

Gender representations in Spider-Man video games

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Supersankarit ovat nykypäivänä suosionsa huipulla, erityisesti elokuvissa ja tv-sarjoissa. Samankaltaista suosiota nauttivat videopelit, jotka ovat vuosien mittaan nousseet myös valtavirran suosimaksi viihdemuodoksi. Tämä tutkielma yhdistää supersankarit ja videopelit, sillä tutkimuksen keskiössä ovat sukupuolten representaatiot Hämähäkkimieheen pohjautuvissa videopeleissä. Aiemmat tutkimukset supersankarisarjakuvista, -elokuvista, -sarjoista ja yleensä videopeleistä ovat löytäneet muun muassa hypermaskuliinisia ja epäinhimillisiä mieskuvia sekä seksualisoituja, passiivisia ja toissijaisiin rooleihin asetettuja naiskuvia. Koska nimenomaan supersankaripeleihin keskittyvää tutkimusta oli haastavaa löytää, valikoituivat niissä esiintyvät sukupuolten representaatiot tutkielman aiheeksi.</p> <p>Tämä tutkielma keskittyy ikoniseen supersankariin Hämähäkkimieheen ja tämän kumppaniin Mary Janeen. Aineistona toimivat kaksi menestynyttä videopeliä, vuoden 2000 <i>Spider-Man</i> ja vuoden 2018 <i>Marvel's Spider-Man</i>. Aineisto kerättiin pelejä pelaamalla ja YouTube-videoita katsomalla. Hahmojen esittämiä sukupuolten representaatioita tutkittiin kuudesta elementistä koostuvaa karakterisaatioluokittelua soveltamalla.</p> <p><i>Spider-Manin</i> Hämähäkkimies edustaa takavuosille tyypillistä osittain liioitellun maskuliinista machosankaria, eikä siviilihenkilöllisyys Peter Parkerin hahmoa kehitetä juuri laisinkaan. <i>Marvel's Spider-Manin</i> Hämähäkkimies taas on huomattavasti kypsempi ja inhimillisempi, ja Peter Parker -hahmoa kehitetään lähes yhtä paljon kuin supersankaria itseään. Mary Jane puolestaan kehittyy <i>Spider-Manin</i> seksualisoidusta ja passiivisesta uhrista <i>Marvel's Spider-Manissa</i> modernin toiminnalliseksi naiseksi, joka ei vaaroja kaihda.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen löydökset edustavat samaa progressiivisempaa linjaa, joka on havaittu myös muissa medioissa. Se ei heijastele vain videopelien muutosta, vaan myös yhteiskunnan muutosta. Aiemmin aliedustetut ja -representoidut ryhmät saavat enemmän näkyvyyttä ja hyväksyntää, kun tulevaisuuden representaatiot ovat monimuotoisempia.</p>	
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1. INTRODUCTION

Superhero media is currently at the height of its popularity. In particular, the cinematic universes of the two industry juggernauts, Marvel and DC, have managed to achieve tremendous success. The DC Extended Universe's (DCEU) worldwide box office revenue is 5,47 billion U.S. dollars, while the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has grossed 22,56 billion U.S. dollars in total. This means MCU is the highest-grossing film franchise of all time (Statista 2021a). In addition, 2019's *Avengers: Endgame* film alone has grossed nearly 2,8 billion U.S. dollars, making it the highest-grossing film in the world, surpassing the likes of *James Cameron's Avatar*, the previous holder of the record (BBC 2019). The recent years have also seen an increase in the number and popularity of superhero TV shows. The programmes, both on TV and on various streaming services, vary from darker crime thrillers such as *Jessica Jones* and *Daredevil*, and the "bizarre" and "trippy" *Legion*, to the oddness of *Doom Patrol* and the social commentary of *Watchmen* (Martin 2020).

Gaming is enjoying similar success. As a hobby or as an occupation, among each age group and gender, for hardcore and casual audiences, and as physical or digital media, gaming's popularity has continued to grow without ceasing. Analysts predicted the total revenue of the gaming industry in 2020 at 179,7 billion dollars, with mobile games accounting for 87,7 billion dollars, console gaming for 52,5 billion dollars, and computer gaming for 39,5 billion dollars (Nesterenko 2020). The present study then, combines superhero media and gaming, concentrating on superhero video games, which have received little attention in research, yet have garnered critical and commercial acclaim on their own turf, most notably the *Batman: Arkham* series and various games based on Spider-Man. The top ten list of the best-selling superhero video games of all time is dominated by Spider-Man and Batman. *Batman: Arkham City* and *Arkham Knight* appear on second and third place, while *Arkham Asylum* also makes the top ten. Three Spider-Man games appear on the list: two of them are licensed games based on the blockbuster films, while *Marvel's Spider-Man* earns its place as the best-selling superhero video game of all time (Carter 2019).

The present study focuses on the leading industry giant, Marvel. It is a reasonable assumption to call Marvel's Spider-Man the company's most iconic superhero of all time. Originally created by Stan Lee (1922-2018) to resemble an ordinary guy, the character debuted in 1962 in the final

instalment of a comic on the verge of cancellation. The issue became a best-seller and paved way for long-lasting success for the character (Anhalt 2017). The current study concentrates on researching gender representations in two Spider-Man video games released during different eras, a classic one in the beginning of the new millennium and a modern instalment in the late 2010s. Neversoft and Activision's *Spider-Man* (2000) features the superhero attempting to save his city from a mysterious mist, while being the target of both supervillains and the authorities after being framed for crimes by someone impersonating him. In Insomniac Games and Sony's *Marvel's Spider-Man* (2018), the hero must both save his city from a new type of threat, and balance his personal life as Peter Parker. The current study focuses exclusively on Spider-Man and his civilian identity Peter Parker, and Mary Jane Watson/Parker, who debuted in 1966 as Peter's love interest and later, wife (Chipman 2016). The present study aims to discover what kinds of gender representations appear in the games, and what kind of change can be observed concerning the representations between the two video games from vastly different eras.

The motivation for the selection of the current topic is the combination of the tremendous success of superhero media and the evergrowing popularity of gaming. Thus, the present study deals with phenomena that are extremely current and meaningful to a lot of people. In addition, the study researches a societal subject, as gender issues are a crucial topic that continues to formulate material for research, despite the fact that already 41 percent of gamers in the United States were women in 2020 (Statista 2021b). As will be discovered in the theory and context chapter, the traditionally poor gender representations in both the comic book industry and the video game industry further increase the relevance of the study. Additionally, the present study's importance is amplified by the fact that both of the analyzed characters are well-known icons that have influenced many a life.

The present study contributes to superhero media research by studying superhero video games. For context, the findings are compared to previous relevant research on gender representations. Characterization theory functions as the basis of the analysis method. A specific characterization taxonomy devised by Pearson (2007) has been slightly modified and will be utilized to analyze the characters as they appear in the video games. The six elements the taxonomy consists of allow for a comprehensive analysis of each characterization, and then they will be inserted into the context of gender studies and relevant previous findings in order to analyze the emerging gender representations. The data of the study consists of a total of four different characterizations, Spider-

Man/Peter Parker twice and Mary Jane Watson/Parker twice, as both characters appear in both of the two analyzed video games. This also enables the comparison between the characterizations in the two different games.

The current thesis begins with a chapter on theory and context. This chapter introduces previous findings on gender representations in the fields of superhero comics, superhero films and TV shows, and video games. The comic book section deals with themes such as identification with superheroes, hypermasculinity, the duality of superheroes, body problems, and the issues of sexualization and victimization. Regarding superhero films and TV shows, findings focus on popular characters such as Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, and Jessica Jones. The section on video games concentrates on sexualization, underrepresentation, equality of role division, and the divide between hardcore and casual games concerning gender representations. In addition to the aforementioned sections, characterization theory and the analysis method for the present study are explained and described in detail. Then, the present study's data, the two video games, and research methods are described. The analysis chapter includes each of the four characterizations divided into the six individual elements, per a modified version of Pearson's (2007) characterization taxonomy. The analysis includes tables and excerpts in order to present information with increased clarity and accuracy. The analysis chapter concludes with a discussion on the present study's main findings and comparisons to previous research. Finally, the thesis concludes with a discussion on the implications of the present study for future research.

2. THEORY AND CONTEXT

This chapter discusses previous findings on phenomena relevant to the topic of the present study. First, gender representations in superhero comics, superhero films and TV shows, and video games will be discussed. Then, the field of characterization will be discussed along with a detailed description of the theoretical method used in the analysis section of the present study. However, for the sake of clarity, the core concepts of gender and representation must first be defined.

Gender is the first concept to be defined. People can be grouped into the categories of female and male based on their biological features. Therefore, the term “sex” can be used when referring to “biological femaleness and maleness” (Lips 2018: 2). However, this strict classification is perceived to be insufficient, and thus the term *gender* is utilized “to refer to culturally-mediated expectations and roles associated with masculinity and femininity” (e.g. Oakley 1972; Unger 1979; as quoted by Lips 2018: 2). Gender is a social construction, and one’s gender identity depends on how they perceive themselves: “as male, female, or as someone who does not fit neatly into these categories.” (Lips 2018: 3). Socialization exposes us to gendered images daily. “Through the media, children, adolescents, and adults are presented with a continuous stream of gendered expectations and models to imitate” (Lips 2018: 11). Lips (2018: 12) further adds: “we swim in a cultural sea of gendered images and, at every stage, a desire to “fit in” pushes individuals to conform to those images”. Thus, the media, including video games which are the focus of the present study, can significantly influence how one performs their gender.

Now, the second core concept, representation, will be defined. The Cambridge Dictionary (2020) defines representation as “the way that someone or something is shown or described”. While this accurately covers the core idea, there is more happening underneath the surface. As Kress & van Leeuwen (2006: 7) point out when providing their definition of the concept, the representation is shaped by the participant(s) and the situation: “a process in which the makers of signs [...] seek to make a representation of some object or entity [...], and in which their interest in the object, at the point of making the representation, is a complex one, arising out of the cultural, social and psychological history of the sign-maker, and focused by the specific context in which the signmaker produces the sign”. Thus, the gender representations that will be analyzed later on can potentially

reflect how the developers of the analyzed video games view the world. Furthermore, representation is also shaped by the modes it is constructed with. As Kress (2004: 110-116) says, the modes are “all the means we have for making meanings”, such as “writing, layout, color, and image” to list a few. Video games are a modally rich medium, often making use of several modes simultaneously, such as moving image, image, written text, and sound. Therefore, the characterization theory utilized to analyze the representations later on reflects the multimodal nature of video games.

2.1. Gender representations in superhero comics

Since their inception, superhero comics have been a source of role models and models of gender behavior for their consumers. In the late 1990s, Brown (1999: 25) identified a theme of duality regarding masculinity in the twentieth century: “At the one end is the hyper-masculine ideal with muscles, sex appeal, and social competence; at the other is the skinny, socially inept failure”. Brown (1999: 25) continues by claiming that this shows in the portrayal of masculinity in comics as well with male superheroes being nearly “exclusively hypermasculine”. According to Brown (1999: 26), comic book consumers “are also aware that several new and incredibly popular comics are erasing the ordinary man underneath in favor of an even more excessively powerful and one-dimensional masculine ideal”. Masculine traits that have traditionally appeared in superhero comics include being “hard”, “strong”, “reserved”, and “active” (Brown 1999: 26-27).

While extreme hypermasculinity was a trend in superhero comics in, at least, the late 1990s, the aforementioned theme of duality was prevalent, too. Brown (1999: 31-32) claims that the large majority of comic book heroes are “a variation on the wimp/warrior theme of duality”, and lists examples including vastly popular characters, such as nerdy teenager Peter Parker versus Spider-Man, rich playboy Bruce Wayne versus Batman, and gentle scientist Bruce Banner versus The Hulk. According to Brown (1999: 31), the wimp side holds a lot of importance as it “facilitates reader identification”. Thus, hypermasculinity can be interpreted as a harmful trend, because it makes superheroes less human and therefore more challenging for the average person to identify with.

Facciani et al. (2015) found evidence of the overrepresentation of males, especially white males, in comics. The researchers utilized content analysis to study popular comic books from 1991 to 2005, ending up with a total of over 8000 frames and over 23,000 characters. Facciani et al. (2015) discovered men to represent “85% of total comic book characters”, and white males specifically represented “79% of the protagonists compared to other human protagonists”. Consequently, as protagonists appear in central roles, white males were clearly “the characters with the most agency” (Facciani et al. 2015). According to the researchers, the overrepresentation of white males in comics may be traced back to the traditional comic book target audience, white men.

Avery-Natale (2013) found a continuous escalation towards increasingly unrealistic and unachievable bodies in superhero comics. Utilizing content analysis, Avery-Natale (2013: 74) studied “comic books [...] from the 1940s to the years 2007-2008 [...]”, ending up with over 250 images. A trend towards “a less easily achievable and more sexualized body that is less comparable to the average body types of men and women” was discovered (Avery-Natale 2013: 100). For male superheroes, comparisons between their earlier (1940s and 1950s) more realistic bodies and their current bodies were drawn, as their “musculature has since become far more defined and exaggerated” (Avery-Natale 2013: 100). For female superheroes, changes such as a significant increase in breast size, more revealing costumes, and a more “sultry” look, were observed (Avery-Natale 2013: 100). Searching for a reason, Avery-Natale (2013: 100) points the finger at comic book creators: “With men determining the entire comic book project, it is no surprise that their imagining of hegemonic gender norms dominate the industry’s presentation of both men and women”.

One way male superheroes construct their masculinity is through changing their costumes. As Weltzien (2005: 230) puts it, “the popular genre of the superhero comic book presents a well-known example of the construction of masculinity through the use of different costumes”. This returns to the theme of duality discussed earlier in the Brown (1999) section. According to Weltzien (2005: 232-233), changing costumes “transforms the whole personality and is connected with specific abilities”, and perhaps the three most iconic superheroes, Superman, Spider-Man, and Batman, pay for their “supermanliness” inside the costume with social incompetence out of the costume. Weltzien (2005: 246) views this as “a steady doing and undoing of two separate identities, which restlessly constructs masculinity within the act of changing costume”.

Wonder Woman is unarguably the most iconic female superhero of all time, and therefore an appropriate starting point for the discussion of female characters in superhero comics. According to Emad (2006: 956), Wonder Woman is “one of only seven American comic books that has been consistently published since the medium’s American origins in the 1930s and 1940s, and the only one with a female main character”. Wonder Woman’s representation of femininity has remained largely consistent throughout the years, the long, flowing hair and large breasts remaining as her permanent trademarks (Emad 2006: 975). However, her image has undergone changes from the frequently running woman “in star-spangled shorts in 1944” to the “wide-eyed, large-breasted ingenue in 2001” (Emad 2006: 955). In an attempt to attract more female comic book readers amidst worsening commercial performance by the mid-1980s, DC transformed Wonder Woman into “a symbol of female power”, complete with a “toned and muscular body”, a “determined expression”, and a “functional costume” (Emad 2006: 974). However, by 2001, Wonder Woman’s image had shifted again towards a significantly more sexualized direction, as described by Emad (2006: 976): “large breasts and a costume that barely covers her body are prevalent no matter the artist or author”.

