

“ME TOO”: QUESTIONS OF CONSONANCE
AND DISSONANCE BETWEEN DIGITAL
GAMES AND REALITY

Bringing the Outside into the (Magic) Circle

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I Introduction

In 1938 Johan Huizinga theorized that the fictional worlds of games take place within a “magic circle” that separates them entirely from reality. This idea was based on a dice game performed within a circle drawn upon the ground, where Huizinga identifies that, “Inside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count.”¹ This meant that the contents of the game were divorced from the systems and cultural traditions of the real world. Huizinga took this theory further, applying it to all play spaces, stating: “But whether square or round it is still a magic circle, a play-ground where the customary differences of rank are temporarily abolished. Whoever steps inside it is sacrosanct for the time being.”² Here, he determines that the physicality of the game space is irrelevant, regardless of its shape or location it is still bound by the circle. He also adds another factor into the equation, establishing that those who are not equal outside of play find themselves made balanced within it, suggesting the possibility of a utopian inclusiveness.

After Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman’s 2003 book, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals*, reintroduced the theory to a virtual age, the concept of the magic circle greatly shaped the discourse surrounding video games, and it

¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 12.

² Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 77.

continues to be a primary lens through which we analyze the dynamics of play. One of the questions this essay will ask is whether, and in what ways, this model must still be reconsidered or revised as “play” moves out of the physical sphere and into the virtual. Moreover, it will show how the relationships of the player to the game and the game to “reality” become complicated in the world of virtual play, in which interactivity is essential but *choice* is limited. Here interactivity is defined as the dialogue that develops when a user provides a digital system with input, such as the press of a button, click of a mouse, or even physical movement of the player; the program then responds to that instruction, thus creating communication between player and game. Instances of interactivity manifest each time the user makes contact with the game, whether that be to navigate through a menu, design and move a character, or send a message to another player. Where Huizinga had only envisioned human to human interaction, the program can serve as an in between, or even the alternative, to another person. This breaches the idea of the circle, linking the real with the virtual. As such, interactivity also provides the potential to create empathy-based relationships between differing identities, because these programs can connect perspectives that might not otherwise encounter each other.

Huizinga’s model was limited to physical play spaces, such as a playground or a tennis court; as a result of the increase in interactivity and mechanisms for “personalization” of one’s digital experience, the real and virtual have become increasingly porous, blurring the distinction between fiction and reality. This essay

will go beyond the simple idea of inclusion versus exclusion as a binary model of quality, in favor of a more nuanced approach of an individually measured social consonance and dissonance. This idea then referring to the way in which various identities that exist in the real world become excluded or discongruent within the virtual spaces of games, which are presented as utopic and thus disconnected from reality. Through this essay, I will examine the increased permeability of the magic circle in a video game setting, and, through semiotic investigation, will analyze the potential consonance and dissonance between the virtual and the real worlds. I will also consider to what extent signified meaning becomes the point of intersection, or collision, between the real world and the virtual. As I will demonstrate, the virtual sphere has currently not yet exploited interactivity and formal signification to make room for truly empathic relations to non-normative identities, nor has there been devised a system of representation which incorporates experiences outside of those of straight, white, young, cisgender, able-bodied men.

Representation in media serves as a signifier of “reality,” and, therefore, of legitimacy. When certain groups are not portrayed within video games, this seems to question the validity of those identities, which are essentially comprised of anyone who is *not* a straight, white, young, cisgender, and able-bodied man. A lack of diverse portrayals, as well as a surplus of stereotypical depictions, causes alienation for those groups. Providing players with the chance to design their own characters supports the possibility of self-inclusion; however, as technology grows to allow for more player choice in designing their avatar’s individuality, this both

opens up the possibility of defining more varied identities, and at the same time calls for greater responsibility in attention to the way signification operates in video games.

Given that video games can provide the opportunity to create an avatar and move through a setting as one chooses, it might be expected that those virtual spaces would serve as an escapist environment where persons from marginalized identities would be able to find comfort and acceptance. However, more often than not, the virtual world simply replicates the divisions and prejudices of the real world, further alienating the already disenfranchised. Instead of operating as a utopic space for identity creation, the dissonance felt within society is not escaped in the virtual world. This is a result of a hegemonic structure in society, or a power dynamic in which the predominant group holds control over all others via the mechanism of culture. When structures like this are replicated within the gaming industry by default, that in turn contributes to a singular, authorial point of view. For those existing as part of a marginalized group, this means that the game space cannot liberate them from the oppression that they feel outside of the game world, nor provide the opportunity for the personal freedom of identity definition or an intersectional exploration of individuality. If the goal is to create a true utopian fantasy, then the dissonance that oppressed peoples feel in the real world would need to be alleviated within the game space, not reproduced.

This essay will propose models for and encourage the integration of a discourse surrounding representation within the mainstream video game

community, thus allowing us to acknowledge the magic circle with more social consideration, questioning whether players feel consonance within the virtual sphere or whether there is dissonance between their real lives and their digital identities. Here I measure inclusion by asking whether players feel consonance, in addition to asking whether there are any characters with similar identities or experiences to those players. In the latter scenario, one of the ways in which inclusion may be made tangible is by the player's ability to say "me too" to a game character, whether that be a literal option within the context of the game or not. This capability references the idea that users may feel as though there are situations in which their identities are validated. Examining various examples of problematic depictions of the "other" in the virtual sphere, including gender, race, class, and sexuality, this essay will identify successes as well as areas which would benefit from an expanded dialogue on representation. It will also make recommendations for how game developers may work towards creating more inclusive environments, even within the limits of the medium. Video games are not implicitly exclusionary spaces, and with this essay I will demonstrate that with careful attention to signification, they can actually create powerful feelings of inclusion.

II Introduction to Semiotics and Games

The reason that representation can serve as indication of authenticity is because each choice made within the design process conveys information to the user. This is the operation of media as defined by the field of semiotics. Theorist and critic Roland Barthes succinctly outlined the movement's goals in his 1964 book, *Elements of Semiology*, where he states:

Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not *languages*, at least systems of signification.³

This means that the goal of semiotics is to deconstruct a production into each of its formal components, whether that be sonic, visual, or mechanical, and analyze the associations connected with each of those elements. Most simply put: form contains coded content. The result of this “coding” is that the inclusion of stereotypes, or the exclusion of already marginalized groups, perpetuates harmful real world structures.

This discourse on representation has been investigated throughout other artistic mediums, such as in the fine arts, but with regards to video games, there is a distinct divide between the academic theorist, the author (or, in this case, the

³ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 1.

game developer), and the user. For video games, critical theory exists on a purely academic level, but it has yet to fully trickle down into the maker culture. Other media, particularly the fine arts, are also comprised of academic, consumer, and maker classes. However, within the fine arts, the makers, and to some extent the consumers, are still expected to understand some of the higher level discourse, whereas the games industry has no such expectation. Even among academic video game theorists, who have dealt with identity politics through representation on a nuanced critical level, there persists an idealized notion of the game world as a utopic space for identity creation, where real-world associations present no interference.

This is particularly the case with Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, or MMORPGs, which, with their human to human interaction and enhanced mechanisms for self definition, are critically posited as an ideal platform for identity construction. Typical of this thinking, Miroslaw Filiciak's essay, "Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Games," portrays the game space as a paradise for those who wish to construct an identity from scratch, stating: "It is easy to notice that the MMORPG user situation is an idealized image of the situation of the postmodern human creature, in which a user can freely shape his own 'self.'" Filiciak pushes this thought further, asserting: "A huge role is played here by the ability to choose appearance[. . .]"⁴ This understanding of video games, shared by many theorists within the field, does not

⁴ Miroslaw Filiciak, "Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Role-Playing Games," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 90.

take into critical consideration how the game space remains significantly *limited* in terms of identity construction. This conformity within academic thought may, in part, be due to the fact that many theorists share similar identities that do not exist within a culturally fraught place; it is easy to inadvertently overlook the restrictions of character creation when one has the privilege to do so.

