The Portrayal of Female Characters in *Grand Theft Auto V*

Bachelor's Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Videopelit ovat yksi nykypäivän suosituimmista ajanviettotavoista. Pelaajien melko tasaisesta sukupuolijakaumasta huolimatta videopelien ajatellaan kuitenkin yleisesti olevan vain miesten kiinnostuksenkohde. Yksi suurimmista syistä tähän lienee miesten ja naisten esittämisen erot videopeleissä: suurin osa videopelihahmoista on miespuolisia, kun taas naispuolisia hahmoja on vähän ja he ovat usein seksualisoituja. Myös medialla on tähän vaikutusta, sillä naispuolisista videopelihahmoista nostetaan yleensä esille ainoastaan seksualisoidut naishahmot.

Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää, kuinka naispuolisia hahmoja esitetään *Grand Theft Auto V* -videopelissä. Kyseinen peli on uusin osa *Grand Theft Auto* -pelisarjasta, joka on tunnettu erityisesti väkivaltaisuudestaan ja seksistisestä tavastaan esittää naisia. Peli tarjoaa siksi mielenkiintoisen lähtökohdan naispuolisten hahmojen tutkimukselle. Tässä tutkimuksessa aineistona toimi sellaisten pelin päätehtävien videokohtaukset, joissa esiintyi naispuolisia hahmoja. Analyysin kohteeksi valittuja naishahmoja analysoitiin multimodaalisen diskurssianalyysin keinoin visuaalisesta, lingvistisestä ja narratiivisesta näkökulmasta.

Tutkimus osoitti, että naispuolisia hahmoja ei esitetä pelissä aivan niin negatiivisella tavalla kuin yleisesti luullaan. Visuaalisesti kyseiset naishahmot olivat melko realistisesti kuvattuja ja vain yksi heistä oli huomattavan seksualisoitu. Hahmoihin ei myöskään kohdistunut fyysistä väkivaltaa. Suurin osa hahmoista oli narratiivin kannalta merkittäviä ja he esiintyivät erilaisissa rooleissa, mutta toisaalta roolit olivat jokseenkin negatiivisia. Jokainen hahmo oli selkeästi oma persoonansa, mutta lingvistisesti heidät esitettiin melko yksipuolisesti. On kuitenkin tärkeää huomioida konteksti, jossa hahmot esiintyvät. Peli on satiiri amerikkalaisesta mediayhteiskunnasta ja naishahmot ovat siihen sopivia stereotyyppejä. Siitä huolimatta heidät on esitetty visuaalisesti ja osin myös narratiivisesti monipuolisesti, ja vaikka lingvistinen esitys onkin yksipuolista, se tuo esille hahmojen persoonaa.

Tässä tutkimuksessa saavutettiin monipuolinen analyysi hahmoista multimodaalisen diskurssianalyysin keinoin, mutta aineisto oli melko suppea. Jatkossa aineistoon voisi sisällyttää eri sukupuolia edustavia hahmoja ja vertailla heidän esittämistään, ottaen huomioon pelin ja sen hahmojen kontekstin. Näin eri sukupuolten esittämisestä voisi saada tarkemman analyysin.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Digital games are increasingly popular and one of the main forms of entertainment in our society nowadays, as over 60% of U.S. households have at least one person who plays digital games for three hours or more per week. In addition, contrary to popular belief, gaming is not popular only among men: 41% of gamers (i.e. game players) are female, meaning that digital games are played almost equally by both men and women. (ESA 2016: 2–3).

Most gamers are still male, however, and some research has been made on the reasons behind the lack of female gamers. First, gaming is considered as a masculine activity, because technology in general is associated with masculine culture; moreover, women are thought to be technologically inferior (Bryce and Rutter 2002: 252). Second, video games are dominated by 'masculine' themes and violence (Bryce and Rutter 2002: 246), as can be seen in the best-selling game genres of 2015, which are shooters, action games, and sports games (ESA 2016: 10). However, there are female gamers who are also interested in these genres. Instead, it is suggested by a variety of studies that the reason could be related to the nature of the character portrayal in digital games: the lack of female characters and their sexualization might discourage girls and women from playing digital games and participating in game culture in general (e.g. Bryce and Rutter 2002).

Indeed, as shown by previous research, women have been underrepresented and sexualized in video games throughout the years (e.g. Dietz 1998; Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel, and Fritz 2016). However, in the recent years, women have been portrayed in more diverse and dominant roles than earlier: there is evidence of the so-called Lara phenomenon, i.e. strong and capable female characters are appearing in dominant positions (Jansz and Martis 2007: 142). Nevertheless, even the stronger, more capable female characters in dominant positions are still sexualised, and despite the Lara phenomenon female characters are more likely to be sexualised secondary characters, although less than earlier and less than has been suggested in the earlier studies (Lynch et al. 2016: 11–12, 17). In addition, female characters appear rarely on video game covers and magazines, and they are usually portrayed as sex objects in both of them (Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess 2007; Fisher 2015); moreover, female characters might not be included in the marketing campaign at all, especially if they are not sexualised (Kondrat 2015: 189). Thus, there is not enough evidence of the existence and actual portrayal of women in

video games for those who are not already playing them, and it is therefore easy to assume that women are portrayed in a similar way (i.e. rarely or sexualised) in video games themselves. Thus, more research is needed to raise discussion and awareness of the possible mismatch between gender portrayals in video game marketing and video game contents. Furthermore, studying the gender portrayals in video games could help in improving video game character designs, as well as in including a variety of female characters in marketing campaigns, to ultimately make video games more approachable to everyone.

