

The Tenets of Knighthood:
The Framing of Gender and the Civic Imagination in Online Fan-Discourse Surrounding *Gotham Knights*

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MA Thesis New Media and Digital Culture
April 21st, 2024

Abstract: Batman has been a cultural figure for the better part of the last century and undergone much change in that time and become a transmedial figure. This thesis discusses and explores the ways in which fans of the Batman game title *Gotham Knights* frame and discuss the topic of gender within the title, as well as how these fans may engage with the civic imagination to explore alternative game experiences and narratives. Using a framing analysis to examine online posts shared to Reddit and Steam forums, this thesis explores how gameric discourse is used to frame female villains, construct masculinity through nostalgia and the gaming industry, and explore the ways in which co-creative thought and the civic imagination offer suggestions for further growth in diversity and acceptance.

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Introduction

Batman, perhaps one of the western world's most well-known comic book figures, has been part of the geek zeitgeist for the better part of the last century, ever since his introduction in detective comic #27 in 1939.¹ In the time since his introduction, Batman's story has been adapted, changed, rewritten, retconned, and resurrected more times than any fan or Detective Comics (DC) writer seems to be able to keep up with. Yet, the supply of stories about the caped crusader appears to be endless. There always seem to be more stories to be told and adaptations to be made featuring the beloved vigilante, all the while further solidifying his extensive legacy—especially within the context of fan discussions and fan media. Needless to say, the Dark Knight has captured the hearts of nerds, geeks, and academics alike.

The 2022 RPG videogame title *Gotham Knights*² spurred a series of online discussions which form the basis of this thesis: adding onto the long-standing legacy of Batman media and games while also reflecting the ways in which this research space is ever changing. However, while this genre often remediates existing standards of hypermasculinity (therefor also holding powers to enact change in such identities)³, there is also still be interest in the game from those who fall outside the targeted audience and therefor carry a different perspective, especially within the scope of larger transmedial franchises. These speculations lead me to posing the following research question; How does the gaming community frame gender in online discussions of *Gotham Knights*?

To expand on this question, I also want to ask the following sub-questions; how do we see performances of masculinity within the fan discourses? How do fans of *Gotham Knights* employ the use of civic imagination to envision change? And how are the frames established within these fan spaces a reflection of gamic discourse?

In this thesis, I reflect on the existing discussions around the representation of gender identities within games that have, like Catwoman in Arkham City, often been limited to a small and narrow mould to appease to the main demographic and expand upon them, while simultaneously exploring how these sorts of games reaffirm and shape a sense of masculine

¹ Roberta Pearson, Willam Uricchio, and Will Brooker, ed. *Many More Lives of the Batman*. London: British Film Institute, 2015. 13-20.

² WB Games Montréal, *Gotham Knights*, Warner Bros. Games, PC/ PS5/Xbox Series X/Xbox Series S, 2022.

³ Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, "Introduction: Masculinity and Gaming: Mediated Masculinities in Play," introduction, in *Masculinities in Play* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 7.

identity as well. Like many forms of media that have been socially determined to be “geeky”, Batman is a narrative written and constructed for and by male, heterosexual, often white, creators.⁴

To approach my research, I have chosen to use a framing analysis as it will allow me to properly situate and use fan discourse to understand what aspects of gender within the game have caught people’s attention. Additionally, a framing analysis will allow me to acknowledge and group patterns within the discourse to highlight recurring comments and critiques, as well as constructive thoughts without having gathered every possible post or comment regarding the topics of gender and gender representation within *Gotham Knights*. This grouping will help me come to understand what aspects of the game’s narrative and world building have landed with the audience, as well as how people react to these decisions and their implementations which will allow me to best understand and exemplify what was done well and could be replicated in future game titles, as well as understand what areas might need further improvement. Additionally, this approach allows me to bring in voices whose opinions and experiences may differ from my own, and therefor will allow me to present legitimate ideas for further change whereas if this thesis focused on all that I noticed as an avid fan via textual analysis, my suggestions would more accurately be a reflection of my own hopes and dreams.

To further diversify my suggestions, I will be pulling from a range of discussions surrounding the topics and seeing which patterns emerge, such as discussions surrounding the presence of female enemy NPCs⁵ and the presence of female villains, a nostalgic desire for a return to the way things were,⁶ the role of these games in the construction and reaffirmation of gender identity, the inclusion and expansion of the role of Harley Quinn,⁷ and dreams for a

⁴ Carlen Lavigne, “‘I’m Batman’ (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series,” *Cinema Journal* 55, no. 1 (September 2015): 134.

⁵ Another Game Where Most of the Enemies Are Female. Why Is This a Thing? :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, October 22, 2022; <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3490878556689580259/>.

“R/Gothamknights on Reddit: This Game Makes You Hit Women.,” Reddit, October 26, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/GothamKnights/comments/ye6r4u/this_game_makes_you_hit_women/.

⁶ “History Repeats Itself Again and Again.. :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, November 23, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3594464430429341597/>.

⁷ “R/GothamKnights on reddit: Gotham Knights FINALLY Fixed the Harley Quinn Problem!,” Reddit, August 26, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/GothamKnights/comments/wyja3u/gotham_knights_finally_fixed_the_harley_quinn/.

different future for games. With these thoughts, and texts by George Lakoff⁸ and Robin Lakoff,⁹ as well as Vorhees' work "Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses,"¹⁰ and Henry Jenkins¹¹, I will explore the role of civic imagination and co-creative thought to establish and explore the importance of presenting a diverse representation in media.

Academic Relevance

The prolonged tenure of the world's greatest detective has paved the way for many academic discussions, even just within the last two decades. With texts ranging from *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*¹² by Brooker in 2001, delving into the origins of the masked vigilante, the role of fandom, and the beloved character's potential for queerness, to Lavigne's 2015 analysis of gender in the Batman: Arkham City "I'm batman (and you can be too): 'gender' and constructive play in the Arkham game series"¹³, wherein she explores the framing and construction of gender in the second game in the Batman Arkham series, Arkham City, to Brooker, Pearson, and Uricchio's book *Many More Lives of the Batman*¹⁴ exploring the continued complexities of the character into modern day. The academic discussion of Batman also includes extensive literature exploring the representation of mental illness within the franchise, such as in the article "What's Diagnosis Got to Do With it?: Psychiatry, Comics and *Batman: The Killing Joke*"¹⁵ by Zullo, and many more, all exploring separate aspects of the extensive, intertextual, and complex Batman mythos.

This thesis aims to build on the aforementioned 2015 article written by Lavigne exploring the changing role and framing of gender within the extended Batman franchise, using an exploration of the community discussions surrounding the 2022 Batman franchise title *Gotham*

⁸ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁹ Robin Lakoff, "Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting 'Women' and 'Power' in the Same Sentence," *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, January 2003, 160–78.

¹⁰ Gerald Vorhees, "Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses," *Futures of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2012).

¹¹ Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova, eds., *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

¹² Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked : Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2001.

¹³ Carlen Lavigne, "'I'm Batman' (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series," 133–41.

¹⁴ Roberta Pearson, Willam Uricchio, and Will Brooker, ed. *Many More Lives of the Batman*. London: British Film Institute, 2015.

¹⁵ Valentino L. Zullo, "What's Diagnosis Got to Do With it?: Psychiatry, Comics and *Batman: The Killing Joke*." *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society* 2, no. 2 (2018): 194-214. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ink.2018.0013>.

