated have at least one male who feels “protective” of them or comments on what happened, which seemed to make the situation “feel better.” Participants also excused female mistreatment, as in a scene from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* where Ciri is being attacked by male henchmen while attempting to rescue her friend from torture. When Ciri was called “cunt” and “bitch,” and told to “get on your

knees,” one participant thought it was appropriate behavior given that Ciri was the one breaking into the enemy hideout to rescue her friend.

Another component of internalized sexism was evidenced in the duality of the participants who said that female objectification did not affect them personally, but also talked about “other women” who were impacted by it. One participant, who said that she had no problem with female objectification, said that game characters were “not real life” and therefore did not have an impact on women. However, the participant also talked about the tendency for women to compare themselves to video game characters and desire to emulate them, going as far as getting plastic surgery to become like that character, or strongly desiring to live in the fantasy that character lives in. The same participant also discussed her frustration with unrealistic depictions of transgendered individuals and wondered if negative male character portrayals would adversely affect how males see themselves. She also imagined the benefit to men of playing as empowered males, stating how they would “feel good about going into the game knowing they’re going to [...] be playing as this empowered male character.” The participant also expressed concern that men who heard a female character talk about what she likes in a man might feel judged, doubt themselves, and wonder if they should be like that idealized male character in order to be accepted or wanted.

***Invalidation of the female experience.*** The core variable I found within the data was the invalidation of the female experience. Participants reported perceiving that their worth as women, female traits, voice, and opinions were not validated within the gaming community. This lack of value caused most participants to report a desire to distance themselves from the stereotypical “female” gamer and prove their worth as gamers in a

male-dominated community. However, participants also reported that their voices are not heard in the gaming community and they often feel unsafe when harassed by male gamers. Lastly, many participants discussed a desensitization effect that decreased their reaction to and discomfort with objectified or violated female character portrayals. Some participants also justified negative female portrayals, while one participant expressed disapproval of women who voice criticism or concern about female portrayals.

**Effect of character portrayals on others' expectations about gender roles.**

The second question that guided my research was: How do representations of female characters in video games influence the way female gamers perceive other gamers' expectations about women's gender roles? I identified open codes within the data that revealed participants' perceptions that female gamers are expected to choose characters that are healers or support, do not fight, and are created for looks, not usability. Participants also perceived the expectation that female gamers lack skill, need protecting, and use sex to get what they want, just as female characters do. There is also the expectation that, like female characters, female gamers' value is in their appearance. Participants perceived the expectation that traits associated with being feminine are inferior, that showing emotion as a woman discounts the validity of the opinion being expressed, and that women can be abused. From those open codes, three themes emerged. Those themes are: in-game expectations; real-world expectations; and masculine superiority. I then identified the core variable within the data as the existence of negative and unrealistic views of women. Table 2 contains an itemization of the open, axial, and selective codes, accompanied by participant quotes.

| Table 2   |  |                                |  |
|---|--|--------------------------------|--|
| <i>Quotes and Codes Related to Effect of Character Portrayals on Others' Expectations About Gender Roles</i>  |  |                                |  |
| Participant Quotes  | Open code  | Axial Codes                    | Selective Code   |
| <p>“We’re the healer and support.”</p> <p>“A guy . . . was like ‘You’re not a girl, you care about stats. Girls only care about outfits and how cute they look.’”</p> <p>“They’re stupid, they’re reckless. They need to be protected. They can’t protect themselves.”</p> <p>“Just ‘Okay, I’m cute, you saved me; I’ll let you have sex.’”</p>   | <p>Women are only healers or support characters</p> <p>Women want characters to be attractive, not powerful</p> <p>Women lack skill and need protecting</p> <p>Sex used as tool and reward</p>                                     | <p>In-game expectations</p>    | <p>Perception of negative and unrealistic views of women</p> |
| <p>“They think that women are supposed to look a certain way, and so they want that certain type of woman.”</p> <p>“She’s a sexy woman. And she’s the only woman. She’s done something to make herself valuable to them—she still is a trophy.”</p> <p>“It’s like women get their way by sleeping around.”</p> <p>“Guys think that this is how you’re supposed to treat the woman.”</p> <p>“Portrayed that it’s okay to abuse women.”</p> | <p>Women in the real world are supposed to be like the idealized fantasy character</p> <p>Women are valued for their appearance</p> <p>Women are expected to use sex to get what they want</p> <p>It is okay to mistreat women</p> | <p>Real-world expectations</p> |  |
| <p>“Most [female characters] are treated as less than; not as equal.”</p>   | <p>Masculine is good and feminine is bad</p>   | <p>Masculine superiority</p>   |  |

|  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p>“Men in my life have been like ‘Well, you're mad, so you've already lost this fight.’ I'm not emotionally compromised.”</p> | <p>Women are compromised by their emotions</p>       |  |  |
| <p>“See women like that as bitchy. They don't see her strength, just that she's difficult.”</p>                                | <p>Feminine characteristics are weak or negative</p> |  |  |
| <p>“Female aggression and sexual aggression is always gold-digging, suspicious.”</p>   |  |  |  |

*In-game expectations.* The theme of in-game expectations refers to the participants’ understanding that certain expectations exist for female gamers within the gaming community, particularly when playing games. The key properties within this theme are: role as healer and support character; character created for looks, not stats; women lack skill; need protecting; and sex used as tool and reward.

Many participants described an explicit expectation that female gamers play healer or support characters that stay away from the frontlines of battle, instead of choosing warriors or other fighting and damage dealing roles. According to some participants, men will ask if the participants play a long-range character (someone who fights away from the frontlines) simply because they want to stay in the back. “Most guys think that women are shy and submissive, and they want to play a healer” stated one participant. Another mentioned a label called “heal slut” where a support or healing character is submissive to a male “tank” character (someone who deals high damage) and behaves as a “yes woman” who does whatever the tank commands. For many participants, this creates the expectation that every woman playing a healer will submit to the male damage dealing character. Other participants reported being questioned by men

who make statements such as “Are you really a girl? You’re playing tank. You’re just pretending to be a girl.”

There is also the expectation, stated by most participants, that female gamers will be less skilled than males, know less about their characters or game mechanics, and not care about competition or being the best at their role. One participant recalled a male player who said “You’re not a girl; you care about stats. Girls only care about outfits and how cute they look.” Other participants recounted similar experiences of male gamers telling them that “women only like games with dating.” One participant discussed her incensed reaction to statements such as “of course you play a woman and a healer; you’re a girl,” stating that her inner response is: “I just like to shoot aliens. How dare you.”

Participants also described the expectation that female gamers “need protecting” or extra care and explanation, just as the female characters in many games require: “They’re stupid, they’re reckless. They need to be protected. They can’t protect themselves.” Other participants commented on the perception that female gamers need to be helped along, or “carried.” “There’s the young, giggling character who looks like an adolescent girl, but sexual” stated one participant. “She always needs help or acts like she doesn’t know very much.” However, many participants noted that male gamers often play as female characters when possible, “probably because they like staring at a nice butt.”

Some participants find there is an expectation that women will trade sexual favors or cybersex for in-game currency and items. According to participants, males use online chat and voice options to both harass female players and ask them for cybersex, berating participants for “pretending to be a girl” and then asking them for sexual favors. One participant stated that she knows of women who have cybersex with men for rare,

expensive in-game items. Others noted that the expectation for women to trade sex for goods is so prevalent that a male or female gamer could simply say, “I’m a girl, give me stuff” in order to receive the rare item they desire. However, participants stated that there are large implications as well, with male gamers often accusing female gamers of trading sexual favors to gain entry to certain teams or ranks, despite how skilled the female player is. This expectation has real-world consequences for participants, which will be discussed next.

*Real-world expectations.* The next theme that emerged from the data pertains to real-world expectations placed on female gamers within the gaming subculture. The key properties within this theme include: wanting and expecting the idealized fantasy woman in real life; valuing women for their appearance; expecting women to use sex to get what they want; blaming women for mistakes; and assuming it is okay to mistreat women.

The theme of real-world expectations emerged from participant descriptions of the expectations they face when interacting with other gamers. In the world outside of video games, male and female gamers interact through voice-chat, messaging, social media platforms, live streaming on video games, gaming and anime conventions or other events, and other social means.

Participants noted that because the gaming industry is male-driven, and male fantasy sells, female gamers conclude that “if you’re a guy, you like big boobs and skimpy ladies.” For participants, this creates the message that men want an idealized, unrealistic woman, and that some men objectify women in the same way they objectify female characters. “They always make fun of the girl’s boobs,” stated one participant when discussing how males, in real life and as characters, laugh at animations that depict

large, “bouncing” breasts. Participants also mentioned the abundance of situations where a male character humorously tries to look up a female character’s skirt or touch her breasts. Another noted that objectifying female portrayals, and the way male players and characters react to them, creates “an unrealistic expectation about what a woman should look like, and not near enough about what a true woman is and what she brings to the world in general. And I think that brings disappointment to both genders.”

Another participant recounted conflict with a past boyfriend who developed an obsession with a female video game character and wanted the participant to dress and behave like the character in real life. Other participants spoke of similar situations, where male gamers became immersed in the gaming world to the degree that “what they look for in the real world falls short.” The participant went on to explain that “most men” play video games and expect women in the real world to have “the big boobs, the small waist, the big hips” that the female characters have: “They think women are supposed to look a certain way, so they want that certain type of woman. . . . That’s what they expect women to be, and it’s not at all what women are.” Participants noted that characters in many popular video games are designed to “look like a real person,” which “plays with your mind” and causes both men and women to expect video game “perfection” in the real world and feel deep “disappointment” when they do not find it. Another participant described male gamers she knows who do not understand “what a real woman is.” She stated that many male gamers “want the women they see in the video games. And they find themselves to be in their 30’s and still alone. Because that woman doesn’t exist.”

Participants also expressed concern that interacting with objectified and violated women in video games, especially when that behavior is accepted by the main male



character, “creates a very dangerous mindset in a man, that women are okay with things like this.” Some participants reported the belief that “it perpetuates a very scary mentality of the way men can treat women.” As an example of this, one participant discussed the dangers of going to gaming events without other women, because “guys will grope the girls, and the others won’t stop him. No one helps her.”

Many participants reported that games which employ the tropes of women as emotional, vindictive, manipulative, and unreasonable serve to reinforce the already present real-world female stereotype. Participants noted that women are often accused of being “emotional and difficult,” as well as “manipulative and untrustworthy” and incapable of making good decisions or being reasonable when they are upset. When discussing Scene Five from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015; see Appendix F), in which Yennefer became jealous and angry at Geralt, participants noted that watching the scene strengthened the idea that women are “moody, bitchy, and not worth apologizing to.” One participant added that men might think “even if I wronged them, [women] shouldn’t be mad at me,” which parallels comments she has received from male gamers in real life.

Some participants noted that the male character, Geralt, “mocked and trivialized” Yennefer’s feelings. One described the possibility that because gamers take on Geralt’s male perspective, they may not question his cruelty. The participant further described her reasoning that Geralt is the “hero” of the game and his reactions are therefore viewed as correct, sending the message that “I can still be the hero and treat women this way.” Some participants made a more direct connection, describing how their opinions or emotions had been invalidated by males in real life, explicitly because they were women.

As noted previously, participants have found that male gamers expect women to use sexual appeal or sexual favors to get what they want. One participant, who works in the gaming industry, noted that often when women are promoted, men comment that the woman slept with someone to get the position: “Sleeping with someone. That's what people say about a woman who gets anything.”

For many participants, the culmination of spoken and perceived male expectations has a real-world effect. One participant described how her interactions with male gamers are affected by knowing that they play video games and her assumption that they “have this [negative] perception of women based on what they see in video games.” Another participant stated that she is wary of male gamers until she has learned more about them: “I know what kind of messed up things could be in his mind. . . . I recognize that these gamer guys are potentially the people that are not going to be able to ‘just look.’”

However, participants also expressed the understanding that many male gamers are “respectful” and “can tell the difference between fantasy and real life” enough to understand that what they see in games cannot and should not be mirrored in real interactions. Yet many participants still noted the large presence of vocally misogynist male gamers, which causes many to act cautiously. One participant explained her reason for being cautious by stating: “Games are a gamer’s primary media of consumption, and for many guys the most intimate connection they have is with a fake woman.” For that reason alone, stated some participants, women must be portrayed better.

