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## **Bridging Game Studies and Feminist Theories**

Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin  
Université du Québec à Montréal

Maude Bonenfant  
Université du Québec à Montréal

### **Abstract**

Starting from the premise that feminist theory remains underutilized in game studies, the authors demonstrate that mobilizing concepts from feminist pioneers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Betty Friedan, and Laura Mulvey contributes to a better understanding of how and why gender stereotypes in video games (such as Ms. Male, Smurfette, Damsel in Distress, Natural-Born Happy Homemaker and Sexy Action Heroine) are problematic. They also provide an overview of concepts developed by more recent feminist authors, such as Karen Boyle, Barbara Creed and Martine Delvaux, which highlight the damage caused by constant victimization of women in games, the abjection of their sexuality, and the serial reproduction of stereotypical female bodies. On a more positive note, the authors offer a glimpse of how feminist theories can inspire promising new game characters that undermine patriarchal and heteronormative schemes.

**Keywords:** video games, feminism, representation, gender, stereotypes, feminist theory

*Résumé en français à la fin du texte*

## Introduction

Game feminism has widely flourished during the past two decades. Many scholars, game critics and feminist activists have voiced concerns around the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes and sexist narratives in video games, while arguing in favour of diversifying game characters and plot devices (Cassell and Jenkins (eds), 1998; Graner Ray, 2004; Kafai et al. (eds), 2016; Kafai and al. (eds), 2008; Lignon (ed), 2015; Ruberg and Shaw (eds), 2017; Shaw, 2014). A growing number of statistical studies (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2009; Brehm, 2013; Dietz, 1998; Fox and Tang, 2014; Williams and al., 2009) and qualitative content analyses (Corneliussen, 2008; Huntemann, 2013) identify recurrent sexist tropes in video games, highlighting their problematic aspects. Feminist theories, however, remain underutilized in offering explanations as to why these tropes are harmful, or why there should be more nuanced and diverse gender representations in games.

This article will illustrate how seminal feminist theories can be mobilized to better understand why gender stereotypes in video games are damaging, regardless that these theories originated prior to the digital era. More precisely, Simone de Beauvoir's "Second Sex", Luce Irigaray's concept of women as a "Currency of Exchange" and Betty Friedan's notion of the "Feminine Mystique" will be used to explain how Ms. Male, Smurfette, Damsel in Distress and Happy Homemaker characters are enmeshed in an outdated patriarchal system. Laura Mulvey's theory of the "Male Gaze" and Karen Boyle on gendered media violence will respectively be utilized to elucidate why the objectification of female characters in video games is detrimental, and why female characters are commonly portrayed as victims in video games. Barbara Creed's concept of the "Monstrous Feminine" will be mobilized to show that female monsters in video games often consolidate ancient myths and beliefs about women's sexuality. Finally, Martine Delvaux's recent analysis of "Serial Girls" will be introduced to critique repetitive and homogenous representations of female bodies in video games, advertisements, and promotional events.

## Ms Male and Smurfette characters and de Beauvoir's "Second Sex"

Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the "Second Sex" can be employed to study Ms. Male and Smurfette characters from a critical perspective. In a [video](#) broadcast on her website *Feminist Frequency*, Anita Sarkeesian (2013d) describes the Ms. Male character as a feminine version of

an existing male character, which game designers have modified by adding stereotypical, arbitrary and socially constructed markers of femininity such as long eyelashes, red lipstick, blush, pink outfits, bows, high heels, jewelry, beauty marks, etc. Instead of creating an original female character with her own features, game designers transform a male character into a female character by adding feminine attributes to the original body. These attributes allow the players to quickly identify the character as female, while reducing her personality to its “girly-ness” and reinforcing gender binaries. The real problem with this, explains the feminist activist, is that women are thus “marked”, while men generally remain “unmarked”. Ms. Pac-man (*Pac-Man*, Namco, 1980), Amy Rose (*Sonic the Hedgehog*, Sega, 1993), Dixie Kong (*Donkey Kong Country 2*, Nintendo, 1995), Toadette (*Mario Kart Double Dash!!*, Nintendo, 2003), MeeMee (*Super Monkey Ball: Banana Splitz*, Sega, 2012) and Pretty Bomber (*Super Bomberman R*, Konami, 2017) feature among the numerous Ms. Male characters of the video game landscape. When a female character is the only woman among a group of male characters, like Wendy O Koopa in *Super Mario Bros. 3* (Nintendo, 1988), Lily in *Scribblenauts* (Warner Bros., 2009), White bird in *Angry Bird* (Rovio Entertainment, 2009) and Wonder-Pink in *The Wonderful 101* (Nintendo, 2013), she corresponds to a trope coined the “Smurfette” by feminist author Khata Pollitt (1991). In addition to serving as the token chick in a male-dominated environment, the Smurfette character sends an underlying message that boys are the norm, and girls the variation (Sarkeesian, 2013d).

De Beauvoir’s theories can help untangle the deep historical roots of these tropes in Western patriarchal culture. In her famous book *The Second Sex* [*Le deuxième sexe*], written in 1949, she suggests that men are considered universal subjects by default, while women are seen as referents of alterity:

[Woman] is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other. (Our translation, 1949, p. 15)

Thus, the word “man” does not only serve to designate a gender, but also the entirety of human kind. In patriarchal cultures, women are marked as the negative, the opposite, or the contrary of men: the “second sex”. According to de Beauvoir, this phenomenon is well-illustrated in the story of Genesis, in which God created Eve from Adam’s rib so she can serve as his companion and

prevent his loneliness (1949, p. 14-15). Sarkeesian (2013d) herself uses this example to draw parallels with Ms. Pac-man, who is built from Mr. Pac-man's body. In addition to showing that representations of women in correspondence with masculine models are part of a long tradition, de Beauvoir's theory highlights the problematic aspects of Ms. Male and Smurfette characters. All civilizations have been organized around this Same/Other duality, explains de Beauvoir, because it is easier for any subject to define itself in opposition to an "Other". In the case of men and women, the reciprocity of their relationship is, however, denied: "It is not the Other who, defining itself as Other, defines the One; the Other is posited as Other by the One positing itself as One" (our translation, 1949, p. 17). The relationship between men and women is "asymmetrical"; men describe women as the opposite of themselves, but never the other way around (1949, p. 242). Consequently, men are autonomous and can exist by themselves, while women only exist in relation to men. Men are sovereign subjects with intrinsic value and meaning, while women require men to be valuable and meaningful. Another consequence of this lack of reciprocity is that women's bodies, desires and sexuality have rarely been properly depicted in patriarchal discourse; rather they have often been conceived and depicted as the opposite of men's paradigmatic bodies, desires and sexuality. In his psychoanalytic theories, for instance, Freud depicts a girl's "Electra complex" as the counterpart of a boy's "Oedipus complex", and female "penis envy" as the parallel reaction to male "castration anxiety". By doing so, he fails to understand the specificities of feminine libido and disregards the possibility that girls may wish they had a phallus for the power and privileges that are associated with it (1949, pp. 82-84).