The present study focuses on the portrayal of female characters in the cutscenes, i.e. non-interactive cinematic sequences, in the digital game *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2013), which is the latest instalment in one of the most controversial and popular video game series of all time, *Grand Theft Auto*. *Grand Theft Auto V* (*GTAV*) itself broke seven Guinness World Records after it was published, one of them being "Best-selling videogame in 24 hours" (Lynch 2013), and it has remained in the top 10 best-selling games after two years of its release (ESA 2016: 11). The series is known especially for its violence and sexist gender portrayal, as the main characters are always men who perform criminal activities while women appear only rarely and usually as sexualised characters (e.g. Hoggins 2013b). Additionally, one of the most common ways to describe the portrayal of women in the game series is that they are prostitutes with whom the playable male character can have sex and take their money back afterwards by killing the prostitute (e.g. Hoggins 2013a, Parker 2011). Hence, *GTAV* provides an interesting subject for studying gender portrayals, as it is one of the most popular video games and the portrayal of women in the series has been criticized for years (e.g. Cook 2013; Parker 2011; Petit 2013).

Previous studies on gender portrayal in digital games have mainly used methods of Content Analysis, but the present study uses a Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach. Due to the limited scope of the study, it will not attempt to make any generalized claims about gender portrayal in digital games. However, the main findings can be used as background information and inspiration in further studies.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This section will give an overview on the theoretical background of the present study. In the first part, a brief description of previous research on the portrayal of women in video games will be given, in addition to which a few of the most relevant ones will be covered more in depth. In the second part, a new approach to studying character portrayals in digital games will be introduced. The approach used in most of the previous research is Content Analysis, but for small-scale studies Multimodal Discourse Analysis is a more suitable approach, as it offers tools for a more in-depth analysis.

2.1. Previous Studies: Women in Video Games

Most of the previous research on gender representation in video games and the media around them (e.g. game magazines) has approached the subject with the methods of content analysis (e.g. Dietz 1998; Glaubke, Miller, Parker, and Espejo 2001; Dill, Gentile, Richter, and Dill 2005; Martins, Williams, Harrison, and Ratan 2009; Downs and Smith 2010). Schmierbach (2009: 152) describes content analysis as a method for categorizing specific elements, codable units of analysis, within the subject of study. He notes (2009: 154) that when studying games, the first step is to sample the games within which the units of analysis are then selected. As is evident from the content analyses related to gender representation in video games, there is no universal agreement on the sampling of the games and the units of analysis: the methods for determining both the sample games and the units of analysis vary vastly between the different studies.

One of the first studies on gender portrayals in video games was by Dietz (1998), who analysed portrayals of gender and violence in the thirty-three most popular video games in 1995. She created five categories for the roles of women in the games: a sex object or a prize, the victim, the hero, in a feminine role, and no female characters (1998: 432–433). According to the findings, 30% of the games which had human characters did not have female characters at all, making the absence of women the most common portrayal of them. The second most common portrayal was the woman as the victim, as was the case in 21% of the games. (1998: 433–435). Moreover, the women were portrayed as "visions of beauty with large breasts and thin hips", evil or obstacles, and in non-significant roles (1998: 435–436). In summary, she states that most of the games minimize the roles of women either by not having female characters, presenting

them as dependent upon men or in supporting roles to men, or portraying them as sex objects and overall as contributing less than men (1998: 436). In addition, 21% of the games portrayed aggression or violence directed specifically at women (1998: 437). She claims that the results of her study reflect the lack of value given to women in our society, and that the games teach that women's contributions are subordinate or less important than men's contributions.

The study by Dietz was followed by a variety of other content analyses on the portrayal of women in video games. Most of them have similar findings: women are vastly underrepresented and generally sexualised in video games. The sexualisation of women is mainly shown in their visual portrayal, as many female characters are less clothed than male characters and a large number of them have large breasts and sometimes even emphasized features of the backside. For example, Beasley and Standley (2002: 286, 289) studied clothing in relation to gender portrayal in forty-eight different video games, and found out that only 13.7% of the characters were women, out of which 41% had large breasts. They also note that 31% of the large breasted female characters appeared in games rated E (for Everyone), showing that sexualised portrayals of women are not restricted to only games targeted for older and more mature audiences. A more recent example is a content analysis by Lynch et al. (2016), in which the gender portrayal of 571 video games released between the years 1983 and 2014 was analysed. Their findings were in line with the previous studies, but they noticed a pattern in the amount of sexualisation over the years: the earliest games featured the least sexualised characters, after which the number of sexualised characters increased throughout the 1990s until the early 2000s when sexualisation started to decrease (2016: 10, 13). The increasing pattern is explained by the development of video game consoles' graphic capabilities from the very simple and minimalistic portrayals of the early consoles to the more realistic and detailed portrayals of the newer consoles; the decrease, on the other hand, could be because of the increasing interest in video games by women and the criticism towards gender portrayals in video games (2016: 13). However, they also found out that female characters in recent games were more likely to be secondary characters, and secondary characters were more sexualized than primary characters, making it more likely for female characters to be sexualised; moreover, the sexualization of them this way emphasizes their secondary role by reducing their importance to their physical appearance (2016: 11–12, 14).

Jansz and Martis (2007), however, had different findings about the roles female characters appear in. They assumed that more female characters had begun to appear in video games and

therefore examined "the appearance of a tough and competent female character in a dominant position", which they call the Lara phenomenon (named after the main protagonist of the *Tomb Raider* series, Lara Croft) (2007:141–142). They analysed the characters' roles, power positions in the narrative, and appearance. Their analysis included only twelve video games, but showed that there was almost an even number of female and male characters, out of which both female and male protagonists held a dominant position while the characters in submissive positions were all men. However, the appearance of the characters was stereotypical and especially the female characters were sexualised by having large breasts, emphasized features of the backside, and less clothing than male characters. (2007: 145–147). Thus, even though there is evidence of the Lara phenomenon, female characters are still sexualised in their appearances. However, MacCallum-Stewart (2014: Playing with Lara, para. 1), in her article about the recreated 2013 version of Lara Croft states that many video game protagonists are created in an idealised form, and there comes a point when the sexual physicality of the characters should be looked past. For example, Lara's physical appearance has been remade into a more realistic, athletic body with normal sized breasts, in addition to which her character is more complex both emotionally and mentally (2014: Crystal Dynamics, para. 3), but despite the attempt for a more realistic body and complex character her physicality is still held against her. It shows the importance of focusing on the character as a whole, instead of emphasising only their sexual appeal and reducing their quality as a character to the physical level.

