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Introduction:
Gender Issues in Video Games

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Since the beginning of the 1990s, many feminist scholars have highlighted the proliferation of gender stereotypes and sexist narratives in video games, as well as the marginalization of female players and game designers. The solutions advanced to address sexism in game culture and to diversify the game industry have followed three primary trends.

During the 1990s, the small proportion of female players and the growing importance of technological literacy encouraged many scholars and activists to promote the creation of computer games specifically designed for girls. Even though these games risked naturalizing gender binaries, ghettoizing female players, socializing them according to stereotypes, and limiting the exploration of alternative designs (De Castell and Bryson, 1998), transforming the game industry one step at a time, by creating spaces where young girls would feel comfortable to play, was the most realistic approach for many (Kelley, 1998; Laurel, 1998; Martin, 1998). Simultaneously, groups of female players like *Quake Grrl* proved that women can enjoy beating boys at their own games, and that many assumptions about what girls want are not accurate (Jenkins, 1998). Although the Girl Games movement prevailed during this "first-wave" of game feminism (Jenkins and Cassell, 2008: 5), not everyone agreed on the form that these games should take. The anthology *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998) crystalizes the debate as to whether games for girls should reflect women's aesthetic preferences and involve typical female activities (pink games) or appeal to girls' real-life interests and

favours exploration and co-operation instead of competition and aggression (purple games) (Laurel, 1998; Martin, 1998). In 1995, the release of *Tomb Raider* and its acrobatic female character with an oversized bust, Lara Croft, launched an ongoing debate as to whether this iconic figure is a demeaning or empowering model for women (Kennedy, 2002).

Between 2000 and 2010, the number of female players increased, the gender gap in technology slowly closed, and the advent of MMORPGs allowed both male and female players to experiment more freely with gender identities. However, the rarity of women game designers, the marginalization of female players, the dimorphism between male and female avatars, and the proliferation of passive or hypersexualized female characters persisted (Consalvo and Harper, 2009; Corneliussen, 2008; Huntemann, 2010; Sarkeesian, 2013). At the same time, the conception of gender as an evolving social construct was spreading through feminist studies, and more voices called for gender-neutral games that would appeal to both men and women (Brunner, 2008; Fullerton and al., 2008). The publication of *Beyond Barbie & Mortal Kombat* (Kafai and al., 2008) surfed on this "second wave" of game feminism; many of the contributors shift their attention from game mechanics and representations towards contextual factors that explain gender disparities within gaming practices (Taylor, 2008). During this period, discussions on gender issues in video games, however, remained mostly centred around white heterosexual women.

After two decades of game feminism, and despite growing awareness of the need for inclusivity in the video game industry, discussions on gender issues in video games are far from obsolete. Repeated episodes of harassment, and threats towards female game designers or feminists who publicly denounce stereotypical representations in video games, are reminders that sexism in game culture is not eradicated, and that further efforts are needed to change perceptions (Chess and Shaw, 2015; Goldberg and Larsson, 2015). It is also time to take stock of what has been achieved to date; many scholars now realize, among other things, that gamers from ethnic and LGBTQ communities have been excluded from the conversation, while the rarity of coloured and queer characters in video games has been ignored. In the past few years, many scholars have tried to widen the scope of discussions around gender issues in video games, and to address these

blind spots of game feminism. They started to discuss topics such as alternative, reflexive or critical representations of gender, the diversification of game characters and production teams, and masculinity in video games (Kafai and al., 2016; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017; Shaw, 2014). Inspired by recent developments in gender and queer studies, more researchers have adopted an intersectional approach to gender/race/class/age, or a postmodern approach to gender as something that we "do" and that is open to exploration on an individual basis, thus collectively initiating a "third wave" of game feminism (Richard, 2013).