Knights.¹⁶ This research will simultaneously help to explore how the gamic space has changed since Lavigne's text in 2015, while also exploring the role of fan discussions in the analysing of videogames and other franchised media, therefor allowing me to offer actionable future steps for companies to continue on improving the represented diversity in media, and simultaneously highlighting the importance of fans in the continued growth and existence of media properties. I aim to continue from where Lavigne left off and explore gender within the larger Batman videogame canon as it has been continued since the publishing of her article in 2015 specifically focusing on the ways in which the community receives and contributes to the ever-changing representation of gender and gender diversity within the established Batman storyboard. As put by Salter and Blodgett, Batman is "the geek hypermasculine ideal", a figure who embodies the most masculine traits, the strength and brute force, but also the intelligence to think his way out of trouble.¹⁷

The publication of *Gotham Knights*¹⁸ and its role in continuing the franchise of Batman games offers us the opportunity to revisit Lavigne's work with the lens of a more recently published topical game and see how the framing of gender within the Batman mythos and storyworld has changed in the 9 years since her article. The *Gotham Knights* title carries over certain traditions of the Batman and comics mythos yet focuses on some of Batman's closest teammates rather than the Caped Crusader himself. Within this thesis I aim to explore the ways in which gender presentation has changed, specifically through the lens of the fan perceptions of these design decisions and changes, which will show us an insight into the community reactions, emphasizing the importance of fandom in the process of keeping media alive, and showing us both what could have been done better, but also what people felt was done well, and should therefore be repeated. Unpacking the baggage of Batman has found its place in the world of academia, and continues to remain topical, reinvigorated with each new iteration and adaptation, from this thesis's focus *Gotham Knights*¹⁹, to the most recent DC title *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*.²⁰

¹⁶ WB Games Montréal, *Gotham Knights*, Warner Bros. Games, PC/ PS5/Xbox Series X/Xbox Series S, 2022.

¹⁷ Anastasia Salter, and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing*, 1st ed. 2017. Cham: Springer International Publishing: Imprint: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

¹⁸ WB Games Montréal, *Gotham Knights*, Warner Bros. Games, PC/ PS5/Xbox Series X/Xbox Series S, 2022.

¹⁹ WB Games Montréal, *Gotham Knights*, Warner Bros. Games, PC/ PS5/Xbox Series X/Xbox Series S, 2022.

²⁰ Rocksteady Studios, *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League*, Warner Bros. Games, PC/ PS5/Xbox Series X/Xbox Series S, 2024.

Yet, though all these analyses and retellings of Batman explore various aspects and interpretations of this long-standing cultural icon; ranging from questions of represented progress, to a wide range of adaptations, to the various taboos explored through the narratives within the large comic canon, such as done by Brooker throughout his explorations of the caped crusader, to fandom interactions, there is always more left to explore when it come to the vigilante and his ever growing contingent of colleagues, co-workers, and sidekicks.

Theory

To begin with in my exploration of the relevant theory, I will start by looking into the narrative of Batman and offer insight into the narrative and cultural implications that are set forth by this media franchise which will be important to be aware of throughout the construction of the rest of my following arguments. I will then continue on to explore the role of fan works and the civic imagination, as well as the way these elements interact with one-another. This will then lead into a brief exploration of the role of gender, exploring how people may feel pressured to perform a certain gender expression and how these ideas are re-affirmed by the media they consume. In this segment there will also be a discussion as to how gender and the idea of masculinity are constructed and reinforced by gamic narratives and representations. The following section will then discuss the importance of world-building in establishing the setting and how these visual decisions impact the ways in which players receive information regarding diversity. Then to both conclude this theoretical exploration, and bridge to my methodological considerations, I will be discussing the importance of networked selves and identity within online commenting spaces as well as the gamic nature of such commenting, and how discussions on online forums shape opinions, which will provide the canvas for the method of my analysis.

Narrative and Cultural Implications of the Batman Media Franchise

The character of Batman was first introduced into the superhero comics canon by Detective Comics (DC) back in 1939. First created by Bob Kane and Bill Finger,²¹ the caped crusader has

²¹ Roberta Pearson, Willam Uricchio, and Will Brooker, ed. *Many More Lives of the Batman*. London: British Film Institute, 2015. 13-20.

taken on a mythos of his own that has allowed him to remain relevant and interesting to a modern audience.²² Batman is able to change, able to put on different faces and capes depending on who represents him, and in what medium he is being presented, his adaptability making him suitable for ever changing audiences.²³ He has become a transmedial icon, persisting through the ages and adapting to match his ever changing audience and socio-political landscape.

The adaptability of Batman has not only seen him survive in the ever-changing media landscape, adapting to narratives suited to changing audience tastes, but has also made him adaptable in forms beyond the narrative. The flexible nature of the Batman character and setting helped establish the foundation for a storyworld long before such a phenomenon had a name, leaving him ideally suited for a number of various kinds of adaptations across various media forms.²⁴ After nearly a decade, we have reached a point that telling a story within the setting of Batman, without the titular character, is not only possible- but engaging. It is that predisposition for change which makes me think that *Gotham Knights*, set within the Batman transmedia franchise, is so suited for exploring discussions of gender within the contingent fandom. The Batman franchise has both a long-term dedicated audience, comprised of fans who know all there is to know about the caped crusader, as well as fans who are intimately familiar with a single specific version of the man- a version relevant to one of the many different iterations of the character tied into a single era of his existence. Then there also the people, familiar with Batman in a passing sense, the way people are familiar with any other large scale, long lasting, pop-culture phenomenon, who are familiar with the dark knight in name only.

The initial basis of this thesis comes from Lavigne's work regarding Batman, and where the *Arkham* game series intersects with Gender.²⁵ She explores the role of gender within the Arkham game series as established in universe, and what the effects and implications were of certain design and narrative decisions on the game. As is highlighted by Lavigne within her article, gaming and the gameric space offers the space to challenge perspectives of those who engage with the worlds through offering players characters she describes as being

²² Will Brooker, *Batman Unmasked : Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. 35.

²³ Roberta Pearson, Willam Uricchio, and Will Brooker, ed. *Many More Lives of the Batman*. 13-20.

²⁴ Dan Hassler-Forest, "The Politics of World Building," essay, in *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industry*, ed. Marta Boni (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 380.

²⁵ Carlen Lavigne, "'I'm Batman' (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series." 133-41.

“inhabitable”.²⁶ Within *Gotham Knights*, the player is immediately able to choose another female character, Batgirl, who offers a female character with agency for the player to inhabit from the outset. The player is able to place themselves within the experience of both male and female coded characters from the start of the game, establishing an equality between Batgirl and the other three male player characters.

In contrast to the world of *Arkham City*, where there are only a few opportunities for the player to control Catwoman, offering little opportunity for players to inhabit a female character and female NPCs are few and far between, the world presented to the player by *Gotham Knights* offers a much wider range of female coded characters for the player to engage with. However, despite having these female characters, they are often times left to the wayside, assume they are present at all.²⁷ Yet, their presence and acknowledgement are steeped in the feminist movements, such as Batgirl’s presence being used to remind women to seek equal pay in the 70s, and later running for (and winning) a position in Congress.²⁸ While playing *Gotham Knights*, the player is immersed in a world which through its range in NPCs and player characters more closely replicates our reality than *Arkham City* ever did.²⁹

Civic Imagination and Co-Creative Thinking in Fandom and Fan works

The concept of civic imagination was introduced in the works of Henry Jenkins and is used in reference to the role and importance of the input and community interpretation of a potential future. This mode of co-creative thinking closely relates to the nature of exploring and understanding the role of community comments within a gamic space wherein fans are able to imagine ways a media franchise close to their heart could be different to reflect versions of reality most relatable to them. In the case of this thesis, the terms co-creative thought and civic imagination work to reflect the concept of a constructed collaborative understanding of a fictionalized world extending beyond the boundaries of actioned changes to a game or narrative. With these terms I aim to emphasize the focus of my research onto the imagined possibilities presented by commentators rather than focus on tangible changes made to the game by members

²⁶ Ibid., 134.

²⁷ Roberta Pearson, Willam Uricchio, and Will Brooker, ed. *Many More Lives of the Batman*, 134–152.

