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Angry in Pink: Representation of Women in Video Games in the *Infamous* franchise (2009-2014)

Abstract. It is still common for video games to be classified as a predominantly male pastime. Five years after #GamerGate, women and non-binary people still meet with the harassment, sexism, and aggressive behavior (Fox and Tang 2017) and in mainstream games the number of male characters still overshadows the number of female playable characters. While the non-binary and transgender characters are hardly ever present, women characters are often pigeonholed as a narrative tool, mostly as a trope of “Damsel in Distress”, that is a victim whose death is to be avenged or the heterosexual love interest (Ivory 2006, Beck et al. 2012, Huntemann 2014). The parallels can be drawn between the over-sexualization of the playable action protagonists in digital games (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro 2009) and the disagreement over overt expressions of female masculinity in society (Halberstam 1998). Drawing on Halberstam’s work I will offer an analysis of Fetch, a protagonist of *Infamous First Light* (2014) — a standalone additional content to a video game franchise developed by Sucker Punch Productions.

Keywords: *Infamous First Light*, female masculinity, representation, gender stereotypes, video game representation

The perception of what identifies a “gamer” changes slowly: video games are still assumed to be played in majority by teenage boys, even though reports and surveys have systematically been revealing it not to be true (Shaw 2011). With over one billion people playing online games worldwide, the number of female-identified gamers currently fluctuates between 38% and 48% (Yee 2017). However, the substantial problems arise around the “gamer” identity label due to the misogynistic, sexist, often overtly aggressive and violent online behavior of those identifying as “hardcore-” or “core gamers”, who continue to be “white, middle-class, heterosexual, technologically competent, so-

cially isolated, and violence-oriented masculine subject” (Harvey and Fisher 2014, 580; Todd 2015, 64), making it difficult for women and non-binary people to feel comfortable and, in result, refuse the label of a gamer whatsoever (Shaw 2011). The idea of “the hegemony of play” (Fron et al. 2007) suggests that the underrepresentation of other genders in the industry correlates with the image of an ideal imagined player as well the homogeneity of in-game representation of characters, both of who reflect the aforementioned profile. While the racial and sexual minorities begin to gain more recognition, it still often occurs in the context of marketing — LGBTQ gamers are assumed to be interested primarily in queer narratives and tend to be omitted in the creation of the mainstream storylines (Shaw 2011). Although not a minority, female-identified players are still often perceived as a substantial minority of those who play games.

The toxic behaviors of some gaming communities have been brought to light in 2014 as a result of a controversy known under the Twitter hashtag #GamerGate, which was widely used to harass and threaten several women in the game industry and journalism. With the initial and biggest backlash targeting the feminist game critic Anita Sarkeesian and game designer Zoe Quinn (Mortensen 2018, 789), it eventually spread to game studies, targeting feminist game scholars (Chess and Shaw 2015, 208). The controversy sparked multiple discussions and allowed both the researchers and the game creators to engage in the discussion about inclusivity, representation, and the toxic hypermasculinity associated with a “male hardcore gamer” persona. Mia Consalvo commented on the event that “[i]ronically, Gamergate will help create more knowledge” (Straumsheim, 2014), and it certainly raised awareness and sparked discussions aiming at creating more inclusive gaming spaces but it also pointed out harmful effects of the stereotypes of the hardcore gamer and inspired researched on the diverse performances of the male gamer identities (Bell et al. 2015).

While a lot of research has focused on the problematic behaviors and experiences of online players, for the purposes of the article I will concentrate on how the misogynistic and sexist attitudes of the video game industry translate to the content they produce in single-player games. First, I will offer a closer look at the portrayals of female characters in video games and how they changed over the years, pointing out the most prominent categories of characters appearing in many contemporary titles. Furthermore, drawing on Halberstam’s concept of female masculinity (1998) I will offer an analysis of these characters who are coded as masculine, drawing parallels between overt masculinity and the oversexualization. Finally, I will analyze *Infamous First Light* (2004) which introduces a first female protagonist in the series. I will discuss how the game subverts the stereotypes of women shown in previous installments of the game and codes Fetch as strong, self-confident, independent, and how, through the other characters, her anger and strength are not only allowed but justified and praised.

