# Masculine Pleasures as Normalized Practices: Character Design in the Video Game Industry

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# Masculine Pleasures as Normalized Practices: Character Design in the Video Game Industry

**Jessica E. Tompkins[1] and Nicole Martins[1]**

**Abstract**

Scholars have extensively studied video game labor practices (e.g., Bulut, E. (2015). Glamor above, precarity below: Immaterial labor in the video game industry. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 32(3), 193-207. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2015.1047880, Bulut, E. (2020). White masculinity, creative desires, and production ideology in video game development. *Games and Culture*, 16, 1555412020939873; Banks, J. (2013). *Co-creating videogames*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing; Kerr, A. (2010). The culture of gamework. In M. Deuze (Ed), *Managing Media Work* (pp. 225-236). London: Sage; O'Donnell (2009). The everyday lives of video game developers: Experimentally understanding underlying systems/structures. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 2. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2009.0073, O'Donnell (2014). *Developer's dilemma: The secret world of videogame creators*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press; Johnson, R. S. (2013). Toward greater production diversity. *Games and Culture*, 8(136), 136-160. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412013481848, Johnson, R. (2014). Hiding in plain sight: Reproducing masculine culture at a video game studio. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 7, 578-594. https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12023); yet, few have exclusively examined the process of character design (e.g., Srauy, S. (2017). Professional norms and race in the North American video game industry. Games and Culture, 14, 478-497. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412017708936). Using a grounded theory analysis of 19 interviews with games designers and developers, this

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work complements existing research with insights on how gender and gendered interactions, technologies, audiences, market logics, and corporate culture integrate and influence character design practices. We found that technological affordances (e.g., game engines and related software; see Whitson, J. R. (2018). Voodoo software and boundary objects in game development: How developers collaborate and conflict with game engines and art tools. *New Media & Society*, 20, 2315-2332) converged with the masculine, heteronormative identities of game developers to shape normalized valued practices for character design, resulting in formulaic tropes that generally appealed to a masculine audience. Changes in status quo character design were attributed to diversity-conscious individuals, who operated within organizational practices privileging proven formulas over innovative designs.

**Keywords**
video game characters, game design, game labor, organizational culture, grounded theory, avatars

> The design team does not work in a vacuum. They are always… they have to justify everything to the corporation, to the company, to the owner. They have to do all that. And those guys are all coming with… "How do I make a million dollars?" Not… "How do I push forward diversity in character design?" (Drake[1], age 38)

As a former game developer, Drake's statement exemplifies the inherent tension that creatives face whilst working within the AAA (i.e., big-budget, commercial) video game industry. Their quote highlights how a return on investment may motivate status quo practices, such as successful formulas for character design, despite ongoing debates in the popular press concerning a need for greater diversity (e.g., Ong, 2016; Dall'asen, 2020). Research exploring game character portrayals has shown stereotypical depictions and gender tropes over the last two decades. Negative gender stereotypes are attributed to male and female characters (Dietz, 1998). Yet, heroic protagonists are predominately white men while female characters are often portrayed in a secondary and sexualized manner (Jansz & Martis, 2007; Lynch, Tompkins, Van Driel, & Fritz, 2016). Scholars speculate exposure to such gender tropes may actively discourage minority groups from playing and making games (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory, 2009).

In light of the ongoing public discussions and academic scholarship surrounding diversity in games, the question remains as to why these portrayals have perpetuated in game content creation. To fill this knowledge gap, the current study explores character design from the perspective of 19 game designers/developers.

## Video Game Characters, (Mis)Representation & Sales

Given the popularity of digital gaming, understanding the medium's cultural and social-psychological impact is a popular topic of academic inquiry (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Ferguson, 2018). With game characters a salient aspect of gameplay, it's perhaps unsurprising that video game character portrayals are a popular research topic in media scholarship. Historically, white male characters dominate the digital populace. From 133 games, Williams et al. (2009) found an overrepresentation of white males compared to female characters and characters belonging to minority ethnicities. As representative content analyses require a lengthy data collection period, it is reasonable that Williams et al. (2009) virtual census remains the only large-scale character study more than a decade later. Although scholars lack a representative source of what the virtual census looks like today, a non-profit found that among video games shown at a major gaming expo in 2019, only six games centered around female protagonists while 28 featured males (Sarkeesian & Petit, 2019). A gender gap remains.

Women in games are depicted in ways that map onto gender tropes, often in the representational fashion that presents women as sexual objects for a heterosexual male viewer—that is, their portrayal is coded for her *to be looked at* by the male gaze (Mulvey, 1989). In the 1990s, female characters were portrayed as damsels in distress, frequently depicted as subordinate to male characters, and sexualized (Dietz, 1998). More than a decade after Dietz (1998) seminal analysis, female game characters remained underrepresented and significantly more likely to be depicted partially nude, having an unrealistic body image, and wearing clothing inappropriate to their role in the gameworld (Williams et al., 2009; Downs & Smith, 2010; Lynch at al., 2016).

