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# "An Agenda of Gender in the Realms of the Rendered:

# A critique of gender in videogames through 'performance theory'"

## BA (Hons) Interactive Media Production

## (2005-06)

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**Abstract:**

This dissertation examines the gender performances allowed in popular videogames played by men and women in both the actual and virtual realms, with the emphasis on deconstructing female performance. It sets out to answer why people the games they do, what they do in these games regarding gender performance and what accounts as unappealing in game design to each sex. It is investigated through the application of theory fused with the examining of three popular types of games that can appeal to both sexes. Ideas behind power amplification, female avatars and the creation of meaning in games are discussed. It concludes with how it is possible to broaden the videogame medium within the public eye by designers affording more roles of performance of a masculine, feminine and neither/both gender nature; through virtual representation, gameplay, and literal physical performance.

**Acknowledgements:**
Many thanks to my tutor Michael Molesworth, at Bournemouth University.

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**Chapter One:**

**Introduction**

The videogames industry has swollen into a multi-billion dollar behemoth over the last twenty years; the current corporate landscape in creating a title being the polar opposite to the halcyon days of the early eighties. By comparison to the film industry which has existed for over a century the videogame industry is still in its infancy. With the programming for the '*Commodore 64' (Commodore 1982)* and '*Sinclair Spectrum' (Sinclair 1982)* the developers were not limited by popular genres and what sells to the masses – rather it was a time of near boundless creativity that celebrated their now seemingly primitive achievements. As the technology was so fresh, writing these games was usually the product of trial and error, where both the market and the experimenting producers themselves were dominantly young males and their patience was the key – learning the required coding skills and actually loading the games took time and energy. The games produced were new and tentative, where experiments in sprite design, gameplay and narrative transcended the boundaries of marketing demographics. These early coders are now the CEOs of some of the biggest software companies in the world. Although technology today allows far more sophisticated games to be created and played there still exists a gender divide perceived in the industry where females in general simply 'don't get' most current videogames. Over recent years the videogames demographic has changed with more females playing consoles or logging onto online games:

"clearly, the myths that most Internet users are male, video games are "boys' toys," and most gamers are underage are just that: myths. Despite the growing numbers of female gamers, the gaming industry as a whole is not meeting their needs and not taking their interests and preferences into account. Given the enormous buying power that women have and will continue to have, this is a shortsighted mistake (Wright, 2004)".

It is now common knowledge that the videogame industry creates more revenue than the Hollywood film industry; although not taking into account DVD and excess merchandise sales:

(Indeed, these are extraordinary times for video game fans. The $10 billion video game industry, which generates more revenue than Hollywood…(Yi, 2004) For the year 2005, US retailers sold $10.5 billion of gaming hardware, software, and accessories, 6 percent higher than last year's $9.9 billion. The 2005 tally also sets a new record for the industry, breaking 2002's previous high of $10.3 billion (Sinclair and Feldman, 2006)) yet within the public eye it has always been viewed that video gaming is the sole pursuit of young socially challenged males. The marketing campaign for the '*Playstation' (Sony, 1994)* has successfully changed this view a little by clever advertising and sponsorship deals of physically enduring street sports. Yet if the industry is to grow and become accepted in the same universal entertainment light as the film industry it will be necessary to continue to close the gender divide by providing fulfilling mentally and physically stimulating entertainment for both males and females of all ages; which in turn will help drop the impression that the videogame industry is an impoverished, narrowly produced medium that only exists to fulfill the atavistic desires of teenage males.

Why is it that females do not hold a greater share in the minds of the developers of videogames in comparison to males thus creating an as yet untapped resource for the industry in terms of manufacture? The reality is that a significant majority of the videogame industry has and is dominated by the male gender, and in turn the view of popular culture echoes the masculine discourses of publishers and their game designs. The roles assigned to most of the most popular games in the public eye (futuristic first person shooters such as '*Halo: Combat Evolved' (Bungie, 2001)*, military shooters such as '*Medal of Honour: Allied Assault' (2015 Inc., 2002)* or racing games like '*Gran Turismo' (Polyphony Digital, 1998)*) are performances that are largely appreciated by men and not appreciated or performed by women, and female videogame play has and is in the minority. By studying gender reproduction in the realms of the virtual across the most popular game genres played by both males and females it is possible to define what attracts females to play, and by comparing these findings against those games that only

males play it is hence possible to identify the performances in games that females find so unappealing. Consequently, by attempting to find a link between these female performances and the possible reasons they do and do not play games it can be defined as to how the videogame industry can create gratifying and rewarding games for both genders.

Why men and women do and do not play games is a reflection of the performances granted, through the hardware and software marketed towards them. Suggesting that games were solely about 'someone getting killed, finding out why someone was killed or taking over the world' (Subrahmanyam and Greenfield 1998: 51)… either underestimates the craft of games production and active gaming, or demonstrates a lack of familiarity (Bryce and Rutter, 2004: page 74)". This 'lack of familiarity' is either caused because men and women fail to see how their performances can be used for the task at hand, both in a virtual (when using the game software) and actual (when performing with hardware) sense. Although focusing on women, this study attempts to answer why people do not play games and why they play the games they do.