2. Video game women: Damsels in Distress and female masculinity

Both Mario (Nintendo, 1981-) and Zelda (1986-) franchises, which had their newest titles published in 2017, are considered iconic since, in many ways, they defined how the platform and adventure games are currently designed. Both involve a male protagonist — Mario and Link respectively — who embark on a great adventure in order to save their princess — namely, Princess Peach and Princess Zelda. In the majority of games, both these female characters were portrayed as passive — they were “Damsels in Distress”, the kidnapped victims, and the prizes to be won at the end of the game by the male hero and, thus, the player. Both have already been introduced as playable characters as well, proving themselves to be just as capable warriors as their male counterparts. However, often there had to be a price to pay for the privilege of performing the activities considered to be male: at first, in order to be able to fight Zelda, who did not become a playable character until 2009, the player had to impersonate a male warrior called Sheikh or be under an influence of a spell, thus still perceived as passive at her core.

Another significant woman character is *Tomb Raider*'s (1996) Lara Croft who, being a strong and independent character, plays much like her male counterparts. Despite being widely criticized for the overly sexualized outfits and avatar design (Summers and Miller 2014, 1028), she undeniably marked a change in the video game industry, even though the progress seems slow in the mainstream part of the industry. Although it is easier to find a playable, strong female character, they are often still a second choice, while it is the men who are portrayed on the covers and are a default option. Those characters who are queer, non-white, or have some kind of disability still often lack any representation whatsoever (Shaw 2011).

In her study from 1998, Tracy Dietz analyzed female characters in the popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis video games, finding out that 41% of narrative games with characters did not include any women (433). The action and “hero” female characters were in the definite minority, while the already aforementioned “Damsel in Distress” trope was the most common (21%). Finally, 28% of female characters were portrayed as overtly sexualized (435). Multiple newer studies show that women keep being portrayed as overtly sexualized and as sex-objects but also as, at the same time, aggressive (Summers and Miller 2014, 1030). These proportions were replicated by the study by Ramírez and others in 2002 in which they analyzed the game covers where women were not only less often portrayed than men but also were more often placed in submissive positions (Jansz and Martis 2007, 143). The majority of them were white and the women of color were shown as sexualized and dangerous; games like *Grand Theft Auto* (1997), widely criticized for their sexism and portrayed violence against women, often code the bodies of color as “savage and uncivilised” (Leonard 2006, 86).

Mirroring the trend observed in television and cinema, the tropes of “Tough Girl” and “Bad Girl” are often present in video games as well (Inness 2004, 2). It would appear, however, that much more attention has been placed on those characters who are sexualized while the others tend to instead be coded as masculine, butch, or both.

Among the protagonists who are tough and capable one needs to mention Samus in the Japanese *Metroid* series (1986-) who, for the most part of the games, appears in armor hiding her figure and making her indistinguishable from male soldiers. Generally praised for her masculinity is the “female Shepard” from the *Mass Effect* original trilogy (2002-2012) — there, the player can choose either the male or the female protagonist, both of whom are customizable in regards to their race, hair color, and facial bone structure. However, despite offering a seemingly wide range of possibilities, the limitations of the series have been also noticed, like the lack of race-specific hairstyles or facial features, and the lack of diverse body types (Dietrich 2013). Voices can be heard among the fans that the reason female Shepard gained such a wide recognition and loyalty of her fandom is that she plays just like her male counterpart.

Some other notable non-sexualized, non-victimized female characters appear in supporting roles, like the mechanic Ellie from *Borderlands 2* (2012) or both Nadine Ross and Chloe Frazer from the *Uncharted* franchise, who appeared in their standalone downloadable content (DLC) game *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* (2017). With the latter, upon the announcement of the DLC, the fans began speculating (forum comments by CybeSai, 2006) about whether the characters will be portrayed as gay or bisexual, confirming the notion that masculine women often are perceived as queer. It is worth noticing that the practice of introducing a DLC dedicated to the popular female character is not uncommon and despite being a proof of fans’ interest in storylines including strong female characters, still reflects the belief that the gender of the protagonist influences sales (Williams et al. 2009).