Female characters are often victimized and face severe, permanent injury in superhero comics. Stabile (2009: 87) says that “although superheroes today are more ethnically and racially diverse than in the past, gender remains the third rail of superhero narratives”. As superhero stories often rely on the trope that there is a victim who needs protection, the victim is often either “female or feminized” (Stabile 2009: 87). Brown (2011: 175) brought to attention that there is a difference on the portrayal of violence and injury between male and female characters: “male heroes can die [...] but they tend to die heroically and are often commemorated and/or magically brought back from the dead on a regular basis. The women, on the other hand, are more likely to be casually but irreparably, wounded, such as when Barbara Gordon’s (the original Batgirl) spine was shattered by The Joker just for fun”.

Cocca (2014) found that the sexual objectification of female characters in superhero comics has decreased over the years. Cocca’s (2014: 412-414) data set included “six issues each of 24 titles from [...] DC and Marvel”, with the full sample being nearly 15,000 panels in over 140 issues. Cocca (2014: 420) discovered that nearly each comic book issue portrayed female characters in

sexually objectifying ways, such as unnatural and sexualized poses. However, when comparing the 1990s to the 2010s, the percentage of objectification had dropped to roughly half of what it used to be (Cocca 2014: 420). Cocca (2014: 420) makes a distinction between “ensemble titles” and specifically “female-headed titles” as “female characters [were] objectified more often in ensemble titles”, implying that female-headed titles tend to practice gender representation in a significantly more progressive manner in comparison with ensemble titles.

In addition, Cocca (2014) discovered that traditional gender norms are still somewhat widespread in superhero comics. Cocca (2014: 421) argues that gender norms are reinforced by women being represented as sexual objects. However, Cocca (2014: 421) also argues that the norms are unsettled by women “being portrayed as [a] strong subject[s]”. Thus, it seems superhero comics reflect at least two conflicting views on what a female character’s role should be, simultaneously balancing on both the traditional and the progressive side of gender representation.

Setting sights into the future, recently there have been numerous positive changes in the superhero comics industry. Curtis and Cardo (2018: 381) declare that “there has been a noticeable change in superhero comics over the last five to ten years that has done a great deal to address their notoriously poor record on representation”. The change includes a black Captain America (Isaiah Bradley, debuted in 2003), the first Pakistani-American superhero Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan, debuted in 2013), a trans character, and a gay marriage (Curtis & Cardo 2018: 381). In addition, gendered names such as “She-Hulk”, are starting to become a thing of the past as female Thor Jane Foster will be known as simply Thor (Curtis & Cardo 2018: 388). The change has also led to the number of female characters increasing, females appearing in lead roles more often, traditionally male characters being gender-swapped into females, “and a significant increase in the number of women writing and drawing the comics” (Curtis & Cardo 2018: 381). As comic book creators substantially diversify, the assumption is that the target audience will undergo changes as well and lead to more gender-smart superhero comic book content being published.

Curtis and Cardo (2018) analyze Ms. Marvel (Kamala Khan) and Captain Marvel (Carol Danvers) as two examples of modern female superheroes. According to Curtis & Cardo (2018: 384), Ms. Marvel is used by the writers “to express traditional feminist tropes about equality and

empowerment, as she negotiates relations with people and institutions on the path to working out who she is and what she wants”. Her civilian identity being Kamala Khan, Ms. Marvel allows writers to explore not only the topic of gender but age, class, and discrimination as well (Curtis & Cardo 2018: 384). Captain Marvel, on the other hand, begins her superhero journey feeling undeserving of her rank as an “authority figure confers legitimacy on the woman and her self-doubts.” (Curtis & Cardo 2018: 390). However, after walking out the victor of a crucial battle, she abandons her old costume and switches into a new less sexualized one, symbolizing her newfound identity as a modern, strong superhero (Curtis & Cardo 2018: 390).

In conclusion, gender representation in superhero comics has traditionally been rather poor. The hypermasculinity trend has made male superheroes less human and therefore more difficult to identify with (Brown 1999). The duality theme regarding masculinity means the male superhero is super only in costume, but a wimp out of costume (Brown 1999; Weltzien 2005). Males, especially white males, have been excessively overrepresented in the comics (Facciani et al. 2015). Both male and female superheroes have unachievable bodies, which can be attributed to the mostly male comic book creators (Avery-Natale 2013). Female characters have often been sexualized from costumes to bodies to poses (Emad 2006; Cocca 2014). They are also often victimized and face more severe injury in comparison to male characters (Stabile 2009; Brown 2011). However, recent positive change is helping to restore trust in the superhero comic book industry’s future. While sexual objectification still transpires, it has significantly decreased and happens less in female-headed titles (Cocca 2014). A more diverse cast of comic book creators has led to the number of female characters increasing and appearing in primary roles, as well as better representation of race and sexuality minorities (Curtis & Cardo 2018). The industry as a whole seems to be heading into a different, more positive direction in terms of gender representation.

2.2. Gender representations in superhero films and TV shows

Prater (2012) studied *X-Men* films and discovered troubling representations of female superheroes lacking the appropriate control over their own superpowers. According to Prater (2012: 161), “in the *X-Men* trilogy of films [2000 to 2006] the main characters through which the issues of power and control are explored are women”. A central female character in *X-Men* is Jean Grey, also known as Phoenix, who made her debut in 1963. The portrayal of Jean Grey/Phoenix is

significantly different in the films in comparison to the comics, as in the comics Grey “brought herself back to life [...] as the Phoenix”, as “a force for good”, while in the films Grey “transforms directly into the Dark Phoenix”, a villainous version of the regular Phoenix (Prater 2012: 163). According to Prater (2012: 163), Grey’s “inability to control her power [...] creates a murderous monster” as she slays her lover Scott Summers (Cyclops) after her transformation. Prater (2012: 164) says that while “male characters’ loss of control is always due to an attack from an outside force”, in Grey’s case it is simply due to her inability to control her own powers. These findings imply that female superheroes are represented as incompetent and unfit for the demanding role of a hero.

Prater (2012) also found instances of women’s sexuality being depicted as dangerous in the *X-Men* films. As a consequence of female characters lacking the ability to control their own powers, they begin inflicting harm on their male partners: “The Phoenix [...] tries to force herself on Wolverine”, “rip[s] her fiancée apart after kissing him”, while Rogue “puts a human boy she likes into a coma with her first kiss” (Prater 2012: 165-166). Overall, Prater (2012: 168) argues that “the *X-Men* films perpetuate and more overtly represent some of the worst constructions of gender offered by the comics”.

In contrast to the *X-Men* films, Marvel’s *Jessica Jones*, which aired from 2015 to 2019, is notable for being the first Marvel TV show designed “specifically for an adult audience” and featuring a female lead, as well as “having a female showrunner [...], women writers or co-writers, and, in its second season [2018], all women directors” (Green 2019). According to Green (2019: 177-178), Jones avoids stereotypical gender representation in several different ways. She constantly refuses to wear traditionally feminine clothing, instead opting for “jeans, tank tops, sweaters and a sturdy leather jacket – clothes that will stand up to the rough wear of a superhero lifestyle” (Green 2019: 177). She is also an active agent rather than a passive one, as evidenced by “her determination to be a ‘reader’ rather than merely a ‘spectator’ of truth, as she uncovers Kilgrave’s [Jones’ archenemy] existence” (Green 2019: 178). Green (2019: 179) concludes that “Jones embodies resistance to gendered power because she is at once superhuman and noir anti-hero”.

Superhero films have had a lack of female leads and female directors, but recently there has been positive change regarding this aspect. According to Curtis (2020: 928), “only one of the forty-eight Marvel-related films since [...] *X-Men* in 2000 had a woman lead [...], and since Marvel Studios began the official Marvel Cinematic Universe [...] in 2008 [...], there have been no women-led films at all”. The recently released films *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Captain Marvel* (2019) represent a break from the tradition. While *Wonder Woman* is “the first DC adapted movie to be directed by a woman”, *Captain Marvel* is the second Marvel film to be directed by a woman (Curtis 2020: 928). In her movie, *Wonder Woman* is represented as a strong superhero in complete control of her own powers. She is “technologically advanced”, “unapologetic about her powers”, “does not understand the limits placed on women”, is able to block “machine gun fire with her shield”, and liberates a village “almost single-handedly” (Curtis 2020: 934-935). In the same vein, *Captain Marvel* is also an unapologetically strong hero. She has innate special powers, is able to control and eventually embrace them, and successfully becomes the first of the Avengers (an iconic group of superheroes), “a title previously carried by Captain America [a male superhero] in both the MCU and the comics” (Curtis 2020: 936-938).

The *Wonder Woman* film (2017) is the first *Wonder Woman* movie to exist despite the character’s long history. Schubart (2019: 162) says “it was 33 years before a live-action adaptation of *Wonder Woman* appeared on television, then another 39 years before [Gal] Gadot was in *Wonder Woman*”. Prior to the release of the film, there was much debate surrounding *Wonder Woman* actress Gadot’s physique, from muscle mass and overall body mass to bust size. Earning more than 820 million dollars, no doubt remains about the film’s commercial success (Schubart 2019: 168). However, Schubart places more emphasis on the importance of Gadot’s *Wonder Woman* renegotiating the superhero body towards a significantly more attainable direction. Schubart (2019: 168) describes Gadot’s portrayal as a “lean, strong, determined, and attractive woman whose physique looked attainable”. According to Schubart (2019: 169), Gadot’s *Wonder Woman* is “a ‘tough’ yet ‘attainable’ role model”, and an example of “how to make a female superhero a believable protagonist in a mainstream cinema film”.

Mulder (2017) observed a turn towards realism in the recent reboots of male-led superhero films. Using Superman, perhaps the most iconic superhero of all time who debuted in 1938, as an example, Mulder (2017: 1051) says the *Man of Steel* film (2013) portrays Superman in a

significantly more humanizing light. Mulder (2017: 1051) argues that Superman is no longer “the resolute, invincible superhuman one might expect” as his superhuman powers are shown “to be a product of and a contributor to the protagonist’s trauma and alienation”. According to Mulder (2017: 1051), the grittier and more realistic trend originated with the *Dark Knight* trilogy, a series of Batman films released from 2005 to 2012. In the *Man of Steel* film, Superman is also portrayed as a more selfish, individualistic person instead of constantly fighting for the greater good: “Kal’s [Superman’s birth name] indecision specifically about what to do with his body makes him a figure of relentless individualism. He breaks from established moral codes and turns inward to follow his gut” (Mulder 2017: 1054). Mulder (2017: 1062) concludes that recent reboots of classic male superheroes, such as the aforementioned Superman and Batman, highlight “the crisis to which the superhero responds [...] [as] analogous to an internal somatic crisis that gives rise to a crisis of identity”.

Baker and Raney (2007) studied superheroes in children’s animated programs, and found non-stereotypical gender representations. Utilizing content analysis, Baker & Raney (2007: 30) analyzed 24 different programs containing superheroes with the chosen episodes featuring 70 superheroes in total. Baker & Raney (2007: 36) discovered that their hypothesis of stereotypical gender representation “was supported for only 7 of the 51 variables”. Among the supported were a larger number of male superheroes, males being portrayed as more tough and threatening, and females being represented “as more emotional, attractive, and concerned about appearance” (Baker & Raney 2007: 36). However, among the unsupported were portrayals of being “intelligent, brave, dominant, technical” and task-oriented, and the stereotypically feminine traits of being a victim, passiveness, following, showing affection, among several others, where no significant differences were observed between the genders (Baker & Raney 2007: 36). Baker & Raney (2007: 36) argue that in a positive light, the results can be interpreted as “female superheroes [...] finally breaking down the gender-based stereotypes that have permeated children’s cartoons for decades”.

However, Baker and Raney also suggest that a pattern of heroism always being linked to solely masculinity, regardless of gender, may exist. While “females are indeed being portrayed in less gender-role specific ways in some respects”, “they are seemingly being portrayed more like males in certain areas, while at the same time maintaining some key feminine characteristics” (Baker & Raney 2007: 37). Baker & Raney (2007: 37) draw the conclusion that “females are being presented

as more masculine” instead of males gaining some stereotypically feminine traits, and thus this “might suggest that to be heroic, one has to be more masculine, regardless of gender”. Therefore, the children watching these programs might learn to view masculinity as the only way of performing heroism.

In conclusion, the same progressive revolution that seems to be transforming the superhero comics industry, can also be observed in superhero films and TV shows. However, that does not erase the past issues with representation. In the *X-Men* films, female superheroes are depicted as lacking control over their own superpowers and being dangerous sexually (Prater 2012). On the other hand, Jessica Jones diverts from stereotypical gender representation (Green 2019). The same applies to Wonder Woman and Captain Marvel, who are portrayed as unapologetically strong superheroes in their recent films, thanks to the increasing number of female-led titles and female film directors (Curtis 2020; Schubart 2019). Male superheroes have become more realistic and humanized in the recent film reboots of their classic stories (Mulder 2017). The superheroes in children’s animated programs do not conform to gender stereotypes, but heroism seems to be inseparably linked to solely masculinity (Baker & Raney 2007).

2.3. Gender representations in video games

Ivory (2006) studied reviews of video games and found that females are underrepresented, appear in passive roles, and are sexualized. Applying content analysis on game reviews from the GameSpot website (founded in 1996) of games released in 2004 “to indirectly measure video game character representation”, Ivory (2006: 104-108) ended up with a total of 100 games from a broad variety of genres. According to Ivory (2006: 111), there is a great difference between the representation of male and female characters: “female video game characters appear to be underrepresented overall, as active characters, and as playable characters, they are proportionally more likely than males to be portrayed in a sexualized fashion”.

Instead of utilizing reviews of video games to analyze game characters, Williams et al. (2009) directly studied the characters within them, and discovered that females are underrepresented, passive, and limited to secondary roles. Using content analysis to study games released in 2005 and

2006, Williams et al. (2009: 822-823) ended up with “the top 150 games across all platforms, with a minimum of 15 titles per [gaming] system”, eventually reducing the number to 133 titles and weighing them based on their commercial popularity. The researchers (2009: 823) studied a total of 8572 characters within the video games. The findings showed that the number of male characters significantly outnumbered female characters with roughly a 85% to 15% split, male characters were more often the active agents, and female characters were more likely to appear in secondary roles (Williams et al. 2009: 824).

Downs and Smith (2010) analyzed 20-minute samples of actual gameplay from video games, and found evidence of the underrepresentation and hypersexualization of female characters. Downs and Smith (2010: 722) define hypersexuality in this case as “a synonym for depictions of overtly sexualized characters in video games”. Utilizing content analysis, Downs and Smith (2010: 724) studied the “60 top-rated games for the Nintendo GameCube, Sony PlayStation 2, and Microsoft Xbox” from 2003 based on their commercial performance, with 20-minute samples of each game and their characters acting as the data. Downs and Smith (2010: 727) discovered that the games featured “a substantially higher proportion of male characters” with roughly a 86% to 14% split, with male characters also appearing more often in both primary and secondary roles. Regarding hypersexuality, female characters often either wore revealing clothing or appeared completely or partially nude, with their proportions often being exaggerated (Downs & Smith 2010: 727).

The findings of Kondrat’s (2015) questionnaire for gamers indicated that gamers are aware of the misrepresentation of females in video games, yet do not seem worried about the consequences, while expert interviewees agreed on the representation, but disagreed on the effects. The questionnaire included 234 respondents, 78% of which were male and 22% female, each of them identifying themselves as a gamer (Kondrat 2015: 180-181). The two interviewees were expert professors from a Swedish University (Kondrat 2015: 180). 77% of the respondents think that females are “stereotyped in video games”, the primary ways being sexual objectification and sexualized clothing (Kondrat 2015: 183-184). However, most of the respondents do not think that gender representations in video games have much if any consequences, while the minority that do, argue that “negative stereotyping [...] might affect women and men’s perceptions, morals and identities” (Kondrat 2015: 186). The experts agreed on the misrepresentation of the female gender, and mentioned “diversity issues, which include ethnic and race discrimination” (Kondrat 2015:

186). However, regarding the consequences, the experts claim representation affects “the consumer and game industry”, and presents itself as a lack of strong female characters (Kondrat 2015: 186-187). Thus, the findings seem to depict a divide between the mindset of a typical gamer and an expert of the field.