²⁸ Ibid., 134-152.

²⁹ Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia Education: The 7 Principles Revisited - Pop Junctions,” Henry Jenkins, June 21, 2010, https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2010/06/transmedia_education_the_7_pri.html.

of the community. This focus will allow for an exploration of the discussions in online space, and make it possible to engage with, and examine, ideas not necessarily reflective of my own.

In the introduction to part one in his book, Jenkins states that “before you can change the world, you need a vision of what a better world might look like” which is precisely what proves the power and role of civic imagination.³⁰ Understanding the civic imagination and engaging with alternative thoughts provided by an audience who cared enough about the game to think of how it *could* have been different plays an important role in understanding how such games play a role in understanding what a different world could be like. This mode of engagement sees an audience taking an active role to imagine how a game that they already enjoy could be better. Communal online forums offer the space to construct and adjust narratives to versions within which audiences feel seen, feel challenged, and feel secure. The civic imagination is what offers people the ability to let themselves explore ways that both the digital and physical world could be different, how the future could perhaps be better.

Within this thesis, the co-creative thought and civic imagination we explore is presented through publicly shared texts. These various posts are shared by fans on social platforms where others turn to look for information about the game, what was good, what might have been better or different all engage with the civic imagination to imagine a different reality both in-game and beyond. Therefore, it is also important to establish that this co-creative thought does not act nor exist in a vacuum, and is relayed to us through various frames, some of which I will be exploring during my analysis. It is also important to keep in mind as I further elaborate on frames and their roles during the discussion of my methods, that frames are intrinsically linked with the theories behind co-creative thought and the civic imagination. It is these frames which allow for people to construct, communicate, and share alternative futures and lives they hope to lead one day with a wider audience.

The Construction and Reaffirming of Gender

Salter and Blogget explore how gender is shaped and reaffirmed within media spaces, which often times are heavily skewed and coded to highlight and reflect masculine ideals and

³⁰ Henry Jenkins, Gabriel Peters-Lazaro, and Sangita Shresthova, eds., *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change*, 31.

identities.³¹ As they write, “In life, straight white male might be the easiest difficulty level: in gaming, straight white male is the default avatar” a choice that makes it difficult for games to break out of the “straight white male gaze”.³² This consistent reaffirming of the life experience and superiority of a certain targeted demographic within the videogame sphere, alongside with the often times very immersive nature of games pulling the player into the spaces constructed for them by the developers and teaching them about a certain expression of the world around them creates an environment ripe for encouraging those who play games with a traditional masculine expression as a way to reaffirm their own gender and gender expression.³³

The notion of a reaffirmation of gender expression is also one that has been explored within academic literature. Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees wrote that, historically the gaming industry has served the “neo-colonialist white patriarchy”.³⁴ The introduction to their book about masculinity within games explores how the games industry is a powerful space, with the ability to both enrich and impoverish as a consequence of the highly mobile nature of game development.³⁵ In their exploration, they state that the world of videogames has “historically been the domain of men and boys”, and that this perception alongside the societal structure of patriarchy have continued to be reproduced and reinforced through “production, marketing, consumption, and critique of digital games”.³⁶ The presence of masculinity, and the ways in which media production and consumption reinforce these ideals, is not a monolith, and the various expressions of it are “crucially, *reconstituted and reconfigured through games*”.³⁷ This yearning for a reconstitution of masculine identity, and a reaffirmation of the players male-ness is seen in the comments surrounding *Gotham Knights*, with commentators on social media going so far as making sweeping statements asserting a straight male identity as the majority in gaming

³¹ Anastasia Salter, and Bridget Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media: Sexism, Trolling, and Identity Policing*, 9.

³² *Ibid.*, 75.

³³ Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia Education: The 7 Principles Revisited - Pop Junctions,”

³⁴ Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, “Introduction: Masculinity and Gaming: Mediated Masculinities in Play,” introduction, in *Masculinities in Play*, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

demographics,³⁸ and making claims about what a legitimate gamer would want to see in a game.³⁹

Yet, it is important to emphasize and remember that even the highly masculinized identities and ideals are constructed. While these games offer a consistent reaffirmation of masculinity, this is still a reaffirmation of a socially produced identity.⁴⁰ Over time, such repeated performances of gender and various archetypes of maleness can start to feel inescapable- and those performing them may come to believe them as natural, yet it is important to note that these ideals and structures are not inescapable. These constructed forms of masculinity are not set in stone, and there is always opportunity for growth and change, just as there is no one way to be masculine.

Returning to ideas posed in the work by Lavigne let us explore which of her statements hold true, as well as what may have changed over time, such as the ability to play as Batgirl from the start, meaning the role of strong female character has become more inhabitable than Catwoman ever was.⁴¹ Lavigne's article also further exemplified the representation of women in the extended Batman franchise. Throughout her article she explores the positioning of feminine figures in the world of Batman, as established through the Batman: Arkham game series (known more colloquially amongst fans as the Arkham-verse), and notes that their presence has been limited, likely as a consequence of the way mainstream superhero works have often times chosen to present "men as hypermasculine authority figures".⁴² She argues that, despite the player's ability to play as Catwoman at certain points throughout the game, she remains "both a victim and a sex object".⁴³ She is the only female character to fight herself, rather than via proxies, and the other female characters that are featured in the game are persistently positioned as damsels in distress, in need of saving or having others fight on their behalf, and as objects of sexual desire.⁴⁴ There are few other NPC women who appear throughout *Batman: Arkham City*, and when they

³⁸ "History Repeats Itself Again and Again... :: Gotham Knights General Discussions," Steam Community, November 23, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3594464430429341597/>.

³⁹ Ibid.,

⁴⁰ Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, "Introduction: Masculinity and Gaming: Mediated Masculinities in Play," introduction, in *Masculinities in Play*, 10.

⁴¹ Carlen Lavigne, "'I'm Batman' (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series," 136.

⁴² Carlen Lavigne, "'I'm Batman' (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series," 134.

⁴³ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 136.

do they are not only positioned as incapable of saving themselves, but again also as objects to capture the male gaze, objectified and clearly unsafe in Gotham City. Though most notable has to be the conspicuous absence of female NPCs, something the *Gotham Knights* title has rectified.⁴⁵ Lavigne also highlights that within the combat scenarios players face when controlling Catwoman, her fighting remains sexualized, but more notably, her opponents are always men.⁴⁶ Even when the player plays as Catwoman, her demeanour is sultry, and her stance invokes thoughts of the femme fatale, rather than a vigilante capable of holding her own regardless of her sex appeal.⁴⁷

Politics and Perceptions of World Building

One key theoretical consideration in the exploration of gender representation within any media property is the role and importance of world building. The world constructed for players to interact with may be realistic, or fantastical- but no matter how closely the world reflects life, and how much thought has gone into every small detail, the world remains a constructed reality, and the choices made during the process of constructing that reality hold implications which reach far beyond the scope of a screen.⁴⁸ Building a storyworld, as discussed by Hassler-Forest allows for fans to engage with the media property in a variety of ways, while also constructing a reality that is useable beyond just the bounds the constructed media property.⁴⁹ These worlds provide spaces for audience participation, and engagement, and DC's superhero franchises are quite possibly some of the biggest examples of this to date, alongside the worlds of Star Wars, Star Trek, and more. Between the game, comics, and TV show all published under the title of *Gotham Knights*, and all of which take place within the same world: the same Gotham, the story has undoubtedly become a storyworld.

The story of *Gotham Knights* is told in one such storyworld, built on the foundations of the long-standing ideas and concepts of Batman, and the ever-chaotic Gotham City. Yet in the context of this storyworld, more is relevant than just the parts used to construct its whole. Boni's foreword establishes the role of worldbuilding in the process of narrative construction within any

⁴⁵ Ibid.,138.