This conception of games as a utopic space for identity creation is not just restricted to scholars of the medium; many creators of games also share this vision. However, even games that have purposefully tried to enact this ideal have failed to meet the demands of an always evolving, contemporary audience because a discourse on limited representation was not integrated into the broader culture. This was the case for Nintendo, who came under fire after the 2014 Western release of their game, *Tomodachi Life*, failed to include same-sex relationships.⁵ The game was created with the intention of simulating realistic human experiences, and it advertised the ability to create characters, called Miis, that could represent both yourself and your friends. Players were encouraged to customize the appearance, voice, and personality of each figure they introduced to the game to represent the real people in their lives.⁶ As part of its marketing, *Tomodachi Life* was advertised with the slogan: “Your friends. Your drama. Your life.” (fig. 1).⁷ Despite this emphasis on replicating lived experiences, the ability to enter gay relationships, a facet of the real world that the series was trying to duplicate, was not reflected

⁵ *Tomodachi Life* (Nintendo, 2013), video game.

⁶ “Nintendo 3DS - Tomodachi Life,” YouTube video, 1:22, posted by “Nintendo,” April 10, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sBTHSY5GKKY>.

⁷ *Tomodachi Life* box cover showing the game’s slogan, “Your friends. Your drama. Your life.”

within the game space. For many people, this meant that *Tomodachi Life* was not *their* life.

Nonetheless, the lack of a mainstream discourse on representation has not prevented game creators from intentionally attempting to address a diverse audience. Before I can make recommendations for how game developers may work towards creating more inclusive environments, we must first investigate how the individual parts of a video game operate to signify meaning. There are many factors of a game's design that work to convey information to the player. The next section will use the language of semiotics to break the medium of video games down into some of its most basic methods of signification.

III Primary Signifiers in Games

By analyzing video games through the lens of semiotics, we can better see how each individual component is working to signify meaning to players. We will begin by looking at how textual options operate within games. Throughout the history of the gaming industry, dialogue choices within single-player narratives have been celebrated as an indicator of freedom; they provide players with the possibility to perform as a character whose experience is unique from that of another user's. This is facilitated when users are presented with virtual conversations in which other characters will speak with them and they are given several possible responses from which to choose. Upon selecting a reply, the player's avatar will act out that input, and then the other characters will respond. It is true that when given textual choices within a game, there is a potential for deep role-playing, which is to say, that a participant can assume the actions and attitudes that might be associated with a particular character, or personal insertion within the storyline because this allows users to enact their own will within the confines of the virtual plot. The dialogue of both the player's avatar, as well as the other characters in a game, can indicate many aspects of that person's individuality, including their speech mannerisms, background, and class. Because of this, the text options allowed to the player determine whether that player is a part of certain groups, as well as whether they

are or are not “in the know” about those groups. In these instances, “the know” is often representative of the normative assumptions of Western culture. In these cases, any users whose identities do not align with the norm become alienated by those choices.

Even in otherwise progressive games, there are still moments that fail a diverse audience. *Dragon Age: Inquisition* is a typical role-playing game set in the fantastical world of Thedas, where the player fills the role of the Inquisitor, who must lead an army against an evil sorcerer.⁸ The game emphasizes diversity and interaction between characters; it presents the player with a fully-voiced and varied cast, comprised of individuals of differing personalities and races, and whose sexualities exist outside of the player’s own actions. It also explores the idea that gender and sex are not synonymous, a concept generally untouched by mainstream video games. In the game, just after recruiting a band of mercenaries called The Bull’s Chargers, their leader invites the Inquisitor to drinks with the group, during which the members of the Chargers introduce themselves to the Inquisitor. After meeting a mercenary named Krem midway through the conversation, he casually makes reference to the fact that he is transgender. At this point the player may choose from four dialogue options: “Why pass as a man?” “Are you a woman?” “When did you know?” and “And the rest of your crew?” (fig. 2).⁹ Each of these responses is invalidating, even if the player actually does have an understanding of trans identity politics. The third reply, “When did you

⁸ *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), video game.

⁹ To view this scene in its entirety visit, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMXP7qVNAD4>.

know?” while lacking the inherent violence of the previous two, which invalidate the character’s identity, presumes an intimacy between Krem and the Inquisitor that would be unlikely in the given reality that they have just met. The final option, “And the rest of your crew?” serves only to let the user change the subject. At best, these dialogue choices presume a cisgender player who is not “in the know” on trans identity issues. Worse, they reveal an assumption that transgender people are an “other,” and deny trans players, most of whom are encountering an in-game transgender character for the first time, with the opportunity for a moment in which they can bond with someone like themselves.

Just as games rarely present characters of a range of gender identities, the physical bodies of these characters are generally young, fit, and able. The homogeneity of these representations becomes even more narrowly defined when we focus on the depictions of women, where we rarely see anything that exists outside of a stereotypical Western standard of attractiveness and desirability. While digital male figures are allowed some diversity among body types, female figures rarely get the same treatment. This is most obvious in MOBAs, or Massive Online Battle Arenas such as *Dota 2*, *League of Legends*, or *Smite*, which are games in which users are placed on teams and must battle against each other while playing as select existing avatars from a provided roster.¹⁰ MOBAs often include numerous male characters with a diverse range of body shapes and ages for users to choose from, but they also tend to depict very few female avatars, and render each with

¹⁰ *Dota 2* (Valve Corporation, 2013) video game; *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) video game; *Smite* (Hi-Rez Studios, 2014) video game.

similar, slender and sexualized bodies (fig. 3).¹¹ This again reinforces the notion that the body types neglected by our games are in some way less valid than those that make it to the screen.

In the popular online shooter game *Overwatch*, Blizzard Entertainment tries to provide a cast of characters with differing body shapes, ages, and sizes.¹² The female “tank” character, Zarya (fig. 4)¹³ is a woman with obvious muscle mass. In games, “tank” refers to a class of characters whose role on a team is to absorb damage, thus protecting their teammates. Female tank characters are a rare occurrence within games, and they are almost always depicted as a slender figure in bulky armor. Meanwhile, male characters can have hulking figures and remain lightly clothed. This design trope implies that men are in their natural state strong, while women are weak, requiring bodily augmentation in order to be powerful. Therefore, Zarya’s muscular frame reads as an exception to the rule, and despite this aberration, the majority of the other women in *Overwatch* conform to the slender and sexualized norm. Even the genre’s best attempt to date still fails to truly represent a wide variety of female body types.

The ways in which these figures move, that is to say their body language, has the potential to indicate many aspects of each character’s identity, expressing what distinguishes them from other persons. These movements can strengthen a user’s conception of what defines each individual within the game, as they can

¹¹“Starting Champions,” accessed November 11, 2016, http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/featured/new-player-guide?source=http://na.leagueoflegends.com/en/site/guide/#/champions/starting-champions?_k=cg8n96.

¹² *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016) video game.

¹³ “Overwatch Homepage,” accessed November 11, 2016, <https://playoverwatch.com/en-us/>.

communicate qualities such as a character's mood and personality as well as their physical abilities or class status. Here the term "movement" is used to refer to the animations that reveal how characters physically make their way through a space or perform an activity. When applied to a player-character, these animations most often play as a result of user input, such as the press of a button or click of a mouse, although some begin in response to a lack of given instructions, which is referred to as an "idle" animation. These images provide game designers with a creative avenue with which they may express subtextual details of a character that might not otherwise be disclosed; even the way in which a character sits down can signify something to the player.