Over time, female characters have become more progressive, yet problematic traits remain. A quantitative analysis of female characters across 31 years revealed that sexualization peaked in the mid-90s and started to decline in the early 2000s (Lynch et al., 2016). Yet, an interpretative piece of 11 gender-stereotyped female characters found that while the characters were often portrayed as highly skilled in combat, they were sexually objectified and isolated from meaningful relationships in the game narratives (Tompkins et al., 2020).

Sales pressure may be one reason why female game characters are sexualized. Near (2013) found that, among titles rated Teen and Mature, sales were highest in games with box art featuring a non-prominent but sexualized female character. An analysis of video gaming magazine advertisements over twenty years found that pure, submissive depictions of women were declining, whereas sexualized and dominant portrayals were increasing (Summers & Miller, 2014). Beyond their sexualization, women appear infrequently in advertising: non- female characters (and non-white males) appeared less frequently in gaming magazines compared to their demographic counterparts in the US population (Burgess et al., 2011). By representing women as objects of desire in video game box art and advertising (yet not too prominently as to threaten male dominance), companies may have been historically encouraged to

conceptualized exploitable images of women in character design for a largely male and heterosexual audience.

## By (White) Men, For (White) Men: Games Culture & Industry

Forty-five percent of game players in the United States are women, yet 61% of the most frequent game purchasers are men (ESA, 2018). Data indicating that men spend more money on video games than women may influence the industry's market logic to create content, including game characters, that appeal predominately to male consumers.

For this reason, the games industry hails women as a distinct audience of gamers, or a Player 2 to the core male Player 1. For Player 2, gendered assumptions about who is responsible for housework and caretaking prescribe modes of play that can be experienced predominately in short sessions on mobile devices (Shaw, 2014). Player 1 is the recipient of big-budget console and PC blockbusters brimming with action and adventure to occupy hours of leisure; for Player 2, it's the brightly colored and accessible free-to-play apps that can be played for 10 minutes while queuing at the grocery store.

Beyond gendered assumptions for sales and presumed modes of play, the core gamer identity is construed as heterosexual and white (Shaw, 2009, 2014; Gray, 2020). These market logics may underpin character conceptualization and favor status quo designs. Srauy (2017) noted the industry is hesitant to embrace innovative content over fears that target consumers (i.e., heterosexual white men) will not immediately embrace it. Indeed, a particularly marginalized group in gaming are black lesbian players, who not only have few characters to strongly identify with but are ostracized by both white and non-white male gamers who view them as both other and sexually unavailable (Gray, 2020). When the industry fails to consider such intersectional identities, it contributes to a cycle of consumption and production that reinforces the male demographic as ideal target audience, gamer, and game developer.

### *Gender & Game Talk in the Workplace*

The International Game Developers Association annual quality of life survey represents the industry as largely male and white (Weststar & Legault, 2017). Most developers are avid gamers who own at least one video game console to keep current with the latest trends (O'Donnell, 2009), encouraging the currency of "game talk"—or, "discursive resources for developers when trying to describe abstract concepts like game mechanics" (O'Donnell, 2009, para. 1.6).

As demonstrated by the occurrence of "game talk" (O'Donnell, 2009), or developers using gaming references as a shared knowledge base in group discussions (Zackariasson, Walfisz, & Wilson, 2006), the video game industry is a field partially defined by interactions that make salient one's status as a gamer. These practices can, intentionally or not, marginalize women who may not play as extensively as their

male colleagues. Johnson's (2013) field work in a games studio found that masculine discourse prevails in game development when men outnumber women, demonstrating how gamer capital and masculinity intertwine to position women as outsiders.

Socio-cultural values may impact how game developers design female characters in accordance with the sexist attitudes and beliefs existing in society (Tompkins et al., 2020). Indeed, Bulut succinctly argued that "white masculinity… informs how they [game workers] imagine escapism, and ideologically structures how they relate to technological work" (2020, p. 3). The tools that professionals use during game development, such as game engines (the tools internal to development studios for building games; e.g., Unity and Unreal Engine), and 3D character modeling software provide the sets of rules that define as well as constrain output (Foxman, 2019; O'Donnell, 2014). Whitson (2017) contends that software's role in game studios is an agentic, unpredictable one, forcing developers to adopt trial-and-error approaches to resolving and (eventually) institutionalizing solutions to frequently encountered issues. Considering these works, we therefore asked: how do developer identities and tools converge to impact character design (Research Question 1)?

## Diversity & Gamer Resistance

When women are perceived to lack gamer capital, it may encourage workplace discrimination or harassment. Social media posts including the #1ReasonWhy hashtag were predominately written by women, citing sexist comments and harassment in the workplace as prominent reasons for the large disparity between the number of men and women working in the industry (Weber, 2012).

