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Videogame aesthetics

On the use of gender stereotypes in story-driven videogames

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Abstract

In general, the videogame industry is a male-dominated environment, in which women or people with other non-male gender identities are often overlooked or even harassed. However, (female) gender stereotypes are still used in promotional material and videogames. This kind of use of gender stereotyping might lead to in-game and real-life behavior entangling. In other words, harassing people in-game might cause this type of behavior to become acceptable behavior outside of the in-game world as well, while the concept of catcalling or calling someone names during an online game might be a reason for some to find it acceptable to do this in everyday life too. However, the use of stereotypes might not only affect the culture surrounding a videogame and (its role within) society, but also the value of the videogame itself. More specifically, making use of gender tropes might cause the videogame's aesthetic value - i.e., its value as a work of art - to increase or decrease. Namely, the presence of gender stereotypes could affect the videogame's capacity to allow people to engage in moral reflection through identifying with the characters.

Preface

3

In order to gain inspiration on what to write in the preface of this thesis, I looked for some examples on the world wide web. The ones I found were mostly made up of thank you notes and stories about the ancient origins of subject ideas, some of which date as far back as high school.

I feel as though I lack this kind of inspirational backstory. Nonetheless, I can say that being able to write about a topic related to videogames, especially in relation to philosophy, was something I have 'always' wanted to do. In other words, I wanted to write about videogames and I would figure the rest out later. Fortunately, this plan seems to have worked out surprisingly well. Additionally, the writing itself provided me with the perfect opportunity to perfect my coffee drinking skills, my Larry King pose, and my anger management skills in regards to my incredible internet connection.

Now, humor aside, I would like to genuinely thank my thesis supervisor, Nathan Wildman. In addition to his help with the writing process, there was a sense of lightheartedness present during our meetings that I greatly appreciated. And, though it may sound cliché, it is a nice feeling to be able to look back on the experience as a whole with a smile on my face, rather than a frown.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

1.1. General introduction: (societal) relevance and research question

While there has been some progress in breaking with gender roles and stereotyping in the area of videogames, the industry itself mostly remains a male-dominated environment (Heeter, 2014, p. 392). Moreover, many still hold onto the belief that playing games is primarily an activity that males participate in, even though there are likely (almost) as many gamers that are female (or otherwise non-male identifying), with players who identified as female making up approximately 40% of "most frequent game purchasers" (Patridge, 2020, p. 168).[1] Then, if women are associated with videogames, this is often linked to the types of gaming experiences 'suitable' or enjoyable for a woman to engage in. For example, a woman might be more inclined to enjoy an RPG or visual novel than she is to appreciate a first-person action shooter (Heeter, 2014, p. 394, 397).

But even if, at least for some, women were indeed more interested in certain gaming genres, that is not to say they would or could not be inclined to try other genres (Heeter, 2014, 394-395). Other than there being a lack of female representation in a number of games in general, female characters are often sexualized. The frequent stereotypical and inaccurate portrayal of women, combined with the social ostracization based on gender, could close the door to some games for many female players. Those who would like to explore certain genres, might not be able to do so, not because they do not like the games being offered but instead because of the sexist behavior of others before, during, and after the playing experience. Additionally, there might be a type of 'flow', in which stereotypical portrayals used in-game confirm the sexist attitudes that exist in the real world, and vice versa: sexist attitudes might be confirmed by stereotypical in-game portrayals based on (a biased notion of) reality.

However, this essay's main interest lies not so much in illustrating the societal effect of including gender stereotypes in videogames as such, but rather in investigating in what way this kind of stereotypical characterization might affect the value of a videogame as an artwork. Therefore, the research question it aims to

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[1] This percentage does fluctuate year by year, the average having been between 38% and 48%, between 2010 and 2020 (Patridge, 2020, p. 168).

answer is "(how) can the presence or absence of (female) gender stereotypes, by influencing one's capacity for moral reflection, affect a videogame's aesthetic value?" Now, the remainder of this chapter will serve as an introduction to the different concepts that are mentioned in the research question, as well as highlight some underlying assumptions.

1.2. Background information: videogames as art

The nature of the videogame as a form of art comes mostly from their ability to present players with immersive fictional worlds (Tavinor, 2009, pp. 182-183). Through its narrative, a videogame is able to make its players think about morality by reflecting on relatable and morally complex situations (Tavinor, 2009, p. 162). Its interactive nature allows people to interact directly with the story and not only confronts passive viewers with their morality, but enables players to actively take part in the story and interact with its characters. Thus, players are not only allowed to think of themselves as being in someone else's shoes, they are also encouraged to control the actions of said person and reflect upon their own views and choices.

Hence, the (aesthetic) value of videogames, at least in the context of this paper, is linked to whether the experience is immersive and is able to present the player with a coherent and relatable experience.[2] This will be further elaborated on in chapter two. Note that there is not necessarily a single right answer to questions such as what it is that makes art 'art', what makes an aesthetic experience 'aesthetic', and what makes a videogame art or an aesthetic experience (Freeland, 2002, Chapter 6).[3] But since the purpose of this paper is not focused on exploring the possible answers to that question as such, the explanation that has been given above (and will be further elaborated upon in chapter two) will be assumed to be correct throughout. Moreover, this paper will focus on videogames in which the narrative is a key aspect. Games that are not driven by any narrative structure, as for example *Tetris* or *Pong*, will not be considered here.

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[2] See §*1.3.*
[3] See also, for example: Abell (2012); Bourgonjon et al. (2017); Dezeuze (2016); Dickie (1969); Schellekens (2022); Smuts (2005); Tavinor (2009).

1.3. The value of art: about aesthetic and moral content

In the context of this paper it will be assumed that a videogame's aesthetic value at least partially depends on its capacity to persuade players to have a meaningful experience by – through engaging with the videogame – identifying with certain in-game characters, which allows for moral reflection to take place.[4] However, for the sake of clarification, a brief overview of the relation between an artwork's aesthetic value and moral content will be given here. In other words, the question of why and how moral content can have an effect on art's aesthetic value will be explored.[5]

Naturally, there are a number of different beliefs regarding the nature of art, what it means for something to be art, and how – or if – moral content affects an artwork's (aesthetic) value. Aestheticism, for one, holds that the dimensions regarding art and morality are separate from one another (Kieran, 1996, p. 337). Ethicism on the other hand, states that, depending on the case, ethical demerits may sometimes count as aesthetic demerits and vice versa (Carroll, 2010, p. 251). Additionally, where ethicism holds that any relevant ethical value or disvalue is also aesthetically relevant, moderate moralism only counts those that affect uptake (Carroll, 2010, p. 259).[6] Moralism also states that the aesthetic-ethical value relation is positive and invariant. In other words, ethical defects (or merits) are always aesthetic defects (or merits) (Thomson-Jones, 2012, p. 278). (Strict) immoralism on the other hand claims the aesthetic-ethical relation to be negative and invariant (Thomson-Jones, 2012, p. 279). Thus, from the point of view of immoralism, an artwork's ethical defects can be aesthetic merits.

