The Quest for Change: Writing Video Game Narratives to Battle Sexism

A Master of Arts Thesis

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Can video games be used to break down sexist attitudes and behaviours in their own community? This research investigated the intersection between narratives being able to inform users, games as highly immersive narrative sites, and how to deliberately design a game narrative with the goal of informing and building empathy in players about a social problem. This project investigated the question through several kinds of textual and field-work based research methods. First: a reflexive, auto-ethnographic exploration of the researcher's own position in the community, plus a review of current literature, and game-player interviews were combined to establish a contextual knowledge base about negative gendered concepts and attitudes in gaming. These elements were then used to inform the construction of a game narrative which sought to, while being a great game, expose sexist attitudes and behaviours, challenge gendered stereotypes, and stimulate empathy and understanding towards the 'other'. A portion of this narrative was turned into a playable game which was used to perform player testing, which revealed elements of how games create affect in users. These research stages were then combined to build a set of guidelines for use by other game developers; guidelines designed to suggest effective ways to shape game narratives which seek to break down sexist attitudes and behaviours within the gaming medium and community.

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You're offered a golden scroll. You open it. Inside, it reads: *Change for the Better can Happen, but you must Take Action. This is your Quest.*

Will you take the scroll, and go on the Adventure? Or will you hand it back, and go back to your daily life? If you take the scroll, then read on. If you return it, close this document (or put away this paper), and go have a cup of tea.

1.0 Introduction

This research project was born from the question of how to create positive change in the video game community – and in particular, how (and whether) it was possible to use game narratives to do that. It took the question of whether the intersection of three key elements of game research could be leveraged to create an impact on the gaming community's negative reproductions of gender and the sexist attitudes and behaviours which are both created and are reinforced by these reproductions. These elements were; first – a fictional narrative's ability to inform the opinions of users, inspire empathy, and influence cultural discourse; second – how the video game as an immersion-rich environment that has the potential to stimulate strong connections between player and narrative has an effect on this ability to inform; and third – what the practical application was of these two points is in relation to specific narrative techniques and game mechanics.

Narrative can inform → Games as immersion-rich narrative sites → How to build informing into game narratives = Making games which inform → Making change in community?

Figure 1 – Research Project Core Investigation

The goal was, ultimately, to see if the deliberate activation of these elements could be used to create a game narrative, and a game, which could help players to perceive and experience gender differently, and experience the effects of sexist stereotyping from within, thus developing an empathetic response based on a 'personal experience' which afforded a better understanding of the negative effects of sexist attitudes and behaviours.

The desire to see these changes arose from my own position within the community of gamers, as a queer woman, and as a writer. I wished to see a transformation in my community which would move us toward an environment where women were not belittled, undermined, threatened, verbally abused and diminished by male gamers; where female, gender-diverse and queer gamers could feel that they were a part of the community on equal-footing with anyone else, and where the characters and narratives in games represented the diverse world we already live in, not a narrow vision rooted in the reproduction of stereotypes which diminish the complexity of human beings and of gendered expression.

My desire to focus on game narratives was rooted in the belief that game stories could be written in a way which allowed for a great game experience but which also explored gender in a more complex and realistic way than is seen in most current games. Based on this, as part of the research process, I developed a narrative which would allow for this level of exploration. However, as the research developed, I realised that games cannot be fully understood or investigated if they are not played – as per Dovey and Kennedy (2005): games are a part of a cyborgian circuit which requires the gamer in order to become a game. This perspective highlighted that I would need to make my game playable in order to truly understand its 'realisation' (its making 'real'). Based on both this and the time and resource constraints, I took a small slice of my narrative and developed this as a playable game. I then had players play the game and tell me about how this game-story affected them.

My ultimate goal of community-level change could not come from just me, however, and so as well as investigating whether this kind of informing-and-empathy-building

activity could take place, I also sought to build a set of guidelines which other game designers and writers could employ to achieve the same or similar goals. These guidelines developed out of all elements of the research: they were informed by the literature around this topic, through the participant research into player experiences with games and gender, and through my learnings while writing then building the game.

I have developed this thesis document with elements of interactivity as part of the design. I want to address you, the reader, and ask you to take part in this adventure into change. As part of this research experience, I will invite you to play the game which I made – encouraging you to play how you would like to, make the choices you want, to explore the character's journey. I will invite you to consider the feelings that this experience evoked in you, and as we progress through more of the research, learning more about the relationship between games and affect, I encourage you to reflect on how you believe the narrative and mechanic techniques within the game may have had an effect on you. I also provide videos of the different choice trees in the game, so that you don't have to worry about 'missing' anything when you play.

The progression through the thesis itself echoes my own my own process of searching for an answer to the questions above. You will move through the literature review, the methodology, the first wave of field work with participants discussing their own experiences as gamers, into the description of the game itself, and see the second wave of field work with feedback on the game. From there I present the guidelines which were informed by each preceding step.

Now however, I would like to set the stage by inviting you into my own story of games and gendered experience, and will provide some context of the gaming community's issues in this area.

1.1 Our Games, Our Stories

This story, of research, change and play, was always one which began with us, with gamers, with the community of players, with the community of makers. The gaming 'art world' (as per Becker (1982)) is one where the consumers and the creators have always crossed over, and it is a community which moves fluidly between the profoundly mainstream (see the *Pokemon Go* release (Niantic 2016)), to exclusive, often tech-heavy subculture cliques (for example the *Tetris* world-championships). Its collective behaviours can be that of profound positive energy and good ('Play Games. Heal Kids. | Extra Life' n.d.) or that of acts of outright violence and hate (Schreier 2014).

I have a very vivid memory of my first real experience with video games: I was only days away from my fifth birthday, it was Christmas, and my brothers (aged seven and nine) and I had been begging our parents for a Sega Master System for months, only to be repeatedly be told that it was too expensive. For the record – I had absolutely no idea what a Sega Master System was, only that it was likely Awesome and, The Most Fun Ever Imaginable, as instructed by my brothers – knowers of all Cool Things. Imagine then, the roars of delight as we opened the present sent from our grandparents – a SEGA! I can clearly remember screaming at the top of my lungs, and along with my brothers running around in circles in the room. I had no idea what this machine was or why we were so happy, only that fortune had smiled on us in the most wonderful of ways.

By the end of that day, I had seen, and presumably played, my first ever attempt at *Alex Kidd* and video games have been part of my life ever since.

However, along with that memory is another, bitter note: I never got past the first level in *Alex Kidd*. A similar story emerged as we went through other games and other consoles: *Wonder Boy, Sonic, Abe's Oddysse, Mario, Crash Bandicoot, Golden Eye, Quake, Counter-Strike, Quake III, Halo*[1]. The same story, between being perpetually the youngest and thus hobbled by trailing hand-eye coordination, and by being a girl – and as such not expected to have any interest or talent for video games – I learnt to watch, not play. In fact, almost all of my early experiences *playing* games were in moments where I was alone, away from the observation of my brothers, playing where I could set the difficulty to an appropriate level and be left to fail away from notice, until I had learned how to succeed.

Then eventually, the emergence of turn-based RPGs[2] into my life; games where I could take the time to consider and strategize, where the game required wit and problem solving, rather than reflex, aim, and calm under fire. Not only that, these games had *story*, and suddenly there were women on the screen, who sometimes had depth and interest to them! A different world opened up. I was 17 (and my brothers both moved away) when I bought my own Playstation 2, and that Christmas the boys bought for me *Final Fantasy XII* (Square Enix 2006) and its full official guide. It felt like what it was – an

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[1] *Alex Kidd in Miracle World* (Sega, 1986); *Wonder Boy* (Sega, 1987); *Sonic the Hedgehog* (Sega, 1991); *Oddworld: Abe's Oddysee* (GT Interactive Software, 1997); *Super Mario 64* (Nintendo, 1996); *Crash Bandicoot* (Sony Computer Entertainment, 1996); *GoldenEye 007* (Nintendo, 1997), *Quake* (GT Interactive, 1996) and *Quake III Arena* (Activision, 1999), *Half-Life: Counter-Strike* (Sierra Studios and Valve Corporation, 2000); *Halo: Combat Evolved* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2001).

[2] Role Playing Games, or RPGs, are games where the player inhabits a character within a (typically fantasy or sci-fi) world and plays out their story. These games often have a strong narrative focus. 'Turn-based' means the player has a 'turn' in a battle, and then an enemy has a 'turn', much like in a board-game. Allowing the player time to strategize their actions.

acknowledgement of me having my own interest and space within this world of games, individual, and valid in itself – both witnessed and supported by the same people who had led me into, and (unintentionally) excluded me from that world.

My story goes on, of course, and as I became an adult I found more games I enjoyed, I found a community of other female gamers to share with, and as the skill level between myself and my brothers began to close we three found ourselves playing multiplayer games together as a way of staying in touch when living apart (such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004), *Borderlands 1* and *2* (Gearbox 2009, 2012)*, Diablo 3* (Blizzard 2012)*,* and *Overwatch*[3] (Blizzard 2016)). I later joined forces with another female gaming friend and we created a 'Let's Play' channel on YouTube[4]. I grew in my enjoyment of games, and began feeling that this was 'my place', not just a space where I was adjacent to others.

1.2   The Mission

This experience, of being 'in but not in' the gaming world – of being part of but also excluded, is not unique, and is shared to varying extents by many if not most female gamers. Even as I grew into feeling comfortable as a gamer, I was equally aware of some of the highly toxic behaviour going on in the gaming world. Female game commentators were being threatened and harassed (Schreier 2014; Chess and Shaw 2015), game companies were saying they couldn't include female characters because they were too

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[3] For those not familiar with these titles, several of them are 'shooter' style games. For me it was a revelation to slowly learn how to play these games. I had become convinced though my younger experiences that I would never learn how to play these, that I would never have the hand-eye coordination. Also, despite all my studies of gender theory, there was a small, insistent part of me which believed this was in part *because* I was female-bodied.

[4] A 'Let's Play' channel is one where gamers record themselves playing a game and post the video online (usually with recorded audio, and sometimes video of the gamer themselves as they play).

resource-costly to animate (LeJacq 2014a, 2014b) and, despite a few great female characters existing, still typically women were almost never the main character, were often written one dimensionally, illustrated in a hyper-sexualised style, and by and large, not playable at all even *if* present (Downs and Smith 2010). Simultaneously, even the male characters seemed to come from the same batch – white, hyper-masculine, straight, cis, and short-spoken with a 'gritty' backstory (Kaiser 2014; Allen 2014; Kolan 2011). While I was feeling more like I was a gamer, large parts of the gaming community were still, either unintentionally or by some with deliberate intent, developing an environment which made me, and others not part of that biscuit-batch, feel unwelcome.

The question I had, was *why*?

The answer to that question is extremely long and complex, but much of it relates to the stereotypes society develops around who plays games, why they play, what they want, what they will buy, and what makes for a 'good' experience. Such as the stereotype that the 'main' or even 'only' people who play games are anti-social white men and boys (Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2016), and also the stereotype and belief among this very demographic that if games were to include what they perceive to be the wants and perspectives of 'women' or 'feminists' or other diverse groups, that this will diminish their experience (Chess and Shaw 2015; Salter and Blodgett 2012; Timpane 2014). These stereotypes, both of gamers and what gamers want, in turn feeds how games are written, made and marketed – avoiding difference, and allowing for this 'male gamer' to play as his 'ideal self' (Paaßen et al. 2016). However, my history with games provided me a different perspective: I knew that it was possible to enjoy games when playing as a character who was fundamentally different to myself, because I had

been doing so ever since my first steps as Alex Kidd back in 1992. I knew that difference didn't ruin games – but exclusion, sexist stereotypes and erasure could.

It was from this cocktail of emotions and experiences that the genesis of my research question arose. If this problem was within the community of gamers itself, how could that community be changed? How could we break down the walls of stereotypes and dispel the fear of difference? The most obvious answer was through the very games that these people were playing, but the next question which fell from there – was how do you actually *do* that in a way that is effective?

We needed better games. We needed games which could prove there was fun to be had in difference – outside the realm of the 'anti-social white male' player. We needed games which could make difference something which held no fear or risk, and which could make 'the strange' familiar and relatable.

Thus my journey began.

Part of me was approaching this conundrum as a researcher, but another was approaching it as both a gamer and a writer. As a player, I longed for more games with solid storylines and diverse, interesting characters; and as a writer, I was continuously annoyed by how the industry rarely attempted, and even more rarely succeeded, at telling complex stories with sophisticated scripts written by skilful writers (Gaider 2016). So I wanted to build a game that could help improve my community, but also show how a great story and characters could make a game full of life and emotional connection – how it could make games *better*.

But what about other people? Did others have similar experiences to me? Did they wish

for the same things? If I wanted to build games that were more diverse and inclusive, I

needed to know how other people felt too.

But first – before you go any further on this journey of research and games,
would you like to take a moment to put aside academic questions, and simply...

PLAY

[click 'play' to link to *The Dunes – Prelude*]

Welcome back, I hope you felt engaged with Zenith's journey! There are some questions I would like you to ask yourself, to echo the questions which I asked my participants. Take a moment to ponder each, and perhaps write down a few key thoughts.

1. How would you describe your emotional reaction to the story? How did it make you feel?

2. What did you think of your character, Zenith?

3. How did you feel about how the people in the Village treated Zenith?

4. Have you had much contact with trans people or people who don't conform to gender norms in your life?

5. Are you aware of the status 'gender neutral' or 'agender' and what do you think it means?

6. If you met someone who preferred to be referred to with gender neutral terms, such as 'they' rather than he or she, how would you feel about that? Have you struck that before playing this game?

7. What is your sense of the sorts of challenges a person who is gender-neutral might face?

8. Sometimes when playing a video game, a player can find they feel like they 'are' the character to some degree. What is your sense of that as you've played through this game?

The goal with the *Prelude* was to simulate a number of potential responses:

o increased understanding of people who are gender neutral,

o familiarisation with the appropriate ways to use gender neutral pronouns,

o empathy for the experiences and challenges of being gender neutral,

o role-modelling of positive ways of interacting with gender neutral people, and

o   an exciting, engaging experience of the story and game.

Whether or not some, or all, of these responses were triggered will depend in many ways on you, and we will explore why and how these responses were chosen and built into the game throughout the rest of the thesis. As we progress, consider if any of these responses were particularly effective for you, and possibly which were not.

As an additional note, the full game (as detailed in Chapter 5) explores a broad range of gendered issues; the Prelude became strongly focussed on the issue of living gender neutral because of the short nature of the narrative and the focus on Zenith specifically. Each of the four main characters in the full game have a 'gendered challenge' to face in their journey which is used as the key 'informing and empathy building' focus. The Prelude attempts to give players an insight into Zenith as an individual and their own challenges.

I have taken up the quest of attempting to make change in the gaming community, and to do it, set out on a journey using the medium of games themselves as the way to battle inequality. On this quest, I wrote the narrative for a game, and then, encountering the tricky puzzle of the action of investigating games demanding an actual game – took on the legendary boss battle of making a playable game, which was hard-fought! The game was to explore how the player can have their perspectives, attitudes and behaviours informed by the way gender is presented and performed in games, how gendered stereotypes are broken, how exposure to the effects of sexist behaviours can inspire empathy and understanding, and how becoming familiar with the unfamiliar can reduce fear of the unknown and build tools for relating to people outside the player's personal perspectives. All through using the rich, interactive and immersive narrative

environment provided by games as a medium. Both the 'realised' *Prelude* and the narrative of *The Dunes* full game seek to make change in their players, and both games and the guidelines which I will present based on the games' creation and reception will hopefully go on to help make change in the community as a whole.

For now though, let us will step back to before the game was made: into the literature review – to help us build understanding why people play, the problems of gender in the gaming world, what happens to people when they're playing, and how we can activate this to stimulate empathy and informing through narrative design. These elements will become the foundation upon which the game will later begin to take shape.

2.0 Literature Review

Compared to many other academic fields, video game research is still relatively new, and also is greatly affected by how fast the technology itself is changing. Already we have in our grasp technology which even ten years ago seemed like an impossibility, and video games themselves were only first created a mere handful of decades ago. These factors mean that literature directly on the topic of my research question is limited. As such, I have explored a cross-section of areas to understand better the effects of games and game narratives, the relationship between the player and the game, and informing through games – which builds a framework for approaching how to affect the player using a game narrative. For the sake of this literature review I have divided these areas into the following sections:

1. **Why games? Why play?**

   This section discusses the fundamentals of video gaming and play, what draws people to video games, why they are engaging and what they experience as they interact with this medium.

2. **Gender and Video Games**

   This section will cover the history and context of gender and diversity issues within the video game community, it will look at both the content of games themselves, the people who play them, and demonstrate the current climate around gender within the gaming world.

3. **Representation and Role Models**

   This section will review the effects of representing minorities in media and how both role modelling and role play can create affect in an individual.

4. **Educative Games, Gamification and Values**

   This section investigates video games being used as a tool to educate, to explore values and to inspire empathy. It will discuss games being used in the classroom, games being used to create habits, and gamification in general as a process.

5. **Immersion, Embodiment and Interactivity**

   This section investigates the discourse around the specific design elements of video games which are said to create personal engagement in users, explores the relationship between cognitive and sensory immersion, and explores the role of performative embodiment in the immersive experience.

6. **Constructing the Narrative**

   This section discusses key challenges to building informing about sexism into the game narrative itself without unbalancing the 'entertainment' of the user, and details some of the unique elements of game narrative design which must be considered when writing stories for games.

Due to the breadth of topics, several of these sections will focus closely on a limited number of core resources, alongside supplementary secondary resources, creating a body of research developed by interweaving the different topics listed. Through looking at each of these interrelated elements of games and gaming, we will form a framework through which we can see how to create a game which can leverage game design elements to inform about the negative effects of sexism, build empathy towards the 'unfamiliar', role model behaviours, and break down stereotypes within games and the community.

2.1   Why games? Why play?

This section discusses the fundamentals of video gaming and play, what draws people to video games, why they are engaging and what they experience as they interact with this medium. We look into the diverse experiences of play and fun, of players' experiences of 'flow' and their intriguing relationship with failure. Understanding these elements enables, at a core design level, a game to be built with effective engagement with users and a clearer understanding of key elements to leverage when building a game for change.

Part of what makes video games such a successful and ever-growing medium is the broad range of ways they can stimulate the user. Games are fun, they are a challenge, they are social connectivity, they are mood control, they are skill-teaching, and possibly most significantly of all, an environment where our failures are just as thrilling as our successes – loaded with the inherent optimism of escaping failure 'next time' (McGonigal 2011; Juul 2013).

Video games are a subset of the broader 'game' definition, (which includes tabletop[5] games, sports, competitive and imaginative play and many more) and they are vastly diverse. A purely text-based game like *Zork* (Infocom 1977) is a game, a simple ball-bouncing game like *Pong* (Atari 1972) is a game, gore-filled shooter games like *Doom* (id Software 1993) are games, complex social story-worlds in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG's) like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) are games, and abstract, cognitively and sensory immersive experiences like *Journey* (Thatgamecompany 2012) are games. All this variety of what makes a video game stimulates a huge appeal to play these games. Data as of 2013 (Spil Games 2013) put the worldwide numbers of gamers at approximately 1.2 billion, or 17% of the world

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[5] 'Tabletop' games being the common term for both board games and the 'Dungeons & Dragons' style social role play game.

population, and these numbers only increase as more people are born into the digital era. So what is it about games – and what are some of the fundamentals of 'play' which drives people to play them, and keep on playing? One theory of play drivers, based on evolutionary psychology, is that the action of play is a method by which species test and create 'behaviour variants' which in the long term can create biological advantage. This urge for play then has become hard-coded into our species over time as those with this biological advantage have passed this on (Ohler and Nieding 2006).

From a social perspective, despite being present cross-culturally and throughout history, the way we talk about 'play' and of 'games' has not kept static meaning over time and place. From Plato's desire to make philosophy playful (Ardley 1967) while also seeing play as solely the realm of children, to the Puritanical desire to rout out idleness, to Montessori's research into alternate forms of education using toys and structured play, through to the current trend of 'free play' being an essential part of child development, the way we talk about the basic concept of play shifts depending on context and time. In *The Ambiguity of Play,* Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) addresses the ambiguous array of ways we talk about play, within both academia and public discourse. He identifies seven different rhetorics which make up that discourse:

1. The rhetoric of play as progress (i.e. play as a developmental tool – note this is only applied to children and animals),
2. the rhetoric of play as fate (i.e. how the dice may fall),
3. the rhetoric of play as power (i.e. how people may use play to determine or reinforce status),
4. the rhetoric of play as identity (i.e. how playful activities in festivals or events can fortify community and cultural identity),

5. the rhetoric of play as the imaginary (i.e. how children might play 'make believe'),

6. the rhetoric of play as the self (i.e. typically solo-play which is focussed on a person's own fun, relaxation or aesthetic experience), and

7. the rhetoric of play as frivolous (i.e. both a counter-argument against the 'play as work' rhetorics, and also a representative of the chaotic humour that calls out lawful order) (1997, pp. 9-11).

Sutton-Smith thus reveals that society's discourses of play can be highly changeable, not just over time and culture, but also simply through how it is framed for a given conversation.

Applying Sutton-Smith's analysis to video games quickly shows that all of these different ways we describe play can be found in game genres and the activities of gamers:

Sutton-Smith's Play Rhetorics	Applicable Game Genres
Play as progress	Educational games
Play as fate	Gambling style games or games which involve significant luck mechanics or 'RNG' (random number generation – a randomising effect that will prevent the game from reacting the same way every time). Games such as *Hearthstone* (Blizzard Entertainment 2015).
Play as power	In gaming competitions (eSports), and also in situations where social groups of friends might use their competitive skill to negotiate for social status.
Play as identity	Players identifying with 'geek culture', enacting this through going to conventions and through cosplay.

Play as imaginary	While some games aim for realism, many do just the opposite, games like *Journey* deliberately invoke an abstract, imagination-rife experience.
Play as the self	While increasingly video games have multiplayer or co-op options, large portions of the game world are still designed for solo play. Not only that, but they are designed to be an activity which enriches the player's time spent alone.
Play as frivolous	Games such as *Katamari Damacy* (Namco 2004) or *Goat Simulator* (Coffee Stain Studios 2014) (where users play as a havoc-raining indestructible goat who can make cars explode by licking them,) actively use the power of the absurd as a game feature.

This scope of play which is represented in games simultaneously serves to emphasise the incredibly diverse ways people approach the experience of gaming, and also the depths of play responses addressed by a video game.

Given that play itself is such a culturally ambiguous concept, the next question is: what unites video games and makes them such a compelling form of entertainment?

In *Reality is Broken* (2011) Jane McGonigal defines a video game as something which contains a goal, with rules that define and limit how a person can achieve that goal, a feedback system (such as a score) which tells players how close they are to achieving the goal, and voluntary participation, "…the freedom to enter or leave a game at will ensures that intentionally stressful and challenging work is experienced as *safe* and *pleasurable* activity" (McGonigal, 2011, p. 21).

McGonigal also draws attention to how gamers ride the edge of challenge:

"variety and intensity of feedback is the most important difference between digital and non-digital games. […] You can also feel how extraordinarily attentive the game is to your performance. It only gets harder when you are playing well, creating a perfect balance between hard challenge and achievability. […] In other words, in a good computer game you're always playing on the very edge of your skill level, always on the brink of falling off."

<div align="right">(2006, p. 24)</div>

She points out how gamers love to fail, though they might not realise it, which is echoed by Jesper Juul in *The Art of Failure* (2013), who points out that by failing we prove that our decisions (and by extension we ourselves) 'matter' (p. 122). Both Juul and McGonigal look at how the adrenaline rush of 'dying' or failing is even higher than a moment of success (McGonigal, 2011, pp. 65-71), and this pushes gamers to try 'one more time'. Games create a space where success is theoretically always possible, and failure itself transforms into a chance at redemption:

> "It is the threat of failure that gives us something to do in the first place. It is painful for humans to feel incompetent or lacking, but games hurt us and then induce an urgency to repair our self-image. Much of the positive effect of failure comes from the fact that we can learn to escape from it, feeling more competent than we did before."

<div align="right">(Juul, 2013, p. 45)</div>

Juul suggests that we play not for the feeling of success, but because we love to attempt to escape the feeling of failure.

Both McGonigal and Juul's theories speak to how gaming is about challenge[6], about reaching for a goal and navigating how to get there – encouraging the player to be highly

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[6] There is some question on whether video games require 'challenge', (in its broadest possible sense,) in order to be games. In general, the fundamental of challenge does seem to be mostly true, but questions in this area are where the line between video games and other mediums begins to mix. For the sake of this thesis I cannot fully explore the edges of where games stop becoming games, and what activities are game-like without challenge. Some games explore fun through being soothing or emotionally satisfying, but challenge is usually not completely absent –

engaged and highly attentive. For many games, without this feeling of being simultaneously both under threat and powerfully competent, games can quickly lose their ability to ensnare a player's interest.

Amidst this defying of failure and mixed with other sensory stimulations in games, players can achieve an experience of 'flow'. "Flow" as defined by researcher Mihaly Csikzentmihalyi (1997) is what gamers would typically refer to as being 'in the zone', a phrase used to describe the feeling when things in the game are moving along at exactly the expected pace. You act, the game reacts, there is just the right balance of excitement, peace, concentration and fun. When you're in the zone, the real world often falls away and the only thing for you to focus on is your next in-game step. "When you are in a state of flow, you want to stay there: both quitting and winning are equally unsatisfying outcomes" (McGonigal, 2011 p. 24). (See also section 2.5 for a discussion of immersion and its effects).

Penelope Sweetser and Peta Wyeth (2005) produced the following breakdown of the different elements of flow specifically in the context of games, which they describe as 'GameFlow':

GameFlow	Flow
The Game	A task that can be completed
Concentration	Ability to concentrate on the task

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even in games where you cannot 'fail' in the sense of something like 'dying', the player is motivated by achieving a great experience, and 'failure' can become simply having a lacklustre experience. This more nebulous aspect of games is fascinating but is out of scope for this investigation.

Challenge/Player Skills	Perceived skills should match challenges and both must exceed a certain threshold
Control	Allowed to exercise a sense of control over actions
Clear Goals	The task has clear goals
Feedback	The task provides immediate feedback
Immersion	Deep but effortless involvement, reduced concern for self and sense of time
Social Interaction	No corresponding element of flow

<div align="right">(Sweetser and Wyeth (2005) in Sweetser et al. 2017, p. 1.3)</div>

This further helps to specify the relationship between the game, the player, the input and output feedback cycle and the emotional reactions that creates.

McGonigal adds to the above by discussing another state, *fiero*, which relates closely to the above discussion of the feeling of escaping failure: "Fiero is what we feel when we triumph over adversity" (2011, p. 33). She argues that fiero is different to flow in that in flow, you are in a harmonious state with the game, whereas in fiero, you are 'fired up', impassioned. The game has you completely engaged, but also you may be fighting the game with all your ability, you are just as likely to be yelling at the game as feeling good about it, but, like the rush of failure, fiero is a powerfully emotive, and enjoyable (mostly), state to be in.

