

## Gender and video games: How is female gender generally represented in various genres of video games?

Xeniya Kondrat<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

*Gender representation in video games is a current sensitive topic in entertainment media. Gender studies in video games look at the difference between the portrayal of female and male characters. Most video games tend to over-represent stereotypes and in general use extensive violence and cruelty (Maietti, 2008). Some video games use wrong, disrespectful and sometimes even violent representations of both genders. This research paper focuses on the current representation of female gender in video games and how they are represented, stereotyped and used as characters in games. Results show that there is a difference between portraying women in the past and present. This research paper is based on previous academic research and results which were achieved with online questionnaire among game players and two interviews with professionals in the field of game design. The results show that there is still negative stereotyping of female gender. However, at the same time, the answers of the respondents show that the target audience of video games desires improvements in presentation of female gender as well as male.*

### **Keywords**

*Gender, video games, feminist theory, cultivation theory, uses and gratification theory*

### **Introduction and background**

Video game history started in 1940 when Edward Condon designed a computer that could play a game called “Nim” with one player (Video Game History Timeline). The first home video game, “Space Odyssey”, was created in 1972. In 1993, a release of “Mortal Kombat” forced the US government to start rating the games based on their violence level (Video Game History Timeline). The first game with a female protagonist appeared

---

<sup>1</sup> Utrecht University of Applied Sciences, Netherlands, [xeniyakondrat@gmail.com](mailto:xeniyakondrat@gmail.com)

in 1996: “Tomb Raider”. It became one of the most popular games in video game history. Afterwards, Will Wrights created a game called “The Sims” in 2000 which became the most popular game amongst female players.

As we can see, video games have a rich and long history. Video games are viewed by many as an essential communication medium for children, teenagers and even grownups nowadays. Edery & Mollick (2009) claim that video games train for a logical way of thinking, teach cooperation with other people – players, create and improve their imagination. Video games became a channel of communication and socializing between people.

Video games of different genres have become a subject of research based on aesthetics, moral and sociocultural representations and technical aspects (Jahn-Sudmann & Stockmann, 2008). Video games allow children and teenagers to discover new worlds, where they can do anything they want to, even things that are impossible in real life. Video games can also teach something new, which is not necessarily good for a person’s perception and mind, such as violence, sexuality and aggression.

In 1998, Dietz analyzed 33 Sega games and found that almost 80% of the games contained violence, of which 20% was directed towards women characters (Dietz, 1998). From the same research, Dietz also determined that most of the female characters in these 33 video games were portrayed as “damsels in distress” (Dietz, 1998). These female characters had unimportant roles, as non-active characters, they could not participate in the video games, and they did not have any other role besides just being locked or lulled. Other than that they were stereotyped by being dressed in tight and provocative clothing, which showed their large breasts and long legs. The author states in her research that “this representation is harmful to children of both sexes since they will internalize these expectations and accept the idea that women are to be viewed as weak, as victims, and as sex objects” (Dietz, 1998).

One of the biggest criticisms of video games is stereotyping. Stereotyping implies that a set of fixed and most of the time non-truly based information or image is being used for the representation of something or someone (Oxford University Press, 2014). As mentioned before, some video games constantly stereotype female gender. Most common ways of stereotyping in video games are “damsels in distress” and sexual objectification. The representation of females in video games is usually sexualized (Jahn-Sudmann & Stockmann, 2008) and according to Laura Mulvey (1975), “presents them as objects of the male gaze: most women appear to be hardly older than 30, in most cases wear skintight, figure-accenting clothing and are slim.” In these kinds of games, women are dressed in provocative clothing and are created to serve males as an aid or even as a sexual object. As an example, *Grand Theft Auto III Vice City* allows the player’s character to have sex with a prostitute, afterwards kill her, and from this act get a health bonus.

Researchers are trying to show that mass media is affecting our perception of the real world and its standards by providing us with unreal, made-up beauty and moral rules. Since video games are a part of mass media, nowadays they are partly responsible for the unrealistic, ideal body perceptions as well. Girls and boys who play video games that use

this ideal shaped body image for females are more likely to create their concept on how female should look like based on this representation.