⁴⁶ Ibid 137

⁴⁷ Ibid., 136-137.

⁴⁸ Dan Hassler-Forest, "The Politics of World Building," essay, in *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industry*, 379.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 38.

form of media, exploring the role of worldbuilding as the key to further unlocking the contemporary media landscape.⁵⁰ She also highlights the role of fan engagement and interaction in the process of “making and remaking” the storyworlds that house the narratives they love, and the ways in which advances of digital media forms such as the internet have offered more room than ever before for fans to share such ideas in a visible way.⁵¹

The importance of worldbuilding, already emphasized by Boni in her foreword, is then also further explored and expanded in the chapter by Dan Hassler-Forest, who calls storyworlds “both commercial properties and sites of audience participation” while emphasizing the important role this aspect to storytelling plays in an ever-changing political landscape.⁵² In the case of this thesis, the world building is of significance because not only does it encompass the digital assets that shape the virtual world, the buildings of Gotham City and the night sky overhead as you go out on missions, but the NPCs you fight. The decision to include female coded NPCs, such as the female grunts and the Godmother mini bosses, is just as much a part of the construction of this digital space as the street art you drive by.

The act of storytelling has, in many ways, become an act of building a fictional world for the audience to engage with, and a way to encourage fans to engage with the civic imagination—allowing them to imagine changes both within the digital space, and beyond.⁵³

Online Reviews as Networked Publics and Gamic Discourses

Much like the idea of imagined communities first posited by Benedict Anderson in his text *Imagined Communities*, which offers an exploration of the act of constructing a sense of identity within colonial spaces through the use of narrative texts to construct a sense of shared identity and unity within a group, the internet and online communities offer a similar virtual town square.⁵⁴ The concept of imagined communities is often used in post-colonial spheres, however the shared sense of community and unity created through the narratives surrounding the modern digital culture work comparatively to bring together people from a wide variety of

⁵⁰ Marta Boni, “Introduction: Worlds Today.” Introduction. In *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, edited by Marta Boni, 9–27. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017, 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 17–18.

⁵² Dan Hassler-Forest, “The Politics of World Building,” essay, in *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industry*, 378.

⁵³ Marta Boni, “Introduction: Worlds Today.” Introduction. In *World Building: Transmedia, Fans, Industries*, 11.

⁵⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London ; New York: Verso, 2006).

backgrounds and establish a sense of shared identity on the basis of a common interest or hobby.⁵⁵

The concept of networked identities, as explored by Papacharissi⁵⁶ applies a similar mode of thought to the establishment of internet culture, and the ways in which the manner of speech in online spaces can help shape or reaffirm both a sense of shared identity and community. The opinions shared by one member of the community, even in online spaces, affects the ways in which the object or experience being reviewed is perceived by others who also consider themselves members of said same community.⁵⁷ Camilla Vásquez and Dacota Liska also explore the interconnectedness of online and offline identities, and how both influence one another in turn, and how online reviews are used as a mode of identity construction and reaffirmation on online social platforms.⁵⁸

Additionally, Gerald Vorhees helps establish the significance of the role of audience participation and perception within this discussion regarding frames, exploring this mode of identity construction within the sphere of games and gamic discourses; as well as how discourse in online commenting spaces itself can be considered gamic, which he defines as to be “as if communication is a digital game”.⁵⁹ In his article Vorhees establishes that games “not only engage in multiple levels of representation— textual, visual, aural, narrative and procedural – but also are woven into and through the discursive formations that give shape to contemporary culture”.⁶⁰ To Vorhees, digital games are not only stories in and of themselves, but also well suited to offering an audience generative sites, contexts wherein it becomes possible to explore new what ifs, and possible futures not yet our own.⁶¹

Vorhees’ text offers an understanding that alongside telling the player stories, digital games make arguments, and how engaging in this discourse is a game in its own way as well.⁶² The design and narrative of a game not only functions within the role of catalyst for conversation, but also offers those who play the game a forum with established boundaries to

⁵⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 7.

⁵⁶ Zizi Papacharissi, ed. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010, 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁵⁸ Camilla Vásquez and Dacota Liska, “Online Identity and Discourse Analysis,” essay, in *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2023).

⁵⁹ Gerald Vorhees, “Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses,” *Futures of Communication* 1, no. 1 (2012), 1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 6.

discuss and tackle the larger, more complex, issues that have been knowingly or unknowingly woven throughout the story in all its facets.⁶³ The narrative within a game, and the related implications this has on a socio-political landscape does not exist in isolation, and a significant portion of the established narrative depends on the perspective and approach of the audience who engages with and discusses the game. The creation of meaning is, at least in part, a circular process resulting from a never-ending exchange between consumer and creator, engaging in co-creative thought, civic imagination (and in some instances even co-creative creation), through online forums, platforms, and archives.

Method

Framing Analysis

As mentioned previously, the main methodological approach for this thesis will be a framing analysis. Framing, as used by both George Lakoff, as well as Robin Lakoff, is the act of positioning a narrative, highlighting certain aspects or traits of a situation while diminishing other aspects. Framing, according to George Lakoff allows us to “comprehend one aspect of a term in terms of another”.⁶⁴ How a situation is framed is able to affect the ways in which a situation is perceived. Inversely, the ways in which a situation is perceived may also influence how it is framed by an audience, with the context impacting which elements of a narrative will be considered important or relevant by an audience, and which might be considered lesser, changing the phrasing used when discussing a topic to affect how the topic is perceived.⁶⁵ Framing as a methodology helps us in the exploration of the ways in which what is being said within a group, as well as *how* those things are said have an impact beyond the post itself. As is explored within the context of gender and politics by Robin Lakoff, there is a complex relation between reality and fiction, and “the line between art and propaganda can fuzzy”.⁶⁶ Even when a

⁶³ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁴ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 17.

⁶⁵ Robin Lakoff, “Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting ‘Women’ and ‘Power’ in the Same Sentence,” *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, January 2003, 173.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 163.

narrative disavows political influence, claims apoliticality, it still holds sway over its audience's opinions and interpretations of the socio-political landscape around them.⁶⁷

Choosing what to say, how to say it as well as choosing what to omit, directly affects how an audience will perceive the words and ideas being proposed. Even in denying the power of framing as a tool, one engages with “a form of manipulative control”.⁶⁸ An example of such an effect would be the decision on whether to use the words “fighting female NPCs” versus using the phrase “pummelling women”⁶⁹ when discussing the presence of female NPC characters in the world constructed within *Gotham Knights*. The first phrasing showcased here acknowledges and places emphasis on the capability of the enemies and reminds anyone reading it that these characters are ultimately programmed pixels that have been visually represented in a way that reads to us as an audience as female. The second statement implies a sense of helplessness on behalf of the NPCs and simultaneously ignores the distinction between fiction and reality implied within the first phrasing, while also placing them into a semblance of helplessness.

Approaching the selected posts with a framing lens will allow for the examination of the interaction of the factors and theories discussed above, while also allowing for a level of nuance within the analysis. This understanding of nuance will enable an examination of how various opinions from the community have been presented through gathering online posts under a selection of different overarching frames. Acknowledging nuance will help explore both deliberate and emerging patterns in the constructive and critical opinions of people, while also understanding that these opinions have been created and presented within certain contexts and reflect different backgrounds. The way in which the argument is brought and constructed, how the argument is framed, impacts the ways in which a reading audience is likely to perceive it, and what aspects of the situation they will take away from the discourse. This is partially done by choosing the topic itself that is being framed, and partially done by choosing specific terms and what elements of the situation to emphasize.

However, while Lakoff created a solid base understanding of the power of framing in discussions of gender, her explorations of framing exist outside the gamic space. It is for this reason that the text written by Vorhees is also important to the methodological construction of

⁶⁷ Ibid., 163-164.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 169.