In conclusion, women in video games have been underrepresented and sexualized in video games throughout the years. However, in the recent years, women have been portrayed in more diverse and dominant roles than earlier and there is evidence of the Lara phenomenon, i.e. strong and capable female characters in dominant positions. Nevertheless, female characters are still sexualized, although less than earlier and less than has been suggested before. It is important to look past the characters' sexual physicality and consider their personalities, behaviour, and narrative complexity, as well as their importance in the game, to reach a comprehensive analysis of them. Hence, the present study will analyse female characters from three different angles: their visual appearance (including behaviour), linguistic features, and role in the game's narrative.

2.2. A New Approach: Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The main method for studying gender portrayals in video games has so far been content analysis. However, as Ensslin (2011: 118) states, video games consist of a variety of representational modes, such as written and spoken language, still and moving images, and sounds and music, and they should therefore be analysed multimodally to study the complex layers of meaning created by their multimodality.

Jewitt, Bezemer, and O'Halloran (2016) define multimodality as "multiple means of meaning making". The means for meaning making can be called semiotic resources, which are "the product of the social meaning making practices of members of a community over time"; for example, the length of a shot in photography and film-making is used to represent levels of social intimacy. A mode, on the other hand, is a socially organized set of semiotic resources for meaning making. In other words, different semiotic resources appear together in socially organized sets called modes, which usually appear together with other modes; for example, images are used alongside writing and gestures accompany speech. (Jewitt et al. 2016: 71).

In social semiotic theory, the importance of "meaning as choice" is emphasised: a sign maker (the producer or the interpreter of a sign) chooses semiotic resources to make the semiotic entities meet particular social functions or purposes, all of which are shaped by the sign maker's social, cultural, political, and technological environments. A sign maker's social experiences have shaped their subjectivity, which in turn shapes their choice of resources, by making them choose one semiotic resource over another (Jewitt et al. 2016: 67–68, 73). In other words, as Ensslin (2011: 119) summarizes, all semiotic choices comprise of personal or institutional values, beliefs, and ideologies. Multimodal Discourse Analysis can therefore be used to analyse the choice of modes and their intended meaning by using social semiotics and considering the sign makers and the reasons they chose something over another. The present study adopts social semiotic theory to examine the kind of meanings the different modes chosen to portray female characters create.

Furthermore, Ensslin (2011: 119–120) introduces the theory of denotation and connotation as well as the Hallidayan metafunctions of language and communication, which provide useful tools for multimodal analysis. The three Hallidayan metafunctions are the ideational metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the textual metafunction; out of these, the

first one is the most relevant for the present study, as it is related to "the representation of people, places, things, and ideas through language and other semiotic modes". The theory of denotational and connotational meanings, i.e. literal and associative meanings, can then be used to analyse how semiotic modes are used to represent the people, places, things, and ideas, or in the case of the present study, the female characters in the video game.

Ensslin (2011: 124) argues that when analysing video games, the video game aesthetics should be taken into account as a whole, including both the audio-visual aspects of the game and the tactile sensations and actions, as video games are innately interactive in nature. However, she also notes that from an ideological perspective the most important structural aspect of video games are cutscenes, which are the same for all gamers and which are "sequentialised and organised following the game makers' ideological and aesthetic trajectories", and therefore indicate how the game is supposed to be understood (2011: 123). Hence, considering the limited scope of the present study, limiting the analysis to cutscenes should provide more than enough data to examine the portrayal of female characters from a multimodal perspective.

3 PRESENT STUDY

The following section will present the aim and research questions of the present study, as well as the data and methods used for analysis.

3.1. Research Questions

The aim of the present study is to analyse how the female characters in *GTAV* are portrayed multimodally. In order to receive a comprehensive analysis of the characters' portrayal, the research questions are:

1. How are female characters portrayed visually in the cutscenes of the game *Grand Theft Auto V*?
2. How are they portrayed linguistically, i.e. via language used by them and of them?
3. How are they portrayed in the game's narrative, i.e. what are their roles, positions and importance in the game?

3.2. Data

The data was gathered from the PC version of the game *GTAV*, which was developed by the British video game developer Rockstar North and published by the American video game publisher Rockstar Games in 2013. It is one of the most popular and best-selling video games of all time; moreover, the *Grand Theft Auto* series is one of the most controversial video game series of all time and has raised moral panic in the media throughout its years of existence because of the violent contents and their feared psychological effects on young people (Ensslin 2011: 113–115). The game series, however, has always been targeted towards a mature audience, and *GTAV* itself is rated M (for Mature, 17+) on the ESRB ratings system.

GTAV is an open world action-adventure video game set within the fictional state of San Andreas, based on Southern California, in which the main points of interest are the metropolis of Los Santos, based on Los Angeles, and the countryside of Blaine County nearby it. The game has three different playable protagonists (i.e. main characters), each of whom are male criminals from different backgrounds: Michael, a retired bank robber with a wife and two teenage

children; Franklin, a former street gang member working as a repossession agent; and Trevor, a volatile and violent maniac who lives by his own rules and who used to be Michael's criminal colleague. The main goal of the game is to commit criminal activities in most of which all three protagonists are needed to work together to be successful. (Rockstar Games: Grand Theft Auto V, n.d.). There are multiple activities in the game, including the missions progressing the main storyline and, for example, side missions helping various other characters accomplish different goals.