Then, how does art's moral content affect its value as art? Kieran (1996, p. 337) explains that through promoting 'imaginative understanding' by one's engagement with art, it can be said that art is able to cultivate moral sensibilities. He also reasons that one of the purposes of having the capacity to use imagination is to allow for the possibility of being able to appreciate certain situations and identifications not previously understood (Kieran, 1996, p. 339). So, engaging with art cultivates an ability to 'expose' its appreciators to appreciate experiences that they

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[4] See §2.2 for a further explanation regarding the importance of identification and (moral) reflection.
[5] This being relevant in virtue of the remainder of this paper running on the assumption that an artwork's moral content affects its (aesthetic) value as art.
[6] In the context of this paper, *uptake* refers to an understanding of the intended message of a work, or the author. Uptake could then 'fail', if the intended message is misunderstood or unperceived by the audience. (See also §2.2 and §3.2. Additionally, see *footnote 10*).

would have been unable to (imaginatively) understand prior to this engagement with an artwork. As such, an artwork's moral significance has to do with how it is able to and allows us to explore our (moral) values and commitments (Kieran, 1996, p. 345). By identifying with the characters depicted in an artwork, not only do we imagine what those characters and their struggles represent, we might also be able to imagine what it would be like to find ourselves facing those same struggles (and how we would behave). Take, for example, van Gogh's painting *The Potato Eaters*, which depicts a group of 'peasants' having a dinner made up of – as the name suggests – potatoes (Kieran, 1996, p. 345). If the audience is able to not only perceive the living conditions of the peasants, but – by identifying with them – can imagine what it would be like to find themselves in those same conditions, a certain (imaginative) understanding of, for example, looking out for others might be cultivated. This is precisely what van Gogh prescribes through this work (see also *footnote 7*).

The intrinsic ethical value a work of art possesses is thus not determined by its depiction alone, but also by its attitude towards the portrayed subject and how the work persuades its audience to reflect on that attitude (Thomson-Jones, 2012, p. 282). So, the (im)moral nature of an artwork can be of aesthetic value by allowing for certain imaginative experiences of unethical perspectives that would be unable to be portrayed or reflected on in such a way if said (im)morality was not present (Thomson-Jones, 2012, pp. 289-290). Then, we might say that:

> Sympathy for a character, admiration or horror at their actions and approval of the attitude to life a work expresses, for example, can all be internally connected to moral assumptions. Where this is so, the moral character of a work is relevant to its artistic value. (Kieran, 2006, p. 133)

> It is, after all, only through the particular descriptions, characterization, rhythm, imagery, allusions, narrative structure, and so on, employed by a novel that it expresses the particular attitudes constituting its ethical perspective. (Thomson-Jones, 2012, p. 287)[7]

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[7] Kieran (1996) has a similar idea, namely that – in his example - van Gogh "(…), through the use of a developed, formalized style, [he] is attempting to represent in a fresh, bold, and nuanced way how the landscape may, in fact, be understood" (p. 344-345). Kieran then explains that the way in which the landscape can be conceived of is expressed precisely by van Gogh's use of certain colors and brushstrokes. It is the particular way in which one can understand van Gogh's landscape that warrants the significance of the work.

Moreover, the presence of immoral content in an artwork is not strictly aesthetically devaluing. Hamilton (2003) explains that the anti-theoretic approach recognizes art's moral ambiguity and the 'unfinished' state of our morality (Kieran, 2006, pp. 137-138). A work that is morally problematic is able to give us the possibility of taking our own moral thoughts and beliefs into question and reflecting on them[8]. In other words, through the artistic representation of a certain attitude, those who engage with the artwork gain a certain sense of understanding, about humanity - within that particular context - and are thereby persuaded to critically reflect on their (moral) understanding (Kieran, 2006, p. 140). So, if a morally dubious perspective is presented to an audience, members of said audience might also gain an understanding of why they feel a sense of apprehension in regards to the way in which that immoral view is portrayed.

However, according to Kieran (1996, p. 347) if an artwork (deliberately) promotes a false imaginative understanding, i.e., if an artwork doubles as a means of propaganda and therefore prescribes a flawed or depraved moral understanding, it is "nonvaluable" as a work of art.[9] An example of this is Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* that serves as an attempt to persuade its audience to become convinced of the glory and power of Nazism and the Third Reich. He gives another kind of example by pointing out how Pound's *Cantos* might be a 'hard or 'complex' case, because, while it does promote an imaginative understanding about the world and provides an "imaginative grasp of the possible requirements of moral integrity" (Kieran, 1996, p. 347), Pound also explicitly promotes anti-Seminist views at various points throughout the poem.

Therefore, the important question is whether or not an artwork's (im)moral character is able to cultivate an understanding in its audience (Kieran, 2006, p. 140).[10] If such a cultivation of (moral) understanding follows from the work's (im)moral nature, said nature thus contributes to its artistic value.

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[8] See also *§2.2.*

[9] I do not necessarily agree or disagree with Kieran (1996) on this point (see also *footnote 10*), but I think he is correct in saying that our, at times, ambivalent attitude towards immoral works suggests that "the moral understanding manifested in a work (…) [can] bear significant relation to its value *qua* art" (p. 347).

[10] On a side note, it might be interesting to question whether or not the audience's uptake plays a part in an artwork's value as art or not. Since, if the uptake 'fails', a given piece of art *in and of itself* could still have provided its audience with the opportunity for moral reflection, even if a certain individual was

1.4. Summary and preview

In this section the societal relevance of this paper was introduced, as well as the concept of videogames as works of art. Then, some possible views on the relation between the value of an artwork and its moral content was examined.

Though I do not come to a strict definition of what exactly makes art *art*, I do take a stance regarding the relation between aesthetics and morality. Throughout the rest of this paper, I will regard Kieran's (2006, p. 140) belief that the presence of (im)moral content in an artwork might affect an artwork's value *as art*, causing either a decrease or increase in aesthetic value, to be correct. Furthermore, within the context of this paper it will be assumed that an artwork's moral content has an effect on its aesthetic value.[11] This assumption is relevant, when remembering that the main question this paper is interested in exploring is as follows: "(how) can the presence or absence of (female) gender stereotypes, by influencing one's capacity for moral reflection, affect a videogame's aesthetic value?" In other words, the inclusion of certain gender stereotypes might affect the capacity a player has regarding his or her engagement with the game experience, which then could affect the possibility for moral reflection. This will be explained further in the rest of the paper, specifically in *Chapter 2.* Moreover, the examples used are mainly based on

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unable to engage with the art 'properly'. Additionally, an artist might unintentionally create a work that contains a kind of meaning or message that was not intended by the artist to be present. So, the audience might misunderstand or fail to recognize the intended message or gain an understanding of something that was not (meant to be) present in the work. For example, a player might think (early) *Tomb Raider's* (Core Design, 1996–2003) Lara Croft wearing skimpy outfits is a 'symbol' of how women can be both capable and alluring or recognize it as a 'bad' (gender) trope and engage in some type of (moral) reflection on whether or not they agree with how Lara is portrayed through this type of clothing. However, there does not seem to be any deliberate portrayal from the developers' side regarding the inclusion of this kind of stereotypical 'female wardrobe', i.e., the audience is neither *meant* to find Lara's outfit to be either a 'positive symbol' or an 'opportunity for further deliberation about these kinds of stereotypical portrayals'. If it is indeed the case that the audience can assign its own meaning to a work, we might follow Barthes in saying that "the reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. (…) the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (Barthes, 1967, p.148). So, the person who engages with the work would be the one who assigns its meaning (see also the concept of *personal* value: pp. 9-10). In the rest of this paper I have attempted to refrain from giving a definitive answer to the question of whether or not *uptake* is important to the artwork's aesthetic value, though I do deliberate about it at certain points where this concept is mentioned (see also §*2.2* and §*3.2*).

[11] At least in the cases that will be used as examples, since these consist of narratively driven videogames that allow for moral reflection (see also *Chapter 2*). In favor of following the paper's argument throughout the remainder of this paper, the reader should (imagine themselves) to agree with me that this is indeed the case, since I do not have enough words to explain why one should necessarily agree with this statement.

female gender tropes (see §*1.1*). However, some cases that include 'stereotypically male' characterizations will be examined as well.