Ms. Male characters are a particularly good illustration of the asymmetrical relationship between men and women, as they are usually designed by men and perform the role of a male character's sweetheart or mother-of-his-child instead of having an identity and life of their own (Sarkeesian, 2013d). The Smurfette character also symbolizes this unbalanced relationship between men and women, in so far as she sends the underlying message that boys are "central" while girls are "peripheral" (Pollitt, 1991). In the nineties, the presence of Ms. Male characters in video games was partially justified by technological limitations and by the fact that game producers were mostly targeting young male players. Now that technologies allow for the design of more realistic characters, and women represent half of the gamer population (ESA, 2015), we need to ask

ourselves why these tropes persist in video game environments. In her article “FemShep: féminité sexualisée ou subversive? Analyse du personnage féminin de la série *Mass Effect*”, featured in this issue of *Kinephanos*, Pascale Thériault (2017) describes the female version of Shepard from the *Mass Effect* series (Bioware, 2007) as a new type of Ms. Male character. Although her body shape differs from that of her male counterpart and she is an active playable character, her movements and interactions are copied from those of the default male avatar, instead of being adapted to her body and feminine outfits. As a result, when she wears a skirt as a casual outfit, sits down and spreads her legs in the same fashion as the male avatar, she [exposes her crotch](#) in a very inappropriate and ludicrous way. According to Thériault (2017), this “wardrobe malfunction” was not intended by the game developer and can be interpreted as a lack of concern for the particularities of the female avatar. As pointed out by Sarkeesian (2013d), the female variant of Shepard was almost absent from the games’ teasers, trailers, posters, print ads and magazine covers. Moreover, she is always referred to as “female Shepard”, while the male avatar is only called “Shepard”.

De Beauvoir’s theory can help us to establish why Ms. Male characters still exist despite improvements in graphic design and changes in gamer demographics. When confronted with the arrival of women on the marketplace after the Second World War, explains the feminist author, Western societies insisted that women keep wearing dresses, skirts, corsets, heels and so on, to preserve the differences that mark them as the desirable “Other” (1949, p. 312). Even though Western societies accepted that women could perform traditionally masculine roles, the ideal woman remained one who embodied alterity and who could be easily differentiated from men (1949, p. 392). Considering de Beauvoir’s theories, we can speculate that the inclusion of playable Ms. Male avatars in recent video games has something to do with our society’s obsession for preserving differences between men and women in contexts where they are more or less equal in terms of power, social roles and positions. This would explain why the female avatar in *Mass Effect* occasionally wears a skirt even though she acts and moves like the male avatar. This could also serve to demystify the exaggerated dimorphism between male and female avatars in online role-playing games like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004). Even though male and female avatars from the same races have identical strength and skills in the world of Azeroth, the female avatars

are thinner versions of the overtly muscular male avatars. Moreover, their feminine features (breasts, tiny waists, buttocks) are accentuated in ways that remove any ambiguity regarding their sex (Trépanier-Jobin, 2013, p. 202). We could say the same for other MMORPGs like *League of Legends* (Riot Games, 2009) and *Guild Wars* (ArenaNet, 2005).

Finally, de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* contributes to our understanding of why women would keep playing games that display these tropes, beyond the fact that they may not have many alternatives. Because women have always been defined by men, explains the author, they feel that they require them to exist and cannot afford to break this vital relationship (1949, p. 21). Markers of femininity have become part of women's identities, making it difficult for them to break away from these markers without having a feeling of self-annihilation. De Beauvoir encourages women to overcome this feeling, to refuse the myth of femininity and to assert their subjectivity, instead of letting themselves be passively shaped and modelled by men (1949, p. 406). Following de Beauvoir's advice, we could encourage women game designers to create female characters who have a personality and a body of their own instead of ones that are modeled on male characters. As expressed by Adrienne Shaw (2014) in her book *Gaming at the Edge*, women game designers should not, however, carry the burden of diversifying video game representations alone. Creating innovative characters should be a responsibility shared by every game designer. Our energies should therefore be put towards the creation of more diverse development teams, as argued by game designer Brie Code (2017) in her article "Is Game Design for Everybody? Women and Innovation in Video Games", featured in this issue of *Kinephanos*.

### **The Damsel in Distress trope and Irigaray's theory of women as currency**

Luce Irigaray's theory that women have historically functioned as a "Currency of Exchange" indicates the patriarchal roots of the most widely used trope of the video game landscape: the Damsel in Distress. As pointed out by Nina B. Huntemann (2010) and Anita Sarkeesian (2013a), many of the most popular video game narratives of all time involve helpless, passive, gorgeous damsels saved from perilous situations by courageous men who often become their husbands afterwards. This stereotype can be traced back the ancient Greek legend of Andromeda who was chained naked to a rock as a sacrificial offering to a sea monster before being saved by a man

named Perseus who claimed her as his wife (Sarkeesian, 2013a). This figure can also be found in countless seventeenth- and eighteenth-century folktales involving a knight-errant who proves his chivalry by saving a vulnerable woman, as well as in numerous fairy tales adapted by Disney, such as *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella* (Do Rozario, 2004). In the video game world, the trope made its first appearance in *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo, 1981), a game inspired by the movie *King Kong* (Cooper and Schoedsack, 1933) in which a lady named Pauline cries for help while a hero called Jump Man climbs up ladders and avoids obstacles to rescue her from a crazed ape (Huntemann, 2010, p. 252). The kidnapping of a damsel by a male villain, followed by her deliverance by a masculine hero, quickly became Nintendo's favourite plot device. In the [final stage of \*Super Mario World\*](#) (Nintendo, 1990), for example, Princess Peach calls for help, slowly falls from Bowser's vessel when he is defeated by Mario, and rewards her saviour with a kiss on his cheek before heart-shaped fireworks explode over their heads to symbolize their forthcoming union. Nintendo repeated this plot device in 14 games of the core series, and judging by the [trailer of \*Super Mario Odyssey\*](#) (2017) for the Switch console, in which Mario appears to cross an open-world-like setting to prevent a forced marriage between Princess Peach and Bowser, they show no sign of giving it up.