Lately, it has been mentioned that there is a slow change in video games and their target audience. There appears to be an increasing trend in the number of women playing video games and the age of players of both genders. According to the Entertainment Software Association<sup>2</sup> report in 2013, 55% of game players are male and 45% are females (Entertainment Software Association, 2013). This means that there is a switch at the market and target audience's interests. Adults, especially male ones, who grew up with video games tend to continue playing them and now women are starting to gain interest in them as well. Therefore, it proves that video games have become one of the most important and influential media nowadays. Moreover, it is necessary to research and analyze video games themselves as well as their effect on the target audience and the world.

Video games are one of the largest media outlets today. They appear to have a strong influence on the players and their perception of the world. According to various research, it seems like some of video games provide wrong and negative ideas about how the female gender should look, feel and be treated. Dmitri C. Williams notes that "at the same time as games were drawing the ire of conservative society, they were also used as a means of reinforcing social norms and power relations (Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2008).

This was particularly evident for gender and age" (Williams, 2003) where female gender and players are still ignored and presented in "a negative image of the male antisocial teenager" (Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2008). It is important for game production companies to represent female gender in a respectful way, so that the target audience can learn about and perceive the female gender in a realistic, non-stereotyped way. This includes both genders, female and male, since it affects both of them. Therefore, the following policy and research questions were established to aid in the research of this topic:

**Policy Question**

*How can stereotyping of female gender in video games be changed?*

**Research Question**

*How is female gender generally represented in various genres of video games?*

These policy and research questions will guide the research and help to explore information, which can assist in giving professional advice at the end.

This research will hopefully give a clearer image on how female gender is currently represented in video games and why it is represented in such a way. At the same time, this research might help to determine if females are stereotyped in video games. One of the main goals of this research is to determine if representations and stereotyping of

---

<sup>2</sup> Entertainment Software Association is an American association which is dedicated to the computer games and game industry <http://www.theesa.com/>

females in video games are carrying negative or positive images. If the portraying of female characters is negative what will be the way of changing it?

Based on previous general academia research in this field, theories which have been collected and used for the questionnaires and the data that came out of it, advice will be given on how to improve the representation of female gender in video games, if needed.

### **Theoretical framework**

In this chapter the theoretical concept and perspectives that are related to the gender representation, self-esteem and identity are discussed. This theoretical framework will review Uses and Gratification, Cultivation and Feminist theories. A review and critical analysis of these theories will be conducted, based on previous research papers and articles which were collected during this research.

#### ***Uses and gratification theory***

The uses and gratification approach was developed by Blumler and Katz in 70's to explain how consumers use media to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals, and to do so by simply asking them (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). Uses and gratification theory defines why people choose certain media and what they do with it. This theory analyzes how peoples' needs influence their choice in media. It proves that the user plays an active role in media by choosing what he or she wants to see, watch or hear. Blumler and Katz, the founders of this theory, believed that the users are goal-oriented in their needs and make decisions by themselves.

As an example, if a person wants to feel relaxed and watch a comedy he/she can go to the cinema or just stay at home and watch something on the TV. Whether he/she chooses to go to the cinema or stay at home depends on the person's feelings and desires. The same works for video games. Some game players prefer to play shooters or action and others massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPGs). This theory might be useful for this research paper and helpful in figuring out why people like to play video games and what affects their choice.

Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974) mentioned that the uses and gratification approach may actually be based on the reasoning of Lundberg and Hulten (1968), which includes the following five elements:

1. "The audience is conceived as active – an important part of mass media use is assumed to be goal directed and patterns of media use are shaped by more or less definite expectations of what certain kinds of content have to offer the audience member."
2. "In the mass communication process much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience member. This places a strong limitation on theorizing about any form of straight-line effect of media content on attitudes and behavior."
3. "The media compete with other sources of need satisfaction."

4. “Methodologically speaking, many of the goals mass media use can be derived from data supplied by individual audience members themselves- i.e., people are sufficiently self-aware to be able to report their interests and motives in particular cases, or at least to recognize them when confronted with them in an intelligible and familiar verbal formulation.”
5. “Value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communication should be suspended while audience orientations are explored on their own terms.”