***Masculine superiority.*** The last theme that emerged related to female gamers’ perceptions that men hold negative and unrealistic views of women, was that of masculine superiority. This term refers to the idea that, as one participant expressed:

“masculine is good; feminine is bad.” This sentiment appeared earlier in this section, but is addressed here as a separate theme because it affects not only how female gamers perceive their roles, but also how they perceive the expectations of others, namely male gamers. The properties of this theme are: belief that masculine is good and feminine is bad; belief that women are compromised by their emotions; and belief that feminine characteristics are weak or negative.

Participants stated the perception that female characters exist “to empower the male character” and that traits such as physical strength, prowess, and courage are considered masculine and associated with male characters. In contrast, participants reported that female characters are usually “treated as less than; not as equal.” Participants again noted that when women play as female characters online, male players assume it is because they “don’t want to fight” or think the character “looks pretty.” Several participants reported the perception that enjoying aesthetic properties in games or desiring to play characters that do not appear “tough” signals that they are less serious about their gaming experience and their opinions are less important.

When discussing scenes from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), as well as other video games where women were shown to be emotional by “throwing fits” and “overreacting,” some participants noted that males may “see women like that as bitchy. They don’t see her strength, just that she’s difficult” and therefore needs to explain or justify her feelings. Participants also perceived that emotions such as sadness, grief, jealousy, fear, and anger are diminished in interactions with male gamers and used as insults. They reported that other players who sound feminine, whether they are women or not, are called “gay” by other players. In addition, participants stated that men who play

as healers—a class arbitrarily assumed to be played by females who want to avoid fighting on the frontlines—are challenged by male players, with insults such as: “You’re playing a healer and you’re a dude? You must be a faggot.”

As one participant indicated, traits like sexual aggression are prized in males but not females. In Scene Two of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015; see Appendix F), Keira Metz and Geralt have a romantic dinner and sexual encounter. Keira then tricks Geralt by putting him to sleep so she can steal important papers. Some participants expressed frustration with the portrayal of Keira, lamenting that what could have been a display of feminine power and confidence was undermined by Keira’s portrayal as a stereotypically “manipulative” woman. One participant remarked that Keira’s deception was “unfortunate, because it takes a really nice, powerful thing (females owning their sexuality) and makes it into ‘she just slept with me because she wanted to get information and betray me.’” Several participants also described their perception that the scene and others like it reinforced the idea that “if a woman wants to sleep with you, and you don’t have to chase her, she’s a slut or she wants something.” Another participant stated that scenes of female sexuality and exploitation “reinforces the idea that women are not naturally sexually aggressive.” Some participants echoed similar perceptions, stating that female aggression and sexual aggression are “suspicious” and seen as attempts at “gold-digging,” instead of indications that women have desires they wish to fulfill. One participant reported being hesitant with men she is attracted to, knowing that negative expectations exist: “I don’t wanna be sexually aggressive because it’s negative and it’s bad and it leads to guys thinking of me as a slut, or someone who’s trying to get something.”

*Perception of negative and unrealistic views of women.* The core variable I found within the data was the perception that male gamers hold negative and unrealistic views of women and their roles. Participants described the expectation of male gamers that women in the real world can be objectified or mistreated, like the characters in most video games. Participants also reported being expected to be less skilled in games, hold submissive roles, and only enjoy games that are “pretty” and have little combat. Participants also perceive that male gamers expect women to trade sexual favors for in-game rewards and real-world positions within the gaming industry. Most participants also described situations in which they were devalued for being women or showing emotion.

**Perceptions of gender roles and expectations and their effect on social interactions.** My third research question was: How do female gamers’ perceptions of women’s gender roles and of the corresponding expectations of others affect their social interactions within the gaming culture? The open codes I identified revealed that when participants interact with others in the gaming subculture, they behave in ways that help them avoid harassment and maintain physical and emotional safety, often by finding other female gamers to interact with. Participants reported consciously choosing to ignore negativity as much as they can, in order to better enjoy their experiences with other gamers. Participants also discussed learning what behaviors and comments are more acceptable within the gaming subculture, and using those to help them gain acceptance as “one of the guys.” As part of the gaming subculture and industry, participants stated the need to work twice as hard as their male counterparts to fight for and maintain their positions in the community, control their emotions, and be valued for their intellect and personality instead of their sexual appeal. From the open codes, three themes emerged:

protect well-being; fit in; and prove merit. The core variable that emerged to organize the data was: survival. Table 3 displays the open, axial, and selective codes, as well as participant quotes.

| Table 3  |  |                           |                 |
|--|--|---------------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Quotes and Codes Related to Perceptions of Gender Roles and Expectations and Their Effect on Social Interactions</i>  |  |                           |                 |
| Participant Quotes   | Open code  | Axial Codes               | Selective Code  |
| <p>“Speaking up gets you so much negative attention, it’s almost better not to speak up.”</p> <p>“I don’t go to things where I know I have to worry about being groped.”</p> <p>“I . . . started reaching out for other female gamers . . . and a lot of [female gamers] don’t want to play with strangers anymore.”</p> <p>“Put your blinders on, ignore everybody else, and just persevere.”</p> | <p>Avoid harassment</p> <p>Guard safety</p> <p>Find other female gamers</p> <p>Ignore negative interactions, female portrayals, and comments</p> | <p>Protect well-being</p> | <p>Survival</p> |
| <p>“If you wanna have a lot of friends, especially male friends, you have to be one of the guys. It's like entering a boy's club, really.”</p> <p>“If you start saying something like, ‘You shouldn’t be treating a woman like this,’ they're like, ‘What? You're no longer fun.’”</p>   | <p>Be one of the guys</p> <p>Learn what female gamers should not do</p>  | <p>Fit in</p>             |                 |
| <p>“[Women] have to work twice as hard and they need to be on guard all the time.”</p> <p>“I had to fight tooth and nail.”</p>   | <p>Work twice as hard as men to get the same outcome</p> <p>Fight for position</p>   | <p>Prove merit</p>        |                 |

|   |                           |  |  |
|---|---------------------------|--|--|
| <p>“Makes you want to stay in control, knowing men expect [women to be emotional and lose control].”</p>  | <p>Control emotions</p>   |  |  |
| <p>“Being reduced just to your sexual, physical aspect was such a difficult thing. So being able to be like “I’m this, but I’m also the smartest person in the room, and that being valid.”</p> | <p>Be valued for self</p> |  |  |

**Protect well-being.** The theme of protecting one’s well-being emerged as participants discussed ways that their interactions with gamers, especially male gamers, are affected by the need to protect themselves physically, mentally, and emotionally, with properties such as: avoiding harassment; guarding safety; finding other female gamers; and ignoring negative interactions, female portrayals, or comments.

Given that online harassment is a constant reality for women who play online games with competitive, text chat, or voice chat features that allow gamers to communicate with each other, many participants have learned how to avoid harassment. One participant plays as male characters to avoid harassment, stating that “Sometimes I make super ugly female characters. She’s not cute and demure looking, for anybody to harass her.” Participants reported avoiding the use of voice chat, especially in the presence of an actively aggressive male player. If voice chat is needed, participants stated that they mute or block harassers. Even when participants know their input could potentially help their team, as one participant put it: “Speaking up gets you so much negative attention, it’s almost better not to speak up. Even if you lose the game, at least then you’re not also crying and upset.” Another participant reported that she will choose “masculine or neutral” screen names and user handles to avoid unwanted comments from

male gamers. It also helps, said some participants, to choose games where friends can choose to play together or join the same team. One participant noted that “female gamers don’t want to play with strangers anymore,” and will actively look for other female gamers in the hopes they will be more inclusive and social, recognizing how hard it is for females in the gaming community.

Some participants also stated that it is safer to go to gaming events in a group, because “harassment happens” and most of the time participants feel unable to stop the harassment or find support from others, even when being groped. One participant noted that her male friends become angry on her behalf, shocked that harassment happens, and want to know why the participant is not angrier at her mistreatment. The participant stated that “getting angry is not going to help. It takes a lot of energy to be angry when I can put that towards the game or something else.” Participants reported that they purposefully choose to ignore the bad behavior of others whenever possible, attempting not to feel affected by it. Another participant stated that she recognizes “toxic” behavior and is careful to avoid places or gatherings where she might be unsafe: “I don’t go to things where I know I have to worry about being groped.” Many participants reported that they choose to “move along and hope I don’t see more of this,” realizing that if they want to play the games they love and gain the positive experience they desire, they must learn to ignore negative input that would compromise their experience. As one participant stated, “Put your blinders on, ignore everybody else, and just persevere, or you won’t play because you’re not getting that positive experience out of it.”

For some participants, playing their favorite games recreationally—in smaller amounts or without intense competitive aspects—reduces emotional and mental stress.



One participant discussed her choice to “just play as a hobby” and stated her belief that it helped her maintain emotional and cognitive distance from the game content. Other participants reported that they have chosen to divide their gameplay, supplementing intense or competitive play with offline games or more accepting game communities, providing a needed break from the negative aspects of gaming. Other participants described their choice to occasionally play simpler games designed to appeal to a wider audience: “I just play as a little girl and I don’t have to worry about sexualization or objectification or anything. I just have fun. I missed that.” Participants stated that when they “choose games carefully” and purposefully decide which individual gamers or gaming communities they interact with, they enjoy their gaming experience more and have a greater sense of personal safety.

Lastly, participants discussed using positive coping skills during gameplay or interactions with gamers. Participants attempt to let negative interactions “roll off your shoulders” and tell themselves that they are going to enjoy the game, despite their disappointment with limited or restrictive female character options. Participants also remind themselves that the gaming community consists of many positive and kind gamers, and purposefully connect with family influences that bring them strength. One participant described the positive influence of growing up in the presence of “strong female roles.” She discussed drawing on those experiences as an adult, using them to create some separation between the objectified female portrayals in video games and her own sense of self. Many participants voiced the understanding that the gaming community can be safe and accepting, “depending on who you talk to and where you go.” Unfortunately, they also noted that most of their favorite games and events come with a

high price and if they want to avoid harassment, objectification, and other negative behaviors, they would have to leave the games and experiences they love.

*Fit in.* For participants, the theme of fitting in means understanding how to interact with other gamers who see the world differently than they do, or reject the idea that objectification and sexualization of female characters is a problem. The key properties of this theme are: being one of the guys and learning what not to do.

Participants described “fitting in” with other gamers as an important element of participating in the gaming subculture. This desire to be a part of their community is complicated by their awareness that the treatment and portrayal of females within video games and the gaming community is a tense subject that is often the catalyst of violence against women. All but one of the participants described strong reactions and opinions regarding the predominantly objectified portrayals of women. They also described the understanding that voicing thoughts or opinions that did not align with those of male gamers, giving strategic suggestions during gameplay, or expressing feelings make them targets for harassment and possible violence.

All but one participant noted that the portrayal and treatment of female characters in video games like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and others send a message about how women should behave in order to be accepted by their male-dominated community. When discussing Scene Two of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015; see Appendix F), one participant noted that seeing female characters portrayed negatively—in this case, using their feminine, sexual influence to manipulate men—made her feel that the portrayal is a cautionary tale for women. The participant discussed how the way in which a female character’s behavior—in this instance, sexual confidence—is portrayed sends a message

to women about how they are viewed by men: “A woman could watch this and feel it’s teaching them how not to behave.”

Other participants described themselves reacting to the “boy’s club” mentality of the gaming community: “If you want to have a lot of friends, especially male friends, you have to be one of the guys. It’s like entering a boy’s club, really.” Thus, participants reported that they, and other female gamers, decide not to voice many of their opinions about female character portrayals. Some participants said that speaking up was not worth the trouble, while others recognized that “speaking out” often means “being shunned” or becoming the “prude who is no longer fun.” One participant recognized that those who aren’t comfortable with sexualized females are sometimes viewed as less in-touch with their own sexuality or less comfortable in their own bodies. Another participant echoed this view, noting that critiquing female objectification is often used against female gamers; they are accused of being unattractive and jealous of the idealized characters, causing them to hesitate before expressing an opinion for which they will be labeled.

Other participants recognized that many female gamers, themselves included, have strong desires to emulate their favorite characters or have the same fantastical experiences. Participants noted that the strong desire to become a favorite character inspires female gamers to mimic what they see in games, finding others who enjoy the same game or character and also want to escape into another role or world. One participant described it as taking the “feeling they had in the game and going back to it in the real world.” While participants noted that this can be an unhealthy desire, causing some gamers to live more in fantasy than reality, they also described the feeling of safety and camaraderie that can be difficult to experience without other gamers.

*Prove merit.* The theme of proving one's merit emerged in reference to participants' reports of how difficult it is for females to be promoted or taken seriously in the gaming industry or subculture. Participants described that in order to "earn" or maintain a place in the male-dominated gaming community, they "have to work twice as hard and be on guard all the time." The key properties of this theme are: work twice as hard as men; fight for position; control emotions; and be valued for self.