Nintendo is not the only game company that abuses this trope. Kidnapped, cursed, possessed or petrified women appeared in countless arcade games, beat-em ups, first-person shooters and role-playing games such as *Dragon's Lair* (Cinematronics 1983), *Double Dragon* (Technōs Japan, 1987), *Resident Evil 4* (Capcom, 2005) and *Devil May Cry 4* (Capcom, 2008), as demonstrated by Sarkeesian (2013a) in her video [“Damsel in Distress part 1”](#). We may want to think this cliché has become less common, but in fact it is being used in an increasing number of games like *Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones* (Ubisoft, 2010) and *Double Dragon Neon* (WayForward Technology, 2012). Even if the damsels sometimes help the masculine hero to fulfill his quest by opening doors, giving hints or even saving his life (Sarkeesian, 2013b), they still feature in someone else's story instead of being the heroines of their own adventure. Humorous variations on the Damsel in Distress plot device can also be found in several independent games (Sarkeesian, 2013c). In *Fat Princess* (Titan Studios, 2009), for instance, the ultimate goal of male characters is to capture the enemy's princess while feeding their own princess with slices of cake so she becomes too fat to be

kidnapped. In the multiplayer game *Castle Crashers* (The Behemoth, 2008), several knights fight together to defeat the enemy and rescue the king's princesses. At the [end of the game](#), they fight each other to determine who will get the only princess that the king makes available as a reward. When the winner removes the princess's veil to kiss her, he discovers that she looks like a grotesque clown. Far from criticizing or deconstructing the Damsel in Distress trope, argues Sarkeesian (2013c), these games use humour to justify their reproduction of a worn-out stereotype.

Luce Irigaray's theory helps to elucidate how the Damsel in Distress trope reinforces an outdated paternalistic concept that women are men's property, and can therefore be exchanged to cement or break alliances. In the chapter "Women on the Market" of her book *This Sex Which Is Not One* [*Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*], Irigaray explains that patriarchal societies are based on a trading system in which men play the role of traders, and women the role of merchandise, commodity, or currency (1977, p. 169). Within this trading system, women's exchange value relies on men's specific needs and desires. Women are therefore deprived of their specific value and reduced to transactional objects that circulate from one man to another (1977, p. 176-177). This system was implemented in primitive societies where men from different clans exchanged women to prevent incestuous unions or make alliances, and survives in the western tradition of asking a father for his daughter's hand. According to Irigaray, mothers are excluded from this trading system in so far as they only have reproductive value, while virgins have the highest exchange value and prostitutes represent a value that can be exchanged (1977, pp. 180-181).

The Damsel in Distress character in video games is a modern incarnation of this old tradition. The fact that she is a character who fuels rivalries, and who often kisses, hugs, or screws her saviour, gives the impression that women are tractable objects and that they must give their bodies to their rescuers as rightful compensation (Huntemann, 2010, p. 253). The Damsel in Distress is not the only trope that can be interpreted through Irigaray's theory that women function as "currency". The prostitute character from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar North, 2004) provides another illustration of a woman cast as a tractable object between men. In this game, the male avatar, controlled by an assumed male player, drives a prostitute to her clients, picks her up, and takes a cut of her salary. Ironically, the male protagonist himself becomes a commodity when the

prostitute pays him to have sexual intercourse at the end of the [pimping mission](#). Some people highlight this scene to argue that *Grand Theft Auto* should not be taken seriously, but from a critical perspective, the scene seems to use humour as a pretext to convey harmful depictions of women.

The Damsel in Distress trope has long been overrepresented in the media landscape (especially in action films and Disney princess movies); in video games, however, the trope exceeds the level of representation to contaminate game mechanics. In games, damsels may also serve as a motivation for the player, a treasure to be discovered, or a prize to be won for completing the game. As Sarkeesian (2015) explains in her video [“Women as Reward”](#), the Damsel in Distress plot often involves a “Smooch of Victory”, which is sometimes replaced by “Sex of Victory” according to which the rescued victim explicitly makes her body available to her saviour, as is the case in *The Witcher 2* (CD Projekt, 2011) and *Ride to Hell: Retribution* (Eutechnyx, 2013). Even leading female characters can serve as a reward for assumedly straight male players (Sarkeesian, 2015). Samus Aran from *Metroid* (Nintendo, 1987), for example, is covered from head to toe during the gameplay, but shown garbed only in a leotard to players who complete the game in less than three hours. In *Metroid Prime 3* (Retro Studio, 2007), the bonus ending includes a [scene](#) in which she removes her heavy armour, while the camera zooms in and out, and pans over her tightly wrapped body. Instead of being exchanged between male characters, Samus is offered by male designers as a trophy to presumed male players.

Luce Irigaray’s theory clarifies the ways in which the Damsel in Distress and her Smooch (or Sex) of Victory are anachronistically bound up with the patriarchal male-dominated system, as they perpetuate an archaic conception of women as spoils of war that dispossesses females of their own bodies. In her book, Irigaray asks herself what would have happened if women refused to participate in this trading system and found an alternative way to live: “What if these ‘commodities’ refused to go to ‘market’? What if they maintained ‘another’ kind of commerce, among themselves?” (our translation, 1977, p. 193) Similarly, we could ask ourselves what would have happened if women players refused to play games in which female characters are objects of exchange between men? Perhaps the game industry would have worked towards the diversification of game characters more actively. Irigaray’s interrogation demonstrates that players have

responsibilities concerning the games they consume, as much as designers have responsibilities concerning the games they produce. It would, however, be a mistake to believe that only women players suffer from this division of roles; men can also be uncomfortable with the idea that people of their gender have to be courageous and fearless in any perilous situation (for an explanation of how video games reinforce hypermasculine stereotypes, see Salter-Blodgett (2012)). As explained by Shaw (2017) in this issue of *Kinephanos*, women players and marginalized audiences are not the only ones who would benefit from more balanced depictions of gender in games; all players who contest sexism and who are provided with a growing number of game options should boycott games that display these tropes. This would accelerate the diversification of game representations, as the creation of more complex, empowered and multidimensional women characters for a large proportion of the gamer population would become financially profitable for game companies.

