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Self-Saving Princess: Feminism and Post-Play Narrative Modding

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Since Donkey Kong tossed his first barrel in 1981, princesses in video games have served one purpose: to be saved. Successful completion of *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo 1981) sees Kong defeated and Jumpman and Lady lovingly reunited. Lady had found her hero and Jumpman had won his prize. Women were cast as damsels in distress and have predominantly been trapped in this role. More than three decades later little has changed. Female protagonists in video games are still almost non-existent. When we do encounter the elusive heroine, she is typically either portrayed as a sexual object to be gazed upon and controlled, or she is simply a female “skinned” version of the male protagonist. Cast into these roles, it is hardly surprising that women and games have long had a troubled relationship, ranging from who is creating the games to who is playing them to who is talking about them.

This paper explores and investigates the myriad of ways that video game narratives get modded post-play for feminist purposes (intentionally and unintentionally). We will look at modding through cultural critique of the medium as well as through online discussion surrounding game play and game design that happens without the intent of feminist critique or modding. “Modding” as an activity emerges differently in each context, and we explore examples that show the richness and instability of this concept below. Specifically, we are interested in the way women change the way others experience the game (modding) in order to help expose or improve the gaming environment for other women (feminist purposes). For the purposes of this discussion we are defining post-play narrative modding (PPNM) as any significant changes to the narrative or to a gamer’s perception of the narrative that happens post game development and without actually changing the code. With constant downloadable content (DLC) and updates, video games are rarely static. PPNM, however, attempts to focus on what happens after the game’s initial release, which is typically the time when it receives the most attention. While we focus more strongly on players who have already played the game, it is possible, and probably common, that players who have yet to experience the game may also have their read of the narrative affected by the post-play narrative modding that they encounter. “Post-play” does not intend to suggest that the play is ever finished or that it is a linear activity. Instead, “post-play” in this

context is meant to indicate all activity that happens after the moment the game goes public and players are able to interact with the game.

There are many ways that the narrative of a game can be modded. Some games, like *Half-Life* (Valve 2007), *Skyrim* (Bethesda Softworks 2011), and *Civilization V* (2K Games 2010) offer options for their players to create worlds on their own that can become part of the game. This level of interaction can very directly change other players' experiences with the game. This is not the kind of modding that we focus on in this piece, though we recognize that important feminist modding can and does occur through this type of modding. Another, often less explicit, way that game narratives can be changed is through forums, blogs, fan-fiction sites, and novels devoted to further development of the story. Classic games, like *Mortal Kombat* (Midway 1992), have experienced this kind of modding of the players' experience with the game through subsequently released movies. *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft is another character significantly changed by modding through movies, fan-fiction, and other forms of fan participation. Croft has been modded in a way that enhances her visibility and changes her cultural meaning beyond the narrative provided solely through gameplay. One cannot pick up a controller to play *Tomb Raider* (Core Design 1996) without being influenced in some way by this type of modding. The type of modding we are exploring in this paper is most closely connected to this second type of modding: modding that takes place through player and critic participation after the game has been created through discourse but primarily not through coding.

As we discuss what we believe are the benefits of using post-play narrative modding actively and seeing how it may happen unconsciously, we find it is crucial to keep in mind the nuances of this and other feminist work in gaming scholarship. In other words, we believe post-play narrative modding to be one tactic in the ever more vast feminist toolkit. For example, Cornelia Brunner (who asks us to think about gender on a queer theory-influenced butch-femme continuum) discusses the way animation can be a type of "tinkering" that leads toward feminist action and women becoming familiarized with in an IT environment (Brunner 37-40). By teaching girls how to create their own game environments, Brunner suggests that this opens up the possibility for "femme play" (40). PPNM works in a similar way, though it is much more abstract, its users mod narratives, not code, and action is more open-endedly collective, rather than having a fixed number of participants.

