

PLAYING NICE: THE LIMITATIONS AND STEREOTYPES PLACED ON FEMALE  
HERO REPRESENTATIONS IN VIDEO GAMES

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This thesis provides an investigation of how gender stereotypes affect the narrative, mechanics, and experience of three different console based video games (Venetica, WET, and Velvet Assassin) with female protagonist. Each game is addressed within separate case study chapters and discusses how gender is integrated and intertwined with each narrative structure, image representation, and interactivity. Further analysis is provided in each case study as gender is addressed across several parts of each game, beginning with the female protagonist's role as hero, her representation throughout the game (i.e. body image, attire, and weapons), and the game play experience. In conclusion, this thesis shows that the protagonist gender within a video game does affect the game in its entirety. More specifically, all three female heroines discussed in this thesis showcases stereotypes associated with the dominant sexual representation of female video game characters, as well as similar traditional feminine and masculine stereotypes associated with heroines in film and television. This provides for rather problematic representations of female heroes, along with the games designed for them which are equally as stereotypical in their narrative, mechanics, and game play.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In today's society, heroes are seen almost everywhere. No matter where we turn, in both reality and the media, heroes can now be found. While the term, hero, seems to be widely understood, the current definitions according to the Oxford English Dictionary are as follows:

A person, typically a man, who is admired, idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities. A war hero. The chief character in a book, play, or movie who is typically identified with good qualities and with whom the reader is expected to sympathize. *In mythology and folklore*: A person of superhuman qualities and often semi-divine origin, in particular one of whose exploits and dealings with the gods were the subject of ancient Greek myths and legends

With this definition, it is easy to see how hero characters in literature, film, television, and video games were created. Each definition is able to be embodied by a particular hero. While, more often, a single hero embodies a combination of the definitions presented above.

Heroes which embody a culmination of these descriptions have become the characters that readers, viewers, and players love, and can be found in a variety of content suited for children, adolescents, and adults. From the Greek myth of Hercules, to the first appearance of Superman in comics in 1938, to the many heroes created for film, television, and video games, the hero character is always revisited, reconstructed, redeveloped, and reintroduced to a new generation. As the hero character continuously changes, depending on the medium he is presented, one constant fact remains. Whether it is in definition or representation, all the heroes that society has come to accept and love are always male.

Some of the most famous examples seen across various media platforms are: Superman, Batman, Iron Man, and Captain America. While this is a small list, one thing is very evident among these examples, the word man. Out of the four examples listed, three of them all contain the word man in them. Without the adjectives placed before man, these heroes could easily be



any other man. It is the possession of courage, noble and superhuman qualities, along with being the main protagonist of the story, which make these characters heroes. As protagonists, of stories, films, television shows, and games, each hero uses his own supernatural abilities to accomplish his mission, whether it is for justice, redemption, or even revenge. However, having courage, noble qualities, superhuman abilities, and being the protagonist of a story are all characteristics that could easily be fulfilled by female characters as well. In order to substitute some of the most famous examples referenced above, it would be as simple as replacing one word, woman instead of man. Unfortunately, the desire for women to be included in the realm of male heroes has resulted in the addition of lesser known heroines such as: Supergirl and Batgirl. While these two heroines can be seen as an attempt to incorporate the female gender into the dominant world of male heroes in media, they are still lacking in many ways. The most evident is that both heroines are more commonly found in comics and rarely appear in any other platforms such as film, television, or video games.

While small inclusions, such as the heroines stated above, were made, it still begged the question, where are the women? Sure Supergirl and Batgirl are female characters, but they are not seen as women. They are merely representations of girls with less power and ability than their male counterparts. These female representations may be super heroes but their male counterparts are the ones seen saving the day. Superman and Batman are seen as men not boys, so where are the equivalent female heroes that can be seen as women and not just girls? While female heroes made an early appearance in comic books, they still were not able to be seen in other forms of media for quite some time. Wonder Woman, the only heroine to place the word woman as a part of her name, first appeared in comics in 1941; yet, she was not seen on television until the 1970s. Slowly, from the 1970s onward, the appearance of female heroes in

film and television began to emerge and different types of heroines aside from super heroes also began to be seen. By 1979, the film *Aliens* was released with protagonist and female heroine Ellen Ripley. This was followed by the appearance of female heroine Sarah Connor, in the film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), along with a slew of television shows in the mid-1990s to early 2000s such as: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), *Charmed* (1998-2006), *Xena: The Warrior Princess* (1995-2001) and *Dark Angel* (2000-2002). During this time period, the most prominent example of a heroine in video games, Lara Croft, also appeared (Tomb Raider 1996-present), making it seem as if female heroes are more prevalent than before.

Unfortunately, this is not the case. When it comes to video games, female hero characters continue to be extremely scarce. The video game industry has generated more than 10 billion dollars, and with the amount of video games produced within a year, only the smallest percentage will be produced with female heroes (Miller and Summers 738). As the female hero character is finally becoming more common in both film and television, she has yet to truly break through the dominant male character barrier of video games. While research has been done concerning gender in video games, it is limited at best. The focus of most investigations remains on obvious gender issues such as video games having far more male characters than female characters and of those female characters even less are female protagonists (Dietz 433-437). A study conducted by Jansz and Martis indicates that out of twelve games investigating twenty-two characters 60 percent were male while only 30 percent were female (146). Miller and Summers provide similar results as 282 of the characters, out of the forty-nine games investigated, were male while only 53 were female (737). These articles also reference obvious appearance differences between male and female video game characters. The statistical findings in Jansz and Martis article state that at least 77 percent of the female characters they investigated have overly

exaggerated bodies. Miller and Summers state that most female characters in their study were sexy and attractive in appearance. These studies along with others also support Beasley and Standley's findings that more female characters are seen wearing overly sexual or extremely revealing attire in comparison to male characters (286-289; Janz and Martis 146; Downs and Smith 727; and Miller and Summers 738). Yet, among these comparisons concerning gender, there seems to be almost no discussion of female protagonists in video games other than Lara Croft.

Video games designed with female protagonists are rare, but they do exist. Examples of such games are the Metroid series (1986-2010); Primal (2003); and Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem (2002). While not as popular as the Tomb Raider series, featuring Lara Croft, these games do provide examples of video game heroines and future games with female protagonists deserve further analysis. As much as investigations of female heroes' body type and attire needs to be discussed in video game studies, whether or not their gender affects the game in a problematic or positive way should also be considered. Is being a woman problematic when portraying the role of hero in video games? Is her gender problematic for the designed mechanics or overall game experience?

Adding to the discourse of media studies in video games, this thesis seeks to address these very questions. With a gap in research concerning gender within video game studies, the goal of this thesis is to better understand how gender is integrated and intertwined in video games. Therefore this thesis provides an investigation of how gender stereotypes or biases may affect the narrative, mechanics, and experience of a video game with a female protagonist. Gender is discussed across all parts of the game, beginning with the female protagonist's role as hero, her representation throughout the game (i.e. body image, attire, and weapons), and the

game play experience. Each of these sections provides an analysis of themes associated with narrative, image, and interactivity of the game. More specifically, this thesis examines the following questions. Are stereotypes associated with the underlying narratives of games with female characters? If so, do these stereotypes create a problematic or positive representation of female characters who assume the role of hero? Also, how are female heroes represented in games in terms of body type, beauty, attire, and assumed weapons or abilities and are these representations problematic or not? Lastly, does having a female hero character create any gendered mechanics and does her gender affect the game's overall narrative experience?

The importance of investigating these issues is evident from both an industry and cultural standpoint. Video games within the last five years have shown a rapid growth in numbers. David Edry and Ethan Mollick address this revolution of a new medium in their book, *Changing the Game: How Video Games are Transforming the Future of Business*. They state that “while growth in the movie industry has been slow and while the music business has contracted; video games have grown at double digit rates. Games are now on the verge of eclipsing the music industry and have already surpassed Hollywood box office revenues” (5). With such massive success in the industry, investigating the gender differences portrayed in games with male versus female protagonists is necessary in order to better market to a large population of women who currently do not play games or dislike video games simply because they are continuously geared towards men (Burrill 48).

In response to such industry success, it is nearly impossible for video games not to have made a significant cultural impact. Video games have become a large part of society, social interactions, and are even capable of providing digital connections to other media. Culturally, these games have become just as important a field of study as radio, film, and television. Video

games have become an area of media studies which is constantly expanding its academic discourse. Prominent researchers in gender studies and game studies both indicate that further investigations on female protagonists are a great source of interest. Although there are still large amounts of women who do not currently play video games or dislike them, there are a smaller number of women who are slowly starting to gain more interest and play more video games (Labre and Duke 144-146; Taylor 94, 108).

Unfortunately, with video game studies as an academic field no more than thirty years old, most questions regarding how gender affects several aspects of video games have yet to be unanswered. Although video games have become more recognized in media studies, research conducted on the issues of gender roles or gender stereotypes are still in their infancy providing an area where much research is needed. As the study of gender within the field of video game studies is still relatively un-examined there is no specific literature that completely encompasses this thesis project. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2 has been compiled to provide a necessary foundation for this discussion. Most literature referenced throughout Chapter 2 has been composed primarily from research addressing film and television studies that can be aptly applied to the issues this thesis is investigating. Research prominent to the discussion of narrative and game play found within game studies is also referenced along with the sparse research in video game studies concerning gender.

Chapter 2 is organized into the following sections: the narrative representation of the female hero role; character representation including body type, attire, as well as weapons, powers, and abilities; and narrative experience and mechanics. With video game studies not addressing stereotypes and tropes specifically associated with female heroes, literature concerning stereotypes and tropes of female heroes in film and television provide a foundation

for further investigation. Stereotypes of ideal beauty, attire, and limitations concerning weapons are also addressed within the literature concerning film and television female heroes. A more detailed list of the types of female characters, their body types, attire, and weapons often found throughout video games studies is also described in Chapter 2.

While film and television are often discussed alongside video games, the experience of watching a film or television show in comparison to playing a video game is entirely different. The main differences stem from narrative design and interactivity. The question of whether or not video games can be seen as a storytelling medium, similar to film, or whether their interactive ability discourages any type of actual narrative is not a new debate. Whether or not stories and game play can co-exist is of much importance to the field of game studies. Ever since tabletop role-playing games<sup>1</sup>, the issue of whether or not games can tell stories has been a large question surrounding game studies. However, whether or not games are affected by the protagonist's perspective should be equally as important. Just as film narratives differ depending on whether the story is being told from a male or female perspective, discussing whether there is any effect on the narrative structure of the game due to gender of the character is equally as important. Investigating the difference in how the story and game play is designed for games with female leading characters instead of male characters is an aspect of narrative in video games which needs further exploration. What differences can be found in game play due to the leading character being a woman instead of a man is what this thesis seeks to address.

As interactivity is a key difference between film and video games they do not just simply follow a storyline from beginning to end. Video games require interaction from players in order

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<sup>1</sup> Tabletop role-playing games (RPG) refers to games such as Dungeons and Dragons which are literally played on a table with a large game board as well as other game pieces. The mechanics or rules and explanation of the entire game world are provided within books which serve as guides to how to play the game. Since they are RPGs, players are required to adopt a role which they then use as their identity throughout the game and within the game world (Costikyan 5-9).

to continue unfolding the underlying narrative which has been designed as a series of missions, tasks, and levels. This ability to unfold the underlying storyline is only possible through certain mechanics designed into the game. Mechanics, defined by LeBlanc, are what is necessary for game play itself; in essence the rules and structures that define the game (440). These necessary pieces consist of: the rules of the game, the program code, and even the physical layout of the controller (LeBlanc 440). Every game has certain rules or a specific structure that the game follows and that the players must abide by in order to advance. However, in view of the fact that these mechanics and limitations for each game and genre are different, there is no one definable structure for them. While much research is done on this technical aspect of video game mechanics, there have been very few studies focusing on whether or not the mechanics of the game are specific to the protagonist's gender.

The games chosen for this thesis (Venetica, WET, and Velvet Assassin) are based on four criteria. These criteria are drawn from T.L. Taylor's previous work on gender and female players of massively multiplayer online games and massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMOG and MMORPG) (93-124) but has been adapted to investigate gender, specifically female protagonists, in console based video games. The distinction in this first criterion is that the characters in console games cannot be altered or formed by the players like avatars found in online games. The second criterion in selecting games for this thesis is that they must have a female protagonist. Additionally, in order to conduct a more current study, the third criterion narrows down the number of games played on these consoles to games produced within the last four years (2008 to 2012). The fourth criterion in game selection is that they must be from (or provide elements of) the following two genres, third person shooter (TPS) games (typically defined as an action game, consisting primarily of shooting, in which the playable character is

visible on screen) and action adventure role-playing games (RPG) (typically defined as a game in which a player controls the playable character visible on screen that is immersed in a fictional world). One reason is that both of these genres allow players to view the characters they are playing; a necessary component for the analysis of the female protagonist representation. The other reason is that both of these genres are considered hardcore games<sup>2</sup> rather than casual games<sup>3</sup>. Based on these four criteria, the following games were selected: *Venetica*, *WET*, and *Velvet Assassin*.

Additionally, for reasons of practicality the case studies discussed in Chapter's 3, 4, and 5 restrict most of their focus on the first three levels or major quests accomplished in each game. Other areas of game play are only mentioned if gender plays a significant role in a specific mission or level. This amount of game play is sufficient for the player to develop a certain degree of understanding and proficiency of each game as well as provide adequate time to compile sufficient and accurate information to address the research questions presented on page five. After gaining a working knowledge of each of the games in this study, supplementary visual tools such as YouTube clips of game play walkthroughs are used. These clips assist in addressing the issue of attire worn by the female protagonists that cannot be seen within the first three levels of game play. Therefore each case study refers to these images where appropriate in order to provide an adequate discussion of gender across six sections (Narrative Representation of the Female Hero: Female Hero Character Representation; Body Type; Attire; Weapons, Powers, and Abilities; Narrative Experience and Mechanics) throughout each video game (*Venetica*; *WET*;

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<sup>2</sup> According Jesper Juul, hardcore games are those which consist of emotionally negative fictions (science fiction, vampires, and war). They also require a large amount of time in order to be completed, along with a high level of mastery of gaming conventions and controllers (Juul 8).

<sup>3</sup> Juul describes casual games as maintaining complexity while having mechanics that can be easily mastered even by people who have not played a vast amount of video games. These games tend to be more puzzle-oriented and contain a large amount of positive feedback throughout game play, and tend to not consist of any armed conflict (Juul 26).



*Velvet Assassin*). With this only being a brief overview of each section that is discussed, Chapter 2 continues to provide sufficient information in order to understand the analysis of each game provided in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEWED LITERATURE

#### The Narrative Representation of the Female Hero Role

Most primary protagonists found in film, television, and even video games, tend to be male. Even though female characters have been integrated into these texts, it took a significant amount of time before female characters were able to become protagonists and they are still sparse. Although women are now more accepted in media, common male roles such as action heroes are far more difficult for women to assume and it has been rare for female heroes to be seen on screen or as interactive characters. Female heroes also continue to be plagued with stereotypes and other boundaries associated with images of women in media. Therefore, this section addresses the narrative stereotypes and labels given to female heroes, or women of action, found in film, television, and video games. Because of the scarce amount of literature on female heroes in video games, this discussion will mostly rely on the research of female heroes in film and television with brief references made to female video game characters as well as the popular heroine Lara Croft (Tomb Raider; 1996-present). The literature reviewed is divided into three discussions. The first is the limited representations of the female hero role in film and television. The second is the limited, yet common roles for female video game characters, and the third is the rare role of the female video game hero.

In past years, film narratives have mainly presented women as side characters to men. While men were portrayed as heroes and men of action, female characters were seen as love interest, “damsels in distress,” mothers, or sexual objects. These roles are subsidiaries to the main agent of the narrative and therefore do not share the limelight of male protagonists. However, as the range in characters began to vary from these stereotypes new images of women began to be seen. One of the first roles to portray women with a sense of empowerment was the

femme fatale. This new character presented a woman who embodied both sexuality and power gaining acceptance from viewers both on screen and television (Tasker 120). Yet, this femme fatale character did not stray too far from the predominant stereotype of being objectified (Tasker 120). The femme fatale character also rarely had a narrative happy ending, which re-solidified the concept that these types of women would never prosper on or off screen (Tasker 120). It wasn't until the emergence of the female hero character that women began to break away from passive roles and become women of action. These women can be viewed as powerful in similar ways as their male predecessors; however, even with their new found power these female heroes struggle with the fact that their representation creates confusion about gender boundaries in that they portray both masculine and feminine qualities (Tasker 68-69). An example of this is presented by the character Ripley in the film *Alien* (1979) as she demonstrates the power of brute strength allowing her to defend herself, kill the alien, and be the sole survivor out of a crew including various male characters. However, Ripley's "female body challenges and disrupts the tradition of heroes..." being predominantly male and interrupts "...an automatic reading of her image..." (Hills 41). This contradictory image results in female heroes negotiating between stereotypes associated with opposing gender binaries which could ultimately lead to portraying a masculine image for the role of hero or a more feminine image to be accepted as woman.

Yvonne Tasker discusses examples of these contradictory stereotypes associated with the narrative role of action heroine in her research stating that action women in film still represent certain stereotypes such as: the butch type, the tomboy, the feisty heroine or the glamorous sexual action woman (68). Some of the other roles used to describe female hero roles in narrative terms are the following: macho, mothers, or Others; and at times they are described as all three (Tasker 69). Dawn Hienecken further elaborates on a few of these stereotypes or narrative terms

that Tasker mentions. Hienecken states that the tomboy stereotype is usually associated with a narrative in which the female hero is close to her father and is typically in search of some sort of reconciliation with him or in search of authority (28). This type of narrative structure can be seen as a substitution of a father and son narrative. In this case, instead of the son wanting to reconcile with his father or achieve a sense of power to make him proud, a daughter is substituted. As for the feisty heroine stereotype, Hienecken mentions that this particular character "...appears as both the sexual object as well as the protagonist..." (28). However, she mentions that the feisty heroine is usually set apart from the other women in the film or television series. Also, the feisty heroine character does not seem to throw a woman into a man's narrative. With most male narratives portraying the protagonist to be powerful and masculine, the feisty heroine's role of being a sexual object is more stereotypically associated with women on screen. Therefore, this narrative attempts to merge both an active male and objectified female role into one.

As for some of the other narrative terms, mother is one often used for female heroes. In a more stereotypical narrative sense, the term mother is associated with domestic activities such as: child rearing, cooking, and keeping up with household duties. On the other hand, the female hero, while being a mother, is a much different character. This female hero mother character will do anything to protect her children, even participate in violent actions or perform criminal acts. Hienecken states that this mother character allows her aggressiveness to be easily explained through her desire to want to protect her young (28). However, as Tasker suggests, this statement only helps to "explain away the heroine's actions..." (20). Both Hienecken and Tasker agree that "female centered texts function in a way to 'explain away' the aggressive tendencies of female heroes in various ways" (38). Tasker explains that when this occurs it may also be "...used to reassert [the female hero's] femininity..." (20). This narrative justification tends to reaffirm

“...the accident of fate by which the heroine occupies her position” (Tasker 20). Such examples as “protecting children and families is an acceptable normal form of toughness for women or female characters...that is not found to be out of the ordinary” (Inness 20).

An example used by Tasker to exemplify the previous statements is the female hero Sarah Connor in the film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Sarah Connor falls under many of the stereotypes or narrative terms seen above. She can be seen as macho and mother as she demonstrates qualities of each of these terms throughout the film. Sarah can be seen as macho via her attire as well as her search for the authority through weapons and violence which along with her muscular body type and work-out scene towards the beginning of the film. Lastly, Sarah is foremost a mother character as her fundamental goal for everything she does is to protect her son, John Connor, and his future. As an action heroine, Sarah’s actions are explained and justified specifically via narrative elements associated with her femininity. Although it may seem like she uses her abilities to bring about change in order to save the world from a horrible dystopian future, ultimately she is seen as a mother trying to protect her child. At one point in the film, in order to explain Sarah’s actions, she is even labeled mentally insane. The narrative justifications of Sarah’s abilities either classify her as an over-protective mother or a woman who is not in her right mind.

A television example is presented through the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003). Although Buffy is not a mother character like Sarah Connor, she can be classified as a bit of a tomboy, somewhat macho, but primarily a feisty heroine. Buffy’s tomboy image also aligns with her attempting to seek power in a male dominated culture of vampire slaying. Her Watcher, Giles, is part of an organization which creates rules that the slayers, who are usually women like Buffy, must follow without question. Throughout the series Buffy decides that she

wants to make her own rules and seeks out the authority to do so. Her macho qualities are mainly derived from her fighting abilities as well as her super human strength allowing her to fight against the vampires. Lastly, Buffy aligns well with Hienecken's description of a feisty heroine; even though Buffy strays away from being seen as just a sexual object, she is the protagonist of the television series. Similar to Sarah Connor's character, Buffy's abilities are also justified by only being "physically powerful...within the context of the realm she occupies" (125). In Buffy's case, her abilities are not justified through the role she assumes, but by the fictional genre specific world she inhabits. While this is may be seen as a justification that is no different for a male hero, for female heroes this reasoning is seen as a way of reasserting Buffy's femininity placing her back within binary boundaries.

These genre specific worlds also exist in video games; however, narratives created for female hero protagonists are rare. Early on, much like film, the only roles portrayed by female video game characters were very stereotypical and passive (Ivory 104). Most were nothing more than non-playable characters (NPC). Presently, stereotypical female NPCs still exist, but over time female characters have become more common among a variety of game genres and roles (Miller and Summers 738). Female video game characters can now be seen as: sidekicks, selectable characters, fighter characters, and heroines. Some sidekick characters are still only NPCs, but some play minor roles throughout the game. A few sidekicks, along with fighter characters, are often selectable. Though most female video game characters are sidekicks, selectable, or fighters, they "are always less important than the hero" (Inness 2). Inness states that "the sidekick may also tote around a gun but her main purpose is to parade around in a skimpy outfit" (2). This statement holds true to most female sidekicks found in video games. Hienecken even mentions that the "sidekick role for women takes a decisively inferior role to the male hero

in both skills and intellect” (29). Unlike film, it does not seem that most female characters are designed with inferior skills to their male counterparts in video games. A study conducted by Millers and Summers supports this statement as their results indicate that most skills such as the use of fire, invisibility, super speed, martial arts, or using magic were no different whether it was a male or female character who possessed them (739).