For example, movement works to express subtle details in Bungie's popular MMORPG *Destiny*, which was released in late 2014. In the game, players take on a role as one of many Guardians who are tasked with protecting Earth, and by extension all of humanity, from hostile alien forces.¹⁴ Players begin the game by creating characters, after which they are advised to investigate threats from and fight their way through foreign planets. Guardians are allowed a brief reprieve between missions in which they may explore a safe environment and upgrade their equipment. It is in this space that players are given one of few opportunities to instruct their characters to sit down, relax, and take in the vibrancy of the world. Although male and female Guardians are otherwise treated by the narrative as though they are entirely equal, it is here in their movement that they become

¹⁴ *Destiny* (Bungie, 2014), video game.

differentiated. Feminist and games critic Anita Sarkeesian analyzes these differences in an episode from her non-profit Feminist Frequency's video series,

Tropes vs Women in Video Games, saying:

Watch how a male guardian sits down, taking a load off after a long, hard day fighting the forces of pure evil. It's simple. It suggests confidence. When a female character sits down, however, it's a completely different story. She sits like a delicate flower. This is supposed to be a hardened space warrior and yet she is sitting around like she's Ariel from *The Little Mermaid*.¹⁵

As Sarkeesian describes, when a male player-character performs the sitting down movement he brusquely drops to the ground, as if worn and tired (fig.5).¹⁶ In contrast, a female Guardian's animation for the same gesture presents a woman who carefully descends, as if she were concerned with her etiquette (fig. 6).¹⁷

Just as male and female bodies act differently in games, they are also viewed differently. In 1973 Laura Mulvey identified and described a phenomenon in which the viewpoint of the camera within a film takes on the perspective of a heterosexual male, reflecting the sexual interests of that identity with its framing. Mulvey coined this occurrence with the phrase "the male gaze" in her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," however the same concept can be applied here to video games.¹⁸ In short, this occurs when the composition of the screen reflects a

¹⁵ Anita Sarkeesian, "Body Language & The Male Gaze," YouTube video, 7:56, posted by "feministfrequency," March 31, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP0la9SEdXQ>.

¹⁶ Anita Sarkeesian, "Body Language & The Male Gaze."

¹⁷ Anita Sarkeesian, "Body Language & The Male Gaze."

¹⁸ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," In *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 837.

power structure in which woman is a passive entity, presented mainly for the viewing pleasure of an (assumed) active male audience. Sarkeesian argues that

An indisputable example of this is when the camera lingers, caresses, or pans across a woman's body— although it's not always that obvious. In games, it can be as simple as the in-game camera resting so that a character's butt or breasts or both are centerline, it can [also] be cutscenes that rest on a woman's butt[. . .]¹⁹

When a game's camera treats a figure in this way, it signifies to the users that the body is an object, worth nothing beyond its sexual value, over which the implied male player has power.

The way in which a game's characters and environment are composed on the screen and how the camera is directed through that space determines which elements of a scene are important or unimportant, as well as what aspects of those elements are valuable. As such, the way in which the camera treats a character or a facet of the virtual world also regulates how players will read that component. Because games are spatial stories, in those spaces the *mise-en-scène* serves as another form of narrative. One of the ways in which this can negatively impact how a game is read is when the camera movement values a character for the sexual characteristics of their body, a gaze which in turn renders them as a narrative object rather than a person with agency.

Video games are slightly different than film with regards to the gaze in that users have some degree of interactivity, which can sometimes determine things such as the camera angle. However, it is important to note, that while video games

¹⁹ Anita Sarkeesian, "Body Language & The Male Gaze."

differ from film in terms of the player's ability to control the gaze, the player is still limited to the options provided by the developer, who is usually male. For example, when one attempts to pivot the in-game camera, the perspective will often snap back to whatever serves as the standard camera position for the given game, and this framing of the game screen predominantly reflects the perspective of a straight male, just as within cinema.

This treatment and use of the male gaze is present throughout Lara Croft's long and complicated relationship with the virtual sphere, however, the newest reboot, simply called *Tomb Raider*, actively attempts to create a portrayal of women and women's bodies that does not objectify them.²⁰ In order to do this, developer Crystal Dynamics redesigned the iconic character's visage so that her outfit, which has traditionally been comprised of a revealing top and short shorts, now becomes a tank top and cargo pants, an outfit much more suited to trekking through the wilderness. In addition, the studio altered Croft's basic body shape so that she more accurately reflects proportions seen in the real world. However, what the developers did not take into account was how the perspective of the game's camera might also be working to disempower its female characters. As a result, in certain moments *Tomb Raider* still allows the camera to linger on Croft's body, objectifying, rather than empowering her. For example, there are certain sequences throughout *Tomb Raider* in which Croft must shimmy up a small cliff-face by wedging herself within a crevice in the wall. During these scenes the camera is

²⁰ *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) video game.

removed from its usual over-the-shoulder placement, and repositioned beneath her body, locked at an angle that frames her butt within the center of the image (fig. 7).²¹ Regardless of the other advancements the game has made in Croft's portrayal, this choice of framing still expresses to players that her anatomy is more important than any facet of her character or personal struggles.

The final signifier to be considered is that of game mechanics, which are systems of rules as defined by code that determine how the user interacts with the game world. Mechanics allow gameplay by determining how a game functions and how it responds to user input and are a requirement for a work to be considered a game. The way in which the user is allowed to interact with the environment and characters of a game is another aspect of the medium that works to inform that player. When the mechanics of a game contradict the central themes of the narrative, rather than reinforcing them, this creates a phenomenon called "ludonarrative dissonance." "Ludo," which stems from the term "ludic," meaning playfulness, refers solely to the mechanics of a game, while "narrative" alludes to the story. Noting that it was difficult to talk about games when there was little established language to do so, game developer Clint Hocking coined the term in a 2007 blog post.²² Since then, the theory has been widely accepted as a part of the games discourse, but it has also often been misunderstood. Ludonarrative dissonance is not as simple as a conflict between the tone of the narrative and that

²¹ Anita Sarkeesian, "Body Language & The Male Gaze."

²² *Click Nothing*. http://clicknothing.typepad.com/click_nothing/2007/10/ludonarrative-d.html.

of the game mechanics. Rather, it occurs when the messages sent by the story and mechanics are in direct opposition to each other.

Ludonarrative dissonance is seen in the *Assassin's Creed* series from developer Ubisoft, one of few examples of games from a high budget studio that explore narratives related to the history of people of color challenging oppressive systems. Shortly after releasing *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag* in 2013, the studio published a downloadable add-on entitled *Assassin's Creed: Freedom Cry*.²³ While the main game saw players take on the role of Edward Kenway, a pirate who seeks glory for himself and his crew while defying various governments, *Freedom Cry*, instead, told the story of Kenway's first mate, Adewale. A former slave, Adewale cared for Kenway's ship and crew in *Black Flag* before decades later having a vessel and a company of his own in the narrative of *Freedom Cry*. The add-on takes place after a ship battle leaves him marooned on the island of Saint-Domingue, today comprised of the nations of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The narrative centers around Adewale's struggle to free slaves and catalyze uprisings. As players progress through the game, they are incentivized by rewards that will upgrade their equipment and grant them more power within the game world. In order to receive these enhancements, the game requires that a certain number of persons have been liberated from their holdings (fig. 8).

²³ *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag: Freedom Cry* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2013), video game.