While social media can be leveraged to bring awareness to sexism, these tools often provide an anonymous platform for individuals to harass others. When a viral blog post implied that female game developer, Zoe Quinn, engaged in intimate relationships with gaming journalists in exchange for favorable reviews of her game, an online movement purporting to rally around a call for ethics in gaming journalism emerged—#Gamergate (Massanari, 2017). Numerous women and allies in the games industry came to Quinn's defense and renounced #Gamergate, with many of them experiencing harassment (Massnari, 2017; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Kelleher, 2015). As the movement grew and feminist critics vocalized anti-Gamergate sentiments, #Gamergate supporters levied threats at cultural critics (Massnari, 2017).

#Gamergate's increased vitriol towards feminists in gaming demonstrated a movement emboldened by what was perceived as attacks on gaming culture more broadly (Dewey, 2014). Because #Gamergate was analyzed by academics (e.g., Chess & Shaw, 2015) and industry professionals (e.g., Leigh, 2014), a spotlight was placed on diversity issues entrenched in gaming, signaling the beginning of the end for the industry's dominant masculine identity (Neiborg & Foxman, 2018). On the other hand, these discussions were generally received with pushback from those participating in #Gamergate—"people who, by and large, are representations of the power

structures that have been built into gaming culture for decades" (Chess & Shaw, 2015). With gamers often being actively involved in games co-creation through participation in modding communities, online forums, fan websites, and market research (Banks, 2011; Kerr, 2010), we wondered if #Gamergate shaped game developers impressions of audience demands and had subsequently impacted the industry's approaches to character design (Research Question 2).

## Games Companies as Organizational Cultures

New releases in the AAA market are frequently derivative of other financially successful games, creating a barrage of familiar sequels to popular titles, rather than innovative products (O'Donnell, 2009; Tschang, 2007; Zackariasson et al., 2006). Because game studios are both businesses and creative enterprises, clashing world views and subsequent negotiations may occur between executives and creatives (e.g., designers, artists, and writers; see O'Donnell, 2009; Tschang, 2007).

The organizational cultures of game labor, where corporate stakeholders wield power by means of project management, aesthetic input, and market testing, influence creative direction (Kerr, 2010). Organizational culture is a negotiated order that emerges through the interactions between individuals; it is influenced by actors with symbolic power, or those with the power to define circumstances under which interactions occur (Hallett, 2003).

Executives with high status in the organizational hierarchy may harbor symbolic power within the organizational culture of commercial game companies. Executives at publishers, the companies that market and distribute video games created by game development studios, possess symbolic power because publishers generally provide full funding or significant capital to their studios (Kerr, 2010). Thus, designers and producers in leadership positions may actively shape organizational culture by acting as negotiators between design teams and publishers to coordinate a vision that aligns rationally with publisher expectations (Tschang, 2007). Those lacking the social capital to impact the negotiated order may experience tensions; Bulut noted a game artist lamenting that "art became less art" when their studio was acquired by a console publisher (2015, p. 202). With this in mind, we wanted to investigate the role of organizational culture on character design (Research Question 3).

## Method

This study explores how video game characters are designed on collaborative and hierarchical teams of artists, designers, producers, and creative directors via a series of qualitative interviews with industry professionals and creatives. We spoke directly with character designers who have worked in the professional video game industry at an independent studio or AAA commercial company. We created a series of interview questions guided by the research questions. Study recruitment began in May 2016 and

lasted until May 2017 when we noted that reoccurring patterns in the dataset indicated thematic saturation.

We recruited participants online via social media (primarily Facebook and Twitter), through games industry/research mailing lists, and by snowball sample when participants and/or colleagues shared the study's recruitment materials with their own networks. This project was approved by a university Institutional Review Board. All participants are identified only by pseudonym and references to games and studios were removed from direct quotes.

## *Participants*

This research utilized a dataset ($N = 19$) of working and former game designers/developers, a population that is challenging to recruit for academic studies given the prevalence of non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) that prevent designers from publicly speaking about industry trade secrets. Eighteen self-identified males and one female took part in the interviews. We did not hear from more women despite our efforts to recruit via special interest social media groups (e.g., a Women in Gaming group on Facebook). We recognize this ratio is not ideal yet understand that women in gaming are a particularly vulnerable population when it comes to online trolling and harassment. With this in mind, we did not solicit interviews from anyone directly in line with the human-subjects research principle of minimizing harm.

Participants ranged in age from 27 to 76 years ($M = 42$, $SD = 12$). Interviewees self-identified their race/ethnicity as Caucasian/white ($n = 16$), African American/Black ($n = 1$), and Filipino ($n = 1$), while one person elected to not reveal their race/ethnicity. The length of time participants reported working in the video game industry varied from about 6 months to 26 years ($M = 12$). Most participants worked in North America (United States and Canada, $n = 14$), while others reported working predominately in the United Kingdom ($n = 4$) and Asia ($n = 1$).