These selectable or playable female sidekicks do not appear in many video games that have underlying narratives, but the few that do showcase stereotypical associations specific to the gender of each character. A prime example of these stereotypical narrative limitations are described in Burrill’s book *Die Tryin’ Videogames, Masculinity, Culture*. Burrill discusses female sidekick and selectable roles found throughout the Resident Evil (1996-2012) video game series (48). These games offer players the choice to select either the male or female protagonists to use throughout the game. While there are no differences in the occupations or end goal of the game for both characters, there are significant differences in the narrative of the game, as well as character costumes, and weaponry (Burrill 48).

In Resident Evil II (1998), if players choose the male character, then players meet a young uninfected woman who is searching for her possibly infected boyfriend. Throughout the narrative of the game, a romance blooms between the male character and the woman until she eventually betrays him and dies. On the other hand, if players choose the female character, the narrative is completely different. Players meet a young girl who they are required to take care of and protect throughout the game. The female character in this narrative suddenly becomes placed in the role of a mother doing anything to defend her young throughout the game. Just as Burrill states, this narrative clearly portrays gender divisions in the programming of the game (50). These narrative stereotypes associated with gender demonstrate an assumption that male

characters must be engaged in romantic and sexual scenarios whereas female characters should place their motherly duties as their number one priority and reason to fight. These games do offer selectable female hero characters, but the designers have still placed heteronormative roles and standards on the narrative of the game itself which still seem similar to those found in film (Burrill 50).

Lara Croft is one of the first female character examples in video games that did not succumb to traditional gender binaries or heteronormative roles. The reason for this is that Lara is not a typical female video game character but a female hero. With the mechanics designed for Lara's character, she is just as masculine as any male video game character. She is capable of taking care of herself and getting through the game without any assistance from other characters. Contradicting this masculinity is Lara's appearance as a sexual object presented by both her body image as well as attire. Just like her film and television counterparts, Lara fulfills being both a sexual object and protagonist, presenting contradictory stereotypes placed on female hero characters.

As film and television have shown, female hero narratives do allow for empowering images of women to be seen, yet still appear to retain stereotypical character limitations. In accordance with Tasker's beliefs, it would seem that female heroes are portrayed within these stereotypes because their actions and bodies are not easily accepted in films. As she states, at times these action heroines, or muscular female heroines, pose problems for the binary conceptions of gender identity by not aligning with traditional images of women. Tasker continues to define the female hero as a refusal to be either masculine or feminine. This description depicts female heroes as far from traditional images of women as possible. Whether or not female video game heroes are far from these traditional binary concepts is yet to be seen.



With no previous literature on this subject, this thesis hopes to analyze this concept further in the following three case studies.

Thus, this thesis is investigating the roles of three different types of female heroes in the following chapters, analyzing what limitations or stereotypes may be placed on female video game heroes; as well as analyzing if these games narratives' are simply throwing female characters into narrative worlds designed for male characters. Furthering this analysis, the next section takes a more in depth look at the female hero character in film, television, and video games. The following section discusses the representation of the female hero concerning: body; attire; weapons, powers, and abilities, in order to understand the ongoing discourse surrounding female hero characters in media as well as form an adequate analysis of the female video game hero.

#### Female Character Representation: Film, Television, and Video Games

As stereotypes concerning female heroes extend further than just their role, additional issues presented by their representation as a character are brought up. Female heroes' body, attire, and abilities also need to be taken into consideration as they are large elements that contribute to the construction of these characters. A character's body and attire are key investigative elements in gender studies throughout media. Unfortunately, the main literature concerning female characters' body and attire in video games is limited to non-playable characters (NPC) and selectable characters. The only literature focusing on a female hero video game protagonist is represented by Lara Croft. With this narrow video game literature on protagonist female heroes, it is necessary to draw from female hero examples in film and television. Within these examples, specific stereotypes and portrayals of the active woman emerge incorporating weapons, powers,

and abilities which can now be applied to the interactive female video game protagonist. In the following sections, protagonist female hero examples of body, attire, along with their weapons, powers, and abilities are discussed in relation to film, television, and video games.

### Female Hero Body Type in Film, Television, and Video Games

In film, television, and video games, aside from the protagonists' gender, another dominant focal point is their body. Hero characters in particular come with a specific body type in mind. For male characters, an overly muscular or lean athletic build are the most common stereotypes, while the focus for most female characters is sex appeal (Durham 26). A commonality between most heroes in media male or female is that they both tend to align with the physical ideals of what is considered handsome or beautiful. As female characters are transitioning from their passive images of sexual objects to active female heroes, it seems that a new body type is emerging. This body type combines the muscular male stereotype referenced by Tasker and the sexual object stereotype referenced by Heinecken to form an image that is still able to be accepted throughout film and television (69; 28).

In more recent years, the conventional discourse regarding female bodies in the media is slowly being challenged by the surge of female hero characters. Even though there are contradictory concepts of what depicts the body of a hero in comparison to what type of body depicts a woman; the female hero character attempts to balance these contradictions in order to portray a physically strong, independent-thinking woman. As female heroes attempt to steer away from stereotypical roles emphasizing their femininity, an ideological balance is disrupted (Durham 26). If they are not seen as mothers or overly sexual characters, they tend to fall into the category of being something other than woman.

As these women assume the role of hero, embodying strength and masculinity, they still maintain ideal images of beauty. Kimberly Neuendorf, Thomas Gore, Amy Dalessandro, Patricie Janstova, and Sharon Snyder-Suhy state that the ideal portrayal of female beauty depicted throughout media is: a statuesque, very thin, small hipped, and extremely attractive women (Neuendorf et al. 751). The particular image of women described above is seen in a variety of films, televisions, and video games perpetuating the stereotype that this image of beauty must be upheld throughout all media images. Even though female hero characters "...do not occupy passive feeble bodies," they still do "...conform to the social ideals of slenderness and dominant definitions of beauty" (Durham 26). Durham's studies indicate that female hero characters in film and television are unable to escape such typical characteristics as being: white, fine featured, and blonde (26). Durham states that in order for a female hero character to be successful, she must be white and blonde to transcend society's barriers placed on ordinary women and allow them to assume a role of empowerment (27). Nonetheless, Durham does admit that there are certain exceptions to these traditional stereotypes as more film and television female hero characters are beginning to integrate different races and ethnicities (27). According to Durham's description, it is apparent that the stereotype being maintained for female heroes seen in film and television still demands for them to maintain and represent ideal femininity and heterosexual desirability. When it comes to the representation of female heroes in media, it must continue to re-enforce dominant constructions of gender.

However, another viewpoint on female hero bodies is offered by Yvonne Tasker. She suggests that the female hero bodies does not simply fall under the standard stereotype of beauty, but portrays a contradictory image that is sexualized while still capable of demonstrating a muscular stature (Tasker 145). This notion provides a more complex look at the bodies of female

heroes. Rather than just seeing their bodies as typical representations of beauty, Tasker believes that elements of masculinity through a muscular build can also be seen. Sherrie Inness refers to this contradictory image of the female body as blurring the line between the traditional masculine and feminine gender roles (22). Tasker further refers to this contradictory image by stating that the action heroines seen in films are muscular women who redefine the bodily understanding of female characters. As female heroes continue taking on roles originally created for men, it only makes sense that as women assume these roles, the clear cut boundaries of gender are becoming distorted.

According to Tasker some of the most prominent examples of this contradictory image of female hero representations in film are: Sarah Connor in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*; Ellen Ripley in *Aliens*; Charly Baltimore in *The Long Kiss Goodnight*; and Ellen in *The Quick and the Dead* to name a few (67-68).



Figure 1. L-Linda Hamilton as Sarah Connor (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, 1991); R-Sigourney Weaver as Ellen Ripley (*Alien* series, 1979-1986)

In figure 1 both Linda Hamilton and Sigourney Weaver provide examples of action heroines that redefine the bodily image of women. By adopting a more muscular physique associated with male heroes, the two actresses in figure 1 blur the boundaries of stereotypical gender

representations.

In contrast to figure 1, figure 2 displays images of the bodies of some of the most prominent examples of television female hero representations investigated in media: Buffy from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; the Charmed sisters in the *Charmed* series; Xena in *Xena: The Warrior Princess*; and Max in *Dark Angel*. These women have strayed away from the muscular physique of the film action heroine and are presented as having physically fit bodies that accentuate their feminine features more than their muscles.

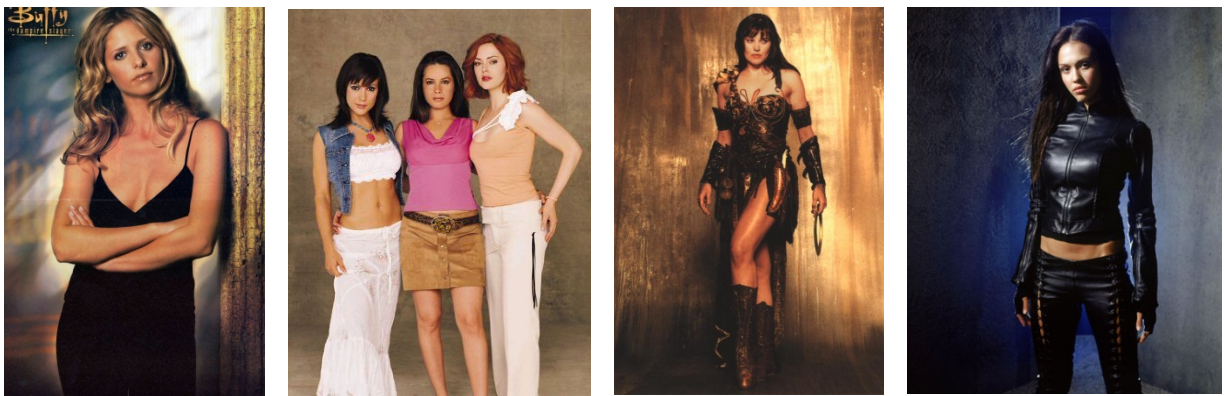


Figure 2. L-Sarah Michelle Gellar as Buffy Summers (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, 1997-2003); ML-Alyssa Milano, Holly Marie Combs, and Rose McGowan as the Charmed Sisters (*Charmed*, 1998-2006); MR-Lucy Lawless as Xena (*Xena: The Warrior Princess*, 1995-2001); R-Jessica Alba as Max Guevara (*Dark Angel*, 2000-2002)

These female hero characters suggest that powerful women on television can be portrayed without adopting the overly muscular body image often associated with the female action heroine. While Tasker states that most female heroes in film must adopt a muscular physique in order to challenge the male dominated world she is placed in, according to Durham, most female hero body images still adhere to the conventional standards of beauty (70; 26). This is why the female hero is still perceived as a woman to be looked at. Numerous female heroes still represent the ideal beauty or body that is seen as a visual spectacle. Even if some of these women are recognized as having a more masculine body, they still are unable to escape traditional feminine

stereotypes. Each actress who portrays one of the characters listed above is conventionally beautiful as well as presents a physically fit body. With other similarities clearly shown, Durham further suggests that almost all film and television actresses playing female heroes are Caucasian with medium to long length hair (27). Several examples fitting Durham's description are: Linda Hamilton, Sigourney Weaver, Geena Davis, Helen Hunt, Sharon Stone, Sarah Michelle Gellar, Alyssa Milano, Holly Marie Combs, Shannon Doherty, Rose McGowan, and Lucy Lawless with the exception of *Dark Angel's* Jessica Alba who is of mixed race. With the exception of some hair color variations it can be argued that most female heroes tend to be white, fine featured, and blonde. It appears that any challenge to gender narrative imagery is minimal in media representation of female heroes.

Although there is scarce research on the sub group of female hero characters in video games, the limited representation of female character imagery is still highly stereotypical and overly sexualized. Thus, the information gathered below incorporates video game studies on stereotypical female video game characters, and a small number of female video game hero examples such as the widely popular heroine, Lara Croft (Mikula 79). However, just as female characters in film and television transitioned from passive feeble characters to active heroines, so too have female video game characters. Beginning with non-interactive characters, female video game characters have slowly transitioned into leading interactive characters of games. Therefore, the first category of body types to be addressed is that of the non-playable character (NPC).

The earliest representation of female video game characters portrayed them as nothing more than NPC's. Perhaps one of the earliest and most popular female NPC characters is Princess Peach of the Super Mario Brothers (1985-1988) series. As seen in figure 3, the body associated with Princess Peach is more reminiscent of a child's cartoon. She is not sexualized in

any way.



Figure 3. L-Princess Peach from Super Mario Brothers (Nintendo,1985-1988); R-Stripper character in Grand Theft Auto (Rockstar Games, 1997-Present)

Princess Peach presents a feminine body that is not overly exaggerated in any way. However, NPC's have come a long way from Princess Peach, yet now showcase overly sexual bodies and attire. Re-emphasizing this representation is Miller and Summers' results which indicate that most female characters found in video games are depicted sexually and wear revealing attire (286-289; 739). A prime example of this sexual body type is presented by the strippers found throughout the video game series Grand Theft Auto (1997-present) presented in figure 3. In terms of body type, these more sexual female characters are now a common stereotype among a variety of game genres and roles.

Several studies illustrate that most video game female characters tend to have overly exaggerated breasts, hips, and buttocks (Janz and Martis 146; Miller and Summers 738; Downs and Smith 727). These video game female characters have become the established typecast along with their stereotypical body images. Firstly, one of the most common stereotypical representations among female video game is the overly sexualized sidekick or fighter character (Carpenter 97). Although these character types have highly sexualized body images, they are also depicted as having muscular or physically fit bodies in order to fight other characters. These

sidekick characters can be found in the major distributed games such as the Resident Evil (1996-2012) series and the Halo (2001-2010) series. These sidekick characters are also usually NPCs or play minor supportive roles throughout the games. Fighter characters are found in majorities of games that provide selectable male and female characters to battle with. Mortal Kombat (1992-present), Street Fighter (1987-2011), and Tekken (1994-2011) are some of the most popular video games in this genre that provide playable, selectable, characters.



Figure 4. Various selectable female fighter characters found in Mortal Kombat (Midway Games and Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, 1992-present)

RPGs such as Final Fantasy (1987-2011) also provide these types of characters. Throughout gender studies, research in video game female representations acknowledges that these sidekicks and fighter characters are highly sexualized characters that have become the current stereotype for female characters.

Unfortunately it appears that this body image stereotype is responsible for the most recognized video game female protagonist, Lara Croft. There are limited video game heroine character examples, but the most popularly referred to is the Tomb Raider series' Lara Croft. Sadly, most literature identifies Lara as merely a sexualized male fantasy of a female lead character (Mikula 79). Although identified as one of the first heroine characters, Lara's body image places her in the realm of every prior highly sexualized female character (Mikula 80).





Figure 5. Lara Croft in Tomb Raider (Core Design, 1996-present)

She is designed in an extremely sexualized manner with large breasts, small waist, large buttocks, and extremely long legs. Even though Lara Croft displays a new kind of playability for female video game characters as well as a more physically fit character, the highly sexualized image remains a stereotype of adolescent male-fantasy (Mikula 84). With all the advances in video games Lara Croft accomplished, she is merely a slightly more-clothed fighter character one might choose in a Tekken game. Other popular female characters in video game culture include Jill Valentine, Claire Redfield, and Rebecca Chambers found in the Resident Evil series (Burrill 50). These characters, unlike Lara Croft, are designed with a slightly less sexual body image but unfortunately are not main protagonists in each game.

Although female hero protagonist characters are still rare, specifically in video games, a few other examples do exist. Some lesser-known examples are the following: Hildegard von Krone in the *Soul* series video games, who appears in *Soul caliber IV* (2008); Samus Aran in the *Metroid* series (1986-2010); Jennifer Tate in *Primal* (2003); and Alexandra Roivas in *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (2002). Each character listed above varies in body shape attempting to stray from the typical highly sexualized female character body. However, just as film and television heroines are unable to escape conforming to the standard images of beauty female

video game characters are still conforming to the standard image of sexuality.

While a few film and television female heroes have slightly attempted to break away from the mold with changing hair color to varying race and ethnicities. Most female heroes still conform to stereotypes of beauty. Another stereotype they must maintain is that of a muscular or physically fit body (Tasker 69). This complex and contradictory body image is where female video game characters and film and television characters align. Both representations of women in different types of media are required to portray a contradictory image of both sexuality and masculinity. This contradiction seems to continue from the physical body types of female heroes to their attire. Therefore, the following area focuses entirely on the attire (i.e. masculine, feminine, sexualized, or androgynous) worn by the various female heroes discussed in this section.

#### Female Hero Attire in Film, Television, and Video Games

Aside from body image, attire is another important component of character representation. This is because apart from powers or abilities, clothing is another main element associated with heroes. The attire worn by heroes in film, television, and video games are just as iconic as the characters themselves. Both male and female heroes in media have iconic attire that has become synonymous with the characters wearing it such as: Captain America's patriotic outfit, Wonder Woman's one-piece, and Lara Croft's signature shorts, T-shirt, and gun holsters. However, unlike Captain America's outfit which portrays patriotism, masculinity, and strength by accenting his muscular figure, female hero attire is typically more focused on sexuality and accentuating the female body. In an attempt to separate female hero attire from this stereotype women began to be seen in more masculine outfits. Although this portrayed women as the

complete opposite of their previous sexual stereotype, this attire also masked their femininity. This effort to change the type of attire worn by female hero characters has resulted in the expansion beyond masculine or sexual stereotypes, and now addresses female hero costume styles ranging from masculine to androgynous. To further explore the clothing worn by female heroes in film, television, and video games, the following discussion reviews literature investigating three categories of attire: masculine or muscular, feminine or sexual, and androgynous.

Beginning with literature on masculine or muscular attire, Tasker states that the “...masculinized attire of the [female] action hero involves costumes which incorporate elements of male clothing as a part of the negotiation of the presentation of women’s bodies” (80). In this sense, Tasker suggests that female heroes are often seen wearing elements of male clothing in order for the female body to be more accepted in a hero role. With attire and body image going hand in hand, attire which contradicted feminine body images began to be seen more often. This way female hero characters are able to escape the image of having both overly sexually body images and attire; allowing them to better establish themselves as women of action. Along with Tasker’s previous statement, she further suggests that “masculine clothing [merely forms] a disguise behind which the real figure of a woman is glimpsed” (81). This statement does not suggest that the male clothing used by female heroes helps negotiate their bodies but rather hides them behind the masculinity of the clothing. From this perspective, it would seem that the masculine attire which has become iconographic with action films only provides a male guise for female heroes. Therefore, it constructs a character that is more easily incorporated into action films.

A good example of masculine attire worn by a female action hero is displayed by Sarah

Connor in the film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. Tasker uses Connor as a reference in her research since most of her attire, throughout the film, consists of masculine elements such as: pants, a sleeveless muscle shirt, and boots. In this film, actress Linda Hamilton already displays quite a masculine body image with masculine attire. Even though she has a masculine body image, her attire further attempts to conceal any trace of femininity. Compared to the feminine image of Sarah wearing a long dress in the one flashback scene of the movie, her masculine attire throughout the rest of the film allows her to be more accepted as an active hero. This costume of masculine attire has become such a large part of the iconography of action movies that it seems highly unlikely that Sarah could have still been depicted as a hero, or performed any action sequences, if she was wearing a long dress. In order to be a participating woman in the *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* film Sarah must put on the costume that allows her to perform the duties of a hero.

In genre films, like the one referenced above, iconographic images like a hero's attire is used to create a specific character type. Although this same tactic is used in television and video games, more variety in attire is applicable due to the prolonged time period in which they may be viewed or played. A television series allows for masculine, feminine, sexual, and androgynous attire to be explored throughout several episodes. Similarly, video games allow for their characters to go through various outfit changes throughout the game or over the game series. For example, with the length of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series Buffy is able to transition in and out of feminine and masculine attire depending on the episode or scenario. There are numerous episodes which depict Buffy in feminine attire such as dresses, skirts, blouses, heels, and even a cheerleading outfit. Her outfits do not try to hide her feminine body image but do not accentuate her body either. Throughout the series she is typically dressed fashionably, whether she is

slaying vampires, going to school, or just going to the local club, the Bronze. At times Buffy does change into more masculine attire to fight, but most often fights in whatever outfit she has on which is typically more feminine.

Another television example of feminine attire often worn by female heroes is the *Charmed* series. Their outfits combine femininity with sexuality at times, but are never overly sexualized. Through the observation of various episodes throughout the series one is able to note that all three sisters are frequently depicted wearing pants and blouses but occasionally are seen wearing skirts, dresses, high heels, and even low-cut tops. Even though they are provided with a variety of costume changes, none of their outfits hide their femininity. Yet, upon simple observation of the iconic outfit worn by Xena throughout the *Xena: Warrior Princess* series one can clearly see how it emphasizes sexuality. Xena's attire consists of a corset-like armor that accentuates her chest along with a skirt with various slits and can be seen as a blend between male armor and female attire. Xena's armored outfit truly accentuates her body and is overly sexual in comparison to the attire worn by other warriors throughout the series.

An example consisting of a culmination of all the previous outfit styles can be found throughout the *Dark Angel* television series. Through the observation of various episodes of both seasons, one can say that the main character Max wears a blend of masculine, feminine, sexualized and androgynous clothing. Her attire typically consists of T-shirts, jackets, pants, tennis shoes, and backwards caps. Occasionally, she is depicted in a fitted all-black outfit that is worn when on missions. Variations of her outfits are worn by male characters at her work place and the military facility she is held at throughout the show. She is rarely seen in dresses except for one or two episodes when they are necessary for disguise. Overall, as a female hero, Max's attire is the most diverse among the several examples provided concerning television heroines.