**Chapter two:**

**Performance**

'Performance theory' advocates that "We are constantly 'playing a part' when we are in society… fashion, make-up and costume, the everyday operations of life and the social 'roles' of such representational figures as politicians, bankers, businessmen, priests and doctors (Carlson 2004, 33/34)"; where society today can be deconstructed solely through the execution of these performances. Videogames can be observed as an extension of this theory, where the player is granted the ability to perform different roles in the name of entertainment; so the design of these games when marketing toward specific audiences is very important.

Judith Butler (1956-) was responsible for several books and articles about gender, power, identity and sexuality and it was in her book 'Gender Trouble' (1990) that she posited the notion of 'gender performance theory' where everyday women and men 'perform' gender, and it is merely a construct of society. To Butler, gender is not of a fixed essence inherent within each of us, rather it a continuous reflective and reflexive repetitive process that includes micropolitics of the self - where second by second decisions all connect to form the gender code one subscribes to, to express oneself. The contrasts greatly to what is otherwise considered to be 'gender', whereby being born either male or female there is a set pattern of behaviour and discourses to follow if one is to be successful in fulfilling these sexual characteristics. The past has viewed 'masculinity' as typically showing emotional detachment and having a dominant nature over the opposing gender of 'femininity' whose traits classically contrast greatly, with discourses of a submissive, devoted and doting nature.

People are not born people, rather they are created through a series of performances, which they are socialized into, and then these are recreated throughout their lives. Thus 'femininity' is constructed by the recreation of performance in women. The fact people perform these things allows us to critique ourselves (by understanding the socially constructed nature of performance) so that we might perform in a different way, or

discover new ways to perform. Acting out performances such as wearing a dress or developing muscles is now nothing to do with gender; either sex has the option to choose what role they wish to perform regardless of gender.

"Butler's view of gender is not as a given social or cultural attribute but a s acategory constructed thorugh performance, and thus characterized not by a pre-existing essence or unchanging social determination but by the always shifting dynamic of performativity. In Butler's first study of this phenomenon, Gender Trouble she called gender 'performative', a 'doing'. …The subject is itself 'performatively constituted by acts, including acts that signify a particular gender. These acts in return are not singular events, but 'ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production (Carlson 2004, 76/77)". These repetitive behaviour codes are naturally reproduced in the production of videogames; their very markets being shaped by gender demographic and the roles people are designed to 'slip into'. That is not to say all games should be gender neutral as most people are happy with their roles in society - performance is not necessarily negative in any way, instead, the notion of 'performance' can be used as an analytical tool to understand and deconstruct gender as a set of roles. If people are happy with their roles then nothing needs to be changed; gender performance can be argued in a positive light as day to day performance shapes personality and, how men and women choose who they want to be. The same applies to fictional media, where "We bring our own cognitive, cultural and psychological templates to every story as we assess the characters and anticipate the way the story is likely to go (Murray 1997, 110)".

Gender stereotyping is at the heart of videogame designs as they allow exploration beyond otherwise everyday narrow gender culture. Some games purchased by consumers mirror the performances they fantasize about being or situations that are not available in real life (such as Role Playing Games, or God Simulators); whilst others games allow real life performances to be used at the task in hand of playing the game (such as Rhythm Based Games). Similar to how performativity insists that all of social reality is

constructed, videogames can be deconstructed as such and so either the playing virtually or literal actual performance can be understood as a showing of a doing.

**Chapter three:**
 **Analysis**

By examining three popular game genres that both sexes do play and noting attention to both audience performances and onscreen representation then the varying design aspects with regards to what defines an attractive 'performance' for men and for women can be studied. This analysis of the performances simulated in these games can then be used to determine the comparison with other well known games that are marketed solely towards males. An ideal set of performances can therefore be compiled, along with possible unappealing performances that halt a gameplayer before even playing. Needs, interests and preferences of performances could then be hypothesized for future games.

1        **Role playing games or RPGs** focusing on *'Final Fantasy VII' (Square, 1997)* and *'Final Fantasy XI' (Square-Enix, 2002)*

 "It has been claimed that because of the importance of spectacle in computer games, narrative content is 'basic in the extreme' secondary to gameplay and the rendering of the game environment (Darley 2000: 150)" (Bryce and Rutter, 2004: 75). Role playing videogames are contrarily a genre that involve heavy narrative and character development. The social element of online role playing is contradicting to the original RPGs of the eighties and early nineties which were solo in their performance design. The earliest of the *Final Fantasy* series RPGs stem from earlier forms of role play gaming which involved mystical magical worlds often rooted in medieval backgrounds. Narrative is written first and the game crafted around the story of the characters and the way their developing relationships affect each other. With the release of *Final Fantasy XI* (which was the first of the series to deviate away from the offline template) the narrative suddenly became much more carefully constructed as the roles available to the players would affect the way the virtual world was to be designed, with how much emphasis was to be placed on linear narrative.