Most interviewees were currently working in the industry or with games in some capacity ($n = 12$), with three respondents concurrently working as professors/instructors at a university. Seven participants formerly worked in the games industry, three of which were in the process of pursuing a Doctoral degree. Because many game developers sign NDAs about their professional work, speaking with researchers—even anonymously—may be deemed risky. Former developers may have felt more comfortable speaking about their previous work when no longer associated with the industry.

Although all participants worked on character design in some capacity, the specific roles ranged from leadership positions (e.g., chief creative officer, and creative director), narrative and worldbuilding roles (e.g., writer, narrative designer, and character designer), artists (e.g., animator, art director, technical artist, and 3D artist), producers, quality assurance, programming, and general design roles (e.g., game/systems designer, and level designer). Most respondents held multiple roles over the

course of their careers. Participants reported working in a variety of studio settings, ranging from small independent companies that employed less than 10 people to large commercial companies that employed hundreds or thousands of individuals.

## Interview Protocol

The semistructured interview included three sections of questions, as informed by the study's overarching research questions. The first section focused on demographic information and experience in the video game industry. The second section addressed the design of female and male game characters. The third area addressed working on teams in a company setting. Finally, participants had an opportunity to voice any final thoughts related to the interview topics. Prior to study recruitment, a pilot interview was conducted with an independent game developer. We revised the questionnaire for clarity and completeness after receiving feedback from the pilot participant. Due to changes in the interview questionnaire, the pilot interview was not used in the final sample for consistency.

## Procedure

The recruitment materials invited prospective participants to contact the first author by email. Before confirming an interview, the first author examined prospective participants' websites and public social media presence (e.g. personal webpage/portfolio, Twitter, and LinkedIn) to confirm professional work in the industry. Prior to scheduling, participants were sent a consent form and were invited to ask any questions. Afterward, an interview was conducted by the first author via Skype ($n$ = 15) or face-to-face ($n$ = 3). At the start of the interview session, the first author explained the purpose of the study before going into the interview script. Interviews averaged about 1 hour and 15 minutes in length, with the shortest lasting approximately 35 minutes and longest at approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

## Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, a method that extracts meaning from people's lived experiences representing the phenomenon of interest (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Analysis followed an open coding procedure in which conceptually similar responses were grouped together to form categories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). We read each transcript multiple times using the method of constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Similar themes were grouped into single categories and assigned a conceptual label capturing the meaning of the categories. For example, "male-dominated industry" and "technological affordance/constraint" were categorized under "female sexualization trope."

## *Themes*

Research question one asked how developer identities and tools converge to impact character design. We found several themes that spoke to a male gaze operating in game development, which impacted the design of game characters. The first category of themes concerns the prevalence of sexualized female characters as stemming from a male-dominated work culture as well as technological affordances and constraints.

## *Female Sexualization Trope*

Two themes were identified discussing the prevalence of sexualized female characters: games as male-dominated labor and technological constraint/affordance.

*Male-dominated industry.* A male-dominated labor force was cited as contributing to the pervasive representations of sexualized women in games ($n = 7$). In the words of Raymond, a 66-year-old white male who worked predominately in the United States, male developers historically created the games that they themselves would want to play: "I started in the industry when it was young men making games for each other… that's pretty much how it started." Others expressed that this mindset lingered.

*Technological constraint/affordance.* Eleven participants expressed sexualization was enabled by technological constraints and affordances. The presence of tight, figure-hugging clothing was discussed as potentially mitigating computational issues in 3D modeling and animation. Bulking, flowing clothing was discussed as computationally expensive, requiring more processing power to animate fabric in a digital gameworld. This may suggest that the presence of form-fitting, figure-enhancing clothing is partially an outcome of such limitations. Technological advancement and affordances were cited as reasons why women could be sexualized in games. Pierre, a 45-year-old white male, who worked predominately in Canada stated:

> You're working on a 3D character and you have this power that you can morph body parts, right, so you can easily picture what happens with like… you know, guys who watch *Playboy*… but all of a sudden, they see somebody who can scale boobs on a slider… so, "yeah, her ass could be perkier!" and things like that, that came back really often.

Pierre's experiences suggest that a male gaze can operate (and go unquestioned) behind the technological tools wielded by developers in an industry dominated by men.

## *Masculine Desires*

The second category of themes concerning the male gaze at work in character design speak to the notion that game developers conceptualized characters as desirable from

a masculine perspective. Gendered portrayals were discussed as both idealized and realistic, but generally from a masculine, heteronormative lens.

