Spring 2013

Masculinity in the virtual world of video game : a question of agency

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SOCIOLOGY HONOR THESIS

I pledge that I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.

Abstract: *Masculinity is an understudied topic in video games. Traditional literature considered video game as a traditional media and focused mostly on video games content, thus contributed to the common myth that playing video games make people more violent. However, recent studies suggest that video game is distinctive compared to traditional media, and that violence is not the motivating factor in video games. This study involves a content analysis of 22 video game reviews and a non-participant observation of 4 gamers playing The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim. The results suggest it is not violence, but rather agency that governs the dynamics of the video gaming experience. Each of the four gamers exhibits an unique play style, two of which minimize or dismiss violence. This suggests that gamers incorporate their morality into the virtual gaming experience, and that the dynamics of gender and identity are complex and independent of the games' inherent values.*

Introduction: Video Games and Violent Masculinity

Masculinity is an essential topic in the social sciences, yet it remains nowhere near as well studied as femininity. Since Connell (2005) gave rise to the notion of hegemonic masculinity, the term has been used across various scholarly works to encompass values such as physical strength, toughness of character, willingness to take risks, confidence and sexual appeal. Adherence to this ideal is observable in American society, especially among lower classes (Anderson, 2000). Supposedly, one mode through which hegemonic masculinity is reproduced is mainstream media. Existing literature on the media industry claims that TV, Hollywood, music videos, and advertisements actively emphasize physical aspects of masculinity. Exposure to these influences could have consequences on how young males developed masculine identities, as well as place strain on males to conform to these ideals (Katz, 1999).

A more recent media format—the video game—provides a new avenue through which masculine identity can be constructed and propagated. Video gaming is a rapidly growing entertainment industry. As of 2008, video games were a $26.5 billion industry worldwide (Fox & Bailenson, 2009). Seventy-two percent of American households play video games. The average gamer is 37 years old and has been playing for 12 years. Eighty-two percent of all players are 18 or

older (ESA, 2011), and seventy percent of American college students play video game frequently (Barlett & Harris, 2008). While fifty-eight percent of gamers are males (ESA, 2011), the majority of video games and especially famous games titles are targeted specifically at males audiences (Jansz & Martis, 2007). Thus, as a popular modern media, video games have the potential to deeply influence the gamers. Most notably, they carry messages about gender identity and can transmit them to the media consumers. By all merits and accounts, video games are a potential agent of socialization into hegemonic masculinity.

Video games are not an unknown domain in the scholarly world, although it remains largely unexplored. Existing literature has focused exclusively on the content of video games, most notably how video games characters are portrayed. Since video games are virtual reflections of actual society, its characters are more often than not human or humanoid characters (Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Behm-Morawithz & Mastro, 2009; Deselms & Altman, 2003; Fox & Bailenson, 2009). Research has indicated that video games carry stereotypes found in actual society through the portrayal of video games characters, which are often racist, sexist, and hypersexualized (Dietz, 1998; Ivory, 2006; Barlett & Harris, 2008; Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Behm-Morawithz & Mastro, 2009; Deselms & Altman, 2003; Fox & Bailenson, 2009). Other research also focuses on the immediate post-effects of video games, most notably violence and effects on self-perceptions (Klimmt, 2010).

Overall, traditional research on gender and video games only scratches the surface of this important theme. First, many studies assume homogeneity across all video game markets: the first video games of the 1970's are lumped with state-of-the-art technology that embodies recent game titles (e.g. *Skyrim*, *Assassin's Creed*). Modern video games embody a completely distinctive and immersive gaming experience, in which gender becomes more developed and stark than

in earlier games whose technology did not allow easy gender identification or roles. Advanced technology allows new games to recreate extremely authentic characters who could engage in much more diverse social interactions than real humans, since games' virtual settings have few boundaries. Second, empirical studies have focused either on content of games, or on whether players' attitudes changed after a short period of video gaming. Yet this approach neglects the *experiential aspects* of video games. There has been no rigorous analysis of how players themselves interpret gender dynamics of video games —i.e. there is little work on how players ignore, reject, or appropriate gendered logics of games into their own identities or practices. Unlike television, newspapers, or music, with which the audience interacts passively, video gaming involves an interactive environment, where players actively engage in the activity and where their decisions can have actual outcomes in the virtual world. It is the *process* that defines video gaming, not the information or outcomes.

This lack of focus on the experiential process of gaming is the main weakness of the existing literature. The focus on content analysis reveals intriguing messages about stereotypical portrayals of video game characters, but they did not further explore how these messages and images are interpreted by the players. Accordingly, there are little findings on whether or not the absorption of such information helps shape the identity development of the players themselves. Again, it is important to re-emphasize the fact that video games are an interactive media in which players participate actively in determining the course of game-play. Thus, any messages transmitted through video games are processed uniquely by each player. In other words, the player helps construct his/her own virtual reality, using his/her own social experience, similarly to the social construction of reality principle. As such, it is important to consider how the social reality of the individuals affects how they interpret the information in video games.

In addition, it might be that immediate post-effects of video games on players are not particularly significant in understanding the impact of video games on consumers. While the traditional literature has established that playing video games does increase acceptance of certain stereotypes shortly after play time (Beck, Boys, Rose, & Beck, 2012), it is still looking at video games as traditional media or stimulus. Many stimuli, from watching TV, listening to music, or engaging in high-intensity activities are able to alter social perceptions of reality, but their effects are short-lived and often inconsequential (Ferguson, 2011). Video games, however, engage players on many different levels of perception, and repetitive play could possibly have a stronger short-term effect than traditional media, given how much the average gamers play video games (Ferguson, 2011).Yet no research has been done on the potential short term effect. This weakness is due to the fact that interactive video games are fairly new, and thus extensive longitudinal studies have not been possible.

Indeed, I suggest that the results from traditional literature have uncovered only the superficial aspects of video games. Much of this literature has summarily concluded that most video games feature stereotypical and violent males who engage in heavy actions that sometimes feature extreme violence and M-rated content, while female characters remain secondary and are heavily sexualized (Fox & Baileyson, 2009; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Klimmt et al., 2009) I propose that this superficiality is simply the manifestation of a much deeper underlying element unique to video game: agency. It is agency, I believe, that underscores the game's mechanic, logics and narratives and ultimately provides a perceived sense of connection and immersion with the player. These consequently result in a perceived sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in the gamer that affect his identity construction and his perception of masculinity.

In this study, I want to bridge the gap in the current literature by exploring the experiential aspect of video games: how video games are gendered, and how gamers incorporate these gendered logics and mechanics into their own reality. The focus is less on the content or the effects on behavior, but rather on the experience of playing the video game itself: why people play video games, how they act and make decisions in-game, what motivates/engages them in video games. I believe this is a novel approach that bridges the link between the content of video games and their possible consequences on gamers. This approach could provide valuable insights on how to understand this revolutionary media and thus, how to properly study it to maximize its benefits as an entertainment and minimize its risks as a negative influence on behaviors.

Specifically, I want to set aside the idea of the violent male in video game as established by the traditional literature and instead focus on what I believe is the heart of the issue: the construction of masculine identity through agency in video games. I think that the common belief that permeates both society and academia that video game makes people more violent is largely an oversimplification. Other than the fact that no direct link between video game and increased aggression or criminality has been established (Lin, 2013), there is much more to masculinity in video game than mere violence. Thanks to new technology, recent video games are now able to construct a much more complex virtual society that allows the gamers to customize their experience according to their social reality. Though it might be true that some video games might be violent or militaristic in nature, within the parameters of the game the player has the freedom to navigate the virtual world as he sees fit. Consequently, gamers would be able to incorporate their moral values and identities into the game, making the video gaming experience a unique and personal process. It is this sense of agency that embodies the defining characteristic of modern video games and thus video game consumers.

Dual Reality: The Virtual World of Video Games

Recent works (Fox & Bailenson, 2009) on video games have stressed the importance of interactivity in the study of video games. According to role-playing theory, players do not passively receive input from video games. Instead, they assume the role of (main) characters and make their own decisions—i.e. the players project themselves into the game, where they navigate the game's environment in personal and unique ways. Indeed, Jansz and Martis (2007) as well as Fox and Bailenson (2009) have pointed out that unlike conventional media, video games are more influential thanks to their ability to engage the players: "In the case of video games, the reception of media content has a specific character because of the games' interactive nature. Players are largely in control of what they experience" (Jansz & Martis, 2007, p. 142). This characteristic, they argue, is a strong agent of identification:

> Interactivity has two distinct consequences for the reception of game content. First, enjoying a video game generally means that players are drawn into the represented world and become less aware of the mediated quality of the experience (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003). The resulting feeling of 'being there' is generally referred to as a state of "presence" (Lee, 2004). Presence conceivably may intensify the gamer's reception of game content in order to construct personal meaning. Second, interactivity may also have consequences for the gamer's identification with characters represented in the game. Many video games enable their players to enact identities in the most literal sense of the word. Gamers can actually 'be' their characters in a playful virtual reality. (Jansz & Martis, 2007, p. 142)

Thus, the experience of different gamers playing one game can thus be immensely varied. It is necessary, then, to view video gaming experience as a unique and personal process through which the gamer experiences a virtual identity with a strong sense of authenticity.

