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Are we ready to talk about feminist game mechanics?

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Abstract

While character design and representation have been extensively discussed within feminist discourse, the attention given to game mechanics has been limited. This study aims to challenge the assumption that feminist ideals in video games can only be conveyed through narrative elements and investigate the potential of integrating feminist principles into game design, with a specific focus on game mechanics. Drawing on Bogost's (2007) Procedural Rhetorics theory, which asserts that digital systems can enable the creation of interactive arguments surpassing traditional rhetoric, the thesis examines how mechanics can prioritize inclusivity and diversity. Through critical analysis of existing discourses and semi-structured interviews with game design students who are pursuing a career as industry professionals, the study evaluates the current state of the industry and identifies areas for improvement. Nine interviews were conducted, and thematic analysis using a deductive approach was employed.

The study highlights the significance of representation, with participants expressing a preference for strong female protagonists, while also recognizing divergent perspectives on whether the mere inclusion of a female character equates to a feminist game. Player agency during gameplay was not frequently mentioned in the interviews, a topic commonly discussed in scholarly literature.The study calls for clearer guidelines and definitions in the field and proposes two categories: Empowerment and Equality, derived from participant responses. Participants suggested examples of feminist game mechanics related to empowerment (addressing real-life issues and encouraging collaboration) and equality (ensuring equal chances regardless of gender).

Keywords: feminism, video games, game mechanics, procedurality, procedural feminism, feminist games

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1 Introduction

The question of whether feminist schools should approach video games in the same manner as they do with cinema, or recognize video games as a unique medium and adopt a distinct approach, serves as a fundamental premise of this research. It is imperative to acknowledge that video games possess attributes that extend beyond the narrative and characters of the game. Therefore, feminist schools should determine whether existing approaches to analysing video games are sufficient or whether new frameworks are needed to account for the unique aspects of the medium.

According to Chess and Consalvo (2022), video games have permeated various industries beyond the obvious examples, such as the increasing use of gamification in streaming services and the incorporation of games into transmedia storytelling. Although not everyone may consider video games a distinct medium, the authors argue that game studies analysis and theorization remain relevant to the broader field, even in more subtle and nuanced ways. However, from a feminist perspective, the game design industry faces several issues that are still prevalent today. Issues that are often discussed include the portrayal of female characters, who are often hypersexualized or relegated to secondary roles; the prevalence of toxic online communities that often perpetuate misogyny, racism, and homophobia, additionally, there are concerns about unequal representation and pay for women and minorities in the game development industry. The feminist critique of games, that is focusing primarily on the narrative aspect of video games, however, there is a lack of focus from feminist schools on the mechanics of the games.

So this research looks at the idea of *feminist games* and attempts to formulate a definition of what this term might mean for game designers and game design students. While the term *feminist games* is generally recognised and used to refer to games that promote gender equality or address feminist issues, it is important to note that everyone may have a unique understanding of the term based on their individual backgrounds, viewpoints, and experiences. In other words, there is a risk that the term may be interpreted differently by different people.

1.1 Research questions

This study utilises a research-for-design approach with the aim of addressing the following research questions:

Research Question 1
What can be defined as a feminist game according to game design students?

Research Question 2
What is feminist game mechanics?
    a. What are the essential characteristics of feminist game mechanics?
    b. What should be avoided in feminist game mechanics?

In this study, defining the term *feminist games* was a difficult task. It involved not only recognizing the features that distinguish a game as feminist but also understanding the different meanings and interpretations that are attributed to the term by various game designers and players. Due to the absence of a universally accepted definition of *feminist games*, identifying the characteristics that make a game feminist may be challenging. This

lack of agreement presents a complex and broad issue that necessitates careful consideration to gain a comprehensive understanding of the concept.

Despite the difficulty of providing a clear-cut definition of *feminist games*, the objectives of this study were to provide practical suggestions on how game designers can create games that promote feminist ideals and contribute to the academic discussion of *feminist games*. The study sought to identify the design elements and game mechanics that can be utilized to support feminist principles and values and identify the elements that should be avoided in the feminist game mechanic. By addressing this, this study aimed to provide game designers with guidelines for creating video games that are more inclusive and equitable. The importance of distinguishing characteristics of *feminist game mechanics* lies in the recognition that procedural rhetoric may operate at a distinct conscious level for the audience in comparison to narrative structure. The study recognized the potential of digital games to promote social change and positive values and seeks to empower game designers to create games that challenge existing power structures and promote feminist values.

The additional objective of this study was to contribute to the feminist discourse on games in academic circles, by shedding light on an unexplored theme. Currently, the discourse predominantly focuses on the narrative of video games as a medium, which is a traditional area of focus inherited from other media, such as cinema. However, video games possess unique interactive characteristics, and this research aimed to provide an additional lens for the discourse by exploring a different approach. By doing so, this study hoped to enrich the feminist discussion on games and broaden the scope of the discourse beyond its current narrative-centric focus.

1.2 Limitations

This research project acknowledges several limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the findings. The constraints of time and resources may restrict the depth of investigation in certain aspects and limit the ability to conduct rigorous testing of the research outcomes. Additionally, the researcher's limited interviewing experience may have an impact on the data collection process.

It is important to underscore that the guidelines formulated for feminist mechanics are intended to address gender biases and provide practical recommendations for game designers to create games that promote gender equality and authentically represent women's perspectives. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the scope of this research does not explicitly delve into the intersectionality of other social issues such as race, disability, and queer theory, despite recognizing their significance within the context of feminist game design. Future developments of this research could explore these themes more comprehensively, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of feminist game design that encompasses multiple intersecting identities. Additionally, it is important to note that this paper primarily explores gender as a binary concept and future research may consider the broader understanding of gender as a spectrum.

Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the researcher's cultural background may introduce inherent limitations in their comprehension and interpretation of feminism. Similarly, due to the limited scope of this research, the cultural backgrounds of the interview participants were not extensively examined. These limitations offer opportunities for further exploration in future studies, aiming to gain a more comprehensive understanding of feminist game design across diverse cultural contexts.

2 Theory

This study aims to utilize procedural feminism as the theoretical framework, which is a combination of feminist theory and procedural rhetoric. Although procedural feminism has not been widely applied in game design research, this study explores its potential applications. The theoretical background is explained in more depth further in this section.

2.1 Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is a theoretical framework that encompasses a variety of perspectives and approaches aimed at understanding the ways in which gender and patriarchal power intersect in various social, cultural, and political contexts (Grosz, 1995; Burket & Brunell, 2023), including the field of game studies. According to Butler (2011), feminist theory should focus on subverting the norms and expectations associated with gender identities rather than merely seeking to incorporate women into existing structures and systems of power. In *"Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity,"* Judith Butler challenges traditional binary notions of gender identity and argues that gender is a performative act that is socially constructed rather than biologically determined. Butler argues that gender is a cultural product that is constantly being re-constructed through various social practices, rather than a fixed and essential identity. Butler argues that the binary gender system reinforces power dynamics that privilege men and subjugate women and that feminist theory should therefore aim to deconstruct these power structures. Butler also emphasizes the importance of intersectionality in feminist theory, recognizing that individuals' experiences of gender are often shaped by their other social identities and positions of power. In this way, she argues that feminist theory must be inclusive of a wide range of experiences and perspectives, rather than being limited to the concerns of white, middle-class, cisgender women.

In their article *"Feminism and gameplay performance",* Westecott (2018) highlights the definitional challenge for feminism in identifying what makes a creative output "feminist" without reproducing exclusionary practices. The author notes that identifying feminist work is essential for celebrating and making visible feminist creative practice and working against the erasure of women from history. However, the categorization process used to identify feminist work risks excluding other works that do not fit within the narrow definition. Westecott suggests that feminist scholars and creators need to adopt a more inclusive approach that recognizes the diversity of feminist perspectives and creative practices. Perez (2019) has also mentioned erasing women from history in her book. According to Caroline Perez in her book *"Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men,"* historical gender data gap refers to the long-standing issue of insufficient data being collected or recorded on women's experiences and lives, resulting in a lack of understanding and recognition of the various ways in which women are impacted by and interact with society. This data gap has been perpetuated by a number of factors, including gender biases in data collection methods, a lack of recognition of women's contributions to society, and the prioritization of male experiences and perspectives. This knowledge gap can have far-reaching consequences, impacting everything from medical research to urban planning and leading to a perpetuation of gender inequality.

This thesis acknowledges that feminism as a term encompasses various historical perspectives, often categorized into four waves. Rampton (2015) discusses the

conceptualization of feminism in terms of these waves. Engelbrecht (2022) further explains that feminist theory has evolved, with the first wave characterized by activism leading to women's suffrage. The second wave emerged during the 1960s with influential theorists such as Betty Friedan, Simone de Beauvoir, and others laying the groundwork for modern Western feminist theory. The third wave arose in the 1980s and 1990s, representing a break from the second wave theory. Furthermore, Engelbrecht (2022) suggests that the fourth wave of feminism is characterized by women's utilization of social media as a tool for activism. While it remains debatable whether this online activism represents a distinct new wave, it is undeniable that many women have used social media platforms to voice ongoing struggles and experiences of oppression.

However, it is important to note that while these waves of feminism can provide insights into analyzing feminist perspectives, their chronological framework may not be the most effective for analyzing the relationship between feminism and video games. Given that games are a relatively recent form of media, the waves of feminism may not align neatly with the evolution of feminist discourse within the gaming industry. Therefore, alternative frameworks may be necessary for understanding feminist perspectives within the context of video games.

In her analysis of feminist discourses, Judith Lorber (1997) identifies three main categories: gender reform feminisms, gender resistant feminisms, and gender revolution feminisms. Gender reform feminisms, such as Liberal feminism, focus on achieving gender equality through the lens of liberal political philosophy. Zhang and Rios (2021) define liberal feminists as proponents of the belief that all individuals are inherently equal, advocating for equal rights and opportunities across genders. They argue that societal restructuring is not necessarily required for women to participate in significant roles and professions. Marxist feminism recognizes the importance of housewives in sustaining capitalism through unpaid labour and reproducing the labour force. Housewives' work supports employers and workers, and their economic dependency perpetuates gender inequality (Lorber, 1997).

According to Lorber (1997), gender resistant feminisms challenge patriarchal oppression and seek to create spaces of empowerment for women. Radical Feminism, a prominent example within this category, actively opposes the subjugation of women by patriarchal systems and advocates for women-only spaces as a means of resisting male dominance and reclaiming agency. Gender revolution feminisms encompass perspectives such as Postmodern Feminism and Queer Theory, which aim to deconstruct and redefine traditional gender norms and identities. These approaches question the fixed nature of gender and emphasize the importance of recognizing and celebrating diverse gender expressions and experiences.

By categorizing feminist discourses into these three frameworks, Lorber (1997) provides a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted nature of feminist thought and activism, encompassing a range of strategies and goals for achieving gender equality.