The anthology *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai and al., 2016) crystallizes this transition from second to third wave game feminism by bringing together articles on topics such as the emergence of non-normative and anti-racist identities in independent or serious games (Lepore and Denner, 2016; Nakamura, 2016; Pearce, 2016); homosexual romances in video games and players' reactions towards them (McDonald, 2016); collective, intergenerational and familial gaming practices of African-American, Mexican and Latino female players (Gray, 2016; Richard, 2016; Siyahhan and Gee, 2016); and the embodiment of various identities by male players (DiSalvo, 2016). This book suggests incentives for diversifying production teams and highlights the fact that coloured women in the tech industry often suffer from a double impostor's syndrome; they feel at once invisible because of their gender, and highly visible because of their ethnicity (Bryant, 2016). The authors also gather articles about various ways to promote different gender identities through design and marketing (Flanagan and Kaufman, 2016; Westecott, 2016).

The recent publication of the collection *Queer Game Studies* (Ruberg and Shaw, 2017) indicates that the third wave of game feminism has achieved a certain maturity, as queer theory has come to be associated with research beyond the scope of gender studies. In this book, queer theory is indeed mobilized to challenge persisting dichotomies in game studies (narratology/ludology, production/reception, control/agency, success/failure), as well as strict definitions of what is a game and a gamer. Queer theory is also used to question a variety of assumptions on the ways games should be studied, played or criticized (2017: ix-x). The authors do not exclusively study

LGBTQ characters or gamers, but include design and gaming practices that shatter former ideas, or use queer theory as a method to rethink the foundations of game studies (2017: xiii-xvii).

The articles presented in this special issue of *Kinephanos* are part of this third wave of game feminism, inspired by intersectionality and queer theory. They were written by speakers who participated to the second edition of the *Game History Annual Symposium* on the *History of Gender in Games* co-chaired by Mia Consalvo and Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin. This event took place at BAnQ (Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec) on June 26 - 27 2015, with the collaboration of TAG (Technoculture, Arts and Games, Concordia University), CMS|W (Comparative Media Studies | Writing, MIT), the Canada Research Chair in Game Studies & Design (Concordia University), LUDOV (Laboratory for the Documentation and Observation of Video Games, UdeM), Homo Ludens (UQAM) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). One of the goals was to document the emergence of a "third wave" of game feminism, while promoting dialogue between scholars and people from the game industry. The articles in this special issue cover three tracks of the conference: game feminism, gender representations in games, and the role of women and minorities in the game industry.

The article "Bridging Game Studies and Feminist Theories", written by Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin (UQAM, Montreal) and Maude Bonenfant (UQAM, Montreal), addresses the topic of game feminism. 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.

The next four articles address gender representations in video games. In her article "Diversity without Defense: Reframing arguments for diversity in games", Adrienne Shaw (Temple University, Philadelphia) provides alternative justifications for diversifying video game representations. The author defends the idea that depicting marginal identities in video games is politically important, not because of the alleged direct effects on audience attitudes, nor to fulfil the presumed need of minorities to identify with game characters, but because it expands the types of identities all players are asked to identify with. From this perspective, the diversification of game representations should be considered part of making games better for everyone, instead of a targeted marketing strategy for a niche audience. In addition to the evident benefits of this approach, explains the author, it would also allow for a more large-scale diversification of video game representations.

In her article "The Poetics of Form and the Politics of Identity in *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation*", Soraya Murray (University of California, Santa Cruz) mobilizes an intersectional approach from visual and cultural studies to analyze *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft, 2012) and its central female character Aveline de Grandpré. This game, which is set during the colonial period that preceded the American War of Independence (1775-1783), uniquely presents one of the few black heroines of the video game landscape. The author explains how Aveline is a departure from the damsel in distress stereotype and the Orientalist trope of the exotic victim, while stressing that a deeper analysis of the game's poetics reveal the persistent influence of Orientalist fantasies and the imperial violence characterizing the history of the European empire. To illustrate how cultural norms and power relations are translated within the game, Murray studies the Persona System on which *Liberation*'s gameplay relies, involving three costumes and modes that Aveline can utilize depending on the circumstances she is in and the mission she needs to complete. Every persona comes with different limitations and affordances that are inherently related to the character's gender, ethnicity, and class. At the end of her article, Murray highlights the uncertainty surrounding Aveline's sexual orientation, which she interprets as another facet of the character's fluid identity and adaptability.

