

Between the Gloss and Reality

How gender representations have meaning in a play world: a case study on Grand Theft Auto V and Mirror's Edge

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Abstract

This thesis explores how representations of masculinity and femininity are valued in a case study on two video games: *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Mirror's Edge*. I will give an account on gender representations in the media, and in video games specifically. I will place the ways in which these representations on gender are valued for the two video games in the debate on the distinction between a play world and the actual world. Here, I draw on Johan Huizinga's key text *Homo Ludens*, who considered the world of play to be separate from the actual world. I will discuss critiques on his text through the use of texts by Christoph Bareither, Joost Raessens, Tom Boellstorff, and Marinka Copier. I will analyze my own experiences through participant observation, and this data will be substantiated with autoethnography. I will also employ an ethnographic content analysis to analyze what other video game players have written about the two video games in articles and blogs. The results show that the play world of video games is not completely separate to the actual world, but they are in dialogue with each other. Representations of gender that are portrayed in the two video games have their effects in the real world, as evidenced by the data. For future research, I would suggest more qualitative studies on specific cases to contribute to more knowledge about what these representations mean, while staying attentive to its complexities. Another different avenue to take would be to compare the upcoming *Grand Theft Auto VI* to the recently released *Mirror's Edge Catalyst*.

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1 Introduction

Growing up, I played a lot of video games whether it was with my sister on the PlayStation 1, with strangers on the PC, or on the PlayStation 3 and PlayStation 4, with or without friends. Ever since I can remember, I have loved to get lost in a game for a few hours. Although in the present adult life has caught up with – deadlines, responsibilities, bills – I still enjoy playing games on my PlayStation 3 and my sister’s PlayStation 4, and love watching other people play games. As Joost Raessens also discusses, “playfulness has gradually become a central category of our culture” (Raessens 2014, 94).

Current day technology has made it much easier to be involved in gaming without actually playing, and it is obvious that I am not the only one who enjoys this. There are many people who record their gameplay and upload it on YouTube, so called Let’s Play Videos (Bareither 2016, 111). Over 200 million people have watched gameplay videos on YouTube in 2018, amounting to more than 50 billion hours of gameplay (Takahashi 2018). A different way to watch other people play games is through Twitch, an online streaming service. Its popularity is obvious when looking at their numbers; in 2018 people watched a total of 434 billion minutes of gameplay (Grayson and D’Anastasio 2018). Trying to make that number seem manageable is impossible, some calculating shows that it is a total of over 650,000 years of gameplay watched in one year.

I have always been interested in games with a detailed storyline, and these are the kind of games I still watch as Let’s Play Videos on YouTube. Also when playing these kinds of games myself, I liked how it would give me the possibility of really relating to the character I was playing with. I never paid attention to the fact that these characters I was relating to were – for the most part – male characters. One of my favorite games from when I was young is *Grand Theft Auto (GTA) San Andreas*, which I used to play on my computer. The main character is Carl Johnson – CJ – and he embodies the stereotypical hypersexual, hypermasculine black male (Spates and Slatton 2014, 2). Playing as CJ in an open world environment, nothing was impossible. I could steal cars, run over people with said cars, go to the gym, earn money as a taxi driver, and so forth. However, when following the actual missions, there was a storyline surrounding CJ, filled with plot twists, betrayal, and most of all, a lot of violence.

It was only later in my life that I started to wonder why I saw so few female protagonists in video games, and the few that were, were portrayed as overly sexualized (Ivory 2006, 104). One example that is discussed very often is that of the Lara Croft game franchise. In the first

Tomb Raider game (1996) which starred Lara Croft, she was more of a pin-up representation of a woman, than a realistic representation of a woman. As Mikula argues, “[h]er body is excessively feminine – her breasts are massive and very pert, her waist is tiny, her hips are rounded and she wears extremely tight clothing” (Mikula 2003, 79).

However, Lara Croft also had her redeeming qualities. Rather than just being a damsel in distress who needed to be rescued by a man, she was the lead protagonist in the game. Not just any lead protagonist, but a strong one, capable of physical feats such as rock climbing (ibid., 79-80). Almost twenty years later, Lara has become more realistic. Rather than hot pants and a hypersexual body type, her clothing are now more meant for mobility and her body type has become more average – albeit still very athletic (Hernandez 2014).

Especially after having completed a bachelor in Cultural Anthropology and while in the middle of a Gender Studies master, I often notice how the majority of popular video games seem to contribute to the unequal portrayal of men and women, and the perpetuation of stereotypical notions of gender. Every year, there is the Electronic Entertainment Expo – also known as E3 – where developers and publishers can introduce their upcoming games. Some of the biggest game developers show what they have been working on every year, such as Microsoft, Nintendo, and Electronic Arts.

An analysis of the videogames, illustrated on the right by Figure 1, during the 2019 E3 shows that 5% of them has a female protagonist. Males, on the other hand, are the protagonist in 22% of the video games (Sarkeesian and Petit 2019). Moreover, if we look at whether these presented games have a notable combat and violence element, it shows that 85% do (ibid.). This makes me assume that in most video games where most protagonists are men, they are portrayed to be adventurous and violent (Scharrer 2004, 397).

This also implies that when women are the protagonist, they mostly fulfill a violent and adventurous role. If these are the kinds of stereotypes that are being portrayed in video games, it will only strengthen already existing stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in society (Williams et al. 2009, 818-820).

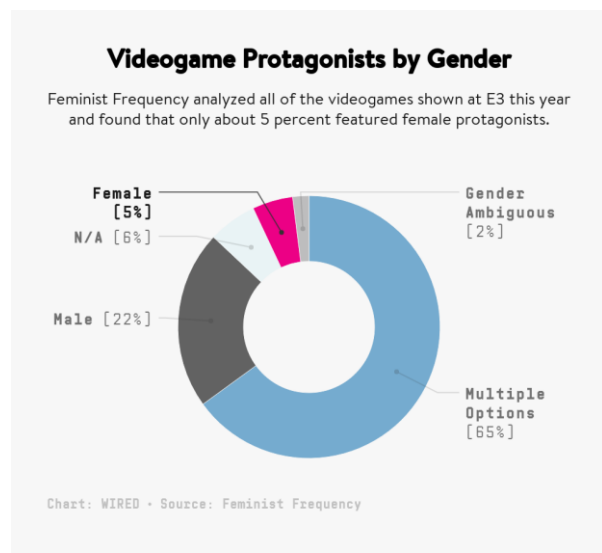


Figure 1 In: Sarkeesian and Petit 2019

I am curious to see in more detail how notions of masculinity and femininity are represented in video games. A lot has already been written about gender representations, as I will discuss in this thesis. However, I have not seen much written about how people experience these gender representations. For this thesis, I wonder what value these representations have to video game players. For the purpose of this research, I will focus on my own experiences and how other people experience representations of gender in a video game world. I will place this in the debate surrounding the concept of play, to see how the representations of notions of gender are being experienced in a game world that effectively consists of play. My research question is: What do gender representations mean in a play world?

In order to answer my research question, I will first go into the theory in Chapter 2. I will discuss the central debate around the world of play, focusing on texts by Tom Boellstorff, Christoph Bareither, Joost Raessens, Marinka Copier, and Johan Huizinga. I will also discuss gender representations, specifically in the context of video games. In Chapter 3, I will first go into detail about the two video games I have chosen as case studies; *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V)* and *Mirror's Edge*. I will also discuss how I gathered my data, and which research methods I used to analyze the data. Chapter 4 will consist of my data analysis and discussion, divided into three themes: (1) masculinity, (2) femininity, and (3) the magic circle. Chapter 5 will be the concluding chapter, where I summarize my findings, and answer my research question.

2 Theory

2.1 A Play World

As I mentioned in my introduction, in this thesis I explore how my own experiences with gender representations in the video games *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Mirror's Edge* relate to the experiences of other people who have played these games. I want to know what these representations mean, not only to me but also to other people, in a play world. But before we can go deeper into what is understood by a play world in video games, we must first explore the concept of play.

One of the most notable authors to do this is Johan Huizinga, whose book *Homo Ludens* – originally published in 1938 – still counts as a key text with regard to the debate on play (Raessens 2014, 100). Huizinga argued that it is impossible to exactly determine what play is (Huizinga 1949, 5-6). What he does say is that, “[h]owever we may regard it, the very fact that play has a meaning implies a non-materialistic quality in the nature of the thing itself” (ibid., 1). Play is not something that can just be understood by looking at the physicality of it; there is a meaning to it.

Christoph Bareither defines play as “creating a paradox of communication, since the practice of play at the same time denotes and does not denote actual non-playful processes” (Bareither 2017, 116). Everything in a play world at the same time refers to the actual world, while at the same time being separate from it – to some extent. Huizinga, too, emphasizes the distinction between play and ordinary life in his definition of the characteristics of play:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings. (Huizinga 1949, 13)

It is specifically the part where Huizinga argues that play takes place within its own time and space that has been critiqued by other authors. One of them is Joost Raessens, who voiced some of the critiques on Huizinga’s take on play. The critique on the boundedness of play that places

it in a time and place that is distinct from non-play, is that it is this dichotomous thinking that prevented Huizinga from seeing the ambiguities of play (Raessens 2014, 101-103). He mentions, for example, the ambiguity in Huizinga's text when "[h]e denotes play as reality at one moment, but as appearance as another" (ibid., 103).