        "As the digital art medium matures, writers will become more adept at inventing belief creating virtual objects and at situating them within specific dramatic moments that

heighten our sense of immersed participation by giving us something very satisfactory to do" (Murray 1997: 112). It was the release of *Final Fantasy VII* that launched the Japanese RPG into Western popular videogame culture, with the detailed story and avatars performances created to be related to on an emotional level. Intelligence was blended with the story which whilst certainly linear was epic in scope enough to allow enough choices to remain entertaining and engrossing.

These choices are multiplied considerably with the 'open ended' nature of both online RPGs (such as *Final Fantasy XI*) and online God simulators which allow the expression of a performance to be applied to a blank canvas bordered only by the designers, awaiting to be painted upon by the player: a certain non-linearity that may or may not be able to expressed in the players real life performances. An offline RPG charged with narrative or an online RPG that reflects the ability to choose performance bring relatable human elements that can be appreciated by both sexes.

The performances of the defined avatars in the offline world of *Final Fantasy VII* all form a necessary part of the way the storyline progresses which contrasts in comparison to the online world offered by *Final Fantasy XI* - the actual player his or herself is much more of an integral part in the way the game is hence shaped once entered, where real life preferences can be applied to the design of the avatar or where the actual actions applied from the player to the avatar shape the experiences of others within the virtual environment. It allows a greater degree of personal performances to be applied to a realm of real human interaction. Playing these games are also rife with players who seek to indulge in fantasy by adhering to their imaginations; by not being pinned down by the performances that surround them in day to day society.

Playing as the opposing gender in Massive Multiplayer Online RPGs (MMORPGs) is an expression of the player of the desire to encompass or experience more exotic performances than is allowed in real life. The modern society we live in makes it hard for men and women to express themselves beyond their inherent gender, and in a virtual world it is easier to experiment with how a world will treat the player behind a screen.

That is not to suggest a player who virtually changes sex would be inclined to change sex in real life, rather it is seeing how it is to perform as the opposing sex through intelligent exploration although it is also possible that men in particular enjoy playing the opposite sex as a way of dominating the female form.

With regards to gender performance the gameplay of *Final Fantasy VII* in comparison to *Final Fantasy XI* did not allow the scope to choose and design an avatar to play within the world, but the nine main characters were interesting and eclectic enough to remain motivating to play; they were weaved with the storyline allowing the real life player to become emotionally linked with the relationships of these virtual fictional characters; the love triangles, deaths and possible confusion over ones identity were universal themes that players of both genders could relate to.

2        **God Simulators** focusing on '*The Sims' (Maxis, 2000)*

God Simulators have their roots in *'Populous' (Bullfrog, 1989)* which released for the *Amiga (Commodore, 1985)*, and still the player is often a deity in God Simulators situated in a position of responsibility where the opportunity to influence and create is laid out before them. *The Sims* is different in that the lead character is still the player but is essentially a character built by themselves in the likeness of who they wish to be; whether this be a refection of a real life persona or a total reinvention. The avatars of *The Sims* have the abilities to build social clans and families where social skills are exercised, skills in shopping, buying and selling are applied, and the nurturing and building of relationships are encouraged. These performance roles available are directly mirroring the day to day behaviour of people, but especially women.

     "Butler develops the assertion of French existential writer Simone de Beauvoir (1908-86) that "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" That is, one's biological sex is raw material to be shaped through practice into the socially constructed performance that is gender. To perform this 'successfully' gives a person a secure place within a given social world" (Schneider 2002: 130/1). As the open endedness of the

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opportunities present are so grounded in reality, it allows the bridging of the gap between a feminine consumer to see how their real life performances can be used to articulate an otherwise surreal virtual world that has been shaped by their very real performance input. The hypothetical element of 'what if…?' drives players of both sexes to to indulge and experiment beyond the performances allowed beyond their computers.

The feminine performance of 'maternal instincts' are especially practiced, in the elements that the game allows the player to design the perfect house in the perfect neighbourhood from which to shape their growing virtual social sphere; Similar to capitalist ideals, the player climbs the hierarchal pyramid to consumer bliss and can then take virtual photographs to display their 'wealth' upon the Internet. It could be suggested that women prefer to have power or control over a character that they have shaped in comparison to playing a linear narrative as they see how their real life performances and preferences can shape the game.

*The Sims* is not neutral in terms of roles, rather it allows both male and female roles. The strength of these games is that they encompass a variety of roles that people can slip into and perform - a virtual realm that allows the player to project their performance dreams.