Feminist game scholar T.L. Taylor talks about the importance of inhabiting a game environment. She writes, “The context and structure around game play matter...a lesson we can learn from looking at women who inhabit game culture is that social networks and access...are core considerations for play” (52). She goes on to examine how power relations and other non-game factors end up profoundly affecting women’s play. We hope to situate post-play narrative modding in response to this type of revelation. As more and more communities are built that support women’s entrance into technological environments like games, as we will discuss later, the more we are able to control the factors that Taylor talks about in her piece. Thus, the problem that Taylor discusses of “sidelining” women’s gaming communities begins to fade, because women’s issues become part of the mainstream discourse, as we have seen happening recently on gaming hubs like *Kotaku* that now regularly include pieces about sexism in their mainstream news flow.

To enter into this rich conversation, we analyze post-play narrative modding in three sections. First, we look at the way post-play narrative modding can work for critics within the gaming community and industry. Through this section, we can see just how powerful PPNM can be and just how violent reactions become when “outsiders” begin to challenge the norms that dominate gaming. The second section examines the way PPNM works in the player-game relationship. We work through several extended examples to see how this type of modding shows up in this relationship. The third section discusses other ways PPNM can be used to create positive change in the community, as well as considering potential ways of using PPNM as a method of creative resistance.

Critics’ Post-Play Narrative Modding

Recently, two important (and controversial) figures have changed the way that players experience games: Anita Sarkeesian, a cultural critic responsible for the site *Feminist Frequency*, and Jennifer Hepler, a narrative developer for Bioware Corp, a video game company. Anita Sarkeesian came into the spotlight while trying to raise funds through a Kickstarter campaign for a project that uncovers the tropes that she argues dominate the portrayal of women in video games. Her call for funding for a series of videos on this topic was met with outrage, disgust, threats, anger, and resentment from some sectors of the gaming community online. Memes started to sweep across the Internet that showed Sarkeesian’s face with photoshopped bruises and black eyes. While threats and representations of physical violence were particularly prominent in this case, there were also articles published claiming that Sarkeesian is just trying to scam people out of

money because “she just wants to use the fact that she was born with a vagina to get free money and sympathy from everyone who crosses her path” (Lewis 2012). One group made a “beat up Anita Sarkeesian” Flash video game which featured a close-up of Sarkeesian’s face that the gamer could punch (with his or her mouse) to make it look bruised and swollen (Sterling 2012).

But anger wasn’t the only response to Sarkeesian, and in fact, it seems that the anger and threats of violence incited more support for her project than had existed previously (and may have existed at all). One responder wrote, “Just from an academic standpoint I was extremely excited to see what you churned out with these videos. When I saw the backlash, I was moved to back you. Do what you do.” Those in the gaming community who were supportive of Sarkeesian’s project (or as a backlash to the negative reactions) responded by giving money to the Kickstarter campaign. While it was the goal of the project to raise \$6,000 for the production of her web series on women in video games, the campaign ended with over 6,900 backers and raised \$158,922. While players and funders may have had disparate opinions of her project, ranging from violence to encouragement, the strong reactions she garnered demonstrate just how emotional and passionate people in the community can be about uncovering the hidden narratives at work behind the games we play (and supporting those interested in doing so).

The mixing of positive and negative responses, especially to these extremes, also characterizes the Jennifer Hepler incident. Hepler, who worked as a narrative designer on games in both the *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect* series, came under fire when she supported the inclusion of more narrative choices in video games. When it was announced that *Mass Effect 3* would have a narrative mode (along with the traditional gameplay modes) that would allow players to play through the game and focus on the narrative (making the gameplay ostensibly easier), there was a huge backlash in a very vocal segment of the gaming community. Hepler was called “the cancer that is killing Bioware” (Sterling 2012) and was threatened in multiple online forums. She was accused of ruining the *Dragon Age* series by giving players the ability to pursue (or be pursued by) same sex love interests (or in the words of her harshest critics “shoehorning homosexual relationships down gamer’s (sic) throats”). Hepler’s attempt to expand the way gamers can play to include those who want more narrative than fighting was seen as a direct attack on the traditionally male, white, and heterosexual gamer.