Joost Raessens says in his article that "[g]ames are the formalized parts of *play*" (ibid., 104). It then makes sense that the aspects discussed above are also applicable to games, and more specifically to video games. This is what Boellstorff argues in his ethnographic book *Coming of Age in Second Life*, on exploring the virtually human in Second Life, a virtual world where people exist and interact with the world and each other online (Boellstorff 2008, 4). As I have mentioned above, Bareither argues that the play world is simultaneously separate from, and in referral to, the actual world. In video games, then, the virtual world is similar to the actual world, in a way that will give a video game player the ability to do something meaningful in the game (Bareither 2017, 112).

Tom Boellstorff conducted anthropological research in Second Life and the way its residents make meaning. His data was collected over a period of two and a half years (Boellstorff 2008, 4-7). Boellstorff places the interesting aspect of virtuality in its potentiality. As he argues, "it can be said to exist whenever there is a perceived gap between experience and 'the actual.' This is now the most important meaning of 'virtual' with regard to virtual worlds; 'virtual' connotes approaching the actual *without arriving there*" (ibid., 19). It is exactly this gap that made it interesting for me personally to see how video game players – including myself – make meaning and ascribe value with regard to representations of gender.

This perceived idea that the virtual world is separate from the actual world is captured in the term of 'magic circle', taken from Johan Huizinga's text, and often used in the area of Game Studies. The magic circle entails that "games proceed within their own boundaries of time and space, absorbing players utterly into a separate world set off from ordinary life" (Copier 2019, 160). Within Game Studies, then, video games are considered to be taking place in a play world that is completely separate from the actual world. Bareither also explores this argument, when he says that in the area of contemporary game studies, there is still the idea that a game world is an enclosed entity, separated from the actual world (Bareither 2017, 115-116).

As I have mentioned above, this dichotomy between the play world and the actual world is also a critique that Joost Raessens has voiced with regards to the text by Johan Huizinga. However, Copier argues that Huizinga is often misunderstood when he is being critiqued for his view that play is a bounded entity. Through reading his text more closely, Copier notes that Huizinga's goal was to focus on how play is an important part of how culture forms, and that

this understanding is more ambiguous than his definition of play (Copier 2009, 166-167). Nevertheless, in Huizinga's definition, he does place the world of play in a spatially separate sphere from non-play (Huizinga 1949, 13).

Video games can thus be seen as a form of play, which means the world in, and of, a video game can be seen as a sort of play world. References that are made in video game worlds, then, refer to the actual world. When what is being referenced are notions of gender, it is important to see to what extent the boundary between play and actual is being reaffirmed or instead being broken down. I will discuss this more in the next sub-chapter on gender representations.

2.2 Gender Representations

Where other people have mostly focused on the ways in which gender is represented in video games, I want to go beyond just that in this thesis. For my research, I also looked at my own and other players' experiences of gender representations. How do I value these representations in the context of a play world, and how do other players value it? A key intervention is made by Stuart Hall who wrote about the encoding and decoding of culture. In the context of television he discusses how what you are seeing is never the actual thing, but just a representation of the thing it refers, similar to what Boellstorff argued in the sub-chapter on A Play World. Hall argues that what you are seeing – whether on the news, on the television, or when playing a video game – it is itself already a representation. People watching this do not just passively consume it, but he argues that they actively decode the meanings in media (Hall 2006, 164-170). This would explain why people who play video games interpret different moments in different ways, depending on their personal context. This also means that I interpreted the video games I played from my specific personal context. In my research, I looked at how other gamers interpreted representations of gender in video games.

It is important to look at gender representations in video games and how and if they are valued as distinct from the actual world. As Tracy L. Dietz argues, the society around an individual informs them what gender roles they should fulfill, and which behaviors go along with this (Dietz 1998, 425-427). Specifically when we look at media, representations of gender have their effects in the actual world. Dill and Thill argue in their text that theory shows that “symbols in the media contribute to users' schemas (e.g., about gender roles and relationships) and that these schemas then influence people's real life behaviors, thoughts and feelings” (Dill and Thill 2007, 854).

Video games, as a type of media, require active participation from a player, and it allows a player to become immersed in the game. Symbolic meanings in video games are experienced

in a different way from other types of media, precisely because of this immersion (Dietz 1998, 430-431). If gender representations in video games are portrayed in a stereotypical manner, Williams et al. argue that this will increase the strength of these stereotypes in daily life. This is because when you see a certain stereotype of an individual or a group of people all the time, this is the stereotype you will be able to recall at a later moment. To a certain extent, they argue, media in this way can inform one's perception of a group of people (Williams et al. 2009, 818-820).

For example, Niki Schroeder, a qualitative researcher, argued that stereotypes about women in Dutch advertisements work to confirm traditional gender roles. According to her, women in Dutch advertisements are often portrayed to be the head of the household, and she believes that this influences the way we see women – confirming traditional beliefs that the woman should take care of the household, while the man provides for the family with his job (Schroeder 2019).

Williams et al. also emphasize that it is important to see your own group represented. They discuss that representations in media and real-world experiences are in dialogue with each other. To see your own group represented in for example video games gives off the impression that your group matters in both the offline and online world. On the contrary, if your group is not or barely represented, this might give off the idea that your existence does not matter in society (Williams et al. 2009, 818-820). Specifically in video games it is important to have your group represented, since Jansz and Martis argue that it is the interactive nature of a video game that allows for identification with the character you are playing (Jansz and Martis 2007, 142).

It is unfortunate, then, that representations of gender in video games still leave a lot to be desired. At first glance, it becomes obvious that for a large part the representation of women in video games consists of no representation at all (Scharrer 2004, 395-396). Williams et al. gave an account of prior content analyses that looked at the occurrence of male and female characters in video games. All of the analyses they mentioned showed that male characters feature in video games more often than female characters. In these video games, it was also more likely for a male to be the main character, and females were more often a secondary character. Moreover, there is also a disproportion in which ethnicity is being portrayed, with one analysis showing that more than two-thirds of main characters are white (Williams et al. 2009, 817).

Williams et al. also conducted their own research, that they argue is more comprehensive than these previous analyses. They worked with a larger base of video games to study, amounting to a total of 8572 characters to be categorized on the accounts of gender, race and age. Their research shows that male characters feature more often than female characters, with

85,23% and 14,77% respectively. Moreover, when it comes to being the primary or secondary character, it is more often the male that is the main character, with the female filling a more supportive role. Additionally, no matter whether the character is male or female, the character is most likely to be white (ibid., 823-825).

Of course, this does not mean that men are always portrayed in positive ways, as they are also often negatively stereotyped. To discuss how not only women are negatively stereotyped in video games – *when* they are represented – but men as well, Scharrer uses the concepts of hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity. A key aspect of this is that these are exaggerated characteristics of masculinity and femininity (Scharrer 2004, 397-398). Hypermasculine males are characterized by, among other things, “a lack of empathy or sensitivity especially in regard to sex; the pursuit of excitement, adventure, and sensation; and the belief that physical violence is normative for men” (ibid., 397). In the representations of stereotypical males, a distinction can be made between white men and non-white men. Specifically black men in video games are portrayed as engaging in more gang or hood violence and criminality. Rather than being white-collar criminals, black men in video games are involved in more stereotypical gang or hood violence; they typically belong to a gang, or they deal drugs in their hood (Everett and Watkins 2008, 143-147).

Hyperfemininity, on the other hand, is associated with a traditional view of women that are passive, dependent on men, and are seen as sexual objects (Scharrer 2004, 397). This fits in with the fact that females are more likely to be secondary characters than main characters, since it is often their role to be a (sexual) prop to the main male character (Children Now 2001, 15-16). Asian women specifically are – just like they are in other forms of media – generally depicted as exotic and mysterious in video games. Here, too, they fulfill the role that is expected of them; to be a sexual prop to the main character who is white and male (Phi 2009).

There are many authors who have written about possible negative consequences of stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity, who have argued for example that video games as agents of socialization can have effects on what people think about these notions in the actual world (Dietz 1998, 430-431). There is friction, however, with the opinions of game enthusiasts, as Dill and Thill argue. They discuss how these game enthusiasts do not think negative ideas about for example masculinity and femininity have any real effects, since it is just a game (Dill and Thill 2007, 853).

3 Methods

As case studies for this thesis I have chosen two games: *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA V)* and *Mirror's Edge*. In order to see how notions of gender are represented, I used a combination of methods to study not only these two games, but also the ways other people have interacted with them. As a cultural anthropologist who specialized in Gender Studies, the methods I used are qualitative in nature. Qualitative methods are especially useful when discussing specific cases, as I did in my research. In this chapter, I will first discuss the context of the two video games. Next, I discuss how ethnographic fieldwork has inspired me during this research. This will result in two sub-chapters; on autoethnography, and participant observation. Content analysis was also part of my research, and I will discuss how ethnography informed my choice for content analysis. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss how I gathered and recorded my data.