It is somewhere in the intersection between challenge and play where we find the word 'fun' (Podilchak, 1991). Fun is one of the core drivers for playing games, but is both activated in different ways, and experienced in different ways. Michael Sellers (2006) and LeBlanc (2004) provide a description of the fundamental features of a game and how they interact by classing them as Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics (a useful

definition throughout this research). It is through the interaction of these elements, on a functional level, they suggest fun can occur:

> "The first of these, *mechanics*, refers to the specifics of what can happen in a game—what the pieces or actors in a game do. For example, the mechanics of chess defines how each piece can move […]. In a computer game, the mechanics define the rate of a vehicle's acceleration or the damage done by a sword.
>
> A game's *dynamics* describes how the specific mechanics interact. In chess, two knights can form a pincer to trap another piece […] The mechanics of a game are always defined explicitly and thus are entirely predictable. The dynamics rely on the effects of multiple pieces acting together and so often result in unpredictable systemic behaviour. […]
>
> Finally, the *aesthetics* describe the reaction in the player evoked by the unpredictably arising from the dynamic interactions of specific objects in the game."
>
> (Sellers, 2006 pp. 12-13)

LeBlanc states that aesthetics in this sense are the "desirable emotional responses evoked by the game dynamics" (LeBlanc, 2004 p. 37) and the 'fun' component of video games, though he attempts to avoid the term 'fun' due to what he feels is its overly abstract sense. (For this analysis, I embrace both the ambiguity of how to define the word, and the clarity of its meaning in a non-analytic sense). Despite his dislike of the term, LeBlanc attempts to clarify the terminology by highlighting eight "Kinds of 'fun'":

> "1. Sensation: Game as sense-pleasure,
> 2. Fantasy: Game as make-believe,
> 3. Narrative: Game as drama,
> 4. Challenge: Game as obstacle course,
> 5. Fellowship: Game as social framework,
> 6. Discovery: Game as uncharted territory,
> 7. Expression: Game as self-discovery,
> 8. Submission: Game as pastime."
>
> (LeBlanc, 2004, p. 54)

These categories are echoed in similar ways in other game texts, such as the earlier

states of 'GameFlow' and in *Values at Play in Digital Games* (Flanagan and Nissenbaum

2014) and *How Games Move Us: Emotion by Design* (Isbister 2016) – although none

mention category 7, of expression. The latter two texts seem to imply that self-discovery

is a result of other game elements, but not a driver towards video game play, but this

would be strongly countered by Helen Kennedy's investigations of female gamers using

gaming and skinning as a form of identity play (2011). These different categories do

show us how the drive towards gameplay, and towards 'fun' is experienced and

activated in several different ways.

Taking these 'types of fun' to the user, some authors instead frame the question of play-

drivers or fun-experiencing as 'types of players'. In this scenario the player engages with

games with an awareness of how *they* experience fun or entertainment. Different

motivations for personal media choice can include aggression, competitiveness, risk,

challenge and achievement, fantasy and escapism, frustration, intolerance, and skills

and efficacy beliefs (Klimmit and Hartmann 2006 pp. 133-141). Klug and Schell (2006)

frame this as player types:

> "*The Competitor* plays to be better than other players.
> *The Explorer* plays to experience the boundaries of the play world. [She]
> plays to discover first what others do not know yet.
> *The Collector* plays to acquire the most stuff through the game.
> *The Achiever* plays to not only be better now, but also be better in rankings
> over time. [She] plays to attain the most championships over time.
> *The Joker* plays for the fun alone and enjoys the social aspects.
> *The Director* plays for the thrill of being in charge. [She] wants to
> orchestrate the event.
> *The Storyteller* plays to create or live in an alternate world and build
> narrative out of that world.
> *The Performer* plays for the show [she] can put on.
> *The Craftsman* plays to build, solve puzzles, and engineer constructs.

Most players are a combination of two or more types, the motivations meshing together in various combinations often changing emphasis depending on what game they are playing."

(Klug and Schell, 2006, pp. 91-92. My gender-alteration.)

Kallio, Mäyrä, and Kaipainen (2011) suggest instead, player motivational urges which they group together in three ways:

- Social Mentalities: Gaming with Kids, Gaming with Mates, Gaming for Company
- Casual Mentalities: Killing Time, Filling Gaps, Relaxing
- Committed Mentalities: Having Fun, Entertainment, Immersion.

(Kallio, et al., 2011, in Dixon 2011, p. 3)

Looking at all of these ways of approaching gamers, play and fun, one thing is clear, that gaming, and people's experience of it, is complex and multifaceted. Even players playing horror games would still use the word 'fun' to describe the experience, despite some negative emotions being triggered by the experience (Perron 2009). Different things are gaming, are playful, and different people gain different types of enjoyment from these varied activities.

Looking to other arguments for the drivers towards playing video games, Klimmt and Hartmann argue that the complexity of games and the range of responses demanded from users means they should be analysed through the lens of the psychology of action and selective exposure (2006 p. 133). They state that as a game often requires a great deal of investment (whether time, money, or effort) to participate in, games must be a highly intentional choice,

"[...] before exposure to a computer game can be fun, players must invest much more than they would have to for an enjoyable evening in front of a television set or with a book. For this reason, we should consider the

> process of choosing to play a computer game a well-considered and
> intentional action."

<div align="right">(Klimmt and Hartmann 2006, p. 134)</div>

I'm not sure that I agree with this entirely, as once a person has the setup for playing games (such as owning a decent computer or a console – which is a commitment to the *concept* of gaming, often more than the game itself) activating game playing can be reasonably trivial (especially if we look at 'casual' games such as phone-games or Facebook games). This echoes the different types of play and players; gaming can be deliberate and deep, but it can be trivial and an acknowledged 'time-filler' activity.

Klimmt and Hartmann also state that, based on theories of play being a 'special kind of action', games are played for the process, not for the result, being an "absence of any consequence orientation" (p. 134). However, it is worth noting that even within Sutton Smith's own breakdown of types of play, several, such as play for social status and play for education, are both play types which have a motivational consequence – though there may be instances where, motivationally, this was a *benefit*, not the *purpose* of the action.

Mood management theory is also often mentioned as a driver for gameplay. "People can make well-informed decisions to alter their own condition and use media entertainment in order to improve their well-being." (ibid, p. 135). The theory suggests that people will employ games to activate specific feelings and levels of psychological arousal.

Of course, there are many types of activities that humans use in this way, reading a book can serve the same purpose, or model train making or, (presumably for some) going for a run. What is significant for games is the particular combination of challenge, voluntary

participation, choice, failure-escape and stimulating feedback that creates a powerful reaction and response in people playing games.

Ultimately, what this literature shows us there is not one type of fun, there is not one type of play, but what games are capable of is activating a specific set of stimulation impulses which link into potentially all types of emotions that we use to describe fun and play. They are also a powerful fantasy tool which provides both mood management and also a link into the experience of escaping failure and achieving flow.

For the purposes of my own research, this literature establishes some core ways to think about play and gaming, and an understanding of how different people engage with games. Games' core elements: fun, fiero, flow, fantasy, voluntariness, challenge, success and failure all influence how the game I seek to construct must be designed.

2.2 Gender and Video Games

This section looks at recent history and significant trends of gender and diversity issues within the video game community. It explores how women are excluded from both the community and the medium, how female bodies are hypersexualised and males bodies are made hyper-masculine, how female characters are presented as passive sites of male agency, and how all of this creates an environment within the game community of it being a 'male space' which some male gamers are willing to aggressively defend. This allows us to see the ways in which games currently function as a site of problematic gendered stereotypes, and where a game which seeks to break down sexist attitudes could focus.

> "I keep reading about articles and studies where experts say girls don't like shooting and blasting games but instead prefer quiet, contemplative games with well-rounded characters and storylines that stimulate their

imagination. I'd venture to say, however, that these studies are a reflection of how we condition girls to be passive. The image of a woman with a gun is too shocking, to disruptive and threatening to the male dominant order of things."

<div align="right">(Aliza Sherman, cited in Cassell and Jenkins 1998)</div>

Games and gender have something of a torrid history. From the hypersexuality of characters in games (Downs and Smith 2010), lack of representation of female characters (Beasley and Collins Standley 2002), unhealthy representation of machismo and 'male-values' (Paaßen et al. 2016) for both male and female characters, depictions of (sometimes domestic, often sexual) violence towards women (Dill et al. 2005), lack of women in the game industry (Prescott and Boggs 2014), and the vicious attempts by some male gamers to silence women in the game community (Chess and Shaw 2015), the world of video games is a contentious space in relation to gender. However, despite the issues with representation within this world, still many people and players are committed to the potential of games as a positive form of entertainment.

The video game world is a network of people who make games, people who sell games, people who play games, and people who report on and discuss games (Becker 1982). Within this world – and interestingly, this has increased over time – women have been treated as second-class citizens, and the dominant discourse has been that boys play games, girls don't (Yee 2014). This is despite women being a large demographic in gaming (41% of US gamers (Entertainment Software Association 2017)) and having been so for years.

Within gaming, conceptualisations of gendered bodies are often turned into hyperbole for the pleasure of the male gaze, which typically means male bodies are hyper-masculine, and women's bodies are hyper-sexual, (Paaßen et al. 2016). Several different studies on the depiction of women's bodies in video games have taken place, (Downs

and Smith 2010; Martins et al. 2009) and these have established that female characters are both less present, only 13.74% of nearly 600 assessed characters in one study (Beasley and Collins-Standley 2002), and "significantly more likely to be shown partially nude, featured with an unrealistic body image, and depicted wearing sexually revealing clothing" (Downs and Smith, 2010, p.721). Even when a rare female character has agency and power, to do this she must typically embody both male ideals of strength and simultaneously be a sexual object to titillate the male gaze (Kennedy 2002; Salter and Blodgett 2012).

This trend is influenced by the stereotype of gamers being largely young white males, a pervasive rhetoric about what these young men must want, and how this becomes a self-confirming cycle:

> "[T]he first effect of the male gamer stereotype is its own persistence via feedback loops. The association between gaming and the male gender leads to less visibility of female gamers—due to a reduced feeling of fitting in, reduced self-identification, prescriptive stereotyping, and active discrimination—which in turn leads to a stronger association between gaming and the male gender. [...] The male gamer stereotype also informs the perceived audience for game developers (Shaw 2012, 2013), leading to game content and marketing that panders to a clichéd young male audience, most notably with violent game play and hyper-sexualized depictions of female characters."
>
> (Paaßen, Morgenroth, and Stratemeyer 2016, np)

As well as extreme bodies, video games often present problematic concepts of gendered behaviour. In 2012 Anita Sarkeesian created a YouTube series called *'Tropes vs Women in Video Games'.* The series looked at such topics as the 'Damsel in Distress', 'Women as Reward', 'All the Slender Ladies: Body Diversity in Video Games', 'Lingerie is not Armor' and the 'Sinister Seductress', (Sarkeesian 2013-2016) critiquing trends and tropes of misogynistic and patriarchal representations of women in games. The series succinctly

drew attention to the fact that female characters are not only heavily sexualised, but often portrayed as helpless, passive, only present as tools of male action, and other concepts which present women as lacking in depth, personal agency, diversity and capability.

This process of representing women in stereotyped, passive, sexualised ways in turn can have an effect on how women are perceived outside of gaming. Edward Downs and Stacy Smith (2010) provide an excellent summation of the research and theory around the effects of sexualised characters in media, relying heavily on the theory in Bandura's *Social Cognitive Theory of Mass Communication* which presents means "through which symbolic communication influences human thought, affect and action" (Bandura 2001, p. 265). Downs and Smith state, "Just as with traditional media such as television, movies, and print media, video game players may pick up cues from video game characters that *create or strengthen cognitive scripts about gender roles* and sexual objectification" (2010, p.721, emphasis added). They also point out how video games have the ability to *repeatedly* model characters and behaviours, potentially causing higher levels of retention:

> "Without the ability to symbolically code and retain information, Bandura argues (2002, p. 127) observational learning would not be possible. Retention processes involve restructuring modeled events into rules for memory (Bandura 2002). In video games, a player has the ability to witness how characters present themselves and interact with other characters over and over again. [...] [Repeated] exposure through extended play should make it very easy for a video game player to create, rehearse, and strengthen symbolic representations of events. Gender schema theory suggests (Calvert and Huston 1987) and subsequent research reveals that exposure to stereotyped, sexual interactions on television can provoke schema that categorize women as sexual, submissive, and less intelligent than their male counterparts (Thompson and Pleck 1986). As such, repeated

exposure to attractive, scantily clad female characters may be problematic

for young, male gamers' sexual and relational development."

(Downs and Smith, 2010, p.723)

The authors also point out that once internalised, people can then go on to produce the

internalised ideas within other (such as real-life) scenarios, and that if attitudes are

"shared by a peer group or reinforced" this effect only becomes strengthened (p. 723).

Several studies have analysed the direct effects of hypersexuality on players in games,

finding that the 'self-efficacy' of female players was negatively affected when playing

with a sexualised avatar (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009), and more rape-myth

acceptance when playing a 'self-avatar' dressed in revealing 'sexy' attire (Fox, Bailenson,

and Tricase 2013). Parallel research has investigated the stereotyped depictions of race

and sexuality in games, and the negative associations this creates in players and in the

community (Waddell et al. 2014; Shaw 2009, 2012; Burgess et al. 2011), showing a

similar relationship of depiction, role-play and affect. This relationship between users

and the concepts presented in games is both a help and a hindrance when considering

using games to create social change, as the methods by which games currently reinforce

gender stereotypes and sexist perspectives in players are the same methods which

mean that video games can theoretically be a powerful agent for positive social change.

To understand how reinforced sexist discourse moves into and from games and the

gaming community, we can find an example in the 'Gamergate' controversy in 2014,

which exposes how the sexist attitudes and behaviours of male gamers can be enacted

towards female members of the gaming community, creating an environment where

women can find themselves in a hostile and unsafe environment. Many women, People

of Colour and LGBTQIA+ people have regularly found themselves to be verbally abused

by (typically) white male gamers, both while playing and while participating in

community activities (Kuznekoff and Rose 2013), exacerbated by the digital nature of

the gaming community and the protection of online anonymity, (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2016). This trend of sexist, exclusionary harassment was laid bare when Gamergate occurred:

> "Briefly, Gamergate occurred in late 2014 as a particularly virulent form of online harassment by a number of angry activist male gamers targeting several high-profile women in gaming under the guise of challenging bad games journalism. More specifically, the Gamergate incident revolved around the bitter breakup between [game creator Zoe Quinn] and her gamer ex-boyfriend and subsequent claims that she traded sexual favors to get her interactive casual game, *Depression Quest*, developed and released. With her critique of gaming's endemic sexism, [Anita] Sarkeesian was ensnared prominently in Gamergate, as was game developer Brianna Wu. These women were condemned as not true gamers and were subjected to death threats and incessant bullying and harassment on social media."
>
> (Everett 2017, p. xiii)

Underlying the actual events, Gamergate arose from a group of male gamers who sought to enforce a culture where gaming is a male space and a male platform, and their belief (Chess and Shaw, 2015) that if women and feminist critiques were allowed in the video game space then this will result in gaming changing so significantly that it was no longer 'their' space where their perspectives and desires were privileged, and *therefore* no longer a 'fun' space for those gamers. Gamergate itself led to massive online harassment, including death-threats and threats of rape and other violence, both to the women themselves and anyone planning to attend functions where they spoke, causing several of these women to retreat from public life and several events to be cancelled (Schreier 2014).

The culture of 'games as a male space' is so strong that some male gamers related to the Gamergate controversy, strung together a series of largely unrelated events as 'evidence' of a 'conspiracy' of feminists and academics trying to "actively fuck with the

paradigm of games" (Burger and Fries, cited in Chess and Shaw 2015, p. 213). Shira

Chess and Adrienne Shaw (who were identified by these gamers as members of this

'conspiracy') in their reflections on this, point out that although not all male gamers are

invested in sexist action, that the "systemic sexism structures the industry and gaming

culture" create an *environment* where "the very idea of integrating elements of

feminism into video games is read as actual evidence of a conspiracy" (2015, pp. 208-

209). Both these systemic structures, and the series of events around Gamergate help to

highlight how sexist attitudes and beliefs are reinforced by games, and these events

contributed to many female gamers (myself included) feeling extremely excluded and

unsafe in the community. While, anecdotally, I believe Gamergate and the events

around it made many female gamers draw closer together, it also served to create

another barrier between the male and female game communities, especially online.

Of course, as already stated, potentially harmful concepts of gender in video games is

not restricted to female bodies and personalities, Paaßen et al. point out that game

culture is influenced by "masculine identity and norms" and:

> "[…] an "exclusive male identity," [Kilanski 2003] which is fundamentally
> opposed to both femininity and homosexuality. Men whose *ideal selves* are
> more masculine as well as less feminine, are those most likely to hold
> negative attitudes towards women."
>
> (2016, np, emphasis added).

Games often present the male ideal as "hypermasculine authority figures ("strong,

powerful, aggressive and usually anti-social")" (Lavigne 2015, p. 134) and,

> "Video games can often reinforce hypermasculine stereotypes (Dill and
> Thill, 2007) despite the continued tension of geek "masculinity" as defined
> in opposition to athletic masculine norms (Taylor, 2012). The appearance of
> characters (Kirkland, 2009), their actions (Yao, Mahood, & Linz, 2010), and
> their perceived role within the game society (Scharrer, 2004) have all been

addressed as problematic areas in the development of players' masculine
identities."

(Salter and Blodgett 2012, p. 402)

This hyperbolic level of masculine presentation has all kinds of associated issues, linked to hegemonic and toxic masculinity, and the detrimental effects this can have on men and boys, (Levant and Powell 2017; Kiselica and Englar-Carlson 2010). Hand in hand with this, even when women are expected to play, their play style and desires are often crowbarred into stereotypes of 'femininity' to match the masculine:

> *"The Sims* is a game where the majority of players are girls and women, […].
> It is odd, perhaps, that when males play a military game like *Call of Duty*, we
> do not say that they are playing with toy soldiers. But when women play *The
> Sims*, we say they are playing with a dollhouse."

(Gee and Hayes 2010, p. 2)

However, despite the way gender is presented typically in and by the dominant male perspective, this does not always match the way people use games: Helen Kennedy provides an example of how female players of *Quake* use the game as a community building and transgressive gendered performance of tech-savvy, shooter-game-competent femininity, (Kennedy 2007) which defies typical discourse about gendered gaming. In games themselves, even mainstream 'triple-A' games such as the popular *Dragon Age* series (BioWare 2009-2014) have respectfully featured male and female characters with depth and complexity, (and gay, transgender and People of Colour characters), providing a key example that games do not have to rely on sexist stereotypes and topes in order to succeed.

What all of this indicates is that gender is often rendered in the extreme in games, and privileges both the male gaze and the male 'ideal', which has the capacity to be problematic for all involved. What it has fed within the community is an attitude of

privileging male views and male aggression towards women which is at times then reflected back to real women in the community. It's into this cycle that I wish to feed my game – in the hope to affect both the representation of gender in the medium, and also the culture and attitudes within the community.

2.3   Representation and Role Models

This section will review some of the literature around the effects of representing minorities in media and how both role modelling and role play can create affect in an individual. The ways in which both positive and negative representation affect the user provide critical keys for how to design a game's content for changing negative beliefs and behaviours.

> "[T]he 'machineries' and regimes of representation in a culture do play a *constitutive*, and not merely a reflective, after-the-event, role. This gives questions of culture and ideology, and the scenarios of representation— subjectivity, identity, politics—a formative, not merely expressive, place in the constitution of social and political life."
>
> (Stuart Hall, 1996, in Malkowski and Russworm 2017)

As we have already begun to explore, media can have a powerful effect on us as individuals and can have a cyclical relationship with how society creates and reproduces and is in turn affected by the discourses within said media. Negative representation, or the reproduction of stereotypes, can affect the way people perceive all kinds of groups in society, in both positive and negative ways.

Chimamanda Adichie presented a TED Talk in named "The Danger of a Single Story" where she describes the powerful effect of media on herself as a young middle-class Nigerian girl:

"[…] when I began to write, at about the age of seven, […] I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading: All my characters were white and blue-eyed, they played in the snow, they ate apples, and they talked a lot about the weather, how lovely it was that the sun had come out. Now, this despite the fact that I lived in Nigeria. I had never been outside Nigeria. We didn't have snow, we ate mangoes, and we never talked about the weather, because there was no need to."

(Adichie 2009, m 0:38-0:58)

Later, Adichie summaries the effects of stereotypes, "The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar." (2009, m 13:44)

Representation, and certainly not 'positive' representation, is not simply achieved through a minority being present in a narrative. In *Media and Ethnic Minorities*, Valerie Alia and Simone Bull (2005) discuss the relationship between media and representing ethnic minorities. They state, "We rely heavily on the media to inform us about the world at large. At best, they offer integrity, illumination, reflection and information. At worst, they are weak reeds that succumb to distortion, sensationalism and misrepresentation" (2005, p. 14). In Chapter 3, they discuss what they term the 'Once Were Warriors syndrome', where cultural groups internalise portrayals of their own culture which are either created by or mediated through outsider perspectives. They call for media to be more diverse and reflect more social voices, as a narrow range of perspectives has the power to negatively affect society:

"It is the job of the media to communicate [a] multitude of identities to the public. Such coverage is an antidote to the essentialism that encourages physical and structural violence."

(Alia and Bull 2005, p. 142)

The book *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* explores a variety of ways in which representation has both succeeded and failed in games (Malkowski and Russworm 2017). In chapter six, TreaAndrea Russworm explores the thematic flaws in the game *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012) where even though players are given a sympathetic black African American character to play as, as the game ending still reproduces a sequence where your 'newly-sympathetic' black character demands to be shot dead (due to a zombie bite), the overall narrative still reinforces problematic social themes (Russworm 2017). In *Queer Youth and Media Cultures* (Pullen 2014) a number of essays discuss the different ways in which LGBT-identifying young people are represented in and their queerness moderated by media. In the chapter 'Media Responses to Queer Youth Suicide' (pp. 63-85) Christopher Pullen discusses the 'It Gets Better Project' which seeks to reach out to LGBTQIA+ youth through messages about how 'it gets better'; Pullen critiques the project, both acknowledging that message and representation in media can be useful, but also pointing out that a person stating in generalist terms that things 'will be better' does not provide useful tools to young people. This highlights, in hand with Russworm, both the potentials and potential-pitfalls of representation of minorities in media. While media if employed with nuance and cultural awareness can provide diversity of representation of people/s, without said nuance and social awareness, and without meaningfulness to a consumer, it's not guaranteed to be of value.

As well as the above, an important consideration is that portrayal of concepts in media does not, in all cases, result in user internalisation, "The act of offering a portrayal does not guarantee that an audience will wholeheartedly accept it, much less react in some predictable fashion or take from it what the producers intended" (Alia and Bull 2005, p.

viii). This is a notable consideration when designing a game with the intent to create affect, as the designer must understand that not all their efforts will succeed.

As well as informing cultural discourse, significant figures in media also have the power to become models for individuals' behaviour and ideals in aspirational senses. Paaßen et al. discuss the power of role models and explain that "Role models have been shown to impact motivation, goals and behaviour by making respective domains, goals and behaviours both more attractive and attainable [...]. Importantly, research shows that *only role models whom individuals believe they could resemble have this positive effect."* (2016, np, emphasis added). This implies that without diversity of representation, people are less likely to find role models which they believe themselves to be able to become. Additionally, with in my own project, this highlights the need to ensure the cast of my game is highly diverse, not just in minority representation, but also in the sense that their personalities are wide-ranging. This will help to provide a wider net for people to 'believe they could resemble' that character (both physically and emotionally).

A thorough synopsis of the current research on role model theory can be found in Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters (2015). They provide the key observation that the role modelling process also requires a 'role aspirant' who internalises and synthesises the modelled behaviour and determines within themselves who the role model should actually be.

> "['Role aspirant' is] a term which should be understood as an individual who makes active, although not necessarily always conscious or deliberate, choices about in whose footsteps to follow based on their own values and goals. In other words, just as leaders do not exist without followers (Haslam, 2004; Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011), role models do not exist without role aspirants. In this way, role aspirants are those who both create role models and benefit from them—and therefore including how their own

attributes contribute to the perceptions of role models and the

psychological processes on their side is key to understanding the role

modeling process."

(Morgenroth et al. 2015)

They define role models as having three core functions: (a) acting as behavioural

models, (b) representing the possible, and (c) being inspirational (2015, p. 465).

In a more active form of role modelling, role *play* can be a valuable tool for educating

and building empathy. Tonkin and Michell (2010) show how the process of putting

oneself in the role of another person (in their case, an abusive person playing the role of

their spouse) can allow different types of insight, leading to a shift in perspective. This

process is a critical potential influencer of gamer experience, and when combined with

the above, the gamer is provided multiple ways to access empathy, understanding,

information, and de-othering. (Further exploration of effects of embodiment can be

found in section 2.5.)

These different elements show that there is a critical relationship between the

representation of diverse peoples in media having an effect on both individuals and

society, diversity in role models being an integral element for providing aspirational

potential for minority players, and how the ability to play *as* diverse characters creates

potential for empathetic and educative perspectives gained through role play.

2.4   Educative Games, Gamification and Values

This section investigates video games being used as a tool to educate, to explore

values and to inspire empathy. It will discuss games being used in the classroom,

games being used to create habits, and gamification in general as a process. By understanding how others use games to educate, we are able understand the ways games are effective for learning, which both grounds the research premise in supporting research, and provides examples of how to build this into my own game.

In 'The Power of Values', in *Values at Play in Digital Games,* Frank Lantz (2014) comments on the ability for games to operate as a kind of fantasy or 'simulacrum', proving users with a theoretical environment where concepts can be tested out which they might not have access to in real life.

> "Games can explore the complicated and ambiguous world of values because they are dynamic models, simulations, and imaginary spaces and also because they function as stylized forms of social interaction. Games are a way for people to engage with issues through the entanglement between a dynamic system and the aspects of the world that it points to and reflects, as well as through the entanglement between those things, ourselves, and each other."
>
> (Lantz, F., in Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014)

This illustrates one of the key ways games allow for education and/or value exploration: they are a 'role play' simulation environment for testing cultural learning, a 'safe' platform within which users can explore and be exposed to potentially novel moral frameworks. Not only that, but the interactive and game design elements (flow, fiero, play etc) provide for an attractive and stimulating environment for users. Hodhod et al. advocate for using games to teach as they can provide:

> "[...] activities such as role playing, which helps students to transfer their knowledge and beliefs into actions (McBrien & Brandt, 1997), brainstorming moral dilemmas (Bolton, 1999) and using interactive learning models (Shapiro, 1999)."
>
> (Hodhod, Cairns, and Kudenko 2011, pp 208-209).

Games have been used by the education sector in a number of ways. The *Handbook of Research on Effective Electronic Gaming in Education* (R. Ferdig 2009) presents a broad summary of different uses and methodologies for gaming in education, from using games to stimulate learning languages through a more goal-and-reward-orientated and socially naturalistic setting than is found in a formal learning plan (Zhao and Lai 2009), to the 'citizenship education' which can occur in Social Studies classes through games which immerse students in certain time periods and contexts – illustrating key concepts such as power and social freedoms, economic education, and decision and participation skills (VanFossen, Friedman, and Hartshorne 2009). Using game theory without games themselves, the Institute of Play is a design studio in New York which develops both schools and school curriculum which "[mimic] the action and design principles of games" (www.instituteofplay.org, 2016). This broad range of applications indicates the diverse and flexible ways in which games can be leveraged for educating.

Games are not only platforms for 'teaching', but also deliver learning to the user in specific ways which are highly effective. James Gee in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (Gee 2003a) proposes that games already are 'learning machines' which offer a number of techniques for learning which should be employed in wider education, such as: "[giving] information "on demand" and "just in time," not out of the contexts of actual use or apart from people's purposes and goals, something that happens too often in schools" (Gee 2003b, p. 2) and delivering challenges and skill acquisition in "fruitful order" (ibid) which allows for the establishment of understanding and skill before being enticed with a new problem to resolve.

Leveraging some of these elements Gee describes and other elements of 'gamification', video games or their close-relatives have been employed to stimulate change in

behaviours through a range of self-help products, sometimes referred to as "lifestyle gamification" (Chou n.d.), such as Jane McGonigal's *SuperBetter* (www.superbetter.com) and others such as *Habitica* (habitica.com), *Fitocracy* (www.fitocracy.com) and more. These products use a game-like goal-setting, feedback and reward system, as well as often containing a social layer, to help people build good habits and set and achieve life-goals. Items such as the 'Fitbit' and other challenge-and-tracking tools also employ game-like design elements to stimulate users. However, despite the ever-growing proliferation of the theories and applications of gamification and games for education, the process is not without its critiques. Dr Rachel Kowert, author of *A Parent's Guide to Video Games* (2016) made the following comment in a Q&A session:

> "The issue here is the fine line between "educational" games and games that promote education/learning. For example, when I was a child, I remember very clearly playing *Math Blaster* ...it was not very fun and I do not think it made a substantial difference in my learning. However, I also remember very clearly playing *Oregon Trail* which was also a designed for learning but not in such a 1+2 = 3 way. The point here is that [games] that are typically created for learning are the kinds of games that no one wants to play – they are repetitive, the objective is obvious, and are not nearly as fun to play as other games."