The thread that ties the online attacks against Sarkeesian and Hepler together is that both are engaging in a type of post-play narrative modding that exposes some very ingrained, and very powerful, narratives that are present in the gaming community's history. For example, in some cases it seems that the presence and focus of the narrative elements of a game is seen as feminized. For some, this focus on the narrative is something that hardcore (also heterosexual, white, male) gamers see as something feminine and as having no part in "their" games for any reason other than to string together the interactive battle sequences. The idea that games should not only include but celebrate and expand the narrative elements implicitly suggests that interactive battle is not the only way to play—something that deeply offends some players. Similarly, Sarkeesian is exposing some of the extremely sexist, racist, and misogynistic natures of much-beloved video game heroines. Players who are entrenched in the traditional narratives surrounding these avatars (players who have always securely been the audience for video games) are threatened by the possibility of narratives on which they have built part of their identities being drastically altered.

Interestingly, Sarkeesian is purposefully using critique to expose the sexist depiction of many female video game characters. However, this activity also is a type of PPNM because it fundamentally changes the way that players are able to engage with the game because of their knowledge of her critique and the community's response to it. Once these tropes are exposed and brought into mainstream discourse, the player's experience of the game is modded. Likewise, Hepler's initial act of responding to an interview question was likely not done with the intention of modding players' experience of *Mass Effect*.

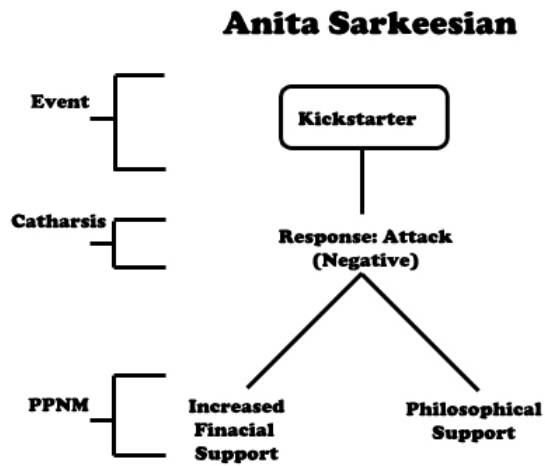
The stories of Sarkeesian and Hepler give us, as video game theorists and researchers, the opportunity to explore how the narrative of video games get modded after development. While Sarkeesian is actively seeking to mod our understanding of the roles of female characters in video games after the games have been completed (and usually after we have experienced the game itself), Hepler is changing narratives in a more traditional way in addition to post-play narrative modding. Hepler's changes to the games' narratives occur during production, but we do see post-play narrative modding occurring through her interview and responses to it post- game release. What is of import to us in this project is the backlash, both positive and negative, that has created a layer of modding that—though Hepler may not have intended—fundamentally mods the way players interact with the games.

When the now infamous interview was published in which Hepler talks about how she sees the narrative as being equally important (if not more so) to the fighting in the dungeon crawlers and first person shooters that she is writing for she is modding the narrative in a way that immediately makes some people in the gaming community uncomfortable and leads them to react violently. Hepler became the victim of sexist, racist, and misogynistic attacks that eventually led Dr. Ray Muzyka, the co-founder of BioWare, to make a public statement about the situation and pledge \$1000 to Bullying Canada in Hepler's name (Chalk 2012) This led to a tertiary modding of the narrative that results from the support of the developer itself and the implication that it supports not only Hepler, but her understanding and valuing of the narrative elements of games in general.

Mia Consalvo reports that the violent reaction from gamers is indicative of a "toxic gaming culture." She writes, "The rage we see expressed by threatened individuals and groups seems to be based on at least two factors — sexist (as well as racist, homophobic and ageist) beliefs about the abilities and proper place of female players, and fears about the changing nature of the game industry" (2012). Consalvo also discusses the stories of Hepler and Sarkeesian to show just how violently the community responds when confront with a conflicting view. By recognizing and utilizing PPNM, we hope that academics and those in the community can try to undo some of the toxic gaming culture Consalvo writes about.