Through this process of identification, the player subconsciously internalizes the character he/she is controlling and develops a deep connection with it. The character's actions become that of the player. "Its" thoughts become his/her thoughts. Indeed, the most successful role-playing games have mechanisms that punish or reward the player for the actions made during the game, most of them are irreversible. This encourages responsibility in the player and inevitably identification with the character itself. In other words, the games are no longer targeting/directing the characters, but the players themselves.

This identification process is the nucleus of the interactivity of video games. Klimmt et al. (2009) provide a comprehensive analysis of different theories on identification and advance their own model. Specifically, identification is considered as the adoption of the perceived identity of the target character (in video games) by the players themselves. In other words, the games shape the players. This is plausible, as the unique nature of video games, allows the player an immersive experience, based on which the players could construct their own perception of that game character and of the virtual gaming world. This is made stronger with the fact that modern video games allow a generous amount of customization in place for the players to make the characters however they like. This results in the game protagonist becoming the player's representation in the virtual world, and vice versa (Klimmt et al, 2009). Interestingly however, this also has the side effects of allowing the player more freedom: if the player is free to create a character that he would identify with, then that gives him a degree of autonomy from the specific agenda of the game.

Such a strong identification, the authors propose, would invariably lead to changes in the players' self-perceptions (Klimmt et al, 2009). The concept of self for the player becomes increasingly associated with their avatar in the virtual world. Accordingly, the role that the game character plays and what happens to him/her will have an effect on the players. However, Klimmt et al. have noted that such effect is temporary, although just how long remains to be determined. In two follow-up studies in 2010, they test this theory that video games players identify with the gaming characters, which produces alterations to their self-perceptions (Klimmt et al, 2010). In study 1, 61 participants played either a shooting game or a racing game. The results show an increase association with military-related roles for those who played as shooter, and a similar increase association with racing roles for racing-game players. Study 2 replicated study 1 with 48 participants, with similar results. The research done by Klimmt et al. (2009, 2010) as well as various other scholars (Fox and Baileyson, 2009; Janz and Martis, 2007) suggests that identification does occur, and that it can effect player's sense of self, which invariably includes their masculine identity.

However, these studies only test for immediate after-effects on perception, and as such the results should not be mistaken for permanent identity changes. Numerous other studies have proven that stimulus such as sports or martial arts could temporarily increase the aggression level of participant, however these effects tend to dissipate shortly after the stimulus is withdrawn(Lin, 2013; Beck, Boys, Rose, & Beck, 2012). Accordingly, video game should be considered as only a stimulus that has temporary effects which are often inconsequential. Indeed, there have been no studies or data whatsoever on violence or crimes committed as a direct result of playing video games. In other words, the consequential changes in action, let alone in identity, from playing video games are questionable.

Game developers seem to have grasped the hidden effects of identification theory as well. To further immerse the player in the virtual world created by video games, the industry makes use of the latest technology available. In a content analysis of 150 video games, Martins insists on the power of realism and the processing power of game systems (Martins, 2009). The system's capability to render a more realistic virtual environment is positively correlated with the potential impact on sexual arousal and aggressive responses (2009). The more powerful a gaming system is, the more powerful the effects it has on the player. With the latest gaming system coming in at ten thousand dollars and with increasingly innovative gaming technology, there is little limit to the visual capabilities and processing power of video games.

However, using identification theory to claim that the games can freely influence the players is a problematic overstatement. Gamers are not blank slates that video games can freely write anything they want on. With eighty-two percent of the players being an 18 years old male (ESA Entertertainment Software Association, 2011), it is highly unlikely that he would be passively and unknowingly influenced by the agenda in video games. Rather, I suggest that gamers actively use the identification effects of video game to experience an identity that they want to explore. This probably explains why video games are so attractive to consumers. To address this, Shapiro (2010) suggests that people engage in the virtual world for identity exploration. Players explore an alternate identity different from that of their real lives, as a different person with different opportunity structures. In this sense, many players see video games as living out another life. This view has recently become the new lens through which scholars examine the virtual reconstruction of reality in video games, and their potential effects on gamers. Scholars have decided that it is no longer sufficient to observe and measure changes in individual gamers. It is

now necessary to explore the virtual world of the games themselves to properly assess the virtual reality constructed there (source).

In one such study, Leonard analyzes the visual content of Grand Theft Auto, one of the most popular gaming series among male players (2003). Playing as a thug in a powerful white family, the player fights to control the streets and underworld against other racial-ethnic groups. Leonard notes that it is the virtual playing field and its immersive environment that makes up its primary appeal. Comparing video games with tourism, which allows the players to experience new environment-or experience the "other"-but with financial and physical limitations, Leonard claims that video games allow players to totally immerse in the experience without any such dis-advantages. The interaction is so strong that it becomes a "consuming other": players are not simply experiencing a new identity, they are consuming it. Thus, the identity exploration pro-posed by Shapiro (2010) could well be elevated to identity consumption (Leonard, 2003).

From these findings we could draw a new suggestion: while it is possible for video game to temporarily make the gamer to identify with specific roles promoted by the game's agenda, the gamers are often well aware of this effect. Indeed, they actually take advantage of these effects in order to explore a new identity that would otherwise be unavailable to them in real life. In a sense, video games do not alter the gamers' identity, they provide him with more options of which identity he wants to associate himself with. This expansion of identity option is one of the principal elements of agency that will be discussed later.

Princes and Outlaws: the Bloody Male of Video Games

If identity exploration is the main attraction of video games, and if identification makes them so addictive, it is natural to ask the following question: What are the most common identity(ies) promoted in video games? Thankfully, extensive literature exists on this topic.

If there is one finding consistent across all the studies, it is that most video games characters are exclusively white, heterosexual males (Dietz, 1998; Ivory, 2006; Barlett & Harris, 2008; Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Behm-Morawithz & Mastro, 2009; Deselms & Altman, 2003; Fox & Bailenson, 2009) An overwhelming number of male characters appear violent. Controllable and primary characters are predominantly white males and often assume leading, critical roles in the games. They often appear as powerful and war-like. The presence of blood and brutal weapons are consistent throughout different games (Dietz, 1998). Even in games that are rated for teen and children, violence is abundant (Fox & Bailenson, 2009). The roles that male players can adopt are vastly diverse: the Arthurian warrior who builds his empire through martial and military conquests, the sorcerer who bends the magical forces of the fantasy worlds, the Robin Hood-like thief and adventurer who fights for the greater good, the bloodthirsty warlord, and the space explorer. Video games also re-invent popular science-fiction characters in other medias, such as *Star Wars, Star Treks* and *Lords of the Rings*. The opportunities are endless.

In stark contrast to their male counterparts, research has confirmed the stereotypical and sexualized representation of women in video games. Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009) state that women are inadequately represented in video games, and that such representation is hyper sexualized. Similarly, Jansz and Martis (2007) claim that female characters rarely appear, and that when they do, they are mostly in a submissive, secondary role .Female characters often

have unrealistically large breasts, small waists, and large buttocks, which are emphasized through the use of revealing clothing, nudity, or partial nudity. They are highly likely to play a submissive, secondary role in relation to the main character who is often a male (Jansz and Martis, 2010). As Fox and Bailenson (2010, 148) put it, they "are much more likely to appear in a sexualized or objectified manner, often solely for ornamental purposes. Indeed, the famous game *The Witcher* features numerous female characters with whom the player-controlled character can sexually interact. After the main character finishes having sex with them, the player is rewarded with a "sex card," which is a picture of the female characters in nudity or partial nudity. The strong consensus reached by these authors and their referred colleagues indicates that this virtual representation of women is characteristic of video games that include women.

The stark contrast between male and female images in video games reveals an observable and consistent pattern: men are violent and dominating toward other men as well as women. Apparently, masculinity in video games thus is synonymous with conquest, both physical and sexual. This links back directly to the idea of hegemonic masculinity presented at the beginning of the introduction (Connell, 2005). It is these findings that contributes to the common misconception that playing video games make gamers, who are predominantly males, more violent and sexist. This also assumes that video gamers readily and willingly welcome the violence found in video games. If the pattern holds true that most video games out there are violent, then violent masculinity must be the main attraction of video games, and the primary reason gamers enjoy video games in the first place.