3       **Rhythm based games** focusing on '*Dance Dance Revolution*' *(Konami, 1998)* and '*Rez*' *(Sega, 2002)*

This genre of game is the polar opposite to the open ended nature of a MMORPG or God Simulator; instead the player is encouraged to perform as linear as possible to achieve the highest score. *Dance Dance Revolution* was released first in amusement arcades as entertainment whereby literal physical interaction with the machine by the use of feet pads which were to be used in rhythm to the music played. The character designs praise both sexes who are represented as stylised 'street-smart' young people enraptured with their dancing around psychedelic backgrounds that also move and transform in time to the music. The environment present is a key factor to why females play rhythm based

games; often *Dance Dance Revolution* is played in a friendly and sociable videogame arcade**.** Playing through a standard *Playstation* controller arguably defeated the object of playing the game, so when released for the home market a wave of 'Dance Mats' were also released so the arcade experience could be bought into the living room without an expensive arcade machine, allowing players to physically perform for the game in their own set goals of physical exercise (a calorie counter was included in the home release of *DDR*) or simply because they wished to dance and be praised for it.

*Rez* is an abstract shoot 'em up with a keen emphasis on rhythm where similarly to *Dance Dance Revolution* the player is awarded for destroying enemies and achieving goals set out by the designers, and the environment of the game gave a psychedelic story with which to participate in time to the music. The portrayal of the character is of a changing creature that 'evolves' depending on how well the player accomplishes targets. Both *DDR* and *Rez* are relatively 'pick up and play' where it is not complicated to see how performance can be applied; there are no complicated manuals to wade through before being engrossed.

Playing through a standard controller may be in itself a masculine discourse whereas incorporating more innovative ways to express oneself in the realm of a videogame may pave the way for more a greater share of female videogame players - peripherals such as the dancemat, or later microphone with *'SingStar' (SCEE, 2004)* allow more 'real' ways of a player to express themselves to the game. There is also the element that both sexes can relate to of a desire to use their natural rhythm, and this extension of the hardware to further capture the raw emotional, expressive performances of singing or dancing is what makes people play. *Rez* was later repackaged with a *'Trance Vibrator' (Sega, 2003)* which pulsed in time to the music; a peripheral that is almost certainly designed for female gamers but represents an interesting development in the design of hardware/software amalgamation, where the players performance is recorded via controller and then hence 'rewarded' through the trance vibrator.

**Chapter four:**

**Creating Meaning and Affordance**

The theory of 'affordances' was cited by Gibson and is an effective tool to deconstruct performances further. They are:

> "Successful interactions between an observer and the environment, and objects within the environment, (and) implies an knowledge of what actions are possible and appropriate in any given situation. Gibson (1979) defined affordances as the opportunities for action for the observer provided by an environment, and proposed that observers perceive these affordances rather than abstract physical properties of objects and environments. In this sense affordances are real. They have a relational ontology in they do not exist as a function of either the environment or the observer alone, but only have existence in the interaction between the physical capabilities and properties of the observer and the physical properties of the environment (University of Queensland, 2000)"

Therefore it is the pursuit of the game developer to allow as much affordance between the player and the game as possible, although these affordances can be as a meaningful or meaningless of a performance to a player depending on personal relevance. They can be as complicated as the individual in question; and the depth of meaning in games is a result of the affordances granted from the developers to the players. That is not to say that affordances are universally relevant to everybody. A player of *The Sims* could argue that the acquisition of material goods in a virtual space is ultimately meaningless, and that a personal preference is leaned towards the instant emotional gratification of online 'First Person Shooters' - it depends on the roles that wish to be fulfilled by the gamer.

Games do not just afford experiences that reflect reality, and the performance of playing a videogame can be as creating a meaning of resistance, whereby the game has escapist qualities that allow what cannot be done in real life (as seen with the popularity of *Grand Theft Auto* series). Escapism affordance allows fantasy performance, where as quoted in the book 'Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life' Cohen and Taylor suggest "For most of us . . . reality appears relatively friendly. Most of

the time the world looks and feels like our own. We pass our time in it with the help of a set of established constructions which allows us to see it as stable, orderly, even 'normal. (Cohen S, Taylor L 1976: 19)" Videogames are a way of allowing the expressing of a player beyond their gender performance effectivities as exercised in otherwise mundane day by day in reality, and men possibly crave this fantasy if they feel at loss with society. Commodities are used to bridge aspirations, and there are significant differences between genders with their uses of media as gratification.

The technical deconstruction as practiced by the early and current developers of games can be argued as a masculine discourse. When females buy gadgets it is less the technical aspect that is involved, rather the product is purchased because it does a job; hence the 'geek' stereotype of perusing over technical specifications is masculine. Klein's 'consumer consumptions' suggest men are producers, where women are consumer and this is extended into the virtual where men do not see a case of superficial polygons, rather it is the affordances granted to the them. Yet with the construction of the postmodern consumer which ties in with Butlers micropolitics, to consume is not soley a feminine trait anymore. With the recent feminization of men it is now men who consume too - the only difference between men and women are the affordances or irrelevance.

With regards to the marketing and framing of games, showing possible gender affordances granted towards women could possibly stop alienating them. Women can view them as testosterone drenched boring wastes of time, or worse, patronizing; where games do not represent a productive thing to do where little, if anything is achieved. Meaning in games is created through their affordances. The often masculine and linear nature of games prevent women from accessing most titles, although any form of narrative is bound by its authors, directors or designers as linear by default because all work on a project begins and is predestined to end when completed or not updated; and as seen non-linearity within the narrative framework of linearity can be exploited in many different ways, yet ultimately it is just a false impression. This concept of non-linear narrative will undoubtedly continue to be tackled with the in the videogame industry,

however true non-linear videogames will linger a façade, bound by the very nature of authorship no matter how many branches within a potential destiny conclusion.