In his essay, "The Natural: The Trouble Portraying Blackness in Video Games," game journalist Evan Narcisse succinctly describes this contradiction, stating:

Even black-protagonist video games that I like have their flaws. In *Freedom Cry*, there was the messy stumble where the game's mechanics turned the same slaves you fought to free into currency to get more deadly weapons. It was essentially something like "Liberate 300 more slaves to get access to this cool machete." Wait, isn't that the same commoditization that I just worked to end inside the game's narrative?²⁴

So while the narrative of *Freedom Cry* purports to be about disrupting the commodification of black lives, the mechanics require players to do just that in order to advance. Here, the dissonance occurs because the prevailing message of the narrative is that transforming black lives into objects of trade is *bad*, yet the game entices players to trade those same lives in order to receive something *good*.

While the above example contains a level of violence, this does not mean that ludonarrative dissonance is an inherently problematic process. However, developers need to be aware of the phenomenon and how it impacts the message of their games. When the narrative of a game promotes inclusivity but the mechanics contradict that idea, this undermines the desired consonance. That process of signification becomes particularly potent when it calls to question the validity of an identity. Each of the signifiers discussed above operates in a similar manner. Dialogue, the design of bodies, a character's physical movement, a camera's gaze, and a game's mechanics are not implicitly negative aspects of

²⁴ Evan Narcisse, "The Natural: The Trouble Portraying Blackness in Video Games," Kotaku, (October 14, 2015), accessed September 11, 2016, <http://kotaku.com/the-natural-the-trouble-portraying-blackness-in-video-1736504384>.

design. Nonetheless, all convey information that can work towards creating social consonance and dissonance for players, meaning that those choices must be made with careful consideration.

IV Bringing the Outside into the (Magic) Circle

Video games, an interactive medium where users move more fluidly between the magic circle and the real world, make the issue of consonance and dissonance more immediate, and make the signifiers one chooses more important. This is particularly true for the social universes found within games that can be shared online, as opposed to the physical spaces in which Huizinga had envisioned play taking place. While the games of Huizinga's era were quite literally separate from the rest of a player's life, a space in which players could truly adopt an entirely new role or identity, the increasingly digital nature of our play has blurred the line that dictates where a game ends and reality begins. As such, it is difficult to argue that the theory of the magic circle should remain the standard with which we analyze the contents of games. This is not to say that the theory retains no value in contemporary games discourse; acknowledging that the game space holds an alternate reality with its own rules remains important to understanding the medium.

In his defense of the magic circle, Eric Zimmerman cites identity creation as one of the ways in which the circle is still pertinent to discussing games, explaining: "Outside the magic circle, you are Jane Smith, a 28 year old gamer; inside, you are the Level 62 GrandMage Hargatha of the Dookoo Clan."²⁵ However, this

²⁵ Eric Zimmerman, "Jerked Around by the Magic Circle - Clearing the Air Ten Years Later," Gamasutra, (February 7, 2012), accessed November 8, 2016, http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/135063/jerked_around_by_the_magic_circle_.php.

understanding of the game space still does not take into consideration the ways in which Jane Smith's personal identity is retained when she enters the circle, and in what ways that identity might be challenged or invalidated. Although, as Zimmerman later states, new meanings *are* generated within the game space, sometimes elements of a game are recognized only for the meanings they hold in reality.²⁶ Discussing games in ways that both utilize the theory of the magic circle and that move away from it allows our culture to broaden its understanding of how digital games operate within our world, and how meaning is carried between the fictional space and reality. Acknowledging this fluidity validates concepts that theorize that interactivity can lead to an empathic experience that the user can then transport from the game and into the real world. In addition, this porousness means that the game itself does not exist within a vacuum, but within the context of the culture in which it was created. Therefore, more than just serving as an influence, ideas and meanings that exist within reality can also be brought into the game world in their entirety. However, this permeability also means that these play spaces are susceptible to hegemonic control, that real-life oppression can be duplicated within those fictional realms.

These hegemonic real world structures, expressed through the signification we have discussed, are often repeated unconsciously or unintentionally on the part of the game designer. It has sometimes been suggested that these power dynamics *should* be included in the virtual world, simply because that is the way things are in

²⁶ Zimmerman, "Jerked Around by the Magic Circle," 4.

the real world. In his analysis of this defense Dan Wohl criticizes that sentiment, stating: "Abiding by the historical fact of sexism in a fictional universe that is otherwise not bound by historical fact, I'd say, accomplishes nothing as much as reinforcing the idea that it's the default order of things. That's a problem because of the ways it still *is* the default order of things."²⁷ That is not to say that games can never reflect that aspect of our reality, but to include hegemonic systems within the virtual sphere without commenting on the negative nature of that pervasiveness simply works to buttress those systems. In addition, games cannot be touted as a utopic space while they are simultaneously recreating the systems that disenfranchise already marginalized groups. If the goal is to create a true escapist fantasy, then to be successful the dissonance that oppressed peoples feel in the real world would need to be alleviated within the game space, not reproduced. In creating a fantasy realm, developers have the freedom to design that space to be anything. So why replicate all the biases and power imbalances of the real world?

Again, some would argue that it is enough that players are able to recreate images of themselves within the game space, in the form of an avatar, which is then treated similarly within the world regardless of how that those characters differ from the norm. In actuality, users are not always able to create a likeness of themselves, and players with female avatars *are* often the recipients of gendered insults or come-ons that are missing from the experiences of those with a male

²⁷ Dan Wohl, "Is "Historical Accuracy" a Good Defense of Patriarchal Societies in Fantasy Fiction?" *The Mary Sue*, (December 5, 2012), accessed September 06, 2016, <http://www.themarysue.com/sexism-in-historical-fantasy/>.

player-character (fig. 9).²⁸ Regardless, the option to create a being with one's own likeness *does* present a ripe moment for players to see someone like themselves within a world in which that representation might not otherwise exist. Yet these possibilities become incredibly narrow when the customization options are limited to creating young, able-bodied, binary gendered, slender, and fine haired figures, as seen in so many games.

Some may continue to argue that game spaces and the real world in which they are created are entirely disparate spheres. The argument therein being that a video game takes place in a fictional realm, and therefore has no bearing on our real world. But if that were truly the case, then real-world social structures would not be replicated within games as a default. Because oppressive structures have become so systemic, this duplication occurs even within games that have the intention of disrupting hegemonic norms, which is where ludonarrative dissonance becomes an especially powerful force. This happens in games such as 2011's *SPENT*, which was created by the McKinney ad agency with the aim of teaching economically privileged people about the struggles of low income individuals.²⁹ The game challenges the player to live through one calendar month with \$1,000. Each day represents a difficult decision between things like spending money or sacrificing one's health (fig. 10). In Gina Roussos's essay, "When Good Intentions Go Awry," she explains why the mechanical system of *SPENT* works in opposition to its purpose:

²⁸ An example of this can be seen in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, which features both a male protagonist and a female protagonist, but only the latter receives gendered insults.

²⁹ *SPENT* (McKinney, 2011), video game.