⁶⁹ “History Repeats Itself Again and Again.. :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, November 23, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3594464430429341597/>.

my analysis, and not only relevant in theoretical considerations. Vorhees's work establishes that the powers of framing are not only relevant within the role of politics as established by Lakoff, but in effect for online gamic discourse and within the world of games themselves- stating that "digital games exemplify textuality", meaning that methods of analysis relevant within more classical areas of study can be applied to games and fan discourses in an equivalent way, while making considerations for the impact of the medium on the message.⁷⁰ The intersection between Lakoff and Vorhees works to cement the presence of frames within games and other comparable forms of media, emphasizing the role of games as texts, which allows for the consideration of context which frames and directs a player's actions. Beyond this, it also allows us to acknowledge that games and gamic narratives hold notable influence over their audience's perception and perspective on complex social issues.⁷¹ Each design decision made in the process of developing and publishing a game has implications for the perspective of the audience it reaches, establishing a "productive tension" between the rules of a game and person playing it, and having the power to spark a larger discussion.⁷²

Within the space of this analysis, the construction of online frames works to support the exploration as to what effects pushing boundaries within games may have upon what an audience is willing to accept and accommodate. While also guiding an exploration into what various audience groups might reject. This use of frames helps demonstrate the importance of creating storyworlds that offer a representation that is diverse and engaging, with the ability to push and challenge a game's main demographic. Presenting certain scenarios and settings within the gamic space, and framing them in a variety of ways, creates the opportunity for "contextualiz[ing] player's actions" in a renewed context, and encourages questioning the status quo.⁷³ Even when women are present only in small numbers when compared to men, it is quickly perceived to be the case that they are dominating the discussion.⁷⁴ This is something seen within the selected comments as well, with one commentor complaining about a supposed 2:1 ratio of female to male NPCs.⁷⁵ In these contexts, women are framed as irrational, driven by emotions, weak willed

⁷⁰ Gerald Vorhees, "Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses," 9.

⁷¹ Ibid., 11.

⁷² Ibid., 12.

⁷³ Ian Bogost, "Videogames and Ideological Frames." *Popular Communication* 4, no. 3 (August 2006): 169.

⁷⁴ Robin Lakoff, "Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting 'Women' and 'Power' in the Same Sentence," 162.

⁷⁵ R/Gothamknights on Reddit: This Game Makes You Hit Women.," Reddit, October 26, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/GothamKnights/comments/ye6r4u/this_game_makes_you_hit_women/.

– and when the emotions expressed are those few that have come to imply power, the expression of them is diminished, and rendered childlike.⁷⁶ Lakoff explores the intricacies of the ways in which women in positions of power are framed and represented across various institutions.

Corpus

For the purposes of this thesis and my analysis, I have selected posts from both the r/GothamKnights sub-Reddit, and the game’s Steam page. I selected 6 discussion posts from the sub-Reddit, and an additional 10 posts from both the games Steam discussion page and the game reviews. To select these posts, I searched using the terms ‘gender’, ‘woman’, ‘women’, ‘female’, as well as ‘Harley Quinn’. I then selected a variety of posts from what came up that I felt would offer the basis for a well-rounded analysis. Many of the posts, especially those critical of the game or released closely following the game’s launch focused heavily on the issues of the game. Specifically, the majority of reviews appeared to be focused on aspects of the game such as bugs, graphics, performance, or framerates- however between those the number of posts that in some way, shape, or form, engaged with the presence of gender within the game were quite present.

The posts originate from a period surrounding the release of the game starting in August of 2022, to late October 2023. This specific time range was chosen to allow for the inclusion of both posts made by the early adapters, as well as the group of players who may not have engaged with the game before it became available through game streaming platforms. Additionally, early on following the game’s release there were a lot of discussions to be held regarding the technical aspects of the game, and therefor there was less discussion in regard to the visuals. Making the decision to cover a wider range of time also allows for the inclusion of a larger demographic of players, ranging from the hardcore DC fans who bought the game on launch and went into it with limited prior knowledge of what to expect to the people who may have bought the game much later, and went into the story with preconceived expectations as to what the game experience might be like.

⁷⁶ Robin Lakoff, “Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting ‘Women’ and ‘Power’ in the Same Sentence,” 163.

Analysis

Platform Differences and Similarities

While for the purposes of this analysis, Steam and Reddit posts will be treated the same, and no consistent distinction between the two platforms will be made, it is important to acknowledge that despite similarities the two platforms are not the same. Steam is a digital marketplace, set up for the sale of games. Opinions and discussions posted there are shared with the intention of informing people who might be considering buying the game, while also offering a space for reviews to be visibly linked alongside these purchases, meaning these reviews are more likely to influence the purchasing decisions of an audience.⁷⁷ Additionally, Steam's recommendations and "queue" system means that on this platform the content is also more likely to reach people who have little other knowledge of Batman and the extended series of transmedial properties associated with it, therefor gathering a different demographic.

Comparatively, Reddit separates out various communities into sub-groups related to specific interests into sub-Reddits. Here, while it is possible to receive recommendations of new sub-Reddits, the audience within a niche community such as r/GothamKnights on Reddit is much more likely to be familiar with the game and associated other media properties. People may reference a site like Reddit for reviews, but it is a space for discourse and discussion rather than a site for reviews. Moreso, Reddit assumes the role of a forum space wherein people are able to offer advice, discuss exploits, and analyse the decisions made during the game's production in a level of depth not always possible on Steam. Additionally, Reddit as a consequence of offering a range of smaller communities allows for more moderation and control as to what can or cannot be said within a certain sub-Reddit.

Both platforms also offer different dynamics that will be important to be aware of going forward. Steam encourages its own brand of humour, allowing people to react to reviews labelling them as "funny" alongside the usual upvote and downvote options, which are also available and commonly used on Reddit. The inclusion of a "funny" option encourages the gamification of the process of sharing opinions, establishing social rules to follow and use to construct a game-like experience.⁷⁸ Not only are people now sharing what they think of the game

⁷⁷ Zizi Papacharissi, ed. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, 27.

⁷⁸ Gerald Vorhees, "Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses," 8.

on Steam for the benefit of others but also to gain approval, something that research has shown can impact other's perception of a media product.⁷⁹ The effect of this social game are seen throughout multiple posts, wherein various people comment on Batgirl's butt or other aspects of the visuals of her character model,⁸⁰ each of which follow a comparable format, and were met with a very positive community reaction, garnering on average 300+ reactions of "funny" with the exception of the post that used this as a way to criticize the game and warn people away from purchasing⁸¹ which only had 65 "funny" reactions, and a similar post which flipped this model around and commented on the butt of a male character,⁸² which received 71 "funny" reactions. (Figure 1)

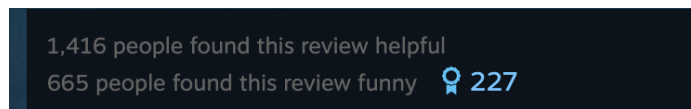


Figure 1- Review demonstrating the use of “funny” and “Helpful” markings in Steam reviews.

I believe that these ideas along with a sense of communal identity supported by the metaphorical town square of the internet allow for the constructing of a networked and imagined community, which influence the ways in which people experience a game. This experience then informs how they are expected to act and present themselves, and likely informs which frames they felt compelled to adhere to within the frames I will highlight and analyse in this thesis.

⁷⁹ Zizi Papacharissi, ed. *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, 2.