(Kowert 2016, np)

Although game-design has come a long way since the 1983 *Math Blaster!* (Davidson & Associates)*,* gamification is not the solution to all problems that some present it as. The gamification of education, or lifegoals, or even Jane McGonigal's dream of planet-saving problem-solving is an interesting challenge for utilising what video games can teach us about the human psyche, but it is also important to note that as soon as the design-goals of 'fun' and 'play' are replaced at the top of the priority list with another goal (such as educating, or marketing), games can swiftly lose their 'game-y' nature (game in a 'recreational' sense (Gee 2003b)), and become a different creature entirely. Ian Bogost's

cynical summary *Gamification is Bullshit* (Bogost 2011) and his follow-up more nuanced

argument in Walz and Deterding (2014) 'Why Gamification is Bullshit' (Bogost 2014)

both point out the flaws in taking game design principles and applying them outside of

things designed to be games first and foremost, (such as fitness tracking and habit

forming). This highlights a tension between games for fun/recreation and games as a

tool for learning. Margaret Robertson's article *Can't Play, Won't Play* points out:

> "[The] problem being that gamification isn't gamification at all. What we're
> currently terming gamification is in fact the process of taking *the thing that*
> *is least essential to games* and representing it as the core of the experience.
> Points and badges have no closer a relationship to games than they do to
> websites and fitness apps and loyalty cards. They're great tools for
> communicating progress and acknowledging effort, but neither points nor
> badges in any way constitute a game."
>
> (Robertson 2010)

She also points out that the lack of a 'fail condition' and an extremely limited (or non-

existent) application of user-choice are far more integral to something being a game

than a simple success condition that you either do or not choose to complete.

> "A world of badges and points only offers upwards escalation, and without
> the pain of loss and failure, these mean far less. And when this upward
> escalation is based only on accumulation of points, rather than on
> expressions of my choices and my skills, then this further strips out the
> sense of agency and competence, so crucial to the emotional and
> neurological buzz we get from gaming."
>
> (ibid)

What this indicates is a kind of weird space around the edges of game design which

employs parts of game mechanics without all of them, producing perhaps a game-cousin

product, which seems to not quite be a game. Robertson argues that we should replace

the word 'Gamification' with 'Pointsification', but to-date the term still stands.

In another 'in and outside' games space, 'serious games' is a genre of game design which uses games specifically for teaching before play. "A serious game is a game in which education (in its various forms) is the primary goal, rather than entertainment" (Michael and Chen 2005). They are not always inherently 'serious' in nature (Breuer and Bente 2010), nor are they necessarily played in a serious way when given to users (DiCerbo 2016), but their driving and designing force is around using games to educate about something. It is of note that although this design approach may appear to fit my own, when looking at my ultimate goal of community level change, in my case the need is for the 'primary goal' to be to make a fun game, for the game to still be play and recreation, in order for the relevant users to have the motivation to play it, (more discussion on this point in Chapter 7.1.)

Somewhere in the mix of games for fun, games as learning tools, gamification and serious games, however, we can still learn useful techniques and perspectives. *Designing Games for Ethics: Models, Techniques and Frameworks* highlights a number of different approaches to the delivery of ethics in a game context (Schrier and Gibson 2011). The chapter 'Fostering Character Education with Games and Interactive Story Generation' aligns in some key ways with my own research. Within, Hodhod et al. investigate how to use educative games in a classroom setting in order to teach "core ethical values, such as trustworthiness, caring, honesty, fairness, responsibility and respect for self and others along with supportive performance values that form the basis of good character, such as diligence, a strong work ethic, and perseverance." (Hodhod, Cairns, and Kudenko 2011) This approach differs from my own in that (from their description) the game does appear to be 'serious' in its goals, and also differs due to its use within a class lesson plan environment, but offers key suggestions on how to create affect in users, such as through showing "diverse views on the same topic or situation" and "[showing] the

emotional impact of actions on the non-playing characters" in order to build an emotive

relationship with players (ibid, p. 229-230).

Looking to mainstream-released games that seek to inform or inspire empathy, we find

closer parallels to my own research. *Gone Home* (The Fullbright Company 2013) is an

"interactive exploration simulator" (Steam 2018) where players are invited to explore a

family home to discover why they player's sister has run away. The game employs

storytelling, exploration, and nostalgia (Veale 2017) to draw the player into experiencing

empathy for the emotional journey of a teenage girl falling in love with (spoilers)

another teenage girl, and the challenges and fears of a young queer character.

Depression Quest (The Quinnspiracy, 2013), is "an interactive fiction game where you

play as someone living with depression" (Quinn 2013). Users move through the day-to-

day of a character (referred to as 'you' throughout the story) who suffers with

depression, and must make choices to guide their character/themselves through this

experience. The main mechanic of the game is that the user is presented with choices to

make in a scenario, and regularly the choice that a 'well' person might make (such as,

'shake off your bad mood and have a great time') will be visible but crossed out. This

mechanic is clearly designed to highlight that the ways a 'well' person might deal with a

challenging situation is not often possible for someone suffering from a serious illness.

The creator, Zoe Quinn said of the function: "Externalizing that [mechanic] into a game

and asking people to take some time out to see what 'rules' other people have to live

with, I think, is a powerful use of the medium" (Parkin 2014).

Some other games which explore empathy and understanding include *Hush* (Jamie

Antonisse 2008) and *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014) (described by Justin Clark for

Gamespot as "a longform exercise in empathy" (2014)). Both games are set in war-zones

as the characters try desperately to survive (see more in Aida Akl's *Gaming Gives Expression to the Horrors of Genocide, War* (2015)).

Probably one of the closest games I found to my own design goals was an indie game called *Cart Life* (Hofmeier 2011). It's a game where users play as impoverished shop-cart owners battling with addictions, monotonous jobs, language barriers and custody battles. The game actively employs tedium as a game mechanic, increasing the sympathy between the gamer and the character's life. Adam Smith's 2012 review of the game states:

> "Trying to make every penny count is hard, particularly when those pennies must be earned in time-consuming and will-sapping retail tasks conducted on the sidewalks of an unloving and monochromatic cityscape. *Cart Life* is a story about people in just such a situation, people who have responsibilities, weaknesses and histories. It's a simulation of life without glitz, glamour or much in the way of good tidings. It's one of my favourite games of recent times."

(Smith 2012, np)

Intriguingly, I would say that in my emotional response to playing *Cart Life* I felt like I was 'playing', more than some of the above-mentioned games. Even though the game is emotionally serious in tone, it was still fun. I was having my critical awareness of a person's life stimulated, but I didn't *feel* like it was the goal of the game, the game was being gamey in its design. Both *Cart Life* and *This War of Mine* also not only employ an empathy-creating experience through their narratives, but, like *Depression Quest,* also through game mechanics[7], a methodology which *Values at Play* authors Mary Flanagan

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[7] In *Cart Life*, players must make decisions such as whether to feed their character or their pet, or feed their smoking addiction, and will experience consequences from each choice. In *This War of Mine,* players must frequently make morally challenging decisions such as whether to steal from other starving people or wander into active war zones to loot pittances of food, even knowing it may mean your own friends will starve to death.

and Helen Nissenbaum recommend as a critical and effective strategy when trying to deploy social values through video games (2014).

In the earlier quote from Frank Lantz, he refers to the game he helped develop called *Power Planets* (Area/Code 2010). The game teased out for players the concept behind making sustainable choices in the current time which will benefit later generations on our planet, or making self-serving short-term decisions. In the game, users have to gain points through optimising power-output on 'their' planet, but each planet goes through five 'epochs' and for each epoch the planet is passed to a different player. As such, players can either play selfishly, maximising cheap but polluting power like coal, which will mean the next player is left with a smog-choked disaster, or they can play with an eye to 'altruism', by investing in clean energy, hoping that the current keeper of their next planet is doing the same. Through this process, players gain some insight into the forward-planning required by sustainable research, and not only that, they get to experience something that might be in our near future – being 'given' the responsibility for a planet so badly damaged it is beyond repair. This is one way games can provide a simulacrum – not just as an 'educator' for things we as a society already know, but a theoretical simulation of scenarios we can only guess at. Players in this situation go through an emotional reaction to a model, experiencing, though based in fantasy, a 'real' emotional reaction to a theoretical reality. Games are not, of course, the only medium which can evoke this emotional simulation, however they do provide a powerfully immersive, active-learning based environment alongside this emotive experience, which feed each other in turn, allowing for an emphasised total experience.

All of these games rely on the aesthetic experience of players interacting with the game, making choices for the characters and inhabiting their lives, or making decisions and

living with the consequences – as a way of activating empathy, challenging held beliefs, questioning moral frameworks and broadening understanding. This process is presumably motivated within designers by the goal of creating change in an individual: in *Depression Quest* the creators seek to raise awareness and understanding in the user of the experience of mental illness. *Cart Life, This War of Mine* and *Gone Home* attempt to build empathy and understanding of particular real-life experiences. Although the longitudinal effects of this process have not yet been studied (to my knowledge,) this field is rapidly growing and this may only be a matter of time.

Through all this diverse and growing knowledge around both how the fundamentals of gaming can benefit education, and how games are being used already as sites for informing, building knowledge and stimulating empathy, we can see how the goals of this project are potentially attainable. In *Values at Play*, Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum point out three core statements:

> "[T]hat societies have common (not necessarily universal) values; that technologies, including digital games, embody ethical and political values; and that those who design digital games have the power to shape players' engagement with these values."
>
> (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014)

This statement sets down the challenge for game designers to take the games in which values and learning is *already occurring*, and if they so choose, turn this towards goals which may benefit our society.

2.5   Immersion, Embodiment and Interactivity

This section investigates the discourse around the specific design elements of video games which are said to create personal engagement in users, explores the

relationship between cognitive and sensory immersion, and explores the role of performative embodiment in the immersive experience. Through understanding these elements we learn more about what functional tools can be used by the game designer to deepen user-engagement with the game itself and its narrative messages.

> Immersion and interactivity are often seen as dichotomous concepts; one cannot be fully immersed if one is interacting with an outside world. The problem is one of control; interactivity denotes gaining control, [...] whereas immersion denotes a loss of control, a giving in to the world one is surrounded by and simply taking it all in. The computer game medium, however, thrives on the ambiguity that exists between the boundaries of control and the loss thereof. It is in the relationship between immersion and interactivity that the aesthetic experience of computer game play can be understood.

> (Sommerseth, 2009, p. 4)

In the section 'Why Games, Why Play?' we have already looked at some of the elements of games which drive people to play and keep playing. In this section we delve into the ways users are affected by some of the unique elements of game design, and how, as per Sommerseth above, the relationship between interactivity and immersion is achieved.

One of the great debates within the study of video games is whether games have the capacity to be *more* immersive than other types of media, particularly visual media (McGonigal, 2011; Isbister, 2016). The conversation largely centres around how games are a unique medium because of the ability users have to make *choices* within games which makes them more immersed. In the words of Katherine Isbister, author of *How Games Move Us: Emotion By Design,* "At their heart, games differ from other media in one fundamental way: they offer players the chance to influence outcomes through their own *efforts*" (2016, p. 2, emphasis added).

People typically use the word 'interactive' to describe games, which is technically true, but any object which is made for using is interactive to some degree. What games provide is an extremely high level of responsivity reacting to a mixture of choice and effortful activity.

Isbister also points out that choice is not only found in narrative, it's in every element of the game:

> "When I run, I make a series of choices about actions I will take that might affect whether I win. I feel a sense of mastery or failure depending on whether I successfully execute the actions in the ways I intended. My emotions ebb and flow as I make these choices and see what happens as a result. I feel a sense of consequence and responsibility for my choices. In the end, I am to blame for the outcomes, because they arise from my own actions."
>
> (Isbister 2016)

This 'choice and consequence' relationship is part of the failure 'paradox' which draws players back to games despite games stimulating 'negative' emotions: "Failure forces us to reconsider what we are doing, to learn. Failure connects us personally to the events in the game; it proves that *we matter*, that the world does not simply continue regardless of our actions" (Juul 2013, p. 122). It is this proof of the importance of our choices, of our interactions with the game having meaningful effect, which affirms our value in relation to the object itself.

However, choice alone does not give a narrative depth nor, arguably, is it 'narratively interactive' simply through *having* a choice; it is when there is an *affective* relationship between the user and the narrative when interactivity becomes 'real' for the user.

Hanna Sommerseth critiques hypertext narratives[8] and the "cult of interactivity" (Ryan 2003, in Sommerseth 2009, p. 3) around them for, it seems, not having at much choice as they proport to. While I have no desire to debate the validity of hypertext fiction nor define the difference between game narratives and said medium, I speculate that Sommerseth's critique is in some way objecting to a scenario where a is choice offered, but what is delivered has a very low degree of meaningful consequence and/or complexity of narrative. This creates an environment where though there is choice present, there is very little affect. This applies to both hypertext fiction and games: "adding irrelevant interactivity to interactive storytelling doesn't make it better. The interactivity is not independent and separable from the storytelling; the two must be in harmony to be effective" (Crawford 2013).

This affectual experience of choice and related consequence has the ability to cut through any 'passivity' that a user might feel, compared to someone reading a book or watching a film. Isbister (2016) provides an excellent summary of this, including discussing how scientists have tracked the different parts of the brain activated by playing versus watching a game, and discusses how active involvement and choice leads to very particular feelings such as guilt and pride which are directly linked to the player's own participation in events, which is not seen in other mediums:

> "[The] capacity to evoke actual feelings of guilt from a fictional experience is
> unique to games. A reader or filmgoer may feel many emotions when
> presented with horrific fictional acts on the page or screen, but
> responsibility and guilt are generally not among them. […] Conversely, a film

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[8] A form of digital narrative where a reader uses hypertext links to jump from one part of the text to another, much in the style of 'choose your own adventure' books, allowing narrative choice and elements of interactivity.

viewer might feel joyful when the protagonist wins, but is not likely to feel a sense of personal responsibility and pride.

(Isbister 2016, pp. 8-9)

Thus, as affectual user-choice increases the feeling of personal responsibility and involvement in the events of the narrative, *interactivity itself* has the capacity to feed into *emotional immersion*.

As well as choice, games affect our state of immersion through an array of stimulation sources: visuals, sound, haptic interfaces and feedback, as well as cognitive and emotional stimulation through problem solving, and character and narrative – all of which draw the user deeper into the experience. Sommerseth points out that reading books relies purely on imagination, whereas games use a variety of visual and other sensory information to provide large parts of the information.

> "When a reader is immersed in fiction, the 'transportation' from one space to another is purely cognitive – the reader's body is still and the construction of the fictional world takes place in the reader's mind. For a player of games to experience immersion, various technologies exist that act directly upon the player's perceptive systems in order to create an experience."

(Sommerseth 2009)

In this scenario, the body itself becomes part of the experience – interacted upon and interacted through. Sommerseth argues that immersion in games cannot be discussed without also looking at the bodily form of interactivity, "an understanding of immersion as well as interactivity that takes the body as its starting point, as opposed to the text" (2009, p. 4).

As the body and the game become linked, spatial awareness and presence, "a sense of "being there" inside a game world" (Tamborini and Skalski 2006, p. 1) is a key element of

the experience of immersion. In *Video Games: Perspective, Point-of-View, and Immersion* Laurie Taylor (2002) reviews the different formats of point-of-view in video games and their effects. This includes: first person; third person; third person trailing; overhead or top-down (sometimes called a 'god view'); and three-fourths isometric (2002, p. 5). Taylor analyses how these different perspectives effect the player and how they are shaped by the game itself: "Perspective shapes the player's perception of the game space because it tacitly encodes the vantage point from which the player acts on and engages with objects and actors in the game world" (ibid).

Taylor also points out that distance from the action can create a kind of abstraction of involvement, which may be a design consideration when trying to increase player empathy and personal engagement with the narrative:

> [Of top-down/god view] "Gameplay in these games is based on the concept that the player is a force that acts upon the world of the game, rather than a force within the game that then acts on the objects and actors of the game from within. The god view is a distancing, abstracting point of view—the logical end of the "cone of vision" paradigm of linear perspective where the end of the cone is outside of the field of the game space: the view looks onto the game space, but is not present within it."
>
> (2002, pp. 6-7)

Taylor notes that games where the player is embodied by multiple characters, such as some role-playing games which operate with a 'party' may also reduce the sense of user involvement: "Playing as the controlling force of a group is not the same as playing within the game space: in party system games, the player plays as a controlling external force which acts on the party, and the party then acts within the game" (Taylor 2002, p. 7). However, when looking at these arguments it's worth considering more closely the word 'immersion' and its different interpretations. On one hand, immersion can be a spatial state of being *submersed into something* ('she was immersed underwater') or a

cognitive experience of being *absorbed by something* ('he was immersed in his daydreaming'). Considerations of the effects of point-of-view must take this difference in meaning into account. While a perspective such as 'god view' not stimulating spatial immersion in a virtual-physical sense will affect a person's *level of presence*, this does not mean it removes their experience of immersive *cognitive absorption* and thus potential engagement.

In games, our bodies are both outside the game, and within the game, and our perceptions of these two states of being affect our emotional relationship with the game. Gregersen and Grodal in *Embodiment and Interface* draw attention to the difference between the factual, sensory body, and the inner sense of being:

> "We will refer to embodiment in two somewhat different, but related ways. One entails conceptualizing the human body as a physically-existing, biologically-evolved entity. The other entails *our experience of ourselves as embodied beings* and our mindful experiences of the world due to our embodiment."
>
> (Gregersen and Grodal 2009, p. 65)

When considering this, one can see how the sense of embodiment can spread beyond one's own physical shape and into others (such as a game avatar). Rune Klevjer describes this as "vicarious embodiment" (2006) and presents that the avatar is the player embodied and is affected by the game world:

> "[The avatar] exploits the digital computer's unique capacity for realistic simulation, and acts as a mediator of the player's embodied interaction with the gameworld, […] it gives the player a subject-position within a simulated environment, a vicarious body through which the player can act as an agent in a fictional world. This vicarious body is not merely a mediator of agency or 'interactivity' in a general sense, but belongs to and is exposed to its environment. In other words, an avatar is interesting and playable not just because of what it makes us able to do or perform, but because of what

happens *to* us in the world that the avatar lets us inhabit. The avatar is the embodied manifestation of the player' engagement with the gameworld; it is the player incarnated."

<div align="right">(Klevjer 2006, p. 10)</div>

This perspective of the avatar being players' embodied self within the game-space is critical for our understanding of how the player is linked to the game and narrative world.

The body within the game and outside the game creates a multi-layered experience. Steven E Jones suggests that games and their interface are "space in multiple dimensions" where video game play is "necessarily a hybrid experience, bodily as well as mental" which "requires a physical as well as mental engagement" which not only has a physical interface, but awareness of the game as being a game: "[a game] usually demands mixed attention, cool in its detachment and aware of the game and its always at least partly haptic or somatic interface." (Jones 2009, pp. 270-271). Despite on the surface appearing to countermand Dovey and Kennedy's (2006) description of the interaction between a game and a human being a cybernetic loop which transforms user and technology into a cyborgian artefact – "the collapse of boundary between human and machine" (Kennedy 2011, p. 206) in fact these theories can align, as while the 'boundary' between game and machine is 'collapsed', both human and machine are required for one and other, one does not dissolve into or erase the other. These perspectives are relevant as they provide an understanding of how intertwined the user is with both the haptic interfaces and game content, as well as the perception of self both inside and outside of the game.

It's at this point, where the person and the machine begin to 'collapse' into each other, and the avatar becomes the player embodied, that we see also how performance can

play an essential part in the relationship between the player and the 'character'. How role-play becomes a mixture of projecting self and playing a part. Fragoso (2014) points out that the term 'suspension of disbelief' was originally prefaced by the word 'voluntary' and proposes that between the interactivity, interfaces and participation in games, that video games are "better described as a *performance of belief*" (p. 58, emphasis added) as a process where users make the deliberate choice to *enact* their engagement.

Role-play within a game, as either a specific character or as an agent of the self in a game context, can both allow for both the playing out of novel concepts and can involve a freedom of personal expression. Isbister quotes a player's comment from Sherry Turkle's 1995 *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*:

> "You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself
> if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You
> can be less talkative. You can be whoever you want, really, *whoever you*
> *have the capacity to be."*

<div align="right">(Tucker, in Isbister, 2016, p. 54, emphasis added)</div>

This caveat that is mentioned here, 'whoever you have the capacity to be' is particularly interesting because it highlights how the characters we play are a performance that is linked to us as users, and even when given the ability to do so, action completely outside of our own realm of behaviour patterns (even theoretical ones) can be difficult for players.

Finally, and perhaps most critically of all, Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson presented in 2007 a theory which provides an extension to asking how we affect the game through the avatar – how then does the avatar affect us? The Proteus Effect, as they dubbed it, looked at how players' behaviour was affected by who or what they were playing as. The

conclusions showed that players playing tall characters were more likely to play confidently, and players assigned attractive characters were more likely to be intimate in their 'self-disclosures' and distances from allies (Yee and Bailenson 2007). Follow-up research has looked at how male gamers choosing to play 'healer' characters will choose to play as female characters, forming a kind of self-perpetuating stereotype, (Yee et al. 2011) and how White American gamers playing as Black American characters in violent games have higher aggression and negative thoughts about Black people post game (Yang et al. 2014). Yee also wrote *The Proteus Paradox* (Yee 2014b), a book that both explores the above and also provides a kind of mass-ethnography of gamers and gamer behaviours. This group of theories are particularly critical in the question of whether a game can create change in an individual, because it shows clear evidence that an avatar has the power (even if temporarily) to affect a person's behaviour and perceptions.

Through looking at how interactivity in the form of choice activates a player's capacity to become personally responsible for a narrative, how 'immersion' is a variety of states which can emotionally and cognitively involve a player in a narrative, as well as 'submerse' their awareness into a game space, which then links to embodiment, where the player affects the avatar, is represented by the avatar, is linked in their sense of self to the avatar and is affected in turn by the avatar, we learn more about how to establish and strengthen the relationship between the player, the game, and the characters. By strengthening this relationship in the design of the game, designers increase the chances of the game narrative, and its change-making elements, having an effect on the player.

2.6   Constructing the Narrative

This section discusses key challenges to building informing about sexism into the game narrative itself without unbalancing the 'entertainment' of the user, and details some of the unique elements of game narrative design which must be considered when writing stories for games.

Games are a medium which, as we have already seen, take many forms and relate to and with the user in many different ways. Narrative and story are just one element of this (Aarseth 2003), but they are highly effective tools for informing, challenging stereotypes, and shifting negative attitudes and beliefs. Narratives can be used for this task in part because of how they create and reproduce stereotypes; because of how they can deliver information, and because of how they can construct paradigms and worlds which can exemplify 'ways of being' which are outside a user's own perspective (Mattingly and Garro 2000).

The specific ways that game narrative has the ability to affect users have been discussed above, such as through stimulating empathy through role-play and role modelling, and through immersion and embodiment, but a core function of this research project was to be able to write a narrative which was strong enough in its emotional storytelling that it could create learning, representing and empathy building moments while keeping the player engaged. I do not have the scope in this project to detail how a person might go about writing *well*, as that is several theses in itself, however two key areas which require attention are: how does the game narrative incorporate the goal of challenging stereotypes and sexist attitudes and beliefs, and, what are the significant elements of writing *for* games which are unique to the medium and must be considered when developing the narrative.

In an attempt to make change to sexist attitudes and behaviours in the gaming community, I leverage the narrative in *The Dunes* to do several things:

1. Challenge gender stereotypes through using characters and stories which counter existing stereotypical gendered 'norms';
2. Draw attention to and stimulate empathy for those affected by sexism by showing how it occurs and affects people;
3. Normalise concepts of gender which might be 'strange' or unfamiliar to some users; and
4. Provide representation and visibly to minority groups.

The process of 'how' I go about doing this is detailed in the methods chapter, however, for all of these, one of the core challenges was how to represent diversity effectively while maintaining good storytelling, as "it is difficult to remain entertaining while addressing gender stereotypes […] directly and earnestly" (Trépainer-Jobin 2017, p. 103). One method of combatting this is through making a complex and narratively dynamic world, plot and set of characters within which to place the gendered challenges of the game – thus ensuring that the 'earnestness' of the gender and sexism elements is balanced out in an entertaining and dramatically-compelling story.

In addition, a risk when building a narrative which highlights sexism is that it has the potential to simply reproduce the concepts which it actually seeks to disrupt (ibid). One method I have employed to manage these risks is careful consideration of from where and through whom negative experiences are being generated in the narrative, and curation of an 'outsider' versus 'insider' environment where gender and sexism are shown to be performative (Butler 1999) and 'put upon' the characters from society – the outside – rather than produced within the self and the 'close allies' insider environment. As already discussed, in consideration of Russworm's (2017) warnings of how thematic real-world contexts can cause unintended re-interpretations of in-game events and

themes, I have also sought to write with an eye to what is being shown through both the micro and macro narrative elements, and how these can be perceived. More discussion of methods in these areas can be found in Chapter 3.

Within the game industry, writing for games is increasingly being referred to as 'narrative design' as the task requires many elements of game and user experience design. Jay Posey (2008) explains what a Narrative Designer ("what's left over when you smash a writer and a designer together" (p. 56)) actually does. In particular he describes how the Narrative Designer must have a grasp on mechanical functions of the game, not just the story, as in 'narrative-centric' or story-focussed games mechanics are either part of the storytelling or must be considered as part of the aesthetic experience:

> "Take, for example, a save-game feature. When outlining how such a feature is implemented, a Designer is primarily concerned with functionality: how does a player access it, when is saving available, does the game use checkpoints or a save-anywhere mechanic, and so on. The Narrative Designer, on the other hand, must also consider how such a feature is presented in-game from a narrative perspective: does the user interface make sense in the context of the gameworld, does the saving mechanic need a "story" explanation, would a save-anywhere system interfere with the pacing of the narrative, and so forth. Though at first look a save-game feature may not seem like it needs narrative consideration, such details can make or break a player's buy-in to the game's narrative."

(Posey 2008, p. 56)

To illustrate his example, we can look to a recent game, *NieR: Automata* (Platinum Games 2017), in this game the main character is an android, and the player 'saves' the game by uploading their 'data' to the network, so that if the android's body is destroyed a copy can be issued with the character's 'mind'. This creates a narrative-based 'reason' behind the save which interweaves the perceptions of character and player.

Another challenge for the Narrative Designer is the process of guiding players through the game itself and 'teaching' players about the game mechanics, "the game writer wants to deliver sufficient assistance to allow the player to enjoy the game and to do so using the least obtrusive mechanisms," and "must anticipate the issues the player will face, taking into account as broad a spectrum of problems as will encompass the likely difficulties faced by each and every member of the game's audience" (Bateman 2006, p. 85). In Mary DeMarle's 'Nonlinear Game Narrative' (2006) she points out that even though a writer may want the player to progress in a certain way that doesn't mean they will, and that the writer must understand the full scope of 'if the player can they will' and how this can affect a narrative's progression. (These challenges are looked at in further detail in Chapter 7.) While these elements present a challenge, they also afford, as detailed in the earlier discussions of the effects of choice and interactivity, a way to invite the player into a participatory experience of the narrative which can create a unique relationship between user and story, which in turn rewards the hard work the game narrative demands. In addition, the game's mechanics provide a way to stimulate 'fun' around the narrative, increasing the 'entertainment' factor to when attempting to balance the social education elements of the experience. In this sense, the 'Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics' (Sellers 2006) of the game become tools to aid the Narrative Designer who seeks social change.

The task of weaving in ways to break out of common stereotypes, inform players about the effects of sexism, and include positive representation takes the construction of this game's narrative to a further level of challenge – but one for which there are ways through. By making a game narrative which is complex and dramatically engaging, by considering the wider themes of narrative being told, by creating an 'insider vs outsider' environment which places negative experiences outside the character's trusted friends,

and by wielding the game's MDA's effectively, I believe the writer can create a great game story which incorporates this social education in a way which remains digestible and entertaining for the player.