3.1 Video Games

The video games that will feature as case studies for this research, *Mirror's Edge* and *GTA V*, were released in 2008 and 2013, respectively. I already spent a lot of time on playing both games shortly after they were released, and over the years since. It has been interesting to revisit them years and approach them in a more scientific way, rather than just for fun. When I was initially imagining the topic of this research, I was not yet sure which video games I wanted to analyze. However, as the scope of this research took shape, I started thinking more seriously on which video games I could use. *GTA V* quickly sprung to mind. I received this game as a Christmas gift in 2014 and in the past five years I spent countless hours on it. When I think about a game that features men who are violent, and women who are sexualized, *GTA V* is one of the first games I think about. It takes gender representations of men and women to the extreme.

The idea for the second game came up when I was staying at my sister's house. While browsing the online PlayStation 4 (the most recent PlayStation console) store, I saw that the game *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst* was on sale. This is a reboot to the original 2008 *Mirror's Edge* released for the PlayStation 3. It made me think back to the early 2010s when I would play *Mirror's Edge* myself, and how much I enjoyed this video game. I remember how excited I was all those years ago since it was the first game I ever played where the main character was a woman.

3.1.1 Grand Theft Auto V

Grand Theft Auto (GTA) V is the fifth official instalment of the Grand Theft Auto Series, and the fifteenth if you count all its expansion packs and the like – such as *GTA San Andreas* which I mentioned in my introduction. It was published by Rockstar Games, and released in September 2013 for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. *GTA V* is considered to be an action-adventure game, and takes place in an open world where you can roam freely. The game has been incredibly successful, grossing \$800,000,000 on the day of its release, and an estimated \$6 billion in the years after (GTA Fandom, 2019; McGonagle 2018). A staggering 110 million copies have been sold of the game, another indicator of its enormous success (Kain 2019).

In previous instalments, you played with one central character during the entire game. *GTA V* is the first game in the series where there is not one central character, but three central characters: Michael de Santa, Franklin Clinton, and Trevor Philips (GTA Fandom, 2019). As Rockstar Games have posted on their site:

Amidst the turmoil, three very different criminals plot their own chances of survival and success: Franklin, a street hustler looking for real opportunities and serious money; Michael, a professional ex-con whose retirement is a lot less rosy than he hoped it would be; and Trevor, a violent maniac driven by the chance of a cheap high and the next big score. Running out of options, the crew risks everything in a series of daring and dangerous heists that could set them up for life. (Rockstar Games 2019)

For this research, I played *GTA V* for a total of 16 hours, which was only a relatively small part of the total campaign. In order to complete all missions, a player is expected to invest a minimum of 30 hours (How Long To Beat 2019). I played long enough in order to get similar amounts of data for each of the three main characters, but short enough so that it would not exceed the time I spent on *Mirror's Edge* by too much. During these 16 hours, I thought it would be most fair to keep my free-roaming in *GTA V* to a minimum. Since the game is open world, it was incredibly detailed, looking almost like a real city. There were other people walking around, I could see advertisements on the street, I heard radios blasting from cars, and so on. Keeping my free-roaming to a minimum does mean that I missed notable happenings that stood out for other people. Moreover, I also missed notable happenings since I did not play through the entire game, but only a part of it.

3.1.2 Mirror's Edge

Mirror's Edge was released November of 2008 by EA DICE, a subsidiary of Electronic Arts, for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. The PC version was released in January of 2009 (Mirror's Edge Wiki 2019). Despite the fact that the game was well received with favorable ratings – score aggregator Metacritic reported a score of 79 out of 100 for the PlayStation 3 version – it has only sold about 2,5 million copies (Metacritic 2019; Nath 2013). This is of course nothing compared to the 110 million copies that *GTA V* sold, and so during this research I had to keep in mind that the reach of *Mirror's Edge* would be inferior compared to *GTA V*. As Williams et al. (2009, 818) argued in their research: “Thus, if the goal is to measure what the public is actually consuming, content from the two should not be given equal weight in the analysis.”

Regarding the plot of *Mirror's Edge*, Electronic Arts [EA] posted the following on their website:

You are a Runner named Faith – an agile courier who transports sensitive data, using the rooftops to avoid prying eyes. Now your sister has been framed for murder and you're running for your life. This action-adventure classic delivers you straight into the shoes of a unique heroine as she traverses a vertigo-inducing cityscape, engaging in intense combat and fast paced chases. Live or die? Soar or plummet? One thing is certain: this city will teach you to run. (EA 2019)

I played through the entire length of the campaign, which took me about seven and a half hours. Since there was no down time in between missions, I could not free roam and explore the world. Whereas in *GTA V* there was a lot in the environment to look at as well, the world of *Mirror's Edge* looks more simplistic, and in this sense less realistic. The city, which remains unnamed, consists for the most part of white buildings and white scenery with slight color accents. Since you spent the campaign on the rooftops you do not see any people walking around, and the advertisements you can see are relatively non-descript.

3.2 Data

While doing my participant observation, which meant that I was playing the two video games, I wrote down as much data as I could. I would write down what my character said, what other characters said, what I could see and hear in the world around me, and what all this made me think of and how it made me feel. For the content analysis, I tried to gather a substantive amount

of blogs and articles from other people who have thoughts and feelings about these two games. I did this through using several Google searches for both video games. With these Google searches, I tried to find blogs and articles that were specifically about masculinity and femininity, or at least featured it. I also looked specifically for characters in both video games. For *GTA V* I had raw data that consisted of 25 articles and blogs, which I analyzed including their comments. For *Mirror's Edge*, this amounted to 22 articles and blogs, including their comments.

I compiled my own video game data and the contents in these blogs and articles in one data file, together with comments on the blogs and articles that stood out to me. While reading through this data, I would give parts of the texts codes to capture what I considered to be key parts of the text. This helped me to find connections between sources, and helped me keep track of all my data (Boeije 2009, 268-269; Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1279). Through these codes, I created the themes that I will discuss in the next chapter. In the analysis, I also connect these themes to the literature.

3.3 Ethnography

I started my research from the standpoint of Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnography of the particular. She discusses this as a strategy in order to write against culture. As she says, "[i]f 'culture,' shadowed by coherence, timelessness, and discreteness, is the prime anthropological tool for making 'other,' and difference, as feminists and halfies reveal, tends to be a relationship of power, then perhaps anthropologists should consider strategies for writing against culture" (Abu-Lughod 1991, 147). What she means by this is that, specifically in the anthropological tradition, there can be a tendency to see a culture as completely closed off. In this way, to study a different culture implies studying people that are 'other'. However, Lila Abu-Lughod argues that feminists are aware of this power relationship and she proceeds to discuss strategies in order to prevent this power imbalance.

One of these strategies is that of the ethnography of the particular. Instead of trying to find generalizations about people or cultures, we should pay attention to the particulars of people's lives, so that we can see the complexity (ibid., 149-150). It is this thought that I always keep in mind when doing research. The research I did is focused on the particular complexities of the people I study. In the case of this research, this means I looked at the particulars of both myself, and the other people's opinions I have read. While I can collect and analyze the data, and extrapolate it to the theory, it would be impossible for me to make general statements about a group of people.

To approach research in this way, I believe ethnographic fieldwork is the most fitting method. As an anthropological method, “ethnography provides an account of a particular community, society, or culture” (Kottak 2013, 9). In my research, I wanted to provide an account of a particular part of the gamer community, including myself. To do this, I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork, albeit on a small scale.

Of course, studying video games is different from traditional ethnography, since I was able to do my research without getting up from my couch. In the previous chapter, I have already shortly discussed Tom Boellstorff and his anthropological research in *Second Life*. It is his discussion of the virtual that inspired me to do virtual ethnography. This means that I did my research in the “gap between experience and ‘the actual’” (Boellstorff 2008, 19). Although the video games I played were not online with other people, I did spend time in a world that was different from the actual world (ibid., 21).

What particularly interested me was Boellstorff’s argument on why it is precisely the anthropologist who is fit for the study of the virtual. As he argues, “ethnography may be particularly well-suited for the study of virtual worlds because from its beginnings it has worked to place the reader ‘virtually’ in the culture of another” (ibid, 31). Within anthropology there is a focus on seeing the world from different perspectives – perspectives that both are and are not your own.

Moreover, an anthropological perspective is fitting since it emphasizes the fact that knowledge is situated and partial (ibid., 70). When doing my research, I was aware that my thoughts about the video games, and my thoughts about people writing about it, came from a specific place: my own situated and partial knowledge. For example, I have certain preconceived ideas about notions of masculinity and femininity, in part because I researched them for this thesis. I took these preconceived ideas into the virtual world with me, which may have influenced what stood out to me while playing the video games. My position also played a role in how I interacted with my raw data. As a white female gamer, I know that I am rarely represented in video games. Most video games I have played were with male lead characters. Analyzing my raw data, then, influenced which opinions I agreed with, and which I did not.

Ethnography, then, is well suited for the research I have done. My research was on a very specific subculture – gamers who played these two video games. Anthropology has taught me to look at the experiences of people from their perspective, which in this case meant I tried to immerse myself in the video games as if I were actually the main character. The data and knowledge I collected from both my own gameplay and what other people have written about it, have to be seen in their specific context. It is situated and partial. Situated because my

position has had an influence on my experiences. Partial because I am only looking at my own experiences, compared with the experiences people have discussed in articles and blogs, but also because this thesis is limited to the two video games.