⁸⁰ “Gotham Knights Reviews: After 6 months of patching,” Steam Community, June 10, 2023. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

“Gotham Knights Reviews: batgirl got a nice booty” Steam Community, October 21, 2022. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

“Gotham Knights Reviews: I wish batgirl chocked me out with her thigh like she does to them.” Steam Community, October 28, 2022. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

“Gotham Knights Reviews: batgirl so thick she crashes the game.” Steam Community, December 25, 2022. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

⁸¹ “Gotham Knights Reviews: batgirl so thick she crashes the game.” Steam Community, December 25, 2022. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

⁸² “Gotham Knights Reviews: they gave Nightwing a fat ass so the game deserves praise for that.” Steam Community, November 29, 2023. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

Frames

Throughout *Gotham Knights*- or at least amongst the people who play it, discussions on gender appear time and time again, and within this section I aim to highlight some of the many patterns within the selected discussions. Whether the discourses engage positively or negatively with the constructed worlds, the discourse surrounding *Gotham Knights* dates back to before the game's release. In this section of the thesis, I want to introduce a few of these posts, which I have selected to demonstrate a range of opinions and framings and explore how they each make use of language to engage with the presence of gender within *Gotham Knights*, while also going through and categorizing them based off of my own observations.

Within this discussion there were numerous trends that caught my attention, and it seems imperative to take a moment to highlight the ones discussed within this thesis. Within these comments there was a trend of sexualizing the character of Batgirl and using her physical attributes as cornerstones for review in a highly sexualized manner. The most notable of these posts reviews the entire game in context of Batgirl, in a manner that reads as objectifying.⁸³ This post however also exemplifies the gamic aspect of commenting, as discussed by Vorhees.⁸⁴ In the context of posts such as these, not only is a frame established wherein the ability and power of a character is diminished to physical appearance alone, a pattern of an attempt at humour is also created and repeated.⁸⁵ Within this aforementioned post, Batgirl is used more as representation to explain the function of the camera mode, and review other graphics settings in the game, rather than that she is discussed regarding her actual presence or role within the game. Yet, in comparison to a few other reviews, each of which also heavily reference Batgirl in similarly sexualizing and objectifying ways, this review at least contains substance. There is a similar review, though with far less content, that simply blames the game's poor functioning upon launch on the fact that supposedly "Batgirl so thick she crashes the game".⁸⁶ These comments reflect not only a sense of humour within a portion of the community who played this game, but also

⁸³ "Gotham Knights Reviews: After 6 months of patching," Steam Community, June 10, 2023. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

⁸⁴ Gerald Vorhees, "Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses," 14.

⁸⁵ Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, "Introduction: Masculinity and Gaming: Mediated Masculinities in Play," introduction, in *Masculinities in Play*, 10.

⁸⁶ "Gotham Knights Reviews: batgirl so thick she crashes the game." Steam Community, December 25, 2022. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

highlights the presence of a set of social rules within the online community the authors of these posts are speaking to.⁸⁷

This pattern, of using the only female playable character, and discussing her in terms that position her more as an object, while not treating the male playable characters the same way, caught my attention. It reflects, in my opinion, a sense of “gamer humour” – an expectation of something that will read well with an audience that is, as another poster on Steam claims, made up of “straight male[s]”⁸⁸, showing little care, respect, or regard for anyone who doesn’t reflect this presumed majority demographic.

It was also interesting to find a review where this approach was flipped, and the reviewer instead commented on Nightwing’s butt⁸⁹ they were not rewarded with a similarly comparable positive reaction. While this review is in essence and style quite similar to the majority of the reviews simply stating that the game is one that should be played because Batgirl has a nice butt, doesn’t receive the same engagement or positive reaction. This makes it appear as if that same aforementioned “straight male” gamer might become uncomfortable when a male character is framed in the same way a female character is. It is possible that those who strongly cling to a certain masculine ideal might become unsettled at the implication that they could ever find attraction of any kind in the male physique, or uncomfortable at someone else blatantly objectifying men in much the same way they have been arguably objectifying women in turn.

There is also an argument made by some within these posts that it has become necessary to return to, what they view as, a better time. Especially within the posts expressing frustration with the presence and framing of female characters within *Gotham Knights*, there is often a call for a return to the good old days, a time when things were different- better, in the eyes of whomever wrote the post. These posts frame the presence of women, specifically ones with agency, within the game as something of an overtaking, with one such post lamenting what they experience as a “2:1 female to male ratio” and wishing that there was a “normal mode”.⁹⁰ In all, as we continue to explore different frames and patterns found within the selected posts, I do want

⁸⁷ Gerald Vorhees, “Discursive Games and Gamic Discourses,” 14.

⁸⁸ “I Wish There Were More Female Character :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, June 10, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3416557114752279354/>.

⁸⁹ “Gotham Knights Reviews: they gave Nightwing a fat ass so the game deserves praise for that.” Steam Community, November 29, 2023. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

⁹⁰ R/Gothamknights on Reddit: This Game Makes You Hit Women.,” Reddit, October 26, 2022, https://www.reddit.com/r/GothamKnights/comments/ye6r4u/this_game_makes_you_hit_women/.

to make clear that often times, these ideas are not limited to suiting a singular frame and more often than not fall under multiple different umbrellas.

Female Villains

One notably prominent frame that was established within the collected posts, and further highlighted within the responses on those posts whose format allowed for discussion, was one focused on the presence and visibility of female villains. Now, these opinions ranged widely; from some claiming that “women don’t form gangs & commit violent acts”⁹¹ and lamenting their dislike of the fact that within the game you are made to “[pummel] women”⁹². Yet others rejoiced, stating it was “such a refreshing breath of fresh air to take down women enemies in this game”,⁹³ and celebrated that for the first time in a Batman franchise game Harley Quinn formed a formidable and worthy opponent.⁹⁴



Figure 2- Three Images of Harley Quinn from earlier *Batman: Arkham* titles and one of her appearance in *Gotham Knights*

Another element of Harley Quinn that I often saw highlighted was the change that the developers had made regarding her costume (Figure 2). One poster stating, “Harley looks so hot and like an

⁹¹ “Another Game Where Most of the Enemies Are Female. Why Is This a Thing? :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, October 22, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3490878556689580259/>.

⁹² “Majority of the Criminals Are Women :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, October 25, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3490879077211235057/>.

⁹³ R/GothamKnights on Reddit: Probably the most underrated thing about this game for me is female bad guys.” Reddit, February 20, 2023.

⁹⁴ R/GothamKnights on reddit: Gotham Knights FINALLY Fixed the Harley Quinn Problem!,” Reddit, August 26, 2022,

actual woman rather than a sex doll”⁹⁵, alluding to the often skin-tight and sexual costumes Harley was seen wearing in earlier Batman game publications. Within the game, she is removed from the shadow of the Joker- one of Batman’s longest standing and most dangerous opponents and allowed to stand on her own two feet. She is able to strike fear into the hearts of Gotham’s citizens and rules a section of the city’s underbelly with an iron fist, “returning to her villainous roots” as is pointed out by one post.⁹⁶

While Harley Quinn’s independence in *Gotham Knights* is certainly interesting- and something lauded heavily by people who played the game, the presence of female NPCs, especially as opponents for the player to defeat, is something that quite possibly got even more attention. As highlighted by Lavigne, aside from Catwoman, no female characters in *Batman: Arkham City* participate directly in combat, something which *Gotham Knights* approached differently, with Batgirl, Harley, and other female NPC characters all fighting directly and capably.⁹⁷ The opinions on Harley Quinn that I found were all generally in agreement, celebrating her rise to independence in the digital space, following a similar process within both the comics, and film franchises. However, the opinions regarding the presence of female NPCs were far more mixed. While some saw the reflection of real-world diversity in the worldbuilding as “a breath of fresh air”,⁹⁸ demonstrating that there is an audience who is glad to see a more diversified representation of not just who is allowed to serve as heroes, but also who assumes the mantle of villain- showcasing that it is certainly possible for women to fall into lives of crime as well, others lamented this decision. As mentioned before, some claimed that it was impossible for women to join together and form criminal gangs,⁹⁹ and others insinuated that the possibility to fight women may be an indicator that those who worked on the game could be “women

⁹⁵ “R/GothamKnights on Reddit: Harley’s Design Finna Make me Act up....” Reddit, August 29, 2022.