*Idealized gender.* For both female and male characters, idealized representations were predominately coded with masculine desires. *Female characters* as *sexy and powerful* ($n = 14$) was identified as a sub-theme under idealized gender. Designers discussed designing female characters using an alluring appearance paired with a strong personality/skillset that would assumedly attract both men (as objects of heterosexual male gaze/desire) and women players (as powerful and attractive role models). Males protagonists were typically discussed as *aspirational* ($n = 18$), guided by assumptions of a core male audience. The aspirational male character was described as powerful, being in control, and heroic. A few participants also mentioned that the male hero had to be bland enough such that (assumed male) players could easily project themselves onto them. Idealism was largely discussed in the context of formulaic AAA characterizations.

*Realism.* When participants spoke about their individual approaches to character design outside of AAA, characters were discussed as being designed with realism in mind, but typically in highly gendered ways. *Realism* was discussed by 16 participants when referencing female character design. Realism for female characters was identified as two sub-themes: *personalities* and *appearance*. Seven participants referenced realistic personalities. Designing realistic women was ascribed to personalities that were relatable but flawed on some dimension (generally to humanize them), and fitting into the narrative. Roughly half of participants spoke about the importance of female characters with realistic body proportions and clothing appropriate for their task in the gameworld.

Realism was discussed by ten participants in the context of male character design. We identified a sub-theme: *functionality.* Eight participants spoke about male characters needing to be believable in terms of achieving what is required of them in gameplay. For instance, Jeff, a 32-year-old white male who worked in the United States stated, "you need like a hulk of a dude… to accomplish the insanity that he goes through."

## Gendered Interactions in the Studio

Two themes capturing how developer's gender identities impacted design approaches were found: *normalized practices* and *diversity/allyship*.

*Normalized practices.* Eight participants expressed they did not observe significant distinctions across genders in approaches to character design. A perceived lack of observable differences might be attributed to masculine socialization in the workplace and broader cultural norms surrounding aesthetic beauty. Raymond, a former AAA developer working as a professor stated:

> … As matter of fact, I've been surprised that a lot of the women art students, and a lot of the women I work with on teams, have a tendency to draw what they think is wanted… and so they're drawing sexualized characters. I see that far more than I expected to.

Raymond's response suggests that women artists may recognize sexualized depictions as normalized practice.

*Diversity/allyship.* Eight responses suggested that more women in the workplace diversified approaches to character design, either through direct intervention (e.g., a woman speaking up about featuring a female character on the game's cover) or by galvanizing their male colleagues to take a stand against problematic tropes.

According to participants, the presence of women on the team has the potential to alter status quo decisions. Chris, a 46-year-old male, shared a scenario where the development team was discussing the game's opening scene:

> … We're having this conversation, and we're like, alright, we're gonna put her in her underwear, and um, one of the designers on the team, who was a woman, Jill, went to lunch with me, and said, "That is just completely wrong, it completely undermines what we're trying to do… we're trying to make her a human being that is not objectified… we're trying to make her a person, and now we're gonna put her in her underwear… it's not right, something must be done." And I was like, "I'll say something, I agree with you." So, I think that, if… there hadn't been a woman on the design team, that I couldn't go complaining to the creative director and say, "I think this is wrong, and so does Jill here," it would have been much less effective at getting that stupid idea cut.

The concerns of a female coworker were particularly noteworthy in motivating Chris to speak up about the problematic way the female character was originally conceptualized for the game.

## *Impact of #Gamergate*

Research question two asked whether #Gamergate impacted the industry's approach to character design. Sixteen participants mentioned #Gamergate's effect on the industry. Two themes were identified: *diversity wakeup call* and *damaging/minimal impact*.

*Diversity wakeup call.* Nine participants felt #Gamergate had the opposite effect on the industry than what was intended by the members of the movement. In other words, interviewees expressed that it brought greater awareness to the industry in terms of the ongoing diversity issues in games and character design. Although #Gamergate was harmful for many women in the industry, participants felt that #GameGate put a spotlight on issues related to diversity and inclusion, and felt the industry was actively doing more to support diverse audiences.

*Damaging/minimal impact.* Seven participants expressed that #Gamergate had the intended effect on the industry or minimal impact in the long term. It was expressed by some that AAA executives were perceived as doubling down on catering to their core audience by sticking with formulaic tropes appealing to men. Other participants could be cynical about #Gamergate having a profound impact on AAA studios. For instance, Dean, a 36-year-old white male who worked for 3 years at a AAA studio, felt large companies were too risk averse to fundamentally change: "it's too monolithic a company, [game title redacted] is too huge a property for them to risk it, you know, they are not gonna be the ones to take a stand for progressive values, they've got too much money on the table."

## *Organizational Culture*

Research question three asked how organizational culture impacts character design. We identified three primary themes for the influence of organizational culture on character design: *marketability*, *target demographics*, and *publisher influence.*

*Marketability.* Most participants expressed notions that characters, particularly sexualized females, were designed for marketability ($n$ = 16). Ten participants felt the perceived audience demand contributed to the prevalence of sexualized women in video games, particularly for AAA. Six participants explicitly stated that men as core gamers contributed to the presence of sexualized female game characters in AAA games.