Participants stated that the gaming subculture is "male-dominated" and that women who hold any positions of power are often threatened or accused of manipulation and "using sex to get what they want." Therefore, participants described the need to work harder than their male counterparts in order to gain the respect and positions they want. Even still, noted one participant, women often do not receive credit for the good work they do and are frequently blamed for anything that goes wrong.

One participant who plays competitive games described the experience of becoming a female leader in a male-driven competitive game, stating that she "had to fight tooth and nail" until she earned a high position within her guild. The participant reported that even after she had earned her position, she faced constant sexual harassment from male gamers who questioned her skills and abilities because she was a woman. Her solution was to aim for "a high-end, professional raiding guild" that required even more skill and discipline than the position she held at the time. The participant "pushed" herself even harder, working to become a high-ranked leader, officer within her guild (in-game association), and in the top one percent of players in the game. Yet she was, and is, still harassed and male gamers continue to question her skills and accuse her of using sexual favors to gain her position.

Participants also reported the desire to work harder at controlling their emotions around male gamers—especially if the males play video games featuring objectified and mistreated women, or voice their disapproval of women who show emotion. Participants described the perception that emotional women are “weak, manipulative, and unreasonable” and noted their response to those misperceptions. One participant stated how knowing that male gamers may have false impressions of women and emotional expression created a desire in her to “stay in control.” Other participants expressed a similar idea, reporting that they attempt to “be stronger” around male gamers and remain “more composed,” hoping to counteract any negative perceptions.

Lastly, several participants observed that when a woman is not “traditionally attractive” or does not look like the objectified female characters so prevalent in video games, they must to work hard to be valued. Participants reported “pushing” themselves to be funny, smart, entertaining, and fun to be with. One participant described the difficulty in being “reduced to just your sexual, physical aspect” and her struggle to be recognized for her intelligence instead of her body. As one participant observed, girls are taught “not to value a guy for his body, but to value his kindness towards us or his personality.” The participant explained that while she might think a man is “hot” she would not consider dating him “if he’s annoying.” However, participants noted that males often receive a different message. One participant commented on the likelihood that males will desire females for their appearance more than their personality or intelligence. She recalled hearing males say, “I might date her if she’s hot enough.” Participants recognized and questioned the power of female physical appearance, with one participant commenting: “It’s a weird thing that [men] can bypass so many personality traits because

of physical attractiveness.” Thus, participants perceived that they must work harder to be seen for who they really are and to feel that it is “enough” to be valued.

*Survival.* The core variable I found within the data for research question three was that of survival. Participants described their strategies for coping with negativity and harassment and protecting their well-being. Most participants also described the need to fit in by being “one of the guys” and learning what actions result in harassment or shunning. Lastly, participants discussed the need to work twice as hard as men to prove their worth in gameplay, within the gaming industry, and as people.

### **Summary**

The data used in this study was collected through participant interviews, participant observations, and document analysis and critiques of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015). The data was coded using open, axial, and selective coding to ensure a reliable and comprehensive understanding of the experience of female gamers is established. The findings from the data analysis were then presented without interpretation or explanation, which will be covered in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

The findings of this study first indicate that the representations of female characters in video games affects how female gamers perceive their roles and self-efficacy, causing them to feel their experiences as female gamers are invalidated. Second, the findings of this study indicate that female character portrayals influence the way female gamers perceive other gamers' expectations of women and their roles, creating a perception that male gamers have unrealistic and negative views of women. Third, findings indicate that female gamers' social interactions within the gaming community are affected by their perceptions of women's gender roles and the expectations of others, causing female gamers to employ strategies for coping and survival within the gaming subculture.

Given these findings, and the complexity of the female gamer's experience, I will strive to explain what the findings mean. In speaking with the participants, making participant observations, reading and analyzing critiques of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), and analyzing scenes and characters from within the game itself, I gained insight into the participants' experiences as female gamers. Using that insight, and quotes from the participants, I will provide interpretations for the findings based on the research questions they answer. I will also provide information that will help to elucidate the experience of female gamers and point toward the next step in understanding and enhancing that experience.

### **Invalidation of the Female Experience**

The first research question to guide this study was: How are female gamers influenced by representations of female characters in video games, in terms of women's

gender roles and their own self-efficacy? The answer that emerged from the data was this: Female gamers feel their experiences are invalidated. They perceive that the typical female video game character—with an unrealistic and objectified physical appearance and negatively portrayed character traits—represents what male gamers consider the ideal woman. Given the unrealistic ideal, female gamers perceive the message that women are defined by and valued for their sex appeal instead of their personality or story. Hence, the worth of a “normal” woman is diminished. The “average” woman is not special, cannot be the hero of her own life, and is not desirable as a typical female video game character. In addition, female video game characters are often portrayed as “less than” the male hero, shown in sexualized or objectified roles, and in need of saving by males.

These negative associations with traits typically aligned with femininity cause female gamers to reject “feminine” traits and labels—instead choosing to be “one of the guys” within a male-dominated subculture. Female gamers also perceive that the ideas, opinions, emotions, and roles of women in the gaming community are often dismissed or minimized. Female gamers desire game characters and storylines that do not objectify and sexualize women, yet know that those desires often go unfulfilled because they do not align with what is considered to be the dominant demographic. When female gamers voice their opinions about the portrayal and treatment of female video game characters, they are accused of jealousy or “whining.” Female gamers who question character portrayals are very often the targets of sexual harassment and violent threats—much like the female characters in most video games. Like their fictional counterparts, female gamers are harassed and objectified, and their voices are not heard—they feel powerless in the face of male aggression and dominance. Lastly, many female gamers have



internalized the sexist and misogynistic messages present in most popular video games, becoming desensitized to or justifying the objectification and violent treatment of female characters. These factors, when taken together, create the experience of invalidation.

The findings of this research study indicate that female gamers perceive the average female video game character to represent the ideal “male fantasy,” communicating that average women are not special enough to be main characters or worthy of attention. The experiences described by participants relate to role objectification, in which male characters are cast as the main character in charge of leading and protecting others, while female characters are portrayed as helpless, sidekicks, and tools for use within the game (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007). In addition, male video game characters are traditionally viewed in terms of their abilities and actions, with terms such as “strong,” “muscular,” and “violent” while female characters are usually thought of in terms of their appearance, with terms such as “skimpy clothes,” “naked,” and “big boobs” (Dill & Thill, 2007, p. 860). Research on the objectification and limitation of female characters supports and aligns with the experiences of most study participants. Participants perceived the message that average women are less attractive, special, or worthy than idealized, objectified women. Research findings indicate that regular media viewing in general, and in particular the viewing of thin bodies, will alter how males and females perceive female bodies in the real world, as well as their beauty expectations and pursuit of the idealized image (Harrison, 2003; Harrison & Hefner, 2006; Moriarty & Harrison, 2008). Realistic looking female characters with unrealistic body proportions have also been shown to increase female body dissatisfaction and escalate the idealization of thin female bodies in male gamers

(Martins et al., 2009). Viewing portrayals of objectified and unrealistic females is also linked to negative attitudes about female gender roles and the treatment of women (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Burgess et al., 2007; Dill & Thill, 2007; Fox, Bailenson, & Tricase, 2013; Gay & Castano, 2010; Miller & Summers, 2007).

The participants, as female gamers, have consumed a large variety of video games and found, by and large, that the stories and characters were designed for men. Sex scenes focus on female bodies and vocalizations, female armor is created to display breasts, stomach, and thighs, and females are both eager to sleep with the main character and in need of saving by him. Participants noted this theme in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), commenting on the “weakness” of the female characters, even those who at first appeared strong, as well as the overt sexualization and male “fan service.” This sentiment was echoed by Gies (2015), who commented on the “oppressively misogynist” world of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), noting that the objectification and poor treatment of women became a disturbing and exhausting theme (Gies, 2015).

Participants expressed a desire to see strong female characters who were not oppressed or in need of saving. However, they also recognized that strong female characters who are not objectified do not appeal to the majority of male audiences. Participants noted that the female voice is not heard or validated, because it does not align with the opinions of the male-driven video game industry. For many female gamers, this signals that women and female characters have a clear role: they are to be looked at and used, but otherwise ignored.

Research also supports the participants’ perceptions of existing in a male-dominated subculture, with female characters sexualized and designed to appeal to male

audiences (Cook, 2013; Sarkeesian, 2014). Females are continuously sexualized, with an ever-increasing demand for greater sexualization of their bodies and clothing, while some male characters have been reduced in their sexual appeal and given more realistic clothing in an effort to fulfill consumer demands (Ruddick-Sunstein, 2013; Williams, 2015). While male characters are created to fulfill the hyper-masculine power fantasy of most male gamers, female characters are also created for male consumption, as hyper-feminine sexual fantasies that portray them as submissive and rewarding to male players (Burrows, 2013; Dr. NerdLove, 2012; Scharrer, 2004).

Participants discussed this trend in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), noting the overt objectification and use of female characters as sexual rewards for the male main characters, and thus male players. Video game critics noticed the same theme, with Grayson (2015) observing that many female characters have outfits “designed for lusty, probing eyes,” that are created with the intention to entice male gamers to undress the women in their minds (para. 16). Gies (2015) commented on the excessive amount of nudity in the game, stating that the women are “comically sexualized” (para. 25). Most participants noted that even the strongest sorceress was reduced to “a pair of boobs” by her clothing, thus demonstrating that she was first and foremost designed to be looked at (Patterson, 2016).

In reaction to the idea that emotions and sexuality in females is negative, many female gamers have strong, negative reactions to stereotypical female characters, rejecting them for being “weak” and “needy.” The term “female gamer” is also rejected for its association with traits that the majority of male gamers seem to view as negative in females, such as: being feminist; complaining; lacking skill; showing emotion; and

manipulating men with emotions or sex. Research findings support female gamers' perceptions that emotional expression in females is viewed as negative. Researchers have found that when male and female faces were shown depicting identical emotional expressions, and given identical causes for the emotions, participants attribute the male's emotion to "having a bad day" and the female's emotion to her disposition as an "emotional" person (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009).

For many female gamers, the overarching message is that being more like the female video game characters, or at the very least not questioning female portrayals, brings acceptance from male gamers. Being "female" is negative and can lead to harassment and violence—in and out of video games. Therefore, being "one of the guys" and silencing personal opinions or needs is the safer and more acceptable female role in the gaming community, despite the difficulty in making or maintaining the transition.

Participants who recalled the difficulty of finding their place in the "boy's club" of the gaming community, with their ideas and opinions dismissed, are reacting to a video game industry where women make up only 11% of game designers and 3% of programmers. Women in the gaming industry are paid significantly less than their male counterparts, despite being employed in much larger numbers within the graphic design and technology fields (Burrows, 2013; Gamasutra, 2014). In addition, women throughout the gaming industry report being unwelcome in the boy's club that objectifies women in their business practices as well as their video games, and rejects critiques on the sexualization of females (Burrows, 2013; Hills, 2013).

The idealization of female bodies as well as the perpetuation of stereotypical female traits causes many female gamers to reject those feminine characters and labels,

wanting to separate themselves from those negative connotations and harassment by male gamers. Female gamers perceive that they have no voice within their community because harassment and rejection of their ideas, needs, opinions, and emotions by male—and some female—gamers is commonplace and often violent. In a brutal world, game or otherwise, female gamers want to feel in charge of their lives, and see that female strength reflected in the games they love.

Participant descriptions of harassment, and fear of retaliation for speaking out about female character portrayals, are also validated by research and real-life experiences that received news coverage. Women who question or critique female character portrayals are threatened with rape and mutilation, or accused of feeling threatened by sexualized characters because they are “fat, ugly, and slutty” (Hess, 2014; VanDerWerff, 2014). Further studies on how male gamers react to a female presence online again revealed that participant experiences align with those of other females in the gaming community. Studies show that players with feminine usernames or voices received an average of 100 sexually explicit messages a day, compared with male users who received an average of 3.7 (Hess, 2014). In addition, female voices elicited three times as many hostile and sexually aggressive comments during games than male voices (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013). In addition, players with female voices were called “whore,” told to “shut up,” and were sexually propositioned (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013). The Pew Research Center found that of the women aged 18-24 who interact online, 50% are called offensive names, 25% are sexually harassed, and 26% are cyber-stalked (Pew Research Center, 2015). This treatment culminates in some participants stating that they are reduced to sexual objects of aggression and feel powerless to make a difference, feeling that

“nobody cares” when women are mistreated. Female gamers who are dismissed as being too sensitive to mature content, ignored, or threatened eventually stay quiet, not expressing their true feelings or standing up for themselves, attempting not to make the situation worse.