⁹⁶ R/GothamKnights on reddit: Gotham Knights FINALLY Fixed the Harley Quinn Problem!,” Reddit, August 26, 2022,

⁹⁷ Carlen Lavigne, “‘I’m Batman’ (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series.” 137.

⁹⁸ R/GothamKnights on Reddit: Probably the most underrated thing about this game for me is female bad guys.” Reddit, February 20, 2023.

⁹⁹ “Another Game Where Most of the Enemies Are Female. Why Is This a Thing? :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, October 22, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3490878556689580259/>.

beaters”,¹⁰⁰ and one poster even wished for a “normal mode”¹⁰¹ where they would be able to turn on a version of the game with all male enemies; a version of the game more reflective of titles of decades past.

Quite notably, the poster who insinuated that there was no such thing as women criminal gangs then also chose to compare the game’s decision to include women to something as unrealistic as having “pink dragons that puke rainbows”, claiming that both would be so egregious that they would impede on their ability to suspend their disbelief and enjoy the game.¹⁰²

Nostalgia

Another frame which became apparent to me as I examined the posts I had selected was one of nostalgia. There was this pervasive desire for a return to a previous status-quo, an attempt at returning to a space that felt familiar. It is here where we really see that, while certainly not *acceptable*, a certain extent of the objectification and frustration expressed by people within these comments is likely reactionary. *Gotham Knights* is, in style, a game that follows in a long legacy of media targeted at male audiences, and engaging with such media content has likely become a cornerstone of the masculine identity of some of the people writing these posts. These are the people who feel that the world of games is, in some sense, *their* space.¹⁰³

In these posts, often times the choice to include a diverse range of NPC models and characters is seen as “nonsense being pushed in entertainment today” as part of a woke agenda from companies who “replace 90% of [their] staff so [they] can be proud of ‘diversity’”.¹⁰⁴ In the way these elements are spoken of, it becomes apparent that they see themselves as wholly representative of the gaming demographic. There is an insistence that “most gamers are straight

¹⁰⁰ “Majority of the Criminals Are Women :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, October 25, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3490879077211235057/>.

¹⁰¹ “Gotham Knights Reviews: A lot of the negative reviews are comparing this to the Arkham series...” Steam Community, February 22, 2024. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

¹⁰² “Another Game Where Most of the Enemies Are Female. Why Is This a Thing? :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, October 22, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3490878556689580259/>.

¹⁰³ Joan Miller, “For the Horde: Violent ‘Trolling’ as a Preemptive Strike via #GamerGate and the #AltRight,” essay, in *Popular Culture and the Civic Imagination: Case Studies of Creative Social Change* (New York, New York: New York University, 2020), 216-217.

¹⁰⁴ “History Repeats Itself Again and Again.. :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, November 23, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3594464430429341597/>.

males”, followed by claims that this means that out of a sense of misguided chivalry they don’t want to fight female NPCs, and that these games should be in settings with “brutally aggressive combat” and “gritty environment” where the hero is masculine, attractive, and plenty of more passive eye candy such as Harley Quinn,¹⁰⁵ the end of this post implying that the passive Harley from the Arkham games should have remained.¹⁰⁶

The disconnect between perceived reality and the world established within the game becomes further apparent as people call for a “normal mode” while lamenting the perceived “2:1 female to male ratio of violent criminals”,¹⁰⁷ implying that a game without female coded NPCs, and entirely male enemy NPC worldbuilding as was present in earlier titles is superior, and the decision to introduce a variety within the enemies in *Gotham Knights* is out of the norm, and a detractor to the game.¹⁰⁸

Industry and Gamer Identity

This leads us into the final stand-alone frame within these comments that I found. As mentioned earlier, these shifts within the industry towards a game with a greater range of NPCs and a more diverse world causes its own issues. This frame I found in my exploration of my selected comments was a focus on shifts within the industry, and discussion of how those decisions impacted the identity of those playing *Gotham Knights*. In these comments, I saw frequent complaints about perceived forced progressiveness, and critique that making an effort towards encouraging a diverse and welcoming workplace for all kinds of employees within the gaming industry was to blame for a decrease in game quality.¹⁰⁹ In some sense, these complaints are reminiscent of the same complaints made by a similar demographic around the events leading up

¹⁰⁵ “History Repeats Itself Again and Again.. :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, November 23, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3594464430429341597/>.

¹⁰⁶ Carlen Lavigne, “‘I’m Batman’ (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series.” 137.

¹⁰⁷ “Gotham Knights Reviews: A lot of the negative reviews are comparing this to the Arkham series....” Steam Community, February 22, 2024. <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

¹⁰⁸ Carlen Lavigne, “‘I’m Batman’ (and You Can Be Too): Gender and Constrictive Play in the Arkham Game Series.” 138.

¹⁰⁹ Another Game Where Most of the Enemies Are Female. Why Is This a Thing? :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, October 22, 2022;

<https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3490878556689580259/>.

“History Repeats Itself Again and Again.. :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, November 23, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3594464430429341597/>.

to #gamergate, a response to a threatening upheaval of the status quo.¹¹⁰ Through exploring these posts, I also noticed a trend that often times more critical comments which expressed their discontent did so in reference to their masculinity. One example of such an opinion was when one poster claimed, “most gamers are straight males”¹¹¹ in the comments underneath a post wherein another poster was lamenting the fact that they felt that the industry appeared unaware of “what the fans want and don’t want”.¹¹²

A similar sentiment is echoed within the comments of a post I have yet to discuss, wherein a commenter asserts he prefers “playin with women” despite being self-proclaimed “right minded and not a feminist” listing his preference as “a matter of taste” so long as they are “not designed to fill the left and/or feminist agenda”, stating that “games should not follow ANY agenda”.¹¹³ Even in this claim towards a desire of an a-political game, one wherein the world review reflected aligns with the social, cultural, and political sentiments held by the author, is in and of itself a reflection of political ideals- and as stated by Voorhees, “the presupposition of neutrality for non-overtly political analysis is false”, everything is political even in apathy.¹¹⁴ On this post, another user responded in agreement, stating that “straight males don’t want to look at another guy the whole time they play”.¹¹⁵ Now, while as a result of both time limitations and the anonymity afforded by these platforms, it is not possible to speak to these people and ask for their exact reasonings, the terms they use alongside the opinions that are shared within their comments imply a sense of insecurity in their own identity, and a difficulty with a game whose constructed narrative does nothing to further reinforce their sense of masculinity.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Joan Miller, “For the Horde: Violent ‘Trolling’ as a Preemptive Strike via #GamerGate and the #AltRight”, 216.

¹¹¹ “History Repeats Itself Again and Again.. :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, November 23, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3594464430429341597/>.

¹¹² “History Repeats Itself Again and Again.. :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, November 23, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3594464430429341597/>.

¹¹³ “I Wish There Were More Female Character :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, June 10, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3416557114752279354/>.

¹¹⁴ Robin Lakoff, “Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting ‘Women’ and ‘Power’ in the Same Sentence,” 169.

¹¹⁵ “I Wish There Were More Female Character :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, June 10, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3416557114752279354/>.

¹¹⁶ Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, “Introduction: Masculinity and Gaming: Mediated Masculinities in Play,” introduction, in *Masculinities in Play*, 10.

Co-Creative Thinking and the Civic Imagination Among *Gotham Knights* Fans

The final frame that I want to highlight is one of Civic imagination and co-creative thinking. This frame is constructed of posts wherein people offered thoughts for ways in which the game could be better. In these posts people expressed personal opinions and use these to explore what they wish that *Gotham Knights* had done differently. Examining how the game could have made space for more (or perhaps different) female characters, and how these inclusions could have possibly added complexity, depth and weight to the narratives presented within the game.