This premise that masculinity in video games exclusively involves violence is the primary issue I would like to explore in my research. I suspect that there is something more complex underneath the violent content of video games. It is true that the content of most video games are

violent, but looking at video game content remains a superficial examination of video game. Content is simply the surface, the first visible elements of video game and not the game itself. Instead, the vital element of video games is the gaming process itself, which is the distinctive feature that differentiates video games from traditional media. I suggest that violence is simply the visible manifestation of agency. For our sociological purposes, agency can be defined as the capacity of an agent (in this case, a person) to act in a world, actual or virtual. More specifically, it is our ability to make decisions and to take actions that gives us a sense of agency. Agency is more or less the center of existence, because our sense of fulfillment comes from our ability to take action. Violence, however, is often the shortcut to agency. If A wants to get B to do something, he virtually has the options of 1) persuasion 2) bribery or 3) coercion, which in video game often involves pointing a gun at B's head. Needless to say, coercion or virtual violence is the simplest way to achieve agency. However, it is not the act of violence itself that matters. Instead, it is the fact that through violence A achieves agency and thus control over B that is at the heart of the issue. This is why agency is easily mistaken for violence, since the latter is the most common expression of the former in the virtual world of video game. Nevertheless, it is crucial that we determine whether or not agency is the underpinning element that governs the world of video games.

Current Research

Hypothesis

This project aims to further explore the concept of masculinity in video gaming by employing an approach that focuses on the video gaming experience. I hypothesize that violence is neither the governing element nor the main attraction of video games, instead it is simply a ma-

nifestation of agency. It is the construction of agency embedded in multiple elements of video games that allows the gamers to experience self-expression and new identities that are otherwise unavailable in real life. Through this process of agency consumption and enactment, the individual gamer reinforces or alters his masculine identity to better develop a sense of self. This is an entirely new outlook that will possibly revolutionize the way in which video games are looked at in order to better understand how it could be used as an agent of socialization in the modern world. This will also enrich our knowledge of video gaming as a distinctive media and bridge the gaps between the virtual world and the real world, helping us rethink masculinity in the era of information technology. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to obtain data on the gaming process itself, namely, how the gamers themselves individually perceive the gaming process and what values they attribute to different elements of the game.

My first step in this study is to investigate the idea of violent males in video games. As established in the above literature review, the majority of video games male characters are violent and/or engage in violent activities (Dietz, 1998; Ivory, 2006; Barlett & Harris, 2008; Bartholow & Anderson, 2002; Behm-Morawithz & Mastro, 2009; Deselms & Altman, 2003; Dill, Brown, & Collins, 2008; Fox & Bailenson, 2009) Such data suggests that being masculine/being a man in video game is about being violent. If that is the case, then violence is the main attraction of video games for male gamer. Accordingly, a better game would thus have more violent content, and consequently would be better received by the gaming community. A correlation between violent content in video games and the game quality would prove that masculinity in video game is de facto violence. Thus, one guiding hypothesis: If masculinity in video game is about violence, then the more violent the video game is, the more attractive it is.

Research Design: A Two-Way Approach

In order to get at how the content of video games are received and critiqued by gamers, it is necessary for the study to investigate how the gamers themselves describe the games. A highly useful resource at disposal is the online video game reviews. Since video games are both a rapidly-growing form of media and entertainment, the gaming communities have developed websites entirely devoted to the promotion and assessment of video games. On these websites, reviews are written and a tentative score is attributed to each game as a reflection of the game's overall quality. A content analysis of these reviews would uncover how the gamers themselves feel and rate the quality of each game. Most importantly, it might yield data on which game elements are the most crucial to the enjoyment of video games.

A second method to complement the content analysis is observation and unstructured interviews, the best way to study behaviors for is field work. Unstructured interviews while observing offers specific advantages. First, it allows me to see how the players make decision in-game, how they immerse themselves within the gaming world and how they conduct themselves in a relatively friendly and stress-free environment, without too much disruption. Second, this might also help me uncover patterns, messages or meanings that the players themselves are not aware of, which would not be available using interviews or surveys. Third, it allows for a complete and independent collection of data without having to rely on the participants to provide the data. I will be able to see and record the entire experience with as much details as possible, while the gamers might only remember what is important to them.

Content Analysis of Video Game Reviews

Most notable among online websites is Gamespot. A popular gaming website dedicated solely on video gaming of all platforms, Gamespot is one of the primary sources of information for gamers on video game news, reviews, discussions and promotion. In 2004, Gamespot won "Best Gaming Website" as chosen by the viewers in Spike TV's second *Video Game Award Show*. The review system by Gamespot is highly regarded among gamers and is meticulously conducted. For most released games, Gamespot staff would write a detailed review assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the game, as well as giving it a score on a scale of 10. This information is used by gamers to decided whether or not to invest in a game, but it also serves as advertisement for the reviewed game. The reviewers are all professional gamers themselves, highly familiar with the gaming industry and game development. As such, reviews written by Gamespot would provide insightful data on the gaming experience contained in each game.

For this study, a content analysis of 24 game reviews collected from Gamespot was completed. Since the goal was to investigate the latest video games, all game reviews were chosen from among reviews published in May 2012. Only games that were rated Teen or Mature were selected, resulting in 22 game reviews. I went through the reviews using a combination of manifest and latent coding. Although I specifically had the coding category of "violence" to start with, I also wanted to investigate other elements affecting the gaming experience, especially agency. The three main coding categories were *Violence, Fantasy/Fiction* and *Agency.* These were not mutually exclusive categories, as one review often contained multiple instances of each of these categories.

After I went through the coding phase of the research, I noticed several intriguing trends that I did not expect in my initial hypothesis. First, having read through the sample of games several times, I noticed that three categories recurred across many games. The issue of violence is definitely there, and for many games violence is indeed the most dominant feature. However, there is also the idea of adventure in the form of fantasy or fiction, and more importantly, the idea of agency, as in how connected the player is with the gaming world.

Fantasy and fiction usually serve as the setting for many of the games. Most games feature their main storyline as happening in a fantasy world of warriors and magic, or in a fiction setting in a far, imaginary future. It's easy to understand, because these settings would make for a much more interesting story than something that happens out of ordinary life. The possibilities are endless: naval battle during an alien invasion, playing as super soldier to repel alien invaders, sole survivor of a zombie apocalypse, following Batman as he saves Gotham city, save a fantasy world from ruination by a demon lord etc.

Those settings compliment the theme of violence well. As can be seen above, almost all of the themes/storylines involves violence on some levels. You will always be killing or destroying things one way or another, whether it is through magic or through old-fashioned run and gun. Violence is the easiest and most consistent category to code, including things like weapons, high-intensity action verbs and adjectives and military-related materials.

Agency here refers to how connected the gamer is with his gaming world, or how "alive" the game feels. This proves to be extremely difficult to code, since expressions of agency are normally embedded in whole sentences or sometimes even whole paragraphs, while fantasy/fiction and violence can be coded in words. The counts for agency are thus substantially low-

er, but each individual count actually has more value than that of the other two, because there is much more meaning associated in each.

Re-categorizing the codes: after the coding phase was completed, I went through the coding schema and the coding results one more time to ensure consistency throughout the coding process. The goal was also to see if the codes could be broken down further into smaller, more distinct sub-categories. However, the results seemed to be consistent and the sub-categorizations had too few distinct differences to warrant a recoding. Thus, I kept the results of my first coding attempt.

Participant Observation of Skyrim

As with social interactions, the best way to study virtual interactions is field work in the form of non-participant observation. For the context of my study, I opt for a middle ground between participant and non-participant observation, in the sense that I will be asking minor questions as I watch my participants playing video games. This middle ground would reduce the pressure for the participants that someone is watching them, as well as facilitate their enjoyment

Target population and Samples

Since the goal of the study is masculine identity development, the target population should ideally be young male gamers at the University of Richmond. Snowball sampling or availability sampling are used, since this research requires much co-operation on the part of the participants (Schutt, 2011). I contacted the first participant, an avid video gamer for the first observation and through him, I got references to work with other gamers.   .

The participants are asked to play the game *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* for the introductory sequence, so this varied from person to person, anywhere from 35 min to 1 hour. The introductory sequence is great material for observation because it contains the most crucial elements of the game. Game developers usually need to make the introduction as attractive as possible to hook the gamers in early on. As they play, I watched and take notes of what was happening, as well as asking open-ended questions on the rationale of their decisions. Most usually, it is in the form of "Why did you choose to do this? What do you think about this element of the game?". The goal is to keep the questions as undisruptive as possible.

