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Damsels Not in Distress –

Player Reviews on the Female Protagonists in *Remember Me* and
Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

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ABSTRACT

Tämän pro gradu -tutkielman inspiroi vuosien kokemus videopeleistä ja niiden parissa tehdyt havainnot sukupuolesta. Taustalla oli halu tutkia, kuinka pelaajat suhtautuvat naishahmoihin. Tutkielman tavoite olikin saada selville, mitä pelaajat ovat arvosteluissa sanoneet naispäähenkilöistä kahdessa eri videopelissä *Remember Me* ja *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. Tutkielmassa haluttiin myös tehdä havaintoja mahdollisista asennemuutoksista naispäähenkilöitä kohtaan pelien julkaisuvuosien 2013 ja 2017 välillä.

Tutkielmaa varten kerättiin 59 pelaajien kirjoittamaa nettiarvostelua, joista valittiin 60 leikettä analyysia varten. Analyysissa käytetyt leikkeet valittiin siten, että ne mainitsevat naissukupuolen joko yleisesti tai viitaten päähenkilöön. Analyysin pohjana käytettiin tutkimuksia naishahmoista videopeleissä, sekä tutkielmia pelaajien kokemuksista sosiaalisen median ilmiöistä, jotka ovat mahdollisesti vaikuttaneet heidän asenteisiinsa naispäähenkilöistä. Leikkeet on analysoitu joko yksittäin tai pareittain ja niistä löydetyistä havainnoista on tehty yksityiskohtaisemmat yhteenvedot, joista käy ilmi materiaalin kautta saadut tulokset.

Tutkielman löydökset vastasivat pohjateorianaan käytettyjen tutkimusten tuloksia. Molempien pelien arvosteluiden joukosta nousi myös samoja teemoja, joista merkittävimmät olivat naispäähenkilöiden seksuaalisointi ja feminismi. Yleinen asenne naispäähenkilöitä kohtaan vaikutti olevan positiivinen ja naispäähenkilöt nähtiin progressiivisena askeleena videopeleissä. Suurin muutos, joka vuosien 2013 ja 2017 välillä oli tapahtunut, oli negatiivinen asenne feminististä vaikutusta kohtaan. Tämä asennemuutos vaikutti olevan Gamergate -ilmiön aiheuttamaa.

KEYWORDS: video games, female protagonist, gender, feminism, Gamergate

1 INTRODUCTION

After years of playing video games it has become evident to me that female protagonists are in a minority. There are many theories surrounding this issue varying from misogyny among players to game industry favouring male protagonists due to bigger revenue. Gender politics have initiated online wars between different groups pointing fingers at several directions. Feminist video game critics blame men in the industry for sexualising and objectifying women and male gamers blame these feminists for ruining their games with female empowerment. The real issue, however, is yet to be uncovered.

The general impression is that video games are a man's world and most games are targeted at male audiences. The female character representations are also often very sexualised and objectified, which further deters some women from video games. (Ivory 2006: 103-104) The Lara Croft phenomena that began in the 90s has kept the big breasts, thin waistline and revealing clothing in popularity until this day. What began with movies has now passed down to video games; the commercialisation of the female body and stereotyping women make now millions in revenue in the video game market that is financed mainly by young men who are the primary consumers of these products. (Jansz 2007: 141-142)

In order to gain understanding of what players think of female protagonists in video games, I decided to study a sample of player reviews online in order to see what the gamers said about the gender of the female protagonists in two chosen video games *Remember Me* (2013) and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017). *Remember Me* was faced with an issue of finding a publisher due to the female protagonist. Many publishers claimed that the protagonist has to be male or else the game will not sell. Despite the resistance the developers were adamant and refused to change the protagonist to a male. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, however, was welcomed with open arms and no one seemed to be interested in the protagonist's gender and the game received several awards. This attitude change was an interesting phenomenon that I wanted to find more about.

1.1 Aim

The aim of the thesis is to study the player community's opinions of the female protagonists in two games, *Remember Me* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. This is done by analysing inserts from online player reviews on the sites of Steam Store and Metacritic in order to

- 1) find out how gamers reacted to and commented on the gender of the protagonist and to
- 2) detect changes of attitude on gender between the release years of the two games in 2013 and 2017.

The theoretical starting point is to understand the concept of female characters in general by looking at studies done on women in movies and video games. Studies on player attitudes are looked at to gain understanding of how players experience gender in video games. One of the primary studies is Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz's (2009) research on the effects of sexualised video game characters on players, which explains how gender stereotypes affect the attitudes on female gender. Laura Mulvey's (1975) famous study on the male gaze also supports this information and helps to understand the Lara Croft archetype that has affected many female protagonists through gaming history. This knowledge is combined with examples from different characters and video games. The theory also touches on online phenomena in order for the reader to understand what happens in the gamer communities and how it may have affected the way players experience video games. Parts of the theory were also chosen to explain the trends that surfaced from the game reviews so the reader will have prior knowledge before reading the analysis.

1.2 *Remember Me* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*

Remember Me is an action science-fiction video game that was developed by Dontnod Entertainment and published by Capcom in 2013. The story begins in 2084 futuristic version of Paris called Neo-Paris where a corporation called Memorize has developed a

brain implant that allows people to upload and share their memories. Memorize has then created a surveillance state that controls its citizens through their memories by either stealing them or over-feeding them to people creating memory-addicted humans that cannot function as normal human beings anymore. The protagonist Nilin is part of a rebel group called Errorists who seek to bring Memorize down and free people of the memory control. Nilin has been captured by Memorize and she wakes up with severe amnesia in a memory cleanse facility. The story is about her regaining the stolen memories, as well as bringing Memorize down once and for all.

The game is shown from the third person perspective and Nilin is always visible to the player. Nilin is a mixed-raced character and she wears a modern outfit. Her slim figure and long legs are highlighted by high heels to give her a feminine look (see Appendix 1). Nilin fights either unarmed or by using technological weapons to alter memories. She is very agile and displays physical strength and dexterity in her moves.

Dontnod Entertainment had said that the reason for making the protagonist woman was that it “felt right” for the story and showing parts of her private life as a straight woman was meant to make the story more immersive. The publishers, however, saw that it would hinder the game’s sales because protagonists have traditionally been male and men would not like a straight woman. Dontnod Entertainment still decided to keep Nilin and continued to look for a publisher, and eventually the game was given to Capcom. (*Polygon* 2013)

Hellblade Senua’s Sacrifice is a fantasy action game that is based on Scandinavian and Celtic mythology. It was developed and published by Ninja Theory in 2017 and has since then received several awards for its narrative and audio design. The protagonist Senua is a Pict warrior from ancient British Isles, who is raised by a single father and brainwashed by him to believe that Senua’s mental health issues, her schizophrenia and psychosis, are a darkness living inside her making her dangerous to everyone else. When she falls in love with a man named Dillion she wants to get rid of the darkness. She does this by going alone into wilderness away from the tribe and while she is gone Viking raiders have ransacked the village. She finds Dillion’s dismembered body and the darkness tells her

that Dillion's soul was sacrificed to the Viking goddess Hela. For Dillion's soul to pass on in afterlife, Senua must save his soul from the depths of Helheim.

Senua is viewed from the third person perspective and she is visible during the gameplay. She is styled as a Pict warrior and looks like a natural woman of her time (see Appendix 2). Senua fights with a sword and displays both physical strength and dexterity during battles. She is also very human in her expressions and reactions, and the graphics of the game capture these emotions in great detail.

Unlike *Remember Me*, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* is based on historic events of Viking raids on the northern coasts of the British Isles. It also focuses on Senua's psychosis and everything in the game is the reality she experiences that creates a dark and twisted world with its own monsters and puzzles. The visions, illusions, voices, and other symptoms she experiences mimic what real psychosis and schizophrenia patients have experienced. The game encourages players to look for more information about psychosis and mental health in general to raise awareness about these illnesses.

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice faced no issues finding a publisher like *Remember Me* did. One of the differences was that Ninja Theory both developed and published it, whereas Dontnod Entertainment had to look for a separate publisher for the game they had made. The self-publishing removed the issue of having to deal with publishers who do not like female protagonist games. It may also have helped that Ninja Theory is known for its popular game *DMC: Devil May Cry* (2013) which gave the developers a bigger name before *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* was published. Ninja Theory had also already published one female protagonist game called *Heavenly Sword* in 2007, so Senua's gender was not a new step for them.

2 RESEARCH MATERIAL

The research materials were collected independently over the course of one week. The familiar platforms made the collecting easy and there was even excess material left that did not make it to the analysis due to the limitations of this research. The inserts that were chosen followed the criteria that are explained in this chapter.

2.1 Player reviews

The altogether fifty-nine different player reviews on *Remember Me* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* were chosen from two different sites, Steam Store, and Metacritic. Inserts used in the analysis were extracted from those reviews and there are sixty of them in total; two of the inserts were taken from the same review. There are thirty inserts for *Remember Me* and thirty for *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. There were also fifty-eight different usernames, as one of the players had written reviews for both games. Fifty-one of the inserts were taken from Steam Store and nine from Metacritic site. All inserts were cited between the 13th and 19th of February 2019 as they were on the sites during that time.

All of the inserts are numbered chronologically beginning with 1-30 of *Remember Me* and 31-60 of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. The reviews on Steam Store were chosen as based on their contents. Date, negative or positive score, place of purchase, nor hours played did not affect the choice. The inserts chosen are comments on the protagonists; their gender, physical or mental attributes, actions, or possible stereotypes. The reviews chosen from Metacritic were chosen with the same criteria. The inserts are sorted under ten different trends and within those trends sorted by date from the oldest to the newest. All of the chosen reviews were written between the 4th of June 2013 and the 6th of February 2019 online and they differ in length from one sentence to full paragraphs. All of the reviews have been written under usernames, thus the people behind them remain anonymous. None of the reviews were affiliated with any specific critic site, which means that they are personal opinions of the individuals rather than paid reviews.

Inserts that were relevant to the topic of this research were taken from the reviews and will be analysed to form a picture what the player community is saying about the protagonists. The inserts follow the principles of how the reviews were chosen; what is said about the protagonists, i.e. gender, physical and mental attributes such as comments on appearance, their personality, comparisons to other protagonists or action heroes, or any indications of female stereotypes common in popular culture.

2.2 Steam Store and Metacritic

Steam Store belongs to Valve Corporation which is both a game developing studio and a distributor of digital games. It allows the users to buy their games online and then post their personal reviews for other potential buyers to see. Valve Corporation was founded in 1996, and they released their first game in 1998. Later in 2003, they created Steam Client, which was an individual browser that worked alongside with the internet site. Eventually Steam allowed game developers to publish their works on Steam Store and distribute their creations through it. (Valve Software 2019) Similarly, many bigger studios like Bethesda rely on Steam registration when publishing games. This means that a game, whether it is a digital or a physical copy, has to be registered to Steam in order for the buyer to play it. This minimises the possibility of pirating the games. This also adds to the reliability of the site, as it cannot be used by people who do not actually own the games they review.

