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# **From damsel in distress to lady of the hour: Representation of female protagonists through tropes in action-adventure video games in comparison to film and television in the 21st century**

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## **From damsel in distress to lady of the hour**

Representation of female protagonists through tropes in action-adventure video games in comparison to film and television in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

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# 1. Introduction

Video games have grown into a popular pastime worldwide. Much like film and television before, the scope and diversity of games has increased, reaching various audiences within society through multiple game types and genres. At their core, video games are an interactive storytelling medium: the player controls part of the story, even if that story is predetermined. Players take actions in-game, and feel the repercussions of such actions more deeply than they would when watching a character do so in a passive medium (i.e. film).<sup>1</sup>

By controlling and relating to the main character, the player can immerse themselves in the game world. This influences the way in which the story is experienced by the player.<sup>2</sup> Many games use cinematic cut-scenes as well as gameplay elements to tell intricate, evocative stories, creating a lasting impression for the players. As such, games have the power to invoke emotions and sensations unique to their type of storytelling.

At the same time, research by game design specialist Stefan Hall indicates that narrative conventions and visual presentation in video games have been heavily influenced by media such as film and television.<sup>3</sup> As a result, we can recognise similar visual and narrative conventions in games as in film and television. These conventions, stereotypes or ‘tropes’, when repeated often enough, can influence the expectations viewers or players have of the narrative.

In Western feminist discourse of the past few decades, the representation of women in media has been criticised by scholars as well as critics and audiences; the recurring story tropes have been examined in various analyses to uncover underlying stereotypes and sexist beliefs. Research conducted by Williams et al. in 2009 suggests that “that these tropes affecting marginalised groups can discourage affected groups from playing as well as creating games themselves.”<sup>4</sup> As mentioned by media critic Anita Sarkeesian in “Women vs. tropes in video games”, tropes can help us recognise larger recurring patterns of how various experiences and stereotypes are being normalised.<sup>5</sup> Recognising these patterns will allow for an evaluation on the ways in which predetermined conventions are being constructed, deconstructed, inverted and subverted.

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<sup>1</sup> Isbister 2016, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Salen and Zimmerman 2006, pp. 29-30.

<sup>3</sup> Hall 2011, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Williams et al. 2009, qtd. in Tompkins and Martins 2022, p. 400.

<sup>5</sup> Sarkeesian 2013b, 22:38.

Moreover, multiple studies have pointed out that specifically video game narratives can also impact the way players experience the real world. In 2018, media literacy expert Helen Liu analysed the behaviour and attitude of adolescents when playing video games and concluded that this group is generally seen to be heavily impacted by different types of gender representation in this medium.<sup>6</sup> In similar research, media psychology scholars Alessandro Gabbiadini et al. evaluated the influence of hypermasculinity in video games on players.<sup>7</sup> They found that violence, particularly against women, can desensitise players to these types of violence in real life and potentially lower the degree in which male players empathise with women. However, the papers did not reveal a direct causal link between violent video games and violent acts committed by players in real life. To the researcher's knowledge, other research also did not show a causal link between the two, but it did show that these effects can mostly be seen in insecure and vulnerable adolescents.

The viewers or players and the way they interact with the filmic or gamic material is critical to the success of the release. With the increasing industry and the communities surrounding it, it is therefore important to analyse how certain social ideas are frequently embedded in these media, in order to understand what stereotypes they are reinforcing or even perpetuating. As the demand side of the video game industry grows into a more diverse audience, the supply side has a more complex task in engaging their audiences. With feminist discourse demanding more authentic representation on one side, and the ever-evolving digital entertainment industry on the other, there seems to be a discrepancy between the expectation and reality of how female characters are presented in video games as well as in film and television.

This thesis therefore aims to provide an overview of how certain narrative tropes have made their way from action-adventure film and television into video game stories of the same genre, and of the differences that have arisen between these different types of media. These criteria have been chosen because action-adventure covers a broad range of popular subgenres and includes heavy gameplay elements as well as extensive story elements. Moreover, AAA-titles can be expected to present the dominant tropes in contemporary society because of their budget and wide target audiences.

I will then answer the following research question: *since the year 2000, how have stereotypical or tropological story elements been maintained or subverted in narratives with*

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<sup>6</sup> Liu 2018, p. 130.

<sup>7</sup> Gabbiadini et al. 2016, p. 11.

*female main characters in popular action-adventure video games in comparison to non-ludic media?*

In answering this question, I will strive to measure in which ways the narratives of three recent AAA action-adventure video game case studies follow the dominant gendered tropes in film and TV of the same scope and genre, and what this means for the medium of video games.

This introductory chapter highlights the relevance and scope of the research, as well as the research question. In the following subchapters, an overview of relevant previous research regarding gendered tropes in digital media will be presented, after which the methodology of the thesis is described.

Chapter two presents an analysis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in television and film, in order to outline gendered tropes regularly found in these media. To conclude this chapter, I will then briefly compare it to the status quo of research on gendered video game tropes in the same time frame.

Chapter three provides an in-depth analysis of the same gendered tropes in three more recent high-profile action-adventure video games with playable female lead characters; *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2013) *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) and *The Last of Us: Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020).

Below, I will start by giving an overview of previous research and relevant definitions.

## **1.1 Theoretical framework**

Throughout the thesis, the concept of tropes will remain central. In most academic studies regarding this concept, the definition of literary theorist Kenneth Burke is used. This interpretation uses the four master tropes as he specified 1941, to point out how a word or phrase is used to mean something different or more than its literal definition. Burke defined tropes as four main figures of speech: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony.<sup>8</sup> However, Burke's definition of tropes will not be an effective one to use for this thesis, as I am looking to analyse similar narrative situations to one another. Instead, I will therefore follow a second definition. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary divides the first definition of a narrative trope into two entries, the first referring to Burke's tropes, and the second to what this thesis will follow: "1a: A word

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<sup>8</sup> Burke 1941, p. 421.

or expression used in a figurative sense: figure of speech” and “2a: a common or overused theme or device: cliché.”<sup>9</sup>

Semiotics scholar Steven Allick cites the further definition by the Webster Dictionary as follows: “A trope is a common pattern, theme or motif in literature. A well understood and well used idea or concept also known as a cliché. [...] Literary tropes may refer to characters (e.g. the noble savage), plot (the clever prison break) or setting (the haunted castle).”<sup>10</sup> This definition more so points to a means of analysing specific scenarios and character types, bearing similarities to the theories used by influential folklorist Vladimir Propp, whose approach regarding the identification of story ‘functions’ can be seen as the base of later structuralist narrative analysis and as a precursor of tropes as used in the present research.

Gender theorist Marta Zarzycka defines tropes as ‘concepts [that] steer attention back to the construction of familiarity. [...] Tropes allude to broader discourses, norms and narratives [...] and could thus reveal taken-for-granted values, assumptions and perceptions of a given society.’<sup>11</sup>

Following these characterisations, we can focus on tropes as repeating story-elements in media and the discourses, norms and narratives surrounding it, and to compare different iterations and representations in different media with one another. If certain tropes occur in multiple media types and across different genres and stories, it does not only point to assumptions and values of society as Zarzycka mentions, but can also influence these assumptions by repeating or challenging them, as covered in Liu’s previously mentioned research.

As media studies expert Henry Jenkins suggested, many valuable ideas can be found in fan spaces where discussion about subject matter is hosted.<sup>12</sup> This would include critical non-academic articles such those on pop-culture websites *Vulture* or *Screenrant*, video essays published online, and other community content such as blog posts.

These critical observations of popular culture provide a useful framework for identifying tropes in the cases presented in this study, as they can be used to identify and compare similar situations to one another and are based on a database of popular culture.

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<sup>9</sup> Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “trope,” accessed 23 July, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trope>.

<sup>10</sup> Webster Dictionary, qtd. in: Allick 2012, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Zarzycka 2017, qtd. in Sandman 2021, 4.

<sup>12</sup> Brehob 2013, p. 20.



An extensive index of tropes has been established with open-source wiki TVTropes.org.<sup>13</sup> Multiple scholars have appealed for the use of this wiki as a foundation for academic research; Emily Brehob, for example, mentions that the communities behind the pages on TVTropes have adopted strict rule sets to keep the website consistent.<sup>14</sup> I would also argue that this index is particularly useful as it quotes an immense base of popular culture, on which it continues to build. Moreover, more recent academic authors have also adopted the concept by using the trope names as stated on TVTropes.

The tropes quoted in various academic research as well as on TVTropes can point towards specific trends in stereotyping within narratives. It is therefore useful to adopt these sources as an archive of tropes, that can function as a context for the analysis of tropes of women in video games. Now that the concept of tropes has been defined, I will turn to previous research on tropes and female characters in film and television.

General research on gender roles, conventions and stereotypes in media has been a subject of feminist studies for decades; Laura Mulvey's ground-breaking 1989 psychoanalytical research on how the male gaze influences cinema and how men look at women in film is an example,<sup>15</sup> as is Judith Butler's 1990 publication *Gender Trouble*.<sup>16</sup>

More recent research, specifically regarding narrative tropes, has been carried out by communications expert Nichole Bogarosh and machine learning engineer Dhruvil Gala et al., among others. Bogarosh examined women's roles in popular films between 2000 and 2011; she concluded that the presentation of women as inferior and dependent is still prevalent in film.<sup>17</sup>

In 2020, Gala et al. analysed gender bias in certain tropes in film and television, such as the Evil Genius-trope, the Hot Scientist-trope and the Damsel in Distress-trope, using tropes as established on TVTropes.org.<sup>18</sup> The authors found that, among implicitly gendered tropes, which are not necessarily bound to gender but are often used in corroboration with a specific gender, tropes containing the word 'genius' find higher use with male characters, while tropes containing the word 'sex' are often used for female characters. They conclude that "the bias captured by these topics [...] provides further evidence of the limited diversity in female

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<sup>13</sup> Börzsei 2012, p.3.

<sup>14</sup> Brehob 2013 p.39.

<sup>15</sup> Mulvey 1989.

<sup>16</sup> Butler 1990.

<sup>17</sup> Bogarosh 2013, p. 111.

<sup>18</sup> Gala et al. 2020.

roles.”<sup>19</sup> Although the research by Gala et al. mainly mentioned more superficial tropes, it puts in perspective how some tropes are explicitly gendered.

In a 2019 research, cultural research fellows Svenja Hohenstein and Katharina Thalmann remark that, although we can identify more complex female characters on television in recent years, the vast majority of them is still white, straight and able-bodied, leaving room for improvement with regards to minority groups.<sup>20</sup> This is also supported by women in film scholar Martha Lauzen, who mentions for example that in 2019, 68% of all female characters with speaking roles were white.<sup>21</sup>

The biased tropes can be found across action-adventure film and television releases in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and those affecting the narrative and characters will be used as a baseline for the analysis on gamic representation in this thesis. For the sections on television and film and the selection of tropes, I will use sources such as Svenja Hohenstein and Katharina Thalmann, Jeffrey Brown, Berit Åström, and Sarah Stang, among others.

I will now turn to previous research on tropes and female characters in video games.

Since video games are a relatively young medium which has steadily gained the interest of broader audiences, discourse around the medium and its content gradually built up throughout the past decades. From 2000 onwards, the academic sphere saw a gradual rise in research on video games as a medium.<sup>22</sup> Since then, multiple scholarly studies have been carried out with the goal of explicating the roles of women within video games. Most of these combine the narrative and visual elements of the story, discussing the way characters are shown in story as well as graphics.

Game theorist Jared Capener Hansen conducted research on gendered character tropes in video games in 2018, offering an in-depth look at the Damsel in Distress-trope, in which a female character is rendered helpless and needs to be saved by a male character in order to advance his plot. Hansen also takes a closer look at aspects such as female dependency and objectification, and ties this into the usage of tropes. He concludes that the use of stereotypes and the staging of violence against female characters can affect social judgments players make both within the game world and in the real world. Most of the research relied on players who self-reported on their experience while playing games. This did not indicate any harmful effects

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<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Hohenstein and Thalmann 2019, p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> Lauzen, 2019, p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Allick 2012, p. 11

of sexist stereotypes within the games.<sup>23</sup> Hansen states: “This does not mean that there are no negative effects to the Damsel in Distress-trope, but rather that they are subtler and nuanced.”<sup>24</sup> He concludes that the gameplay time was too short to acquire a comprehensive look at the gameplay, and that the participants might have answered in the most socially desirable way, therefore leading to less reliable results.

In discourse analysis presented through a series of video essays released 2013-2016, media critic Anita Sarkeesian similarly offers an overview of the different iterations of the Damsel in Distress and other harmful gendered tropes in video games, and discusses the different forms these can take.