3.3.1 Participant Observation

An ethnographic method that played a significant role in this research is that of participant observation. As James Spradley argued in 1980, the participant observer has two purposes: “(1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation” (Spradley 1980, 54). As a participant observer, then, you do not just observe a social situation from a distance, but you actively engage in it. In this position, it is important to realize that as a researcher, you are always participating and observing from a subjective perspective (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 66).

Instead of trying to observe the two games – *GTA V* and *Mirror's Edge* – from a distance, I instead fully immersed myself by playing them myself. In this way, I was observing and participating simultaneously. I played the games as if it were me in those worlds, and during the participant observation I continuously asked myself how it made me feel. I participated by doing the missions in the video games. I also interacted with the game world around me, and with the other non-playable characters.

3.3.2 Autoethnography

I played the two video games myself, and in my analysis chapter I use my own experiences to illustrate the rest of the data. Therefore, I considered it suitable to use autoethnography in my research. Important characteristics of autoethnography – similar to participant observation as well as ethnographic content analysis – are self-observation and reflexivity (Mills, Durepos, and Wiebe 2010, 43). Reed-Danahay discusses the two forms of writing that is contained under the name of autoethnography. A first is that autoethnography denotes writing about a group of people that you – the researcher – are a part of as well. In this way, you also do research on yourself. The second one is that is called the self-aware anthropologist. The self-aware researcher is conscious of their subjectivity (Reed-Danahay 2009, 29-30).

In my research, both these aspects have been important. As a gamer, I was a part of the video game community that I studied. Moreover, during my research I was aware of my position, and the ways my subjective perspective made my experiences different from that of other people who played these video games. Because I played the video games as a part of my research, I experienced it in an academic manner. While I was playing, I would think of what would be a good theme to discuss, or I would consciously ask myself how it made me feel.

Practically, my autoethnography means that throughout my chapter on data analysis, I will feature my own experiences. For example, I will write vignettes of an experience that I had, and supplement it with my feelings and thoughts I had at that moment. In this way, I, as a writer, am constantly present in my own research. Since I write about how other people experience gender representations in these video games, I think it is fitting for me to have played the games as well, and to have that reflected in this thesis.

3.4 Ethnographic Content Analysis

Together with ethnographic methods, I also did a content analysis on the blogs and articles I collected. Content analysis, as Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon argue, “is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). The sort of content analysis I have done is more in line with what Altheide calls ethnographic content analysis, rather than the more quantitative conventional content analysis. The more quantitative method would entail more of taking a tally of how many times certain themes in data are repeated (Altheide 1987, 66-68).

Ethnographic content analysis, on the other hand, has more of a focus on reflexivity and interactivity (ibid., 68-69). For my research, this means that I first collected data through my participant observation in the video games. From this initial descriptive data I derived categories from aspects that stood out to me. For the blogs and articles I analyzed, I used these preconceived categories to code the text. While analyzing these texts, new categories would come up, for aspects of the video games I had not identified in my own gameplay (Smith, Sells, and Clevenger 1994, 269-270). During my research, I would keep reflecting on my data and adjusting my framework, and adjusting categories I was using. In this way, I was systematic with identifying the categories in my data, but it remained flexible enough that I could change or add categories (Altheide 1987, 68).

I chose for the ethnographic content analysis because I believe it fits in more harmoniously with the rest of the methods I used. Using the ethnographic content analysis allowed me to focus more on the qualitative aspects of my data. In my analysis this means that I will mention how often a sentiment is repeated, but that I enrich this number with my data, for example in the form of quotes I used from the articles and blogs I analyzed.

3.5 Limitations

There are limitations to the methods and approach I am using. A part of focusing on only two video games with qualitative research methods means that I am creating very specific knowledge. Although my research can be used for comparison, it is impossible to draw

generalizations. As a result, in this thesis I do not generalize my findings at the end of my analysis. As an anthropologist, I also wonder to what extent generalizations are productive. Lila Abu-Lughod, in her text, specifically advises against it. She argues that generalizations about a specific culture or subculture leads to “homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness” (Abu-Lughod 1991, 152).

I was also limited in the amount of data I could actually discuss. As I already touched upon in my discussion of *GTA V*, I did not play through the entire game, and kept my free-roaming to a minimum. This means that the data I gathered from specifically *GTA V* is only a limited part of the total amount of data I could have gathered. I decided to place more value on playing both video games for roughly a similar amount of time, rather than trying to exhaust all data I could find. However, this does mean that I missed out on many things that would have happened if I had continued playing. Moreover, I knew beforehand that a large part of the data I analyzed would not end up in this thesis. To limit the scope of my thesis, I decided to limit my scope to three overarching themes.

With ethnographic content analysis, specifically, a limitation is that I analyze what people have written in blogs and articles online. These people can take on any persona they want, and this hood of anonymity might have influenced the ways in which they voice their opinions. They might not voice these opinions in real life. Moreover, analyzing these texts meant I interpreted what they said and attached categories to parts of it for what I thought they meant. These articles and blogs were written in the past, and I only analyzed the text as it is. I did not enquire more about what certain passages meant, or what they wished to express. Whenever I discuss someone’s opinion in this thesis, it is laced with my interpretation of what argument I believe they are making.

4 Empirical data and analysis

4.1 Results

As I discussed in my methods chapter, I used coding to structure the data I collected, both from my own gameplay, and from articles and blogs of other people online. In this chapter, I discuss three themes: (1) masculinity, (2) femininity, and (3) the magic circle. To illustrate these themes they feature short vignettes, taken from my own gameplay. These are events that stood out to me while I was playing, and that helped me find the overarching themes. For each theme, I discuss my own experiences, and combine it with the data from the content analysis. As I already mentioned in my methods chapter, in choosing only these three themes, I am aware that the scope of this research is limited. A lot can be said about both *Mirror's Edge* and *GTA V*, but I unfortunately had to leave them out and limit my data analysis to the themes at hand.

The first two themes are for the most part to set the context. They describe how notions of gender (in this case, masculinity and femininity) appeared in the two video games, and what both my opinions, and those of other people on the internet, are about them. The third theme, the magic circle, hits right at the crux of my central debate; the distinction between the play world and the actual world. In the discussion of the three sub-chapters of my results, I will explicitly relate it to this central debate.

4.1.1 Masculinity

The sun is shining brightly as I walk along the boardwalk near the beach in Los Santos. I have my homie Lamar with me, who has been my best friend since childhood. We both grew up in Chamberlain Hills, a low-income neighborhood that is riddled with crime and ruled by gangs. The part of town we are walking, though, is obviously inhabited by the wealthy people of Los Santos. The boardwalk is lined with beach houses, each with at least one convertible in the driveway. Lamar and I are planning on 'boosting' (i.e. stealing) two of the expensive cars, but I am feeling pretty nervous about it. It must look suspicious that there are a couple of 'niggas' walking around this part of town. Lamar tries to ease my mind by telling me it is legit business, which is something I am very much in doubt of. Lamar says: "I'm getting my money in the hood. I'm straight, fool. I'm cool." "You cool?" I reply, "Cool what? Slinging dope and throwing up gang signs? Yeah right." (GTA V – own gameplay)

This is how we are first introduced to Franklin Clinton, one of three main characters in *GTA V*, in a mission where he and Lamar are going to steal cars to bring back to Simeon. Simeon is our

employer from the car dealership, and he can resell the stolen – he prefers to call them ‘repossessed’ – cars in his shop. I felt almost awkward playing as Franklin, since he seems like the stereotypical black male from the hood. The way he and Lamar speak is different from the way other characters speak, as they are using more “ungrammatical, perhaps stereotypically ‘ghetto’ speaking styles” (Entman and Rojecki 2000, 200). Their vernacular is full of slang, such as ‘boosting’ cars, and calling each other ‘homie’ or ‘nigga’. Franklin is the stereotype of the black male that is seen as criminal and less intelligent – evidenced by the first mission where he steals a car, and the way he talks (Ratliff 2014, 25-26).

This is also what stood out to Will Newman, who posted about *GTA V* on the blog Queen Mob’s Teahouse – a popular social media forum. He says:

Franklin Clinton is A Black Man. Since he’s A Black Man, he’s the [most relevant least relevant / least relevant most relevant] character in the game. Franklin lives in South-Central Los Santos, across from a liquor store whose shopfront is constantly populated by other black people. He also says the n-word a lot and all his friends are “criminals,” to varied degrees. (Newman 2015)

Will also implies that Franklin seems to represent the stereotypical black man that grew up in the hood and is involved in criminal dealings. As evidenced by the vignette at the beginning, the way he makes his money is through crimes like stealing cars. It is only after he becomes Michael’s protégé – one of the other three main characters in *GTA V* – that Franklin gets into more ‘serious’ crimes. Will Newman refers to them as “white” crimes, such as professionally set up heists (ibid.). In the articles I analyzed, Will Newman appears to be the only person to take offense to the stereotype of Franklin being a Black Man. In the context of masculinity, other articles and blogs focused the most on Michael de Santa.