Steam Store was seen as a good source of player reviews due to its reliability. The review system of Steam Store gives detailed statistics about the number of comments and divides them clearly by either negativity or positivity. The reviews can also be filtered in several ways, such as showing reviews from a certain month. It also shows whether the game was bought from Steam Store, or from some other place. The platform is also reliable because it allows the player to comment only if the game has been either purchased online or registered in Steam. The review also displays the hours played, which allows the reader to decide whether the review is based on half an hour, or hours of gameplay, as this affects its trustworthiness. The downside of Steam Store is that only players on PC platform may review the games it sells as it does not include console games. While PC platform still

forms a hefty 60% preference of all possible gaming platforms, it still ignores about a third of gamers who prefer to play on consoles such as PlayStation and Xbox. (Statista 2019)

Metacritic belongs to CBS Interactive which is part of CBS Corporation that owns a substantial number of mass media, such as television channels, news sites, and radio channels. CBS Interactive was founded in 1992 and it owns several other critic sites, such as Gamespot, Game Faqs, and Giant Bomb that focus on game reviews and other video game related journalism and content. (CBS Interactive 2019) Metacritic was founded in 1999 and it covers all forms of mass media products, for example movies, music, books, and video games. The site was created for publishing both user reviews and critic reviews linked to the site. The aim is to collect a so called metascore for the product which is the average score based on the reviews the users have given. (Metacritic 2019)

Metacritic was chosen because it is a widely known and popular review site that allows registered users to write their reviews on any media products covered by the site. The categorisation lists video games as different products based on their platform. This means that the reviews on different platforms, such as PC or PlayStation, are separated. The issue with Metacritic is that the reviews can be written by anyone, even by players who may not have ever purchased the game or played it for very long. This makes the reviews less reliable than those on Steam Store.

3 FEMALE PROTAGONISTS AND THE VIDEO GAMING WORLD

The world of video gaming is vast and full of surprises to those who do not take part in the online community discussions. The attitudes towards female protagonists vary from side to side and are constantly influenced by online phenomena and social media. In order to gain better understanding of the concept of female characters in general, the theory will deal with history of female protagonists and give further examples of how video games depict women. These examples include the comparisons between different kinds of protagonists as well as introduce studies done on video games and women. In order to add to the reader's understanding of the research material, the theory also includes descriptions of online phenomena that have influenced player attitudes.

3.1 History of female protagonists in popular culture

Women in movies were depicted very differently back in the day when male heroes ruled the cinema world. As Yvonne Tasker explains in the book *Spectacular Bodies* (1992), female action heroes were a rarity that was used mostly in the male hero's favour. Tasker says these women were depicted as tomboys who refused the conventional womanhood by becoming independent, sexually free, and even violent. In movies they were often sidekicks who confirmed the male hero's heterosexuality or being the only witness of his personal suffering and softer side. Women were also objects to be mistreated, raped, or killed. The male hero would either save the weak and vulnerable woman that could not hold on her own and needed protection, or he would avenge the woman's death and then be even more motivated to finish his quest. (Tasker 1993: 14-19)

Wendy Arons (2001) speaks of female sidekicks in fighting movies. According to Arons, there is usually only one female fighter who is surrounded by more feminine women and is often depicted as a weaker fighter dependent on the hero's help. This weakness and helplessness would be the triggering effect for the woman to be the hero's love interest. Arons also points out that these movies would also often parody female stereotypes; feminine and physically attractive women would lack intellect, personality, and charm. The men would also be blinded by this beauty and would not notice the lack of intellect.

Arons says that this exploits and presents female body as a sex object. (Arons 2001: 43-45)

According to Tasker, the independent heroine who worked alone was more of a response to the feminist cry for a less stereotypical woman than an actual empowerment movement. Action women were created to break the stereotype of a conventional weak and fragile woman who was nothing more but a man's love interest or a sidekick that confirmed the male hero's superiority. As Tasker puts it, in the end they created a stereotype of their own: a strong independent woman who would not need a man, was free to experience her sexuality as she liked, and who determined their own lives. The powers of these strong women would stem from personal suffering, suffering of others, or some other magic that granted them more strength and skills than men. They were often exaggerated to the point of being pure fantasy, which removed them from the relatable spectrum of strong female characters. (Tasker 1993: 15-19) According to Jeffrey Brown (2004), these strong females would often gain the role of a "bad girl" and seen as a "pseudo-male". The woman differing from the stereotype would be masculinised by having the woman cut her hair short, have harsh makeup, or wear black leather. These women would so be sexually more aggressive and depicted as masters of phallic power. The woman's body is still feminine and meant to be desired, but the mental traits would be masculine to fit the tough male stereotype. (Brown 2004: 51, 54, 60)

A female heroine's womanhood is usually put an emphasis on, especially if she happens to be a mother. Mothers are not considered to be action heroes, as they are depicted as caring and gentle, not violent or independent. This creates a controversy that a mother or a love interest cannot be an action heroine as the gentleness and dependency supposedly weaken them. (Tasker 1993: 26-27) Arons (2001) agrees with Tasker by saying that mothers would often submit to masculine authority. They would still hold power in the family as capable fighters, but the nominal authority would be in the hands of men. (Arons 2001: 45-46)

According to Tasker, lesbianism was also rare in the older movies, while homosexuality among men was always looming there in the male buddy environment that required one

female character to prove the audience that the male hero was not homosexual. Female sexuality was strictly bound to the men in the movies and more often to the male protagonist whose love interest the woman would become. Thus, lesbianism was not shown in cinema very openly in the 1980s when *Red Sonja* (1985) was released. It was also narrowed down to certain kind of movies that explored such unconventional themes. (Tasker 1993: 29-31) Arons (2001) also points this out in her research that lesbianism was presented as a demonised threat to the stability and social order of the society because it was considered to take away the male prerogative of having sex with women. However, lesbianism and the female body were still exploited in a pornographic way despite the demonisation of autonomous female pleasure, which meant men still got sexual arousal from lesbianism even though they considered it violence against their manhood. (Arons 2001: 37-38)

3.2 Female characters in video games

The average female protagonist throughout the history of popular culture has been sex symbol that emphasises femininity. On one hand, femininity is considered to be mental strength, physical fitness, intelligence, independence, or sexual freedom. On the other hand, however, femininity can also be softness, maternal instincts, sexual attractiveness, or fragility. Sheri Ray (2004) claims that in video games femininity is often exaggerated and emphasised. Women have been turned into objects to be rescued or possessed creating the cliché of damsels that cannot help themselves. (Ray 2004: 29) Similarly Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz says in her study *The Effects of the Sexualization of Female Video Game Characters on Gender Stereotyping and Female Self-Concept* (2009) that video games often present unrealistic standards for women and encourage the objectification of women (Behm-Morawitz 2009: 810). While male characters are hyper-sexualised and stereotyped as well, it is still a reoccurring phenomenon in the gaming world that the female characters serve the purpose of being love interests or helpful NPCs rather than being heroes on a quest.

The age-old issue of female characters in video games is that women are often mere side characters that are either hyper-sexualised or stereotyped. According to Behm-Morawitz,

female characters are often unplayable by the player and designed for sexual desire. Female characters have also revealing clothing more often than the male, and seductresses are often in powerful positions. (Behm-Morawitz 2009:809) A good example of this powerful seductress is Bayonetta in *Bayonetta* (2009) who resembles a dominatrix with supernatural powers. Other good examples are Thrish and Yennefer from *The Witcher 3* (2015); they are powerful sorceresses who act as the male protagonist Geralt's potential love interests. Many of these female characters have the stereotypical big breasts and a narrow waist like Lara Croft. According to Ray these are signs of fertility that are designed to be appealing to male players. (Ray 2004:102) However, Behm-Morawitz (2009) argues that the sexualised appearance diminishes the powerfulness of the woman's role (Behm-Morawitz 2009: 810). Games that entail a female protagonist that is not only strong, but also different from the sexualised stereotype, like Faith in *Mirror's Edge* (2008) and Nilin in *Remember Me*, do not usually reach the same revenues as the traditional male protagonist games.

Video games, like all products of popular culture, are always made the target audience in mind. In most cases, this means they are created mainly for men. This affects the way the protagonists are developed, and which gender is preferred. According to Xeniya Kondrat's study (2015), most protagonists are male. She also says that

In case if a female character introduced into the game, the high chance that she is going to be highly sexualized. Despite this fact, the target audience is getting more diverse, it does not change the perception of female gender by video game companies and society. (Kondrat 2015: 178)

According to Statista, there has been a rise in female video gamers in the USA since 2006. Approximately 38% of video gamers were women in 2006, and the percentage rose to 47% in 2012 and to 48% in 2014. In 2018, 45% of gamers were female. (Statista 2018) This goes along with Kondrat's claim that the audience is getting more diverse despite the male-dominance in gaming. Jeroen Jansz's study *The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games* (2007) supports Kondrat's claims. According to his statistics, 64% of the characters in the analysed video games were male and 71% of them were in dominant roles. Also 47% of men were competitors and 50% of the women

functioned as bystanders. (Jansz 2007: 143) This further emphasises the idea that female characters haven't been in a minority in video games and when they do appear, they serve a purpose as an object of desire rather than play an active part. Kondrat's arguments are also valid when looking at example cases in gaming industry. After the release of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2015), which featured a female protagonist Aloy, Sony Entertainment's head of worldwide studios Shuhei Yoshida admitted that they had been worried about the game's success due to the protagonist's gender. "She's a female lead character. That has always been the vision by the team, but we had a discussion. Is it risky to do a female character?" (*Polygon* 2015) Similarly, Naughty Dog studio developed a popular game called *The Last of Us* in 2013. The publisher Sony Entertainment asked to remove one of the central characters, a little girl called Ellie, from the front of the game case's cover to the back because a girl on the cover would make it less marketable. However, everyone at Naughty Dog refused to do it: "I believe there's a misconception that if you put a girl or a woman on the cover, the game will sell less." (*Polygon* 2012) Kondrat says that the video game industry is still not interested to make games for both men and women, and like kids' toys, video games are stereotyped according to gender. Because of this reason most games are created to attract mainly men, and some games, such as Barbie games and *The Sims* series (2000-2019), are designed for women. (Kondrat 2015: 178-179) These games are simulations that focus on creation in safe environments, unlike role-playing games or FPS (first-person shooting) games for men that show violence and have little space for artistic creativity. This suggests that games targeted at women are designed to be calm and safe, whereas games for men are stereotypically full of danger and action.

Jansz and Kondrat's claim of the male dominance of the game industry can also be seen when looking at the most popular video games. The typical example is the *Grand Theft Auto* series by Rockstar Games that has gained popularity steadily over the years since 1997. The latest game of the series *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) has sold over a 100 million copies and is the most profitable entertainment product of all time with over six billion dollars in revenue. (*Game Industry* 2018) Male protagonists also do not suffer the same kind of sexualisation as female protagonists do but are rather stereotyped in other ways. According to Karen Dill (2007), men in video games are depicted as the action hero type; a muscular and physically superior beings who are brave, strong, and powerful. Their

muscularity and strong-willed character also strengthen the image of violence and hostility creating a stereotype of a brute. This violence is also often directed at women. (Dill 2007: 853) For example, in *Grand Theft Auto V* it is possible to pay a prostitute for sex and later on kill her in order to get the money back, which supports Dill's findings. Dill also claims that emphasising traditional femininity is designed for serving men. Female submission is the counterpart of hegemonic masculinity and this it repeats in video games making use of the stereotypical and sexist gender roles. (Dill 2007: 854) Dill also thinks that the aggressive, sexualised, and trivialised female characters are not true figures of liberation for women in video games because they do not free women of the gender stereotypes but simply glamorise violence. (Dill 2007: 861)

James Ivory (2006) did an interesting research on video game reviews on game journalism sites online to find how gender is represented in them and how female characters are portrayed. He found that online reviews mentioned little of gender even if the female characters of the games being reviewed were heavily sexualised and stereotyped. (Ivory 2006: 112)

Also of interest is the video game reviewers' apparent lack of attention to sexualized character portrayal. Though this study did not record reviewers' gender and some reviewers have androgynous first names, most of the Gamespot editorial staff is clearly male (Gamespot, 2004). The possibility that primarily male group of reviewers is ambivalent or unsupportive toward sexualized portrayals in video games is intriguing. If reviewers are critical of infrequent and sexualized female portrayals, and if there is a corresponding disinterest or disapproval present in the larger video game audience, video game makers might be encouraged to depict female characters differently than they have in the past. (Ivory 2006: 112)

This raises the question whether the sexualisation of female characters has become such a norm that male reviewers no longer pay attention to it. Ivory believes it may be that the reviewers were not interested in gender or simply downplayed sexual depictions. He also suggests that it may also indicate that the reviewers are displeased with the proliferation of sexualised women in video games. As Ivory (2006) has pointed out, the majority of video game characters are male and most of the women are sexualised to fit the visual needs of male players. Ivory (2006: 111) prompts a good question: if most female

characters in video games are to be portrayed in a sexual manner, should their numbers be increased at all?