Herein lies the inherent problem with this interactive poverty game. When I'm playing the game, I'm faced with decisions like whether to pay to fix my broken car or start taking the bus instead. I make a decision (taking the bus) and then I see the outcome of that decision (saving money but sometimes being late to work because the bus is unreliable). For each scenario, the outcome (and its consequences) are directly caused by my decision. I feel that I have personal agency. Because I am playing the role of a poor person, I extend this feeling of personal agency to poor people in general. In the end, my attitudes toward the poor are not swayed by the game. Any positive feelings evoked by empathy from seeing the challenges of poverty are off-set—or even outweighed—by the negative feelings brought on by the belief that poverty is personally controllable, which is the inevitable result of playing a poverty game which emphasizes decision-making.³⁰

Although the game aspires to grow empathy for those living in poverty, it ends up implying that those challenges faced by the destitute can, with hard work and determination, still be easily overcome. This, of course, is unrealistic in the real world, given the societal structures that prevent such advancement from taking place. Nonetheless, because the game functions in a way that aligns with an ideology that is prevalent in reality, it ends up creating a very real reinforcement within the minds of its players, even those who had expressed sympathy for those in poverty prior to playing.³¹

Although developed with the intention of educating middle and upper class individuals about the difficulties faced by the impoverished, the ludonarrative dissonance created here subverts that effort and creates social dissonance for people marginalized by poverty. To “gamify” poverty in this way replicates and

³⁰ Gina Roussos, "When Good Intentions Go Awry," *Psychology Today*, (December 7, 2015), accessed September 11, 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sound-science-sound-policy/201512/when-good-intentions-go-awry>.

³¹ Gina Roussos, "When Good Intentions Go Awry."

reinforces a hegemonic idea, thus contradicting the concept of the magic circle that states that the virtual world contains a separate reality from the real world. This signification takes on added strength because players have personal control within the narrative of the game, a meaning which they can then transport outside of the magic circle.

V Questions for the Future

While one can theoretically enter the virtual magic circle and take on an entirely new persona, the limits of that space also place constraints on the user's identity definition. For many individuals, the goal when beginning a game that allows for the customization of the player's avatar is to create a character in one's own image. However, some cannot enter that circle and retain their real, actual personage because the virtual sphere simply has not yet made room for that identity. This means that it is especially powerful when a character besides the player's avatar shares some of the same struggles as a marginalized person, as that can, to some degree, bridge the gap and validate those experiences. More than that, when users are given the opportunity to acknowledge that a character within the game space shares the same concerns and difficulties as they do, a moment of true connection can be borne.

Earlier, we looked at a scene from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, in which a trans character is introduced to the game. We noted how the dialogue options presume that Krem is "the other" and that the player is supposed to occupy a normative identity. These instances do not allow a player to literally say, "me too," to be included in a sphere that otherwise makes little effort to give them space. Providing that option can create a very real sense of consonance, and would let players know

that there are people who both understand their struggles and empathize with them.

The question then becomes how to allow for the creation of these opportunities, which I shall refer to as “me too” moments. In an article on FemHype (which is a community blog dedicated to publishing articles related to videogames), titled “Pick Your Poison: Character Creation & The Gender Binary,” the author, identified as Teddie, applies this question to that interaction we discussed from *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Here Teddie exclaims: “Unfortunately, there are very few games that support a canonically trans protagonist (and no mainstream [Role Playing Games] at all), despite how maddeningly easy it would be to give trans players the chance to validate their own gender. Just give me the option to say ‘Me too!’ to Krem, BioWare!”³² So while there may be many ways to facilitate a “me too” moment, simply providing the player with the option to literally say “me too” at all can be incredibly powerful and validating. As gamers move forward, it is important that we consider whether mainstream video game culture subverts the hegemonic norms of our society or whether it reinforces and validates them, alienating players who are already marginalized outside of the game space.

What is most important is that video games are not inherently exclusive by nature. In fact, games have an amazing potential as inclusionary spaces; they can provide first-hand experiences of identities that are not often otherwise explored in much of our culture. Evan Narcisse sums this up, sharing “What excites me about

³² Teddie, “Pick Your Poison: Character Creation & The Gender Binary,” FemHype, (October 20, 2015), accessed September 11, 2016, <https://femhype.com/2015/10/20/pick-your-poison-character-creation-the-gender-binary/>.

video games — at their best anyway — is when the conglomeration of mechanical systems, music and art congeal into [a] result that's capable of being deeply expressive about the human experience."³³ If in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* the player was given the option to respond to Krem by saying "Hey, I'm trans too!" not only does that provide transgender players with a unique moment with which to connect with an in-game character, but it also acknowledges that trans players exist at all. For people who do not see their identities reflected elsewhere within the media, allowing for instances of recognition, such as in that example, is incredibly powerful. As for those who are unaware of the experiences of different people, these situations doubly work to create empathy and to humanize that which is normally othered.

There are designers who are actively working to redefine the tropes that have estranged marginalized players from the medium since its formation. Games such as 2015's *Read Only Memories*, which have been created with unprecedented queer-inclusivity, and those like 2011's *To The Moon*, which presents an uncommonly full and realistic representation of autism, suggest the kind of utopic inclusiveness possible in the virtual realm.³⁴ Despite these games and many others, experiences like these are still a minority within the industry, and there is no one instance that we can point to and say "That's the one that gets everything right!" As we have seen, even some of the most well-meaning games fall into the trap of replicating hegemonic structures. This is really no surprise, given that the

³³ Narcisse, "The Natural."

³⁴ *Read Only Memories* (MidBoss, 2015), video game; *To the Moon* (Freebird Games, 2011) video game.

conversation about signification within games has yet to break into the mainstream games discourse; it is, however, disappointing.

In order to remedy this widespread replication of oppressive systems, the broader games community needs to actually engage in the conversation about signification on cultural construction within the virtual sphere. This means that critical theory will need to be incorporated within the maker and consumer cultures of the video games industry. Hegemonic structures do not need to be entirely kept out of games, but when they are included, we must acknowledge their pernicious nature and discuss their implications. We need to keep trying to ignite and encourage an awareness of these issues within the mainstream gamer. More than that, we need to create a standard by which the entire industry operates; it must become a norm for games players, educators, makers, and critics to all discuss the significance of representation within the medium. Until this occurs, the dissonance felt by marginalized individuals in the real world will continue to be carried over into the game space. If there is a mainstream awareness of potential problem areas, it then becomes easier for designers to self-critique and for the community to constructively call attention to failings. While some theorists and developers, such as Anita Sarkeesian, Manveer Heir, and Katherine Isbister, to name a few, have already begun working to identify significant breakthroughs and areas in need of improvement, establishing a culture which is sensitive to these issues is paramount to the growth of the medium. Retaining this process and incorporating it into the normal dialogue of the culture surrounding video games gives this type of thinking a

chance to become second nature. The video game medium is unique in that it can create amazingly human moments, instances in which the dissonance that is felt by marginalized individuals in the real world can be temporarily relieved; it can provide people with the opportunity to see someone who is similar to themselves, and to finally get to say, “me too.”

Illustrations

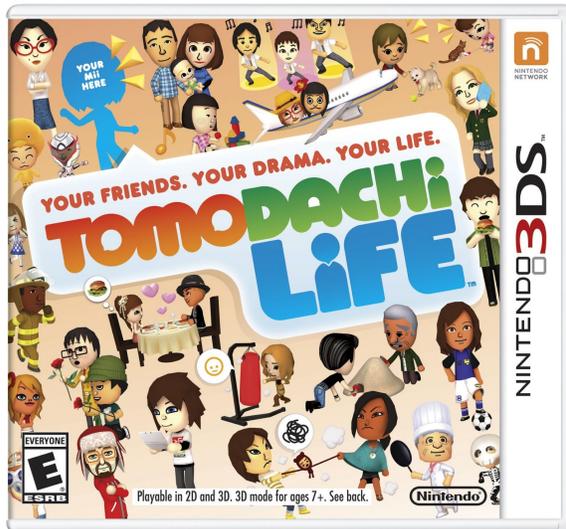


Figure 1. *Tomodachi Life* box cover showing the game’s slogan, “Your friends. Your drama. Your life.”