Sarkeesian and Hepler's approaches to PPNM end up looking slightly different, having distinct reactions and context specific impacts. By visualizing the way that each of these figures engage in PPNM, we can begin to see ways that feminists can begin to directly participate, and even create, the type of modding that many of us see as necessary to overcome the overwhelming masculine and sexist discourse that dominates video game discourse specifically (and technological discourse generically). As can be seen in this visual, after creating an event, there is a cathartic response from the white, male, heterosexual, hegemonic community—usually consisting of hatred, death threats, threats of rape, violence, and so on. This type of reaction to feminist (re)action has been seen over and over again with women who have created an event that questions, criticizes, or violates the status quo of the video game industry. [1]

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/LayneBlackmon_image1.jpg)



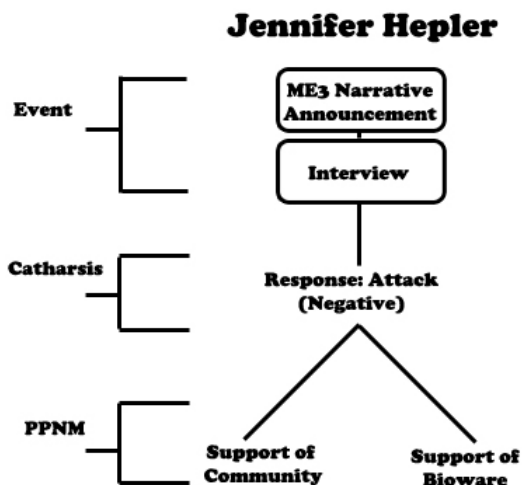
In response to this negative catharsis, Sarkeesian then received increased financial and ideological support. Of course, this type of response has not always been possible, but as online feminist communities begin to grow and as video game executives begin to stand up for their female employees, the

response to the violence becomes more prevalent. This is where the PPNM happens: because support quickly follows the catharsis, the creators of the event are able to continue to mod our understanding of video games. The violence of the original cathartic event brought more notoriety to Sarkeesian's work, and the financial and ideological support for her project increased significantly. Further, the more violent the reaction became, the more popular gaming sites like *Kotaku* and *Rock, Paper, Shotgun* published about the issue, thus reaching a larger audience than the original Kickstarter campaign would have likely reached (Plunkett 2012 and Meer 2012). Of course, direct causality is difficult to show in this kind of situation, but we can at least see the effects of the vitriol on the reach of her project.

With some important differences, Hepler has gone through a cycle similar to Sarkeesian's. What is interesting, and worth noting, is that the Hepler event actually consists of two events, inextricably connected but also years apart. Hepler's interview (originally published six years earlier) would have probably never been brought into the spotlight without the changes that happened to the narrative in *Mass Effect 3*. Likewise, without having a "meddling" woman, Hepler, to blame, there would likely have been far less violent of an outcry against the changes.

(https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/LayneBlackmon_image2.jpg)

Rather than the direct financial support Sarkeesian received for her project, Hepler found support through the executives at Bioware Corp that defended her and continue to support her and others' innovative visions for video games (through employing them and defending them in public). Like Sarkeesian, Hepler's PPNM allows for growth as a response to attacks rather than shirking because of the threats. Not long ago, there was



no community to support those who found themselves stuck in the catharsis stage of this cycle, leading many women to give up on their attempts to change the culture and retreat to safer spaces (and virtual obscurity). Now there are numerous sites like

GeekFeminist, *Border House*

Blog, *Not Your Mama's Gamer*, and *fatuglyor Slutty.com* devoted entirely to supporting women in the gaming community.