3.2.1 Lesbianism over homosexuality

Lesbianism is an on-going trend in video games that feature female characters and the homosexual orientation in women can be seen in both protagonists and NPCs. According to Adrienne Shaw, the sexual preferences of women are more explicitly expressed than those of men: “In general, women’s homosexuality seems to be more often marked through relationships to other women and men’s homosexuality appears to be marked more often through stereotypical signifiers.” (Shaw 2016: 3881) Shaw also points out that homosexual men are a clear minority in video games and if there are any, their sexuality is not as openly discussed. Bisexuality is more common and less of a taboo especially in games that allow the player to choose the gender of the protagonist. Video games may also have homophobic content in dialog, which further alienates the LGBT community from video games. (Shaw 2016: 3880, 3885) In most games the sexual preference of the character does not matter, but in roleplaying games it may serve a role if there are romance sub-plots available. However, homosexuality is an option rather than default. In *Mass Effect* trilogy (2007-2012) there are both bisexual and lesbian female companions available for romance in all three games but only two homosexual options available in the third.

In a recent free-to-play game called *Apex Legends* (2019) there was one male character called Gibraltar from the initial character roster, that the publisher EA officially announced as homosexual. (*Gamer Revolution* 2019) However, the game is in so called battle royale format, which is basically an online game where everyone plays against everyone in a survival setting where the last man standing wins. In this context, the sexual preferences of the playable characters do not matter, and the information on their sexuality can only be found on their descriptive background stories. Regardless, the reveal of Gibraltar being homosexual made some players displeased. *Comic Book* collected some of the fan community reactions to sum it up and some of the tweets call Apex a “feminist ravaged” game due to the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans, Queer) positivity

while some celebrated the diversity the game provided. One player had taken an issue over Gibraltar's sexuality after the background stories were revealed and had sent feedback to EA:

I have been grinding the game and I have almost 60 kills as Gibraltar and he's by far my favourite character in Apex. Today I read a post about Gibraltar's background and it said he had a boyfriend and therefore he was gay. Please EA/Respawn, don't make him a gay character. He's already my main and I can't be playing as a fag in this game. Thanks, and I hope you take my suggestion into consideration. (*Comic Book* 2019)

As Shaw (2016: 3881) pointed out, the attitudes towards homosexuality have not made way for the LGBT community in gaming due to homophobic content in video games. It can be seen in player comments like this that while these reactions are just a few drops in the ocean, it still shows that the aversion of homosexual men still plagues the gaming world. It also implies there are double standards when it comes to homosexuality, as lesbianism seems to be preferable to homosexuality.

3.3 The Lara Croft archetype and sexualisation

The protagonist Lara Croft of *Tomb Raider* series is often considered to be archetype of female protagonists and many refer to the character as a comparison when describing other female video game characters. Jeroen Jansz calls this Lara phenomenon, "the appearance of a tough, and competent female character in a dominant position." (Jansz 2007: 142). Jansz also claims that the competence and power of the Lara type characters would actually be empowering. (Jansz 2007: 147) Lara Croft is also considered to be a female created by a man. This man was Toby Gard in 1996, and according to Maja Mikula's studies, "everything a bloke wants and everything a girl wants to be." (Mikula 2003: 81) This has made Lara an empowering figure despite sexualised appearance; Lara is seen as a dominant female and a sex symbol that sets the unrealistic standard for female characters. (Mikula 2003: 84) Because of this standard she is the prototype players may see in other female protagonists.

According to Claudia Herbst (2004) Lara has been designed for male pleasure and she fulfils a masculine fantasy by being a fully controllable woman. Lara also combines sexuality and violence and delivers what reality cannot; unrealistic eroticism and an object for cyber-sexual fantasies. Lara's gun also symbolises toughness, and as a virtual character, she is invincible. Herbst points out that this combines sexuality and aggression, which has been a familiar combination throughout the history of female characters. (Herbst 2004: 26-27, 32, 37) Herbst also says that Lara's notoriety has created an image of silent and sexualised women, and this image is in a great need of strong female protagonists who have the voice Lara in *Tomb Raider* does not. (Herbst 2004: 41-42)

In the book *Gender Inclusive Game Design* Sheri Graner Ray (2004) criticises *Tomb Raider* for being a hypersexualised cliché and claims that games featuring hypersexualised female characters are less attractive to female players than those portraying women respectfully. Ray also claims that the “eye-candy” character may be pleasing to male players. Similarly, Ray says that using female stereotypes includes sexist humour, which may also repel some female gamers. (Ray 2004: 29-33, 35) Behm-Morawitz's study on how female sexualisation in players affected them revealed that female players were more affected by the sexualised characters than male players. Women who had played with hypersexualised female characters had less favourable attitudes towards their own gender afterwards. The sexualisation had also negative effects on the women's self-esteem. Similar results in male players were not recorded. Behm-Morawitz suspects that the counter-stereotypical mental traits of the sexualised characters influenced the men's attitudes. This suggests that regardless of sexualisation, powerful and strong female characters may even have positive influence on male players. (Behm-Morawitz 2009: 819-820) This study would confirm Ray's claims that hypersexualised games repel women because they have more negative impact on them while at the same time contradicts with Jansz's claim that they would be empowering. The results of the study would also suggest that the physical appearance of the characters does not matter as much to male players and has no negative influence on their attitudes towards female gender as long as the women do not represent negative stereotypes through mental traits. In a sense, Jansz's claims are true here; strong and competent female characters do empower women, just not in the eyes of female players.

3.3.1 The male gaze

The visual representation of women in video games has become more and more important as the graphics and mechanical capabilities of gaming platform have increased. Examples of sexualised and objectified female video game characters often come down to the same concept: the male gaze. According to Laura Mulvey (1975) cinema offers scopophilia which means taking other people as objects and subjecting them to one's own curious gaze. This is erotic pleasure that comes from the visual stimuli. Mulvey says that the world is split in active male and passive female sides: the male gaze is projected on females that have been styled according to the visual sexual pleasure. The emphasis is on what the woman provokes in the man, or what she represents, which can be either love or fear. The woman in herself has no importance in this but only the inspiration she gives. The point is for the woman as an erotic object to take the man out of his reality. (Mulvey 1975: 4)

When looking at video game characters, such as Lara Croft from the point of Mulvey's research, it is clear why female characters are designed for the male gaze. They are objects of desire meant to take the man out of reality. The woman is meant to create an illusion of fantasy:

The image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the structure of representation, adding a further layer demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order as it is worked out in its favorite cinematic form - illusionistic narrative film. (Mulvey 1975: 7)

However, Mulvey also mentions the part of narcissism and ego. The image is screened through the spectator's ego in order for the man to recognise his likes. This implies that the erotic identity is separate from the instinctual drives. (Mulvey 1975: 3) This suggests that the same stimuli are not interpreted in the same manner by all males despite the instinctive sexual drive that responds to erotic visuals. This difference may explain why the opinions and observations on the sexualisation of female characters differ so drastically in gaming communities.

3.4 Feminism and video games

Feminists have long tried to push against female stereotypes, and the sexualisation of women in popular culture. Video games are no exception and they have been vastly critiqued since the dawn of Lara Croft. According to Jennifer Jenson (2014) the feminist perspective on video games derives from the gender identity issues; the distinction of genders, expectations of gender roles, and perspectives of cultural differences. The video game industry is a male dominant field where the oppression of women is hidden in sex-based structures and thus requires further investigation to interrupt the misunderstandings of gender stereotypes. (Jenson 2014: 4)

Jonathan Burnay's research *Effects of sexualized video games on online sexual harassment* (2019) revealed that playing with sexualised female characters increased online sexual harassment towards women. This harassment was mainly in the form of sexist humour, and Burnay believes that female submissiveness may be related to this. Sexualisation of women may also lead to dehumanisation. It was also found that female stereotypes accompanied with female submission, sexualisation, and dehumanisation would more likely trigger sexual harassing. (Burnay 2019: 220-221) This seems to contradict with Behm-Morawitz's (2009) claim that sexualisation of female characters does not influence male players' attitudes. However, it is to be noted that as Behm-Morawitz said, the mental traits of the characters may affect this. In the light of Burnay's research, it may be possible that the real issue is not sexualisation, but rather the gender stereotypes. A mentally incompetent woman with hypersexualised figure may be what influences male players most. This is why the work Jenson (2014) mentioned about interrupting the gender stereotypes is important; by revealing and removing the harmful stereotypes, the effects of sexualisation may decrease.

The issue players have with feminism is that they often believe that the intention is to bring more gender politics into video games. Many are also defending the visual representations of video games and fear that sexually attractive female characters will be removed due to feminist inference. This creates opposition towards women in the industry. According to Sian Tomkinson (2015), this opposition has led to a lack of women

in the industry and its important positions despite the growing number of female gamers (Tomkinson 2015: 627-628)

Although Morley claims that increased participation of women will lead to equality, such visible participation is often met with trolling and abusive behaviour. Morley's explanation that 'increased participation [of women] is constructed as a victory for gender equity by some, and as an indication of ... an assault on masculinities by others' mirrors the territorial conflict present in game communities. With an increasing number of females becoming active in game culture, some males feel disempowered, as if their cultural space has been invaded (Morley 2011, 226). (Tomkinson 2015: 628)

Tomkinson's research focuses on one of these male bullies, a video game journalist Ryan Perez who openly attacked against a female gaming celebrity Felicia Day on Twitter in 2012 with condescending messages and calling her a "glorified booth babe." Perez lost his job due to the misogynistic nature of his comments, and the controversy was seen as an act of catharsis that hindered the change of attitudes. The controversy was also said to have contributed to have been a catalyst for the Gamergate controversy in 2014. According to Tomkinson, female players who label themselves as "geeks" are often perceived as fake and required to "de-gender" themselves in order to gain authenticity. (Tomkinson 2015: 617-618) Because of this opposition and defending the male-dominant culture space, female protagonist games may be seen as feminist attacks towards the industry. This raises the question whether this has something to do also with the game industry that consists mainly of men, and if the lower sales of female protagonist games are a result of this territorial attitude.