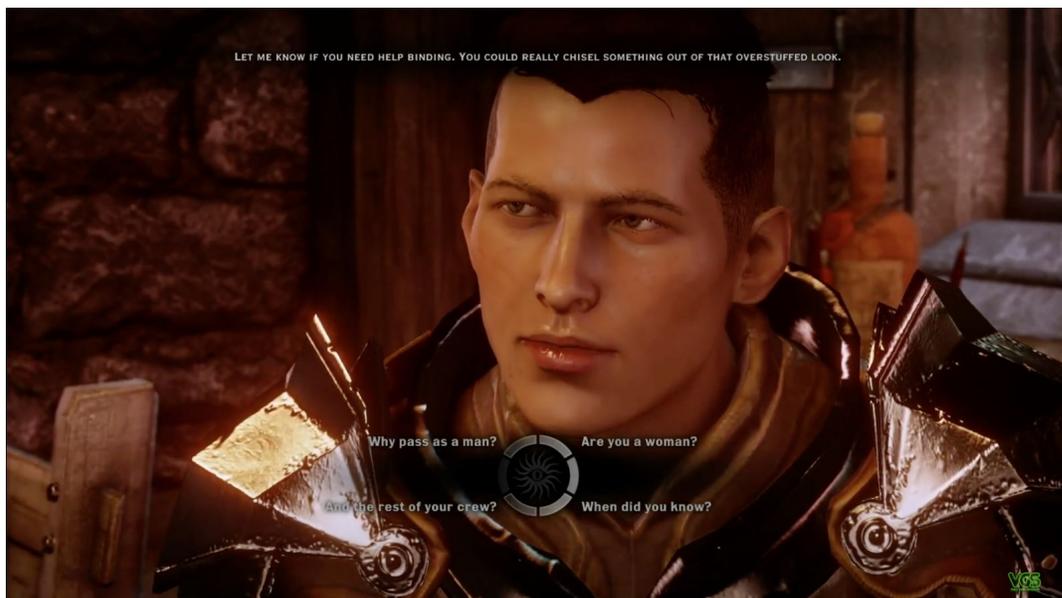


Figure 2. Screenshot of the introduction of the character Krem in the game *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. When Krem is first introduced, he casually makes reference to the fact that he is transgender by offering to help another character bind his chest, stating: “Let me know if you need help binding. You could really chisel something out of that overstuffed look.” At this point, the player may ask, “Why pass as a man?” “Are you a woman?” “When did you know?” and “And the rest of your crew?” Image by Video Game Sophistry, November 21, 2014.

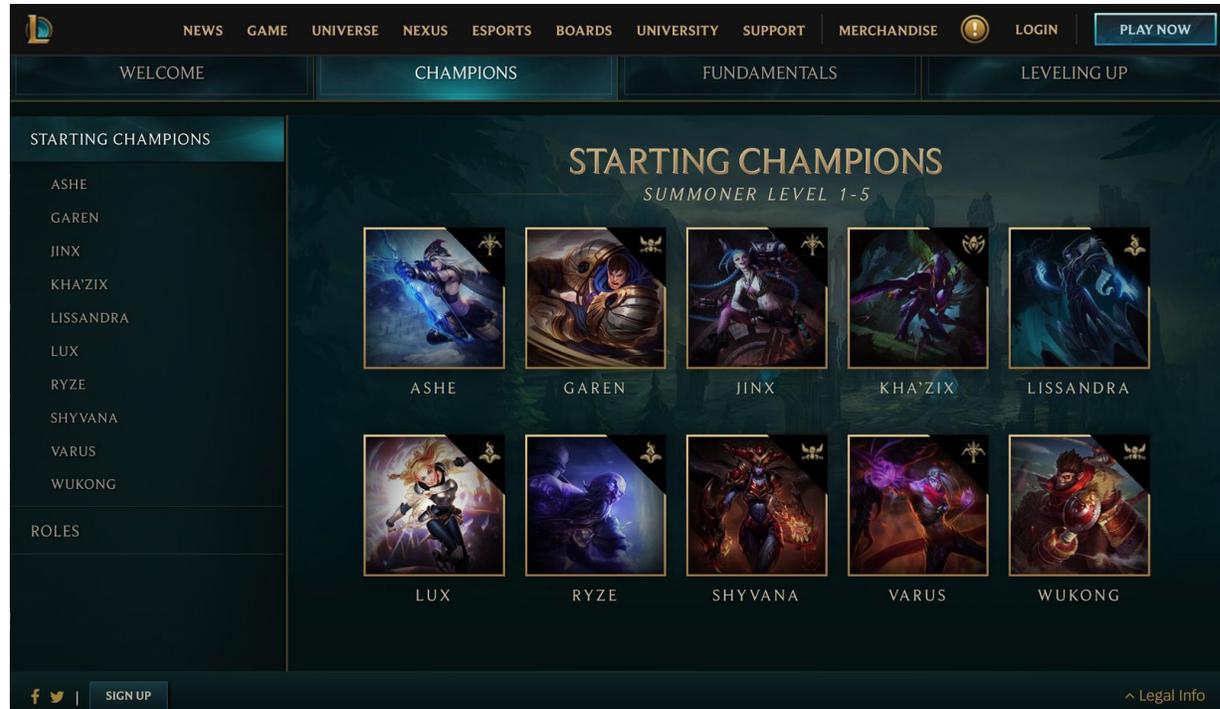


Figure 3. Screenshot from the “Starting Champions” page of the *League of Legends* website showing various diversely bodied male characters amongst a selection of female characters, all of whom have the same body type. Image by Quinn Spence, November 20, 2016.

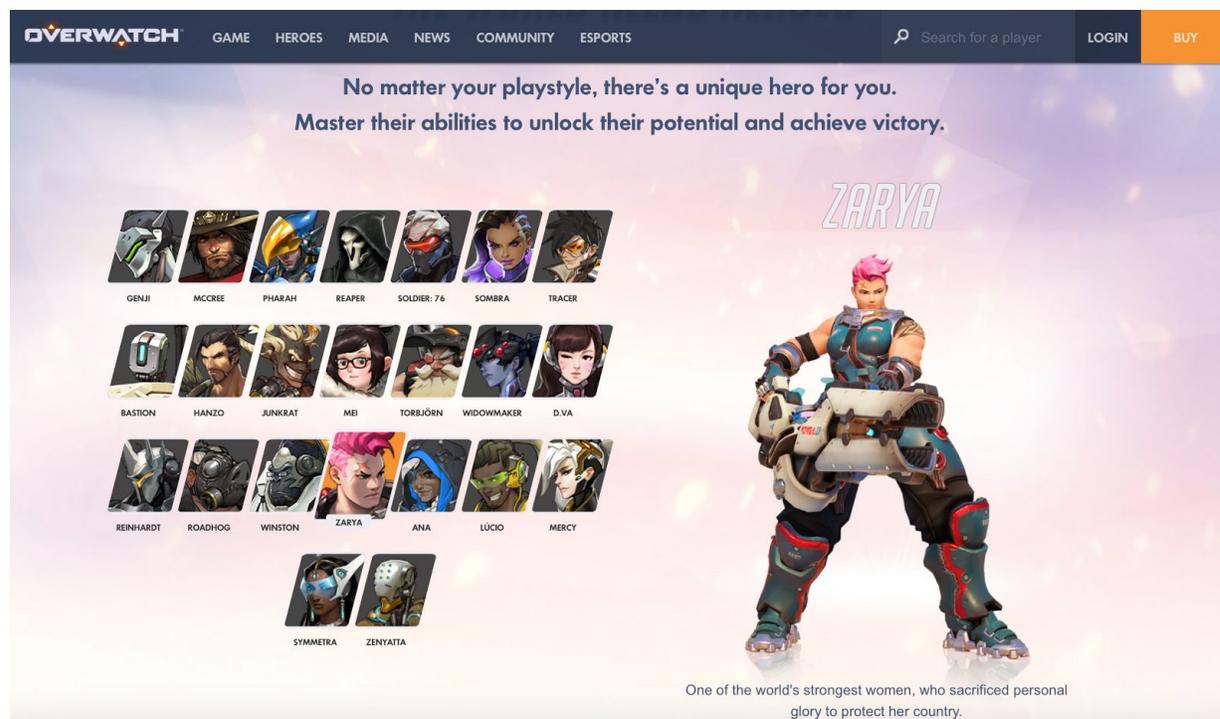


Figure 4. Screenshot from the homepage of the *Overwatch* website showing the character Zarya. A caption reads, “One of the world’s strongest women, who sacrificed personal glory to protect her country.” Image by Quinn Spence, November 20, 2016.