In *Female Masculinity* (1989) Jack Halberstam, by discussing the masculinity in separation from the male body, not only asks what it means, but also emphasizes how it tends to be ignored and actively attacked when occurring in the context of the female body. Despite the numerous images of masculine women, including women who are butch, transgender or even athletic, most of the societies still are characterized by the protectionist attitude towards masculinity (15). Ignored widely in both academic studies and in the broadly understood culture, the “widespread indifference to female masculinity (...) has clearly ideological motivations and has sustained the complex social structures that wed masculinity to maleness and to power and domination” (2). Further, in the introductory chapter, he explains that the “dominant masculinity” is a “naturalized relation between maleness and power” (2). Thus, the concept is difficult to analyze — or even notice — unless the focus is taken from the male, middle-class, and white body, and juxtaposed with alternative masculinities (3). Although seemingly women — or, more precisely, girls — meet with more permission for gender ambiguity than feminine men, the need for stiff, binary categories seems to be culturally embedded and equally oppressive to each gender. Crucially for Halberstam, female masculinity tends to be perceived as less threatening when coded as heterosexual as then it often falls into the socially acceptable degree as contrasted with the “excessive masculinity of the dyke” (28). It is important to acknowledge emerging alternative femininities and to recognize the female masculinity as one of diverse femininities.

3. Female character development in the *Infamous* series

Infamous (2009) is an action-adventure video game published by Sony Computer Entertainment and developed by Sucker Punch Productions. The series includes three main, standalone games. *Infamous* and its sequel, *Infamous 2* (2011) featuring Cole MacGrath as the protagonist, while *Infamous Second Son* (2014) is set seven years later after the events of the original duology and introduces a new protagonist, Delsin Rowe. Additionally, there are two web browser games and two DLCs to the games — the non-canonical *Infamous: Festival of Blood* (2011), which envisions Cole as a vampire, and canon *Infamous First Light* (2014) with the events preceding *Second Son*. The latter is the last edition to the franchise and the only one with a playable female character.

The original *Infamous* follows Cole MacGrath, a bike messenger. Unknown to him, one of the packages he is tasked with delivering contains explosives. The explosion, known as the Blast, destroys a major part of the Empire City, creating the Conduits — people who possessed superpowers allowing them to manipulate energy. While trying to navigate between those who perceive him as a monster and hold him responsible for the catastrophe, Cole tries to embrace his new powers of energy manipulation. This struggle between good and evil is at the core of the gameplay as player's actions determine Cole's character and, consequently, his powers, attitudes of the citizens towards him, and the ending: Cole either can sacrifice himself and all Conduits in order to save the city or absorb the powers of the monster called Beast and become the new Evil himself. Although both games place an emphasis on player choices, *Infamous Second Son* reveals that only one of them was canon by placing the events of the game after Cole sacrificed his life, destroying the majority of the Conduits with him.

In *Infamous*, the majority of the characters are male, with the notable examples among the non-player characters (NPC) being Cole's ex-girlfriend Trish Dailey (*Infamous*), Nix (*Infamous 2*) and Fetch (*Infamous Second Son* and *Infamous First Light*). Although both women from the first two games differ substantially in the way they are portrayed, they follow the similar pattern of events: both are subordinate to Cole and both have to eventually die to facilitate the progress of the narrative.