3.4.1 The aftereffects of Gamergate

Gamergate began in 2014 when a female game developer Zoe Quinn released a game called *Depression Quest*. According to mainstream media, Quinn's former boyfriend Eron Gjoni claimed that Quinn had cheated on him with a game journalist Nathan Grayson from website Kotaku, who had supposedly given Quinn's game a positive review due to their affair. While these claims were straightened later to reveal that Grayson had never actually reviewed the game, the uproar had already been stirred and the gamers began Quinn's online lynching. This caused an anti-female campaign among

gaming communities and targeted harassment and threat towards Quinn. (*The Telegraph* 2014) Torill Mortensen (2016) who studied Gamergate considered it important only to a relatively small group of image board activists. However, she also admits that the real size and effects of Gamergate are hard to determine. The approximate number of people involved in Gamergate was 150 000, though the statistics only took into account the people who were actively posting, but not the spectators. Scholars still agree that the event was culturally important and had long lasting effects in the gaming world. (Mortensen 2016: 3-4)

According to Despoina Chatzakou's study on Gamergate (2017), the controversy started as a denigration of women in the gaming industry and later escalated into abusive online behaviour, such as death and rape threats becoming a coordinated harassment campaign towards female players and game developers. Steam platform allowed these indie-type games to be distributed to a bigger audience, but it also opened a way for the online bullies to attack in organised groups. (Chatzakou 2017: 1-2) The discussion of female stereotypes in video games was no longer constructive questioning but rather seen as an attack towards the male-dominated field like Tomkinson (2015) spoke of in his research. Tomkinson mentions Anita Sarkeesian who is considered to be a figurehead of feminist critique towards video games. Sarkeesian launched a Kickstarter campaign in 2012 to collect money for her Tropes vs. Women video series that focused on portrayal of women in video games. This resulted in systematic online hate campaign and Sarkeesian received threats of violence and rape. (Tomkinson 2015: 628) Sarkeesian was one of several main targets of the campaign and she is seen as a nemesis for the traditional video gaming that promotes gender stereotypes in gaming communities.

The player's fear after Gamergate was that the future video games would be affected by feminism Quinn and Sarkeesian represented, and this caused an abusive reaction towards women in gaming communities. Kishonna Gray calls this silent dominance:

The invisibility, isolation, and exclusion of women constitute an effective tool of silent (masculine) domination and the silencing of women (the dominated). Silence must be examined not in the physical act of hushing or not allowing

someone to speak; rather, silence is a structural and systemic concern that renders groups powerless. (Gray 2016: 6)

From this perspective it seems as though Gamergate stirred a fight for dominance between feminists and gamers: men wanted to keep the silence, while women wanted to speak out the issues of female representation in video games. As Gray puts it, Gamergate is a response of default gamers being forced to include women in video game narratives. This anxiety of geek masculinity made them centre themselves as victims and has made them defend their male dominance in the gaming culture. (Gray 2016: 2) The uproar over *Apex Legends* mentioned in chapter 3.2.1 is one of the aftereffects Gamergate caused. The progressive approach of bringing more sexual minority video game characters was considered an application of feminist ideology and some men took it as an invasion of territory. The victimhood that stems from this need to territorially protect the video gaming world has since then made male players more conscious of female characters as well, which shows in reviews of games with female protagonists. The critical eye is often on the effects of video game feminism; is the protagonist too empowered, is the emphasis on the gender, or does the game follow a certain agenda.

3.4.2 The social justice warrior standard

The term “social justice warrior”, or SJW in short, became known during the Gamergate controversy. While there is no official description for a social justice warrior, Urban Dictionary explains the term like this:

A person who uses the fight for civil rights as an excuse to be rude, condescending, and sometimes violent for the purpose of relieving their frustrations or validating their sense of unwarranted moral superiority. The behaviors of Social justice warriors usually have a negative impact on the civil rights movement, turning away potential allies and fueling the resurgence of bigoted groups that scoop up people who have been burned or turned off by social justice warriors. (Urban Dictionary 2017)

The term “social justice” itself means the distribution of wealth, privileges, and opportunities within a society. (OED 2019) This implies that social justice warriors seek to protect this equal distribution, equal treatment, and acceptance of diversity through

their activism online. These values set an assumed standard that players often refer to in online communities when describing for example products of media and popular culture. The SJW phenomenon occurs mostly in social media communities on various platforms such as Tumblr blogs, discussion forums, and Facebook where people share their opinions, moral values, and other principles. The term is usually used as an insult, although some would still use it for self-identification despite the negative association. Adrienne L. Massanari (2018) calls the term SJW a meme that creates a window to political upheaval and misogyny. According to Massanari, the term was used long before Gamergate, but its use as a reference to reference began after the controversy. The term SJW is strongly tied to social media platforms, like all memes, and its main function is to villainise and dehumanise femininity. (Massanari 2018: 3-4, 15) The term SJW is then used on people, feminists and any gamers alike, to insult them for pointing out the issues within video games:

During #Gamergate, the SJW came to represent a literal spoilsport—the one who fails to derive happiness properly from the games that GGs enjoyed; or, rather, perversely derived happiness from spoiling the “game” for others by pointing out problematic representations and systemic issues within the gaming industry. (Massanari 2018: 10)

Massanari also claims that the concept of SJW has created an image of monstrous feminine, an ugly and obnoxious female figure, which dehumanises the SJWs in order to discredit their arguments. By presenting the SJW as inferior, or “cancerous” as Massanari points out, it becomes almost like propaganda that is used to protect the Gamergater ideals of video games (Massanari 2018: 12-14) This leads to the same kind of bullying Tomkinson (2015) talked about in her study; male gamers defend their male-dominant territory not just from women, but also from feminist influence and differing opinions that the social justice warriors represent to them.

As Massanari’s (2018) study concluded, games differing from the mainstream are seen as “SJW games” and the term appears in online game reviews frequently. A good example of the Gamergate’s aftereffects was the release of *Mass Effect Andromeda* in 2017. The game allows the player to customise the protagonist who can be either male or female.

Many of those who would have liked to play as a female complained that it was impossible to create an attractive face for the protagonist. While there was no actual proof, this still raised implications that feminism had invaded the game to make sure players would have to create a realistic woman instead of an attractive character. Female side characters were said to be unattractive as well and many blamed “social justice warrior” agenda for it and many cancelled their pre-orders for the game after seeing the first bits of game content before its release. (*Kotaku* 2017) This refers to the monstrous image Massanari (2018) spoke of, as many players felt the game was made in the image of social justice warriors to be more progressive.

4 ANALYSIS OF THE PLAYER REVIEWS

One of the common things that the reviews of both *Remember Me* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* had was that most of them did not discuss the characters at all. Out of the one hundred first reviews on *Remember Me* after its release there were only sixteen that talked about the protagonist. The number was even smaller in the first hundred reviews of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*; only seven out of the one hundred first reviews mentioned the protagonist in some way. This proved the task of collecting reviews that talked about the protagonist's gender in any way more difficult than originally anticipated. It gave the impression that the players of these two games did not consider the gender of the protagonists important or relevant enough to mention. However, the reviews have been written by players who have played the game, which affects the overall sampling since players who would find the female protagonist problematic would not likely even purchase the game.

As with the player reviews that discussed gender, it was hard to find game journalism that would openly discuss the gender of the protagonists of these games in their articles. The original intention was to gain perspective from the professional reviewers who worked for game journalism sites and compare them to player reviews. However, due to lack of material the task proved rather futile. The protagonists were often discussed merely in general terms without mentioning the gender specifically. It gave the impression that discussing gender was somehow considered indiscreet or irrelevant. This is the same observation Ivory (2006: 112) made in his study on online reviews; the reviewers seem to avoid depicting female gender in the reviews for reasons he was unable to uncover in his research.

The trends that emerged from the inserts were partially the same on both games. *Remember Me's* inserts had trends that mentioned gaming industry, the protagonist's physical appearance, discussed the importance of gender and female protagonists in general, as well as sexualisation of the protagonist. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice's* inserts spoke of the female protagonists and their sexualisation as well, but also made comparisons to *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft and focused heavily on feminism. The trends

that were found were partly expected but also partly surprising. It was anticipated that online phenomena like Gamergate would have affected the player attitudes in some way but its effect on the attitudes towards gender were more substantial than originally assumed.

The inserts will be commented either individually or in pairs. Further findings will be discussed at the end of the analysis in more detail in order to form a general overview of the inserts. Similarities and differences, as well as detected changes in the attitudes found in the reviews are explained in more detail.

4.1 Player reviews of *Remember Me*

The inserts of *Remember Me* focus mostly on gaming industry and female protagonists in general. Out of the sixty inserts only three were negative in tone, which corresponds with the amount of positive reviews on Steam Store and Metacritic. Most of the reviews on these sites spoke about the technicalities of the game rather than the characters.

4.1.1 Gaming industry

Eleven reviews mentioned either the publisher issue Dontnod Entertainment had with finding publisher for *Remember Me* or talked about gaming industry avoiding female protagonists in general. The overall attitude was positive towards Dontnod Entertainment's choices and negative towards publishers who had ignored the game's potential.

- (1) Quite a few publishers passed on this game due to the female protagonist. I understand the cold business mindset: male protagonist based games sell more. If I were them, yes I agree, but that's because gamers are fucking immature. If you feel awkward playing a female avatar in an non-mmo and questioned of your sexual orientation, your sexual orientation is already questionable. If you're a confident person in general, you would care less about the shallow insecurities. (Pending Insanity, 5.6.2013, Steam Store, cited 13.2.2019)

Pending Insanity's comment that some men avoid playing female protagonist games because they may feel sexually insecure. This refers to *Remember Me*'s creative director Jean-Maxime Moris's quotation in an interview about the problem of finding a publisher for the game due to female protagonist: "We had people tell us, 'You can't make a dude like the player kiss another dude in the game. That's going to feel awkward.'" (*PC Gamer* 2013) This may also refer to how the gaming industry avoids homosexuality. As Shaw (2016) pointed out, lesbianism is more common than homosexuality due to homophobic contents in games. A female protagonist in love with a man would be too homosexual from their perspective and according to the insert would make some players question their sexuality. This awkward situation is likely what the publishers originally wanted to avoid, although to players it does not seem like a valid reason not to publish the game.

- (2) I also enjoy what most of the major gaming companies identified as its biggest mistake: having a female protagonist. Nilin is strong, smart, and has nicely rounded character development throughout the story. (EuclideanPsychosis, 8.6.2013, Steam Store, cited 13.2.2019)

Player EuclideanPsychosis suggests that gaming companies would see female protagonists as mistakes. Female protagonists may be seen as financial failures when the industry's main point is to make as much profit as possible with the product. Because of male dominated audience, however, most video games may seem more relatable when they feature male protagonists instead, regardless of the story and context. The player also considers Nilin a strong protagonist, which would imply she differs from the norm of a stereotyped female character.

- (3) I have to give kudos to the developers to give the lead role to a female character, and she is a very stylish chick, her outfit is really slick and i loved how they put extra effort into her animations. (HonestlyTrue, 9.6.2013, Metacritic, cited 14.2.2019)

HonestlyTrue approved of the developers' choice to stand by their decision to have a female protagonist. He also sees Nilin from the male gaze perspective by calling her "stylish" and the clothing "slick".

- (4) Now I'll admit this game popped up on my radar in a bit of peer pressure as some friends really loved the look of it but the first gameplay shown didn't have me sold. But they a few days later another gameplay was released involving a helicopter fight of sorts that's when i started my own love for it. It was passed up by many gaming companies for its female protagonist which i think is quite a silly reason. (jdean049, Metacritic Jun 9, 2013, cited 14.2.2019)

Player jdean049 brings up how publishers passed up *Remember Me* due to the female protagonist. This player's opinions echo the other inserts; many of them do not see the protagonist's gender as a valid reason to refrain from publishing the game.