While film and television female heroes such as Sarah Connor, Buffy, and Max are depicted in attire ranging from masculine to androgynous (*Terminator 2: Judgment Day*; *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; *Dark Angel*), most female video game characters are still found wearing very sexual attire (Beasley and Standley 286-289; Miller and Summers 738). According to Berrin Beasley and Tracy Standley most video game female characters have less clothing on than male characters (286-289). They also state that female characters are often seen wearing low-cut clothing that increases attention to their bodies and emphasizes their sexuality. Further studies conducted by Miller and Summers as well as Janz and Martis support Beasley's and Standley's findings that most female video game characters appear to be either scantily clad or overly sexually dressed (738; 146). Findings list that female characters are frequently wearing tight fitted, short, or revealing clothing. Yet, none of these studies indicates whether or not female characters are seen wearing any other types of attire such as feminine, masculine, or androgynous. With the limited, if any, literature focusing on female hero attire in video games; the only studies that elaborate on clothing commonly focus on the overly sexual attire worn by most female characters. Although, female video game characters, similar to their film and television counterparts, have gone through a transition concerning the roles they play, their attire has not transitioned very much at all.

Beginning with one of the first tropes of video game female characters; the "damsel in distress." The typically worn attire by these characters is long princess-type dresses. This outfit is not sexualized and is considerably feminine. The "damsel in distress" non-playable character (NPC) is synonymous with this iconic type of attire. However, female video game characters have ditched the girly princess attire and are now seen in more sexual clothing. The current most common video game female representation is the overly sexualized sidekick or fighter character.

Just as their body image is indicated to be highly sexualized, so is their attire. Most female fighter characters found in games like Tekken or Mortal Kombat wear tightly fitted clothes consisting of: short skirts, dresses with high slits, tights, low-cut tops, and high heeled boots or shoes. Examples of these outfits can be seen on the following Tekken characters in figure 6.



Figure 6. L-Julia Chang; ML-Christie Monteiro; MR-Alisa Bosconovitch; R-Lili Rochefort characters in Tekken 6 (Namco Bandai, 2009)

These outfits construct very sexual character images and simply re-enforce the sexuality of their bodies. Although these are tough fighting characters, they are more reminiscent of their comic book predecessors. The attire worn by these female characters portray them more as fetishistic images rather than women of action.

Other selectable women of action, who are more well-known female characters, are Jill Valentine, Claire Redfield, and Rebecca Chambers (Burrill 50). These three Resident Evil characters are also portrayed in rather revealing attire throughout the series; however, it can be noted that both Claire and Jill transition from rather revealing to more conservative attire throughout the game series. These two characters serve as examples of female representations progressing towards less sexual attire. However, since their attire only changes from one game to the next, these particular games only allow growth for both character and attire by developing a whole new game.

This change in attire from game to game has more recently even affected the most popular female hero game Tomb Raider. Unfortunately the main attire female protagonist Lara Croft is known for mainly accentuates her sexuality (Mikula 80). There are not several well-known examples of video game heroines, yet the most popular example only wears a small top, exposing her abdomen, and very short shorts. Throughout the game Lara's attire does not change and although there have been several games released within the Tomb Raider series her outfits never became less sexualized. However, now that more female hero type characters are beginning to emerge throughout video games, the attire worn by these characters are slowly departing from this stereotypical image.



Figure 7. L-Jennifer Tate in Primal (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2003); M-Samus Aran in Metroid Prime 3: Corruption (Nintendo, 2007); R-Alexandra Rovias in Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem (Nintendo, 2002)

As seen in figure 7, Jennifer Tate, Samus Aran, and Alexandra Roivas are examples of female heroes which showcase somewhat proportional bodies that are not over sexually exaggerated. Addressing their attire, their outfits consist of pants, shirts, boots, and at times complete armor. Their clothes cover more of their bodies than the average female character currently found in video games (Beasley and Standley (286-289). From their image to their attire, these examples of video game female heroes stray away from their overly sexualized predecessors commonly



found in video games.

With female characters assuming the role of hero the costume they put on must re-enforce this character construction. It is easy to see how the time allotted to a single film can create a very iconic look for a female hero as well as construct an image that will be accepted on screen. On the other hand, an entire television series has a longer period of time to provide a variety of attire worn by female heroes over a course of several television episodes. Thus, television series are able to construct a more diverse character that can showcase both feminine and masculine clothing while still portraying an acceptable representation. With the longer time available in television series over several days, weeks, months, or years, they are able to provide images of female heroes in a wide range of attire from masculine, feminine, sexual, and even androgynous. At times, one television series, such as *Dark Angel*, is able to showcase all of these styles in one series. While audiences have time to adjust to seeing a female hero change various styles of attire throughout a television series, the time within film is limited. This provides a shorter time period for viewers to accept a female hero on screen while not having her portray an array of stereotypes already associated with female characters.

As for video games, some console games such as Tomb Raider only allow for Lara Croft to be seen in one iconic outfit throughout the entire game, much like film characters. However, more and more current games, including the Tomb Raider series, now allow female characters to change clothes throughout the game, much like a television series. This feature now allows for interactive character construction as the outfits can be interchanged throughout the game by the players. Although, depending on the attire that is pre-designed into the game, the character may only have one or two outfits that are not overly sexual. It is this interactive element to attire that will be investigated as a part of character construction and representation in the next three

chapters. However, before that, the last attribute of a female hero, weapons, powers, and abilities, must be discussed. Thus, the following section addresses the female hero's skills and capabilities among film, television, and video games.

### Female Hero Weapons, Powers, and Abilities in Film and Television

An important element of any hero is his/her weapons, powers, or abilities. After all, almost all hero characters are in possession of special abilities such as: strength, speed, intelligence, fighting/combat abilities, and weaponry knowledge. Occasionally, a hero may even acquire superhuman or supernatural powers such as: flying, super strength, super speed, etc. (Stabile 90). However, since the "standard" hero is almost always a man, it is no surprise that all of the abilities or attributes described above are stereotypically associated with masculinity. Therefore, just like narrative roles, body image, and attire, stereotypes and limited representations also exist when speaking about weapons, powers, and abilities. With weapons and abilities being associated with masculine stereotypes, female heroes in possession of any standard weapons, powers, or abilities become defeminized (Tasker 135; Stabile 90). A woman cannot possess masculine attributes and still be accepted as feminine. However, if the female hero assumes masculine weapons, powers, or abilities, and has them "explained away," similar to justifying their role throughout the narrative, then her attributes are more easily accepted. These limitations lock female heroes into either accepting passive abilities or "masculine" abilities that are justified in order to still be read as feminine.

An example of a female hero not presented with masculine abilities is found in the television series *Heroes* (2006-2010) (Stabile 90). The character, Claire Bennett, is a high school

teenager in the television series that has the power to regenerate<sup>4</sup>. A distinction Stabile makes is that while men in the series are granted powers such as flight, Claire's power only allows her to regenerate. Stabile continues to state that while Claire's power in the television series is portrayed as one of the most sought after special powers in the show, she is never able to really defend herself or those around her (90). For a good portion of the television series the main tagline is "Save the Cheerleader; Save the World." This tagline represented that Claire was an important character, while also placing significant importance on saving her. Even though Claire is a female hero herself, she is almost never seen partaking in any fighting throughout most of the series. While several men throughout the show line up to try and protect Claire, as a hero herself able to walk away from large fires and explosions, she is unable to ever truly defend herself or protect others (Stabile 90).

Most film and television examples of female heroes are equipped with weapons, powers, and abilities typically associated with masculinity. Female heroes such as Sarah Connor, Ellen Ripley, Charly Baltimore, and Ellen mainly use guns, along with some combat abilities, to fight against their enemies. Tasker mentions that, as weapons, guns are symbols of power, and are typically associated with a masculine image (135). Thus female heroes assuming guns both assume power and an associated masculine image. However, she also states that female heroes actions tend to be justified or "explained away" (Tasker 20). This would include their weapons and actions while using them, which Tasker suggests re-emphasizes female heroes' femininity. Therefore heroines that assume masculine weapons are stuck in a contradictory bind.

As for other female heroes such as Buffy and Max, they do not primarily use weapons but instead rely more on combat abilities consisting of super strength and speed. However, just

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<sup>4</sup> Regeneration is a super power which gives the user the ability to recreate lost or damaged tissues, organs, and limbs (Superhero Database).

as Buffy's narrative role of becoming a hero is justified by the fictional world she inhabits, her abilities are explained by receiving them through magic. Another example is the character Max, from *Dark Angel*. She is capable of super strength and speed due to being genetically enhanced. Her abilities are explained through her genetics that were changed from birth without her choice. These two examples are how female characters are provided with excuses in order to empower them with masculine abilities.

Another example, provided by Stabile, is the character Niki Sanders from the television series *Heroes* (89). Niki has the power of superhuman strength, allowing her to take on enemies and defend herself and her family. However, Niki is unable to possess this power while continuing to be a loving mother and wife. Her power is only accessible through her alternate evil personality which thinks more about herself than her family. Niki's power is aligned with the depiction of an evil woman who at times is not in her right mind. All of her feminine and motherly qualities are completely forgotten as she assumes her alternate personality and supernatural powers. While, acquiring powers or abilities is a common trait among both super heroes and action heroes, for most female heroes this requires a negotiation of contradictory masculine and feminine traits.

In order to be considered heroes, similar to their male counterparts, these women in media require weapons, powers, or abilities. While powers and abilities are definitely required to be a super hero, combat skills are more of a common ability associated with action heroes who may not possess any other powers. Having only two stereotypes for female heroes presents a limitation to the powers they are able to attain. Female heroes are stuck with either portraying a passive feminine woman or a more masculine active woman. However, unlike film and television, the female characters in video games are interactive. The video game female hero is

not just in possession of special abilities but requires them in order to advance throughout the game world. While interactive female heroes in video games can be seen as perhaps transcending objectivity or becoming subjects in their own narratives, they are still characters that are ultimately controlled by a player and must follow certain mission or tasks in order for the underlying narrative to move forward at all. Also, female heroes within video games may perform masculine actions but are still locked within sexual stereotypes such as Lara Croft. As there is not much literature concerning female hero abilities in video games, this thesis must refer to the following examples of weapons, powers, and abilities which female video game characters possess in games such as Tekken, Resident Evil, and Tomb Raider. Most fighting video game characters all have specific abilities. Games such as the Tekken series present female characters that are equipped with certain fighting abilities and their own special moves. Since these characters are basically fighters, their special abilities typically consist of combat skills. However, unlike the television characters previously discussed which have “explanations” for their powers, these characters do not. The game itself does not have much of a narrative and only provides an extremely brief background for each of the characters whether they are male or female. Mostly all of the fighters in the Tekken game series simply have these abilities because they are trained fighters. No clear justification as to why each character, male or female, fights is given aside from the main male character Kazuya Mishima.

As for the selectable Resident Evil series characters, Jill Valentine and Claire Redfield, their main weapons of choice are guns similar to Lara Croft in Tomb Raider. Both Jill and Claire use guns to fight off the zombies that threaten their lives throughout the games. Also, each game has a different underlying narrative, but the use of guns is mainly explained as a form of protection for Jill and Claire as well as the other selectable male characters. In Lara’s case, she

also uses a gun for protection but not particularly because it is associated with the underlying narrative of the game as much as it is just part of the mechanics of the game. This is where the use of masculine weapons, powers, or abilities begins to differ from film and television to video games. Whereas film and television narratives provide reason or justifications for the heroes' actions, some video games merely have their characters possess certain weapons and abilities as a part of the game mechanics. As mechanics are brought into the picture, a distinction between the analysis of passively viewing active women on screen and actively being in control of these women in video games needs to be made. With interactivity being a large part of game play, not only is the character assuming masculine weapons or abilities but the player is as well. Therefore how gender is intertwined with these interactive skills and abilities must be looked at from a different perspective than film and television.

Throughout this section it seems that most examples of female hero powers either ultimately re-enforce femininity or are more associated with masculinity that they require an acceptable explanation as to why a women might possess such abilities. Female heroes are limited to these two choices or stereotypes, and neither favors the image of a strong empowered woman accepted in media. It seems female heroes are locked within a double bind of either not being accepted as feminine while attaining masculine powers and abilities, or not being accepted as heroes without them. Other than these two stereotypes, it would seem that female hero abilities in video games may be nothing more than mechanics used to move the game forward. In this case, the abilities provided in these games may be designed with male characters in mind while the protagonists are ultimately substituted with female characters. Although the abilities of female hero characters are not as easy to analyze as their body images or attire, they still play a large part in the construction of the active masculinity or passive femininity of the character.

These stereotypes and contradictions, of conventional standards of beauty, masculine or overly sexual attire, and masculine abilities, will play a significant part in the analysis of the female hero representations in the video games found in the next three chapters.

### Narrative Experience and Mechanics in Video Games

As previously mentioned in the above section, as more focus begins to move towards video games as interactive forms of media, the gap between them and film is more evidently seen. Whereas, female heroes possess abilities, which they use on screen in film and television, the powers granted to female heroes in video games are in the control of the player. With interactivity being a main source of differentiating this medium, using theories and analysis fit for film seem inapplicable. Although the following literature does not serve as a complete answer for how video game narratives should be studied; it does shed some light on the ongoing discussion of how they are addressed, viewed, and interpreted within video game studies. As interactive forms of entertainment, these games are not typically viewed as a storytelling medium. However, there are games that provide underlying storylines such as: role-playing games (RPG), first person shooter games (FPS), and third person shooter games (TPS). Therefore, the main questions are how do we discuss games which do provide underlying narratives, and what part does gender play in the construction of the game's mechanics? With these questions in mind, the following discussion will assess the academic literature that delivers new approaches to analyzing narratives in video games.

Narrative and story-telling is a fundamental part of film and television; however, the narrative found in video games does not unfold on screen but requires interactive participation. Even though "a great deal of video game visuality is borrowed from film," they tend to part ways

due to the game players' interactivity (Burril 73). Burril states that video games are not simply stories being told, but stories being unfolded through processes of interactions (74). These players have transitioned from passive viewers unable to alter or determine the trajectory of the narrative on screen and are now able to control the direction the video game narrative. With such a high degree of interactivity, it seems inappropriate that film theory is still being applied to analyze the narrative structure of video games. Although film and television studies mostly concentrate on the analysis of narrative as a linear structure presented to a passive audience, video games should not be studied in the same manner.

In these past ten years, video game researchers known as, Ludologists and Narratologists, have been unable to decide whether games are a storytelling medium or not (Costikyan 194-196; Juul 1-10). Ludologists believe that when studying games, the focus should be on game play mechanics consisting of all the necessary components required to play such as the: rules of the game, program code, and controller (LeBlanc 440). Greg Costikyan's main argument on game narratives supports the Ludologists' perspective by stating that games and stories are not compatible (6). He continues to elaborate that if designers make games more like stories; the constraints placed on the game play will make them less enjoyable. On the other hand, if the designers lessen the story to allow for better game play; they might as well have no narrative structure at all.

Although Costikyan states that games and stories are not compatible, the Narratologists believe otherwise. Narratologists are more interested in studying video games alongside other storytelling media (Costikyan 6). These groups of theorists believe that video games follow the same dramatic arc of a well-told story; thus, can be studied in the same manner as films or books. However, this uncertainty about whether or not video games should be studied for their



narrative structure or their game play is the basis for further investigation into how games can provide both of these features, if at all possible. This thesis strives to perceive video games as texts which provide for a narrative experience through the mechanics and dynamics<sup>5</sup> of game play.

Rather than choosing between the Ludologist or Narratologist beliefs in studying video game narrative or just game play; the analysis in the following chapters uses Henry Jenkins' proposed theory of interactive narrative experiences as well as Giles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's theory of the "rhizome" which both allow for new ways to investigate narrative structure within video games (672; 25). Henry Jenkins proposes a middle ground position to analyzing interactive narrative experiences that places the emphasis of analysis on video games more as spaces with variable narrative possibility and less as stories. Jenkins presents the following limitations of narrative video game research such as: it compares the only classical linear storytelling model to video games, it has limited understanding of narration, it only addresses whether the complete game tells a story, and it fails to recognize that games function as new transmedia storytelling environments (673-674). Jenkins believes this approach as being too narrow a perception of video games and would rather emphasize how this interactive media can be seen more as a space for optional possibilities of narrative experiences.

This thesis shares Jenkins point of view that the current analysis of video games is too narrow and thus is utilizing his theory to study video games as narrative experiences. Only viewing video games as fitting into one box or another for analysis is a constricted discussion. It is better to recognize that as video games have tried to integrate both storyline and game mechanics that they should be investigated as a medium that provides an experience

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<sup>5</sup> Dynamics are defined by LeBlanc as the events that emerge from game play (i.e. what happens when the game is played; new strategies are discovered as well as structural concepts) (441).

encompassing these two elements. With the desire to discuss video games from a more innovative perspective; the only research able to support the investigation being conducted in this thesis is Jenkins' model of narrative spaces and his perspective that incorporates the use of game mechanics and dynamics to work through games' narrative spaces. In order to have a better grasp of the narrative spaces or experiences that Jenkins proposes the following descriptions are given.

Jenkins' describes the narrative experiences as follows: The first type of narrative, an enacted narrative, is advanced forward by the players' interaction with the broadly created narrative that may only "...facilitate the protagonist's movement towards resolution..." (Jenkins 679). This narrative type coincides well with third person shooter games (TPS). These games have the main protagonist progress through the game only to reach a goal at the end that finally concludes the game. According to Edward Schneider, Annie Lang, Mija Shin, and Samuel Bradley, first person shooter games or most shooting games in general provide either an underlying narrative to validate the actions taken by the protagonist within the game or simply a narrative space for the protagonist to shoot their way to the next level (362). Researchers do not propose that the narrative found in this genre of games is incorporated to shed any real light on the protagonist's character but merely progress the game towards its ultimate goal.

The second type of narrative, an embedded narrative, allows for more flexible interactivity as the players' progress through the *mise-en-scene* of the pre-authored narrative and they are able to reconstruct the plot through their acts of "detection, speculation, and exploration" (Jenkins 683). This type of narrative can be found particularly in role-playing games (RPG). Within these games, a narrative has already been written as the character proceeds accomplishing quests or tasks required to continue along the pre-written story and

reach the end of game play. RPGs require the players to sort through the tasks they encounter and the information they acquire in order to decipher and understand the game's primary narrative focus (Jenkins 683).

These narrative experiences described by Jenkins aid in understanding the different categories of narratives present within video games. Merging Jenkins' theory with Deleuze's and Guattari's theory of the "rhizome," offers more of an exploration into how narrative structures in video games function. Their theory of the "rhizome" is defined as "a model of continuing offshoots, taproot systems that travel horizontally and laterally, constantly producing affective becoming that themselves contribute to the dynamic multiplicity of creation and existence" (Deleuze & Guattari 25). This definition explores more of how video game narrative structures function in a "rhizomatic" manner. Depending on the genre of a console video game, the narrative structure is capable of generating multiple optional paths or routes that players may choose from within the game. These paths or routes allow the character to progress in the game. However depending on the decisions players make, it is uncertain which of the various available paths they will choose. A particular mechanic that guides players down specific paths or helps to create alternate ones is the directional/environmental mechanic. This mechanic limits players' mobility within the game world as well as providing options for different narrative paths. In order to make games more engaging, these types of settings are created to make the game world seem spacious and free to explore while players are simply still moving along according to the rules and mechanics that have been designed. Thus Deleuze's and Guattari's theory of the "rhizome" allows video game narratives to be analyzed not from beginning to end in a straight line but investigate the multiple paths coinciding throughout the game. In this sense, throughout the following chapters both Jenkins and Deleuze's and Guattari's theories are implemented in

investigating video game narrative structure from new viewpoints.

Although using more innovative perspectives to analyze narrative structure in video games is a small segment of what this thesis entails, the larger discussion throughout this thesis is how gender ties into all of these segments being analyzed. Within the following case studies this thesis intends to address the following questions throughout the narrative experience section. How does gender affect narrative construction? How does gender affect the mechanics (i.e. optional paths, missions, and questions) of each game? Currently, it is uncertain whether a game's narrative experience is explicitly linked to character gender or not. This means that gender could be found to be intertwined from the character role to the mechanics of the game. Thus the need for new and innovative ways of studying these narrative experiences becomes apparent.

Jenkins and Deleuze's and Guattari's theories provide a new point of view in analyzing the types of narrative experiences provided by both RPGs and TPS games investigated in the following case study chapters. Therefore, these theories will also be used to aid in discussing what part gender plays in the construction of video game narratives. As described by Jenkins, enacted narrative experiences require that the character advance his/her way through the game to reach the end goal. In order for the character to make his/her way through a game he/she must complete a set of tasks in order to move forward. This thesis intends to investigate whether or not these tasks align with the gender of the protagonist character and if they result in further stereotypes concerning gender binaries.

Jenkins' other theory describing narrative experiences states that the embedded narrative experience consists of a beginning and an end which is already pre-written. Yet, this experience allows the character to choose how to go about completing the necessary tasks to reach the end.

This type of narrative experience is extremely suited for RPGs. RPGs, more than any other video game genre, have pre-written narratives linked to the protagonist of the game. This mainly happens due to the particular genre in which these games are created which specifically entails role-play. It is also likely that the “rhizomatic” options available in RPGs will also be linked to the protagonist character. Combining both Jenkins and Deleuze’s and Guattari’s theories will assist in analyzing the video games in the following chapters. Through this analysis it is hoped that a better understanding of interactive narratives will also emerge to further assist this investigation of gender and video games.

In summary, this chapter has addressed literature compiled from film, television studies, video game studies, gender studies, and philosophy. Research in these areas is used to provide an overview of the following sections: narrative female hero limitations; female hero character representation including body image, attire, weapons, powers, and abilities; narrative experience and mechanics in video games. The following three chapters will investigate these sections and provide a discussion of gender across six sections (Narrative Female Hero Limitations; Female Hero Character Representation; Body Image; Attire; Weapons, Powers, and Abilities; Narrative Experience and Mechanics in Video Games) throughout each video game (Venetica; WET; Velvet Assassin).

## CHAPTER 3

### CASE STUDY 1: VENETICA



Figure 8. Venetica Xbox 360 video game cover image (Rombax Games, 2011)

This chapter provides an analysis of the game Venetica by addressing gender across each of the following issues: the narrative representation of the female hero role, female character representation concerning body image, attire, as well as weapons, powers and abilities, and narrative experience and mechanics. However, before investigating these issues a brief introduction of Venetica is provided below.