Unlike all of the other frames explored above, I have separated out this frame because it offers space for actionable response beyond analysis. While some of the posts that fall within this frame do not offer many suggestions, rather expressing desires for what they hoped the game would have been, as is the case in a post wherein the poster states that they “wish there were more [playable] female characters”.¹¹⁷ This is especially noticeable with posts who offer input on which characters they would have specifically liked to see included, or ways they would have specifically wanted to see characters already present handled.

One example of this second aspect is a post referenced previously in my discussion on framing and gender, wherein the poster offers the ways in which they feel Harley Quinn would have made a very strong main villain for the narrative.¹¹⁸ In this post, the author explores their reasoning for why they believe that including Harley as the narratives main villain would have been a strong narrative decision, mentioning aspects of her design, such as the way the spade symbol her mask is made of is “a symbol for death”¹¹⁹ and how she would have excellently carried on the theme of inheriting and building legacies that is woven throughout the narrative of the rest of the game.¹²⁰ Later, within the comment section on the same post, the author elaborates their argument and ideas further, mentioning that “it would have been fun to dive into her altered origins as a villain” which interestingly helps both establish legitimacy for this line of thought as well as creates the implied assumption that her origin would not be the same as that of her character through other forms of related media within the franchise.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ “I Wish There Were More Female Character :: Gotham Knights General Discussions,” Steam Community, June 10, 2022, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/discussions/0/3416557114752279354/>.

¹¹⁸ “R/GothamKnights on Reddit: I swear, Harley should've been the main villain. It totally fits with the "inheriting the legacy" motif” Reddit, October 18, 2023.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.,

¹²⁰ Ibid.,

¹²¹ Ibid.,

In another post exemplifying this sort of co-creative thought the author explains why they feel that the game would have benefitted greatly of the inclusion of Kate Kane, who within the comics canon is the cousin of Bruce Wayne, and wears the mantle of Batwoman. The poster claims that including Kate would “make perfect sense” considering that her father Jacob Kane was one of the game’s main enemies.¹²² Within this space of the civic imagination fans feel free to engage with the media presented to them, and shape it into an image reflective of the world they would like to see, as well as reflective of the kinds of reality they have been taught to construct. Again, much like all other frames discussed in this thesis, they do not exist outside of the social contexts the commenters may experience in their daily lives, yet knowing and understanding the role of this mode of fan production has offered valuable insight into what sorts of cultural norms fans may be reflecting or rejecting onto the title of *Gotham Knights*.

Conclusion

Through the course of this thesis, I have identified and explored various frames created within the comments made on the platforms Reddit and Steam regarding gender within the game *Gotham Knights*. I explored both constructive frames, wherein the game was celebrated and people suggested ways in which the game could have possibly been further improved, and frames which took on a more critical stance, which often times showed people who were frustrated by how the game may have chosen to break out from often very male focused systems and structures, which were present in earlier Batman game titles- and who may have struggled with the ways in which *Gotham Knights* made choices that did not reaffirm traditional and conservative interpretations of a masculine identity and ideals.¹²³ In continuing along the lines of research established by Lavigne I have been able to explore both aspects within the industry that have changed, while simultaneously highlighting areas where there is still room for improvement and growth. This analysis, with a focus on understanding the ways in which the audience of this game experiences the changes that have occurred within the industry since 2015, offers insight into the ways in self-identity in gamers may have changed, as well as where there will still be

¹²² “R/GothamKnights on Reddit: I think it would’ve been super amazing if these characters was playable via dlc” Reddit, July 25, 2023.

¹²³ Nicholas Taylor and Gerald Voorhees, “Introduction: Masculinity and Gaming: Mediated Masculinities in Play,” introduction, in *Masculinities in Play*, 7-8.

room for growth and improvement in the future, as well as the malleability and fragility of gender identity and diversity within the gamic space.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite my best attempts, my choice to manually curate the posts I analysed for the purposes of this thesis only represent a portion of all potential discussions to be had. For the purposes of both time, and my own sanity, it was necessary to be selective and critical. Additionally, this hand selection process has most likely introduced a bias into my argument and research, even though I have attempted to gather a sample that represented various different viewpoints and approaches. Additionally, I am not so bold as to claim I even *found* all potential posts which could have been of interest, as I had to choose and limit my search terms and methods and there is no database which conveniently lists all posts for convenient and quick searching.

This limitation, while unavoidable, would be lessened by others conducting further research within this vein. Other researchers, especially those from other backgrounds than my own, are likely to find information and frames that I simply did not notice. Additionally, conducting further research would allow for the selection of other comments and posts, and the use of other search terms than I did to build an increasingly extensive analysis.

Another limiting factor within this project, was my decision not to conduct a study of platform affordances. Exploring the ways in which both platforms I used to gather the posts for my analysis allow for and encourage various types of interactions (as well as what *specific* kinds of interactions they encourage and allow), would allow for possible further insight into the behaviour of posters on these platforms. Additionally, it would allow for the addition of another dimension to the analysis within this thesis, as it could potentially help in exploring the differences of rhetoric and demographics between the two selected platforms.

As my final discussed limitation, it is important to acknowledge that the data on which this thesis is based was anonymized by the platforms from which the posts were sourced. This meant that there was no possibility to conduct interviews or execute any type of ethnographic analysis. While throughout this thesis, it was possible to assume certain things about various posters based on what they chose to share, a lot was left up to my own assumptions. This also meant that there is no way to corroborate the truthfulness of my assumptions and requires careful

consideration and handling. In future further research, I believe this area of exploration would benefit from a more personal ethnographic study. Conducting interviews with people from a variety of backgrounds, with differing experiences and opinions of this game – or any other title – would give them the opportunity to elaborate and explain their opinions and encourage a possibly more well-rounded exploration of this topic.

And lastly, the research conducted within this thesis has been highly qualitative, relying on my input as a researcher, and the observations I have made. However, I believe it would be very interesting and beneficial for future research to continue on this path in a qualitative sense, using either a content analysis, or other qualitative methods to chart the use of certain terms and phrases. A more qualitative approach would allow for the study of a much larger amount of data and show various trends within the data that might not be noticeable with as small of a sample as qualitative work necessitates. It would also allow for a statistical analysis of the data, and a better understanding of how statistically significant, or insignificant, the presence such comments and ideas might be within a game's community.

However, despite the limiting factors discussed above, I hope my thesis will be able to offer the basis for further research on other titles within the Batman franchise and the games industry at large. I hope that this thesis might form a blueprint to allow for future comparable studies exploring the ways in which the communities of various genres and types of games engage with gender diversity within the games, and how that reflects different possible approaches for diversifying the videogame landscape. Perhaps in future studies this same line of inquiry could be applied to more recent DC titles such as *Suicide Squad*, *Kill the Justice League*. Or to other well-established franchises, such as *Assassins Creed* or *The Witcher*. And how would we see such a study play out in the realm of eco-games, or cosy games? There are so many genres and approaches to the field of videogames that while not one thesis is going to be able to adequately cover every kind of game in existence as a consequence of the endless diversity within the field, but with the framework I have established here, I hope that we might be able to make a good start.

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Figures

Figure 1. Review demonstrating the use of “funny” and “Helpful” markings in Steam reviews. Screenshot of Steam Review Page. Steam Community, <https://steamcommunity.com/app/1496790/reviews/>.

Figure 2. Three Images of Harley Quinn from earlier *Batman: Arkham* titles and one of her appearance in *Gotham Knights*. Image shared on r/GothamKnights sub-Reddit. “R/GothamKnights on Reddit: Gotham Knights FINALLY Fixed the Harley Quinn Problem!” Reddit, August 26, 2022. https://www.reddit.com/r/GothamKnights/comments/wyja3u/gotham_knights_finally_fixed_the_harley_quinn/.