### **The Natural Born Happy Homemaker and Friedan’s “Feminine Mystique”**

Betty Friedan’s (1963) book *The Feminine Mystique* suggests another avenue for identifying traces of patriarchy in video game culture. After conducting interviews with numerous housewives, Friedan identifies a “problem that has no name”: a widespread sense of dissatisfaction among suburban wives that sometimes develops into depression. Refusing to believe that this symptom could be the result of a dysfunctional libido, as suggested by many psychiatrists, she develops the concept of the “Feminine Mystique”, which is the false idea that all women are fulfilled as housewives and mothers (1963: 1). According to Friedan, this myth is partly constructed by the media, especially by women’s magazines in which so-called experts popularize Freud’s deterministic idea that “anatomy is destiny”, and in which subject matters are confined to cosmetics, furniture, and motherhood as if women have no interest in economy, civil rights and politics (1963, p. 24-28, 45 and 154). The Feminine Mystique is so powerful, explains Friedan, that women who feel unhappy think that they are abnormal or sick, instead of considering the possibility that a career is missing in their lives. They “grow up no longer knowing that they have the desires and capacities the mystique forbids” (1963, p. 66). In her book, Friedan therefore tries to demonstrate that well-educated women are meant to be more than a “set of reproductive organs in heels” (Collins (2013) in Friedan, 1963, p. xii).

Like women's magazines from the sixties, many video games associate female characters with maternity and domesticity, even though a majority of women were already participating in the labour force in the early days of the games industry. At the end of *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo, 1996), for instance, Princess Peach tells Mario that she baked a cake for him, and at the beginning of *Super Mario Galaxy 2* (Nintendo, 2010), Bowser tells Mario, "Maybe I'll have Peach bake me something for once." Because Peach is associated with the traditional female activity of baking, and confined to the castle's interior, balcony or porch (except when she is kidnapped), she appears as a Natural-Born Happy Homemaker. *Legend of the Seven Stars* (Nintendo, 1996) is one of the rare games in which Peach is a playable character who fights the Mushroom Kingdom's enemies alongside her male compatriots. However, her main weapon is a frying pan, while other male characters' weapons have nothing to do with household objects. In the *Megaman* TV series (Capcom, 1994), based on the eponymous video game series (Capcom, 1987), the female character Roll is a humanoid robot who looks like a schoolgirl, created by Dr. Light to help with the housekeeping, cleaning and cooking. In the fighting game *Tatsunoko vs. Capcom* (Capcom, 2008), Roll appears as a playable character who uses her broom and bucket as weapons.

Borrowing from Friedan, we can see how these games reinforce conventional divisions of labour between the sexes and consolidate the myth that women are more devoted to their home and their children than men because of their biology (1963, p. 8). Even though the majority of women now have careers, the idea that balancing work and family is a feminine concern persists (Lipovetsky, 1997, p. 296). While Friedan emphasizes how the Feminine Mystique is responsible for the misery felt by many women, we can argue that both men and women suffer from this myth. In many modern societies, men who wish to stay at home and take care of their children often have to deal with social stigma and are constrained by parental leave regulations.

In games made for girls, the association of women with maternity and domesticity transcends the realm of representations, extending into the mechanics of gameplay. One might think that the creation of these games would have stopped with the girl games feminist movement at the end of the nineties (Cassell and Jenkins (eds), 1998), but in reality, games made for girls are still alive and well. In the mini-games of the website [Play.Barbie.com](http://Play.Barbie.com) (Mattel, 2014), targeted towards

young girls, activities revolve around marriage, housekeeping and child-bearing, such as decorating a house, babysitting, baking a cake for a child, or organizing a wedding by choosing a dress, selecting a ring and designing a cake. In the past few years, a couple of adventure games were added to the website, but gameplay remains oriented towards the completion of simplistic tasks that underestimate young girls' cognitive capacities. We could say the same for many francophone girl games websites like [jeux-fille-gratuit.com](http://jeux-fille-gratuit.com), [jeux-fille.fr](http://jeux-fille.fr) and [jeuxjeuxjeux.fr/jeux/fille](http://jeuxjeuxjeux.fr/jeux/fille), which revolve around makeup, food, fashion and decoration. In the multiplayer girl game *Barbie Dreamhouse Party* (Little Orbit, 2013) for Nintendo Wii, gameplay occurs entirely inside a domestic space and involves household duties: after Barbie's opulent pink mansion is put under lockdown, Barbie and her girlfriends (controlled by the players from a third-person point of view) are trapped in different rooms and forced, by a pink robot named Closet, to find girly objects or household items such as shoes, sorbet bowls, buckets, brushes, detergent bottles and boxes of clothes, and put them in the correct order on four pedestals. Succeeding in this overly simplified task allows them to unlock fashion items and mini-games such as catching falling boxes of shoes, matching accessories with their fabulous outfit, making piles of cupcakes, grooming dogs, etc. This trend is unfortunately not limited to digital games; a few years ago, Lego made a surprising move by creating two different collections for boys and girls. While the collection for boys called *City* is based on the exploration of public spaces, professional activities and means of transportation, the pinkish collection for girls called *Friends* revolves around domestic settings and tasks, in addition to offering more limited possibilities in terms of construction and creativity, transforming the Lego set into a mere dollhouse.

These games for girls tell young female players what their real-life interests and range of activities should be confined to. In addition to sending an underlying message that the domestic sphere is a feminine domain, these games literally train young girls to become "good" mothers and spouses by asking them to constantly perform household related tasks. As demonstrated by Bogost (2007), video games can be a powerful means of persuasion; in addition to conveying ideological messages through representation (as in all forms of media), they force players to perform actions and follow procedures according to a program's code, in ways that can shape behaviour and alter a player's vision of the world. The introduction of the book *Feminine Mystique* written by Cail Collins in

2013 suggests to what extent these repetitive and superficial domestic tasks can be alienating for the women who perform them. Before urbanization and industrialization, explains the author, women played an instrumental role in the family economy, through crafting various items and exchanging them for other supplies. Women were also perpetually exhausted by the amount of work involved in cooking, cleaning and manufacturing things. After Americans moved from farms to cities, and following the invention of home appliances, suburban housewives were freed from their most time-consuming – and most creative – chores, and being a stay-at-home mother and wife no longer required specific abilities. Reduced to consumers whose biggest concern was to find the best laundry detergent, women (especially well-educated ones) became lonely, bored, unfulfilled and depressed (Collin (2013) in Friedan, 1963, p. xii-xv). Similarly, girls who play games such as *Barbie Dreamhouse Party* have nothing to do other than clicking a button to choose between a limited selection of dresses, shoes, jewelry, ingredients, etc. Just as suburban wives of the sixties were stripped of fulfilling craft activities, young girl players are deprived of challenging and stimulating gameplay. Moreover, the appropriation possibilities of girl games are limited to such a degree that little space is left for inventiveness and emancipation. In this context, it comes as no surprise that young girls are less interested in games than boys (ESA, 2015).