The game was played through to receive a first-hand experience of the overall structure of the game and to see the relations between interactive gameplay sections and non-interactive cinematic scenes (i.e. cutscenes). The data consists of cutscenes from those main storyline missions in which a female character appears. Cutscenes were chosen instead of interactive gameplay sections as they are always the same for every player each time the game is played; moreover, as Ensslin (2011: 123) notes, cutscenes reveal information about the game makers' ideologies behind the game and therefore the way the game is supposed to be understood. Thus, cutscenes are suitable for analysing the visual, linguistic, and narrative portrayal of the characters as they portray the characters the way they are meant to be seen as.

Because of the limited scope of the study, the focus of the analysis is on the most important female characters, as suggested by Beasley and Standley (2002). Thus, the cutscenes analysed more in depth are the ones in which one or more of the most important female characters are a part of. The importance of a character is based on the number of cutscenes they are involved in and the closeness of their relationship with at least one of the main playable characters.

3.3. Methods of Analysis

The present study uses a Multimodal Discourse Analysis approach: the main theories used are social semiotic theory (Jewitt et al. 2016) and the theory of denotational and connotational meanings (Ensslin 2011: 120). Social semiotic theory is used to the extent of examining the meanings of the different modes chosen to portray the female characters, whereas the theory of denotational and connotational meanings aids in analysing the meanings. Previous studies on the subject will also be used as a guide for the analysis, particularly for deciding where to focus on. Specifically, the studies by Dietz (1998), Beasley and Standley (2002), Jansz and Martis (2007), and Downs and Smith (2010) were used as a guide for most of the visual and narrative

elements, apart from age which was added based on the suggestion by Rughiniş, Rughiniş, and Toma (2016). Their study was also the inspiration for adding sociability as an element of the linguistic portrayal.

The analysis consists of three different points of view. First, the focus is on the visual portrayal of the characters: based on previous studies, this consists of the characters' age, body type (including breast size), clothing and its appropriateness, and behaviour (particularly sexual behaviour). Second, the linguistic portrayal of the characters is analysed: the focus here is on the language the characters themselves use and the language used about the characters, and the characters' sociability, which examines whether the female characters talk to each other or not, and if they do, what it is that they talk about (Rughiniş et al. 2016: 10). Third, the narrative portrayal of the characters is analysed: here, based on previous studies, the focus in on the characters' roles, violence, and importance to the narrative and game progress. Roles consist of hero, evil, victim, ally, housewife, prize, and sex object, and a character can fit into a variety of roles throughout the game. The focus of violence is on whether the character commits or receives violence, and the importance to the narrative and game progress is determined by the characters' influence to the events in the narrative.

These points of view were chosen to gather a comprehensive analysis of the characters' portrayal, instead of focusing only on their physical aspects, which has been the main focus on most of the previous research.

4 ANALYSIS

The game has altogether 77 main storyline missions, out of which 27 missions have cutscenes where at least one female character appears in. There are altogether nine different female characters who are named and appear in the main storyline; of these, four characters are more prominent than others and they are therefore the main interest of this study. The female characters shown most are Amanda and Tracey (both appear in eight missions), who are Michael's wife and daughter, respectively. They appear consistently throughout the game and are closely related to one of the main characters, which makes them the most important female characters in the game. The two next most prominent female characters, who both appear in five different missions, are Denise, Franklin's aunt who provides accommodation for Franklin during the early stages of the game, and Patricia, who is kidnapped by Trevor and seems to be his short time romantic interest.

4.1. Visual Portrayal

Most of the characters are adults, Tracey being the only exception as a teenager. Her and Amanda's appearances could be described as the most ideal, in the sense that they fit the Western beauty standards: despite being thin, they both have curves and large breasts; additionally, they both have long hair and often appear in clothing that draws attention to their breasts. Additionally, it is implied in one of the missions that Amanda has undergone a breast augmentation surgery (See Appendix 1), which explains her breast size. While Amanda's choices of clothing are appropriate for the different situations (for example, the revealing top is part of her sport outfit), Tracey is scantily dressed regardless of the situation, the most notable one being her audition in a reality TV show while wearing a revealing shirt and a miniskirt with thigh highs and ankle boots. Moreover, Tracey's behaviour can be described sexual more often than Amanda's: she is first seen dancing on a table wearing revealing clothing, and later she is seen dancing in a sexual manner during her reality TV show audition (See Appendix 2), while Amanda's sexual behaviour is only implied by her cheating on her husband (See Appendix 1).

While Amanda and Tracey appear in various situations with various outfits, Denise's and Patricia's appearances do not have much variety at all: Patricia has only one outfit and Denise two, the only difference between her outfits being the colour. The outfits of both characters show barely any skin and are regular everyday clothes; furthermore, their body types are

average and their breast sizes seem appropriate considering their body types. In addition, their behaviours cannot be described sexual at any time.

In conclusion, the characters' visual portrayals can be described as close to realistic, considering their body proportions and the appropriateness of their clothing and behaviour. However, it cannot be denied that some of the characters are sexualised, the most notable one being Tracey, who is constantly dressed in revealing clothing and acts in a sexual manner.

4.2. Linguistic Portrayal

The linguistic portrayal of the characters is tied to their personalities and situations. However, the way the characters speak themselves is rather negative: for most of the time, Amanda is complaining to Michael, because she is annoyed by his behaviour and not happy in their marriage (See Appendix 1); Tracey is usually complaining to Michael as well, because he stops her from doing the things she wants to do (See Appendix 2); Denise is either complaining about Franklin, or men in general, or chanting feminist catch phrases (See Appendix 3); and Patricia barely says anything, although she is usually polite and kind when she does say something (See Appendix 4). Moreover, the characters are usually talking to male characters, except for Denise who regularly interacts with her feminist female friends. Additionally, Amanda and Tracey interact with each other twice, first arguing about Tracey's boyfriend (See Appendix 1) and second while their home is under attack (See Appendix 2).