Now, to answer the research question, some steps need to be taken first. In particular, these steps will consist of clarifying different concepts and underlying 'assumptions' (e.g., see §*1.4*). To start, *Chapter 2* will explain the importance of *identity, interactivity and morality*. Then, *Chapter 3* will explore the use of gender stereotypes by building further on the concepts illustrated in the second chapter and making use of a number of different examples of gender tropes in videogames. This paper will end with a conclusion and a brief discussion in the fourth chapter.

2. Videogame aesthetics (1): identity, interactivity and morality

2.1. Introduction

This chapter will focus on showing how players might identify with characters and how this identification can bleed from the game world into the real world and vice versa. Its relevance for the overall question of this paper can be found in the explanation of how artistic value might increase because of identification, and how bad gender portrayals might create a sense of disconnect and affect the possibility of finding meaning through identification.

The difference between the protagonist of movies and most main characters of videogames has a lot to do with agency (Aldred, 2014, pp. 374–375). The moviegoer watches the action unfold. Meanwhile, the gamer takes part in said action by controlling the player character, at least to some extent. By offering a number of affordances and constraints, a videogame can shape a player's feeling regarding his or her sense of involvement with the game, by for example either allowing or not allowing the player to interact with objects, choose certain dialogue options or perform specific actions (Stang, 2019, p.4). An example, in which the player might experience a 'lack of' involvement when they are presented with only redundant dialogue options, would be David Cage's *Beyond: Two Souls* (Quantic Dream, 2013). There is a lack of affordance throughout the game, because the player is not offered any meaningful dialogue options that have an effect on the outcome of the story. Whatever dialogue options are chosen, the player gets to select the ending they would like to see from a list of options near the end of the story. If, for example, the player rejects all romantic advances of a non-playable character that is present in the story, the player character can still choose the ending that depicts him as the 'final' love interest. Thus, there is a distinct absence of 'real' choices, actions that have consequences, and a logical pay-off here.

As such, someone who plays a game makes decisions from both a player's perspective, as well as from the perspective of the in-game character. The player has the capacity to fluctuate between identifying with the player character as an extension of their own identity or to view the character as a separate entity, or something in between. To what extent players identify with videogame characters might be related to the nature of said character. For example, players might

recognize that certain characters share a number of relatable opinions or traits with them, without necessarily identifying with them on a deeper level. However, if the character is more of a blank slate there might be more opportunity for the player to project him- or herself onto the player character. One might even identify with the character not only as an entity that is controlled by them, but as an avatar or extension of their own being, since a player who is able to place his- or herself into the role of the agent that performs some action, i.e., killing a dragon, often makes use of first-person discourse when describing what event took place (Robson & Meskin, 2016, pp. 6-7). So, rather than a player stating that character 'x' killed a dragon, they would say something along the lines of 'I killed the dragon'. The first-person perspective that players take on when they talk about their interactions with videogames serves to illustrate the self-involvement present in (narratively driven) games.[12] This self-involvement also allows truth statements to be made about the player, in the sense that what the player does in the fiction of the videogame can be true. Moreover, what further separates the engagement with videogames from engagement with other types of fiction is the parallel between playing a videogame and playing a "childhood game of make-believe", which cannot be said to exist for (most) other types of fiction (Robson & Meskin, 2016, p. 7). Take *Minecraft* (Mojang Studios, 2011) for example, in which the final objective of the game is to slay the Ender Dragon.[13] The player might also choose to customize their character, as to resemble their own appearance or someone they might pretend to be. In this case, i.e., by reflecting the player's appearance and possibly adding an element or role-play, the first-person discourse remains present. Then the phrase might become, for example: 'I, Moraxx the Destroyer, have just defeated the Ender Dragon!'

Note that it should be said that full character customization is not strictly needed to (partly) identify with the player character. Players are in some circumstances able to recognize themselves to such an extent in a non- or minimally customizable player character that they can identify with them. Even without the option to customize or pick your own appearance or gender, playing a videogame can still be an immersive experience (Therrien, 2014, p. 471). In the case of the

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[12] Hence, (some) narratively driven videogames can be considered self-involving interactive fictions (Robson & Meskin, 2016, pp. 6-7).

[13] *Minecraft* might not be the most narratively driven game per se, but here it works as a simple example to clarify the distinction between (self-involving) interactive fiction and fiction that lacks that particular type of (self-involving) interactivity.

Ender Dragon, once a player has completed their task of defeating it, he or she will likely say 'I just defeated the Ender Dragon', even if the player character has the default skin.[14] Even role-playing does not strictly require customization, i.e.: 'I, Steve, have slain the Ender Dragon!'

Now that the self-involving interactive nature of videogames has been illustrated, the rest of the chapter will further examine how this interactive nature plays a part in the exploration of player identity, gender and morality. First, the possibility of feeling a sense of connectedness with the player character and their actions through immersion will be discussed. Then, the concept of identification and the exploration of one's identity and morality will be linked to the aesthetic value a videogame might have. Additionally, the concepts of nostalgia and personal value will be briefly explored, as well as their possible effect on a player's appreciation of a videogame as a meaningful experience and its aesthetic value as an artwork.

2.2. The aesthetic value of videogames: identity and morality

Firstly, as mentioned previously, there is no objective answer when it comes to deciding whether or not a medium has aesthetic value.[15] Identification with a character is important here, because the extent to which a player is able to identify with a character is related to the meaning a player can find through that relation.[16] This is reminiscent of how, according to philosopher Martha Nussbaum, readers of certain literature are able to resonate with the characters and their moral dilemmas (D'Olimpio & Peterson, 2018, p. 98).

> As we engage imaginatively with the plight of these fictional others, we care about the decisions they make and the consequences of their actions in the fictional storyworld.

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[14] The player might choose to pick a different 'skin', i.e., appearance, but there is a default character (skin), named 'Steve'.

[15] See also §1.2 §1.3. Additionally, the rest of the argument can be followed best if the reader is in agreement with this paragraph (see *footnote 11*).

[16] Whilst this paper focuses mainly on identification as a 'priority', a player might also come to appreciate an initially 'unlikable' or 'bland' character more, the more they see of that character. So, the development of a meaningful relationship might take some time and must then be established prior to having the possibility of identifying with the character. Take for example the character Clementine from Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series (2012). In the first game, or 'season', she comes across as a 'stereotypical' child, i.e., you could essentially replace her with any other child character. She mostly comes to mean something to the player through her developing relationship with the main character. However, in later installments she develops as a character and the player is able to better identify and reflect on her – and in extension their own – (moral) choices in a meaningful way.

In this way, the empathetic reader is practising a moral attitude of compassion and sympathetic engagement with other(s) who differ to themselves. A central idea defended here is that the nuances of moral judgement sometimes escape the black and white depiction of analytic moral philosophy and are better expressed in narrative form. (D'Olimpio & Peterson, 2018, p. 98)

And in turn, a sense of meaning – through identification and exploration - can influence whether or not the medium as a whole – the videogame - contains some kind of artistic value. If there is no possibility of identifying with the character, the player might experience a sense of disconnect and because of that be unable to have an immersive experience.[17] Since the artistic value of the medium within this context is tied to being able to step into someone else's shoes and through identification explore not only that character's, but also their own identity, the use of bad gender stereotypes might limit the meaning of the work as a whole, when it is looked at as being a form of art.