Several participants accepted objectification to the point where they became desensitized to it and internalized the messages of sexism and misogyny present in many video games. They began to doubt and diminish the female perspective, favoring the male perspective instead. Research supports the participants’ reports of desensitization to objectifying portrayals as well as the internalized sexism present in some participants.

The term “internalized sexism” refers in part to the process of women accepting and internalizing “sexually objectifying experiences” and seeing themselves as objects to be looked at and valued for their appearance, as well as the “passive acceptance of cultural, institutional, and individual sexism” (Szymanski, Gupta, Carr, & Stewart, 2009, p. 102). However, another key element of sexism is “internalized misogyny,” which manifests in men or women perpetuating the hatred and devaluation of women and female-related characteristics, in their actions toward and beliefs about other women (Szymanski et al., 2009, p. 103). For women, internalized misogyny often manifests in negative comments about other women or female characteristics, and attempting to set oneself apart as different from “most girls” (Ferguson, 2016, para. 9). This is evidenced in phrases such as “I’m not like other girls,” “women are so dramatic,” or “I don’t do or think X, like ‘most women’ do” (Ferguson, 2016, para. 9; 20). Such phrases reinforce the idea that women are all the same, falling under the stereotypical perception of what a female does or thinks. The phrases also serve to set the women who use them apart as

better than the average woman because they do not have a certain stereotypical “feminine trait,” instead drawing positive attention to their stereotypically “masculine” characteristics (Ferguson, 2016, para. 16).

When discussing *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and other games, participants discussed both negative reactions to, and defenses for, female objectification, sexualization, and brutalization. One participant defended a character’s overtly sexualized clothing that displayed her nipples by saying that her dress was consistent with how all sorceresses dressed. However, as mentioned earlier, other sorceresses who were more prominent in the game did not dress in the same manner, and none of the women in the world were dressed consistently enough to defend their impractical sexualization (Patterson, 2016). Other participants excused or felt desensitized to poor female treatment by male characters, and some were glad to see a male character scold a female for going into battle with her shirt open.

Only two participants noted that male characters scolding females for exposing their breasts highlighted the discrepant treatment and expectations of women and the fact that the character’s nudity was intended for the male gaze. This sentiment was echoed by Gies (2015) when he stated that the interaction was “truly worthy of eye-rolling,” and further noted that having a male criticize a woman for going into battle with an open shirt “is really the snake eating its own tail of video game sexism in a game where a significant portion of its speaking female characters are similarly and impractically exposed” (para. 26).

According to objectification theory, females are taught through culture and media to internalize an outside, observing perspective of their bodies and are rewarded for their

self-objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Gay & Castano, 2010). The more females interact with sexualized characters, the more they turn that sexualization and objectification on themselves, which increases psychological distress (Szymanski et al., 2009). It was found that women who played sexualized female characters perceived less positive mental and physical traits in women as compared with men (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009).

For females, greater connection to their character, especially in RPG games, predicted more body dissatisfaction in themselves and in their estimation of others (Harrison, 2000; Jackson et al., 2009; Martins et al., 2009; Scharrer, 2005). This supports the feeling of most participants that overt sexualization can negate the positive qualities of a female character (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). In addition, it was found that males and females who viewed sexual stereotypes later reported those same stereotypes as their personal beliefs, leading participants to change their sexual attitudes and expectations and take on the perceptions they interacted with (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999; Ward, 2002; Ward, 2004). Additionally, viewing sexual content increased female perceptions that some activities were less acceptable for females than for males, and women who played sexualized game characters were more accepting of rape myths (Fox et al., 2013).

Gamers interact cognitively and emotionally with video game characters and content. They interact with the game world on a deeper level than would be possible through movies or television, causing the games to become very real to the players (Bailey, Wise, & Bolls, 2009; Jin & Park, 2009; Lewis, Weber, & Bowman, 2008). Thus,



as gamers continue to interact with their game worlds from the male perspective, they internalize the message that the perspective of their male “hero” is correct.

### **Perception of Negative and Unrealistic Views of Women**

The second research question used to guide my study was: How do representations of female characters in video games influence the way female gamers perceive other gamers’ expectations about women’s gender roles? The answer that emerged was the perception that negative and unrealistic views of women exist within the gaming community. Participants believe that there are certain expectations for female gamers during gameplay and in the real world, and that masculine features are superior to feminine ones.

Participants discussed the perception in the gaming subculture that female gamers are expected to be submissive, only like “pretty” games, be less skilled, and use sex to get what they want. According to participants, female gamers are expected to play characters that heal or support others, keeping them away from the frontlines of video game battle and making them submissive to the order of the characters in direct combat. Female gamers are told that they do not care about game mechanics or strategies because “girls only care about outfits and how cute they look.” When discussing games, many female gamers are told that they are not skilled and do not understand what they are talking about, “because you’re a woman.” Female gamers are also accused of trading sexual favors for in-game positions or items, and asked to expose their breasts or have cybersex with male gamers—even after the male gamer has sexually harassed them.

According to research on male perceptions, it was found that males exposed to hyper-masculinity in media increased their acceptance of hyper-masculine beliefs

(Scharrer, 2005). Additionally, researchers suggest that interacting with objectified, sexualized, and unrealistic portrayals of females increases negative attitudes about gender roles and the treatment of women (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Burgess et al., 2007; Dill & Thill, 2007; Fox, Bailenson, & Tricase, 2013; Gay & Castano, 2010; Miller & Summers, 2007). Negative views of women are also linked to increases in violence against women, and male gamers who played video games with objectified and violently treated women showed a significant increase in supportive attitudes about rape and acceptance of rape myths (Beck et al., 2012; Ward, 2002).

Researchers have also found that playing as sexualized female characters led men and women to report negative beliefs about women and their capabilities, as well as more negative judgments about their dress and roles in public and at home (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Further, males who regularly view sexual stereotypes about women report a change in their sexual attitudes and expectations, including the belief that virginity is a negative quality, an overestimation of how many people have affairs, and the expectation that they should have many opportunities for sexual experimentation (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999).

Thus, the research on media and video game consumption serves to support perceptions from female gamers that increased exposure to sexualized and objectified women has an effect on male gamers, negatively changing their perceptions and expectations of female gamers. Participants described being called “slut” and “e-whore” by male gamers. One participant recalled being accused of “showing my tits” and “sucking someone’s dick” in exchange for being allowed to play in a guild. Participants

recalled being told their opinions did not matter, either because they were women or because they showed emotion, with male gamers telling them “I’m going to rape you.”

### **Survival**

The third and final research question in my study was: How do female gamers’ perceptions of women’s gender roles and of the corresponding expectations of others affect their social interactions within the gaming culture? The answer that emerged was: survival. Female gamers survive interactions with others in the gaming community by using coping skills that help them avoid harassment, maintain physical safety, and protect their well-being when faced with harassment or negative female portrayals. Female gamers also behave in ways they believe male gamers and the community at large approve of, hoping of gaining acceptance. Lastly, female gamers work hard to prove their merit as gamers and in the gaming industry, fighting for their positions, improving and honing their skills, and controlling their emotions.

Participants stated their desires to protect themselves from stress and harassment, ensure their safety, and ignore negative messages. Several participants stated beliefs in their abilities and acceptance of themselves, despite understanding the negative perceptions of others. Some participants also recounted how exposure to “strong female influences” in their families reinforced their feelings of self-efficacy and strength, broadening their perceptions of gender roles and female strength. Aligning with participant experiences, researchers found that women who rejected traditional gender roles, believed in expanded roles for women, and believed they could succeed beyond gender expectations reported increased feelings of self-efficacy and well-being, even during times of stress or transition (Weiss et al., 2012).

Research validates the perceptions of participants who stated the need to fit in by becoming “one of the guys” and work harder to maintain their position and control their emotions. As stated earlier, women make up a small percentage of game designers and programmers in the video game industry, and are paid significantly less than their male counterparts (Burrows, 2013; Gamasutra, 2014). Women in the gaming industry also indicate the difficulties that participants discussed in overcoming the “boy’s club” mentality and standing on their own. They report being groped, even at game development conventions, and feeling out of place in conventions with sexualized and inappropriate themes (Burrows, 2013; Hills, 2013).

Participants also reported feeling the need to control their emotions in order to overcome the negative perceptions of male gamers. Findings indicate that males who consume video games featuring objectified and sexualized images of women report more negative beliefs about women, judgments about stereotypically feminine roles and traits, more negative sexual attitudes toward females and sexuality, and the increased acceptance of rape myths (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Harrison, 2000; Jackson et al., 2009; Martins et al., 2009; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999).

Data on the effects of interacting with sexually objectified female characters reveals that the female experience is invalidated in the gaming community, that negative and unrealistic views of women persist, and that female gamers must work to survive and secure a place within their community.

### **Limitations**

Some limitations of the methodology used in the present study were noted during the interview process. For example, a few interviewees were more concise in their

explanations or discussion of their answers as the other participants. While they did provide useful and meaningful information, their answers were sometimes short and less informative, despite further prompting. One participant commented that she did not feel “articulate” or that she was “explaining this very well.” Another participant would sometimes answer in short, uninformative phrases such as “probably” or “not for me personally” but would usually elaborate with prompting.

As previously mentioned, five participants were open when discussing their experiences and perceptions, while one participant appeared to be more guarded when answering. This participant conveyed her frustration at those who wanted to “complain” about females in video games and expressed that she did not understand why female portrayals were criticized. However, she did answer each question and provided extensive information about her experiences, opening up as the interviews went on and giving progressively more elaborate information.

As a researcher, I struggled with how to incorporate this data. I wanted to ensure that the participants’ voices were heard and that I honored their perspectives without ignoring or minimizing any part. However, I also wanted to reconcile or make sense of the discrepancies and dualities in their reports and attempt, through my understanding of the topic and of the impact of internalized sexism, to find the deeper meaning of their accounts.

Despite the limitations discussed here, a large amount of robust data was collected, reflecting both the variety and continuity of the participants’ experiences. I also attempted to maximize the reliability and validity of my data through member checking and the use of a second coder. The second coder was trained in my coding system and

performed random checks of my coding for each axial code, resulting in a Cohen's kappa of .91 (91% agreement between coders). Thus, the use of these research techniques helped to ensure the reliability and validity of the data.

### **Future Directions**

During data analysis and coding, several pieces of data emerged that warrant further consideration and research. They are: Appropriate female portrayals; social learning through immersion; influence of anime on the gaming culture; the relationships between video game sex and pornography; understanding the experiences of male gamers; and expanding the research on female gamers. These themes are notable due to their connection with the gaming subculture, and the possibility that they further elucidate the experience of female and male gamers and present information on how character portrayals can be improved. Thus, it is suggested that the themes be further explored and researched, in order to provide practical information that can be used by the video game industry and gamer community, parents, educators, psychologists, and others who are interested in or impacted by the impact of video games. In order to provide information, the themes will be described briefly in terms of their need for further exploration.

**Appropriate female portrayals.** During their interviews, and while discussing *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), participants noted characteristics of female portrayals that they appreciated and wanted to see more of, as well as issues that detracted from those characters. Given that female gamers now make up around half of all gamers, it seems crucial that more female opinions on character designs and interactions be gathered, analyzed, and taken into serious consideration. Participants questioned whether

video games need male main characters or objectified portrayals of women in order to sell video games, especially given that male gamers often play as female characters.

Participants also voiced their belief that when a game is high-quality, with a good story or well-designed characters, the surface trappings of sexualization and brutality are not needed.

Participants described their desire to see a character who is nuanced, portrayed as attractive, intelligent, funny, and independent. Most participants thought of themselves as multilayered and wanted to see more women like them. According to participants, this means an “average” woman who is neither a sexualized male fantasy nor the “one” special key to existence. Participants voiced a desire for the average yet complex woman to “be legitimized in video games.” One participant wanted a powerful female character that would empower women but also give men a new perspective, allowing them to think “I can respect you and still think you’re sexy.” Participants believed the concept of a sexy and powerful, yet not objectified, female character is missing from most games. As one participant stated, “In the portrayal of sexy characters, they’re sexy and that’s it.”

Another participant, who does not consider herself “traditionally attractive” according to currently imposed beauty standards, wanted a female character creator that would allow her to make a character like herself. She wanted the option for her character to be neither beautiful or ugly, but “average” and to feel that her appearance was valid within that game world. Similarly, when playing *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, most participants appreciated seeing wrinkles on the face of a female character. However, after seeing that her body was “perfect” and not aged to match her face, participants expressed

disappointment in the lost opportunity for that character to be something more than “eye candy” meant for male consumption.