Results of Quantitative Content Analysis

The characteristics of the game, comprised of violence, Fantasy/Fiction, Agency/Experience are displayed in the table below

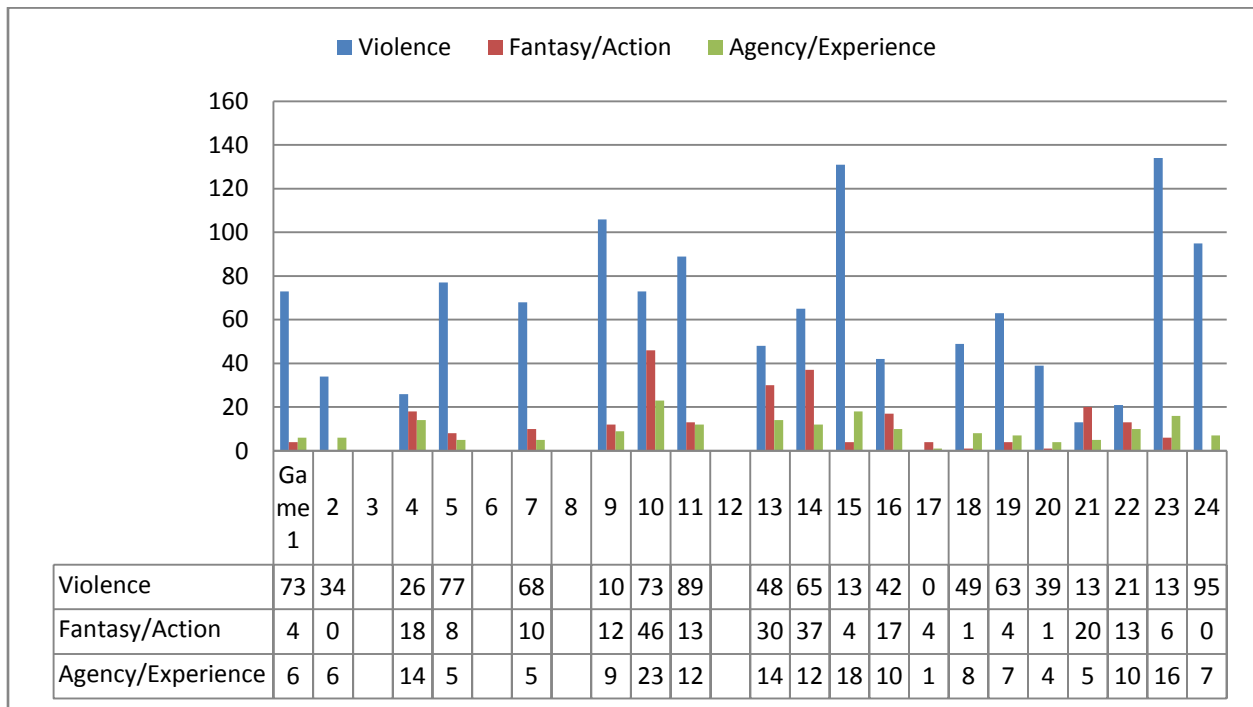|	Game 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Violence	73	34		26	77		68		10	73	89		48	65	13	42	0	49	63	39	13	21	13	95
Fantasy/Action	4	0		18	8		10		12	46	13		30	37	4	17	4	1	4	1	20	13	6	0
Agency/Experience	6	6		14	5		5		9	23	12		14	12	18	10	1	8	7	4	5	10	16	7

Figure 1: Frequency of Violence, Fantasy/Fiction and Agency vs. Game Rating

Figure 1 describes the frequency of three main categories found in video game reviews. The higher the frequency of one category, the more important that element is for the specific game. Each game thus has four columns, Violence, Fantasy/Fiction and Agency respectively. Data is missing in game 3, 6, 8, 12 because each or all of the category had a count below 3, or because the games did not meet the selection criteira and thus not qualified for analysis. These games were discarded during the analysis.

The count for each category represents how many times an element of that category appears in the game review. For example, for this excerpts from *Diablo III* review, "a setting in the game's fourth act effectively makes you feel like part of a desperate, large-scale war between humanity and the forces of hell" (Diablo III review, 2012), makes you feel like is one count for agency, war is one count for violence, and hell one count for agency. Thus, for Game 1, a Violence count of 73 means that there are 73 elements of Violence in the game's review, a Fantasy/Fiction count of 4 would mean elements of Fantasy/Fiction appear 4 times, and so on.

The Game's Rating is the score given to each game by Gamespot and its members as a reflection of the game's overall quality. For a detailed list of what the exact games and their respective Game's Rating, refer to Appendix. Frequency from the three main categories would be run in correlation test with the Game's Rating. If there's a correlation between Game's Rating and one of the three elements, it would mean that the better the game, the more it incorporates such element. For instance, if the video game is about violence, then the better the game, the more violent the content.

	Violence	Fantasy/Fiction	Agency
Game's Rating	No	No	Yes (0.687)

Figure 2: Correlation between Violence, Fantasy/Fiction and Agency with Game's Rating

Figure 2 describes the correlation between Violence, Fantasy/Fiction and Agency with Game's Rating . Not surprisingly, correlation is not significant between violence and game's rating ($p = 0.577$). However, there is correlation between agency and popularity ($p = 0.001$, Pearson Correlation $= 0.687$). From here we can suggest that the better games are the ones that allows for more agency.

If the initial hypothesis holds true, then we would expect that the better a game is, the more violent it would be; or that violence would be more prominent than the other categories. This has proven to not be the case. I've noticed that except for Max Payne (where the violence count reaches above 120), all the other games that received a "great" (8/10 or above) have a noticeably high count in agency and occasionally in fantasy/fiction. Diablo III, for example, one of the most anticipated games of last summer, has a ratio of violence/fantasy/agency of 73/46/23 respectively. Dragon's Dogma also has a ration of 26/18/14. In contrast, the ratio for most other games falls somewhere within 75/15/10.

Indeed, the games that receive higher ratings do tend to have a higher count for agency, while not necessary for violence. This leads me to think that violence might not be what gamers are after in video games. They actually seek agency and immersion in a virtual world where they can be free, to do whatever they want to do. Violence just happens to be the easiest way to achieve agency. It is much easier to hold power over someone by threatening them with a gun,

than by persuading them. In real life however, we are restricted by laws and social order to freely exercise our agency. Such limits have no place in the virtual world however, and we can already see that most games adopt a setting that legitimizes violence.

Most interestingly, there is a correlation between agency and violence (p = 0.036, Pearson Correlation = 0.472). This suggests that there exists a relationship between agency and violence, although it is unclear which one causes the other. As I suggest, it is possible that violence is a visible manifestation of agency that is most readily available in the virtual world. This is made more obvious when one looks at the evidence in the game review itself. For example, consider the following quote from Diablo III's review:

> "....a setting in the game's fourth act effectively makes you feel like part of a desperate, large-scale war between humanity and the forces of hell. Just when you've had your fill of one region, it's time to move on to another, and each location is so different from the one that preceded it that you feel as if your quest to rid the land of evil is taking you across a vast and varied land." (Diablo III review, 2012)

It is clear that although there is much mention of violence, it is rather how the violence makes the gamer appreciates and immerses himself more in the game that makes it significant. Thus, it is not the violence itself, but rather the goal of using violence in the game, which is to convey a better sense of agency.

This unexpected correlation between agency and violence is particularly intriguing as it suspects there is something much more than violence going on in video games. Is violence agency in disguise? If agency in video games is violent, what does that suggest about the motivation

of gamers to participate in violent video games? Why would they seek agency through violence and not other means? There are all questions to ponder for future research.

Discourse on Agency

The results from the content analysis suggest a crucial and intriguing development to my study. It is possible that the violence we observe in video games is simply a visible expression of the concept of agency, which could be an underlying factor that governs individuals' attraction to video games.

For our sociological purposes, agency can be defined as the capacity of an agent (in this case, a person) to act in a world, actual or virtual. More specifically, it is our ability to make decisions and to take actions that gives us a sense of agency. However, I believe that there is one key factor missing here in our scholarly definition of agency: **the ability to observe the consequences of our actions**. In the real world, it is possible for us as humans to observe how our actions directly or indirectly affect our socially constructed environment. Since the scholarly discussion of agency normally concerns with the actual world, it is of little surprise that this factor is often overlooked in the virtual world. The distinction here is that, in the virtual gaming world, actions/decisions take place in there and do not carry over to the actual. However, it is the perception of the players that what they do in the game matters, in the gaming world and possibly the actual world, that gives them a sense of agency. Indeed, with new technology, video games are able to provide players with a significant immersive experience.

A further attempt to investigate agency is the research done by Prybilsky and Ryan, 2009, who ultimately find a possible relation between agency, autonomy and competence. They hypothesizes that violence does not make a game better, as long as players feel a sense of autonomy

and competence. Their results support the hypothesis, with an added insight: players with a history of aggression tend to prefer violent games, provided that the two factors above are accounted for. This study directly supports my summer research, where I found out that violence was not necessarily the deciding factor of a game, but something more.

Indeed, agency seems to be the underpinning factor that motivates and attracts video gamers in the first place. The existing literature provides numerous theories on explaining the motivation to play video games. Of particular notice for my research is the self-determination theory. This theory asserts that humans possess three basic intrinsic needs that are vital to psychological well-being: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Tamborini et al., 2011) It is the fulfillment of these intrinsic needs that drive people to play video games. Autonomy is the perception that our behaviors are directed by us alone and are not subjected to outside influence; competence is simply the desire to feel that one is capable and has talents; relatedness define the need to feel close to important "others" (Tamborini et al., 2011) This directly supports earlier findings that violence do not account for satisfaction in video games (Przybylski et al, 2012) Instead, it is a sense of autonomy and competence that accounts for the motivation for playing video games.