However, why exactly is it plausible to suggest a medium possesses artistic value through creating meaning by identification? In other words, could it not be said that something can have meaning to me without any identification being present or without the medium as a whole classifying as art at all? While it is indeed the case that certain things can carry meaning for someone without necessarily having to be art, value in these cases is not strictly of the artistic kind. Rather, the notion of personal value is at play here. The difference between artistic and personal value is dependent on the way in which the object has moral content. By identifying with a character, there is not just a character being presented to you, but you are in some sense that character, which in turn opens a way to think about both their and your own (moral) views and choices. If it is unable to bring about some sort of moral

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[17] In some cases the meaning of the work might actually be expressed by deliberately creating an experience, which leaves the player feeling a sense of disconnect. The player could be addressed directly, as is the case with the following line from *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012)*:* "Do you feel like a hero yet?" This might prompt or even force players to actively reflect on their moral standing (Heron & Belford, 2014, p. 20). The game might also reveal its fictional nature by 'revealing' that it is in fact a game that is being played (Van de Mosselaer, 2022, pp. 168-169). An example of this can be found in *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Cafe, 2013), in a segment where the player travels to a specific part of the map to which the narrator states: "Alright fine. Go ahead Stanley. You want to know so badly what's out there? You want to find out what lies at the end of this road you've chosen? Well, don't let me stop you. You see, there's nothing here. I haven't even finished building this section of the map, because you were never supposed to be here in the first place. Broken rooms, exposed developer textures. Is this what you'd wanted? Was it worth ruining the entire story I had written out specifically for you? Do you not think I put a lot of time into that…" (Encrypted Duck, 2020, 45:54)

character contrast, the object's value might be of a personal nature, as opposed to an aesthetic one. That is not to say something that has personal value is generally worthless, but personal sentiment on its own might not be enough to justify something having aesthetic value as well. Moreover, personal sentiment might influence the player's engagement with the game by 'overwhelming' them with nostalgic feelings.[18] For instance, a player might experience a feeling of nostalgia when revisiting an old game from his or her past. Their past experience of playing the game, and the feelings and memories associated with that experience, can influence how the videogame is perceived or appreciated by that player. For example, I myself have fond memories of playing *World of Warcraft* (2004) with my dad. Now, whenever I find myself wanting to play the game, I tend to remember it making for a more fun and engaging experience than it actually provides if I were to play it at this moment in time.

As such, "players could attach idiosyncratic meaning to in-game content" (Bowman & Wulf, 2023, p.3). Then, a player might not be able to understand that the videogame they are playing lacks aesthetic value or they might 'ascribe' aesthetic value to a game that has none. In turn, this might also influence whether or not players are able to appreciate the game in full, which might not impact the aesthetic value as such, but does impact the capacity in which it can be appreciated and recognized as possessing that type of value.[19] And, if the player fails to appreciate or properly engage with the videogame, i.e., the 'uptake' fails, its aesthetic value might be decreased, in the sense that the art becomes 'without purpose'.[20]

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[18] The kind of nostalgia that is meant here is what is called 'media nostalgia': "Media nostalgia (…) describes the nostalgia that is triggered when one consumes exactly the same content and (…), remembers the bygone experience during the current one" (Bowman & Wulf, 2023, p. 2).

[19] "Narratives featuring rough heroines are not aesthetically valuable because (or when) they subvert gender norms. They are aesthetically valuable because (or when) they successfully prescribe allegiance; the subversion of gender norms makes allegiance more difficult to achieve and thus a greater aesthetic achievement" (Clavel-Vazquez, 2018, p. 209). Similarly related, not appreciating a game that is art or appreciating a game that is not art, when thinking about gender stereotypes, can cause the player to not properly engage with the videogame. As such, he or she might also fail to reflect on the use of stereotypical portrayals of gender, which renders both the meaningful use of stereotypes and the subversion of gender roles 'useless'.

[20] 'Without purpose' refers to the medium itself allowing for the kind of moral reflection that is necessary to appreciate a videogame as art, but not being able to actually provide this because of – in this example – overshadowing personal value causing a failure in the uptake. To make this seem less 'definitive', one might say that a situation such as this one does not necessarily lower the aesthetic value itself, but causes a sort of failure in the expression of its meaning as art (as was intended by the artist). (See also §1.3 and §3.2).

2.3. Brief glimpse into immersion

But, if the above is the case, what is so special about videogames in particular? One might object that it is surely possible to engage in the reading of literature that presents the reader with relatable and thoughtfully portrayed characters, through which experiencing a sense of identification is not an impossibility. However, there is an important difference between videogames and most other forms of media and art. Namely, the key aspect that a videogame possesses is its existence as an interactive medium. The consumer is no longer reading about the protagonist as a passive bystander, but controlling the player character in their interactions with the environment. It might even be said that in "videogame playing (…) players are almost invariably characters in the fictional worlds associated with videogames" (Robson & Meskin, 2016, p. 7). In turn, this creates an even stronger possibility for the player to compare his- or herself to the (player) character. Thus, it brings forth the opportunity to reflect upon one's identity and moral considerations. One could even argue that proper engagement can only be achieved when this type of moral reflection is present, since, without it, the (moral) message might be lost on the player.[21]

To introduce the concept of (partial) identification with the player character, what follows is a brief account of the possible sense of immersion that might occur in players whilst engaging in the videogame *Shadow of the Colossus* (Japan Studio; Team Ico, 2005).[22] This also highlights the fact that someone who identifies as a woman might still feel connected to a player character who has a different gender than herself. In addition, it should be noted that 'identification' and 'immersion' are not interchangeable. Identification refers to whether or not one is able to see themselves in a character, while (a low or high sense of) immersion refers to the degree in which someone is or is not engaged with the experience.

> After the defeat of the first Colossus, all music stopped. I stabbed my sword into its body while it cried out in pain one final time, and subsequently fell lifelessly down to the ground. Calm music started and I almost threw up. Later I realized that I couldn't blame Wander for having killed the creature. He had his goal, just as I had mine. His

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[21] Note, again, that engaging in moral reflection does not need to be strictly 'written into' the game's narrative as such (Heron & Belford, 2014, p. 20). Questions of an ethical nature that get presented directly to the player, as is the case in *Spec Ops: The Line* (Yager Development, 2012), whilst separate from the in-game narrative, confront the player with a moral dilemma that has no consequences in the fiction itself.

[22] The example that will follow is based on my personal experience.

endgame was to defeat the sixteen Colossi so that his love would be returned, while mine was to aid him in their defeat so that I could see what would happen after I did so. For both me as the player and Wander as the protagonist the Colossi became a means to an end.

What adds to that feeling of guilt is that the Colossi themselves have a peaceful nature overall. Some of them only attack you when you trespass into their territory, while some of them need to be provoked and one of them doesn't even defend itself once. However, I have progressively started to sympathize not only with them, but empathize with Wander. I can place myself in his shoes, because I can imagine partaking in a morally questionable task in his situation. I had quite a difficult time coming to terms with this at first. Certainly, I would not be like Wander and harm the innocent, but the truth is not that. I too would place the lives of some over the life of one, if that one person meant everything to me. Wander and me aren't so unalike after all then, because neither of us reveled in the killings themselves. (Schrik, 2021, p.2)[23]

There are however certain limitations. A player cannot always act according to what they would choose to do, if given 'complete' freedom, i.e., if they were not held back by certain fixed narrativeevents or game mechanics. Following the importance of identification, that also means you cannot always be the person you want to be or would like to be. An example comes in the form of a game having bad dialogue options that can be unrelated to the character as such or the overall story. A rather funny example is the fact that in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt, 2015) the main character can ask a number of random strangers (NPCs) if they would like to play a card game, named Gwent. Whilst there are better examples of bad dialogue (options) to be found, this particular case is a nice illustration of how 'silly' options can break immersion, which then could lead to a diminishing of the opportunity to identify with or reflect about the character and their – or the player's – (moral) choices.