Characters that were brave and independent made a very positive impression on participants. They enjoyed seeing and playing as females who had their own agendas and bravely fought for their friends or those in need, even when others were afraid. One participant appreciated a female character’s compassion and empathy, noting that those qualities are “a woman’s strength.” Several participants also related to certain female characters in their desire to help others and admired the bravery to do so in the face of restrictions. However, participants also noted that those characters were again “robbed” of their power by sexualized clothing that “played to the male-gaze” and “reduced a powerful woman to a pair of boobs.”

Clothing plays an important part in creating an appropriate, empowered female character. Female characters who were “fully clothed” gave participants the impression that they were of greater importance to the main character and the story, and they connected the lack of clothing with being unimportant or a “throwaway” that the main character would use as a tool and never come back to, which was unfortunately the case for all of the less-clothed female characters in the game.

Participants also noted that games with a main female character who is strong and capable is “an exciting surprise” as well as “empowering” and “a confidence builder” that makes females “feel more included,” especially if the game is popular or well-marketed. Participants stressed the desire to see the main female characters treated with respect and became angered or frustrated when those characters received sexual threats and insults, or when their emotional responses were invalidated.



Strong and positive characteristics were noted by participants in some of the female characters within *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) and in other games. However, participants lamented that when female characters were sexualized, objectified, or turned into helpless victims in need of rescue, their positive impact was diminished. The female characters went from strong and empowered to appearing “manipulative,” “weak,” and “made to be looked at.” As another participant noted, “good portrayals feel accidental because the bad portrayals were obviously intentional.”

While several participants stated that they enjoyed opportunities to play as a strong female character, including their time playing Ciri in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), it is notable that their enjoyment did not seem to affect their responses to questions related to Research Question 1: How are female gamers influenced by representations of female characters in video games, in terms of women’s gender roles and their own self-efficacy? This question explored their personal experiences, perceptions of women’s roles, and their own feelings of self-efficacy. Given that participants desire strong female roles, it could be expected that interacting with strong female characters would impact participants. However, this was not the case. This is possibly explained by participant statements that strong female characters who are not sexualized or mistreated are “rare,” causing participants to view the exceptions as accidental or experimental. Thus, until strong female characters are appropriately portrayed with consistency, any positive experiences with female characters, while enjoyable in the moment, are unlikely to positively impact female gamers’ perceptions of women’s roles and their own place in the gaming community.

Female gamers believe in the power of video games, and long for a strong woman they can project themselves onto without feeling objectified or demeaned. Participants believe that playing as strong, independent female characters who are not objectified and act as the heroes of their own stories would have a positive, empowering impact. Therefore, it is recommended that further research study the impact of playing as empowered female characters that are not sexualized. As this study has explored the experience of female gamers interacting with current female character portrayals, it reasons that an additional step would be the exploration of female gamer's experiences and perceptions when interacting with female characters who are designed according to their preferences. Additionally, it may be useful to gain quantitative data on the projected sales of video games featuring strong, non-objectified female main characters. Given that characters are designed to appeal to the dominant audience of male gamers, and the fact that many male gamers play female characters, it seems important to understand whether the presence of a strong female lead would influence game sales.

**Social learning through immersion.** Another area for further research involves the use of video games with positive social messages to teach gamers about empathetic responses and altruism. Participants mentioned many times during the interviews that realistic games, with life-like characters and good voice acting, draw them into a story and create an emotional connection. Many participants expressed the hope that social interactions within the game, when positive, could be used as "social lessons" to teach about communication skills and respectful treatment.

As a reverse point, participants worried that negative interactions would instill negative messages and perceptions in gamers. Participants were concerned that the

objectification, debasement, and mistreatment of female characters would teach male gamers to mistreat women and view them as manipulative and emotionally volatile. Participants believed that games can be harmful social lessons if the player is “controlling a character that is interacting with a perfect yet fake female” and taking on the moral choices and thought processes of that character. For some participants, the reasoning lies in the sheer number of hours that most gamers spend in their game worlds. Participants mentioned that for many male gamers their most intimate connection with a female is through a video game. This perception is supported by research studies demonstrating that the morals and societal messages expressed by video game characters can influence the empathic and social responses of gamers when interacting with others (Dietz, 1998; Fraser, Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Nelson, & Stockdale, 2012; Miller & Summers, 2007). For that reason, the lessons should be those of respect and empowerment.

When discussing character interactions in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), participants discussed their desire to see the “hero” of the game treat women with more respect, believing it would send a positive message to players. Participants described the positive, empowering effect of completing an in-game mission where they helped a teammate or saved a village from destruction. According to participants, they wanted more of that positive feeling, seeking other rescue missions and taking that positive feeling with them into the real world. This aligns with research findings that main characters are created to fulfill gamers’ fantasy of being the hero, while in-game quests create a sense of accomplishment and productivity that gamers strongly desire (Burrows, 2013; Dr.NerdLove, 2012; McGonigal, 2011; Scharrer, 2004). However, instead of a male hero rescuing a helpless female, the social lesson would happen through the

respectful, equal cooperation of a male and female character or the heroic actions of an empowered female character. Given the power of their own experiences, and knowing that immersive games “affect how we see ourselves and interact with others,” participants hoped that positive, respectful character interactions could have a beneficial impact on immersed players.

Some video game developers are already creating impactful and memorable games filled with positive social interactions that have a lasting effect on players. One popular example is *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012) from Nintendo Co., Ltd., the seventh-best-selling game for its platform, with over 10.97 million copies sold to date. An internet search for “Animal Crossing life lessons” will result in internet pages filled with articles written about the positive and life-altering impact of playing *Animal Crossing: New Leaf* (2012). Gamers praise the game’s ability to nurture a feeling of care and respect for others and the earth, citing “life lessons” such as “help others,” “donate to a cause,” “return things that are lost,” “welcome new people,” “serve others,” “make the other person feel important,” and “be yourself” (Jon, 2016; Quinlan, 2014).

While this game rewards friendship, kindness, and responsibility, the characters are stylized humans and animals that appear more like cartoons than real life. Males and females are represented similarly and treated equally. Characters are not objectified or sexualized, male and female bodies are shaped the same and clothing options provide full body coverage. While the characters do not look like “real” people or animals, gamers still become immersed in the game world and feel inspired to implement the kindness they see in the game when interacting in real life (Jon, 2016; Quinlan, 2014).

Given that a less-realistic game can have a large impact on male and female gamers alike, it seems reasonable to suppose that the positive influence of a game featuring realistic and nuanced characters may be even greater. In fact, researchers and video game designers are actively creating alternate reality games (interactive, transmedia narratives affected by player actions) that employ the mechanisms of video games to solve real-world problems and help players improve their lives by living “gamefully” (McGonigal, 2011; SuperBetter, 2017). McGonigal (2011) and other developers at Institute for the Future (2017) believe that gamers are experts at cooperation and problem solving, who crave the satisfaction of completing tasks and helping others (Kreit, 2012). Many successful games have already been created that help players treat mental and physical health issues, increase self-efficacy, promote altruism and community collaboration, and brainstorm solutions to crises such as worldwide oil shortages (McGonigal, 2011; World Without Oil, 2007). Thus, it has been found that if the intrinsic motivation of gamers can be harnessed and focused on current issues such as global food shortages, depression, and obesity, true social change will occur (McGonigal, 2011).

Given the success and popularity of pro-social video games and alternate reality games, research on the effects of interacting with realistic characters engaged in reciprocally caring and empathetic relationships would contribute important information on the positive power of video games, and perhaps influence video game developers to create a new genre of video games.

**Influence of anime on the gaming culture.** The next theme to emerge from the data is the strong influence that anime (Japanese computer or hand-drawn animation) and

Japanese culture have on the gaming subculture and the gaming industry at large. While participants did note that the gaming subculture is influenced generally by Western culture in its objectification and sexualization of females, they also stated the particularly powerful influence of anime. For this reason, research on the experiences of female gamers when interacting with objectified female anime characters would help to further expand and complete the findings of this study. In addition, research on the impact of female character portrayals on male and female gamers would provide important information on the gaming subculture.

Several participants spoke of the strong crossover between anime and video games, noting that most gamers are heavy consumers of anime, which often serves to perpetuate and strengthen objectification and “sexist” views of women. Some participants described how women in anime are often portrayed with large, bouncing breasts that male characters react to with overt excitement or laughter. Male characters are often attempting to look up the skirts of females or touch their breasts, and many anime series portray sexualized and scantily clothed adolescent females, similar to those in video games. Female characters with pre-teen or adolescent faces are commonly depicted with short skirts and large breasts, often vocalizing shouts that sound sexual in nature. Additionally, participants noted that anime and video game conventions often attract the same audience, and that gamers will cosplay dress as their favorite anime or video game character at either convention, as the two meld so closely.

Another trait in anime culture is that of portraying a young, beautiful woman with light hair, skin, and eyes, who is the “chosen one” that must be saved and protected. Such female characters, according to participants, often “hold great power” but are

“completely helpless and in need of saving.” Participants described the difficulty in seeing the perpetuated message that youth, light skin, and otherworldly “specialness” is prized as worthy of attention in yet another seemingly male-dominated sector.

When participants described their perceptions of female characters in video games, they often added their views of anime characters. Participants noticed that both anime and video game female characters suffered from similar negative portrayals, and felt affected by both. Participants noted that the commonplace tropes of female sexuality, objectification, and violation coexist closely with the themes of many video games, reinforcing and strengthening negative female portrayals in each culture.

In sum, there is a close connection between the video game subculture and anime subculture, with many members of one group also belonging to the other. Therefore, research on the number of gamers who are also part of the anime subculture, as well as a document analysis of character portrayals and interactions within manga (Japanese comic books), graphic novels, television shows, and movies created for the anime subculture, would be useful. In addition, the effects of consuming anime media containing objectified female character portrayals will create a more complete understanding of gamers’ experiences and influences.

**The relationship between video game sex and pornography.** Video games like *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) provide unlimited opportunities for viewing pornographic sexual encounters that explicitly feature female sexual organs and sexual activity in an erotic manner. These sexual displays are designed to arouse sexual excitement in viewers, as evidenced by the fact that the player can visit brothels and choose among scantily clad women who are dancing and speaking provocatively, asking

Geralt, the main character, if he has “a snake’s tongue” or “any special wishes” and Geralt replying “let’s have some fun.” Prostitutes wear masks, dance on Geralt, and spank him. Sexual encounters with secondary female characters are also presented as rewards for his help and include hide-and-seek scenarios and sexual intercourse on a stuffed unicorn (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). In addition, gamers describe visits to the brothel as having “nasty fun” (Saturn’s Beard, 2015) and create videos of the “hottest” sexual encounters (ZoominGames, 2015). Within the gaming subculture, there exists a multitude of tutorials created by gamers to help other gamers access every possible sexual encounter or view them online (Hernandez, 2015).

Research on the effects of pornography show that viewing pornographic content rewires the brain, changing its neurological and chemical composition (Fight the New Drug, 2017b; Love, Laier, Brand, Hatch, & Hajela, 2015). Furthermore, studies show a correlation between pornography use and brains that are smaller and less active, and those who consume pornography report an increased desire to view more deviant or violent sexual encounters (Fight the New Drug, 2017a; Fight the New Drug, 2017b; Love et al., 2015; Zillman, 2000). For most people who regularly watch pornography, their sexual preferences change, causing them to desire sexual acts they once considered abnormal or unethical, and impairing their ability to become sexually aroused by their real-world partners or perform sexually without pornography (Fight the New Drug, 2017a; Park et al., 2016; Zillman, 2000). Consuming pornography also leads to negative attitudes and beliefs about women, sex, and relationships, and increases both support for violence against women and acts of violence toward women in the real world (Berkel,



Vandiver, & Bahner, 2004; Dorin, 2009; Hald, Malamuth, & Yuen, 2010; Weinberg, Williams, Kleiner, & Irizarry, 2010).

Neuroscientific research reveals similar neural processes involved in both substance addiction and internet addiction. Furthermore, internet gaming has been recognized by the APA as a potentially addictive disorder that requires further research (Love et al., 2015). Researchers reviewing the literature on substance addiction and internet pornography addiction conclude that internet pornography addiction fits into the accepted framework for understanding addiction and has similar mechanisms to substance addition (Love et al., 2015). Additionally, some researchers now consider internet addictions such as internet gaming disorder and internet pornography addiction to be behavioral addictions (Love et al., 2015; Voss et al., 2015).

