Gameboys and Gadget Girls: Separate Spaces, Parallel Play

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Abstract

Even though women play video games in nearly equal numbers to men, play a variety of games ranging from 'hardcore' AAA games to 'casual' mobile games, and dedicate a significant amount of time to play, many women are still unwilling to identify as 'gamers' and claim membership within the larger gaming community. Gendered marketing practices in the industry may play a role by impacting the consumption preferences of women, which in turn impacts the way that they view their position in the community.

In Chapter 1: Masculine Market and Gaming Girls, I give an overview of the history of video game marketing and how it came to be focused primarily on a masculine audience. I then offer a description of what types of games are typically marketed toward men and women respectively as well as the types of games that existing research suggests women predominantly play

In Chapter 2: Consoles and PCs and Phones, (Oh My!), I discuss my content analysis of video game covers across platforms. The content analysis is broken down into six sections. Together, all these codes serve to distinguish each of the 60 video game covers analyzed as marketed toward either a feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral audience.

In Chapter 3, "Put some clothes on. Go read a book.", I detail my interviews with 6 women who identified as frequent video game players. I asked the women about their gaming preferences and tried to determine whether they identified as members of the larger gaming community.

Finally, using a mixed methods approach I compare the results of the content analysis and interviews to determine how production companies might attract more feminine players.

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Introduction

On March 20th, 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 Pandemic, Nintendo released *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* to worldwide acclaim. The title sold more than 13 million copies in the first six weeks, (11.77 million of which sold in the first 11 days) making it the fastest-selling title ever for the Nintendo Switch (Browne, 2020). By March of 2021, the title had officially sold 35.9 million copies worldwide. Despite its immense success, many self-described 'gamers' do not believe that it counts as a 'real' game because it features 'cute' cartoon graphics, simple controls, and a relaxed, forgiving narrative (Chess, 2017).

This is problematic for many reasons – the most prevalent being that *ACNH* is often perceived by those same players as a 'girl's game' (JustAnotherStrange, 2020). This positions 'girl's games' as somehow less valuable than more traditionally masculine games like *Call of Duty* (Chess, 2017). This rhetoric has long existed in all walks of life; childcare and housekeeping are labelled 'women's work', romantic comedies are denigrated as 'chick flicks', and soap operas (which are targeted at housewives) are often called overly dramatic, silly, and technically 'bad'. When we consistently label women's work and women's media as 'less-than' we imply that women are somehow less than men- *less* serious, *less* profitable, *less* important.

"Girls' games" are every bit as beneficial to players as more traditionally 'masculine' ones. In the case of the global COVID-19 Pandemic, one 'girls' game', *Animal Crossing New Horizons*, was instrumental in helping many players–including men!–find comfort amid the crisis. Some might argue that this would be true of any game, but the statistics say otherwise; *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* and *Ring Fit Adventure* (both Nintendo) were also released during the pandemic, but only sold a joint 18 million copies during their first year–a stark 25 million copies

behind *ACNH* (Hashimoto). Clearly, there was something unique about *ACNH* that made it particularly appealing to audiences during this time.

ACNH functioned as a transitional object for players because of its laid-back atmosphere and comforting gameplay mechanics (Silverstone, 1994). Transitional objects, according to Silverstone, are comfort items/safety blankets that help people maintain ontological security during times of stress. In this case, *ACNH*'s laid-back atmosphere and comforting gameplay mechanics made it an ideal escape for players during the pandemic. *ACNH* is the fifth installment of the *Animal Crossing* series and is part of the life simulation genre (Pearce, 2021). This means that play revolves around remediating everyday life (Apperley, 2006) with tasks like decorating, speaking to neighbors, fishing, designing clothes, harvesting fruit from trees, hunting fossils, catching bugs, farming, and cooking.

ACNH's promotional materials advertise the game as a luxurious, peaceful, island escape. One poster asks, "Why not start a new life on a deserted island?" (Justin, 2019) and another exclaims, "Your island adventure awaits!" (fenyxgamesandcollectibles, 2021). In the first trailer for the game, released at Nintendo E3 in 2019, a voice exclaims over a black screen, "Your attention, please. The Nook Inc. Getaway Package Charter Flight will soon be arriving at the deserted island." Then, the rhythmic sound of calm waves is heard as the dark screen fades away to reveal a round figure dressed in flip-flops and a Hawaiian shirt walking slowly on a brightly colored beach. The trailer cuts to an image of the same figure standing at the end of a rocky outcrop overlooking the ocean at sunset (Nintendo, 2019). Alongside the tagline, "Deserted Island Getaway Package", right away, these images tell the audience that *ACNH* is a gateway to peace and relaxation amidst an increasingly stressful reality.

While the game does have an overarching goal (to achieve a 5-star island rating), there are no negative consequences for not reaching this goal. A player could spend hours running around their island making no discernable 'progress' and the game would carry on with no negative repercussions. Interestingly, features in previous installments of the franchise that could be construed as disciplinary, such as the lack of an auto-save feature, were removed from *ACNH*. This shows evidence of what Scannel refers to as a structure of care (Scannel, 2014). They tried to make the game as easy-going and pleasant for the player as possible. This is further evidenced by the 25 updates released between March 2020 and December 2021—12 of which (11 free) added sizable additional content (Nookipedia, 2021). Throughout the height of the pandemic, the developers paid close attention to what players wanted to see change and did their utmost to deliver.

Based on Ubisoft and EA's practices regarding predatory microtransactions (and similarly, those of other companies) and because Nintendo did *not* construct unnecessary paywalls surrounding *ACNH* updates, it is my opinion that their marketing tactics and decisions regarding *Animal Crossing*'s release were not malicious nor solely financially driven. I argue that the team in charge of *ACNH* (and Nintendo by extension) were part of a care structure that intentionally helped their audience cope with the traumas of the Covid-19 Pandemic. This care-structure is further evidenced by the fact that many updates delivered content that was directly asked for by players on social media (Reynolds, 2021). For example, the latest update included the introduction of Brewster, a beloved character from previous games who had been noticeably absent in *New Horizons*. After months of social media fervor over Brewster's absence, he was finally added to the game alongside other highly requested features such as cooking and increased design-storage (Reynolds, 2021).

Many claim that *ACNH* also provides players with a sense of community (Liao, 2020; Wedding Season, 2021). There are several special events in the game marking real world holidays/celebrations that, in many cases, were not celebrated normally due to the pandemic. For example, on the player's birthday, their island's residents throw them a party complete with cupcakes and confetti. I personally remember feeling comforted by this given that my own real-world birthday could not be celebrated as it normally would. Interestingly, wedding season was introduced on April 23rd, 2020, after numerous social media posts about in-game weddings went viral (Wedding Season, 2021). Due to Covid-19, many 2020-2021 weddings were postponed and, as a result, some *ACNH* players held virtual ceremonies in the meantime (Liao, 2020). In the case of weddings, and in the case of other postponed events such as graduation ceremonies real world rituals were replaced by virtual ones. Friends and extended family who could not visit due to travel restrictions were able to visit their loved ones through the game – in other words, communities were formed and strengthened in a way that would not have been otherwise possible.

Given the benefits and popularity of games like *Animal Crossing New Horizons*, why is it that so many 'gamers' still don't consider them 'real' games (JustAnotherStrange, 2020)? And why is it that so many women who play *ACNH* -alongside a plethora of traditionally 'masculine' games- still don't consider themselves to be 'real' gamers? By all accounts, women who spend many hours a week playing video games of any kind should be able to call themselves gamers, yet in my experience this is hardly ever the case. Clearly there is a disconnect between how women view themselves and the games they play and how they view the larger gaming community.

In this thesis, I aim to uncover the reasons that women are still reluctant to identify as members of the gaming community despite prolific engagement with games as well as the relationship between gendered marketing materials and the types of games that women choose to play. I hypothesize that a lack of feminine representation in marketing materials of AAA games will lead women to overlook them when choosing which games to purchase. Because of this and based on existing research regarding feminine gaming preferences, I also theorize that women will engage most frequently with games like *Animal Crossing New Horizons* and *Stardew Valley* as well as mobile games like *Candy Crush Saga* (Chess, 2017).

Research Questions and Methodology

My main research question is "How do women situate themselves within the larger gaming community in relation to the types of games they choose to play?" With that larger question in mind, other questions I seek to answer include: "How does marketing impact the types of games women play?", "How does gender-specific marketing vary across different major video game retailers and how might this impact the gaming-systems women choose to purchase?", "Do women tend to identify themselves as 'gamers?'", and "What kinds of games do women play and why?".

To answer the first two questions, I conducted a content analysis of 60 video game covers from 6 different online stores: Google Play (Android), Apple's App Store, Steam (PC), Microsoft Store (Xbox Series X), PlayStation Store (PS5), and the Nintendo eShop (Switch). I coded each cover for gender cues to discern whether their intended audience was feminine, masculine or gender-neutral using Chess's reports on current industry standards. As mentioned earlier, literature is sparse concerning industry marketing practices, so it was necessary to put my

results in conversation with Chess's research (the only existing literature on the subject I could find). Using this information, I was able to determine that Nintendo, Xbox, and PlayStation games are still being primarily marketed to a masculine audience, Steam (PC) and Apple (mobile) are being marketed to gender-neutral audiences, and Android (mobile) is being marketed to a feminine audience.

To answer the second two questions and to determine whether consumption practices align with marketing practices, I then conducted one-on-one interviews with six women 18-30 years of age who identified as frequent video game players. The interview results indicate that women prefer gender-neutral games that feature non-sexualized women, character customization, and story-driven content as well as role-playing-games (RPGs). The women tended to avoid online multiplayer games for fear of harassment and when they did play these games, they had to develop strategies to cope with/avoid the harassment they faced. Overall, the participants were reluctant to identify as 'gamers' because they believed themselves to be lacking in skill/time dedication necessary to 'earn' the title.

Finally, using mixed methods approaches, I compared the results of the content analysis and interviews to try and determine how video game companies might make their games more appealing to women without making them less appealing to men. My results indicate that to attract women, companies should feature non-sexualized women or gender-neutral characters in marketing materials, use primarily bright/colorful palettes, and highlight themes that depict adventure and/or a story-based narrative featuring non-romantic human relationships. Because women prefer gender-neutral marketing over overtly feminine marketing, these practices should not alienate masculine audiences.

Chapter Layout

This thesis is organized into an introduction, three chapters covering background information, a literature review, a content analysis, and interviews - and a conclusion. In Chapter 1: Masculine Market and Gaming Girls, I give an overview of the history of video game marketing and how it came to be focused primarily on a masculine audience. I then offer a description of what types of games are typically marketed toward men and women respectively as well as the types of games that existing research suggests women predominantly play. I then explain how sexualization of women in games as well as harassment of real-life women by the gaming community serves to discourage some women from engaging with AAA games.

In Chapter 2: Consoles and PCs and Phones, (Oh My!), I discuss my content analysis of video game covers across platforms. The content analysis is broken down into six sections: presence of characters, humanity of characters, gender of characters, sexualization, violence, perceived theme, color palette, and graphics. Each of these categories is further broken down into relevant codes. Together, all these codes serve to distinguish each of the 60 video game covers analyzed (and on average, their platforms as a whole) as marketed toward either a feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral audience. At the end of the content analysis, I was able to determine (on a small scale) how each platform skewed regarding the gender of their intended audience.

In Chapter 3, "Put some clothes on. Go read a book.", I detail my interviews with 6 women who identified as frequent video game players. I asked the women about their gaming preferences and tried to determine whether they identified as members of the larger gaming community. It was important to determine what types of games the women typically played (and

why they played them) to see whether current marketing trends align with the interests of feminine players.

Finally, using a mixed methods approach I compare the results of the content analysis and interviews to determine how production companies might attract more feminine players. I also offer solutions to women who are interested in expanding their gaming libraries but are unsure of where to start (for fear of harassment, wariness of sexualization, or simple lack of exposure to different kinds of games).

Chapter 1: Masculine Market and Gaming Girls

In this chapter, I will draw upon discussions of gendered game genres, harassment, and feminine representation to ground my interview results and provide a brief background of the state of the field. I will then discuss previous research on gendered marketing practices to which I will later compare the results of my content analysis.

'Her'assment in Gaming

On July 20th, 2021, the state of California filed a lawsuit against game-production giant, Activision Blizzard (Paul, 2021). Activision Blizzard is most well known for their production of the *Call of Duty*, *World of Warcraft*, *Guitar Hero*, and *Candy Crush* games and their net worth was calculated at a whopping 80.05 billion dollars as of April 2021 (a record high since the two companies merged in 2008) (Forbes, 2022).

The lawsuit was filed by California's department of fair employment and housing (DFEH) against Activision Blizzard following a two-year investigation into the company, which revealed discrimination against women, discrimination against pregnant employees, sexual harassment, retaliation against female employees, and unequal pay (Betancourt, 2021). Several articles pertaining to the lawsuit have described Activision Blizzard as possessing a "frat boy culture" (Betancourt, 2021. Paul, 2021. Greenbaum, 2022.) with one highlighting "'cube crawls', which involved men drinking excessively as they crawled their way through various cubicles and engaged in inappropriate behavior towards the women" as particularly emblematic of the moniker (Betancourt, 2021).

Some of the more harrowing allegations included male employees (who made up 80% of the 9,500 members of the work force) openly joking about rape and their sexual 'conquests', a male supervisor allegedly telling "a male subordinate to 'buy' a prostitute to cure his bad mood"

(Betancourt, 2021), mothers being "routinely kicked out of lactation rooms so men could hold meetings" (Paul, 2021), women being criticized for leaving to pick up their children while men played (non-work-related) video games, and "male co-workers at a holiday party allegedly (passing) around nude photos of a female colleague" (Paul, 2021).

Unfortunately, harassment of women, POC, and members of the LGBTQ+ community has a long history in the gaming community and in the gaming industry. Perhaps the most notorious example of this phenomenon was GamerGate in 2014, during which verbal and physical attacks on feminine gamers, game creators, and game scholars were organized online (Chess & Shaw, 2015). GamerGate shook the gaming world, and the discourse surrounding it brought attention to what was not a new problem - a misogynistic undercurrent plaguing the community.

In summer 2014, a game creator named Zoe Quinn was accused online by her ex-boyfriend of trading sexual favors for positive game reviews. Although the accusation was baseless, it gained traction on certain corners of the internet including 4chan, now infamous for its association with misogyny and racism (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Actor Adam Baldwin was the first person to use the hashtag (#GamerGate) which spawned a widespread online movement targeting alleged corruption in games journalism in response to Quinn's supposed transgression (Chess & Shaw, 2015).

This "movement" led to extreme harassment of women in the gaming community including death threats, threats of rape, and doxing. Anita Sarkeesian famously became a target of this hatred when she created a GoFundMe account to sustain her production of videos offering feminist critiques of popular games (Jane, 2016). In August 2014, she was forced to flee her home after receiving death threats which contained the home addresses of her and her parents,

and in October that same year someone anonymously threatened to enact "the deadliest school shooting in American history" unless she cancelled a scheduled talk at Utah State University (Jane, 2016, pp. 286).

GamerGate was an incredibly well publicized instance of coordinated and consistent harassment in the gaming community. However, there are many everyday occurrences of harassment in gaming fueled by the same underlying hatred and misogyny that do not receive the same widespread public attention.

Prior to GamerGate, in 2011 scholar Kishonna Gray published a harrowing account of her experiences with misogynoir in gaming (Gray, 2011). She explained that she often played MMOGs because (among other things) she enjoyed the cooperation involved in fighting alongside other players rather than against them (Gray, 2011). However, Gray was always careful not to use her microphone, as she feared the backlash she might face if her race and gender were revealed. Unfortunately, occasionally, her fears came to fruition.

Gray detailed one experience in which she was tasked with protecting her guild leader and failed (due to his own foolhardiness). The leader began to chastise her and became frustrated with her lack of microphone, so she began to speak to avoid further upsetting him. Quickly, the conversation shifted from an attack on her skills as a player, to sexist attacks against Gray as a person; "Oh you guys hear this? That's why you suck. You're a fucking girl! What the fuck are you doing in my room?" (Gray, 2011). Soon after, the attacks became racist as well, with one player exclaiming,

Wait wait wait. You're not just any girl. You're black. Get this black bitch off my

team … Did you spend all your welfare check buying this game? … Get back to

your crack pipe with your crack babies (Gray, 2011).

Unfortunately, Gray's experience is not unique. Women, POC, and members of the LGBTQ+

community are routinely harassed in all areas of the video game world simply because they do

not fit the stereotypical idea of what a 'gamer' should be, and because those who *do* fit that ideal

feel threatened by them. Harassment of women in the gaming industry and of feminine players

goes hand in hand with the misrepresentation of feminine characters in games.

History of Sexualization in Games

In the 1970s and 1980s, the height of the arcade era, games ran on hardware that could

only produce minimalistic graphical depictions. While feminine and masculine characters were

both depicted on screen, the difference between genders was negligible. Perhaps the most iconic

example is Pac-man and Ms. Pac-man, who differ only in the addition of Ms. Pacman's red bow.

Because the graphics were so limited, in the 70's and 80's women could not be hyper-sexualized

in-game[1] as they were in the 1990's and often still are today (Cunningham, 2018). Despite this, a

masculine culture still arose in gaming to the exclusion of women.

Throughout the 1980s graphical processors became more advanced, and with them came

more sexualized depictions of both feminine and masculine characters. This trend continued well

into the 2000s with the introduction of the PlayStation and Xbox – produced by Sony and

Microsoft respectively (Cunningham, 2018). One of the most recognizable video game women

from this time is Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider*.

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[1] Notably, while Ms. Pac-man was not sexualized in game, she was still sexualized on the artwork that adorned the arcade machine itself.

Lara Croft has long been a source of debate in the video game industry. On one hand, she was a strong feminine lead in a time when these were few and far between. But at the same time, she was highly sexualized: known best for her oversized breasts, impossibly small waist, tiny shorts, and garters. This look lasted almost 20 years, from 1996 until 2015 when Lara's body became more realistically proportioned, and she was given pants to wear instead of shorts (Lowbridge, 2016). Some women praised Lara for showing them that they could be strong, athletic, and as capable as any man – while others felt misrepresented by the impossible body standards she emblemized.