Dickerman et al. (2008) describe traditional video game gender stereotypes regarding role and body type. Dickerman et al. (2008: 22) argue that while “the hero in a game is traditionally male”, so is the villain. Regarding body type, “both the hero and villain are typically large and imposing with prominent musculature”, deviating tremendously from the average person (Dickerman et al. 2008: 22). In contrast, “the princess, or damsel [...]”, a female then, “is portrayed as helpless, incapable of violence, and often wearing [...] revealing clothing that fails to contain her impossibly proportioned body” (Dickerman et al. 2008: 22). Therefore, neither gender’s video game body imagery seems to be realistic, although the female gender appears to be on the receiving end of most of the sexualization.

Dickerman et al. (2008) also observed prominent sexualization of females in the marketing of video games. An advertisement for *Neverwinter Nights*, a 2002 role-playing game, depicts an almost nude woman, who appears in the actual game in significantly more covering clothing (Dickerman et al. 2008: 23). In an advertisement for *Sid Meier’s Civilization IV*, a 2005 strategy game, “a busty version of the Statue of Liberty” appears alongside the tagline “Civ goes big”, although the game itself lacks “anything overtly sexual” (Dickerman et al. 2008: 23). In the case of a commercial for *Dead or Alive: Xtreme Beach Volleyball*, a 2003 sports game notorious for its highly sexualized content, sexual innuendos concerning masturbation and the letter X from the Xbox gaming console’s name, are utilized (Dickerman et al. 2008: 23). All in all, it seems that regardless of the genre and the game’s actual content, the sexualization of females in video game marketing has been prevalent.

Lynch et al. (2016) studied female characters in video games from the early 1980s to 2010s, and discovered positive change towards reduced sexualization over the years, although females still remain limited to secondary roles. Using content analysis to study recorded segments of gameplay, Lynch et al.’s (2016: 570) data consisted of a total of 571 video games featuring “playable female

protagonists”. Lynch et al. (2016: 576) came to the conclusion that they found “a pattern of change in sexualization over time that indicates the industry may be reacting to its critics”. The least sexualization of female characters transpired in the 1980s, primarily due to the extremely limited graphical capabilities of the early games, while technological evolution in the 1990s and the early 2000s led to the introduction of “more sexualized female characters than other periods”, potentially as a method of drawing in male gamers (Lynch et al. 2016: 576). A growing female gamer audience and criticism towards the industry may have led to “a decrease in the sexualization of female characters after 2006”, and an increase in the number of female characters (Lynch et al. 2016: 576-577). However, female characters are still often confined into secondary roles, which Lynch et al. (2016: 577) argue may lead to sexualization: “Nonprimary characters are less central to the story and, consequently, designers may sexualize them to enhance their appeal”, “reducing their importance to their physical appearance”.

Jones (2017) discovered empowered female characters in the successful video games *Tomb Raider* (2013) and *The Last of Us* (2013). These two games serve as “origin games for their female heroines” (2017: 38), Lara Croft and Ellie, respectively. The games portray females as strong and capable, both as playable characters and as non-playable characters (Jones 2017: 38). According to Jones (2017: 38), “no women in these games are competing with other women for the sake of a man and no man is trying to save his romantic partner”. In addition, Lara’s and Ellie’s clothing and body proportions suit the action and the settings they are placed in (Jones 2017: 38). However, sexual objectification does transpire via a threat of rape being placed on the female heroines (Jones 2017: 39).

In contrast to the majority of other researchers’ findings, Wohn (2011) discovered entirely different results, as she studied “casual games” instead of the prominently analyzed, more traditional “hardcore games”. Defining casual games, Wohn (2011: 199) explains they “are simple in interface and are mainly played on web browsers, mobile devices, or downloaded to the PC”. Wohn (2011: 199) lists examples, including “popping bubbles”, “trivia”, “mahjong”, and “card [games]”. In contrast to hardcore games, the player base of casual games is a significantly different one, as female gamers are the majority (Wohn 2011: 199). Wohn (2011: 200-203) utilized content analysis on a random 200 game sample of “downloadable casual games”, and on a “selective sample of the 54-most downloaded games”. In the larger random sample, Wohn (2011: 201) discovered that

actually “females are over-represented as solo human primary characters in casual games”, with a 77% majority. From the smaller selective sample, females were found to be over-represented again, while neither gender was sexualized (Wohn 2011: 203). The body imagery of casual games was found to be relatively healthy as well: “the proportion of “normal” body types was greater than that of “thin” body types, with the occasional “heavy” body type” (Wohn 2011: 203). Thus, with a radically different target audience, casual games represent genders in a radically different manner, too.

In conclusion, in a similar manner to superhero comics, video games have a notoriously poor track record in regard to gender representations, as an industry by males and for males. Female characters have been constantly underrepresented, passive, sexualized through revealing clothing and exaggerated bodies in both the games and their marketing, and confined to secondary roles (Ivory 2006; Dickerman et al. 2008; Williams et al. 2009; Downs & Smith 2010). Gamers seems to recognize the facts, but whether they care or not is a different matter altogether (Kondrat 2015). However, while the issue of the secondary role still remains, over the years the sexualization has reduced and female characters have started appearing in larger numbers (Lynch et al. 2016), including empowered female character representations, where the female heroines star in their own games (Jones 2017). In addition, casual games, which divert from hardcore games in both content and target audience, represent gender in a significantly more progressive manner (Wohn 2011). With constant criticism and the ever-increasing audience of female gamers, the video game industry seems to be undergoing major changes on the gender representation front, heading into a more inclusive and diverse direction.

2.4. Characterization

The concept of characterization refers to the construction of a character. Despite what one might assume, the study of characterization has not attracted a great deal of attention (Chatman 1978; Culler 1975; van Peer 1989; as quoted by Culpeper 2014: 5-6). Instead, the interest has focused on the question “where do characters exist?” (Culpeper 2014: 6). Culpeper presents the two contrasting approaches to a character’s existence, humanizing and de-humanizing. In the humanizing approach, “characters are imitations or representations of real people, or – the more extreme view – that they are actually real people” (Culpeper 2014: 6). However, this approach has received a fair share of

criticism, although as Culpeper (2014: 7) points out, “humanising characters is part of most people’s appreciation of literature: part of the enjoyment of plays and films is imagining characters as if they were real people”. The de-humanizing approach, then, views characters as “purely textual existence” and essentially “‘agents’ of the action” (Culpeper 2014: 7). Thus, the consequences of a character’s action matter, but not the character’s motives behind the action. Whichever approach one prefers, one’s view on a character is unique to them: “one’s impression of a character is formed in the interaction between the text and the interpreter’s background knowledge” (Culpeper 2014: 28).

Several different approaches to studying characterization have been devised over the years. In the next few paragraphs, I will be presenting some of them, and then continuing into the model in use for the present study. One of the approaches, the semic approach to characterization, utilized by “structuralist literary scholars, such as Barthes ([1970] 1975)”, relies on “specifying a list of features or ‘semes’ that distinguish one character from another” (Culpeper 2014: 48). Often, the features concern “binary opposites like male/female, adult/child, good/bad, beautiful/ugly” (Culpeper 2014: 48). However, this approach was deemed insufficient for the present study, as Culpeper (2014: 49) claims it “offers too little guidance on how to identify semes or on how they might cohere [...]”.

The actantiel model of characterization (e.g. Greimas 1966) differs significantly from the semic approach. It categorizes characters based on six different roles: “sender/receiver, subject/object and helper/opponent” (Culpeper 2014: 50). However, similarly to the semic approach, Culpeper (2014: 50) argues this model is “simplistic characterisation”, and cannot be used “for more sophisticated stories”, such as a story-driven video game, for example. Culpeper (2014: 50) says this is the case because the model was “largely developed from classical, traditional or oral stories, which tend to rely more on the development of plot than of character”.

Finally, Frye (1957) developed a model for comedy characters based on dramatic roles. The model includes “four general role types”, such as a “self-deprecator” and a “buffoon”, “stock figures within these types”, such as a self-deprecating hero or a buffoon entertainer, and examples of these stock figures (Culpeper 2014: 51). Culpeper (2014: 52) commends the approach as it is “not

proposing a scheme that contains roles which fit characters exactly”. However, the approach the present study will be taking is based on a taxonomy devised by Pearson (2007) with additions from Culpeper (2014) and myself, especially with regard to the medium of a video game. The approach will be presented in detail in the next section.

2.4.1. Pearson’s taxonomy

Pearson (2007: 49) has created a character taxonomy she says “works for characters in all moving-image forms – film, television and video games”. The taxonomy consists of six key elements that construct a character, which I have modified with additions from Culpeper (2014) and myself to improve the compability with the video game focus of the present study. The taxonomy will be utilized to analyze the data of the present study, and it will now be presented in detail, one element at a time. This section will then conclude with a complete table of the final taxonomy.

The first element is *psychological traits/habitual behaviors* (Pearson 2007: 43-44). This category aims to reveal the core of a character’s personality and the various aspects surrounding it. It includes the character’s main personality trait and the kinds of behavior it typically leads to, along with various other personality traits the character possesses. It also includes various other details on the character, such as what they like or dislike, what are their typical activities, details on their personal life, and hobbies, potentially. In addition, the flat and round distinction, originally coined by Forster in 1927, will be included in the element. A flat character is essentially a caricature “constructed round a single idea or quality”, while a round character is not flat, and is more versatile and capable of surprising the audience (Culpeper 2014: 52).

The second element is *physical traits/appearance*. Pearson (2007: 44), discussing an actor playing a character, lists “facial configurations/expressions, body posture/gestures and vocal quality/mannerisms” as integral contributions to the physical embodiment of a character through the actor. From Culpeper (2014), clothing, body proportions, and physical stature are added into the category. According to Culpeper (2014: 224), “a tall person may give the impression of social power, as well as of physical power”. Thus, the height of both of the analyzed characters will be compared to the average height of the American population, as both characters are American. With

my prior knowledge of the appearance of the characters to be analyzed, I decided to add colors, accessories, hair, and makeup into the category. In summary, the finalized element includes clothing and their appropriateness, body type and body proportions, physical stature, mannerisms, colors, accessories, hair, and makeup.

The third and most expansive element is *speech patterns*. This element discusses the language use of a character. Pearson (2007: 44-45) analyzed the characterization of Gil Grissom from the TV show *CSI* (2000-2015), and discovered strict formality, aphorisms, quotes, and allusions as typical patterns in Grissom's language use. For this element, several methods from Culpeper (2014) will be adopted to analyze language issues such as power relations, communicator competence, socio-economic status, confidence, pompousness, and down-to-earthness. Beginning with power relations, the distribution of talk between communicators can reveal aspects of power between them. Issues of interest include the total number of "turns for each participant, the length of each turn, and the total volume of talk for each participant" (Culpeper 2014: 173). These three essential aspects will be studied in order to analyze the power relations in the data. In addition to the distribution of talk, speaker alternation can also uncover power relations. There are multiple issues regarding turns in communication situations: "Speakers may either self-select [...] or they may have a turn allocated to them by another speaker", and "speakers may also butt in without waiting for the other speaker to finish their turn, in which case we have an interruption" (Culpeper 2014: 173). Speaker alternation will be analyzed as well to uncover more about power relations in the data.

Furthermore, the lexical richness of a "character's speech can suggest certain characteristics", such as "lower diversity results" potentially indicating "lower communicator competence, lower socio-economic status, and higher anxiety" (Bradac 1982: 107; see also Bradac 1990: 396-7; as quoted by Culpeper 2014: 188). Thus, communicator competence, socio-economic status, and confidence can be linked to one's lexical richness. Lexical richness can be calculated using a type/token ratio, where the "number of different words by the total number of words" can be divided to reach "a figure that reflects the diversity of lexis relative to the size of the total sample of speech" (Culpeper 2014: 188). This method will be utilized in samples of dialogue where it is both relevant and fair to the analyzed characters. Regarding pompousness and down-to-earthness, attention will be paid to the use of formal and informal lexis. Using excessive formality "may give the impression that someone is rather aloof or pompous", while "informal lexis that someone is 'down to earth'"

(Culpeper 2014: 183). If no glaring instances of formality or informality are found, this will simply be mentioned as so in the analysis. Finally, any emerging salient speech patterns not discussed in the aforementioned categories will be analyzed.

The fourth element is *interactions with other characters*. They partially define a fictional character, and can thus reveal aspects about their characterization. Discussing Gil Grissom again, Pearson (2007: 45-46) lists various important interactions to his character, such as his position in the hierarchy of his workplace, his professional and personal relationships with his subordinates, and his emotional ties to other characters. Out of these, professional and personal relationships, and emotional ties were adopted into the final taxonomy. In summary, the element discusses which characters do interactions transpire with, and what kinds of interactions are they.

The fifth element is *environment*. The places where a character prefers to spend their time can reveal plenty about them. In Grissom's case, spending a substantial amount of time in laboratories underlines his "scientific professionalism", his quirky office decor reveals his "mad scientist" personality, and the *CSI* TV show switches between workplace and home to uncover different aspects of his personality, both the chaotic and the intellectual side (Pearson 2007: 46-47). However, environment is not limited to only physical surroundings. The concept of human surroundings is adopted from Culpeper (2014: 226) into the taxonomy: "Just as it is possible for a person or character to choose what to do or say and how to do it or say it, so it is also possible, assuming an absence of constraint, for a person or character to choose their surroundings, both physical and human". For example, "in a Shakespearean play, one might expect a king to be at court or on the battlefield, surrounded by regal paraphernalia and consorting with the nobility or courtiers" (Culpeper 2014: 226). In conclusion, this element includes both physical and human surroundings.

The sixth and final element is *biography*. The main purpose of this element is to deepen a character's backstory. Thus, this category includes the various "details [that] deepen the character" as "biographical details can flesh out established traits or introduce the contradictions characteristic of 'real' human beings" (Pearson 2007: 47-49). Therefore, all six elements of the slightly modified taxonomy have now been described in detail, and they are all visible in the table below.

Table 1. The final version of the taxonomy.

Element	Description
Psychological traits/habitual behaviors	Major personality trait, typical behavior, other personality traits, typical activities, likes and dislikes, details on personal life, hobbies, the flat and round distinction.
Physical traits/appearance	Clothing and their appropriateness, body type and body proportions, physical stature, mannerisms, colors, accessories, hair, makeup.
Speech patterns	The distribution of talk, speaker alternation, lexical richness, formal and informal lexis, any other emerging salient speech patterns.
Interactions with other characters	Which characters interactions transpire with and what are they like, professional and personal relationships, emotional ties.
Environment	Physical surroundings, human surroundings.
Biography	Biographical details that deepen a character's backstory.

The table of the taxonomy concludes the chapter on theory and context. Next, the chapter on the present study will discuss issues regarding the selection of the data, research ethics, and the nature of the data itself.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

In addition to data selection criteria, research ethics, and the considerations of the researcher, this chapter will focus on presenting the data, the two video games, in greater detail. The descriptions of the games will include discussion on their gameplay, story, central characters, and both critical and commercial reception.