These intrinsic needs are another way to define and categorize agency, since autonomy, competence and relatedness all relate back to the capacity to take action in a world. How do these intrinsic needs play a role in attracting and motivating gamers? Two studies have shown that enjoyment of video games are indeed related to need satisfaction (Tamborini et al., 2011) Another research lends support to this by specifying that enjoyment depends on the satisfaction of both intrinsic and extrinsic needs (Tamborini et al., 2010) The two studies agree in principles. The only differences are that the researchers have each time discovered different variables that

influence need satisfaction and enjoyment. Different characteristics of video games such as interactivity (Tamborini et al., 2011), co-playing and natural mapping (Tamborini et al., 2010) all contribute to video games enjoyment. Of particular notice, interactivity seems to heighten the intensity of need satisfaction. This goes along with earlier literature review that suggests that the more immersive a video is, the more the player feels in control, which, for my research purposes, enhances their sense of agency.

These intrinsic needs are another way to define and categorize agency, since autonomy, competence and relatedness all relate back to the capacity to take action in a world. Again, this would hint at the idea that agency is the motivating element in video games. To explain why intrinsic need satisfaction are important to video game players, Przybylski et al. suggest that this is due to the discrepancy between the ideal self and the actual self (2012) According to the authors, video games allow players to experience the ideal self that are unavailable in real life. Their research supports the idea that the more players feel disconnected with their ideal self in real life, the more satisfaction they gain from playing video games. This supports the earlier literature on "identity cruising" that claims that people play video games to try on different identities. Przybylski et al. (2010) have shed light on this by proposing that the identities people experiment with in the virtual world might actually represent their ideal self.

This last point is the missing link to the question: "Why do people seek agency in video games in the first place?" As the above study suggests, this might be due to the fact that individuals perceive a lack of agency in their own actual lives, and thus they have to seek it elsewhere. Namely, in the virtual world of video games where agency is made obtainable through many means, of which violence is the most popular. Furthermore, agency is closely related to the "ideal self" that each individual aspire to become. This has particular sociological significance.

On one hand, it implies that modern society can alienate individuals with their ideal self. On the other hand, societal values also serve to determine what an individual's ideal self can, or should be. Here we observe the discrepancy of the modern society in an interesting paradox: it provides and promotes the image of idealized self, but does not provide an actual venue through which individuals can reach their aspiration. Instead, they rediscover their ideal self in video games, the parallel fiction universe of the real world.

Role-playing in Modern Video Game: An Examination of the World of Skyrim

To better understand the experience of modern video gaming, it is necessary to understand the essential characteristics of modern video games. With state-of-the-art technology and the recent trend towards a media experience as immersive for the consumers as it can be, video game developers have focused exclusively on creating games that reconstruct the world with as much authenticity as possible. Striking visuals, interactive game-play and narratives that "suck you in" (an award on Gamespot for games that have particularly attractive storyline) are the hallmarks of video game in the last couple of years, and the standards by which new games are being judged. Thus, it is imperative that a close case study of the new video games is conducted to properly assert how the logics and elements of video games are able to produce a sense of agency, which often comprises of competence, autonomy and relatedness (Tamborini, Grizzard, Bowman, Reinecke, Lewis, & Eden, Defining Media Enjoyment as the Satisfaction of Intrinsic Needs, 2010).

One such game that embodies the "ideal" video game is the role-playing game *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*. Skyrim receives a score of 9.0 on Gamespotby both critics and over 2900 users. The highest score ever given for any game on Gamespot is 9.1 for Rome: Total War in 2004. It is

attributed with emblems such as "Sucks you in", "Get more than your money's worth", "Great Sequel", "Great Story", "Outstanding Visuals Design", "Variety" and "Better than the sum of its parts". Just these awards alone give us an insight on what the qualities of an outstanding game are. As Gamespot puts it, "The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is the big, bold, and beautiful sequel you hoped for and is sure to bewitch you for countless hours". On IGN, Skyrim wins a similar award with an IGN rating of 9.5 (excellent) and community rating of 9.4. According to the official website of Bethesda Software, the game's developer and publisher, as of the year of 2012, Skyrim has sold 10 million copies with a sales record of 620 million US dollars, bringing it to the best selling game since its release (along with a first-person shooter game Call of Duty).

This incredible popularity alone should already draw scholarly attention for those who wish to explore the virtual world of video games, yet Skyrim has another distinctive feature that makes itself the ideal case study for the purpose of this research. Skyrim is a role-playing game, a genre of game that allows the players to adopt the role of an in-game character and literally lead their lives in the game's virtual world. Unlike action or sport games that emphasize action, role-playing games appeal to its audience by creating an immersive environment that the player can freely explore, and an intriguing narrative that serves as the general plotline and raison-d'être for the game characters. As the latest trend dictates, successful role-playing games are often non-linear. This means that there is no definite outcome or conclusion to the game. Instead, the player's choices and actions will determine how his own story in the game unfold, including his background, allegiances, adversaries and sometimes, even romances.

Thanks to this specific nature, role-playing games are often the most immersive and interactive of all game genres, as it's evident by the hugely popular World of Warcraft and the rise of other online role-playing games. Among recent role-playing titles, Skyrim certainly stands out

as the prime candidate for closer inspection. Named as the "Best role-playing game of the year" by IGN, it combines all the aforementioned elements of role-playing game with state-of-the-art visual technology, providing a visual world that is as authentic as it is interactive. The non-linear characteristic is also tremendously enhanced, due to the fact that there is no specific order to the different narratives provided in the game, apart from a short introduction sequence that lasts for approximately 30 minutes, compared to the total time needed to finish the game of over 500 hours, it is safe to say that the gaming experience of each gamer will be as unique as his imagination allows, or even more.

Although this might be an extreme case of a highly well-done role-playing game, it is nonetheless significant to the goals of this particular research. Since the topic to be investigated is masculine identity development in video games, it is necessary to investigate a game that provides gamers with as much agency as virtually possible. The fact that Skyrim has achieved record sale and its popularity illustrate the need for a detail scrutiny with a sociological perspective. Indeed, a similar study has been done on a prequel to Skyrim. Hayes conducted a case study of two women playing Morrowind, the third in the series, while Skyrim is the fifth. In addition to the element of agency, Skyrim is, in nature, a militaristic game, and this gives me a **necessary bias.** Since I am exploring the hypothesis that video gaming is more about agency than about violence, choosing a non-violent video game would negatively bias my findings since the elements of violence will be minimized. If, on the other hand, I can conclude that people are minimizing violence in a militaristic game, then that would certainly suggest that there is more than violence at play here.

Poster for The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim

Skyrim is the fifth sequel of the famous series The Elder Scrolls. Named after Skyrim, the harsh and snow-covered land in the North of the Empire, where the main story takes place, the game revolves around the return of the Dragon of legendsand the Dragonborn, which is gradually revealed to be the player's character. At the very first impression, one can quickly recognize that the game draws heavily on the theme of ancient Vikings and Celtic cultures, the object of much historical enthusiasm and romanticism. The welcoming screen, the background image, the music and the game language all reflect a Celtic ambiance. Indeed, Routh who is a total newcomer to the game, during the first few minutes asks "Are we in Scandinavia?"As the game starts, the loading screen changes to depict an imposing black dragon on top of a stone throne. These initial elements have the incredible effects of drawing in the gamers at the very start, through the use of the most iconic figure in fantasy and video games: dragon. The somber back-

ground and mysterious quote also serve to highlight a sense of intensity that affects player on an emotional level.

These introductory elements transit smoothly and directly into the game's world as the story starts and the player finds himself as a prisoner on a wooden carriage slowly trekking through a forest path on a winter day. The first control the player is given is the camera control, which simulates the character's eyes and vision in game. As the character looks around he can locate the other game characters: a Stormcloak soldier, a horse thief and Jarl Ulfric, the leader of the rebellion. The rapport with the game world is established an instant later as the supporting characters start talking to the players and among themselves. Through these interactions the player very quickly learn about the setting of the world around him, the major events and the most important figures. Skyrim is plunged into a rebellion, led by the traditionalist Stormcloaks led by Ulfric Stormcloak against the Imperials commanded by General Tulius. The reference to the Roman conquest era is visibly observable here. This direct and straightforward introduction to the game allows the player to effortlessly grasp the story of the game in a highly immersive, innovative way. As Francis put it, "I really like this intro scene. It really draws you in and you learn all you need to know about what happens in the game".

As the player is led to the chopping block, he is now given the option to create his character—the most important and most personifying aspect of role-playing game—that serves as his avatar in the virtual world. As the game customization menu opens up, the player is presented with endless options to create his character. He can choose from seven different races in the game, each with a full range of customization from hair style to cheekbone height. A model of the character is now visible—the first time the player gets to see how his character, or more pre-

cisely, he looks like in the game—and is constantly updated as the player customizes the facial features, body type and other elements of appearance.

The revolutionary aspect with this character creation process is that the choices given to the player allow him to totally create a character that is distinctively representative to him. The seven races provide adequate racial representation: the Nord represents Scandinavian people, Breton are French or other Frankish people, Redguard for Middle-Eastern Asia or African American, High Elves or Dark Elves are slightly based off Asian people. Aside from these humanoid races, Argonians are reptile characters and Khajitts are cat-like humanoids, allowing the players the possibilities to play as a half-man, half-animal race. This significant feature undeniably favors the identification process mentioned earlier and stays away from the overrepresentation of any particular race as the early literature suggests. If players can perceive that the game is representative of their own background, it would further enhance enjoyment and immersion.