However, the way other characters talk to and about these characters varies somewhat more. Although Amanda and Michael spend most of their time arguing, meaning that Michael is usually angry towards Amanda, giving her sarcastic answers and insulting her hobbies (See Appendix 1), he along with everyone else refers to her with neutral words, such as *Amanda, wife* or *mother*. Overall the other characters tend to talk to her in a more respectful manner than Michael does, except for Trevor, who almost immediately comments on her appearance. Patricia follows a similar pattern: her husband talks to her disrespectfully, and while the other characters are not very polite to her either, she is most of the time called by neutral terms as well, usually by *Patricia* or *wife* (See Appendix 4). In general, however, she tends to be ignored by the other characters when she is with them and she is only talked to a few times. Tracey, on the other hand, usually receives condescending and sexual talk, as the adults either do not approve what she is doing or show sexual interest toward her (See Appendix 2). However, she

is also usually called by neutral terms, such as *Tracey*, *daughter* or *sister*. Despite the other three being referred to most often with neutral terms, Denise is referred to with both neutral and insulting terms, the neutral ones being *aunt* and *auntie*, while the insults include *dried up ass sister* and *crazy ass*. In addition, every character talks to her differently: while Franklin insults her, Trevor belittles her by giving her a few dollars to make her go away, and a third male character defends her, possibly because of his sexual interests toward her. The female characters, however, seem to admire and support her. (See Appendix 3).

In conclusion, the linguistic portrayal is rather one-dimensional: while the characters' constant arguing and complaining are reasonable considering the characters' life situations, the conversations lack positive tone and show only one side of the characters. However, most of the characters are usually called by their names and other neutral terms, which shows that the other characters most often respect them.

4.3. Narrative Portrayal

Most of the characters have a variety of roles throughout the game, except for Denise, to whom evil is the only role that seems suitable, considering her attitude toward Franklin (See Appendix 3). Another evil character could be Amanda, since she keeps irritating Michael by doing things he does not approve, such as cheating on him and spending his money, which, on the other hand, she does because he cheated on her first. On the other hand, she can be seen as an ally, since despite their fights she is on Michael's side and occasionally tries to make their life together work out. Additionally, she is sometimes regarded as a sex object. (See Appendix 1). Tracey, however, is a sex object, since her appearance and behaviour are sexualised and one male character in particular shows sexual interest towards her. She could also be a victim, as some characters can be seen as trying to take advantage of her young age; for example, when auditioning for a reality TV show she seems to be slightly confused about what is going on. In addition, Michael sees her as a victim, as he wants to rescue her from a few situations, such as the filming of the TV show. (See Appendix 2). Lastly, Patricia is mainly a victim, since Trevor kidnaps her, but she can also be considered as a prize from Trevor's point of view. She is also a housewife, as she begins to take care of Trevor's household while being held captive there. (See Appendix 4).

Furthermore, here are notable differences in the importance of the four characters. One of them in particular does not seem very important at all: Denise does not affect the game progress in any way, as she usually only appears either in the beginning or the end of a mission, does not take part in the missions herself, and unlike the other characters, she does not have missions related to her. The other characters have important parts in some of the missions, however. For example, Patricia is kidnapped in one mission and then returned to her husband in another one, whereas Tracey, for example, is rescued from a boat in one mission, and in another one Michael and Trevor end up committing violence on one male character because of how he treats her. Lastly, Amanda's actions in one mission particularly affect the narrative and game progress greatly, making her the most important character of the four: Michael catches her cheating on him in their own house (See Appendix 1), which causes him to perform a series of actions which ultimately lead him into meeting Trevor.

Despite the violent nature of the game, none of the female characters are shown committing or receiving physical violence. However, Patricia's kidnapping can be considered as psychological violence, since she is held captive and threatened to be killed. On the other hand, she seems to be handled gently and she seems to be relatively free to move around in the place she is held captive in, and even seems to enjoy her time there (See Appendix 4).

In conclusion, the characters appear in a variety of roles, such as evil, victim, sex object, and housewife; additionally, three of the characters affect the narrative and game progression meaningfully. There is no physical violence shown towards the characters nor are they shown committing it, but at least one of them receives psychological violence.

4.4. Overall Portrayal

The games in the *GTA* series are generally believed to portray women in a sexualised and misogynistic way, which is partially true in the case of *GTA V*: the two most frequent female characters are visually portrayed sexualised, with thin bodies, large breasts, and sometimes revealing clothing – interestingly, the youngest female character is the one who is scantily clad most often and whose behaviour can be described sexual more often than any other female characters' behaviour. However, the next two most frequent characters are hardly sexualised at all with their average body types and clothes that show barely any skin. From the linguistic and narrative points of view, however, all four characters are objects of sexual or romantic desire at

some point of the game, which is the reason one of them is kidnapped. Despite their desires, there is only one male character who is shown to attempt to engage in somewhat sexual behaviour with one of the four female characters, who in this case is the youngest and most sexualised one. The portrayal of the four characters can hardly be described as misogynistic, however, except for perhaps the stereotypical manner three of the characters keep complaining to and about men, portraying the women in a negative light because of their complaining. Additionally, the kidnapping of one of them could be considered as misogynistic, but the character is kidnapped out of romantic (or sexual) interest rather than hatred, and as she is held captive she seems to be relatively free to do as she likes inside the kidnapper's home.

In addition, the popular way of describing female characters in the *GTA* games as prostitutes who can be hired and then killed to take the money back is not the most accurate way to describe the female characters. Prostitutes and strippers exist in the game, but during the main missions the main protagonists do not interact with them until towards the end of the game, when one of the main protagonists purchases a strip club and they meet at the club for a few times to plan their heists, and even then, the only way they interact with the strippers is by talking with them. It is possible to pay for a lap dance or hire a prostitute and kill them outside the main missions, but that is for the player themselves to decide; moreover, they are only one kind of characters amongst other kinds of characters, including men, who can be killed and whose money can be stolen by killing them, if the player so wishes. Furthermore, it is important to notice that the prostitutes and strippers, who are without a doubt the most sexualised characters in the game, appear in a main mission cutscene only a couple times.