Literature: In Conclusion

Based on this review of current literature, I seek to explore within my own game how to harness the power of interactivity leading to affect, immersion effecting emotion, role modelling providing aspirational patterns of behaviour, narrative providing scope for unfamiliar/unlikely experiences which can allow for experimental value testing, embodiment and role-playing stimulating empathy, choice creating a sense of personal responsibility, narrative working with mechanics, and how fun, challenge, feedback, fiero and flow can activate a profound sense of engagement with a medium – all to create the potential for strong impact and change in a player.

This literature review highlights that there is a complex net of interdependent elements influencing the player's experience of game narratives, all of which play a part in how one could use a game narrative to challenge sexist attitudes and behaviours. I believe that it is by harnessing all of these elements that we create the best possible opportunity for the player to participate in the emotional journey and learning provided in the game, and thus provide the greatest chance of contributing to or shifting their perspectives – and towards stimulating change in the wider gaming community.

We have seen that the game community and games themselves have throughout their history both reproduced and created an array of stereotypes and sexist portrayals; of characters in games, and of the people who play them – which in turn has reinforced sexist attitudes about gender and negative behaviours from some male gamers towards

women. In my game, I will create a narrative which challenges these stereotypes, illustrates and invites empathy through exposing the negative effects of sexism, makes less mainstream gendered expressions less 'unfamiliar' and creates role-models by representing diverse characters. Through inviting players to participate in the choices of the game and become embodied within the game characters and world, this will allow the player to become *present within* and *personally responsible for* the narrative journey. Through these tools, and though a story and set of characters with dynamism and emotional depth, I seek to deeply engage the player in the game and its attempts to change negative sexist attitudes and behaviours.

In the following chapters, I will explore how these interdependent elements of game design function, and how to go about applying them within the narrative I intend to construct based on a combination of this literature review and a responsive reflection on the comments and observations of research participants. The next chapter continues to follow my own quest as I began to explore the 'how' and the 'what' of this research project. The literature has provided an understanding of why people play and why they keep playing, the context of gender issues in games and the community, the effects of representation and role modelling through games, how games are used to educate, how immersion and embodiment place the player inside the game, and reviewed the challenges of storytelling inside a game. With this knowledge in hand, the next step is: how do I actually *make* this game?

3.0 Methods

This research does not simply ask the question what do games do to people, but also *how do we employ those effects with purpose?* Critically, it must address the question – *what does that look like in the form of a narrative? How would we make that?* This research has required a multi-layered approach to the methodological side of the investigation, and contains several different elements in its process. These steps have amalgamated both existing research methodologies in the studies of games and gamer culture, traditional Anthropological methods, and functional explorations of real making.

As you've already seen, the first stage of my approach to this research was one of autoethnographic investigation into my own place in the gaming community and why my experiences were driving me to seek some different material in the world of games. I decided that to create change I needed to write a game story which could expose sexism, stimulate empathy, challenge stereotypes and incorporate diversity – something which could be a great game without reinforcing inequality, and use that to build narrative design guidelines which others could use.

While beginning work on the narrative, to broaden my perspective, I undertook small-scale field work with gamers of a variety of backgrounds, discussing with them their relationships with games and how game narrative may or may not have affected them on a personal level, to help inform what elements of the game might have the most impact. In tandem with this, I also undertook some textual analysis of games where diverse representation was present in the narrative.

Part-way through this doing and making, it became apparent that in order to rigorously test the narrative guidelines, it would be impossible to simply write a script. Due to the inherently interactive, embodied, and immersive environments that games provide, to truly investigate both the narrative and the relationship it did or didn't create with players, this would have to occur within a playable game context. I needed players inside the game, making it game-y. This resulted in changing the project's design goals: I changed tack and wrote and built (with the help of an artist) a very short prelude to the game I had been developing, and then tested and discussed this with research participants. It was through all of these layers of methodological action that the research and its enquiries were developed to a 'useful' state. In the following sections I will describe in greater detail each of these layers of the approach and what informed them.

3.1   Autoethnography

Two key values of autoethnography are that a researcher is forced to critically analyse and open up their own perspective and how they are intertwined with a research topic (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Bochner 2001) and also that it can give a voice directly to a person 'inside' a cultural group (Archetti and Reed-Danahay 1998) rather than passing that voice through another person's (academic) filter.

In the case of this research, I employed an autoethnographic perspective to provide the research with the context of myself as a female gamer seeking more diversity and less sexism in games and the community. The fact that I sought to learn how to build more socially effective narratives for video games arose both from my own position as a writer, and as a queer female gamer. I sought both to see more people that represented me and others rarely seen (or rarely portrayed well) within games, and, as a writer, was

already deeply aware that many game narratives fell short of the excellent writing seen in many other fields. Both of these elements were driving factors in my desire to undertake this research, and set the scene for the research questions themselves.

As well as providing this initial context, autoethnographic method threads through the entire thesis. When doing field work, I also performed a 'self-interview' asking myself similar questions to those I was asking my participants. I also where relevant reflect on some key experiences and challenges I faced while writing *The Dunes*, and writing and building the Prelude, in order to explore not just the written text, but my experience as the participant-creator.

In addition to this, drawing on autoethnography as a practice which has often sought to challenge the formal strictures of academia and make academic investigations more 'evocative' (Anderson 2006; Méndez 2013), I have chosen to write this thesis in a less formal, open way, with plenty of open reference to my own presence and perspective, and elements of an interactive design at key moments. My wish is for this text to be accessible and easy to read for people within the gaming community who might wish to investigate these questions themselves, and so have allowed the 'narrative' elements of autoethnography to influence the style of text within this thesis.

Acknowledging my presence within the research has allowed me to provide a more honest telling of this journey, and kept the research openly grounded in my own experiences – ideally showing both the passion and subjectivity which I bring to the project. Through making myself one of the subjects, I am investigating a real gamer and her real battle to make change, not just as an academic, but as a member of the gaming world.

3.2   Textual Review

To help provide a solid foundation of understanding of the current environment of gender, sexism and social issues in gaming, I performed a basic level of textual review, both on games themselves which feature themes around minority representation, and in the ways the game world has been talking amongst and about themselves on these issues. The purpose of this activity was to see how people were approaching the question of representation, sexism and social issues in games, and means I have included a number of 'grey literature' references within this thesis, to include the perspective of the gaming community.

As part of the game reviewing I played, or played part of, several key games myself, such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare 2014) (a story-focussed Role Playing Game known for representation of queer characters, and for featuring a trans male character), and such as *Depression Quest,* I also watched videos of others playing some games such as *Cart Life* (One F Jef 2012). I also read a selection of game reviews and articles (commentary by the community, not academia) on games and on the debate of sexism and representation in games and media (Rantasmo 2015; Drew Dixon 2013; Bennett 2016; Clark 2014b; Zimmer 2017; Trota 2017), which alerted me to the ways the game community is talking about their own games.

As part of this process I also examined what the current top grossing games are in the world (Entertainment Software Association 2017), and for the last several years, and explored the representation in these games (Bailey 2015).

These steps allowed me to see what was happening in games, what people in the game world were saying about games, and immerse myself in some of the gendered representations in games, both positive and negative, pushing my own perspective more broadly that what I would typically experience in my own 'corner' of the game world.

3.3   Guidelines to Help Build the Guidelines

One of the goals of this research was to be able to produce a set of guidelines which were practical, and easily understood and applied by other game makers. These guidelines would provide a framework for how someone could, with intent, include social awareness and education into a game without compromising its 'game' value. Many research projects explore issues, but do not provide a clear framework from which a reader could take this information and easily apply it to their own projects. I wished to provide principles which would help game developers build in this kind of design goal easily and simply, while avoiding potential stumbling blocks. Not only this, but as a writer myself I wished to be able to use this guide for my own future work to help me understand what I might need to incorporate or remove.

Building this guide was essentially the result of this entire project, and will be discussed fully in Chapter 7. However, as I was beginning the narrative construction before I had fully fleshed out the structure and content of the guide, I required a 'phase one' version which would provide a foundation as I began writing.

During the writing phase, I developed the following 'Exemplar Delivery Framework' (EDF) which details the ways a creator can *show examples in the text* of how sexism effects characters and the story, and stimulate empathy, normalise the unfamiliar and represent diverse peoples.

(Sexism) Exemplar Delivery Framework			
Type 1	Type 2	Type 3	Type 4
Showing how sexism **occurs**	Showing negative **effects** of sexism	Showing 'It's okay to be (_____)'. **Normalisation**	**Resistance** and victory
Shown through examples of sexism actively happening – using microaggression largely, but also directed macroaggressions[9].	Shown through causal examples; in how sexism events have resulted in negative emotions, decisions, or behaviour patterns in the characters. Typically prefaced by Type 1.	Shown through diverse characters being present in a narrative, their experiences being validated, and their perspective being presented as 'mundane' or ordinary to some degree. Can be achieved through presence alone without narrative focus, i.e. through minority representation or inclusion of non-stereotypical characters, stories, perspectives or behaviours.	Shown through characters encountering (in Type 1 or 2), then 'overcoming' sexism in some way. Sometimes this is just a personal resistance, other times it is an active 'victory' over a person or situation.
Value			
Type 1 is valuable as an educational moment for people who don't experience much sexism, however, it can be depressing (particularly if occurring repeatedly) for people who do.	Type 2 is useful for educating players on how toxic sexism can be, and showing character development at the same time.	Type 3 de-others, breaks or subverts stereotypes and makes the 'strange' more familiar. Can be 'conflict free' (doesn't require negative events to occur in the narrative to show this). Thus is easier to create in narratives without impinging on the principles (below).	Type 4 are very positive moments (particularly for anyone who might have experienced sexism themselves,) but they're also often very narratively 'obvious'. Type 4 also result in 'it's okay to be (…)' validation, but are less 'normalising', and more focussed on actively combating negative social norms.
Principles:			
All of these 'Types' must be considered through the following guiding principles: 1. For the above to be subtle enough that it's not the main focus of the game (for the delivery of social education to be accessible and not a distraction or detraction for people who might be resistant to a game based on reducing sexist attitudes and behaviours). 2. For people to go away feeling positive, empowered, and better informed, with more mental tools for operating outside of gender stereotypes and sexist frameworks.			

Figure 2 – Sexism Exemplar Delivery Framework (EDF)

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[9] Microaggressions being the often subtle comments or actions which betray a (usually) structural prejudice against a marginalised group. Macroaggressions being the obvious and often violent expression of this.

This framework was developed through the above textual analysis of gendered games and media, through a review of how the gaming community has reacted (poorly) to issues of sexism in games, and through a cross-reference of the goals of a game of positivity, fun, challenge and play[10]. This framework also relies heavily on the writing maxim 'show don't tell', which is particularly relevant, I feel, in the case of discussing social issues in games, as it allows the user to observe and gives space for critical reflection and potential personal uptake, without 'telling' someone what to think or feel (see more in Chapter 7).

What this framework provides is a method to create characters, stories and scenes which reflect some or all of these 'Types', giving me while writing a baseline to ensure I stay on target. Also, throughout the game building process, I checked back on these Types to ensure that the narrative hit all of these points and did not deviate from the guiding principles.

This framework, however, does not summarise the complete set of narrative guidelines, as it does not step into the elements specific to game design which build immersive, strong relationships to characters and stories. The full set of guidelines contains the above but also an exploration of how game and narrative build a sensory and emotional immersion experience based on choice, interactivity, interface, sociality, and embodiment, informed by the literature and the game-making process.

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[10] If these elements are what is guiding the design process, which we have seen is not always the case. The EDF can still apply outside of the play/fun design priority, but don't necessarily require a 'victory' scenario, nor for the sexism to be as subtly deployed, depending on the goals of game design.

3.4   Writing a Narrative

Areas of Focus

As this research project emerged from my own self-analysis of my position within the community of gamers, it from the beginning was focussed around the role of narrative within games. My own background is in creative writing, and through this I became strongly aware that narrative within games is both extremely important to how players experience emotive immersion in games, and also an area which is frequently neglected as significant – both within the community and by game developers (Gaider 2016).

Through some textual analysis of games which are described by the gamer community as being 'story rich', through referencing my own experiences of games with strong or affecting stories, and through discussing with other gamers during my field work which stories or characters they found meaningful, I was able to gain some insight into what potentially was needed from game narratives, and I used this as a starting point for my game narrative. The main themes were:

- Greater diversity. Many of my field work participants said that while they had enjoyed existing games which included minority characters, they felt that games would benefit from even more. In part because when a non-stereotypical character or storyline is employed as a 'rare deviation' from the 'norm', then what can happen is that this deviation can become generic in itself, or 'tick the diversity box' and is left at that. Katy Gilpatric (2010) points out that the 'strong ass-kicking woman' archetype is problematic and has become stereotypical in itself, and many others have pointed out, such as Anita Sarkeesian (2013) and Rantasmo (2015) that when there is only one character to represent everyone

within their minority group then it's difficult for this character to represent the variability and depth of that community. Based on this, I ensured my game had a range of characters which broke or addressed different stereotypes, and had different genders, sexualities, and ethnicities.

- Better stories. By this I refer to the phenomenon where narrative in games has been deprioritised, or written by people who are trained and experienced in game design, not in writing (Gaider 2016). The unfortunate result is that games have a high rate of flat, unengaging, and stereotypical stories (Alexander 2015). While this is improving as narrative design as a skill becomes more common, in general, the games industry needs to improve its characters, stories, and narrative intelligence. To address this I put effort into characters with complex backgrounds, moral challenges, secrets, and built a fantastical but believable world and fantasy framework within the fictional setting of the game, as well as an overarching story with drama and tension.

- Accessible diverse stories. There are a growing number of games which break important ground in the journey to increase diversity and narrative depth in the games industry, however, the number of these games which are 'mainstream' (whose experience goals are fun, challenge, play, and thus what many gamers are seeking) are comparatively small. We need to see more mainstream games building in values of diversity so that diversity is normalised in the broader community, not only in the fringes. To address this I kept the tone of my game's narrative a mixture of light and dark, wrote in humour and character development, and deliberately employed mainstream genre tropes (such as the giant piloted robots, or 'mechs') with my own twists.

With these elements in place as core building blocks for the narrative, I was able to start formulating the world, characters, and story of my game.

Gender as Fluid, Character as Solid

Both in regards to the project aims and as a challenge to myself on how to portray gender outside of stereotypes, one of the early goals for the full game was for the players to be able to choose the gender of the main characters, but for those characters to be written the 'same' (to have the same personality and motivations), irrespective of their gender. This was in an attempt to challenge social discourse equating sex and gender, and the socially 'accepted' performances of gender in Western society. Games such as the *Mass Effect* series, and the *Dragon Age* series (both by developer BioWare) already allow this style of gender choice, and I believe this does important work in the 'Type 3 – Normalisation' part of the EDF in regards to minority presence and representation. However, one issue with this method in the BioWare games is that the gender changes are so narratively 'normalised' that gender becomes not a factor. Thus, while it is possible (and great fun!) to play as female Commander Shepard in *Mass Effect*, none of her experiences relate to being a woman specifically. The risk here being that her gender is normalised to the point of erasure.

Of course, the counter-argument is that gender and equality should not always be presented as a social battle: in an equal society gender would not have to be a highlighted topic because media representation would actually present the real, equal world. As there is still work to be done in this area, it is important that female characters in games don't simply become coded male stand-ins (Kennedy 2002). With this in mind, I needed my game to expressly educate about and create empathy for the negative effects of sexism – which meant sexist-affected gendered experiences needed to be

explicit. This led to the decision to build in narrative variance where while the *characters themselves* were written with the same personality irrespective of their gender changes, as their social environment altered depending on their presented gender, their *lived experiences* were different. This difference would modify their experiences, and thus to some extent their perspectives, even though their personalities were on the same baseline. I wanted this variance to build a sense of gender and sexism being something that is *done to* people, rather than something which is inherent.

It is worth noting that some of this 'difference' of the characters would not be apparent to players who only played the game once. However, there is evidence of players seeking 'all the endings' or '100 percent completion' which shows that some players of narratively divergent games will either replay or fact check a game to see what would have happened if they made different choices (Hamilton 2012; Roth et al. 2012). However, in consideration of players playing once, I also took care to write the character narratives in such a way that even without playing the other 'version', the player would be aware of how sexism was affecting the character, and each character had narrative moments where it was shown that they were frustrated in some way by sexism.

Below, *Figure 3 – Main Character Sheet: The Dunes* shows an early working document I used to keep track of the main characters. In particular the highlighted section shows the core differences in the characters' gendered experiences and variance.

Name	Personality	Personal struggle	'Mech'	Party role	Gendered experiences	Flaws
Zenith	Quiet, but tactically minded. Extremely reserved but has a steely focus on their goals. Can be sarcastic and sassy when feels comfortable. Gender neutral. Of the Wastes. Appearance: Turquoise messy hair and golden eyes. Brown-skinned. Short and compact.	Accepting love, self-forgiveness and feeling confident.	Kingdom guard	General damage - knives, swift mover (rogue/lead) Secondary skills: Sneaking	Zenith is gender-neutral. Challenges include: People mis-gendering them, assigning them gendered stereotypes, people not being able to cope with their lack of gender.	Lack of compassion. Self-reliant to a fault. Lack of social awareness makes it very difficult to understand why people do what they do. Very goal focussed due to personal trauma and doesn't care about others' goals.
Michi	Mischievous and playful, but also self-centred and lazy. Extremely good looking and used to everyone trying to get on their good side. Very shallow and selfish, conflict avoidant. One of the People of the Earth. Appearance: Lilac hair, pink eyes, olive skinned.	Finding their pure heart and accepting it as their right path.	Nature elemental	Ranged support/DPS. Classic mage (white / 'nature' - not 'black') Heals and poison. Secondary: Spirit whisper	As male: people telling him to harden up, be less emotional. Expected by other men to not take no for an answer in sexual situations. As female: people dismissing her opinions. Often accused of being 'slutty'. People more likely to accuse of being a witch. As both: people expecting them to be more practical.	Distractibility, laziness, insincere, inability to deal with conflict, emotional cowardice. Hedonistic. Obsessive. Selfish.
Jeyn	Boisterous, loud, aggressive and outwardly jovial. Very loyal. Has anger management and insecurity issues. Kalibran. Appearance: blond, broad framed and not skinny. White.	How to communicate / express their feelings, being comfortable in themselves.	War beast	Tank. Melee, heavy weapons or barehanded specialism. Secondary: Special foe agro pull	As male: Expectation to be unemotional. Anger and grief channelled into violence. People dismissing his opinions (because he's a grunt), or taking his opinions as law (over a woman's) even when he's wrong. As female: ridicule and dismissal. People not understanding why she can't express herself well (why she doesn't have a 'softer' side). Devaluing of her desire to learn to fight.	Aggression. Lack of self-confidence manifesting in over-confidence, ego, lack of empathy/ability to healthily express any 'softer' emotion.
Ayo	Caustic, details-obsessed, law-abiding technical genius. Extremely arrogant and loyal to the Empire. Anxious but committed to the moral 'right choice'. From border town of the Empire. Appearance: Black hair and eyes, thin and tall, very dark brown skinned.	Overcoming cynicism and learning humanity can be good.	Mirage	Crowd control /general damage /tactical mage: mind control that actually has a range of really useful effects Secondary skills: Hacking / horrify	As male: Outright homophobia. Other men dislike him, are actively hostile towards him because of his intelligence and because he doesn't play any of the 'jocky' male games. Women find him intimidating and awkward. As female: People expecting her to be incompetent. Women become hostile and socially exclude her because she's so caustic, men compartmentalise her as being man-like and unattractive due to her intellect.	Pride, arrogance, gullibility, finickyness, one-eyedness. Thinks of the world in black and white terms. Unforgiving.

Figure 3 – Main Character Sheet: The Dunes (Working Document). Highlighted – Gendered Experiences

One example from the narrative of this 'gendered difference' would be in the character Jeyn's backstory. After the death of Jeyn's mother, Jeyn's distant father struggles to provide them with any emotional support. The young Jeyn channels their grief into hitting an old training dummy with a wooden sword. As male, Jeyn's father sees this and enrols Jeyn into weapons training. As a female, Jeyn's father doesn't know how to deal with this behaviour, and Jeyn has to sneak into training until her father later acquiesces. In contrast to this, the young female Jeyn is expected to grieve, and given some awkward emotional support by her father, whereas the young male Jeyn is essentially given a pat on the back and expected to deal with it. These simple differences alter the male and female Jeyn's perspective on life, battle, and Jeyn's relationship with his or her father. The point of these contrasting experiences is not to indicate specifically that life is much harder for women, but to show how when sexism influences our actions, all people ultimately suffer.

These story elements employ the EDF Type 1 and Type 2 (showing how sexism occurs and the negative effects thereof) and are designed to both create in the player a resentment of sexism, and also an awareness of and empathy for negative experiences that the player might not have realised that others encounter.

Gameplay and Game World

The social environment of the game world was designed to be fantastical and imaginative, but with similar types of social inequality and sexist discourses as found in many cultures today in order to highlight those issues to the player. The world is no utopia of social understanding, nor a dystopia of repression. The cultural context was designed to be familiar and relatable for many players, with problems easily paralleled with their own society.

Mechanics wise, I designed each of the characters with a set of both narrative choices and skillsets which provided an analogous narrative link with either frustration with the state of the world or a commitment to overcome society's pressures and to focus on 'healthy' behaviours (see Figure 4). Players making choices lining up with one side or another of these 'facets' of the character's personality would experience different events and have different relationships with other characters due to their decisions. The two sides were designed to be 'satisfying' for players in both branches, and the negative/positive elements of the different facets were not designed to be a judgement, merely to allow choice and show how different people have different coping methods and stages in their lives (more discussion of this in Chapter 7.2).

Character personality facets		
Ayo	**Aligns with**	**Personality expression**
Truth	Ayo's desire for truth and justice.	More self-critical, more friendly, more willing to give others a second chance.
Patriot	Ayo's loyalty to the Empire and self-righteousness.	Sharper, more critical of others, more obsequious towards power and wants to follow the rules.
Zenith		
Hala	Zenith's relationships with people and desire to be connected with them.	Friendlier, more willing to trust others, more socially competent.
Star	Zenith's fascination with Ancients and distance from people.	Distant, dry sarcasm and socially awkward.
Jeyn		
Valour	Jeyn's honour and desire to be a force of good. Loyalty to friends and compatriots.	Cheerful, honest and willing (occasionally) to accept criticism.
Pride	Jeyn's anger at her troops' betrayal, ego and strength in own opinions.	More suspicious and critical, more emotionally awkward, more likely to stand up for herself
Michi		
Heart	Michi's urges to learn about people and desire for people he cares about to be happy	Less critical, more willing to give things a shot, more caring about others' problems
Chaos	Michi's laziness, uncaring curiosity, forest justice	Pointedly insightful, uncaring about things that don't affect him

Figure 4 – Character Personality Facets, (Working Document), *The Dunes*

In addition to the above choices, in line with the theory that choice in narrative enables a deeper sense of personal responsibility for a character, the narrative demanded that it be written in a style where choice and *consequence* were a core function of the gameplay. However, this presented no small challenge – a typical game narrative with branching choices would be written by a team of writers due to the sheer amount of text which has to be written in order to provide these multitudes of options. While developing the narrative I chose to approach this problem by initially only writing one 'version' of events, with only key significant events having an alternate option written out – the idea being the branching events could be added later, in an attempt to keep the game within the limits of what could be investigated during a Master's thesis.

I further sought to enable not just choice but sociability, as some players experience their strongest connections with games when playing with others. It was this that drove me to design the game with four main characters, any of which a player could choose to play as – the idea being that friends could also play as one of the other three. Because this idea ran behind the way the party of four was set up, none of the four was the 'main' character, and each had their own quest-sequence to deal with their own goals and challenges.

Big goals… too big a challenge?

It was with all of this in mind that I began to construct the story; one which showed the effects of sexism through characters' varying lived experiences; which allowed players choice of how the characters were gendered and expressed themselves; which challenged stereotypes, stimulated empathy, normalised the unfamiliar and represented minorities; which had a group

of characters (and players) questing together; and which had a deep and engaging story-world with believably epic adventures.

Ultimately, while this spectrum of goals were rooted in sound approaches to the medium and research objectives, they were somewhat ambitious. Not only that, but I had underestimated what Posey (2008) had warned of, that a narrative designer must design much of the game itself. A truly surprising amount of game mechanics influenced the story and storytelling, requiring a considerable amount of work on such things as world maps, abilities and skill trees, interface options, quest chains and navigation. Even things which I could not control in script alone (such as whether the game would be made with enough graphic sophistication that I could have a character make a silent gesture or if the graphic simplicity would mean I would need to express the same emotion in another manner such as words or sound effects,) affected every part of the script. The breadth of the goals and the challenges inherent led eventually to a need to reconfigure the project aims.

3.5   Field Work Round 1

When it comes to studying games and their players, Kristine Jørgensen reminds us that games are "dynamic systems that are realized once players start interacting with them" (2012 p. 374). She further points out that:

> "As games are emergent systems that potentially react differently to different kinds of playstyles, we cannot be limited to studying our own gameplay. We also need to investigate how other players interpret specific game features and respond to them for a fuller understanding of games, not only as activity, but also as designed artifacts."
>
> (ibid)

Jørgensen suggests studying gamers using a conversational style of interview (aligned with many cultural anthropological methodologies of contextual, participant observatory interviews) where players are invited to be 'co-researchers' into their own experience. Adrienne Shaw (2013) echoes this, exploring methodologies where two different gamers are individually interviewed to provide contrast; they play games during their interviews, and their experiences and thoughts on games are held in context with their other media consumption. This acknowledgement of the role that users have in the understanding of games guided my inclusion of gamer participants in this study, both to provide context early on in the research, and then later to test and receive feedback on *The Dunes: Prelude*.

The first wave of fieldwork happened early in the research, and was designed in part to compare and contrast the similarities and differences of other gamers' experiences to my own. I interviewed four participants during phase one, two men and two women, who had (to some extent) a range of different gaming backgrounds (both in their genre choices and how extensively they had played games). These interviews took place as audio-recorded discussions with time during the interview given for the gamer to play one of their favourite games and discuss what they enjoy about it.

During these interviews I asked about the participants' history with games – what brought them to games and what made them stay. We discussed their awareness of sexism in the gaming world, and in games. In particular, I sought to find out ways they felt gender could be or had been expressed in games which would be a positive representation, in their view, and ways they had found unhelpful in existing stories. I also wished to understand better what storylines and characters had been personally impactful for them, and explore some of why this might be. Finally, we discussed under what circumstances the players might have felt themselves to 'be' the characters they were playing as – this to investigate the embodied

experience of 'becoming' the character, and whether this process led to greater empathy for the character's experiences.

It was as I concluded this round of interviews that I understood the reality of how the narrative couldn't be investigated without gamers playing it. The research demanded people – players – be involved in the 'real'-isation of the questions posed by the research. Thus, if I needed players to play, and I needed a game that was playable.

3.6   Remixing the Narrative and Building a Game

The need to have a tangible game presented an abrupt shift in the project's processes and goals. Due to the amount of time left in the project, I needed to take *The Dunes*, and somehow synthesise a narrative small and self-contained enough to be able to be made into a game within the scope of the project.

The first step was a massive cut-down of the narrative – I had to take what was shaping up to be a 30-40 hour story, and achieve the same research goals in only approximately 30 minutes of gameplay. The first decision I made was to focus on only one out of the four main characters, and the next was to take an existing scene – previously a flashback of one character's backstory – and turn this into a playable short story.

This short story was the tragic tale of Zenith, a young gender-neutral character from a nomadic desert tribe from the Wastes – a massive inhospitable desert. The story, previously told through a series of brief flashbacks during the full game, tells of how Zenith is drawn to discover one of the Ancients; huge bio-mechanical war machines which can be piloted by people and were discovered buried all over the world only a few generations ago. After

discovering one of these machines, Zenith unintentionally 'merges' with it, becoming its pilot – even knowing that to do so causes eventual madness and death. This draws another, more violent of these Ancients to Zenith's village, and it attacks, easily wiping out the comparatively defenceless people. Zenith then summons their own Ancient to fight the attacker, and defeats it, but this is too late to save their people, who have near-all perished in the attack. These tragic events motivate Zenith's actions throughout the entirety of the full game.