Venetica is a first edition action/adventure role-playing game (RPG) produced by Rombax Games in 2011. As of February 22, 2014 in the U.S. alone, Venetica has sold over 11,000 copies in its first ten weeks of sales and over 70,000 copies total by the end of 2013 (*vgchartz.com*). The synopsis of Venetica is as follows: the main character, a woman by the name of Scarlett, must defeat an evil necromancer in order to defend her father, Death. Since Scarlett only learns she is the daughter of Death at the beginning of the game, she must accomplish certain tasks to learn about her spiritual powers and become a strong warrior in order

to defeat this great threat to the world of the living. The game is set in 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice, where the character explores five districts as well as underground catacombs in search of her target. Scarlett's goal, as well as the players' goal, is to complete the quests or tasks, learn various magic and fighting techniques taught by skilled trainers, obtain the moon blade weapon, and kill the necromancer in order to complete the game. A unique factor in this game is Scarlett's use of supernatural powers in combat. Throughout the game she is required to learn more skills in order to manage both her twilight meter and mental energy which are used for her supernatural abilities.

The following portion of this case study will discuss the following questions: What types of stereotypes or limitations are associated with Scarlett being a female hero character? How is Scarlett represented in the game considering the following: body type, attire, and weapons, powers, and abilities? What type of narrative experience and mechanics are present in Venetica and how does the narrative construct gender?

### The Narrative Representation of the Female Hero Role

Just as her film and television counterparts, Scarlett's role as hero seems to be designed with narrative stereotypes and limitations. Throughout the game, Scarlett's actions, as well as why she assumes the role of hero, are "explained away." To begin with, the introductory sequence, which sets up the underlying narrative, presents Scarlett in a stereotypical heterosexual female character role. The scene opens with Scarlett conversing with a man named Benedict, her lover, about whether or not she has decided to go with him as he travels into battle. In this introductory conversation, Scarlett says that her destiny is not to be a hero. As a traditional female character, she believes that her place is at home. Her dialogue further constructs this stereotypical image by continuing to encourage Benedict to go off and fulfill his dream of

training, while she once again states that she is not an adventurer and belongs at home. These statements made by Scarlett reinforce the stereotype that women should not be out traveling or exploring, but that home is the only space for women. Taking into account the historical context of the game's setting, the home was Scarlett's only "place." While fictional liberties could have allowed for Scarlett to be more adventurous or present a female character that would like to go against traditional stereotypes within this time period, Venetica instead solidifies the traditional roles of women of that time period. Within a few brief lines of the introductory sequence, Scarlett's narrative role emphasizes that she does not wish to be a hero at all, but rather a traditional woman of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

This introductory sequence presents a rather problematic image of Scarlett as she is depicted through traditional heterosexual stereotypes. While femininity should not be seen as problematic, when it comes to the representation of a female hero, an emphasis on femininity can result in the heroine being less accepted in her role. With masculinity continuously being linked to heroism, it is difficult to establish this image while placing a large emphasis on femininity and traditional heterosexual feminine stereotypes such as the ones presented by Scarlett in the introductory sequence. Scarlett's introductory dialogue and actions do not construct an image of heroism or even a desire for empowerment. This beginning sequence of the game sets up Scarlett to be no different from other women of the 16<sup>th</sup> century time period. This initial portrayal of Scarlett lays the foundation of a female character that later must be negotiated and re-constructed in to that of a hero.

The re-construction of Scarlett's image begins when the village within the game is attacked. With the attack underway, and Scarlett and Benedict in danger, she does not hesitate to pick up a weapon and fight. This first empowering action begins Scarlett's transition from



passive woman to active female hero. Unfortunately, soon after that, she seems to be incapable of any defensive actions. Requiring Benedict to save her ultimately results in his death. This action all too closely resembles how the female character in video games is always saved by the male hero (Carpenter 98). This scenario begins to provide the complications of negotiating elements of masculinity and femininity as Scarlett attempts to assume of the role of hero. While she initiates the escape from traditional heterosexual values that align her with women of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, she suddenly regresses back to those traditional values once she has presented a small moment of empowerment. It is difficult to perceive Scarlett as a heroine when she continues to fall back into these stereotypes. This scenario swiftly removes the small steps Scarlett makes towards her role as hero and continues to portray her as a “damsel in distress.”

As the underlying narrative continues, Scarlett meets her father, Death, who tells her that she possesses certain powers. As Scarlett has reverted back to her more passive role of a traditional female character, she yet again states that she is not a warrior and believes she has no powers. She goes as far to say that after losing Benedict, there is nothing left for her in this world. This part of the dialogue completely emphasizes that as a woman Scarlett is nothing without a man. It also re-emphasizes gender stereotypes of women being hopeless and helpless without a man in their lives. However, once Death mentions that if she accepts her powers she would be allowed to see Benedict again, she is more than willing to assume the role of hero and accept her new found abilities. One of the main reasons Scarlett obtains power is to be able to see her lover Benedict again, not because she desires empowerment. Aside from her longing to see Benedict, the other reason she accepts her role as hero is to please her father. If she pleases her father by accomplishing the task he has given her, he has promised to fulfill her primary desire to see Benedict once more.

Both scenarios emphasize a problematic representation of Scarlett as a female hero. While narrative justification or reasoning as to why hero characters assume their roles are necessary, tying Scarlett's justification to her feminine desires, presented by trying to please men or be with them emphasizes specific traditional heterosexual stereotypes. Instead of Scarlett wanting to accept her powers and abilities to become an empowered woman based on her own decisions, the narrative simply "explains away" her future actions and new found physical strength. This need to reassert her femininity in order to explain her actions and why she becomes a hero is part of the limitations found in narratives created for female heroes. These limitations continue to justify the accident of fate which caused Scarlett to occupy the position of hero.

Furthermore, as Scarlett develops into a female hero character, she can be seen as falling under the narrative trope of a feisty heroine. Hienecken describes this term as being both the protagonist and sexual object of the narrative but still being set apart from other female characters (28). This trope applies to Scarlett because unlike macho or masculine characters, she does not seem to be thrown into a male narrative but is placed in a storyline written for a female character. Unfortunately, this also means that the underlying narrative found in *Venetica* is more associated with a stereotypical portrayal of a woman than a female hero. It is only after Scarlett unwillingly accepts her role as hero that the game attempts to merge both an active male and objectified female role into one. It seems that the underlying narrative in *Venetica* is merely an example of how female video game characters are suffering the same fate of stereotypical roles mentioned by Tasker (69). These types of narratives do allow for empowering images of women, yet always within the realm of stereotypical character limitations. Just as her film and television counterparts, Scarlett is not placed within a narrative which solely empowers her but rather a

narrative where her masculine traits are justified through her status as a woman in love.

It seems that Venetica presents a female hero narrative that is still suffering from traditional binary gender concepts. While the female hero character in film and television tends to present a blend of contradictory traits associated with masculinity and femininity. Scarlett presents a female hero that takes one step towards empowerment and then regresses back into traditional heterosexual stereotypes. This indecisive narrative representation is problematic for Scarlett as it re-enforces gender binaries and displays that she cannot fully be accepted as heroine. With this type of underlying narrative, Scarlett's role as hero is limited to a woman exploring far off places and accomplishing various missions only to see Benedict once more. As Scarlett's role has been found to be limiting, the next area of concern is Scarlett's representation as a female hero character.

### Female Character Representation

As the previous section addresses the narrative female hero limitations in Venetica, the next three sections continue the investigation of gender throughout the game by specifically focusing on how the female hero character, Scarlett, is represented. The following sections are subdivided into: Body Type, Attire, and Weapons, Powers, and Abilities. It is pertinent to discuss these issues in order to investigate how female hero characters are typically designed in most console-based role-playing games (RPG). In the case of this study, it is necessary in determining how Scarlett is represented throughout the game, beginning with her body image.

## Body Type



Figure 9. Main Image of Scarlett in Venetica (Rombax Games, 2011)

Within this first section concerning character representation, neither game play nor any of Scarlett's capabilities are part of the analysis. The concern of this section is only Scarlett's body, and whether it elicits elements of masculinity, femininity, or sexuality. Just by looking at figure 9 it is easy to see that Scarlett's body type does not possess any masculine elements. She may depict a more athletic body type, but still elicits femininity. The rest of her body is also relatively proportional and does not display the stereotypical body image associated with female video characters that are usually extremely sexual and have exaggerated body proportions (i.e. enlarged breasts or buttocks) (Miller and Summers 738). Although, Scarlett's body does not possess incredibly sexual elements, she still does display a tiny waist along with relatively long legs. As far as female video game characters are concerned, Scarlett is a step in the right direction for a female protagonist. However, in comparison to film and television images of female heroes, Scarlett has not strayed too far from the stereotypes associated with the women of action seen on screen. Additionally, along with most female heroes in media Scarlett still portrays conventional

conceptions of beauty. Scarlett is white with medium length brown hair, and feminine features such as: almond eyes, long eye lashes, and high cheekbones. Her feminine beauty fits Durham's stereotypical description of female heroes being thin, attractive, and having fine features, with the only exception being that she is not blonde (26-27).

Overall, Scarlett's height, weight, body proportions, facial features, hair, and makeup can be seen as eliciting an athletic build while still maintaining feminine qualities. With this type of body, Scarlett aligns more towards the depiction of female heroes seen in television. Scarlett's body definitely does not support the stereotype displayed by Lara Croft or other female video game characters. Unlike these images, Scarlett represents an image of femininity commonly represented by female heroes on television, similar to that of Buffy from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Scarlett's body image reflects a video game female hero character that is attempting to break away from the traditional overly sexualized stereotype. This small attempt reflects positively on Scarlett as a female character. Yet, she is unable to escape stereotypes of ideal beauty resulting in her body being seen as visual spectacle. This depiction of Scarlett's body continues to be problematic as Scarlett negotiates the portrayal of her role as hero. However, body type is not the only characteristic associated with the representation of the female video game hero, there are still other elements such as: attire and capabilities that must be analyzed.

#### Attire

Furthering the investigation of Scarlett as a female hero, this section addresses the second category of attire. The following elements of attire and style are discussed ranging from masculine, feminine, overly sexual, and androgynous. Similar to the previous section on body type, this discussion does not encompass any game play or any of Scarlett's abilities within the

game. The focus of this section is the various outfits Scarlett is seen wearing throughout the game. Each outfit is described and discussed below in reference to category, functionality, and stereotypes.

Most of Scarlett's outfits throughout Venetica, present her as a reasonably well-dressed character in comparison to the typical female characters found in video games. Within the game, Scarlett is either moderately or fully clothed. Although her change in attire only provides small differences in defenses throughout game play; she is seen changing into a total of seven outfits. Out of those seven, there are two full-armored outfits. Even though Scarlett has several outfits which are labeled as armor, there are only two outfits that actually cover Scarlett completely and appear capable of withstanding an actual battle. Although the other armor outfits that Scarlett wears throughout Venetica have their own protective qualities, it is only these two outfits which look like they might actually be defensively appropriate. The defensive properties that these two outfits have in Venetica are as follows: the Dervish armor protects Scarlett from mostly all weapon types while the Guard Plate Mail armor only defends against hammers and swords but can be pierced by spears. Whether or not these outfits come with such defensive capabilities, they still both accentuate Scarlett's feminine body. However, as much as these outfits may still emphasize Scarlett's feminine body, they also happen to be the only two outfits that can be considered as having androgynous or masculine elements to them.

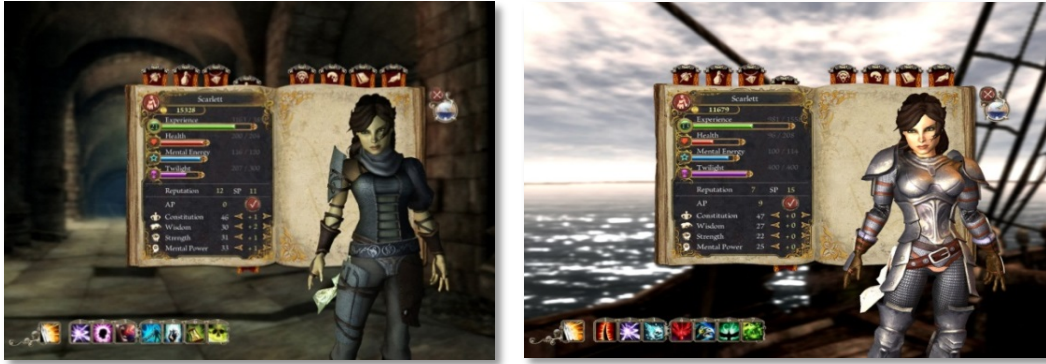


Figure 10: L-Scarlett in Dervish Leather Mail Armor; R-Scarlett in Guard Plate Mail Armor (Rombax Games, 2011)

Although these armored outfits shown in figure 10 appear later within the game, they are the only articles of clothing that depict Scarlett in masculine attire. Even though Scarlett wears these outfits consisting of more masculine or androgynous elements, they are still fitted accentuating her curves. While Tasker mentions that female heroines in film wear masculine clothing in an attempt to disguise their feminine body image that does not seem to be the case in Venetica (80). Scarlett's two armored outfits do not hide her feminine body at all. Scarlett's two sets of armor attempt to blur the binary lines of gender by presenting an image of Scarlett that does not completely align with either masculinity or femininity. Unlike the attire often worn by video game characters, such as Laura Croft, which only allow for them to be seen as a fetishized representation of an active woman, the attire above worn by Scarlett provides a contradictory image that attempts to negotiate the image of being both feminine and hero.

Contrarily, the following three outfits worn by Scarlett in Venetica reveal more of her feminine side. Aside from the two armor outfits eliciting masculine elements previously investigated, Scarlett is seen wearing three outfits with much more feminine qualities displayed below. The first image on the left in figure 11 shows Scarlett in a white low-cut full length dress. The second image in the middle of figure 11 depicts Scarlett wearing a pair of tightly-fitted pants

and a low-cut long sleeve top revealing her abdomen. Lastly, the image on the right of figure 11 displays Scarlett in an elegant low-cut dress which has a slit on her left side up to about the middle of her thigh.



Figure 11: L–Scarlett in white dress; M–Scarlett in Proper clothes; L–Scarlett in the Nethercoat (Rombax Games, 2011)

These outfits do cover Scarlett’s body more than most female characters attire in video games. In comparison to female heroes presented on television, such as Buffy, Scarlett’s three outfits displayed above are far more revealing. Even though Buffy’s attire did consist of skirts and dresses, they were not always low-cut or extremely revealing. These examples of Scarlett’s attire do not just depict her femininity but also provide a slightly sexualized and stereotypical image of Scarlett. Even if slightly sexual attire is accepted in the television show *Charmed*, sexual attire on female video game characters merely aligns them with the dominant stereotype that all female characters in video games are only presented in overly sexual attire.

The left image presented in figure 11, of Scarlett in a white dress, is how Scarlett is first depicted in the game. Before she receives any special powers or training, the stereotypical feminine dress she is placed in seems to be what any non-playable character (NPC) would be wearing. Although the top of the dress is quite revealing, the overall appearance of Scarlett is that of a standard non-playable female character. The second outfit of pants and a blouse



displayed in the middle image of figure 11 depicts Scarlett's transition from traditional female character that needs protection, to someone who is empowered and capable of defending herself. However, Scarlett does not just find this secondary outfit but is required to change into it in order to progress forward in the game. This pant and blouse outfit, entitled as "Proper clothes," seems to reveal more of Scarlett's body than her previous white dress. This attire is used to represent Scarlett's transition from "damsel in distress" to female hero, even though the change in clothes makes no difference in the game according to mechanics or defensive purposes. One possible rationale for this change may be the fact that without changing Scarlett's white dress more of her body would be revealed by its torn appearance.



Figure 12: Scarlett's ripped white dress after battle (Rombax Games, 2011)

Scarlett's ripped dress as seen above in figure 12 begins as a sign of femininity but ultimately ends up a more sexual image. To begin with, dresses are typically seen as stereotypical outfits for most women in multiple media representations. To place a female video game hero in a dress negates her actions and empowerment and places her within the heteronormative ideals of how a woman should dress (Burrill 50).

Although certain television show episodes do occasionally feature their female hero characters in dresses, most of the time these heroes are often wearing pants or other feminine

outfits. Typically, their clothes do not showcase their sexuality like the type of attire seen on stereotypical video game characters. In certain instances, when film and television female heroes are seen wearing dresses, they are perceived as trying hard to maintain the beauty of their dress; a symbol of their desired femininity. Only to later have their dresses torn away or dirtied in the midst of being confronted by opponents. Some examples of the previous statement can be seen in the film and television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Dark Angel*. In the film *Buffy and Vampire Slayer* (1992) Buffy tears up her own prom dress during the film in order to battle the vampires who invade the school. This incident is portrayed in a different way in the television series in the episode “Homecoming” where both Buffy and Cordelia must fight for their lives while their homecoming dresses get torn and dirtied (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer*). Another example aside from Buffy is seen in television series *Dark Angel*’s episode “Art Attack” as the protagonist Max tries to not ruin her very expensive new dress as she attempts to attend a wedding and rescue her co-worker all in the same night.

These images represent female heroes’ feminine beauty being torn away in order for them to access their “masculine” abilities. The images of having the heroes’ dresses torn away, similar to Scarlett, can also be interpreted as an indication that female heroes are not meant to be beautiful; but rather symbols of power, in essence, stripping away their femininity to only leave behind their more powerful and masculine image. While a separate interpretation can suggest that the dresses which are torn from these female heroes represent a removal of the limited and controlling expectations society has placed on them as women. Ultimately, their feminine attire and associated restrictions must be removed in order to be seen as capable. This symbolism further suggesting that heroes like Scarlett cannot be feminine and heroic. Once female heroes’ accept masculine abilities and duties, they lose their femininity to assume their protector and

defender role; a role which is clearly unfit for a hero in a dress. Although the female hero's beauty is stripped away to emphasize more masculine and powerful traits, the torn outfit further appeals to the male fantasy as it reveals more of the female body. Although the female hero is stripped of her beauty via her dress in order to be accepted as powerful and empowered, it is problematic to her acceptance for this new torn outfit only further projects her sexuality.

Scarlett's sexuality is further depicted by her last two outfits. These outfits can be classified as overly sexual and stereotypical clothing commonly seen on most fighter female video game characters. The amount of coverage provided by these two outfits, consisting of short skirts and small tops which only cover her chest and leave her abdomen exposed, are similar to the signature outfit worn by Laura Croft.



Figure 13. L-Scarlett in Persian armor; R-Scarlett in African armor (Rombax Games, 2011)

Even though both outfits are identified as “Armor,” it is questionable exactly what this type of armor is actually protecting. According to Venetica, Scarlett's Persian armor, the left image in figure 13, is supposed to protect against axes and hammers but is vulnerable to blades and spears. Her African armor the right image in figure 13 protects against spear strikes and magic but it is otherwise vulnerable to every other weapon. Unlike Scarlett's first two outfits of armor which fully cover her and look as if they are capable of guarding against any attack, these last two

outfits displayed in figure 13 look like they are more about showcasing Scarlett's figure rather than protection. These outfits which do not cover much of Scarlett's body strongly leans towards the stereotypical sexualized characters commonly seen throughout video games as discussed by Beasley and Tracy (286-289). It seems that even as a video game female hero character, Scarlett's clothing is still similar to a simple non-playable character (NPC). These last two outfits suggest that as a female hero, Scarlett is still subject to the same types of outfits that have been seen in studies by Miller and Summers and Janz and Martis (738; 146).

As Scarlett assumes the role of hero her attire should re-enforce this image or character construction. Instead most of her outfits still reflect the stereotypical image of most video game female characters. Even though Venetica allows for Scarlett to wear a variety of attire over the course of the entire game, her outfits do not help her be seen as a more diverse character. Out of the seven outfits available to Scarlett at least two still re-emphasize the female video game stereotype of overly sexual clothing. This revealing attire is particularly problematic in its association with female video game characters as it almost disregards the heroine's role of hero and places them within the realm of sexual object. Attire for female heroes should depict similar representations whether it is in film, television, or video games. However, female heroes in video games presented in dresses or other sexualized attire portray clear gender binaries. Even though Scarlett is granted powers throughout the game it does not diminish the problematic stereotypes associated with her attire.

### Weapons, Powers, and Abilities

As previously mentioned, a hero character is comprised of many characteristics such as a particular body image, iconic attire, and specific weapons and powers that aid them in

accomplishing their missions. As the first two characteristics have been discussed in the former two sections, the last element of investigation is Scarlett's weapons, powers, and abilities seen throughout Venetica. Unlike the previous section that concentrates mainly on Scarlett's image, this section focuses on her capabilities. Unfortunately, as hero characters are stereotypically male, most weapons, powers, and abilities are commonly associated with masculinity creating various stereotypes and limitations when it comes to female heroes. However, past research concerning female film action heroes have shown that in order for them to become more accepted they must acquire masculine abilities to function properly in a male dominated world (Tasker 22). It would seem that this still holds true in video games as Scarlett must acquire masculine weapons and abilities in order to make her way through the game world of Venetica.

When discussing Scarlett's weapons, powers, and abilities, her physical weapons consist of a: sword, moon blade, axe, hammer, and shield. Swords, axes, hammers, and shields are weapons most commonly associated with male characters in any media. Although seeing a female character wielding these weapons can be seen as a sense of empowerment, these weapons ultimately just associate her with a more masculine image and defeminize her. As with female heroes in film and television, it seems that Scarlett is following the same concept of having to assume masculine abilities in order to be easier accepted as a hero. However, the alternative would not be any better as feminine weapons would only re-enforce separate stereotypes, and currently no weapons, powers, or abilities with any specific types of feminine elements exist within hardcore console video games.

Aside from Scarlett's physical weapons, she also has magical spiritual powers and standard combat abilities. Unlike Scarlett's weapons and combat skills, her magical spiritual powers are not as easily defined as either masculine or feminine. They are just as powerful or

even more so than her physical weapons but do not have the same masculine qualities associated with a typical male weapon such as a sword. Since spiritual and magical powers have been linked to both male and female characters in film, television, and video games; these powers cannot be labeled as either feminine or masculine. However, her fighting skills are most definitely not feminine. With both Scarlett's weapons and combat abilities associated with masculinity, she is merely re-emphasizing the need to adhere to a typical portrayal of masculinity in order to be accepted as a woman of action. As female heroes are required to assume these capabilities, they ultimately move further from a feminine image and assume a more masculine one. With Scarlett being required to fight to progress through Venetica it is even more difficult for her to not assume a more masculine image. It seems that even if the hero happens to be a woman, it is still hard to separate masculine qualities from the hero representation.