A prime example of video game narratives that have been modded post-play with a feminist bent would be the discussion and publicity surrounding the 2012 trailer of *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2013) in which a pubescent Lara Croft is forced to defend herself from a sexual attacker after being shipwrecked and captured by a group of scavengers. At the *Tomb Raider* debut, it was explained that as the player you would be able to defend Croft's honor and by successfully doing so it would do more to build the narrative of Croft as survivor in your mind. In this video game equivalent of the bildungsroman, the rape (or rather the successful defense against it) was yet another "coming of age" moment for Lara Croft. The game's executive producer, Ron Rosenberg, said in an interview with *Kotaku* that players would want to protect her from being raped by the scavengers because she "hasn't become a woman yet." He goes on to say that, "[s]he is literally turned into a cornered animal" and that this sexually violent and dehumanizing situation made her more human in his eyes and that in these circumstances, the infantilized Lara Croft "is even more enticing...than the more sexualized version of yesteryear". On the rationale behind the brutal treatment of the teen aged Croft, Rosenberg claims that "[s]he literally goes from zero to hero... we're sort of building her up and just when she gets confident, we break her down again." He believes that all is fair in the pursuit of "a great origin story" (Schreier 2012).

After significant uproar in the online games community, Karl Stewart, director of Crystal Dynamics, defended Rosenberg's comment, and the *Tomb Raider* title itself, by saying "rape is not a word in our vocabulary." Stewart went on to argue in his interview that because they never used the word rape when developing the scene where Laura

has to defend herself from a sexually aggressive scavenger, that—essentially—there is no harm done. Seemingly, in their minds because they don't say rape, it is a "pathological" situation, not a physical one. Like the Sarkeesian and Hepler events, the reaction to this interview was widespread, from mainstream sites like Kotaku to sites that specialize in feminist critique like Border House and The Kernel. In a much-popularized editorial, *The Kernel* author Mic Wright writes, "I've played a lot of *Halo* and I don't remember Master Chief ever being anally raped to help us empathise with him more. Was Mario forced to give a Bowser a blowjob so we could understand his head-smashing rage better?" Wright, and many other authors push up against Crystal Dynamics' defense of their treatment of Lara by forcing them to put Lara's narrative in conversation with other game narratives. Many gamers in the community are rewriting Lara's narrative before the game is even released, and they are purposefully resisting the narrative that the developers are attempting to sell.

For example, Kellie Foxx-Gonzalez on *The Mary Sue*, a self-proclaimed "guide to girl geek culture," writes about the way Lara Croft has been changed from an ass-kicking heroine into a victim with the most recent iteration of *Tomb Raider*. Foxx-Gonzalez writes,

Personally, the worst part about this reboot is that it is taking a traditionally feminist character (who has been embraced as an empowering fantasy in spite of the canonical hypersexualization of her character), one of the most beloved ass-kicking female protagonists in gaming, and warping her and her story to cater to a male-dominated gaming culture (and culture at large).

This article shows the resistance of women in the gaming community against gaming companies' attempts to change characters that the community has invested in and built narratives about in fan fiction and art. This becomes a moment of tension between the ability of the game developer to modify an extant character and the desire of the community to have their own view of the character to not only be the dominant one but also to be reflected in future game version.

The way Sarkeesian and Hepler have been able to both modify the gaming community and garner support for further feminist community building shows just how powerful creative resistance strategies like PPNM can be. While it is likely neither of these women intentionally employed this strategy, particularly because Hepler's incident was separated from what turned out to be its cathartic moment by several years, articulation of exactly what is happening in these situations can help map the way that

future modifiers can change their communities. Amanda Phillips writes about this kind of resistance in her blog titled, “5 Things Academics Might Learn From How the Rowdy Social Blogosphere Handles Fucknecks.” She provides several examples of positive feminist action that has emerged from the violent threats from misogynistic gamers. As we can see, change is happening. And the truly creative strategies that are emerging have the potential to become productive methods used by critics, academics, players, and others to critique, analyze, and change the video game community.