One woman, Meagan Marie, explained in an interview with BBC News that her first reaction to seeing Lara Croft was one of joy – she felt represented and inspired by the character. She explained that many of her peers felt the same, stating, "I know so many women who talked about wanting to be an archaeologist or wanting to go into these other fields because Lara inspired them" (Lowbridge, 2016). The dichotomy between Lara Croft's status as both a sex symbol and a feminist symbol is still very much alive today – as will be discussed in Chapter 3. The sexualization of feminine characters in games did not end with Lara Croft, and most who are sexualized are not regarded as even remotely feminist. So, how did sexualization, misrepresentation, and underrepresentation of women in games become so abundant?

History of Gendered Video Game Marketing

Originally, video games were marketed toward *everyone* – not just men. Early games were marketed as fun things to do at the bar (other than drink) and were appealing to both men and women (Kocurek, 2015). In fact, there is even evidence to suggest that half of all profits for the arcade game, *Pong*, came from women (Kocurek, 2015). But as games shifted from bars to their own dedicated space, what Kocurek refers to as "technomasculinity" began to prevail

(2015). Advertisements glamorized gamers as "young, male, technologically savvy, bright, and mischievous" in a way that drew on a long history celebrating the technological achievements of boys and young men (Kocurek, 2015, pp 20). As more young men started piling into arcades, and as violence became a trademark of video games, moral panic surrounding arcades made young women feel less comfortable sharing the space (Kocurek, 2015). For the most part, it was never that women did not enjoy playing games – instead, they were driven out by the looming sense of impropriety surrounding arcade culture (Cunningham, 2018; Kocurek, 2015). As women began to avoid arcades, video game companies stopped targeting them as a desirable demographic (Cunningham, 2018). Thus began the trend that is still in place today.

Because media showed mostly men playing games, women began to believe that games were made for men to their deliberate exclusion (Chess, 2017; Cunningham, 2018; Newman, 2017). Even when women *were* included in marketing materials, it was done in a way that still clearly depicted boys and young men as the primary audience (Newman, 2017). Newman offers an Atari commercial from the late 1970's which clearly illustrates this trend. The commercial featured the following jingle:

> Did you play with a friend on a rainy day?
>
> Did you play with your dad?
>
> Did you show him the way?
>
> Did you play with your sis?
>
> Did your mom always miss?
>
> Did you play a game from Atari?
>
> Have you played Atari today? (Newman, 2017, 73.)

The commercial mentions every member of the family – the son, Dad, Sis, and Mom. But it specifically addresses the son, letting us know that he is the one in charge. Dad needed to be taught how to play the game (the son alone is a natural expert, capable of teaching others) and Mom was hopelessly incapable of playing even after being taught. Sis is hardly mentioned – she might be good at the game, but we don't get to know – the focus, after all, is on the boy. Girls might be willing to play, even capable of playing well (unlikely based on how poorly Mom did), but at the end of the day the message is clear – Atari is a boy's game.

This marketing trend continued well into the 90's and – as I will later discuss – into today. In 1989, Nintendo released the Game Boy Pocket (better known simply as the Game Boy). Cunningham explains that while this device came loaded with Tetris, a game popular with boys and girls, naming the device Game *Boy* signaled very clearly to consumers who the product was for (2018). Despite this, many girls did play the Game Boy and by 1995 Nintendo had announced that 46% of Game Boy users were women (Stuart, 2014). Despite this statistic, it took another 9 years for Nintendo to announce a Game Boy "just for girls" – the Game Boy Advance SP Limited Pink Edition. Even then, the device was still called a Game *Boy* and it was only offered for a short while (Bramwell, 2004). This clearly shows that rolling out a pink device was most likely a publicity stunt rather than a genuine attempt to make girls feel like they belonged in the gaming community.

Modern Gendered Marketing Practices

Guidebooks on current industry practices surrounding the marketing of video games are not made readily available to the public, however, Chess managed to interview several designers about how they market games to women in (Chess, 2017). After speaking with those designers, she determined that the most common themes for games marketed to women are as follows: fairy

tales, supernatural, mystery, bucolic, animals, cooking, fashion, fitness, and family togetherness (Chess 2017). She also noted that women typically do not gravitate toward romantic themes and do typically enjoy, "mature storylines with human relationships at the center" (Chess, 2017, pp. 43). However, designers did note that using feminine themes in the design of a game can be dangerous, as making a game too overtly feminine may alienate masculine audiences (Chess, 2017)– a point I find peculiar as designers typically do not show such scruples regarding the alienation of *feminine* audiences.

Designers also mentioned that women tend to prefer games with relatively low in-game risk (2017). This means that, as was the case in *Animal Crossing New Horizons*, there are no direct repercussions for not doing a task 'correctly' the first time. In the commonly considered hardcore game, *Elden Ring*, failure means restarting from the last checkpoint you visited – which, unless you are incredibly diligent, may have been a long time ago. In relation to the forgiving atmosphere characteristic of 'casual' games, women also tend to prefer games which have an easy-to-understand user interface (2017).

In addition to theme, visual cues are incredibly important in marketing games. Contrary to popular belief, "women's games" – which are sometimes called 'pink games' – are not typically pink (2017). Once upon a time, games *were* marketed using overtly feminine themes and an abundance of pink, but as of 2017, designers were taking a different approach. Let's return for a moment to the Gameboy Advance SP Limited Pink edition. When it was announced in 2004, Nintendo advertised the product as perfect for a new breed of "gadget girl" who was "all about style" (Bramwell, 2004). They remarked,

> Already a hit with Kate Moss, Claudia Schiffer and Christina Aguilera, the Game
>
> Boy Advance SP Limited Pink Edition is small enough to slip into handbags

everywhere and offers girls hours of entertainment – wherever they are! On the

bus, on the tube, in the hairdressers – girls will be able to play their Game Boy

Advance SP Limited Pink Edition whenever they need entertaining (Bramwell,

2004).

In this case, Nintendo tried to market the Gameboy Advance as a fashionable accessory rather than highlighting the affordances it had as a gaming console. Interestingly, they did promote the device's portability – something designers today still highlight as an attractive aspect of 'casual' mobile games for women.

Similarly, in 2012, Nintendo launched a 3DS ad campaign featuring female celebrities including Gabby Douglas and Diana Agron to entice girls to play. One commercial featured actress Sarah Hyland of *Modern Family* fame promoting the game *Style Savvy: Trendsetters*. In it, Hyland holds a pink Nintendo 3DS and states, "The next big trend can come from anywhere – you just have to know how to spot it… My name is Sarah Hyland and I'm not a gamer. With my 3DS I'm a stylist" (Gamesxl13, 2012). 8 years after the launch of the special pink Gameboy Advance, Nintendo attempted once again to appeal to girls through a pink accessory – and once again they promised that it was fashionable – you aren't a gamer you're a stylist!

However, in Chess' study, designers claimed that the industry no longer uses stereotypically 'girly' colors because feminine audiences complained when they did (2017). Instead, Chess writes, "the key word to describe the visual design for games for women seems to be 'lush'… It can't appear to be targeted toward girls, so anything overtly pink or feminine wouldn't sell" (Chess, 2017, pp. 48). Additionally, feminine games tend toward round shapes and soft shadows. In mystery or hidden object games, the lack of rich colors is usually made up for using an abundance of visually rich material including shiny elements (2017).

Finally, feminine games are characterized by customizable characters (when possible), an absence of sexualized character models (as mentioned above), minimal violent content, and a low risk for real-world harassment (2017). The assertion that women want to play as a character which represents them is self-explanatory. Because of this, women tend to prefer games where they are not forced to play as a masculine character but can instead decide for themselves who to play as. Interestingly, while women do not like to play as hypersexualized characters, sometimes slight sexualization is acceptable in the name of fashion (2017).

One designer (a woman) explained to Chess that in some games, such *as Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*, women possess hourglass figures and wear revealing clothing because they are following current fashion trends - not because they are meant to appeal to the male gaze (2017). This distinction helps explain the popularity of such games among feminine audiences yet introduces a gray space regarding what constitutes 'fashion' and what constitutes 'sexualization'. This is an important distinction because overt sexualization typically signals that a game is intended for a masculine audience – but if characters wear revealing clothing for fashion rather than sexualization, the game is likely intended for a more feminine audience.

Also, designers note that *some* violence is usually acceptable to feminine audiences, but not in excess and not if that violence is perpetrated by a man against a woman. This is notable because, as Chess explains, people often assume that most women would be against *any* violence in games which is not necessarily true (Chess, 2017). Chess offers the example of *Angry Birds* and explains that the 'lush' colors and cute characters should round out the minor levels of violence (Chess, 2017). However, in games with extreme or gender-based violence, feminine audiences are less likely to buy-in. For example, *Cyberpunk 2077* features a questline in which the player is sexually assaulted off screen (evidenced by them blacking out and reappearing nude

in an enemy hideout) (CD Projekt RED, 2020). Because this violence is extreme, the game would likely not be as well received by women as a game with minor/cartoon violence.

Finally, women tend to avoid games that put them at risk of harassment. As discussed earlier, many women have reported being verbally attacked and threatened by men when playing MMOGs and traditionally masculine multiplayer games like *Call of Duty* (2017). Because of this, those who *do* engage in these games tend to avoid speaking into a headset, as this might alert otherwise unsuspecting players of their gender and lead to harassment (Chess, 2017; Gray, 2012).

Feminine Vs. Masculine Games
One theory for why AAA games are still primarily marketed toward men is that while women are playing video games, the *types* of games they play differ from those of masculine audiences (Chess, 2017; Cunningham, 2018; Lynch et al, 2016). In *Ready Player Two*, Chess explains that while women have always played games like *Call of Duty*, *Final Fantasy*, *World of Warcraft*, etc. they were always considered outliers because those games were not intended for them (2017). But in some genres, women *are* the intended audience and in Chess' experience, games from these categories are played more frequently by most women than games from traditionally masculine categories (2017).

She explains that (as is the case with all forms of media) games designed for women are looked down on and seen as inferior to masculine games (2017). But, she argues, these 'feminine' games are important, worth playing, and worth studying *because* they are made for women and because they serve the exact same purposes as masculine games: killing time/entertainment, escaping from reality, and fostering community (2017).

Games that are typically marketed toward men include fighting games, first person shooters, and sports games, as well as most big-budget games - also known as AAA titles (Chess, 2017, Cunningham 2018). People who play these games are often referred to as hardcore gamers because the tone is often serious, players invest a significant amount of time into playing, and the mechanics are comparably difficult/technical (2017).

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) like *World of Warcraft* and RPGs/Adventure games like *The Legend of Zelda*, while originally targeted toward men, are often labelled "gender-neutral" because they attract a large feminine audience. Scholars have theorized that this unexpectedly large feminine audience is directly linked to a comparably low number of hypersexualized feminine characters in both categories of games in 2016 (Cunningham 2018, Lynch et al 2016). Other games marked as "gender-neutral" include Nintendo's *Animal Crossing* series and PC megahit, *The Sims* because they draw in large audiences of all genders (Chess, 2017).

Feminine games typically feed into the tendency of adult women to prioritize productivity over leisure (Chess, 2017). Mobile games, such as *Candy Crush Saga*, *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood*, and my personal favorite, *Choices: Stories You Play*, are designed to be played in short bursts. This means that women can play between chores, on the way to work, or while waiting to pick up their child from school. These "casual games" stand in direct opposition to hardcore games, which are designed to be played for hours at a time. In hardcore games, such as *Horizon Forbidden West* (2021), players can only save at certain locations (such as a campfire) which prevents them from exiting the game whenever they want. However, when a player wants to exit a casual game like *Choices*, they automatically start right where they left off. Furthermore, casual games often have breaks baked directly into their algorithm. For example,

in *Choices*, players need a "key" to read each chapter of the interactive story. The game only allows a player to have 2 keys at a time, and one key regenerates after three real-world hours. This means that (unless the player spends real money to purchase keys early) players can only play two chapters every three hours (Pixelberry Studios, 2022).

It is important to note that 'casual' games do not *necessarily* equate to casual play and 'hardcore' games do not necessarily equate to hardcore play. For example, I have been known to play *Choices* for several hours at a time (having purchased a monthly subscription to bypass the 'key' mechanic). There are also players who choose to play 'hardcore' games in short bursts to fit their schedules. Interestingly, research suggests that games like *World of Warcraft* are successful because they can be played in short bursts or long stretches and appeal to hardcore and casual gamers alike (Shaw, 2015). Although most games can be played in casual or hardcore ways, for the purposes of this discussion, the labels 'casual' and 'hardcore' will be used to reference the perceived intention of developers as discussed by Chess (2017).

Discussion

In summary, there is a long history of exclusion, underrepresentation, and harassment of women in the field. Based on this history, production companies have routinely disregarded women as an equally important demographic to men and, typically, when games are marketed specifically to women, those games are seen as 'casual' and less important than games designed for men (Chess, 2017; Cunningham, 2018).

While some games are marketed specifically to men or specifically to women, the actual composition of the player base and of the larger gaming community may not reflect the 'intended audience' depicted by visual marketing cues. The issue of who 'counts' as a member of the gaming community is central to game studies (Shaw, 2015) and is one of the main issues driving

this research. I, for one, have played AAA traditionally masculine games for as long as I can remember, and I know that there are plenty of other women in the world who share experiences like mine. However, the women in my life are reluctant to identify as members of the community regardless of the types of games they play and most of them shy away from AAA games they believe are 'for men'. It is for that reason that I intend to examine the correlation between gendered marketing practices, the types of games that women play, and the willingness of women to identify with the larger gaming community.

Chapter 2: Consoles and PCs and Phones (Oh My!)

In this chapter, I will discuss how video game covers are marketed toward different genders. I will do this by analyzing video game covers from six different platforms and explaining how the elements used in those covers relate to the gendered marketing practices discussed by Chess in *Ready Player Two* (2017). I found that out of six different platforms, Steam and Apple are most likely to market their games to a gender-neutral audience. Xbox markets their games primarily to men and Android markets their games primarily to women. These findings, when used in conjunction with the results of my interviews, should show how gendered marketing effects the types of games that women choose to play.

To determine how popular games are being marketed toward audiences of different genders, I conducted a content analysis of video game covers on 6 different online stores; Samsung's Google Play, Apple's App Store, the PlayStation Store (PS5), the Microsoft Store (Xbox Series X), Steam, and the Nintendo eShop (Nintendo Switch). Steam was chosen to represent PC games because it was listed on several gaming websites as the most popular PC game store. Although data suggests that Android users outnumber Apple users worldwide, Apple is popular enough – and their game selection varied significantly enough – that it warranted inclusion alongside Android. For each store, I downloaded the cover images for the top 10 games listed under the "Bestsellers", "Popular", or "Featured" pages depending on which was available. This resulted in a total of 60 game covers for review.

Based on existing research, I decided to code each game cover for presence of characters, humanity of characters, gender of characters, sexualization, violence, perceived theme, color palette, and graphics (Chess, 2017; Robinson, et al, 2008). Each category was broken down into smaller categories in accordance with research done by Chess and Robinson et al, respectively:

Humanity: Human, Humanoid, Non-Human (Robinson, et al, 2008)

Gender: Women, Men, Other/Unknown

Color Palette: Pastel, Bright, or Dark (Chess, 2017).

Graphics: Bit, Cartoon, or Realistic (Chess, 2017).

Violence: Presence of Weapons, Explosions/Background destruction, and Blood (Chess, 2017).

Perceived Theme: Fashion, Cooking, Farming, Puzzle/Mystery, Art/Coloring, Board Game/Party Game, Adventure, Horror, Sports, or Shooting/Fighting (Chess, 2017).

Sexualization: Amount of clothing and tightness of clothing (Robinson, et al, 2008).

In the following sections, I summarize the findings related to each of these categories. Then I explore how these factors work together to create gendered forms of marketing.

I hypothesized that the results of my content analysis would likely line up with the trends discussed by Chess in *Ready Player Two* (2017). I believed that the two mobile platforms in the study, Apple and Android, would use mostly feminine visual cues befitting a 'casual' playstyle. I also believed that Steam, Xbox, and PlayStation would target a primarily masculine audience and that Nintendo (responsible for the *Animal Crossing* series) would employ the most gender-neutral marketing tactics.

Humanity of Featured Characters

The first coding theme centered on the humanity of characters, as humanity is (generally) a precursor to gendered representation as well as sexualization. It is also important to note how many characters were included across covers for each platform, because research indicates that women prefer games with complex human relationships at the center and enjoy bucolic (farming/animal) games (Chess, 2017). This suggests to me that games featuring at least one character on the cover (human or otherwise) are more likely to attract a feminine audience. This

is not to say that covers featuring humans or animals would *not* appeal to men – simply that they *would* likely appeal to women. As seen in Figure 1, Nintendo featured the most characters by far out of all six platforms (90) and Android featured the least (5). Notably, PlayStation technically had over 70 total characters, but over 50 of them were from one cover. If included, PlayStation would have had more total characters than Xbox, but still less than Nintendo. However, because this game was an outlier, I decided to only include one woman, one man, and one gender-neutral character, leaving the total for PlayStation at 22.
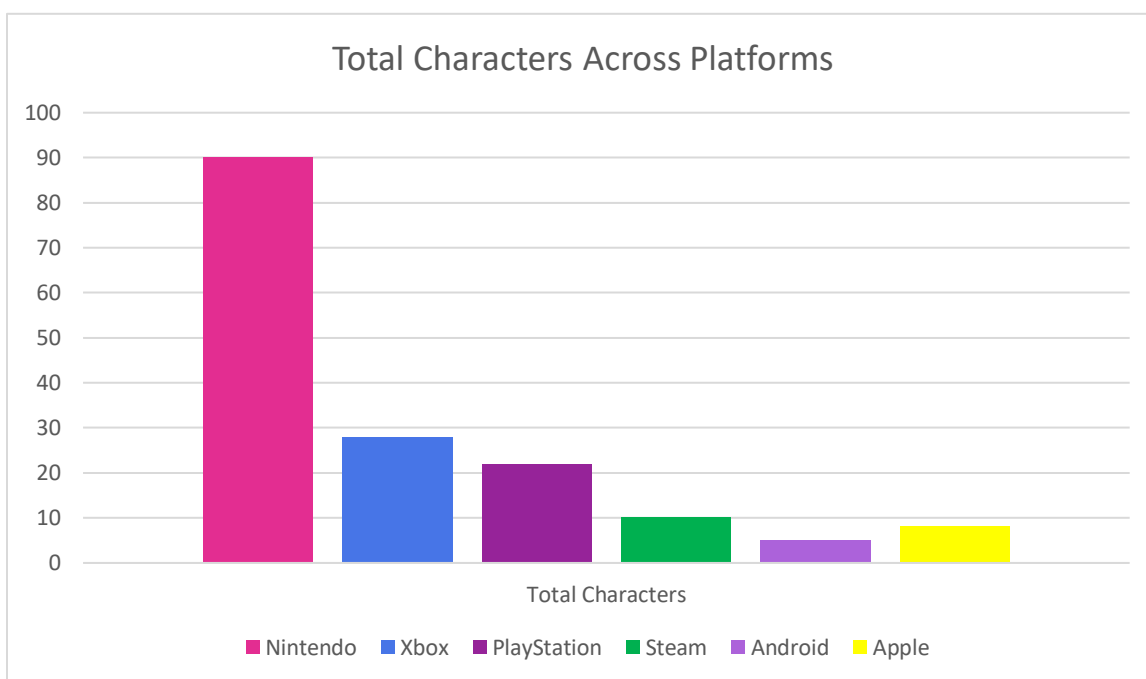

Figure 1: This chart shows that Nintendo featured the most total characters, and Android featured the least.