The result is an entirely unique avatar that is personal to the player. What's more, this process is entirely autonomous, and the player is completely free to choose whatever he wants to be in the game without any constraint. Indeed, this customization feature literally allows the player to choose how to be "born" or what to be in the world, a choice that does not exist in real life. Indeed, this unique choice will prove to be the most tell-tale factor of the player's sense of agency in the virtual world, as I will discuss later. After all, if you can control how you look like and who you are, is that not agency and total control?

Shortly after creating and giving a name—by which you will be referred to directly throughout the game—to his character, the player is driven to the chopping block, where, right before being decapitated, a dragon appears out of nowhere and total chaos ensues, thus allowing

the player and other prisoners to escape. This 3 minutes hasty escape from the dragon is the only scripted sequence in the game during which the player is forced to act in a certain way, but it ends quickly as the player is given two choices: whether to follow a Stormcloak or an Imperial to escape. Whoever the player follows will persuade him to join his respective side, however the player has no obligation to do so and can still opt to follow the opposite side, or to remain neutral. This is an intriguing development in game script-writing. A choice influences how game characters react to the player, but not necessarily irreversible in deciding the outcome of the game. On one hand this engages the player by giving him the illusion of a dilemma. On the other hand it gives him agency by assuring that he is, in a way, in total control of his actions and can deal with the consequences.

The Game's Parameters

After deciding whom to go with into a keep, the player is now given total control of the character. The first and probably the most immersive element is the camera perspective. The player can opt to play the game from a first person perspective, where his vision replicates real-life vision, meaning only his arms and parts of his legs will be visible, while peripheral vision is restricted. Alternatively, he can adopt the third-person perspective, which offers a different immersive experience and better situational awareness. In this mode, the player is able to view his entire character and his surroundings, as if he is standing right next to his game character. These different perspective can be switched back and forth immediately with a button. The combined visual and immersive effects of these two perspectives are of vital importance in creating the gaming experience.

Secondly, the character can interact with virtually any object in the virtual world mostly through the use of one single button. Depending on the situation or the nature of the object, the player can decide to talk to a character, search a container, loot a body, harvest alchemical ingredients, pick locks, open/close door etc. Most of the actions are mutually exclusive, so confusion is eliminated. This mechanic not only smoothes the game's progress but also gives a sense of authenticity to the gaming world, as all objects, no matter how significant, can be interacted with in one way or another. This feature gradually takes away the illusion of a virtual or "fake" world and instead makes the game feel more authentic and engaging. For example, Routh tries to pick up any usable object in the dungeon to explore their uses, including a lantern to help illuminate the dark. Without a doubt, the ability to interact with any object directly increases the gamer's agency, because it enhances his capacity to take action in the gaming world.

Thirdly, the combat system—the center of most video games—is streamlined for maximized control and comfort but still offers plenty of options and varieties. Depends on the weapons combinations of the player, the use of the three mouse buttons will dictate how the character blocks, attacks, fire projectiles etc. Almost any characters in the game can be attacked, although different characters will have different responses to the provocation depending on the standing of the player. Again, this fact that the player can take action on other characters and thereby be affected by them in return enhances his agency and identification with the game character.

Supporting characters in the games are as fundamental as the player's avatar itself, and can either support or hinder him. Characters can be merchants who will either buy from or sell items to the player, enemies who will try to eliminate him, quest givers who direct the players to objectives, guards who keep order in the towns/villages, or companions who will fight by the

player's side. Some companions can even be married and become the player's spouse. Most characters have a distinct voice-acting and personality with endless dialogue options depending on the situations, giving them an authentic existence in an otherwise virtual environment. Supporting characters play a central role in game in the sense that it creates a virtual society. Many characters are also archetypical, represents a strong personality that the gamer himself can relate to. Indeed, it is common for young gamers to have role models who are game characters. They represent an ideal and a way of life, without the constraint and scrutiny imposed upon them by actual society.

All the above elements are seamlessly linked together through a system of narratives, or "quest" to guide the player through the game to give it content, and the different outcomes provided by each quest results in the non-linear, multi-directional nature of Skyrim. For each quest/objective, the player can consult a menu that gives a brief description of the background and what needs to be done, as well as an objective marker that guides the player to the target location. While for most role-playing game, the completion and following of quests are essential to the gaming experience, in Skyrim none of the quests, be it primary or secondary, is optional. Choosing to accomplish the quest is entirely at the player's discretion. Alternatively, players can choose to roam freely through the world of Skyrim and accomplish objectives as they see fit. With over 200 quests, this non-linear model ensures that the Skyrim experience varies immensely from one person to the next.

Observation and Discussion of the Skyrim Experience

Character Creation: Who Will I Be in Skyrim?

The first and most important choice in the entire game Skyrim is how you want your character—your personal avatar in the virtual gaming world—to be. The character creation panel, as mentioned before, allows a thorough, complete customization of your character. With the myriad of options available to them, each gamer can, and does, create an avatar that is unique to him.

Character Creation Window for Skyrim

Race is the first decision in the character creation process, followed by facial features, skin tones, hair styles, tattoos and scars. The default race is Nord, which is the native race of Skyrim and often portrayed as the protagonists of the game. For this reason, almost all of the participants have played as Nord at least once in their previous experience with Skyrim. As J puts it "they have the resistance to the elements of the land, and this is their homeland, so you kind of

feel the most welcome". Interestingly, not all participants choose Nord as their race for this play-through. Two (out of four) players choose to play as Orc, a beast-like race that favors skills at arms and martial prowess. They are also a fantasy race not based on humans.

Character creation seems to take two distinct, but not necessarily mutually exclusive, tendencies. This insight well observed by one of the participants himself. R said: "In video games, people have a tendency to create a character that personifies them in real life, but I like to make one that is completely different to who I am". Indeed, this tendency is well illustrated in the fact that both R and J choose Orc, which is a popular race in fantasy yet non-existent in real life. In particular, Francis chose a horsehair hair style—bald head with a single long crest of hair running from forehead to back of the head—for his Orc avatar. When asked about his decision, he answered: "because I always want to try this hairstyle out for myself, but in real life I cannot. Here however I can do whatever I want". Similarly, Routh chose to play as an Argonian, a human-lizard hybrid. "Because I like lizards," he said.

This tendency to allow character choices that are not possible to the player himself in actual life speaks highly of the agency factor in Skyrim. First, it is already remarkable that in this virtual world, the player gets to choose *who they are and how they look like*, options that are not available for them in real life. The desire to be whoever you want to be is largely constricted by social pressure and norms. "I can't have this hairstyle if I go to work" said R as an example. When presented with an option to try out a virtual life that is more or less as authentic as actual life itself, players like R are eager to try out a new experience with creating a new virtual self. If agency is defined as the human capacity for action (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998), then the capacity to adopt a new identity, albeit virtual, is arguably a strong expression of agency.

In a parallel sense, players can also choose to make a character that personifies their own self-image. Del picked a Redguard, a highly athletic race with high stamina regeneration. Being a martial artist and a personal trainer, this choice of race clearly reflects on his own aspiration. The tendency is replicated in his choice of bald hairstyle, closely resemble his shaven head. Interestingly, he also put scars on his character. When inquired, he responded: "I would personally like to have a scar, but that would not be easy in real life". Scars in actual life would undoubtedly come with negative implications of danger and violence. "I like my character to be like Kratos in the God of War game", he said. Kratos is the God of War in another game, with a bald head a scar on his left eye, an epitome of strength and aggression. Obviously, Del had established a strong connection with such character so as to reconstruct him in another game. This again links to the above idea that game characters can be adopted as role models.

As an interesting middle ground, Mac chose to create a character that would "represent who I would like to be in Skyrim had I been born in Skyrim". He chose to create a Nord character, a native of Skyrim. "I believe in their cause and I believe that they deserve to have their own land. I am willing to fight for that cause. They are also proud and honorable, qualities that I highly value myself". Here, we see that the gamer is using his own personal values to reconstruct himself in a different environment. "I want him to look like he has been through a lot but has managed to survived". These are all militaristic values favored by the game's narrative. Here we can see how the character creation is affected by the context of the game itself. According to self-identification theory, it is possible that a desire to identify himself with a certain group that shares his values is what motivated Mac's choices for his character creation.

Throughout the observations, the unique experiences and characters that the players create are distinctive enough to allow for the creation of four different personalities in Skyrim:

Francis impersonates *the noble bandit*. Del plays the ***ruthless mercenary.*** Mac adopts the role of the ***honorable and faithful freedom fighter.*** Lastly, Routh is ***the lizard explorer***.