### **Hypersexualized female characters and Mulvey's Male Gaze**

The theory of the male gaze, developed by Laura Mulvey in her iconic 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, supports an understanding that the objectification of female game characters is part of a long tradition. In her article, Mulvey focuses on two contradictory pleasures provided by conventional cinema: identification with the character on the screen and “scopophilia” which, according to Freud, involves the pleasure of “taking other people as objects” and “subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (1975, p. 198 and 202). In patriarchal societies characterized by gender inequality, the pleasure of looking has been unevenly divided between the active/male/subject of the look and passive/female/object of the look (1975, p. 203). According to Mulvey, Hollywood movies reinforce this unfair division, insofar as female characters are used as mere spectacles that interrupt the flow of action, while male characters control the action and serve as the “bearer” of the spectator’s look (1975, pp. 203-204). As a result, female characters are reduced to erotic objects of contemplation for the visual pleasure of male characters within the

story, and of spectators in the audience. According to Mulvey, different cinema techniques, such as pans over women's legs or close-ups of women's faces, are used to structure the film around the male protagonist's look, in a way that encourages both men and women viewers to identify with him and fix their gaze on the passive female character (1975, p. 204). In light of Mulvey's theory, female viewers are stuck in a double bind; they are forced to identify with the opposite gender and objectify their own kind. Conventional Hollywood films therefore seem to be made by men and for men. Other feminist film scholars, like Teresa de Lauretis (1984) and Linda Williams (1991) believe that the identification of the viewer with the character is a more complex and fluid process; women spectators may also identify with the passive female character or with both characters in alternation. In any case, there seem to be few good options for women to identify with, and no role model to draw inspiration from.

Similarly, many female characters in recent video games are used as eye candy to please the target male audience. In her video [“Women as Background Decoration”](#), Sarkeesian (2014) highlights the presence, in numerous games such as *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft, 2012), *Forza Horizon* (Turn 10 Studios, 2012) and *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* (Eidos, 2011), of “insignificant non-playable female characters whose sexuality or victimhood is exploited as a way to infuse edgy, gritty or racy flavouring into game worlds”. Objectified by the way they are dressed and animated, these characters are designed to function as mere ornaments to titillate assumed straight male players. AAA companies not only display scantily clad female bodies in their video games, but also in their promotional campaigns. A 1997 [Sega Saturn advertisement](#), which was selected as the best ad campaign of the year by *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, features a gorgeous naked blond woman whose breasts and pubic area are hidden by screenshots of the company's games, and whose image is accompanied by the following text:

In case you did not notice, there is a beautiful, naked woman on this page. When you've got Sega Saturn's triple 32-bit processing power, NOTHING ELSE MATTERS. She's got blonde hair, blue eyes and the best body her money can buy. SO WHAT! There's no time for distractions when you're deep into Sega Saturn [...]

The woman appearing in this ad is not only treated as a beautiful decoration, but also referred to as a useless distraction for male players. As pointed out by Sarkeesian (2014), we can trace this

trend back to a 1971 [advertisement](#) for the *Computer Space* arcade cabinet, featuring a woman in a transparent nightgown passively standing beside the machine. These ads are not only selling a game, but a culture in which women are reduced to their passivity and their “*to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 203). Just as *films noirs* objectify their powerful and deadly *femmes fatales*, recent video games also tend to hypersexualize the most empowered female characters. Special agent Rachael Foley, from *Resident Evil: Revelations* (Capcom, 2012), for example, earned the nickname “pair of walking tits” for her plunging neckline, which goes all the way down to her belly (Perron, 2015, p. 105-106).

Because video games are an interactive medium, players are not “passively” looking at what producers want them to see; they actively control their avatars by moving the camera, and therefore become partly responsible for the objectification of female characters (Sarkeesian, 2014). In mature content open-world role-playing games like *Watch Dogs* (Ubisoft, 2014) and *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012), some sexy female characters “programmed with crude looping sexualized behaviors” even serve as “minimally interactive sex objects to be used and abused” (Sarkeesian, 2014). For all these reasons, video games seem to amplify the pleasures of scopophilia involving the subjection of someone to a *controlling gaze*. In video games, the objectification of female characters does not only operate at the level of representation, but also at the level of gameplay, since the mechanisms and cinema techniques that allow visual pleasure are embedded in the program code, and their use is left to the discretion of players.

According to Mathieu Triclot, the critical distance from a fictional character required for visual pleasure is more difficult to achieve with a playable protagonist, because players tend to consider them as their alter egos (2015, p. 29). On the contrary, Marion Coville believes that playable female avatars who always appear from behind increase the scopophilic pleasure of seeing without being seen (2015, p. 56). Some male players reported to choose to animate female avatars in MMORPGs because they find they are more pleasant to look at (Bonenfant, 2013, p. 180). While male avatars generally have their butt strategically hidden, obscured, cut out of the frame with an over-the-shoulder camera angle, or covered by a piece of fabric as is the case in *Batman: Arkham Knight* (Rocksteady Studios, 2015), action heroines often wear light clothing and tight outfits that mould

to their butt and seem inappropriate in their perilous situation (Sarkeesian, 2016c). Policewoman Jill Valentine from *Resident Evil* (Capcom, 2002), for instance, wears a uniform that enhances her curves without providing any protection against bloodthirsty zombies (Perron, 2015: 107). Much has also been written about the objectification of the infamous character Lara Croft (Blanchet, 2015). Feminist game scholars are generally ambivalent towards this action heroine who is at once a “feminist icon” and a “cyberbimbo” (Kennedy, 2002), a “kick-ass, intelligent female superhero” and a “hypersexualized caricature” (Graner Ray, 2003). In her article “Andromeda on the Rocks: Retreading and Resisting Tropes of Female Sacrifice in *Tomb Raider*”, published in this issue of *Kinephanos*, Meghan Blythe Adams (2017) highlights the ambivalence of Lara Croft in the recent games *Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2015). Although her feminine features are less exaggerated than in previous games of the series, and her outfit is better adapted to the role of adventurer, her deaths are more spectacularized and eroticized than ever. Indeed, richly detailed moments of her peril are accompanied by heavy breathing, whimpering, and her final gasps before dying, and the scenes in which she is impaled on branches, pipes or other phallic objects are imbued with sexual symbolism.