As shown in Figure 2, Nintendo featured the most human characters (43), and Android featured the least human characters (3). Xbox featured the most humanoid characters (8), and Apple featured the least humanoid characters (0). Nintendo featured the most nonhuman characters (40) and PlayStation and Xbox tied for the least nonhuman characters (0).
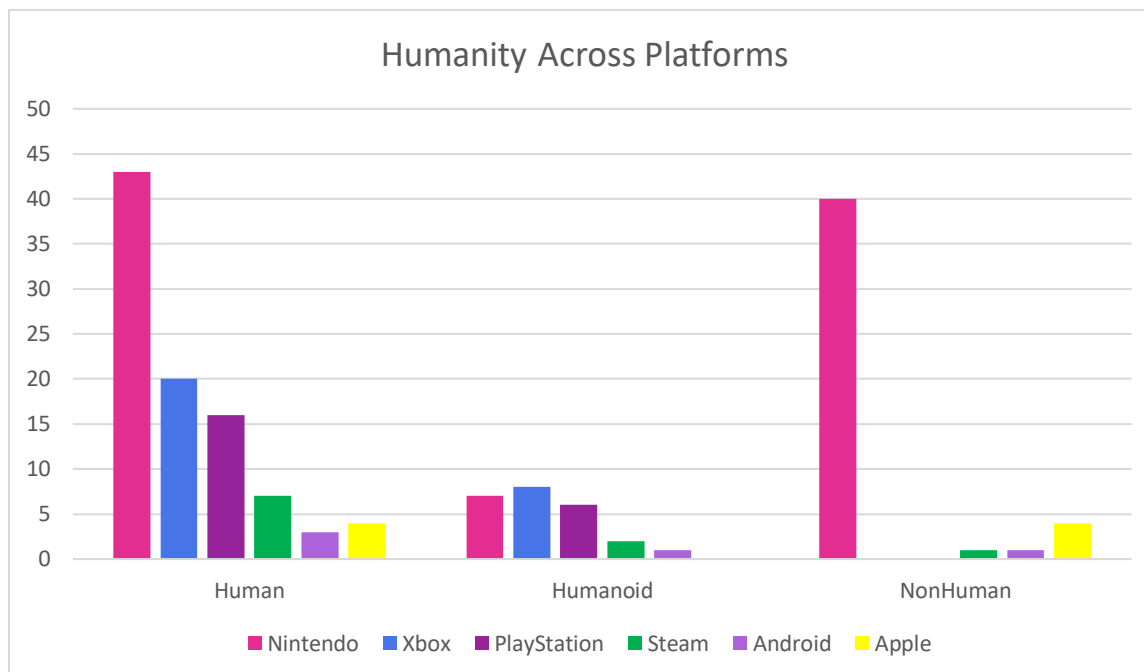
Figure 2: This chart shows that Nintendo featured the most Human and Non-human characters. Because research indicates that women prefer games with central human relationships as well as games featuring animals, this makes Nintendo most feminine of the 6 platforms.

It is notable that Nintendo featured the most human and non-human characters because, as mentioned above, when marketing games to women, companies tend to highlight animals (nonhumans) and stories featuring central human relationships (Chess, 2017). Xbox and PlayStation both featured many human characters, however, they did not feature any non-human characters which suggests that they are not putting as much focus on feminine audiences as Nintendo. Because of this, I assert that Nintendo used the most feminine marketing of the six companies in terms of humanity. Steam, Android, and Apple, which featured a similar number of humans, humanoids, and nonhumans are the most gender-neutral of the six.

Gender of Featured Characters

It stands to reason that platforms targeting a feminine audience would include feminine characters on the cover (or at the very least, gender-neutral characters). Therefore, it was necessary to examine the gender of characters included on the covers for each platform. Coding for the gender of featured characters revealed that Nintendo featured women most frequently (70% of covers), followed by PlayStation (20%), and finally Xbox (0%) as shown in Figure 3. Nintendo also featured characters of unknown gender most frequently (60% of covers), followed

by PlayStation (40%), and then Xbox (30%). 100% of Nintendo covers contained masculine characters, followed by Xbox (90%), and then PlayStation (50%). This means that there was only a 30% difference between masculine and feminine representation on the observed PS5 and Nintendo covers compared to a 90% difference between masculine and feminine representation on the Xbox covers (see Figure 4). This hints that the PS5 and Nintendo Switch may seem more approachable to a feminine audience when compared to Xbox Series X. While Nintendo and PlayStation featured women and characters of unknown/other gender more frequently than Xbox, all three consoles featured fewer total women than men or gender-neutral characters.
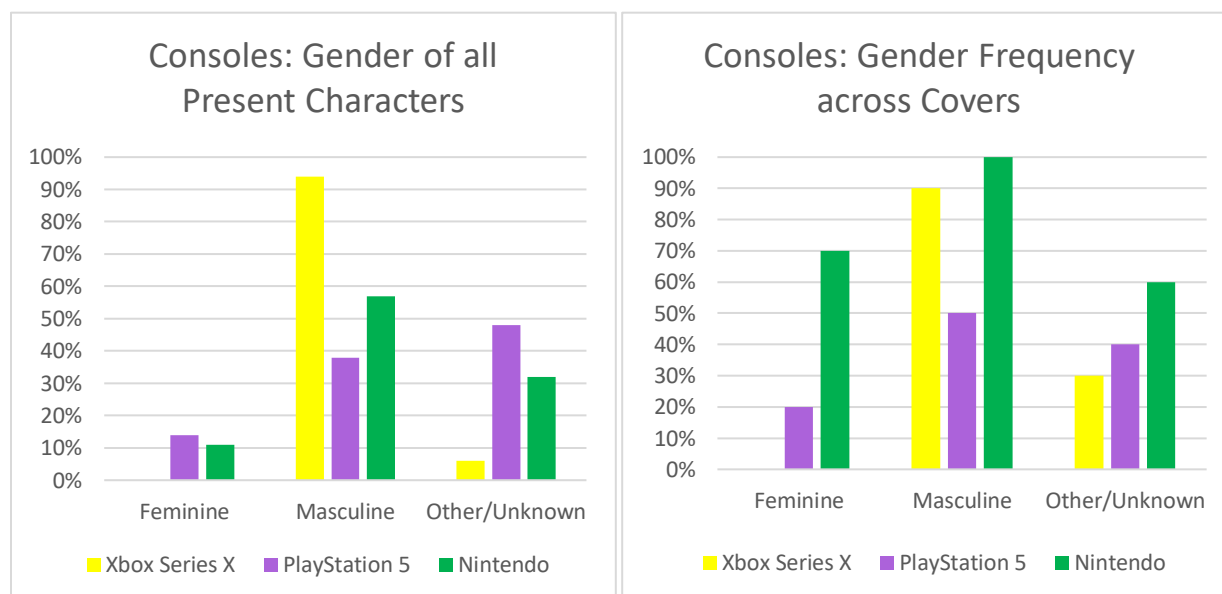

Figure 3: Xbox featured the highest percentage of men and no women. PlayStation featured the highest percentage of women and the highest percentage of gender-neutral characters.

Figure 4: Nintendo features characters of all genders most frequently of the consoles. Xbox features the least women (0).

For the game covers on the Nintendo Switch eShop, across all covers there were 77 human and humanoid characters present. Of these, 10 were feminine (11%), 39 were masculine (57%), and 28 (32%) were of other/unknown gender (Figure 5). 100% of covers contained at least one masculine character, 70% contained at least one feminine character, and 60% contained at least one gender neutral character (Figure 6). This shows that for Nintendo, masculine

characters appeared most frequently across covers and in the highest amount per cover. Women appeared least per individual cover, but gender-neutral characters appeared least often across covers.
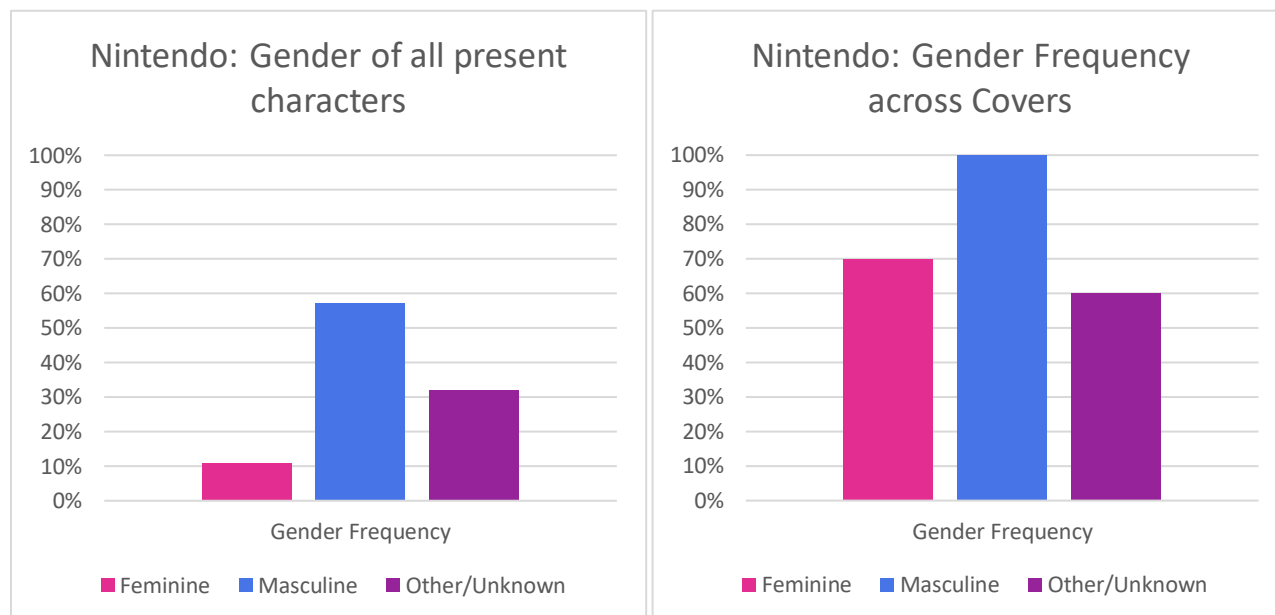

Figure 5: Out of all characters present on Nintendo's covers, most were men and very few were women.

Figure 6: Men appeared most frequently across Nintendo covers (at least once on 100% of covers). Gender-neutral characters appeared least.

Across all Xbox Series X covers, there were 0 women (0%), 15 men (94%), and one character of other/unknown gender (6%) (Figure 7). 90% of covers contained at least one masculine character, 30% contained at least one character of other/unknown gender, and 0% contained at least one feminine character (Figure 8). This means that on Xbox Series X covers, men are most likely, and women are least likely to appear across covers and there are fewer women per cover than men or gender-neutral characters.
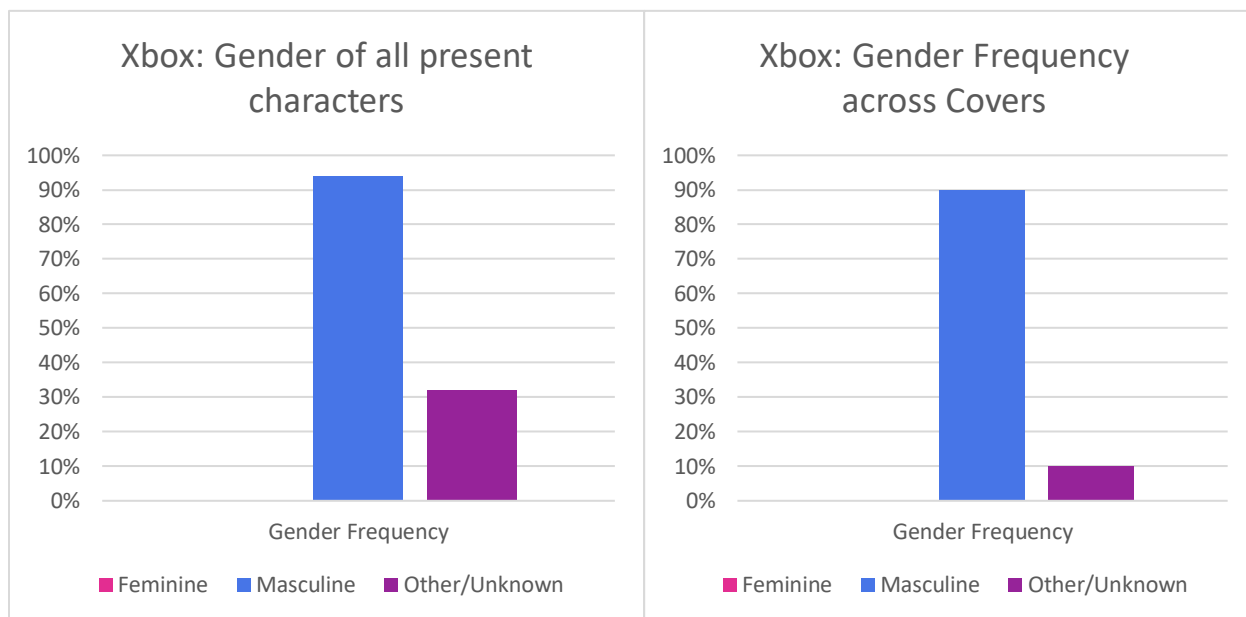
Figure 7: 94% of all characters on Xbox covers were men and none were women.

Figure 8: At least one man appeared on 90% of covers. No women appeared on any of the 10 covers.

There were over 68 total characters across PlayStation 5 covers. However, over 50 of them were from one game: *Planet Coaster Console Edition*. There were only two characters clearly visible (a woman and a man) and the remaining characters were of unknown gender. This means that men and women were shown in equal amounts, so the game would likely be seen as desirable by both masculine and feminine consumers. Because of this, to avoid skewing the data, I chose to mark *Planet Coaster* as containing one man, one woman, and one character of unknown/other gender. Given these adjustments, the PS5 covers contained a total of 21 gendered characters. Of these, 3 were women (14%), 8 were men (38%), and 10 were of other/unknown gender (48%) (Figure 9). 50% of the covers contained at least one man, 40% contained at least one character of other/unknown gender, and 20% contained at least one woman (Figure 10). So, men were most likely to appear across PS5 covers, but there were more gender-neutral characters per individual cover than men or women.
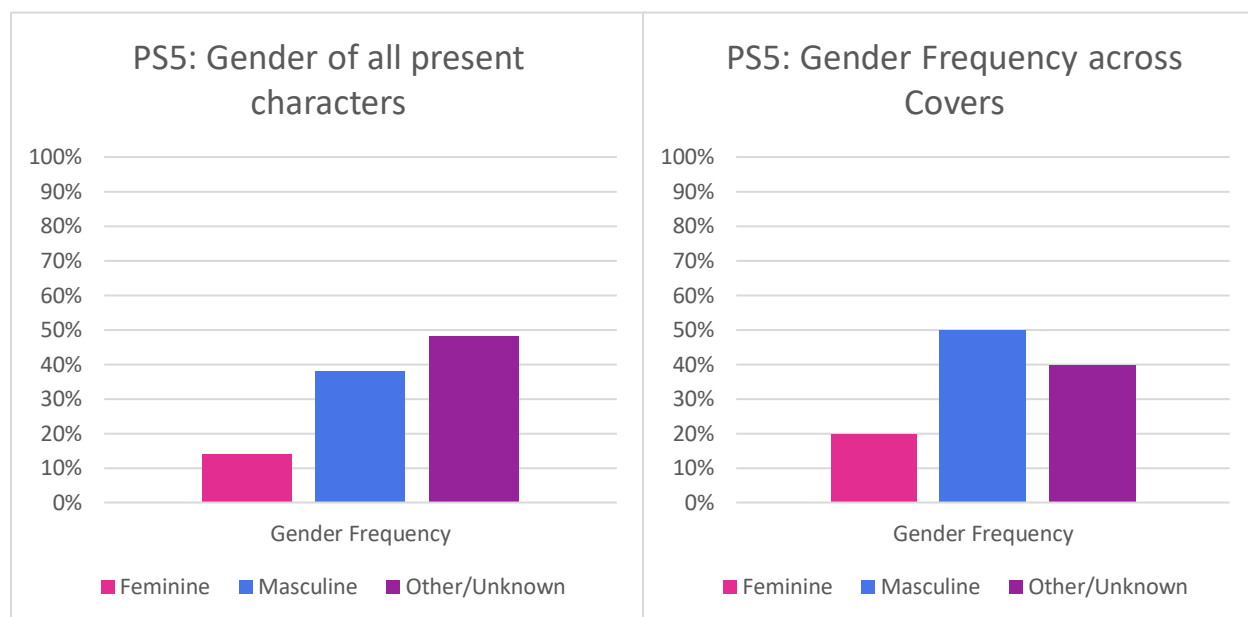
Figure 9: Of all characters present on PS5 covers, 48% were gender-neutral, 38% were men, and only 14% were women.

Figure 10: Men were present on half of all PS5 covers and appeared the most frequently. Women appeared the least.