Trish is a white woman with short, black hair who, at the beginning of the game, is Cole's girlfriend. She leaves him, however, blaming him for causing the Blast which killed her sister — Amy, who, having blond hair, often symbolizes innocent victims of the attack. Trish works as a nurse and when Cole falls into a coma following the explosion, she is the one who looks after him, thus fulfilling the stereotype of a caring and protective woman. In further parts of the game her role changes into Damsel in Distress. The first time Cole has to save her when her truck is attacked while trying to deliver medicines to the hospital she is not present during the fight, and Cole rescues her only after defeating all the enemies. The second time she is in need of protecting is when the game's antagonist, Kessler, forces Cole to choose between saving her and a group of other people after the series of tasks involving finding bombs around

the city. Later, Kessler is revealed to be Cole from the future of an alternative universe, who set out to “mold [Cole] into the savior he failed to be” (Infamous 2009). However, regardless of the player’s choice, Trish is murdered and her death becomes an important emotional event for Cole and his character development. Thus, placing Trish in the position of being a prop meant to push the story forward and give the character a believable motivation for his anger and a possible transition into the proverbial “dark side”.

Although the main female character of *Infamous 2* seems as different from Trish as possible, she is also doomed to die. Nix is a black woman and a Conduit, controlling oil, or napalm, and fire and representing the destructive and chaotic forces. She is aggressive, violent, and lacks emotional empathy, making her seem cold, uncaring, and even insane. Where Trish embodied the feminine softness identified often with the “good” side, Nix reflects chaos and evil, raising question about racial representation of women. Her design is coherent with the stereotypical perception of blackness as “less feminine than some mythic norm of white femininity” (Halberstam 1998, 29). Although the game does not include the romantic plotlines, and Cole’s pre-scripted attempt to kiss Nix meets with her escape via teleportation, she is the most sexualized character in the series, dressed in tight leather trousers, ripped sleeves and a top revealing both her entire stomach and cleavage. She wears dreadlocks and her design draws heavily from the African culture, strengthening the link with the stereotypes of black women’s sexuality being more aggressive. At its end the game offers the player the choice to become a hero or the new Beast — in the first case Nix is killed together with Cole and most of the Conduits in the world while in the second he kills her personally. Once again then a woman’s death becomes a plot device, this time emphasizing Cole’s turn to the evil.

In the context of the rest of its franchise, *Infamous First Light* offers a subversion of these male-female power dynamics. The player controls Abigail “Fetch” Walker, a twenty-three-year-old Conduit with the ability to control and manipulate pink neon. Her powers allow her to fire neon energy beams and consecutive fire shots as well as create stasis force and explosions. By using the sources of neon energy scattered around the city she can achieve superhuman speed while turning herself into pink neon smudge. The ability to move around the city with increasing speed feels liberating and empowering also from the ludic point of view. While often women are connected with the stealth mode of play while male characters tend to be stronger and better suited for direct combat, Fetch’s speed and strength are noticeable as subversion to some of the possible expectations.

The pink color seems to be of significance and it is also a crucial element of her appearance: from her hair and clothes to the neon power itself; pink defines her. However, it clearly does not bring the connotations of the fragile femininity, but rather gives her an “edgy” look. Pink became widely associated with femininity in 20th century, but had been progressively shunned by feminists of the 1960s and 1970s for “emphasiz[ing] their difference from men” (Dole 2007, 59). However, in the beginning of the

current century, the color seemed to come back into favor due to one of the strands of the third wave movement, which, following the explosion of the pink, girl-targeted merchandise, centered around the rise of the new type of popular culture heroine who can wear pink and be self-confident, strong, and independent (60).

The events of *Infamous First Light* are set before the *Second Son*. The game is framed as a story told by Fetch to Brooke Augustine, the main antagonist of the *Second Son* game and a leader of the Department of Unified Protection. Augustine captured Fetch and put her through a number of tests aimed at training the Conduit and enhancing her skills. Each training corresponds with the events from the past as described by Fetch and thus serves as a tutorial for the player, who can then use the skills in story mode. Fetch tells the story of her fight with a drug lord Shane who kidnapped and then staged her brother's death. In the second part of the game it is revealed that Augustine intends for Fetch to take revenge on Shane by killing him and she forces the young woman to tell the story in order to awake her anger. Without the knowledge of the *Infamous First Son's* narrative — which is not required in order to understand and enjoy the *First Light* — it is not clear what Augustine's motives are and whether she really is a villain. Although she has imprisoned Fetch, she clearly believes in her and wants to help her, even though the methods might be controversial.