However, if the female hero assumes masculine weapons, powers, or abilities, and has them "explained away," similar to justifying her role throughout the narrative, then her femininity is more easily accepted. Similar to television characters such as Buffy, Max, and Nikki Sanders who have their range of combat abilities and super strength explained, so too does Scarlett. Although she acquires masculine weapons and abilities that defeminize her, the underlying narrative of the game justifies why she has come to assume these capabilities in the first place. Scarlett never desired these skills but has come to require them in order to complete her mission assigned by her father and ultimately see Benedict again. This "explanation" reasserts her femininity as being a simple woman who just wants to see her lover again. Even her spiritual powers are "explained away" as only being granted to her through her father, as well as only being accessible through her super natural mental energy. Just as Nikki Sanders can only access her powers through an alternate personality, Scarlett's powers fundamentally rely on her

mental energy or visit the underground world of Death, the twilight world, in order to cast any spells. Without her father Death bestowing power upon her for his own benefit she would be powerless.

It seems that in order for Scarlett to be able to navigate a threatening male dominated world within the game, yet still retain her femininity, she must assume masculine capabilities while still having them justified through other means. In this sense, Scarlett never truly assumes a masculine role nor is completely defeminized by the weapons she gains because the underlying narrative justification aligns all of her instances of empowerment back to reasserting her femininity. While an argument can be made that through a female hero assuming powers she is able to dismantle stereotypes associated with how female characters are portrayed in media, this does not seem to be the case in Venetica. Scarlett's role as hero, or her assumption of powers, does not rid her of stereotypes associated with female characters but rather enforces them along with masculine stereotypes often associated with the role of hero. Throughout Venetica, Scarlett does not dismantle stereotypes but rather presents a culmination of them in order to embody an action heroine that can be accepted for toting weapons while still being visually attractive.

### Narrative Experience and Mechanics

The previous section analyzes the limitations that gender places on Scarlett's weapons, powers, and abilities, this section focuses on how gender filters into the mechanics and interactivity found in Venetica. As interactivity is an integral part of video games, it is not surprising that limitations associated with gender also extend into the mechanics of Venetica. Some of the standard mechanics found in most RPGs equip the characters with weapons, skills, and abilities which facilitate in accomplishing quests and progressing through levels. In

Scarlett's case, she is provided with the weapons, powers, and abilities discussed in the previous section. These capabilities are not just assumed by Scarlett but also serve as interactive mechanics associated with furthering game play. As her weapons, powers, and abilities are necessary elements used to progress throughout the game, they can be deemed as mechanics. With action, and being active, primarily associated with the male gender, these mechanics require Scarlett to depart from her femininity in order to be accepted as a hero character. As active abilities that would specifically suit a female protagonist currently do not exist within hardcore console video games and have yet to be developed, there is no way to further investigate these hypothetical mechanics. However, if these mechanics are designed focusing on elements associated with femininity, they would most likely adhere to established stereotypes.

Concerning narrative experiences, according to Jenkin's theories, Venetica can be described as an embedded narrative experience. As a narrative experience there are several instances of gendered limitations that place Scarlett within the stereotypical binds of being a female character. Being a role-playing game (RPG), Venetica, comes with a pre-designed underlying narrative. This narrative provides a beginning, a sequence of events, and eventually an ending. Although there may be a pre-written story to Venetica, the interactivity of the game allows for players to accomplish various quests in whatever order they chose. However, players will still be required to complete a certain amount of quests before moving forward. Unlike a rigid film narrative that is incapable of change once it has been produced, the RPG narrative experience in Venetica may take different directions and/or approaches as the game is explored and manipulated by the interactive players.

This type of narrative experience described above aligns well with Deleuze's and Guattari's theory of the "rhizome." As Venetica is a RPG, it has many paths or options to offer



players. It requires players to make choices of how and which quests/paths they want to accomplish in order to advance in the game. However, the paths the players decide to choose can affect the players' future series of movements and can even result in a completely different game play experience or overall narrative creation. The various optional paths found in Venetica mainly usher players forward throughout the game; yet also allow for players to revisit these paths if they choose. However, revisiting does not change the elements that are already components of creating the overall narrative.

With the underlying narrative experience of Venetica being designed with a stereotypically feminine version of Scarlett in mind, examples of gendered interactivity, mechanics, and limitations are seen throughout the narrative experience described in this section. Examples of these interactions reveal that gender is closely associated with the overall underlying narrative as well as the interactivity of the game. For example, in one scenario, two male non-playable characters (NPC) accuse the protagonist Scarlett of being responsible for the attack on the village and decide to murder her; however, Scarlett's spiritual abilities allow her to come back from the dead and offer players two options: "Have them pay for their treasons." or "Show mercy and let them live." (Venetica). Players can choose between the two options, what actions they wish Scarlett to commit.

Although not all of these options/paths have issues regarding gender, there are a few that reflect an issue of gender in relation to the interactive narrative experience of Venetica. Even though it seems that both of the options presented to Scarlett above would still be available if the protagonist had been male, there is the possibility that these choices would be unnecessary as the mechanics of the game would have just required for players to kill all NPCs in order to progress through the game. Whereas violent actions are more attributed with masculinity and passive

actions are associated with femininity, it would appear as if Scarlett's gender might require a more passive option in order to maintain her femininity. While either option given in the game is seemingly unfavorable for a female character, Scarlett's choosing to kill her murderers associates her with a more masculine action. An argument can be made that this action creates an image of empowerment, allowing her to be accepted as hero; however, it is problematic in the sense that it diminishes her representation as a woman.

Also, while mercy can be shown by a male or female character mercy tends to often be associated with weakness. When stereotypes of strength and hypermasculinity are associated with male heroes the act of showing mercy, which can suggest weakness, is typically not a game play option. If the player, role-playing as Scarlett chooses this option it could demonstrate weakness or passiveness. This choice would only re-emphasize a stereotype that women are weak or passive and further re-enforce Scarlett's image as a woman. This passive action may reassert Scarlett femininity, but it hinders the players' ability to gain more points or monetary value that comes from killing NPCs rather than forgiving them. These types of options or paths are capable of resulting in different embedded narrative experiences throughout Venetica, leading players to construct Scarlett as either merciful or merciless.

Another example of gendered limitations and stereotypes provided by the narrative experience in Venetica is demonstrated by the directional/environmental mechanics of the game. Near the early stages of the game, Scarlett is required to transform from a lady to a sexualized fighter via her attire. This change is pushed forward as part of the limitations associated with the underlying narrative. Being an RPG console game, it is more than reasonable that Venetica may have more directional/environmental limitations than a larger virtual world. However, virtual world or not, towards the beginning of playing Venetica, Scarlett is informed by male NPCs that

they cannot let her pass in her torn dress. Even though this can be considered a directional/environmental limitation, it seems highly biased towards Scarlett being a female character. It is doubtful that if the protagonist in Venetica had been a man, he would have been denied passage because of his attire. This directional/environmental limitation seems considerably biased towards a female character by requiring her to change from her dress to pants and a blouse in order to progress in the game. Also, Scarlett's new pants and blouse attire still reveal her body and accentuate her curves almost as much as her torn attire. In order to get past these directional/environmental limitations Scarlett must do away with her feminine attire only to attain slightly more masculine attire that ironically provides a sexier image of Scarlett than before. Even if these directional/environmental limitations are simply used to guide the game forward, the limitations found in Venetica still present a bias towards the female protagonist, Scarlett. There is no narrative or interactive reason why these mechanics must reflect a gendered underlying narrative due to Scarlett being a woman.

Overall, this section provides an analysis of the gendered narrative experience and mechanic limitations presented in Venetica by applying both Henry Jenkins theory of narrative experiences as well as Deleuze's and Guattari's theory of the "rhizome" (683; 25). The examples provided above demonstrate how Scarlett's gender is able to affect both the mechanics and the interactive narrative experience of the game. Although not all the choices/paths offered in Venetica are subject to Scarlett's gender, game play seems to be designed around the elements of balancing the contradictory characteristics that are attributed to the female hero character. Thus the game play designed in Venetica still suffers from similar gender stereotypes and limitations associated with the typical female hero character found in media.

## Conclusions

In short, Venetica presents several elements of gender stereotypes and limitations that are integrated and intertwined throughout the game's narrative, mechanics, along with Scarlett's representation. As a female hero, empowerment, strength, and moving away from traditional conventions of beauty and objectification are what this thesis hoped to uncover about interactive heroines. However, Venetica showcases typical stereotypes, emphasizes ideal beauty and femininity, and re-enforces former video game elements associated with female characters. This representation is problematic as it merely portrays Scarlett through typical media stereotypes as well as depicts clear gender boundaries through her role as hero and her attire. It is impossible for Scarlett to move past these stereotypical labels and limitations with these gender boundaries still in place. Furthermore, as she reluctantly assumes her role of hero it is made clear that her empowerment is justified via her feminine desires to see Benedict again.

While she assumes the role of heroine there is almost nothing heroic or empowering about her. As an example, Scarlett never searches or desires any of her abilities. In Venetica Scarlett's abilities would be better seen solely as mechanics that move the game forward rather than actual sources of empowerment. Throughout the game there are always certain features reminding the player that Scarlett is not a true hero but a woman attempting to fill a man's role. Whether it is dialogue associated with mechanics, Scarlett's attire or abilities, or the underlying narrative Venetica constantly presents gendered stereotypes and limitations incorporated into various game scenarios, and presents Scarlett as merely a combination of traditional female character stereotypes as well as common female video game stereotypes.

As this thesis continues to explore how gender is intertwined throughout video games, perhaps different types of female heroes will emerge that will not have as many stereotypes or as

limited of a representation as Scarlett. The next case study will address the same questions found in this chapter as the female hero found in the video game WET is analyzed.

## CHAPTER 4

### CASE STUDY 2: WET



Figure 14. WET Playstation 3 video game cover image (Bethesda Softworks,. 2009)

This chapter provides a case study analysis concerning gender issues across the video game WET. Before analyzing WET, a brief overview of the game is provided. WET is a first edition third person shooter (TPS) game produced by Bethesda Softworks in 2009. In the U.S. alone, it sold over 88,000 copies within its first ten weeks of sales and over 119,000 within the year of its release, 2009 (*vgchartz.com*). As of February 22, 2014, the total number of sales in the U.S. for the game WET from its release in 2009 to 2013 is over 195,000 (*vgchartz.com*). The synopsis of WET is as follows: the main character, a woman by the name of Rubi Malone, is hired to carry out several missions. Rubi is described as a “problem-solver,” bounty hunter, and your basic mercenary. She carries out missions that she accepts with the promise of being paid once she completes them. The main point of the game is to have the character complete all the missions until the credits roll at the end of the game (WET). The game appears to be set in the 1970s, due to its stylistic feel, which closely resembles 1970s films. However, there is no exact information on whether or not the game is set in present time with just a 1970’s film style. The

game features various locations which Rubi travels to such as: Texas, Hong Kong, and London. Rubi's goal, or the players' goal, within the game is to complete accepted missions, kill anyone who gets in the way, and master certain acrobatic, as well as weaponry, skills. There are several unique factors found within this game such as: pauses within the game that feature 1970s stylized advertisements similar to those found in drive-in theaters; Rubi's array of acrobatic skills; and Rubi's rage mode that enhances her abilities while changing the visuals of the game to a red and black film noir look.

Similar to Chapter 3, this case study analysis is conducted through personal game play and observed game play via YouTube recordings. This study also addresses the following questions: What types of stereotypes or limitations are associated with Rubi being a female hero character? How is Rubi represented in the game considering the following: body type, attire, and weapons, powers, and abilities? What type of narrative experience and mechanics are present in WET and how does the narrative construct gender?

### The Narrative Representation of the Female Hero Role

As previously stated, the protagonist for the video game WET is a female character by the name of Rubi Malone. However, with WET belonging to the Third-Person Shooter (TPS) game genre, it does not seem to have much of an introductory sequence. Therefore, the underlying narrative of the game begins along with the gameplay and does not fully explain the background of the protagonist or shed any light on the overall plot of the game. Although WET lacks an introductory sequence, the underlying narrative which emerges throughout the game displays Rubi as a character with more masculine traits than feminine. Whereas Miller and Summers along with Ivory have stated that most female video game characters are designed with

traditional feminine stereotypes such as being passive or overly sexual, Rubi only demonstrates stereotypes associated with masculinity (738; 104). Just like her film predecessors that were only able to be accepted as action heroines by portraying more masculine qualities, Rubi seems to be limited by this similar representation throughout WET via her assertive dialogue, aggressive actions, and lack of feminine qualities or traits.

In order for Rubi to be more easily accepted portraying the role of hero, she often uses assertive dialogue throughout WET. Unlike traditional female characters, Rubi, much like the action heroines who came before her, uses dialogue throughout the game that is far from passive. During a transaction at the beginning of the game between a non-playable character (NPC) named Simmons and another nameless NPC, Rubi is seen from the roof stating, “That piece of shit has my case.” This type of dialogue is not frequently used by traditionally feminine characters but is often used by male action heroes throughout film, television, and video games. These masculine characters typically have very assertive, and at times even vulgar, language. However, they are not the only characters in media who speak this way. Female action heroes assuming masculine traits, like Sarah Connor, also use assertive and vulgar language. For example, Sarah tells the character, Miles Dyson, in the film *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, “Fucking men like you built the hydrogen bomb;” and in another scene in the film she tells Dr. Silberman, “...it’s gonna feel pretty fucking real to you too.” Similar to Sarah’s use of assertive and vulgar language, Rubi is merely assuming more masculine qualities through her dialogue while discarding any feminine or passive language

While assertive language seems necessary for both male and female heroes in conflicting situations, it does not always appear assertive when used by female characters. The problematic representation associated with assertive language is it comes off as the female character being



rude, vulgar, or seeming less feminine. Certain times, assertive dialogue works against the positive empowered portrayal of a female hero. Instead it presents her as a female character that would not fully be able to perform within the role of hero without such language. In Rubi's case, her assertive and at times vulgar dialogue do not present her as empowering but depict a female character desperately trying to embody the masculine stereotypes considered worthy of the hero role.

However, even while Rubi frequently uses assertive and vulgar dialogue associating her with more of a masculine image, WET still provides gendered dialogue through the game reasserting gender binaries. Within WET various male NPCs use the words "baby" and "bitch" while describing or talking to Rubi. It seems that no matter how much Rubi assumes masculine qualities and dialogue befitting of a male hero, the game makes sure to emphasize that she is a woman in a man's role. The terms "baby" and "bitch" are associated with particular stereotypes when referring to women in media. "Baby," is often linked to women seen as sexual objects or as property of other men, and "bitch," is often used as a derogatory term to insult women. Even as Rubi attempts to present an image of masculinity, in order to gain more acceptance as a hero, the male characters in the game make sure to place Rubi within stereotypical terms that are particularly associated with submissive or belittling representations of women.

If the protagonist had been male, these terms would most likely not be used towards the hero character at all. However, even with these gendered statements Rubi does not shy away from more empowering statements throughout the game. When a Male NPC, that is an acquaintance, tells her that, "These men [she is going up against] are dangerous." Rubi's response is simply, "So am I." This type of dialogue suggests that Rubi is on an equal level with these male characters or might even be more powerful than them. When fighting enemy male

NPCs she even makes statements like, “Wanna play rough?” or “Are you guys even trying?” This dialogue suggests that Rubi is putting her male enemies down or even enticing them to not treat her as gently as they would with a stereotypical female character. Rubi’s statements make a point to emphasize that she can handle anything these male NPCs throw at her. Just as a male hero may mock his enemies with the thought of them being on an equal level or even being inferior to him, Rubi too is portrayed as equal or above her enemies throughout her dialogue. When one NPC says that he is going to kill her, she replies by even saying “I don’t think you have it in you.” In these instances, it seems that Rubi is portrayed to be even stronger than her male enemies. She is not afraid of them at all. Instead of fear or insecurity, Rubi’s dialogue is empowering and assertive, which match her aggressive actions.

Rubi’s actions from the start of the game are aggressive. Due to the game being a TPS, Rubi’s character does not have much interaction with other characters in the game aside from killing them. She is presented as an empowered female character who takes action to get the things she wants. Without explaining why, except for her desire to retrieve a case, Rubi opens fire on anyone who gets in her way. From the start of the game Rubi comes off as a confident, strong, and powerful character whose main goal is killing those who get in her way and completing her mission. The game presents Rubi as a female character who chooses to do this line of work and seems to enjoy it. The game merely states that she is a gun for hire while continuing to associate her with masculine qualities in order for her to continue to be easily accepted in her role as hero.

Similar to most action heroines displaying masculine qualities, Rubi is mainly portrayed as being devoid of any kind of femininity while completely assuming the role of a masculinized hero. Rubi freely chooses to accept or take on her missions throughout the game with the only

reward being retrieving whatever item she was sent to acquire and getting paid. Rubi does not hesitate to acknowledge that she is a powerful and empowered character through her dialogue and actions. She is presented having rather strong character traits; unfortunately they are mainly masculine. While most of Rubi's character traits align her with an empowering image, her lack of any feminine traits presents her as problematic portrayal of a female action hero. Rubi is not negotiating between portraying masculinity or femininity but is pushed almost completely towards a masculine image. The contradicting notion of balancing both masculine and feminine traits seems to be a key description of the female action hero, but Rubi can almost be seen more as a stereotypical male hero. Her assertive and at times vulgar dialogue along with her cold killing skills are more commonly seen in male heroes in video games. These masculine traits and abilities suggest that female heroes in video games must part with their femininity in order to be accepted as a hero character in masculine game worlds. However, the way Rubi is presented makes an observer wonder whether she was designed with any feminine traits to begin with. Unlike other female heroes in video games, there are almost no clear reasons given to explain Rubi's strength and actions that may reassert her femininity.

It can be argued that a small attempt is made to reassert Rubi's femininity; however, it is hard to ignore the many other factors which disregard it entirely. As a female character, although Rubi is never seen trying to please men, most of her contractors or employers do happen to be male NPCs. The fact that male employers are hiring her for her skills can be perceived as Rubi being used for male gain. Although this is applicable towards the beginning of the game, throughout the rest of the game this does not hold true. Even though the narrative does make minimal attempts to place feminine limitations on Rubi; throughout a large part of the game her actions are her choice. She is not fighting due to motherly instincts or to please a man but for her

own self-satisfaction of monetary gain and revenge. At the mid-point in the game when Rubi chooses to seek revenge, she is not on a mission for money or for hire from another man, but is simply getting back at the man who betrayed her. From this portion of the game till the end, Rubi's actions are all her own. They can no longer be seen as being used for male gain and no longer explained in such a way as to reassert her femininity. Ultimately, towards the end of the game Rubi's actions are her own choices, and in making such decisions as a female character, are also empowering. Though Rubi can be classified under the narrative term macho, she definitely branches away from suffering from the same limitations placed on previous female video game protagonists.

Along with breaking away from these limitations, one of Rubi's final battles makes a rather significant statement. Although Rubi has no female enemies throughout the entire game, she meets a female rival towards the end of the game named Tarantula. Upon meeting this enemy, Rubi even mentions that Tarantula resembles a character from a comic book. This statement clearly attempts to display an evident distinction between Rubi as a female protagonist who has departed from the stereotypical female video game representation and Tarantula who still resembles her female comic book predecessors. Tarantula aligns with an overly sexual female character that can be found in film, television, and video games. She is also a female character working under a man and not fighting Rubi of her own free will. This battle places many distinctions between Rubi and Tarantula, making it clear that this is a battle not only within the game but also against the stereotypes found within video games concerning female characters. Although Rubi is able to easily kill many male NPCs, Tarantula embodies a true rival to Rubi as she is one of the most difficult enemies for Rubi to defeat throughout the entire game. After beating Tarantula, Rubi is easily able to defeat the main male NPC. This situation implies

that within the game, and as a representation, the most difficult thing for Rubi to defeat is the stereotypical female video game character along with her representation.

Throughout the narrative, WET presents a female hero that still suffers from the negotiations and stereotypes associated with masculine type action heroines. The game's underlying narrative asserts Rubi as more of a masculine character than a woman, and unlike previous film action heroines, she does not display any elements that reassert her femininity. Although she is overly masculine, she is attempting to display a new type of female hero that is capable of adopting masculine qualities, being seen as an equal, and defeating male characters. In this sense, Rubi is far from the stereotype associated with the typical female representation seen in most video games. The problem with this narrative representation is that Rubi's traits only associate her with the stereotype of embodying a masculine or macho image. This representation is further problematic as most of her masculine actions and qualities do not empower her as a woman but are rather seen as more of a guise of empowerment used to further suppress her femininity in order to be accepted as a hero character. With this type of narrative representation established, the following areas investigate whether Rubi continues to be associated with an image of masculinity or if a blurred image of masculinity and femininity will emerge throughout the analysis of her body image, attire, or abilities.

### Female Character Representation

As the previous section addresses gender according to the narrative limitations of WET, this section continues the investigation of gender by focusing on how the female character Rubi is represented. The analysis of Rubi's representation is subdivided into three main categories: body image, attire, plus weapons and abilities. These areas are essential in investigating how a

female hero character is designed in a console-based third person shooter game (TPS). In interactive video games, female heroes do not have one single simple definition but are representations composed of several qualities, an array of contradictory images, and a refusal to be either masculine or feminine (Tasker 68). Therefore, the fundamental aim of this character analysis is to determine what qualities and images Rubi aligns with, by beginning with an investigation of Rubi's body.

### Body Type



Figure 15. Main image of Rubi in WET (Bethesda Softworks, 2009)

This analysis section consists of Rubi's body image in WET without encompassing any game play or character abilities. The focus of this section is to analyze whether Rubi's body showcases elements of masculinity, femininity, or sexuality. Based on the image seen in figure 15 it can be stated that Rubi does not present a sexualized body and is not depicted as overly exaggerated in any way. Therefore, the following discussion is mainly concerned with whether Rubi's body portrays masculine or feminine elements. Though the game never sets up Rubi as a stereotypical female character, as a woman, the one feminine quality she cannot escape is her

appearance. She does not have overly sized breasts, hips, or buttocks, but she does display a rather small waist along with a feminine upper body and facial features: consisting of almond green eyes, long eyelashes, and straight brown medium length hair. As a female character, Rubi does portray elements which adhere to the standard image of beauty found in most film and television heroines mentioned by Durham, but her overall body image seems to be a blend of both feminine and masculine traits (26).