For Steam, the only PC game store in my study, there were 9 total human and humanoid characters across all featured covers. Of these, 3 were women, 5 were men, and 1 was a gender-neutral character (Figure 11). 30% of covers contained at least one feminine character, 30% contained at least one masculine character, and 10% contained at least one gender-neutral character (Figure 12). This means that women and men were both equally likely to show up across the Steam covers, but there were more men per cover than women. Gender neutral characters were least likely to appear across covers and appeared in the smallest number.
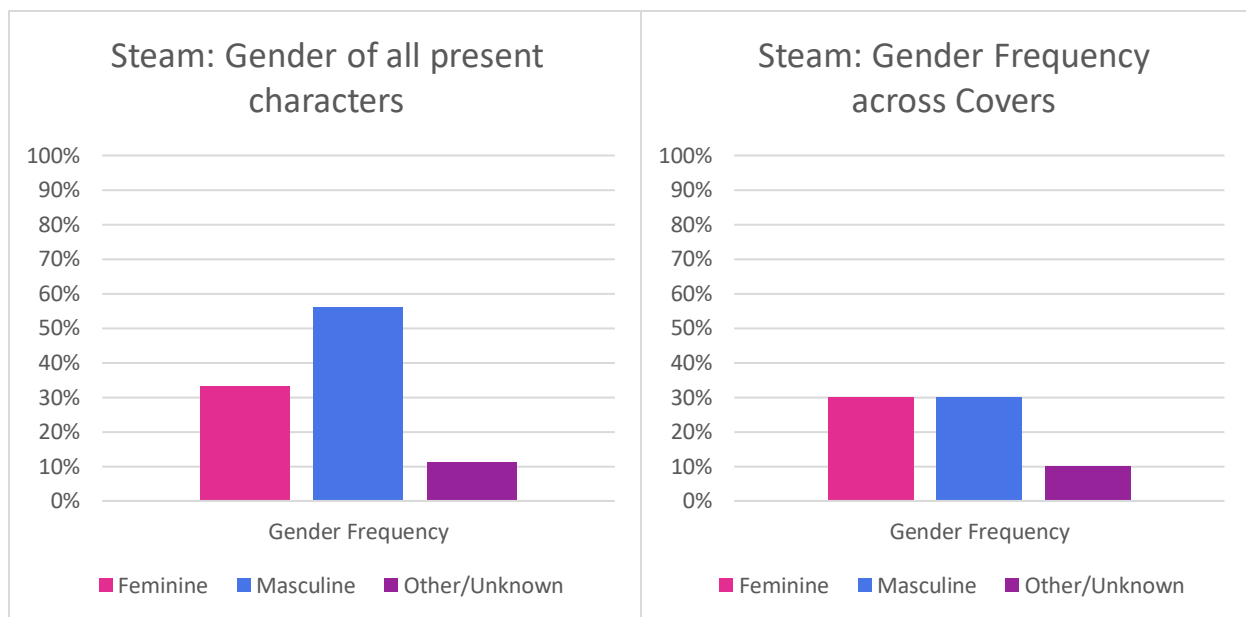
Figure 11: Of all characters present on Steam covers, the majority were men at 56%. Gender-neutral characters appeared the least at 11%.

Figure 12: Women and Men occurred equally frequently across covers (30% respectively). Gender-neutral characters appeared least frequently (10%).

For gender of featured characters, both mobile app stores showed overall gender-neutral results. The covers on the Apple App Store contained 4 total human and humanoid characters. Of these characters, 2 were men (50%), 2 were women (50%), and none were gender neutral (0%) (Figure 13). 20% of covers contained at least one feminine character, 20% contained at least one masculine character, and 0% contained at least one gender neutral character (Figure 14). The covers on Android's Google Play also featured a total of 4 human and humanoid characters. Again, two were feminine, two were masculine, and none were gender neutral. 20% of covers contained at least one woman, 20% contained at least one man, and 0% contained at least one gender neutral character.
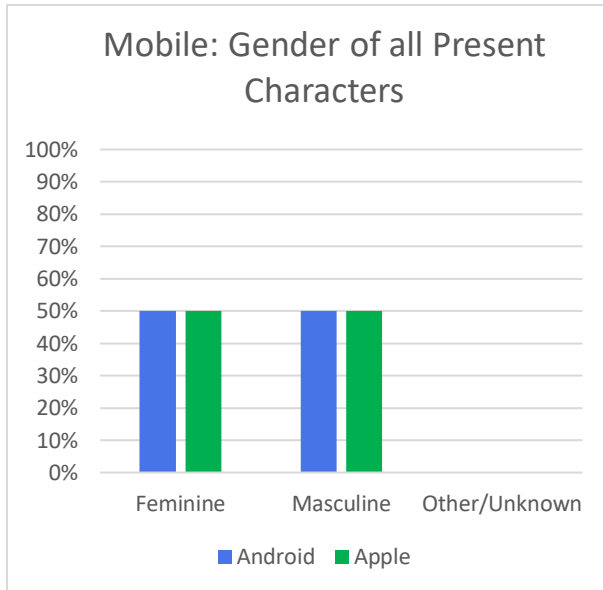
Figure 13: Women and men appeared in equal numbers and gender-neutral characters did not appear at all on mobile covers.
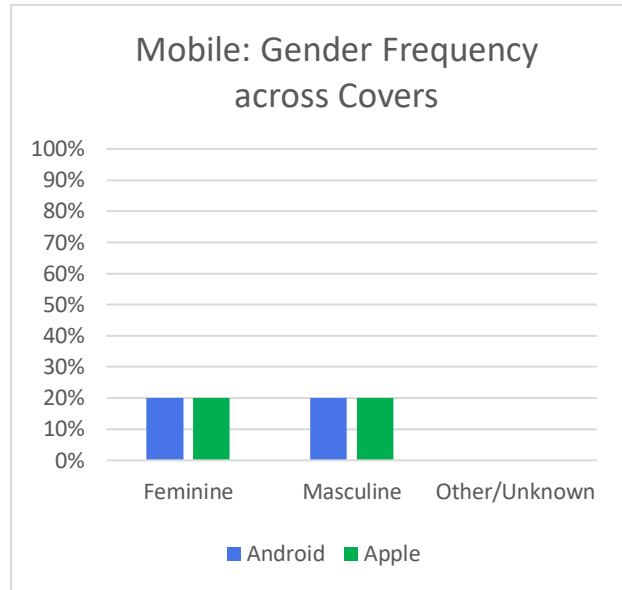

Figure 14: Women and men appeared with equal frequency across all mobile covers and gender-neutral characters did not appear at all.

Across all six stores, Xbox featured the highest percentage of total masculine characters (94%) and PlayStation featured the lowest percentage of total masculine characters (38%). Android and Apple tied for the highest percentage of total feminine characters (50%) and Xbox featured the lowest percentage of total feminine characters (0%). PlayStation featured the highest percentage of total gender-neutral characters (48%) and Android and Apple tied for the lowest percentage of total gender-neutral characters (0%). However, despite Android and Apple not featuring any gender-neutral characters, their ratio of men to women was still 50:50 which evens out to gender-neutral representation in the long run (Figure 15).
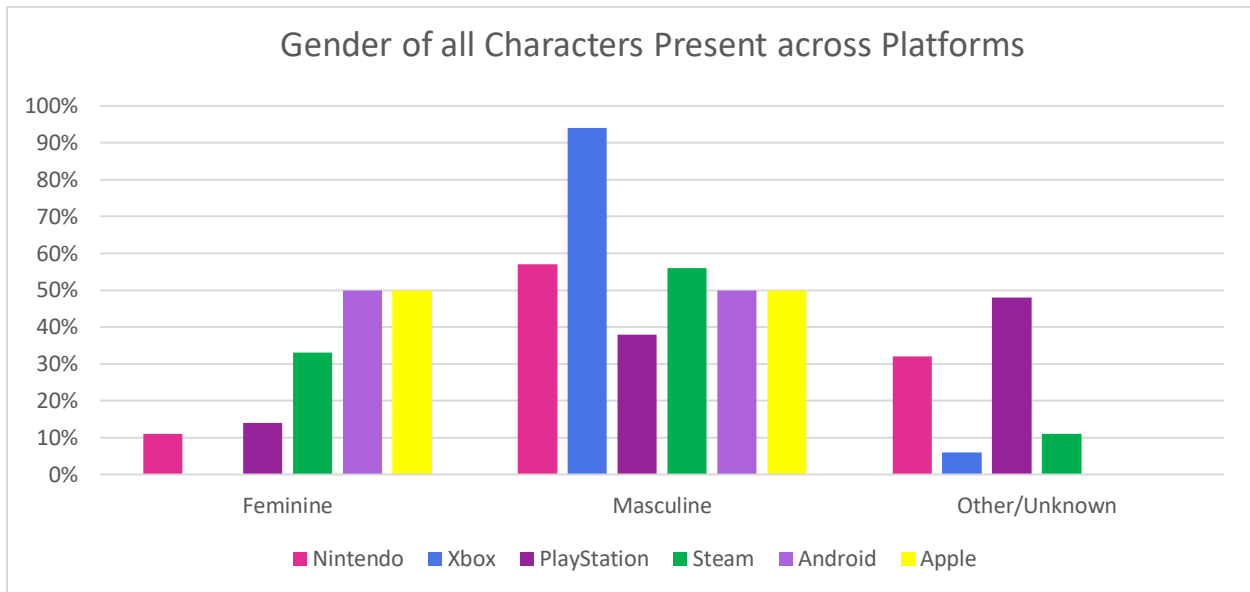
Figure 15: Xbox featured the most men out of all six platforms and featured the least women. Android and Apple featured the most women but were overall gender neutral.

Across all six platforms, Nintendo had the highest frequency of masculine (100%)

feminine (70%), and gender-neutral characters (60%). Android and Apple tied for the lowest

frequency of masculine (20%) and gender-neutral characters (0%). Xbox had the lowest

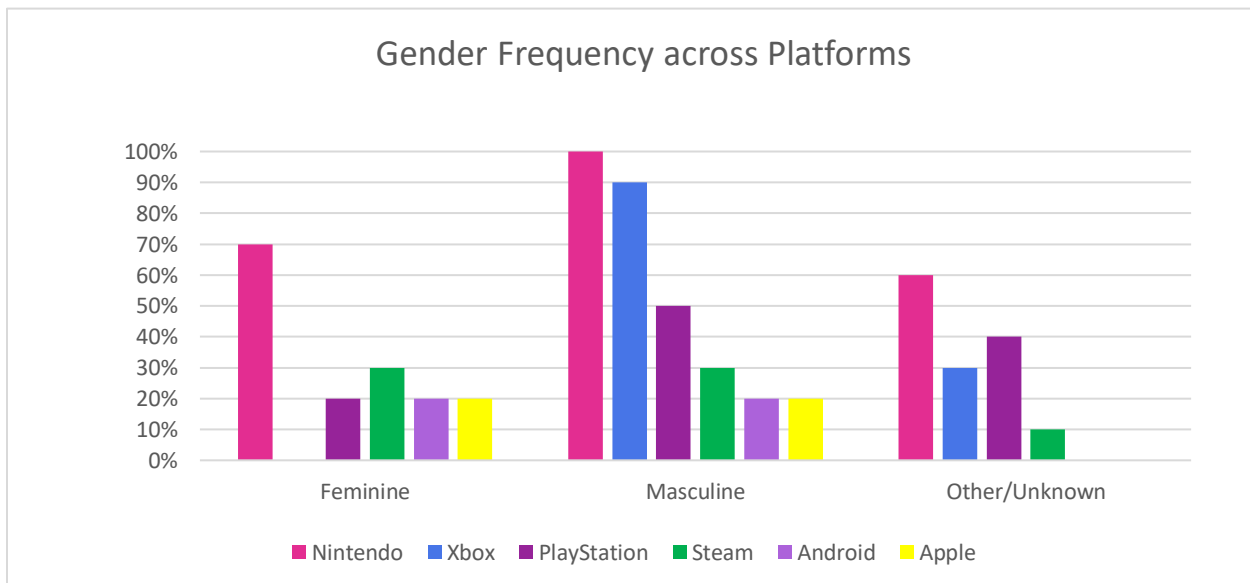frequency of feminine characters (0%) (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Nintendo featured characters of all genders most frequently of the six platforms. Xbox featured women least. Apple and Android featured gender-neutral characters least.

For gender of featured characters Android and Apple were the most likely to appeal to all genders because they featured an equal amount and an equal frequency of feminine and masculine characters. Xbox was the least gender neutral of all six platforms (skewing heavily masculine). None of the six platforms were overtly feminine.

Dominant Color Palette

Next, I coded for dominant color palette on each cover. Research shows that games intended for a feminine audience used to contain overly feminine colors such as pinks and pastels (Chess, 2017). However, upon realizing that this alienated masculine audiences and did not appeal to feminine audiences as intended, marketing teams replaced these colors with more 'gender neutral' ones that were bright, heavily saturated, and 'lush' (Chess, 2017). Marketing teams targeting masculine audiences without considering feminine ones will forgo these bright colors in favor of dark ones (Chess, 2017). Please refer to Figure 17 for an example of dark, bright, and pastel palettes (Note that the specific colors do not matter as much as the saturation and brightness):

Figure 17: Color palettes for reference.

For the consoles, Xbox and PlayStation's covers skewed masculine and Nintendo's were gender neutral. 60% of Xbox game covers were dark, 40% were bright, and none were pastel. The same was true for PlayStation: 60% dark, 40% bright, 0% pastel. For Nintendo, 80% of covers were bright, 20% were dark, and 0% were pastel.
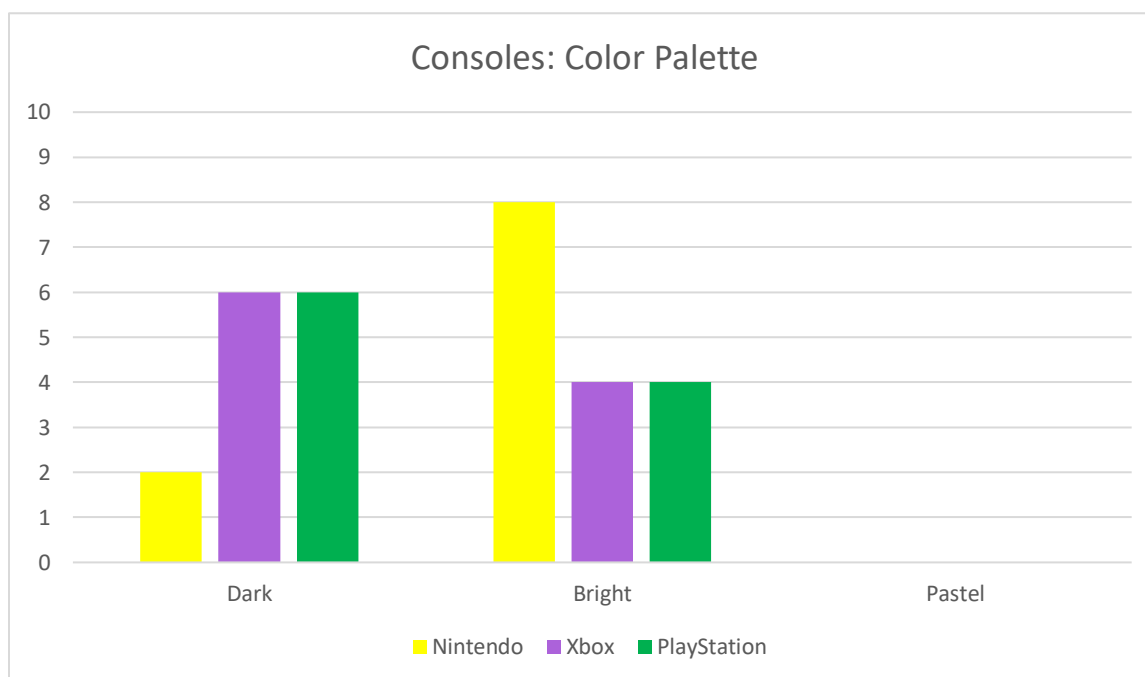

Figure 18: Nintendo featured the most bright palettes out of the consoles making it the most gender-neutral. PlayStation and Xbox both featured mostly dark palettes, making them masculine.