The last two productions of the *Tomb Raider* series and their controversial female character, Lara Croft, are also under scrutiny in the article "Andromeda on the Rocks: Retreading and Resisting Tropes of Female Sacrifice in *Tomb Raider*", from Meghan Blythe Adams (University of Western Ontario, London, Canada). Although these games move away from the damsel in distress stereotype by staging a capable and courageous female character, Adams suggests *Tomb Raider* (2013) and *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (2015) do not fully realize their subversive potential, because the endangerment, rescue, and death of female characters serve as sources of guilty pleasure for the player. The games' narrative, which revolves around the kidnapping and the sacrifice of female characters, is analyzed through the lens of George Bataille's theory of the ritual sacrifice. The author also highlights the spectacularization and erotization of Lara Croft's death, before turning to a discussion on the ambiguity of her sexual orientation.

The article "The Witcher, or The End of Masculinity (as We Know It)", from Dawid Matuszek (University of Silesia, Katowice), looks at how the protagonist of *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED, 2015) deconstructs traditional models of masculinity involving heroism and paternalism. While the first two games of the *The Witcher* series depict Geralt of Riviera as first a "collector of women" and then a sex toy for powerful witches, *Wild Hunt* problematizes the masculine/feminine dichotomy by portraying the character as a nomadic, immature, and half-castrated subject, whose masculinity is not fully achieved and whose gender identity remains ambiguous. Through the lens of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, the author describes the evolution of the character's relation to masculinity after an event makes him realize how much his world does not welcome valiant knights who wish to protect damsels in distress. As the avatar cannot be customized, Matuszek asserts that the player is more a witness to the complexification of the character than an accomplice.

The female protagonist of the *Mass Effect* series (BioWare, 2007-2012) is thoroughly analyzed in the article "FemShep : féminité sexualisée ou subversive? Analyse du personage féminin de la série *Mass Effect*", written by Pascale Thériault (Université de Montréal, Montréal). At first glance, Jane Shepard (called FemShep by the fans) seems to distinguish herself from the majority of female game characters in terms of her looks and skill, but the author's detailed

analysis of the character, the game, and its promotional campaign reveals that FemShep is a feminized copy of her masculine counterpart, like many other female characters of the video game landscape. The author also asks herself if the wider range of romantic options for FemShep, compared to those of BroShep, illustrates a better tolerance for lesbianism than for male homosexuality in our societies, or if it should only be interpreted as another proof that *Mass Effect*'s narrative was written for the male avatar. Even though FemShep's movements and interactions are modelled on those of BroShep, FemShep embodies a new form of femininity that overcomes the limitations of traditional action heroines who are strong and active, yet also objectified and fetishized. The mix of feminine and masculine attributes in FemShep's body contributes to subverting gender norms. While the subversive potential of the supporting female characters of the series is not fully realized, their femininity contrasts with the masculine aspects of FemShep in a way that makes them more obvious.

This special issue of *Kinephanos* ends with an article from Brie Code (Tru Luv Media) entitled "Is Game Design for Everybody? Women and Innovation in Video Games". This article examines the role of women and minorities in the game industry. Previously a game designer at Ubisoft, the author shares her personal experiences within the game industry, complemented by the perspectives of colleagues, to highlight four barriers that affect the integration of women in this workplace: 1) the fact that computer science was, until recently, seen as a masculine domain, 2) the rarity of non-stereotypical women avatars that can inspire women players, 3) the influence of unconscious bias during the recruitment process, as well as 4) discrimination, marginalization, and favoritism. The author also suggests solutions to overcome these barriers, and emphasizes the benefits of diversified production teams in terms of innovation and working conditions.

Each author adopts, in their own way, a contemporary perspective on gender issues in video games, imbuing discussions of this topic with complexity, and conveying a message of hope. The authors highlight the positive initiatives undertaken by the game industry these past few years, while pinpointing elements that could yet be improved to change dominant mentalities. This special issue of *Kinephanos* exhibits the wave of optimism that is currently flooding game feminism, buoyed and supported by a wave of changes throughout the game industry.

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