*Target demographics.* Fifteen participants discussed how AAA game studios target specific demographics when creating games, influencing character design. Interviewees expressed assumptions about who the audience *was* were reflected in content. The anticipated player for most AAA games was frequently identified as an 18 to 35-year-old male. For instance, Josh, a 39-year-old white British male with experience in AAA and smaller independent studios, acknowledged the market logics and financial pressures on character design:

> The commercial reality is games with straight, white, heterosexual cis-gendered… all those stereotypes of masculinity, all stereotypes of Hollywood leading men… those games are still selling really, really well, so those games will continue to be made.

While individuals like Josh may be aware of these mythologies that govern rational, market-driven logics in the industry, they are always constrained by the power relations of the overall organizational structure. When formulaic tropes are normalized, they are not questioned, and alternate strategies may be suspect.

*Publisher influence.* Fifteen interviewees expressed publishers exert influence over game design. Participants stated that publishers often inform studios *who* the game is

trying to reach. We identified two sub-themes for publisher influence: *risk aversion* and *market research*. Six participants cited risk aversion as a reason why character design typically depends on familiar tropes and stereotypes. Sticking to such characterizations was stated to be quick and proven to work in AAA companies, which saved both time and money. Nine participants offered that AAA companies often undertake market research to inform design decisions. In several instances, interviewees cited scenarios in which executives in AAA companies were not simply making assumptions about their audiences—they had hard data to back up their choices. For instance, Drake—who worked exclusively in the casual and mobile games space—mentioned a company implementing a romantic storyline into each of their games after a love story proved to be successful. In Drake's words: "they [the company] put two and two together and said, 'our female demographic wants love stories,' and then boom, there was a love story in every game after that."

## Discussion

The goal of this study was to understand character design from the perspective of industry professionals. Our aim was to complement existing research with insights on how gender and gendered interactions, technologies, audiences, market logics, and corporate culture integrate and influence character design. Generally, this work supports the notion that innovations to game content are incremental in nature, a strategy frequently employed by risk-averse publishers who fear that sudden changes to previously successful content provide minimal return on investment (e.g., Tschang, 2007; Zackariasson et al., 2006).

### *Gender & Technology*

We found several themes speaking to the intersections of developer identities and technologies. Notably, a male-dominated labor force was perceived as facilitating the sexualization of female game characters.

Technological affordances in a labor force, predominately male (and heterosexual), converge, impacting game character's designs. Because game engines and their associated tools essentially lock-in specific modes of production, those working with the software are first constrained by what is permitted (and what is not; Foxman, 2019; O'Donnell, 2014) as well as the engine's look and feel (shared assets such as fonts, lighting, physics interactions, etc.; Nicoll & Keogh, 2019). The sentiment that tight-fitting clothing was often a strategy for mitigating computational expense might have emerged as a standard method in response to dealing with precarious software (see Whitson, 2017). Second, the heterosexual male gaze of artists and other design stakeholders mentioned by participants like Pierre ("yeah, her ass could be perkier!") operate within those technological affordances. Much like the man behind the camera in Mulvey's (1989) seminal work on the male gaze in narrative film, the developers who create the objectified imagery of a female character, including her visual codes in

the game (e.g., cutscenes, camera angles, animations, etc.), generate a woman displayed for the enjoyment of other heterosexual men. Together, technology and (masculine) user enable the manipulation of the digital female body in service of male pleasure.

The male gaze was discovered to operate in the ways developers discussed character conceptualization. Respondents spoke to notions that female character design involved an ideal character as sexy and powerful. An alluring appearance coupled with empowerment was deemed not only appealing to a male gamer, but was also assumed to attract female audiences, too. Women gamers have observed improvements to depictions of gender in gaming, citing a fully clothed and believably proportioned Lara Croft in the 2013 *Tomb Raider* reboot as a signal of progress (compared to the short–short donning original Croft of the 90s; Cote, 2020). On the other hand, male character design in the context of AAA games was discussed as generally aspirational in nature.

When discussing realism in character design, personality and appearance were generally discussed for female characters as being relatable and fitting successfully into the game's narrative. Male character design was deemed realistic by several participants when he appeared to functionally fit into the scenarios required by gameplay. The ways in which idealism and realism were discussed for male and female characters suggest participants applied gender stereotypical beliefs about men and women in their approach to character design. Women could be powerful, but within the context of physical allure. Meanwhile, men could appear functional, but no emphasis was placed on their physical attractiveness. This aligns with the physical attractiveness stereotype, which posits that attractive individuals are more positively evaluated than those deemed unattractive; this stereotype is stronger in the evaluation of women than men (Bar-Tal & Saxe, 1976). Designers could be implicitly leveraging the physical attractiveness stereotype to produce female characters with global appeal.