Like Xbox and PlayStation, Steam skewed masculine with 70% of covers falling under the "dark" category (Figure 19). The remaining 30% of covers were bright and none were pastel. Apple games were mostly gender neutral (Figure 20). 90% were bright, 10% were pastel, and 0% were dark. Android was also mostly gender neutral with 80% bright, 10% pastel, and 10% dark. Android and Apple tied for the most feminine marketing of the six platforms in terms of color palette because they were the only two that used pastel (Figure 21). However, they are both gender neutral, using mostly bright colors. Steam was the most masculine of the six companies (70%), with PlayStation and Xbox following closely behind (both 60%). Apple was the most gender neutral (90%), with Android and Nintendo tied for second (both 80%).
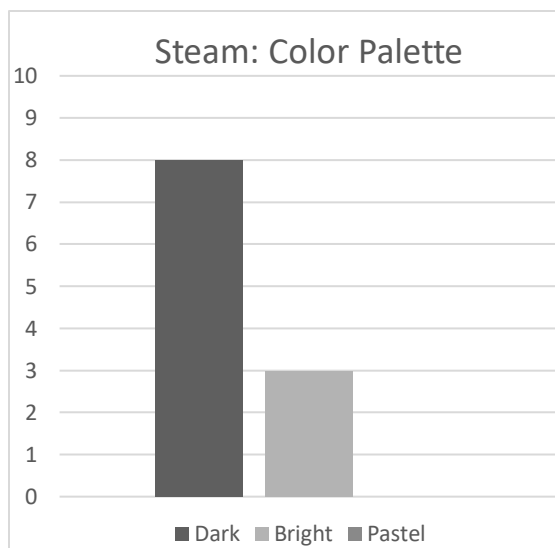
Figure 19: Steam featured mostly dark palettes.
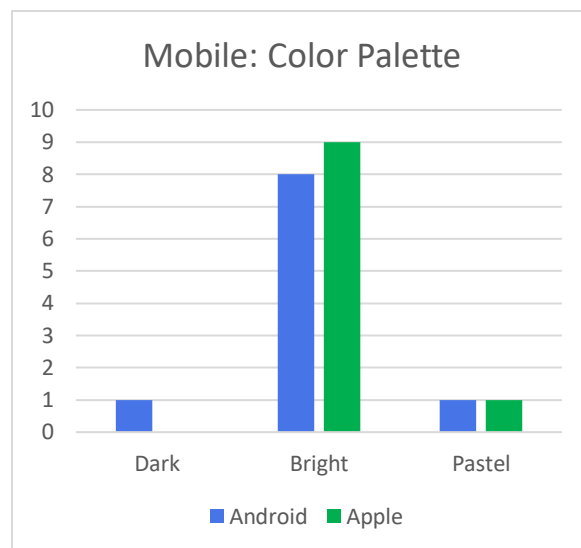
Figure 20: Apple and Android were both gender neutral in terms of color.
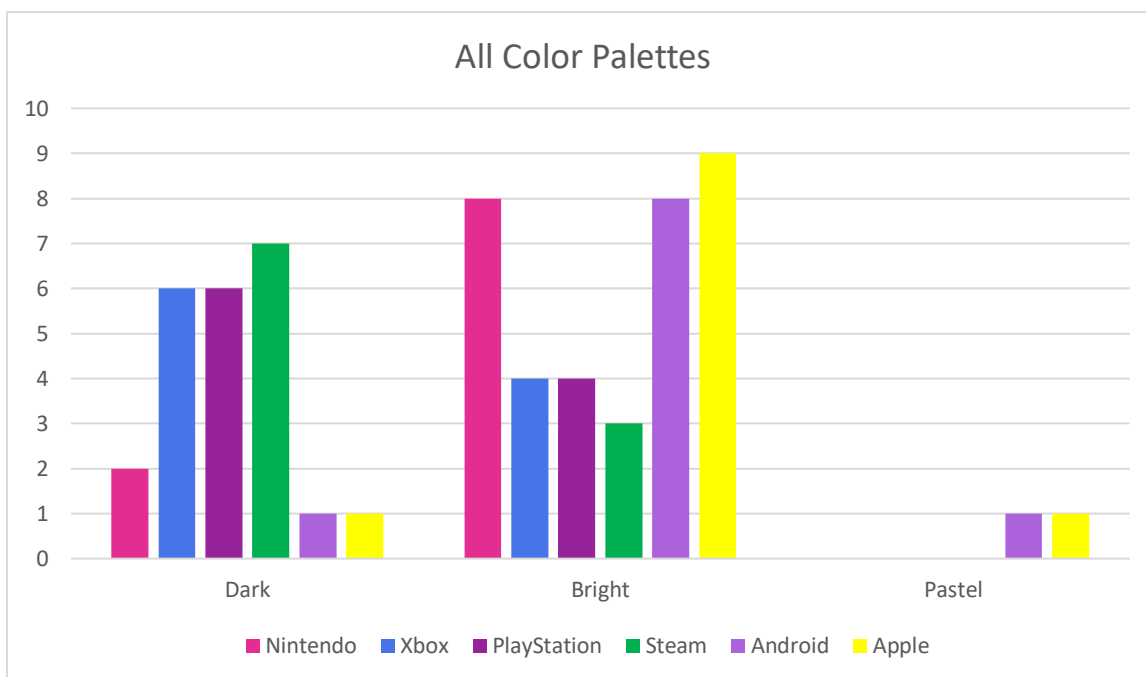
Figure 21: Apple is the most gender neutral for color because it used the most bright palettes. Android and Apple are both the most feminine of the 6 because they were the only platforms to use pastels. Steam is the most masculine because it used the most dark palettes.

Graphics

Graphically, games intended for feminine audiences contain, "rounded shapes, shiny elements, and soft shadows" which appear most frequently in cartoon-style games (Chess, 2017, 48). Therefore, it was important to examine which covers contained cartoon (feminine) elements

and which were more visually realistic (masculine). For the consoles, Xbox was the most masculine with 100% the covers falling under realistic. PS5 had 60% realistic and 40% cartoon, and Nintendo was feminine at 100% cartoon. Steam had 50% cartoon graphics, 30% realistic graphics, and the remaining 20% had text on a solid background and could not be judged for graphics (this was unique to Steam). For the mobile games, Apple skewed feminine at 100% cartoon and Android had 70% realistic and 30% cartoon.
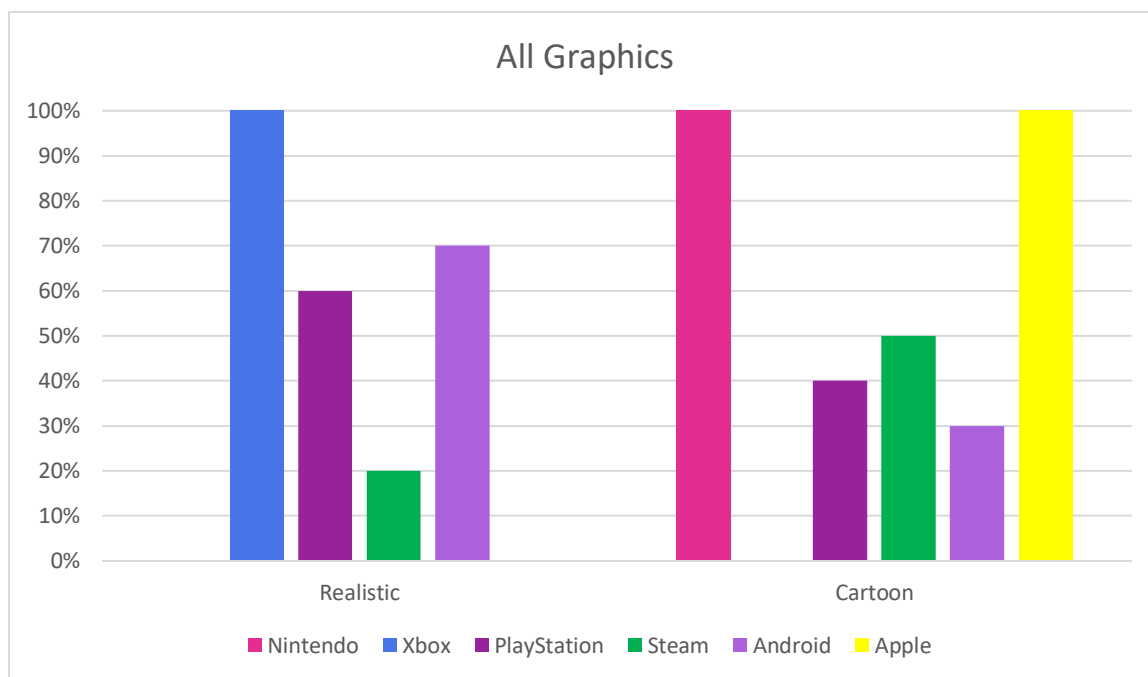
Figure 22: Nintendo and Apple are the most feminine in terms of graphics because 100% of their covers were cartoon. Xbox did not feature any cartoon graphics making it the most masculine.

Violence

Research shows that while women will accept *some* violence in their games (often balanced by lush graphics and feminine theme), they will not accept an abundance of violence (Chess, 2017). Because of this, games marketed toward women will likely steer clear of most violence on their covers unless the violence is balanced by other feminine themes.10% of Xbox games contained blood, 50% contained weapons, and 40% contained background destruction (Figure 23). 10% of PS5 games contained blood, 30% contained weapons, and 30% contained

background destruction. No Nintendo games contained blood, 50% contained weapons, and 10% contained background destruction.
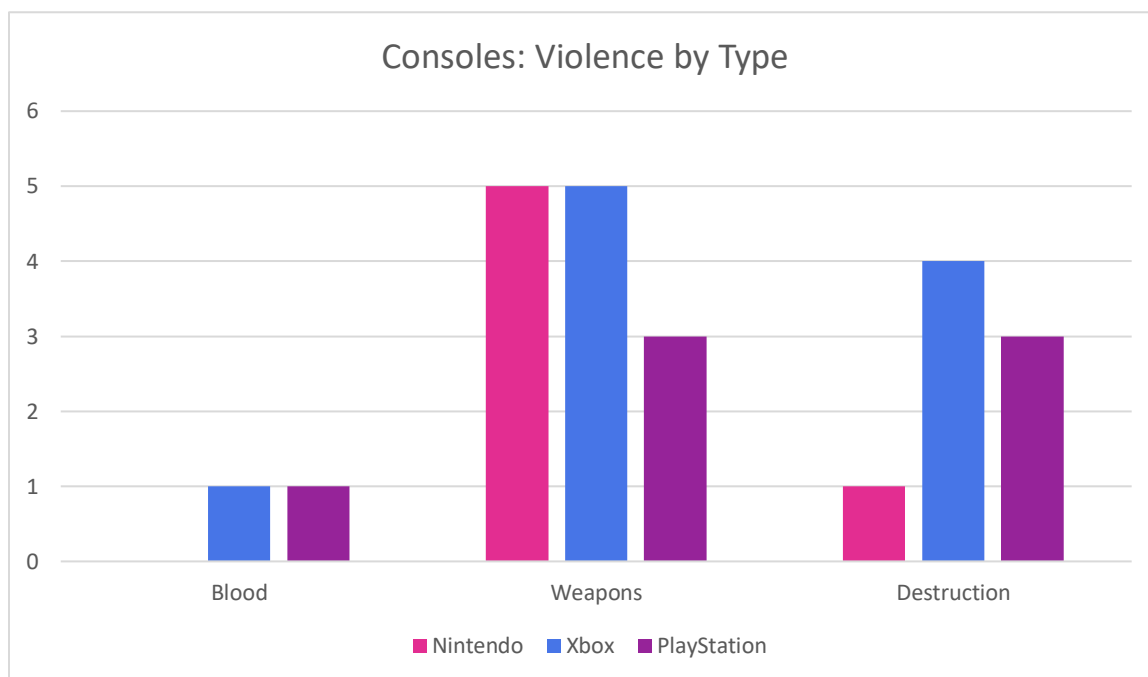
Figure 23: Out of the three consoles, Nintendo and Xbox featured weapons most frequently. Xbox featured destruction most frequently. PlayStation and Xbox featured blood most frequently.

60% of Xbox games contained at least one form of violence and there were 10 unique instances of violence across all 10 covers (Figure 24). 50% of PlayStation games contained at least one form of violence totaling 7 unique instances. 50% of Nintendo games contained at least one form of violence and there were 6 unique instances.

Figure 24: Xbox covers contained the most unique instances of violence and featured violence most frequently. Nintendo and PlayStation featured violence at the same frequency, but PlayStation contained more unique instances of violence per cover than did Nintendo.

Steam did not feature any blood, 20% of covers contained weapons, and 20% of covers contained destruction (Figure 25). 40% of covers contained at least one type of violence, and there were 4 unique instances. The Apple covers did not feature any blood, 20% contained weapons, and none contained destruction. The Android covers also did not feature blood, 10% contained weapons, and none contained destruction.
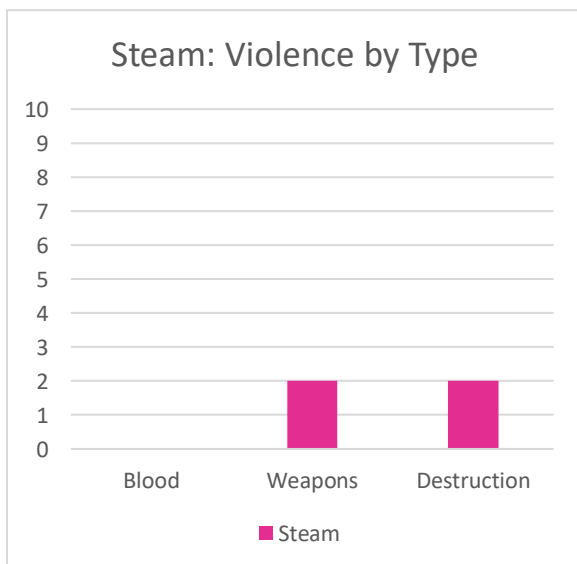
Figure 25: Steam did not feature and blood but featured weapons and destruction on 20% of covers.
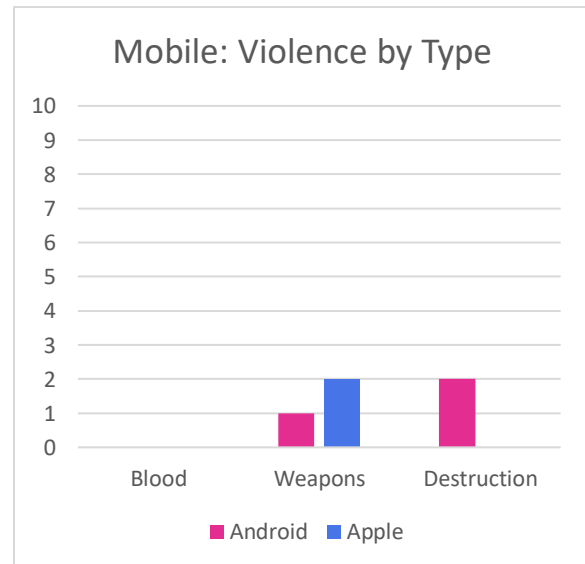
Figure 26: Apple did not feature blood or destruction but did feature weapons more than Android. Android did not feature blood but did feature weapons and destruction.

40% of Steam games contained at least one type of violence totaling 4 unique instances. 20% of Apple games contained at l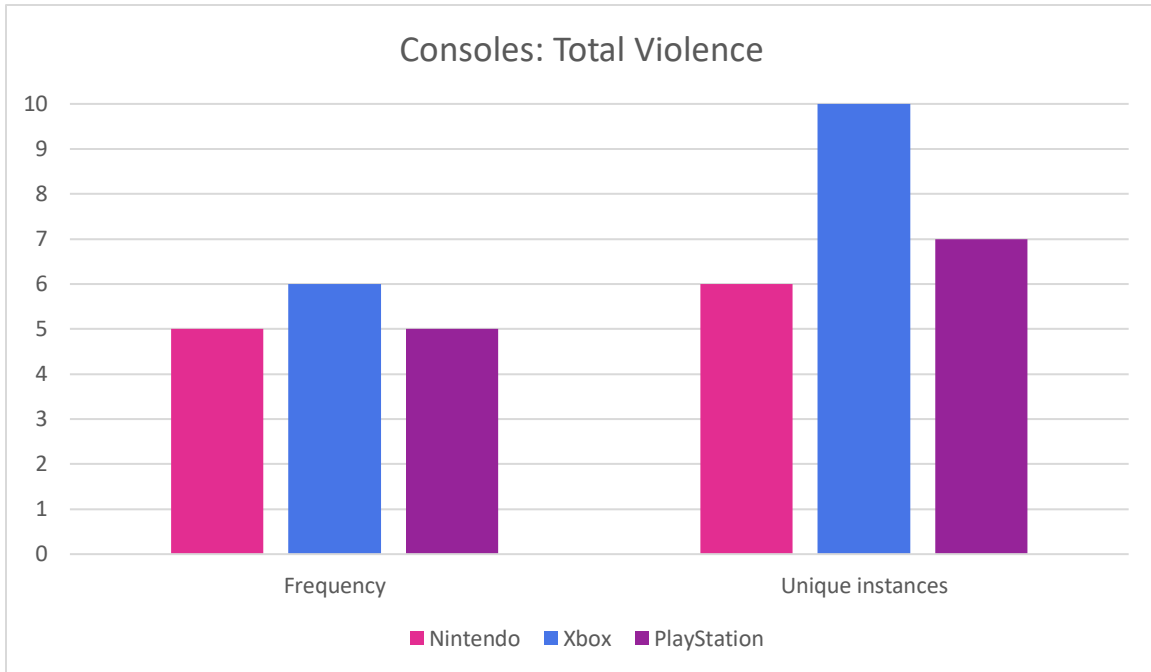east one type of violence and there were 2 unique instances. 10% of Android games contained at least one type of violence and there was 1 unique instance (Figure 27).
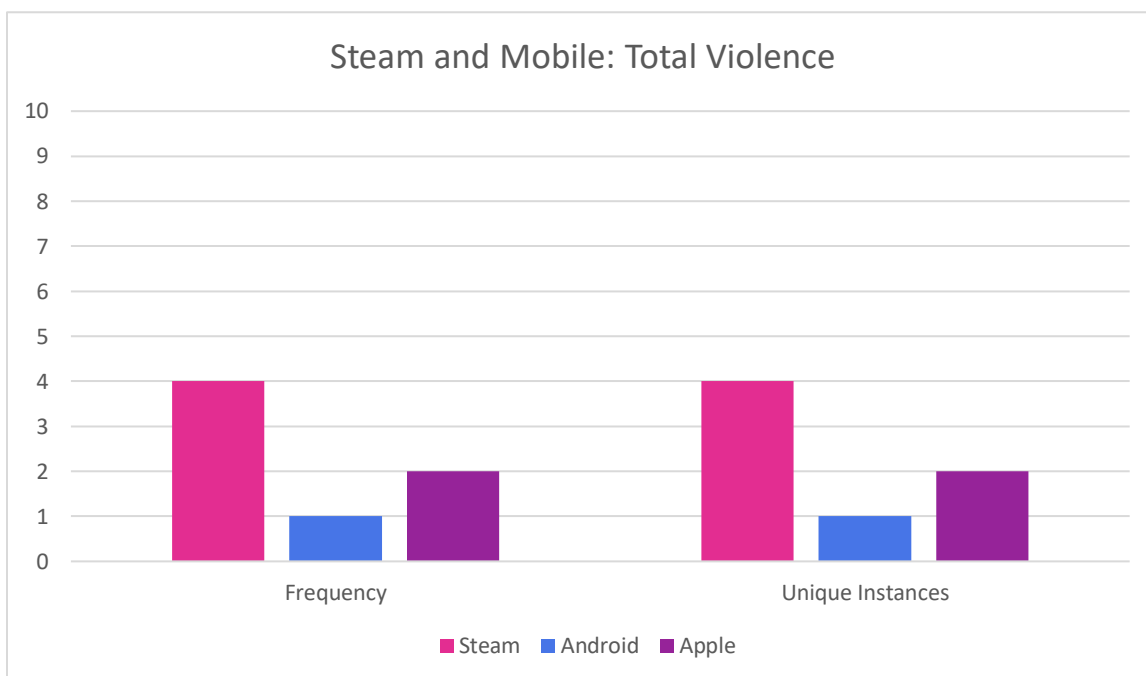
Figure 27: Steam featured violence the most and Android featured violence the least.