**Chapter five:**
 **Virtual Death, Power Amplification and Female Avatars**

Those that do play games do so through the fusing of participation method (usually a controller or peripheral) and onscreen representations of the performances that are allowed and hence displayed. There is not anything about digital gameplay itself that the female gender finds so objectionable, although it could be proposed that amplification of power is a masculine performance. Men are more interested in modifying vehicles so they appear or perform more aggressively, and the gadget market is almost male dominated and so it is of little surprise that many games aimed at men offer a virtual amplification of power in some form. The privileging of power (and spectacle) over narrative is an inherently physical emphasis over intellectual responses, and this desire of power amplification extends itself over the games avatar most notably in successful adventure games (such as *'Tomb Raider (Core Design, 1996)')* that involves being able to control a female avatar.

The player gets the opportunity to direct the performance of a seductive 'Femme Fatale' who in turn dominates the game's environment. A successful female avatar could or could not reflect the female behaviour discourse of submissiveness, but the avatar will always be submissive to the player, which is appealing to masculine performance. "In the(se) games female characters can be said to represent the masculinist vision of women (Burill 2002: 187)" where males are hailed as the players controlling their marionette strings with the female having been created to be dominated. Whilst a certain degree of feminine empowerment is advocated by the inclusion of confident gun wielding female protagonists who in turn are given the chance to dominate their surroundings, it still remains that these virutal respesentations of women are being controlled by men. Details regarding character identity and personality are put after the male gaze where the avatar is leaded and guided whilst always having her form studied.
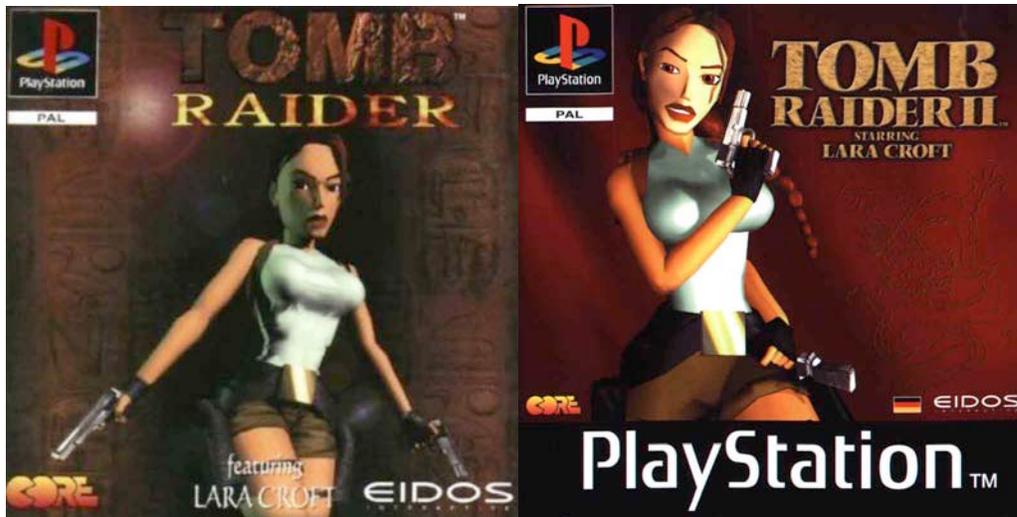
Figure 1.1a and 1.1b – Core Design's 'Lara Croft' in '*Tomb Raider'* and *'Tomb Raider 2 (Core Design, 1997)'* - an illustration of Lara's growing assets. Both accessed from www.megghy.com

Female avatars in games are becoming more sexualized with time (see Figure 1.1a and 1.1b). The exaggeration of these features could be argued simply that the technology now exists to render enhanced sexualisation. It is possible men and women make sense of games differently; decoding the performances granted or if allowed encoding their own performances into their avatars. To men it is more popular to play as an object of desire if they are female or an idealistic model of masculinity if they are male, that they get to control. Although to women the desirability afforded by the designers into their avatar designs is not as important; rather it is the point in playing the game in question, and whether their feminine performances are going to be available to be exercised in completing the task at hand. Often these male designers are of the complete opposite in terms of personality and opportunity to the avatars they create, which would explain why so many masculine affordances are in male avatars; the dreams and fantasies of these designers are therefore perpetuated in the games published. Men do fantasise about women in games as their increasing sexual nature affords a greater degree of fantasy to be transferred out of them. Whereas men and women both look for very different qualities in mates, so do men and women fantasise differently; to a woman a computer created man cannot sexually satisfy – although to men it seems they can, at least in the

powerful realm of the imagination. In film the medium is very different and a lot less about active control and domination (masculine discourses); to a movie viewer the relationship between the media and his/herself is one of a passive nature, where the viewer is the one being dominated by the director and their film. This explains why men and women can both passively fantasise about movie stars, yet women have significant difficulty in fantasizing about the virtual, and what it comes down to is a lack of personality in the virtual, and these differences between men and women. Men will fantasise about Lara Croft on a purely aesthetic level, and in the future the same will be possible for women to do the same towards male avatars; but these male avatars will require a personality that would mirror that found in real life which is broadcast by male actors in their roles on film, but less successfully so far in the realms of the virtual. A feminine affordance that values life, character qualities and behaviour traits can be achieved; even balanced with the perpetuating masculine performances in todays games of death and expendibility.