3.1. Data and methods

The present study's data consists of two Spider-Man video games, a 2000 game simply called *Spider-Man* and the 2018 release *Marvel's Spider-Man*. The games were selected based on three criteria. First, the games had to have their own unique storyline, and therefore, could not have been based on an existing film's or comic book's story. Second, in order to be able to analyze the potential change in gender representation over the years, the games had to have been released far apart from each other with regard to time. Third, the games had to be popular according to commercial performance and critical reception, in order to increase the study's significance.

The data was collected by playing the games myself and watching YouTube footage of them. Prior to this study, I was already familiar with the content of the selected games, as I had played through both of them several times. Regarding the use of YouTube in research and digital ethics in general, the idea is that while the internet is indeed a public space, there are areas many a user think of as private, such as chatrooms and forums (Schultze & Mason 2012; as quoted by Whiting & Pritchard 2017). Thus, digital ethics involves thinking about where the material is located and how the public can access it (Whiting & Pritchard 2017). Watching published video footage of a game with no personal commentary over it falls under fair use, as the video can be viewed by anyone who comes across it on the platform, and the focus is solely on the video game content instead of a "human participant". The video format was chosen because of convenience, as it allows me to pause, rewind, fast forward, and use slow motion while gathering the data. Simply playing through the games myself would not allow for any of these functions.

Cutscenes, the cinematic sequences within a video game, were chosen to be analyzed as they contain content scripted by the developers and outside of the player's influence. A cutscene is where the player simply watches the screen as the cinematic moves the story along. Regarding the 2000 game, a certain number of gameplay "one-liners" were chosen to be included in the analysis as well, as they provided additional material for the analysis. In the 2018 game's case, the longer and more advanced cinematics were deemed to already contain enough material for the analysis, and thus the gameplay one-liners were omitted for that game. For the sixth element in the taxonomy, biography, text entries in a specific "Character Viewer" function in *Spider-Man*, and the pause menu's "Characters" section in *Marvel's Spider-Man*, were utilized.

The characterizations of Spider-Man/Peter Parker and Mary Jane in the two video games, for a total of four different characterizations, will be analyzed thoroughly using the character taxonomy described earlier. The theoretical method allows for the complete deconstruction of each characterization in order to uncover the smaller elements behind the overall characterization, and discovering what kinds of gender representations are created one element at a time. Next, for the sake of the reader completely understanding the study, it is crucial to present the data, the two video games. From this point on, the 2000 *Spider-Man* game will be referred to as "SM", while *Marvel's Spider-Man* will be referred to as "MVS".

3.2. Spider-Man (2000 video game)

Spider-Man was developed by Neversoft and published by Activision in 2000 for the PlayStation, Nintendo 64, and Game Boy Color, 2001 for Windows and Dreamcast, and 2002 for the Mac (Wikipedia 2020a). Occasionally, the game is referred to as "Spider-Man 2000" in order to better differentiate it from other Spider-Man video games. After comic books fell out of popularity in the 1990s, Marvel was forced to file for bankruptcy in 1996 (Williams 2018), which means few Spider-Man video games were being released in the 1990s. Thus, SM represents the early period of Marvel's comeback from the brink. SM was also the first Spider-Man game to be released by publisher Activision who had exclusive rights to the character from 2000 until 2014 (Liebl 2020).

SM belongs to the action-adventure genre of video games. The only playable character is Spider-Man. There are no gameplay sequences under his civilian identity Peter Parker, or as Mary Jane Parker. The game does not feature a free-roaming open world structure. Instead, the structure of the game is linear and mission-based. Spider-Man has limited health and limited webbing, which means he has to collect health icons and web cartridges. Spider-Man retains his superhuman powers. He can stick to walls and ceilings. He can also swing with his webs. During combat, he can perform powerful punches and kicks, but also utilize web-based offensive moves such as shooting web, creating a protective web dome, and launching web projectiles. By playing through the game, players can unlock hidden costumes, which feature unique properties, drastically changing the course of the gameplay.

SM begins with Dr. Otto Octavius (civilian identity of the villainous Doctor Octopus) speaking to an audience at a science expo. Drama ensues as Spider-Man seemingly interrupts the speech, assaults the crew, and steals experimental science equipment. However, with Peter Parker in the attendance, it is revealed that the villainous Spider-Man is an imposter. Now an outlaw, Spider-Man must clear his name, and find the source of a peculiar fog that begins spreading throughout the city streets. Important characters in the story include Spider-Man/Peter Parker, Doctor Octopus/Dr. Otto Octavius, Venom/Eddie Brock, Mysterio, Carnage, Black Cat, Rhino, and Mary Jane Parker. The review aggregator website Metacritic (2000) calculated SM a score of 87 out of 100, indicating “generally favorable reviews”, making the game a critical success. According to VGChartz (n.d.), the PlayStation version of the game alone sold over 3,1 million copies, indicating the game was a commercial success as well.

3.3. Marvel’s Spider-Man (2018 video game)

Marvel’s Spider-Man was developed by Insomniac Games and published by Sony in 2018 exclusively for the PlayStation 4 (Wikipedia 2020b). Because of this, the game is also occasionally referred to as “Spider-Man PS4”. MVS was released in 2018, which was a tremendously successful year for Marvel films, seeing the release of box office hits such as *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Infinity War*, and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. Therefore, in comparison to SM, MVS was released when Marvel was in an entirely different state. As *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) was the last

title to be published by Activision, MVS was the first major Spider-Man video game since that title, and the first one to be published by Sony.

MVS is an action-adventure game. The majority of the game is played as either Spider-Man or Peter Parker, but Mary Jane Watson and Peter's young ally Miles Morales star in their own gameplay missions as well. Instead of the linear and mission-based structure of SM, MVS features a large free-roaming open world filled with story missions and optional side activities. Spider-Man is even more agile than before, since he can now run on walls and cover longer distances by web-swinging. The combat is more advanced with a greater variety of hand-to-hand attacks and gadget-based web attacks, along with the addition of environmental attacks and special moves. Mary Jane's and Miles Morales' missions rely on more stealth-based gameplay, where the player tries to sneak undetected instead of engaging in combat. While progressing in the game, players will unlock new costumes with unique properties, and new gadgets along with upgrades for them.

MVS begins with influential crimelord Kingpin getting arrested. This starts a war between other criminals and criminal factions for the right to rule the city. An enigmatic group who call themselves The Demons emerge from the shadows, while scientist Dr. Otto Octavius slowly becomes consumed by bitterness and morphs into Doctor Octopus, eventually forming the villainous group Sinister Six. With the city in chaos and the looming threat of a dangerous bioweapon being released onto the streets, Spider-Man must take back control, one district at a time. Important characters in the story include Spider-Man/Peter Parker, Doctor Octopus/Dr. Otto Octavius, Mary Jane Watson, Mister Negative/Martin Li, Miles Morales, Yuri Watanabe, Norman Osborn, Silver Sable, and Aunt May. MSV became a critical success, earning an average score of 87 out of 100 from the review aggregator website Metacritic (2018), indicating "generally favorable reviews". An even more significant success was the game's commercial performance, as MSV sold 3,3 million copies within only three days of its launch (Sinclair 2018), and has amounted to lifetime total sales of over 20 million copies (Chowdhury 2020).

While the chapter on the present study has now concluded, the next chapter will be the analysis of the characters as they appear in the video games.

4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The four characterizations will now be analyzed using the character taxonomy (Pearson 2007 with additions from Culpeper 2014 and myself) discussed earlier. Therefore, the analysis of each character will be divided into sub-sections according to the elements in the taxonomy. The analysis chapter will conclude with a discussion on the present study's main findings in comparison with the findings of previous research.

4.1. Spider-Man/Peter Parker (SM)

Spider-Man is a superhero and the main protagonist in SM. Peter Parker is a photographer for a newspaper and Spider-Man's civilian identity.

4.1.1. Psychological traits/habitual behaviors

Spider-Man's major personality trait is being heroic. Thus, his habitual behaviors include protecting the innocents, saving lives, and engaging in battle with supervillains. He selflessly puts others' needs before his own, as evidenced by him opting to first save a group of people he has no personal ties to, and only then concerning himself with his abducted wife. He is unbiased and able to put personal differences aside. For example, he rescues extremely vocal Spider-Man skeptic J. Jonah Jameson without a moment of hesitation. He also evidently cares for the supervillain's survival. He never kills them, regardless of what atrocities they may have committed, preferring to let the police arrest them instead. He shows visible concern when Doctor Octopus is seemingly caught in an explosion, and promptly carries him out of a self-destructing secret lair over his shoulder.

Regarding other personality traits, Spider-Man is intelligent. He is able to make quick, improvised decisions and keep the innocents unharmed. He is also capable of deduction, effortlessly narrowing down the options for the identity of the imposter Spider-Man. Overall, he represents the brains over brawn type of superhero. Additionally, he is physically vulnerable. He shows concern when facing

certain supervillains, such as when Rhino charges towards him, and when Mysterio transforms into a gigantic version of himself. He gets physically overpowered several times. Venom knocks him off the roof of a subway, and Carnage chokes him out with his tentacles.

Spider-Man is surprisingly violent, even excessively so. He interrogates Venom by repeatedly punching him in the face, although Venom has already been defeated at this point. Even after winning him on his side, he still violently lunges at him. He also holds Mysterio up in the air by his collar for quite a long period of time, eventually shattering his glass dome that acts as his head. In Spider-Man's defence, he does refuse The Punisher's, an antihero notorious for outright killing his enemies, aid. All in all, Spider-Man's use of violence can be seen as justified payback for the villains' actions, or as excessive since the foe has already been defeated in a fair fight. The violent behavior seems more fitting for an antihero or even a villain.

Spider-Man seems indifferent and cold towards what happens to officers of the law. For example, after causing a police helicopter to spiral down and crash, he proceeds to make a joke about it. As a result of the imposter Spider-Man's crimes, Spider-Man becomes an outlaw hunted down by the authorities. Thus, his indifferent behavior can be viewed as a direct result of this dire situation. He and the police have been placed on opposing sides. Still, he does treat the fate of potentially dying police officers in a very lighthearted manner. In addition to his cold treatment of the police, Spider-Man shows signs of pessimism. He initially refuses to believe that the previously villainous Dr. Octavius has reformed. This hardly seems surprising, as supervillains have a habit of constantly returning despite their atrocious antics. It is likely that years of being Spider-Man have slightly changed his mental attitude from optimism towards pessimism.

Spider-Man prefers to be in control of a situation, as evidenced by his disdain for getting surprised by the likes of Venom. He dislikes the use of guns. After disarming The Punisher, he rejects his help offer, likely due to the high potential of guns causing lethal damage, which he cannot accept. Spider-Man loves to make bad jokes himself, but he dislikes bad jokes by others. He seems very unimpressed after hearing Venom's quip about surfing the web. Spider-Man dislikes loud noise when he is attempting to concentrate, such as The Human Torch and Black Cat partying while he is concentrating on playing cards. He is particular with the color combinations of his suits, and

especially Mysterio's color mixing of green and purple elicits multiple disapproving remarks from him. At the end of SM, he unwinds by playing cards with fellow superheroes, although the dialogue suggests that he rarely attends these activities, making it an irregular hobby at best.

Overall, regarding Spider-Man/Peter Parker's personality and behavior, his characterization is quite complex and contains unexpected traits. Although being heroic is the major defining aspect of his personality, it is not who he is entirely. Thus, the character is capable of surprising consumers, and using the flat and round distinction, is a round character.

4.1.2. Physical traits/appearance



Image 1. Spider-Man in SM. © 2000 Marvel Characters, Inc. © 2000 Activision, Inc. Developed by Neversoft.



Image 2. Peter Parker in SM. © 2000 Marvel Characters, Inc. © 2000 Activision, Inc. Developed by Neversoft.

Spider-Man’s primary outfit is the iconic red and blue superhero suit consisting of a mask, an upper body part, gloves, tights, and boots. The suit is form-fitting and appropriate for a superhero that relies on fluid and agile movement. It also successfully disguises his identity by covering every inch of his skin. As Peter Parker, he wears a black leather jacket with a white top underneath, and blue jeans. It is an uncharacteristically rugged yet believable look for his civilian identity. He also has short brown hair, which can convincingly fit inside the mask of Spider-Man. His body type is lean and muscular. His bulging musculature is visible underneath his suit, yet his body remains on the realistic and attainable side. Several other characters, such as Rhino, Scorpion, Venom, and Carnage, physically dwarf him and look significantly more exaggerated in comparison.

Regarding physical stature, Spider-Man is 5 ft 10 inches or 178 cm tall. His height is not mentioned in the game, but it is listed in the official manual packaged with the game. The average height for an American male is 5 ft 9 inches or 175 cm (Wikipedia 2021). Thus, he is very close to the average height and does not appear to gain any additional social or physical power this way. However, it fits his characterization as a superhero that is physically an underdog. At his height, he is overcoming the odds against foes of higher physical stature. This makes Spider-Man’s feats of bravery more impressive.

4.1.3. Speech patterns

For the next three categories in this element, which are the distribution of talk, speaker alternation, and lexical richness (as explained in Culpeper 2014), four longer stretches of dialogue were analyzed. In these instances, interaction with various different characters transpires, allowing for the analysis of multiple different power relations. Then, for the remaining two categories, formal and informal lexis (Culpeper 2014), and other emerging speech patterns, the entire data from the SM game was utilized.

Table 2. The distribution of talk between Spider-Man and other characters in SM.

Section number and participant	Number of turns	Average length of a turn	Total volume of talk
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(S1) Spider-Man	6	3,1 seconds	~19 seconds
(S1) Daredevil	6	3,9 seconds	~23 seconds
(S2) Spider-Man	6	6,5 seconds	~39 seconds
(S2) Black Cat	4	4,4 seconds	~18 seconds
(S3) Spider-Man	9	3,3 seconds	~30 seconds
(S3) Venom	8	2,7 seconds	~21 seconds
(S4) Spider-Man	7	3,8 seconds	~27 seconds
(S4) Mysterio	6	5,4 seconds	~32 seconds

As is evident from the table, the number of turns appear to be quite balanced, but there is variety in the average length of a turn and the total volume of talk. Regarding the cutscene starring Spider-Man and Daredevil, although equal in the number of turns, Spider-Man's total volume of talk is slightly lower and the same applies for the length of his average turn. As Daredevil fills the role of a veteran superhero giving advice to a younger hero, he is in a position of authority and above Spider-Man in power. Therefore, it also reflects in their speech.

The cutscene with Spider-Man and Black Cat produced different results. Spider-Man has more turns, his average turn is longer, and his total volume of talk is significantly larger. He appears more powerful compared to Black Cat, clearly taking charge in the situation. The same applies for his sequence with Venom. Although nearly equal in the number of turns, Spider-Man's average turn is slightly longer and total volume of talk larger. This underlines his intelligence in formulating a plan, a demanding task where he excels over Venom who then speaks less, as is reflected in the analysis.

Finally, in the cutscene featuring Spider-Man and Mysterio, Spider-Man has one more turn compared to Mysterio, but his average turn is shorter and total volume of talk smaller. However, this does not necessarily reflect the power relations between the two, as Spider-Man is interrogating Mysterio in this sequence. Therefore, it would only seem logical that the questions would be briefer than the answers.