Players’ Post-Play Narrative Modding

While cultural critics undergo these cathartic and explosive events that create sudden and significant change, players often mod game narratives in more subtle ways. It is not uncommon that players are unaware of the fact that their actions modify the game for themselves and others. However, uncovering more about how this layered relationship exists between the player and the game (as it is never a straight line between those two entities) can expose gaps that can be filled by the scholarship of feminist new media theorists and cultural critics in order to create change that encourages game developers to recognize women as an audience for their games and to subsequently create better female characters in the games themselves. This article attempts to fill one of those gaps by revealing some of the productive ways that feminists and those concerned about women in the gaming community can modify gaming narrative, protagonists, and the community in a positive way.

Female main characters in games like Epic Games’ *Gears of War 3* (2011) and Bioware’s *Mass Effect 3* (2012) often have characters that are more female “skinned” versions of the male characters that are the default in the respective series. This is especially true in the case of *Mass Effect’s* female Commander Shephard (FemShep). The female Commander Shephard does not seem to be different in any way from BroShep. While one would not expect (or want) a female character that was essentially different or downgraded from the male version of Commander Shephard (BroShep), the lack of acknowledgement of her femaleness reinforces the idea that the standard, default character is male and that developers are unwilling to make essential changes to the (male) commander based on biological sex. In a more utopian model this would not mean that FemShep’s quarters are painted pink or that she encourages her crew members to “share,” but this representation might occur in her interactions with others, the responses that she gets from others, or just the simple realization that a male Marine would probably not goad a female commander into a pugilistic battle. In this situation it would also seem strange that FemShep’s interactions with the Krogan

race (which values females for their reproductive value above all else because of their viral sterilization as an attempt at genocide by their former enslavers) would not be influenced by her sex. Logically, FemShep's interactions with male Krogan soldiers (and their responses to her as a female soldier) would be influenced in some way by the fact that she is able to physically reproduce and is instead focusing her efforts on militaristic endeavors, as it would not be likely that she would be unquestioningly accepted as one of the guys. The fact that sexual differences exist in the *Mass Effect* universe, but do not exist for Femshep, further indicates that FemShep is simply a female-skinned BroShep. Further contrast can be seen between FemShep and the women that surround her, as squad mates and/or her possible love interests, who do seem to respond to characters and situations based on their own experiences as women.

The lack of female qualities in FemShep both exposes the fact that the gaming industry believes the default player, and thus the default character, is and should be male and indicates a perspective that gender-blindness is the key to equality. By making the female characters exactly like the male characters, developers can sidestep any accusations of stereotyping or misrepresenting women. The problem with this, as with most times a gender-blind defense is invoked, is that the default rarely incorporates any female attributes, but is solely based on traditionally, historically, and contextually male characteristics. This is a difficult pitfall to avoid, and can only be done through nuance in the game, diversity on the team behind the game, and, most importantly for this paper, through post-play narrative modding.

In essence, the characterization of FemShep as a "real" woman does not happen with the printing of a FemShep version of the game cover (hidden on the back of the cover emblazoned with BroShep), or even with the inclusion of the choice in the game itself, but rather in the modding of the narrative that the player does during and after gameplay. For most players of the *Mass Effect* series, it is the interpretation of the actions of FemShep and the conscious choices that they make for FemShep that make her female.^[2] This modding begins as soon as the opening sequence rolls and the tutorial begins. For example, the simple act of choosing not to take a frightened and abandoned child along during a firefight in order to keep him safe because the player consciously wants to make choices that are not stereotypically feminine is a kind of modding of the narrative that takes place during gameplay and begins to shape the narrative that will continue to unfold for the player as the game progresses.