In contradiction to Rubi's feminine features, she does display a rather muscular and athletic lower body. With Rubi's body image combining both feminine and masculine features, she can be seen as a character that is able to be accepted as hero but is still an object of male desire. While the stereotypical body of Lara Croft is almost impossible to accept as a hero character, Rubi's unique body type allows for both acceptance and visual spectacle. Unlike most female video game characters which resemble their overly exaggerated comic book predecessors, Rubi's body more closely resembles the body images of female heroes often seen in television. Heroines such as Buffy and Max portray body types that do not emphasize their masculine or feminine features but attempt to find a blend between the two (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer; Dark Angel*). These types of bodies allow for viewers to be more able to accept female characters as action heroines while still portraying enough feminine traits to continue to also fit into the category of visual object.

With Rubi's body proportions, facial features, and hair, her overall image can be seen as displaying contradictory traits that are both masculine and feminine, and can be seen as a large improvement from the heroines of past video games. Although she is no exception to conventional standards of beauty, she presents a body type that reflects positively on the representation of a female hero. With her body type blending a combination of both masculine

and feminine traits, her character is able to be more easily accepted as a heroine. This acceptance suggests that Rubi's body depicts a positive representation that is able to negotiate elements of masculinity and femininity. While Rubi cannot simply be analyzed on her body type alone, other factors such as her attire and capabilities must also be investigated. Thus, the following area investigates Rubi's attire throughout the game in order to continue the discussion of gender presented throughout WET.

### Attire

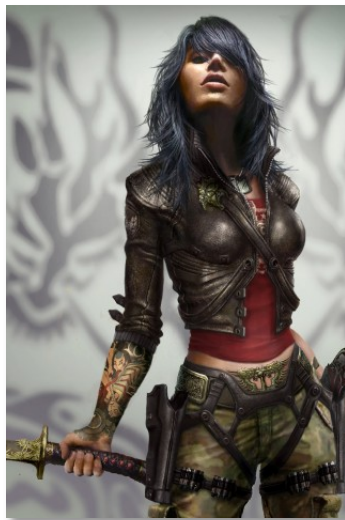


Figure 16. Rubi's outfit throughout WET (Bethesda Softworks, 2009)

Continuing the discussion of Rubi as a female hero, this section addresses the second category of attire. Similar to the previous section on body type, this discussion does not encompass any game play or any of Rubi's abilities within the game. The focus of this section is to discuss Rubi's outfit worn throughout the game by its category (i.e. feminine, overly sexual, masculine, and androgynous), functionality, and stereotype.

In the case of the video game WET, Rubi's attire possesses both masculine and androgynous elements. Unlike the stereotypical attire worn by most female characters found in



video games, Rubi's clothing is not revealing or sexual. Rubi's outfit throughout WET presents her as a rather well-dressed character in comparison to the typical female characters found in video games. She is always fully clothed throughout the entire game, with her outfit depicting a masculine/macho style. As seen in both figure 15 and figure 16, Rubi's outfit consists of several masculine and androgynous elements. The masculine elements include the following: military style black boots, green camouflage cargo pants, a red T-shirt and a short dog tag necklace. Along with these being masculine elements they are also androgynous as they can be worn by either a male or female character. Perhaps the only feminine element of Rubi's attire is her short fitted brown leather jacket with three-quarter length sleeves. This style of jacket is typically associated as a feminine article of clothing and would probably not be worn by a male character. However, this particular jacket does not detract from the overall masculine feel of Rubi's outfit. Aside from Rubi's jacket, her attire avoids any other feminine elements. As a whole, Rubi's attire breaks away from the stereotypical sexual clothing worn by former female protagonists such as Lara Croft of the Tomb Raider series, and attempts to present a new type of video game female hero image.

As for the functionality of her clothing, it does not seem that Rubi's outfit has any defensive qualities to it. However, in comparison to previous attire worn by female video game heroines, it is far more appropriate for the tasks and missions she takes on. Throughout the game there also does not seem to be a necessity for Rubi to change clothes for separate defensive purposes or to further progress in the game itself. Similar to Lara Croft, Rubi engages every mission in the same clothing. A major difference between the two being that Lara's outfit was sexual and fetishized the female body while Rubi's is similar to what a male Third-Person Shooter (TPS) protagonist might wear. Rubi's attire attempts to break away from the

stereotypical clothing worn by most female video game characters as well as female video game protagonists.

Most female video game characters as well as female video game protagonists are often found wearing stereotypical overly sexual outfits. As a female video game protagonist, Rubi strays away from this stereotype; however, it is only to be associated with the stereotype of wearing masculine or macho clothing. With there being no change to Rubi's attire throughout the entire game, her one singular outfit aligns well with iconic masculine styled outfits typically worn by action film heroines. This type of masculine attire is a common feature of female heroes in film, such as Sarah Connor's attire in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. However, the main reason female action heroes wore masculine clothing in films, was an attempt to disguise their feminine bodies in order to be more accepted assuming a typically male role on screen. Throughout media it seems that female heroes are more easily accepted if the female body is seen underneath the guise of masculine styled clothing. WET seems to have applied this concept to Rubi's outfit in order for her to be more accepted as a hero image.

Although, unlike her action heroine predecessors, Rubi's outfit may contain masculine elements but these elements may also be seen as androgynous. Therefore, the elements of her attire do not seem to attempt to disguise her feminine body at all. In fact, since her attire is tight fitting it showcases her feminine body underneath the masculine styled clothes and even allows for a small area around her abdomen to be occasionally shown. This type of androgynous attire attempts to blend both feminine and masculine elements together. In this sense, Rubi's attire aligns more with the attire worn by Buffy in television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and Max in *Dark Angel*. These television shows occasionally have their female protagonists dress in androgynous clothing that has more masculine elements but still showcases their feminine body.

Rubi is a large change from female video game representations of the past and also seems to blend elements from action heroines seen in film and television. Rubi's attire indicates that female heroes in video games are beginning to be represented similar to those in film and television. Her outfit demonstrates that female protagonists do not have to always be sexually dressed in order to be accepted as video game heroines. However, this blend of attire still maintains the contradictions found in female hero representations. Looking at Rubi's attire from an opposite perspective it seems that the only way for female heroes to avoid being sexually dressed is for their outfits to adopt more masculine elements. This simple alternative concerning attire is problematic as female characters are only able to avoid sexualized outfits by wearing attire similar to what most male characters might wear. This alternative only allows for Rubi's femininity to be disguised beneath masculine clothing. This guise of masculine attire over feminine bodies does aid in blurring the gender binaries associated with female characters but still poses a problematic representation for female heroes as they must succumb to traits associated more with masculinity while placing their femininity second.

With her attire and body image combined, Rubi most definitely displays contradictory images with her masculine outfit and feminine body. Her refusal to be either masculine or feminine is also specifically emphasized by her outfit being suited for both male and female characters. Rubi's attire does not resemble the female video game representation of the past, portrayed by Laura Croft, but displays a more androgynous image of a female video game hero. However, as a video game character, Rubi's representation cannot be analyzed simply by her overall image but must also incorporate her interactivity. Therefore, the following segment investigates Rubi's weapons and abilities.

## Weapons and Abilities

This last section analyzes her weapons and abilities throughout WET. Almost all of Rubi's weapons and abilities are stereotypically associated with masculinity. This association places various stereotypes and limitations on the female hero. Most past research concerning film action heroines show that they only tend to be accepted as heroes on screen if they acquire masculine abilities. This is what enables action women on screen to be able to function properly in a male dominated world (Tasker 22). Video games, such as WET, seem to have embraced this idea of having female heroes acquire masculine weapons and abilities. Doing so, allows for female heroes, such as Rubi, to better function in Third-Person Shooter (TPS) games that are predominately male oriented.

Within WET, Rubi has three main physical weapons, two hand-held guns and one sword, which are used for both defensive and offensive attacks. Mainly they are used for offensive attacks but can be seen as defensive weapons due to the fire she receives from the non-playable characters (NPC). As in most shooting games, all of the weapons Rubi uses are typical weapons used by male characters in this genre. Since most of these shooting games are designed with male characters and male players in mind the weapons provided for TPS characters generally tend to be masculine weapons. Although Rubi is a woman, it does not change the fact that the shooting genre of the game is still linked to weapons representing masculinity. With no feminine weapons existing in hardcore console video games, there does not seem to be any other alternative to this current predicament.

When considering past literature, concerning both heroes and heroines, throughout media genres such as film and television, Tasker states that the most commonly used weapons are guns (135). She mentions that the reason is that they are associated as traditional symbols of power.

Therefore, in order to further present an image of power, most male heroes will use guns as their weapons of choice. However, even if Rubi may be using guns to portray a sense of empowerment, it is hard to see past these weapons being anything but masculine. Her sword is yet another physical weapon which is used to empower her as a hero. Yet, the sword, being a phallic symbol, mainly just represents another image of masculinity. The sword, commonly used by male heroes as both a defensive and offensive weapon, is another weapon that clearly associates female heroes with a masculine image. Ultimately, even though these weapons may be symbols of power, they become problematic as they cause a struggle to negotiate whether Rubi's weapons defeminize her as a woman or align her with a masculinized subject position. Currently within video games there does not seem to be any other alternative to this problem as video games have continued to arm both male and female protagonists with masculine weapons.

Even though these masculine weapons defeminize heroines, their femininity is usually re-asserted throughout various reasons provided by the underlying narrative. Similar to justifying the female protagonists' role as hero throughout the narrative, she can also have her masculine weapons, powers, or abilities "explained." Rubi, however, is an exception to this common occurrence. Rubi's masculine weapons and abilities are never explained through the underlying narrative as being linked to her femininity. Rubi does possess masculine weapons but the underlying narrative never discusses how she came to own them. The only explanation the narrative provides is why Rubi uses her weapons and abilities, and that is simply for her own monetary or vengeful gain. Neither of these reasons is associated with femininity. Therefore, while Rubi is in possession of these masculine weapons, she is mainly defeminized as a woman without any re-assertion of her femininity through the underlying narrative of the game.

It can be suggested that not having Rubi's femininity reasserted is a positive step forward

in empowering female characters in the same way male characters are granted power. However, this situation is also problematic in that her lack of femininity overshadows the fact that she has become equally empowered. With Rubi discarding her femininity in order to wield masculine weapons, she displays that a female hero must associate themselves with masculine traits in order to be accepted as hero. If the goal of female heroes is to present an image of female characters overcoming stereotypes and presenting a character that is not indicative of being placed within the gender binaries of male or female, having Rubi discard her femininity entirely negates the negotiations of gender associated with the female hero role.

The additional skills referred to below cannot be placed within specific gender binaries and can mainly be seen as androgynous. Both her acrobatic skills as well as her occasional “Rage” mode are not technically weapons, but do aid Rubi in accomplishing her missions. These skills are used hand-in-hand with her weapons but do not necessarily add to her masculine or feminine traits. Since both male and female hero characters throughout video games have been known to possess acrobatic abilities, they cannot be entirely associated with either gender. It is not uncommon to see several video game characters, both male and female, flip or slide throughout the game. In the case of WET, her acrobatics are intertwined with her shooting capabilities making these skills a unique game feature. However, though her acrobatic skills are interconnected with her weapons, this association alone does not necessarily mean that her acrobatic abilities enhance any masculine qualities.

Other than Rubi’s acrobatic abilities, she possesses a unique game feature called “Rage” mode which can also be classified as androgynous. This separate feature is activated when blood splatters directly on her face, and is used throughout later parts of the game. As presented in figure 17 this feature also causes the screen to display the entirety of Rubi’s fight within “Rage”

mode in a red and black noir setting.



Figure 17. Image of Rubi in “Rage” mode (Bethesda Softworks, 2009)

Simply put, “Rage” mode enhances both Rubi’s weapon capabilities and acrobatic skills enabling her to kill many enemies without losing a large amount of health. This is a unique game feature that is found in WET; however, variants of this type of ability can be found in other video games with male and female characters. Rubi’s “Rage” mode can be seen as an equivalent to characters leveling up, gaining a special ability, or accessing a new combination. In accordance with the discussion of gender throughout WET, the important factor is that this particular game feature cannot be classified as a masculine or feminine trait. It is merely an ability that allows her to accomplish her missions and get through difficult game play scenarios. In no way can “Rage” mode be seen as emphasizing a more masculine or feminine representation.

Taking into consideration Rubi’s weapons, combat and acrobatic abilities, and her “Rage” mode, she can be considered as aligning with stereotypes and limitations associated with previous female action heroes. However, Rubi does display a few twists to these typical stereotypes. Although she does align with the negotiation of having to assume masculine weapons to be more easily accepted as a woman of action, there is no reason found within the underlying narrative to re-assert her femininity throughout the game. Also, both her acrobatic

skills and “Rage” mode can be seen as androgynous. These abilities or features designed by the game do not provide traits that are associated with either masculinity or femininity. Although these androgynous skills may signify that Rubi still possesses a shred of femininity, ultimately the fact that her weapons and most of her capabilities are typically used by male heroes significantly disassociates her from a feminine image. Rubi is simply thrown into the typical female hero stereotype that suggests that heroines must assume masculine capabilities in order to navigate through a threatening male world within a game. With Rubi killing throughout WET in order to progress through the game, she further assumes a more masculine subject position. This problematic limitation of locking Rubi into assuming masculine abilities without any justification continues to further align her with only a masculine image. Even though Rubi is a woman who still possesses feminine traits when it comes to her body image, all of her other masculine qualities from her attire to her capabilities make it difficult for her to still be accepted as a feminine hero.

### Narrative Experience and Mechanics

While the previous section analyzes the limitations associated with gender concerning Rubi’s weapons and abilities, this section focuses on how gender filters into the narrative experience, interactivity, and mechanics found throughout WET. With interactivity present, it is easy to understand that video games are nothing like films. However, with elements of storytelling as well as character construction occasionally being found, it is easy to see why researchers have argued over whether video games can be studied alongside narrative driven media such as films and television shows. As for the video game WET, it is not suitable to be



studied solely alongside other narrative media but it certainly would not simply be studied as game play either.

WET is a video game that does not exactly have a narrative structure similar to film but it does have features which feel like the players are allowed to step in and out of the narrative as they participate in the interactive sequences. Although WET is not a film, there are certain stylistic elements throughout WET that mimic cinema, making the game unlike most Third-Person Shooter (TPS) video games. While Costikyan argues, that it is difficult for video games to possess both story-telling and game play qualities, WET attempts to blend as much of these two elements as possible in order to provide enjoyable game play and a sequence of events players are able to follow (6). The game does so by offering a rather easy to follow underlying storyline while still requiring players interactivity and use of mechanics to unfold the entire narrative till the end. While opposing arguments on how video games should be analyzed have gone on for the past ten years, WET attempts to not choose sides but rather incorporate stylistic cinematic elements which provide for a unique narrative experience. Although video games of various genres do have introductory scenes or even other small animated scenes that emerge throughout the game in between interactive sequences, WET is different. It uses graphics mimicking specific elements typically found in film, making the game, at times, feel more like an interactive film than an actual video game.

Therefore, in order to analyze the narrative experience found in WET, the following theory is used: Henry Jenkins' theory describing narrative experiences (672). The narrative experience that coincides well with the game WET is Jenkin's enacted narrative experience. A pre-written narrative that only progresses a game forward is exactly the type of narrative experience found in this video game. The underlying narrative in WET is similar to that of a film

narrative, in the sense that the main character, Rubi, progresses through each scene or level fulfilling her missions until she pursues her ultimate goal of finding the man who set her up. Unlike role-playing games (RPG), which allow the player to choose their own course of what quests to take on, TPS games have players basically advance through levels that increase systematically in difficulty until they reach the end of the game. As for the underlying narrative, with each level of the game another piece of the story is unveiled and interactively resolved or passed. Along with the story being unfolded interactively, gendered limitations and stereotypes also progress and change throughout the game. While the first half of the game presents a contradictory image of Rubi having masculine actions while still be used as a tool for male gain, the later scenes and sequences of the game portray Rubi as a more empowered heroine. Although she still portrays a rather masculine image, she is able to take control and make her own decisions. She even fights a stereotypically overly sexual female non-playable character (NPC) towards the end of the game.

In order to further explore the gender issues seen throughout the narrative experience of WET, specific scenes or sequences are referenced below that depict gendered situations or scenarios regarding Rubi. For example, the opening scene, that is similar to an animated clip, distinguishes Rubi's first mission as a female mercenary catering to Mr. Acker's orders to deliver a heart to him. Although, Rubi's main goal throughout the game is to complete her missions, get paid, and kill anyone that gets in her way, this first mission can be considered gendered having her work for a man. Even though her accepting this mission can be seen as Rubi portraying a passive female character, the mission she carries out is entirely masculine. The contradiction of masculine actions while being a tool for male gain is commonly discussed when addressing female heroes in media. However, unlike film, Rubi is not simply seen taking these

actions but the player is interactively apart of her masculine actions in order to progress through the game. Without completing this first mission there is no way for Rubi to continue to progress through the enacted narrative experience. As soon as this first mission is completed, the game interjects the cinematic elements of opening credits to the game roll on the screen. While the mission prior to the credits promotes interactivity, these cinematic moments promote the feeling of participating in an interactive movie rather than a game.

Once the credits have been completed, the game continues with its cinematic feel by having a countdown reel appear, as it would in films, to signify the start of the next animated scene or mission that will be assigned to Rubi. The second animated scene also displays Rubi receiving an assignment. This time, her mission is requested by an associate of Mr. Ackers claiming that Mr. Ackers would like for Rubi to bring back his son from Hong Kong. As she accepts, a film reel sound can be heard as the game switches to the next interactive sequence of the game. Now players can change their position of being a passive viewer during the animated scene to an interactive player for the upcoming action sequence. While accepting this mission is necessary in order to continue progressing through the game, Rubi continues to portray a passive position of accepting another task to please a man. While it does seem that these exact same missions would be handed to a male character within this genre of game, since Rubi is a female character, these tasks create a problematic bind for heroines who must abandon their femininity to assume masculine weapons and commit masculine actions. Although Rubi may be trapped within the limitations of portraying a masculine image throughout WET, there are certain empowering moments which are inserted towards the end of game.

While the enacted narrative experience continues to progress throughout WET via Rubi's missions, it is the cinematic plot twist that emerges mid-way through the game that seems to be

the catalyst sparking Rubi's transformation from a woman portrayed as a tool for male gain to an empowered heroine taking action to fulfill her own vengeance. The plot twist which occurs in the game stems from her accepting her previous mission. When the mission was requested, Rubi believes it came from Mr. Ackers. When in reality, the mission was really assigned to her by a man she has never met named Rupert Pelham. After realizing she has been tricked into delivering Mr. Ackers son to his death, she decides to seek revenge by going after Pelham. As the enacted narrative experience continues, Rubi must carry out all the tasks necessary in order to reach Pelham at the end of the game. It is also at this point in the game that Rubi begins to branch away from the typical female hero stereotype she is associated with in the first two missions discussed above.

At this time in the game, she stops taking orders from men and begins calling the shots herself. Her missions are no longer orders given by male clients but rather her own tasks to seek out her revenge. While Rubi portrays a rather masculine image, she can still be considered a tool used for male gain. While this stereotypical portrayal places limitations on Rubi as a female hero, it also allows her to be seen more as a woman of action. While Rubi's new found independence basically tears away any association to her femininity, it also causes her to assume an almost entirely masculine portrayal of a hero. Though Rubi can be seen as empowering she is disguised by masculinity. Although, Rubi does not fall into the typical stereotypes associated with female heroes, she still falls into the negotiations of having to completely assume a masculine subject position in order to fulfill her role as hero. She has assumed control of her fate entirely, but it has come at the cost of her femininity. Even though it is common for female heroes to constantly be negotiating between presenting elements of masculinity or femininity. The fact that Rubi must discard her femininity entirely in order to assume the role of heroine is a

large loss as well as problematic to her presentation as a woman. While masculinity is a significantly important element of being a hero, it should not be used as a stereotypical crutch that female heroes must abide by.

Rubi furthers this stereotypical masculine image by basically ridding the remainder of the game of any feminine presence entirely. In the last level of WET, players are required to participate in Rubi's fight against the only other female character in the game. While Tarantula does represent an unfavorable image of female characters in video games, Rubi's actions continue to construct an image that aligns with the similar limited representations and stereotypes already established for film action heroines. The only way for Rubi to be accepted as both hero and feminine throughout WET is to either be a tool for male gain or renounce her femininity entirely and adopt a more masculine subject position.

While the narrative experience of Rubi's missions are gendered requiring her to portray both elements of femininity and masculinity, the game does not provide many mechanical limitations in relation to gender aside from Rubi's weapons. The only other mechanics that may possibly be affected by the gender of the protagonist are directional or environmental. These mechanical limitations guide players in the direction towards the items Rubi is attempting to recover as well as the end of the game. Within WET, these mechanics are responsible for restraining Rubi from freely exploring the game world. She is limited to only moving around certain areas during actual game play. However, these particular limitations are not linked to Rubi's character being a woman, since they are commonly associated with the design of a TPS game whether the protagonist is male or female. These directional/environmental limitations in mechanics are mainly used to guide the protagonists in the right directions; therefore, they would not have been any different if the protagonist of WET had been male.

In summary, WET is a game that has a simply constructed underlying narrative that is more concerned about moving the game forward than storytelling. Aside from WET being an enacted narrative experience, it is a game with many gendered missions and scenes. As far as gender is concerned, WET does not depict Rubi having a strong feminine image, but rather creates an overly masculine image required to navigate the game's enacted narrative experience.

### Conclusions

WET is a video game that presents elements of gender stereotypes and limitations associated with the female heroine and protagonist, Rubi. These elements can be found throughout the underlying narrative, seen in her physical representation, and experienced through her interactive abilities and mechanics throughout the game. While WET strays away from the standard Third-Person Shooter (TPS) game by providing a female protagonist, it still subjects Rubi to typical media stereotypes.