In 2019’s “Out of the margins”, Rowan Lucas examines the historical representation of women in narrative video games and compares this to more recent titles such as *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) and *Horizon Zero Dawn*.<sup>25</sup> Lucas and Sarkeesian’s research includes the visual representation of characters (such as clothing and body shapes), while Hansen’s study focuses on narrative tropes that are presented in less visible ways. Lucas concludes that “exposure to games that keep within sexist tropes for both male and female characters can affect how individuals in the real world construct their socio-cultural frameworks and participate in cultural rhetoric and discourse,”<sup>26</sup> underlining how gender stereotypes can have significant impact.

Social communications researcher Maude Bonenfant and game scholar Gabrielle Trépanier-Jobin highlighted problematic tropes in video games in a 2017 research. Both statistical research as well as discourse analyses were used in their paper. The authors analysed a number of these tropes using pre-existing feminist theories to offer an explanation on why they can be harmful and detrimental to female representation and how they came to be.<sup>27</sup> They state for example that the Ms. Male character trope, which features a flat, genderbent copy of a male character such as Ms. Pac-Man or Smurfette, illustrate asymmetrical relationships between men and women.<sup>28</sup> The authors conclude that both older and newer feminist theories can be used to uncover patriarchal tropes, but also to analyse how innovative and progressive female characters have come about.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Hansen 2018, p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Hansen 2018, p. 43.

<sup>25</sup> Lucas 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Lucas 2019, p. 111.

<sup>27</sup> Bonenfant and Trépanier-Jobin 2017, p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 47.

Regarding tropes in games, analyses by Jared Capener Hansen, Rowan Lucas, Anita Sarkeesian and Adrienne Shaw will be leading, with additions from texts on general representation in games by Jennifer Malkowski, Edmund Y. Chang and Rebecca Jones among others.

Although evolving representation broadens the spectrum of potential stories to be told through the medium of video games, even the prospect of diversity has also sparked resistance among gaming communities. In order to fully understand any criticism and texts regarding representation in video games during the past decade, including sources used in this thesis, it is important to also mention the ‘GamerGate’ scandal.

Over the course of 2014, the hashtag #GamerGate started to circulate, primarily used by gamers who felt that the diversification of the video game sector (both in the working field and the games themselves) was negatively affecting the industry as well as the gaming community. The events of GamerGate are detailed by game researcher Cherie Todd, who describes various cases of harassment of women in the gaming industry.<sup>30</sup>

According to a 2022 survey among game designers led by communications scholars Jessica Tompkins and Nicole Martins, out of the sixteen participants who mentioned GamerGate’s effect, nine thought the campaign actually acted as a wake-up call and activated industry awareness and action.<sup>31</sup> However, seven participants responded that they perceived GamerGate as damaging or having minimal impact on diversity in the industry, some stating that they perceived AAA-executives to be “doubling down on catering to their core audience by sticking with formulaic tropes appealing to men.”<sup>32</sup>

Among the victims of GamerGate was the aforementioned Anita Sarkeesian, a media critic who hosted a Kickstarter project to create a web series about tropes and women in video games. Despite receiving threats, the crowdfunding goals were met and the series was eventually launched on Sarkeesian’s YouTube channel Feminist Frequency. During this series, Sarkeesian discusses various tropes and archetypes negatively impacting female characters in video games, such as the Damsel in Distress and the Sinister Seductress. She also highlights positive uses of tropes and cases in which negative tropes have been subverted or averted, as is

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<sup>30</sup> Todd 2015, pp. 64-67.

<sup>31</sup> Tompkins and Martins 2022, p. 409.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 410.

the case for *Beyond Good & Evil* (Ubisoft, 2003). Sarkeesian also refers to tropes as clichés and plot devices.<sup>33</sup>

Now that the most prevalent theories and additional information used in this research have been discussed, I will turn to the methodology of the thesis.

## 1.2 Methodology

The intention of this research is to indicate how gendered narrative tropes can be recognised or are subverted in popular video games in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in comparison to film and television releases of the same era. As seen in the previous subchapter, film and television as well as video games feature gendered tropes that can be harmful, such as the Damsel in Distress. Film and television have seen an uptick in complex female characters and heroines in the past years, and despite scandals such as GamerGate, various AAA-games feature female leads. In this research, I will first consider how tropes are employed in action-adventure film and television from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, after which I will compare this to research on tropes in video games.

To see which tropes from the same trope groups as in chapter two are employed and how they influence the narrative, I will then present a discourse analysis of three case studies: *Tomb Raider* (2013) *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *The Last of Us: Part II* (2020). This means that I will critically examine texts, including academic material, critical non-academic texts and examples from film and television. In doing so, I will be able to evaluate whether the same tropes common in film and television, as well as other video games, can be recognised in the case studies and how they are presented.

Below, I will first explain the criteria employed to select the tropes, and subsequently the criteria for the case studies.

The tropes mentioned in chapter two and three are based on common tropes found in research and literature regarding gendered tropes (such as the Final Girl and the Damsel in Distress), as well as common themes seen in action-adventure films in general (such as romance and three-dimensional characters). I have grouped together similar subjects so they can be discussed and compared to one another, eventually classifying the themes as follows: the Action Girl and the

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<sup>33</sup> Sarkeesian 2013a.

Final Girl; sexual assault; moral greyness and multidimensional characters; the Damsel in Distress and the Woman in the Refrigerator; problematic parental tropes; romance and sexuality.

I will mostly turn to the aforementioned pre-existing analyses of female protagonists in television and film in order to make up a status quo of the state of gendered native tropes within these media. I will then use this data to contextualise the gamic representations through tropes.

In order to select three games to analyse, I have narrowed down the scope of possible choices by applying the following selection criteria; commercially successful single-player AAA-games (i.e. blockbuster releases) published in 2010-2020 within action-adventure (sub)genres, and featuring playable female main characters. I will clarify these criteria below.

I will focus on AAA-releases because of their worldwide distribution and their status as ‘mainstream’ titles. AAA-studios have high budgets, but are less incentivised to taking risks.<sup>34</sup> We can therefore expect these bigger releases to employ less risky tropes that are more accepted in contemporary society.

While independent games are less subject to market risks and tend to employ more diverse characters and risky tropes, the AAA-market seems to be slowly shifting towards incorporating more inclusive gaming experiences as well. This moderately growing field of AAA-games with more diverse representation is very interesting, given their extensive reach.

Moreover, the higher fidelity in gameplay that big-budgets games offer can also influence the identification the player feels with regards to the character they play as.<sup>35</sup>

I have limited my study to games with a worldwide release between 2010 and 2020 that have sold at least 6 million units within the first year after being released. These so-called ‘hits’ are more likely to represent tropes that are more prevalent in society.

To further narrow down the scope of case studies, I will only explore single-player action-adventure games. This genre provides players with both story and gameplay-elements; it is a middle ground between lore-heavy games targeted at a smaller target audience, and casual games with little to no story or character depth.

In order to identify games with comparable narratives and tropes, I further limit my study to games with a central female player character that cannot be substituted with a male character by choice. The following games qualify for these criteria and will be used as the primary case studies during this research: *Tomb Raider* (2013) *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *The Last of*

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<sup>34</sup> Tompkins and Martins 2022, p. 410.

<sup>35</sup> Hansen 2018, p. 50.

*Us: Part II* (2020). Given the already limited number, I have purposefully not chosen to apply further selection criteria regarding tropes, to present a group of case studies as neutral as possible.

*Tomb Raider* marked the start of a prequel trilogy of the acclaimed franchise that started in 1996. Throughout the events of this game, heroine Lara Croft travels to a remote island in search of a lost kingdom and gains vital survival skills. The *Tomb Raider* games have in the past both been acclaimed and criticised for their portrayal of a female hero; as we will see, this instalment manages to subvert some of the earlier caveats while upholding others.

*Horizon Zero Dawn* was praised for its story, worldbuilding and graphic quality. In this post-apocalyptic world, people have been divided into tribes that all value different aspects. Motherhood plays a role in this game, and gender roles are explored in a subtle way, which makes it an excellent case study for feminist readings, though some of the tropes found in the game seem to oppose its progressive ideals.

In 2020, *The Last of Us: Part II* was both one of the biggest releases and one of the most polarising ones. It features a few returning characters from its predecessor, one of which is the deuteragonist of this second instalment. The heavily mixed reviews were partially due to the addition of a second playable female character. This even drew death threats from some audience members.<sup>36</sup> As explored in later chapters, the split storytelling helps facilitate the portrayal of multidimensional female characters.

Now that the games have been selected, I will first turn to tropes and women in film and television, after which I will analyse video games.

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<sup>36</sup> In an article for Independent, Amy Coles mentions that after the plot for *The Last of Us: Part II* was leaked online two months before its release, negative comments on the new character Abby, as well as her physique, submerged; Coles, Amy, "The rampant body-shaming of Abby in The Last of Us Part II shows gamers still can't accept a realistic female lead," Independent, 9 July 2020. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/last-us-2-abby-gaming-naughty-dog-a9609616.html>

## 2. Tropes and their usage regarding women in film, television and video games in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

In digital popular media with female main characters, we can often find similar tropes as discussed by Hansen and Bogarosh, among others. To draw a comparison between video games and other media, I will firstly focus on film and television in this chapter. I will identify some of the most prevalent tropes seen and discussed in female-centred narratives in film and television. These tropes have been explicated by previous researchers as being commonplace in action-adventure narratives with female characters, and are also identified by TVTropes.

In the following subchapters, I will further analyse how these biased tropes can be found across action-adventure film and television releases in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and briefly compare these findings with research on tropes in video games. I found some of the heavily gendered tropes to lessen in frequency throughout the years, but some of them appear to stay relevant.

### 2.1 The Action Girl and the Final Girl

By virtue of genre, the main character in an action and/or adventure story needs to be able to fight, run, climb and perform dangerous stunts. When this character is female, she can often be assigned the trope Action Girl. TVTropes specifies it as “a female badass who is tough and kicks butt. [...] She faces dangerous foes and deadly obstacles, and she *wins*.”<sup>37</sup> However, this trope name is not frequently used in academic research, which more often refers to similar terms such as the ‘Action Chick’ and ‘Tough Woman’ (throughout women’s studies expert Sherrie A. Inness’ 2004 text),<sup>38</sup> the ‘Superwoman- and Tough Girl-tropes’ (throughout the 2020 research paper of literature and film scholar David Sunil),<sup>39</sup> or ‘the action heroine’ by various sources including Yvonne Tasker, whose texts will be employed later in this chapter. The descriptions in these papers are not exactly the same as TVTropes’ definition, but I would argue them to be comparable; Inness’ characterisation of the Tough Woman reads: “Popular culture’s new tough women do not need men to rescue them from peril.”<sup>40</sup> This implies a similar idea to how the trope is described on TVTropes. Sunil defines the Tough Girl as “[not just having] the physical prowess that rivals the men in the narrative as well as the intelligence (emotional and

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<sup>37</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. “Action Girl,” accessed 12 March, 2022. [tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ActionGirl](https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ActionGirl).

<sup>38</sup> Inness 2004.

<sup>39</sup> Sunil 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Inness 2004, p. 7.



psychological)<sup>41</sup> after which he emphasises that the trope came to be as a deliberate subversion of the Damsel in Distress.

Since this present research focuses on the action-adventure genre, nearly every female main character discussed here would fit into this category. The trope can therefore be regarded as fairly neutral when considering action-adventure media with female protagonists, as they need to be able to respond appropriately to hostile environments. However, it is useful to see this trope as a base with which we can analyse related tropes in order to establish whether the Action Girl is often accompanied by other inherently negative or positive tropes.

Related to the Action Girl-trope, we can recognise another trope that can mostly be found within action-adventure subgenre survival horror: the Final Girl. The term Final Girl was first coined by Carol Clover in 1992.<sup>42</sup> In their 2000 publication *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, Justine Cassel and Henry Jenkins briefly mention how the trope arose in horror films of the 1980s and 1990s, showing how it was often used similarly, and always applied to narratives with female protagonists.<sup>43</sup> The authors conclude that tropes like these, exist ‘not to empower women but to allow men to experiment with the experience of disempowerment.’<sup>44</sup> At its core, the Final Girl is “last character left alive to confront the killer.”<sup>45</sup> In recent research, Kylie M. Fujii characterises a ‘new’ Final Girl lead, mentioning how the character development of the Final Girl since the turn of the century more often includes misogyny, gaslighting and/or sexual assault as a backstory leading to moral ambiguity regarding the following revenge she enacts upon her attacker.<sup>46</sup> She clarifies: “On the one hand, audiences feel happy for her [for taking revenge], but on the other hand, can audiences condone her actions [...]?” We will see that this motive in film indeed is not rare, especially in specific genres, in the following subchapter.