With this ability of men to make sense of games via increasing sexualisation, even avatars in stylised cartoon games become more sexual (see Figure 1.2):



Figure 1.2 – Sonic Team's 'Rouge the Bat'. An illustration how even videogame avatars based on stylised cartoon are sexualised. Accessed from www.kevskingdom.com

In '*Sonic Adventure 2 (Sonic Team, 2001)*' for the '*Dreamcast' (Sega, 1998) (*later *'Sonic Adventure 2 Battle (Sonic Team, 2001)*' for the *'Gamecube (Nintendo 2001)')* there are two main stories that entwine around each other, where the player can decide (although eventually both stories have to be played ₒᵤₜ to complete the game) if they wish to control the good team of 'Sonic', 'Knuckles' and 'Tails' or the bad team of 'Shadow', 'Dr Eggman' and 'Rouge'. 'Rouge the Bat' plays the femme fatale and actually has breasts, is conniving manipulative, and working for Dr Eggman cannot be trusted (even her name sounds phonetically seductive). It could be suggested that it is simply easier to sexualize the female form because of the actual real way both men and women can see how obvious a sexually ready woman is (with the growth of breasts), whereas the masculine identity of sonic is down to his heroic voice and actions. That is not to suggest that men are more likely to play as Rouge simply because she has breasts; similarly men are not likely to play *'Counter Strike (Valve, 1999)'* because of their avatars virtual rippling muscles. This exaggeration of male and female features is a result of the performances allowed; in the case of *Counter Strike* the player is literally performing as the avatar from a first person perspective, whereas in *Sonic Adventure 2* Rouge and the other characters are played from a third person angle, suggesting that they are more defined characters than just another *Counter Strike* soldier to kill or be killed. Rouge does not need breasts; yet by having them another dimension is added to the avatars character of a seductive, dangerous nature similar in vein to Lara Croft or Bloodrayne (from the game *'Bloodrayne (Terminal Reality, 2002)'*).

With games the whole relationship is the player having to actually perform to get any virtual performance out, and so with a female avatar being manipulated, especially to men, the space between the game developers and the player (the affordances granted) is rife with hypothetical fantasy. This realm of sexual fantasy is eliminated with a male playing as a masculine avatar, as the sexual affordances between male player and male developer are also eliminated; in this instance the developer and gamer are one and the

same – with the same reasons for making the game is the same reasons for playing the game – therefore player/developer fantasy performances are the same.

These perpetuating female avatars fulfill marketing demographics and therefore successfully sell, but could be contended as being detrimental to the cultural impression the videogame industry gives females. The masculine ideology of controlling women as objects is amplified within videogames where femme fatales such as '*Tomb Raider*'s Lara Croft and '*Bloodrayne*'s Bloodrayne are designed to be sexually alluring, amongst all of their deadly gun-play and acrobatic abilities to complete each level. With that sexual element the avatar becomes an object, where it is the players duty to control and dominate them towards the goals set out by the game. It could be argued that women with guns constitutes feminine empowerment, and females are discarding the constraining elements of femininity by expressing themselves through more empowering and secure performances, yet it is the performances laid out in the game which frame whether the avatar is to be respected or to be seen in a solely sexual way.

A main female audience performance against the playing of videogames (and therefore getting involved in the industry) is a result of this 'Lara Croft effect' where females avatars are overtly sexualized in favour of their main audience and this is possibly a major irritation for women. The answer could be to level the market and have a much wider range of games for both sexes and all age and not alienate women through overt sexualisation; who have a preference with both the gendered and the non gender descript performances allowed by the game. Movies get away with sexualisation of women because they are real actresses performing their roles, it could be possible to say that which women can therefore relate to at least on a physical level and that as videogames carry on doing the same as the current level of games aimed at young white males put a lot a girls off of their first steps into playing a game due to this popular negative media image. It is marketing barriers that stop most women from accessing most titles but getting over these will involve breaking the perpetuating popular discourse that videogames are solely for young males.

By appealing directly towards sex the re-release of *'Rez'* with the *'Trance-Vibrator'* is taking games to a new level of affordance effectivity). How the increasing sexual nature in videogames (both in avatar and hardware design) bare upon the virtual and actual performances of men and women in the future remains to be seen.