Michael de Santa, the Michael who ends up having Franklin as his protégé, also fits in to the theme of stereotypical men in *GTA V*. We first meet him during his therapy session with Dr. Isiah Friedlander, where he talks about how miserable he is in his life. At first glance, Michael represents the American Dream; his house is more a villa than an actual house with its private pool and tennis court. He mentions that he is already retired, which is quite young for a man in his mid-forties. He is living proof that if you work hard – even though Michael worked hard in the criminal circuit – you can make enough money to retire early with a villa and expensive cars. He appears to have the quintessential American family: a wife and two kids – one boy and one girl.

Nevertheless, he is not happy. As he mentions to Dr. Friedlander: “I’m rich, I’m miserable. Half the time, my kids can’t stand me. The other half, my wife is cheating on me” (*GTA V* – own gameplay). Playing as Michael, his unresolved issues seep into you. His frustration with life is tangible as it is noticeable in almost everything he does and says. One day I (playing as Michael) am sitting on the couch in front of the television, eating some chips. I hear noises from upstairs – my son Jimmy is yelling at his video game. I walk up the stairs to his room and ask him what he is doing. Without even looking away from his screen, Jimmy tells me he is not doing anything. As I try to engage him more into a conversation with me, he tells me to go away. He still has not looked away from his video game. I get so pissed off, that I grab one of the chairs in his room and smash it into his television (*GTA V* – own gameplay).

In a blogpost on Giant Bomb, a person using the username *librariangmr* argues that this frustration can be partly placed in the fact that Michael’s masculinity is being threatened through his dysfunctional role within his family. Instead of being a perfect husband and father, he has a wife who cheats on him, and two kids that do not want to hang out with him (Librariangmr 2013). Watching Michael go from seemingly living the American Dream to having it fall apart makes him, in my opinion, the saddest character in the game, and I am not alone in that. For Paul Tassi, contributor on Forbes, it was heartbreaking to watch Michael struggle to keep his family together (Tassi 2013b).

Rachel Kaser emphasizes that stereotypical masculinity is very much a part of what the *Grand Theft Auto* series tries to convey, when she says that it “has always been about exploring the tarnished American Dream through the lens of frustrated masculinity” (Kaser 2018). Other people have written more generally about how masculinity seems to be a core part of *GTA V*, and specifically how stereotypical masculinity is prevalent in the video game. Apart from discussing Michael de Santa, Paul Tassi noted how all secondary characters in the game “are exaggerated parodies of weirdos in real life (Tassi 2013b). Since the men are parodies, Stephen Totilo wrote on Kotaku – a video game website and blog – that the game has a lack of respectable men (Totilo 2013).

Mirror’s Edge, too, features a man that is more a caricature than a realistic portrayal of a man. His name is Travis Burfield, nicknamed Ropeburn. Faith first hears about him when she is trying to find out who set up her sister for the murder of a family friend. The family friend – Robert Pope – was running for office when he was suddenly killed by an anonymous assassin. Faith wants to help her sister out, and she decides to go and talk to some people. The name Ropeburn pops up, a former wrestler who got hired by Robert Pope to handle his security. Playing as Faith, I make my way to Ropeburn’s office to find out if he knows anything. As I

am crawling through the vents, I hear Ropeburn answering a phone call. During this phone call, he is the perfect example of the traditional masculine man who equates femininity to weakness. He tells the person on the phone to “don’t get your panties in a bunch” (*Mirror’s Edge* – own gameplay).

Even though I played *Mirror’s Edge* several times in the past, the first time I see Ropeburn again I am taken aback by how obviously masculine he is portrayed. He is quite literally built like a closet, with a large, muscular upper body. The head that sits on his shoulders seems almost tiny in comparison. He is also not afraid to throw his weight around, since he does not hesitate to grab me (as Faith) by the shoulders and throw me off of a roof. He then jumps down the roof holding a metal pipe, intent on seriously harming me. If you combine his large stature with his knack for violence and disrespect for women, he seems the embodiment of the stereotypical macho man: Ropeburn is violent, aggressive, and values masculinity over femininity.

Perhaps because of the fact that Ropeburn seems a mere caricature rather than a fleshed out character, most of the articles and blogs I read barely mentioned him. Moreover, we must also keep in mind that not an enormous amount of copies have been sold of *Mirror’s Edge*, implying that it means there are also less people who can write about the video game. Only Bennu, a male gamer and writer from Australia, talks about him in a blog he wrote on gaming website LevelSkip. Similar to my experience, the first thing Bennu noticed was the fact that he was “a hulk of a man” (Bennu 2019). I agree with Bennu when he says that he “just oozes a sleazy personality” (ibid.), which I assume is the feeling Ropeburn is supposed to give off – he is created to be unlikeable.

In both *GTA V* and *Mirror’s Edge*, then, the male characters seem to live up to various tropes of masculinity. Whether he is the ‘black gangbanger’, the ‘cheating husband’, or the ‘macho man’, the characters are stereotypically portrayed. Especially in *GTA V*, there are quite a lot of people who have discussed this, and who voiced their opinions on these representations. This was not so much the case with *Mirror’s Edge*, which might have something to do with the fact that none of the male characters in the video game were very fleshed out. Another possible explanation might be that *Mirror’s Edge* is such a niche game, with not a large amount of copies having been sold. It makes sense that when there are less people to write about the game, there is also less critique written about it.

4.1.2 Femininity

My boss wants me to go and repossess a car from someone named James de Santa, up at the fancy part of the city. I get in my car and quickly make my way to the house, no, the villa, complete with gates and more importantly, a closed garage door where the car must be. I jump over the wall and look around for a way to sneak inside without the residents noticing, so I can find a way to open the garage doors. Suddenly I notice the open window a floor up, that I can access via the car port. I climb inside and sneak my way to the floor downstairs. In order to get to the garage, I need to go past the kitchen. Just as I walk into the hallway to the side door of the garage, I hear two people enter the kitchen. Hiding behind the wall, I decide to stay and see what they are doing. The man and woman are wearing tennis clothes, and are carrying their tennis rackets inside. The man tells the woman she is a great student, while in the meantime the woman backs up into him, back to front. He holds her hands around her body, simulating the swing of the racket. (GTA V – own gameplay)

As we learn later, the woman in the vignette above is Amanda, and she is Michael de Santa's wife. Throughout the game it becomes obvious that her role in *GTA V* is to be the cheating, gold digging wife. We learn from Trevor, one of the other main characters, that Amanda was a stripper and prostitute before she met Michael and had two children with him. In the game, Amanda is continuously sexualized. With a background as stripper and prostitute, during the game she is often seen cheating with her various instructors. The tennis coach described in the vignette above is one of them.

I am quite disappointed by the portrayal of Amanda, as one of the most present female secondary characters in the game. She is hardly the epitome of an independent woman. If she is not cheating on Michael with one of her instructors, she is yelling at Michael. She is clearly unhappy in her marriage, often drinking herself to sleep. I wonder, then, why she does not just leave? However, it becomes clear that she has a hard time giving up the perks of staying with Michael; he buys her whatever she wants, and it is because of him that they are living in their nice villa. It seems a luxurious lifestyle is more important for her than being in a healthy relationship.

Paul Tassi, in his contribution to *Forbes*, also dislikes the way Amanda is portrayed, calling her “an ex-stripper who does literally nothing but scream at him every time she's onscreen, and cheats on him frequently off-screen” (Tassi 2013b). Joseph Dempsey also has an idea of why Amanda is still staying with Michael: since she is a “spoilt lazy brat”, she needs to

“use Michael as a human credit card” (Dempsey 2013). However, just as can be said about the portrayal of masculinity in *GTA V*, everyone in the game comes off as pretty hateful. Just like Michael as ‘the cheating husband’, it also has, as Saeed Jones writes for BuzzFeed, Amanda as “bitchy trophy wife” (Jones 2013).

Specifically in *GTA V*, femininity is equated with sexuality. Every single female character in *GTA V* that is even remotely a fleshed out character has first and foremost a role as a sexual object. There is Michael’s wife, Amanda, who routinely cheats on him. His daughter, Tracey, is trying to be famous, even if it means dancing provocatively on national television. Franklin Clinton’s best friend Lamar keeps talking about how ‘sexy’ his aunt is. The list could go on. However, what bothered me the most was the pervasiveness of strippers, and the extent to which I could interact with them.

In downtime in between missions, I (as either of the three main characters) had the option to go to a strip club and ask for a private dance. Of course, in itself there is nothing wrong with strippers, as sex work is work. The problem for me was, however, that during a private dance I had the option to touch the woman dancing for me, as long as the bouncer standing near the entrance was not looking. This implied that I could go against company rules of not being allowed to touch the women, and therefore touch them. What is more, if you touch the women for long enough they ask you home with them, to have sex. To me, this seemed to suggest that all strippers are prostitutes as well, which is a popular stereotype about the community that is frankly not true (Kennedy 2014).

The portrayal of strippers and prostitutes is one of the most often discussed subjects in the articles and blogs I analyzed. It is also one of the most critiqued subjects. Whereas with the portrayal of the characters in the game, you could argue that everyone is supposed to be a stereotype or a parody, the way that strippers and prostitutes are portrayed is considered to be unnecessarily sexist. The writer with the username *librariangmr* noted that the *Grand Theft Auto* games “don’t go out of their way to depict women in the most positive light. Oftentimes, they are characterized as strung out street walkers, strippers, internationally renowned porn stars and gussied up pieces of sex meat” (Librariangmr 2013), in this way also emphasizing the fact that females in *GTA V* are first and foremost a sexual instrument to the main characters.