Researchers have documented the steady increase of pornography within video games, and the general transformation of internet pornography into a medium that is easily accessed and more extreme and violent than it has been in the past (Price, Patterson, Regnerus, & Walley, 2016). Additionally, pornography has been found to be one of the primary ways that adolescents learn about sex and sexual relationships, with two out of three boys having viewed pornography before the age of 14, often on personal handheld devices (Paul, 2010; Rothman, Kaczmarzky, Burke, Jansen, & Baughman, 2015; Zillman, 2000).

Considering the connections researchers have made between internet pornography addiction, internet gaming addiction, and general pornography addiction, it reasons that the effects of consuming pornographic scenes in video games should be explored. Research on how sexual content in video games mirrors that of internet or other

pornography should be conducted to inform the public and future researchers on the similarities and differences between video game and other pornographic sexual encounters. Additionally, research on how viewing pornographic sexual scenes in video games affects player perceptions of sex, sexual desires, intimate relationships, and brain functioning may provide valuable information that can guide clinical treatment and inform future game design.

**Understanding the experiences of male gamers: Furthering the current research.** All gamers are affected by their interactions with video game content, and to varying degrees take on the perceptions and morals of the characters and worlds they immerse themselves in (Dietz, 1998; Fraser, Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Nelson, & Stockdale, 2012; Miller & Summers, 2007). Participants reported perceptions that male gamers are negatively influenced by video games, and concern that male gamers may be influenced by how male characters are portrayed. One participant even noted that hearing a female character state her preference for certain male physical characteristics may create a negative self-perception in male gamers. In addition, video game characters are designed to appeal to the hyper-masculine power fantasy of being powerful, dangerous, and the ideal male (Burrows, 2013; Dr.NerdLove, 2012; Scharrer, 2004). Body dissatisfaction is a growing concern for males, and associative learning—through mediums such as television, advertisements, and video games—has a strong influence on individuals' perceptions and satisfaction with their bodies (Boothroyd, Tovee, & Pollet, 2012; Harrison & Hefner, 2006; Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009).

Given the above information, and the findings of this study, it is crucial that the experiences of male gamers also be explored and understood. The impact on male

gamers' sense of self-efficacy and identity is likely influenced by the male characters they interact with and play as. The impact may be even greater for males, as they are more often able to play as male characters they can project themselves onto and identify with. In addition, they may experience pressure from the perceived male-dominant subculture to embody certain beliefs and act in ways that are considered "masculine" in order to maintain their position in the "boy's club" that participants discussed.

**Expanding the research on female gamers.** This research was designed to understand the lived experiences of female gamers by exploring their perceptions in great depth. By focusing on fewer participants, each experience could be explored more completely and provide greater understanding of how each participant interpreted and gave meaning to their experiences of viewing, interacting with, and playing as female video game characters. Such focused inquiry provides findings that can inspire further questions and inform broader research.

In this study, participants reported experiences that align with current research on video games and their impact, demonstrating that female gamers experience the same phenomena that have been previously documented (Burrows, 2013; Fox, Bailenson, & Tricase, 2013; Hess, 2014; Hills, 2013; Sarkeesian, 2014; VanDerWerff, 2014). This information demonstrates how the experiences of a few female gamers confirms and relates to the broader literature on the gaming culture and female gamers. It also points to areas that can be expanded upon through more defined research questions and the use of larger participant groups.

In order to fully understand and appreciate the gravity of what female gamers experience while playing video games and interacting within the gaming subculture,

research must continue to explore the broader implications of female gamers' experiences. It is crucial to understand whether other female gamers report perceptions about themselves and others that are similar to those reported in this research, such as feeling invalidated in the gaming community and perceiving negative and unrealistic expectations of women. Given that the majority of participants described a desensitization to objectifying and violent female portrayals, and in some cases justified such portrayals, it will also be important to explore this phenomenon and understand the percentage of female gamers who experience it. Based on this research, it appears that experiencing internalized sexism and a desire to justify the objectification and violation of female characters may impact the ability of some gamers to quantitatively report the impact of such portrayals on their perceptions of self and others. Without more in-depth questioning, it may be difficult to reveal the deeper impact on these gamers.

In addition, further research into the coping skills utilized by female gamers could provide greater resources to parents, mental health clinicians, and gamers themselves. Understanding what factors contribute to greater resilience and critical thinking in female gamers allows for education that can guide gamers through healthy strategies of engagement. This may allow gamers to engage with the medium they love while maintaining greater distance from the content and viewing themselves as powerful agents who are not defined by gender roles or objectified portrayals. It may also provide the incentive for gamers to reject video games that create content which objectifies and violates women and call for game developers to further improve the games they produce.

## Conclusions

The video game industry continues to expand, and with that the number of female gamers. What is now a male-dominated industry creating male-driven games featuring the sexualization, exploitation, and violent treatment of women, is being increasingly critiqued by a new wave of female consumers. Given this increase, and the internalization of messages regarding the appearance, roles, and treatment of women, research on the experiences of female gamers is needed to provide information on how the internalization of messages within video games affect the personal perceptions and social interactions of female gamers.

Therefore, my study was designed to understand how female gamers are affected by interactions with female video game characters. The study aimed to explore how female gamers perceive the representations of female video game characters, how they see themselves and their role in society and the gaming culture, how they perceive expectations on themselves as females, and how those perceptions and expectations affect their behavior as women and gamers.

The data used in this study was collected through participant interviews, participant observations, and document analysis and critiques of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015). The data was coded using open, axial, and selective coding to ensure a reliable and comprehensive understanding of the experience of female gamers was established. The findings from the data analysis were then described, along with supporting participant quotes.

The findings of this study first indicate that the representations of female characters in video games affects how female gamers perceive their roles and self-

efficacy by causing them to feel that their experiences as female gamers are invalidated. Second, the findings of this study indicate that female character portrayals influence the way female gamers perceive other gamers' expectations of women and their roles, creating a perception that male gamers have unrealistic and negative views of women. Third, findings indicate that female gamers' social interactions within the gaming community are affected by their perceptions of women's gender roles and the expectations of others, causing female gamers to employ strategies for coping and survival within the gaming subculture. Areas for future study include the power of appropriate female portrayals, the impact of social learning through immersion, the influence of anime on the gaming culture, the relationship between video game sex and pornography, understanding the experiences of male gamers, and expanding the research on female gamers.

While this qualitative study focused on the in-depth lived experience of six female gamers, the findings did accurately reflect what has been documented in past research and literature reviews on video games and the impact of objectified female characters while providing greater insight into the subtle and hidden perceptions of female gamers. Thus, the participant experiences provide a window into the deeper meaning of what female gamers experience while offering information to inform expanded research on larger groups of participants.

The video game subculture exists within a larger cultural milieu that objectifies and sexualizes women and young girls, with advertising, music, print media, television, and movie content that prioritizes the objectifying male gaze and male fantasy of power and control (APA, 2007a; APA, 2007b). Messages of sexism and misogyny are present in

every facet of consumable media, often presented in subtle, nearly undetectable ways such as sexual jokes at a female character's expense, products that promise women "flawless" beauty, or magazines that tell women about keeping men "hooked and happy" (Aiello, 2017) and men about the benefits of letting other men "test drive" their wives or girlfriends (Wellor, 2017). Pornography is easily accessible to children and adults, and pornographic content is often featured in popular video games (Paul, 2010; Price et al., 2016; Rothman et al., 2015). Messages of objectification are harmful for female consumers, feeding and perpetuating self-esteem and body image issues in women and young girls (APA, 2007a; Aubrey, 2006; Monro & Huon, 2005). Video games often contain the same objectifying messages, further reinforcing them through immersive interactions that engage gamers on a deeper level than other forms of media (Fox et al., 2013; Konijn et al., 2007). In addition, female gamers face not only harassment from male gamers, but from powerful groups (e.g. Gamergate) within the gaming subculture that target females who are gamers or employed in the video game industry (usually through threats of physical and sexual violence), further compounding the larger messages of Western culture (Harwell, 2014; VanDerWerff, 2014).

Given the pervasiveness of female objectification and violent treatment of women, as well as the pervasive use of pornographic sexual encounters in video games and other mass media, it is crucial that males and females are educated on sexuality, gender roles, and the impact of objectification—particularly its impact via video game character portrayals (APA, 2007b). Video games often perpetuate a static gender dichotomy, with male and female characters in traditional gender roles. These restrictive roles impact female gamers. However, researchers have found that women who reject

traditional gender roles report increased self-efficacy and well-being (Weiss et al., 2012). Additionally, researchers have found that sexual education is linked to increases in positive and expanded attitudes toward women and young girls (Grose et al., 2014). Sexual education is also correlated with reports of increased empowerment and less acceptance of traditional gender roles in both males and females (Grose et al., 2014).

Therefore, it reasons that education on sexuality and expanded gender roles would provide female gamers with greater internal and external resources to combat the messages they interact with during gameplay. An expanded view of what roles are possible for men and women may increase gamers' ability to more critically engage with video game content and question the appropriateness of video game character portrayals and interactions. Furthermore, the presence of positive female role models is crucial for both females and males. Interactions with empowered females would further contradict the objectified and sexualized female characters found in most video games, giving gamers another point of reference when thinking critically about video game content.

Considering the positive effects of education on gender roles and sexuality, parents, teachers, community leaders, and mental health professionals must become educated on the topics of sexuality, gender roles, and objectification. The APA (2007b) encourages mental health professionals to increase their awareness of these topics in order to provide sound information for males and females. However, it is also important for leaders and decision makers in every area of a gamers' life to understand the impact of interacting with objectified, sexualized, and brutalized female characters. In order for mental health professionals, educators, parents, and gamers to confidently engage with the topic of female portrayals in video games, they must feel that strategies and resources



are readily available. Thus, they would benefit from trainings, conferences, in-school presentations, or other forums where the findings of this research study as well as practical resources and strategies could be presented and discussed. Furthermore, if gamers are to think critically about the content they interact with, they must have help in building the necessary skills. Gamers, mental health professionals, and others must be given clear and research-based information that will help them understand how females are portrayed, the messages inherent in those portrayals, and the largescale impact that follows (APA, 2007b).

Video games are a powerful and engaging medium that have the potential to expand and improve the way gamers view gender roles, the expectations placed on female gamers, and social interactions. It is my hope that through thoughtful, honest critiques of the medium we cherish, gamers will use the information uncovered to improve the portrayals of women and the gaming subculture as a whole.

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**Appendix A**

**Video Game Usage Questionnaire**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Instructions: Please read each question carefully and answer as accurately as possible.  
You may decline to answer any question.

1. How old are you? (You must be 18 years or older to participate)

\_\_\_\_\_ years

2. Please specify your ethnicity

White

Hispanic or Latino

Black or African American

Native American or American Indian

Asian/Pacific Islander

Other \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your sex?

FEMALE

MALE

4. What is your marital status?

Single, never married

Married or domestic partnership

Widowed

Divorced

Separated

5. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed?

*If currently enrolled, highest degree received.*

Some high school, no diploma

High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent (for example: GED)

Some college credit, no degree

Trade/technical/vocational training

Associate degree  
Bachelor's degree  
Master's degree  
Professional degree  
Doctorate degree

6. What is your employment status? Are you currently...?

Employed for wages  
Self-employed  
Out of work and looking for work  
Out of work but not currently looking for work  
A homemaker  
A student  
Military  
Retired  
Unable to work

7. What is your profession?

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8. Have you played The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt?

YES            NO

9. If you answered "yes" to the previous question, how many hours do you estimate that you have spent playing The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt?

1-3 hours      3-6 hours      6-9 hours      More than 9 hours

10. On average, how many hours do you spend playing video games per day?

1-3 hours      3-6 hours      6-9 hours      More than 9 hours

11. How long have you been a gamer?

\_\_\_\_\_ years

12. Do you consider yourself part of the gaming subculture?

YES            NO

13. If you answered “yes” to the previous question, how long have you been part of the gaming subculture?

\_\_\_\_\_ years

**Appendix B**



### Interview Guide for Face-To-Face Interview

#### *For Researcher Only*

\*\*Before interview begins, tell the participant: “You may refuse to answer any questions you wish, without explanation.”