A related issue might be choices that are presented by the game as being meaningful to the overall narrative, i.e., that affect the story and more specifically its ending, but that end up having little to no effect on the outcome of the narrative. An obvious example of this would once again be the 'choose your own ending' screen in Cage's *Beyond: Two Souls* (Quantic Dream, 2012). Here, the player can choose

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[23] This excerpt was taken from an essay I originally wrote for the course *Play and Game* (2021). (Additionally, I had my last name changed sometime last year, explaining the difference there).

whatever ending they would like to see, mainly having to do with what character(s) the main character ends up reconnecting with, even being able to pick an ending in which she ends up staying with someone she (should have) had a negative (through the player's choices) relationship with. So, on one hand, having choices that have consequences pertaining to which ending to the story the player gets to witness, plays into the interactive nature of videogame fiction (Robson & Meskin, 2016, p. 25). It is exactly because the player is expected to play a role within the story that their choices and deliberations matter and in extension that the narrative ends in a way that is at least to a certain degree consistent with the actions made by the player.

On the other hand, it might be noted that engaging in the game, by performing actions and by morally reflecting on those actions, does not necessarily require (all) actions or choices to determine what ending one gets (Stang, 2019, p.1). For example, another videogame which has a reputation of presenting the player with false choices is Telltale's *The Walking Dead* (2011). In the game a notification will appear on the screen after a conversation between the player character and an NPC, notifying the player that "'x-character' will remember that…". Many of the dialogue options have little to no effect on how the story plays out, hence the notification is in a way misleading. Furthermore, the ending, whilst having slight variations depending on some of the choices the player has made, remains mostly the same regardless of what choices the player makes throughout the game: with the main character Lee always ending up diseased. The way in which he dies varies from getting shot out of mercy to turning into a 'walker' (zombie). Note that having only a single ending like this can add a meaning of its own, which in this case might be something along the lines of 'no matter what you do, this is inevitable.'

In short, one could suppose a lack of player influence on the outcome of the narrative points to a 'failure of the game as a game' by presenting the player with a "distinct story and a distinct game rather than a story told through a game" (Jurgensen, 2020, p. 75). However, depending on the context, a game might want to invoke a sense of 'uneasiness' regarding agency and the meaning of (moral) choice(s), at times going as far as to subvert expectations (Stang, 2019, p. 1; Van de Mosselaer & Gualeni, 2022, p. 66).

This chapter has focused mainly on showing how the interactive nature of videogames relates to certain important aspects like identification and immersion.

Furthermore, the aesthetic value of a videogame was linked to its ability to encourage players to engage with the game in such a way as to allow moral reflection. In the next chapter it will become clear how the use of gender stereotypes in videogames is related to these concepts.

3. Videogame aesthetics (2): aesthetics, gender and stereotypes

3.1. Gender stereotypes and videogames: the different realms of the problem

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, the next step in the argument is to ask where the use of stereotypes and its effect on a videogame's aesthetic value comes in. However, some distinctions about the use of stereotypes and the presence of sexism, in this particular context, need to be made first. More specifically, this regards the different 'dimensions' in which these can be found. Because, when talking about the use of female stereotypes and the issue of sexism within the context of the gaming world, there are roughly three: the 'real-life', the 'mixed', and the 'in-game' dimension.

The real-life dimension

The real-life dimension encompasses sexism in and around the gaming community as a whole. This type of sexism and/or harassment of female or 'other' gendered players is present outside of the game, but can influence how people choose to act in the game. For example, engagement with a game might feel limited, if the ability to explore one's (gender)identity suffers from external limitations, such as the expectation to conform to certain 'accepted' gender roles. Such a biased way of thinking also manifests itself outside of videogame environments (Brehm, 2013). An example is the lack of visibility regarding the presence of female professionals in the gaming industry (Heeter, 2014, pp. 396–397). Additionally, a woman is often seen as a female (gamer), as opposed to a (male) gamer.[24] Lastly, videogame marketing is often catered towards a 'heteronormative' male player base Promotional material is often seen to feature the male version of the player character as opposed to a female counterpart (Sarkeesian, 2013, 20:59). This once again solidifies the view of a male protagonist being the default or obvious choice.

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[24] In general, many people still seem to associate the term 'gamer' with someone who is a male-gendered player (Paaßen et al., 2017, p.421; Schiano et al., 2014, p.66). Moreover, it is interesting to note that female players seem to be less inclined to refer to themselves as gamers, when compared to male players (De Grove et al., 2015, p. 354; Kuss et al., 2022, pp. 5–6). So, it might be said that, in general, 'being a gamer' is more often part of someone's identity if that person is male, than if they were female.

The mixed dimension

Second, the mixed dimension is mainly concerned with sexism and harassment within the game itself, done by and to real players. Different from the real-life dimension, the mixed dimension is categorized by in-game behavior, such as harassment or sexual assault. MMORPG's or other forms of online gaming, for example, often include gender customization options (Brehm, 2013). However, freedom of choice is often limited. Women might be forced to play as a male character, in fear of experiencing in-game harassment from other players if she were to choose a female avatar. Additionally, a male player might pick a male character, because playing as a girl might be perceived as feminine by himself or other male players. Thus, gender-based stigmatization can transfer between in-game worlds and the real world. Whilst this 'external' issue does not necessarily affect the aesthetic value of the game (as a videogame) *as such*, i.e., when looking at the medium itself, the normalization of sexist attitudes in the real world could have an effect on whether or not people recognize that this type of value is present and are able to appreciate the experience as an aesthetically (and therefore morally) valuable one.

Furthermore, cases of virtual sexual assault have been known to occur (Danaher, 2022). There are instances of players' avatars being exposed to undesired sexual remarks, interactions or even virtual rape in many online games, such as *World of Warcraft*, after which victims might suffer mental health issues (Schott, 2017*)*. Then, the condonement of online (sexual) harassment might lead to a more accepted attitude regarding such behavior in the real world.

The in-game dimension

The third and final - in-game - dimension has to do with the in-game portrayal of female stereotypes and the use of tropes. This can range anywhere from (player) interactions with NPC's and the environment to avatar customization options or the role of certain characters within the story, not necessarily influenced by factors outside of the game itself, i.e., members of a gaming community or players that engage in online gaming.

An example of such an in-game issue is the seemingly oversimplification of gender as a 'ranked' dichotomy. Other than the fact that gender is often not as simple as either male or female, the male option is often still portrayed as the default option

for playing the game. For example, in the MMORPG *World of Warcraft*'s latest patch the options for gender remain mostly the same appearance-wise, namely the avatar can either be 'male' or 'female' (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004). The change lies in the labels and icons given to the option. The icons have changed from the Mars symbol and the Venus symbol to what is more commonly seen as a masculine outline and what is generally thought of as a female silhouette. These two options are labeled 'body 1' and 'body 2', expressing either a masculine or feminine appearance respectively. In the end, this only works to emphasize the concept of gender as a dichotomy and the idea that the masculine appearance is the first or default setting. So, giving players the choice between playing as a male or female character does not automatically lead to a more inclusive environment, a better portrayal of female characters, or a solution to any other related issues.[25]

Additionally, the assignment of certain characteristics to a particular gender(identity) in general might impact the player's ability to be able to identify with or explore their own identity through controlling the playable avatar. An example of this, is the way how 'cross-dressing' is treated in *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Somerton, 2022, sec. Part Three-Homo Hyrule). In this game the playable character Link can unlock an outfit that is usually reserved for a certain group of in-game characters that is exclusively made up out of female characters. If Link, or the player, chooses to wear the outfit nothing much will happen story wise. The only noticeable difference are some odd looks from some of the non-playable characters that you encounter in the world. However, in another game from the series, *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*, the opposite is true. In this story it is Princess Zelda who dresses in what is seemingly deemed as masculine clothing. After taking off her disguise however, she is almost immediately kidnapped by the villain.