In regard to speaker alternation, the vast majority of Spider-Man's turns are initiated via self-select. In addition, he allocates turns to a few other characters. For example, this transpires when him and

Venom are deducting the imposter Spider-Man’s identity, and when he is interrogating Mysterio. No notable interruptions were discovered in the data. Regarding power relations, Spider-Man thus appears to be powerful, as he is self-selecting his own turns, allocating turns to other characters, and does not get interrupted.

Table 3. The lexical richness of Spider-Man in SM.

Cutscene in question	Number of unique words	Total number of words	Ratio
w/Daredevil	50	74	0.68
w/Black Cat	95	144	0.66
w/Venom	78	102	0.76
w/Mysterio	66	86	0.77

Based on these figures concerning Spider-Man’s lexical richness (Culpeper 2014), he appears to be a competent and confident communicator. His ratio constantly stays comfortably above the 0.6 mark, peaking at 0.77 in the cutscene starring him and Mysterio. However, it is crucial to note that the analyzed instances of dialogue are not very long and thus, that will cause the ratio number to trend upwards. With longer stretches of dialogue, the ratio could have potentially been lower. Nevertheless, with the data available from the SM game, the results solidify Spider-Man’s position as a capable communicator.

In regard to formal and informal lexis, Spider-Man’s speech showed no signs of excessive formality. However, he does utilize informal expressions.

Excerpt 1: *Examples of Spider-Man’s informal speech in SM.*

“Uh-oh. Spider Sense is tingling! The boys in blue again. Better hide.”

“So, we’re partners, but only for now! After we bust those tech thieves, it’s payback time for kidnapping my wife.”

“Whoever your boss is, he’s off his rocker! No one can control the Symbiotes.”

Spider-Man refers to the police as “the boys in blue”, shortens arresting technology thieves to “bust those tech thieves”, and when calling the unknown evil mastermind behind the ensuing chaos mad,

he says he is “off his rocker”. Therefore, the game depicts Spider-Man as a down-to-earth person who does not exhibit signs of pompousness through his speech, opting to utilize informal expressions instead.

Spider-Man is an extremely avid user of humor. Witty remarks are one of the defining aspects of his speech.

Excerpt 2: *Examples of Spider-Man’s use of humor in SM.*

“J.J., you’re out of the will. I mean it this time!”

“Hey, you gonna pay for that tower?!”

“Aww, did you hurt your little tusky-wusky?”

The first quip relates to long-time rival J. Jonah Jameson nearly causing Spider-Man to get shot by the SWAT team. The second quip is heard after Spider-Man tricks a police helicopter to crash into a tower. Finally, the third remark is what Spider-Man says to Rhino during their battle. It is a reference to the tusk that is part of Rhino’s suit. It appears that Spider-Man uses humor to decrease the pressure of bleak situations. It shows to be his coping mechanism for events of high anxiety and stress.

There are also a few instances where Spider-Man utilizes sarcasm.

Excerpt 3: *Examples of Spider-Man’s use of sarcasm in SM.*

“Tell me this, Einstein: who could’ve wanted to steal Octavius’ technology?”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I was out saving the world.”

In the first instance, Spider-Man has grown tired of Venom undeservingly taking the credit for his deduction, sarcastically referring to him as “Einstein”. In the second instance, Spider-Man utilizes sarcasm after The Punisher complains about him rarely joining fellow superheroes for a game of cards. These instances of sarcasm use establish Spider-Man’s personality as lively and cheeky instead of a complete “babyface” hero.

Spider-Man insults his foes frequently. He calls Mysterio “fish bowl”, referencing his dome for a head, Rhino “stupid”, and a Symbiote, a slimy alienlike creature, “snot bucket”. This can be interpreted as his way of playing mind games with an opponent, or as simply poking fun at his adversaries. In addition, Spider-Man has a tendency of talking to himself. His speech includes lines such as “Think, Spidey, think!”, “Keep moving, Spidey!”, and “C’mon, Spidey, he’s getting away!”. It is vital to note that he refers to himself under his superhero name instead of “Peter”, potentially as a method of separating his hero and civilian identities in his own mind, too. Spider-Man is the one accomplishing the feats of bravery, not the photographer Peter.

4.1.4. Interactions with other characters

Spider-Man regularly interacts with supervillains such as Doctor Octopus, Venom, Mysterio, Carnage, and Rhino. With Rhino, the interaction immediately escalates into a physical altercation, as Rhino holds uncontrollable hatred towards Spider-Man. The case is slightly different with Doctor Octopus and Carnage, as their hostility stems from the fact that Spider-Man is the obstacle preventing their masterplan from succeeding. The interaction with Mysterio is more personal, as he has stolen Spider-Man’s identity and framed him for criminal activities. Their feud climaxes with Spider-Man violently interrogating him. With Venom, the interaction is even more personal and emotionally charged. Venom abducts his wife, taunts him, and repeatedly attacks him before eventually switching alignments. Then, Venom becomes a somewhat trusted ally. He is different from the other supervillains as he is a foe first and an ally later. Their interactions also contain heated personal feelings from both sides, as Venom blames Spider-Man for ruining his civilian career as the photographer Eddie Brock.

Spider-Man also interacts with his fellow superheroes such as Black Cat, Daredevil, The Punisher, and The Human Torch. The interactions with The Human Torch are friendly, and he gives brief advice to Spider-Man. Daredevil believes in Spider-Man’s honesty despite the latter’s outlaw status, and he appears as a benevolent mentor figure. The Punisher is initially monitoring Spider-Man through his sniper scope, but eventually offers him assistance. However, the fellow superhero Spider-Man interacts with the most is Black Cat. She initially helps him, but she is later injured by Rhino and abducted by fake paramedics. Towards the end of SM, she is rescued by Spider-Man. Thus, she appears as an ally in the first half of the game and as a damsel in distress in the later half.

Other interactions take place with Peter's boss and Spider-Man skeptic J. Jonah Jameson, and Peter's wife Mary Jane Parker. As Jameson is Peter's boss, they have a professional relationship. However, their interactions are overall rather hostile, as Jameson treats Peter in a rude manner and tries to get Spider-Man shot. With his wife Mary Jane, Peter has a personal relationship and a high emotional tie. Mary Jane is ultimately rescued by him after being abducted and nearly drowned by Venom. In conclusion, the interactions between Spider-Man and supervillains are hostile as expected, since superheroes and supervillains are natural enemies. However, fellow superheroes are quick to believe in Spider-Man's innocence, offering their support and assistance in a friendly manner.

4.1.5. Environment

Regarding physical surroundings, Spider-Man spends all of his time in the city. That is where the action unfolds and thus, where the hero needs to be. SM takes place in urban locations with no rural events. Spider-Man prefers to traverse the city high up at rooftop level. As a mysterious mist is blanketing the city, it is not advisable anyway to go down to ground level. More importantly, Spider-Man's superhuman abilities are underlined, as he uses his agility to effortlessly access areas normal people would not be able to. Several landmarks such as The Statue of Liberty and The Times Square are explicitly shown, establishing New York City as the place of events. Other prominent locations include the dark and dirty sewers, and the high technology secret lair. These are locations where Spider-Man must simply go in order to confront his adversaries.

In regard to human surroundings, Spider-Man associates with fellow superheroes. He plays cards with them to unwind, indicating that he does not mind associating with them outside of working hours, too. Spider-Man also reluctantly forms an alliance with former enemy Venom, spending a considerable amount of time with him. As Peter Parker, his civilian identity enables him to interact with the common population unidentified, as evidenced by him attending a science expo like any other person would, and observing Black Cat's treatment by the paramedics.

4.1.6. Biography

In the “Character Viewer” function, Spider-Man and Peter Parker are listed as separate characters. For Spider-Man, only his superpowers are listed: “super strength, super agility, stick to walls, Spider Sense”. He is emphasized as a superhero first and foremost. Peter Parker’s biography says the following: “When not out fighting crime as Spider-Man, he is a photographer for the Daily Bugle”. Thus, his secret civilian identity is revealed and so is his civilian occupation as a photographer for a newspaper. This highlights that he is not only living the life of a superhero, but there is a separate common person side to him, too.

4.2. Mary Jane Parker (SM)

Mary Jane Parker is a supermodel and the wife of Spider-Man/Peter Parker.

4.2.1. Psychological traits/habitual behaviors

In SM, Mary Jane’s sole purpose is to be a damsel in distress. Therefore, her role consists of constant panicking and fearing for her life, while slowly descending towards the surface of a water pit. Using the flat and round distinction, it can be determined that she is a flat character. While a round character would at least possess the ability to surprise the consumer, Mary Jane is strictly confined into her one-dimensional and stereotypical role with no twists or turns.

4.2.2. Physical traits/appearance

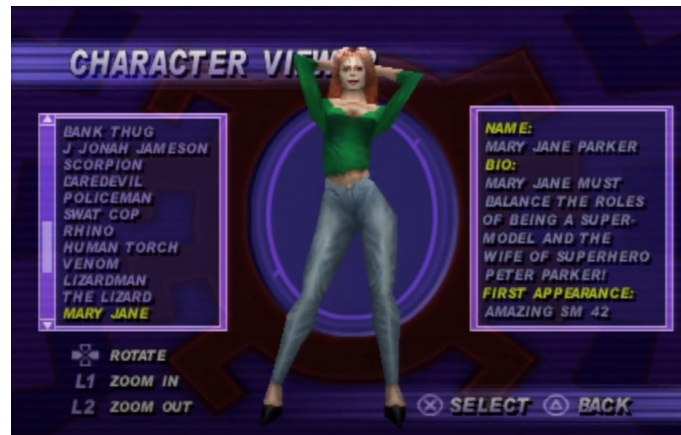


Image 3. Mary Jane Parker in SM. © 2000 Marvel Characters, Inc. © 2000 Activision, Inc. Developed by Neversoft.

Mary Jane wears a vibrant green shirt with the sleeves rolled just above the elbows. The revealing V-neck exposes her collarbones and her cleavage. The short hem exposes her abs and navel. She also wears blue jeans and black heels with no socks or stockings. She has long red hair and wears red lipstick. In the “Character Viewer” function of SM, she poses suggestively with her hands crossed behind her head, directing attention to her figure. Overall, her clothing is sexualized, designed to expose the maximum amount of skin and overemphasize her feminine features. Regarding body type and proportions, Mary Jane has a body appropriate for a supermodel with long legs and a very small waistline, but with the addition of moderately large breasts. Her body type and proportions can be considered rather unrealistic and unattainable.

In regard to physical stature, Mary Jane is 5 ft 8 inches or 173 cm tall. Her height is not listed in the game, but various online sources list her at that height, and so does the MVS game. On average, the American female is 5 ft 5 inches or 165 cm tall (Wikipedia 2021). Thus, she is considerably taller than the average and has the potential of gaining social and physical power this way. However, as she is strictly limited to her role as a damsel in distress, her above-average physical stature does not manifest itself in any meaningful ways.

4.2.3. Speech patterns

In order to research the distribution of talk, speaker alternation, formal and informal lexis (as explained in Culpeper 2014), and other emerging speech patterns, the instance of dialogue in which

Mary Jane participates in, was analyzed. For the analysis of her lexical richness (Culpeper 2014), a total of ten lines uttered by her during SM gameplay were analyzed.

Table 4. The distribution of talk between Mary Jane, Spider-Man, and Venom in SM.

Participant	Number of turns	Average length of a turn	Total volume of talk
Mary Jane	2	2,1 seconds	~4 seconds
Spider-Man	4	5 seconds	~20 seconds
Venom	4	5,5 seconds	~22 seconds

Mary Jane’s number of turns is half of that of Spider-Man and Venom, her average turn is the shortest, and her total volume of talk is drastically smaller compared to the other two participants. The analysis supports the claim that Mary Jane lacks both power and importance in the story. In addition, the sole way she gets to speak is by interrupting the distracted pairing of Spider-Man and Venom. Thus, she is on the receiving end of nearly zero attention.

Table 5. The lexical richness of Mary Jane in SM.

Data in question	Number of unique words	Total number of words	Ratio
Ten gameplay lines	27	48	0.56

In comparison with Spider-Man, although Mary Jane’s total number of words is substantially lower than in any of the analyzed instances of dialogue featuring Spider-Man, her lexical richness ratio is still a lower number. A lower total number of words predicts a higher chance of more unique words, yet the opposite applies to Mary Jane. However, it must be noted that while the analyzed sequences for Spider-Man were dialogue, Mary Jane’s data consists solely of isolated lines uttered by her. Also, she is in constant fear for her survival. Despite these circumstances, the analysis of her lexical richness still implies a lack of communicator competence and confidence on her part.

No instances of either excessively formal or informal lexis were discovered. Regarding other emerging speech patterns, Mary Jane's speech is dominated by cries for help.

Excerpt 4: *Examples of speech typical for Mary Jane in SM.*

“Save me, Peter!”

“Peter! Help!”

“Help me!”

Mary Jane's speech stresses her role as a helpless victim in need of rescuing. In addition, Venom's comments on Mary Jane are relevant for her characterization. Venom refers to her as “little Miss Fashion Model” and “one of those famous bimbos”. This is in character for Venom who enjoys taunting Spider-Man as frequently as possible. However, it is also the first time Mary Jane is mentioned in the game, and therefore the first reference to her is as someone physically attractive yet unintelligent.

4.2.4. Interactions with other characters

Mary Jane only interacts with two characters, Spider-Man and Venom. The interactions with Venom are highly hostile. Venom abducts her and nearly drowns her. Although barbaric in behavior, Venom does not hold a personal grudge against her. Instead, she is targeted because of her status as Spider-Man's wife. Spider-Man is her husband, and therefore they are in a personal relationship with high emotional ties. He is also the one who rescues her from certain death. It is critical to note that upon defeating Venom, Spider-Man does not immediately rescue Mary Jane. Instead, he chooses to argue with Venom for a long period of time and to keep physically attacking him, while Mary Jane is still suspended in the air, hanging onto a chain. It is only when interrupted by Mary Jane that Spider-Man realizes his wife's still dire situation. This highlights her extreme lack of importance.

4.2.5. Environment

Mary Jane only appears in one location, in the sewers. After being abducted, Venom takes her to the sewers in order to lure Spider-Man there. There is an arenalike large hall in the sewers where she is hanging onto a chain, being slowly lowered towards the surface of a pit of water. The surroundings look dull and grey, echoing the threat to her survival that she is facing. Regarding human surroundings, as she is the wife of a superhero, she becomes involuntarily involved in the conflict between superheroes and supervillains.

4.2.6. Biography

In SM's "Character Viewer" function, her full name is given as Mary Jane Parker, confirming that Peter Parker and her are married. Her biography says the following: "Mary Jane must balance the roles of being a supermodel and the wife of superhero Peter Parker". Therefore, she is given two separate roles to fulfill, as a homemaker and as a supermodel. She is not solely mentioned as Peter's wife, meaning in that case she would only have significance because of her status as his wife. However, her occupation is only reflected in her exaggerated body type and above-average physical stature, as her role is very limited and so is her character development.

4.3. Spider-Man/Peter Parker (MVS)

Spider-Man is a superhero and the main protagonist in MVS. Peter Parker is a research assistant and Spider-Man's civilian identity.