This is a sentiment that is regularly recurring. Tom Hoggins, writing for The Telegraph voices a similar opinion: “Women in the game are either bit-part players or set dressing: strippers to throw money at, prostitutes to pick up” (Hoggins 2013). The fact that you can touch a stripper without the bouncer watching repelled Tom Hoggins, who seems just as horrified by it as I am. These feelings and arguments are repeated in 8 more of the articles and blogs I

analyzed, which means that in around half of the data I analyzed the representation of sex workers is considered to be problematic. Moreover, none of the articles and blogs discussed it in a positive light.

I am waiting in the City Protection Force underground car park for officer Miller, who is my sister's boss. Kate told me to talk to him if it went down badly. Which it did. Kate is now being framed for the murder of Robert Pope, and I am the only one who can help her. This is the second time I want to talk to officer Miller. Although the first time he made no promises to help me, he did promise not to get in my way. I feel like it will be safe enough to talk to him this second time. I drop down from the steel beams near the ceiling, and officer Miller turns around, startled by the sound. I ask him if he knows anything about Project Icarus, it is something I heard Ropeburn mention and I wonder if it is related to Kate's framing. Out of nowhere, officer Miller pulls a gun on me. He apologizes, but says the only way his bosses will go easy on his team and Kate, is if he gives them me in exchange. He is obviously not expecting me to have the quick reflexes that I do, and I have him disarmed before he can blink. For Kate's sake, I tell him I will let it slide this one time. The next time he pulls a gun on me, I will kill him. He seems to have understood the message. I hand him back his gun, and walk out of the car park. (Mirror's Edge – own gameplay)

Whereas *GTA V* has three male main characters, and the women in the game are only there as instruments to the male plot, *Mirror's Edge* Faith shows that she is not to be messed with. If something or someone threatens her, as shown in the vignette above, she does not hesitate to take matters into her own hands. As a teenage girl, nothing seemed cooler to me than playing a kick-ass woman in a video game – Faith gave me that. She is strong, both physically and mentally. Getting from rooftop to rooftop as a Runner means she is constantly sliding, vaulting, jumping, climbing, and so on. Her appearance reflects a life lived in constant movement. She is lean without looking thin, slightly muscular from what must be a lot of cardio.

Her outfit, too, felt and still feels refreshing to me. Rather than stereotypical female video game characters who wear skimpy outfits, Faith is seen wearing athletic white trousers with a black tank top – one that does not show any cleavage. Her outfit represents her lifestyle. This is also what the producer of *Mirror's Edge*, Tom Farrer, wanted to express. He said they “wanted to get away from the typical portrayal of women in games, that they're all just kind of tits and ass in a steel bikini. We wanted her to look athletic and fit and strong [enough] that she could do the things that she's doing” (Ashcraft 2008c).

This is also what other people appreciated about Faith. Some commenters on the Kotaku article written by Brian Ashcraft say that they do not want more “unrealistically buxom babes strutting their stuff in our games” (Gloveofpower 2008) but instead they want female protagonists who are more realistic. David Ochart wrote about *Mirror’s Edge* on the site of the Mary Sue, and I think he voiced the kind of femininity that Faith possesses really well. He said:

Faith is a complete badass – a brooding, tattooed loner with a mysterious past, the likes of which women rarely get to play. Her sister Kate is no castle-locked princess either, rather a high-level policewoman who has been framed for murder by the very institution that she lives to uphold. Neither woman is over-sexualized, nor are they helpless – and it isn’t a man who needs to save Kate, it’s her sister. (Ochart 2015)

Most people commenting on the article by Brian Ashcraft agree that Faith is not supposed to look attractive, she is supposed to look like a realistic woman. She is supposed to look athletic. However, there have also been some critiques on what Tom Farrer has said. Since the rest of the game is not realistic looking, they wonder why he places so much emphasis on Faith looking realistic. A comment by someone with the username *Shibbashabba* reads: “I don't know about the rest of you guys, but I play games, read comics and books, watch movies to ESCAPE reality for just a bit. So, why then do I want to be faced with a ‘real’ character” (Shibbashabba 2008)?

Not only is Faith a woman, which is pretty rare in the video game industry, she is also a woman of color. When you finish the video game, you can unlock some material that shows concept art from the making of *Mirror’s Edge*. In the earlier concepts of *Mirror’s Edge* the developers explain that Faith was more Asian looking, but for the final product they gave her a more Eurasian look. Although her Asian roots are never explicitly mentioned or acknowledged during the gameplay itself, it is nice to see a female protagonist that is not just another white character.

This is also what Julie Muncy appreciated in an article she wrote for Wired. She said about *Mirror’s Edge* that they took a risk, since “the central character is a woman of color who is not a sex object, but a defiant, powerful hero” (Muncy 2016). For her, this is a part of what makes the video game so special (ibid.). Muncy’s opinion is echoed by Wiehahn Diederichs in his Gear Burn article. He considers the fact that in an industry where characters are predominantly white and sexualized, *Mirror’s Edge* sets itself apart by having a woman of color as lead character (Diederichs 2016). In my data, positive sentiments about the fact that Faith is

a kick ass woman of color was repeated 5 more times. I believe the portrayal Faith is one of the reasons why the game is still so special to me, as well as to these people who wrote articles and blogs about it.

4.1.3 The Magic Circle

So Los Santos is a place of contrasts, of luxury and poverty, tranquility and violence, beauty and ugliness. GTA V is an imperfect yet astounding game that has great characters and an innovative and exciting narrative structure, even if the story it uses that structure to tell is hobbled at times by inconsistent character behavior, muddled political messages and rampant misogyny. It also raises the bar for open-world mission design in a big way and has one of the most beautiful, lively, diverse and stimulating worlds ever seen in a game. Your time in Los Santos may leave you with a few psychological scars, but you shouldn't let that stop you from visiting. (Petit 2014)

When Carolyn Petit wrote this concluding paragraph about *GTA V* in her review, I do not think she expected to receive the attention it got. As she said, despite its “rampant misogyny”, the game is still very enjoyable, and worthy of the 9 out of 10 score she gave it. With over 20.000 comments, it seems that not everyone focused on the high score, but rather on the fact that she critiqued the misogyny that is apparent in *GTA V*. Some of the comments said, as Tom Hoggins also discussed in his The Telegraph article: “Petit was called, amongst other things, a ‘moron’, while another said there was ‘no point in giving GTA to a woman to review. Their input is worthless” (Hoggins 2013). The online verbal abuse that Carolyn Petit suffered affirms that for many people, video games are still a man’s place, and women do not have a place in this world.

This specific incident is part of a wider trend, often under the guise of saying ‘if you do not like it, then do not play it,’ or alternatively, ‘if you do not like it, then do not buy it.’ The latter is what Karl Slatoff – then CEO of Take-Two which owns *GTA V*’s publisher Rockstar Games – said in response to critique on the misogynist nature of *GTA V* (Campbell 2014a). Maybe a third variation would also work: ‘if you do not like it, then keep that opinion to yourself.’ The abuse of Carolyn Petit is not a unique case, I saw similar comments on other articles and blogs I analyzed. When discussing *GTA V* online, there seems to be no room for critique, especially not on the way the game treats women and femininity.

It is what people write about both games and how other people comment on it, that really intersects at the central debate on play I outlined earlier in this thesis. This is also what surprised me the most when I was reading these blogs and articles; the amount of discussion that took place. There were many different opinions on *GTA V* specifically, and out of these opinions I

identified three main lines of reasoning. The first line of reasoning follows to some extent along the lines of the abuse against Carolyn Petit, and the comment made by Karl Slatoff – the video game is just satire, do not take it seriously. The second line of reasoning is exactly what draws out reactions like the one above; the people who believe that these problematic representations have their effect in the real world, and therefore is not something to joke about. The third response was the closest to the one I also have, which is that it invokes a feeling of boredom.

To me, the first line of reasoning seems the most extreme. This has partly to do with the fact that the people in my data who expressed this opinion have done so in a manner that was less than civil, the comments on Carolyn Petit among the harshest. But it is a rhetoric often repeated, also to a lesser extent. It is this less extreme reasoning that seems to actually contain an argument, rather than just shutting down any and all critique by saying, ‘if you do not like it, then do not play it.’ The people who argue that there is nothing wrong with these representations are saying that *GTA V* is pure satire, and therefore not to be taken seriously.

Librariangmr said in his blog that “[t]he humor in Grand Theft Auto works because it puts a funhouse mirror up against our society” (*Librariangmr* 2013). He argues that it is not only the women who are negatively portrayed, but the men as well. He therefore finds the critique against *GTA V*’s misogyny ungrounded to some extent, since it is not how he experienced the game to be (*ibid.*). In the comments to his article, he finds likeminded people. One of them, with the username *Mamba219*, says that “[c]alling GTA ‘misogynist’ is so hilariously off-base that it honestly makes me a little sick,” and that “[i]t’s an artistic choice” (*Mamba219* 2013). He believes that a video game can do whatever it wants since it is their choice, as long as it is satire.