To transform these high-drama moments into a playable narrative, I shifted the story from being solely about the attack, and developed a 'day in the life of' atmosphere in the beginning of the story, where the user plays as Zenith going about a relatively ordinary day – though troubled by a strange dream – interacting with all the people of their village in much the way they would any day. The player and Zenith then head into the Wastes; searching for items, crafting, and battling minor enemies before they discover the Ancient. Zenith hides this discovery from their family, and after this the story quickly moves on to the final attack and battle.

The narrative attempted to apply the research goals – though very limited by the game length and time constraints of the game development process – in several key ways: through how the player was digitally embodied, through using the EDF, through narrative immersion, role play and modelling, and through employing player choice and consequence, (see further exploration below).

DIGITAL EMBODIMENT

One format for the game which I considered early on was to use a 'Visual Novel' style gameplay where the game occurs through a series of still images and interactive text. While this would have been much easier and faster to build, as per the literature (Klevjer 2006;

Gregersen and Grodal 2009; Tamborini and Skalski 2006), the indication was that players being digitally 'embodied' – being able to see an avatar moving and physically representing their presence in the space and their desire to enact on that space – could increase the bond between gamer and character/world. As such instead I chose *RPG Maker MV* (Kadokawa 2015) as my game software, as it would allow for the player to 'become' Zenith embodied, (see Figure 5).
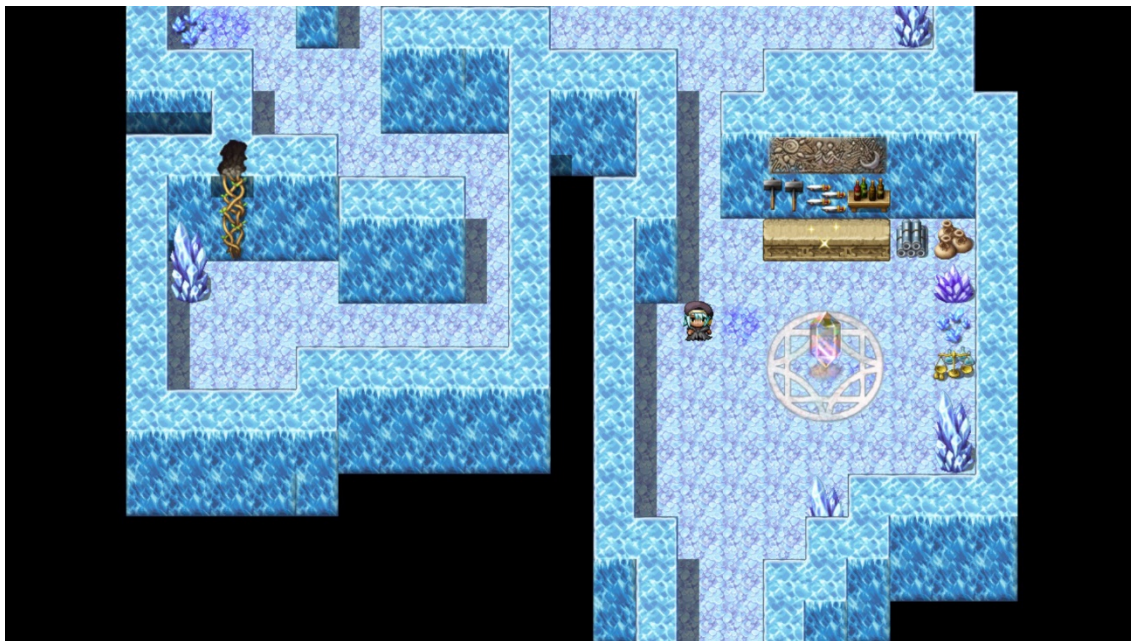

Figure 5 – Zenith in the Caves

SEXISM EXEMPLARS

The game sought to apply the full spectrum of the sexism Exemplar Delivery Framework through a range of methods. In Zenith's interactions with other villagers we see a range of responses to Zenith as a person, and as an openly gender neutral person. At one end of the scale we have Zenith's family and one close friend who are totally accepting of Zenith; then there are some villagers who are not hostile but confused and slightly derisive or unnecessarily invasive in their questioning of Zenith's sex; finally, providing a negative interaction, we have

Marta, a villager who seeks to push Zenith into conforming to one gender or another, and who becomes extremely hostile when resisted.

These more unpleasant interactions are designed to align with the EDF 'Type 1 – Showing how sexism occurs' – they were developed in line with what many gender-neutral or transgender people experience from their communities (Boyne 2016; Pennington 2016; Quirk 2016). The 'Type 2 – Showing negative effects' is not explored in great depth due to the brevity of the narrative, however it is experienced personally by some players, as they feel "terrible"[11] after experiencing Zenith's perspective in these negative interactions. 'Type 3 – Normalisation' is deployed through the positive relationships Zenith has with their family, who are both accepting and affirming of Zenith's gender, and through the game's own focus on Zenith's adventures. As the only people who raise Zenith's gender are non-family and/or outsiders, this attempts to create an impression that issues around Zenith's gender are presented from the outside, but which for Zenith themselves is something of a non-issue. Finally, Zenith experiences 'Type 4 – Resistance and Victory' when they resist Marta's attempts to force Zenith into gendered clothing, and Zenith overcomes the social fear of Marta's disapproval. Zenith's narrative arc also supports this resistance, as they begin the story nervous and worried, and then have a thrilling adventure when the discover their Ancient, which is designed to mirror the thrill and freedom of discarding – even temporarily – society's pressures to conform[12].

---

[11] Participant - Amelia

[12] It's worth acknowledging the 'downside' of the thematic narrative is that while Zenith has a victory over Marta socially, the story itself ends in disaster. This could be interpreted as 'victory is doomed to failure'. However, this disaster is what sets Zenith on their path in the full game – a path ultimately to lead to personal and social acceptance and, if the player succeeds, in a 'win' for Zenith, which I hope will counter any thematic issues. I believe it's also not an unrealistic experience to have some victories only to have some losses. In this case Type 4 is achieved socially, even if the metaphorical victory requires the full game to be ultimately achieved for Zenith.

NARRATIVE IMMERSION

Following the guiding principles of the EDF and the literature, I pursued the game story being engaging and fun. The world-building was designed to be imaginative and wonderful, and the narrative to be emotionally complex and exciting. The goal was for the wider story to be able to engage with players beyond the issues of sexism and gender.

INFORMATIONAL / ROLE MODELLING

The game sought to educate with a light hand, to contribute to a player's tools of how to conceptualise gender and relate to others. Zenith is referred to as 'they', 'child' and 'lil-sib' (short for 'little sibling'). These examples are designed to provide players with tools for how they potentially could relate to a gender neutral person in real life. In addition to this, both Zenith themselves, and Zenith's family and close friends, provide a range of exemplar behaviours as potential role modelling and role play of ways of being or relating to others.

CHOICE AND CONSEQUENCE

The literature indicated that choice, and the consequences thereof, were an essential part of helping a player feel 'involved' in a narrative (Isbister 2016; Juul 2013). Initially I felt it was too difficult to have significant consequence and narrative branching occur in a 30-minute story, and thus all the choices present were 'chained'[13] (S. Davidson 2017) however after players who played through the game more than once experienced a frustration with the superficial nature of the choices, I was encouraged to revisit the choice structure. This involved building

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[13] 'Chained narratives' is a term coined by Saf Davidson, a Narrative Designer, at the 2017 New Zealand Game Developers Conference. This term refers to choices which diverge out but then return to the same point. This is a functionality often found in games where the writers wish for the player to feel some control over conversational and game direction, but who don't want to develop different narrative trees. This decision is made for a number of reasons, but most often due to time and financial constraints. While this functionality is excellent for saving time and money (and giving writers control over narrative flow), the risk is that players can become aware that they are chained, and can feel disempowered by their choices having no meaning.

in a series of events which occur differently based on the way the player chooses to play

Zenith, items which you receive based on interactions with other characters, a crafting system

which 'scans' Zenith and opens different options depending on Zenith's actions, and ultimately

a split ending where Zenith's brother, or Zenith's friend, or no one, might end up saved from

death by the player's choices (see Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8).
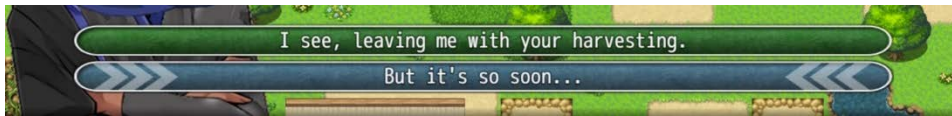

Figure 6 – Choice Dialogue Options

Figure 7 – Ending, Brother Saved

Figure 8 – Ending, No One Saved / Filler Image for Luuc Saved

As part of making players digitally embodied in the avatar and the space, I needed to be able to visually tell some elements of the story. This involved several layers of visual communication. We had Zenith in their 'sprite' form, Zenith as a 'bust' and Zenith in illustrated stills developed by an artist used in 'cut-scenes' (where the player watches pre-scripted events instead of controlling the character). These layers of visual representation are a common in the RPG genre, however they too presented challenges. Creating a character who was visually gender neutral was at times limited by available technologies (*RPG Maker* comes with a sprite 'generator' where I could construct characters, but the templates are separated into male or female, see Figure 9 and Figure 10) but I felt it was important for Zenith to be visually ambiguous in their gender, even though this is not the case for all gender neutral people, as this would reduce players unintentionally biasing their perception of Zenith toward one gender. Even during development, and though I had insisted that I didn't 'know' as the creator what Zenith's sex was, both myself and my artist (and most people who played the game) did gender Zenith often. I felt that this underlined the need to try to avoid placing a gendered lens on Zenith's character design, personality and actions.
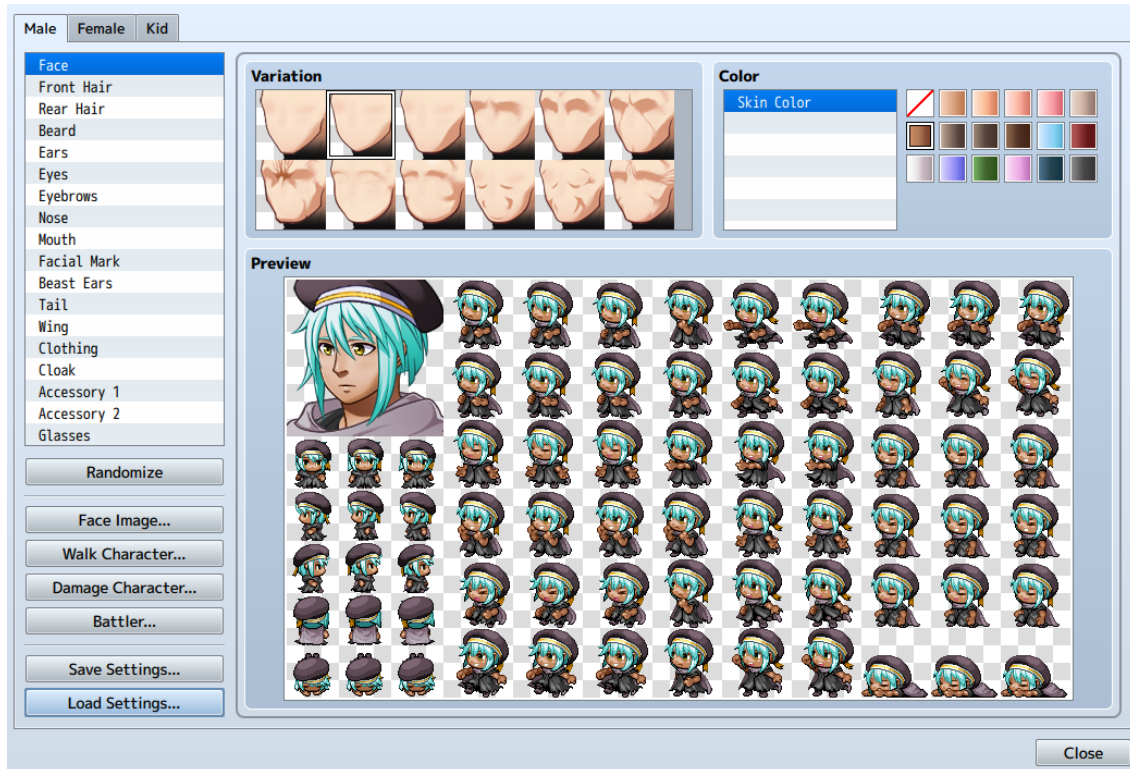
Figure 9 – *RPG Maker MV* – Sprite Character Generator: Zenith using 'male' options
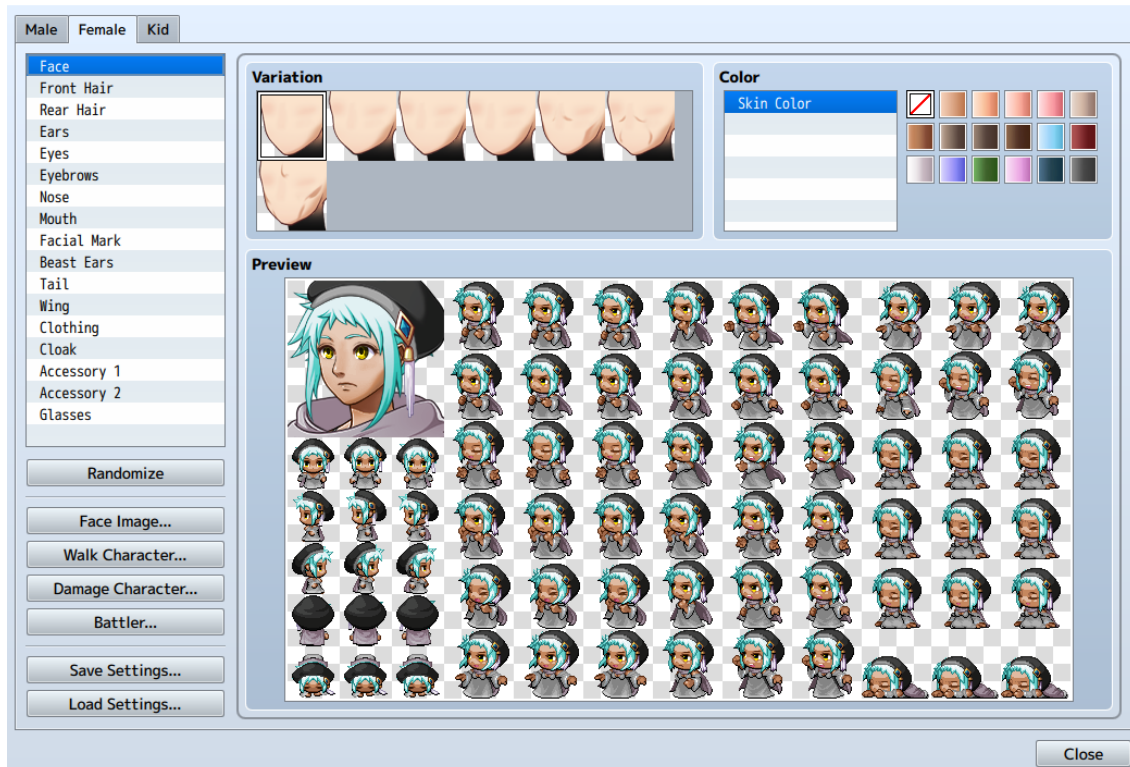

Figure 10 – *RPG Maker MV* – Sprite Character Generator: Zenith using 'female' options

Additionally, the software also came with some default busts, however all of these portraits were white-skinned, and no one in Zenith's village was supposed to be. Due to the time and budget constraints both myself and my artist were operating within, I had to compromise on this initially for everyone other than Zenith and simply inform my participants of the incorrect portraits being used, but over time all of the busts will be re-drawn as dark-skinned characters (see Figure 11).
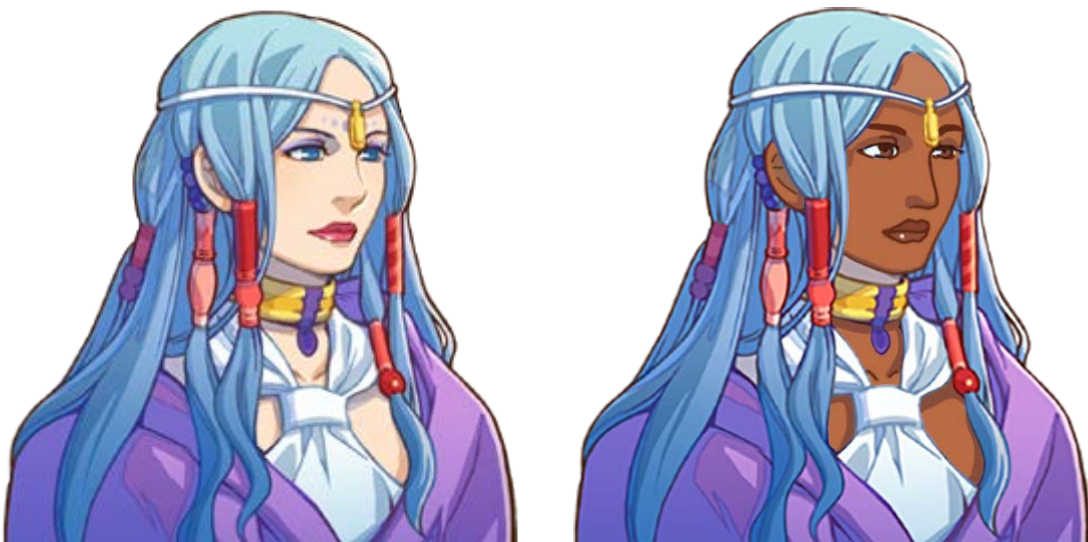

Figure 11 – Original bust of Zenith's Mother (left) and reworked version

Working with a professional artist on a very tight time and resource budget also presented challenges of how to create effective visual storytelling on a shoestring. Because of this, most of the art in the game is rough and conceptual in style, though with the combination of music, sound effects and narrative drama this still conveys a great deal of emotion (see Figure 12).

Figure 12 – Evolution of Art for 'Zenith's Mother Trapped' Scene

Creating the game, though short, required a synthesis of all of these elements sited within both the story and the game mechanics, and it was through the development of the game that I gained a deeper understanding of how writing for games is inherently interwoven with an understanding of said game mechanics. Developing the game took several months and included as a great deal of upskilling on elements I was not anticipating encountering at the beginning of this research, such as programming and scripting logic, sound design, visual design, story-boarding and film direction, as well as building the script, the characters, the choice paths and figuring out how the gameplay would function. However, after a great deal of success and frustration, I had a mostly-functioning version ready for the players to play.

3.7   Field Work Round 2

The purpose of the second wave of field work was to, as already discussed, allow the game to be gameful with players playing it. In addition to this, it also sought to investigate whether any of the research goals succeeded. Together, these elements would inform the narrative guidelines.

My approach to the interviews was to get participants to play the game (with their gameplay and audio recorded), followed by a series of questions. It is worth noting that while the game was playable at this stage, it was an 'alpha' version – in the sense that it was far from a 'finished', polished game, much of the art was 'placeholder' style, and the time constraints had not allowed for thorough bug testing, nor for complex game mechanics. However, the goal of this phase of the research simply sought to investigate, to co-research, to find out what players had to say about the game and their experiences and what this could tell me, and so the rough-edged version of the game sufficed.

All four of the participants interviewed in phase one returned to take part in phase two, with two additional participants, one male, one female.

After playing, the questions I asked participants were the same ones I asked you, the reader; focussing on the emotive response to the characters and narrative, and the players' understanding of both the story events and the EDF queues which occurred in the narrative (which some players found "obvious", and for others went unnoticed). The core of the questions followed these conceptual themes:

- If the player felt empathy for Zenith,

- o If they felt Zenith's frustrations about how the people in the village spoke to them;

- If they learnt things about how to address a person who is gender neutral,

  - o If they learnt about experiences which a trans person might have,

  - o Was the terminology used unfamiliar, and did it become less so because of the game;

- If they engaged with and had curiosity about the narrative;

- If they felt like they 'were' Zenith on some level. Did they feel personally attacked by Zenith's negative interactions? What emotions did they experience, if any, in those moments?

It is worth noting that these interviews, while informal and conversational in structure, asked players to examine their emotions and reactions at quite a complex level, very soon after absorbing a narrative. Both the level of immediacy and the complexity of questions had their uses – as people provided raw, unfiltered responses – but also their drawbacks. Some participants struggled to formulate responses of any depth to some questions. I believe the methodology in this area could be refined further, perhaps with allowing participants to play the game again after the first playthrough with the questions in mind, thus allowing them to be more reflexive and less reactive on second run.

If you want to, feel free to replay the game or watch one of the playthroughs (link). I think a good time is either now, where you can reflect on the things I was looking for – or after reading the player responses to the game in Chapter 6, so you can compare and reflect on their reactions and your own. The choice is yours!

One unexpected development during these interviews was that the most useful interview (in terms of volume of data) was when two participants played 'together' – sitting alongside and making decisions together on how to proceed. The data from this session was richer as the two players were communicating their experiences back and forth to each other. Although this did mean that they were influencing each other's perceptions, this is no different than how many people experience media in more typical environments. If given the option, I would recommend this approach, although further investigation into how the players' relationships might affect this would be required. In this case, the players were close friends.

Jørgensen notes that the way gamers differ leads to a need to involve a variety of players in game studies. The downside to this is that it is very difficult to test gamer response without using a large and diverse sample size, though I did attempt to recruit players with different 'gamer types'. During the playtesting I attempted to not guide the players and simply let them approach the game as they wished to, however I found that as I was only interviewing a small sample size, I did 'lead' in a few moments, as there were events which occurred in the game which were possible to miss. While this is common in game design, and not a problem in terms of how I constructed the game (where key moments were unmissable), due to the small sample size I wished to get as complete coverage of the game's narrative as possible with the people I was interviewing.

Though small, the participants were still able to provide me with a spectrum of responses, all of which are valid and intriguing in their own right. Shaw (2013) reminds us that even her sample size of two allows for comparisons of opinions which can highlight the diversity of experience encountered by players playing the same medium – which was indeed integral in this case.

3.8   Methods – In Conclusion

I set out on this methodological journey with the question of: how would I make a narrative which could create affect in a user? What would that look like? It is through moving through all of the above methods, analysing myself through autoethnography, analysing the current environment through textual review, forming an initial set of guidelines through my understanding built from the literature and textual research, beginning a narrative, discussing games with co-researcher participants, building a playable game, and through getting players to play this game and provide feedback that I was able to make the journey from wanting to create change – to making something which has the potential for change.

In addition, these steps provide a powerful foundation of research inquiry which allows me to both propose and experiment with a set of guidelines which seek to provide tools for subverting negative sexist discourse in game narratives.

Finally, it has also provided me with a tangible game, a game, (though small) which already embodies the underlying goals of this project: it is a diverse game which highlights sexism, seeks to inform, break stereotypes, build empathy and normalise the unfamiliar, which in itself realises the desires of both me and my participants. Its very nature is a break away from sexist game culture, and is something which can be sent out into the game community with aspirations of creating affect in the people which it finds.

4.0 Field Work Round 1: Experiences with Gender and Games

Now for that anthropology stuff! We're getting to the juicy parts where we get into the talking and the game and the people and what it all might mean. In this chapter I will discuss the first wave of interviews I had with game players – these conversations are what gave me the building blocks of the game and helped me compare my feelings about games and the community with others'. After that in Chapter 5 I'll look at more detail about the game and why I made certain character and story choices, and then in Chapter 6 we'll hear again from the participants, this time about their responses to playing the game. Then in Chapter 7 I smash it all together and form up the guidelines based on everything we've learnt so far.

So now, these are the conversations I had with my participants/co-researchers; their histories with games, and the way gender played a part in those experiences.

Being a Female Gamer

I spoke with two female participants in the first round of field work, and they had some similar, and some very different experiences of games compared to my own.

Amelia, who was also younger sister to an older male gamer, recounted an experience which echoed my own: one of watching games as a young girl rather than playing them much, and how this developed in her a sense of not being comfortable in the gamer space.

> "I am aware that I am a woman when I'm playing games and I don't know what
> that says about it. […] [It's a] feeling like the men in my life are really good gamers,
> or good with technology [...] and not necessarily feeling on the same level – so
> feeling a bit self-conscious about it."
>
> (Amelia)

Comparatively, Juliette didn't have this experience. She was the second-oldest in a family of five children, with only an older sister ahead of her. Her childhood experiences of gaming were very collective and egalitarian, from her perspective, such as she and her siblings gathered around a Nintendo *Gameboy*, each having turns playing. For all of us, however, the experiences in our teens and early 20s were highly aligned:

> "I think the times where I've felt enabled to play games and not worry about it
> have largely been around other females or in situations where I don't feel judged."
>
> <div align="right">(Amelia)</div>

All of us found our stride playing video games when playing with close friends or family, people inside what Amelia referred to as the "trust-bubble."

On our experiences of encountering sexism in games and in the game community, we all spoke about how in our early years we were in many ways unaware of how sexist and lacking in diversity video games were:

> "[It wasn't] something I really thought about probably until I was in my early 20's,
> at all. In retrospect – you know there's all the drama over like, Lara Croft's body
> and those sorts of things. So looking back, you look at her and yeah she's totally
> unrealistic and the portrayal of gender and of women in games [is] super two
> dimensional. But again [it was] something I hadn't really thought about – even
> though I wasn't being represented in games. It's not something – and in retrospect
> I sort of feel like it should have – but it didn't really occur to me [that] something
> that was off or wrong."
>
> <div align="right">(Juliette)</div>

This experience was shared between all of us, and is indicative not just of how this affected us as female gamers, but how this erasure was normalised for male gamers as well – where the underrepresentation of female (and LGBTQIA+, disabled, and People of Colour's) presence in

games and in the gaming community was so effective that we didn't question that we weren't present.

However, over time these issues became such a trend that we did begin to notice:

> "It wasn't until much later, like I said, my early 20s, that I started to think… it would be nice to see women who are real women, in terms of the way they are written. Not just the way that they look, because no one looks real in video games, right – and there's arguments for all sorts of 'what's real' in terms of looks – but in terms of the way that women are written not necessarily as people, but as something you do something to… or a reason to go do something. And it's not unless you're playing as a woman [protagonist] that you get some sort of semblance of a character."

(Juliette)

We also all showed signs of the knock-on effects of sexism in our own behaviours and that of others. Juliette spoke of how being a woman in the gaming community was often couched in outsider terms. That beating other male gamers in would result in the male player being teased about being "beaten by a girl", and how when meeting a male gamer the man would often "question your gaming resume". Additionally, despite none of us ever experiencing active online harassment, nonetheless our behaviours had all been 'modified' by our knowledge of the behaviours of the gaming community. We all either outright avoided playing with strangers online, or if we did, we never spoke audibly to avoid being identified as female. Amelia also discussed how it is difficult for women to play games without it becoming a 'statement' by default, and how sometimes we just want to be able to play games without gender being a big deal.

These shared experiences indicate that while we are all women who love games, acting within the gaming community can be challenging because sexism has affected how each of us relate to gaming and other gamers.

Being a Male Gamer

Comparatively, a strong theme through discussions I had with male gamers was that of unawareness. Until it was actively drawn to their attention, the men I spoke to essentially hadn't noticed the problem:

> "I really only became aware of [the issues of gender in games] because people started complaining – like actually talking about it. [...] And… I'm sympathetic to that cause, but I didn't really come to that conclusion on my own – like it's not something that I consciously noticed and was like, 'this is definitely missing' just because… yeah... it just didn't affect me, I suppose."
>
> (Harry)

Compared to the women, the gradual realisation of the flaws in gendered representation didn't seem to happen on its own, indicating a level of 'if it doesn't affect me I don't notice it's happening', despite both men being people I would describe as feminists. This highlights the potential value of using games to inform as it can require a lot of emotional energy and real time, even in people who actively do care about the experiences of women, to become educated about a perspective which doesn't naturally cross into one's own path.