## 2.2 Sexual assault and related tropes

In various narratives with female protagonists, danger is particularly tied to sexual assault, varying in intensity; multiple academics as well as TVTropes connect specific tropes to this

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<sup>41</sup> Sunil 2020, p. 2264.

<sup>42</sup> Clover 1992.

<sup>43</sup> Cassel and Jenkins 2000, 30-31.

<sup>44</sup> Cassel and Jenkins 2000, 31.

<sup>45</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. “Final Girl,” accessed 25 April, 2022.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/FinalGirl>

<sup>46</sup> Fujii 2022, p. 12.

subject. Sometimes, the character is shown as Defiled Forever; as per TVTropes “the idea that extramarital sex, including sexual assault, morally corrupts and/or defiles one. [...] Also used as further justification of for why rape is ‘a special kind of evil.’”<sup>47</sup> With the Rape and Revenge trope, TVTropes states “the character, or someone close to [them], has been raped. And now it’s time to settle the score.”<sup>48</sup> The following actions (often revenge) are legitimised; the previous powerlessness is overcome. This, depending on who is settling the score, can tie this trope to the Action Girl-trope as well. The presence of specifically sexual violence in order to set up the Action Girl can be seen as problematic, especially since, as we will see, male protagonists within the same genre are rarely subjected to this trope.

Media scholars Yvonne Tasker and Lindsay Steenberg discuss these tropes with regards to fantasy action television series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), in which sexual violence is used multiple times as a way to reduce the power of the female characters by empowering the men.<sup>49</sup> It therefore could be seen as upholding the Defiled Forever trope.

In *Beyond Bombshells*, journalist Jeffrey Brown examines the same issue of sexual threat in action narratives, and compares this to the way in which male action heroes are shown to endure torture in popular media of the same genre.<sup>50</sup> Both Brown as well as Adrienne Shaw refer to the *Millennium* trilogy, which features a widely criticised and decidedly graphic rape scene, as a demonstration of the extensively used Rape and Revenge-trope. In this story, which was claimed to be “a vision of female empowerment” by the Independent, but “misogynist” by others (as quoted by The Guardian), the main character takes revenge on rapists and systemic misogyny.<sup>51</sup> Throughout his book, Brown refers to these narratives as rape-revenge stories, which is in line with how TVTropes addresses it. The trope of revenge itself “long predates cinema”<sup>52</sup> in multiple genres, but it is striking to see that particularly sexual violence is a trope seen with female characters. Shaw mentions that media with male adventurers or heroes also includes violence, but rarely that of sexual nature.<sup>53</sup> In Brown’s vision, the suffering or torture of male bodies is used to show the opposite of feminisation; their resilience and endurance is a solidification of masculinity.<sup>54</sup> This fits the other researchers’ conclusions, as male characters

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<sup>47</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. “Defiled Forever,” accessed 28 April, 2022.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DefiledForever>

<sup>48</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. “Rape and Revenge,” accessed 28 April, 2022.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/RapeAndRevenge>

<sup>49</sup> Tasker and Steenberg 2016, 174-175.

<sup>50</sup> Brown 2015, 24-53.

<sup>51</sup> Both reviews qtd. in Brown 2015, 25.

<sup>52</sup> Ma 2015, 49.

<sup>53</sup> Shaw, p. 63.

<sup>54</sup> Brown 2015, 26-28.

in action-adventure do face dire situations and even torture scenes, but the threat of sexual abuse is predominantly forced upon female characters.

We can conclude that specifically sexual violence is significantly higher for female characters. It is sometimes used as a drive for the female characters' actions (or those of characters close to them) and appears in different subgenres of action-adventure and thriller film and television releases. The harmful tropes that correspond with this theme can be recognised in various releases throughout the years.

### 2.3 Moral greyness and multidimensional characters

Discussion on the morality of characters can be found in Svenja Hohenstein and Katharina Thalmann's "Difficult Women".<sup>55</sup> Following their research, the 1990s and 2000s mostly showed 'difficult' or complex male characters, while the female characters were often more flat.<sup>56</sup> They conclude that the television shows of the 2010s form a pivotal moment for female representation in television history, as many series creators deliberately work against the status quo of tropes used against women on TV by creating more complex, interesting and morally grey female characters.<sup>57</sup> They state: "an increasing number of television shows in the 2010s have played with viewers' gendered expectations, adopted an unapologetic (intersectional) feminist political agenda, and handled female characters and themes in a nuanced, complex, and non-stereotypical manner,"<sup>58</sup> naming *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019) as one of the examples. They characterise the titular character's defiance of gendered expectations as follows: "[The show] has updated the superhero genre by creating a heroine who has PTSD, a penchant for whiskey, and a lack of entrepreneurial skill, but still runs her own detective agency and drives off the 'Big Bad' through her superhuman powers."<sup>59</sup> As an action-adventure protagonist, I would typify her as having Grey-and-Gray Morality,<sup>60</sup> since she is shown not to view the world and her actions as 'good' or 'bad'; this adds onto the complexity of the character. I must point out that the PTSD, which is an important plot point within the series, stems from sexual violence in the character's past, after which she seeks to settle the score. In relation to the previous

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<sup>55</sup> Hohenstein and Thalmann 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p. 115.

<sup>57</sup> Ibidem, p. 126-127.

<sup>58</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.

<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 111.

<sup>60</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. "Grey-and-Gray Morality," accessed 4 June, 2022.  
<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/GreyAndGrayMorality>

subchapter, we can thereupon recognise the narrative as both breaking various tropes as well as following a particularly harmful one.

Tasker and Steenberg mention that *Game of Thrones* features a diverse group of women from different standings who all use violence.<sup>61</sup> In opposition to the use of the sexual abuse scenes which take away agency from the characters, the authors also claim that, in comparison to other quality television series, the women in *Game of Thrones* are less traditionally sexualised and the focus of the characters is less reliant on their silent manipulation but rather their strengths as warriors; they exemplify this with characters such as Arya, Brienne and Ygritte.<sup>62</sup> In this series, these Action Girls “are not contained by their fantasy world, but rather can be seen as disturbing commentaries on the conventional characterisation of women in fantasy and the limits of such representations.”<sup>63</sup> Indeed, the series offers a diverse group of women, some of whom are politically engaged or active in battle themselves, and most of whom are shown having their own opinions, agency and moral compass.

From these various case studies, combined with the research by Lauzen and Gala et al., we can conclude that the general rise of female protagonists in film and television has also brought more subversions of audience’s expectations by showing women as complex characters with agency. However, we can still recognise harmful tropes, particularly regarding sexual assault as described in the previous subchapter.

## **2.4 The Damsel in Distress and the Woman in the Refrigerator**

According to women’s studies scholar Carol Stabile’s 2009 research, many action heroes in comics, and later in film and television, were created in response to international crises during the second half of the previous century, and they continue to fill Hollywood action blockbusters with militarised forms of sexism and narratives of protection up to the time of research.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, communications academic Nichole Bogarosh suggests that “this prioritisation of active masculine heroes and the emphasis on passive female victims serves to ‘other’ women as the weaker sex.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, these narratives within action-adventure films are

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<sup>61</sup> Tasker and Steenberg 2016, p. 171.

<sup>62</sup> Ibidem, p. 174.

<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, p. 174.

<sup>64</sup> Stabile 2009, qtd. in Bogarosh 2013, p. 43.

<sup>65</sup> Bogarosh 2013, p. 43.

still prevalent in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as also addressed by Hendryanto and Kurniawan, who explore victimisation in *Snow White and the Huntsman* (2012).<sup>66</sup>

When the lead character is male, he must often save a Damsel in Distress; “a female character [who] is put in immediate danger in order to put the cast in motion.”<sup>67</sup> This damsel might also already have died at the start of the movie, which would then still serve as a means to put the plot in motion by virtue of revenge; in that case, she is the Woman in the Refrigerator as per TVTropes.<sup>68</sup> Either saving or avenging this character both poses women as commodities to further the plot of the male hero, which can be seen as a presentation of similar ideas prevalent in society; it takes away agency of a character and renders them helpless or submissive.

While, as can be seen in the previous examples and established analyses, these tropes in which authoritative male characters lead the narrative for the female character(s), I would like to raise a few examples of films from the past years that have subverted this trope or even evaded it in its entirety; in *Captain Marvel* (2019) the titular superhero establishes herself while pointing out that her intrusive male mentor-turned-antagonist has only held her back from her true potential. This could simultaneously be perceived as an aversion of the Damsel in Distress-trope, seeing as she saves herself multiple times, and as a subversion of the important male mentor, which will be further discussed in the following subchapter. When the male mentor asks the heroine to prove herself to him, Captain Marvel simply responds: “I have nothing to prove to you,” which, according to media and communication scholar Neal Curtis, further cements this subversion.<sup>69</sup> Captain Marvel’s previous mentor was a woman by the name of Mar-Vell, who is quoted as being her inspiration and is even her namesake. With this context, we can also state that the male mentor trope is also gender inverted; the male mentor is shown to have bad intentions and thus loses this role, while the protagonist, when shaken out of the amnesia imbued by the antagonist, realises her mentor was a woman from her past all along.

Another example of the subversion of women as victims can be seen in superhero film *Birds of Prey* (2020), in which the trope is conversed in the opening sequence, as main character Harley Quinn mentions that she previously spent too much time seeking approval from abusive men. This film does seem to include a Damsel in Distress at first, although the girl is not saved by a man but instead by the group of female protagonists including Quinn herself, and she plays

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<sup>66</sup> Hendryanto and Kurniawan 2020, p. 3.

<sup>67</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. “Damsel in Distress,” accessed 15 December, 2021.  
<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DamselInDistress>

<sup>68</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. “Stuffed into the Fridge,” accessed 15 December, 2021.  
<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/StuffedIntoTheFridge>

<sup>69</sup> Curtis 2020, p. 936.

a part in her own escape. We could say that the trope has been subverted in this case, as saving the character does not function to further a male hero's plot. Although the film is partially based on the fact that the lead women seek revenge on men who wronged them, comparable to the Revenge tropes analysed in chapter 2.2, they are also shown to choose paths of their own volition. As Ryan Michael Monk mentions in "Pretty / Violent": "If Harley Quinn can choose her own narrative, then so can the women in the audience."<sup>70</sup>

The Damsel in Distress-trope is less frequent in film and television with female protagonists, as the trope requires a male protagonist to profit off the damseled character. As the number of female protagonists rises, this weakens the Damsel-trope. In recent films, we can even recognise very deliberate subversions (and sometimes defiance) of the trope. However, as we will see in the following subchapter, rehashings of the same trope has been developing in the same time period instead.

## 2.5 Problematic parental tropes

Multiple scholarly texts refer to the parental characters in film and TV narratives. Deceased mothers are a theme often seen across various genres of film and television, according to literature and gender scholar Berit Åström, and their deaths sometimes form the start of the adventure, as is the case with for example *Supernatural* (2005-2020) and *Dexter* (2006-2013), and many Disney movies.<sup>71</sup> This point is further analysed by media communications expert Rebecca Feasey in a 2017 research. She concludes that "teen television thrives on the 'missing mother' trope, science fiction and fantasy [on] the absent mother,"<sup>72</sup> also stating that since the emergence of quality teen drama, the trope of the missing, unavailable or unwanted mother has even become more commonplace.<sup>73</sup> Åström states that the death of the mother is also regularly used as a plot device to strengthen the bond between father and child while the mother's death is 'easily dismissed', for example in *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010).<sup>74</sup> Mothers are being shown as less important than fathers. She adds the following: "[the father's] absence is usually not as easily dismissed as a mother's. Instead, it structures the whole narrative [...]."<sup>75</sup> As also

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<sup>70</sup> Monk 2021, p. 60.

<sup>71</sup> Åström 2015, p. 595-596.

<sup>72</sup> Feasey 2017, p. 233.

<sup>73</sup> Ibidem, p. 226.

<sup>74</sup> Åström 2015, p. 596.