It is also important to understand media functions while analyzing the uses and gratification approach. Lasswell was the first one who purposed the four-functional interpretation of the media in 1948. However, the later investigation by McQuail, Brown and Blumler (1972) improved his interpretation and became:

- a. Diversion
- b. Personal relationships
- c. Personal identity
- d. Surveillance

Media can serve several functions at the same time. For example, television series provide functions of personal identification with the characters as well as diversion since people watch television for relaxation (Blumler, Brown, & McQuail, 1970). Also, another study, which was done based on the analyzing children’s essays on the topic “Why I like to Watch Television”, found out that the main reasons are: to pass time; to forget, as a means of diversion; to learn new things; to learn about myself; for arousal; for relaxation; for companionship; as a habit (Greenberg, 1972). Based on that, we can assume that video games can serve functions of diversion, personal relationships as well as personal reference, reality exploration and value reinforcement.

According to Greenberg (Gratifications of Television Viewing and their Correlates for British Children) television was the main media for the youth in 1974. It was most universal, trustworthy, used and adored media for them. Already then researchers understood the importance of analyzing and researching what attracted adolescents so much from television. It was important to find out what they seek and think they receive from it because it would lead to understanding “potential effects and social behaviors resulting from television and may be predictive of those behaviors” (Greenberg B., 1974). Nowadays, television is still the first major mass media, but internet and video games are becoming favorite media for the users as well. As an example, more than 50% of the participants of the Deloitte’s survey have a gaming console in their house (Deloitte, 2013). Most of them (80%) are 14 to 17 years old. Definitely, it becomes clear that video games should be studied as well, like television has been studied for several decades now.

McQuail’s (1987) typology can be used for analysis of what kind of reason or need a person feels for a certain media use. This typology consists of four sections: information, personal identity, integration and social interaction and entertainment:

- “Information sections consists of reasons such as finding out about relevant events and conditions in immediate surroundings, society and the world;

seeking advice on practical matters or opinion and decision choices; satisfying curiosity and general interest; learning; self-education; gaining a sense of security through knowledge”

- “The Personal Identity section focuses on needs which help in finding reinforcement for personal values; finding models of behavior; identifying with valued others (in the media); gaining insight into one's self; Integration and Social Interaction; gaining insight into circumstances of others; social empathy; identifying with others and gaining a sense of belonging; finding a basis for conversation and social interaction; having a substitute for real-life companionship; helping to carry out social roles; enabling one to connect with family, friends and society etc.”
- “The Entertainment section is based on needs of escaping, or being diverted, from problems; relaxing; getting intrinsic cultural or aesthetic enjoyment; filling time; emotional release and sexual arousal.”

Not all of the reasons mentioned above can be used for analysis of the usage of video games, but the sections, Personal Identity, Integration and Social Interaction and Entertainment are appropriate. These sections might give a clearer view into why people play video games and what kind of needs they fulfill by playing them. Based on the answers of the respondents, it might be possible to understand what they want to see in video games, why they want to see it and how to implement it. It is likely that relaxation and avoidance are going to be the most popular gratifications. Video games are created as entertainment. Therefore people are most likely to play them when they need to relax and avoid doing another task or at least prolong the time before doing the task. Also, as it was mentioned before, video games allow players to enjoy and imagine unreal worlds and situations. Therefore, it is very probable to receive a high percentage on the fantasy gratification as well.

### **Cultivation theory**

Firstly, the theory was a part of the “Cultural indicators” project of Gerbner. The cultivation theory (analysis) was the third step of the project and was defined as the “study of the relationships between institutional processes, message systems and, and the public assumptions, images, and policies that they cultivate” (Gerbner, 1970, p. 71).