Acting against or for perceived female traits is play that is not only in conversation with the game, but with societal norms, player context, and game context. Not saving the child changes the narrative. Even if the developer's intent was not to include space for female action or counteraction, the player can choose to interact with the game in this way. Thus refusing to save the child can become a type of feminist action through PPNM not because of the game itself but because of why the player chooses a particular path. While playing through this section of *Mass Effect 3*, one of the co-authors of this article struggled with making the decision whether or not to save the child because of the way that she felt it could be perceived or how it would "write" FemShep as a maternal figure rather than a militaristic one. This kind of action, then, becomes a complex one, layered with the narrative of the game, the narrative the player herself has constructed about herself as a gamer, the narratives working in the gaming community about the game, and also the perhaps more invisible narratives dictating gender norms. It is because of this complexity that it is so difficult to label a game as "feminist" or "anti-feminist" because it is always situated in the specific narratives surrounding the player. Though it's complex, it does not make it less powerful. In fact, the kind of flexibility allowed the player is the very thing that makes the space for PPNM.

Violating the way the game was "intended" to be played has long been one way that players can mod their experience and others' experience of the game, particularly with the popularity of online forums, machinima, vlogs, podcasts, blogs, and the other countless ways that people connect online and offline. Since there have been games there have been cheats, walkthroughs, and communities based on giving and receiving new information that can change one's experience of the game. From a PPNM perspective, this is one way that players can make their voices heard in the community, even if it's on a smaller scale. All female guilds, groups like FragDolls, and sites like geekfeminist.org have been quietly chipping away at the notion that women don't belong in the gaming industry. This environment is primed for a positive response to events like those incited by Hepler and Sarkeesian. By faithfully participating in this community building, modding play and community, players have had a major hand in creating the environment that allows us to move beyond the hatred and catharsis stage to the PPNM stage.

As authors, we have been dedicated to being part of the PPNM that takes place in games through our podcast and blog site nymgamer.com. Through this work, we have seen our direct and indirect influences on players. Whether it is making a "suggestion" that

allows a player to read a game a little differently, or if it is the validation of a “sense” that the player already had, through comments, feedback, emails, and other communication avenues we continually hear that players’ experiences of games are changed as a result of a podcast or a blog. When sites much larger than ours, such as *GeekFeminism*, take on issues in the gaming industry, the feedback is similar in tone. We have experienced it over and over: once it has been suggested that you read something differently, your experience of the narrative of that game changes—whether it’s noticing the cultural representations in *Red Dead Redemption* (Rockstar Games 2010) or seeing the feminist side of *Lollipop Chainsaw* (Warner Bros 2012).

The player-game relationship is complex and it is not nearly as static as some theories of game studies that focus on the mechanics or the procedures may suggest (such as Procedural Rhetoric and other theories that focus on algorithms). As we play, read, interact, discuss, rant, narrate, research, and fictionalize, we change the narrative of the game. As feminists, the more we engage in this kind of narrative changing, the more likely we will be able to encourage players to both demand better games and read games more critically. By becoming part of the discourse of gaming, feminist reads will be central to how everyone experiences the games themselves. The more voices there are that demand recognition for female players, better heroines, and princesses that save themselves, the more the games industry will have to take this audience into account or be left behind.

Moving From Here: Future Feminist Modding

Feminist research strategies enacted in an environment as complex as video game studies/research/community show up in a myriad of ways. In this article, we have mapped one way that post-play narrative modding can work for those inside the environment to create positive change. The change is not linear, or painless, but as we can see in the increase of feminist communities, it can be effective. To conclude, we would like to sketch a few ways that post-play narrative modding can be used or analyzed in other ways for feminist purposes.

One of the primary features of PPNM is that it creates choice. In an environment that is so entrenched in code, choice is a tricky thing. While we have the perception of choice in games, our choices are actually limited and pre-decided by the game’s developers. I may choose to be one of several races or classes in *World of Warcraft: Mists of Pandaria* (Blizzard Entertainment 2012), but I cannot choose to be a dragon (at least not yet). PPNM supports and creates choice. One thing that Jennifer Hepler’s work in the

industry is doing is creating a new type of choice, the choice to play the narrative of the game without much combat. Creating alternatives can be a controversial one for those who are used to things being one way. In the gaming community, players who are white, heterosexual, and male have traditionally been both the ones creating the games and the audience for the games. By making room for choice in games, designers — like Jennifer Hepler — are implicitly making room for the inclusion of Others, thus disrupting the norm.