In an article written by Laura Sydell, she talked to three women who played *GTA V*, and how they felt about the demeaning portrayal of women in the video game. They all agree that the video game is meant to be satire, and that adults are smart enough to understand that (*Sydell* 2013). One of the women, Whitney Hills, told Laura Sydell that “she found the writing to be ‘incredibly sly, intelligent and subversive’” (*ibid.*). When I was playing, I too had moments where I had to chuckle because of the writing, because I assumed that it was meant to be satirical. One example is from a mission I played as Franklin.

The sun is setting in my street. I hear noises from inside, what sounds like high-pitched voices chanting ‘yayayaya’. I walk in on my aunt Denise with two of her friends, and one random white old lady. They are waving their arms ecstatically, while the white woman says “all our prayers have been answered”. They then notice me walking into the living room, and they

abruptly stop. I ask Denise what is going on. As she tells me, “Magenta is reinvigorating my femininity”. Weirder out by their ludicrous gathering, I walk out the front door. I can hear them chanting “vulva, vulva” from the living room. (GTA V – own gameplay)

There were really only these two articles I discussed above who explicitly argued that *GTA V* is satire and is therefore legitimized in representing specifically femininity in the way it does. Most people who discussed this point, however, I placed within the second line of reasoning. These people are arguing that even if *GTA V* is actually a satirical game, it is not obvious enough to bring that point across. Across my data, there were 11 articles or blogs who critiqued *GTA V* in this sense, to various extents.

This is for example what Tom Hoggins argued in his *The Telegraph* article. As he said: “The satirical barbs at its target demographic are too heavy-handed, the industry too much in its adolescence, which leads to many of its male players to revel in its frat-boy humour, rather than feel repelled by it” (Hoggins 2013). This is a sentiment I saw echoed in other articles and blogs as well, the fact that even if it supposed to be satire, there is the worry that people will not understand it. It is what Carolyn Petit argued in the review I mentioned at the beginning of this sub-chapter of my results. She said that in *GTA V* there “are exaggerations of misogynistic undercurrents in our own society, but not satirical ones. With nothing in the narrative to underscore how insane and wrong this is, all the game does is reinforce and celebrate sexism” (Petit 2014), which is also what Fruzsina Eördögh considers to be a very valid point by Petit (Eördögh 2013).

A different kind of critique voiced explicitly by two people on the problematic representations focused on the fact that *GTA V* has three male lead characters, but no female lead character. Paul Tassi does emphasize that both men and women are negatively stereotyped. However, the difference for him is that with the three main characters, you do get fleshed out characters with a development arc, and therefore goes beyond just the superficial parody. Since there is no female lead character, he thinks the women are still getting the bad end of the deal when compared to the men (Tassi 2013b). Stephen Totilo, in his *Kotaku* article, argued along the same lines. He, too, says that *GTA V* not only lacks respectable women, but also respectable men. Nevertheless, we do get the main characters with an actual storyline, ascending their stereotypes (Totilo 2013).

The main problem voiced in this second line of argument, one that I agree with, is that these representations – whether satirical or not – have their effects in the real world. The people who say it is just satire seem to believe in a clear distinction between a play world and the actual

world, what happens inside a game is relevant within the game only. However, I believe that these boundaries are more porous. When I shut off the game, the things that I experienced did not stay inside the PlayStation 3, but I kept thinking about it. What is more, I am writing a thesis about it, which means that these problematic representations stayed with me enough that they warranted a deeper discussion.

GTA V features harmful stereotypes, where groups of people are negatively stereotyped. Will Newman wrote his article about it, discussing for example how the women in the video game are overly sexualized, and how the black characters – such as Franklin – are racially stereotyped: Franklin Clinton as the ‘Black Man’ (Newman 2015). Malika Saada Saar, writing for HuffPost, that with these representations, *GTA V* “is legitimizing, and significantly profiting off of, America’s rape and gender-based violence culture that we must be seeking to end, and not expand or further entrench” (Saar 2014). *GTA V* might not be the cause of harmful stereotypes in the actual world, it does seem to contribute to the normalization of these stereotypes.

Everyone responds in a different way to representations of gender in *GTA V*, whether they believe it is satire or not, and whether they believe it is harmful or not. I am certain that there are people who play this video game and that it will confirm some of their beliefs: that women are there as sexual objects, that men should be violent, and that black men are always gangbangers. As Malika Saada Saar concludes her article:

In a matter of weeks, parents will be wrapping gifts for our children. If we want more for our daughters — and our sons — then there is no reason to purchase *GTA V*, and be complicit with the many ways in which violence against women and girls has become the comfortable norm. We must call out the very practices that bind our daughters to a culture of violence. Even when those practices include a popular, profit-busting video game that our kids, or other family members, want for the holidays. (Saar 2014)

I identified a third way of dealing with gender representations in *GTA V*, and this is the one I relate to the most in my experiences of playing the video game. When I would encounter a stereotypical representation in the game, I would, for the most part, just feel tired of it. Not just in the video game, but in all aspects of life, I often feel like I am being bombarded by repetitive images, similar to the ones I have discussed in the previous two sub-chapters of my results. Helen Lewis also said she feels bored, when she wrote about how women in *GTA V* are not

much more than decoration. She said: “I’m bored, more than anything, as well as irritated that another generation of young players isn’t being offered something more exciting than this” (Lewis 2013). In her article, Helen Lewis quotes games journalist Leigh Alexander, who said: “I think that’s why its problematic elements rankle – not because I’m ‘offended’, but because it seems lazy, repetitious. I’m not ‘offended’ that I can’t play as a woman; I’m disappointed at the missed opportunity” (ibid.).

In a forum on the sub-Reddit called GirlGamers, someone whose account has since been deleted asked what people who played *GTA V* thought of it. One comment stood out to me, by someone with the username *AkuTaco*. They said:

GTA has been telling the same story of machismo confronting a superficial society from the very beginning. That part is played out, and the characters won't win any awards for their complexity. But nothing really beats grabbing a bike or a car and riding around those massive maps. (GirlGamers 2014)

Just like me, *AkuTaco* obviously noticed the machismo in *GTA V*, but seems bored by it as well. I think boredom is my overarching feeling about *GTA V*. I think *GTA V* does try to portray satirical representations of masculinity and femininity, but in a way that it might not be clear to everyone. Even if I understood the jokes, this does not mean that everyone is going to understand they are jokes. Moreover, whether they are jokes or not, they still contribute to the perpetuation and normalization of stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity.

I think having positive representations are important, and that they do matter. I believe *Mirror’s Edge* proves that. Whereas *GTA V* is just an enjoyable game to play, *Mirror’s Edge* feels really special to me. Every time I play it again, I get a warm feeling, and I am just as excited to be Faith for a couple of hours. One of my favorite moments is the very end of the last mission.

I look into the terrified eyes of Kate. She is barely hanging onto the edge of the rooftop, of a building that seems to stretch down for miles. Her handcuffed hands barely finding any sort of friction to hold on that little bit longer. Just as I see her fingers slowly letting go, I am able to dive for the edge. I latch onto her handcuffs a millisecond before she would have fallen. My heart beating, I help her back onto the roof, back into safety. I touch her face, still in disbelief that I almost lost her for good a second ago. She falls into my embrace, thankful that her big sister was there to catch her. Not believing what we have gone through over the last couple of

days, we both stare in awe and shock at the city that stretches out in front of us. I place my arm around her shoulders. (Mirror's Edge – own gameplay)

After this moment, the end credits rolled. Instead of a story that is focused on a heterosexual love interest for Faith – in my opinion an over-used trope – it ends with her saving her sister. After the discussions on *GTA V*, I consider *Mirror's Edge* to be a breath of relief, since the opinions in my data discussed for the most part appreciation of a female main character. In the sub-chapter of my results on femininity I already discussed some of the opinions of people who enjoyed the fact that with Faith, you had the option to play as a kick-ass woman. Faith is not just another white woman, she is a woman of color, something that was celebrated, which I discussed in the sub-chapter of my results on femininity as well.

Out of the total of 22 articles and blogs I analyzed, the 11 that explicitly discussed their feelings about Faith did so in a positive manner. Sarah Nixon wrote about *Mirror's Edge* that being able to play as Faith made the video game “one of the most valuable games I’ve ever played” (Nixon 2013). As a female video game player, it is nice to be represented in video games, and to be able to play as a female character. But also for non-female gamers she can be considered a good role model. In his article, someone with the username Jason G. said “I would be proud to have Faith as a daughter, so by my ‘Logic’ that makes her a great female role model” (Jason G. 2015).

With Faith, the gaming industry took a step forward towards normalizing female protagonists that are not overly sexualized, or stereotyped in any other way. *Brinstar* wrote about Faith on her blog, and said:

Therefore, personally, as an Asian woman, I am happy to see someone of my race and sex portrayed in the way that Faith is — strong, driven, skilled, aggressive, independent, etc. It’s incredibly rare to find a WOC (woman of color) like Faith in videogames, in a starring role, and portrayed in a pretty positive way. When I think of the few female Asian videogame characters (and I can’t think of that many) it makes me sad at the level of hyper-sexualisation and exotification out there. It’s bad enough that I rarely ever see myself represented in media, it’s even worse when the representations I do see are so appallingly bad. I think Faith is a massive step forward for WOC protagonists in games. (Brinstar 2009)

For *Brinstar*, it is not only important to be able to play as a woman who does not adhere to the stereotype of being sexualized. For her, as an Asian woman, she is aware that Asian women in media are often depicted as exotic. To be able to play as Faith, a non-problematic Asian female understandable made her happy.