While gendered approaches to character design were discussed, differences based on gender of the designer were not reported. Participants noted that women and men did not fundamentally differ in their approaches to character design, with several participants noting that female artists would often sexualize female characters as frequently as men. The unquestioned normalization of such practices serve as an example of the game industry's endemic symbolic violence against women (Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2016), a hidden yet coercive form of dominance that maintains inequality at a cultural level rather than through physical force (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). When we understand this merger of the heterosexual male gaze and technological affordances as enacting symbolic violence against women by means of their objectification, it may explain why several participants did not recognize salient differences in how characters were designed across genders. When women and other folks reify sexually objectifying images, they may do so because they no longer perceive such practices as necessarily violent. As Johnson (2014) concluded, "masculine discourse is the only (and thus natural) way game projects are conceived, constructed, and completed" (p. 581) in game studios.

On the other hand, interviewees discussed how the intervention of female coworkers contributed to change or served to galvanize male coworkers in taking a stand against problematic tropes. Returning to Chris, a female designer seemed hesitant to voice her concerns about a female protagonist shown in her underwear. Chris' support bolstered their decision to voice their concerns to their colleagues. Chris' allyship instigated a change for that particular game, in which the lead female character was no longer shown in undergarments. Small, incremental decisions that deviate from normalized practices, such as the above anecdote, may contribute to broader organizational shifts over time.

The emphasis on interpersonal relationships demonstrates that allyship for our participants predominately operated at a micro-level; the scope of support did not extend to the institutional level. Research suggests that dominant members of an authority group (i.e., white men) generally participate as allies when offering support to individuals but rarely for systematic progress, arguing the work undertaken amounts to "nice guy" activities (Patton & Bondi, 2015; p. 509). In parallel, our male participants could engage in moments of social justice with individual women but were not explicitly challenging the power structures (i.e., management, hiring practices, etc.) enabling the status quo.

## #Gamergate Impact

We asked if #Gamergate had a perceived impact on the industry. Some respondents did not see #Gamergate having ramifications (or minimal) on the industry at large, demonstrating the perception that some companies were hesitant to alienate their core audience. Yet, roughly half felt #Gamergate was a catalyst for change in the industry with respect to diversity. This may be the case for some companies: a AAA games publisher reported running a study aimed at understanding what players think about representation, diversity, and inclusion and found that pushback on diversity came from a minority of players (Shi, 2019).

## Organizational Culture

We asked how organizational culture influenced character design. Creating content for an 18 to 35-year-old male was deemed a normalized practice, with sexualized portrayals of women seen as enticing this demographic. Additionally, user data could be leveraged to generalize design decisions to entire demographics, such as Drake's comment about his company featuring love stories in mobile games popular with female audiences. This notion supports Shaw (2014) contention that women are sweepingly generalized as Player 2 in the games industry, where successful content is unquestioningly propagated to subsequent games designed for the same/similar audiences. Such tactics are arguably normalized valued practices that form the basis of legitimacy that "negotiators deploy as symbolic power to define the situation and influence future practices, interactions, and the ongoing negotiated order" (Hallett, 2003, p. 136).

Despite these entrenched values, some developers pushed for innovation, particularly in pursuit of diversity. Josh employed his awareness of social issues while working in AAA. When actors within an organization are resistant to institutional values, they may employ identity politics to undermine dominant cultural values (Rao, Monin and Durand, 2003). A current identity movement in the games industry involves members of non-dominant groups typically underrepresented in gaming—women, LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, people of color, and their allies supporting one another and advocating for diversity (Evans & Janish, 2015). Josh explained a scenario in which he advocated for changing the ethnicity of the playable character from white to a person of color:

> So I said, "Okay, could we at least have it not be a white man," and they welcomed it like, "Yeah, there's no problem with that, it's real easy to do, we just switch the character's skin." And so, we had a Black male lead in that action title… And so, that's because I'm conscious of these kind of things, 'cause I was very aware of these things, this was like… something like eight years ago now, something like that, as when there weren't many characters who weren't white as the lead character…

As Josh's story demonstrates, the industry is susceptible to the homosexual reproduction of management, or when key personnel come to perceive policies, procedures, and structures as normal, resulting in homogenous perspectives and practices (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). A homogenous practice unquestioned by other designers on Josh's team was assigning whiteness to the protagonist.

The role of whiteness in game labor becomes invisible when white developers fail to recognize their own privilege as content creators (Srauy, 2017; Bulut, 2020). Josh's scenario indicates that diversity-conscious individuals may advocate for designs that challenge the status quo, despite working within entrenched, normalized practices curated by a homogenous workforce. Organizational changes occur when there is a discrepancy between an individuals' worldview and their position in the organization (Emirbayer & Johnson, 2008). Such mismatches, involving a perspective deviating from normalized practices, may provide opportunities for diversity-conscious designers to seize moments for innovation (e.g., having a black lead character as opposed to a white one).