4. Violence and self-empowerment

Fetch's backstory follows a well-known pattern: struggling to control her powers she accidentally injures one of her classmates. To save her from dire consequences, her older brother Brent arranges their escape. He is the voice of reason, the protector, and the healer, the only one who has a stabilizing and calming influence on her. When they both start to use drugs, he is the first one to get clean and the one to help Fetch fight addiction. The struggle with drug abuse is an obvious metaphor, and Fetch's issues mirror her problems with control over the neon power. Both can be additionally seen through the (self-) empowerment and power frameworks. The subversion of the traditional gender roles become more striking in the latter part of the plot. This time it is Brent who is kidnapped, thus becoming a Damsel in Distress. Furthermore, his death becomes a motivation for the protagonist to unleash her powers and justify her search for revenge.

According to Jacques Derrida the responsibility and the drug addicted person's irresponsibility understood as opposing social expectations is an important element of the drug use discourse (Cover 2005, 100). When Shane tricks Fetch into a trap, inducing drug-like hallucinations, she eventually kills her brother mistaking him for either the monsters in her vision or the soldiers attacking her in real life. The message of the game is clear that she is not to be blamed — to the contrary, she has been violated as the drug was forced on her, changing her perception and taking the control from her.

Although eventually the neon powers become a clear source of her empowerment, for the most part of her life they have caused her to experience alienation and anxiety.

Her status as the social pariah — as symbolized by her addiction, runaway status, and the association with the “dangerous” and “rebellious” subculture in a form of piercing and heavy makeup — can be read in terms of performing queerness (Halberstam 1998). The dichotomy between the masculine and feminine seems to stay at the core of the power imbalance experienced by these characters. By shifting the power and taking her revenge, she evokes the bully/bullied dichotomy and reverses the roles, locating the power in the bully (Cover 2005, 100) in the powerful scene of Shane’s execution. Although the bully metaphor is not always sufficient to describe the cases of violence, here it can be linked with the theories explaining the empowerment and self-empowerment as the actions towards regaining control over self, which were threatened by social arrangements. In the words of Nira Yuval-Davis:

‘[t]hese calls are a result of the view that the internalization by the powerless of the hegemonic value system according to which they are invisible, valueless and/or ‘dangerous’ is a major obstacle to the ability to resist their discrimination and disadvantage” (1994, 179).

The scene of execution in extremely powerful — when Fetch confronts Shane, she is shown bruised and wounded as a result of long chase, and yet towering above him. His death is pre-scripted, unavoidable, slow, and painful. The image is striking: as video games rarely portray the bruising and wounds on the action of the protagonist, Fetch is beaten up with smeared makeup, evoking the connotation with the photographs of the female victims of the domestic abuse. The issue of violence against women and its often insensitive portrayal in video games has been an important part of the discussion: games like *Grand Theft Auto* (1997-) or *Dead Red Redemption 2* (Rockstar Games 2018) met with criticism due to the in-game permission to abuse female non-player characters (Henricksen, 2018). The focus on the self-empowerment in the violence prevention further constructs women as both victims and as being in the position of power and control. With the assumption that most of the violence towards women happens in the domestic space, female bodies are constructed as vulnerable and submissive as opposed to the male aggressor (Frazier and Falmagne 2014, 480). Furthermore, this can lead to the connotation between violence or aggression and masculinity. Halberstam writes that “[a]s long as masculinity is annexed in our society to power and violence and oppression, we will find some masculine women whose gender expression becomes partially wedded to the worst aspect of a culturally mandated masculinity” (1989, 109).