Supporting Characters: The Virtual Society of Skyrim

It is clear from the process of character creation and the interaction between gamers and the virtual world that the supporting characters (namely, every characters in the game that are not the player's character) serve as crucial interactive bridges between the virtual and the actual world. By this, I mean that they serve as representatives of certain ideals and viewpoints that the gamer can choose from. In sociological terms, these supporting characters replace real life primary support group, or peer group. Just from the beginning the game clearly represents two different factions with distinct characteristics and goals. The Empire represents the heavy-handed government of a multiracial empire in a time of strife, while the Stormcloaks represents the nationalistic freedom fighters willing to sacrifice everything for freedom and independence. The stance the player takes in relation to these two factions strongly influences their experience in the game.

Indeed, for Mac *the honorable freedom fighter*, following the ideals of the Nord is central to his masculine identity in Skyrim as it strongly reflects his personal values. Mac himself chose a Nord because "I like Jarl Ulfric and Ralof. They are both tall, proud and loyal. I want to fight for them". Interestingly, Mac homed in on the masculine qualities of the characters: "Ulfric is taller and more confident, even though he is about to be executed. Also, he has the loyalty of his men. They are ready to die for him. Tulius might be in the dominant position, but his men are not so dedicated. Haggard was reluctant to kill me even though he was ordered by Tulius".Mac seems to value physical confidence through height and posture, as well as leadership capabilities.

Life circumstances are apparently not that important to him, since he clearly favors Ulfric even though Ulfric was in a submissive position while looking down on Tulius despite his high status.

This personalitybears some resemblance with the hegemonic masculinity promoted in mainstream media, but without the violence. However, it is more in line with the militaristic values as promoted in the US Marines Corps, for example. The central values here are not just power and dominance, as Mac clearly rejected, but rather strength of character and loyalty to an ideal and to your brothers in arms. The strong man does not fight for himself, but for a greater cause. In this case, it is for freedom, independence and the safety of your comrades. Leadership is at the heart of this identity, as it serves as the inspiration to bring men together and to ensure their loyalty. It is possible that the militaristic nature of the game promotes this type of masculinity, as the setting is highly militarized from the beginning. However, it is also arguable that the masculine values inherent in the player (Mac) himself is given an ideal environment to blossom in Skyrim. As discussed before, the virtual gaming world allows for opportunity that is not normally available in real life. Mac might not have joined the military for practical reasons, but it is entirely possible that his values are in line with the militaristic values of the Marines Corps.

Francis, *the noble bandit*, on the other hand takes a more neutral stance on the issue, yet without compromising his own values. In the same execution scene, Francis commented that "Yeah, I understand the Empire goals that they need to keep order in Skyrim and that's not bad. But I don't like how the Empire goes about doing this. They bind Ulfric's mouth so that he could not speak and defend himself. Not very nice". Francis is adopting a well-informed opinion based on presented facts, without favoring any side. He weighted both the strengths and weaknesses of the Empire. In this case, it is the duty of government versus a heavy handed method. That is not to say however, that Francis let his judgment of others to compromise his own safety. When de-

ciding who to flee with, he chose to go with the rebel. "I could have gone with either, but seeing as they (the Empire) were about to kill me, they probably will still kill me anyway, so I'll go with this guy instead".

From such observation it is clear that the gamers continually perceive and process the masculine identity presented in the game throughout their own experience. Mac and Francis each has distinctive values, but they certainly incorporate it into their character creation and into their perception of other game characters. Just in this regard, masculinity in video gaming is a significant factor, and it does not necessarily incorporate violence. As seen above, Mac admires strength of character and leadership in the leading characters Ulfric and Tulius, while Francis even dislikes violence in the way the Empire treats its prisoners. This is what leads to the distinctions and variations between the two styles.

The choice of perspective

Among the first choices the player has to make is which perspective to use. All players decisively opt for the first-person perspective, as this "is more immersive"(Francis). The effects of this first-person perspective as an element of immersion particularly shines in combat situations, which are the centerpiece of most video games, Skyrim included. The experience is more or less a simulation of actual combat re-enactment, meaning player will thus have to rely on his virtual combat experience and reflexes to maneuver. For example, the camera will shake heavily and a blurring effect will occur that clouds the in-game vision, to simulate a concussion. When the player receives or deals damage to an opponent, particles of blood will be sprayed all over the screen for extra visual details. "It's like you really are in combat, you can see your blood on the screen" said R. A crosshair is permanently situated in the middle of the screen to better assist

the player with aiming, locating and interacting with objects. This militaristic element makes it "easier to aim and attack", said Mac. These elements are all complemented with coordinated sound effects to construct the most authentic and most immersive gaming experience. In the words of J, it "feels more real and you have the sense that someone is really attacking you". Similarly, Routh was surprised when he was drawing a sword: "Wow, it really feels like I am drawing a real sword".

An example of the first person camera

Arguably the first-person perspective offers a highly interactive gaming experience as it tries to replicate the actual perceptive abilities of real actions. The avatar's actions become the player's action, and what happens to it literally happens to him. Thus, the player gradually builds a deep connection and identification with his avatar as he slowly and subconsciously digests this concept. As this connection develops, the player perceives a heightened sense of agency, since the actions are perceived to be authentic and that he is consumed in the situation the avatar itself

is in. However, this sense of agency is further heightened with the fact that the player can also experience actions that are normally forbidden in real life due to social constraint. Suffices to say that this is the closest one can get to actually reenact ancient combat techniques without violating the norms of society.

An alternative to the first-person perspective is the third-person perspective, which offers a different immersive experience and better situational awareness. In this mode, the player is able to view his entire character and his surroundings, as if he is standing right next to his game character. Instead of viewing the game through his character eyes, the player observes the game with his avatar situated at the central of the screen. The vision is much less restricted as the player is given full view of the area around his character, including objects that are behind his avatar. In the first-person perspective he would have to turn to see this. This invariably means that during combat, the player is more aware of enemies' or allies' maneuvers,

Although most of the immersive elements granted in the first-person perspective are preserved in the third-person perspective, some differences persist. On one hand, the player could not see or feel the intensity of an imminent attack or the restrictive vision of cowering behind a shield. On the other hand, the player can now fully see how his avatar moves and performs actions: how his stance changes to adopt a guard posture, how he reaches up to deliver an overhead blow, how he reaches behind his back for a quiver of arrow etc. As J puts it, "It's nice to see your character entirely, but I still prefer the first-person for the effects".

An example of the third person perspective

For such reasons, this third-person perspective gives a different type of connection and identification with the avatar than what the first-person perspective does. If the latter gives a full visual and audio description of the experience, it cannot make up for the fact that the actual human body can feel what is happening to it. In other words, the player is unable to feel how his entire body reacted to the action. In the third person perspective, however, the player at least gets a visual sense of how his avatar is reacting to the game. Mac commented that "it's cool to watch your character animations sometimes, but sometimes the animations are really bad".

The fact that the player can freely transition between these two perspectives means that he can earns the full benefits afforded by both. This is done by most players on a highly regular basis to adapt to different game situations. "This is easier for navigation", said Mac when using the third-person perspective. Del also uses it for moving around, but switches back to first-person for combat. The result is a stronger immersion than any single perspective can provide.

From what I have observed, it is apparent that the choice perspective reinforces agency through authentic and immersive reproduction of reality on the superficial level. The player experiences the authenticity of the actions, thus feeling in control and "being there". There are instances where the players' remarks indicate an enjoyment of the violence (such as blood spraying on the screen). However, as Prybilsky et al. (2009) suggested, this is possible only when agency is already accounted for. In other words, if the game wasn't able to produce a realistic immersion, the players might not have enjoyed the violence as much because it would feel inauthentic.

Play style: Negotiating masculinity in Skyrim

It would appear that most of the immersive elements above are combat-related, which would support the old claim that video games are enjoyable because they are violent. This, however, is not accurate because it's what the players choose to do with such combat that speaks about their personality and identity development.

A few of the players do go with the traditional route of hacking their way through their opponents. Del, ***the ruthless mercenary*** stated that "I want to become a sell sword (the term for mercenary). That's why I followed the Imperial guy into the keep because he probably has the most money". In contrast, Mac followed the rebel and told the imperial "you are Imperial, no one like you". Again, the player's alliances early in game speak volumes about their gender identity. One cares only about his own profits while the other follows an ideal. They both prefer direct combat with close-combat weapons, although Del likes to use two small swords in each hand while Mac "I fight with a two-handed weapon when possible". Although their methods are similar, their motives are different. Del does it "because I'm a mercenary", while Mac does it "because the Nords fight with honor and courage". These are two distinctly different aspects of the

same concept of violence. One is personal freedom and liberation from all moral constraints, while the other is aspiration to uphold the moral values of society that an individual deems worthwhile. Thus, morality in this context can be both liberating and constricting, depending on the perspective of the player. While the ruthless mercenary may view morality as burdens, the honorable warrior considers it the foundation of existence and a cause worth fighting and dying for.