<sup>75</sup> Ibidem.

stated by media studies specialist Melissa Ames in a 2014 research, the portrayed father figures often drive the main characters' choices and motivations; In drama-adventure series *Lost* (2004-2010), the father figures are either deceased, missing, abusive or estranged.<sup>76</sup> In this series they are not only absent, as Feasey mentioned for the mothers, but they strongly influence the characters' stories.<sup>77</sup> This apparent priority of the father at the expense of the mother is not confined to drama series such as *Lost* and children's adventure movies such as *How to Train Your Dragon*; as pointed out by feminism historian Kara Kvaran, the relationship of the protagonist and their parental figure is ever-present in superhero action-adventure films.<sup>78</sup> She claims the reliance on male role models has even become more dominant in comparison to female role models which has brought about a gendered status quo for mentor figures or the inspiration behind a hero's actions:

Analysing comics-based superhero films elucidates the role of the father figure from a gendered perspective. The near complete reliance on male role models and the removal or obfuscation of their female counterparts has created a film genre which doubly reinforces the idea that only male characters are inspirational or to be emulated.<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, as for example seen with recent outings of superhero films by Marvel, the father figure is undeniably tied to many heroes' origin stories. In the recently released series *Hawkeye* (2021), for instance, archer Kate Bishop is trained by semi-retired superhero Clint Barton. During an accident in which Clint saved Kate, her father died. The events led to the bond between Kate and her mother worsening, and Kate idolising Clint's heroism. This example reflects Kvaran's claim - the dominance of the father figure reinforces the negative view of women.

Åström already mentioned Disney characters, and a more elaborate point regarding recent change in these films is made by media culturist Cassandra Stover. While early Disney movies often revolve around a (substitute) mother, "[...] postmodern Disney updated the mature authority figures to male adults as a source of approval and justification for the heroine's aspirations, in fact reducing her agency and independence. Valerie Walkerdine notes that throughout popular culture, the "Daddy's girl" presentation of childish innocence is "more

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<sup>76</sup> Ames 2014, p. 433.

<sup>77</sup> Ames 2014, p. 436-437.

<sup>78</sup> Kvaran 2017, p. 219.

<sup>79</sup> Ibidem.

alluring” to the viewer, “corruptible” and “vulnerable.”<sup>80</sup> It seems that previously, women were much more important, but they were also often shed in a negative light; the stereotype of the evil step-mother comes to mind.

As in even more Disney films since then can be seen, the heroine must either prove herself worthy to her father, or worthy of his inheritance. To illustrate this, I would like to raise a recent action-adventure Disney release; in *Raya and the Last Dragon* (2021), the single father of the titular heroine is turned to stone after saving her. One of the main character’s most significant goals is to reverse the petrification. Although this storyline could also be read as an inversion of the Damsel in Distress-trope – since she is the hero who must save the helpless male character – it could conjointly be identified as yet another narrative in which the heroine must prove herself worthy to the authoritative father, following this recent trend found in more Disney movies.

It becomes clear from the discussed academic literature that the tropes surrounding authoritative parents, and specifically fathers, are ever-present, perhaps more so than before for Disney films as per Stover’s research. The discussed research suggests that the pressure from fatherly figures encourages viewers to see the main characters as more innocent, while it simultaneously underscores the importance of fathers as well as their power. This can also be said of the superhero genre, in which mothers are often presented as less essential to the plot while paternal figures are – whether alive or post-mortem – typically the inspiration behind the superhero’s goal, morality and/or identity. These tropes concerning parental guidance can bring across the ideas that mothers are less suited to be mentors than fathers, and that father-child bonding is more important than mother-child bonding. It also seems that the emphasis on father figures forms a more recent trend, perhaps because of the rise of action heroines and the lingering stereotype that action-adventure skills are found more in men.

Regarding on-screen relationships, not only parental relationships but also romantic ones often shape the characters and arcs. Below, I will explore this category.

## **2.6 Romance and sexuality-related tropes**

Whether romantic or platonic relationships are important parts of any story. However, when considering female main characters in action-adventure, it is notable that neither academics,

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<sup>80</sup> Stover 2013, p. 5.



nor the TVTropes genre page for action-adventure, mention specific romance tropes, aside from the trope Always Save the Girl, in which the hero “values the life of their I've interest over absolutely everything else.”<sup>81</sup> This trope is implied to be gender neutral, as indicated by the neutral pronouns used in the explanation. It is often used for male characters and their female love interests, as also exemplified in chapter 2.4, but can also be used for female characters and their love interests.

Because of the scarcity of discussion on romance tropes for female protagonists within the genre, I will evaluate a few previously mentioned sources in order to possibly extract stereotypes or tropes.

Ryan Monk mentions that “[Love scenes] are rare in superhero films,”<sup>82</sup> indicating that this subgenre of action-adventure generally steers away from showing any explicit sex scenes. His case studies are markedly diverse in their romantic (sub)plots; in the aforementioned *Birds of Prey*, one of the plot points includes the main character leaving her abusive ex behind; *Wonder Woman* (2017) features a surprisingly sincere relationship between the main character and a pilot she meets, and in *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) we meet Furiosa, an independent woman whose romantic or sexual interests are never mentioned and whose interest lies in dethroning a malevolent patriarch she used to fight for.

When considering Monk’s case studies, it seems the main Action Girls in recent films do not follow any pre-set tropes. Indeed, if we compare it with aforementioned titles such as *Captain Marvel* and *Raya and the Last Dragon* (no romance but instead a focus on platonic relationships) and TV series such as *Game of Thrones* (an array of different relationship types), it appears the romantic subplots – or lack thereof – showcase that this genre does not rely on romantic tropes in film and television releases with female main characters. From these examples, we can even state that the absence of romantic subplots is quite commonplace in recent releases. This latter observation might be the case because there are no Damsels to be saved and ‘kept’ as a prize, which is often the case for Damsel-type tropes. Instead, the female characters are shown as independent Action Girls.

Despite the seemingly diverse romantic subplots in action-adventure, there is a notorious trope that harkens back to the start of the film industry concerning queer female characters in film

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<sup>81</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. “Action-adventure Tropes,” accessed 8 May, 2022. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ActionAdventureTropes>

<sup>82</sup> Monk 2021, p. 28.

and television: Bury Your Gays. This trope is applicable to queer characters who die without a clear reason, often on-screen, just after declaring their love for someone or after spending the night for the first time. It can be recognised in many media portrayals of LGBTQ+ characters, especially women in horror and survival (sub)genres.<sup>83</sup>

Starting from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, authors and filmmakers followed this trope in order not to come “under fire for breaking laws and social mandates against the “endorsement” of homosexuality.”<sup>84</sup> This means that the scarce representation that was present, generally ended negatively and that happy queer characters were particularly uncommon. Even though the controversial Hays Code that governed this self-censorship was overturned in 1968, similar codes were instantiated by media executives and broadcasters. According to media theorist Kelsey Cameron, specifically television was seen as a risky place to show diversity because of its purpose as family entertainment.<sup>85</sup> She mentions that “the narrative coupling of sexual non-normativity and premature, unhappy endings is [...] part of the foundational habits of TV-making.”<sup>86</sup> This could explain both the fact that the Bury Your Gays-trope happens more often in television than in film, as well as the fact that it is still around today.

After online outrage following the death of lesbian character Lexa on the drama-adventure show *The 100* (2014-2020), queer popular media outlet *Autostraddle* released an infographic showing the scope of the Bury Your Gays-trope in television across multiple genres from 1976-2016.<sup>87</sup> Out of the 11% of television shows featuring queer women, 84% did not feature a happy ending for these characters. In 68 out of 193 shows with queer female characters, at least one of them died, while in these same shows, only 12 showed the death of a male character of equal narrative importance. This demonstrates the disproportionality of the Bury Your Gays-trope.

From these sources and examples, we can conclude that the various protagonists are not necessarily subjected to one or two main tropes, but instead we see variety in the romance plots presented. In fact, multiple heroines did not have any on-screen romance at all. Different

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<sup>83</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. “Bury Your Gays,” accessed 18 July, 2022. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BuryYourGays>

<sup>84</sup> Hulan 2017, p. 17.

<sup>85</sup> Cameron 2018, p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> Cameron 2018, p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> Hogan, Heather, 2016. Autostraddle's Ultimate Infographic Guide to Dead Lesbian Characters on TV,” Autostraddle, 25 March 2016. <https://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddles-ultimate-infographic-guide-to-dead-lesbian-tv-characters-332920/>

sources also indicate that the harmful Bury Your Gays-trope is ever-present in the digital media landscape.

Now that the most frequent and relevant categories of tropes have been explored in film and television, I will compare these findings to research on gamic tropes from 2000-2020.

## **2.7 A comparison of film and television from the 21<sup>st</sup> century with video games of the same era**

We can recognise similar gendered tropes in video games as in film and TV. Below, I will give a brief overview of research considering the specific trope groups as examined in the previous subchapters, in order to compare how women are represented and whether the difference in media also brings about a difference in tropes.

A 2018 study by Jared Capener Hansen indicates that in video games, more so than other media, the Damsel in Distress-trope can be recognised within the story set-up.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, this claim does correspond to the data found on television and film; while the trope is decidedly found in those media, especially with regards to adventure films, it can be recognised more often and is more integral to the narrative within games. Anita Sarkeesian's research supports this claim; she mentions that "even though Nintendo [as the most well-known example] did not invent the Damsel in Distress, the popularity of their save-the-princess-formula essentially sets the standard for the [gaming] industry."<sup>89</sup> In video games, the hero, as a projection of the player, can essentially save the damsel, whereas in film this is a passive process. This active narrative might be a reason for the high frequency of this trope in games.

In his research, Hansen quotes an analysis by behavioural scientist Shankar Vedantam which points out that "women are encouraged to be altruistic, to be compassionate, and to avoid standing up for themselves; this meekness accepts oppression because assertiveness is not a feminine trait."<sup>90</sup> This falls in line with the subordination of female characters as mentioned by Bogarosh, reducing them to objects or placing them 'in the fridge'. A woman who can frequently be found 'in the refrigerator' is the mother; as pointed out by Åström, the maternal character is notably often either already deceased, sick or otherwise absent, and when alive and healthy, is not presented favourably. This preference for fathers over mothers also the case for

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<sup>88</sup> Hansen 2018, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Sarkeesian 2013a, 11:54.

<sup>90</sup> Vedantam, qtd. in Hansen 2018, p. 10.

video games. Media theorist Sarah Stang discusses these paternal storylines in her 2017 research.<sup>91</sup> She states this ‘dadification’ of video game narratives in which the paternal character protects a daughter-figure can be seen as a rehashing of the Damsel in Distress-trope as “[they still follow] the familiar video game narrative structure in which the player is invited to identify with a male who uses violence to [...] save the victimised female.”<sup>92</sup>

She concludes three out of her four case studies (*BioShock 2*, *BioShock Infinite* and *The Last of Us*) present a display of fatherhood that relies heavily on violence, redemption and/or the father finding a surrogate for his lost daughter. However, when the daughter is the protagonist, the death of the father or paternal figure is often the start of the adventure in film and television, but the number of games that feature this storyline (e.g. *Silent Hill 3* (Team Silent, 2003) as well as *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012)) seems much lower in comparison, especially for earlier games. This might be caused by lower numbers of female protagonists overall.

As gender studies scholar Edmund Chang mentions in his 2017 essay, some video games offer their players decisions, although these are never totally free; they have been pre-scripted by the developers.<sup>93</sup> Although these choices also cover the usage of objects, accepting or declining quests and expanding one’s power, perhaps the most notable type of choices concerns romance. A game can have different types of set-ups concerning these choices; in for example BioWare franchises such as *Mass Effect* (BioWare, 2007-) and *Dragon Age* (BioWare, 2009-), romanceable characters have an approval rating the players must reach before inciting any romantic actions. The characters in these games have their own sexualities and preferences, and therefore more agency as they cannot be romanced by every character type. Their rating, however, is visible to the player and can be interpreted as a list of tasks to finish in order to be awarded with romance options. According to gaming journalist Carolyn Petit, this can lead to players only seeing these NPCs as a means to an end, with all interaction between the player and the NPC relying on the expectation of a romantic reward at the end.<sup>94</sup> She notes, then, that this ‘transactional model’ for relationships is how some men view women. The use of romance in such manners can perpetuate the idea that our interactions with others are merely a way to secure our expectations of them, which makes it a problematic trope that objectivises all parties

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<sup>91</sup> Stang 2017.

<sup>92</sup> Stang 2017, p. 163-164.

<sup>93</sup> Chang 2017, p. 238.

<sup>94</sup> Petit 2019, 0:40.

and generalises them as being interested so long as we adhere to their wishes. YouTube user Games As Literature proposes that the use of a more invisible system which ensures that players make their decisions based on enjoyment rather than numbers could be a more natural and less problematic way of presenting romance within video games.<sup>95</sup>

In video games with a linear story and romantic (sub)plots, the player is not presented with any choice at all. Petit iterates that in these game types, the main protagonist is most often heterosexual, whether confirmed or implied.<sup>96</sup>

Many of these examples would imply that we can predominantly recognise negative tropes in these titles, and that there are no positive outliers. However, as comprehensively clarified by Anita Sarkeesian, an example of an action-adventure game that stands out in subverting and averting stereotypes is *Beyond Good and Evil* (Ubisoft, 2003); it provides us with a positive portrayal of (adoptive) motherhood in the playable main character Jade, who is shown to fight for righteousness.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, the character is never sexualised and, although she does have a male mentor figure, they save each other multiple times and are shown to work together instead of in a strict hierarchy.