The female characters in *GTA V*, therefore, seem to be less sexualised and less misogynistically portrayed as is generally believed. However, it is important to remember that the analysis focused on only four female characters out of nine who appear and are named in the cutscenes of the main missions. Including all nine characters in the analysis could provide different results, but, nevertheless, the fact that the two most frequent female characters are sexualised, one much more than the other, cannot be ignored: even though the other two female characters (and possibly the five others as well) are not sexualised, the two who appear the most in the game are sexualised, and they are most likely also going to be the ones the players pay the most attention to and remember the best from the game. The game's target audience is primarily adult men, which could explain this, but a game being marketed towards male consumers should not make it necessary to sexualise any of its female characters. However, two sexualised female

characters out of four (or possibly nine) can be considered a positive outcome, considering the popular beliefs on how women are portrayed in the *GTA* games.

In conclusion, the female characters are portrayed in a somewhat versatile manner. Firstly, from a visual point of view, the characters are portrayed close to realistic, as their body parts are, for the most part, proportional to their body types; moreover, they represent different ages and different body types, while only one of them is remarkably sexualised. The choices of clothing are appropriate for the situations most of the time, too, the most notable exception being the clothes worn by the youngest character while auditioning for the reality TV show. Second, from a linguistic point of view, the characters are portrayed one-dimensionally and for most of the time they do not talk to other female characters. The language used about the characters is sometimes neutral, but often insulting or condescending. Thirdly, from a narrative point of view, the characters have a variety of roles throughout the game, although most of the roles are rather negative: evil, victim, sex object, and prize, compared to which the other two appearing roles, housewife and ally, are more positive ones. On the other hand, three of the characters are important to the narrative and game progression, as the characters' behaviour affects the narrative and there are missions related to them.

In other words, the characters' visual and narrative portrayals show the most variation, while linguistic portrayals are rather one-dimensional for the most part. However, considering the nature of the game in question and the popular beliefs about the portrayal of women in the game series and the game itself, the results seem positive: the characters have their own personalities, they represent a variety of body types, and they are important to the game progress as they affect the narrative; moreover, only one character of the four is notably sexualised and none of the characters receive physical violence.

5 DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to find out how female characters are portrayed in the game *Grand Theft Auto V*. In order to reach a comprehensive analysis of the portrayal, the research questions focused on three different aspects: visual portrayal, linguistic portrayal, and narrative portrayal. A multimodal approach was applied in order to include every aspect in the analysis.

Because of the limited scope of the study, the number of analysed female characters was limited and the focus was, therefore, on the female characters who appeared most often in the main missions of the game. The aim was to analyse the most important female characters, as suggested in previous studies (e.g. Beasley and Standley 2002), but it became apparent during the analysis of the chosen characters that not all characters who appear most often in a game are important to the narrative or game progression: while this is a worthwhile finding, in future studies, when every character cannot be included in the analysis, the characters should be compared in more ways than only the number of times they appear in the game before choosing the characters to be analysed. However, the best results would be reached if every character could be included in the analysis. In the present study, including every female character from the main missions in the analysis would have given a better view on the variety of female characters present in the game's main storyline missions, but the number had to be limited because of the scope of the study. Nevertheless, the four female characters analysed in the present study provided interesting information on the portrayal of female characters in the game, and there were evidence women are not as negatively portrayed in the game as is popularly believed.

However, in order to reach the most comprehensive analysis of any kind of characters, they should be compared to other kind of characters: in the case of the present study, the female characters should be compared to characters of any other gender, which most likely means only male characters in the game in question. As the women are portrayed in a somewhat negative way, as stereotypical, complaining women who are somewhat sexualised, the men are not portrayed in any more positive way: they are violent, angry, and greedy criminals. In addition, men are treated worse than women by the characters: the object of the male characters' violent behaviour is most of the time another male character. While there are two female characters in the game who suffer brutal deaths, neither of them is caused by the player, whereas there is one

male character who is brutally tortured as part of a mission and many others who must be killed by the main protagonists during the missions.

Furthermore, when analysing characters, the context should be taken into account: understanding the context makes it easier to put the character portrayals into perspective and analyse their appropriateness by how well they fit in the context, which in the case of the present study is the game world: the three main protagonists are criminals, which means the game is about criminal lifestyle, violence and flawed characters. Considering this, the female characters could be portrayed in a much worse way than they are now as diverse, arguing, somewhat sexualised characters. On the other hand, they could be portrayed better, too, by having them be more involved in the game progress and show other sides of them than the unhappy one. To receive an even better understanding of the context, the game *GTA V* should be studied as a satire, as the game world is a satire of American media culture (Suellentrop and Houser 2012). It is beyond the scope of the present study, however, and is something that could be the focus of a future study. In the present study, the context can be considered to an extent: knowing the game is a satire, it can be assumed the characters are exaggerated stereotypes that exist in an American media culture; for example, Amanda is a nagging housewife while Tracey is a blonde girl who lacks intelligence. As a satire, the game most likely aims to make fun of the real world and perhaps raise discussion, but, as mentioned above, that is beyond the scope of the present study.

In conclusion, for future studies analysing characters, it would be beneficial to include as many characters as possible in the analysis to gather an overall view of the characters' portrayal; in addition, including characters from different groups (e.g. gender, race) would be useful as it allows a more in depth comparison between various groups of characters. Furthermore, the game world, its themes, and the context should be taken into account when analysing the character portrayals' appropriateness.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Excerpts of Amanda's dialogue and dialogue about Amanda

(Mission name: *Father/Son*)

Tracey: "You're such a fucking dictator! Why the fuck not?"

Amanda: "He is not staying the night! He's a bum!"

Tracey: "Oh my God!"

Amanda: "I don't even know why you are with him!"

Tracey: "I don't give a shit!"

Amanda: "He's a bum!"

Tracey: "Are you kidding me?"

Amanda: "He is homeless!"

Tracey: "He doesn't have anywhere to go!"

Amanda: "I don't care!"

Tracey: "Oh my God!"