The utilization of feminist theory in the realm of game studies aims to analyze the representation of gender in video games, the position of women in the game industry, and the gendered encounters of gamers from a critical perspective. Although several scholars have applied feminist theory in game design studies, this study gives particular importance to Adriene Shaw, Mia Consalvo, and Anita Sarkeesian, as they have made significant contributions to the application of feminist theory in game studies. These scholars have employed feminist theory to assess the marginalization of women in the game industry, the depiction of women in video games, and the gendered experiences of gamers.

Feminist theory in game studies continues to evolve and be reinterpreted in light of new developments and technologies in the gaming industry. This is the reason this theoretical framework is used in this research for understanding the ways in which gender and patriarchal power are implicated in video games, the game industry, and the culture of gaming, and how those ways could be improved.

Despite the progress that has been made in feminist game design and analysis, there are still challenges to be addressed. The game industry remains male-dominated and game design and development practices often exclude diverse perspectives and experiences (Bonenfant & Trepanier-Jobin, 2017). Furthermore, there are still instances of overt sexism and harassment in gaming culture, which can make it difficult for women and other marginalized groups to participate fully in gaming communities. Consalvo's (2012) article discusses the problem of toxic gamer culture and its impact on feminist game studies. The author argues that despite the growing popularity and acceptance of video games, the culture surrounding them remains hostile towards women and minorities, perpetuating misogyny, racism, and homophobia. Consalvo argues that this toxic culture is reinforced by a number of factors, including the anonymity and distance afforded by online interactions, the competitive and aggressive nature of many games, and the lack of consequences for negative behaviour. This culture can create a hostile environment for women and minorities who wish to participate in gaming communities, making it difficult for them to enjoy the same experiences as their male counterparts.

Feminist game design and analysis have become important fields in game studies, providing alternative perspectives and approaches to game design and analysis that challenge traditional gender norms and power structures. While there have been significant strides made in these areas, there are still challenges to be addressed in the game industry and wider gaming culture Some key perspectives of feminist critique in game design studies include representation, agency and stereotypes.

2.1.1 Representation

In feminist game design, representation refers to how gender is depicted in video games, including the roles, behaviours, and appearances of characters, as well as the overall themes and messages conveyed by the game. Representation can have a significant impact on how players perceive gender and their own gender identity.

In her book *"Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of gamer culture"*, Adrienne Shaw (2014) underscores the significance of the representation of women in games. The author identifies several representation issues shared by games and other media such as books and films, highlighting that the distinctive characteristics of games as a medium are frequently overlooked. According to Shaw, *"Representation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible" (p.4)* The author examines the backlash against Sarkeesian's work and observes that some critiques were not aimed at denying women's presence in games, but rather rejected the right of anyone to criticize games as cultural texts.

Malkowski and Russworm (2017) discuss the significance of identity, representation, and video game studies. They assert that video games are influential mediums that reflect and sustain dominant ideologies and cultural values. The authors contend that the field has moved from analyzing games as technological objects to viewing them as cultural objects with social and cultural implications. The authors also investigate the importance of representation in

video games, arguing that they can shape our attitudes towards race, gender, and sexuality. The authors explore the potential of video games to challenge dominant cultural norms and values by providing alternative representations of race, gender, and sexuality that can foster social change.

Dill and Thill's (2007) study aimed to investigate how video game characters and their gender roles may affect young people's perceptions of gender roles in real life. The results of the study suggested that young people's perceptions of video game characters reflected sexist media depictions of gender roles. Male characters were commonly described as physically strong and aggressive, while female characters were often portrayed as physically attractive and submissive. The study also found that participants who played video games with more stereotypical gender portrayals were more likely to hold sexist attitudes in real life. The findings of this study suggest that video games can play a significant role in shaping young people's perceptions of gender roles and may reinforce negative stereotypes.

Chess (2017b) argues that the playful aspect of games is inherently political and can have significant impacts on societal attitudes and values. Chess posits that through the process of playing games, individuals are actively shaping their identity and creating new forms of representation. She asserts that the playful nature of games offers an opportunity to challenge dominant norms and push for greater diversity and inclusivity in the gaming industry. Chess contends that it is important for feminist gamers and game designers to critically examine the ways in which games shape and reflect societal attitudes towards gender and identity. In doing so, she argues that the gaming industry can provide a space for the creation of alternative representations and the subversion of harmful patriarchal norms. The chapter highlights the importance of viewing games not just as entertainment, but as political and cultural artefacts with the potential to shape our identities and challenge oppressive structures.

2.1.2 Tropes and Stereotypes

From a feminist perspective, tropes and stereotypes towards women in game design can perpetuate and reinforce gender-based discrimination and oppression. Tropes are recurring themes or devices used in narratives, while stereotypes are oversimplified or exaggerated characteristics of a group of people. Some common tropes and stereotypes towards women in game design include the damsel in distress, the femme fatale, the sexualized or objectified female character, and the one-dimensional female character who exists only to serve as a romantic interest for the male protagonist. Anita Sarkeesian is one the most prominent figures who studies stereotypes in games. Sarkeesian (2013) examines the representation of women in video games and the common tropes that perpetuate harmful stereotypes. She argues that women in games are often sexualized and objectified, depicted as damsels in distress or as rewards for male protagonists, and portrayed in ways that reinforce harmful gender roles. She defines The Damsel in Distress trope as a female character who is portrayed as helpless and in need of rescuing by a male protagonist. Sarkeesian also discusses the limited roles available to women in gaming, such as the lack of female protagonists and the relegation of female characters to supportive or background roles. She points out that these tropes are not only harmful to women, but they also limit the potential for more complex and diverse storytelling in games. These problematic representations of women in games can also affect female players' experiences, as they may feel excluded or misrepresented. For instance, the work of Chess (2017a) highlights that certain activities are often stereotypically associated with women, such as caregiving, and it is important for game designers to avoid these types of stereotypes when creating games.

DiSalvo (2017) argues that stereotypes are prevalent in gaming and that they reinforce societal prejudices and biases. Specifically, gaming has been associated with reinforcing gender and racial stereotypes, such as the portrayal of men as aggressive and women as passive. DiSalvo notes that these stereotypes are not only harmful but also limit the diversity of gaming, both in terms of the characters that are represented and the types of players that engage with the medium. Additionally, DiSalvo suggests that addressing stereotypes in gaming requires a more intersectional approach, which recognizes and addresses the ways in which different forms of discrimination and oppression intersect to shape experiences and identities.

Stereotypes can also lead to harmful attitudes towards female players, such as harassment and discrimination. Williams, Consalvo, Caplan & Yee (2009) conducted a study that investigated the gender roles and behaviours of online gamers. The authors analyzed survey data collected from over 7,000 gamers and found that there were differences in gender representation across different gaming genres, with female gamers being more likely to play social games and male gamers more likely to play competitive games. They also found that female gamers were more likely to play as female characters, while male gamers were more likely to play as male characters. The study also found that male gamers were more likely to engage in aggressive behaviour and use derogatory language, while female gamers were more likely to report experiencing harassment and negative social interactions. The authors argue that these findings demonstrate the persistence of gender stereotypes and inequalities in the gaming community and suggest the need for further research to address these issues.

In her chapter *"Women in Defense of Videogames,"* Constance Steinkuehler (2016) argues that the stereotype of a "typical gamer" as a young white male is a harmful oversimplification of the diversity of people who play games. She suggests that women's participation in gaming has been a catalyst for positive change in the industry, pushing for greater inclusivity and representation in games. Steinkuehler also examines the complex relationship between gender, identity, and gaming, noting that games can serve both as a source of empowerment and a site of oppression for women. Ultimately, she argues that the key to creating more equitable and inclusive gaming communities is to challenge stereotypes and embrace the diversity of experiences and perspectives within gaming culture.

2.1.3 Agency

Agency in video games refers to the extent to which a character has control over their actions and the events that unfold in the game. Female characters' agency has been a topic of discussion in video game studies, as they have historically been portrayed as weak and in need of male protection, and their agency has often been limited. Player agency is an important concept in feminist discourse on games as it relates to the ethical considerations of game content and design. It highlights the importance of meaningful choices for players and the need for designers to balance agency with ethical responsibility.

Phillips (2020) examines the representation of gender and sexuality in *Bayonetta* (PlatinumGames, 2009-2023). Phillips notes that the game has been a subject of controversy in feminist discourse, with some arguing that Bayonetta represents a powerful female character who subverts traditional gender norms, while others criticize the game for its objectification and sexualization of women. In her analysis of *Bayonetta* (PlatinumGames, 2009-2023), Phillips also examines the character's sexuality and how it is portrayed in the game. She argues that Bayonetta's sexualized appearance and behaviour can be seen as a form of agency and resistance against patriarchal norms. However, this interpretation has been

controversial among feminist critics who argue that Bayonetta's sexualization reinforces harmful stereotypes and objectifies women. Phillips acknowledges these concerns but suggests that Bayonetta's character can also be viewed as a complex and subversive representation of femininity in video games.

Glas (2015) in their article discusses how games and movies differ in terms of the player's agency and the ability to make meaningful choices. It notes that while movies are typically linear and rely on cinematic storytelling techniques, games offer players more agency and the ability to engage in spatial exploration or puzzle-solving. Glas also suggests that games can be influenced by the conventions of melodrama and that designers need to carefully balance ethical gameplay with other design goals. It is important that the article discusses how games can present challenges and opportunities for players that are distinct from those found in movies.

Sjöblom (2015) also discusses player agency and the ways in which players are given the power to make choices in video games, including the choice to harm digital children. Sjöblom argues that the discourse surrounding the topic often neglects to consider player agency and instead focuses on the morality of the act itself. According to Sjöblom, agency refers to the degree of control and decision-making power that players have in the game world. She notes that agency is a complex concept and that it is not simply a matter of giving players complete freedom to do whatever they want in a game. Sjöblom suggests that designers have a responsibility to provide players with meaningful choices that reflect the game's themes and mechanics, while also taking into account ethical considerations. She argues that when players are given agency, they are more likely to engage with the game world and become emotionally invested in their decisions. However, she notes that designers must also be aware of the potential for players to abuse their agency and harm other players or game characters.

2.1.4 Delimitation of the current study

This research will not concentrate on the feminist criticism of production processes in the game design industry, as the topic is complex and extensive. Nonetheless, it is imperative not to disregard or underestimate the significance of such issues, which hold a prominent place in ongoing discussions (DeWinter & Kocurek, 2017). Several debates revolve around the challenges that female game designers encounter within the male-dominated industry. However, this study intends to examine games as a media product and their impact on players, rather than investigating the intricacies of production processes.

2.2 Procedural Rhetoric

The additional theoretical framework that this research is going to utilize is procedural rhetoric. Procedural rhetoric is a theoretical framework that examines the persuasive potential of computational processes. This framework was first proposed by Ian Bogost (2007). According to Bogost, computational processes and procedures can serve as a form of argument, similar to written and spoken language. Procedures are made up of rules and steps, and these steps can shape our understanding and interpretation of information in a similar way to the language used to present it. Thus, the study of procedural rhetoric aims to understand how computational processes can be used to make persuasive arguments and to investigate the ways in which these processes shape our understanding of the world.