1. What do you think about the way females are portrayed in video games?
2. What do you think of how female video characters look and dress?
3. What do you think of how female video characters behave?
4. What do you think about how female video game characters are treated by other characters in video games?
5. Do female characters and how they're portrayed relate at all to the real world? If so, how?
6. Do female characters and how they're portrayed affect how you see yourself?
7. Do female characters affect how women in general see themselves?
8. Do female characters affect how men see women?
9. How do you feel when you see the way females are portrayed in games?
10. Please describe the gaming subculture.
11. What is it like for female gamers in the gaming subculture?
12. What is *your* experience of being a female gamer in the gaming subculture?
13. Are there expectations for female gamers in the gaming subculture?
14. (If expectations are identified) Tell me more about that—why do you think that is?
15. (If expectations are identified) Do these expectations affect how gamers interact with each other? If so, how?

**Appendix C**

## Interview Guide for Game Play Interview

### *For Researcher Only*

\*\*Before interview begins, tell the participant: “You may refuse to answer any questions you wish, without explanation.”

1. What do you think of the female character’s appearance?
2. What do you think of the female character’s behavior?
3. What do you think about how the female character is treated by other characters in the game?
4. Do the female characters and how they’re portrayed relate at all to the real world? If so, how?
5. In your opinion, how does this female character relate to those in the majority of video games? [do you need to specify a genre of video game?]
6. Think about males who play this game and interact with this female character.
  - a. What do you think their opinion is of the female character?
  - b. How do you think this relates to what they think about females in general?
    - i. How they interact with them?
    - ii. How they treat them?
    - iii. What they expect from them?
7. Do the female characters and how they’re portrayed affect how you see yourself? How?
  - a. How you interact with others?
  - b. How you interact with other gamers?
  - c. How you interact with male games?
8. How do you feel when interacting with this female character and seeing how she is portrayed?
9. Do you think this portrayal of females in video games has an effect on how other female gamers see themselves in the real world?
  - a. How they interact with others, especially other gamers?
  - b. How they interact with male gamers?
  - c. How they act?

**Appendix D**

## Exploring the Experiences of Female Gamers

### Consent Form

You are invited to participate in this dissertation study conducted by a psychology student in the doctoral counseling program at Northwest University. The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of female gamers while playing video games. The following information is provided in order to help you to make an informed decision about whether or not to participate.

Participation in this study will require a 60-minute videotaped and audiotaped interview at the beginning of the study, a 90-minute videotaped and audiotaped interview while you play the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, and a 30-minute review of the results in which you will be able to clarify any information presented. You may refuse to answer any questions you wish, without explanation or negative consequences. First you will complete a short pre-screen questionnaire. If you are eligible for the study, you will participate in the face-to-face interview. At another time you will participate in the game play interview, in which you will play the game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* while being interviewed about your experience. At the end of the study you will participate in the review of results.

Interviews will be held either in person or via live video chat session. All meetings, either in person or through live video chat, will be conducted in a private and secured room in the Northwest University Graduate and Professional Studies Building, located at 6710 108<sup>th</sup> Ave NE Kirkland, WA 98033 or in the NUhope Community Counseling Center, located in the Davis Building at 5710 108th Ave NE Kirkland, WA 98033. In order to securely video record live video chat interviews, I will use a web application with strict encryption procedures to ensure data security.

If you participate via the live video chat option, you are advised to use the following steps to create a private and secured space to ensure a confidential interview: 1) ensure that you are in a quiet and secured room with a door that you can shut. 2) ensure that you are alone and not in the presence of others whom you would not feel comfortable hearing your interview.

There are minimal risks associated with this study. The risks might include mild discomfort due to the personal nature of the interview questions and embarrassment associated with the nature of the game play interview. The benefit of taking part in this study is the opportunity to participate in the research process as a research subject. If at any time you would like someone to talk to about any feelings or thoughts that arise during your participation, please let me know and I will provide you with counseling referral information within one week of your request.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are free to decide not to participate in this study, not to answer any questions you wish, or to withdraw at any time. There will be no negative consequences for you if you refuse to participate. You may refuse to

answer any questions asked. Upon completion of the study, you will be entered into a raffle in which two participants will be randomly chosen to receive a \$15 Starbucks gift card. Please note that this study is in no way affiliated with the video game The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, and is being conducted for scholarly purposes only.

If you choose to participate, all identifiable information will be treated confidentially. Your responses will be organized and tracked using an identification code rather than your name. A key linking participant identity with identification codes will be kept in a locked cabinet separate from your responses and accessed only by the study's investigators. The information obtained in the study may be published in psychology journals or presented at psychology conventions but your identity will be kept strictly confidential. The recorded video sessions will be stored on an external hard drive, which will allow for secure storage. After data analysis, the video files will be stored in a locked file cabinet within a secure office located in the Northwest University College of Social and Behavioral Sciences building, located at 6710 108<sup>th</sup> Ave NE Kirkland, WA 98033. All data forms will be destroyed by May 31, 2022.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Chaitra Devereaux at [chaitra.devereaux@gmail.com](mailto:chaitra.devereaux@gmail.com) or 425-287-7753. If you have further questions, please contact my faculty advisor, Leihua Edstrom, at [leihua.edstrom@northwestu.edu](mailto:leihua.edstrom@northwestu.edu) or 425-889-5367. You may also contact the Chair of the Northwest University Institutional Review Board, Doctor Molly Quick, at [molly.quick@northwestu.edu](mailto:molly.quick@northwestu.edu) or 425-889-5327.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Researcher:

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**Appendix E**



## Exploring the Experiences of Female Gamers

### Invitation Email

Dear (Name),

My name is Chaitra Devereaux and I am a Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.) student at Northwest University. I am currently investigating the experiences of female gamers and would like to know if you are willing to help.

My research is fueled by my passion to understand how female gamers experience and interact with the games they play as well as the gaming subculture. This includes gaining a better understanding of how female gamers perceive the characters they play as and interact with and how they perceive themselves. I am also interested in understanding how female gamers interact with other gamers within the gaming subculture.

Your willingness to help will involve a 60-minute videotaped and audiotaped interview at the beginning of the study, a 90-minute videotaped and audiotaped interview while you play the video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, and a 30-minute review of the results in which you will be able to clarify any information presented. You may refuse to answer any questions you wish, without explanation or negative consequences. You will also be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire.

I would love to meet with you (in person or live video chat) and am happy to answer any questions you have. Please let me know if you are available to help.

I appreciate your time and consideration!

Respectfully,

Chaitra Devereaux, MA, LMHCA  
Psy.D. Student, Northwest University

**Appendix F**

### **Game Play Scenes**

The following scenes were chosen from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) for use during the gameplay interview with participants. The scenes were chosen in order to represent the variety of female characters, portrayals, and interactions within the allotted interview timeframe. In an effort to ensure a consistent experience, each participant was instructed to choose the same dialogue options, described below, allowing them to hear and see the same character interactions with as little variation as possible.

#### **Scene One**

The first quest participants experienced in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015), appears early in the game and is entitled “Hunting A Witch.” The female supporting character, Keira Metz, assists Geralt in following clues that will help him locate his adopted daughter, Ciri, whom he believes is in danger. At the start of the quest, the player is introduced to Keira when Geralt interrupts her bathing. Keira calls to Geralt, saying “Don’t be shy” to invite him into her bathing area (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). The camera angle first shows Geralt’s view, watching Keira’s exposed breasts and nipples as she bathes (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). This imitates the male gaze, which is intended to appeal to male players and give them the experience of viewing Keira for themselves (Cook, 2013; Sarkeesian, 2014). The player then watches the scene from behind and to Keira’s side, seeing Geralt and Keira’s naked body at the same time (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). Geralt unabashedly looks Keira up and down, and she continues to bathe while talking to him. Geralt says “Missed a spot,” and Keira replies by exposing herself more, as if looking around her body for the spot, and says “Where? I hope you didn’t come to gawk” (*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, 2015). Only then does Keira

tell Geralt to turn around while she uses magic to dress in a shirt that is open to the waist, almost completely exposing her breasts. As noted earlier in this chapter, Keira's nipples are usually visible from her open shirt during normal conversations and character movements (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). When Geralt reproaches Keira's cold greeting, she says "I believe I greeted you with a pleasant view" (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

Keira tells Geralt that a powerful elf inquired about Ciri and agrees to take Geralt to the elf's hideout, which is concealed in a maze-like underground cavern or ruins and passageways. When they enter the cavern, Geralt and Keira see enemy soldiers from the Wild Hunt and surmise that they are also looking for Ciri. Geralt demands that Keira create a portal so they can follow the dangerous Wild Hunt (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Keira becomes frightened and agitated, saying that she does not want to continue (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt's only response is "Teleport. Hurry up" (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Keira teleports them further into the cavern but they are accidentally separated. When the player lands in the cavern, Keira can be heard screaming for help (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The player must find a way through part of the cavern, fighting monsters, to find Keira. It is then revealed that Keira is screaming because she is terrified of rats. She uses a magical protective shield to keep her safe until Geralt kills the rats (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

### **Scene Two**

After completing the quest "Hunting for a Witch," players can choose to complete a side quest for Keira entitled "A Favor for a Friend," in which Keira sends Geralt off to collect magic items she ordered but never received (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

After collecting the items, Geralt returns to Keira to deliver them. However, he discovers that the goods are not magical at all; they are expensive foods, spices, and wines (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). When asked about the lie, Keira is coy and tells Geralt that he will learn in time, if he is patient. When the player chooses to wait on Keira, she invites Geralt on a moonlit horseback ride and a romantic fairytale dinner, inspired by Cinderella. Keira states her desire to “escape these ghastly swamps for one magical night,” inviting Geralt to come along as her prince charming (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The player can choose for Geralt to play along, and Keira will transform their clothes into something “more glamorous” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). However, Keira’s dress maintains the same low, open neckline with exposed nipples. She comments on this by asking “Neckline too modest?” to which Geralt replies “It’s just right.”

The player is then challenged to a friendly horse race to the forest where dinner is waiting. Keira and Geralt ride their horses through the forest, while Keira taunts Geralt that she will win and get to the site first (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). After they reach the dinner site, there is some small-talk and a reference to a previous quest in which Geralt helped Keira lift a curse (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). She asks whether Geralt burned some research papers, stating her worry that they could fall into the wrong hands (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). After confirming that Geralt did not destroy them, the conversation can turn more flirtatious, with Keira stating that she and Geralt are “friends with benefits” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). If the player agrees, Geralt follows a trail of Keira’s clothes, commenting on each item, until he reaches her and asks for his prize (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). A sexual scene follows, which shows

Keira's breasts and buttocks. Geralt's chest and thigh is seen briefly as the camera pans Keira's body and then lingers on her breasts as she moves back and forth, moaning (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). As with every sexual scene in the game, the player sees only Keira exposing private body parts and hears primarily her sexual moans (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

Geralt and Keira are then seen lying on a blanket, looking at the stars. Keira tells Geralt that she will whisper something dirty in his ear, instead casting a spell that puts him to sleep (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). When Geralt awakens, Keira is gone. He turns to look at the location where the scientific papers are (mentioned earlier during the dinner scene) and remarks that Keira is "up to something" (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). If the player returns to the laboratory, Geralt finds Keira stealing research papers with the intention to profit from them (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt worries that the research is dangerous and doesn't want Keira to use them. He can either offer Keira a compromise (and take the papers from her if he wants) or kill her and take the papers (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

### **Scene Three**

The next quest that participants experience is called "Get Junior" (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). In this quest, Geralt is looking for a character nicknamed Whoreson Junior, who has been in contact with Ciri (Geralt's adopted daughter who is still missing). Geralt first recruits help from a vigilante named Vernon Roche who is staying with his soldiers in a secret base (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). While talking with Roche, a young female soldier named Ves interrupts the conversation to argue with Roche. Ves stands out in this scene because she is the only woman in a cave of male soldiers and her

shirt is untied and open to her navel, with her breasts exposed (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). After the argument, Roche takes Geralt to meet his contact, King Radovid V (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Radovid tells Geralt where Whoreson Junior is hiding, saying that Geralt must pretend he's "come about the new whores" (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Radovid then explains that "Junior constantly requests fresh women. I hear he doesn't treat them well" (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). With this information, the player can then go to Whoreson Junior's hideout.