A small point of critique would be that it is unfortunate that since *Mirror's Edge* is a first-person game, most of the game you are not aware that you are actually playing as a woman. Since the video game was relatively short, there was only a limited storyline, which may have contributed to the fact that Faith's background is never really discussed. Marta Malinowska discusses this as well in her blog. She argues that to avoid showing female bodies in video games in a sexualized manner, they are sometimes not shown at all – female bodies become invisible. This also happened with *Mirror's Edge*, where you have a non-white, female protagonist, who unfortunately is rarely shown on screen (Malinowska 2016).

4.2 Discussion

As evidenced by the two sub-chapters of my results on masculinity and femininity, it is specifically *GTA V* that thrives on stereotypical notions of gender. I limited my discussion to Franklin Clinton and Michael de Santa. However, in *Mirror's Edge*, there was also an example of a stereotypical man: Ropeburn. These men filled various stereotypes, which I named respectively the 'black gangbanger', the 'cheating husband', and the 'macho man'. The articles and blogs I discussed already showed that people think these are harmful stereotypes that are being reproduced. This is especially the case with *GTA V*, where apart from negative stereotypes on masculinity, there are no positive representations of masculinity to balance it out.

I then discussed femininity in both games. Here, too, it is *GTA V* that draws the most attention, both from me and the people whose articles and blogs I analyzed. With Amanda, Michael's cheating wife, we have another example of a female character whose only function is to be a sexual prop in the life of the main male character – Michael. Even more so when we looked at the representation of sex workers – strippers and prostitutes – we saw that in *GTA V*, the only role for women is that of a sex object, subject to a man's every whim. *Mirror's Edge*, on the other hand, gave us an example of how to portray femininity in a way where a female character is not overly sexualized.

Both the discussion on masculinity and femininity already touch upon the fact that what happens in video games does not stay in video games. Some of the representations in these games are considered harmful to the outside world, not just by me, but also by the people in my data I discussed. This would already suggest that the distinction made by Johan Huizinga between the actual world and the play world is not as dichotomous as he discussed it to be

(Huizinga 1949, 13). Instead, it is useful to acknowledge the ambiguity in this distinction, in order to do justice to the complexities of this research (Raessens 2014, 102-103).

I delved into this more deeply in the third sub-chapter of my results. The different lines of reasoning I identified in discussions on *GTA V* shows some of the complexities that are also in the debate on play. The discussions on *Mirror's Edge* functioned like a sort of rebuttal against the first line of reasoning – with the ‘if you do not like it, do not play it’ argument – and as a way to enrich the second argument – problematic representations have their effect in the real world. The third line of reasoning – the feeling of boredom – is a way to contextualize the discussion to some extent, and to emphasize that everyone receives symbols of representation in different ways.

The people who have argued that *GTA V* is just a game, and that stereotypical representations are not to be taken seriously – it is just satire after all – seem to be on Huizinga’s side of the discussion. In his original text on play, argued that play is an “activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life”, and “[i]t proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (Huizinga 1949, 13). The people who fit in with the first line of reasoning believe that the video game world is so separate from the actual world, that any and all representations only have meaning and value within the game. They think that any discussion on them outside of the game serves no purpose.

The second line of reasoning, then, fits in with Boellstorff’s concept of the virtual world. As he said, “‘virtual’ connotes approaching the actual *without arriving there*” (Boellstorff 2008, 19). What happens in the virtual world never actually conflates with the actual world, but it approaches it. This also implies that representations of gender do not stay bounded within the video game world, but they also approach the actual world – they have real effects on the actual world. As was argued in the data I analyzed, *GTA V* might contribute to a process where harmful representations of gender are normalized in the actual world.

The idea that representations do not matter because they happen in a game world has to some extent been rebutted by the discussion on Faith, the main character in *Mirror's Edge*. Faith seems to be the proof that what happens in a video game world does matter in a play world, with people in articles and blogs emphasizing how much it means to them to see themselves represented as a woman without it being problematic. It is unfortunate, then, that the reach of *Mirror's Edge* is so much smaller, with 2,5 million copies in comparison to *GTA V*'s 110 million copies. People are more likely to reinforce their ideas about masculinity and femininity from seeing or playing *GTA V* than from *Mirror's Edge*.

However, one thing that must also be kept in mind is the extent to which representations of gender have their effect in the actual world differs from person to person. I discussed how I felt bored with these overused stereotypes that I did not even take them seriously anymore. Other people expressed similar sentiments. Although the magic circle might be broken in this specific case, there is no complete conflation of the play world and the actual world (Copier 2019, 160).

5 Conclusion

This research aimed to explore how representations of masculinity and femininity are experienced and valued in a play world, through the discussion of two case studies: the videogames *Grand Theft Auto V* and *Mirror's Edge*. There has been research on the effect of the portrayal of gender in media, and how this can perpetuate and strengthen the stereotypes of gender people already have in society. I looked to what extent this can be argued for my specific case studies. The research question for this thesis is: What do gender representations mean in a play world? I outlined the debate surrounding the concept of play with the help of texts by Tom Boellstorff, Christoph Bareither, Joost Raessens, Marinka Copier, and Johan Huizinga. The debate focuses on whether or not the play world is distinct from the actual world.

In this thesis, I looked at representations of masculinity and femininity in the two video games. Whereas there have been many articles discussing gender representations, these did not focus on the actual experiences of people. For this research, I wanted to focus on not just how gender is being represented, but also on how it makes me and others feel. I gathered data on my experiences with the video games, and on other people's experiences, through the articles and blogs they have written. I used this data to see how in these specific cases the debate on play would unfold. For this, I also outlined literature on gender representations, specifically with regard to video games. This is to provide some background of common gender tropes in video games.

The methods I used were mostly qualitative in nature. I used participant observation by playing *GTA V* and *Mirror's Edge* myself and writing down my experiences. These experiences then found their way back into the thesis through autoethnography, where I tried to feature my personal experiences throughout my data analysis. To analyze the blogs and articles of other people writing about the two video games, I used ethnographic content analysis. Rather than traditional ethnographic analysis which is focused on quantitative results, I instead focused more on what was said rather than just how many times something has been said.

The methods and approach I used had their limitations. By choosing qualitative research methods, a consequence was that I am unable to draw generalizations from my data analysis. Furthermore, there were limits to my data gathering, since I did not play through the entirety of *GTA V*. I also had to limit the scope of my research, and in my analysis I stuck to three overarching themes. Specifically when looking at what people have written on blogs and articles, it is important to keep in mind that these are people on the Internet, and they can take

on whichever persona they want, and say whatever they want. Since their texts were written before my research, my analysis is for the most part my interpretation of what I think their intentions were.

My data analysis resulted in three themes: (1) masculinity, (2) femininity, and (3) the magic circle. The first two themes were for the most part to explore how masculinity and femininity are represented in the video games. I used specific examples of moments and people that stood out to me, and related that to what other people wrote about it. In both video games, masculinity is portrayed in a stereotypical manner. Men are criminals, they are violent, and they are not loyal to their partners. These are repetitions of tropes that have already been discussed in the discussion on gender representations.

I also discussed representations of femininity, and with this theme there was a clearer distinction between *GTA V* and *Mirror's Edge*. In *GTA V*, femininity was portrayed – similar to masculinity – as not much more than stereotypical representations. The women were for the most part sex objects, no more than sexual instruments for the main male characters. This is where *Mirror's Edge* diverged. Rather than an overly sexualized main female character, Faith is portrayed as athletic, but definitely not sexualized. Rather than being a secondary character who is just an instrument, she is the main character with her own thoughts and passions.

The articles and blogs written about both video games shows that there are many people who have taken offense to the representations of masculinity and femininity they experienced in both games, but specifically in the discussion on *GTA V*. It is precisely in the online discussion, going into my third theme, that intersects at my main debate. In my sub-chapter, the magic circle, I identified different lines of reasoning that to some extent fit into the debate on play.

Based on my data analysis, there was a small group of people who fell in line with Johan Huizinga's argument that play is in every way separate from the actual world. However, the majority of my data suggests that there is indeed an ambiguity to the distinction between the play world and the actual world. In this research then, the concept of the magic circle where the world of play is completely separate from the actual world does not hold up for the specific cases I studied. To answer my research question on what gender representations mean in a play world, I argue that they are not to be underestimated. Although their influence – whether good or bad – is not all-encompassing, they do matter. The representations in the two video games matter to the people who have played them, including myself. What happens in the play world may not be conflated with the actual world, but it does help to contribute to normalizations of

notions of gender. I – and the other people I studied in this thesis – would rather have this process of normalization happen to positive representations of gender, than the negative ones.

For further research, I would suggest that case studies on gender representations will contribute to a better understanding of what value this holds for people, while remaining attuned to the complexities of the subject. Another interesting line of inquiry might be to, once again, compare the successor of *GTA V*, which will be *GTA VI*, to *Mirror's Edge: Catalyst*, which was released in 2016. With rumors of *GTA VI*, which will most likely be released in the next couple of years, already making the rounds, it would be interesting to see how these newer versions of both games stack up to each other.

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