Yet, this example demonstrates an incremental or superficial step—skin tone was altered, but seemingly not the character's facial features or other markers of ethnicity or cultural background ("it's real easy to do, we just switch the character's skin."). As Srauy (2017) argues, (white) developers may have a superficial understanding of race, as many of their ideas about race are drawn from entertainment texts. This has led to many black game characters being depicted within criminal narratives or other stereotypical frames (Gray, 2020). Thus, it may be "easy" to alter skin tone as an incremental step for inclusion, but a more authentic portrayal could require changing the character's facial features, hair, and/or voice actor. Moreover, as Gray (2020) has argued, the intersection of race and narrative is worthy of consideration: a black

character being introduced to the player via a cutscene where they are depicted in the back of a police car is interpreted differently than if the character is white. When decisions are made to alter a character's race, the intersection of race and narrative framing may introduce stereotypes that would otherwise not exist if the character was a different race. Depending on the stage of development at which such decisions are made, altering the main protagonist's race and backstory does not only pose a greater potential risk in the marketplace but incurs both time and financial cost. Running with familiar narratives and stereotypical depictions acts as a rational economic choice when working against market uncertainty (Srauy, 2017).

## Limitations & Conclusion

Nineteen in-depth qualitative interviews with current and former video game professionals were conducted to understand the individual and collective decisions that influence character design within the industry's structural and interactional constraints and affordances. Guided by three primary research questions, we sought to investigate why gender stereotypical portrayals have perpetuated game content creation. By extracting several themes from our data set, we argue that stereotypical and status quo character designs were historically institutionalized as normalized practices, aided by a largely homogenous (i.e., mostly male and mostly white) labor force. Themes demonstrate how identity and technological affordances converge, such that design tools are wielded in service of heterosexual male pleasures and preferences—for both content creators and consumer audience, alike. Building from extant literature in several disciplines, this research contributes to the bodies of work in communication-focused and critical-cultural games studies, games labor research, and organizational cultures.

While designers felt that it was important to avoid sexualizing female characters, other themes suggest that this perspective could be working against technological forces, the predominate male labor force and heterosexual gaze, and market logics governing character design decisions. Tensions between creatives and game publishers were identified in content creation, yet some designers cited moments where they consciously advocated for innovation through diversity. Challenges to normalized practices were typically incremental in nature, and the presence of men supporting individual women and their ideas for inclusive content was noted.

Some limitations are observed. As with any interview project, participants may have been motivated to speak with academics for a variety of reasons, which could make their data somewhat different from those not interested in speaking with scholars. Notably, three participants were pursuing a PhD after leaving the games industry, and three participants worked as instructors at university game design programs at the time of the interviews. Thus, our sample included several highly educated participants, who may be particularly conscious and informed about issues of representation in digital games.

Additionally, while several participants had experience in both AAA and independent game making, we did not explicitly ask participants to consider how

character creation might differ in these settings, or how the movement from developers between and within these sectors might impact their skills, ideologies, and creative execution (see Whitson, 2013; Whitson, Simon, & Parker, 2018). In contrast to AAA production, small teams or solo indie devs often articulate their final product as an extension of their self-expression and individualism (Ruffino, 2013). Indeed, when participants spoke about their approaches to character design, it was often discussed as *realistic* as opposed to the idealistic approach perceived as conventional to AAA design. As independent games increasingly receive financial support from AAA publishers, the lines between independent and corporate development strategies become blurred (Lipkin, 2013). More research is needed.

Despite efforts to obtain an equal sample of women and men who work in games, only one self-identified woman was interviewed. While low participation from women was not surprising, given that the workforce skews male (Weststar & Legault, 2017), women in the industry have been targeted, harassed, and stalked for openly speaking (critically or not) about games (Kelleher, 2015). While we openly promised anonymity in recruiting materials, women may have understandably felt unsafe answering the call for participants. Future games industry research should consider strategies to include more women and make them feel comfortable communicating with researchers. Response rates might improve among women using an online survey, as it minimizes interaction between researcher and participant, providing a greater sense of anonymity. A research project examining creative decision-making and/or character design in the independent sector might fill the gaps in the present work by contrasting findings between AAA and indie at the same time it might achieve the goal of finding more diverse participants (do-it-yourself game craft engages a broad community of makers; see Westecott, 2013).

Regardless of these limitations, this work makes an important contribution to the literature on game studies and games labor in the context of character design processes. Many themes reported here support extant work on the culture of video game studios and augment the existing literature by connecting it to organizational culture frameworks. While this work uncovered how masculine identities and technological affordances/constraints contribute to stereotypical portrayals, it likewise demonstrates how individuals have the capacity to enact creative decision-making, especially among diversity-conscious individuals and through interactions with diverse teammates (i.e., women). While the games industry may be incremental in its implementation of diverse character design, we found that individual voices and allies can facilitate changes to normative practices.

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## Note

1. All participants were provided a pseudonym.

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