Francis on the other hand, prefers quite a distinct approach. "I like to use stealth, play as a thief. It's less messy, keeps you away from danger, and avoids confrontation when possible". Francis actually makes an effort to stay away from combat as much as possible. Interestingly, he also shies away from looting dead body. After the player kills an enemy in game, he has the option to take their equipment. This is something that every participant does without any hesitation. However, Francis said "I don't like to search the dead, it's wrong and disrespectful. I'm just gonna take what I need and leave the rest alone". Here we see an interesting dynamic of gamer bringing in his own morality into the game, which earns Francis the play style *the noble bandit.* Why is it that he feels compelled to exert morality even when it is not actively reinforced by any external force? There is no penalty whatsoever for looting copses in-game, and all other players do this freely, except for Francis. This could be argued either way. On one hand, we can say that Francis's values are so strong and autonomous that they are able to operate on its own without the mechanics of discipline and punish promoted by Foucault. On the other hand, it is also possible that the player has deeply internalized the acceptable behaviors promoted by society that the "oppressors/masters" do not need to be present to ensure that the subject will behave well (Foucault, 1995).

Yet we also have a particularly independent play style, ***the lizard explorer,*** expressed by Routh who is totally unfamiliar with the game. Unlike any other player, Routh does not jump right into the storyline, but spends countless time exploring the mechanics of the game. He searches each corner of the room for every item that could be taken or be of use, despite the supporting character urging him to move on. "I feel like in a large game like this, things are there for a reasons, and I'm supposed to explore them", said Routh. Instead of being drawn to combat, Routh got excited when presented with a puzzle of how to pick a lock in Skyrim. Here, we even see a form of resistance against the hegemonic masculinity norms imposed by the game. This pattern of resistance against socially imposed gender roles is not uncommon in actual society, and here we observe its intriguing replication. It is clear that, for Routh, the game has successfully created a vast and complex world that the focus on violence is complimentary. This expansion of choices or opportunity structure is a fundamental element of identity exploring in recent video games. Likewise, this possibility for a peaceful play style like this is a proof that it is possible for non-violent gamer like Routh to circumvent the violent agenda propagated in video games.

Discussion

It is perhaps not surprising that in one single video game, during the same game sequence, four different players have four totally distinct play styles. Video games, and in this case Skyrim, might be militaristic and has many violent components, but within the game parameters the players are allowed a large degree of freedom to do as they wish. Each of the gamershasan unique way of navigating the game's parameters which results in distinctive experience.

What is of particular notice here is that each gamer incorporates their values and senses of morality into the games, independent of the game's messages. Even though the game pro-

motes a certain militaristic play style that involves much violence, the participants here show a remarkable ability to lead his own experience to suit his own values and character. While Del enjoys the violence aspect more than most, Mac accepts it as an evil necessity while focusing on the values of camaraderie, independence, leadership and honor. Francis manages to find a play style that minimizes violence as much as possible, while Routh seems to disregard it altogether. This is a new trend in video games: gamers now have the choice of deciding how much violence they would participate in, and in what way it would be carry out.

Although the implication that gamers actively incorporate their morality into the video gaming experience is observed in this study, it is still limited somewhat due to the fact that the game itself is biased toward certain militaristic values. This is an intended sampling error from the start, since I intend to observe the dynamics of masculinity in a video game that promotes hegemonic masculinity. Nevertheless, the fact that despite the militaristic nature of the game, two out of four participants still manages to minimize or even avoid violence altogether is re-markable. The logical next step would then be to ask what dynamics of self expression would be found in other video games which are value-neutral and which allow players to freely create their own virtual environment without any biased or preconceived agenda?

The technology of the games has thus outrun the traditional literature: gamers are no longer forced to play a game where they do not have a choice in how to conduct themselves. They simply not a blank slate that passively digest the messages and agendas of video games. It is also possible to avoid or diminish violence altogether, so violence can be reduced to comple-mentary influence in a game that promotes a certain degree of violence. That is a far cry from the early video games that only allows players to perform certain violent actions. Even though some modern video games do still follow this trend, it is necessary to remember that gamers have the

option of walking away. Indeed, many non-violent gamers do not enjoy violent video games and avoid them altogether, while gamers with a tendency for violent drift more toward violent video games (Prybilsky & Ryan, 2009).

Conclusion

In the study of video games and gender, it is certain that the dynamics of gender and self identity in games are much more complicated than what the content can show. These elements of self-expressions in video games are buried deep within multiple layers of the game structure, and only become apparent during the gaming process. Thus, a move away from the focus on content and instead toward the experiential process of video gaming is an appropriate direction for future research. Although this is certainly an area that requires more research, scholars are quickly reacting to the changes. This might herald a new phase of understanding of video game and its sociological values.

Saying « video game makes people more violent » is an over-simplification. It is almost equivalent to saying that being born into America guarantees that you will be killed in a gun-fight. Although it is undeniable that violence does exist in video games, it is no longer inevitable. Modern technology and new knowledge have led to video games that could reconstruct a virtual society with plenty of choices, possibility and variations for the consumers. These elements al-low the gamer to experience a sense of agency that is both novel and reflexive. On one hand, this newfound virtual agency lets the gamer try on different masculine identities that are otherwise unavailable to them in real life, due to social constraints. This identity exploration enables the gamer to better assert themselves in an unfamiliar, albeit virtual social environment. They may be exposed to new situations that would challenge their perceived sense of self. On the other

hand, this agency simply reinforces their established values and moralities. The freedom of video game allows gamers to participate in situations where they can pursue their personal goals and values without any limit. Such situations, as this study has described, include joining a rebellion to free his homeland and his people, setting one's self free to become a soldier of fortune, becoming an apolitical, peaceful vagabond, or exploring a new world with simple curiosity.

Thus, it should be made clear that the average consumers of video games are not simple identity blank slates. Instead, these are individuals with unique life experiences and personal values, and they bring this personal baggage with them into the world of video game. The more modern and agnostic the game, the more it allows gamers to incorporate their values and morality into the game. Accordingly, I believe that video game is simply a neutral venue of self-expression. Gamers use video games as a means to express themselves, their desires and their values in an alternate virtual society. If anything, video game gives players more choices and a closer connection to their ideal self.

This reflexivity in video game is of particular significance for video games or virtual societies that are neutral in nature and that do not promote any particular values, instead allowing the gamers to freely recreate his desired virtual experience. *Second Life* for example, is a virtual video game that redesigns societies in its most literal sense. Here, gamers are not bound by any chronological or spatial constraints, and are thus able to participate in a virtual medieval European society or a modern Arabic metropolitan. The opportunities for gender expression and exploration are thus endless. Furthermore, this also increases the gamer's exposure to the *other*. They would be able to virtually experience cultures and practices that are alien to them. An American teenager would possibly see China, its people and its culture in this video game before he has a chance to see the country in real life. A disabled man would be able to experience the

life of a martial artist through the computer screen. Although these experiences are unauthentic, it is hard to refute that video games and virtual societies significantly expand the individual's cultural exposure and life experiences. As much video games are as an agent of socialization, they are also a force for cultural diversification and expansion.

This reflexivity in video games mirrors the changes in actual life. As modernization and globalization steadily progress, the individual has more chances to see himself in the eye of *the other* (Anthony Giddens, 1991). This not only exposes him to other experiences, but also allows him to develop a reflexive view of himself through the experience and identity of an *other*. This looking-glass self is the center of self-identity in the modern age (Giddens, 1991). It would appear that reflexivity is an undersold element in video games, since they might be the most proactive media in promoting the identity exploration and cultural expansion. This is certainly a new area of focus for future research on video game.

With video game being a constantly updated and renovated media, there is a promise that future developments in video game technology will spark even more discussion on the gender and identity dynamics than ever. Indeed, game developers are trying to outdo each other in creating the most authentic and fulfilling experiences in the virtual world. Thus, the average gamer will be presented with a plethora of diverse and overwhelming messages on his identity development, through the virtual gaming experience. Given the reflexive nature of the self in the modern world, the new era of information technology might yield the most intriguing questions in the concept of self and self development. The literature would do well to make sure that it is not left behind by the technology, lest these existential issues elude us as people seek new experiences in the virtual world.

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Appendix: Game Number, Name and Rating

Game Number	Game Name	Game Rating
1	Alan Wake's American Nightmare	7.0
2	Batman: Arkham City - Harley Quinn's Revenge	6.5
3	Mad Riders	5.5
4	Dragon's Dogma	8.0
5	Resistance: Burning Skies	5.5
6	Dragon's Lair	4.0
7	Battleship	3.5
8	DiRT Showdown	8.0
9	Resident Evil: Operation Raccoon City	4.0
10	Diablo III	8.5
11	Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon: Future Soldier	7.5
12	Akai Katana	8.0
13	Game of Thrones	7.0
14	TERA	7.5
15	Max Payne 3	9.0
16	Awesomenauts	8.0
17	Datura	4.0
18	Street Fighter X Tekken	8.0
19	Starhawk	7.5
20	Fireburst	5.0

21	Risen 2: Dark Waters	7.0
22	Lone Survivor	8.5
23	Mortal Kombat	8.0
24	Sniper Elite V2	6.0