- (5) Remember Me is by no means a bad game, just a bit dull. Dontnod should be commended however for fighting for their female protagonist. Unfortunately, said protagonist is incredibly bland and have very little character as well as a generic back story. (SilentHero, 16.6.2013, Metacritic, cited 14.2.2019)

Despite *Remember Me*'s lack of mechanical prowess, this player considers it was important for Dontnod Entertainment to defend their protagonist. This is a fair point, considering that the change of attitudes comes from the industry. Players will vote with their wallets but if there are no female protagonist games to begin with it is impossible to know how the attitude towards female leads may have changed over the years. The player also calls Nilin "bland", which might indicate that the mental traits are more important than the representation of gender when it comes to video game characters. This corresponds with Behm-Morawitz's (2009) research that gender stereotypes are more harmful than how the women are represented visually.

- (6) "Remember Me" had a hard time finding a publisher, since the makers didn't want to compromise on the main character being a woman. Apparently, publishers thought that because most gamers are male, they wouldn't want to play as the opposite gender (uhh, Tomb Raider series?) and would feel awkward watching "themselves" if there were love scenes involved. Now Capcom has added the title to their range of games. All is still not perfect - from what I heard, they still meddled by asking for a planned love story to be removed. And as a woman, I cannot help but notice what form-fitting clothing the main character is wearing. (Sun_S, 6.7.2013, Steam Store, cited 13.2.2019)

Jean-Maxime had said in the same interview that was mentioned earlier that Dontnod Entertainment wanted to keep the female protagonist despite the hardship of finding a publisher. It would have ruined the storyline that was built around Nilin and her relationships with other people. Sun_S also brings up *Tomb Raider* which is a good example that proves female protagonist games that are done well in both story and mechanic-wise can be successful and popular. The “form-fitting” clothing also indicates that Nilin is still built for the male gaze.

- (7) It was a controversial choice by Dontnod to have a female lead character but they were adamant - and I think her genuine nature is one to be praised (Meep, 5.1.2015, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Meep also brings up Dontnod Entertainment’s decision to keep Nilin in the game. He calls it “controversial”, which would suggest that the player considers it an unpopular decision among the gaming industry.

- (8) ...and the sad part is that the devs blames the failure of the their game on gamers , said that they didnt like it cause the main character is a girl, lol we dont live in the 80s anymore and they are still charging 30\$ for it (it should be mx 15\$) (RipperG (●_●)♡, 25.3.2016, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

RipperG (●_●)♡ suggests that game developers would prefer a male protagonist because players do not like female protagonists and that would cause the game to be a failure. As the player implies, this is old thinking that may have had some truth to it in the early days of video gaming in the 80s, as he mentions, but since the rise of *Tomb Raider* and video gaming becoming more and more gender-neutral hobby, the attitude towards female protagonists is no longer so evasive.

- (9) And for all the publishers who didn’t wanted to help Dontnod to launch a female based game, just because the chick likes some dude in this plot, Well I have a word for you: Go fukc yourselves. (cybergothika, 24.7.2016, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Player cybergothika brings up the same quote that Pending Insanity does. Oftentimes a female sidekick is straight and serves the purpose of being the male protagonist's love interest. Thus, the player who relates to the male sees himself through the avatar and the cutscenes involving the woman are seen as heterosexual. But when the avatar is female and the love interest male the setting seems homosexual. These two players seem to think that this assumption is nonsensical.

- (10) I sympathize with the developers choice of Nilin as a female protagonist of mixed race which was a bold move and cost them sales for sure. My decision to buy and play the game was of course influenced by the huge success of *Life Is Strange* from the same studio and you can see where their concept of rewinding time came from. (h.barkas, 21.11.2016, Steam Store, cited 14.2.2019)

It is entirely possible that Nilin's gender affected the sales of *Remember Me*. However, it may have even attracted some players. *Life is Strange* (2015) is another female protagonist game developed by Dontnod Entertainment. It earned seven awards for its story and originality and in 2018 it was followed by a sequel *Life is Strange 2* with a male protagonist instead. Often the success of another game of the game studio attracts players to try the other games that may not as popular. For example, BioWare sells games often with its name rather than with brands it has created.

- (11) Let's start with the great moments. Of course, it's a game's plot. Set in a futuristic Paris, the female protagonist (of course, it's woman, what did you expect, it's Dontnod, lol) Nilin has an ability to modify people's memories and infect the way they think about some events, also these abilities can be used to extract a useful information. (American Tragedy, 12.7.2018, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

This insert suggests that Dontnod Entertainment had a reputation of creating female protagonist games. However, this insert was written in 2018 three years after the release and success of *Life is Strange*. *Remember Me* was Dontnod Entertainment's first game so there was no reputation before that. *Life is Strange* created this impression in 2015 because it was another female protagonist game from the studio. Since *Life is Strange*, Dontnod Entertainment's games have featured male protagonists.

4.1.2 The male gaze and character attributes

Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze applies in video games as well. This can be seen in the visual built of Nilin, and how she is described in five inserts that comment on her physical and mental attributes.

- (12) The main character is pretty likeable, interesting, and is realistic. She makes the occasional quip or sarcastic remark, she's remorseful, she's skilled and strong but she doesn't pretend to be an invincible hero. She discovers her past and what she has done, and both accepts and laments who she is. She's flawed, but just as anyone should be. Also she's somewhat non-standard for a main/female video game character, and the deviation from the norm is very appreciated. (Larin_4yLIIKa, 17.11.2015, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Larin_4yLIIKa lists Nilin's attributes, which seem to differ from the standard female protagonist this player has been used to in video games because he says Nilin deviates from the norm. This deviation from the standard is also regarded as "realistic" by him. This realism is her "remorsefulness" and genuineness. This too seems to refer to how breaking the gender stereotype is key to how male players view the female characters; the dumbed-down stereotype of a damsel in distress does not appeal to players anymore.

- (13) Nilin is a strong female lead who, after the prologue, isn't a damsel in distress and is a legitmate ♥♥♥♥kicker. She shows her emotions but when the world around you is, literally, falling apart, most people would show some concern for the brain annihilated zombies or innocent people being pillaged. (Deadaghram, 11.12.2015, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Deadaghram dismisses the damsel in distress trope and considers Nilin a strong female lead by being able to take care of herself. He seems to be concerned about Nilin's lack of emotion despite the madness around her, which make her feel less human. It seems as though this player would appreciate a strong character with a hint of realism; something that Senua has been described to be.

- (14) Things I like: (minor soldier, nothing plot related tho)
1. Background. I always like near future setup, and dystopia feel just makes it even better.
 2. Female protagonist. I generally prefer female characters, which is visually more pleasing. (dreamcaller, Steam Store 25.4.2017, cited 19.2.2019)

Player dreamcaller sees Nilin from the perspective of the male gaze. In this player's opinion, the female figure is visually more pleasing to watch to and it has even affected his preferences for a protagonist. Similarly, in MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online roleplaying-games) male players are known to show preference over female characters due to the visually pleasing effect created for the male gaze. Single-player games that are shown from the third person angle are no different from the MMORPGs in that sense.

- (15) Playing a female protagonist is, as allways, a welcome change of pace. She is funny and sceptic, but also determined. So character and story wise this game absolutely holds up. (einarbd95, 4.9.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)
- (16) The female lead is attractive and engaging; spectacularly voiced which oddly enough was somewhat distracting when interacting with some of the subpar to almost bad acting by minor and/or supporting characters. (staticXorcism, 24.12.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Player staticXorcism and einarbd95 find Nilin's mental traits pleasing. staticXorcism also looks at Nilin through the male gaze; she is created to be attractive and visually pleasant to watch as she interacts with the game world. This would suggest that female protagonist games are still designed to be visually pleasing to male audiences despite creating strong female characters to break the gender stereotypes.

4.1.3 Sexualisation

Only four inserts mentioned sexualisation despite Nilin appearing to be designed for the male gaze. This was an interesting find considering that Nilin as a character is closer to the Lara Croft archetype than Senua is.

- (17) It's a typical Capcom-game: shallow story, overly-stylish optics, overly-sexualized female characters whose "fronts and backs" are continuously visually available to you, unfittingly bombastic music. If you're a heterosexual male, I recommend this game to you. (Marcus, 13.6.2013, Steam Store, cited 13.2.2019)

Marcus implies that Capcom games have hyper-sexualised female characters. Capcom is known for its popular titles like *Resident Evil* (1996-2019), *Monster Hunter* (2004-2018), and *Street Fighter* (1987-2018). While these series do feature female protagonists, the female characters especially in *Monster Hunter* and *Street Fighter* are very sexualised and the clothing tends to be revealing depending on the character. Thus, the implication that Capcom publishes games that typically entertain the male gaze and follow the stereotypical sexualisation of female characters is not entirely wrong.

- (18) Oh, and props for a mixed race female protagonist. Not the best female protagonist in any video game by far (her physical prowesses are completely unexplained, and she still feels a bit sexualized), but still good to see some representation. (Raven Dumron, 27.11.2016, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Raven Dumron agrees with Marcus that Nilin is sexualised and considers her physically unrealistic. However, he agrees with the earlier inserts that a female protagonist is a good change despite the unrealistic physique. It is possible that players like Dumron do not consider female protagonists a problem but rather their role. A slick female in a physically demanding role is not realistic and thus breaks the immersion of the game.

- (19) Well-written female protagonist Nilin is surprisingly likeable despite seemingly gauged to fit that strong, witty character. She'll occasionally throw weird one-liners here and there, but they're bearable for the most part. There is very little hints of sexualizing or stereotyping Nilin's character; she's written in the sense that she happens to be female rather than just being a female character, which is probably why you'll still see people praising her despite giving this game a thumbs-down. (Much Aaaaaaaa, 29.4.2017, Steam Store, cited 17.2.2019)

Player Much Aaaaaaaa's opinion seems to contradict with the former inserts by saying that Nilin is not particularly sexualised. The difference in opinions is likely divided depending on which kind of female protagonists the particular player has more experience

of. Lara Croft as the archetype is known by most so she is usually used as a comparison. In this light, Nilin does not seem as sexualised as Lara, which would correspond with this player's opinion.

- (20) Many people have praised the developers' choice of protagonist as she is capable and unsexualized. This is true, she isn't sexualized...or personified for that matter. Save for some atrocious lines of dialogue like "This little red riding hood has a basketful of kickass", she seems to have very little personal motivation, nuances, or general character; she only once ethically questions her main objective for a brief moment and expresses some degree of relatable emotion during final twist(s) which are, in and of themselves, mildly predictable and fairly shallow. (BooMHouR, 6.2.2019, Steam Store, cited 14.2.2019)

BooMHouR agrees with Much Aaaaaaaa that Nilin is not very sexualised, but also considers her bland like SilentHero in his review. He also says that Nilin is shallow, which would suggest that while Nilin is visually pleasant to watch without excess sexualisation she is not interesting as a character and thus does not break the stereotype of a sexualised and generic female character for this player.

4.1.4 Importance of gender

Several inserts suggested that players found it a good thing that the story would not put too much importance on the protagonist's gender. This gives the impression that some players prefer a more gender-neutral approach to video gaming; the story is more important than the characters' genders.