This might, albeit implicitly, convey a message to players that even though men are not supposed to dress 'feminine' they nonetheless remain themselves, for

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[25] As briefly mentioned with 'the mixed dimension', the absence of an inclusive environment might affect the ability of (some) players to appreciate the (aesthetic value of) the game or cause them to misinterpret what exactly the use of stereotypes within the game could be trying to teach them or make them (morally) reflect on. So, it might be noted that it could be important or at least interesting to think about whether, in addition to the question regarding stereotypes and their influence on aesthetic value, a work's aesthetic value and the opportunity for 'genuine' moral reflection is influenced by the ability of the player to properly appreciate the work of art (by willing to recognize it as such). Again, this does not answer the main question directly, but does deem important when one thinks about the purpose of the art, i.e., even if it has aesthetic value (in the context of this paper, influenced by the manner in which stereotypes might or might not be used), but cannot be appreciated as a result.

the most part. This is in contrast to women seemingly gaining 'masculine' traits when dressed as men, but falling back into their gender assigned roles once they are revealed to be a woman in disguise after changing back into a more feminine outfit. In short, this example shows how, although not necessarily normal or desired, the narrative is still quite 'forgiving' when a man dresses up 'as a woman' (at least for the purpose of disguising himself). And the same cannot - not always, but often - be said in the case of the reverse being true, i.e., in the case of Princess Zelda.

3.2. A meaningful use of stereotypes

> (…) interactive fictions can support fictional agency – they allow their players to shape the relevant work's contents by taking-up the role of active agents within the world of the fiction. And this fictional agency can be used to help fill the experience gap.
> (Cawston & Wildman, 2022, p. 115)

A videogame's interactive nature allows its players to act within the story, so they are able to take action and to feel some sense of responsibility regarding the actions performed.

Following the importance of 'actually doing something', not all use of stereotypes is necessarily a bad thing. If stereotypes are used in the game in a purposeful way, they might serve to send a message to the player. For example, 'why can I (not) do this (be someone or perform some action)?' or 'why am I treated a certain way (… because you, the character, is a woman)?'. In other words, the typical (male) gamer might gain some sort of perspective on issues concerning sexism by stepping into the shoes of a female player. Through the interactive experience, the player might then become more aware of how many women are still wrongly portrayed, and moreover actually gain some sort of first-hand experience with the problem, making it more real and less abstract. That is to say, the player would be directly confronted with the issue at hand, as opposed to it simply existing without affecting him in a direct manner or on a deeper moral and emotional level.

Such a form of moral education - letting players experience the other side of the coin - would lend itself to enhancing the aesthetic value, because it allows people to gain a sense of empathy and become not only more appreciative of the singular elements but of the game as a whole, while also undergoing character development

themselves. And said character development, i.e., pertaining to moral self-evaluation and gaining perspective through the development of aspects of the self, such as empathy, leads to an artistic value as opposed to a 'mere' personal or nostalgic value. That is, because art is meant to make us think about not only its meaning *as such*, but also has a purpose in allowing someone to gain perspective in their own standpoint regarding personal morals and societal issues. In that sense, deliberate use of stereotypes might contain some form of moral education by attempting to make someone undergo a certain problematic experience and therefore allowing this person to acknowledge and better understand the position of the other. In turn, this might add to the aesthetic experience by allowing the player to question their own beliefs, gain more insight into the struggles of others, and by doing so undergoing character development and identity exploration through that 'shift in perspective'.

A possible objection to the idea of deliberately including stereotypical characterizations of women in videogames, i.e., to achieve that the player comes into contact with and experiences in some way a situation or certain conditions that do not normally apply to him, is the risk of an absence of some sort of uptake. If the player does not understand that he is supposed to gain some kind of perspective or fails to understand that any deeper message is present, the tropes which are used might portray to him that this is indeed what women are like in real-life. However, this issue is not easily resolved, as each individual person might think differently regarding his or her experience. Then, this might just be a downfall that is to be expected and has to be accepted to some degree. A brief example to illustrate how the 'uptake can fail' can be found in any media, be it a videogame, visual novel, television show, etc., that portray a post-apocalyptic world that is inhabited by zombies or some other form of infected lifeforms, who were once people. One could say that 'this show is about zombies' (seeing the trope), or even 'some sort of zombie plague could break out in the future' (the trope as a 'wrongfully interpreted' analogy to real-life), while another might say that 'it gives a critique on society as a whole, disguised as a zombie show' (understanding that commentary on an existing issue is present beyond what is presented on the surface).

Then, if the uptake fails, there might be a lack of understanding in regards to the message, which the use of stereotypes was meant to convey to the player. In turn, this might leave the player feeling none the wiser and by the absence of genuine

appreciation, since no new perspective or opportunity for exploration of the self was gained here, the aesthetic value as a whole might suffer. Though, as mentioned before, it might be debatable if the artwork's value as art is directly influenced by a failed or successful uptake, considering the fact that the work in question might give its audience the opportunity for moral reflection even if that opportunity is not fully utilized by a part of the audience. Another related question is in regard to the possibility of an 'unintentional uptake', i.e., the audience perceiving a (moral) message to be present that was not put there by the game developers or writers. For example, if *Metal Gear Solid V*'s female character Quiet wearing a bikini - because she supposedly breaths through her skin, whilst *Metal Gear Solid 3*'s male character The End did not, though he supposedly breaths through his skin as well - makes one question whether or not this is just tasteless fanservice or social commentary on the sexualization of women, one certainly seems to gain something from their experience in terms of moral or ethical reflection regarding these kinds of gender-based normalizations of the different ways of portraying female-presenting and male-presenting characters (Schreier, 2015).[26]

Perhaps a more 'nuanced' presentation could offer or at least bring us closer to a possible solution. We might switch around the way in which characters are often portrayed by including a purposeful use of tropes applied to the portrayal of male characters. We might for example consider implementing male characters that are significantly weaker than their female counterparts, not to necessarily lift up the female characters, but to serve as a mirror to the treatment of female characters.

Another way to go about this could be to try finding a 'balance' in regards to using some stereotypical behavior to mirror how such behavior can be present outside the game world as well. For example, a character who is made comically strong might come across as just another overpowered videogame character, as opposed to portraying a strong and relatable female protagonist. In *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (Ubisoft Sofia, 2012), the main character Aveline is an example of how a

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[26] Perhaps we might say whether or not the failure or success of the uptake – and its 'intended content' – affects the art (as art) directly is influenced by a player's ability to engage with the game without getting overly distracted by the (undeliberate) absurdity regarding gender stereotypical portrayals of characters. However, since this paper is mostly concerned with the in-game dimension, i.e., the (narrative) elements that are present within the game world itself, this specific line of thought will not be explored in further detail as of now. (See also §*1.3* and §*2.2*).

'balanced' character might be portrayed. During the game, she can take on 'The Lady Persona', which consists of her wearing a dress with a rather large skirt. A disadvantage of adopting this persona is that Aveline cannot sprint as fast as she usually would. If she were still to be able to do so it would only come across as her being overpowered, because the dress would likely get in the way. So, if she were to sprint in the dress, at the same capacity as usual, it might paint a picture of her as a fictional woman having fictional capabilities and might fictionalize the concept of powerful women in general. However, this persona still has its advantages, for example by allowing Aveline to carry around a parasol gun or charming guards. Since, the charming of the guards is explained as being part of a persona Aveline quite literally puts on, the 'negative' trope of a flirty woman is utilized both as a coherent part of the videogame pertaining to both the fiction and gameplay, whilst making the player question the motivations to act in such a way. Thus, making sure not to create a sense of ludo-narrative dissonance - referring to a 'clash' between what can be done through gameplay and what is told by the narrative (Paez, 2020) - by portraying female characters as having certain disadvantages within the story's context, while also showing them to be able to overcome those disadvantages.