Procedural rhetoric recognizes that computational procedures are not neutral but instead carry a specific set of values, assumptions, and biases that shape the way we understand information. This framework thus argues that it is important to consider the political, social, and cultural implications of computational procedures to ensure that they are aligned with democratic values and practices. The goal of procedural rhetoric is to create procedures that are transparent, easily accessible, and that encourage critical thinking.

This research is aware of the ideas presented by Sicart (2011) in the article *Against procedurality*. In this paper, Sicart argues against the idea that game mechanics are the most important aspect of games and proposes that games should be understood as a medium for exploring ethical and political issues, rather than as procedural systems. While this research acknowledges Sicart's perspective, it still employs ideas of procedural rhetoric, which includes analysis of game mechanics, in order to explore the representation of feminist themes in video games.

It is noteworthy that although the current study aims to focus on game mechanics, other elements of game design, such as narrative and visuals, will not be overlooked. The primary emphasis is on mechanics, as feminist studies of video games have largely disregarded this aspect. As Anable (2018) discusses the limitations of computational approaches to game studies, which have become the dominant mode of analysis, often at the expense of more traditional approaches to textual analysis. The author argues that video games are not simply procedural or algorithmic expressions, but rather they structure our experiences through a combination of factors, including visuals, narrative, sound, and interactivity. The binary of computation/representation in game studies also reinforces gendered hierarchies in gaming culture. The author suggests that game studies need to move beyond this binary and develop new analytical frameworks that are more inclusive and take into account the complex interplay of various factors in video games. (Anable, 2018, pp.50-53)

2.3 Procedural Feminism

Procedural feminism is a combination of feminist theory and procedural rhetorics and was defined by Cassandra Woody (2020) as a theoretical framework that seeks to identify and challenge the patriarchal structures and assumptions embedded within cultural and technological systems. Similarly, Perez (2019) claims that data and algorithms are often designed with male experiences and needs as the default, leading to biased outcomes that perpetuate gender inequality.

One of the central tenets of procedural feminism is that the design of games must be informed by an understanding of how power operates in society and how it can be challenged through the design of games. This involves examining the relationships between game mechanics, player behaviour, and the representation of marginalized groups in games. It also involves the integration of feminist principles, such as equality, into the design of games, as well as the consideration of the political and cultural context in which games are created and played.

According to Salter and Blodgett (2017), the techniques used in game design are based on hypermasculine standards. The authors point out that the problem with game design education is the reliance on outdated models of "value". They propose that game design studies need to adopt values that are prevalent in other forms of media, rather than relying solely on game design-specific practices. Phillips, Smith, Cook, & Short, (2016) mention that many schools of cultural theory, like feminist and queer critique, have a wide knowledge and vocabulary for

the studies of modern technology, however, despite this, it is quite unusual to find design practices that were informed by those cultural theories.

Samantha Allen (2014) explores the potential of video games to serve as a means of feminist education. Allen argues that video games offer a unique space for learning and reflection, one that has been overlooked by traditional feminist theory and education. Drawing on feminist theory and critical pedagogy, Allen develops a framework for analyzing video games as sites of feminist pedagogy. The article begins by discussing the potential of video games to disrupt dominant cultural narratives and offer alternative perspectives and experiences. Allen argues that video games can be used to challenge gender stereotypes and to encourage critical thinking about issues such as representation, power, and privilege.

Nick Yee (2008) discusses game mechanics and how they affect players of different genders. Yee argues that game mechanics can often perpetuate gendered stereotypes, such as the emphasis on physical strength in male characters and the focus on emotional intelligence in female characters. He also notes that certain game mechanics, such as combat and exploration, tend to be more popular among male players, while social mechanics, such as chatting and building relationships, tend to be more popular among female players. Yee suggests that game designers can create more inclusive game mechanics by offering a variety of options that appeal to different play styles and preferences, regardless of gender.

Smith (2016) discusses the application of procedurality for promoting diversity and inclusiveness in game design, where the idea is that the rules and systems that govern a game can shape player behaviour and experiences. Smith argues that creating procedural systems of playable identity, without considering social issues, can lead to systems lacking empathy and failing to interact appropriately. To promote social responsibility and awareness in game design, social issues must be considered at every stage of software creation. This requires giving AI cultural context and creating tools to author complex social scenarios and appropriate responses for various player identities. By examining game procedures, we can view the game's treatment of diversity and inclusiveness, reflecting the implicit and explicit biases of the designers and developers. Smith suggests that future research should focus on creating metrics that can uncover unintentional biases in generative systems.

Overall, procedural feminism offers a critical perspective on game design, arguing that the design of games has the potential to challenge and subvert patriarchal norms and power structures while promoting social and political change through the creation of new possibilities for representation and discourse.

2.4 Game Design Principles

In order to understand this research, it is essential to understand game design principles, in order to talk about such aspects of the game as mechanics and narrative. Hunicke, LeBlanc & Zubek, (2004) propose a formal approach to game design and research called the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) framework, which breaks down the components of games into three parts. The Mechanics refer to the rules and algorithms of the game, the Dynamics are the emergent behaviours that arise from player interaction with the Mechanics, and the Aesthetics are the emotional responses elicited in the player by the Dynamics. The MDA framework can be used by game designers and researchers to help understand and analyze games and also to guide the development process towards the desired player experience. The

authors suggest that this approach can be helpful in game design and can contribute to the establishment of game design as a more formal and scientific discipline.

Kim (2015) expands on the MDA approach to game design by explaining the three components of the approach: mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics. Kim defines mechanics as the basic rules and procedures of the game, dynamics as the behaviour of the mechanics in the game system, and aesthetics as the emotional responses that the game elicits from the player. The author argues that designers should consider all three components when creating a game, as they are interdependent and affect each other. Kim also emphasises the importance of balancing these components in order to create an engaging and enjoyable game experience.

In addition to MDA theory, this research also utilises game design principles proposed by Burgun (2012), where he argues for a theory-driven approach to game design. He argues that games should be designed with a clear vision and set of goals in mind and that a systematic and analytical approach to game design can lead to better games. Burgun emphasizes the importance of balancing player agency with the designer's intentions and advocates for a focus on interesting decisions as the core of the good game design. Additionally, he proposes that game designers should seek to create games that are engaging, meaningful, and have a clear message or theme.

2.5 Summary

The concept of procedural feminism is built upon the feminist ideals suggested by feminist theory and the idea presented by procedural rhetorics that procedures consist of rules and steps, which can influence our comprehension and interpretation of information in a similar manner to the language used to convey it. In other words, feminist theory provides the message while procedural theory serves as the messenger. The game design theory, particularly the MDA framework, is used for terminology and basic understanding of the game design principles.

3 Methodology

The main objective of this study is to define the concept of feminist games according to the perspectives of upcoming game designers, intending to provide a comprehensive set of guidelines for game designers. The study will investigate the viewpoints of game design students regarding feminist game design practices, in order to uncover both existing practices and possible innovative approaches. To collect data on these aspects, the research will adopt the semi-structured interview method. The data obtained through these interviews will be subjected to thematic analysis to reveal patterns related to feminist themes that are commonly discussed in the literature.

3.1. Method

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection due to their potential to facilitate co-constructed insights. As established in the theoretical framework, feminist analysis of video games has traditionally centred on the issue of representation, while mechanics have been given less attention. On this basis, it was anticipated that the topic of game mechanics would not emerge as a prevalent theme during the interview process. It was expected that the discussion would require careful navigation to guide participants towards discussing feminist game mechanics.

The methodology of semi-structured interviews was deemed the most suitable approach for conducting qualitative research. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the preferred method over structured interviews because they offer a more flexible and exploratory approach to gathering data. As Blee and Taylor (2002) note, semi-structured interviews "provide greater breadth and depth of information [and] the opportunity to discover respondents' experiences and interpretations of reality" (p. 92). Focus groups were considered as a method as well, however, face-to-face interviews were chosen as they allow for in-depth data collection and the sharing of personal stories by participants, which is less likely to occur in focus groups (Cote & Raz, 2015).

The primary objective of this study is to develop a comprehensive guideline for game designers by examining the perspectives of game designers themselves. It is noteworthy to recognize that the adoption of feminist ideals in society holds the potential for benefiting everyone. However, considering the direct beneficiaries of this research, the focus was placed on individuals within the game design industry. Specifically, game design students with a keen interest in pursuing a career in the game design industry were selected as the target group for conducting the interviews. As Cote and Raz (2015) suggest, this study is grounded in social constructivism, which posits that an individual's perception of the world is shaped by social and cultural factors, rather than being innate. This approach aligns with the aim of this research, which is to gain insights into the views and experiences of game design students on feminist game design practices.

While the changeable nature of individuals and the possibility of dishonesty during interviews was one of the potential downsides, this research did not aim to uncover objective and indisputable facts. Instead, the goal was to develop a guideline for game designers based on the insights gained from the discussions. This guideline should not be prescriptive but serve as a starting point for designers to consider feminist game design practices.

3.2 Participants

The participants for this research were carefully selected to provide specific and nuanced results that would enable a deep exploration of the topic at hand. Game design students from Bachelor's and Master's programs were deemed ideal candidates for this study, as they hold a unique combination of familiarity with game design terminology and processes, as well as the ability to discuss the intersection of mechanics and feminism in digital games with greater depth than the general audience. Additionally, game design students are likely to pursue careers in the game design industry, making them the future of the industry and their perspectives highly valuable for potential impact on industry practices. One potential limitation of recruiting participants exclusively from a pool of game design students within the same academic institution is the risk of similarity in their perspectives, arising from their shared academic background and exposure to similar academic influences.

The decision to not include gender as a variable in the analysis was deliberate and aimed at minimizing personal biases that could potentially impact the research findings. By omitting gender as a factor, the study sought to ensure that participants' responses were assessed solely on their content and perspectives, rather than being influenced by preconceived notions associated with gender. Additionally, the researcher's personal views on feminism prompted a cautious approach to prevent any misinterpretation that men and women are predisposed to expressing certain opinions. Given the limited sample size, it was recognized that quantitative data derived from the study may not be statistically significant. Thus, the focus was placed on qualitative analysis to explore and present the diverse range of perspectives expressed by participants. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the issues under investigation while acknowledging the limitations of the study's methodology.

3.3 Test Interviews

In an attempt to evaluate the appropriateness of semi-structured interviews as a means of collecting data, a series of interviews were conducted, and a number of insights were gathered that could inform improvements to the interview guide. It was found that the responses of the participants were sometimes influenced by the interviewers' reactions. This resulted in participants providing what they believed to be the "correct" answer instead of personal stories. Thus, it was concluded that improvements were needed to interviewing skills, and projecting interviewers' personal views and experiences should be avoided. Moreover, it was observed that while discussing *feminist games*, participants often concentrated on representation rather than mechanics, and steering the conversation toward mechanics could influence their opinions. To overcome this issue, the interview questions were revised to make them less abrupt and more smoothly integrated into the conversation.

Another observation revealed that some respondents were not familiar with certain game design terms, which affected their ability to provide clear responses. Although it was assumed that game design students would be knowledgeable about the terminology, some were found to be unfamiliar with it. To tackle this problem, simple explanations of key terms were prepared in advance to avoid confusion during future interviews.