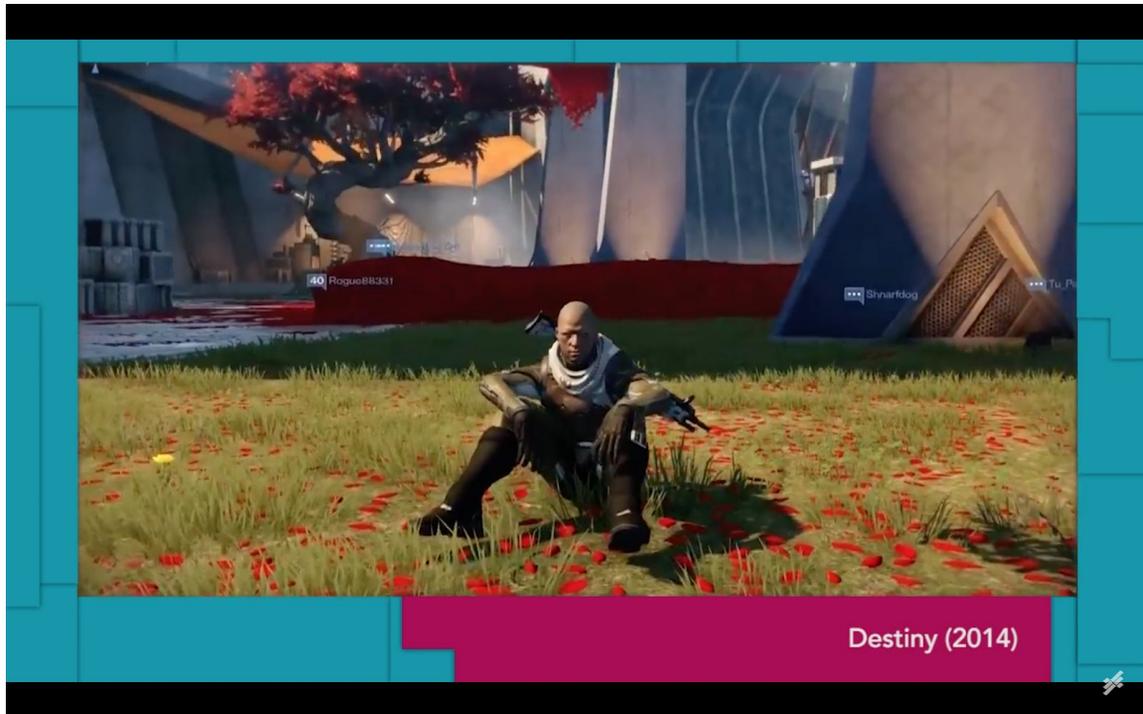


Figure 5. Screenshot from *Destiny* showing a male guardian sitting down. His spread legs and outward stare lend to the pose's suggestion of confidence. Image by Feminist Frequency, March 31, 2016.

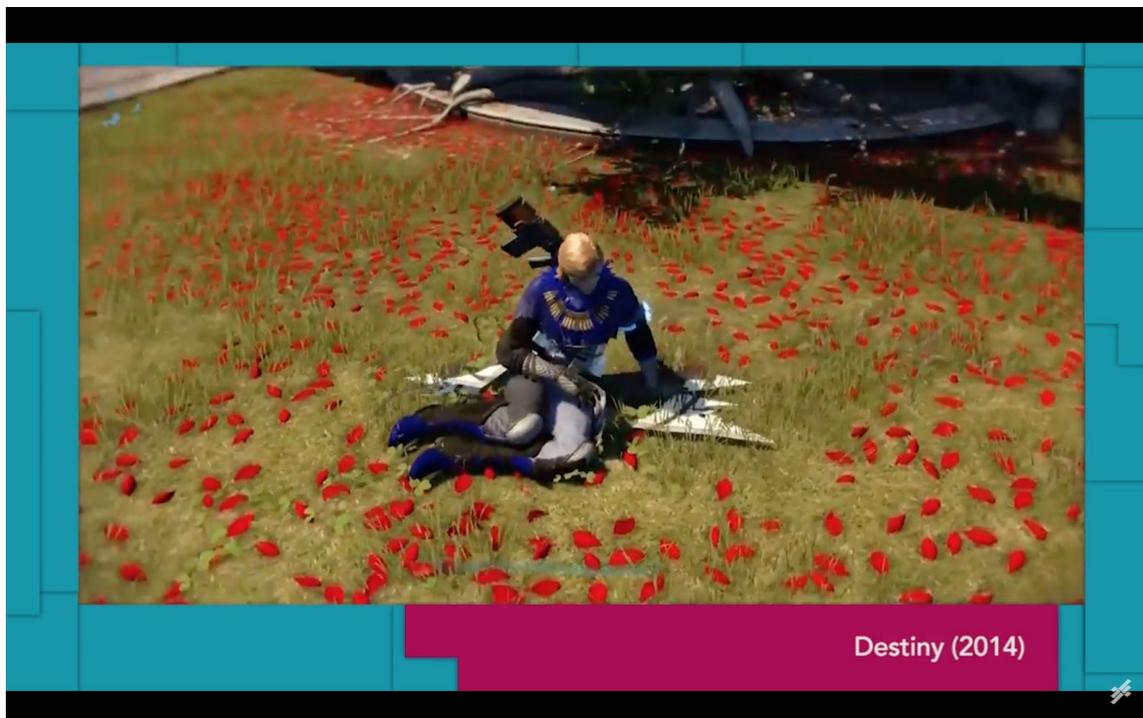


Figure 6. Screenshot from *Destiny* showing a female guardian sitting down. The character appears timid, crossing her legs and gazing downward. Image by Feminist Frequency, March 31, 2016.