In other words, not all stereotypical characterizations need to be exaggerated tropes. An example of this is also present in Telltale's *The Walking Dead: A New Frontier* (2020), in which a male character is "stereotypically" uncomfortable when a female character talks about having her period. Whilst this might be generally the case, (presumably) not all men are uncomfortable with this topic. In any case, including this moment in the game shows how such a topic might be considered taboo, but also (albeit implicitly) shows some form of 'sexism', in that female 'issues' should not be talked about.

This might again encourage the player to think about how the character is treated because of their (gender) identity and gain some perspective through exploring their own views and experiencing certain (gender-related) hardships from someone else's perspective. By then comparing the other's perspective with one's own perspective, he (or she) might then be able to further explore his or her own identity – especially in relation to what it means to be someone (else) – as well, adding to the aesthetic value of the experience through the acquiring of self-knowledge, which is also relevant when put into a broader perspective, i.e., that of people who identify

differently from the person in question and in relation to how certain (sexist) ideas are imbedded into society at large and one's own views on the matter.

The importance of this opportunity to 'step into someone else's shoes' also illustrates why the utilization of 'gender blindness' does not classify as a way to subvert gender roles. In other words, treating all genders as if they were all the same does not work to subvert gender norms, as is shown by the attempt to do so by the developers of *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2020). Within this installment of the Assassin's Creed series the player controls Eivor, who is female according to canon, but can be changed to resemble either a female or a male character at any point in the game if the player wishes to do so. However, the main character being treated the exact same way regardless of gender could send out the message that the aforementioned issues related to sexism are not present or important, exactly because of the game not acknowledging that gender is not only about someone's physical appearance. An earlier title in the series, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2015), makes a better attempt at creating a nuanced portrayal, by having two playable protagonists, one of which is male and one of which is female. Both of these characters have their own weaknesses and strengths that fit with their personalities and work in the overall narrative. In other words, utilizing gender blindness to try and avoid stereotyping might have the opposite effect, since it goes to show that dialogue does not really matter, i.e., a man or woman saying the same thing is treated no different, whilst in reality that is often not the case (Euteneuer, 2016, p. 121).

A more 'nuanced' use of gender stereotypes could also be used to illustrate character development, which in turn adds to the overall experience by presenting the player with a character that is developed and 'relatable'.[27] The portrayal of a character as having certain stereotypical traits, next to developing their 'non-stereotypical' or (personal) character traits, also illustrates how someone's behavior is related to their gender(identity) and vice versa, without defining them as a person.[28] Take for example the (non-playable) character Sadie Adler in *Red Dead*

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[27] See also §2.2.
[28] Meaning that the gender one identifies with is a part of who that person is, as opposed to it being all there is to a person.

Redemption 2 (Rockstar Studios, 2018).[29] Her character is first introduced as rather whiny, since she can be found crying and complaining a number of times while the player walks past. The main reason for this being that her husband was killed quite early in the narrative. As the story progresses, she becomes braver, but sometimes borders on being 'unhinged' in her actions, which hints at her being portrayed as a 'hysterical woman' (TV Tropes, n.d.). Yet, she is not 'hysterical' just for the sake of being so.[30] Sadie's trauma is part of her character development. It is not simply there for shock value, but instead offers an explanation of how she moved on from her traumatic experience and grew as a person. As such, there is some sense of meaning to be found by using a rather stereotypical portrayal of women's emotions, by having it serve not only the narrative but the character itself, to highlight there is more to someone's character than their experiences or actions alone.[31] It is also of importance how these things can shape a person's perspective. When confronted with deliberately embedded (gender) stereotypes the player can be taught not to have beliefs like 'she behaves in such and such ways because of her womanhood' or 'she conforms to such and such gender tropes'. Instead, they are encouraged to ask questions, such as 'if someone does adhere to some stereotype, what are the reasons for them to have become such and such way?'

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[29] A nuanced use of gender stereotypes is also found in *Red Dead Redemption 2*'s player character, Arthur Morgan. Arthur's character at the start of the story can be said to contain "clear masculine codes signifying his strength and propensity for violence" (Henley, 2020). However, his character development sees him becoming a more rounded or developed character, showing signs of vulnerability that breaks with the view that 'only (toxic) masculinity is manly'.

[30] The opposite - regarding the portrayal and use of trauma within the narrative – is true for the games made by David Cage. Recall that in, for example, *Beyond: Two Souls* (Quantic Dream, 2013) the main protagonist can always end up in a romantic relationship with the main love interest, regardless of decisions made by the player. This is even more jarring if the player comes across an almost unavoidable – in that the game pushes the player towards this path – scenario during which she almost gets raped. However, the only consequence of this traumatic event is that she does not sleep with the main love interest on a single occasion later in the story. So, there is no 'pay-off', because the traumatic event is just there to 'take up space' as it were.

[31] An interesting side note here is that in a study by Desai et al. (2017) it was found that female players appreciate the portrayal of complex behaviors by videogame characters more than their male counterparts. Additionally, the ability to identify emotions showed no noticeable difference for either male or female gamers, with the only exception being anger. Females showed a significantly better ability to identify angry characters in comparison to males. So, female players are both more successful in identifying emotions related to anger and have a preference that in-game characters show complex behaviors. Thus, suspension of disbelief might also be harder for female players to accept, since more complex behaviors might be akin to the expression of realistic behavior (i.e., not strictly conforming to gender roles or the use of stereotypes). Again, in this case the portrayal of an 'angry female character' can add to the value of the game when it serves a purpose beyond merely existing as such.

This line of thought also holds true when thinking about a character's clothing or overall appearance. A character can be portrayed as 'sexy for the sake of being sexy' - i.e., Lara Croft in most early games from the *Tomb Raider* series (Core Design, 1996–2003) - or they might not be characterized by any gender trope - as is the case with *Beyond Good & Evil's* (Ubisoft Pictures; Ubisoft Milan, 2003) protagonist Jade - by preferring to wear cargo pants over skimpy shorts. However, a 'balanced' use of stereotyping might be a good alternative, if a character's sexualization has a role in the story by adding a 'layer' to their characterization or motives. *Disco Elysium's* Klaasje, for example, "exudes sex and finds [herself] in troubling situations, [but the] use of [her as] a sensual character is able to say something – both narratively and mechanically (Van Den Elzen, 2022) – in the story" (uricksaladbar, 2022, sec. Disco Elysium's Klaasje - By Hirotonfa).

However, it is not necessary for gender stereotypes to be used in a nuanced way or to be shown in contrast with non-stereotypical portrayals, for them to be 'positive'.[32] For example, gender tropes could be used to make the player's purpose or aim very one dimensional, which in turn serves to force the player to think about their 'endgame' and what they have to do to get there. In other words, by using gender tropes the player's actions might – in some cases – become less justifiable, since there is a disconnect when one thinks about the reasoning behind their actions and the consequences of their choices. For instance, in *Shadow of the Colossus* (Japan Studio; Team Ico, 2005), the player might feel a sense of immersion stemming from both the narrative aspect as well as the play itself that is involved. From a narrative point of view, the player is tasked with saving a girl he presumably loves or cares deeply for, by slaying a number of enemies called Colossi. However, since these Colossi do not seem to have bothered anyone from what the player can tell, the most prominent emotion here might be guilt or disgust at having to kill them.[33] Although this is only one interpretation, the sense one could get from a combination of feelings from narrative as well as play aspects, is that of internal conflict. One on hand the main character wants to save the 'princess', while the player feels more and more guilt over having to kill the 'enemies'. The character of the princess here is used