The Xbox covers contained the most violence, followed by PlayStation and then Nintendo. Android contained the least violence. Weapons were the most common form of violence and blood was the least common.

Perceived Theme

In her research, Chess determined that different game themes are typically used to target men and women separately (Chess, 2017). For example, some categories of "women's" games include fashion, cooking, farming, mysteries, puzzles, and art. Party games/board games tend to target a gender-neutral audience and adventure games, originally intended for men, have historically attracted a lot of women and have recently been marketed in a more gender-neutral

way (Chess, 2017). 'Men's' categories included first person shooters, fighting games like Tekken or Mortal Kombat, horror games with extreme violence (as opposed to gothic mystery games), and sports games (such as Madden and FIFA). Please refer to Figure 28 for a full breakdown of theme per platform.
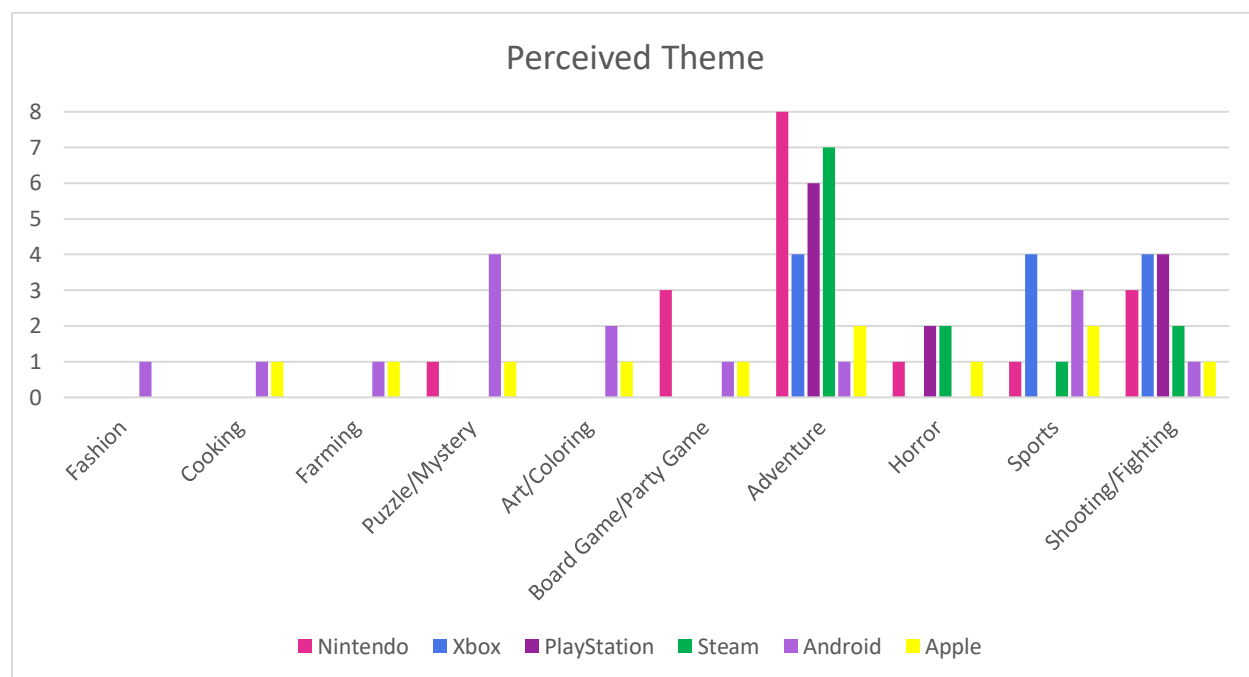
Figure 28: Nintendo was the most gender-neutral in terms of theme because it featured a plethora of Adventure games as well as a few feminine and masculine themes. Xbox featured the most masculine themes and Android featured the most feminine themes.

Notably, Nintendo was the most gender neutral in terms of perceived theme. It included an even distribution of masculine, gender neutral, and feminine games. Xbox skewed the most masculine of all six platforms, containing 67% masculine themes, 33% gender neutral, and 0% feminine. Android contained the most feminine themes, including fashion, cooking, farming, art, and an abundance of puzzle/mystery games (40%).

Sexualization of Characters

For sexualization of characters, clothing was split into amount and tightness for each gender following the example of Robinson et al in *Violence, Sexuality, and Gender Stereotyping: A Content Analysis of Official Video Game Websites* (2008). I opted to code for tightness and

amount of clothing instead of musculature/breast size because body type does not necessarily equate to sexualization. It is well known that video game women who are sexualized are often shown with disproportionately small waists and large breasts. Men being sexualized are often shown with unrealistically large muscles (Robinson et al, 2008). However, in my opinion, body type does not necessarily equate to sexualization. For example, if a woman wearing a size twenty dress was depicted alongside a woman wearing a size two dress, the size 20 woman would likely have larger breasts. This does not mean that she would be more sexualized than the size 2 woman. The difference falls in the type of clothing each woman is depicted wearing, not in the shape of her body. Especially in games with realistic graphics, if a woman with large breasts (that are reasonably proportioned) is depicted in a loose sweater, she is less sexualized than if she is wearing a low-cut top or bikini. Likewise, if a muscular man is shown wearing a loose shirt that does not show off his musculature, he is not being sexualized in the same way that he would be in a skin-tight t-shirt. For example, my codebook specifically states that in the case of armor, which typically forms tightly to the shape of the character, it was only coded as tight if it had sculpted breasts (women) or sculpted musculature (men). This is because sculpting armor to show breasts and muscles does not aid functionality, only aesthetics.

For Nintendo, 96% of men were fully clothed and 4% were shirtless (Figure 29). 100% of women and gender-neutral characters were fully clothed (Figure 30). For Xbox, 92% of men were fully clothed and 8% were shirtless. 100% of gender-neutral characters were fully clothed and there were no women present. For PlayStation, 86% of men were fully clothed and 14% were shirtless. 100% of women were fully clothed and 100% of gender-neutral characters were fully clothed. On Steam, 86% of men were fully clothed and 14% were shirtless. 100% of women were fully clothed and 100% of gender-neutral characters were fully clothed. For Apple

100% of men and 100% of women were fully clothed. For Android 100% of men were fully

clothed. 50% of women were fully clothed and 50% showed cleavage. No gender-neutral

characters were present.
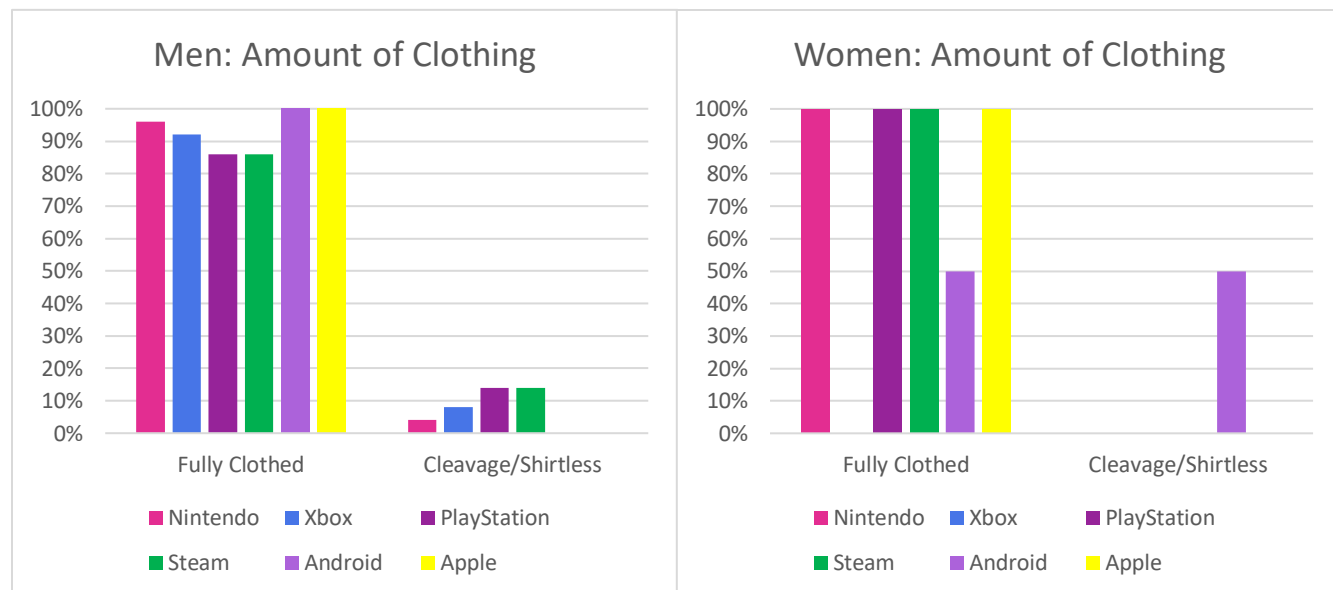
Figure 29: Across platforms, most men were fully clothed. However, for all platforms except Android and Apple, there was at least one shirtless man present.

Figure 30: All women were fully clothed except one woman present on an Android cover who showed cleavage.

For Xbox, 83% of men wore a loose top and loose bottoms, 8% wore a tight top and

loose bottom, and 8% wore a tight top and tight bottom. 100% of gender-neutral characters wore

loose tops and loose bottoms. For PlayStation, 57% of men wore a tight top and tight bottom and

43% wore a tight top and loose bottom. 100% of women and 100% of gender-neutral characters

wore a loose top and bottom. For Nintendo, 93% of men wore a loose top and loose bottom, 3%

wore a tight top and loose bottom, and 3% wore a tight top and tight bottom. 73% of women

wore a loose top and bottom, 18% wore a tight top and loose bottom, and 9% wore a tight top

and tight bottom. 100% of gender-neutral characters wore a loose top and bottom. On Steam,

86% of men wore a loose top and loose bottom and 14% wore a loose top and tight bottoms.

100% of women and 100% of gender-neutral characters wore a loose top and loose bottoms. For

Apple, 100% of men wore a loose top and loose bottom, 50% of women wore a tight top and

tight bottom and 50% of women wore a loose top and loose bottom. Finally, for Android, 100%

of men and women wore a loose top and loose bottom.
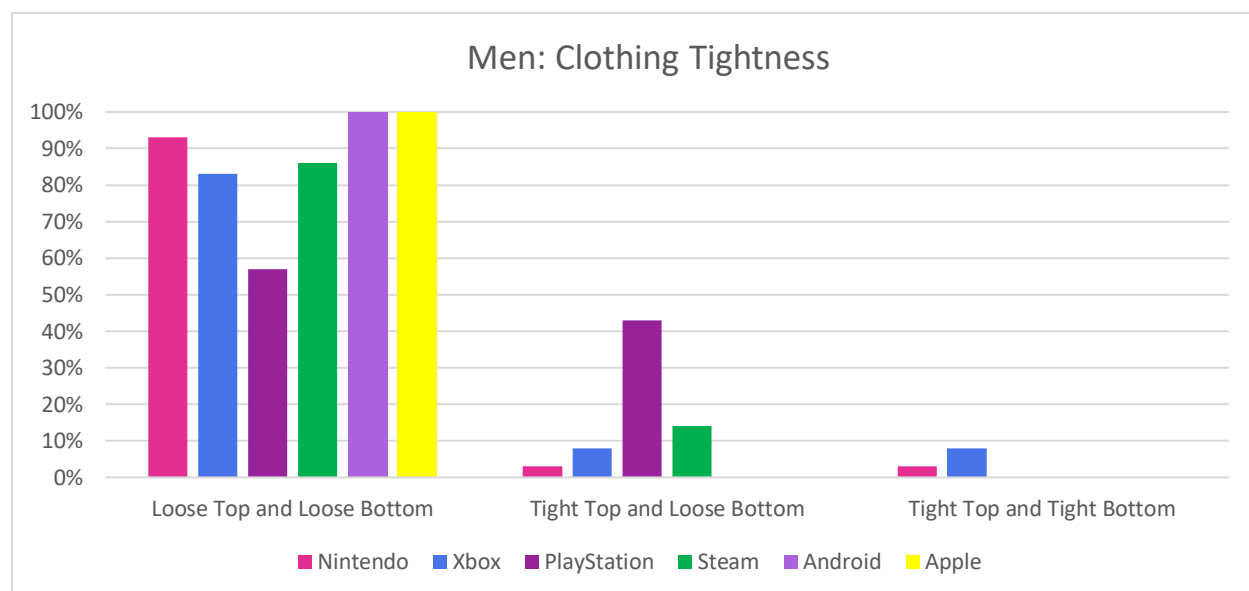
Figure 31: Most men wore loose tops and loose bottoms across platforms. On all platforms except Android and Apple at least one man wore a tight top and loose bottom. For Nintendo and Xbox at least one man wore a tight top and tight bottom.
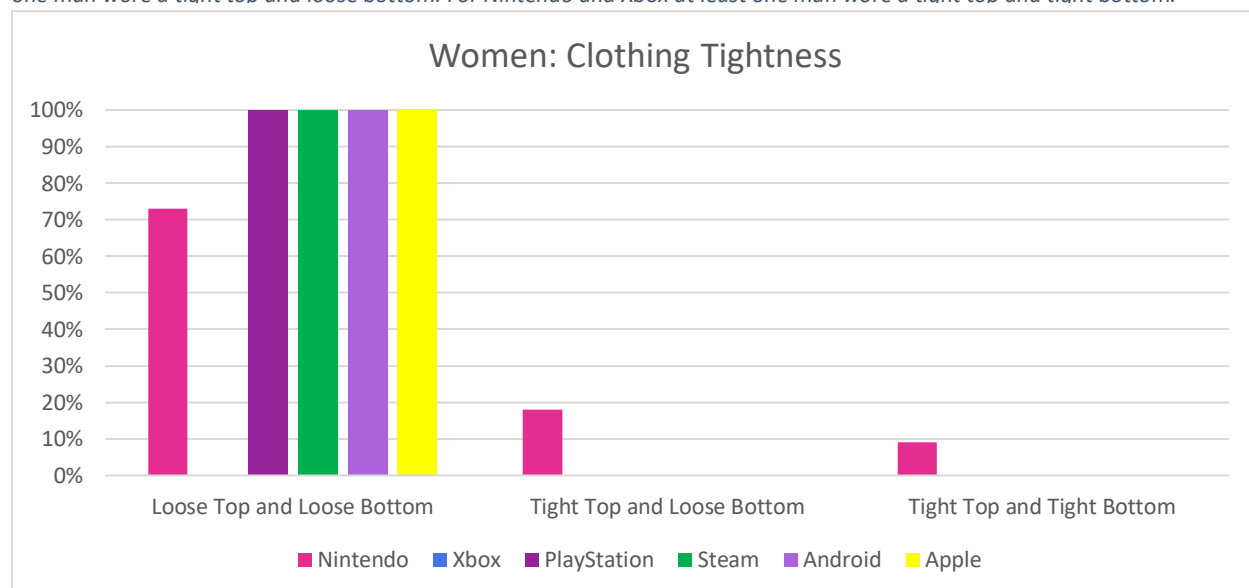
Figure 32: Most women wore loose tops and loose bottoms across platforms. 18% of Nintendo covers featured a woman with a tight top and loose bottom and 9% featured a woman with a tight top and tight bottom.

This suggests that across the six platforms, when women *are* included on game covers,

they are less likely to be sexualized than their masculine counterparts. It also must be noted that

although Android appears to sexualize women in the 'amount' category, it only appears to be a significant difference because it occurred in 50% of 2 total cases.

Discussion

  To recap, for the humanity category, Nintendo featured the most human and non-human characters which positioned it as the most feminine of the six platforms. Xbox and PlayStation did not feature any non-human characters which tied them for most masculine, and the remaining platforms tied for most gender-neutral, featuring a balanced number of human, humanoid, and non-human characters.

  For gender of featured characters, Android and Apple were most gender neutral because they featured an equal amount and an equal frequency of feminine and masculine characters. Xbox was the least gender neutral of all six platforms and contained no feminine characters. None of the six platforms were overtly feminine, but Nintendo featured women most frequently of the six platforms.

  For color, Steam was the most masculine with most of its covers featuring dark palettes. Apple and Android were the only platforms to feature pastel covers, making them the most feminine of the six though they both were overall gender neutral. Finally, Android was the most gender-neutral platform because it featured bright color palettes the most.

  Apple was the most feminine platform in terms of graphics because all of its covers were cartoon and Xbox was the least feminine because it only featured realistic graphics and paid no mind to the 'round shapes and soft shadows' characteristic of 'feminine' games (Chess, 2017).

  In terms of perceived theme, Nintendo was the most gender neutral and included and even distribution of feminine, gender neutral, and masculine games while frequently highlighting Adventure games. Xbox skewed the most masculine of all six platforms featuring mostly

masculine themes and no feminine themes. Android contained the most feminine themes, including fashion, cooking, farming, art, and puzzle games.

Finally, coding for sexualization revealed that men were sexualized much more frequently than women though neither men nor women were sexualized often.

Based on my content analysis findings, I have determined that out of all six platforms, Xbox covers catered the most to men, Android covers were most likely to target women, and Apple and Steam were tied as the most likely platforms to target gender neutral audiences. Xbox was named as the most masculine platform in 5/6 coded categories (losing to Steam in the color category). Android was determined to be the most feminine platform in 4/6 categories. Steam and Apple were each named most gender neutral in 3/6 categories.

Research shows that women respond more to gender neutral games than they do to games which overtly target women (Chess, 2017). Because of this, I argue that based on marketing, women would be most likely to purchase and play games from either Apple or Steam and least likely to purchase games from Xbox. These findings were surprising, as I expected Nintendo to be the most gender neutral and I expected Steam to cater more to men than my results suggest. This is because in my experience, I have found that many Nintendo games use cartoon graphics, feature adventure themes, and are easily accessible to new players which are all features that are desirable to feminine audiences (Chess, 2017). Similarly, because Steam is a PC game store and features many 'hardcore' games, I did not expect it to use such gender-neutral marketing tactics. Hopefully, the results of my interviews should shed some light on this observed disconnect between marketing materials and assumed player-base and help to determine how much marketing effects which games women decide to purchase and play.

Chapter 3: "Why not put some clothes on? Go read a book."