Now that the most prevalent tropes have been divided into categories and compared for film and television as well as video games, I will turn to three case studies to deepen the analysis.

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<sup>95</sup> Games As Literature 2015.

<sup>96</sup> Petit 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Sarkeesian 2015.

### 3. Discourse analysis of three case studies

In order to analyse how the aforementioned trope groups are adopted, challenged or subverted in more recent games, I will compare three case studies: *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), *The Last of Us: Part II* (2020) and *Tomb Raider* (2013). These games all fall within the action-adventure genre, but are fundamentally different in terms of story, gameplay and character building. *Horizon Zero Dawn* could be classified as a light RPG since the player is offered choice in dialogue and optional side-quests but the main story-elements remain unchanged and there is no character creation process. *The Last of Us: Part II* features a set narrative with less open world areas than *Horizon*. The player cycles through two different characters throughout the game, which allows for the story to be told from two distinctive points of view. In *Tomb Raider*, there is one player character and the gameplay is predominantly linear. All three games feature set protagonist(s), with no option to change them.<sup>98</sup>

The three games will firstly be introduced, given a short overview of the story and characters, and analysed individually to highlight story-specific tropes and other distinct elements. Subsequently, I will dedicate separate subchapters to the trope groups from the previous chapter to analyse how they function in each of the case studies. After this, a comparison to the film, TV and game releases discussed previously will be drawn in order to draw a conclusion on how the tropes build on, or subvert existing tropes.

I found that some tropes are to an extent subverted, while other tropes are present in every single case study, and seem difficult to overcome.

#### 3.1 An overview of the three case studies

##### **Horizon Zero Dawn and the Deliberate Values Dissonance-trope**

*“I would have wanted her to be... curious. And wilful, unstoppable even... but with enough compassion to heal the world, just a little bit.”*

- Elisabet Sobeck, the project leader for Zero Dawn, regarding the hopes she had for her future clone Aloy.

*(Horizon Zero Dawn, Guerrilla Games, 2017)*

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<sup>98</sup> Bar customisation options regarding gear and skill upgrades.

*Horizon Zero Dawn* seems to offer a productive view on gender as it shows different types of gender politics and various levels of engagement the individual tribes harbour regarding these politics. Below, I will discuss the Deliberate Values Dissonance-trope, in which different societies are presented as neutral as possible, regardless of whether the author would consider reasonable.<sup>99</sup> I will explore how the trope can be recognised in the game lore and story and plays into these politics, while the game itself simultaneously moves beyond the basic structure of the trope.

In 2017, *Horizon Zero Dawn* was released for PlayStation 4. A PC port was released in 2020. The game is as a light RPG, as it offers players an open world, dialogue trees and optional side quests, meaning it is not entirely linear. It would therefore provide more options for emergent gameplay, depending on how much the player interacts with artefacts and sidequests found throughout the world. Its story takes place in a post-apocalyptic world, in which war machines are getting ever more dangerous. In the story, a young woman named Aloy is shown to be cast out of the maternally-based Nora-tribe for being motherless. Instead of being raised by the tribe, she is taken in by another outcast, Rost, who teaches her to hunt and survive. Initially, Aloy is determined to re-enter the tribe by ways of winning a ritual competition. Though she succeeds, the group is attacked during the competition and Rost, who had followed Aloy, falls victim to the attack. After this encounter, Aloy travels through an area resembling modern-day Colorado and Utah (which has been mostly reclaimed by nature), to end the war machine threat and find Rost's killers.

Throughout the story, Aloy gradually discovers more about her past and about her 'mother' Elisabet, who lived about 1000 years prior, and who was involved in Project Zero Dawn. When it became clear all life on planet Earth would be destroyed in a cataclysmic event, this project was founded to restart life hundreds of years after it would be exterminated by the looming force of sentient war machines. In order to do so, multiple AI with different tasks were generated, and a vast amount of plant seeds and human DNA was stored in facilities operated by these programmes. GAIA, the AI leader of Zero Dawn, created Aloy using Elisabet's genetic blueprint. Although neither are Aloy's mother in the classical sense, both GAIA and Elisabet could be seen as her mother figure, as Elisabet provided the genetics and GAIA created Aloy and offers her guidance throughout the story.

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<sup>99</sup> TVTropes.org, s.v. "Deliberate Values Dissonance," accessed 5 March, 2022. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DeliberateValuesDissonance>

In a 2020 article about the game, literary theorist and queer studies scholar Dalila Forni argues that “*Horizon Zero Dawn* reconsider[s] gender structures and offer[s] new possibilities for the gamer.”<sup>100</sup> Indeed, we can for example recognise a matriarchal society in the Nora tribe which is led by the High Matriarchs. Their goddess, called All-Mother, is also female.<sup>101</sup> The tribe values women higher than men “for their physical and intellectual flexibility, [which] makes her better suited to be a leader.”<sup>102</sup> Other tribes in the game are built on a patriarchal hierarchy varying in fixedness. Some function as monarchies or confederacies while others are shamanistic nomads. As mentioned by Forni, this allows the player to become acquainted with different types of societies.<sup>103</sup>

Although the societies themselves are built in different ways, we can identify multiple characters of various genders performing tasks and occupations both with and without traditional western gender-based boundaries and gender-coded professions. For example, Petra Forgewoman invents and builds weapons, and the female character Ersa is introduced as the captain of the Vanguard. Both professions would be seen as more fit for men in traditional metropolitan views. After Ersa’s death, her brother Erend takes up the position, indicating that this rank is not restricted by gender identity. All three characters are from the Oseram tribe, which is based in their blacksmithing abilities. One of Aloy’s male friends from the Nora tribe, Teb, chooses to become a stitcher instead of a fighter, which in the previously mentioned traditional western views would be a female-coded profession. Across the tribes, female and male healers, merchants and mercenaries can be found. It is therefore interesting to also see some groups are excluding genders from certain professions, which is true for the Carja Sundom’s Sun Priests and the Sun King’s Honour Guard. At one point, Aloy wrongly assumes the gender of one of these soldiers, who in return explains: “No woman can wear Carja armour. When I was young, I chose to become a soldier.”<sup>104</sup> Thus, the two notable bookends of patriarchy versus matriarchy would be the Carja and the Nora respectively, with other tribes being notably less reliant on these values. Indeed, all tribes in *Horizon* are shown as multi-faceted societies, but none of them provide an ideal image of what society could or should be, which allows the players to form their own opinion of the different societies. With this tribe-based worldbuilding in which no tribe is ‘better’ than others, the world of *HZD* falls into the

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<sup>100</sup> Forni 2020, p. 85.

<sup>101</sup> Davies 2017, p. 28.

<sup>102</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>103</sup> Forni 2020, p. 91.

<sup>104</sup> As seen in Crosszeria 2018.

It should be noted that the “Carja armour” mentioned in this quote is most likely only applicable to the Honour Guard, as Aloy can later obtain and wear multiple special sets of Carja armour herself.



Deliberate Values Dissonance trope, described by TVTropes as the ‘accurate’ portrayal of a society, regardless of whether the author or audience consider the societal values presented as sensible.<sup>105</sup>

The existence of multiple gender rules and types of tribes being presented in this way strengthens Forni’s point about the restructuring of gender in the game, as the communities seen throughout *Horizon Zero Dawn* allow for a broad scope of boundaries and rule sets. It therefore presents a more complete extent of possibilities, and highlights the confines of all these types of societies.

In an essay about *Horizon Zero Dawn* and the Gaia theory, Lauren Woolbright argues that Aloy is an intersectionally feminist character.<sup>106</sup> Woolbright mentions this is because within the narrative, features other than Aloy’s gender are more important and more frequently brought up; NPCs do comment on her tribe, social status as an outcast and her actions within the narrative. The author claims that: “Gender is far less at issue in these future societies than it is in our own, unfortunately.”<sup>107</sup>

In comparison to film and TV, where different types of societies are also explored, we can see that in games such as *HZD*, a player can take their own time to familiarise themselves with the communities and how they function, giving a very complete iteration of Deliberate Values Dissonance that would not be possible in non-ludic media.

The fact that Aloy is a woman is just part of her identity, and not what the story nor the NPCs concentrate on. Combat in most tribes is not a gendered activity or profession, so Aloy stands out more by her reputation as a skilled fighter than by the fact that she, as a woman, is a fighter at all.

### **The Last of Us: Part II’s split storytelling**

*“I’m just a girl, not a threat.”*

*“Oh Ellie, I think they should be terrified of you.”*

- Ellie and Dina.

(*The Last of Us: Part II*, Naughty Dog, 2020)

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<sup>105</sup> <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/DeliberateValuesDissonance>

<sup>106</sup> Woolbright 2018.

<sup>107</sup> Ibidem.

*The Last of Us: Part II* features a narrative that is divided over two main characters: Ellie and Abby. While initially they directly oppose one another, they also share a few traits and beliefs, and even some of the tropological stepping stones for both characters are more alike than they seem to be at first. Below, I will discuss how the subgenre survival horror and the split narrative impact the way we can read character-related tropes, and how Ellie and Abby are presented as their own three-dimensional characters even though their stories are undeniably entangled.

The first entry in the *TLoU* franchise, released in 2013, is a mix of action-adventure and survival horror. It takes place in a post-apocalyptic setting, in which a deadly virus has turned most of the world's population into zombie-like creatures. Joel, a smuggler, and Ellie, a fourteen-year-old girl who appears immune to the virus, traverse the United States. Their end goal is a faction called the Fireflies, who are attempting to develop a vaccine. When the two characters eventually reach their destination and Ellie offers her help in the vaccine development, Joel finds out the doctors cannot produce the cure without killing Ellie in the process. He intervenes and saves Ellie from death, thereby taking away the chance at a cure for others.

The second instalment in the franchise picks up the story four years later. Ellie and Joel have settled down, but are not on good terms with one another at that moment. During a patrol route, Joel and his brother rescue a stranger called Abby, and bring her back to her outpost. There, it becomes clear Abby and her companions have ambushed them; Abby seeks revenge against Joel, as one of the surgeons he killed during the events of the previous game was her father. Joel's murder is witnessed by Ellie, who subsequently goes on a quest for revenge on Abby. Below, I will give an overview of the general gendered tropes we can recognise in *TLoU2*, and how they connect to the two main characters and the genre.

Computer programmer Joseph Gonzales argues *The Last of Us* subverts aspects generally found in survival horror video games by placing the focus on the narrative through story-elements, dialogue and character development.<sup>108</sup> Gonzales mentions this includes challenging the definitions of femininity and masculinity within the game characters. In *The Last of Us: Part II*, this can be recognised in Abby and Owen's relationship, which qualifies for the trope Masculine Girl, Feminine Boy. On multiple occasions, Abby is prepared to resolve issues with violence, while Owen is reluctant to do so. Additionally, Abby is physically quite capable and strong, contrasting Owen's slender build. By presenting a cast of distinctly different

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<sup>108</sup> Gonzales 2018, p. 80.

types of characters, the game brings diversity into the story and simultaneously challenges tropes of femininity and masculinity. This can also be seen in the construction of the narrative.

One of the central game mechanics of the second instalment is its fragmented narrative, brought about in two ways. Firstly, it means the player follows Ellie, one of the deuteragonists of the first game, and Abby, a new character. Both characters are eventually on a quest for revenge against one another. I argue they function as each other's narrative foil, highlighting differences between them, their backstory and their goals. The Narrative Foil is a trope often used for either enemies or reluctant partners. In this case it also coincides with the trope *And Now For Someone Completely Different* as the player is suddenly in charge of the character Abby during various sequences of the game.

In research conducted in 2020, Rosana Ruas Machado Gomes concludes that the experience of playing as the antagonist can help the player identify with and understand the character's struggles, while also raising feelings of complicity with the violence shown on-screen.<sup>109</sup> It should be noted that the player has no choice in what happens, since the story is linear and none of the main quests can be omitted. This means that, despite the predominantly embedded narrative, several moments within the narrative place the player in a situation where they have to they need to execute people or animals, after which they are shown the repercussions of their actions, which places them in the middle of the action and story. Indeed, this adds to the feeling of understanding trauma and blame. Since cutscenes and gameplay elements such as quick-time-events are added in between and the characters' emotions are clearly shown in these, the player is able to take more time to process the events as well.