Sarkeesian’s (2016a) video [“Body Language & The Male Gaze”](#) provides a glimpse of how Mulvey’s concept can be mobilized in studies of female video game characters. Drawing on Mulvey, we can also speculate that in games like *Tomb Raider* and *Resident Evil*, players are simultaneously encouraged to identify with the female protagonist, and to objectify her. Both male and female players are therefore stuck in an uncomfortable and contradictory position. However, male players have more opportunities to identify with characters of their own gender that are not objectified. As Shaw (2014) demonstrates in *Gaming at the Edge*, identification is not the only pleasure available through gaming, and the possibility for players to identify with a character that resembles themselves is not as important as seeing their gender, body type, style and sexuality being somehow represented, validating their existence. What Mulvey implies about Hollywood cinema in 1975 can be equally applied to video games in 2017: the constant objectification of female characters and action heroines gives the impression that video games are made by men and for men. In addition to consolidating the idea that men are meant to look while women are meant to be looked at, many video games with action heroines exclude women from their assumed

audience. Less sexualized and objectified female protagonists would allow players of all genders to identify with female avatars without having to enter into a conflicted voyeurism, in addition to making women players feel more welcome in game culture.

According to Mulvey, the fetishization of female characters arose as one of the responses to the castration anxiety evoked by women's bodies, alongside the response of sadism (1975, p. 205). When female characters in Hollywood movies are not objectified, explains the author, they are subjected to male characters' sadistic desires, and are often brutalized, kidnapped, violated or killed. The same can be said for female characters in video games, who are more often victims of men's violence than the other way around, as we shall see in the next section.

### **The female victim and Boyle's theory on gendered media violence**

Karen Boyle's (2015) study on gendered media violence suggests that the frequent depiction of women as victims rather than aggressors is based on essentialist conceptions of women as weak and caring. In our society, violence is generally associated with men and victimhood with women. According to Boyle, violent women such as Karla Homolka, who helped her husband rape and kill three teenage girls in Canada, and Janet Charlton, who killed her partner with an axe because he abused her daughter and herself, are considered guilty of breaking the law and transgressing gender norms (2005, p. 95). They represent a threat to essentialist conceptions of women as biologically nurturing, passive, and vulnerable, as well as a menace to gender binaries and to the domination of men (2005, p. 98-100). Boyle explains that our society generally finds two different ways to contain these threats; either denying the agency of violent women and focusing on their victimhood, or disavowing their gender and depicting them as unnatural women. For example, Homolka was considered subject to manipulation by her husband and a victim of his violence. She therefore got a relatively short sentence of 12 years in jail, despite the gravity of her crimes (2005, p. 101-102). In contrast, Charlton's act of self-defense was interpreted as an unconventional and unfeminine choice she made as a divorced woman and former escort. As a result, she had to spend 21 months in jail for trying to survive her partner's aggression (2005, p. 107). Women who are capable of violence are sources of anxiety in our societies, as illustrated in *noir* and *neo-noir* films such as *Double Indemnity* (Wilder, 1944), *Fatal Attraction* (Lyne, 1987) and *Basic Instinct*

(Verhoeven, 1992), in which a *femme fatale* momentarily disrupts the patriarchal order by plotting against a man before being neutralized or killed (Boyle, 2005, p. 126). This partly explains why news reports rarely point out the gender of male perpetrators and victims, while the gender of female abusers is often emphasized and their femininity denied. According to Boyle, the most socially accepted violent women in our societies are mothers who are protecting or avenging their children, since childbearing and child-caring have traditionally been considered sites of female power. Inversely, the most unnatural crime for a woman is to kill or harm a child (2005, pp. 118-119).

Boyles' theory concerning gendered media violence suggests a hypothesis as to why the game industry seems hesitant to depict women as violent, preferring to cast them as victims. It can also be used to explain why the very few violent female protagonists in video games are often fighting for their lives or trying to defend vulnerable people, such as children. This is the case of Bayonetta; though she refuses to take care of a child or to be called "mother", her mission consists of saving the world while protecting a child and her guardian (Coville, 2015, p. 64). In *Tomb Raider* (Square Enix, 2013), Lara Croft fights for her survival and kills to save her vulnerable female friend Sam. Boyle's theory can also help to elucidate why survival horror games more often allow players to choose a playable female character, in comparison with any other video game genre (Perron, 2015: 100). Emily Hartwood, from *Alone in the Dark* (Infogrames, 1992), and Jill Valentine, from *Resident Evil: Revelation* (Capcom, 2012), feature among the numerous female avatars who can be controlled by players to run away from monsters and zombies. Players of survival horror games derive pleasure from feelings of danger and vulnerability, because their gameplay is based on escaping more than attacking (Perron, 2015, pp. 113-114). Since masculinity is, by convention, incompatible with the role of victim, it seems more "natural" to cast a woman in the role of a terrified playable character who is constantly running for her life, shouting, falling, limping and hiding.

Boyle's theory suggests serious consequences of wide-spread depictions of men as perpetrators of violence and women as victims; the recurrence of this trope in media representations constructs men as powerful, dominant, and aggressive, while reinforcing the belief that women are vulnerable

and passive. In addition to normalizing men's violence, it keeps women in a "state of fear that consolidates patriarchal control" and stigmatizes women's acts of aggression even in cases of self-defense (2005, p. 80). It would, however, be inaccurate to believe that only women suffer from this division of roles. As Boyle explains, male victims often feel more trapped and isolated than female victims because they do not comply with the standard model of masculinity, and this is possibly why they turn into aggressors more often than female victims (2005, p. 99).

### **Women-as-Monsters and Barbara Creed's Monstrous-Feminine**

Occasionally, female game characters are neither sexy action heroines nor passive victims, but terrifying monsters that the player must eliminate in order to survive. Barbara Creed's theory of the Monstrous-Feminine articulates how monstrosity in video games is often associated with female reproductive organs and fears of powerful women. As Creed (1993) explains in her book *Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, every society has its own conceptions of what is horrific about women. Because of Freud's influence, men's fears of women are often associated with a boy's assumption that his mother was castrated by his father. In his paper "Fetichism", Freud (1927) writes: "Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital" (Freud in Creed, 1993, p. 1). Freud (1922) also compares the sight of female genitalia surrounded by hair with the horrifying sight of Medusa's decapitated head. In ancient Greek mythology, Medusa is a monster who has venomous snakes in place of hair and who turns onlookers into stones. For Creed, it is not surprising that Freud makes such an analogy; he considers the snakes phallic symbols that mitigate the threat of castration, and the fact that Medusa "stiffs" her onlookers allows the psychoanalyst to make a clever analogy with the male erection: "[becoming stiff] offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of the penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact" (Freud in Creed, 1993, p. 2).