- (21) And hey! The main character is female, and her sex makes literally zero difference! So that's cool. (DireMuffin, 5.3.2016, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)
- (22) Also, I'm going to come out and say it, it's wonderful to have a really good female protagonist, where the gender of the player character *isn't* a specific plot point. (The Peterson, 23.7.2016, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

The Peterson agrees with DireMuffin and refers to games that sometimes choose a female protagonist to make a gender political point. This issue became a matter for discussion after Gamergate which happened after *Remember Me* was published. However, these reviews were written in 2016 after the controversy and show the aftereffects of it. Gender in video games is seen as a political tool, so video games featuring women are looked with a critical eye for any feminist agenda that would emphasise female empowerment.

- (23) I was very happy that the game didn't shove sjw politics down my throat, and made no deal about the main protagonist's gender and ethnicity - too bad videogame "journalists" did. Having an original female main character never discouraged male or female audiences, poorly functioning/ bad games did. (HyperCobra, 10.2.2019, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

HyperCobra brings up the social justice warrior phenomenon that was associated with the Gamergate controversy. After Gamergate it became a fear of many players that video games would begin to feature more female characters just to support the gender political views of video game critics like Sarkeesian. He also makes a good point that male audiences do not avoid female protagonist games because of the character's gender but rather because the game may have bad mechanics or a dull story. This point could be seen in the whole reviews, as a vast majority of them focused solely on the mechanics and the plot of the game rather than the protagonist. This review was also written in 2019, which means the player has likely experienced more SJW politics online than the other players.

4.1.5 Female protagonists in video games

Remember Me seemed to have inspired discussion on female protagonists in general. Seven inserts spoke of female protagonists in other games and several mentioned the uncommonness of them.

- (24) I'm enjoying the little of Nilin's character that is being exposed through monologue. I really wish there was more, and maybe there will be? Also, the voice acting seems to be well done with her, not so much the supporting cast. Finally, I am always thrilled to play female characters,

its as though its a rarity. (iamthespark, 4.6.2013, Metacritic, cited 14.2.2019)

- (25) It's fantastic to see a strong female protagonist in gaming again. It's still far too rare that we get to see one anymore, especially one this likable. (TheQuietGamer, 29.3.2014, Metacritic, cited 14.2.2019)

Player iamthespark and TheQuietGamer bring up the issue of female protagonist being a rarity in video games. According to Ivory (2006) and many other scholars' studies, this is true when looking at the popular video games. The number of female protagonists has been on the rise, however, but most of them are in indie games that have a limited audience.

- (26) In addition to this and her general badass-ness, Nilin is a very well written female character (we have too few of those in gaming) who is not only strong and willing to fight for what she believes in, but also has vulnerabilities, guilt, and doubts as to whether or not she is doing the right thing. This makes her feel like a real human being you actually care about, as she's not just some guy with brown hair and stubble gunning down waves of baddies. She is also a well dressed character, dressed for the situations and fights she gets into, not to look sexy (don't worry though, she has the butt of a professional jeans model), and every character in the game (except a few villains) treat her with the respect she deserves. Later on, this story reveals how major villains and characters shaped her into the woman she is today, and these scenes still blow me away to this day. (meanapplepie, 1.8.2015, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Player meanapplepie brings up the rarity of female protagonists as well. He also mentions that Nilin is treated with respect despite her gender, which suggests that the player refers to video games that make use of female characters as objects to be used for some purpose. A good example of this is *Grand Theft Auto*'s use of prostitutes, as mentioned in chapter 3.2. A female protagonist whose gender is not brought up by the NPCs makes the game often more immersive for the player and the importance is on the story and action rather than possible gender roles.

- (27) Really, after reading those reviews I just felt like they were excuses to dislike the game and I suspect it's the female protagonist that might be

the cause. Trust me, a male protagonist would've ruined the game. (sankar.chinna, 14.11.2016, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Player sankar.chinna brings up the point that Dontnod Entertainment also has said; sometimes a story is better suited for a female lead than a male. Some games are written for both genders, like *Dragon Age* or *Mass Effect*, but some create more immersion with a certain gender. Games that make use of the damsel in distress trope tend to feature men as protagonists because that is considered to make more sense from the perspective of gender stereotypes. Women as the weaker gender would not be able to save themselves so logically it is the man who saves them. However, *Remember Me*'s story was written specifically for a female lead, as Dontnod Entertainment had said, so changing it afterwards would have affected the overall quality of the story. The story had been written specifically for a woman, so changing the protagonist's gender would have required a full rewrite of the plot and other characters. That would have been expensive for the developers, and it also could have resulted in a story that was not as immersive as Nilin's.

- (28) On a personal note, it was incredibly refreshing to have a biracial female protagonist whose most significant relationship in the game is friendship, something that's considered a bold move, and something I genuinely appreciate. (DrunkArmadillo, 16.12.2016, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

DrunkArmadillo brings up the issue of female characters being often love interests or somehow getting involved with men rather than forming friendships. This is true when looking at the majority of games. Some games allow both, especially role-playing games that feature companions, such as *Fallout 4* (2015). This gives the player a choice whether to pursue a romance or friendships regardless of the protagonist's gender. In *Remember Me* Nilin has a love interest but she also has close relationships with other people as well, which brings more attention to genuine connection between characters.

- (29) A while ago, I heard this game was terrible, And I mean a WHILE. When I first played this, I didn't even know that the things I'd heard were wrong, I did not know the game had positive reviews, this game brings something unique and is one of the few games where a Female Protagonist isn't garbage. (WeebManJenkins, 11.11.2018, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

WeebManJenkins's remark "a while ago" would suggest that the reviews or comments he had read about the game, most likely close to the release date, had been mostly negative. It is possible that in 2013 when the game was discussed in game journalism and the issue of finding a publisher was brought up, it affected the opinions of many players and they considered it bad simply due to female protagonist. Gamergate in 2014 has also had effects on the attitudes towards female leads in games and probably caused the negative reviews to have more influence on players. As mentioned above, reviews on mainstream game journalism sites like Eurogamer, PC Gamer, or IGN do not list Nilin's gender as an issue in the game, and it is remarkably hard to find any mentions about her gender at all. This would suggest that the reviews this player has encountered are those written by other players and not by professional reviewers.

- (30) yes, I know I have a weak spot for those female protagonists so I may not be entirely objective here... still, I find it good that there are more and more games that feature strong female characters and this game, with its peculiar mechanic combined with a solid cyberpunk-style story set in a breathtaking environment withing a dystopian future is one of the best of the kind... (blushade, 22.11.2018, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Player blushade seems to suggest that there should be more action-based games that feature female protagonists. There is a vast variety of female protagonist games, but the player consensus seems to be that not many of them are "strong". A good example is the protagonist of *Metroid* series (1986-2017) Samus Aran who is considered a strong independent female lead by players. However, in *Metroid: Other M* (2010) Samus's strength was compromised by a new side character who acted as her father figure and took control over Samus's actions. Despite her physical prowess and capabilities of handling enemies and taking full care of herself, players no longer considered Samus strong and blamed the developers Team Ninja for ruining her character. In this light, "strong" may not mean the same to players as it may to some developers.

4.2 Player reviews of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*

Regarding *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* thirteen out of the sixty inserts were negative in tone, which is more than those of *Remember Me*. The inserts that spoke of gender were remarkably few in relation to the number of reviews the game had received since its publishing. Most of them focused on the mental health theme the game was known for and had little interest in the female protagonist. However, those inserts that did speak of gender were mostly well-written and displayed interesting attitudes.

4.2.1 *Tomb Raider* comparisons

An interesting trend was found in the inserts of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*; four people referred to *Tomb Raider*. Only one player in *Remember Me's* inserts mentioned *Tomb Raider*, which is an interesting comparison because *Remember Me* is mechanically and plot-wise closer to *Tomb Raider* than *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* is.

- (31) But just a few small cons:
1. It's very linear. I can't see myself playing this a 2nd time. If it were open world, it'd be incredible.
 2. Female main character. Same reason I never fully got into the *Tomb Raider* series. Just can't justify playing a female warrior fighting massive, male enemies (would never happen in reality). (dnage184, 10.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Player dnage184 finds female protagonists unrealistic implying that even *Tomb Raider* was unrealistic for creating the action heroine Lara Croft. While this seems like a sexist remark, the physical prowess is still unexplained as Nilin is slick and would not realistically be physically capable of such actions, just as Dumron said in his review. However, most video games are in the action genre, just like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and *Remember Me*, so it forces the protagonist's role to be physically and mentally demanding regardless of gender. This raises the question whether most protagonists are male because the developers want to keep some realism in their games and not just because of the relatability. However, this attitude does not seem to appear in such

prevalence in other genres of popular culture. Video games are also fiction and fantasy, so the need for realism could be questioned.

- (32) For the record, and it's a dreadful pity I have to state this, this game's shortcomings have nothing to do with the protagonist being female. Despite repeating tired generic industry game tropes (grab this, shoot that, jump here), the *Tomb Raider* series is still so much more enjoyable and engaging than this. (johncoolman, 14.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Player johncoolman finds *Tomb Raider* more pleasant than *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* but points out that it is about the mechanics and the game in general, not the gender. The player seems to be aware of the common tropes in video games but rather than finding them problematic, he enjoys them. This is likely one of the reasons why the old tropes, such as damsel in distress, keep selling in its various forms. *Tomb Raider* has also set a standard for female protagonist games, so games that differ from the archetype are met with critique and comparisons.

- (33) Senua is not your typical female protagonist. She's not the astonishing sex idol you're used to in *Tomb Raider*. She's a struggling girl who sought out on adventure for one purpose— and she would rather die than fail. (jakeknip, 30.12.2018, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)
- (34) Can't help but mention that I love the female character role, she's upstanding and her model shies away from the *Tomb Raider* female build there for eye candy. Simply eloquent. (Derak, 7.2.2019, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Both Derek and jakeknip refer to Lara Croft's sexualisation and the male gaze. Senua as a character does not follow the stereotypical hypersexualised archetype as Lara Croft in the *Tomb Raider* set but rather has a realistic approach, which seems to have pleased many players according to the reviews. Even the modern Lara Croft is more realistic in the last four games between 2010 and 2018 published by Square Enix, so there may have been an attitude change both among the industry as well as gamers.

4.2.2 Sexualisation

Four inserts focused on Senua's sexualisation in general. Most of the players agreed it was a good decision that the developers made Senua realistic and human instead of creating another stereotyped and sexualised female character.

- (35) I'm not saying it's bad, the story is probably really good (unless there is a silly plot twist like "everything was in her head because she's crazy"), graphics and atmosphere are nice, and Senua is really well done and well acted (and realistic, she's not a supermodel like 99% of the females in games). (Zarakai, 9.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)
- (36) Finally a female hero that isn't a Victoria's Secret model. Blood covering everywhere, dirt, mud, scratches, everything combined with her voice and always expressing watery emotions coming from her hazel blue schizophrenic eyes... My type of girl. I wish we could date in the next Verbeia shrine, she gets my neo-paganism a hard-on all for the unconventional reasons. No boobs windows, no bubble ass baiting, no skin exposure. Just an strong Celtic warrior with X chromosomes, a likable character for you. Lovable for me. (cybergothika, 11.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Both Zarakai and cybergothika consider Senua's realistic looks a good thing. They point out the issue that has been mentioned many times before: female characters in video games tend to be physically and sexually attractive and made for the male gaze. Female characters that are also designed for the role of a potential love interest tend to generate the baiting and skin exposure cybergothika mentioned. A good example of this is Miranda Lawson in *Mass Effect 2* (2010). Her backstory is about being genetically modified to be perfect in every way from face to buttocks and she is the canon companion romance for the male protagonist. The game also provides the skin exposure in the form of love scenes and other well-placed camera angles to give sexually suggestive visual to the player. Senua, however, is far from this sexually suggestive archetype and she is portrayed realistically without the "boobs" being on display. This suggests that players do find a female character engaging without the stereotypical visual desirability.