A naive approach to making more females play games is to appeal at a feminine aesthetic level by masking the design in pink and the possibility exists that failed attempts at bridging the market may be seen as patronizing to females, which ironically splits the gender divide further (Nintendo launching a pink *'Gameboy (Nintendo, 1989)'*, or any *'Barbie'* or *'MaryKate and Ashley game';* software which all have overtly female tones). By drawing attention to the fact the product is aimed specifically at women or girls it becomes more transparent to how badly catered women are in the mainstream games market. Therefore these girls that do play games that are not framed or marketed specifically towards them are breaking free from the dominant performance code laid out by the developers. Pink *Gameboy's* and other products aimed exclusively and expressly at a gender are ironically a way of expressing how transparent gender is, and how 'performance theory' is current in its notions that identity is free-floating and not connected to an essence. Marketing towards girls can be seen as condescending and can backfire. Contrarily marketing specifically towards males is far simpler as they seem to like being reminded of their masculinity through dominating a virtual avatar by means of control and the possibility of performing power amplification.

The reproduction of virtual feminine performance is often exaggerated and distorted, and:
"by representing woman as a masculinized technological warrior who is also a tempting and devilish force, the virtual female represents a regression, specifically a medieval one, which is a literalization of millenarianist anxiety. …inspired by the male-dominated technological and militaristic culture of our era, a culture emanating from the monastic culture of the Middle Ages, she magnifies those values prophesized in an earlier epoch, which were most certainly self-fulfilling. (Hart C, Herbst C: 2005)"

As well as the lack of roles assigned to actual feminine performance, maleness is only reproduced and perpetuated in certain ways too which stem from macro narratives of the past, such as popular religion where deviancy from a masculine template (of heterosexuality etc) is considered wrong. Whilst supporting masculine gender affordance effectivities and targeting successfully market, the result amongst females of men controlling the virtually perfect woman is more of a condescending nature. Avatars such as Lara Croft and Bloodrayne could possibly fail to engage on an emotional level, because of the blatant appearance of their sexual element where the player can control such a lust-inspiring object but there is little level of respect for the avatars character. These games facilitate masculine discourses and often the ethos is of hitting targets, or reaching the goal as fast as possible.

Power amplification can manifest in the overpowering of others. Beating, or rather out performing in the real world is far more satisfying than out performing a detached virtual computer controlled opponent, and the trait of dominance is reflected in the popularity of 'Deathmatch' competitions. Although both sexes can appreciate beating another at a performance (part of the attraction of female gamers towards the industry is based around beating men at their own game) it is the content of first-person shooters ('*Unreal Tournament (Epic Games, 1999)', 'Quake (ID Software, 1996*)' that revel in this instant gratification and death that the feminine disposition find so unappealing; the performances granted virtually predominantly of a masculine nature. As cited in '*'Oh Grow Up 007': The performance of Bond and boyhood in film and videogames'* Burill proposes "by bombarding the player on multiple fronts (they) sell a methodology of death and killing that transcends the context of the game. Death becomes the reason to play the game, to both kill and avoid dying (Burill 2002: 187)".
First person shooters in particular:

"can thus be understood as a paranoiac environment that induces a sense of paranoia by dissolving any distinction between the doer and the viewer.  Driven by the structure of the videogame the player is constantly defending himself, or the entire Universe from destructive forces. The play becomes a compulsive pleasurable repetition of a life-and-death performance (Burill 2002: 188)".

This virtual rapture of life and death captures the same adrenaline dynamic as many theme park rides, where a user is safe in the knowledge they will actually survive the ride yet allows themselves to be thrilled by being controlled by outside forces; the difference in gaming being that the player gets a greater degree of control over the ride. Whilst a non-gender specific performance as both men and women can appreciate adrenaline, the concoction of virtual life and death appeals more towards men. It could be argued that this realm loop of life and death applies more to men as Burill notes

"Timothy Beneke claims that 'boys and men defend themselves against a desire to regress and identify with their mothers through institutionalizing acompulsion to prove their manhood, through creating and conquering stress and distress (1997:35)… in other words, through violence, torture and other forms of self-inflicted and manufactured pain, the masculine subject not only proves his manhood, but relives the psychic tension of decentred, white, male subjectivity, particularly in the face of the waning political and social power of the lower-middle and middle-class male… boyhood is essentially, the recuperation of the immortality of youth, a life without end, a masculinity without pain, a fit and muscular body that enables the revenge of the 'cyber-nerds' (Burill 2002: 191)". By creating games that allows a range of performances they are more likely to be popular to both sexes, and by creating for specific gender templates they will be successful in their chosen markets, but irrelevant to followers of other roles. As game developers live in the commercial world, it's not surprising that brand commodities exist in games, as they are then fulfilling their dreams and fantasies as consumers – male performances exaggerated are distorted which in turn are found in the games published. Games could be seen to be reinforcing specific gender roles, and aiding the domination of these socially constructed gender codes that are media perpetuated.

**Chapter six:**
**Conclusions**

The creation of male and female performances, which are always reperformed by people therefore give people a specific sense of what they can and cannot perform, although part of the fun in games is transgression away from these everyday performances. Games will be popular with people because they allow them to see transgressive roles of performance that they can take on, or allow them to perform in a way that they wish to aspire to. One of the reasons women do not engage in games is the lack of roles that they view as interesting enough to take on, and one useful way to look at games was the performances they encourage or allow.