Drawing on Campbell's research on primitive mythology, Creed defends the idea that man does not fear woman as castrated, but rather woman as castrator. Indeed, Campbell notes a recurrent motif in primitive mythologies: the "toothed vagina", which supposedly provoked injury or castration during sexual intercourse. As pointed out by Creed, this belief was sometimes used to justify that "women must be tamed or the teeth somehow removed or softened – usually by a hero

figure – before intercourse can safely take place” (1993, p. 2). The counterpart of the *vagina dentata* myth, explains Campbell, is the “phallic mother” who is perfectly illustrated by the figure of the witch with her long fingers and nose (1993, p. 1). The expression “phallic mother” appeared for the first time in Freud’s (1933) *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* to describe how “the fear of spiders expresses dread of mother-incest and horror of the female genitals” (1933, p. 24). In Freud’s theory, “terrible phallic women” such as witches (with their protruding teeth and their broomsticks), represent failed attempts to disavow and compensate for the mother’s lack of a penis, alleviating the threat of castration (Freud in Fenichel, 1946, p. 303). Barbara Creed disagrees with this essentialist view of women as castrated victims. For her, the fear of castration led men to create another monstrous fantasy involving the figure of the woman castrator (1993, p. 5). In her book, she therefore tries to deconstruct the myth that fearful women are those who are castrated, and to explore the idea that women instill fear when they are active and powerful. To emphasize the recurrent connection of the abject and the monstrous with women’s sexuality and with the fear of women as castrators, she analyzes many “faces” of the monstrous-feminine in horror films, including the woman as monstrous womb (*Aliens*, Cameron, 1986), the vampire (*The Hunger*, 1983), the witch (*Carrie*, 1976), the castrating mother (*Psycho*, Hitchcock, 1960) and the deadly castrator (*I Spit On Your Grave*, Monroe, 1978).

In video games, the terrible phallic woman is often represented by a female villainess who holds a whip, swords or guns. As Sarkeesian (2016b) points out in her video [“Sinister Seductress”](#), many games, such as *Diablo 3* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2013) and *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* (Starbreeze Studios, 2013), also depict female monsters as spiders. In *Doom 3* (ID Software, 2004), the female monster named Vagary takes the form of a naked female bust on a giant spider’s body, whose enlarged abdomen carries a demon fetus. The [female monster](#) of the game *Battle Monsters* (Sega, 1995) is obviously inspired by Medusa: her head is covered with snakes and she uses a giant boa as her main weapon. Men’s fear of sexual difference and castration, however, is better symbolized by sexualized female monsters. In *Resident Evil: Revelations* (Capcom, 2012), for instance, overtly eroticized special agent Rachael Foley turns into a monster after being attacked by a zombie, and becomes one of the most fearful bosses of the game. Bernard Perron describes this monster as the perfect embodiment of the “phallic woman”, because a viscous phallus appears

in the middle of her face (2015, p. 110). Careful examination of this [strange appendage](#) allows one to distinguish a cavity with teeth, recalling the *vagina dentata*. Considering Creed's explanation, we can better understand that the association of female monsters with phallic or castrating women reinforces harmful myths and beliefs about women's sexuality as something to be repudiated and controlled, in addition to reflecting ongoing fears of sexual difference and powerful women who challenge the patriarchal order.

### **The repetition of similar female bodies and Delvaux's "Serial Girls"**

The "Serial Girls" figure, theorized by Martine Delvaux in 2013, helps to explain how the repetition of similar female bodies in different games, within the same game, or in games' paratexts leads to the consolidation of unrealistic beauty canons. As described by Delvaux, Serial Girls are a configuration of several female bodies that look alike, share common shapes, and are in a transitional state between childhood and adulthood:

The serial girls are like twins whose movements are perfectly coordinated, who move in sync beside each other, who can only be differentiated from one another by a detail in their clothing, shoes, hair and skin colour, or by slightly distinct curves... Girls as machines, girls as images, girls as spectacles, girls as merchandise, girls as ornaments... they are the illusion of perfection. (Our translation, Delvaux, 2013, pp. 10-11)

The Serial Girls' bodies are all based on the same model for beauty - a thin young woman with long legs, slight curves, delicate facial features and fleshy lips. To illustrate this figure and emphasize the idea of seriality, Delvaux provides examples of mass-produced Barbie Dolls and Real Dolls, as well as the perfectly synchronized naked bodies of Tiller Girls and Crazy Horse dancers. However, Serial Girls may also refer to any individual female body or to any fragmented female body part (breast, buttock, legs, etc.) that serves as a metonym for the whole series, constantly displayed by fashion, television, film and advertisement industries. In this regard, Delvaux provides the example of women's body parts featuring on DIM's stocking advertisements (2013, p. 73).

Not surprisingly, we can find Serial Girls almost everywhere in video game culture: Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*, Eidos Interactive, 1996), Vanille (*Final Fantasy XII*, Square Enix, 2009), the female characters from *Dead or Alive Xtreme 3* (Tecmo, 2016) and many others all seem to be cast

from the same mould. Countless video games' promotional campaigns participate in this global serialization and fragmentation of women's bodies. As mentioned by Pascale Thériault (2017) in this issue of *Kinephanos*, Bioware launched an advertisement campaign in 2011 for *Mass Effect 3* that involved asking players to choose a female protagonist from a series of [six avatars](#) who have the exact same body shape, but are distinguished by different skin, hair, and eye colour. This way, Bioware was sure to end up with a female protagonist that fit perfectly with beauty standards while creating the illusion of choice for players. A [controversial advertisement](#) for the *PlayStation* remote with two joysticks, published in the *Paris Games Week* catalogue in Fall 2012, displayed an image of a woman's bust with one breast at the front and one at the back, juxtaposed with the slogan "Touch both sides for added enjoyment" (Mar Lar, 2013). After receiving strong criticism, Sony apologized and explained that this publicity was only intended for the convention's participants who were mostly young men (the subtext being that women players were not meant to see it, nor attend the convention). In this advertisement, a woman's body is not only fragmented into pieces, but also artificially transformed in a way that emphasizes her function as a sexual toy. The same can be said for the [Bundle](#) of *Dead Island: Riptide* (Deep Silver, 2013) which includes a hand-painted figurine of a dislocated and bloody female bust with breast implants. Mutilated female bodies such as these illustrate how serial girls are deprived of humanity and reduced to mere pieces of meat. The Serial Girls figure also applies to booth babes who dress alike, parade together, and pose with players at video game conventions to create a spectacle (in recent years, booth babes have tended to be replaced by cosplayers who also reproduce Serial Girls' features). Appearing side-by-side, booth babes are almost undistinguishable, emptied of individuality and dispossessed of their souls. They remain anonymous, instead of having identities and names of their own. Delvaux talks about the rigidity and the frigidity of serial girls; when they move mechanically alongside each other, they seem programmed, robotic, corpse-like. After all, women are less threatening when they are emptied of their humanity, their substance, their sweat, and their blood (2013, p. 35 and 66-67).