Finally, it was noticed that some participants were uncomfortable sharing their experiences with casual games, possibly due to embarrassment, as casual games are a marginalised category of games and often not associated with the game design industry (Chess, 2017b). To

ensure that this does not affect future interviews, efforts were made to create a comfortable environment for participants to share their experiences.

3.4 Coding

The current research employs a combined approach that involves both inductive and deductive methods of thematic analysis coding to analyze the data gathered through semi-structured interviews. The deductive approach is informed by a priori knowledge of the research topic, which was obtained from a comprehensive literature review, while the inductive approach allows for patterns and themes that emerge from the data to be identified and analyzed. To ensure a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the data collected, intelligent transcription will be employed, which involves transcribing every word while interpreting and excluding pauses, status, and filler words.

To achieve this objective, the interviews will be thematically coded. This is a well-established method in qualitative research, whereby patterns or themes that emerge from the data are identified and analyzed in relation to the research questions. This thematic approach to coding will enable a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the data collected in the present study, with a particular focus on identifying patterns related to feminist themes that are commonly discussed in the literature, such as representation, tropes and stereotypes, an agency of players and in-game characters and feminist mechanics. The use of thematic analysis will allow for the identification of patterns in the data that relate to these themes, enabling the research questions to be tested against the collected data.

3.5 Positionality

As a lesbian woman, I have a strong interest in the use of systems to improve equality and shed light on existing societal problems. My positionality is influenced by my personal experiences and my desire to promote social justice through my work as a game design student. I believe that games have the potential to become one of the most influential media, and it is crucial to implement feminist practices in them.

My interest in this field is rooted in my background in advertising, where I learned about the influence of symbols and systems on audiences' opinions. I have been exposed to ideas about how the manipulation of images, words, and other forms of media shapes public perception, which has made me more sensitive to issues related to representation and power dynamics. My experiences have given me a unique perspective on the ways in which systems can shape our views and affect our behaviour. I*nvisible Women*, a book by Caren Perez (2019), has also greatly influenced my work. The book highlights the practises in which the world is systematically designed for men, in ways that we may not even notice at times. This idea has been instrumental in shaping my understanding of the importance of acknowledging and addressing systematic inequalities. I am committed to using my work in game design to create a more inclusive and equitable world.

As a woman, I am aware of the frustrations that women may feel at times, facing unfair treatment and pressure from society. My personal experiences have made me passionate about promoting gender equality and creating a space for women's voices and perspectives to be heard. I am driven to use my skills in game design to create games that are more inclusive and representative of diverse perspectives.

As a Ukrainian in 2023 I feel obligated to prevent russian propaganda from spreading around the world, which is why I am going to exclude data that is related to russian developers, researchers or any other cultural products, as they are harmful to any civilized society and symbolise oppressions of other cultures.

Given my positionality, I am committed to conducting research that is sensitive to the needs and perspectives of women. I recognize that my own experiences and biases may influence my work, and I am committed to being mindful of these influences as I conduct my research.

4 Results & Analysis

The current study aimed to gather data from game design students who expressed their intent to either pursue a career in the game design industry or continue research in the field after completing their academic studies. To achieve this objective, nine interviews were conducted with participants who were enrolled in the same university. The homogeneity of the sample could potentially introduce bias due to their shared academic backgrounds.

The interviews were transcribed using intelligent transcription, a technique that excluded any pauses, status markers, and filler words to ensure accuracy in participant statements and facilitate the comparison of phrasing. The interviews produced 25,000 words of raw data that were subsequently coded and analyzed for themes. The coding scheme was derived from the existing literature on the topic, but new themes emerged during the analysis phase, which are presented in this paper. The data were coded and analyzed using established qualitative research methods. The themes that emerged from the data were grouped into categories based on their frequency of occurrence. Some themes were observed more frequently than others, while new themes emerged from the data that were not previously reported in the literature. These novel themes are discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

4.1 Reflection on the Research

The present study has demonstrated that the use of semi-structured interviews was an appropriate method for this research. It was found that the use of a flexible interview guide, allowing for discussion to unfold naturally, was crucial for obtaining comprehensive and nuanced responses. Additionally, it was noted that open-ended questioning and in-depth discussions were necessary given the complex nature of feminism as a topic. Moreover, the use of semi-structured interviews facilitated a more accurate understanding of the participants' perspectives, as it allowed the researcher to clarify and explore the meaning behind the participants' use of terminology.

The process of conducting interviews was a critical aspect of this research study as it is a main source of data for analysis. However, creating a conducive and secure environment for participants during interviews can be challenging, as observed in this study. It was essential to establish safe and private spaces for the interviewees to encourage free expression and ensure that the participants felt safe during the interview process. Unfortunately, due to limited resources, this was not always achievable, leading to instances where participants may have felt uncomfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas freely.

In this particular study, exploring the subject of feminism in games made the interview process even more challenging. Feminism in gaming has been a contentious issue, and discussing it with the participants was not always easy. Many participants expressed concerns about saying something inappropriate, and despite the efforts to create a safe space for them, some remained hesitant to share their views. This highlights the sensitivity of the topic and how it can impact participants' willingness to engage in discussions openly. To overcome these challenges, interviewing process had to be flexible to encourage participants to share their views freely. Some participants were not very forthcoming with their opinions, which made it difficult for the inexperienced interviewer to elicit detailed responses from them. As a result, it became a personal challenge to encourage participants to speak more openly and

elaborate on their ideas. Additionally, the difficulty of moderating discussions in a way that would produce valuable outcomes for the study was troubled by the researchers' limited experience in conducting interviews.

To address these challenges, several strategies were employed. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data, there were notes prepared, with definitions and explanations of terms that might have been unclear to participants. Additionally, the interview questions were adapted after each interview to improve the range of the data collected. However, some participants still expressed doubts about discussing feminism in video games due to concerns about saying something inappropriate or expressing themselves in a way that might be perceived as insensitive or unenlightened.

Engaging with participants who held views slightly negative towards feminism presented a challenge for me as the researcher, given reasercher'spositionality. However, the inclusion of diverse perspectives in the study was deemed valuable. Surprisingly, the data gathered from interviews with such participants exhibited common patterns with the data collected from interviews with self-identified feminists.

4.2 Themes

Using a deductive approach, this study explored themes related to *feminist games* through discussions with participants, which are aligned with concepts and theories in the literature presented in <u>Theory section 2.1</u> of this paper. The aim was to identify and analyze the key themes that emerge when considering feminist game design from a theoretical perspective.

4.2.1 Representation

As anticipated, representation was a prominent topic during the interviews that focused on *feminist games*. When asked to evaluate games they had previously played from a feminist perspective, the majority of participants responded by discussing the representation of female characters. Some participants viewed a *"strong female protagonist"* as a fundamental feature of *feminist games*.

> I: Well, it depends on whatever appeals to you as a feminist game. What would you consider such?
> R: I can't think off the top of my head of any game that has… any strong feminist message. I would say it happens more often, for me to find games that have characters, that are like strong women or, like, better representation of women.
> *(Interview 4)*

The obtained result is not unexpected given the extensive criticism of the feminist discourse towards the underrepresentation of female characters and their lack of power in comparison to male characters. Despite recent improvements, the game industry remains dominated by strong male protagonists with a mission to rescue a *damsel in distress*. This perpetuates gender stereotypes and fails to challenge the traditional gender roles that have long been preserved in society. Such underrepresentation reinforces the notion that men are the default and women are the exception, thereby sustaining the patriarchal system in which men hold more power and control than women (Malkowski, 2017, p.21).

In contrast, a number of respondents raised a counterpoint that adding a female character alone is not enough to classify a game as feminist. These participants voiced apprehensions about the industry's inclination to use the inclusion of female characters as a marketing tactic to suggest that a game adheres to feminist principles, even if such principles are not truly integral to the game's design. As per the participants, this trend has the potential to create a problematic understanding of feminist ideals in the industry.

> *So I hesitate when I say something is a feminist gameplay, because when people say 'Oh, this is a feminist game', they usually mean there's a woman in it. That's all they care about. They do not care about the story. They do not care about the mechanics. They do not say what the story tells. They're like, 'Oh, there's a woman in it, therefore must be feminist'. So they exchange the idea of feminism with just the existence of a woman…*
>
> *(Interview 5)*

A similar argument was discussed by Shaw (2014), who suggests that the decision to feature a female protagonist in a gaming market that predominantly featured women as victims or as decorative objects could be a marketing tactic to distinguish the game from its competitors. Shaw argues, that the primary objective of this decision may not be to increase representation but to appeal to a male audience with an alluring female lead. The indicated evidence demonstrates that the mere portrayal of a strong female protagonist may not suffice in promoting feminist ideals, thereby emphasizing the intricacy of the feminist discourse. This highlights that some feminist practices are vulnerable to being misinterpreted or applied in a destructive manner.

Other themes that have emerged from the data are *"body image"* and *"over-sexualization"*. The participants in the study recognized the sexualized portrayal of female characters in video games as a problem, however, they did not express a desire for *feminist games* to exclude such depictions. Surprisingly, some participants even considered games featuring sexualized female characters to be good examples of *feminist games*, as long as these characters were depicted as strong and self-sufficient.

> *I was thinking about 2B from Nier: Automata* [PlatinumGames, 2017-2022]. *Because some aspects of the character are better, like, female character representation and strong and independent woman, but then there are lots of other aspects that are really bad. Like outfit and sexualisation, so stuff like that…*
>
> *(Interview 4)*

Malkowski (2017) contends that the portrayal of femme fatale characters in games when designed with care, can provide a justified avenue for the expression of female sexuality. The author argues that the resulting depiction would have the potential to be enjoyed by gamers of any gender and sexual orientation, going beyond mere titillation. Malkowski stresses the importance of maintaining representations of women that include sexuality, from a feminist perspective, since excluding sexuality altogether would be inappropriate (p. 23).

In addition, several participants in the study expressed a desire for video games to present female characters with a more realistic body image that includes body hair and athletic proportions. They believe that this would allow for a more authentic representation of women as real human beings, instead of adhering to unrealistic beauty standards that are commonly perpetuated in media. This is similar to Chess's (2017b) ideas, about games that can and should shape societal attitudes towards the subversion of patriarchal norms.

They're actually built like athletes with, shoulders and with thighs and with everything that includes it's much more of a realistic version of what physically strong a person would look like. I like that. I think that is a step in the right direction, representing people the way they actually look.

(Interview 6)

In conclusion, these findings suggest that participants prioritized the portrayal of female characters as strong and independent, rather than the avoidance of sexualization. The results indicate that some participants even viewed games with sexualized female characters as examples of *feminist games* if these characters were depicted as powerful and independent. This highlights the importance of considering not only the sexualized appearance of female characters but also their agency and autonomy in the narrative of the game. Furthermore, game design students tended to prefer the realistic portrayal of women.