4.3.1. Psychological traits/habitual behaviors

Spider-Man's major personality trait is being heroic yet humanized. His habitual behaviors include protecting the innocents and battling supervillains. He also saves lives by utilizing his superpowers to perform incredible feats of bravery, such as using his web to suspend a nosediving helicopter in the air between two buildings, or pulling back a truck from falling on top of a subway. He has the capability to put others' needs before his own. For example, he has the cure to save his own dying aunt, yet he decides not to use it in order to save thousands of other people he does not personally

know. Spider-Man also lacks vanity and is willing to share the spotlight of the hero with others. He gives credit to police officer Jefferson Davis after they put a stop to the Demons' plans together, saving hundreds of innocents in the process.

Spider-Man is humanized by facing everyday problems. As Peter, he is evicted from his apartment after failing to pay his rent. He then spends the next night sleeping in his aunt's office at a homeless shelter. He also awkwardly attempts to reconcile with his former girlfriend. After losing his aunt, he cries next to her hospital bed. As Spider-Man, he regularly interacts with the common population. For example, he introduces a homeless woman to the homeless shelter his aunt is employed by. In addition, Spider-Man is physically vulnerable and capable of getting injured. He is physically overpowered by several of his opponents, including Doctor Octopus, Kingpin, and Silver Sable.

The duality theme discovered in superhero comic books by Brown (1999), is also present in this game's characterization of Spider-Man/Peter Parker. Inside Spider-Man's suit, he is able to perform heroic feats while delivering a never-ending stream of witty remarks. As Peter, he is often awkward. For example, he attempts to distract Aunt May from her surprise party with rather comedic results. He also makes a joke about a grudge Dr. Octavius holds with very inappropriate timing. Finally, him attempting to reignite his relationship with Mary Jane does not go smoothly. However, this does add to his humanization as he is super only when donning the costume.

Spider-Man evidently enjoys playing the role of a superhero. He celebrates when Captain Yuri Watanabe gives him the permission to commence an attack on Kingpin's thugs. He also "geeks out" over supervillain Shocker's new, more technologically advanced gadgets. These instances indicate a carefree and playful attitude. To balance that, Spider-Man appears to be protective over those close to him. He is often concerned, even mad, at Mary Jane for engaging in dangerous activities. It suggests that in his mind, reckless behavior is fair only for him, but not for others.

Peter is a sensible person who acts as the voice of reason to Dr. Octavius' more reckless and increasingly obsessive behavior. For example, when Octavius' equipment is malfunctioning, Peter is the one who presses the emergency button, while Octavius insists on continuing. In addition, he pleads the Doctor to conduct further testing on experimental robotic arms, which is a step Octavius

wishes to skip altogether. As Spider-Man, this trait repeats as he often tries to reason with Silver Sable, who has an extremely explosive temper. Peter is also idealistic. He firmly believes that Dr. Octavius' work within the field of science will benefit millions of people, and thus even works for him without pay. He also rejects Norman Osborn's lucrative job offer. This idealism of youth can be interpreted as an indicator of Peter's young age. The years have not yet hardened him.

Peter is capable of compassion. He offers his condolences to Miles Morales at the latter's father's funeral, and attempts to comfort him. He also arranges a job position for Miles at the homeless shelter. Peter also keeps Dr. Octavius' medical diagnosis to himself once the two have discussed it. He evidently cares for others and is a socially intelligent person. In addition, Peter is extremely perseverant. After much of Dr. Octavius' equipment gets seized, he is immediately ready to start again from the beginning. As Spider-Man, he returns to action quickly after a life-threatening beatdown despite many a broken bone. Thus, perseverance manifests itself in both Peter and Spider-Man, only in different ways.

In contrast to SM's Spider-Man who had little regard for police officers' lives, MVS' Spider-Man has respect for the authorities, yet he remains wary of them. He has formed a friendship with Captain Yuri Watanabe and later becomes friends with Officer Jefferson Davis. Despite this, there is a divide in the thinking of the police force on whether Spider-Man is a friend or a menace. Therefore, it explains why Spider-Man appears to only trust a select handful of people in positions of authority.

Peter has an intense passion for science. He works as a research assistant for a scientist. He also appears to be a fan of technology. He understands cyber security, as evidenced by him being able to hack into Kingpin's server. In addition, he frequently uses a PC and tablets at Octavius' laboratory to perform complex tests. His affinity for technology reflects his age as someone who has lived amongst advanced technology his entire life. Regarding Peter's dislikes, he finds it difficult to accept help from others. For example, he attempts to reject Aunt May's financial help. Thus, he is a person of high pride. Peter also dislikes betrayal. He appears extremely hurt after Dr. Octavius transforms into Doctor Octopus and attacks his former assistant.

In conclusion, regarding Spider-Man/Peter Parker's personality and behavior, his characterization is multidimensional and nuanced. He is both heroic and humanized, diverting strongly from the archetype of a tough guy superhero. Thus, using the flat and round distinction, he is a round character capable of surprising consumers with unexpected personality traits and behavior.

4.3.2. Physical traits/appearance



Image 4. Spider-Man in MVS. © MARVEL. © 2018 Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC. Developed by Insomniac Games.



Image 5. Peter Parker in MVS. © MARVEL. © 2018 Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC. Developed by Insomniac Games.

Spider-Man wears a slightly modified version of his classic red and blue superhero costume, consisting of a mask, an upper body part, gloves, tights, and boots. Once again, his primary suit is form-fitting and appropriate for fluid movement. It also conceals his identity by covering his skin

entirely. MVS contains one brief scene where he appears only in his underwear, after recovering from poison inflicted by Scorpion. However, the scene is extremely brief and used for comedic purposes instead of in a sexualizing manner. Peter Parker’s primary outfit consists of a green collared shirt with a white top underneath, and blue jeans. He wears wristbands on both of his wrists. In laboratory sections, he also wears a white lab coat over his normal attire, which is fitting considering the setting he is in. He has short brown hair that can believably fit under the mask of Spider-Man. Overall, Peter’s clothing is appropriate and believable for a young male.

Spider-Man’s body type is lean and muscular. It is positively the body of a person who engages in physical exercise, yet it is not overexaggerated or unattainable. His weight is listed as 167 pounds or 76 kg in his “Characters” section biography, which seems plausible. Also listed in his biography is his height of 5 ft 10 inches or 178 cm. The average height of an American man is 5 ft 9 inches or 175 cm (Wikipedia 2021). Thus, he is very close to the average height. It successfully fits the picture of a humanized superhero who is also physically realistic, further facilitating identification with the average consumer.

4.3.3. Speech patterns

For the next three categories in this element, the distribution of talk, speaker alternation, and lexical richness (as explained in Culpeper 2014), six randomly chosen sections of dialogue were analyzed. However, the criteria for selection was that two sections feature Peter and Dr. Octavius, two Peter and Aunt May, and the remaining two Spider-Man and Silver Sable, in order to analyze power relations between different yet storywise essential characters. Then, for the remaining two categories, formal and informal lexis (Culpeper 2014), and other emerging speech patterns, the complete data from MVS was utilized.

Table 6. The distribution of talk between Spider-Man/Peter Parker and other characters in MVS.

Section number and participant	Number of turns	Average length of a turn	Total volume of talk
(S1, S2) Peter Parker	18	4,2 seconds	~1 minute 15 seconds

(S1, S2) Dr. Octavius	17	7,8 seconds	~2 minutes 9 seconds
(S3, S4) Peter Parker	18	3,7 seconds	~1 minute 6 seconds
(S3, S4) Aunt May	16	2,4 seconds	~38 seconds
(S5, S6) Spider-Man	5	3,8 seconds	~19 seconds
(S5, S6) Silver Sable	5	4,6 seconds	~22 seconds

While Peter has one additional turn in comparison with Dr. Octavius, the Doctor's average turn is longer and his total volume of talk is nearly 1 minute more than Peter's. As Dr. Octavius is Peter's boss, this is also clearly reflected in their speech. Octavius is higher in power and therefore speaks a lot more. The results are different concerning dialogue with Peter and Aunt May. Peter has a few additional turns, his average turn is slightly longer, and his total volume of talk is nearly double that of May's. While May is Peter's elder and the two respect each other greatly, Peter seems to take charge in their conversations.

Spider-Man and Silver Sable have an equal number of turns, yet Sable's average turn is slightly longer and her total volume of talk is slightly larger. However, the differences are rather minimal. Thus, the results indicate that Spider-Man and Sable's power relation is equal. They are both placed into the role of an alpha action hero, Spider-Man as a more traditional superhero and Sable as the leader of her own private security firm.

Regarding speaker alternation, 75 percent of Spider-Man's turns are initiated via self-select, 20 percent are allocated by another character, and 5 percent are interrupted. Thus, there are very little interruptions, a relatively small amount of allocations by others, and the vast majority is self-select. In regard to power relations, Spider-Man thus appears to be a powerful communicator who prefers to initiate his own turns.

Table 7. The lexical richness of Spider-Man/Peter Parker in MVS.

Cutscenes in question	Number of unique words	Total number of words	Ratio
w/Dr. Octavius	112	198	0.57

w/Aunt May	123	205	0.6
w/Silver Sable	53	77	0.69

Regarding the cutscenes where the total number of words was larger, Spider-Man/Peter’s lexical richness ratio is in the 0.6 range. In general, these instances of dialogue were considerably longer than those analyzed for the SM game, as MVS emphasizes the story more and is a much more technologically advanced video game. This is evident in the analysis of the cutscenes with Silver Sable, as the smaller number of total words immediately boosts the ratio upwards. All in all, based on these figures, Spider-Man/Peter Parker appears to be a competent and confident communicator.

In regard to formal and informal lexis, no instances of excessive formality were discovered. However, several instances of informality were found.

Excerpt 5: *Examples of Spider-Man/Peter Parker’s informal speech in MVS.*

“You got this, you got this, you got this. Please don’t screw this up.”

“Okay, umm, you hide there. I take out the bad guys, you make a break when it’s clear.”

“He’s a smart kid. He’s just having a tough time.”

“What’s a few bucks when you’re trying to change the world, right?”

“A gang of costumed nut-jobs is taking the city apart piece by piece. Time I return the favor.”

In the first instance, Spider-Man is talking to himself while attempting to perform a heroic feat, and he uses the expression “screw up” instead of “fail”. In the second instance, he refers to criminals as “the bad guys”. In the third instance, he refers to Miles Morales as a “kid” instead of a “child”. In the fourth instance, he speaks about “bucks” instead of “dollars”. Finally, he refers to supervillains as “nut-jobs”. Thus, the absence of formality and the frequent use of informal expressions suggest Spider-Man/Peter Parker to be a down-to-earth person.

Spider-Man utilizes humor frequently. A continuous stream of witty remarks is not uncommon for him. Humor is evidently one of the defining aspects of his speech.

Excerpt 6: *Examples of Spider-Man’s use of humor in MVS.*

“So, should we kiss now? Maybe later.”

“Wanna play twenty questions? No? How about we thumb-wrestle?”

“You brought this on yourself... literally.”

“Nice jumpsuit. Slimming.”

“Scorpion – can you hold on a minute? I was in the middle of a phone call and it was business.”

The first quip transpires when Spider-Man is hanging upside down from the ceiling facing Kingpin who he just wrapped up with web. He says the second remark when engaging in intense battle with Shocker. In the third instance, he makes a pun after dropping an enormous chandelier on Shocker. In the fourth instance, he is mocking the nearly 500-pound Kingpin after seeing the villain in his prisoner overalls. Finally, he jests after being grabbed by Scorpion while he was on a phone call with Yuri Watanabe. While a couple of these instances appear to be part of simply having fun and playing mind games with opponents, they can also be viewed as Spider-Man’s method of battling the anxiety of life-threatening situations. A piece of dialogue by Peter explicitly confirms this: “I have a habit of making bad jokes in, uh, tense situations”.

Peter has a recurring habit of stuttering and stumbling over his words.

Excerpt 7: *Examples of Peter Parker stumbling over his words in MVS.*

“No! No. No! I mean, I mean... not yet. I mean, I came to, uh, I just wanted to talk.”

“No... I mean yes! I mean, no, I don’t not want to, meaning I do want to... only if you want to.”

In the first instance, Peter is trying to distract Aunt May from her surprise party, but struggling to think of any meaningful conversation. In the second instance, he is reacting to Mary Jane’s surprising offer of spending a few nights at her apartment. These instances fit with Peter’s general awkwardness, yet they only transpire with civilian identity Peter and never with the superhero Spider-Man.

Both Spider-Man and Peter refer to several other characters by different names. With supervillains such as Kingpin and Shocker, he refuses to use their villain names, instead utilizing their real names or a nickname. Thus, Kingpin becomes “Willie” and Shocker “Herman”. Charles Standish, an employee of Norman Osborn, becomes “Charlie”, while Dr. Octavius is often simply “Doc”. In

addition, Mary Jane is “MJ”. This play with names reflects not only Spider-Man’s playful attitude, but it also functions as a method of reducing formality among allies and friends, and humanizing supervillains. For example, calling Kingpin “Willie” successfully erases much of his intimidating aura.

4.3.4. Interactions with other characters

As is expected of a superhero, Spider-Man frequently interacts with supervillains such as Doctor Octopus, Mister Negative, Scorpion, Kingpin, Rhino, and Shocker. The case with Shocker, Rhino, and Kingpin is that Spider-Man is simply in the way of their plans, and thus avoiding violent conflict is not a viable option. The same applies to Scorpion, but he also manages to seek out and even ambush Spider-Man instead of Spider-Man finding him each time. The interactions with Mister Negative are more personal, as his civilian identity is Martin Li, Aunt May’s boss at the homeless shelter. Hostility arises once Spider-Man gets in the way of Mister Negative’s quest for revenge. However, the most personal and emotionally charged interactions with a supervillain feature Doctor Octopus. There is a strong emotional tie, as Doctor Octopus’ civilian identity is Dr. Octavius, Peter’s boss, friend, and the scientist he adores the most.

Regarding Peter’s personal relationships, he interacts frequently with Mary Jane, Aunt May, and Miles Morales. Peter takes Miles under his wing, and the two become friends. Miles has always idolized Spider-Man and he becomes fond of Peter, too. Peter has a high emotional tie with his aunt, May Parker. They often converse and do chores at the homeless shelter together. Their relationship appears very warm and friendly with Aunt May remaining as the rock Peter can always turn to, regardless of what trouble he is faced with. She is never short on advice. Peter also has a high emotional tie to his love interest, Mary Jane Watson. The two are no longer in a romantic relationship and have not remained friends, either. Thus, while their interactions are friendly, they are often also tense because of the emotional friction involved. However, during the course of the game, they become close again by spending free time together in various activities and by co-operating to defeat supervillains.

In regard to Peter's professional relationships, he interacts with Dr. Octavius and Martin Li. With Li, the relationship is slightly personal yet mostly professional. He is Aunt May's boss at the homeless shelter and a person Peter grows to admire. They converse about May together and examine an ancient mask Li appears to have knowledge on. However, there is evidently some distance between them, and their potential path to becoming closer friends is shattered by Li transforming into Mister Negative. Peter's relationship is more intensive with Dr. Octavius, both professionally and personally, as he is Peter's boss and a friend he spends a considerable amount of time with. As Peter works as his research assistant, they often conduct tests and experiments together. In addition, they converse about life and science, and share highly personal information with each other. Spider-Man's most crucial professional relationship is with Captain Yuri Watanabe. She is his information source inside the police force, and they aid each other in battling and preventing criminal activity. They also share a personal relationship, as they often engage in humorous and witty conversations together, as friends.

In conclusion, Spider-Man logically faces hostile interactions with supervillains that result in physical conflict. However, two of them are more emotionally charged than the rest, as Peter's former boss and friend, and his aunt's boss switch alignments from good to evil. He has no choice but to engage in battle with his former allies. In addition, Peter has a range of both personal and professional relationships, including a love interest, a blood relative, and several friends.