In these terms, PPNM can be used as a type of creative resistance, by both disrupting what exists and insisting upon choice that acknowledges a diversity of viewpoints. This article has explored one way PPNM can work, through the modification of the narrative of the game in articles, blogs, interviews, and other community-driven practices with the result of altering the way players experience a game. Even when working for seemingly different purposes, such as Sarkeesian does when she critiques video game tropes, in the end she does modify the players' experience of the game through her critique. Other ways that PPNM could be used is in the exploration of a more mechanical view of modding by looking at the code-level modding that occurs within the games themselves and an interrogation of issues of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation in games. While we look specifically at the ways that women are modding games after development, our research could easily be used as the foundation for looking at the ways that other traditionally marginalized groups have also come together to form sub-communities and safe havens while they participate in their own versions of post-play narrative modding (and even more complexly how these different and differing forms of PPNM intersect and what those intersections have to offer for a broader understanding of identity politics). We have been treating modding as a more nebulous term and narrative as a more fixed one (in this instance the narrative of the game is somewhat more stable than in the traditional sense because of its coded nature, until disrupted). Treating these terms oppositely is also a viable path of resistance that many people are already engaging in online — a practice that needs to be abstracted in order to be more fully understood and, hopefully, more widely enacted.

We have attempted to outline a method of feminist intervention in a traditionally hostile environment in order to continue the work that feminists have been doing since before Ms. Pacman got her bow. The work in this community of scholars is vast — from empirical studies to theoretical pieces to personal reflections and so on. We have discussed post-play narrative modding here because we believe it holds potential for both players and scholars to shape their and others' experience of gaming without

needed to be programmers. Women like Jennifer Hepler and Anita Sarkeesian are already modding the way a wide range of people experience games, and we think that is powerful.

For a long time in the gaming community, little support has existed for traditionally marginalized Others, and more specifically women, who have attempted to modify the norm. As the online gaming community continues to grow and flourish, there are a number of sub-communities that exist for the sole purpose of creating a safe environment for women who are looking for an ingress into the larger video gaming community. While cathartic and violent reactions to the impending r/evolution will likely continue for the foreseeable future, we believe it is encouraging to see just how many ways women are enacting change and just how members (of various and varying ilks) of the larger gaming community are positively responding to the disruption of the traditional notion of narratives — narratives in the games themselves and narratives surrounding the games. We hope that with the rich body of scholarship presented in this journal issue, feminists will continue to see video games as a rich and important venue to explore feminist ideas and enact creative resistance.

Notes

[1] For other examples see Kathy Seirra, Noirin Shirley, or consult the 2002 study by Lisak and Miller.

[2] These are the same choices that one can make for BroShep, but it is within the sequencing of the choices and the rationale behind them that the modding occurs.

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8 THOUGHTS ON “SELF-SAVING PRINCESS: FEMINISM AND POST-PLAY NARRATIVE MODDING”



Precious V. Yamaguchi, Ph.D.

SEPTEMBER 11, 2013 AT 1:59 PM

I thoroughly enjoyed this article very much and hope to share it with my Digital Storytelling course that I will teach in the spring. As a professor at an all-women’s college on the East Coast, I have found a very large and diverse population of women who actively and critically participate in gaming cultures and have been long-time gamers. The events surrounding the example of Anita Sarkeesian revealed the intersections of modding, memes, Kickstarters, financial participation, and virtual dialogues between different online communities and individuals as an effective display of feminist interventions in gaming. I think my students will be really excited to discuss this issue as well as Jennifer Hepler’s role in gaming. I appreciate how you chose to embed these examples in a non-linear and non-teleological theoretical framework, emphasizing on all the voices and influences coming from various directions inspired by gamers, feminists, and a issue of the gamer becoming more involved in the decisions and choices of games, whether it is through modding, financial support, creating memes, or through the actual story lines of game and what it means to consciously make decisions based upon gender, race, and personal values.

Thank you very much!

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