"Why not put some clothes on? Go read a book." This was one woman's exasperated

response when asked what she thought about women's representation in video games. Among

the six participants I interviewed for this study, the feeling was unanimous: sexualizing feminine

characters was a trope better left in the past. In this chapter, I will examine the results of my one-

on-one semi-structured interviews with women who regularly played video games. The most

relevant themes uncovered during the interview process included relaxation and challenge,

creativity and narrative, representation and identification with characters, hardcore casual

gaming, outside influence, and hesitant community membership.

I expected that the women I interviewed would primarily favor games that were marketed

as feminine or as gender-neutral and that, while some would regularly engage with 'masculine'

games, the majority would avoid them. I also expected that most of my participants would have

experienced gender-based harassment in the gaming community and that, based on the

stipulation that they must regularly play video games to participate in the study, they would all

identify as gamers.

Interview Methods and Protocol

To recruit participants, I hung up flyers on UVA grounds and I posted an advertisement

to my own personal Facebook page and on public Facebook groups for various gaming

communities/games including (but not limited to) *Animal Crossing New Horizons*, *Destiny 2*,

Pokemon Legends: Arceus, and *Red Dead Redemption 2*. Tellingly, the first response I received

on Facebook was from a disgruntled masculine player who posted a meme of Thomas the Train

captioned, "This is the most bullshit I've ever seen". By the time I tried to screenshot the

message, moderators had removed it for violating their policies. I did not receive any more

online hate to my knowledge, though it is possible that other diligent mods took the comments

down before I saw them (thank goodness for them!). While I did not receive any more harassment, I also did not gain any participants through the public Facebook pages. I did recruit three participants through my personal Facebook page, however. The remaining participants in my study were all UVA students who saw my flyers and reached out to me with their interest. Each participant was between 18 and 25 years old and was given a pseudonym based on her favorite video game character to aid in anonymity.

My participants' favorite video game characters of all time (and their subsequent pseudonyms) were as follows: Samus (*Metroid* series), Sidon (*The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*), Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider* series), Six (*Little Nightmares*), Paarthurnax (*Skyrim*), and Link (*The Legend of Zelda* series).

All my interviews were conducted via Zoom and I audio recorded each meeting (with my participants' informed consent) to transcribe later. My interviews were semi-structured, meaning that I asked specific questions but informed my participants that they were free to engage in open conversation and bring up any topics they thought might be relevant (Hesse-Biber, 2017). I chose to do semi-structured rather than highly structured interviews because I wanted my participants to feel as comfortable as possible and I wanted to allow them to broach topics that I had not previously thought of. However, I did not want to use an open-ended structure because I had specific questions that I knew I wanted to address. After my first two interviews, the third participant introduced a new idea and I reach back out to my previous participants via email to gauge their opinions on the subject (only one responded with her answers). I then added those questions into the protocol for the remaining interviews.

I asked all six participants the same sixteen questions (follow up questions were case-by-case) spanning six categories: personal preference, time dedication, representation, community acceptance, production, and identity. The specific questions asked were as follows:

Personal Preference
1. What kind of video games do you typically play? Why do you play them?

2. What is the first video game you remember playing? What was that experience like, and do you credit it with your continued love for games?

3. Who is your favorite video game character of all time and why?

Time Dedication
4. Do you play mobile games frequently? Do you play them more or less than console/PC games?

5. On average, how many hours a week do you play video games?

Representation and Community Acceptance
6. What comes to mind when you picture a woman video game character?

7. Have you ever felt uncomfortable playing a game because of its depiction of women? If so, why?

8. If a video game allows you to choose the gender of you character, what do you typically pick? Why?

9. If you have ever played an online multiplayer game, have you ever experienced harassment or discrimination based on gender?

Production
10. Do you think AAA games are made for women?

11. When you think of games that are made for women, what comes to mind?

12. Do you believe that AAA titles should focus more on feminine audiences? Why or why not?

13. If AAA titles were to focus more on feminine audiences, what would you like to see change?

Identity

14. In your own words, what is a 'gamer'?

15. In your own words, what is a 'gamer girl'? Do you think this aligns with the pop-culture definition?

16. Do you classify yourself as a gamer?

Relaxation and Challenge

Many of my participants explained that they chose to play the games they did because they believed games should be relaxing. Several cited 'simulation' games or RPGs as their favorites because they allowed for relaxation and freedom. Sidon specifically stated that she does not play shooting games because they are too stressful, instead preferring to play RPGs because, "I like being able to just do whatever I want to do, and most of the time they're pretty relaxing because I don't like high stress games. For me, I'm like, what's the point of playing that? You're supposed to escape stressful situations by playing video games." Link and Samus also mentioned relaxation as a driving force in their choice of games to play.

However, both women also explained that they enjoy puzzles – with Link specifically stating that she enjoys being challenged by the games she plays. When asked to clarify whether that challenge should be technical (skill based) or mental (puzzles), she stated definitively that she preferred mental challenges.

My participants' love for relaxation and for puzzles aligns with Chess's research regarding the types of games that women like to play (2017). In *Ready Player Two*, she specifically states that women tend to play as

> a way to relax, escape, or decompress from the stresses of their lives outside of games. [So,] putting mechanics that deliberately create stress or introduce the possibility of failure tend not to be as popular with players who are playing games to avoid that sort of situation (Chess, 2017, pp. 46).

The designers she interviewed also cited puzzle games such as *Candy Crush Saga* and hidden object games (HOGs) as game genres that are typically marketed toward women (Chess, 2017).

Puzzle games mentioned by my participants included exclusively intellectual games like *Sudoku*, as well as adventure games with puzzle *elements* like *Lego Harry Potter* and *The Legend of Zelda* series. Interestingly, two-thirds of my participants cited the *Animal Crossing* series (and specifically *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*) as a game that they played for relaxation. Samus specifically noted that she had been playing installments of the series regularly since 2005 – totaling 17 years of dedicated play! It is not surprising to me that so many women cited *Animal Crossing* specifically as their source of relaxation given the game's success during the highly stressful COVID-19 pandemic as detailed in Chapter 1.

Creativity and Narrative

Many women also cited *Animal Crossing*'s (and other games') affordances for creative expression as particularly attractive. Regarding *ACNH* specifically, Samus stated, "I like games [where] I'm able to completely customize my character and with

this one specifically, being able to totally customize your island is really cool." Several other women also explained that they prefer to play games where they can completely customize their character.

This desire for customization and freedom led 5/6 of my participants to name role-playing games (which often focus on adventure, customization, and narrative-based choice) as their favorite genre with Lara stating that she played, "anything that has the RPG element. Games like *Sims* and *Animal Crossing*, but also ones where you make a character like *Assassin's Creed*, things like that. Awesome RPG." This is interesting, because according to Chess's research on video game marketing, RPGs tend to be marketed toward gender neutral audiences (2017).

Aside from the creative choices afforded by RPGs, many participants also noted that they enjoyed being able to make narrative-based decisions. Paarthurnax named *Oblivion*, *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, and *Ghost of Tsushima* as her favorite games and explained that she loved them, "specifically [for] the story. I feel like that's a huge difference in [RPGs]. I like being able to pretty much create the story yourself and also just watching someone else's story."

Sidon also valued player choice and explained that she had gravitated toward games which afforded it from a young age. She said that one of the first games she played was *Nintendogs: Lab and Friends*, and she, "Just enjoyed picking up my little puppy dogs and dressing them and *choosing* how I wanted to play with them. And then when I was young, I went for other games like that. So, I got my first *Animal Crossing* game after that… It definitely influenced by gaming style." Notably, my participants' love for player choice did not stop at creativity and narrative. They also specified that they

preferred to play games where they could create their own character and choose their
appearance, name, and gender.

Representation and Identification with Characters

Lara and Paarthurnax both struggled to name a favorite video game character when
prompted because they both preferred playing games where they created and named their own
characters (such as *Skyrim* in Paarthurnax's case). Lara explained, "I find that playing a character
[when] you don't have any say in how they look, how they act, etc. I find that to be just not as
fun." For Lara and Paarthurnax, it was easiest to identify with their character if they were able to
create a feminine character that looked and acted like them. In fact, every single participant
noted that they preferred to play as a feminine character if given the choice because, as Samus
simply stated, "I'm a female so I like for it to represent me."

All my participants believed that women in games tend to be overly sexualized, and all of
them could recall at least one instance where they felt uncomfortable playing a game because of
its depiction of women. When asked what she thought of when asked to picture a feminine video
game character, Samus told me that in most AAA games women tend to be hypersexualized. In
games that attempt to appeal to women and gender-neutral audiences, the characters are not
hypersexualized but are still hyperfeminized. She explained:

> In battle games or shooter games, a lot of times the women are typically displayed
> like oversexualized. And even – like I said, my favorite character was Samus,
> [who] is definitely oversexualized. But then even a game as simple as *Animal
> Crossing*, even though they don't, like, sexualize the characters in any way,
> there's definitely a strict stereotype that they're following. All of the girl
> characters, even though they have different personality types, they're all relatively

girly… You have the 'snooty' character, which is not a positive attribute for a

girl. And then, like the one character [type] that doesn't have a personality is, like,

normal.

She told me that she found it problematic that in most games, women are either "super cute or

super sexualized." Samus also explained that when she was younger, she attempted to play

Grand Theft Auto V, but had to stop because the depictions of women made her uncomfortable.

She noted that there was one feminine character depicted in a masculine way with large muscles,

yet the character still had overly large breasts. She told me, "It was just uncomfortable that, like,

every girl character was either like a prostitute or a hooker, and it's like, I get it. That's the point

of the game. But there wasn't any cool mob boss character that was a girl." What is intriguing

about this is that Samus never once said that the game shouldn't feature hookers – she believed

that they made sense in the world of the game. She simply wished that hookers weren't the *only*

women and that not every feminine character was overtly sexualized.

Although Samus is only one woman in a very small sample, this is notable because it

contradicts existing literature on women's gaming preferences (Chess, 2017). While existing

literature posits that women are averse to any sexualization of feminine characters (except in the

name of fashion) this hints that women may be tolerant of *some* feminine sexualization if it

makes sense in the context of the narrative. Given that this sample is far from representative, a

substantial claim cannot yet be made regarding women's preferences on sexualization, but

Samus' position gives reason to believe that further research on the subject may be warranted.

Like Samus, Six also expressed a general distaste for sexualization of women in games

but her stance was far less permitting. When asked what she thought of when asked to picture a

feminine video game character, she responded, "Um, not great." When asked to elaborate, she

elucidated, "Very skimpy armor, because that's always what it is, right? I'm trying to think of the exact game that I used to play with my dad, but it was always like I would pick the girl and she was, like, naked the whole time. Are you serious? You know, [wear] any armor, literally any." She also explained that this distaste for overly sexualized characters is another reason she was drawn to her favorite game *Little Nightmares* – "Six was a girl and then the villain was a girl. And then there was a pretty good distribution of [men and women]."

But, she warned, an even distribution of genders means little if the women are overly sexualized. She offered the example of *Resident Evil: Village* in which the main villain, Lady Dimitrescu, and her three vampire daughters are depicted with low-cut dresses, makeup, and hourglass figures. Those characters were viewed in the greater gaming community as extremely sexually attractive, and players created widely circulated game-mods and memes which sexualized them further. Regarding these women and other hypersexualized characters, Six exclaimed, "Why not put some clothes on? Go read a book". In my opinion, this is an apt summary of how most women in the study felt regarding feminine sexualization. They were much more interested in feminine characters who displayed intellect, narrative-depth, and physical prowess rather than sexual desirability.

Interestingly, in Samus' case, the desire to play as a feminine character transcended her distaste for the overt sexualization of women in games. She chose Samus as her favorite character because she thought she was 'cool' and specifically stated that she enjoyed the character most in *Super Smash Bros.* because she could transform from Samus (whose robot-like armor makes her appear androgynous) to Zero Suit Samus (who is hyper-feminized but also sexualized). Zero Suit Samus is typically drawn with a small waist, large breasts, high heels, and a skin-tight body suit. My participant acknowledged this sexualization but looked beyond it to

highlight the character's strength and combat skills. In this case, Samus was able to accept the character's sexualization because her change from bulky armor to skin-tight body suit helped to distinguish her as a feminine character.

Similarly, Lara identified with Lara Croft because, to her, she represented feminine strength and capability. Lara explained that despite the overt sexualization in her original design, Croft was a strong feminist symbol. She reasoned,

> From a feminist perspective, although I've never actually played a *Tomb Raider* game… she is a really powerful depiction of a female character. I think games like *Tomb Raider* are often designed for men, right? And I think to an extent, Lara Croft was too – at first at least. But after time, like, she's a good representation of how women can be just as good as men at things like, you know, adventuring and killing things, right? But also, it sort of breaks down that boys' club feeling of video games because I think when you think of most main characters in popular games, they are mostly men. So, it's nice to have that sort of juxtaposition.

It was incredibly interesting to me that both women, despite asserting that they disliked sexualized feminine characters, found immense value in Samus and Lara Croft despite their sexualization. There are two reasons I can think of as to why my participants would pick Lara Croft and Samus as their all-time favorites despite their distaste for sexualized feminine characters.

First, these women may have been the first characters my participants encountered that were strong, capable, and central in their respective games. Because they were the first of their kind in my participants' experiences, they might hold them on a pedestal for the sake of

nostalgia. These characters proved to my participants that strong women *did* exist in games and (based on Lara's statement about 'breaking down that boys' club feeling') made them believe that developers might finally be considering a feminine audience when designing their games.

Second, it is possible that these women have not been introduced to more contemporary feminine characters in mainstream games that might otherwise have replaced their chosen characters as less sexually controversial favorites. Lara was one of the participants who stated that she preferred to create her own character – so it is possible that she has not been exposed to many modern games that feature a strong feminine lead, like *Horizon Zero Dawn* or *The Last of Us Part II* because those games (while still adventure-based RPGs) *do not* allow you to create your own character. Samus, a new mother, stated that besides *Animal Crossing* she currently mostly plays mobile games because they fit more easily into her schedule. She stated,

> They're more convenient. I remember when I was in the delivery room, I
> definitely played [mobile games] for a while…. Just the convenience of it. Like,
> I'm not going to take my Switch with me everywhere, but my phone's with me all
> the time. So I definitely play those more often. I feel like with *Animal Crossing*, I
> might play for only like 15-20 minutes a day if I'm just doing the bare minimum
> of the daily tasks. Whereas with the game on your phone, you can keep playing
> like new levels as long as you want.

Beyond the delivery room, Samus' love for mobile games continued. She explained that it was easy to play in "short bursts… and [while] doing something else like watching TV, while my daughter's playing… when you're waiting in a doctor's office, when you're in the car…" Because of her affinity for games that are played in short bursts, and the lack of narrative/characters in mobile games like *Sudoku* (her favorite) it is likely that Samus has not had

a chance to engage with hardcore games featuring strong/central feminine characters in recent years. While she did mention that she plays *ACNH* regularly, the playable character in that game is customizable, and feminine NPCs are anthropomorphic animals – so they do not offer the same sense of representation that does Samus.

Besides gender, my participants noted that they were able to identify with a character if they were able to empathize with their emotions and/or narrative decisions. For example, Link chose her favorite character because, "I grew up with him, and he's just a fun character to play and I love his outfits… and [even though he doesn't speak] you can definitely feel his energy… and his emotions that he's feeling, which brings you to have the same feelings because you've been playing as him the whole time." She also explained to me that she can see herself within the character (regardless of his gender), stating, "I kind of connect myself with him because you're playing the game and you're feeling like kind of what he's feeling… So, you kind of project yourself into it because you're basically him and you can change your name to make it your name and not [Link]… if you want to go even deeper." Interestingly, Link could easily identify with her character's emotions because he was a hero. However, characters do not to be heroes nor even morally good for a player to identify with them.

In Six's case, her identification with her chosen character was complicated by immorality. She struggled to understand how she could sympathize with a character who did evil things, stating,

> …since you play as her, you get, like, emotionally attached. And then it was also the fact that you would do things that I would most definitely not do… it was morally egregious… but I could still immerse myself in her as a character… I think in *Little Nightmares*, the options that I would pick [are for] survival. And she does that anyway. So [with] any morality I can separate myself from her but

then still agree with her and see myself in her because I would push for that
survival.

It is interesting that Six was able to see herself in a character that was very different from her. The other women I interviewed preferred playing games with characters they designed themselves, or in the case of Sidon and Link, characters that had traits they admired. Six instead looked past her character's flaws and determined that their shared goal of survival was enough for her to identify with.

When asked what AAA production companies could do to make games more appealing to women, my participants concurred that they did not want to see more games *for women*. Instead, they wanted gender neutral games that kept women in mind and did not exclude or alienate them. Six explained,

I feel like I just want them to be more gender neutral, more so than focus on a female audience, right? I feel like if they were to focus on female audiences they are going to focus on, you know, stereotypes. So all of a sudden the whole game will be pink. I don't want the whole game pink! I just want there to be a woman [in the game].

Link added that she does not want AAA production companies to create feminine games that exclude masculine players. She argued,

It doesn't matter if you're a guy or a girl. You can play a game and still enjoy it regardless because it shouldn't matter. But there should be more games that can focus more on [women] but still draw [men] in, because that's also not kind of

fair for them. At the same time, we can be more represented and [represented] right.

Sidon expressed similar sentiments, explaining that she would like to see games with less sexualization of feminine characters, and more feminine characters who are 'strong.' She also called for more variation and story-based gameplay in games like *Call of Duty*, which she said are "basically the same thing [in each addition to the series], just shooting people… if they added different stuff to it, it might bring in a wider audience."

Paarthurnax also mentioned that she wanted more games to feature 'strong' feminine characters but admonished the attempt by game company Naughty Dog to include a diverse cast in *The Last of Us Part II* in 2020. She explained that she did not believe that Naughty Dog succeeded in their attempt at meaningful diversity[2] and offered Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* as a better example of what a feminine lead should be. She explained that she believes a good feminine character should have an interesting backstory that does not involve a man and that she should not be solely driven by romantic love.