The second way in which the narrative is presented as fragmented, is through flashbacks.<sup>110</sup> Gomes discusses various instances of Ellie having flashbacks, which are being used as a narrative technique in order to reveal more information to the player, and later also to display signs of PTSD in Ellie's behaviour.<sup>111</sup> I would argue that these scenes add depth to Ellie's story and help the player understand what she is going through. Additionally, this helps strengthen the Narrative Foil to highlight how Ellie and Abby relate to one another story-wise.

As a comparison with the media discussed in the previous chapter, it is striking to see that neither character's trauma or their violent reactions stem from sexual violence, so (gendered) tropes such as the Rape and Revenge trope are not present. I will discuss this more thoroughly in chapter 3.2.

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<sup>109</sup> Gomes 2020, p. 167.

<sup>110</sup> Gomes 2020, p. 177.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 177-179.

*TLoU2* favours three-dimensional characters and values their differences as well as making the player understand their motives, just like the filmic media from the 2010s started to show more often, as discussed by Hohenstein and Thalmann. However, gameplay elements such as forced quick-time-events add a layer of understanding and participation not possible in film.

### **Tomb Raider as an origin story with a more three-dimensional Lara Croft**

*“C'mon, she's just one little girl!”*

*“Yeah? Well that "one little girl" is kicking our ass!”*

*(Tomb Raider, Crystal Dynamics, 2013)*

The *Tomb Raider* franchise has been analysed by media critics and scholars since its inception in 1996. The choice to develop a video game with a female action heroine was deliberately made to make the game stand out more in a field in which women were often used as helpless side characters subjected to harmful tropes.<sup>112</sup> *Tomb Raider* was developed by Crystal Dynamics and released in 2013, as the first instalment of a reboot prequel trilogy. With this trilogy, the developers intended to show Lara as a more relatable and vulnerable character, instead of the untouchable adventurer she is presented as in previous games.<sup>113</sup> The reboot was constructed to tell her origin story.<sup>114</sup> Whereas the efforts to make Lara a more three-dimensional character did pay off, it does seem the game's narrative did not avoid gendered tropes altogether.

At the start of the game, a cutscene is shown in which Lara is aboard *The Endurance*, a ship in search of the legendary and mysterious island of Yamatai, in order to find archaeological treasures and uncover more of the island's history. The ship is caught up in a

storm and Lara awakens on an unknown beach, which later appears to be Yamatai. Throughout the game, Lara struggles to regroup with all other passengers washed ashore, and simultaneously finds out more about the island and its inhabitants. Its lost civilisation is not

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<sup>112</sup> Shaw 2014, p. 58.

<sup>113</sup> McAllister, Gill, 2011. “Tomb Raider Interview: Karl Stewart,” *Gamereactor*, 6 July 2011. <https://www.gamereactor.eu/tomb-raider-interview-karl-stewart/>

<sup>114</sup> Makuch, Eddie. “Next Tomb Raider to be origin story,” *Gamespot*, 22 December 2010. <https://www.gamespot.com/articles/next-tomb-raider-to-be-origin-story/1100-6284861/>

intact anymore, but the remaining population has formed an exclusively male cult devoted to the goddess Himiko.

When Lara's friend Sam is captured by the cult with the intents of performing a deadly ritual, Lara confronts them and destroys Himiko's remains in order to save Sam. Along with two other survivors, Sam and Lara leave the island at the end of the game. The deadly ritual of a specific character and initiated by cult members is reminiscent of the Damsel in Distress-trope, as it turns Sam into a helpless side character. I will revisit the presence of this trope in more detail when discussing this Damsel-trope in all case studies.

### **3.2 Comparing the Action Girl, the Final Girl and sexual assault in the three games**

As we saw in the previous chapter, the Action Girl is a trope seen in many action-adventure narratives. In survival horror, we can also frequently recognise the Final Girl-trope. In this subchapter, I will revisit these tropes to see whether they can be identified in the case studies and how this influences the narrative. Previously, I separately addressed tropes recurring around the theme of sexual assault. Because they appeared to form the origin story of the Action Girl occasionally, I have also included this section in the following subchapter.

All four protagonists from the three case studies can be considered action girls; throughout the games' narratives, the player can fight (often using multiple weapon types), parkour and use stealth to their advantage. However, the games also show that these 'action girls' are far from invulnerable; *Tomb Raider* and *The Last of Us: Part II* both feature scenes or gameplay parts integral to the plot in which the player character is injured. In *Tomb Raider*, for example, Lara is partially impaled at the start of the game. In the following sequence, it is harder for the player to control her, and the wound stays visible for the remainder of the game. Even in the sequel *Rise of the Tomb Raider*, it looks like this injury is still present. We see a comparable scene in *The Last of Us: Part II*: the game features a cutscene in which Ellie comes home injured, and her girlfriend Dina helps her clean the wounds.<sup>115</sup> Following Gomes' previously mentioned analysis of the game in which identification was central, this gives the player more room for retrospection in the events that happened prior to this moment. However, it does not seem that the tropes often accompanying these situations are gender-specific. For example, the Injured Player Character Stage like we see for Lara Croft is also present in releases

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<sup>115</sup> Boss Fighter 2020.

such as *God of War II* (SCE Studios Santa Monica, 2007) and *Batman: Arkham City* (Rocksteady Studios, 2011), which both feature male player characters.<sup>116</sup>

### **Sexual assault: the start of the Action Girl?**

Regarding the justification of violence against an oncoming enemy, we saw that this often goes hand in hand with sexual assault in film and television when the main character is female. It seems the case studies feature connected tropes but lean into these types of assault with less frequency and intensity.

In *Tomb Raider*, a scene widely criticised by both players and scholars happens early on in the game; shortly after washing ashore Yamatai Island, but after regaining contact with her crew, Lara and her companions are taken captive by a group of cultists. One of them, in Russian, implies that he wants to rape Lara.<sup>117</sup> A quick-time event follows; if the player succeeds, Lara steals his gun and shoots him. When the player fails, however, the cultist strangles her instead of abusing her as he mentioned.<sup>118</sup> Since the remark is made in Russian and the subtitles only indicate the language spoken and not what is being said, only players who speak Russian will be able to understand the weight of this intimidation. However, Adrienne Shaw mentions that the threat of sexual violence is still present and Lara's strength is "being framed in relation to a victimisation narrative."<sup>119</sup> Media history researcher Rebecca Jones further comments on this: "The problem with these threats is that they too often serve as a means of building or establishing women as strong individuals by having them defeat, kill or escape their (would be) rapists."

Indeed, as seen in the connected tropes such as Rape and Revenge, this type of background can be recognised more often in female-centred narratives, and it a hardship specifically demeaning women. In *Tomb Raider*, the scene is also used to establish Lara as an action heroine, as it is her first kill.<sup>120</sup> Immediately after this moment, a cutscene is initiated in which we see Lara breaking down over this turning point. However, during a later conversation with the captain of the ship, Roth, she proclaims she was mostly scared by how "easy it was" to kill someone.<sup>121</sup> Over the course of the game, it is seemingly easier for Lara to kill enemies,

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<sup>116</sup> TVTropes.org. "Injured Player Character Stage," accessed 2 July, 2022.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/InjuredPlayerCharacterStage>

<sup>117</sup> Virtual Gaming Library – VGL 2019, 43:25.

<sup>118</sup> Jones 2019, p. 35.

<sup>119</sup> Shaw 2014, p. 61.

<sup>120</sup> Jones, 2019, p. 39.

<sup>121</sup> Virtual Gaming Library – VGL 2019.

which fully establishes her as an Action Girl. It gives her some key traits to being a Final Girl as well, although Rebecca Jones observes how Lara, as well as Ellie from the *Last of Us* franchise, subvert the Final Girl trope so often seen in survival horror film: “they save their friends – albeit not all of them - rather than being too helpless or incapable of doing so and they do not put on ‘manhood’ in order to be capable survivors or saviours.”<sup>122</sup> Indeed, we can see how their characters are formed by the events that transpire in both games respectively, but all characters involved are shown to be making their own choices.

When analysing sexual violence in *The Last of Us: Part II*, we can see a one-time threat connected to sexual violence, during a flashback cutscene close to the end.<sup>123</sup> During this situation, we can recognise intimidation not necessarily with the intention to act upon it in a sexually violent manner, but with regards to Ellie and Dina’s sexuality; they are being threatened for being two women in a relationship with one another. Although Ellie is shown to be inclined to react, Dina prevents this, following which Joel does intervene by calling out the assailant. Afterwards, Ellie angrily tells him they did not need his help, with which the game emphasises her capability and willingness to take care of herself and others.

*Horizon Zero Dawn* does not feature any sexual violence.<sup>124</sup>

Although some small instances of sexual or sexuality-based violence occur in two out of three case studies, and in the case of *Tomb Raider* this sexual violence is the justification of the main character’s following violence, none of these instances are the sole injustice these women must overcome. The trope of sexual violence as a justification for a more elaborate revenge plot is not found in these cases.

In comparison to the releases discussed in the previous chapter, it seems like tropes such as Rape and Revenge might be less ubiquitous in video games. However, the sexuality-based violence still poses a threat to some of the characters in these case studies, and in some cases marks the start of their ‘development’ as characters, as we also saw in the previous examples in film and TV.

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<sup>122</sup> Jones, 2019, 39.

<sup>123</sup> Ellie 2020.

<sup>124</sup> As specified on *Doesthedogdie*, a website on which content warnings are listed. Doesthedogdie.com. “Horizon Zero Dawn,” accessed 12 August, 2022. <https://www.doesthedogdie.com/media/15858>

### 3.3 Comparing moral greyness and multidimensional characters in the three games

As discussed previously, the use of morally grey characters can make them feel more three-dimensional and more interesting to the viewer or player. Whereas previously mostly men were shown this way in television and film, as mentioned by Hohenstein and Thalmann, the 2010s saw more complex female characters in these types of media. In this subchapter I will explore the extent of moral greyness in the case studies, to show how the storytelling across the three games highlights the characters' developments and indeed helps establish them as three-dimensional individuals.

In *TLoU2*, both Ellie and Abby are seen to approach situations and people in a violent manner over the course of the game, albeit in differing ways; Ellie's character is more predisposed to use stealth to her advantage, while Abby is often seen to prefer a direct approach. This can be seen as one of the aspects of the Narrative Foil trope discussed in chapter 3.1, as it highlights the differences between the two opposing characters. The trope Grey-and-Grey-Morality is also applicable to both characters, as when the player gets to know the characters and their respective allies better, they will see more depth to both Ellie and Abby. Whereas Ellie appeared mostly 'good' and sometimes even cheerful and innocuous during the events of the first game, the events following the four-year time jump and during *Part II* have clearly impacted her judgment and morality. This can lead the player to questioning good versus bad; when the story starts, the players are already acquainted with Ellie and are inclined to see her as a good person. As Abby's introduction is immediately followed by the brutal murder of Joel, they might be predisposed to recognise her as the antagonist. However, upon experiencing more of both characters' stories, neither of them can be designated as 'good' or 'bad' necessarily. The moral greyness of these two main characters follows Hohenstein and Thalmann's research; neither Abby nor Ellie is eventually shown as morally sound, which makes them complex and rounded characters. This is also in accordance with Gomes' aforementioned findings; players are more likely to identify with and understand Abby's struggles after playing through her part of the story.

The differences between them are also reflected through the gameplay, as shown in a video by YouTube channel Gamer Forecast.<sup>125</sup> For example, Abby's fear of heights makes her

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<sup>125</sup> Gamology Forecast 2020.



character react to the player's actions in other ways than Ellie would; when looking down from a plateau or ledge, the game utilises edge blurring and the character's breathing starts to sound more laboured, which clearly indicates Abby's feelings during those moments. This results not only in contrasting story elements, but also characteristic use of gameplay elements, which further emphasises their differences. By showing two female lead characters that are very different from one another, the various tropes here actually diversify the cast of characters. Morally standing opposite one another and as such strengthening this contrast makes Ellie and Abby Narrative Foils. These differences are even more striking because the stories are told through alternating chapters, influencing the way the characters and stories are interpreted.