Both participants did however note that they had become more aware of negative events and ways of portraying women in games as they encountered commentary in the media which in turn made them look at games more critically. Max described his impression now of gender in games as "very much on the extremes", with "very masculine men and very feminine women [and no middle ground]" pointing out that:

> "Even if you have a strong female character, they still look really hot or they've still got that appeal. Because you couldn't have like, a smart normal woman being a character! [Laughs.] That wouldn't work, would it?"
>
> (Max)

He more than once made the comment that he'd like to see more 'normal' characters which actually looked and acted like normal people, "someone you can actually relate to". He said of the super-buff hero of the *God of War* (Sony, 2005-2018) game series "I don't connect with him being a muscly god," and that he identifies with characters more based on "how they conduct themselves and how they try to solve their problems."

In contrast, Harry didn't have strong feelings about the stereotyped characters and representation in games, but this was in part because he feels he doesn't project himself onto the player-character. He stated that he didn't object to the hyper-masculine ideal because he usually perceived it as comedic, and as a young person he identified more as the slight, sneaky "ninja" type character (he noted that even though the brawny male was more dominant, most games still had this 'ninja' body type represented). He did, however, realise as we spoke how some of the gendered stereotyping in games had affected him without his realising, while discussing what motivates his decisions on whether to pick male or female characters:

> "Oh no, I think I just realised my own prejudice! Like, if I was making a barbarian character, I'd probably make a guy. If I was making a magic-y sorcerer, I'd make a female character. [...] I just try to theme them – and I'm just now realising those themes are stereotypes."
>
> (Harry)

This highlights again the 'effects' of gender stereotyping on players – even ones who aren't being actively shut out of the gaming community.

Harry also spoke about his perception of negative attitudes by other gamers towards women, especially vocal women calling for change:

> "It's also that because [gaming] started off as this really niche thing, there's maybe that core group of people that have carried on with it and feel like they're the guardians of gaming or something? Like, they have something to defend? Like they

need to defend hardcore gaming – or what they think gaming is – rather than just realising that gaming could expand infinitely to encompass everyone. It's not a fixed sort of thing where you need to push some people out to invite new people in."

(Harry)

Speaking about the defensive attitudes of some gamers in the community, Harry said he hoped that in general the people with negative behaviours were simply a vocal minority.

These two men both reflected a sense of being somewhat disconnected from the problem of sexism in games, sometimes unaware of how this was affecting them, but still very supportive of change and desirous of more diversity.

Being a Non-Binary gamer

Unfortunately during my field work I did not get the chance to interview any participants who identified outside the gender binary, but I do believe that it is an essential perspective to the research, especially as Zenith is non-binary. Before progressing with a full release of *The Dunes – Prelude*, I do wish to undertake some playtesting with some gender diverse people in order to listen to their perspectives and ensure I haven't poorly described that element of Zenith's life.

I was, however, able to discover some articles online written by non-binary gamers, discussing their challenges around gender representation and games, and this has influenced how the research and game narrative have been constructed.

Latonya Pennington identifies as a gender-diverse female and describes how, while playing one game, she had her avatar's gender force-changed by the game when she wanted to change the avatar's hairstyle:

> "I had completed a level, leveled up, and had unlocked a mohawk and a formal hairstyle for my avatar, which was black and female. When I tried to put the mohawk on my avatar, the game changed my already customized female avatar to an uncustomized male one. Apparently, mohawks were only for boys and sparkly formal hairstyles were the only options for girls."
>
> (Pennington 2016)

She points out that being able to express her identity the way she would like to in games would be hugely positive for her, and is something that others who fit inside the stereotypical 'norm' get to take for granted.

> "While the game itself isn't centered around my gender expression, being able to experiment with it would've provided as much of an escape as the rest of the game. In real life, I am told statements like "Girls should have long hair" and "Girls don't wear tuxedoes". In addition, I don't have the extra money to experiment with my hair and clothes as I would like. Therefore, playing a free video game with an avatar as customizable shouldn't be too much to ask for. Studies show [Madigan 2013] that customizable avatars can help players create their ideal selves and have their avatars impact their real life selves. If playing a free video game can help me figure out my gender expression as well as give me a break from reality without getting rid of the usual gameplay, then those already represented shouldn't get so upset."
>
> (Pennington 2016, np)

Jynx Boyne, who is gender-neutral, describes the unsettling moment of being asked to declare themselves male or female by the game:

> "I sit, staring at the intro screen to, of all things, *Pokemon Y*. I've been here for maybe 10 minutes, staring at a very simple question that Professor Sycamore

asked, that every Professor of Pokemon Studies always asks right at the beginning
of the game.

'Are you a girl or boy?'"

<div align="right">(Boyne 2016, np)</div>

They point out that there is a dearth of representation in games, and that it would be "really
nice to see transpeople in games" (ibid).

Ryan Khosravi interviewed some non-binary gamers in order to discuss their experiences of
gender in games. One, Darya, pointed out that due to games' often fantastical settings, they
have the potential opportunity to diversify the way gender is represented, and yet this
opportunity hasn't been taken up:

> "I feel that several games with alien races and fairly in-depth character creation,
> like Mass Effect and Star Wars: The Old Republic, missed the opportunity to
> explore gender in other species," they told me. "No one escapes the gender binary
> in games, not even robots."
>
> "It's maddening." they continued.

<div align="right">(Khosravi 2017, np)</div>

Khosravi adds, "Even in stories that take place across multiple planets with multiple alien
species, the one thing we can't create is a system without gender" (ibid).

This unity of experience indicates that one of the biggest hurdles for trans people in gaming is
the profound lack of representation, (and poorly executed representation when it does occur).
This frustration seems to be only emphasised by the number of ways games (especially ones
with customisable avatars) *could* allow for players to represent themselves in whatever way
they felt comfortable with, if the systems in place didn't try to enforce the gender binary[14].

---

[14] A notable exception is in *Pyre,* a 2017 game by Supergiant Games, which allows the player to choose
by what set of pronouns they will be addressed – female, male, or gender neutral 'they/them'.

One of the first steps we can take in this space is to increase the amount of representation of these communities in the characters and options in games, and also by building up the voices of and positive spaces for transpeople in the gaming community. This project, ideally, will both increase representation, and also bridge the understanding and empathy gap for cis-gendered players towards these communities, to some degree.

4.1   Meaningful Experiences

There were several additional questions that I asked my participants because I felt they could provide some broader contextualisation around gaming and the way people relate to games. These provide further insight into elements of narrative and game design which may help to build better empathy and engagement.

Meaningful Characters

One question I asked participants was what characters or storylines they had experienced in games which were of significance for them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of the participants expressed an enjoyment of characters who were well written – sometimes even when they were the villain.

> "I suppose that's when that empathy [for the character] comes in, when they've been given that depth into their character, so even though you know they're different [to you] and you might not agree with what decisions they're making, if you can see it from their perspective, I think that's the thing that will pull [your empathy] through."

<div align="right">(Max)</div>

Several participants talked about while there were some characters they've played where their own sense of self had blurred with the characters', even characters they felt distinct from they felt they could engage with if they were well developed narratively.

Villainous characters such as GLaDOS from the *Portal* (Valve Corporation 2005-2011) series (a megalomaniacal murderous AI) and Sylvanas Windrunner from *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004-2016) were both well-loved characters of Juliette. In my own experience, one of my most-enjoyed characters is Yuna, from *Final Fantasy X* and *X-2* (Square 2001). In particular, what I enjoy about her is that she's very feminine and agreeable at first glance, but as the game progresses we see she has a spine of steel and she will even stand up against her own religion in the pursuit of justice. What appeals to me about her is how cleverly she develops in the narrative and how unexpected her personality progression is: she is presented as a stereotype, but steps out of that role completely. She is also a 'strong' female character without being coded with 'male values', as per (Kennedy 2002) and (Paaßen et al. 2016).

Notably – Amelia was very fond of the player-character Master Chief from the *Halo* series. This is particularly interesting because this character is a near-silent protagonist (and thus has almost no personality). However, Amelia laughingly admitted that while playing the game she and her friend would jokingly role-play as Master Chief's voice, providing him with a different name, narrative and personality (in part as the co-op of this game allows for both players to play as two Master Chiefs, which inherently breaks the narrative logic). Thus they created a voice for their 'silent' character.

Overall, what these responses indicate is that characters which catch the imagination by being non-stereotypical, and who have unique and believable emotional journeys (even if they are the antagonist) are often the ones which have the greatest impact.

[On what he'd like to see more of in game characters] "Someone who is a little bit more complicated. So maybe they're not all good and over time they reveal certain things like certain stories or elements to their character that you [might not expect]. And that you make your assumptions about them, then they are kind of challenged in that way. Where they actually make rational decisions – there's some thought process to them that's based on them as a character. And having a bit more emotional depth."

(Max)

While characters with more depth having more impact is a reasonably unsurprising observation, it does help to confirm that games too are subject to what we already know from the study of character and story in other mediums, that having characters with complexity, personality and narratively justified decision-making are likely going to be more effective in their ability to create lasting emotive connection with the player, than, for example, a 'blank slate' character would be.

Becoming and Staying a Gamer – Sociality

One interesting theme which ran through almost all of the personal narratives which other gamers shared with me, was that of social invitation which drew in, and often shaped the most significant link the participants had with games. Almost everyone was introduced to games by another person – invited in and taught about games by others; my participants all first got into games as children through being shown and participating with family members: Amelia started out by watching her brother play games, Juliette was introduced by her mother, Max got into playing games at his cousin's place, Harry while playing with his sister.

Sociality was not just the first step into games, but was often what kept players playing, or what made the experience of gaming significant. Amelia discussed how she and a close female friend would go to video game 'cafés' late at night when no one else was around and play

Halo. This for them this was a core social event. Juliette discussed how one of her earliest game experiences was her mother playing *Tomb Raider* (Eidos Interactive 1996), and later in life it was flatting with gamer friends which shaped her gaming experience. Sharing of games is still one of her core gaming drivers.

> Most of the games I enjoy are with people. [Solo games] have to be really good; I just don't enjoy them otherwise.
>
> Juliette

Possibly the most intriguing example of how gamers use video games in a social way, is what I call, 'Single Player Together', a phenomenon – mentioned by all my participants – where people will play a single-player game, but with company. Sometimes the playing will be shared – with the controls being passed back and forth – other times, one person will play and another/others will 'participate' through watching and communicating with the player.

This process, participating without 'playing' is fascinating on a number of levels – both for how it impacts game design, and what it tells us about sociality and games, and I believe warrants further study. Though outside of scope for this project, it would be worth examining if there are ways to further enable this Single Player Together playstyle in game design, and investigate what it does to the process of players being immersed in the characters and game.

Overall, even from this small sample of participants, we can see how important it is that we consider how complex and significant the social aspect of gaming is, both in the design of these games and also in attempts to understand players and their communities. Sociality can be seen to be a significant motivator for playing games (and is one of the 'player types' or motivators seen in the literature (Klug and Schell 2006; Sweetser et al. 2017; LeBlanc 2004)), and so when seeking to make change to the community, it is worth considering how best to enable it within my own game.

As a body of responses, this field work indicates that while people of all genders are playing and engaged with games, some do face more restrictions and less acknowledgement of their presence within the gaming world. With the perspectives of these players around gender, sexism and gaming, and the characters they want to see and find meaningful, I was able to start fleshing out the game narrative.

5.0 The Game

All of the above, the literature, my own perspectives, and those of my participants, as well as the methodological approach, generated *The Dunes,* both the *Prelude* and the full game.

As already discussed, the initial project was to develop the narrative for an entire, full length Role Player style game, which then developed into building the playable version of a prelude to that game. Below I give an outline of the plot and characters of both the initially planned full game, and the shorter version developed later. This is to show how the research goals and investigation were realised in the narrative and game – and to provide the story context for examples used to explore the narrative guidelines later in this text, as I will provide examples of how these were deployed in the game design, characters, and narrative.

5.1   The Dunes

Below is a brief summary of the plot of The Dunes full game, along with details of all the main characters, and the reasons why they exist. Note that a full plot synopsis was developed as part of the research, however as I will be seeking to get this game developed by a game publisher, I cannot release all of the plot details for intellectual property and spoiler reasons.

The Story

The story and world of *The Dunes* is a fantastical one, designed to entice the imagination and pay homage to the weird and wonderful worlds and stories of some of the most iconic video games of the 90s.

The game takes place on the world of Hala, a world marked by a bitter border war, but still beautiful. On this world, at a time when the people were in the technological equivalent of our early Middle Ages, the people discovered buried technology throughout the planet, remnants of something both older and far more advanced than their own. Studying and adapting this technology leap-frogged their own technology into a mish-mash of 'old and new'. Most significant of these discoveries were what was called the 'Ancients', enormous semi-sentient mechanoids designed for warfare which can be piloted by people. However, becoming a pilot, binding oneself to one of these creatures, will drive the pilot mad and eventually to death. The nations of Hala now have militaries built around using derivative mechs inspired by these Ancients and scavenged from their technology.

Hala is split by four main nations – in the centre, the Empire, a sprawling autocratic empire ruled by the iron fist of their highly efficient military – the Admiralty. On the Empire's eastern border – Avieh – a country which prides itself on its culture, entirely coastal on two sides, and with a highly advanced mecha border control which prevents any entry of foreigners – or exit of their own people. To the west, the Grand Collect of Kalibra – a country formed from a group of feudal regions, highly warlike but also heavily focussed on agriculture; Kalibra and the Empire have been at war for centuries, scarring both the people's hearts and the land. Further west is the Wastes, a huge desert, harsh and unforgiving, only populated by a handful of star-gazing nomads.

Figure 13 – Ubivwa the Ancient; The Dunes - Prelude

The story begins with our four characters on the run, accused of a political assassination they didn't commit – Ayo, Michi, Jeyn and Zenith. The group are unexpectedly thrown together when Bevvyn, an Admiralty Commander, seeks to cover up his treasonous crimes. Forced to flee the threat of execution, the whole team end up binding themselves to Ancients in order to escape. The story follows the group as they reluctantly work together to find a way to break the madness-inducing connection to the mysterious creatures; to stop Bevvyn's terrible crimes; and seek to find a way to achieve their individual goals while each is haunted by something they cannot fully grasp.

The Characters

Each of the four characters exists to combat particular common gendered stereotypes. Ayo, Jeyn and Michi can all be played as male or female. Zenith is gender-neutral and this can't be changed by the player.

AYO is an Admiralty Technician, brusque and irascible, and highly skilled in information technology and security. Born in a border-village in the Empire which was saved from raiders by the intervention of Admiralty security, she covered up her age and enlisted at 16. She quickly rose through the ranks due to her skill with hacking and information gathering, but made few friends due to her acerbic nature. At least, until she met Bevvyn, the Sharp Commander. As intelligent as Ayo, charming, and amused rather than put off by Ayo's barbed tongue, the two become closer than perhaps they should; but when Ayo gets too close to uncovering Bevvyn's misdeeds, he decides to let her take the fall instead.

Ayo's story is one of betrayal and disillusionment, as she seeks to protect the same Empire which seeks her execution. Once joined with her Ancient – Sekiya the Wise – Ayo is haunted by visions of a dark world filled with terrifying apparitions. Ayo's personal quest is to reveal Bevvyn for the traitor he is, and to clear her own name.

As female, Ayo's personality and technical skill is designed to counter stereotypical 'feminine' traits, and also, her position as a protagonist counters the caricature of a 'career woman' being cast as an antagonist female. As male, Ayo is more accepted in his technical field, but is also not strongly masculine coded. He has a slight build and has a background in dancing. He is also gay. Both male and female Ayo have *Type 4 – Victory* moments – female Ayo over people believing she isn't suited to her career, male Ayo over homophobic attitudes.

JEYN is a Forward Knight of Kalibra and skilled with just about every weapon with a sharp edge; she is outwardly brash and jovial but struggles with anger management issues. Jeyn comes from a minor noble family in the cool northern regions of Kalibra. As a child, after losing her mother to disease and raised by an emotionally distant father, Jeyn channelled her frustrations into learning to fight. She's highly gifted, and that, plus her nobility, meant in the

army she was quickly promoted. However, she lacks personal insight and failed to connect with her squadron, leading to distrust and deaths on the team, ultimately resulting in Jeyn rashly ordering her team into a battle after a mutinous argument, resulting in the whole squad getting caught in an explosion. Jeyn is the only survivor, and though sporting a laughing face, is sick with guilt. When the team discover Bevvyn has captured Kalibran soldiers to use for experiments, Jeyn is determined to save them – and regain her honour.

Jeyn's story is one of failure and self-honesty. Jeyn has to learn enough emotional truth to understand her own strengths and limitations. It's a story of coming from privilege and the flaws therein. After a bloody near-death encounter and joining with her Ancient – Athoha Sharp Tooth – Jeyn's moods deteriorate further as she is plagued by a nameless rage.

As female, Jeyn faces distain within the military, but also confusion as people expect her to be more emotive. Female Jeyn breaks the stereotype of women being expected to be in touch with their emotions, and male Jeyn highlights the dangers of men not being taught the skills to channel emotion into non-violent outlets.

MICHI is a wandering witch disguised as a herbalist, Michi is fickle, attractive, easily distracted and quickly bored. After poisoning an entire village of cruel peasants when they tortured and killed a friendly spirit, Michi has become the victim of a curse himself – he must use his gifts to help others, or will perish. Guided by a magical staff which leads him to those in need, Michi reluctantly aids the others, but when he learns Bevvyn plans to raze a sacred forest, Michi becomes more invested in putting a stop to the Commander's plans.

Michi's story is one of putting aside self-interest, and learning to care for things outside himself. Michi's memories have become fragmented by his curse, and he seeks a way to free

himself, and answers for why, after merging with Enngiyn Long Sight, his magic is behaving in ways he doesn't understand.

Michi's gendered experience deals with how society values practical personalities, and with how sex is viewed by society. Michi as male presents a man who is highly sexually active but respectful of and friendly towards women. As female she is sexually confident but not a 'femme fatale', she is not sexual*ised* even though she enjoys and is comfortable with sex. For both versions this works to break down the ideas that sexual desire is paired with sexual dominance or aggression. Additionally, Michi's personality as impractical, lazy and morally questionable presents a different personality type than what is commonly seen in protagonist characters.

ZENITH is a young nomad from the Wastes, quiet, tactically minded and focussed on their goals, driven by the need to find medicine for their gravely injured brother (or friend, depending on *Prelude* decisions) and traumatised after the destruction of their entire village by an enraged Ancient. Zenith is plagued by not knowing if the Ancient which killed everyone they knew was there because of Zenith's actions, and fears that they might bring more aggressive Ancients in their wake. As they and their Ancient Ubivwa the Hand are crossing the Empire, Ubivwa is captured. Bound as they are, Zenith is forced to try to rescue the creature, and when along with the others stumbles on the heartless experiments Bevvyn is doing on living Ancients, agrees to help the others on condition of destroying said research.

Zenith's story is about learning to trust, to care for others, and self-forgiveness. Zenith hears things the others do not, and other Ancients seem inexplicably drawn to them, for good or ill, Zenith does not know.

Zenith is a gender-neutral character, and is present in the narrative as a representation for a highly underrepresented section of the community. Zenith's presence and struggles within the narrative are designed to help encourage understanding of gender non-binary people.

Overall, the story of *The Dunes* both seeks to explore some character types which aren't seen frequently in games; explore and show ways in which sexism is a negative element of society, and show the agency of characters overcoming it; explore how gender is shaped by our experiences and not by our sex; inspire empathy and make diverse characters more familiar; role-model ways of relating, and to present these characters with a range of emotional growth journeys which the player must navigate the character through.

5.2   The Prelude

The *Prelude* is a short game based in the world of *The Dunes.* The *Prelude* tells the backstory of Zenith before the main game begins, focussing on Zenith's relatively normal village life being interrupted by a strange unearthly call and eerie dreams, which ultimately leads Zenith to discover an Ancient hidden in the sands. After Zenith unintentionally melds with this creature, Zenith hides this from their family, but that night their peaceful village life is shattered when a different Ancient attacks the village, killing almost everyone within. Zenith and either Zenith's brother or friend (depending on player choices), make it out alive, and Zenith summons their own mech to fight and destroy the attacking one.

The *Prelude* contains a range of characters, Zenith, Zenith's brother, mother and father, Zenith's flirtatious friend Luuc, and a number of villagers. The story actively addresses Zenith's gender, and the social environment in the village for Zenith is set up to provide a scale of experiences relating to gender. At one end we have Zenith's family, who are very accepting

and supportive, and at the other end we have villagers who are aggressive and somewhat spiteful towards Zenith. The social environment is designed to give players a small window into what life can be like for gender-neutral people in many parts of our own world, and to provide role-play and role-modelling of positive ways of relating to a non-binary person. The wider story is designed to be mysterious and exciting, as well as featuring a narrative which emphasises both innocence and heartbreak. These experiences are designed to encourage the player to empathise with Zenith's perspective.

In Chapter 7, I will discuss the details of how the guidelines on how to build in social education and empathy into games were employed in both the *Prelude* and the full game. But first: this is the part of the journey where the game exists, so now we can get players to play, and see how it made them feel.

6.0 Field Work Round 2: Player Feedback

In this chapter we will look at how my participants experienced the game. Were they affected? In what ways? I will use these elements to influence how I then go on to form the narrative guidelines in the next chapter and to ascertain what elements of the project may or may not have been a success.

DID IT WORK?

The most essential question for this project is: were the participants affected? Did anything about the narrative inform them or inspire empathy? Overall – at least for this group of participants – the answer to that question appears to be: (mostly) yes. The participants all, to varying degrees, became engaged with the story and the characters, and all considered the gendered implications of Zenith's relationships with their community. Some felt strong emotions about and empathy for Zenith's conflicts (Amelia and Alice were so distressed they closed their eyes and picked at random when Zenith was forced to choose between a dress or pants), others less so, but all participants commented on being engaged with what was happening, and all players reacted negatively to Zenith being discriminated against and reacted positively when Zenith overcame this.

There were some key themes in player feedback. One was players experiencing considering the perspectives of a gender-non-binary person, and an increased familiarity with using gender-neutral pronouns.

> "[The Prelude] made me think about my biases. [...] Like, the fact that [Marta] was asking Zenith a question about whether you want to wear pants or a dress – I didn't really think of as a negative or an attack, but I think the game is trying to set it up as if it is? Maybe. Or the way that Zenith reacted made it seem like it was an

attack. But for me it was just like, 'Oh, you're in a video game, you wear pants, you wear a dress, you wear a top-hat, you wear whatever you want,' it doesn't actually matter because it's just a game. But then on the other hand this is a situation where in real life it does matter to people. And that's where it makes me… yeah… that makes me think."

(Harry)

When I asked, most of the participants agreed that seeing 'they/them' pronouns used in media would help them become more familiar with and use these pronouns themselves.

Moana: Do you think having something like a game or a book or a movie where ['they' pronouns were used] and you got more familiar with it, would that help you with that in real life?

Max: Yeah definitely. […] I can't even think of one example where I've seen [those pronouns used in media].

But Victor was less sure:

I don't know. It's strange. It's like the same thing about educating people about sexuality in terms of prejudice, against gay people for instance. There were a lot of questions like with *Mass Effect* for instance, or *Baldur's Gate* [...] whether those dialogues, whether that sort of context, would help people to rethink their ideas [around] how they see gay people. With less prejudice… take the thing as normal. And that was my question – if people would transfer that to real life. I think it's a form of re-educating yourself to do it, but to actually experience it in real life – that situation – it's kind of uncertain whether it actually helps you or not. I don't know. But for me it would be interesting to see because I've never had to deal with [using gender-neutral pronouns].

Victor's question about the lasting effects and real-world applicability of encountering such themes in games are of course valid. However, the hope is that through role play encouraging empathy (Tonkin and Michell 2010), and role-modelling encouraging aspirant behaviours (Morgenroth, Ryan, and Peters 2015), that post-play awareness and change is possible.

Interestingly, even with a small sample size, some participants had highly contrasting views on some of the game world context and issues:

> "I suppose the whole conversation about like pants or a dress felt a little contrived… I suppose it's because everything about that whole village and the world seems really fanciful but then they still have the gender biases that we have in real life… and so I think that's where the disconnect came from… like this is a world with robots and giant scorpions that go around in fours and then it just jumps into that topic? Maybe… I felt like there was a jump."
>
> (Harry)

Amelia and Alice had the opposite reaction to this:

> Moana: "Did you find any of [the conversation with Marta] unnatural in that context – or did it feel reasonable that those people would be saying those sorts of things?"
>
> Amelia: "It totally felt reasonable. I mean, it's very different but it's like being a vegetarian and being told you have to choose between fish and steak or something, you know? It felt like someone else's core beliefs coming up against how someone else lives their life. […]"
>
> Alice: "To me it was believable just in general – I totally believe people do that kind of stuff to each other, like, society at large is not very thoughtful and is pretty judgemental, really. But it was believable to me too because you've created a completely different world so at that moment in your game I am just learning what the society is in your game anyway, so I'm not going to question whether or not that is a normal interaction."

Harry's response could perhaps stem from the way in which fantasy and sci-fi as a genre has often historically operated with a very socially 'simplified' version of society, or could be related to the fact that not a lot of world-building context had occurred at that point in the narrative. It does support, however, both that different players can have significantly different

reactions to the material (Klug and Schell 2006; Shaw 2013), and that using microaggressions (which were unnaturally condensed in the *Prelude*) can be a subtle way of building a context of social repression before breaking into more obvious discussions of those topics (more discussion of this in Chapter 7.1).

Additionally, on the question of embodiment and role play, all the participants agreed that they, at least at times, felt that they 'were' the character Zenith:

> "Yeah, with [Zenith]. For me it always happens anyway, because I'm so used to playing games, it comes naturally. I did, yeah, I did feel like I was the character."
>
> (Victor)

And Juliette's comments on this lined up with the investigation (Isbister 2016) into choice and immersion:

> "You shift in and out of thinking it's someone else's story and then it's your own story, and it was things like… I think when I had to make decisions often I feel like it's my story."
>
> (Juliette)

While I feel that I would consider this deployment of the research a 'success' – in the sense that it allowed my participants to consider different perspectives, feel empathy, and help them to role-play some ways of relating in social situations which are unfamiliar – it's worth contextualising that success:

PLAYER BIAS

All of my participants are people I would describe as being open towards trans people, and because of the context of the research and prior conversations about gender and representation in games, most of them had been 'prepped' in some way to consider gender in games. To perform a more quantitative comparative exercise it would be helpful to find a

group of participants from a more conservative background, and also allow them to play the game without any prior discussion with the researcher about the representation of gender in games.

However the results are of value, even considering the existing perspectives of my participants. In particular, we see that while these players were all already open to trans and gender diverse people, most of them had not encountered using 'they/them' as pronouns, and found it a surprise and a challenge to see and use them.

> "At the start I found it awkward how people referred to them [Zenith] as 'they'.
> That probably just shows my bias of like… still getting used to using that – the
> singular 'they' – but I got it. And also references like, 'little-sib', I thought that was
> cute, like, yeah I get it, it makes sense, but I've never heard that term before."
>
> (Harry)

Several participants also spoke about how they hadn't considered certain perspectives which occurred in the narrative, such as in the earlier quote where Harry realised after consideration that his neutral reaction to Zenith being pushed into wearing certain garments was partly due to his own privilege.

What this shows is that even for a group of people predisposed towards thinking positively about the issues presented in the narrative, they were still pushed and challenged in their perspectives, and to varying degrees, educated in some way. It may also mean that this research is only, or more, effective with players with some predisposition of discursive openness. However without further study this element cannot be resolved at this time.

RANGE/SCALE OF RESPONSE

There were definitely noticeable 'ranges' or scales of responses. For Harry, who I would describe as being not strongly emotive – the reaction emotionally to the game was minimal, however he did reflect more cognitively on his perspectives and biases when discussing the game afterward. Comparatively, Amelia and Alice were very strongly affected by the narrative and became highly engaged with Zenith's emotional trials:

> Amelia: "That Zenith had to choose [between pants and a dress] in that moment was really terrible."
> Alice: "That part was bad!"
> Amelia: "It was like this horrible, peer-pressured moment – actually that was the most awkward part of the game for me – that's partly why I was like 'Let's shut our eyes and hit the buttons!' I was like I can't… how do you speak for this character and say that this is the gender that they should choose when they're forced to and they don't identify with a gender… there doesn't seem an answer to that."
> Alice: "Yeah, I agree."