Throughout the game, Rubi is presented as a masculine action heroine similar to those seen in film. While at first glance Rubi seems quite feminine or perhaps even sexualized in appearance, throughout gameplay these elements are quickly overshadowed by assertive and vulgar dialogue, aggressive actions, and other masculine qualities. With her femininity never being reasserted throughout the game she further embodies this image. This image becomes problematic as it questions whether Rubi can still be seen as a female hero or as merely a female character hidden beneath the guise of masculinity. As the player progresses through the game continuous elements further associate Rubi with masculinity. Whether it is her dialogue, attire or abilities, Rubi cannot seem to escape the constant gendered stereotypes and limitations incorporated into each level of WET. It seems that Rubi can only be seen as a hero after she is no

longer associated with being feminine.

In the next chapter of this thesis, the following case study will continue to explore how gender is intertwined throughout video games by analyzing the female hero's role, representation, narrative and mechanics presented in Velvet Assassin.

## CHAPTER 5

### CASE STUDY 3: VELVET ASSASSIN



Figure 18. Velvet Assassin Xbox 360 video game cover image (SouthPeak Games, 2009)

This chapter provides a case study analysis concerning gender issues across the video game Velvet Assassin. Before investigating Velvet Assassin, some brief information about the game's industry reputation as well as its synopsis and genre is provided. Velvet Assassin is a first edition action/stealth game which also incorporates elements of the third person shooter (TPS) genre. Within the stealth genre, most protagonists are spies or assassins set out to accomplish several missions before reaching the end point of the game. Being an action/stealth game it relies heavily on the player achieving their mission or killing enemies without being caught. The TPS elements incorporated in the game stem from the many guns acquired throughout game play, which aid in killing enemy non-playable characters (NPC) when caught and while in stealth mode. Produced by SouthPeak Games in 2009, it sold over 21,000 copies within its first ten weeks of sales and over 53,000 within the year of its release (*vgchartz.com*). As of February 22, 2014, the total number of sales from the game Velvet Assassin, from its release in 2009 to 2013, is over 110,000 copies (*vgchartz.com*). The synopsis of Velvet Assassin



is as follows: inspired by real life events, the main character, a woman by the name of Violette Summer, has lost everything in World War II in Europe and now seeks revenge against the Nazi regime that destroyed her world and her life. The game is set in German-controlled territory at the height of World War II (1939-1945) and features various locations such as: the Maginot Line, Paris, Hamburg, and Warsaw. The main goal throughout the game is to sabotage important facilities, disrupt enemy communications and logistics lines, and eliminate prominent Nazi soldiers and officials silently without being discovered. With Velvet Assassin being primarily a stealth game, this feature becomes of the utmost importance in completing the tasks assigned to Violette throughout the game.

Similar to Chapter 3 and 4, this case study analysis is conducted through personal game play and observed game play via YouTube recordings. It also addresses the following questions: What types of stereotypes or limitations are associated with Violette being a female hero character? How is Violette represented in the game considering the following: body type, attire, and weapons, powers, and abilities? What type of narrative experience and mechanics are present in Velvet Assassin and can they be linked to gender?

### The Narrative Representation of the Female Hero Role

In the stealth genre of video games, most protagonists are either spies or assassins. Since the main focus of stealth games is for characters to advance in silence or carry out secret missions, spy or assassin character roles are the most commonly assigned to protagonists of this genre. With Velvet Assassin being a stealth game, it is no surprise that Violette is a spy. Therefore, Violette is required to undertake missions in secret and kill any Nazi soldiers that get in her way. However, while Violette assumes this role of hero, she is still forced to succumb to

the limitations and stereotypes often associated with female heroes in film and television.

These stereotypes and limitations place Violette in several contradictory images, displaying her sexuality, masculinity, and femininity. Although Violette is the main protagonist of Velvet Assassin, in the beginning and intermittently during the game, she is displayed as an objectified image in two separate instances. Firstly through flashback scenes in which images of her lying in a bed wearing revealing clothing are shown and secondly throughout any time the mechanic Morphine Mode is used, which will be discussed in further detail later in the chapter. As the game continues, Violette's objectified image is then disregarded and replaced by a contradictory masculine image displaying assertive dialogue and aggressive actions. Unfortunately, this slightly masculine or empowering image of Violette cannot be validated by the underlying narrative. Violette's dialogue and actions are loosely "explained away," due to the circumstances of the war, and her feminine image is simply reasserted. However, it is important to note that her actions are never explicitly justified through the underlying narrative like most female heroes in film and television but are rather "explained" through the introductory sequence, game description, and voice over dialogue found throughout game play.

Beginning with the introductory sequence, the first image of Violette seen in Velvet Assassin depicts her lying in a hospital bed. While the subtitles in the game describe Violette to be badly hurt and haunted by her dreams and memories, the player is not greeted by an image of a person who is bandaged or suffering. Instead, the image of Violette is seen peacefully lying in a hospital bed wearing nothing but a very revealing white dress. The game also makes sure to display a closer look of Violette's body as she is shown from head to toe providing a more fetishized image. This representation of Violette is problematic as she is fitted into the stereotype of an objectified woman. This initial image will make it even more difficult for Violette, as a

female character, to later be accepted as an active heroine. Before game play even begins Violette is placed within stereotypes that depict her in revealing attire negating the woman of action she will attempt to portray throughout the rest of the game.

Aside from this introductory sequence, throughout *Velvet Assassin*, Violette is able to access an ability called Morphine Mode. When this ability is activated, a flashback to Violette lying in the hospital bed is able to be viewed. These flashback sequences only further showcase this stereotypical image. These instances do not allow for Violette to truly be accepted as a hero character. For a brief moment, Violette is a strong female hero character, and the next moment, she is placed back in the stereotypical role of a fetishized female. These instances swiftly remove the small steps Violette makes towards her role as hero. As game play continues, the stereotype that Violette is a sexual object to be looked at, rather than the hero she is attempting to portray, is reemphasized. In these flashback scenes, Violette does not align with the stereotypes or limitations associated with female heroes found in film and television. She is instead confined by the common limitations associated with female video game characters. This suggests that the narrative role of female hero characters in video games do not necessarily guarantee that the female character will be able to break away from dominant stereotypes. Within a few brief moments of the introductory sequence and intermittent flashback scenes, Violette's narrative role emphasizes that she is not an empowered heroine, but rather an objectified woman. Violette is almost depicted similar to a sidekick character found in video games. As Iness states, female sidekick characters "may also tote around a gun but her main purpose is to parade around in a skimpy outfit" (2). This seems to be the perfect description for Violette throughout these Morphine Mode scenes.

However, Violette does not just present this one objectified image throughout *Velvet*

Assassin. She also displays a contradictory masculine image that exudes assertive dialogue and aggressive actions. Starting from the introductory sequence Violette states in a voice over, “I longed to be back in the war...that was my true home...” This statement does not project that Violette is a passive woman afraid of the war but rather an active woman who longed to be part of it. She further describes herself as not even being a human being, let alone a woman. Violette states that the soldiers and spies in this war were “...inhuman beings, butchers on a field of corpses, corrupt and depraved; only a sum of viscera, blood, and bone, creatures without souls.” Violette’s description of herself is as far from a stereotypical woman as possible. She barely considers herself a human being. With this type of dialogue, Violette begins to change from objectified woman to a woman of action. In the first mission, Violette’s dialogue begins to foretell her future actions. She states in the opening of the first mission: “I saw that the area was guarded by Waffen S.S. troops. Those units had one basic rule; take no prisoners, exactly like me.” This assertive dialogue matches Violette’s actions throughout the game which require her to kill most Nazi soldiers she comes across in order to advance. She also makes other assertive statements before and after killing Nazi soldiers such as: “I could easily take the soldier out of the way.’ ‘He will not be doing anything to anyone ever again.’ ‘His final hour had rung.’ ‘I could make sure he never woke up again. One experienced hunter less.’” All of these statements coincide with Violette’s aggressive actions throughout game play. Some examples would be the following: slitting a soldier’s throat, shooting a soldier as he slept, pulling the pin off of a soldier’s grenade so that he explodes, and finally setting off a bomb which made a Nazi fuel depot resemble a cemetery. These actions represent a very different character than the passive image of Violette lying in bed at the beginning of the game. Violette’s actions now align with a more contradictory image befitting of a female hero as she negotiates between representations

associated with masculinity as well as feminine sexuality. While there are still problematic images associated with Violette, such as her overly sexual representation, the assumption of contradictory masculine and feminine elements do present steps toward a more positive image.

The image of Violette slowly created throughout game play emphasizes that she is a woman who does not need a man to save her or assist her. Her dialogue counters gender stereotypes of women being more passive and less active, and Violette is more than willing to assume the role of hero. Whether it is to aid her country or protect what may be left of her family, she desires empowerment and the ability to dispose of the Nazis. Unfortunately, while Violette's dialogue and actions can be seen as empowering, signifying Violette's transition from passive woman to active female hero, reading between the lines of the introductory sequence, game description, and voice over dialogue reveals that Violette's decisions and actions can be "explained away."

The introductory sequence suggests that while Violette is depicted as an assertive, aggressive, empowered heroine, the game world in which all of these actions take place are within her mind. In reality, Violette is still lying passively on a hospital bed in a revealing white night dress. Therefore, it is acceptable to grant Violette such abilities, and have them accepted, as long as in reality she still portrays a helpless woman. The game description also further "explains" Violette's empowerment by stating that she only assumes the role of hero to protect what is left of her family. This suggests that Violette assumes this masculine role of hero due to her motherly instincts of protecting her family. Both of these reasons allow for Violette to be accepted in the role of hero while reasserting her femininity through other circumstances. This need to reassert Violette's femininity in order to explain her actions and why she becomes a hero is part of the limitations found in narratives created for female heroes.

A separate circumstance, the war itself, does not reassert Violette's femininity but provides another reason for why she assumed the role of hero. Due to the atrocious things being done by the Nazi soldiers she is forced to assume this role. Certain dialogue throughout game play provides examples of Violette emphasizing how horrible these men really are. She states throughout one mission: "The house of God. Shauntzel, where are you hiding? What are you praying for, forgiveness for your sins?" Additionally, in another mission she states: "After the Butcher was dead, peace returned to Paris; at least for one night." Both of these statements emphasize that she assumed the role of heroine because of how horrible the Nazi soldiers really are. The first statement reveals that the man she is hunting has committed many sins. Perhaps he should be seeking forgiveness. The second statement suggests that Paris is only able to have a glimmer of peace once another Nazi soldier was killed. The above statements also justify her actions of killing as her desire to regain peace or instill hope. While war always provides a justification for violence or revenge throughout film, television, and video games, women or female characters are rarely present in the action of war. Representations of war spies or soldiers in media have typically been associated with active male characters and not female characters. Velvet Assassin disposes of this stereotype, while attempting to showcase a more progressive female hero, and places Violette in the action of war. However as a female character, she cannot simply be placed within this world of violence without "explaining" her actions. Velvet Assassin continues to showcase that displaying an empowered female character without reasoning is still not acceptable in the realm of video games. In the end, this portrayal of Violette which must be explained and justified via the underlying narrative of the game is still a problematic representation of the female hero.

Within the underlying narrative of Velvet Assassin, Violette can be categorized by the

following narrative terms: feisty heroine and glamorous sexual action woman (Tasker 68). While the feisty heroine is described by Hienecken as being both the protagonist and sexual object of the narrative, she also states that the feisty heroine is set apart from other female characters (28). In *Velvet Assassin*, Violette's assertive dialogue and aggressive actions definitely set her apart from other female characters, but her passive image of lying in a hospital negates her empowering representation. The term glamorous sexual action woman is best personified by the Lara Croft image of a video game heroine. While she is identified as a hero, she is still placed within the realm of prior highly sexualized female characters (Mikula 80). These terms apply well to Violette because she does seem to be both active protagonist and sexual object. Violette aligns with contradictory stereotypes typically associated with female heroes in film and television. *Velvet Assassin* attempts to merge both an active male and objectified female role into one with Violette. These types of narratives do allow for empowering images of women, yet always remain within the realm of stereotypical character limitations.

*Velvet Assassin* presents a female hero narrative that is suffering from incorporating gender stereotypes and limitations that re-enforce gender binaries. With Violette's choice to become a hero justified and her femininity reasserted her attempt at portraying a masculine image is quickly removed. The frequent flashbacks of Violette in the hospital dressed in revealing clothing presents a problematic image as she is portrayed more as a sexualized object rather than a hero. It seems that in order to be a woman of action in *Velvet Assassin*, Violette must be capable, submissive, and sexy.

#### Female Character Representation

The next three sections continue the investigation of gender throughout *Velvet Assassin*

by specifically analyzing how the female hero character, Violette, is represented. The following sections are subdivided into: Body Type, Attire, and Weapons and Abilities. These subdivisions are pertinent to the discussion of how female hero characters are typically designed in most console-based games. As an example of a console-based female hero character, Violette, is investigated across the necessary subdivisions listed above, beginning with body image.

### Body Type



Figure 19. Image of Violette in Velvet Assassin (SouthPeak Games, 2009)

Only Violette's body is investigated as to whether it presents elements of masculinity, femininity, or sexuality. As presented in figure 19, Violette does not possess a masculine body type. She depicts a more athletic body while still eliciting a sense of femininity. Although most of Violette's body is relatively proportional, (i.e. hips and buttocks) as well as her legs being depicted as muscular, her occasional white night dress reveals Violette's voluptuous chest which is not seen while she is in other outfits. So although she attempts to be portrayed similar to the image of female heroes in film and television, the brief moments where more of her body is exposed she can be cast in the same category as most overly sexualized female video game



characters. While Violette appears to have a more voluptuous body, in comparison to most women of action seen in film and television, she is still thin, attractive, and possesses fine facial features that are indicative of the conventional standards and stereotypes of beauty discussed in Durham's research (26-27). Even though Violette's hair color, length, and hairstyle vary from Durham's typical blonde bombshell description, she still manages to elicit an image of beauty and sexuality that can clearly be seen throughout the game (26-27).

Overall, Violette has an average height, long legs, is light weight, with a small waist, and voluptuous chest. With this type of body, Violette resembles a cross between a feminine image of a female hero commonly seen in television, similar to that of Buffy from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and a typical sexualized female video game character. Violette's body type reflects a female hero video game character that is still unable to escape the overly sexualized stereotype displayed by Lara Croft, as well as the stereotypes of ideal beauty that are still seen as visual spectacle. Velvet Assassin continues to provide a problematic image of a female hero as Violette repeatedly showcases similar stereotypes associated with most female characters presented in video games. However, whether this representation is presented throughout other characteristics such as her attire and capabilities is addressed in the following two sections.

#### Attire

Violette's attire and style are discussed in this section in order to further determine her representation within Velvet Assassin. Similar to the previous section on body image, this analysis of attire investigates whether Violette's clothing can be categorized as masculine, feminine, overly sexual, or androgynous. The focus of this section is the various outfits Violette is seen wearing throughout the game. Each outfit is described and discussed below in reference

to category, functionality, and stereotypes.

As stated in chapter two, female heroes in television are now seen in an array of attire from feminine to slightly sexual outfits. Examples are especially evident throughout the television series, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *Charmed*, and *Dark Angel* where both feminine and slightly sexual outfits such as dresses, skirts, blouses, high heels, low-cut tops, and even tight leather outfits can be seen. Unfortunately, there are not many examples that can be found within video games of female characters wearing feminine attire that is not sexualized. The closest examples are characters like Claire Redfield and Jill Valentine, in the video game series *Resident Evil* that are now presented in more feminine outfits. However, they first appeared wearing rather revealing stereotypical clothing.

Unlike other games, *Velvet Assassin* does make an attempt to portray Violette fully clothed and in attire befitting the scenarios she is engaged in. Regrettably, while this attempt is somewhat achieved, most of Violette's attire still abides by stereotypical limitations associated with female video game characters. Violette is seen in either tight fitted feminine outfits or overly sexualized revealing clothing. Out of a total of four outfits, all of them can be categorized as feminine, sexualized, or overly sexualized. While there may be pieces of Violette's attire that hint at masculinity or resemble masculine attire, it is clear that her attire is entirely designed with a female character in mind.

The first set of outfits seen in figure 20 are the first and second pieces of wardrobe that Violette is seen wearing from the beginning to the mid part of *Velvet Assassin*. They also happen to be the only two outfits which have any resemblance to masculine attire. Most of Violette's outfits are clearly tight fitted and designed to showcase her femininity. The pants and jackets Violette wears in figure 20 resemble elements of attire that could possibly be worn by a male

character within this genre of game. While both outfits present masculine or even androgynous elements how the outfits are perceived during game play has also been taken into account within this analysis of attire. Observing Violette in these outfits during game play suggests certain sexualized images as players mainly view Violette from behind as she crouches down or is hunched over. The images presented in figure 20 and 21 are merely presented as references in order to discuss Violette's full attire but are seen in different contexts throughout game play.

Presented in figure 20, are Violette's first two outfits consisting of boots, pants, a T-shirt, jacket, and gloves.



Figure 20. L-Violette in Pilot outfit; R-Violette in leather sneaking outfit (SouthPeak Games, 2009)

Most of these elements are relatively androgynous; but, the style and fit of these articles of clothing are what make them far more feminine than masculine. While Violette's Pilot outfit may be the only attire that can be considered not entirely sexual, her jacket could have been less fitted or even entirely zipped up. Instead, it is tightly fitted accentuating her curves and unzipped drawing attention to her chest. Violette wears this outfit for a good portion of the beginning of the game. Yet, there is no description or established functionality associated with her Pilot outfit.

The only reason given as to why Violette first appears in this attire is because she jumps out of a plane into the drop zone where Velvet Assassin begins. Note that this scene is not actually seen in the game but is mentioned via voice over by Violette during the first mission. Violette's Pilot outfit fully covers her but still suggests a sexual appeal. It can be compared to outfits worn by Buffy or the Charmed sisters. Their outfits were also feminine in style, even hinting at sexuality at times, but always presented the heroines fully clothed. This particular outfit depicts Violette's femininity while slightly hinting at the sexualized stereotype. However, with Violette being a video game character and not a television heroine, any kind of association of sexual attire can be problematic as it merely portrays the dominant stereotype that all female characters in video games are only presented in overly sexual attire. Violette's second outfit, also seen in figure 20, only further portrays this stereotype.

The outfit on the right seen in figure 20 is Violette's leather sneaking outfit. Unlike the Pilot outfit which presents minimal sexual elements, this second ensemble she wears is entirely sexual. The entire outfit is skin tight and accentuates her voluptuous chest, small waist, and extremely long legs. Her attire may consist of a pair of pants, a jacket, boots, and gloves, but altogether it almost resembles an all leather mistress outfit rather than something a spy would wear to take down enemies and accomplish missions (Chalk, *escapistmagazine.com*). The functionality behind this outfit is supposed to provide better stealth ability during a night mission. Though, skin tight leather plus knee-high calfskin boots with heels do not really come to mind when envisioning a stealthy outfit. This type of attire placed on Violette is problematic as it suggests that in order for her to portray a stealth-like image she must first put on the all leather costume emphasizing her sexuality and not her abilities.

Violette's second set of outfits, seen in figure 21, consist of the Nazi uniform she wears

towards the middle of the game and the white night dress she wears intermittently while in Morphine Mode.



Figure 21. L-Violette in Nazi officer uniform; R-Violette in night dress (SouthPeak Games, 2009)

Similar to the Pilot outfit discussed previously, the Nazi officer uniform Violette wears can be categorized as feminine yet slightly sexual. The main difference is that this outfit showcases more feminine elements in comparison to the Pilot outfit. However, her stereotypical night dress is categorized as overly sexual. Unlike Violette's leather sneaking outfit which fully covers her body, her night dress, seen in figure 21, is skin tight and entirely revealing. Her attire clearly displays gender binaries and emphasizes that they are still being forced upon female video game characters. While this is not a new concept within video games, this type of attire continues to further stereotype and limit female video game characters as only being objects of the male gaze. Previous literature on female video game characters reveals that most tend to have less clothing on than their respective male characters, and are typically dressed sexually in either tight fitted, short, or revealing clothing (Beasley and Standley 286-289; Miller and Summers 738). It seems that Velevet Assassin has chosen to continue to portray this stereotype throughout Violette's

attire.

Seen in figure 21, Violette's Nazi officer uniform continues to present her fully clothed, while still suggesting sexual appeal. Mainly the Nazi officer uniform displays Violette's femininity. While presenting Violette's femininity is not specifically problematic, the knee-high calf skin boots she wears with the Nazi uniform do hint at the game designers adding hints of sexuality into Violette's attire. However, the functionality of the Nazi officer uniform is verified throughout game play. Its purpose within the game is to aid Violette in concealing her identity through certain missions, reinforcing her stealth ability. While throughout Velvet Assassin the use of Violette's outfit is validated, it does not seem that her Nazi uniform would facilitate any real-life stealth usage. This outfit reemphasizes her feminine qualities yet still hints towards presenting Violette as a sexualized image. This particular outfit is the least problematic as it does not enforce masculinity or Violette's sexuality but focuses more on representing her femininity. With Violette's sexuality constantly emphasized throughout Velvet Assassin a change of focus to femininity is a positive step towards an accepted feminine hero. However, this image does not last long as Violette's knee-high boots do not let players forget that Violette's main role is sexual object.

The last outfit to be discussed further solidifies Violette's image as sexual object by being entirely revealing and overly sexual. Violette's night dress presented in figure 21 is skin tight, short in length, reveals her chest, and is seen intermittently throughout the game. The amount of coverage provided by Violette's night dress is minimal at best, and can be compared to the stereotypical outfits worn by selectable female fighting characters. In addition, Violette's night dress does not hold any special functionality. Just as Beasley and Tracy's findings have established, her outfit simply adheres to the dominant style of attire worn by stereotypical

sexualized characters commonly seen throughout video games (286-289). Violette is only seen in this outfit when Morphine Mode is activated. Even though Morphine Mode is a special skill the fact that she is seen wearing such sexual attire suggests that female heroes are still incapable of escaping the dominant stereotype (Miller and Summers 738; Janz and Martis 146).