Although the brutality of her revenge on Shane is striking, the combat and physical aspect of it relates to some of the theoretical work, stressing the importance of self-defense training on women’s empowerment, agency, body image, and mental health. Through the training, exercise, and knowledge on how to defend oneself, some feminist scholars argue that women can reclaim their bodies from fear and, furthermore, challenge the stereotype of the female body as the one of a victim (Frazier and Falmagne 2014, 482). However, some notice that the discourses concentrated around

preventing violence towards women further construct their bodies as fragile and in constant danger from men especially. Thus, it again perpetuates both the bully-bullied dichotomy. The gender binarity creates an assumption that, to be safe, and in control of their lives and bodies, women need to abandon “fragile” femininity and embrace masculinity, which is coded as safe and strong. At the same time Fetch is not portrayed as excessively aggressive or masculine, accepting the neon pink powers.

Fetch embraces violence and completely refuses the role of a victim. Interestingly, other characters do not see her as one either. Early in the game it is possible to level up her powers enough for the — exclusively male — opponents not to pose any threat. When imprisoned, Augustine tests her, showing respect to her powers and validating her anger. Although Shane actively tried to destroy her she was never a “Damsel in Distress”: her narrative accurately reflects the construction of the first game’s plot. Just like Cole she loses someone she loves, which pushes her on the path of vengeance. Interestingly, however, there is a difference in how their actions are judged by the game. Cole, for whom a player chooses either the “good” or the “evil” path, is eventually punished for choosing the violence — *Second Son* ultimately deems this choice unethical and wrong by choosing the “good” ending as the setting for its narrative — while it is made clear that for Fetch there was no choice and therefore she is not condemned for it.

It seems important that the player is restrained to follow Fetch’s actions, regardless of their will. Unlike the other games in the series, the linear experience of *First Light* does not offer the player the choice between “the good” or “the evil” path, and in this moment these constraints become abundantly clear. That creates the dissonance between the player — who usually is the one in control — and the character. The player, for a change, is pushed into the submissive position, forced to play out the violence and, therefore, becoming the bullied person themselves. That dissonance can force the change in the player-game relationship. Jaimie Banks (2013: Banks and Bowman 2014, 4) proposed a typology consisting of four types of avatar perception by the player, stating the often omitted importance of an avatar’s role in the relationship with the person controlling them. The categories include Avatar-as-Object, Avatar-As-Me, Avatar-as-Symbiote, and Avatar-As-Social Other. Jaime Banks (2013) explains that these relationships vary in the degree of self-differentiation and explain whether the avatar is perceived as a tool (Linderoth, 2005), mirror extension of a player or “vehicle of play” (Carr 2002), or a “mask” the player wears in order to experiment with different personalities (Galanxhi and Nah, 2007). The last category characterized is by the high intimacy and high avatar agency which allows the latter to be seen as a separate character.

The lack of avatar customization available in the *Infamous* series, and the linear experience and lack of agency offered to the player in *First Light* might make it more difficult to identify with the protagonists. The distinction between the player’s self and the avatar’s otherness becomes emphasized in that last scene of the murder. The player can always stop playing and leave the game, but in order to reach the completion, they must follow their avatar’s lead.

5. Conclusions

Although *Infamous First Light* is not often mentioned in the feminist game critiques, its innovations are particularly striking considering that it is part of a franchise which otherwise includes both the tropes of masculine, white hero and which tends to place its female characters in submissive roles. The treatment of women in the main games of the series mirrors how women are often represented in the gaming industry — they are either damsels in distress and eventually die to strengthen the main protagonist's motivations (Trish), or, if they dare being powerful and aggressive, they also pay the highest price (Nix). The DLC from 2014 differs not only because it introduces a first playable female character of the series, but also because it does not restrict Fetch to “play nice” — she explores the alternative femininities, transgressing the expectations of women to be passive, helpful, and weak. To the contrary, her anger fuels her and she is allowed to be both angry and to seek revenge.

When Fetch subverts the roles, she does not only defy the stereotype of binary genders, but she also forces the player away from their comfort zone. Taking control over the scene by not allowing the players any choice in how brutal the final murder will be, the difference between the active player and the passive character is questioned for long enough to allow a reflection on the power play and the gender dynamic in both video games and the video game industry. Her empowerment manifests both through the actions and in the visual layer, where through the implementation and use of the color pink, the game makes a clear, conscious point in the discussion about female representation.

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