Studying gender performance as reproduced in RPGs, God Simulators and Rhythm based Games highlighted production successfully marketed towards both feminine and masculine performance, and by adapting to afford more feminine performance, games produced over the future will naturally allow a wider scope of possible performances that consumers can relate to or fantasise about playing as. It could be suggested that an audience gender divide can be closed (within industry too with time) by successfully integrating and encompassing, or allowing and affording performances of both a masculine and feminine nature. Marketing games more towards females too obviously may backfire if they feel they are being patronised in any way and innovation in amalgamating hardware peripherals into software also marks a pioneering field to be explored in videogame design. Theoretically from the study; a narrowly linear (as close to non-linear as possible) online game that affords many different types of personal performances, aesthetically and physically of a masculine and feminine nature, where the players avatars are involved in an environment that can be created by them, and rhythm, music or a hardware peripheral emphasis would appeal to both men and women.

Butlers theory is especially relevant when designing worlds, avatars and situations within the videogame sphere as it allows consideration for a proposed audience outside the otherwise constricting boundaries of designing for demographical gender types. Yet designing towards specific gender templates is a reflection of the current successful

marketing that determines and dominates the capitalist world where men do wish to perform virtually as bastions of masculinity and be in immediate (albeit virtual) danger, and so this self perpetuating loop of physical stimulation through a virtual method will continue.

Men largely dominate the videogame industry, and this gender inequity contributes to the frequent depiction of female figures in digital games as sexual objects or super-heroes. The design approach of men and women is clearly different and the presence of more women may improve both content and aesthetic.

Therefore it would be good if games could challenge these roles and allow us a window to see other ways of expressing different male, female or neutral roles.
Yet the hegemony perpetuates these single roles in society of strong masculine and feminine discourse because they sell - whereby physically attractive and mentally virtuous templates appeal to members of the same sex by means of personality simulation, or members of the opposite sex by means of desire.

It could be suggeseted that an example of a possible theoretically successful game aimed at both a male and female audience would have to eliminate sexual barriers if both were to see gender related performance effectivites, and build upon aspects of gameplay that involve socializing with real people such as virtually in MMORPGs. These games represent how women generally prefer to interact in real space rather than something generated for them; tactile female body language is important in self expression in reality. It could also be thought that simulating sexuality is not high on the agenda of producing at the female market (sexually females are less visual and more about experience which is mirrored in body shapes of males and females; males are designed for purpose and females are more aesthetically pleasing).

Games should not have to take a neutral line that avoids strong female or male performances, as girl gamers beating men in 'Deathmatch' tournaments prove the joy of beating a member of the opposite sex at their own performance. Although playing against

a real opponent in a virtual world is more entertaining than playing against a computer opponent the actual performance of playing games that involve virtual physical manipulation is of a male discourse, whereas women are intuitive and decode through physical appearance, gauging responses and discussing face to face instead of expressing through a machine.

If videogames are to continue to grow as an art form and within the minds of the public sphere as an entertainment medium parallel with film or music then they are to continue being marketed and designed towards separate gender performances, yet at the same time a greater emphasis should be placed upon ever increasingly non-linear games where males and females can play differently or the same, and in doing so express contrasting or similar performances to the ones they subscribe to day by day ; if a game is to appeal to everyone is has to allow a wide variety of different roles to perform. The key is the non-linear nature of a game which corresponds to the everyday micropolitics of Butlers performance theory, where express paths of gender are not laid out in a uniform pattern - rather they can be selected to personal preference and tastes by the player regardless of their otherwise inherent gender that is so often expressly marketed towards by the designers of modern videogames. The ability to pick and choose gender roles that successfully afford fantasy or the mirroring of reality will entice more to play, and not

'bind(ing) gender with too many built-in characteristics... (just) let girls be girls in your game. Allow a lot of different types of female characters, not just thin, pretty, busty ones. The end result isn't just going to appeal to women, it'll appeal to a lot of people across the board who want smart, fun, engaging games (J: 2003)'.

Videogame companies cannot have an 'all games must be unisex' rule as members of both gender audiences will be lost; yet a healthy range of games which are unisex and as near non linear as possible will help bring more people into the industry and allow more people to have fun in the virtual; the effectivities of the affordances allowed in the performances granted through the software and hardware are what captivates people to play. An understanding of the desires of men and women to endlessly recreate femininity and masculinity through the roles they pick up and therefore virtually inact is an

explanation for the popularity of videogames, yet increasing the appeal of interactive software as mass market entertainment can be achieved through women producers and consumers balancing out what has been so far mainly a set of perpetuating masculine performances encoded by the lack of feminine affordances. Designing and marketing more towards either gender or non gender specific roles that can be performed will eventually allow the videogame industry to shed the impression of a narrow medium that solely caters for the tastes of young males; and in essence is introducing more organic human elements to interfacing with a mechanical machine.

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