In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, as previously discussed, a cast of considerably diverse female characters can be found. Main character Aloy is presented as the unmistakable hero capable of saving the world. However, she is also shown to be stern when making a point she is passionate about, especially in situations regarding the Nora tribe she hails from. She was always treated as an outsider, even after the events following her triumph at the ritual Proving event. Despite this history, Aloy is lauded as the chosen one and a hero when it later becomes clear she can open the gateway into the mountain deemed sacred by the Nora. Aloy states that she is not interested in their admiration as they had never been interested in her.<sup>126</sup> She is assertive, which can be recognised in this scene. Nevertheless, her interest in saving the world is very much present and fuels her quest, along with the search for more information about her lineage. Aloy is shown as compassionate and altruistic, but does not accept oppression. This makes her a synthesis of how Hansen and Vedantam described the characteristic portrayal of female and male characters.<sup>127</sup> In a 2017 interview, former head of Guerrilla Studios Hermen Hulst discusses Aloy's character. He says:

We never considered not having [Aloy] be a female character. Frankly, we didn't really set out for her to be a 'strong' female lead. Aloy gets beaten sometimes. She's fierce and strong in the sense that she'll fight back, but she'll find her match sometimes. We wanted her to be human, [so] sometimes weak as well. [We are] embracing this complexity. [...] Her gender only partially defines her – the fact that she's an outcast is just as important.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Shiro2809 2017.

<sup>127</sup> Hansen 2018, p.10.

<sup>128</sup> PlayStation 2017a.

Having Aloy be described as a character whose gender is not a fully defining trait, epitomises her as three-dimensional. The story events, which sometimes maintain and sometimes subvert gendered tropes regarding moral greyness further support this; Aloy makes choices and is shown to stand by them, but also expresses her doubts or distrust when necessary.

I would argue this can also be said of *The Last of Us: Part II*. The diversity of the female characters across these games also helps to question certain standard tropes by showing so many contrasting personalities and traits. Additionally, it matches the previously explored theories on film and television, as the female characters' layered personalities enrich the story.

In *Tomb Raider*, the group of people stranded on the island is fairly diverse in skill, gender and appearance. Their lies solely in surviving, with a "whatever it takes" mentality, so that is what the characters and the narrative focus on. As such, it does not really address the gender of the characters.

All three games, like the research in the previous chapter indicated, feature complex women, fitting within the timeframe they were released in.

### **3.3 Comparing the Damsel in Distress and the Woman in the Refrigerator in the three games**

The Damsel in Distress-trope has a long history within video game culture. Of course, when examining games with female protagonists, this trope cannot always be found; a requirement for the 'damseling' of a character is her inactivity and inability to act by herself, and needing a male character to save her. This puts her in a state of helplessness and commodifies her, and when used often, can reinforce the prejudice that women are by nature defenceless beings in need of saving.<sup>129</sup> When a female protagonist saves this damseled character however, one could state the two requirements cancel each other out, since one of the conditions of the damsel-trope is that she is saved by a male character. In *Tomb Raider*, Lara's friend Sam has been subjected to a version of the Damsel in Distress-trope: she is held in captivity for a considerable part of the game until Lara saves her at the end. This could be compared to the previously described scene from *Birds of Prey* in which a group of heroines saves a girl, and as such would likewise not fully qualify for the Damsel in Distress-trope. It might even be seen as a subversion of the trope, as it shows female characters helping one another instead of portraying a woman as helpless and in need of a male character's saviour.

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<sup>129</sup> Lucas 2019, pp. 55-56.

Although this plot point takes away agency from Sam, Lara saving her does prevent the usage of another trope; that of female (self-)sacrifice. As discussed by Meghan Adams in a 2017 research, it eventually lacks the female sacrifice in question because Sam is saved. This means that the trope is subverted in the end, since the set-up is there but it is never fully realised.

Regarding trope extensions of the Damsel-trope, we can recognise an instance of Stuffed in the Fridge for Abby in *TLoU2*: her ex-boyfriend is killed by Ellie during the game. When Abby finds him, however, her thirst for revenge is fuelled more than before.

In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, there are no notable instances of Damsel-type tropes.

Generally, because the Damsel in Distress is a gendered trope, we cannot find any instances of this trope within the three case studies. However, a type of subversion can be found in *Tomb Raider*, and we can also identify an inversion of the connected trope Woman in the Refrigerator in *The Last of Us: Part II*. This is similar to the way in which we saw this trope group in film and television, which might mainly be because of the central action role these women take.

### **3.4 Comparing problematic parental tropes in the three games**

As seen in chapter 2.5 and 2.7, some specific and harmful tropes regarding parental characters can be recognised in film and television as well as video games, such as the violent or absent father, the unwanted mother or both parents being deceased.

Many game releases feature a playable father-figure whose mission is to protect his child, which according to Sarah Stang can be compared to the Damsel in Distress-trope.<sup>130</sup> As concluded in chapter two, father figures are often shown as more important than mother figures in media, and in videogames this often means that the (female) character's relationship to her father forms her personality and story. It is noteworthy that all three case studies discussed in this research feature a storyline around a father-figure, yet only one also dedicates a narrative line to a maternal figure. In this subchapter, I will explore how the parental figures in the three case studies form the narrative, eventually showing how the titles are more alike than they seem to be regarding this aspect.

Rost from *Horizon Zero Dawn* is the person who took Aloy in as a young child, and he perishes in an explosion shortly after the start of the game, fuelling Aloy's quest for revenge as well as for truth. *The Last of Us: Part II*'s Joel, the surrogate father of orphaned teenager Ellie,

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<sup>130</sup> Stang 2017, pp. 163-164.

is killed in an act of revenge, after which Ellie is inclined to take revenge herself. Both games feature a rendition of the You Killed My Father-trope, in which a main character goes on a quest for revenge after their father's death. This gives both stories their main driving point initially.

*Tomb Raider* features no notable narrative threads connected to Lara's biological father, though his disappearance is shortly mentioned in cutscenes.<sup>131</sup> However, contrasting *TLoU2* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, they are not quoted as being the provision of the quest or the reasoning behind Lara's choices as a character. In the sequel games *Rise of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics, 2015) and *Shadow of the Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics and Eidos Montreal, 2018), however, the death of Lara's parents, and most notably her father, do become an important aspect of the plot. In the 2013 game, we can nonetheless recognise a paternal figure in the character Roth, who serves as Lara's mentor. He is the captain of the expedition to Yamatai. Over the course of the game, he suffers multiple considerable injuries. Eventually, during a fight with one of the cultists' leaders, Roth shields Lara from mortal danger after which he passes away.

In all three games, the father figure doubles as a mentor, and in both *HZD* and *TLoU2*, he is killed early on in the narrative. Joel, the father figure in *TLoU2*, was the main playable character in the first game of the franchise, while both Roth and Rost only appear as NPCs. Joel very much fits the father's role Stang identifies as a rehashing of the Damsel in Distress-trope in the first game, while suffering the fate of the Mentor Occupational Hazard-trope in the second. Mentor-type characters often die when their preliminary task has been completed. The trope is characterised by TVTropes as follows: "A hero's mentor dies, often to further the development of the hero or make the villain appear more despicable and imposing."<sup>132</sup>

Additionally, Lawlor's point on the heavy similarities between the dadification of video games and the Damsel in Distress-trope is also of importance here; paternal redemption is the goal, and regardless of the player's opinion of Joel's deeds, he is presented as trying to do the right thing. While their bond grows, the character of Joel as well as the violence around them clearly impact Ellie and she grows more sombre throughout the first game; Stang states the

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<sup>131</sup> Although only small references to Lara Croft's father are made within the video game *Tomb Raider*, it is striking to see that this aspect has provided a more substantial role for its 2018 film adaptation: the film version sees Lara travel in search of her father, who disappeared on a journey to Yamatai.

<sup>132</sup> TVTropes.org s.v. "Mentor Occupational Hazard," accessed 2 February, 2022.  
<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MentorOccupationalHazard>

following: “[...] the redemption of the father is clearly framed as more important than the psychological health of the daughter.”<sup>133</sup>

However, this cannot be said for the second game in the franchise, in which the emphasis on Ellie’s story is vital to the player’s understanding of her character. In *Part II*, Ellie is also shown as being critical of Joel’s choices, which both gives Ellie agency and makes the player question Joel’s morality.

The gameplay and story setup of the two games aids this transition: in the first game, players take on the role of Joel, while playing as Ellie for short amounts of time. The latter option is only the case when Joel is incapacitated. In *Part II*, however, the roles are reversed and the player controls Ellie. It is made clear to the player that Joel and Ellie are not on good terms at that moment, but it is hinted at that both parties still long for the type of relationship they used to have before. Soon after the story commences however, Joel is killed. In a video titled “Understanding Ellie – A Character Study”, YouTube user The Armchair Critic says the following about this pivotal moment in the narrative:

[...] at the beginning of the game [...] Ellie got a taste of what it would feel like to be reunited with Joel at what may be considered the beginning of the story. [...] The player feels robbed and deprived. Ellie feels robbed and deprived. What we are looking forward to, however, isn’t to mend our relationship with Joel, but to experience his role in a story, meaning that we don’t feel any of these emotions through Ellie, but rather more directly.<sup>134</sup>

Indeed, because the players were shown false later-game gameplay footage with Joel present in a trailer for the game, this moment was unexpected not only to characters such as Ellie, but also to players themselves.<sup>135</sup> Although the story then fully turns to Ellie, it never quite loses the importance of this father figure to her, keeping his character present throughout the story despite his early demise.

Ellie’s instant quest for revenge sets the narrative up for a You Killed My Father trope, in which the hero’s father is killed and they have to be the person to take revenge on the antagonist. Oftentimes, this also involves the antagonist taunting the protagonist, which does

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<sup>133</sup> Stang 2017, p. 170.

<sup>134</sup> Armchair Critic 2020, 1:46.

<sup>135</sup> A story trailer for *The Last of Us: Part II* released shortly before the launch of the game features a mid-game scene of Joel and Ellie speaking to one another, indicating that Joel is still alive for most of or the entirety of the story.

happen in *TLoU2*.<sup>136</sup> If the story is assumed to be seen from the player as The Armchair Critic describes it, this means the trope is being placed upon the player as well, making it a more emotional encounter.

In the end, *The Last of us: Part II* seems to subvert the You Killed My Father trope, as this requires the hero to kill the villain and Ellie decides to spare Abby during the concluding battle at the end of the game.

This does not mean the game is free of the trope in question, however, as Abby killing Joel was an act of revenge on her part. One of the surgeons Joel executed to save Ellie in the first game is revealed to be Abby's father. By depriving Ellie of her paternal figure, Abby puts her in a similar position, while also retaining a cycle of revenge. It thus shows the two characters handling comparable situations differently in the end, with one case playing into the trope and the other subverting it during the final moments of the conclusion.

In *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, Rost is shown as a caring and altruistic individual. In her research, Dalila Forni sets him apart as a "positive exception to reconsider male stereotypes and the paternal role."<sup>137</sup> Indeed, when compared to the games analysed by Sarah Stang, the relationship between Rost and Aloy is less dependent on violence. Early on in the narrative, Rost shares a similar fate to that of Joel; he is killed in order to set up the main quest for the game. This early death also shares the trope Mentor Occupational Hazard. With this, the story partially defies stereotypes we have seen before, such as the violent father, but also follows an often seen arrangement that starts off the story.

In comparison, Lara's mentor Roth in *Tomb Raider* only perishes later in the game, so the player learns skills and abilities from him throughout the story. This contrasts Aloy and Ellie's respectable mentors' deaths, as those happen at the start of the games and are mostly used to set the story in motion.

While the You Killed My Father-trope is crucial to setting the plot in motion for two out of the three case studies, it is not always the dominant trope in the story itself. Whereas *The Last of Us: Part II* stays quite consistent in its goal throughout the game, *Horizon's* protagonist Aloy encounters other pressing problems that require more immediate attention, so her revenge on Rost's killers is not always her top priority within the game narrative. However, the story does keep a focus on Aloy's drive to discover more about her lineage as this is central to both her

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<sup>136</sup> TVTropes.org s.v. "You Killed My Father," accessed 15 February, 2022.

<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/YouKilledMyFather>

<sup>137</sup> Forni 2019, p. 96.

own identity as well as the key to eventually saving the world. An important distinction here is that these revelations are connected to her maternal lineage, which makes *Horizon* a subversion of the emphasis on the paternal lineage. This means that, although Rost's death initially paves the way for the story to begin, the body and conclusion of the story partially shift the focus to Elisabet, Gaia and Project Zero Dawn. In comparison to the different examples discussed in chapter two, this can be seen as both an inversion of the father being important and the mother unwanted, as well as a subversion of the latter situation. Players are only focused on Rost at first, and start to get more invested in Elisabet's story as the narrative progresses.