4.3.5. Environment

In regard to physical surroundings, Spider-Man thrives in the city where a superhero is most often needed. He is frequently seen scaling tall buildings and sticking to various vehicles. The New York City, the place of events, contains a generous amount of vantage points and hiding spots for an agile superhero such as Spider-Man. Peter's time is divided into roughly three primary locations: Octavius' laboratory, the homeless shelter, and Mick's diner. Mick's acts as a rendezvous place for him and Mary Jane to unwind, converse about recent events, and make plans for the future. Instead of a fancy restaurant, it is a modest diner, indicating that is either what him and Mary Jane prefer, or what they can afford. The homeless shelter, called F.E.A.S.T., is where Aunt May and Martin Li work. Peter frequently visits the shelter in order to converse with his aunt. He also assists with the occasional chore there. Peter's connection to the shelter reflects his willingness to help those in

need. While Spider-Man helps via grand feats of bravery, Peter does the same through a more traditional route. Finally, Octavius' laboratory is where Peter works as a research assistant. The location underlines Peter's intelligence and passion for science.

At the very beginning of MVS, Peter's apartment is shown. One can see newspaper clippings of stories about supervillains, a sketchbook of Spider-Man's gadgets, various tools, a laptop, sticky notes of upcoming meetings, a professional wrestling show poster, a family photograph with Aunt May, and empty cans and energy bar wrappers. Overall, the apartment appears disorganized and untidy. It reflects that the life of a superhero is too hectic to properly clean up or spend time at home altogether. It also humanizes the superhero as a normal person with common items in his apartment. In addition, the apartment also contains more exotic items specific to Spider-Man. Thus, the surroundings reflect both the superhero identity and the civilian identity simultaneously.

Regarding human surroundings, Spider-Man associates frequently with Mary Jane and Yuri Watanabe. They aid each other in preventing criminal activity. Therefore, Spider-Man does not actually co-operate with other superheroes, but with civilians instead. During work hours, Peter spends his time with Dr. Octavius, his boss. In his free time, the majority of Peter's time is spent with Mary Jane, his love interest, May, his aunt, Martin Li, his aunt's boss, and Miles Morales, his friend and protégé.

4.3.6. Biography

In the "Characters" section, Spider-Man and Peter Parker are listed under the same profile, reflecting the two different sides of the same person. His age is listed as 23, matching his characterization in the game accurately. His place of birth is listed as Forest Hills, New York. Therefore, he is a local and likely extremely familiar with the city he now patrols as a superhero. The phrase "bit by that radioactive spider" unveils the source of his superpowers. His history of being bullied in school is referenced with the sentence "back then my biggest concern was avoiding Flash Thompson at lunch". Thus, he has grown from someone bullied to a powerful superhero standing up to bullies. The extraordinary superpowers listed in his biography include "superhuman strength", "exceptional agility", and "Spider-Sense". His superhuman abilities are therefore

underlined. As a humorous detail, his sense of humor is listed as one superpower: “really good sense of humor, like, really good”. Since he has written his biography himself, this reflects the playful and cheeky attitude in character for Spider-Man.

4.4. Mary Jane Watson (MVS)

Mary Jane Watson is a reporter and a secondary protagonist in MVS. She is Spider-Man/Peter Parker’s love interest.

4.4.1. Psychological traits/habitual behaviors

Mary Jane’s major personality trait is that she is a thrill-seeker, a person who seeks for a rush of adrenaline and excitement in their life, even through danger. Thus, much of her behavior consists of placing herself in dangerous situations. She secretly goes through classified documents before swiftly exiting as armed thugs enter in close proximity. After that, she is excited to plan with Spider-Man how to recover the documents and defeat the thugs. She continues to research the villainous Demons, despite their increasing presence potentially making her a target. She also infiltrates supervillain Tombstone’s motorcycle shop and searches his office. In addition, she infiltrates and wants to remain in Silver Sable’s high-security militia camp despite an alert attracting the guards, until Spider-Man forces her to exit the camp. Finally, she jumps off an extremely tall balcony, blindly trusting she will be caught by Spider-Man. Overall, it appears Mary Jane is willing to do whatever it takes for a good news story. These activities also reflect her intense curiosity, appropriately for an investigative journalist such as her. They also indicate a substantial amount of recklessness and disregard for her own safety, in a manner very similar to Spider-Man. Thus, the reason Spider-Man’s protectiveness irritates her is likely that she views it as a double standard, as a different set of rules for him and for her.

Regarding other personality traits, Mary Jane is extremely competent at persuasion. Despite initial reluctance, she quickly talks Officer Jefferson Davis into trusting her with regard to writing a news story about him. The same phenomenon repeats as at first Norman Osborn’s employee Charles

Standish is pointing a gun at her, but only moments later his anxiety has passed and they act in a friendly manner. She diverts from the more sensational journalists and manages to appear sincere and trustworthy to several different types of people. She also possesses a strong sense of justice. When the Grand Central Terminal is under attack, she performs various feats of bravery in order to keep the hostages alive and safe. Additionally, Mary Jane is clever. Once Rose Rosemann, an estate sale agent, refuses an interview with her, she pretends to call her editor in order to persuade Rosemann to collaborate. Her plan succeeds.

Mary Jane appears to be fond of technology. She regularly works utilizing her laptop and at one point, she uses a tablet to hack enemy drones. Considering her age, it is likely she has spent her entire life amongst modern technology. She also likes Peter's cooking, at least on those occasions when he is not burning the food. For example, she compliments the smell of his chicken curry. She dislikes Peter's overprotectiveness, confirming this by saying "it's just... hard being the one who always gets saved, you know?". While she may understand the reasons behind it, it does not mean she can grow to like it.

In conclusion, Mary Jane's personality and behavior indicate a person of strong will, one who is bold and headstrong, even. In addition, her behavior is largely dictated by her thrill-seeking traits. However, she also has a compassionate and nurturing side to her. Therefore, she refuses to conform to any stereotypical role, retaining her capability to surprise the consumer instead. According to the flat and round distinction, she is a round character.

4.4.2. Physical traits/appearance



Image 6. Mary Jane Watson in MVS. © MARVEL. © 2018 Sony Interactive Entertainment LLC. Developed by Insomniac Games.

Mary Jane wears a few outfits during the course of the game, but her primary attire consists of a brown leather jacket with a white top underneath, an orange scarf around her neck, blue jeans, and brown leather shoes. She has reddish brown hair that is always tied in a ponytail. She wears very light, nearly unnoticeable makeup. She has some freckles. All in all, her outfit does not sexualize her. Her clothing covers most of her skin and is appropriate for the moderately chilly weather of the New York City. In addition, her hair constantly being tied is fitting for the action scenes, since the hair flowing open could potentially be a hindrance. Her femininity is not overemphasized in any way, leading to a healthy look from the perspective of gender studies. Regarding body type and proportions, Mary Jane has a slim yet attainable physique of realistic proportions. Her weight is listed as 120 pounds or 54 kg in her biography, believably matching her in-game model's figure.

Regarding physical stature, Mary Jane is listed as 5 ft 8 inches or 173 cm tall in her biography in the "Characters" section. The average American female is 5 ft 5 inches or 165 cm tall (Wikipedia 2021). Therefore, she is substantially taller than the average, potentially gaining social and physical power this way. She is only slightly shorter than Peter, meaning he does not physically dwarf her in any of their shared scenes. Thus, it makes the physical power relation between the two quite balanced, too.

4.4.3. Speech patterns

For the next three categories in this element, the distribution of talk, speaker alternation, and lexical richness (as explained in Culpeper 2014), five instances of dialogue featuring Mary Jane in a prominent role were analyzed. Love interest and friend Peter Parker is featured in three of them, estate sale agent Rose Rosemann in one, and Norman Osborn’s employee Charles Standish in one. For the remaining two categories, formal and informal lexis (Culpeper 2014), and other emerging speech patterns, the entire data from MVS that features Mary Jane was utilized.

Table 8. The distribution of talk between Mary Jane and other characters in MVS.

Section number and participant	Number of turns	Average length of a turn	Total volume of talk
(S1) Mary Jane	6	3,4 seconds	~21 seconds
(S1) Rose Rosemann	6	2 seconds	~12 seconds
(S2) Mary Jane	13	3,4 seconds	~44 seconds
(S2) Peter Parker	12	2,8 seconds	~34 seconds
(S3) Mary Jane	17	2,7 seconds	~47 seconds
(S3) Peter Parker	17	2,5 seconds	~42 seconds
(S4) Mary Jane	6	3,2 seconds	~19 seconds
(S4) Charles Standish	5	4,7 seconds	~24 seconds
(S5) Mary Jane	10	3,2 seconds	~32 seconds
(S5) Peter Parker	11	2,5 seconds	~27 seconds

In each of the three analyzed instances of dialogue featuring Mary Jane and Peter, although their number of turns are nearly equal, Mary Jane’s average turn is longer and total volume of talk larger in comparison to Peter. However, the differences are often slight and thus indicate a rather equal power relation in their relationship as long-time friends and later reuniting romantic partners. Peter, the male, is not the dominant one, as one could assume based on stereotypes. Instead, Mary Jane, the female, is the one who the distribution of talk is trending towards. However, one should not label either party as excessively dominant, as their power relation overall appears equal.

Similar findings follow from the analysis on Mary Jane and Rosemann. Although the two participants have an equal amount of turns, Mary Jane’s average turn is longer and her total volume

of talk is nearly double to that of Rosemann's. The distribution of talk trends towards Mary Jane again, as she is taking the initiative in the situation, hoping to persuade Rosemann to agree on an interview. Additionally, as Rosemann's role is that of a minor character, and this is one of Mary Jane's introductory cutscenes, it appears logical she would receive the majority of the character development instead of Rosemann.

The findings from the instance of dialogue featuring Mary Jane and Charles Standish divert from the rest. Although she has one additional turn, Standish's average turn is longer and total volume of talk larger, although not by a substantial margin. However, these results can be explained by the fact that Mary Jane is asking questions from Standish and he is providing answers. Thus, it is logical that the answers would be longer than the questions. This is an identical situation to the cutscene analyzed in section 4.1.3. featuring Spider-Man and Mysterio in the SM game.

In regard to speaker alternation, 77 percent of Mary Jane's turns are initiated via self-select, 19 percent are allocated by other characters, and 4 percent contain an interruption. Therefore, the majority is self-select, a rather small amount are allocations by others, and interruptions are very rare. In connection with power relations, Mary Jane therefore appears to be a powerful communicator, often initiating her own turns. As an additional note, these figures are nearly identical to those found in section 4.3.3. in the analysis of Spider-Man/Peter Parker's speech in MVS.

Table 9. The lexical richness of Mary Jane in MVS.

Cutscene in question	Number of unique words	Total number of words	Ratio
w/Rosemann	47	62	0.76
w/Peter 1	104	142	0.73
w/Peter 2	91	123	0.74
w/Standish	32	49	0.65
w/Peter 3	50	63	0.79

Except for the Standish cutscene that can be considered an outlier due to its interview esque structure, Mary Jane's lexical richness ratio comfortably reaches above the 0.7 range in each of the analyzed instances of dialogue. The ratio remains equally high, regardless of the total number of words in the data in question. Not only do the results appear appropriate for her characterization as a confident person, it also seems extremely logical as words are what a reporter like her does for a living. Therefore, it is logical she is highly capable with them since it is a defining part of her occupation. In conclusion, Mary Jane appears to be a highly competent and confident communicator.

Regarding formal and informal lexis, excessive formality remained undiscovered, yet informal utterances were found.

Excerpt 8: *Examples of Mary Jane's informal speech in MVS.*

"So, creepy mask guys. What's your take?"

"Yeah. I'll dig into it."

"Hey, it's your crime system thingie. Looks like a residential break-in."

"Hey. I'm sorry I screwed things up."

In the first instance, Mary Jane refers to masked members of the villainous Demons group as "creepy mask guys". In the second instance, she informs Peter she will investigate a certain issue, utilizing the informal expression "dig into it". In the third instance, she calls Peter's crime alert gadget a "crime system thingie". Finally, as she is blaming herself for failing, she utters she "screwed things up". Thus, the absence of formal lexis and the aforementioned examples of informal lexis indicate Mary Jane is a down-to-earth person refusing to appear pompous via her speech.

One defining aspect of Mary Jane's speech is her frequent use of questions.

Excerpt 9: *Examples of Mary Jane's use of questions in MVS.*

"Let's not make this all about business. How's it going with you? Did you get that promotion?"

"Why did you ask me here, Pete?"

"Do you remember why we broke up?"

“So, I was thinking... what if we teamed up?”

“What about you? Find a job yet?”

In the first instance, she is curious to know more about Peter’s current life situation. In the second instance, she appears unsure of Peter’s motives behind their rendezvous. In the third instance, she is pressuring Peter who acts like there is no history of friction between the two. In the fourth instance, she makes a suggestion in the form of a question, aiming to join Spider-Man’s battle for the city in the role of his partner. Finally, the last instance is identical to the first one. This speech pattern reflects her curious nature, but it also indicates she is unable to completely abandon her investigative journalist role when off duty. Therefore, her occupation also partially defines her personality and speech in her free time.

Mary Jane repeatedly introduces herself during the course of the game.

Excerpt 10: *Examples of Mary Jane introducing herself in MVS.*

“Hi. Mary Jane Watson, Daily Bugle.”

“Officer Davis, Mary Jane Watson, Daily Bugle.”

“Hi. Mary Jane Watson, Associate Editor.”

In the first instance, she introduces herself to Rose Rosemann, an estate sale agent, whom she has not met before. In the second instance, she introduces herself to Officer Jefferson Davis, whom she also has not met prior to that instance. Finally, she introduces herself to long-time friend and love interest Peter using her new title “Associate Editor”. These instances reflect her occupation as a reporter. Thus, she often meets people she has never met before. Additionally, she appears self-aware of this habit, as she utilizes it with Peter as well, a person she is constantly informal with.

4.4.4. Interactions with other characters

Mary Jane’s personal relationships include Peter Parker and Miles Morales. Since Miles becomes Peter’s friend, he also becomes Mary Jane’s friend via this shared connection. She and Miles even save Spider-Man’s life together at one point. However, Mary Jane’s most important connection is with Spider-Man/Peter Parker, her love interest, nearly lifelong friend, and partner in fighting

crime. Thus, the relationship is both personal and professional, although the high emotional tie is ever-present. Their shared interactions start off as friendly yet visibly tense and awkward. Through conversating, investigating, and engaging in dangerous activities together, even saving each others' lives, their relationship later turns romantic again. The story of MVS concludes with the two finally kissing.

Mary Jane's professional relationships include Charles Standish, an employee of Norman Osborn, and a man who has knowledge on a dangerous bioweapon, Rose Rosemann, the sales agent of a shifty estate, and Jefferson Davis, a heroic police officer. Regarding Standish, their interactions begin as hostile due to a case of mistaken identity. He even points a gun at Mary Jane. However, they turn friendly rather quickly. The same applies to Davis. Her plans to write a news story on him are met with initial reluctance, yet they quickly appear friendly, too. However, the opposite is true with Rosemann. As Mary Jane pretends to write a normal story, but in reality wants to investigate Rosemann's estate's criminal ties, she is initially met with friendliness and later with hostility.