Juliette described that at that moment she felt "frustrated and a little bit angry" and that her response (had she had the option) would have been "F*** you!". This indicates that, much like any narrative, there are going to be different levels of effectiveness for different players. Further research into the relationship between player type and the way we activate empathy in character narrative would be of value (i.e. if there are ways to use other elements of the game to reach out to different player types, like narrative unfolding through puzzles, through teamwork, or through exploring or uncovering mysteries).

COMMUNICATION

As discussed in the methods, the narrative should attempt to 'show not tell'; guiding and indicating without explicitly demanding the players experience specific things. An interesting

outcome of this was the range of responses to Zenith's gender. Some players immediately

picked up that Zenith was gender neutral:

[During first conversation between Zenith and their brother:]
Alice: "Is she [Zenith] sad that he's leaving or is she a bit aggravated?"
Amelia: "She or he? Is this a she?"
Alice: "I think they are… gender non-conformative."

And others were confused about Zenith's gender identity throughout the entire play-through.

Also due to the art being still at a conceptual level, there was some difficulty for players in

knowing which characters were which as we moved between cut-scenes and gameplay.

"I thought he was a boy, but just maybe because the character looks a little bit
more boyish, but then when I heard that [conversation with Marta] I thought
maybe I am [a girl]."

(Max)

"Is it a he or her, this guy? […] For me it's like 'he', because the image is very
important."

(Victor)

Intriguingly though, the male players tended to think initially that Zenith 'looked' male, and

the female players at first thought Zenith was female.

The downside of this visual confusion, obviously, is that this failure to communicate clearly

prevents the intended message of the game getting across. Of course, to some degree this is a

natural effect of any storytelling – that you cannot guarantee that the story you wish to impart

is what is received and experienced by users, (though this does not preclude user engagement

in whatever story they are experiencing). However, there are also ways to mitigate this failure

to communicate – such as through adding more clear indicators into the script, but also, once

the full art is developed for the game this will hopefully add a layer of specificity to the visual communication (such as through making Zenith's design more noticeably androgynous and consistent across the different depictions of the character).

If you want to, now is a great time to replay or re-watch the game (link). Think about how these participants experienced Zenith's journey and compare it to your own. Where do you sit on the range of emotional response? Did Zenith's experiences make you angry? Upset? Neutral? Did you assign Zenith a gender at first or were you already prepped by what you'd read in the introduction? Do you think playing the game might affect your ways of relating to gender non-binary people or make you more familiar with using neutral pronouns?

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The feedback shows that all of the players were affected in some way by the narrative. The fact that there is a range of responses is to be expected, and this will help to refine the game and narrative further. What we can see from the participant responses is that all the players were engaged with Zenith's story and experiences, which supports the research as providing a foundation from which use games as a socially educative medium. In the next chapter, we will look at how the research can be applied – forming up the narrative guidelines and showing how each was developed through the game making and player feedback.

7.0 Guidelines for Game Narratives

From the beginning of the research the goal has been to create guidelines, informed by the literature, my experiences and those of my participants, by the game-making process and the feedback of the game's players. In an ideal world, they would be exhaustive and exact, but the reality is, without testing them on more than one game and with more participants, they are better framed as initial or suggestions. However, as this truly is an emerging field, I hope that they can provide a framework for game developers, and a springboard for further research into games for challenging sexism and creating social change.

The guidelines themselves fall under two categories: narrative events, and narrative experience design[15]. Narrative events are essentially what we have seen already in the sexism Exemplar Delivery Framework. These are ways to write events into the actual story of the game which detail the reality and effects of sexism. They deploy the writing maxim: *show don't tell*. The character experiences things, and reacts to them. The player isn't told what to think or feel, simply given the opportunity to witness something they otherwise might not be aware of, and/or provided with theoretical role-modelling. This creates an invitation to understanding, empathy and education, not a forced experience. The guidelines within this category explore the EDF and include: The Subtle Hand – how to carefully weave social education into game narratives without overtaking the game experience; Type 1 and 2, Micro and Macro Aggressions – how to use negative social pressure to illustrate the realities of sexism; Type 3, Representation, Normalisation and Role Modelling – how the representation of diverse peoples breaks down stereotypes and creates a normalisation of diversity; Type 4,

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[15] Note that I am not using this in the sense of visual communication design industry terms of 'experience design' or 'narrative information design', though there is some crossover into both of these fields, particularly the former.

Victory and Resistance – how positive overcoming of negative attitudes and situations empowers players; and Theme and Context – how to consider wider themes inside and outside the game and consult appropriately.

The second category, narrative experience design, in this context means: the construction of the player's immersion in and interaction with the text. This involves how game design tools such as choice and other techniques work *with* the storytelling to enrich the player's experience *of* the narrative so that they have a stronger connection with it. The guidelines include: Understanding Immersion and Entanglement – a breakdown of the ways immersion can happen and affect the player; Embodiment – how the player's body is represented in and links them into the game; Sociality – ways to consider the social factor in and around the game; Narrative Choice: Conversational & Plot – how to use different narrative choices to affect the player's involvement in character and plot journeys; Fun and Play – how the writer should consider gamer and fun types when writing; Additional Considerations – why mechanical elements of the game, such as space and player skills will have an effect on the narrative; and finally Concept Rejection – how players may choose to ignore everything writers try to impart.

For each guideline below I will begin with a short description of the guideline, and then provide a more thorough analysis of the 'whys' of that guideline, including, where relevant, examples from both *The Dunes* full game, the *Prelude*, and from player feedback.

7.1   Narrative Events

The Subtle Hand

Don't let your 'social issue' take over the game experience. Put play first.

I feel extremely daring making such a strong opening statement, because of course there are a number of disclaimers to the above and situations where it does not apply[16], BUT, for the sake of this type of game, for a Not So Serious game, for a game designed to be played in the mainstream gaming community, the challenge from inception was how to incorporate themes of informing about social justice issues and build empathy for the 'other' into games, and how to do it in a way which still made it a highly accessible and consumable game.

As already discussed, there are of course, and have been for decades, plenty of 'Serious' games and educational games (D. Davidson 2008), some of which do a good job of being a fun educational game, and the two goals are not inherently "in conflict" (Michael and Chen 2005). But the purpose of this exercise was not to create an educational game, it was to create a game which had the ability to inform while being a fun game.

To explore the distinction a little further, consider this: gamers don't *want* to play 'educational games', they want to play fun games. If they learn something in the process of their fun (and as per Gee (2003a) they always do learn *something*), then fine, so long as it's not derailing their recreation experience. At the 2017 New Zealand Games Development Conference I attended a talk by a developer, Stephen Knightly (from InGame, which "helps organisations

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[16] Such as, for example, if you are making a game *just* about a social issue. Or if your game is gamey without a focus on play, or on fun specifically.

apply gaming's engaging and persuasive powers to training, customer behaviour, marketing and not-for-profit campaigns" ('InGame – Gaming for Greater Engagement' 2017), including developing educational games aiming at children) called *'Getting Serious about Serious Games'*. I asked him how his development team approach the issue of making educational games and how to avoid resistance from players at their game time being 'co-opted' for learning. Interestingly, his response was that in their experience, children don't mind these educational games, as long as it's clear to them that the game is *for* education.

In this situation we see how instead of a game that is being derailed by learning, it's learning which has been gamified. In Knightly's game deployment and testing, children were playing these games during school or homework time. Thus their 'education time' was being used for these games, not their 'fun free time'. To me this supports a theory that 'educational games' and 'games that can educate' are in some ways completely different categories of design, and while I don't doubt that it is theoretically possible to bridge the two, in general I think this shows that there is greater value in each design system approaching the process differently.

Thus, in the case of this research, to educate or inform without detracting from the 'gameyness' presented a difficult design challenge. In my Exemplar Delivery Framework, I set up the following guiding principles:

1. For the [EDF] to be subtle enough that it's not the main focus of the game (for the delivery of social education to be accessible and not a distraction or detraction for people who might be resistant to a game based on reducing sexist attitudes and behaviours).
2. For people to go away feeling positive, empowered, and better informed, with more mental tools for operating outside of gender stereotypes and sexist frameworks.

These principles guide a fundamental understanding that in the case of games following this project's design goals, education should not outstrip play. In this scenario, the purpose of

keeping sexism education and gender theory subtle and unobtrusive is not to 'hide' this so

that the player is 'tricked' into absorbing it as some gamers seem to fear (Chess and Shaw

2015), but instead for the journey and experiences of the characters to be relatable,

believable, and their challenges gradually enough expressed that the player takes the steps

alongside the character, instead of being forcibly pushed, thus *showing* a truth of experience,

rather than trying to *tell* educational 'facts'.

Type 1 and 2, Micro and Macro Aggression

Microaggressions can be a narrative tool.
Develop a context. Show how inequality <u>occurs</u>, and its negative <u>effects</u>.

In the EDF, I presented Types 1 and 2 as in-text example types:

- Type 1: Showing how sexism **occurs**

  Shown through examples of sexism actively happening – using microaggression

  largely, but also directed macroaggressions.

- Type 2: Showing negative **effects** of sexism

  Shown through causal examples; in how sexism events have resulted in negative

  emotions, decisions, or behaviour patterns in the characters. Typically prefaced by

  Type 1.

These Types present a way for narrative events to occur which help to highlight sexism. The

first suggests that in-text scenes can show sexism occurring, particularly using

microaggressions. The second suggests showing events in the narrative where the characters

are affected by sexism in a negative way. This situation allows for context building, and I recommend that unless there's a specific narrative need to show this happening in an obvious way, to start by using microaggressions to subtly build a context for the player.

Microaggressions, as they occur in the world, are repeated, ongoing, minor acts of prejudice which can build into a combined experience of disenfranchisement, powerlessness, and devaluing of worth. In the case of our narrative guidelines, highlighting events of microaggression is a very helpful tool. Partly as it's highly relatable – microaggressions are a frequent occurrence around us all, for some receiving, others being the perpetrators – and also because they are narratively minor enough not to distract from the story. Of my female participants, all three (including myself) showed evidence of both experiencing microaggressions and how we had modified our behaviour as gamers (such as by not speaking online) because of either actual or potential aggression.

These types of social discourse and expressions of power are what shape many experiences, and it is one of the most pervasive ways that sexism (or racism, homophobia, ableism and other similar issues) spreads through our society. Not only that, but these aggressions are largely invisible to the people who are not affected by them. Because of this, slowly drawing attention to the occurrence and effect of these sorts of actions is a useful narrative and educative tool.

To provide in-text examples: in the *Prelude*, we see one of the characters saying to Zenith, "I don't know why you can't you be normal about anything." This is an example of microaggression. The character in question is not being actively hostile, however they are creating a paradigm where there is a state of 'normal' which Zenith is not achieving. Another character, the Old Man, asks questions staged to 'find out' Zenith's sex; even if he is outwardly

trying to show that he's not *not* accepting Zenith's gender, he feels the need to pry into

Zenith's biology. This type of inquiry, in various forms, is a common microaggression that trans

people face (Quirk 2016).

Figure 14 – Young Girl Microaggression Example; The Dunes – Prelude

Figure 15 – Old Man Microaggression Example; The Dunes – Prelude

In the *Prelude*, the encounters of microaggression are quite condensed, and thus become more obvious. In the full game, in line with the EDF's Principles, events showing microaggression would be less frequent. A gradual introduction of sexist moments would occur, with a building sense of frustration which would link into *Type 2 – Showing the Negative Effects of Sexism*. Thus, as the player starts to become aware of the way the character is being treated, they start to see the way the character is being personally *affected* by those attitudes. They see the character's pain, and the ways the character alters their behaviour based on their experiences. This cause-and-effect process should be written in in such a way that the player experiences the frustrations of the character. In *The Dunes* full game we will see how female-Ayo experiences harassment in the military for being a woman, and male-Ayo experiences harassment for being gay. Both of these things result in a number of 'effects', Ayo becoming less social, being more vulnerable to Bevvyn's seductions, and also lashing out at their classmates which then results in consequences which put Ayo on the path to being framed for treason.

Macroaggressions are of course, also valid, but in line with the previous guideline must be used much more sparingly, and with real consideration of their effects and value. Many stories have used narrative events such as assault or rape as a tool to create an emotional, empathetic reaction. However in some cases this is can be a heavy-handed narrative shortcut, or actually reinforces rape culture. There has also been a trend of (particularly male) writers using this as a way of trying to create a sense of 'vulnerability' in otherwise 'strong' female characters, which is of course a profoundly problematic way of conceptualising womanhood and strength and vulnerability (Ford 2013; Hudson 2015).

Macroaggression does not of course have to be an assault event, it simply requires an overt aggression and expression of something which otherwise might have been 'implied', such as if

a character was to say 'Get out of here, you have no right to speak, you're a woman!', or if a gay character was imprisoned due to their sexuality. Within the game narrative guidelines, it would be most appropriate to use this level of overt aggression as a culmination of a series of microaggressions, as by then the player would be more emotionally 'on board' with the character's journey, and less likely to feel this was deployed for its emotional trigger factor.

There are of course all sorts of situations where a writer might feel it appropriate to use a macroaggressive event, however the most critical thing to ensure is that this event doesn't *compromise* the player's immersion for the sake of their moral outrage. The event should be relevant for both the narrative and the learning experience, and honest to the character's journey.

Type 3, Representation, Normalisation and Role Modelling

Normalise diverse representation.
Fill your story with diverse characters, their stories and perspectives.

One of the ways that discrimination functions is through erasing the presence, stories and perspectives of a group of people. One simple way to counter this is to ensure those people and stories are present in media. In the EDF, Type 3 is:

- Type 3: Showing 'It's okay to be (____)'. **Normalisation**

  Shown through characters being present in a narrative, their experiences being validated, and their perspective being presented as 'mundane' or ordinary to some degree.

Can be achieved through presence alone without narrative focus, i.e. through minority representation or inclusion of non-stereotypical characters, stories, perspectives or behaviours.

Type 3 is based around including minorities and marginalised people in the narrative in a way which normalises their presence. This process both gives narrative voice to under-represented people and helps to 'de-other' and make the 'strange' more familiar. Type 3 also provides the potential to role-model relational behaviours which might give players tools to draw on in real life, and provides role models to a broader range of role-aspirants (Morgenroth et al. 2015).

In the text, Type 3 can be narratively confrontational (i.e. if a minority character is present and this is drawn attention to), but this Type often works well within the Principles when – as with microaggressions – is done largely, (though not exclusively), through 'normalised presence' – by this I mean when minority presence and perspective is framed as, well, just normal. This can at times be more effective than otherwise. For example, if a main character is a female warrior, but this is never mentioned as unusual; this *can* be more effective at altering cultural discourse of what is 'normal' than if it was pointed out – the very act of pointing it out can make it appear 'abnormal' even if framed positively.

However, the risk with employing presence alone with no further narrative focus, is that it may silence the voices and not validate the experiences and challenges which that minority faces as a result of society's negative views towards them. If everything in a story is always presented as 'fine' and socially accepted, this does little to educate others about the real and difficult challenges that minority groups face. Finding a middle-ground here, and drawing on Type 1 and 2 to assist with this, is a recommended method, along with involving the actual minority groups being represented in the narrative in the writing and development process.

In the *Prelude* we see how Zenith is both representational of a minority group (gender neutral), and also how their family is accepting of Zenith's gender expression. Zenith's family is both warm towards Zenith and also they don't make a big deal out of Zenith's gender. In fact, the only time when any of Zenith's family reference Zenith's gender in any way is when a stranger mis-genders Zenith, and Zenith's father corrects the stranger.

Figure 16 – Zenith's Father Correcting Scout

In contrast, however, we also see Zenith's community be less accepting, to various degrees, and several microaggressions do occur.

Figure 17 – Marta Displaying Negative Attitudes towards Zenith

In this sense, both narrative approaches are in play, we get to experience both Zenith's social frustrations and acceptance. Critically, Zenith's family also provide key role-modelling and educative elements of how to address a gender-neutral person (in this case someone choosing to go by terms such as 'they', 'child', and 'sibling').

Rolled out further in the full game, we get to see things like female Jeyn and Ayo in the military – each struggling and succeeding in very different ways, Ayo because she's 'too smart for her own good' and Jeyn because she's 'too aggressive and headstrong'. Conversely, we see male Jeyn profoundly struggling to find healthy emotional outlets, and male Ayo working through his sexuality issues. We see female Michi as a sexually comfortable person who isn't excessively sexualised, and male Michi as a considerate but successful sexual partner. For all of the characters, though they will struggle in some ways with how society views and judges them, they will receive only ever-growing support and trust from their teammates as the story goes on. This attempts to parallel the outer/inner experiences many people experience in social life, and create both a positive and well role-modelled experience without erasing the challenges which people do face in reality.

It's also worth noting that in the full game all of the main characters apart from Jeyn are People of Colour (PoC). While actively challenging racism is beyond scope of this thesis itself, Type 3 is used to normalise a shift in racial dominance within the world of the Dunes, in particular with the largest power in the world – the Empire, being a mixture of different dark-skinned cultural groups. In this sense this is a 'normalised presence' use of Type 3, as this shift of power away from White people is never textually addressed, just presented as the 'norm.'

We can see here how Type 3 can be deployed in a number of ways, and it is best to choose specifically which ways to give textual focus, whether though 'normalised presence' alone to create a paradigm of normalisation, or to confront existing paradigms and provide textual space for a minority group's stories or perspectives. In both scenarios, Type 3 provides an effective tool for subverting existing power structures in media.

Type 4, Victory and Resistance

In the battle vs injustice, let the player win (some of the time).

Considering the goal of creating social change, it's vital while acknowledging the very real and harmful reality of sexism and related issues, to prevent the player from feeling totally disempowered (unless there's a specific reason to). If players walk away from the experience feeling helpless, their informational and empathy building experience is less likely to lead to positive action and change. To this effect Type 4 is an essential companion to Types 1 and 2.

- Type 4: **Resistance** and Victory

  Shown through characters encountering sexism (in Type 1 or 2), then 'overcoming' it in some way. Sometimes this is personal resistance within a character's development, other times it is an active 'victory' over a person or situation.

As players in Type 1 and 2 encounter sexism and react to it, Type 4 allows for the character to resist social pressures, whether actively or passively, and potentially have a 'victory' moment where the narrative allows for 'overcoming' a negative perspective, person, or experience. This is designed so that the player experiences frustration, and then moves, along with the character, into a position of positive agency.

In the *Prelude*, Marta attempts to force Zenith into a position of 'choosing' a gendered expression in their coming-of-age ceremonial garb. Zenith feels cornered and vulnerable during this conversation, and feels forced (the player is actively forced) to choose. Later however, after Zenith is feeling the both the powerful rush of discovering their Ancient and facing the oncoming threat of their own insanity and possible death, Zenith actively rejects Marta, deciding instead to throw off social demands and come to the ceremony in non-gendered clothes which they will make themselves.

This 'victory' moment, in many ways, is the actual victory of the *Prelude*'s narrative, as the later victory over the invading mech is tainted with grief. The moment allows both Zenith and player to feel that they have 'beaten' the social road-block, and is designed to make the player both aware of and feel agency within Zenith's experience of social prejudice. All of my participants reacted positively to this victory moment.

Resistance, of course, is not always a grand event of personal outrage and defiance. Resistance can occur as simply as not giving up when those around you try to discourage you. Resistance could be a male character wearing a clothing item that is socially perceived as feminine. Resistance could be choosing to believe the words of encouraging friends rather than critical society. Many small acts of resistance can help to balance the negative trends seen in Type 1 and 2, and in fact the opposition of these elements can create narrative tension which helps to pull players through a story.

It's important, however, to note that not every negative experience for the character has to be overcome. Just as with real life, we experience negative things regularly, but only devote personal energy to refuting a select few of these experiences. The decision to employ Type 4

has to be a deliberate choice to target something in particular which will be significant, to the character, to the player, and ideally, to the educative journey the player may be on.

Theme and Context

Consider wider social themes and contexts.

At all times, especially if as a writer you are writing about a minority you aren't part of, one must consider the wider themes and contexts your story is operating within and employing. Russworm (2017) summaries this astutely when she points out the problematic thematic context of *The Walking Dead* creating a sympathetic Black character, only to end the game with the player shooting him dead.

As already mentioned, there are some thematic issues with the Prelude, in that Zenith's social victory is immediately undercut by tragedy, and the associations this could cause with making that victory seem pointless. At least one participant commented on how the victory over Marta "didn't matter" because Marta died.

One method to help combat being unaware of a thematic issue, is to use test players, and advisors, especially from whatever minority you might be writing about. These people can be essential for spotting things that you're too close to the work to see. Getting advice early, and checking in at key points of development is key.

7.2   Narrative Experience Design

Gaming is not, of course, just a narrative, it's play, and has the power to be a unique mix of these two things. Because of this, it's of great value for game narrative design to understand and leverage off as many of the advantages provided by the medium as possible.

While many elements of gameplay design are not under the auspices of the writer (Despain 2008; Bateman 2006), nonetheless gameplay design does crossover into the narrative experience, which at times requires the Narrative Designer to construct, frame, or guide the development of a game mechanic or dynamic. The following section of the narrative guidelines are considerations related to narrative *experience* design – how to guide the player through the game itself. They are developed based on my journey while building the *Prelude* and informed by the literature, and chosen for how they might impact on the goals of trying to inform and build empathy with games.

Understanding Immersion and Entanglement

Immerse your players in many ways.

Often in game studies literature, the word 'immersion' is a multi-dimensional one, and it can mean very different things. To some, it refers to the *narrative immersion* that one can experience when becoming emotionally invested in storytelling, and in other instances it can refer to the *sensory immersive experience* which playing a game creates (Sommerseth 2009). In some grey area between these two things is also 'challenge and fun', or *cognitive immersion*, which is a mix of a sensory experience, mental interactivity and a personal narrative of failure and success (McGonigal 2011).

It is critical for any attempt to build game narratives with goals such as in this project, to better understand the ways 'immersion' occurs, and how this affects the player's relationship with the game and the characters. To be more 'immersed' is to be more submerged in the experience of the game. While part of this comes from game narrative, it also comes from other elements of game design. It is of value for the narrative creation process to build a platform which will enable as many of these elements as possible.

Because immersion can occur through different sources and create different effects, I've developed – based on a review of the literature discussed earlier, and my own experiences building the *Prelude* – the following summary of the stages or levels of 'entanglement' which a player can encounter through a game.

Observation / Participation
As players come into contact with a game experience, they are initially in a phase of observation, which then will then typically lead to a state of participation as they engage with the medium.
Sensory Immersion
This stage involves the tools used to stimulate the sensory immersion in a game context; including colour, sound, space, feedback. Players encountering this type of stimulation can experience their sensory awareness being absorbed within the game.
Physicality / Acted Embodiment
The haptic relationship between player and game, including interaction with game controllers and devices, and acted embodiment games (i.e. games requiring the player to move more of their body, often mimicked on screen) which require high levels of player movement. This creates connection based on physicality and presence (Virtual Reality games also stimulate this highly).

Digital Embodiment
Through a combination of sensory, physical, and emotional immersion, a player can experience their avatar or in-game presence becoming a form of digital embodiment which can enhance personal connection with both the characters, game world and space.
Game Story Immersion
Through a game's story players can become emotionally engaged with the characters, plot and world, which can have a direct link to empathy.
Cognitive Immersion / Personal Narrative
This involves a player's mental engagement with the game challenge, triggered by score and feedback; engaging different 'types' of fun/play/player types (i.e. the explorer or the collector); flow and fiero; and satisfying combinations of Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics.[17] Players in this mode can also create a narrative of their *own* experience which does not have to relate to the game story itself (nor does it require an in-game story).
Sociality
Games are frequently played as a social activity, and sociality both has the power to draw in players, engage them, and retain them beyond what the game might be able to do on its own. Sociality can also enhance experiential interaction and can form an inter-personal, relational immersion.
Agency and Choice -> Consequence -> Responsibility
Choice in games allows a player to feel they have an ability to affect their environment. Choice is inherent in making a game interactive, and with this a player becomes more engaged. Player engagement particularly occurs when their choices have a consequence. Choice and consequence, together, can develop in a player a sense of personal responsibility over the story and characters which can increase their bond with the characters and investment in the game narrative.

Figure 18 – Layers of Entanglement

These stages are not linear – the order of passing through any of these gateways can be different, but the more activated, the more opportunity for the player to become emotionally entangled. Additionally, each stage is a scale: a player can be a little or a lot emotionally

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[17] See the section of the Literature Review, 'Why Games? Why Play?' (McGonigal, 2011); (Klug and Schell, 2006); (McGonigal, 2006); (Sellers, 2006)

immersed (this can be activated, for example, by a good story or a weak one). A player can have a small amount of physicality (using a controller) or a lot (dance-mimic games). There is also crossover between some, rumble effects on controllers are both sensory and physicality based. Having a high level of all of these stages is not always conducive to good game design, but asking the questions about how they are being triggered (or not) is a valuable process.

It's with reviewing these stages of entanglement that we can see that all of these phases, though varied, are forms of immersion. Understanding how you are immersing your players is essential to the design process. Some of these elements – in particular ones which the writer can influence – are discussed in greater depth below.

Embodiment

Help your player feel present inside the game world

Embodiment can play a significant role in the task of connecting the player to game. Games have the power to connect the physical body with an abstract, digital one. This allows a 'presence' of the self within the game and enables the acting out of role play, both of which can powerfully connect the player with the game world, avatar and character (Tamborini and Skalski 2006; Klevjer 2006; Tonkin and Michell 2010).

The literature also shows that perspective and point of view do have an impact on this sense of presence related to digital spatiality and physicality (Taylor 2002). Because of this, when attempting to encourage empathy and connection to the character, it is of value for the player to see their presence (in an avatar) and their actions embodied (by the game reacting to their

inputs). In the case of games that seek to inspire empathy and inform, there is also potential value in the player being 'within' the body itself which is the site of social persecution.

It was with this in mind that I made sure the *Prelude* featured a player-character through which the player could witness their own input decisions acted out in a realised 'body'. In the full game, the ideal would be to further enhance this with characters drawn in a more physical style (i.e. more animation, and if a 'sprite' is still used, then for this to be more sophisticated in terms of frames of movement, and form)[18], and ideally a perspective shift to move the point of view closer to the avatar. One question I have yet to resolve and would like to test with participants, is whether shifting player perspective from one character to another will decrease the effectiveness of the player-character bond, or if this would allow the player to empathise with all four characters. The answer to this question will influence whether in 'single player' for the full game the player is locked to controlling one of the characters, or if they can control all four.

Using embodiment in these ways can powerfully connect the player to the character, even characters with defined personalities which differ from the player's. All of my participants used the terms 'I', or 'we' to describe themselves-as-Zenith. Game immersion allows for a great deal of blurring between the self and the character, and embodiment is one of the most effective ways to encourage this connection.

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[18] There is considerable debate over whether games have to be 'realistic' in order to fully activate the feeling of player presence, amongst other things, but the continued success of games which have limited graphical expression even now, shows that this does not have to be a barrier. Instead, I believe that so long as 'presence' is activated to allow a sense of embodiment (in any form – there are literally games where the 'character' is just a moving square), then the player's imagination can be allowed to bridge the gap.

Help people play your game together

As discussed earlier, sociality can be a key aspect to motivating players to play, keeping them playing, and enriching their experience while they're playing. With this in mind, the game designer must ask themselves – in what ways am I enabling sociality in this game?