In many games and most MMORPGs, seriality does not only operate at the level of representation for female avatars, but also at the level of gameplay for both male and female protagonists. Indeed, avatar personalization tools give players a limited range of options for changing the appearance of

their playable character. In *The Sims Online* (EA, 2002), for instance, it is possible to change the skin colour, eyes, nose, mouth and haircut of both female and male avatars, but impossible to modify their body size and shape. No matter what options players choose, their avatars will always look similar. The same can be said for the avatar personalization tool of MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004); players can choose between a wide range of races that seem very different at first glance, but which are all based on the same hour-glass (female) or V-shaped (male) moulds.

Martine Delvaux's theory helps to clarify how and why most female game characters seem based on the same inaccessible beauty model, following a mechanical mode of production that characterizes modern capitalism and production lines (2013, p. 66). Just like manufactured products, serial girls rely on reproductions of the same instead of the actualization of difference. Although they create the illusion of diversity through variations of skin, eye, and hair colour, they remain interchangeable objects of consumption that are equally decorative. The main issue, explains Delvaux, is not a single occurrence of the Serial Girls figure in one media, but the continual repetition of the same body type in many varieties of representation. The seriality of these figures is what leads people to judge real women by unrealistic beauty standards, while encouraging women to align their image with an artificial model to become part of the series (2013, p. 213). This serial model of femininity is so pervasive that it tends to replace the women of flesh and bones it is supposed to represent (2013, p. 192). Delvaux's theory raises concerns that the repetition of serial girls in countless video games, advertisements, conventions, and avatar personalization tools tends to naturalize unachievable beauty norms, such as an extremely tiny waist and perfectly round breasts.

## **Conclusion**

In light of these examples, it becomes clear that game studies and feminist theories can mutually benefit from the establishment of more bridges between them. The fact that traditional feminist theories, written decades ago, are highly applicable in studies of representations of women in video games today indicates that these theories are not outdated, and that work still needs to be done in game culture regarding gender equality. All the stereotypes and theories explored here deserve

more extensive attention and analysis; the main goal of this article was to provide a broad overview of potential applications of feminist theories in critiquing problematic aspects of gender stereotypes in video games. The authors wished to show how past and present feminist theories may be used to uncover old-fashion patriarchal dynamics that influence many female characters, providing the occasion to actualize frequently forgotten theories and to argue in favour of a more active dialogue between game theorists and feminist thinkers.

This article may give the impression that game culture is condemned to be a sexist playground. It is, however, important to stress that feminist theories could also be mobilized to highlight the innovative or critical potential of some female game characters. For example, Monique Wittig's (2007) provocative essay "The Straight Mind" could foreshadow how woman characters who are (or could be) involved in same-sex relationships, like FemShep in *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012), contribute to denaturalizing heteronormative norms and increase tolerance towards homosexuality. Butler's theory on the drag queen or drag king's gender parody points toward the subversive potential of women characters whose feminine features are highly exaggerated, as demonstrated in Coville's (2015) analysis of *Bayonetta* (Sega, 2009), but can also be utilized to analyze women characters who cross-dress and act "like a man", such as Zelda in *Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo, 1998) and Aveline de Grandpré in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012). Her theory concerning parodic repetition of the heterosexual model within a butch/fem couple could, for its part, be mobilized to study lesbian relationships in games like *Mass Effect 3* (BioWare, 2012). Mulvey's conception of an alternative cinema that short-circuits visual pleasure suggests the subversive potential of leading women characters who are only playable from the first-person point of view, such as Samus Aran from *Metroid Prime* (Retro Studios, 2002) and Chell from *Portal 1* and *2* (Valve corporation, 2007 and 2011). Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* could help in stressing the empowering aspects of woman characters whose bodies are intrinsically bound to technology, as is also the case of Samus and Chell. Feminist theories could also be mobilized to imagine innovative game characters that are yet to be designed. Luce Irigaray's (1984) theory on the goddess and the mother-daughter couple, for instance, could help inspire original women characters who compensate for the absence of these figures in the biblical narrative and in the media landscape. Delvaux's (2013) theory on how the Serial Girls figure can be appropriated by

groups of women who unite to form a collective, plural and political entity – like Femen or Pussy Riot – could inspire game designers to create groups of women characters who join forces and perfectly synchronize their movements to neutralize an enemy. Feminist theories are an inexhaustible source of inspiration, and it is up to us to use them wisely.

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*Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin holds a Ph.D. in Communication and is a Professor in the School of Media at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). Her main areas of expertise include game studies, gender studies and media sociology. Her [thesis](#) explores the possibility of using parodies as a playful means to denaturalize gender stereotypes, raise consciousness, and empower people. During her postdoctoral fellowship at MIT Comparative Media Studies/Writing, she pursued her work on gender parody in the field of game studies and created the machinima parody [FREE SPEECH](#). Gabrielle is also Co-director of the research group Homo Ludens on gaming practices and communication in digital worlds. You can learn more about her work by visiting her personal [website](#).*

*Maude Bonenfant holds a Ph.D. in Semiotics and is a Professor in the Department of Social and Public Communication at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). Her research focuses on the social dimensions of communication technologies and digital networks, online communities and digital worlds, as well as on practices and appropriation of video games and online communication tools. She is also Co-director of the research group Homo Ludens on gaming practices and communication in digital worlds, Co-director of the Groupe de recherche sur l’information et la surveillance au quotidien (GRISQ) and author of the book [Le libre jeu](#) (Liber, 2015).*

## Résumé

Partant de l’idée que les théories féministes demeurent sous-utilisées en *game studies*, les auteures démontrent qu’une mobilisation des théories de pionnières féministes comme Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Betty Friedan et Laura Mulvey aide à comprendre pourquoi sont problématiques les stéréotypes de genre vidéoludiques comme la *ms. male*, la demoiselle en détresse, la fée du logis et l’héroïne d’action sexy. Elles montrent également comment des

concepts développés plus récemment par des auteures féministes comme Karen Boyle, Barbara Creed et Martine Delvaux peuvent souligner à quel point sont dommageables la victimisation constante des femmes dans les jeux vidéo, l'abjection de leur sexualité et la reproduction du même modèle de corps féminin d'un jeu à l'autre. Sur une note plus positive, les auteures offrent un bref aperçu des théories féministes pouvant être mobilisées pour analyser ou imaginer des personnages de jeux qui transcendent les schèmes patriarcaux et hétéronormatifs.

**Mots-clés :** jeux vidéo, féminisme, représentation, genre, stéréotype, théorie féministe