Hardcore Casual Gaming

One thing that I found particularly fascinating was that even when my participants chose to play casual games, such as in Samus' case, their style of play was anything *but* casual. Regardless of the types of games they chose to play, each of the women I interviewed played video games for several hours each week. Of my participants, the least amount of time spent per week playing video games of any kind was 2 hours, the most amount of time was 42 hours, and the mean was 16.5 hours per week (using the highest amount for the women who gave me a

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[2] In 2020, *The Last of Us Part II* was met with backlash for the way it implemented POC, LGBTQ characters, and its feminine leads (Alhadad, 2020).

scale, i.e. 10-15). There is no way for me to determine whether the time-estimates reported were accurate because the women may have misjudged the amount of time spent or may have intentionally misrepresented it. It is possible that the women offered higher or lower averages based on what they thought I wanted to hear. For example, if they were embarrassed that they played games too frequently they may have offered a lower amount, or if they thought a high-level of time dedication would add credibility to their testimony, they may have overstated their average. In either case, the fact that all the women played for several hours weekly showed significant dedication to play. This distinction is important for a later section regarding the women's willingness to identify as gamers and position themselves within or outside of the larger gaming community.

Two-thirds of the women in my study played console/PC games more frequently than mobile games. However, most of the women who played mobile games most often did not engage with them casually as existing literature suggests (Chess 2017, Cunningham 2018, Soderman, 2017). Samus' assertion that she plays mobile games in 'short bursts' shows that she does play casually. But the two other participants who mentioned frequent engagement with mobile games described their own playstyles as much more intense.

Link explained that she only plays one mobile game, but she plays it frequently and consistently. She said, "I play one mobile game. It's an adventure game. It's called *Sky: Children of Light*. It's also on the Switch–it got ported to the Switch. So, I play that, but it's originally a mobile game and you just kind of explore, make friends. It's more of a community game where it's actual, real-life people rather than nonplayable characters… it's more of a connection [game] to get friends". She explained that she loved the game enough that she downloaded it on several devices – her phone, iPod, iPad, and Switch. She also used the game to make real-life friends

from around the world and regularly logged on to interact with those players and build her

relationship with them which required consistent and significant time dedication.

Six told me that in addition to the horror games that she plays on PC, she also plays a mobile

fashion game called *Covet Fashion: Model Makeover*. She explained the game to me,

exclaiming:

> Oh my god, it's so awful… you create a wardrobe, but the way the game works is
>
> like you have to put together an outfit. So you want, like, a white shirt and jeans.
>
> The thing about the game is that you have x amount of money and everything you
>
> buy has to be designer. So it's like the only white stuff they have are like $300
>
> white shirts. You can't just buy a $25 shirt from Walmart… [if you don't buy the
>
> right clothes] you can't level up along the way. You can get up to like [level] 65
>
> now. I've been playing for three years and I've only ever gotten to level 25.

I asked her why she still plays this game when it clearly upsets her, and she explained that she

does not want to give up on the game after dedicating so much time to progress. She said, "I

mostly have it still on my phone because I don't want to lose all the work I've done – but I refuse

to open it back up and see how much I've missed… I'm so far behind so I don't even want to

open it, but also I have three years put into it." Six and Link were both incredibly dedicated to

games that were supposedly designed to be casual - hinting that casual games do not necessarily

equate to casual play.

Outside Influence: Encouragement and Harassment

Throughout my interview process, I found that the women in my study were regularly

influenced by others in relation to their own playstyles and gaming preferences. Sometimes this

influence was positive and encouraged the women to branch out and engage in new experiences, but sometimes it led the women to avoid certain aspects of gaming entirely.

Two participants, Link and Lara, cited their masculine relatives as having a hand in their path to gaming. Link detailed her earliest gaming memory playing *The Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time*, stating, "It was when I was around three. My dad pretty much scooped me in his lap and helped me with the controls. [*The Legend of Zelda*] was definitely my childhood, which brought me into more games." Lara had a similar experience bonding with her brother over games.

One participant, Six, credited streamers on YouTube for her interest in gaming. She explained,

> I started watching Markiplier[3] play *Five Nights at Freddy's*, which is when I started liking him, and that's when I started watching Jacksepticeye as well. And that was kind of the only thing I did was watch Markiplier and Jacksepticeye… and I just watched *Five Nights at Freddy's*. And then I was that bitch who knew the lore – I loved the lore. Put me in front of an Easter Egg and I'm on it, I'm done. I love secrets. So, I guess it's just that it was so new and people that I genuinely enjoy played it and the fact that it was not that expensive. So, all three of those culminated into me really enjoying [and playing] that one.

Six is the only participant to have mentioned YouTube impacting her gameplay, and unfortunately, the online gaming community was not always a source of positive influence.

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[3] Markiplier and Jacksepticeye are usernames for prolific "Let's Play" streamers (gamers who upload videos of their gameplay) on YouTube. Mark Fischbach (Markiplier) and Seán McLoughlin (Jacksepticeye) both play games spanning many genres, but Fischbach is especially known for horror, having risen to fame with his *Five Nights at Freddy's* gameplay (Piersey, 2021).

Paarthurnax explained that she had only played an online multiplayer game once and based on her experience, had never done so again. She said that while playing *League of Legends* and "when I was on this team that's all they cared about – whether I was a real girl. Like, yes I'm a real girl! And it just got annoying… it just turned me off from it. So, I just play single player games." Sadly, Paarthurnax wasn't the only woman in my study who experienced harassment playing online games.

Six played *Call of Duty* and *League of Legends*, but quickly learned she needed to develop strategies to avoid harassment. She said:

> I just didn't turn my mic on, like, ever. That was my main strategy… I just
> wouldn't turn my mic on and then people would get mad at [me] for not having
> my mic on. But then I was like, I know you're going to be worse to me if I do turn
> my mic back on. So like, you got me in a catch-22… and I'm holding up like, I
> am the reason you're winning tonight, please! And then my character name is not
> like – it's very gender neutral… So a lot of times I can just fly right under the
> radar. If I don't, it's always 'go make me a sandwich' and I [respond] 'guess you
> don't have anyone who loves you enough to make one for you'. Generally I fire
> back, which is kind of mean, but… let's do it. You want to start this? [Then]
> finish it, you know?

These are all common and well-known strategies that women employ when faced with online harassment: avoiding online games, not using their microphone, using gender-neutral/masculine names, and 'firing back' (Gray, 2011). However, these strategies should not be necessary nor as wide-spread as they are. Something needs to change in the gaming world to make women more welcome in the community – and the answer may be a top-down approach.

Lara explained that she believed gaming companies should play a role in stopping harassment by creating better feminine representation on and off screen. She explained, "games that have good female character representation [are] sort of the first step into making a more inclusive gaming community in general, right? Like gamers aren't going to be respectful towards women in gaming if they don't see [that respect] in their games." She even stated that she fights for this change in her own gameplay and that she exclusively plays as feminine characters when given the chance because she hopes that (if the game auto-reports player data to the developers) it will encourage developers to continue offering that choice.

Community Membership

Despite their obvious passion for the medium and their dedication to consistent gameplay (on average, 16.5 hours/week), only half of the women interviewed identified as 'gamers'. Out of the three who did, only two of them did so confidently. The women who did not identify as gamers met their own definition of what a gamer is (someone who plays a lot of games and plays them well) yet believed themselves to be lacking some unique quality which made them 'worthy' of the title.

Of the women who were not willing to claim the label, Paarthurnax's testimony was the most illuminating. When asked, she responded doubtfully, "I want to say yes, But I feel like I'm not a true gamer. I don't know why. There's no reason for it… I feel like I haven't played enough games to be classified as a gamer". This self-doubt was fascinating to me, because Paarthurnax almost exclusively played masculine AAA games and dedicated the most hours to gaming out of all the women in the study (42 hours a week – more than a full-time job!). If she can't call herself a gamer, who can?

Even Sidon, who did identify as a gamer, was reluctant to accept the title. She explained, "I would call myself a gamer because I probably play more than the average girl would. But I'm definitely not like a *hardcore gamer* because I don't clock those hours. I don't play a lot of the games that a real gamer [would play]." In both cases, the women tried their best to avoid the elephant in the room, but the implication was clear. When comparing themselves to hardcore *masculine* players, they struggled to believe they were legitimate gamers.

Another reason that some women may avoid calling themselves gamers is that they dislike the public perception of 'gamer girls.' Six was careful to stipulate that while she does identify as a gamer, she does *not* identify as a gamer girl. She stated, "I would like to say that a gamer girl is a girl who just plays games. However, I think there is a separate definition where a gamer girl is almost a girl who plays up her femininity as a gamer in order to make money." Samus doubled down on this definition, stating that she equates gamer girls to the 'cool girl' whose only intention in playing games is to attract men by proving that she fits in with them. These accounts tie into discussions on women who stream their gameplay on Twitch.

Women who stream games online are often subject to discrimination that their masculine counterparts (like Markiplier and Jacksepticeye) do not face. Ruberg, Cullen, and Brewster define "titty streamers" or "boobie streamers" as women who stream video game content on Twitch and are perceived by critics as, "drawing undeserved attention and donations from viewers by presenting their bodies in sexualized ways" (Ruberg, et al. 2019). These labels are used to delegitimize feminine gamers who dare to be traditionally beautiful while playing video games and earning money at the same time. Detractors dislike "titty streamers" because they believe that their bodies give them an unfair monetary advantage over more traditionally masculine streamers. The second someone decides that a streamer is showing too much cleavage,

wearing too much makeup, etc. she is suddenly labelled illegitimate – no matter how dedicated a gamer she is (Ruberg et al. 2019).

It is also important to note that not all women have the same reasons for not feeling like they are part of the community. There was only one non-white participant in my study, and all the women were cisgendered and heterosexual. The only Black woman in my study, Paarthurnax, did not mention race at all in our discussion in relation to her experiences with gaming. However, I did not ask her any race-specific questions, and it is possible that she was not comfortable bringing up the topic on her own (I am a white woman and she and I had never met previously).

While my own study did not turn up any new information on racial or LGBTQ+ issues related to gaming, it is important to acknowledge existing research on the topic. Discussions of intersectionality in representation are few and far between, with most discussions of women in games typically revolving around *white* women, and discussions of race in games typically revolving around *men* of color (Shaw, 2014). So, to remedy the misrepresentation and underrepresentation of women in games, it is paramount that we acknowledge and discuss *all* women, and not just cisgendered, heterosexual, white women.

As discussed in Chapter 1 with the example of Kishonna Gray, women with overlapping marginalized identities (such as Black women) face unique issues in the gaming community that go beyond what straight, cis, white women face. Recall, for example, how quickly Gray's experience with harassment went from performance-based, to gendered, to outright racist. One way we might counteract the harassment of marginalized groups in the gaming community is to offer better representations of those groups in games themselves. As Shaw writes, "part of the reason the representation of marginal groups is so important is that media representations serve

as points of recognition that help validate those identities, both for those who identify with those representations *as well as those who do not*" (Shaw, 2014, pp 68). Following this logic, it is possible that if games positively and regularly represent characters from marginalized groups, players who are *not* part of those groups may start to see marginalized people in a more positive and accepting light.

Discussion

The results of these interviews show that women, like all people, have varying tastes. Not all of them engaged with the same games, and none of them picked the same favorite character. There were several instances in which these women's preferences differed greatly from what existing literature would suggest (such as Paarthurnax's affinity for masculine games) (Chess, 2017). However, there are also many ways in which the testimonies of these women supported existing research (Chess, 2017). For example, many of the women expressed a love for story-based games and customization, as well as a distaste for romance. Interestingly, the women overall posited that they did not want games to focus on women specifically, they simply wanted to play games that were inclusive to everyone (as represented in their love for RPGs which tend to be gender-neutral).

The women indicated that they wanted games to include more women who are not overly sexualized and have interesting backstories. These women do not necessarily have to be morally good (as evidenced by Six's love of *Little Nightmares* and Samus' desire for a feminine mob boss), they simply need to be dynamic and executed to the best of the developers' ability.

The participants also indicated that they would be more willing to engage with AAA/masculine games and the gaming community as a whole if they did not have to fear harassment. Although most of my participants were cis, straight, and white, it is important to

remember that some women deal with harassment more frequently than others due to overlapping marginalized identities.

Not many women offered potential solutions to problems of harassment and misrepresentation, but the one woman who *did* suggested that hiring more women in production/development roles would be a good place to start. I agree with this assertion, but also believe that women need to be more vocal about their membership in the gaming community before the industry will truly start to include them. I will explain this further in the following chapter.

Conclusion

The combined results of the content analysis and interviews indicate that the women in my study were unwilling to identify with and participate in the larger gaming community. They also indicate that marketing materials can impact the types of games that women choose to play, which in turn affects the way they view their role in the community.

A lot of women in my study indicated that they felt uncomfortable identifying themselves as 'gamers' because they didn't believe that they were skilled or dedicated enough to warrant the title. This was peculiar to me because those same women spent a significant amount of time playing games and were perfectly capable of playing those games 'well'. One explanation for this disconnect could be that most of my participants did not play traditionally masculine hardcore games. They did not seem to believe that games like *Animal Crossing* and *The Legend of Zelda* were 'hardcore' enough to qualify as 'real' games. Sidon specifically stated, "I don't play a lot of the games that a real gamer [would play]". However, this distinction between what games count as 'real', while fascinating, still doesn't paint the full picture. Paarthurnax played exclusively masculine AAA games, yet she was still not willing to identify as a gamer because she did not believe she played *enough* games. This points to a more troubling explanation – that women in the gaming community do not feel up-to-par regardless of their skill level, thematic preferences, and time dedication to play.

There are two ways that women will be able to gain confidence as players: if the industry works harder to include and acknowledge them in production, representation, and consumer demographics *and* if more women claim their titles as gamers and speak out about their presence in the community. Since the 1970s, there has been an unhappy marriage between production of

games for women and consumption of games by women (Cunningham, 2018; Newman, 2017).

Production companies didn't think women played their games, so they stopped marketing them

to those women. Then, women felt estranged from the community and became less vocal about

their play and/or switched to primarily playing games marketed toward women. Thus – a vicious

cycle was born.

It is clear to me from my interviews that this cycle never truly ended. One woman, Six,

told me that she didn't want to play *Skyrim* because it didn't seem like it had any feminine

characters. This is untrue, as *Skyrim* is an RPG featuring customizable characters of different

races, levels of humanity, and genders. This is the exact type of game the participant claimed to

love and gravitate toward, but based on marketing materials for the game, she did not think it

was made for her and chose to avoid it. Several covers for Skyrim over the years are as follows:

When coded in the same way as those in my content analysis, all three covers indicate a

masculine intended audience. None of them feature women, all of them are very dark, and only

one of them features humans – but that same cover also includes weapons and seems to signal a

fighting/war game rather than adventure (even though it *is* an adventure RPG!). Based on the

signals these covers give off, it is no wonder my participant did not think the game featured

women or the type of gameplay she desired.

Had the marketing teams in charge of *Skyrim*'s cover wanted to attract feminine players

when it released in 2011, they may have been better off using something akin to the cover on the

Nintendo Switch 2017 VR re-release:

This cover features brighter colors than on the original, the featured character is far enough away

to count as gender-neutral, and the vast expanse of nature helps to sell this game as an adventure

rather than a fighting game. The game still doesn't scream "made for women", but it features less

of the overtly masculine marketing tropes present on the original marketing materials. This

should, theoretically, draw in women without alienating men using overtly feminine visual cues.

There is ample research to suggest that women and men play games in nearly equal numbers, so

there is no good reason for the industry to continue to drag their feet on incorporating gender-

neutral marketing strategies (Chess 2017;, Cunningham, 2018; Newman 2017).

If a change toward more gender-neutral marketing were to occur, it might help women to feel as though there is a place for them in the community. If women feel as though the industry accepts them as a legitimate and desirable demographic, they may feel more confident speaking out about their love for games and begin to make connections with other gamers. One woman in my study, Paarthurnax, expressed appreciation to me for providing her with an outlet to discuss her love for gaming. She did not feel as though she had anyone to share her passion with despite living on a college campus with a population of nearly 20,000 people (the majority of whom are women). Given that several of my participants also attended the University of Virginia (as did many prospective candidates who chose not to participate) I know that there is a community of feminine gamers on grounds who could bond over their shared love for video games. However, they simply do not know that these other women exist because none of them are vocal about their membership in the gaming community.

It is possible that the lack of change toward gender-neutral marketing stems from the lack of women in production roles. Previous research suggests that women avoided working in the field because of overwhelming levels of harassment toward women who *did* (Jane, 2016; Consalvo, 2019) and given the Activision-Blizzard scandal of 2021, it seems likely that this is still the case. I admit that I cannot offer a concrete solution to this problem. However, I do believe that the more vocal women are about their involvement in the community and about the harassment they face, the harder it will be for the industry to ignore.

Since GamerGate in 2014, we have seen *some* changes in the way that women are depicted in AAA games. For example, *Horizon Zero Dawn* was released by Guerilla Games in 2017 with a strong non-sexualized feminine lead and a narrative-driven adventure theme. Its marketing materials reflected these attributes signaling a gender-neutral intended audience with

bright colors, a central feminine character, a fearsome beast, a weapon with which to fight it, and

an air of adventure:

Similarly, as mentioned in the introduction, long-established sex symbol Lara Croft's design was

updated in 2015 to highlight her physical prowess instead of her curves. However, even for

well-meaning AAA production companies, more work is needed to ensure that their marketing

materials and games deliver the gender-inclusive messages they intend to send.

The Last of Us Part II, released by Naughty Dog in 2020 was pushed by the developers

as an incredibly progressive game in terms of gender, race, and LGBTQ representation (Reeves,

2021). However, there are those who do not believe that the developers achieved the inclusive

atmosphere they were after (Feminist Frequency, 2020). This disconnect between the

developer's intention and audience reception is reflected in the game's marketing materials:

The cover art depicts a non-sexualized woman (the main character, Ellie), but everything else about its visual cues show that it is intended for a masculine audience: the palette is as dark as it could possibly be while still revealing the character's face, Ellie is snarling in anger (signaling violence), the graphics are highly realistic, and she is covered in blood. If *The Last of Us Part II* was supposed to celebrate diversity as creator Neil Druckmann suggests (Reeves, 2021), why was it marketed primarily to men?

AAA production companies still seem to favor masculine audiences in their marketing decisions (even for games which purport to be gender-neutral). But just because a game appears masculine in its marketing materials does not necessarily mean that it won't feature gender-neutral or even progressive feminist content. So, my advice to feminine gamers is: Don't judge a game by its (masculine) cover.

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