4.2.2 Tropes and Stereotypes

The data revealed that certain aspects of the discussion on stereotypes were closely linked to the discourse on representation, which is also apparent in the literature discussed in the Theory section. Dill and Thill's (2007) work on representation highlights that it often reinforces sexist gender roles. Similarly, participants in the study identified stereotypical portrayals of female characters in games:

Although I'll add to that, because of stereotypes of women in games, female characters usually tend to be in specific archetypes of characters, which sometimes are, viewed as more frail.

(Interview 4)

The participants in the study expressed opposition to the stereotypical portrayal of female characters in games, and the majority advocated for a more realistic portrayal. However, this seems to contradict the concept of a *"strong female protagonist",* which was a recurring phrase used by participants in their interviews. While this phrase may have positive connotations, there is a risk that it could become another stereotypical portrayal of women created solely for the enjoyment of male players. This concern is particularly notable in 2023, the year in which this study was conducted, as it echoes the critique made by Shaw in 2014 of the Tomb Raider games (Core Design, 1996–2003, Crystal Dynamics, 2006–2018, 2021–present). This finding highlights the importance of creating female characters in video games that are both strong and realistically portrayed, in order to avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes or unintentionally promoting new stereotypes.

DiSalvo (2017) mentions several masculinity stereotypes in games, including the *"stoic hero"* who suppresses his emotions, the *"hypermasculine male"* who is physically dominant and aggressive, and the *"nerdy male"* who is weak and passive. The author also mentions the *"female warrior"* trope, which can be seen as a masculine ideal, and the *"damsel in distress"* trope, which reinforces traditional gender roles and the idea that men should be the ones to save women. DiSalvo argues that these stereotypes can be harmful to both men and women by reinforcing harmful gender norms. Similarly, the finding emphasizes the need for careful consideration and attention to detail in the design of female characters, in order to ensure that they do not perpetuate harmful stereotypes. While it sounds positive to show "*strong female protagonists*", it is also important not to turn it into a trope, which would become just a

meaningless act of following norms. Women can be strong and women can be weak, and women should be allowed to be human, and it is important not to forget it.

Participants also mentioned the stereotypes about games, like for example FPS (first-person shooter) being a more masculine game genre, which stereotypically targets boys. A couple of participants expressed their frustration with this stereotype and expressed the idea, that games should not be targeted to a certain gender, but rather to players' preferences.

> *But it's very interesting how our understanding of gaming culture sees FPS - first-person shooter, as masculine. While a walking simulator is essentially a casual game that women like. It's bizarre. I like both, that doesn't say anything about my gender. Just says something about my preferences or maybe about my socialization, but doesn't say anything about my sex.*
>
> *(Interview 5)*

The results of the study highlight the significance of avoiding the reinforcement of gendered portrayals or the establishment of new practices that could be perceived as such. Furthermore, the participants expressed their dissatisfaction with gender stereotypes prevalent in game genres marketed to specific genders, emphasizing the need to redirect attention from gender to player preferences to mitigate the detrimental consequences of gendered stereotypes on both male and female gamers.

4.2.3 Agency

Contrary to initial expectations, the theme of agency did not feature prominently during the coding process, despite the fact that agency has been extensively discussed in video game studies (Flanagan & Kaufman, 2016). Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that many participants mentioned the Bayonetta game (PlatinumGames, 2009-2023), even though most of them claimed that they had not played it before and had only come across it in their studies. Participants frequently characterized the protagonist, Bayonetta, as strong, and while many criticized her overt sexualisation, they also acknowledged that the character owns her sexuality and that it is not necessarily created for the 'male gaze'. The notion of ownership over one's sexuality is significant in the discussion of agency, as it demonstrates a degree of control and autonomy over the presentation and portrayal of the character. The notion that Bayonetta's sexuality can be interpreted in conflicting ways as either a problematic representation or as a challenge to patriarchal norms aligns with the perspectives expressed by Phillips (2020).

> *I would consider Bayonetta* [PlatinumGames, 2009-2023] *a feminist game, simply because in the Tomb Raider* [Core Design, 1996–2003; Crystal Dynamics, 2006–2018, 2021–present] *series… the sexualization of Lara Croft is just slapped on there to… to appeal to gamer boys, but Bayonetta… it can feel sort of the same, but it's much more on the character itself… the character itself wields that sexualization.*
>
> *(Interview 6)*

In the interviews conducted with participants, the concept of agency was not directly discussed, but terms such as *"independent female protagonist"* and *"strong female protagonist"* were mentioned repeatedly. The notion of independence in characters can refer to their ability to control their own fate or their strength in relation to other characters. It is noteworthy that independence in characters was often equated with their powers, which is a

potential area for further exploration. Moreover, independence may also indicate the absence of a connection between female and male characters, as is often seen in the damsel in distress or femme fatale tropes (Sarkeesian, 2013).

The absence of any mention of the player agency during gameplay in the interviews was unforeseen, given that it is a commonly discussed topic among scholars (Sjöblom, 2015). It is unexpected, as issues described by Sundén & Sveningsson (2012) are something that players may encounter. Sundén & Sveningsson argue that 'men and women still end up falling into certain roles, that follow patterns from the real world, where they are expected to act in certain ways and take up certain positions vis-à-vis each other' (p. 58). The lack of discussion on this topic may be attributed to limitations in the design of the interview questions. Future research should consider the necessity for more nuanced questioning to elicit a deeper comprehension of the player's agency during gameplay.

4.2.4 Mechanics

During the interviews with participants regarding feminist games, the topic of game mechanics was rarely discussed, unless explicitly prompted by the interviewer. It was observed that participants primarily focused on the narrative aspects of the games and rarely mentioned game mechanics. Only when specifically asked about game mechanics did participants shift their focus to discussing this aspect of the games.

This outcome was in line with the feminist discourse on video games, where the primary focus of feminist game studies has been on the representation of gender in games through the narrative rather than on game mechanics. However, it is important to acknowledge that game mechanics can also contribute to the reinforcement or subversion of gender stereotypes and norms within games (Bogost, 2007). A comprehensive understanding of gender representation in games requires a nuanced examination of game mechanics, which has not been fully explored in feminist game studies, to the author's knowledge. The absence of detailed discussion on game mechanics during the interviews may indicate a lack of awareness among participants about the possible influence of game mechanics on gender representation in games. According to Yee (2008), game mechanics have the potential to reinforce gender stereotypes, such as male characters being physically strong and female characters being emotionally vulnerable.

During the interviews, participants were prompted to propose instances of *'feminist game mechanics'* drawn from existing games or to devise original examples that had not yet been implemented in games. The participants were urged to engage in brainstorming and provide precise and detailed examples. The focus was specifically on the mechanics of the games, ignoring the narrative. It is important to highlight that the participants in this study expressed a wide range of suggestions regarding what they considered to be 'feminist mechanics.' However, it is notable that some of these suggestions predominantly focused on the narrative structure of games, which goes beyond the scope of the current section. This observation underscores the necessity for providing a clearer definition of the MDA (Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics) principles outlined by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004) to the participants during the interview process. Additionally, it raises the possibility that there may be a lack of a comprehensive understanding and clear definition of these principles within the participants' educational backgrounds.

In the context of feminist game mechanics, the participants of the study held divergent views, with some advocating for empowerment and others for equality. Those advocating for

empowerment suggested that game mechanics should address real-life issues that women face, such as workplace discrimination or invisible domestic labour. As highlighted by Chess (2017a), "It would seem that just as affective labour is devalued in the real world, so is it devalued in the gaming world and as a form of play" (p. 118). This illustrates a negative example of mechanics that reflect real-life issues, but continue to perpetuate them instead of challenging them.

Additionally, the participants proposed that non-violent conflict resolution should be emphasized throughout feminist game mechanics, teaching essential skills such as compromise and collaboration. Similar ideas were expressed by Flanagan & Nissenbaum, where authors proposed alternative forms of competition in games, for example, "players have the important option of turning down competitions if they are non-competitive players. This approach accommodates diverse play styles" (Flanagan, & Nissenbaum, 2008, p.269).

> *It's also about collaborating and building something together and you have many, many games, modern time, where that is much more of a focus, the building of community. The nurturing of... and, and taking care of everybody, regardless of gender orientation, or how they physically appear in the world. I think that is absolutely a tenant of feminism.*
>
> *(Interview 6)*

It is important to note that although the participant did not provide specific examples, their statement reflects the broader idea of emphasizing collaborative and community-oriented gameplay in feminist game design, which deviates from traditional competitive approaches. Future research could delve further into specific game examples that align with these principles, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how non-violent conflict resolution and collaborative gameplay can be integrated into feminist game mechanics.

Salter and Blodgett (2021) propose that the fundamental actions associated with a default platform, such as shooting, collecting, and conquering, contain an underlying hypermasculinity that can hinder the promotion of inclusive and intersectional representation, as well as critical creative practices. This observation aligns with the notion of feminist mechanics, which advocates for alternative game mechanics that eschew violence and instead foster collaboration. By incorporating feminist mechanics, game designers can challenge and address the pervasive hypermasculine norms prevalent in default platforms, thus promoting more inclusive and diverse gaming experiences (Salter & Blodgett, 2021, p. 273). This argument posits that achieving feminist game mechanics involves not only adopting non-violent methods of conflict resolution but also avoiding traditional violent approaches that are rooted in patriarchal structures for games seeking to embody feminist ideals at the mechanical level. By aligning with this perspective, the study addresses Research Question 2b, which explores the connection between feminist game design and the rejection of conventional violent gameplay mechanics dictated by patriarchal norms. The finding suggests that incorporating alternative approaches to conflict resolution and eschewing violence in game mechanics can contribute to the advancement of feminist principles in the gaming industry.

An interesting aspect that emerged from the study was the importance of character-creation tools that allow for diverse body types beyond the traditional feminine and masculine beauty standards. Also according to Westecott the most literal example of the potential for a feminist corrective to game studies lies in digital avatar customization tools (Westecott, 2016, p.238).

Participants stressed the need to depict women as real people with varied body shapes, rather than perpetuating the idealised image of a woman. This can be achieved through greater flexibility in character creation tools, which is typically lacking in games and can be viewed as an area for improvement in-game mechanics. The participants of the study expressed a strong desire for a realistic portrayal of female characters, emphasizing the need to move away from idealized and polished depictions commonly found in games. They advocated for representing women in a manner that reflects real-life diversity, including features such as body hair and a range of body types beyond the traditional hourglass figure. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of avoiding sexualized and impractical clothing choices for female characters, instead favouring attire that is practical and appropriate for the game's context and setting. These suggestions highlight the participants' desire for authentic and relatable representations of women in video games, challenging the prevailing standards of beauty and promoting inclusivity and diversity.

The participants who advocated for equality in *feminist games* expressed the view that game mechanics should provide female characters with the same mechanical abilities as male characters. They emphasized that each character should have an equal opportunity to succeed, regardless of gender. Essentially, these participants argued that there is no need for specific feminist mechanics; rather, mechanics should ensure that all characters have an equal chance to win regardless of gender. Additionally, they suggested that promoting games to female audiences should be done through the story and narrative.