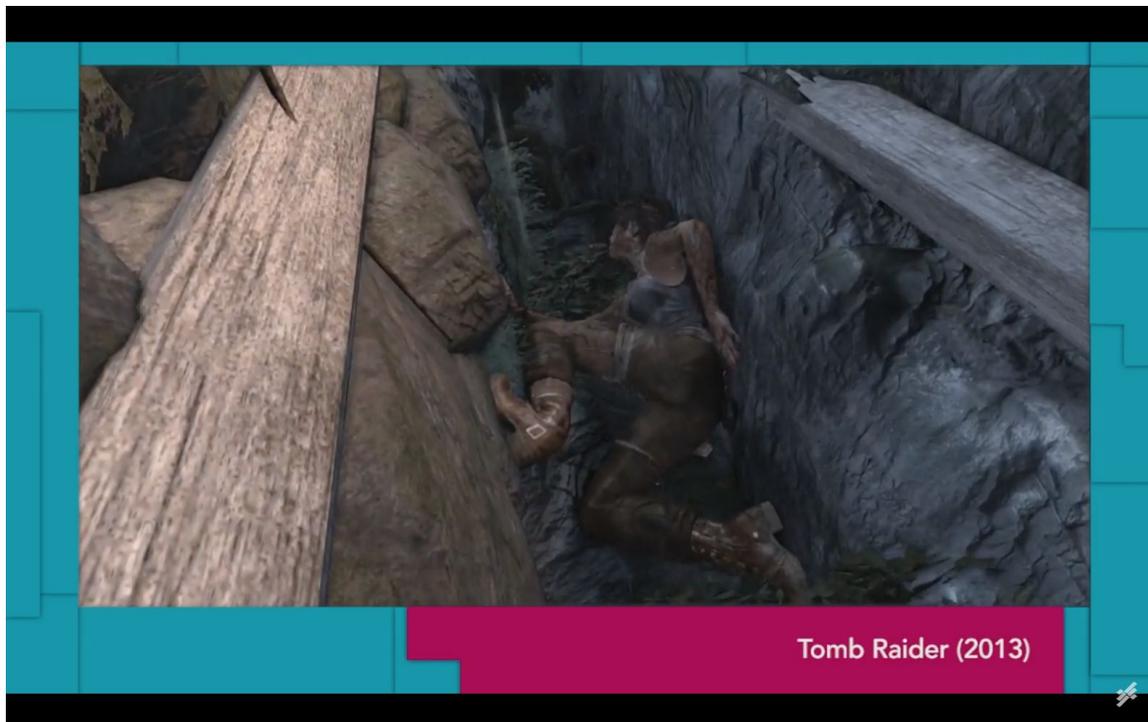


Figure 7. Screenshot from a climbing sequence in *Tomb Raider* (2013) showing how the camera is repositioned from over Lara Croft's shoulder to below her body. Image by Feminist Frequency, March 31, 2016.

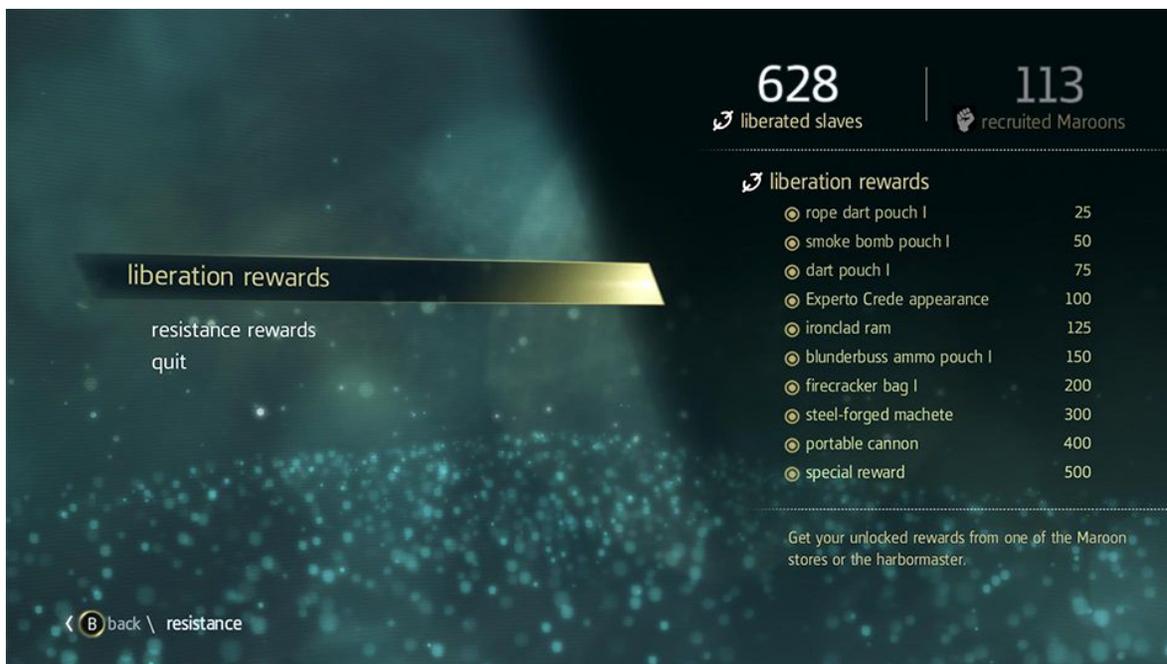


Figure 8. Screenshot from the upgrade screen of *Assassin's Creed IV: Blag Flag - Freedom Cry* showing that the payer must liberate a certain number of slaves in order to receive various upgrades, including the release of 300 people for a steel-forged machete. Image by Aaron Thayer, January 7, 2014.



Figure 9. Screenshot from *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* showing how the game's female protagonist, Ciri, is the recipient of gendered insults. In this scene, a combatant shouts at Ciri, "I'll gut you, you little whore!" This is missing from the experience of the male protagonist, Geralt, as enemies do not use gendered insults against him. Image by Nayla, December 14, 2015.

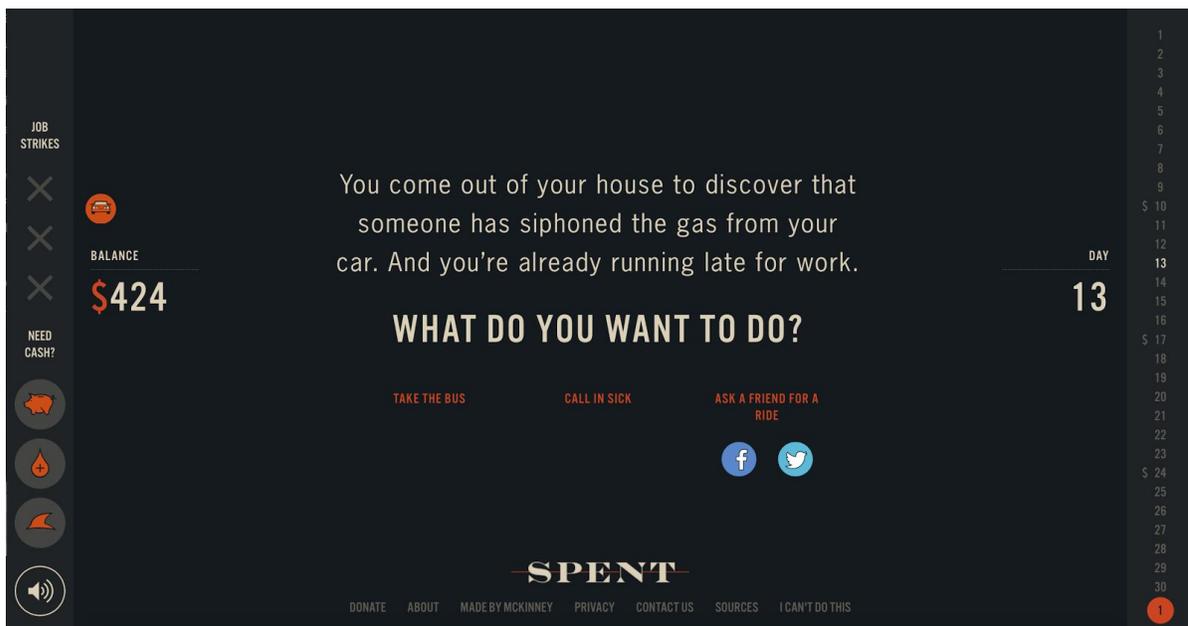


Figure 10. Screenshot from *SPENT* showing a decision moment in which the player must choose between taking the bus, calling in sick, or asking a friend for a ride. Image by Quinn Spence, November 21, 2016.

Gameography

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