- (37) Talking about Senua, this is one of the greatest character I've played in a long time. She's beautiful, simple, human (Yeah, I'm sorry guys, no

need to sexualize a character to make it powerful). You know she's strong but she hides her strength inside of her. Also, she's a broken woman, totally lost in her mind and you'll see her going from a weak desperate woman to a powerful character who will overcome everything to get to her goal. (Olimar660, 12.8.2017, Metacritic, cited 13.2.2019)

Olimar660 makes a fair point that sexualisation does not necessarily mean powerful. In some games like *Bayonetta* (2009) sexualisation is linked to the female protagonists being powerful. Similarly, female sexuality is often associated to be part of her strength in popular culture in general. However, players seem to find the reality more empowering than the sexual fantasy, as this insert would suggest.

- (38) I bought it for £22.50 and I guess I'd want it to cost £10 before I said it was good value of money, but if you want to support this type of game, I thoughtful, artistic representation, of mental health in a fantasy-crossed-with-reality world which treats its female protagonist with respect and no objectification, then definitely splash out at full price. (Shabe – Paul, 12.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Shabe – Paul implies that Ninja Theory respected Senua's character by not hypersexualising her. He also raises a good point that some people might even be willing to pay more for games that differ from the sexualised stereotypes on women. Publishers tend to fund games that are safe investments and have wide market, which forces many developers to look for money elsewhere for games that would not be profitable due to reasons like limited target audience for example. Some video games, such as *Divinity: Original Sin II* (2017), have been almost entirely funded by players who wanted a sequel for the previous game. This raises the question why game developers would not use funding platforms to raise money for their projects and thus remove some of the financial pressure on the profitability of female protagonist games.

4.2.3 Comments on feminism

Eight inserts referred to feminism. This is an interesting change since only three inserts of *Remember Me* spoke about the importance of gender and only one mentioned the social justice phenomena. The difference seems to be that because *Remember Me* was released

before Gamergate it was not affected by the players' fear of feminism ruining their games, whereas *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* is one of the games released after the controversy.

- (39) Also, a female warrior looking for her lost love isn't a very common script in this awful misogynist world neither. Lots of disgusting threads are lurking around the hub. This reflects how some time wasters are PISSED by that game and how effective it is, for that matter. (cybergothika, 11.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

As cybergothika says, the damsel in distress trope is rarely used in reverse in gaming. It is often the man saving a woman but in *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* it is Senua who goes to Helheim to save her lover Dillion's soul. According to cybergothika this may be due to misogyny in the general public and not just the gaming communities. It may also be about the realism of physique; as former inserts have suggested the physical prowess of slick women is not considered realistic. The player also mentions "disgusting threads" online, which implies that there is misogyny among the gaming communities even if it is not clearly visible in game reviews.

- (40) Senua is the best female lead of any game I've played – she's pretty badass (but not like unreasonably badass because some feminist writer\animator had too much pull and so she came off hella cringy like most other female leads that are leads because they're female and did i mention they're female and their personality is female - - (Fapstronaut One, 12.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Fapstronaut One refers to the gender politics in gaming that became an issue after Gamergate and Sarkeesian's critical views on female characters in video games. As this insert suggests, some players believe that feminists would begin to influence video games and take a more gender neutral and politically correct direction. This player seems to suggest that strong female leads are not a problem to players unless they are too empowered and fit a feminist agenda.

- (41) People are simply praising this "game" out of pompous artistic merit and because it has a female protagonist. Like modern art which a lot of time isn't that good but gets a pass because it's "progressive". (SofaTrooper, 13.8.2017, Metaritic, cited 14.2.2019)

SofaTrooper suggests that people praise the game only for the female protagonist because they are rare in video games. While this may be true in some cases, the positive reviews would suggest differently, as well the inserts on sexualisation. This also contradicts with the overall opinion that according to Steam Store's statistics that show 20,288 positive reviews and only 1,795 that are negative, and most of the reviews focus solely on game mechanics or the story.

- (42) The controls are responsive, and once you learn the combat you truly are a force to be reckoned with, and rather than coming off as pretentious with how deep the story runs, or "muh feminism," with the female protagonist, the story really reminds me of tales like the Odyssey, or of Theseus, but with the nordic gods instead. (KRACKROCKSTEADY, 13.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 14.2.2019)

To KRACKROCKSTEADY the female protagonist in the game seems to represent feminism and the female empowerment. It appears that to some players a female protagonist can seem like a gender political statement even if it was not intended. This is likely the cause of Gamergate and seen as an invasion to male territory, as Tomkinson (2015) concluded in her study.

- (43) Their main character was purposely made to be incredibly ugly, like it's extremely hard to not look away when you see her face, it's disgustingly ugly and it's just like with Mass Effect Andromeda, apparently it is politically correct now to make your characters butt-ugly. She doesn't even look like a female, at all. (beakerboy666, 17.8.2017, Metacritic, cited 14.2.2019)

Player beakerboy666 brings up the *Mass Effect: Andromeda* case in 2017. The female protagonist's default face and the customisable pre-set faces were believed to have been made unattractive because of gender politics. This once more refers to the after effects of Gamergate as players believed that feminists in gaming industry would have had too much influence on the newer games released after the controversy. According to this player, one of those influences would be to make women ugly so they would not fulfil the requirements of the male gaze by being visually desirable.

- (44) The game has one of the best executions of a female protagonist I've come across – It's completely seamless, well-written, and not political at all. (jigos, 7.7.2018, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Player jigos says the same as Fapstronaut One and compliments the game for not being political. The player seems to refer to gender politics, which suggests that he has had prior doubts about the game's contents before purchasing it. It also seems that these players have read and experienced the SJW and feminist phenomena online in excess before playing the game. This also shows that players do engage in online discussions about video game culture before buying games, which in turn affects their attitudes and opinions.

- (45) The recipe of this game: A strong female character, add some "white Rastafari", some "independent studio" and "accurately depicted psychosis flashbacks" constantly advertised throughout the game. Garnish with some Viking lore (!) and you have a SJW wet dream game. (dimxanthis, 3.11.2018, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Player dimxanthis mentions again the social justice warrior phenomenon. He suggests that the game fulfils a standard for gender politically acceptable game, which according to him simply means that the game differs from the generic video games. The exact SJW standard is not defined, but to many it seems to mean that anything that is not mainstream can be considered SJW.

- (46) A female protagonist done right. None of this pampering, coddling, "empowering wahmen" bullshit. A dark, gritty, raw game where the lead is terrified every step of the way with good reason, on a psychosis fueled journey of redemption. (Yogi, 4.1.2019, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Yogi shares the opinion with Fapstronaut One and jigos that the game does not include a feminist agenda nor force political opinions on players. He also uses terms "pampering" and "coddling", which implies that video games he has played before have treated female characters more delicately than male. This may refer to how women are serving as objects to be saved and protected in video games that follow the damsel in distress trope.

4.2.4 Senua as a protagonist

There were plenty of reviews that discussed Senua as a character but only in general terms without mentioning gender. Six inserts that talked about Senua as a woman were qualified for the analysis

- (47) Senua as a character was very believable, and incredibly well formed. She felt like a strong female protagonist, without being a superhero. (Captain McBeard, 8.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 13.2.2019)

McBeard's comment on Senua implies that a female protagonist does not have to be the traditional superhero type to be powerful. This touches on the inserts on sexualisation; a female protagonist does have to fulfil a fantasy of sexual or physical powerfulness to be strong and visually pleasing. It seems to be the reality and humanity that intrigues players more in the newer games rather than the unrealistic fiction.

- (48) Senua is easily the most human heroine I've seen in any game ever, and while there have been more 'strong' female characters, there's no heroism like the heroism of the truly broken and crippled. She has to fight her demons, and it's all the more meaningful because unlike fem-Shepard who eats Reapers for breakfast, you can see in the gorgeously motion captured performance of Senua's face, that she is truly terrified as she fights. (HollowPointer, 11.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 13.2.2019)

HollowPointer uses the word "human", which further suggests that players may have begun to prefer a more realistic experience in video games. He also mentions the "superhero" stereotype further agreeing with McBeard that being powerful does not mean inhuman capabilities. Senua is a realistic human in the sense that she feels fear, and as HollowPointer points out, she is terrified but despite that keeps on fighting. These players seem to think that it is the bravery despite human fear that makes her strong rather than unrealistic self-control in the face of mental horrors.

- (49) Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice is an atmospheric fantasy/mystery game with easy but fun puzzles, challenging quick-time combat that feels very powerful, music that teases your adrenalin level, linear but flawless

level design and one of the most iconic female main characters in gaming as of yet. (Leah, 14.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Leah calls Senua “iconic”, which seems to equate her among the popular female protagonists such as Lara Croft and Samus Aran. Leah may refer to the same qualities as HollowPointer and McBeard: Senua is iconic because she resembles a realistic woman both physically and mentally. This suggests that the notion of “iconic” has changed from the unrealistic Lara Croft to more natural and human characters like Senua.

- (50) Ninja Theory managed to pull off something incredible for me here personally. And that is that that a relatively slight scottish girl can take down creatures twice her size and it feels realistic. (Boyo777, 14.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Boyo777 makes a good point that to some Senua’s strength may not seem realistic. However, in the context of schizophrenia it may seem more authentic. This may be what the player refers to; the game is more realistic when realising that Senua fights against her personal horrors in her own mind rather than actual monsters that would be physically hard for her to take down if it were real. As mentioned above, the need for realism in video games could be questioned because they are fiction. However, when the fiction is presented in a convincing way even in a fantasy setting, it makes the game immersive and believable. That is how the game and the characters feel realistic even when they logically should not, as Boyo777 points out.

- (51) Senua is probably the best female hero-protagonist we’ve ever seen in gaming so far. She’s got a simple, bold ambition - to save the boy she loved - and she travels to Hel to do it. As with many such titles, the game explores her personal history and background along the way and she faces externalised version of inner demons as tends to be the case in such stories, but she does it with tenacity, audacity and without compromise. When you control Senua, she feels vulnerable and powerful at the same time and it’s easy to want to help her, not only out of sympathy but because she’s inspiring and strong. (Magnethead, 4.1.2018, Metacritic, cited 14.2.2019)

Magnethead brings up the same things as HollowPointer and McBeard by referring to Senua’s vulnerability. “Vulnerable” suggests that Senua is human and not supernaturally

strong and capable. Despite that weakness she is able to overcome the obstacles she faces. This makes her inspiring and gives the “iconic” glow that Leah mentioned.

- (52) And Senua, jesus mate She is totally THE female character We deserve. She is beautiful, good in heart but most importantly You worry for her the whole time and not because She is a dumb ♥♥♥♥ like in other games, but because You don’t want her to hurt. (Komplex, 2.2.2019, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Komplex implies that female characters in other games would be “dumb” and that Senua is an exception to this. He seems to refer to the females that serve the purpose of an object to be saved and thus give the impression that they cannot handle themselves. Komplex also brings up character attachment. It is possible that it is easier to relate and get attached to Senua because she is so realistic and human. The sexualised and stoic characters do not arouse the player’s empathy as much as someone they can see themselves in.