The most obvious question that arises is 'is my game multiplayer'? If it is, the writer must consider how the multiplayer functionality is built. Are players playing cooperatively or competitively? What emotions is the social aspect trying to stimulate? Depending on the style of multiplayer, the writer must consider how story and character are built up to foster the social environment. This may not even have to occur in-game. Blizzard's 2016 game *Overwatch* exemplifies this – the game's storyline and character backstories are almost entirely conducted outside the game, through short films, comics, artworks and information which the company releases separately to fans. Players share these 'transmedia narratives' (Rholetter 2015; Phillips 2012) and discuss them amongst themselves. Within the game, characters will sometimes share very short dialogues which refer to these stories, but otherwise the way the *narrative* builds on sociality is through the community of gamers, not through the actual gameplay.

Another way narrative can build on sociality in multiplayers is through 'helping'. Many gamers love to help each other (many also like to completely destroy each other, which can also be facilitated by narrative!) and will feel a strong bond with other players if they develop a mutually beneficial relationship of support. Classically this can be seen through 'class roles' – where particular players will choose a type of character which synchronises with others, but

this can be further enhanced by the narrative itself. Consider the *Borderlands* game series (Gearbox, 2009-2015) where a group of (up to) four strangers must help each other in order to survive, in this game both the gameplay and the narrative support the social interaction of helping each other succeed.

For the writer of a single-player game, considering how sociality can activate in a community around a game, and also how players might be playing that single-player game *together* is important. A variety of tasks can enable players to share gameplay based on their strengths, and tasks and quests broken into time-convenient chunks for switching between players is helpful. Additionally, support activities (both embedded in gameplay but also potentially in story and characters) that a secondary player could be devoting more attention to than the primary player is a way this could be activated.

Narrative Choice: Conversational & Plot

Give players the power to choose.
Choice helps players feel involved and personally responsible.

One of the most significant challenges for narrative in video games is the battle with how much or little choice can, or should, the player have. Allowing the player choice enables consequence, and the potential for players to feel personal responsibility over characters' experience – but what does this actually mean at a practical level? There are two main components to narrative choice in story-driven games: conversational choice (what the character is saying); and plot linearity (how the story progresses). These components do crossover, but they each have their own important considerations within the design of player experience.

CONVERSATIONAL CHOICES

When a player is given choice in dialogue, the narrative must split. This can be in a very small way, such as the player deciding to laugh or frown at a joke, or they can be highly significant choices which affect character relationships, and sometimes the progression of the entire game.

Notably, a game *can* have conversational choice while also having a linear plot (discussed further below), it is possible to 'chain' (S. Davidson 2017) choices to ultimately return to the same narrative point. The character may laugh or frown, but the joker will always offer to sell you a sword. The risk here is in presenting an illusion of choice which the player will eventually see through. If they feel that their choices have no consequence, even if that consequence is vague and far into the future of gameplay, they will often resent the process as a farce; as per Juul (2013), it interferes with how much they 'matter'.

Even chained choices do, of course, have an effect on player experience, even if not on game outcomes. For the *Prelude's* first version, all of the choices were conversational only, but they did affect how the player perceived Zenith's personality and relationships with others. Nonetheless, feedback from users who played it through twice indicated they wished for more effects to stem from their conversational decisions, which resulted in me building in a series of divergent elements, such as whether Zenith's brother Sellen or friend Luuc survive the mech attack, but also whether or not Zenith takes Luuc's flirting seriously, and whether Zenith helps the Old Woman pull garnec. These elements also effect what items the player can construct to use in the final battle, creating 'consequence' for player choices.

In the *Prelude* player choices in conversation also affect whether Zenith is portrayed as a more open, cheeky character or with more of a reserved nature and dry humour, which in turn affect the player's perceptions of and relationship with Zenith as a character. The writer must consider how player experiences and perceptions are affected by narrative choice whether chaining or not. Many games allow a user to play their main character in different versions of that character's personality: typically one version will be more 'good/kind/empathetic' and the other will be more 'evil/ruthless/pragmatic' (to varying degrees), which greatly varies player experience. Consider Player A – who gets a kick out of playing ruthless characters – plays one of these games twice. First, they play the 'evil' version and find themselves laughing at lines, cheering at particularly vicious events, and so on. Then they play again, confining themselves to the 'good' choices – they find themselves rolling their eyes at lines, and listlessly clicking through events. Despite playing the same game – how different is their experience?

In *The Dunes* full game, each character will have a two personality 'facets' (Figure 4) – notably I have attempted to not frame this as 'good vs evil', but more an exploration of different personality leanings/motivations. The player making choices in conversations and plot moments based on these facets will result in different 'endings' to each character's quest chain, resulting in different consequences for the characters. This will also affect gameplay of the final battle of the game – such as whether allies will come to the aid of the player, or whether the characters might have certain abilities. Conversational choices will also link into the way the characters deal with and experience sexism in their lives; both choice and occasionally the deliberate lack of choice (as it was in the *Prelude* when Zenith was forced to pick one or other gendered expression in their clothing) will be activated to involve the player in situations involving sexism.

We have seen that choice can make players more engaged (Isbister 2016). The player feeling

that they 'matter' (Juul 2013) can be highly activated when their choices effect the linearity of

the plot and game progression.

When it comes to non-linear games, 'sandbox', or 'open world' games are the best example of

allowing maximum player choice when it comes to the progression of the game. These games,

to varying degrees, are designed to allow players to go anywhere and take on any quest in any

order and shape their own journey accordingly. Quite frequently however, these games will

still guide a player's progression in some ways through a number of tools, such as space (see

below), level of enemies, quest and NPC guidance, points of interest, key unlocking events,

and so on. Narrative is a key element of potentially all of these tools. If used with subtlety, the

players may not even realise they're being guided from one point to the next.

The downside with this type of game, though, is the writers and designers either need to build

in huge amounts of additional dialogue and redundancies to allow the player to progress

through the story in any order, or they must allow for the narrative to be segmented in such a

way that each part is not reliant on any other[19].

A potential pitfall of allowing plot divergence is when games can sometimes structurally let

down players through not guiding players *enough*. Myself and Juliette played *Mass Effect 2*

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[19] *Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo 2017) is probably one of the best current examples of non-linear game narrative. The world is open to the player to explore, and each section of the map has its own storyline which is unique to that area and not reliant on any other. The game manages to avoid feeling disjointed through the fact that you as a player are piecing together your memories of the past. Even though you gain memories in random order, it's only as they begin to join with enough other pieces that you start to figure out a narrative of events. The game is, however, very light on 'main story', and instead focusses on small story events of people you meet and places you go – which is in part how they have so cleverly balanced the non-linearity of the main plot.

(BioWare 2010) together, which was designed to let players voluntarily take on 'companion quests' based around their companions' narratives. Structurally for us, the game progressed like so (moving left to right):

Main Story	Main Story	Main Story	Companion Quest	Main Story
			Companion Quest	
			Companion Quest	
			Companion Quest	
			Companion Quest	

Which we actually found very unnatural and frustrating. 'Stopping' the main storyline to go off and help each of our companions broke our suspension of disbelief around the urgency of the main quest, and there weren't enough cues in the game itself to guide us into balancing the main quests and the companion-quests in a narratively satisfying manner.

In *The Dunes*, attempting to balance the design goal of allowing players to affect plot linearity and with the need to balance story and experience in a satisfying way, led me to develop this structure:

Main Story: Beginning	Main Story: Jeyn's Quest	Main Story: Climax and Ending
	Main Story: Ayo's Quest	
	Main Story: Michi's Quest	
	Main Story: Zenith's Quest	

The middle of the story allows the player to choose which order to undertake each of the characters' quest chains, and upon completing all of them, they can progress to the final stage of the plot. Unlike the example from *Mass Effect 2* where the companion quests were optional and *interrupted* the main story, each of these middle quests are necessary, and they each directly relate to and impact the events of the main storyline.

There are many different ways an author can approach making plot lines non-linear, this is only one example. It's worth noting, however, that I am not entirely convinced that *plots* need to operate in a non-linear fashion in order to engage players with *characters*. While allowing for this does, I believe, give room to enhance a player's feeling of excitement and fun, the argument as to whether this also strengthens their emotional relationship with the characters and characters' stories is more tenuous.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Personal responsibility can occur through conversational choices, plot choices, or a combination of these. Activating this is possibly one of the most effective ways of making a player feel personally connected to a game narrative. Consider, Player A is playing through a sequence: their character is caught in a bomb situation, they are faced with a choice – pull a young girl out of the blast radius and let the bomber escape – or leave the girl and catch the bomber, preventing more deaths. Player A decides to catch the bomber. Later, the character discovers the girl was actually their younger sister that they thought was at home – the character becomes depressed and wracked with grief. The player thinks: *I did this.*

The player, in a moment of narrative choice, has been given personal responsibility over the effects of their decision on the characters themselves. Many emotions can now be triggered; guilt, pride, shame, joy, all linked in to how the player has been involved in the forks in the character's life-path (Isbister 2016). Not only that, but in context with the other elements of game design, we can see that through choice having affect, the story itself has become interactive. *The narrative has become a game.*

Yet we must also consider the power of a well-told, curated story, and that good stories don't inherently need to have choice in order to be powerful. Allowing the writer the ability to guide

the player's narrative journey is not 'bad', and in fact is often, experientially, the better choice. However when we consider this project's goal of deliberately enhancing player empathy and engagement with characters, the value of activating those unique emotions related to personal responsibility, such as guilt and pride, is extremely high. Thus, providing conversational and plot-based decisions which result in personal responsibility for the player is a highly recommended method.

Fun and Play

Give players the ability to play the way they like to play

Despite all of the above, many elements of fun and play are not for the writer to develop in a game. However, the things which writers can work to build in, are things such as the sense of wonderment and imagination created by building a believable and engaging world and set of characters. A story that inspires curiosity and adventure are the tools a writer uses to create an environment of play.

In addition, the writer should keep in mind the 'gamer types' which we have already discussed (Klug and Schell 2006). If there are ways to work in the kinds of challenges which will trigger different types of players or fun, then one should embrace this where experientially appropriate.

To work as an example, *The Dunes* is designed to work well with different gamer types in the following ways:

Klug and Schell's Player types	Achieved through
The Competitor plays to be better than other players.	Game battles, but also focussed on through Jeyn's ability to battle optional bosses. Some of these are difficult to find and some are highly difficult to defeat without special preparation. Only highly determined players will be able to overcome these.
The Explorer plays to experience the boundaries of the play world. [She] plays to discover first what others do not know yet	World exploration. *The Dunes* is an expansive fantasy world, with its own lore, history and eco-system. The player can choose to investigate the breadth of this more or less depending on preference. There are also 'secrets' including locations, items, and events which only a player committed to exploring will discover.
The Collector plays to acquire the most stuff through the game.	Each character has two skills which allow them to discover treasure. Players can choose to enhance these skills by investing in those parts of their skill tree if desired: Jeyn – 'Lock Bash' opens certain doors and locks, 'Roar' incites battles with monsters which drop unique items; Michi – 'Crumble' skill opens non-iron doors and locks, 'Whisper' skill can reveal hidden treasures; Zenith – 'Lockpick' skill opens certain doors and locks, 'Cloak' allows for sneaking and pickpocketing; Ayo – 'Hack' opens electronic locks and doors, 'Distort' can disable or distract guards protecting items.
The Achiever plays to not only be better now, but also be better in rankings over time. [She] plays to attain the most championships over time.	Not a major focus of gameplay, but could be achieved through re-playing, optional boss fights and achievements.
The Joker plays for the fun alone and enjoys the social aspects. [20]	Humour is embedded in the script, and sociality will be particularly activated if the game is built to be multiplayer. However the

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[20] Of all of Klugg and Schell's gamer types, the 'Joker' I feel is the least clear. I suspect what they're trying to describe is the kind of player who plays games 'at parties' or when friends come over. Typically these players play games which have a non-sequential, repetitive concept which can be readily understood and taken part in, and don't require long-term focus to 'beat'; games such as sports games, arcade fighter games, Mario Cart or Super Smash Bros games, car games, and party games.

	game is not particularly developed for short-term, non-linear engagement based play.
The Director plays for the thrill of being in charge. [She] wants to orchestrate the event.	This type will be most activated within the single-player option, thus orchestrating the battle play of all four characters.
The Storyteller plays to create or live in an alternate world and build narrative out of that world.	This will be activated by the game's world and narrative.
The Performer plays for the show [she] can put on.	This is not directly served by the game design, but is potentially activated by how the player chooses to interact with the game (i.e. through multiplayer, or through sharing their gameplay online.)
The Craftsman plays to build, solve puzzles, and engineer constructs.	The game has a crafting / gear enhancing system built into each character's skill tree which players can choose to enhance if they desire.

It's worth noting that this list of player types (or gameplay drivers) is not the only one a designer could use, however, this provides a basic overview of how different elements of the game's design are functionally geared towards different forms of play. Even if it's not the writer's job to fully develop these elements, it's important for the writer to understand how these things interweave on a functional level with the story, and question how they are being used to activate a player's engagement with a change-journey.

Additional Considerations

When I was building *The Dunes – Prelude*, I found there were a number of design elements that I had not expected would be of note for me as the writer to consider. Although not part of the narrative from the player's perspective, nonetheless they are grounded within or linked to the narrative. I've included these below as reflections on my own learning through this process, and for other writers to consider in relation to how they build a coherent narrative for players to operate within on their change-making journey, though they don't have specific 'guidelines' associated.

An unexpected challenge of the game design was the importance of how space is navigated. Both environments and narratives are often controlled in video games through the manipulation of space – players might be unable to go a certain way because there is a blocked pathway which will only open after a specific storyline event has occurred. More than in other mediums, writers must have a strong sense of space as they don't have active control over how the player is moving around that space.

When designing the *Prelude,* I originally wanted as few 'you can't leave until you've done this' moments as possible – I wanted the player's experience to be dictated by their own choices. However, I quickly found that as the narrative was so short, and my sample size of participants so small, I had to control some elements of this or players would miss significant events[21]. Similarly, I also had to manipulate the design of a cave entrance to make it more visible (only two of the five players found the cave without intervention) after I added story-related things to the cave that were essential to the gameplay, (see Figure 20 and Figure 21).

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[21] On normal release, I would decrease some of this control, and let more events be optional, but also use more spatial design of the maps to encourage players towards certain discoveries and conversations. The time constraints of the *Prelude's* first phase precluded this level of subtlety of design.
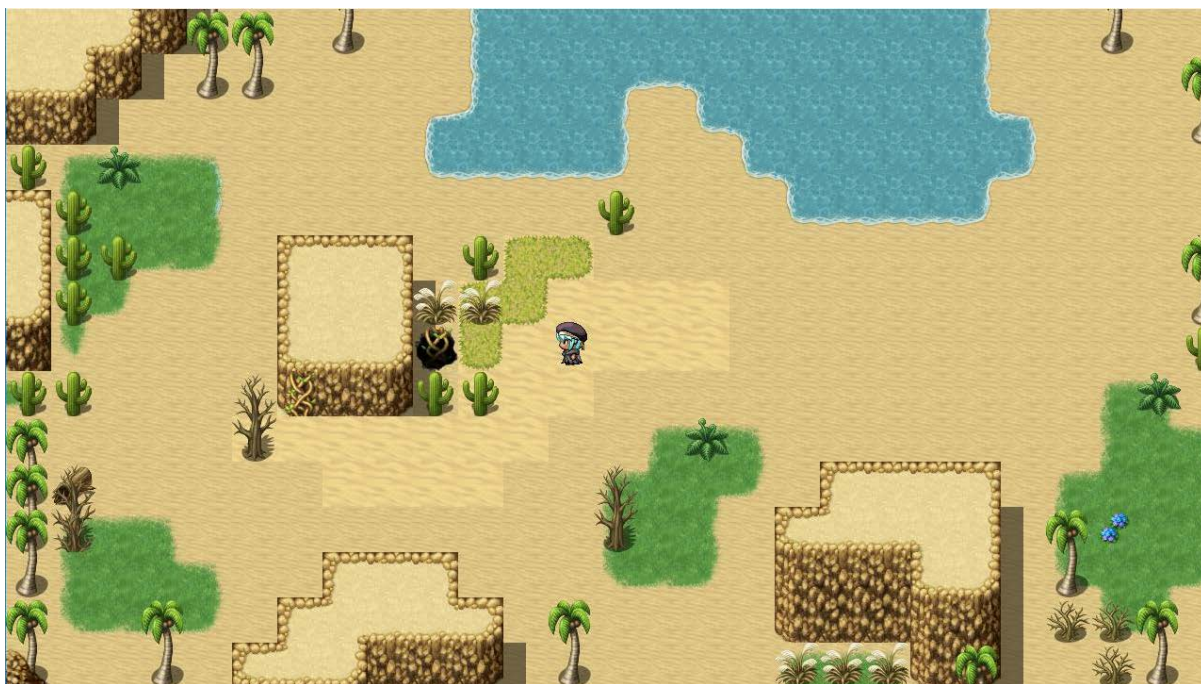
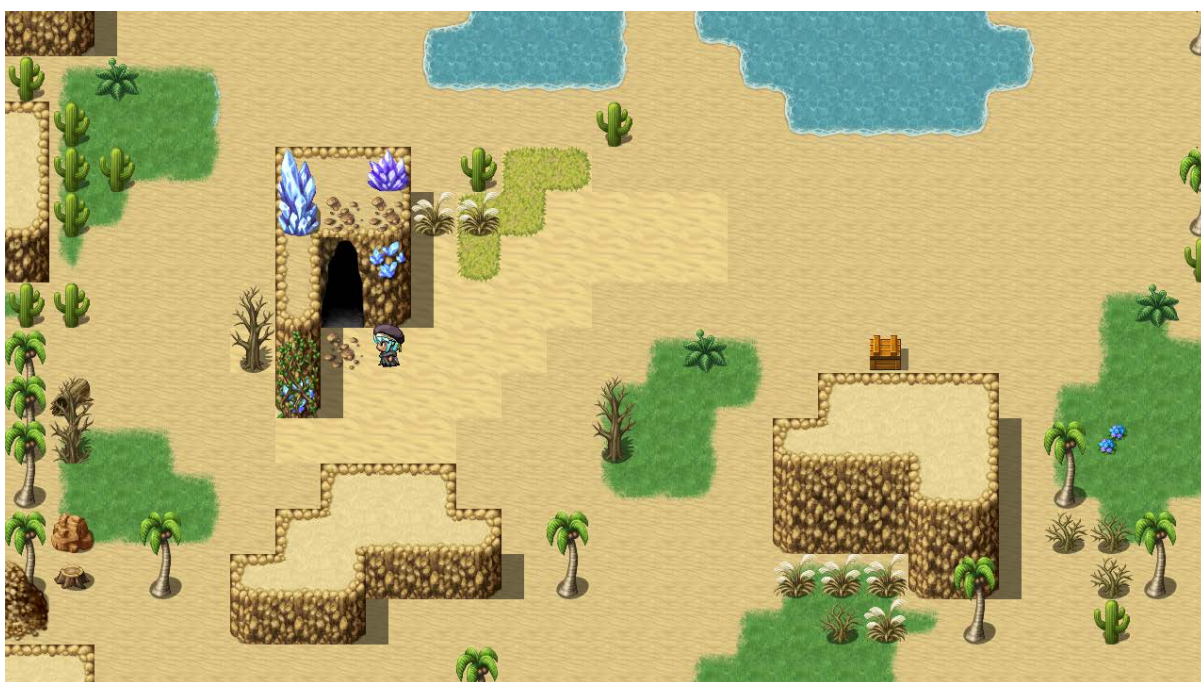Figure 19 – Prelude: Original Cave Entrance

Figure 20 – Prelude: Revised Cave Entrance

In *The Dunes*, I discovered that as I had designed the character quests to be able to be played

in any order, I had to spend time devoted to shaping the world map of the game in such a way

that the distances and methods of travel for the characters from one point to another would

not 'force' a specific order of play[22] (see Figure 22), which led to me needing to develop a

'fast-travel' system which would make the space more easy to traverse. Understanding

distance and how the players were getting from point-A to point-B allowed me the ability to

create relevant story beats and side-quests which followed the flow of space.

Figure 21 – Map Quest-Distance Drafting for the Dunes

Every game's use of space is unique, but it is a somewhat surprisingly essential element for the

writer to understand how space is being navigated and how this connects narrative

progression. The writer must both know when a door cannot be opened without a key

(because players need to activate a scene happening in a specific room), and when the

characters need to take a boat to get from one side of the map to another. This is particularly

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[22] Alternatively, one could do this in the opposite way, making a spatial flow from one location to the next if you wanted the player to be encouraged to proceed in a certain order.

critical when allowing for a non-linear plot, as the way space is traversable directly affects the 'path of least resistance' for a player to progress. The writer must work with other game developers to work out where spatial resistance should be increased or decreased to guide the player appropriately.

When writing the script for the full game, I was also surprised by the need to develop a full (though open to further development) skill tree for the four main characters. This was due to the fact that the story itself hinged on the characters each having usable 'skills' which were related to each of their personal narratives. Jeyn had the ability to aggravate large magical beasts into fighting the team; Ayo gained the ability to distort reality for enemies; Michi could see demons and spirits, and Zenith discovered stealth technology which would allow them to sneak invisibly past observers. Each of these skills weren't just functional, they were actively embedded in the character's narrative.

The skills were part of enhancing player agency. Players didn't just witness characters doing something impressive, instead the player would use the skill and have to complete the task for the character. This activates participation, digital embodiment, game story and cognitive immersion, and consequence. Because each of these skills were linked into the character's emotional journey, I found myself having to figure out how their skill trees could be arranged, as their narrative-based skill would have to work within a range of other skills.[23]

In this case, the writer must consider how the abilities of the character might affect the narrative, and also how allowing the player to have an active part in using these abilities could

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[23] Characters also had other skills which became narratively 'included', such as Ayo's ability to hack computers, and Zenith's ability to pick locks.

increase their involvement. This type of element further gamifies the narrative. By activating

this deftly, we can also bolster the player's involvement in the character's own experiences.

Concept Rejection

It is, I believe, significant to remember while considering all these tools to engage users – that

in the end, players can inherently reject whatever concept you're trying to educate them

about or shift their opinions on.

These tools are designed to allow players to consider a different opinion, or access facts that

they might not know, or familiarise them with something unfamiliar. They are not designed to

force a change of values. They could not, for example, be used to make a player vastly shift

their political leanings if they were strongly opposed to that change morally.

All consumers of media have the ability to be critical of what they consume, and most of us

have probably seen or played something and gone, 'That's dumb' at some point, and distanced

ourselves from the narrative. Additionally, just as we can empathise with well-conceptualised

'evil' characters without agreeing with their actions, we are capable of immersing ourselves in

a story without internalising it.

This is both a safety – in that it prevents the game developers and writers from unintentionally

promoting a harmful concept – and also something where said writers and developers may get

to the end of employing every single one of these techniques and still find players simply

reject their intended perspective altogether. This is an inevitable risk of the endeavour, and all

the more reason to ensure the game is a fantastic game on its own.

Guidelines: Conclusion

These guidelines provide an applied toolset for approaching using game narratives to help to break down sexist attitudes and behaviours and gender stereotypes. The guidelines show how weaving in the social learning elements of the game with a subtle hand and a deliberate use of microaggressions and macroaggressions can draw attention to sexism without overwhelming the game experience. That representation normalises diversity and creates role-modelling opportunities, and that victory moments in the narrative give players a feeling of positive agency. The guidelines also cover functional elements of the game, and have broken down the different ways immersion occurs, discussed how the player being embodied in the game helps them to feel 'presence' within the characters and the world, how the writer must consider how to activate sociality, how choice can be enabled within both in character conversations and in how the plot can progress, how fun must remain a priority, and looked at other considerations such as how to move the characters through the spaces of the story, and how game elements like skills still affect the narrative.

This guide is not exhaustive, however it does provide a set of useful tools which can empower a writer or game developer to activate narrative elements which create affect in a player in a way which will allow for maximum impact when trying to address sexism and to break down stereotyping within games and the game community.

8.0 Conclusion

This project has spanned a wide variety of issues, perspectives and approaches in an attempt to answer my aspirational question of 'can video games be used to break down sexist attitudes and behaviours in their own community?'

My quest took me through many adventures and battles. My very first step was to look to video games, and due to my own background, to game narratives: could they be used to make positive change from within? My dream was to see the gaming community which I was part of become less sexist in the games which we make and play, and in the way we relate to each other. My hope was that if I created a game narrative which showed what experiencing sexism was like, and the negative ways it impacts all genders, that I could help build empathy and understanding, help to represent marginalised people, and contribute to breaking down stereotypes and sexist attitudes and behaviours in games and the community. I also hoped I could develop a set of guidelines to help others do the same.

As I approached the somewhat complex web of literature relating to games and change, some key themes emerged. I found that people interact with games to experience different types of play, that games engage players through fun, feedback, failure, fiero and flow. That within a game we can both encounter role models which can provide aspirational patterns of behaviour, and experience role-play which can stimulate empathy. That representation can affect users and the current environment of gendered representation in games is highly problematic. That within a game we are immersed across a number of different levels including sensory submersion and emotional absorption. That the player can find themselves embodied within the game world and avatar. That games and gamification are already being

used to educate. That through interactivity and choice a player can become personally engaged and feel responsible for the narrative and characters. Together, all of this helped to support the idea that games truly can have a strong impact on players, and that using them to inform players about sexism to build their empathy towards others and break-down stereotypical concepts was certainly possible.

With this knowledge in hand, I set out on the adventure to write the story for a video game. This game was to feature four characters who all addressed some element of sexism or stereotypes in games, and to diversify representation. On the way, encountered some allies: I interviewed four participants, and asked them about their experiences with games and gender and used their feedback to help inform the world and characters I was creating. During this journey I also developed the Exemplar Delivery Framework, which included four ways for a narrative to include examples of sexist issues:

- Type 1: Showing how sexism **occurs**;

- Type 2: Showing negative **effects** of sexism;

- Type 3: Showing 'It's okay to be (_____)'. **Normalisation**; and

- Type 4: **Resistance** and victory.

This framework, and it's guiding Principles of ensuring that the efforts to reduce sexist attitudes and behaviours didn't interfere with game experience, helped to form the scenes and sequences of the narrative.

Mid-way through my journey, I struck a hurdle – one of those annoying epiphany moments. To truly explore the research question, I needed an actual game for people to play. Without the human side of the equation I only had half the picture. Games need people, need players in order to be games, and I needed the story to be a game in order to see how people reacted to

it. I had a wickedly hard boss to face: making a game! Thus, I went to battle, and making the *Prelude* began. Taking one character and a small portion of the full game, I built a playable short story which prefaced the full game, using what I had learnt about making games which could inform and build empathy. Then took to a second round of field work with my participants playing the game and telling me how it made them feel. The feedback? It *did* make them feel things! And it exposed some of them to perspectives they found unfamiliar, and seemed to help reduce that unfamiliarity. Victory! The boss was subdued!

The quest began to resolve, I was able to take the player feedback on board, make some adjustments to the game, and present the results of my mission: a scroll of guidelines which will hopefully help others if they seek to do something similar to myself, and ideally stimulate further exploration into this area of research. These included:

- Don't let your 'social issue' take over the game experience. Put play first.

- Microaggressions can be a narrative tool. Develop a context. Show how inequality occurs, and the negative effects of it.

- Normalise diverse representation. Fill your story with diverse characters, their stories and perspectives.

- In the battle vs injustice, let the player win (some of the time).

- Consider wider social themes and contexts.

- Immerse your players in many ways.

- Help your player feel present inside the game world.

- Help people play your game together.

- Give players the power to choose. Choice helps players feel involved and personally responsible.

- Give players the ability to play the way they like to play.

These guidelines provide a starting point for game designers and writers to consider the best ways in which player engagement, empathy, exposure to the unfamiliar and learning about social issues in a personal context can occur. They will, I hope, be further refined and improved over time, through further testing, and the input of other adventurers.

To conclude: I feel like the first quest on my greater journey is complete. I feel that I have an answer to whether we can make games which can inform about and challenge sexism: we can. The next part of the quest chain, of whether the game I've made (and will make in future) can actually make change happen in the community, is yet to be seen. However, we must keep in mind that users don't consume media in a vacuum; change won't just come from me, from one game, it must occur in a context of a community of change-makers, and my hope is that this research can help to make that process easier and more accessible for a range of writers, game developers and change-making adventurers.

9.0 Table of Figures

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