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[32] I.e., for the use of gender stereotypes to add to the videogame's (aesthetic) value.
[33] The controller also vibrates to illustrate the strength it takes to do this as well as the Colossus' struggle to shake the player off - since most of them are so large in size climbing them is the only way to get to the weak points – adding to the player's feeling of *active engagement* in the narrative.

solely as the main character's motivation to go on his quest, while for the player she serves as both a plot device (i.e., curiosity as to if she will be saved) and a way to almost confront the player with their actions. Since she is a flat character, the conflict here is not strictly between wanting to save her, but having to kill the Colossi. Instead, she becomes more of a background in the conflict between the player and the player character and the decision whether to keep playing to see the story come to an end or to give up because your actions are morally questionable. This allows for a quite interesting perspective in which there is both a sense of immersion - the player feels responsible for the player character's actions - as well as a sense of disconnect from the player characters, because the player is the one who questions his actions while the main character only (seems to) feel determined. If the typical 'saving a deceased loved one, often a woman, by doing such and such to bring back their soul' trope was not used, the player might not have felt as much conflict, because they too might have been motivated to bring the princess back to life if she was a fully developed character.[34] And in turn, the moral dubiousness of the player (character) might have made for a weaker narrative in that their actions would be or feel more justified.

3.3. Conclusion

This chapter primarily focused on the way in which someone's (gender)identity and the playable character in a videogame could be related, as well as how certain gender stereotypes and ideas about gender roles have the ability to transfer from the real world into the game world and vice versa. Additionally, it was addressed how online harassment and offline harassment that stem from sexism can feed into each other, resulting in the risk of excluding female gamers form the gaming community at large and justifying the normalization of both the online and offline expression of sexism. So, the portrayal of gender stereotypes in videogames, especially those in which avatars can be created by the player, caused by existing beliefs that are sexist in nature might serve as a reinforcement of those ideas. Then, by having such portrayals be present in the game, these sexist views might transfer back into the broader world outside of the game, thereby only strengthening them further.

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[34] Also known as *Damsel in the Refrigerator*, this trope "(…) occurs when the hero's sweetheart is brutally murdered and her soul is then trapped or abducted by the villain" (Feminist Frequency, 2016).

In short, it appears that the use of gender stereotypes has a mostly negative effect on the gaming experience as a whole, at least in the context of online games that feature a customizable avatar and allow for the player to choose whether that character is either male or female. Nevertheless, as has been addressed, even if multiple (non-stereotypical) gender options are present, the in-game environment and community surrounding it often do not provide a safe space for people to fully explore all options regarding their choice of gender. Though gender stereotypes might prove to not be exclusively negative in all cases, if they are used thoughtlessly they enhance existing sexist ideas and cause a sort of narrowness when it comes to being able to express oneself freely (and as a part of the community) Thus, it hurts the game's aesthetic value by making some players unable to explore their identity freely and subsequently not allowing for an engaging experience, through which (moral) reflection is possible.

However, there might be one 'positive' aspect that can come from the sexism that is present here, if those who usually fill the role of the 'alpha male' so to speak, are to be placed in the shoes of the ones who have to deal with the numerous forms of (sexual) harassment. By, for example, having a man play as a female character, without revealing he is a man, he could experience a fraction of what it is like to be a member of the oppressed party. There then exists a meaning outside of the narrative itself, namely that of confronting privileged players that do not usually have to deal with the issues surrounding sexism as were discussed here with the perspective of those who are forced to face such problems on a regular basis. Thus, it seems plausible that there is at least some sense of appreciation to be had here by creating in a way a narrative outside of the narrative. The experience itself then becomes more about how the player feels about himself, rather than about how he or she feels about any specific videogame (character) in particular.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Summary

This paper aimed to formulate an answer to the question to what extent the use of stereotypical portrayals of female characters in videogames might be able to either enhance or decrease its aesthetic value.

A videogame's aesthetic value, within the context of the paper, depends on its ability to allow its player to have an immersive experience on which they can reflect upon themselves, and more specifically use that to explore their identities and question their moral convictions. Throughout the paper a number of examples were used to illustrate how the use of gender stereotypes, in the form of tropes used when portraying (mainly) female characters in videogames, can affect a game's aesthetic value.

It was shown how player identification with fictional characters might bleed black and forth between the game world and the real world and how outside influences such as established beliefs of sexism can restrict someone's ability to explore their identity. Often people cannot be who they want to be and might not have the possibility to see themselves in the player character, which in turn impacts the experience's aesthetic value in that it does not allow for further moral deliberation pertaining to oneself. Cases of virtual sexual assault and harassment were also briefly discussed, since the identification that could have been present before such situations might have been lost by experiencing these events.

Additionally, it was shown how game mechanics do not always allow the player to make the 'right' decisions. Moreover, the relationship between fiction and gameplay was considered, as well as the concept of ludo-narrative dissonance and how the way in which certain portrayals of female characters were portrayed in the narrative was supported by the mechanics. Videogames that do not allow for ludo-narrative dissonance, i.e., if the fiction and gameplay do not conflict with one another, might allow for a more immersive experience. However, one could argue that the presence of ludo-narrative dissonance, because of the sense of disconnect, might highlight how 'ridiculous' some stereotypical portrayals might be.

Lastly, the notions of sentiment, nostalgia and personal value were touched upon. On the one hand, this was meant to give some nuance to the value of videogames by clarifying that the absence of aesthetic value does not equal a lack of any and all value overall. At the same time however, it should be remembered that something that has personal value might not have artistic value and that even if something does have artistic value, that personal value almost always plays some kind of role, resulting in the experience itself being different depending on the player.

In conclusion, the use of stereotypical portrayals and gender tropes, in particular those regarding female characters, might either enhance or decrease the aesthetic value of the videogame. If avoided, one might be able to feel more immersed in the game world and thus be able to explore one's identity and reflect on the moral choices they make. If used deliberately, the inclusion of such tropes might be able to tell a meaningful story or send a message about social relations and gender.[35]

4.2. Discussion: suggestions for future research

Naturally, in regards to this paper's subject of gender stereotypes and videogame aesthetics, not all possible questions were asked here, nor all possible answers considered. In other words, there were some assumptions made that could be questioned. For example, the relation between a videogame's aesthetic value and presenting the player with a means of identification or moral reflection was assumed to be true. However, one can ask whether or not artistic value is related to the sphere of moral deliberation (and if it is, in what way). Additionally, this paper focused (mainly) on the use of gender stereotypes of characters that were portrayed as female. It might then be interesting to look (in more detail) at 'other gendered', including but not limited to tropes regarding male characters, (stereotypical or biased) portrayals of videogame characters in future research.

Moreover, this paper briefly touched upon the notion of personal meaning or value and how it differs from aesthetic value. Within the context of this paper, personal value was linked primarily to feelings of nostalgia and the experience of emotions, not necessarily related to further moral reflection, but more attention might be brought to this subject in further research. To clarify, it could be an interesting

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[35] Again, whether this is true or not is debatable (e.g., see the last point in §4.2).

starting point to look at how personal value might influence a player's appreciation of a videogame – fitting with this theme, in particular with regards to videogames containing certain stereotypical 'gendered' portrayals of its characters - through feelings of nostalgia or other emotions.

Lasty, the question of whether or not the (failure of) uptake of the message of a work of art directly influences its value has been brought up a number of times, but has been left mostly unanswered as of yet. Perhaps this would also make for a topic of interest for further research. In addition to the question regarding the influence of the uptake failing or succeeding, it could be interesting to look into how the presence of 'unthoughtful' gender-based stereotypes might cause an 'uptake' in the audience, without the developers or writers of the game actually having deliberately meant for the audience to take away any particular message from their specific use of stereotypical portrayals in said videogame.

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