Amanda: "I do, you hear me? I don't care!"

Tracey: "Oh my God! You have no say..."

Amanda: "Keep your mouth shut!"

Tracey: "I fucking saw him!"

Amanda: "What I do is none of your business! And you watch your language!"

Tracey: "It's not fair!"

Amanda: "I'm gonna call your father and you're gonna get your ass kicked!"

Tracey: "I hope someone cuts your brake cables!"

Amanda: "I swear to God, you kill me! You kill me!"

Amanda: "You know it's not that I wish I..."

Tracey: "Stupid bitch..."

(Mission name: *Marriage Counseling*)

Michael: "Amanda! Amanda! You better not be! Not in my house!"

Amanda: "Fuck you, Michael! Go away!"

Michael: "I'm paying that turd a hundred and fifty bucks an hour to fuck my wife? In my own bed?"

Amanda: "Michael, go away!"

(Mission name: *Fame or Shame*)

Amanda: "Is that yours?"

Michael: "Course not."

Amanda: "I have only got myself to blame for the mess these kids are in. You are either drunk, or you're staring miserably at the clouds, or you're out there doing God only knows what."

Michael: "Oh, yeah, I've done horrible by you. Pulled you out of a midwestern [sic] trailer park, got you a big mansion in Rockford Hills. Hell, the only thing you gotta worry about anymore is what part of your body you want to have chopped off or sucked out again."

Amanda: "Screw you, Michael."

Michael: "Ah, but you won't."

Amanda: "I was faithful to you up until I found you in a stripper. I would divorce your ass if I could. You are nothing but a murdering, cheating, hypocrite! Thank you, Michael, whatever the fuck our fake last name is. You have ruined my serenity yet again. My yoga is fucked!"

Michael: "Oh, is that what they're calling it now? You and your fucking yoga."

Fabien (yoga instructor): "Did someone say yoga?"

Amanda: "Oh, hello Fabien, darling. Namaste."

Trevor: "I'm sorry… I'm sorry… where are my manners, right? Amanda, it is good to see you. I missed you. You used to be fatter. Nice new tits, by the way."

(Mission name: *Did Somebody Say Yoga?*)

Amanda: "Hello, Fabien, darling."

Fabien: "Namaste, Amanda. Are we ready to practice?"

Amanda: "Yes."

Michael: "Oh, yes, she's very centered, a regular oasis of peace and tranquility, this one."

Amanda: "Do you see what I live with? A gorilla with anger issues and worse friends."

Amanda: "His chakras are completely blocked! Don't worry about him."

Fabien: (to Amanda) "Show me the downward dog."

Fabien: (to Michael) "I'm glad we have helped with your impotence, Michael."

Michael: "What'd you say?"

Fabien: (to Michael) "Your sexual energies have been blocked for too long."

Fabien: (to Amanda) "Back into my pelvis. Back, back back, yes… there you go. Hmm, it's very nice."

Michael: "Oh! Oh! Oh! Hey, enough of that shit!"

Amanda: "What?"

(Mission name: *Reuniting the family*)

Amanda: "Michael… be positive."

Michael: "I am being positive. This is me being positive."

Amanda: "Give it up, Michael. The sarcasm. It's one of the reasons I moved out. It's beneath you."

Michael: "No it's not, Amanda. Trust me. Nothing's beneath me."

Amanda: "No, normally there's a whore beneath you."

Michael: "You know, for someone who spends every waking moment working on themselves "inside and out", I gotta tell ya, the progress has been really fucking slow."

Amanda: "How would you know what progress is like, you stupid murdering shit!?"

Michael: "Ah, gee! Because all you do is whine at me."

Amanda: "Oh! All I do is whine? Michael, could you please stop murdering people? Michael, could you please stop endangering me and the both of your children? You kill people and then you sit in the sun and drink and feel guilty about it! That is not work!"

Michael: "I don't see you complaining on the way to the fucking bank! I mean let's face it, Amanda, we're trailer trash, you and me. We were taught to do this."

Amanda: "Get a center, Michael. You have no center."

Michael: "How about, you suck my cock? Huh? No wait, we'll both get a center before that ever happens!"

Amanda: "You are such a fucking animal, a deranged animal!"

Michael: "You're fucking A-right I'm deranged! How could I not be?"

Amanda: "I should have had you locked up years ago, you stupid shit."

Michael: "Do it! Do it! I'll put you in the fucking ground with the rest of 'em."

Source: Rockstar North 2013.

Appendix 2: Excerpts of Tracey's dialogue and dialogue about Tracey

(Mission name: *Daddy's Little Girl*)

Jimmy: "And why don't you stick your nose up Tracey's butt sometime?"

Michael: "Because Tracey doesn't buy cars she can't afford so that thugs break in our house. Tracey doesn't get kidnapped or destroy my yacht."

Jimmy: "Well, that's just because she's too busy getting fucked by dudes to get on TV."

Michael: "You don't talk about your sister that way!"

Michael: "Come on, sweetheart. I'm taking you out of here."

Tracey: "Dad, you're embarrassing me, these are my friends."

Man: "Yeah, you're embarrassing her, dude."

Michael: "They're shooting porno here."

Tracey: "They shoot porno all over town. Mom rented our house to them last summer."

Tracey: "You! You fucking asshole! Aaah!"

Jimmy: "He… he's the fucking asshole, okay? He smashed my TV and he took me to the beach. The beach, with my skin!"

Tracey: "So what? You send him out to spoil my day too?"

(Mission name: *Friend Request*)

Michael: "Out."

Tracey: "No! I'm watching Fame or Shame!"

Michael: "Tough fucking tits! (tries to take the remote control from her)"

Tracey: "No! No!"

Michael: "Give me that..."

Tracey: "No! Argh!"

(Mission name: *Fame or Shame*)

Lazlow (TV host): "Coming up next, it's Tracey De Santa. Judges, Tracey De Santa. Yes."

Tracey: "Hi."