> *Maybe… I'm really not sure because most of the things come from the story and narrative, but for the mechanics, maybe if your character is like a girl, and not is not weaker, than the guys, or is… I mean, from a mechanical perspective, that's the only thing I can think of, if it's an action game. And she's on the same kind of power balance with the guys. That's the only thing we can think of from the mechanics…. But from the narrative, there are a lot of things we can do.*

(Interview 9)

4.3 Definition of Feminist Games

Divergent viewpoints were not limited to the mechanics of games, as the term *feminist games* elicited confusion among participants and reflected the multifaceted nature of the topic of feminism. The interview questions (Appendix A) were structured such that participants were first asked to identify a few *feminist games,* and subsequently prompted to share their own interpretation of the term *feminist games* following a discussion. This approach was implemented to ensure that the participant's responses were not influenced by a fixed definition of the term.

4.3.1 Definitional challenge

In recent years, the notion of *feminist games* has been the subject of increased attention in academia and industry alike (Consalvo, 2019). Despite this, a clear and universally-accepted definition of the term remains elusive. The data collected in the present study revealed that many participants exhibited hesitancy when attempting to define what it means for a game to be considered "feminist." This hesitancy may be rooted in a fear of providing an incorrect definition, underscoring the broader lack of clarity surrounding the term.

Notwithstanding this difficulty in providing a definition, it is worth noting that the participants demonstrated an ability to identify examples of games that could be classified as "feminist." This finding indicates that while the term itself may be uncertain, there is a shared

understanding among those within the industry of what constitutes a game that embodies feminist ideals. However, the lack of a clear definition may make it difficult for game designers to intentionally incorporate feminist themes into their work.

> *I don't have much knowledge about feminism in general. So I probably will say something… because of my lack of knowledge… But for me… how I view it, would be…*
>
> *(Interview 4)*

Westecott's (2018) ideas on the definition of feminism can be applied to the challenge of defining feminism within the context of gaming. The challenge lies in the risk of excluding works that do not fit neatly into a specific definition. However, despite this lack of clarity, participants still hold a certain understanding of what *feminist games* should entail, suggesting that there are common expectations or assumptions surrounding the concept. It is important to address this struggle in defining *feminist games* as it highlights a need for clearer and more concrete guidelines and definitions to be established in the field of game studies, given that all of the participants are game design students in the same institution.

The struggle to define *feminist games* reflects a broader challenge in the game studies field of defining what constitutes a feminist approach to games. This challenge has been compounded by the fact that the field is still relatively new and underdeveloped and thus lacks a standardized terminology and framework for analyzing games through a feminist lens (Westecott, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial to develop a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of what *feminist games* are and how they can be effectively designed and analysed. In the article *"The future of media studies is game studies"* by Chess and Consalvo (2022), the authors describe the challenge in the game studies field of defining what constitutes a feminist approach to games. The authors argue that feminist game studies is a relatively new field that has yet to be fully defined and agreed upon by scholars. They note that while there have been numerous studies on the representation of gender and women in games, there is a lack of consensus on what constitutes a feminist approach to games.

Despite participants' reluctance to define *feminist games*, the definition was still requested during the interviews. The participants were asked to provide their understanding of *feminist games*, and their responses varied.

> *...for me to find games that have characters, that are like strong women or, like, better representation of women*
>
> *(Interview 4)*

> *So it's like, hard to say what is a feminist game if we do not even agree on the feminist idea, but in my perspective, games like Gone Home* [The Fullbright Company, BlitWorks, 2013-2018] *can be considered feminist because it has an experimental design of it. That is meant to give a story that evolves around a minority of people or non-spoken experiences.*
>
> *(Interview 5)*

> *Now, sadly, I would say the last few years the best indication of a game having feminism in the core structure of it, is that people react negatively to it.*
>
> *(Interview 6)*

One participant stated that a feminist game would be something that they could not even imagine (Interview 1), while another believed that *feminist games* promote women's rights and abilities, leaving them feeling empowered (Interview 3).

> *So when I think about a feminist game… I think it's going to be something that I can't even imagine.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

> *I would say one that promotes… women's rights or abilities… or maybe leaves them feeling empowered. Leaves them feeling seen, as in… you can have this fairy dust woman who is super cool and is a complete fantasy image of what a woman actually is, because she isn't this super, you know, that's very Madonna whore complex. You know, she doesn't have to be a Madonna to be feeling like… you know, you're pushing like: "Oh, you're empowered girl!". Like, you know, you can still also show women as weak and realistic and show that they aren't either one of those. They are human. You don't need to put her on a pedestal and you don't need to demean her. That could be a feminist game.*
>
> *(Interview 3)*

A participant believed that games that have female characters with the same opportunities and abilities as male characters are likely to be feminist, while more realistic games that show the physical differences between genders can also be feminist (Interview 2). Another participant mentioned the importance of not portraying women as Madonna figures or weak beings but as human, and not demeaning them, and games that achieve this can be considered feminist (Interview 3).

> *Probably, it's the game where a female character has the same opportunities and abilities as a male character. But also, I will say that… it's fair to say that more realistic games are probably more likely to be feminist… because women in general have different… for example, physical abilities. or physical needs or… something like this.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

One participant expressed that *feminist games* raise issues that are not talked about in games and create a more equal culture by addressing motherhood or other issues related to being a woman (Interview 7). Another participant believed that *feminist games* would have a strong, independent female main character defined by their abilities, not their gender (Interview 8).

I'd probably say that feminist games raise issues, often not talked about within games, to kind of create a more equal culture. So bringing up issues about motherhood or specific aspects that may not be talked too much about in games, like how it is to be a woman, what type of issues and cultural significance that usually means.

(Interview 7)

I guess… There's something that has a strong, independent female main character who is not ever defined by being female, but defined by their abilities or like, Yeah, I mean…that doesn't mean that they are not necessarily gendered

(Interview 8)

Finally, one participant suggested that games that are not centred around the man saving the woman but where they are on the same level with the story could be considered feminist (Interview 9).

I'm not really sure… maybe when there's not the story is not about the guy saving the girl… the whole thing, but it's more like they're on the same page or something… or they're on the same kind of level in the story. Their story is not just about the guy and there's just a sidekick… the female sidekick. So I think maybe that's kind of feminist.

(Interview 9)

The interviews suggest that there is no single definition of a feminist game, and various aspects can contribute to the characterization of a game as feminist. The participants' perspectives vary from having a strong, independent female main character, addressing issues that are not often talked about in games, showing women as human rather than a trope, or having a story where male and female characters are on the same level. Furthermore, within the context of feminist game design, it is worth noting that certain participants hold the perspective that feminist games are characterized by their ability to provoke a negative reaction. According to these participants, feminist-themed games challenge the long-standing norms and conventions prevalent within the gaming industry. This viewpoint aligns with the assertions put forth by Massanari (2017), who argues that feminist games aim to disrupt and subvert the established patriarchal structures and ideologies embedded within the industry.

The notion that feminist games incite a negative reaction signifies the potential discomfort and resistance encountered when confronting traditional gender roles, power dynamics, and societal expectations prevalent in gaming. By challenging these norms, feminist games should seek to raise awareness, foster critical discourse, and prompt a reevaluation of the existing landscape.

Furthermore, the interviews suggest that the concept of a *feminist game* is highly subjective and may be influenced by personal experiences, perceptions and cultural backgrounds. The responses indicate that the participants' understanding of feminism may differ, leading to different interpretations of what makes a game feminist. Finally, the interviews provide insight into the range of feminist themes that can be addressed in games, including representation, discrimination, objectification, agency, power dynamics, and more. Overall, the interviews suggest that defining a feminist game is complex and multifaceted, and there is no single definition. Instead, *feminist games* can address a variety of feminist themes and can be defined by different aspects, such as having strong female characters, addressing underrepresented issues, or challenging established norms.

The perspectives of the participants on feminism occasionally conflicted with one another. To facilitate categorization in this research, such views have been classified into two primary categories: Empowerment and Equality. These categories are essential for classifying participants' recommendations for feminist mechanics. While the participants' views on feminism were multifaceted and nuanced, this research found it necessary to organize them into these two categories to aid in the analysis of the data collected. This approach to categorization allowed for a clearer understanding of the participants' varied perspectives on feminism and their corresponding suggestions for feminist game design mechanics.

4.3.2 Same Topic, Contradictory Standpoints

Some of the participants' definitions of *feminist games* were contradictory to one another. Some participants believed that video games should depict a positive representation of women and their capabilities, while others were more concerned with avoiding the stereotypical patriarchal approaches, like the use of violence in games. The opinions were discovered to be split into two distinct categories: Equality and Empowerment. The first category argues that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men and that they share similar interests. The second category posits that women possess unique strengths and skills that should be respected and celebrated in video games, the same as those of men.

To establish a clear and unambiguous framework for classifying feminist games, this study recommends the use of the categories of Empowerment and Equality, rather than referring to specific schools of feminism. Although these categories align with the definitions of feminist schools such as Liberal and Marxist feminism (Meyers, 2014; Lorber, 1997), relying on these schools may introduce further definitional confusion. Moreover, using these schools of feminism may attribute more significance and connotation than intended to the categories derived from the empirical data.

The category of Empowerment resonates with the key ideas of Marxist feminism, which emphasizes the recognition of reproductive labour typically associated with women, including activities like cooking, cleaning, and caring for children and the elderly. Marxist feminism seeks to challenge the devaluation and marginalization of such labour in societal structures (Lorber, 1997). On the other hand, the category of Equality aligns closely with the principles advocated by Liberal feminism, which argues for equal rights, opportunities, and treatment for all genders (Lorber, 1997). Both Empowerment and Equality address important aspects of feminist discourse and highlight the need to address gender-based inequalities and stereotypes in game design.

By utilizing the categories of Empowerment and Equality, this study aims to provide a more inclusive and encompassing framework for classifying feminist games, allowing for a broader range of perspectives and interpretations. This approach avoids the limitations and potential conflicts associated with relying solely on specific schools of feminism, thereby facilitating a clearer understanding of the feminist dimensions within game design. Therefore, this research aims to maintain an objective perspective by avoiding the explicit mention of specific feminist schools.

It is worth noting that participants in the study may not have been familiar with the various schools of feminism, as they were not introduced to these concepts during the interviews. Consequently, even if their viewpoints align with certain feminist ideas, it does not necessarily indicate their familiarity with the broader theoretical frameworks. Therefore, this

paper refrains from delving into the specific schools of feminism in order to avoid attributing unintended meanings to participants' comments. However, it is acknowledged that further investigation into the relationship between the categories of Empowerment and Equality and the various schools of feminism could be a valuable avenue for future research.

The Empowerment category pertains to games that give players a sense of agency and control, empowering them to take action and create positive changes in their lives or the lives of others. On the other hand, the Equality category concerns games that challenge gender stereotypes and promote gender equality by offering players equal opportunities and rewards, regardless of gender.

Although these categories provide a useful framework for analyzing and classifying feminist games, they do not account for the complexities of intersectionality. The intersectionality perspective recognizes that individuals may experience multiple and overlapping forms of oppression and privilege based on factors such as race, sexuality, and class. Therefore, future research could explore the intersectionality of feminist game design and examine how these categories might be expanded to better address the diverse experiences and needs of different players.