In *The Last of Us: Part II* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the death of the father figure and mentor is employed to justify their respective revenge quests and set the story in motion. In comparison, the death of the mentor is utilised differently in *Tomb Raider*; Roth is present for a considerable part of the game's narrative, after which he sacrifices himself to save Lara. However, all three games (and all four protagonists) do experience the loss of a paternal figure, through which the problematic narratives of both the absent mother and single father, as well as the death of a loved one at the start of an adventure are sustained. The death of the parental figure is, in correspondence with the previously discussed findings of Åström and Kvaran, often the start of the adventure. In comparison to the videogame narratives of releases in the early 2000s, it does seem that the tropes discussed in this part have grown more prevalent, which could point to a harmful trend of 'fridging' the parental figure(s), with the loss of the father being more emphasised.

### **3.5 Comparing romance and sexuality-related tropes in the three games**

In the three case studies, multiple types and tropes connected to relationships can be identified. In this subchapter, I will explore to what extent the dominant tropes in this field are repeated or subverted. With regards to these three case studies, it seems that all of them take a different approach to this aspect of the story.

*Tomb Raider* does not feature any on-screen romantic relationships between characters, nor are there any references made to previous relationships with regards to main character Lara. Though it is not explicitly worked out within the game, there has been speculation about a relationship between Lara and Sam. As mentioned by Meghan Adams, Sam is "a female

romantic object the hero player-character must save repeatedly from peril.”<sup>138</sup> This would make a (future) relationship between the two characters even more plausible, though none of the other two games in the prequel trilogy feature a noteworthy appearance of Sam. Next to Sam, one of the other survivors on the island is seemingly romantically interested in Lara; Alex’ attempts of impressing Lara do not go unnoticed, and are even brought up in conversation – the feelings are not reciprocated by Lara. Over the course of the game, Lara goes on a Roaring Rampage of Rescue for Sam as well as for Alex, although the latter rescue mission goes awry and Alex does not survive the ordeal.

In comparison, *The Last of Us: Part II* has a different approach to romance. Similar to *Tomb Raider*, the story is linear, meaning the player has no choice in what events transpire, but in this game both player characters have romantic interests. *TLoU2* features a central love story between main character Ellie and newly introduced side character Dina, and one between Abby and her boyfriend Owen.

In the DLC add-on *Left Behind* from the first game, Ellie is established as a queer character when she shows romantic interest in another girl. Later, Naughty Dog’s executive producer confirmed Ellie is a lesbian.<sup>139</sup> Subsequently, in *The Last of Us: Part II*, the relationship between her and Dina is fundamental to the game narrative as character development and multiple pivotal moments in the story are connected to it. As Erwin Vogelaar observes in an article about the game, the relationship between the two women makes some of the game’s scenes more tangible and helps to accentuate Ellie’s grief and trauma.<sup>140</sup> The game establishes this bond through personal displays of intimacy and affection rather than explicit sex scenes.

As mentioned before, the end of the game uses the trope Love Cannot Overcome, as Ellie leaves their idyllic life to pursue revenge. Soon thereafter, as she chooses not to kill Abby, she returns home empty-handed to find Dina has left as well. Though the love story does not necessarily end positively for them, it does subvert the trope Bury Your Gays.<sup>141</sup> *The Last of Us: Part II* therefore qualifies for the trope Preserve Your Gays instead, at least with respect to Ellie and Dina, seeing as both characters have been in life-threatening situations but have

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<sup>138</sup> Adams 2017, 113.

<sup>139</sup> Birchmore and Kettrey 2021, 2.

<sup>140</sup> Vogelaar, Erwin, 2020. “Voorspel: The Last of Us: Part 2 is op z’n best als de kleren uitgaan.” Gamer.nl, 21 June 2020. <https://gamer.nl/artikelen/achtergrond/voorspel-the-last-of-us-part-2-is-op-zn-best-als-de-kleren-uitgaan/>

<sup>141</sup> Although *The Last of Us: Part II* ‘preserves’ its queer characters, the same cannot be said of previously mentioned DLC to the first game in the franchise; Riley, the character who made Ellie realise her sexuality, falls prey to an attack of infected, just after the two kiss. This follows the Bury Your Gays-trope quite closely.



survived. Parallel to the instance of Love Cannot Overcome as seen with Ellie and Dina, is a similar situation with Owen and Abby. The trope is thus not gender-based in this game.

In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, no romantic relationships are established. Main character Aloy fits into the trope All Love is Unrequited,<sup>142</sup> as multiple characters express their interest in her over the duration of the game, but she cannot engage with them in this way. In a conversation with Sun King Avad in which he approaches Aloy with romantic intent, the player has no choice but to refuse his offer.<sup>143</sup>

Speaking on the matter, former head of Guerrilla Games Hermen Hulst says: “Aloy is very driven. [...] She really was not going to waste any her time in this game.”<sup>144</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, romantic reaction options are often present in conversations within the RPG-genre. It is therefore interesting that *Horizon*, as a game that does offer choices within conversations, does not offer any options regarding this aspect, focusing on the machines (Aloy’s priority) and platonic relationships instead. It is possible Aloy is asexual, aromantic or both, or, as mentioned by Hulst, simply driven to achieve her goals.

In all three case studies, different variations on romantic relationships can be found, ranging from none (*Horizon Zero Dawn*) to possibly implied (*Tomb Raider*) and established (*The Last of Us: Part II*). However, the female protagonists in these three games are all established as independent characters, none of whom are particularly dependent on other characters. While stereotypes hinged on dependency and their connected tropes are often especially present in secondary characters, this is mostly not the case for these games either. Secondary characters such as Dina in *TLoU2* and in *Horizon Zero Dawn* are shown to have agency by making their own choices. However, Sam and Alex are more reliant on their relationship with Lara and their survival depends partially on her actions, thus placing them in a more passive position. Even though the games all include gendered tropes regarding the subjects romance and sexuality, we can conclude that they vary considerably in how these tropes influence the story and the relationships within these games.

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<sup>142</sup> TVTropes.org s.v. “All Love is Unrequited,” accessed on 26 November 2021.  
<https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/AllLovesUnrequited>

<sup>143</sup> SneakySquidGames 2017. All possible dialogue options are shown in this video, none of them being positive reactions to Avad’s proposal.

<sup>144</sup> PlayStation 2017b, 29:30.

### 3.6 Chapter conclusion

From the analysis of the three more recent AAA action-adventure games, we can conclude that some tropes are difficult to overcome. We can see this for example with the tropes regarding parents, which is in line with previous research by Åstrom, among others. In all three games, a parental figure dies, and in two of these cases it happens at the start of the story. Despite its partial focus on a deceased male mentor, *Horizon Zero Dawn* subverts this expectation by including two important mother figures both crucial to Aloy's identity as well as her responsibilities within the story. This adds a layer of storytelling to the game that is less frequently seen in non-ludic media, and that is only reached through hours-long gameplay. Generally, this imbalance seen across the case studies can be perceived as harmful to both mothers and fathers because the fathers are valued over mothers, but both are shown as expendable.

In a more positive trope group, that of moral greyness and three-dimensionality, we can also recognise correspondence; all three games' protagonists are similarly shown to have agency, and they are clearly shown to be experiencing different emotions based on the events transpiring within the narratives. They generally respond with violence, which is not surprising considering the genre, but are shown to approach situations differently, which highlights their agency and diversity. This is especially apparent in *The Last of Us: Part II*, where the direct opposition of two player characters is a central determinant in both story as well as gameplay.

An example of a trope group prevalent in previous research such as by Hansen and Sarkeesian, but not found in the case studies is the Damsel in Distress and, by extension, the Woman in the Refrigerator. This evasion is mostly because the stories feature female heroes, but even considering this, if the main characters would have been men, only *Tomb Raider* would qualify for this trope. We can consider all games a major step forward regarding the trope of making women seem helpless. *Tomb Raider* is also the only game to include the trope of sexual threat, even though this is conditionally based on the language(s) the player understands.

Generally, we can regard all three games as examples of feminist video games, but while they do subvert some of the more popular tropes seen in film and TV to some extent, they do not avoid all their pitfalls.

## 4. Conclusion

This research aimed to identify, compare and contextualise the various tropes used for female characters in video games, and to see whether their employment in these narratives is consistent with that in television and film. Based on previous research, and on the analysis of three action-adventure games released in the past decade (*Horizon Zero Dawn*, *The Last of Us: Part III*, *Tomb Raider*) it can be concluded that most movements regarding female representation seen in film and television can also be found in video games, in line with Hall's remarks on filmic influence in games. However, it becomes apparent that some tropes are more prevalent in film and television, while others are more common in video games, highlighted by games' unique storytelling method (Isbister) as well as specific rule sets bound to certain media forms (Cameron).

Tropes such as Rape and Revenge can be recognised more in film and TV, while in the case studies and other discussed games this trope could only be found in a brief scene in *Tomb Raider*. This difference could be due to the way the player or viewer empathises with the main characters of ludic versus non-ludic media: the player embodies the character more in video games, making anything happen to the character feel more personal, as mentioned by Isbister, whereas filmic presentations could more easily be made to feel voyeuristic. The Rape and Revenge-trope often distances the victimised character from the viewer while making allowance for her following actions. This, combined with the fact that the sexual assault makes the character a passive factor instead of an active one, could be a reason that it happens less frequently in video games.

Vice versa, tropes regarding gameplay, which were for example employed to strengthen the split storytelling in *The Last of Us: Part II* and used to make the player understand the characters more like Gomes and Gonzales iterated, are a category of tropes specific to video games because of their interactive nature, and we see less of these in film and television.

In contrast, tropes such as the Mentor Occupational Hazard are widespread in all types of media discussed within this research. It is striking that in all of these media, (the death of) a paternal figure is the inspiration behind a character's actions; fathers are more frequently seen as mentors than mothers, especially regarding survival skills. We can gather from this that male and female parents are still not shown as equals, despite the uptick in the number and complexity of female characters (Feasey, Kvaran). Out of the case studies, only *Horizon Zero Dawn* devotes time and story to mother figures.

A distinctive category is that of romance and sexuality; neither film and television nor video games seemed to include any prevalent tropes regarding these themes, despite games' unique approaches to romance (Petit). Even *HZD*, with its RPG-elements, does not feature the option to romance other characters, which we did see in other RPGs discussed in chapter two. *TLoU2* has two fixed romantic subplots. The Bury Your Gays-trope, which is unfortunately common in television as shown by Hulan and Cameron, was not found in the case studies and was also not discussed in the supporting research in chapter 2.7.

This variety in romantic plots could be caused by different aspects, of which I would like to bring two forward. Firstly, it might be caused by the fact that, in all analysed media, the female characters were the protagonists. This turns them from passive objects into active subjects. It is similar to why we cannot recognise the Damsel in Distress in any discussed examples: the female characters discussed are not used to advance a male character's plot, and, following Sunil, these characters came to be as an active subversion of the Damsel-trope, which takes away one of the trope's main characteristics. Secondly, and this would explain the difference between ludic and non-ludic media; since the female character is the main playable character in the video games, it is more difficult to justify her death since a new player character would have to be introduced, changing the player's perspective. could also be the reason we see less instances of Bury Your Gays in video games. Additionally, even though there are -business stakeholders in videogames, overarching codes of conduct limiting representation like those seen in the film and television industries are not found in the gaming industry. *TLoU2* could easily have used its split story to incite the Bury Your Gays trope and halt Ellie's story while continuing Abby's, yet it still kept the main queer characters alive, still subverting the trope.

In conclusion, this thesis added onto the existing discourse of narrative representation of women in media, and more specifically in video games, by breaking down the narrative into tropes and analysing these within a framework of film and television discourse. In doing so, we can recognise that the fundamental characteristics of the ludic medium change some of the characteristics of the narrative as well. Both film and television as well as video games provide digital entertainment, and as we have seen, many storytelling techniques in video games are rooted in cinematic traditions, which makes them similar in function, and partially in form. We can see this reflected in the results, as video games adopt some tropes prevalent in film and television, which in turn have been influenced by stereotypes and expectations from real life.

However, we can also perceive some ways in which video games divert from non-ludic media, which can partially be attributed to its distinctive function as an interactive medium.

To better understand the implications of these results and to reflect on the use of common gender tropes in media, future studies could address bigger sample sizes, different gender groups (e.g. non-binary characters) or draw a comparison between video games with fixed protagonists and games in which the player can choose the gender of their character. This could be used to build upon the results of this thesis.

Moreover, while regarding narrative tropes, the main characters of the various case studies showed differences in quite some categories such as sexuality and morality. However, there is no racial diversity among these player characters, but only among the secondary characters. This also provides ample room for research regarding diversity in video games.

## 5. Appendix

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## **5.4 Glossary and list of abbreviations**

1. FPS – First-person shooter
2. IP – Intellectual property
3. NPC – Non-playable character
4. Port – A new version of a game, specifically edited for a console other than the one it launched on originally
5. RPG – Role-playing game