Lazlow: "Alright, Trace's a 'dancer', but she also likes acting, modeling, and working with children. That's, that's beautiful. You're so original, like a basket full of puppies, or a rainbow, or a… pile of puke."

Lazlow: "Yeah, shake what your daddies gave ya, honey. Look at that, I should stuff a twenty in this." (walks over to Tracey and starts dancing with her while holding his hands on her hips)

Trevor: "You gonna fucking do something about this?"

Michael: "Alright, that's enough. Ho, ho, I said that's enough!" (attacks Lazlow)

(Mission name: *Reuniting the Family*)

Tracey: "So, you'll let me on the show if I blow you!?"

Lazlow: "Yes, and if you could wear some black lipstick, the little guy loves the goth vibe."

(Mission name: *Meltdown*)

Amanda: "Oh, baby. Baby, are you ok? Are you alright, sweetie?"

Tracey: "I think so."

Source: Rockstar North 2013.

Appendix 3: Excerpts of Denise's dialogue and dialogue about Denise

(Mission name: *Franklin and Lamar*)

Denise: (on the phone) "Oh, he here. We living on top of each other and it ain't right."

Denise: (to Franklin) "Shoo, shoo! Get on out of here."

Denise: (on the phone) "Okay baby, I'll see you at that thing, you hear?"

Denise: (to Franklin) "I was on the phone boy, don't be listening! Goddamn freeloader!"

(Mission name: *Chop*)

Denise: "Girl, of course I saved that poor boy's life. But you know what? It's getting to be a bit much."

Woman: "I have no idea how you cope."

Denise: "'Course I cope. I'm a woman."

Woman: "Ain't that the truth?"

Denise: "But, girl, I done done all that I can do, but you know how boys are."

--

Woman: "This is spirit walking. Exercises body and soul. It's all the rage. We are women and we are free!"

Denise: "We are women..."

Both chanting: "Bringing an end to the patriarchy. We are women, hear our pain, we are women, hear our shout, and we are free, have no doubt. We are women and we are free..."

Lamar: "Damn. F is that your auntie?"

Franklin: "Yeah, thank God I missed her crazy ass. She spirit walking and shit now, man… that's just her attempts to…"

Lamar: "Hey, hey! Don't be talking shit about your auntie, man, she got… I mean she cool as a motherfucker, man, come on."

(Mission name: *Hood Safari*)

Denise: "Ah! Don't you step foot in this yard!"

Franklin: "Why? It's half my house!"

Denise: "Nah, I'm gonna call the police!"

Franklin: "For what?"

Denise: "Disloyalty, boy!"

Franklin: "Disloyalty? What is you talking about?"

Lamar: "Don't act like you don't know what it is, homebolio. You ain't been to the set, ain't came to none of the meetings."

Denise: "Hanging out with old men, ignoring your homies, acting all superior… your mamma would turn over in her grave, boy."

Franklin: "So you giving me a lecture about not being a good enough gangbanger?"

Lamar: "Gangs is positive. That's all we got, my nigga. That's our heritage."

Franklin: "Ain't nothing positive about your crazy ass. Man, where Tanisha at?"

Denise: "She got more sense than to hang out with your sorry ass. You know you always been like this, boy… I say left, you say right. I say become a doctor, you say become a patient… I say… who is that?"

Trevor: "Hello, missy… wow, Franklin, you never told me that you had a sister."

Denise: "I'm Denise… Franklin's housemate…"

Franklin: "And aunt… My mother's old dried up ass sister."

Trevor: "Here, darling, why don't you… (gives Denise money) go get yourself something nice, okay?"

Denise: "Thank you! This… this is seven dollars."

Trevor: "I said something nice, not expensive. You wanna be a greedy fucking cow, huh? No… now get the fuck out of here, alright?"

Denise: "You men are all the same."

Source: Rockstar North 2013.

Appendix 4: Excerpts of Patricia's dialogue and dialogue about Patricia

(Mission name: *Caida Libre*)

Patricia: "Yes?"

Michael: "Hi."

Trevor: "Whoa… Hello… Mmm…"

Michael: We're looking for Mr. Madrazo."

Madrazo: "Patricia! For fuck's sake, just let 'em in!"

Patricia: "Right this way, gentlemen."

Madrazo: "Patricia, get us something to drink would you? Quickly!"

Patricia: "You still want a drink?"

Madrazo: "Not now! Dumbass… Don't you see I'm talking to some people here?!"

Michael: "Did you kill him?"

Trevor: "What kind of fuckin' animal do you take me for? No, I didn't kill him."

Michael: "Oh fuck."

Trevor: "But I did kidnap his wife!"

(Mission name: *Minor Turbulence*)

Trevor: "Ron, Ron, that is Michael… and this… is Patricia. Listen… beautiful, y'know I'm sorry about everything that's happened, and I, y'know, I can't guarantee no harm's gonna come to you. Might have to chop you up into little pieces before spraying your pulped mess down the drain, but… I really hope it doesn't come to that."

Patricia: "I appreciate your honesty. You are a good man, I can see that."

Michael: "You need your eyes examined then."

(Mission name: *Predator*)

Trevor: (inhales) "Oh, man… It's cheap, but it's good."

Patricia: (slaps Trevor) "Gasolina? No." (puts the cup away from Trevor)

Trevor: "Wow. Sorry, Mrs. M… Jesus."

(Mission name: *Derailed*)

Michael: "Where have you two been?"

Trevor: "Getting some fresh air."

Patricia: "Talking of beautiful things."

Michael: "Yes, I hear Stockholm Syndrome is very nice this time of year."

Trevor: "Hey, watch your mouth, boy, alright?"

(Mission name: *Monkey Business*)

Patricia: (to Trevor) "No. Stay." (steps out of the car)

Trevor: (to Madrazo) "You better treat her right, man!"

Madrazo: "I will, amigo!"

Trevor: "Yeah, otherwise… the other ear!"

Source: Rockstar North 2013.