The game franchise *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000-2023) sparked a difference of opinion among the participants regarding whether the game's home environment was oppressive or finally appreciated. Harvey (2015, p.36) discusses the idea that access to different types of games can influence a person's preference for them, rather than innate characteristics. Girls may play "pink" games marketed to them because they are more likely to have access to them, but games marketed towards girls don't necessarily have to be pink or have stereotypically feminine characteristics. *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000-2023) is an example of a game that embodies many of the cornerstones of the Girls' Games Movement but is not marketed specifically towards girls. However, Harvey notes that some argue that games like *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000-2023) are still seen as feminine because they are non-competitive. The interview participants had opposite opinions on the matter, with some arguing that the game perpetuated traditional gender roles by depicting women as caretakers and homemakers, while others saw the game as an opportunity to appreciate the value of such domestic work.

> *Q: And do you consider games as, for example, Sims [Maxis, 2000-2023] feminist?*
> *A: No, because everything happens in the house, and there is a stereotype that women's place is at home. So it is like… a point of view of the stereotypical housewife, where the camera doesn't follow the character to work, or other places. It is sort of… like it's reflecting 50's housewife view on life… and it wasn't a great time for women.*
> *(Interview 2)*

> *And home dynamics, we often think of the domestic as a woman's space and you have to spend time just kind of cleaning up your house and in that sense, it puts domestic duties as a part of like, what Sims [Maxis, 2000-2023] have to do and sometimes, you know, if they are spending too much time cleaning, they might not be completely well selected by the time that they go to work and they might do a worse work performance. So in that sense, I think it sheds a lot of light on the struggles people, especially people who are active in the domestic might have today obviously men still go through these issues, but they are often labelled as women's questions.*
> *(Interview 3)*

During the study, two participants commented on the particular feature in *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000-2023), which is the home environment that serves as the centre of the gameplay, and the game camera that always stays "at home". Despite observing the same feature, the participants viewed it from different perspectives. One participant believed that the home environment in *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000-2023) emphasized oppressive gender roles that confine women to domesticity. As a result, the participant considered *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000-2023) to be not in line with feminist ideals and even suggested that it may support harmful stereotypes. In contrast, the other participant argued that the home environment in the game highlights the gender inequalities that women face in real life, like for example invisible labour at home, described by Perez (2019), and offers the player an opportunity to experience and empathize with these issues. *The Sims* (Maxis, 2000-2023) is a widely discussed game franchise by academics (Chess, 2017a):

> The Sims (in its many versions and expansions) can also be considered a caregiving game, situated in the work of emotional labor. Many scholars have noted that The Sims has a history of being popular with female 40 audiences in particular. […] Emotional labor is inevitable as characters from The Sims are entirely dependent on their godlike creator, who is the only one that can improve their overall well-being. These themes of caregiving then relate back to domesticity in expectation of minding the lives of one's family and of the production of daily tasks. (p.112)

During the research, the issue of violence in video games evoked opposite opinions among the participants. Some participants supported the exclusion of violence from video games entirely, whereas others believed it could be suitable in specific themes and contexts. The individuals who opposed violence pointed out that it is not consistent with feminist ideals and, therefore, should not be present in *feminist games*. This reflects Denner & Campe's (2008) work, where they argued that in order to attract girls to games, key factors include cooperative gameplay, minimal meaningless violence, multiple ways to win, and meaningful winning and losing conditions. Denner & Campe's (2008) also argue that girls are more inclined towards skill or learning games rather than those focused on violent feedback.

The participants advocating against violence in feminist games suggested that *feminist games* should employ non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms.

> *You have, for instance, compromise or collaboration, that are other types of conflict [resolution] styles that are very much rooted in feminism, so games present challenges, or puzzles, or whatever it is, gamers are supposed to solve these. Now, if we give them… we don't give them a gun. That is not an option. You can't solve this with a gun. But you can solve this with these other tools. They require that you learn how to compromise. They require that you learn how to collaborate, communicate.*
>
> *(Interview 6)*

Some participants held the view that violence in video games does not necessarily preclude the possibility of a game being feminist. However, they expressed concern that the concept of *feminist games* may be reduced to a gender stereotype, resulting in the marginalization of games designed for girls. Rather than segregating games by gender, they suggested encouraging female players to explore all genres of games, including those traditionally considered masculine, such as first-person shooters.

According to Burrill (2008, pp. 55-56), despite the increasing number of female players, the industry continues to focus on creating games for the young male demographic. Violence and

sexism are prevalent themes in the majority of games, and female players have been shown to be less interested in violent games. However, there are exceptions such as female gaming groups and websites dedicated to female players who enjoy violent games.

> *Mainly because of… there are specific genres that we can absolutely say are masculine normative, like, shoot 'em ups or FPS games.*
>
> *(Interview 7)*

The divergence of opinions expressed by the participants regarding the practical implementation of feminist ideals in game design reveals the absence of a consensus. This suggests that there is a need for a more precise definition or alternative terminology to clarify the scope and nature of feminist game design.

4.4 Summary of the Analysis

In this research, a series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants to examine the key themes pertaining to feminist game design. The interviews revealed that representation was a significant theme, with the majority of participants expressing a preference for strong female protagonists in *feminist games*. However, some participants offered an opposing view, suggesting that merely including a female character in a game does not necessarily make it a feminist game. According to the study, some participants believed that games featuring sexualized female characters could be classified as feminist if those characters were depicted as strong and independent. However, the study also highlights the risk that portraying female characters as "strong" could reinforce gender stereotypes. Consequently, the study emphasizes the significance of avoiding the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the emergence of new practices that may become entrenched as stereotypes. The absence of any mention of the player agency during gameplay in the interviews is noteworthy, given that it is a commonly discussed topic among scholars.

The participants in the study did not often bring up game mechanics unless asked specifically about it. The participants were prompted to suggest examples of feminist game mechanics, and their replies were separated into two categories - empowerment and equality. Those advocating for empowerment suggested more concrete examples of the game mechanics that could be considered feminist: real-life issues, such as workplace discrimination or invisible domestic work addressed in the mechanics of the game; mechanics that encourages compromise and collaboration, with an aim for non-violent conflict resolution; character creation tools that allow for diverse body types beyond the traditional feminine and masculine beauty standards. Participants who advocated for equality argued that mechanics should ensure that all characters have an equal chance to win regardless of gender and emphasised the importance of narrative.

The study's findings reflect the broader challenge of defining what a feminist game is. There is a need for clearer and more concrete guidelines and definitions in the field, and the study proposes two categories derived from participants' responses: Empowerment and Equality.

5 Discussion

One of the concerns of this research was that the interview participants are from the same university and share the academic background, which may result in the similarity of opinion, however, the data showed opposite results. The results demonstrated that game design students perceive feminism in different and sometimes contradictory ways. The consideration of the similar academic background is still valid, as participants demonstrated shared knowledge of certain discussions. The mention of the *Bayonetta* game (PlatinumGames, 2009-2023) in relation to the feminist discourse on video games serves as proof of this common background, as it was included in the course programme. Most participants stated that they had heard of the game as having a feminist theme during their studies, but had not played it themselves. Despite the participants sharing a common academic background, the findings from Chapter 4.3.2 revealed that they expressed conflicting views on feminist games.

This discovery highlights the intricate nature of the topic and underscores the importance of approaching it with sensitivity and careful consideration. The unexpected aspect of this finding lies in the fact that the participants' opinions on feminism are not merely different but opposite to each other. Such opposing viewpoints can pose challenges in design processes, academic discussions, and game marketing efforts, making it crucial to handle this controversy with great attention. One possible explanation for the diversity of perspectives among the participants is the multifaceted nature of feminism itself. Feminism encompasses a range of ideologies, theories, and practices, and as such, it can be interpreted differently depending on individual experiences and beliefs. These varying interpretations can significantly influence the shared understanding of the term *"feminist games"* and contribute to the divergence of opinions observed in the study.

Understanding the complexity of feminism and its subjective interpretations is vital when engaging in discussions and decision-making processes related to game design and academic research. It is essential to approach these discussions with an open mind, recognizing diverse perspectives and seeking common ground to foster productive dialogue.

5.1 Contradictory attitudes

The controversy surrounding feminism in video games may have contributed to the varying perceptions of the topic among the participants. The subject of feminism in gaming has been a contentious issue in recent years, with some gamers perceiving it as a threat to the traditional values of gaming culture, while others view it as an important step towards greater inclusivity and representation in the industry. The emergence of social media and online platforms has amplified this debate, enabling gamers to express their views and opinions more freely and easily than ever before (Consalvo, 2019).

The research conducted has yielded an unexpected finding that suggests feminism may be too controversial to be used as a guideline in the game design process. The participants held antipodal views, with some suggesting that *feminist games* should abandon gender stereotypes entirely, while others believed that feminine traits should be embraced instead of projecting masculine qualities onto female characters. These counter-views suggest that a more nuanced approach may be necessary to address feminism in game design.

The research findings suggest that the term *feminist games* may not be sufficient to communicate a specific design approach or convey a clear message. Designers who aim to create games with feminist principles may find it challenging to collaborate with others who do not share the same opinions. Thus, it may be more beneficial to use more specific and nuanced terminology that better communicates the intended message. Additionally, these identified approaches can be utilized to target specific audiences based on their perspectives and beliefs, aligning with various feminist schools of thought.

While the term *feminist games* has its merits in promoting feminist ideals in video game design, the research suggests that designers should use more specific terminology to communicate their values and design approach more effectively. By utilizing more specific terms, designers can clearly articulate their design philosophy and principles, which may help attract collaborators who share similar values and goals. This approach may also prevent misunderstandings and confusion that could arise from the use of broad terms like *feminist games*. Moreover, the use of specific terminology can help differentiate between different types of games that incorporate feminist principles. This specificity can aim to provide clarity.

Collaboration and dialogue between game developers and feminist scholars and activists can be crucial in the incorporation of feminist principles into game design. By engaging in discussions with experts in the field, game developers can gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of feminist theory and the various ways in which it can be applied to video games. However, it is important to note that the application of feminist principles in game design is a complex process that may not always have a straightforward solution.

Despite the potential challenges, it is still important for academics to provide a clear and useful framework for game developers who wish to incorporate feminist principles into their work. This framework could involve providing specific guidelines on how to avoid perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes or how to create empowering representations of female characters. By doing so, academics can help to ensure that game developers are not only aware of feminist principles, but are also able to apply them effectively in their design approach.

Additionally, while feminist theory may be complex, it is still a valuable tool for game design. The principles of feminist theory can help game developers to create more inclusive and diverse games that reflect the experiences of a wider range of players. Therefore, it is important for academics to continue working to provide useful terminology and a clearer framework for feminist game design. Through collaboration and dialogue between academics and game developers, it is possible to create games that not only entertain but also challenge harmful gender stereotypes and promote equality.