4.2.5 Female protagonists in general

Eight inserts discussed female protagonists in general, which would suggest that the topic has been on the surface since Gamergate. Female protagonists also seem to arouse players to talk more about female gender in video games, as could be seen in the inserts of *Remember Me* as well.

- (53) Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice is an amazing game and anyone who says otherwise is probably the same kind of person who gets pissy at *any* game with a female protagonist. Ignore them, this game is amazing. (SeekaWillow, 9.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

SeekaWillow refers to players who avoid games with female protagonists. He may also refer to the gender political views. As it could be seen in the previous inserts on feminism, the aftereffects of Gamergate may have made some players avoid female protagonist games altogether because they do not want to support the political “female empowerment”. The player may also refer to how some male players feel their video game culture is violated by women because they see it as their sole territory.

- (54) There are some very clever things going on with gameplay, nice artwork, style, direction. I applaud them for doing a mental-health game but far too much of the gameplay keeps you crippled as a dumb helpless neurotic woman who has given into her mental health problems. As a game, Its NOT fun to play this weak woman and i got tired of it rather quickly. (ben, 10.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

Player ben suggests that weak female protagonists are not “fun to play” and implies that Senua is one of them. While other players in the last chapter considered Senua to be powerful because she was human and faced her mental horrors despite her fear there seems to be an opposite opinion that considers her due to her schizophrenia. The player sees it as “crippling” that Senua is so deep in her mental anguish, which reveals that his idea of “strong” differs drastically from most of the players’ views.

- (55) I was also happy to see a female character in a lead role, especially one that directly involves physical skill and fitness, fine tuned reflexes, and an overall ability to simply kick everyone’s butts. It is the sort of game I would gladly play with my daughter, just to break the unstoppable “you’re supposed to be pretty and delicate” doctrine we so frequently see, even amongst our own generation. (RDAbreu, 12.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 19.2.2019)

RDAbreu finds Senua’s physical prowess to be a good example for his daughter and brings up the educational side of gaming. He also seems to refer to the feminist approach implying that there should be more female protagonists that are good examples for women. The stereotype of “pretty and delicate” is more frequently used than the physically fit and capable heroine role. This suggests that as a parent he would prefer to show his daughter the physically strong women rather than the beautiful and fragile. When looking from the perspective of Behm-Morawitz’s research which concluded that women’s self-esteem is affected negatively by sexualised video game characters, his point seems to be even more valid; strong and un-sexualised female characters would likely be empowering and set a better example for young gamers than the Lara Croft archetype did.

- (56) And so what if it has a female protagonist, ultimately the game is boring and overrated. (OnlyChins, 20.8.2018, Steam Store, cited 17.2.2019)

OnlyChins's short statement seems to imply that it does not matter that the game is progressive if it is not well-written. This opinion was shared in the inserts of *Remember Me* as well; the game's issue is not the protagonist's gender but the mechanics and story.

- (57) For me personally the story and the fact that the protagonist is a girl has killed it...
 Women can be taught and fight like a men, but this one is scared all the time.
 All this crying kills the fun. Couldn't really connect with the game..
 Didn't finish it, grew tired with the gameplay and this wining girl crying for her mum.. (Phoibos, 29.8.2017, Steam Store, cited 14.2.2019)

Phoibos was not pleased with Senua's realistic fear but rather saw it as an annoying feature. His comments are also contradictory: on one hand he says that the story was ruined because the protagonist is a woman, but on the other says that women can be taught to fight like men. This implies that for a woman to be as capable as a man she should not feel fear. This contradicts with the former inserts that praised Senua for showing fear because it is more realistic.

- (58) Maybe the reviews set my expectations too high. I was excited to see a game with a female protagonist with a mental illness. (Pooplet, 29.10.2017, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Pooplet's review was negative and thus this insert implies that his expectations were not met despite initial excitement for an unusual protagonist. Senua as a character breaks the norm with her schizophrenia, which was mentioned in many of the reviews. Thus, her gender alone was not exceptional but also her mental state that became the game world.

- (59) This one falls short of the mark for me. Before someone gets triggered it has nothing to do with the female lead or the mental health aspect of the project.. (Qualudes, 1.5.2018, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Qualudes agrees with Pooplet that the game did not meet the expectations. The word "triggered" refers to internet slang that is used when something online offends someone so that person get "triggered". This slang is also often used when referring to online feminists and social justice warriors. In this context it may even refer to game critics like

Sarkeesian who is often seen as the figurehead of feminist video game criticism. Due to this reason Qualudes seems to specify that his dislike for the game does not stem from Senua's gender but from the other qualities of the game so it would not cause negative reactions.

- (60) The protagonist is well-acted and the idea of psychosis juxtaposed with deeply spiritual themes is an old one, but I'm really having a hard time swallowing the need for a[nother] female protagonist who can only be powerful because she's, literally in this case, crazy. (specificinstance, 29.12.2018, Steam Store, cited 18.2.2019)

Player specificinstance implies that Senua is considered powerful only because of her mental health issues. He may also refer to other female protagonists with similar traits; Aurora is a female protagonist in *Child of Light* (2014), and similar to Senua, fights against the darkness of her mind which is an allegory for depression. This suggests that the player has prior experience of female protagonist that have mental health problems.

4.3 Findings

The inserts of *Remember Me* focused mostly on the game industry's assumed attitudes towards female protagonists. This has most likely been affected by the media attention the game received before its publication. This suggests that that players do read game journalism before purchasing games. These articles may also encourage them to buy and try the games themselves in order to find out if the claims made prior had been true or false. It also seemed to have aroused defiance in players who expressed their discontent towards gaming industry for shying away from female protagonist due to believing players would prefer males. The high amount of reviews that focused more on the game's contents (i.e. story, mechanics, and themes) than the protagonist would suggest that players do not put as much emphasis on the protagonist's gender as the industry might believe. The inserts that positively highlighted how Nilin's gender made no difference would further support this. This attitude was further repeated in the inserts that spoke of female protagonists in general; the general attitude towards female protagonist appeared to be positive, which contradicts with publishers' predictions. The inserts of *Hellblade*:

Senua's Sacrifice also supported this and similar opinions on the rarity of female protagonists, and many of the player reviews made a point that the gender of the protagonist did not matter at all and expressed their approval for the choice of gender.

The inserts of *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* referred either to *Tomb Raider* or claimed that most female protagonists are stereotyped. This stereotype seemed to refer to the Lara Croft archetype that has become such a cliché that players seem to want more realistic and relatable protagonists. Nilin was not compared to Lara directly although she was still compared to the stereotype of a weak woman. Both of these protagonists were considered to be different from the norm, Senua more so than Nilin. This was visible especially in the inserts that spoke of sexualisation. Nilin's appearance was considered to be less sexualised than most female video game characters, which seemed to be an indirect reference to the Lara Croft archetype. Her figure was still seen as slick and pleasant to watch, which implies that as a character she has still been designed for the male gaze. Her other attributes that made her break the damsel in distress trope were also praised and most players found her to be strong and capable. Senua, on the other hand, was complimented on her natural looks and clear lack of sexualisation; Senua's attractiveness was tied mostly to her mental attributes rather than physical appearance. These attributes were humanity, bravery, and overall genuineness rather than the superficial stereotype of most female video game characters that these players referred to. Her mental health issues were also seen as a natural flaw and her fight against her fears empowering in most inserts.

The interesting finding was the attitude that when a female protagonist acts like the traditional male hero who saves the damsel in distress, some players saw this as exceptional strength. When the protagonist is male, it is usually considered normal for the male hero to perform such tasks. Senua was complimented on her visible emotions of fear and terror. This was considered to make her more realistic and human, and this feature pleased many of the players. Senua was seen as inspiring and brave by facing the horrors of her mind without any superhuman calmness in the face of certain death. This is an interesting comparison to Nilin, whom in one insert was considered too emotionless considering the state of the world she lived in. Nilin's physique was also considered less

realistic than that of Senua's, although inserts of both games made mentions of the unrealistic approach of putting a female into a physically demanding role.

There has also been a change in attitudes on sexualisation. The importance of the male gaze seems to have decreased as Nilin's appearance was commented on and considered more sexualised than Senua's. Senua was also praised more for realism and naturality, which would indicate that the player preferences have shifted from unnaturally sexualised to realistic. This might be because of games becoming more and more immersive by creating game environments that mimic real life with their detailed graphics and spoken dialog. This means that even characters need to be more realistic in order to create a virtual reality that seems authentic.

The attitudes towards female protagonists seem to have become more open-minded according to the inserts that spoke of female protagonists in general and criticised gaming industry. However, a new attitude seemed to have emerged from the Gamergate controversy: the fear of feminist influence in video games. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* was clearly viewed with a critical eye and many of the inserts seemed to refer indirectly to Gamergate's aftereffects by using the SJW term or mentioning feminism in some form. This is a drastic difference to the inserts of *Remember Me* as only three of them mentioned anything feminism related. As concluded before, Gamergate controversy took place after *Remember Me* so even the reviews that took notice of feminism had been written after 2014. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, however, was released in time when gender politics were on surface in 2017 after Gamergate. The aftereffects could be seen in the inserts as fear of possible feminist influence in the game, like emphasising female empowerment or focusing the story on the protagonist's gender. It seems that players have become more conscious and even wary of any indications of feminist influence.

5 CONCLUSION

The players seemed to find a non-standard female protagonist more pleasing than the stereotype of a weak and sexualised stereotype they referred to. One of these stereotypes came from Tomb Raider's Lara Croft that several inserts mentioned. Players agreed that these two female protagonists were not stereotypical. Nilin was considered more sexualised than Senua but both were still seen as strong female leads that broke away from the damsel in distress trope. Realistic features such as natural look, realistic figure, and showing emotions were considered positive and desirable by most players.

Players seemed to have positive attitudes towards female protagonists in general and many expressed that they wished to see more of them in gaming. Female protagonists were considered rare in video games and the general opinion towards the game industry's tendency to avoid female protagonists in games was seen as exceptional.

The games were complimented for their stories that did not put importance on the gender of the protagonists. Many players referred to feminist influence in the inserts of both games and generally agreed that the protagonists were strong and capable but were not influenced by online feminism. The aftereffects of Gamergate were seen in inserts that brought up SJW terms and referred to gender politics, but most players agreed that these had not affected the games in a negative way. The fear of feminist influence was the biggest attitude change that could be noticed in the inserts.

This research was limited to a small pool of inserts and gives but a glimpse of the vastly growing and ever-changing gaming community that is facing an era of progression and social media phenomena. Further research on newer games such as *Apex Legends* would be interesting to see and see how attitudes towards sexual minorities are presented in game reviews and gaming community discussions. Similarly, the effects of online phenomena on video gaming would be worthy of further research in order to answer questions that this thesis may have raised. The results of this thesis would suggest that social media plays a big part in video gaming and shapes the attitudes of players. The gaming industry is affected by gender politics and there is more and more pressure to

create games for both genders. Video games also reflect the contemporary society like any genre of popular culture, which shows in the player attitudes. Online feminism has become a monstrosity to many, but it has also had good influence. The notion of an iconic female protagonist seems to be shifting from an object of the male gaze to a more realistic and human heroine. This might mean an end to the stereotype Lara Croft has created. It will be interesting to see how far social media can change video gaming, and how gender representation in video games will progress in years to come.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. A picture of Nilin



Appendix 2. A picture of Senua