As Geralt approaches the hideout, he can hear two of Whoreson's Henchmen talking about Junior's whores: "Whores only ever go in. Not one's come out!" says one henchman (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The other says "Boss' got a voracious appetite. I hear 'em squealin' like sows bein' slaughtered." The first henchman then says "Ah, I could do with a bit of fleshy diversion myself," to which the other replies "Mmm, yeah..." (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt asks to see Whoreson Junior and when the henchmen refuse, he kills them and steals the key. He then enters the hideout and must kill the henchmen within (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt enters Whoreson's house and climbs a set of stairs. At the top of the stairs, the player sees blood all over the floor of the landing and hears a woman screaming. At the far end of the landing is a dead woman hanging from her hands, which have been nailed to the wall. Geralt says "Fucking degenerate. He so much as touched Ciri, he'll pay." The player can examine the dead woman, and Geralt comments on her being nailed to the wall (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

Geralt then enters the room to find Whoreson Junior washing his hands. Beside him is a bathtub of bloody water with three dead women in it, naked and beaten (The

Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). There is a beaten and bloody woman hanging from the ceiling, and a bloody woman cut open on a bed (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt beats Whoreson until he agrees to tell all he knows about Ciri. The player learns that Ciri agreed to steal treasure for Whoreson in exchange for him fixing a magical item (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Whoreson insists that Ciri attacked him, and that he had a right to defend himself, but eventually tells the story of what happened. The scene then cuts to “a few weeks earlier” and the player is now controlling the character of Ciri (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Ciri and her friend, an extravagantly dressed male bard called Dandelion, are talking about rescuing their friend from Whoreson Junior. Dandelion is scared, so Ciri goes alone to Whoreson’s hideout (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

The player fights as Ciri, temporarily defeating Whoreson and killing his men before escaping. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Whoreson Junior and his henchmen call Ciri “cunt” and “whore” during combat, as compared to when Geralt fought the henchmen and was called “fool” one time (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The scene then flashes back to Whoreson and Geralt, and the player can choose whether to kill Whoreson, who is begging for mercy. If the player does kill Whoreson, Geralt’s stated reason is that Whoreson hurt Ciri and her friend, and because Ciri is like his daughter, he “can’t let this go” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). There is no mention of the women Whoreson has brutalized and murdered as a reason for his death or punishment (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). If the player lets Whoreson live, the reason Geralt gives is that he is “no executioner” and the only warning given to Whoreson is a veiled threat about exposing his secret alliance with the king (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).



**Scene Four**

After ending the Whoreson Junior quest, the participants play through a short scene involving Ves, the woman they encountered earlier in the cave. This quest is entitled “Any Eye for An Eye” and in it Geralt assists Roche in saving Ves from soldiers (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt learns that Ves has disobeyed Roche’s orders and is determined to save villagers from what she believes will be a slaughter at the hands of invading soldiers. Roche then asks Geralt to help him save Ves. When the player enters the village, Ves’ health bar appears, indicating that if Geralt does not kill the invading soldiers quickly enough and get to Ves, she will die (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The player must go down the main road of the small village, killing the soldiers until he reaches Roche and Ves. Once the invasion is defeated, Roche rebukes Ves for disobeying his orders, saying “You ignore my orders. Go off on a suicide mission. And instead of donning a breastplate, you dash into battle, shirt open, navel and whatnot exposed!” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Ves then replies with attitude, saying “You’re not my father, Roche! You can’t tell me what to do” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Roche tells Ves that if she does not like being a soldier she should join the Sisters of Melitele and become a healer (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

It is then discovered that one of the soldiers survived. Ves wants to kill the soldier and Roche wants to send the message that they can show mercy. If Geralt agrees with Roche, Ves talks back to her commander and asks him if the Witcher took his “stones” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). When Ves is not talking, she looks angry but her body language is more provocative. She usually stands with her hands on her hips, thrusting a

hip out, or stands to the side where her breasts are visible (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt and Roche do not stand this way, when arguing or idle.

### **Scene Five**

The last scene that participants play through is from a quest entitled “Ugly Baby” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). In the overarching narrative of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015), Geralt can choose between two main love interests, Triss Merigold or Yennefer of Vengerberg, or he can try to choose them both and end up alone. In the story participants interact with, Geralt has chosen Triss. Yennefer, without knowing this, asks Geralt to help her capture a djinn and break the spell that binds Yennefer and Geralt together (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Yennefer wants to see if she and Geralt will still have feelings for each other without the influence of magic. After they trap the djinn and lift the curse, Yennefer tells Geralt that she feels the same and is still in love with him (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The player can then choose to have Geralt say he loves Yennefer or tell her that “the magic’s gone” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

When the participants begin the scene, Geralt has just told Yennefer that he does not love her. She is still helping him find Ciri, so she goes to the castle where Geralt and his fellow Witchers live. When Geralt arrives, Yennefer has been there for a week and the other Witchers are not happy with her anger, secrecy, and rudeness, stating that among other activities she threw her bed off the balcony. The Witcher trainer, Vesemir, complains that he knows Yennefer is an “emancipated, strong-willed woman,” but thinks she is going too far (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). The player goes up to meet Yennefer and finds her angry, her magical device having exploded yet again. In the version that participants walk through, Geralt asks Yennefer “What’s eating you?” stating

that he and the other men are not happy with her behavior or secrecy (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

Yennefer assures Geralt that she will explain everything when the time is right. Geralt then asks her about the bed and if she wants to sleep on the cold floor, to which she replies, “I prefer a chill to bedding littered with red hair” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt mocks Yennefer’s anger saying “Ahh, so this *is* about me and Triss” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Yennefer then tells Geralt that he slept with her friend for over a year, which is “base” and “vile” and that the bed was making it hard for her not to think about Geralt and Triss together, so she threw it off the balcony (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Geralt can then remind Yennefer that he was with Triss because he had lost his memory, and therefore did not remember Yennefer or being in love with her, saying coldly “I told you, I lost my memory” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Yennefer then opens a portal and uses it to throw Geralt out of the castle and into a nearby river (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). When Geralt lands in the water, he says “Whoa... she’s really not in the mood” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

Geralt must then return to Yennefer and help her fix her device (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). When he comes back to Yennefer, she is bent over at the waist, with her buttocks and hips thrust out, apparently examining her machine. She asks Geralt if he has anything to say. Geralt can comment sarcastically that the view was “spectacular” causing Yennefer to threaten that next time the view will be a few miles higher, and literally “to die for” (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). This ends their personal discussion, and Geralt is given instructions on how to help Yennefer, who explains how to use a magical device, stating that Geralt should “Grasp it firmly, move it around, and

the louder it squeals, the closer you are,” to which Geralt gives a knowing look and says “Mhm” in a sexual tone of voice (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015). Yennefer scolds him for his “juvenile wit” and the conversation ends (The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, 2015).

Each participant interacted with the game scenes in the order laid out above, answering questions about each scene before playing the next one. This ensured the participants could discuss the scene just experienced while it was still recent and foremost in their mind.

**Appendix G**

| Table 1  |   |  |                                   |
|--|---|--|-----------------------------------|
| <i>Quotes and Codes Related to Character Portrayals and Their Effect on Perceptions of Gender Roles</i>  |   |  |                                   |
| Participant Quotes   | Open codes  | Axial Codes  | Selective Code                    |
| <p>“It's male fantasy and fan service. It's their image of what a woman's supposed to be.”</p> <p>“If you're not skinny or physically attractive then you probably don't matter.”</p> <p>“Women are designed to be weak so men can save the world.”</p>  | <p>Image of what woman is supposed to be</p> <p>Something is wrong with women/myself as a woman</p> <p>Women exist to empower male characters</p>                                   | <p>Conditional value as a female</p>                                 | <p>Invalidation of experience</p> |
| <p>“Female characters are annoying. Their design is really annoying. I don't want to be like that.”</p> <p>“It's toxic-masculine, that masculine is good and feminine is bad. That's why woman is portrayed as weak.”</p> <p>“Female gamer, I kind of hate that.”</p> <p>“It comes back with limitations.”</p> <p>“If you can't prove yourself then you're not one of them.”</p> | <p>Rejection of typical female character</p> <p>Rejection of women who are not obviously strong</p> <p>Rejection of the term “female gamer”</p> <p>Need to be “one of the guys”</p> | <p>Feminine traits and labels perceived as negative are rejected</p> |                                   |
| <p>“Take female input seriously. . . . [instead of] dismissing it as girls who were whining.”</p> <p>“I've been told ‘Your opinion doesn't matter, because you're a woman.’”</p> <p>“[Women are] scared to bring their viewpoint up because of what might happen.”</p>   | <p>Females are not heard</p> <p>Female ideas and desires do not matter</p> <p>Gamers are harassed for being female</p>  | <p>No voice</p>  |                                   |

|   |                 |                     |  |
|---|-----------------|---------------------|--|
| “[Gamers] say ‘I’m going to rape you’ and use it as a tool to suppress someone.”                                | Suppression     |                     |  |
| “You kind of desensitize to the rest of it.”<br>“Maybe because I've been playing for a while I get numb to it.” | Desensitization | Internalized sexism |  |
| “They know each other so I think it was appropriate, how he treated her.”                                       | Justification   |                     |  |

| Table 2   |  |                         |   |
|---|--|-------------------------|---|
| <i>Quotes and Codes Related to Effect of Character Portrayals on Others' Expectations About Gender Roles</i>  |  |                         |   |
| Participant Quotes  | Open code  | Axial Codes             | Selective Code  |
| <p>“We’re the healer and support.”</p> <p>“A guy . . . was like ‘You’re not a girl, you care about stats. Girls only care about outfits and how cute they look.’”</p> <p>“They're stupid, they're reckless. They need to be protected. They can't protect themselves.”</p> <p>“Just ‘Okay, I'm cute, you saved me; I'll let you have sex.’”</p> | <p>Women are only healers or support characters</p> <p>Women want characters to be attractive, not powerful</p> <p>Women lack skill and need protecting</p> <p>Sex used as tool and reward</p> | In-game expectations    | Perception of negative and unrealistic views of women |
| <p>“They think that women are supposed to look a certain way, and so they want that certain type of woman.”</p> <p>“She's a sexy woman. And she's the only woman. She's done something to make herself valuable to them—she still is a trophy.”</p>   | <p>Women in the real world are supposed to be like the idealized fantasy character</p> <p>Women are valued for their appearance</p>  | Real-world expectations |   |

|   |  |                              |  |
|---|--|------------------------------|--|
| <p>“It’s like women get their way by sleeping around.”</p> <p>“Guys think that this is how you’re supposed to treat the woman.”</p> <p>“Portrayed that it's okay to abuse women.”</p>   | <p>Women are expected to use sex to get what they want</p> <p>It is okay to mistreat women</p>   |                              |  |
| <p>“Most [female characters] are treated as less than; not as equal.”</p> <p>“Men in my life have been like ‘Well, you're mad, so you've already lost this fight.’ I'm not emotionally compromised.”</p> <p>“See women like that as bitchy. They don’t see her strength, just that she’s difficult.”</p> <p>“Female aggression and sexual aggression is always gold-digging, suspicious.”</p> | <p>Masculine is good and feminine is bad</p> <p>Women are compromised by their emotions</p> <p>Feminine characteristics are weak or negative</p> | <p>Masculine superiority</p> |  |

| Table 3  |   |                           |                 |
|--|---|---------------------------|-----------------|
| <i>Quotes and Codes Related to Perceptions of Gender Roles and Expectations and Their Effect on Social Interactions</i>  |   |                           |                 |
| Participant Quotes   | Open code   | Axial Codes               | Selective Code  |
| <p>“Speaking up gets you so much negative attention, it’s almost better not to speak up.”</p> <p>“I don’t go to things where I know I have to worry about being groped.”</p> <p>“I . . . started reaching out for other female gamers . . . and a lot of [female gamers] don’t want to play with strangers anymore.”</p> | <p>Avoid harassment</p> <p>Guard safety</p> <p>Find other female gamers</p> | <p>Protect well-being</p> | <p>Survival</p> |



|   |  |                    |  |
|---|--|--------------------|--|
| <p>“Put your blinders on, ignore everybody else, and just persevere.”</p>   | <p>Ignore negative interactions, female portrayals, and comments</p>   |                    |  |
| <p>“If you wanna have a lot of friends, especially male friends, you have to be one of the guys. It's like entering a boy's club, really.”</p> <p>“If you start saying something like, ‘You shouldn’t be treating a woman like this,’ they're like, ‘What? You're no longer fun.’”</p>  | <p>Be one of the guys</p> <p>Learn what female gamers should not do</p>  | <p>Fit in</p>      |  |
| <p>“[Women] have to work twice as hard and they need to be on guard all the time.”</p> <p>“I had to fight tooth and nail.”</p> <p>“Makes you want to stay in control, knowing men expect [women to be emotional and lose control].”</p> <p>“Being reduced just to your sexual, physical aspect was such a difficult thing. So being able to be like “I'm this, but I'm also the smartest person in the room, and that being valid.”</p> | <p>Work twice as hard as men to get the same outcome</p> <p>Fight for position</p> <p>Control emotions</p> <p>Be valued for self</p> | <p>Prove merit</p> |  |