5.2 Author's Position

In the realm of game design, the pursuit of gender equality is a worthy goal, one that should be actively sought after and integrated into game development practices. It is imperative that the gender of the characters does not define them and that players are not restricted from playing certain games based on their gender. However, it is important to acknowledge that achieving gender equality in the industry may be a daunting task given the current socio-political climate. Despite efforts to advance gender equality, women continue to encounter invisible barriers and biases that limit their opportunities for success and

professional growth. Women's contributions to the industry are often undervalued, and patriarchal values still permeate many aspects of the gaming culture.

The prevailing patriarchal system has hindered progress towards gender equality by perpetuating stereotypes and limiting opportunities for women. Although the industry has made some strides towards inclusivity, much remains to be done to create a more equitable environment. While equality is important, it is also important to shed light on women's accomplishments in the areas that are outside of the patriarchal pyramid of achievements, like family, home environment and caretaking. Women were held behind for a long time, and mere inclusion of them in the patriarchal world and treating them as those who have an equal opportunity does not seem to be fair, as it excludes the acknowledgement of obstacles, difficulties and challenges that women have to overcome to be on the same stage as men.

It is noteworthy to highlight the evolution of the researcher's personal definition of a feminist game throughout the course of this research. Initially, at the outset of the study, the researcher's definition of a feminist game centred around the idea that it should address the specific challenges faced by women, highlighting the notion that while women possess the capability to achieve the same feats as men, they often encounter additional hurdles in their pursuit. However, as the research progressed and insights were gathered, the researcher's definition of feminist games underwent a transformation.

Toward the conclusion of the research, the researcher refined their definition to encompass a broader understanding. According to the updated definition, feminist games are characterized by their diversity, acknowledging that there can be a range of approaches to embodying feminist ideals within game design. These games appreciate and acknowledge the work and efforts of women, seeking to challenge traditional gender roles and norms. Furthermore, feminist games prominently feature women characters engaging in activities and accomplishments typically associated with men, thereby subverting traditional gender expectations and promoting gender equality.

The revised definition recognizes that feminist games can take various forms, reflecting the multiplicity of perspectives and experiences within feminism. It signifies a shift from solely focusing on the portrayal of women's struggles to embracing a more inclusive and empowering representation of women in the gaming medium.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the multifaceted nature of feminist ideals in video games, with a specific focus on game mechanics, an aspect that has been understudied in the feminist discourse. While character design and representation have been widely discussed, game mechanics have received less attention. The study aimed to challenge the assumption that feminist ideals in video games can only be reflected through narrative and storylines. The study drew on Bogost's (2007) Procedural Rhetorics theory, which suggests that digital systems can be used to simulate complex real-world systems and phenomena, enabling the creation of interactive arguments that are more compelling than traditional forms of rhetoric. However, the findings of the research showed that the participants had difficulty conceptualizing game mechanics from a feminist perspective, indicating that reliance on narrative still persists among game design students. This study highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of feminist ideals in video games, which includes a consideration of game mechanics and design.

Despite initial expectations for more concrete results, the study found that the discourse on feminism and video games is more complex and multifaceted than was initially anticipated. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are valuable, particularly for game designers seeking to incorporate feminist ideals in their games. By highlighting the diversity of perspectives on the topic, this study provides insight into potential directions for designing games that reflect different feminist values. Moreover, this study can serve as a starting point for more in-depth academic discussions and debates on the topic.

6.1 Research Question 1

What can be considered a feminist game according to the game design students?

The present study aimed to investigate participants' definitions of feminist games, expecting to identify a shared understanding among them. However, the findings revealed a notable level of controversy and diverse interpretations, which proved more divisive than initially anticipated. The lack of consensus among participants in defining feminist games necessitated the establishment of categories to organize their perspectives. These categories, namely Equality and Empowerment, were utilized to summarize and categorize the participants' definitions.

The Equality category encapsulated the belief that feminist games should strive for equal rights and opportunities for women, emphasizing the notion that characters should not be defined solely by their gender. This perspective aligns with the idea that gender should not restrict individuals' roles or abilities in the game world. Contrarily, the Empowerment category posited that feminist games should showcase and celebrate women's unique strengths and skills, such as collaboration and caregiving, while also addressing real-life injustices that women face.

The presence of contradictory perspectives among participants raises concerns about the effectiveness of a unified framework for defining feminist games, as different interpretations can lead to misunderstandings within the industry. Therefore, it is crucial to shift the focus from a broad and potentially ambiguous term like *"feminist games"* to a more specific

examination of the messages that games communicate. This nuanced approach would facilitate clearer communication within the industry and foster a more meaningful integration of feminist ideals in game design.

6.2 Research Question 2

What is feminist game mechanics?

In this study, the participants put forward two distinct approaches for integrating feminist ideals into video games: *Empowerment* and *Equality*. These approaches represent divergent perspectives on effectively incorporating feminist principles into video game design. The *Empowerment* approach emphasizes the role of game mechanics in promoting feminist ideals and calls for a departure from traditional game design approaches, making it particularly relevant to this study. However, it is important for game designers to consider both perspectives and explore a range of approaches to foster greater gender equality in video games. The second approach, *Equality*, focuses on targeting games towards a female audience by leveraging the narrative and thematic aspects of the game, rather than solely focusing on the mechanics. This approach acknowledges the limitations of traditional game design approaches and suggests that feminist ideals can be more effectively conveyed through a game's storyline.

It is worth noting that the categorizations of *Empowerment* and *Equality* developed in this research do not explicitly account for intersectionality, which encompasses aspects such as race and sexuality. As a result, these categories may not fully capture the complexities of feminist game design when applied to these broader frameworks.

a. What are the essential characteristics of feminist game mechanics?

The *Empowerment* approach, which emphasizes the role of game mechanics in promoting feminist ideals, entails moving away from traditional game design tropes and exploring alternative methods. Participants advocating for *Empowerment* suggested that game mechanics should address real-life issues that women face, such as workplace discrimination or the often overlooked invisible domestic labour. Additionally, participants highlighted the importance of incorporating non-violent conflict resolution as a core element of feminist game mechanics. This emphasis on non-violence aligns with the goal of teaching players essential skills such as compromise and collaboration. Another noteworthy aspect that emerged from the study is the significance of character-creation tools that allow for diverse body types, moving beyond the narrow confines of traditional feminine and masculine beauty standards.

b. What should be avoided in feminist game mechanics?

The argument put forth in this study posits that achieving feminist game mechanics involves not only adopting non-violent methods of conflict resolution but also avoiding traditional violent approaches rooted in patriarchal structures. This argument aligns with the perspective that exploring the connection between feminist game design and the rejection of conventional violent gameplay mechanics dictated by patriarchal norms is essential. The findings suggest that incorporating alternative approaches to conflict resolution and eschewing violence in game mechanics can contribute to advancing feminist principles within the gaming industry.

Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of avoiding sexualized and impractical clothing choices for female characters, instead favouring attire that is practical and appropriate for the game's context and setting. These suggestions highlight the participants' desire for authentic and relatable representations of women in video games, challenging prevailing standards of beauty and promoting inclusivity and diversity.

6.3 Evaluation

Are we ready to talk about feminist game mechanics?

The realization that the term "feminist games" can encompass diverse and even contradictory meanings based on individual perspectives was a significant revelation from a personal standpoint. This recognition underscored the intricate nature of the discourse surrounding feminist games, revealing the complexities inherent in discussions on this topic. It became evident that when individuals engage in conversations about feminist games, their conceptualizations of the term can vary significantly, leading to challenges in attaining a coherent understanding of the subject matter.

This finding underscores the critical importance of establishing clear definitions and fostering a comprehensive understanding of the terminology employed within academic and professional spheres. Furthermore, it highlights the necessity for further research and dialogue concerning feminist games, aiming to establish a shared lexicon and a coherent comprehension of the diverse interpretations associated with this term. By acknowledging and actively engaging with the multitude of perspectives and opinions surrounding feminist ideals within the realm of video games, we can strive towards cultivating an inclusive and representative gaming culture that embraces diversity and promotes gender equality.

6.4 Further research

It is crucial to acknowledge that the participants in this study were all from the same academic environment, which may have lowered the diversity of perspectives. Conducting this research on a more global scale could potentially yield more diverse and varied results. This would enable a broader exploration of cultural nuances, social and political contexts, and individual experiences that could influence the interpretation of feminist ideals in game design. Future studies could also explore the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups, including women of colour, LGBTQ+ individuals, and individuals with disabilities, who may have unique insights into the intersectionality of feminist ideals in gaming.

Given the divergent opinions and interpretations of the term *feminist games*, it is crucial to establish more precise and concrete classifications to guide the analysis and design of games. The developed classifications of Empowerment and Equality within this study provide a useful starting point for exploring how game mechanics can be utilized to convey feminist messages. Further research could build on these classifications to create a more nuanced and comprehensive framework for feminist game design. Such a framework could be informed by collaboration and dialogue between game developers, feminist scholars, and activists, ensuring that feminist values are properly understood and incorporated into game design.

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Ludography

Core Design (1996–2003), Crystal Dynamics (2006–2018, 2021–present) *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (Game franchise).[video game], Eidos Interactive (1996–2009), Square Enix (2010–2018), Microsoft Studios (2015–2016)

Maxis (2023) [2000] *The Sims* (Game franchise).[video game], Electronic Arts

PlatinumGames (2022) [2017] *Nier: Automata* [video game], Square Enix

PlatinumGames (2023) [2009] *Bayonetta* (Game franchise).[video game], Sega, Nintendo

The Fullbright Company, BlitWorks (2013-2018) *Gone Home* [video game], The Fullbright Company, Majesco Entertainment, Annapurna Interactive

Appendix A

Question / Iterations of the question	Expected data	Notes
Information about Participants		
1. Are you a game design student?	Expected answer yes/no	
2. Do you plan to work in the game design industry after you finish your studies?	Expected answer yes/no	
3. Are you a casual gamer? / How many hours per week do you play? / Do you play games often?		Avoid labelling like "gamer", or value judgements like "it's a lot" etc.
The main set of questions		
4. Can you name a couple of feminist games? / Can you name a couple of feminist games examples? / What can you call a feminist game? Can you come up with an example?	Respondents might name games that are considered to be feminist in the discourse, but it is important to state that it is their opinion that I am looking for.	● Should refrain from giving participants the impression that the answer is "wrong". ● I will not define the term feminist for participants, as it might influence their opinion
5. Why did you name those games? What about those games makes them feminist? / Why did you consider *game name* feminist?	The answer might come in Question 4	
6. Do you think that mechanics in the previously named games can be considered feminist?		Terminology that might need explanation: Game mechanics
7. How would you define the term "feminist games"?	Make sure that this question is coming after questions 4, 5 and 6, even though their order might be mixed up during the discussion.	
8. Can you think of examples of feminist game mechanics? / What game mechanics could be named feminist?	Answers to this question might be similar to answers to Question 6, it is important to ask participants to think of other examples.	Encourage brainstorming
9. Do you think that mechanics can be more persuasive then story/narrative in game?		Terminology that might need explanation: Persuasive
Extra questions		
10. You mentioned *name of the game* as a feminist game, what about games that are not especially heavy on narrative *example game name*?	Make sure that the example game is different from the examples of the participant to encourage discussion.	Possible game examples: Civilization, The Sims, Simcity, Minecraft