Velvet Assassin provides a large amount of time to showcase all of Violette's outfits. As Violette assumes the role of hero her attire should re-enforce this image. Instead, most of her outfits reflect a stereotypical image of female video game characters. All of Violette's attire is fitted and suggests that Violette is a woman to be looked at not a heroine. These types of outfits are problematic as they continue to lock female video game characters in to stereotypes associated with sexuality and objectification. Velvet Assassin seems to suggest that video games continue to have female hero characters in overly sexual attire or not include female characters at all.

#### Weapons and Abilities



Figure 22. Violette's weapons used throughout Velvet Assassin (SouthPeak Games, 2009)

This last subdivision focuses on the negotiations of gender associated with Violette's weapons and abilities. While the previous two sections investigated Violette solely based on her image, this section focuses on her capabilities that aid her in accomplishing her missions

throughout Velvet Assassin. As seen in figure 22, Violette only possesses physical weapons consisting of a knife, two different types of automatic hand guns, one flare gun, one machine gun, one shotgun, and grenades. Violette also acquires a gas mask; however, it is not so much a weapon as it is used more for protection against harmful toxins that can be found throughout certain levels and missions in the game. With Velvet Assassin being a stealth game, most of Violette's weapons are used for offensive attacks. On the occasion Violette is spotted by German soldiers, these weapons can also be used for defense. Violette begins the game with her only weapon being a small knife, but slowly she is able to acquire various types of guns, grenades, and even a gas mask. She is then able to interchange these weapons while killing enemy soldiers.

The use of guns in Velvet Assassin does not only represent the inclusion of the third person shooter (TPS) genre, but also represents a symbol of power. According to past research, guns are commonly used by both male and female heroes in film and television (Tasker 135). With guns being associated as traditional symbols of power, it would only make sense that male heroes would use them to project this image while battling enemies (Tasker 135). While the use of guns by a female character should provide an image of empowerment, as it does with most male characters, ultimately in Velvet Assassin it does not. This stereotype is far more problematic when it comes to Violette because of her overly sexual appearance and attire. Violette's assumption of weapons does not emphasize an empowered feminine woman but merely a fetishized image of a female hero toting weapons. Of course with Velvet Assassin being a video game, Violette possessing these weapons is not just a requirement for her to be accepted as a hero, but is ultimately necessary to advance within the game. This creates a double bind as Violette must assume these masculine weapons to be accepted as hero yet must still remain as a sexual representation to be accepted as a female character.



An example of this double bind of abilities/mechanics and sexual representation is showcased by a special feature referred to as Morphine Mode. While in a tight spot, during game play, Violette receives a shot of morphine. This shot supposedly allows Violette to relax while lying in the hospital bed, but also has a game function as well. The game function of Morphine Mode allows Violette to attack enemy soldiers from the front or run past any enemy soldiers without being seen, dying, or losing much health. While Morphine Mode does not align with being masculine or feminine, the attire worn while using this game feature is incredibly overly sexualized. Morphine Mode happens to be one of Violette's most useful abilities, yet it emphasizes the stereotype that female video game characters are sexualized women to be looked at. Morphine Mode is a problematic mechanic as it re-enforces that the ultimate way to get through tough situations throughout Velvet Assassin is for Violette to run past them in her most sexual outfit in the game. Although Violette is provided with two masculine outfits that are used throughout most of the game, the use of Violette's sexual image constantly negates any type of masculinity she may gain through her actions. No matter what masculine elements are implemented into her outfits, along with the use of masculine abilities and weapons, the player is always reminded that the hero in this game is in fact a woman. This emphasis on Violette as a woman and not a heroine is problematic as she attempts to portray a woman of action that is powerful and able to handle tough situations throughout game play. Instead Violette is only able to handle difficult situations by using her sexuality via Morphine Mode.

Throughout Velvet Assassin, the only way Violette is able to navigate through a threatening male dominated world is to possess masculine weapons while succumbing to the overly sexual stereotype. In this sense Violette is no different than previous female video game characters and is similar to the representation of Lara Croft.

## Narrative Experience and Mechanics

While the previous section discusses the gendered limitations associated with Violette's weapons and abilities, this section focuses on how gender filters into the mechanics, interactivity, and narrative experience of *Velvet Assassin*. The most standard mechanics found in stealth games are the protagonist's weapons, skills, and abilities. As these capabilities are necessary to progress throughout the game, they can be deemed as mechanics. Players use these mechanics to accomplish missions, kill enemies, and progress through various levels. With *Velvet Assassin* being a video game, these weapons and abilities are not just assumed by Violette but also serve as interactive mechanics associated with furthering game play. However, as stated in the previous section, though all of Violette's weapons are associated with masculinity she is still able to present an overall sexualized image.

In order to begin the discussion on the narrative experience Jenkins' theory is applied. Further investigation concerning mechanics, interactivity, and stereotypes or limitations associated with gender are also addressed. Jenkins' theory of enacted narrative experiences is applicable to *Velvet Assassin* due to its similarity to the third person shooter (TPS) game genre. Stealth games, like *Velvet Assassin*, have the protagonist work through various levels or missions throughout game play in order to progress to the end goal. This type of narrative experience consists of a pre-determined ultimate destination as well as a structure that the player must follow in order to reach the end of the game. Even though the player is allowed to choose how he/she wants to complete the mission, by using whichever weapons and abilities he/she deem necessary, he/she will still be required to accomplish certain tasks within that mission before moving forward. Ultimately, throughout *Velvet Assassin*, Violette is unable to deviate from the pre-written narrative and the mechanics implemented throughout the game. However,

while Velvet Assassin has the player basically advance through each mission systematically, each level also happens to unveil another piece of the underlying narrative.

An interesting part of the narrative experience found in Velvet Assassin is that the entire game actually takes place within Violette's mind while she is in a coma. The game world is a dreamlike state of Violette re-tracing the memories of her past missions. The game attempts to tie all of the missions together to create a sense that they are all part of this one dream world in Violette's head. Interactively, the missions that unfold throughout Velvet Assassin's underlying narrative are resolved and passed, yet gendered limitations and stereotypes are still slightly present throughout the game.

Along with the underlying narrative, there are specific instances, provided by mechanics and interactivity, which present gendered limitations associated with the player's narrative experience. The narrative experience of Velvet Assassin requires players to interactively assist Violette in re-living her previous missions in her mind. One particular mechanic that genders Violette as a woman is Morphine Mode. While the player completes each mission there are certain times when using Morphine Mode, to get passed a Nazi soldier, is necessary. Game play presents Morphine Mode as a mechanical feature that allows players to freeze difficult situations to hide or bring down enemies within missions. As Violette lies in the hospital bed, the shot of Morphine is supposed to help her mind cope with the horrors of war that she is remembering. While this mechanic aids players in advancing through the game, it is still rather sexualized. Every time it is used, Violette is automatically seen lying in the hospital only wearing her night dress. This flash back showcases Violette's body in the most revealing attire she wears throughout the game. Also, while this mode is activated in the game world, or Violette's mind, she is seen running in almost slow motion as she kills enemy soldiers. While this mechanic is

useful, it happens to be extremely gendered. The flashbacks to Violette lying in the hospital do not seem necessary to further the enacted narrative experience. The flash backs while under the influence of Morphine Mode present Violette in a sexual and submissive manner. This depiction is highly stereotypical and closely resembles pornographic images seen in television. Even when Violette is active during game play, seeing her run in slow motion, while wearing her night dress, presents a separate fetishized image closely associated to common female video game characters. This mechanical feature would unlikely exist if the protagonist in Velvet Assassin had been male. Even if a different version of Morphine Mode had been included, it would most likely not involve the male character wearing revealing clothing.

Another gendered limitation tied to Velvet Assassin's mechanics and interactivity is when Violette acquires the Nazi officer uniform. Analysis of the uniform has already established that it possesses sexual elements. However, the dialogue stated by a non-playable character (NPC) before Violette steals the uniform is what causes the mechanical function of this uniform to be gendered. Right before Violette obtains the uniform the NPC states, "I can't wait to see Gretel in that uniform. Then she will get the respect she deserves." This dialogue suggests that only when Violette is wearing this uniform does she gain respect. As a female character, this is highly stereotypical. This dialogue only continues to emphasize the limitations placed on female heroes. Heroines can only achieve respect and acceptance when donning male attire or outfits which possess elements of masculinity.

Other standard mechanical limitations found in Velvet Assassin are directional or environmental. However, these mechanics do not seem to be gendered throughout this game. These mechanical limitations merely guide Violette towards various items she is either attempting to acquire or destroy. They allow for the player to move freely within the game world

in whichever direction the player may choose. However, only one direction actually progresses the movement of the game. All the other optional directional advances are simply there for exploration. This limitation is used often throughout *Velvet Assassin* as Violette is allowed to explore the areas she infiltrates for weapons or other items, but only certain directions allow her to accomplish her missions and move forward within the game. It is important to note that these particular limitations are not associated to the protagonists' gender and are commonly found in most video games.

Overall, this section provides an analysis of the narrative experience and the gendered mechanic and interactive limitations presented in *Velvet Assassin*. By applying Henry Jenkins' theory of narrative experiences as well as discussing the examples above, it appears that Violette's gender does affect both the mechanics and the interactivity of the game (672). While game play does attempt to balance several contradictory characteristics presented by Violette, she is unable to escape the gendered limitations that present her more as a stereotypically sexualized character rather than a female hero. Therefore, *Velvet Assassin* continues to suffer from similar stereotypes and limitations associated with female heroes found in film, television, and video games.

### Conclusions

*Velvet Assassin* is a stealth genre video game that presents several gendered stereotypes and limitations associated with Violette's role as hero, how she is represented, and the mechanics and interactivity found throughout the narrative experience of the game. While addressing each of these elements throughout this case study, it seems that *Velvet Assassin*, along with Violette, is unable to escape the stereotypes associated with female heroes as well as the dominant

stereotypes associated with female video game characters. Velvet Assassin requires Violette to assume masculine weapons, yet ultimately reinforces her as a submissive sexual object. While Violette portrays extremely contradictory images, a narrative trope that can be associated with her image is the glamorous action woman as well as the video game heroine Lara Croft. Throughout the game Violette's representation is problematic as there is always a feature reminding the player that she is not a true hero but a woman attempting to fill a man's role. The game constantly presents gender stereotypes and limits Violette's representation as a combination of female film, television, and video game stereotypes. Although she may have the role of heroine, Velvet Assassin does a better job at showcasing her sexual appeal than portraying Violette as either heroic or empowering.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

As I delved into the realm of video game studies, something that quickly became evident is that most games are designed, marketed, and focus only on male characters and male players. With video games being a billion dollar industry, and with more and more women playing video games, it seems like bad business for the industry to continue to produce games only designed and marketed towards male players. While female protagonists and heroes are becoming more accepted and seen throughout films and television shows, they are almost non-existent in video games. Although video games are a relatively new medium in comparison to film and television, they have been around long enough to start including more female protagonists. Even though the Tomb Raider series, which features the heroine Lara Croft, has been in production since the mid-1990s there has yet to be another video game heroine to reach such fame.

As female hero characters slowly start to arise as protagonists of video games, questions of how these characters' represent and negotiate gender, as well as how gender is intertwined or affects overall game play, have yet to thoroughly be investigated. Aside from statistical research done by Beasley and Standley and Miller and Summers comparing attire worn by male versus female characters in video games, there has yet to be investigations of gender throughout games (286-289; 737-739). Therefore, this thesis sought out to investigate gender associated with female hero characters by selecting three separate video games ranging from the most recent years of production (2008-2012) and addressing the following questions.

Are stereotypes associated with the underlying narratives of games with female characters? If so, do these stereotypes create a problematic or positive representation of female characters who assume the role of hero? Also, how female heroes are represented in games in terms of body type, beauty, attire, and assumed weapons or abilities and are these representations

problematic or not? Lastly, does having a female hero character create any gendered mechanics and does her gender affect the game's overall narrative experience?

After investigating these questions each case study reveals that gender plays a significant role in the way each heroine assumes their role as hero, is represented concerning body type and attire, assumes weapons, and how the mechanics filter into the overall narrative construct. All three female video game heroes investigated in this thesis, showcases stereotypes associated with the dominant representation of female video game characters, as well as similar stereotypes placed on heroines in film and television providing for rather problematic representations. Since each video game heroine assumes the role of hero differently, the following narrative terms were applied to distinguish differences in the stereotypes associated with each hero. Each female hero aligns closely to one of the following narrative tropes described and/or presented by Yvonne Tasker and Dawn Heineken, Scarlett as the feisty heroine, Rubi as the macho heroine, and Violette as the glamorous sexual action woman.

While these narrative tropes were helpful in the analysis of each heroine within this thesis, they still only provide binary terms in which to discuss transgressive characters. With the initial lack of literature in video game studies, regarding female video game heroes, narrative tropes associated with film and television female heroes were the most applicable to this study. Thus, although these tropes may only describe female heroes in binary terms they have still allowed for a distinction in how each heroine negotiates and represents gender in their role as hero. Aside from these narrative tropes, several stereotypes associated with femininity, masculinity, and sexuality depicts problematic representations of Scarlett, Rubi, and Violette.

Throughout Venetica, Scarlett's representation is problematic as it emphasizes typical media stereotypes as well as depicts clear gender binaries through her role as hero and her attire.



Scarlett is unable to be seen as a transgressive female hero character as she portrays a combination of traditional female character stereotypes as well as common female video game stereotypes that seem to only solidify gender binaries. Scarlett's representation could have been less problematic if game designers had not gone through the trouble of insisting throughout the underlying narrative and game play that she did not particularly care to be a hero. While the "reluctant hero" narrative can be applied to male heroes as well, this type of narrative seems particularly problematic for female characters as it is fueled by desires which only support heteronormative ideals of a traditional woman. Her attire also re-enforces current female video game character stereotypes by presenting at least two outfits that showcase Scarlett's sexuality. An alternative to revealing attire that still provides separate armor choices and functionality could have been for her Dervish Leather Mail Armor or her Guard Plate Mail Armor to come in a variety of different colors or styles. This would have eliminated the use or "need" for the revealing attire choices presented in the game and could have presented Scarlett in a less stereotypical fashion.

As for Rubi, her representation in WET is equally problematic as it emphasizes masculine stereotypes. Rubi's representation suggests that she can only be accepted as hero by discarding her femininity and assuming a male subject position. Rubi's assertive and vulgar dialogue, aggressive actions, attire, and other masculine stereotypes throughout gameplay continue to pose contradictory negotiations of gender as Rubi portrays a female hero. Although it may have seemed problematic to present Rubi as the type of character that might be considered "one-of-the-guys," softening her dialogue or actions to reassert traits of femininity would not have allowed her to be accepted in the world she was required to navigate. With little underlying narrative, WET showcases a vulgar aggressive game world that requires a character just as

vulgar and aggressive to dominate it. Having Rubi assume an image clearly associated with masculinity, suggests that game designers may have never had a female character in mind for the game. Or perhaps game designers simply wanted a female character that was visually appealing yet masculine enough to not be considered a typical gun-toting babe.

In comparison, Violette's representation in *Velvet Assassin* is by far the most problematic of the three heroines as it suggests that her sexual appeal is far more important than portraying her as heroic or empowering. Violette constantly presents a combination of overly sexual female film, television, and video game stereotypes. Although Violette presents the most problematic female hero representation, due to her reflection of current overly sexual female video game stereotypes, this could have possibly been avoided with a few tweaks to attire and the Morphine Mode mechanic. While the Morphine Mode mechanic is a necessary part of game play, the night dress she wears when accessing this mechanic is completely unnecessary. Why Violette's night dress is necessary as the attire to represent Morphine Mode is still not clearly answered throughout the game. This mechanic could have just allowed Violette to pass by enemies without changing clothes at all. If a change in attire was necessary to represent that she was in the hospital a longer night gown could have been an alternative option. Another option could have been an alternate variation of her leather sneaking outfit. While this outfit is still fitted and sexualized it at least presents Violette fully-clothed. It seems that *Velvet Assassin* clearly focuses more on showcasing Violette's sexuality rather than portraying her as a hero character.

While Scarlett, Rubi, and Violette's representations demonstrate that even female heroes found in video games must still adhere to the conventional standards of beauty, only Scarlett and Violette still align with the research findings that female video game characters must still be seen

wearing sexual attire (Durham 26; of Beasley and Standley 286-289; Miller and Summers 738; Jansz and Martis 146). The attire worn by Scarlett and Violette support previous research that has stated that most female video game characters are seen wearing clothes that are low-cut and increase attention to their bodies emphasizing their sexuality. However, what makes this type of attire even more problematic on both Scarlett and Violette is that they are not just typical female video game characters but they are supposed to be presented as heroes. Yet, the way games are currently designed it seems difficult to notice a distinctive difference in attire between a heroine and a non-playable female character. With limited research on heroines in video games and the scarce amount of games with female heroes limitations have presented themselves throughout this thesis. However, this gap within video game studies that has yet to focus on female hero characters aside from Lara Croft is also where the significance of this thesis lies.

The analysis of gender concerning female video game heroines is still in its infancy, but the discourse of gender and video games is continuously expanding. Research discussing gender specifically pertaining to female heroes in hardcore console games is an area of video game studies that has yet to be explored thoroughly. The questions addressed within each case study of this thesis are also concerns about female heroes in video games and gender representations that have yet to be further investigated. Therefore, the case studies present in this thesis address the questions of stereotypes still being applied to female heroes in video games as well as how these female video game characters are negotiating gender through each of their representations and game play. The issues discussed throughout this thesis hope to be able to aid in the design of less stereotypical female protagonists or heroes in future productions of games.

In accordance with the future production of games is the future of analyzing video games. In order to analyze video games not simply as a storytelling medium or merely as game play,

Jenkins' provides his theory of narrative experiences which is applied to the three games investigated in this thesis. This new way of investigating video games is the way video games should be addressed in the future. Video games clearly blur the boundaries between cinematic visuals and interactivity, and with the further development of technology the lines between film and video games may become even more distorted. Therefore appropriating Jenkins' theory while trying to find new ways to address how gender plays into the construction of the narrative of video games with female heroes is very suitable.

As female heroes are also seen as transgressive characters which blur the lines between masculinity and femininity, it seemed only appropriate to try and view video games in the same way. This allowed Venetica, WET, and Velvet Assassin to be investigated as narrative spaces intertwining both game play and story. However, it seems that both game play and storyline is affected by the protagonist's gender throughout each game. All three female heroes had mechanics placed within each game that suggested that these mechanics had been specifically designed in relation to the protagonist's gender. While there may be new and innovative ways of discussing video games there does not currently seem to be a way of escaping gendered storylines or game play mechanics.

However, another innovative way of analyzing narrative experiences found in video games does exist in Deleuze and Guattari's theory of the "rhizome." Although it is not as applicable with most hardcore console video games and was not able to be applied to two of the three games discussed in this thesis, it does have applications in the world of online video games as well as the Xbox Kinect games. As Deleuze and Guattari theory of the "rhizome" is defined as "a model of continuing offshoots, taproot systems that travel horizontally and laterally, constantly producing affective relations/becomings that themselves contribute to the dynamic

multiplicity of creation and existence,” it is most compatible with massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG).<sup>6</sup> Since these games exist solely on the internet they basically consist of virtual worlds which facilitate a space for game play and are relatively similar to the structure of cyberspace. Most virtual worlds in MMORPGs can be considered rhizomatic. For example, the world that exists within these games allow for movement in all directions with the “concept” of control left up to the players. Further research could most definitely be conducted in these types of games by applying Deleuze and Guattari theory of the “rhizome.” With more online games being created and virtual worlds becoming common places, the investigation of digital spaces seems to be a logical step for video game studies. If further research is conducted in this area literature provided by Vincent Miller, Lev Manovich, and Mark Poster could prove to be influential in the discussion of how digital spaces are negotiated.

However, this particular thesis hopes to be seen as more of a stepping stone for further research in female hero characters in video games. While gender is the main focus of this study, expansion into addressing issues of race and class are definitely a route that can be investigated concerning female hero characters in video games. Issues of race and class might even be particularly enlightening in selectable fighter games such as Tekken and Mortal Kombat as these games provide various female characters of different ethnicities. The attire worn by these female characters could also be explored for their authenticity or racial/ethnic ties to the character who wears it. Examples of these characters and their attire can be revisited in pages 25 and 32 of this thesis. Other games that may pertain to this type of research are the X-Men video games. As they are interactive replications of the original comic characters these games also possess a range of

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<sup>6</sup> Massively multiplayer online role-playing games are a genre of role-playing video games which is able to host hundreds of players within a single virtual world online. These games basically have combined the MMOG genre with that of RPG genre to facilitate a larger space wherein players can interact with one another. The main distinction between these two genres is the role-playing aspect of adapting an avatar as a representation of the player within the game (Taylor 92).

ethnic female characters that could be investigated. Some examples of the diverse characters would be Storm of African-American decent, Jubilee of Chinese-American decent, and Rogue of American decent.

Another aspect to take into consideration for further research of female video game heroines is different film and television theories that may be more applicable in discussing such a transgressive character. While most of the film and television theories concerning gender use terms and tropes that reitify gender binaries, use of queer theory may help shed some light on characters which tend to blur these binaries. As female heroes attempt to not align with either masculinity or femininity this causes them to be almost incapable of being bound to one representation or the other. In future research the application of queer theory may prove to open a new avenue in which to discuss the issues of gender representation of interactive characters.

Finally further research which includes both male and female heroes is also applicable to the continued study of gender. A comparison study done with male hero characters distinguishing how many male characters exhibit stereotypes concerning hyper masculinity and how many female characters exhibit exaggerated sexuality is another avenue to explore. This type of comparison would perhaps shed light on the fact that not just one gender is depicted stereotypically when it comes to video games. Or it may only further re-enforce previous research indicating that more female characters depict these characteristics than male characters.

As video games continue to become a facet of everyday life the construction of character representations that are created in these games need to be addressed as well. Discussions on how gender is intertwined with all facets of video games, especially their interactivity, is needed more than ever as new technology is emerging daily along with new mediums of interactivity. Further questions concerning gender must now be posed not only in console games but in new digital

worlds and realms of digitally created characters that were nonexistent in past years. While this thesis has brought up informative and problematic issues, the concerns addressed also hope to fuel further research as this thesis strives to continue expanding the discussion of how gender is portrayed and affects video games. This thesis intends to be merely a stepping stone contributing to the large discourse of video games and new media that is continuously developing.

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