In conclusion, while most of her interactions concern Spider-Man/Peter Parker, that is not the complete picture. She also interacts with other characters, depending on where her investigations lead her. It must be noted that several of the characters she interacts with turn from hostile to friendly towards her. It is a testament to her competence at appearing sincere and trustworthy.

4.4.5. Environment

Mary Jane's physical surroundings depend entirely on where her investigations take her. Locations she spends time in include a museum, a motorcycle shop, a militia camp, a terminal, a penthouse, and city streets where criminal activity occasionally transpires. In addition, Mick's diner acts as a safe haven and a rendezvous place for her and Peter to converse in and plan future activities. Mary Jane's apartment is also shown. Her walls are full of paintings and framed photographs of mostly wildlife, such as a toucan, a zebra, and a dog. This indicates a love towards animals, at least a visual fondness towards them if not a complete one. Her apartment is very "artsy" and a lot tidier and more organized in comparison to Peter's. It appears she has more time to spend at home and wants to make the place as comfortable as possible, since she works remotely as well.

Mary Jane's human surroundings depend on whether she is on duty or not. On duty, she associates with people such as the aforementioned Rosemann, Davis, and Standish. They are either people involved in a story she is working on or somehow related to her and Spider-Man's crime-fighting activities. Then, off duty she prefers to spend time with Peter engaging in various activities. Once Miles enters the story, she also associates with him, but to a much lesser degree.

4.4.6. Biography

Mary Jane is not married to Peter in this timeline. Thus, her last name is Watson instead of Parker as it was in SM. Her age is listed as 23. Therefore, she is the same age as Peter, making the two a fitting pair. Her place of birth is listed as Montoursville, Pennsylvania. She was not born in the New York City, but also not far away from there. Her nickname is revealed as "MJ" in the very first words of the biography that has once again been written by Peter. Her love life is unveiled, as it is revealed that she and Peter were best friends since middle school, "started dating senior year of college" for nearly two years, and then proceeded to break up unamicably. Her career progression is highlighted: she has been promoted "from intern to staff reporter". Finally, the core of her personality is underlined. She is described as "fearless" and as one who "follows a story wherever it might lead".

4.5. Discussion: Main findings and previous research

Out of the four characterizations analyzed utilizing the methods provided by Pearson (2007) and Culpeper (2014), Spider-Man/Peter Parker in the SM video game was the first one. Regarding psychological traits and habitual behaviors, he is portrayed as a selfless and unbiased hero, whose main purpose is to bring justice into the world by protecting the innocents. However, he does possess a dark side, as he occasionally acts in a surprisingly violent manner and often disregards the authorities. Thus, instead of being a completely pure superhero, there is a noticeable edge and plenty of machismo to him as well. In regard to physical traits and appearance, his Spider-Man suit conceals his true identity, while Peter's civilian clothing is not sexualized. In addition, he has a lean

and muscular yet attainable body, often appearing as a physical underdog next to his larger adversaries.

Regarding speech patterns, he is a powerful, competent, confident, and down-to-earth communicator with a penchant for humor, wittiness, sarcasm, and playful insults. In regard to interactions with other characters, he frequently engages in both impersonal and personal hostile interactions with supervillains, while maintaining friendly relations with fellow superheroes operating in the same territories. He is emotionally tied to his wife Mary Jane, while his relationship with his boss at the Daily Bugle newspaper is borderline, if not, abusive. Regarding environment, he operates in the New York City, where his effortless access to rooftop areas underlines his superhuman abilities.

Overall, Spider-Man is portrayed as a superhero first and foremost, with rather little attention given to his civilian life as Peter Parker. In his biography, it is mentioned he works as a photographer for the Daily Bugle newspaper, yet the humanized side of him does not receive much development or emphasis at all. Spider-Man is the center of attention, the one performing the feats of bravery.

The second characterization analyzed was Mary Jane Parker in the SM video game. She is confined to a completely one-dimensional and flat role as a damsel in distress in constant fear for her life. She wears sexualized clothing that is very revealing and overemphasizes her feminine features. Additionally, her body is unrealistic and she appears in suggestive poses. Regarding speech patterns, she lacks power, importance, attention, and communicator competence and confidence. Her speech nearly exclusively consists of desperate cries for help. Her interactions with other characters highlight her lack of importance, as she is crudely ignored. In regard to environment, she appears in only one location, where she is involuntarily taken after becoming a pawn in the game between good and evil. Her biography describes her two separate roles as a homemaker and a supermodel, yet her limited role does not allow them to manifest in meaningful ways.

The third characterization analyzed was Spider-Man/Peter Parker in the MVS video game. Regarding psychological traits and habitual behaviors, he is yet again portrayed as a heroic character who is selfless and unbiased. However, he is significantly more humanized than his SM

counterpart. He is constantly confronted with everyday problems and forced to balance his human emotions. His young age shows in his idealism and exciting perseverance, yet he also seems mature beyond his years, as evidenced by his sensible acting and professionalism at his place of work. In regard to physical traits and appearance, his superhero suit once again provides a disguise, while his handful of civilian outfits serve appropriately in different types of situations and settings, each time in a non-sexualizing manner. His body type is lean and muscular yet attainable and realistic.

Spider-Man/Peter Parker is mostly a powerful, competent, confident, and down-to-earth communicator with the Spider-Man side focusing on delivering the witty remarks and quips. On the other hand, Peter is a slightly awkward communicator with a penchant for stuttering and stumbling over his words. Regarding interactions with other characters, Spider-Man's most emotionally charged rivalries transpire with former allies and friends turned evil, while Peter's social circle concentrates on his love interest, aunt, friends, and bosses. In regard to environment, the large city once again enables Spider-Man to perform astonishing feats of bravery. In addition, his personal apartment underlines the hectic nature of a superhero's life, and both of his identities, hero and normal person. His biography elaborates more on his backstory, explaining his source of powers and history of being bullied among other relevant details.

All in all, the newer characterization of Spider-Man and Peter Parker significantly humanizes the character more, adopting a mature and true to life tone. In addition, the character of Peter Parker is no longer simply an afterthought. Instead, his characterization is equally rich and nuanced as Spider-Man's.

The final characterization was that of Mary Jane Watson in the MVS video game. Regarding psychological traits and habitual behaviors, she is depicted as a thrill-seeker drawn to danger and adrenaline. She is portrayed with reckless and stubborn personality traits. The emphasis of her characterization is on her occupation as a reporter. This reflects in her portrayal in a dominant manner, as she is willing to do anything for a good story, is intensely curious, and is a master of persuasion. In regard to physical traits and appearance, her clothing is appropriate for the setting and does not sexualize her. Her visual design seems rather action-oriented, diverting radically from the overemphasized femininity of her portrayal in SM. Additionally, her body type is realistic.

Regarding speech patterns, she is a powerful, down-to-earth, and lexically rich wordsmith who has a penchant for frequent questions, rather appropriately for an investigative journalist. Her power relationship with her love interest and friend Peter Parker appears to be equal. In regard to interactions with other characters, she mostly associates with either Peter/Spider-Man, yet her professional relationships lead her towards often dangerous investigations. Regarding environment, her personal apartment reveals her as artsy, tidy, and an animal lover. Her biography uncovers details about her love life, career progression, and the core of her personality.

Overall, the modern Mary Jane is no longer simply a damsel in distress. Instead, she is a strong and independent character that has a lot in common with a defining aspect of Spider-Man's characterization: both are generally quite reckless with little regard for their own safety.

In superhero comics, Brown (1999) had discovered a trend of hypermasculinity, which means male superheroes were becoming increasingly more masculine and less human. Thus, identification with them was becoming increasingly difficult for the average comic book consumer. Spider-Man's portrayal in the SM video game is rather "comic-booky" and macho. However, Spider-Man/Peter Parker in the significantly newer MVS game is a thoroughly humanized character. Therefore, it appears the hypermasculinity that was once present no longer persists in the modern male superhero characterization, at least not in the case of Spider-Man.

The duality theme of a superhero being super only in costume and a "wimp" out of it (e.g. Brown 1999; Weltzien 2005) cannot be completely interpreted with regard to the SM characterization, as Peter Parker receives such little character development during that game. However, it could be inferred the game is indirectly saying none of the heroics could be performed by Peter. Instead, it has to be Spider-Man in the spotlight. In MVS, Spider-Man performs feats of bravery, while Peter often ends up in various awkward situations. Thus, the duality theme is still present to a certain degree. On the other hand, as was said in chapter 1 of the present thesis, a vital element of Spider-Man's lasting success and popularity is the contrast between a superhero and someone ordinary.

Regarding the unachievable comic book superhero bodies discovered by Avery-Natale (2013), only one characterization matched this finding. In both SM and MVS, Spider-Man/Peter Parker has a lean and muscular yet realistic and attainable body, and Mary Jane follows similar realism in MVS. However, SM portrays Mary Jane with an unrealistic body shape complete with exaggerated proportions. In addition, sexualization of female characters through costumes, bodies, and poses (e.g. Emad 2006; Cocca 2014) matches SM's portrayal of Mary Jane. She wears revealing clothing, has an unattainable body, and appears in suggestive poses. However, Mary Jane in MVS wears appropriate outfits considering the setting, has a realistic body type, and does not appear in suggestive poses. Yet, Mary Jane in SM follows the victimization trend of female characters (e.g. Stabile 2009; Brown 2011), appearing solely to fill the role of a damsel in distress, whom the male hero then proceeds to rescue. In contrast, Mary Jane in MVS fulfills a rich variety of roles. Returning to body types, as Avery-Natale (2013) described, the bodies of superheroes in comics used to be more realistic, but had changed increasingly towards unrealistic. The present study's findings suggest a full circle: the bodies of superheroes might be becoming more realistic and attainable once again.

In superhero films and TV shows, there has been a recent emergence of strong female superheroes, such as Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, and Jessica Jones (Schubart 2019; Curtis 2020; Green 2019). Mary Jane's characterization in the 2018 MVS video game follows this trend, although she is not exactly a superhero herself. Additionally, the recent reboots of classic stories of male superheroes have depicted them as more humanized and realistic (Mulder 2017). This also applies to the characterization of Spider-Man/Peter Parker in MVS, a more humanized and true to life take on the classic superhero and his civilian identity. In a similar manner to the film reboots, the MVS video game is also a reboot of its own, having started a new era of Spider-Man video games after a multi-year break with its own, independent story.

In video games, females have been underrepresented, restricted to being passive, sexualized via clothing and bodies, and presented in secondary roles (e.g. Ivory 2006; Dickerman et al. 2008; Williams et al. 2009; Downs & Smith 2010). Mary Jane's portrayal in SM follows this notoriously poor gender representation discovered in video games, as it sexualizes her through revealing clothing and an exaggerated body, and limits her to an extremely passive and minor secondary role. In contrast, MVS' portrayal of Mary Jane does not sexualize her and places her in an active and

very prominent, although not main, role. As the game is about Spider-Man, it would be impossible to place Mary Jane into the role of the main protagonist, unless a spin-off instalment is made specifically to tell her story.

On a more positive note, the video game industry has seen the sexualization of female characters reduce over the years, and female characters have begun to appear in larger numbers (Lynch et al. 2016). The decrease in sexualization also displays in the differences between the portrayals of Mary Jane in SM and MVS, two video games released during different eras. The modern characterization of Mary Jane starkly contrasts with the classic, evidently sexualized characterization. Additionally, it was found that casual games are more progressive regarding gender representation in comparison with hardcore games (Wohn 2011). Both of the analyzed video games are considered hardcore games, yet only SM follows gender stereotypes, while MVS represents gender in a healthier manner, more in the vein of casual games rather than the hardcore games category it actually is a part of. This suggests that the audience of hardcore games is undergoing changes, too, diversifying to share more similarities with the evidently different audience of casual games.

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to analyze gender representations in Spider-Man video games. The data consisted of two video games, and there were four characterizations analyzed in total. Spider-Man/Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson/Parker were the characters the analyses concentrated on. The research questions asked what kinds of gender representations appear in the games, and what kind of change regarding gender representation had transpired between the two games released during significantly different eras. First, Spider-Man/Peter Parker was portrayed as an edgy, macho, and occasionally excessively violent hero in SM. Second, in MVS, he was portrayed as a more wholesome and humanized hero dictated by complex human emotions. Third, Mary Jane was sexualized, victimized, and restricted to an entirely passive role in SM. Finally, the Mary Jane in MVS is action-oriented, courageous, and bold. Thus, Spider-Man/Peter Parker has shifted from comic-booky hypermasculinity to a more realistic human, who one could presume appears easier to identify with for the average consumer. In addition, Mary Jane has transformed from a damsel in distress in a minor role to a multidimensional character in a prominent role.

Regarding the shortcomings of the present study, one must consider the limitations of the data. As this is a master's thesis, the amount of data was limited to only two video games, although they are games that are highly acclaimed and were released during different eras. However, there were several other games released during the time gap between the two analyzed games that could have warranted an analysis of their own, such as *Spider-Man 2: Enter Electro* (2001), *Spider-Man: Web of Shadows* (2008), and *Spider-Man: Shattered Dimensions* (2010). These games also follow the selection criteria introduced in chapter 3, as they feature their own, independent stories. Additionally, the amount of data available for analysis was not equal for each characterization. For example, SM's cutscenes were significantly shorter and featured less dialogue in comparison to the very cinematic and story-driven MVS. In addition, some characters received a lot more character development than others and thus, produced more data for their characterization analysis.

An in-depth analysis such as the one in the present study should be considered important, as it uncovers both the past and the future, the history where we came from and the direction where we are headed. The present study can prove useful for anyone researching similar issues, whether it is

gender representations in general or superhero media specifically. The study also offers a fresh perspective, as it concentrates on the largely ignored superhero video games instead of other superhero media that has already been the center of research in the past.

The findings of the present study are important, as they can also be thought to reflect change in society, not only in the world of gaming. My findings confirm the findings of previous research conducted on superhero comics, superhero films and TV shows, and video games, where recent years have seen the emergence of more progressive gender representations. Thus, underrepresented groups who have been previously cast aside leading to the overrepresentation of the white male, will receive more exposure and representation in a modern, more inclusive atmosphere. More representation means more visibility and therefore, becoming part of the so-called “normal”.

As the media, video games included, can significantly influence the gender performance of an individual, more progressive gender representation means future generations will be exposed to a broader variety of different representations. They could have a larger pool of role models to select from, and with the better representation of underrepresented groups, find it easier to be comfortable with themselves. While, for example, superhero comics are still seeing a conflict between traditional and progressive representation, the present study predicts progressiveness is the way of the future, as the older analyzed video game leaned towards traditional stereotypes and the newer game towards modern progressiveness. In addition, more diversity in the ranks of the creators of the entertainment appears to indicate more diverse content, leading to increased variety in the representation of different groups.

For future research of the similar kind, there is plenty of unexplored data available. The continued success of superhero media has guaranteed a steady flow of new superhero video game releases. For example, notable recent releases include the virtual reality game *Marvel's Iron Man VR* released in July 2020, the action role-playing game *Marvel's Avengers* in September 2020, and the sequel to the second game analyzed in the present study, *Marvel's Spider-Man: Miles Morales* in November 2020. The past has also seen the emergence of the *Batman: Arkham* series, which can be considered the pinnacle of superhero gaming alongside the most memorable Spider-Man video games, based on commercial success and reception from gaming critics.

Regardless of the nature of the data in question or the analysis method used, the in-depth analysis of gender issues remains important. It allows researchers to explore the details underneath the surface in order to completely uncover, and perhaps, challenge existing representations.

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