The Cultivation theory suggests that media affects and builds people's views of (social) reality. Television, magazines and games affect a person's perception of the real world and its social and moral standards by providing them with mainstream ideas of how a person and the world should look like and behave. Likewise, media images assemble in the minds of the children and teenagers and “eventually result in expectations of the real world that correspond to media representations” (Harrison & Hefner, 2008). Most research which was based on the cultivation theory analyzed television, news and magazines. One of these studies analyzed and established that “makeover” TV programs negatively affect self-esteem of viewers and positively present “perfectionism” and “body dissatisfaction” (Kubic & Chory, 2007). Another study found

out that heavy viewers, especially young men, of the reality dating shows were most likely to have a stereotypical thinking about relationships and women such as “men are sex-driven”, “dating is a game” and “women are sex objects only” (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). It resembles that the perceptions of heavy TV viewers are affected more rather than casual viewers (Morgan & Shanahan, 2010). Therefore, it is logical to assume the same effect for heavy video game players.

When it comes to games “the idea of involvement as an important factor in cultivation underlines the active nature of media use in which individuals are engaged in actively constructing a story rather than being passively exposed to it” (Chong, Teng, Siew, & Skoric, 2012), which can be important in using this theory to analyze video games. The Cultivation theory can be used as an explanation to why thin figure, large breast and beauty ideals are considered as desirable and normal features today (Martins, Williams, Harrison, & Ratan, 2009). Mainstream media affects the mind of heavy media users (television, magazines, video games etc.) and its effects can be found in the perception of the female body among males as well as females. Based on research conducted in 2003, Harrison (Television Viewers' Ideal Body Proportions: the Case of the Curvaceously Thin Woman) found out that heavy television female viewers were affected by the provided female image so much that they felt forced to meet it and by doing so they were ready to reduce their larger breasts or in case of the smaller breast to have augmentation surgery.

The cultivation theory was used in another study related to video games and body ideals. The results suggested that the male gamers who read game magazines (preadolescent boys) tend to have a stronger desire to gain muscularity rather than readers of fitness or sport magazines (Harrison & Bond, 2007). This means that muscularity, power and super abilities of the game characters affect a boy's perception and makes them believe that if they achieve the same level of the muscularity then they will have the same amount of power and popularity. The same goes for female players who wish to be as thin as the female characters of the games with their large breasts, small waist and small hips. They wish to achieve the same tight and thin body, which is not physically possible in most cases and cannot be reached in a healthy way. At the same time, since there are still more male game players, the female body representation in the video games affects boys' minds as well. They see it as normal and attractive. Also even though, girls play fewer games than boys, male players might affect females through peer pressure, such as bullying girls in the school who do not have a thin body. As proof to that, Harrison (2000) did a research study amongst school boys in the United States. The research showed that thinness was socially accepted and valued when fatness was denounced and a fat female will be negatively stereotyped as being lazy, greedy and without any friends (Harrison, 2000).

Another research study investigated how the quality of a game – its realism – affects the game players and their sense of presence, aggression and involvement (Ivory & Kalyanaraman, 2007). It showed that the gamers react more to realistic games rather than low quality (old) games, by having higher skin conductance level as well as aggressive feelings (Barlett & Rodeheffer, 2009).

Based on previous research, it seems logical to use the cultivation theory for this research paper. Hopefully, it will help to find out whether video games affect the perception of game players or not. Depending on the results of the questionnaires, which will be handed out to game designers and game players, it will be possible to analyze if there is a connection between seen “unreal” image of the females in the video games and real perception of them in the present time.

### ***Feminist theory***

The significant shift of women’s social status happened in the last forty years (McNay, 2000). However, there are still some obstacles which are consistently arising among various media platforms. The gender relations are continuously improving but at the same time emerging new constraints. According to Foucault and his negative paradigm of the subjectification concept, that has big influence upon feminist theories, “the identity of dominant group has been maintained through the exclusion and derogation of marginal groups and liminal experiences” (McNay, 2000). This identity subjectification can be seen in mass media nowadays where it is heavily promotes the trends and looks that people “should” have.

The video gaming industry is quite commonly described as male-dominated field where most of the players and characters of video games are males (Soukup, 2007, p. 160). In case if a female character introduced into the game, the high chance that she is going to be highly sexualized. Despite this fact, the target audience is getting more diverse, it does not change the perception of female gender by video game companies and society. This happens because “based on the established social norms, video games are perceived to belong in the male domain, and female players and male players alike experience greater social acceptance by staying within sex-role expectations” (Lucas, 2004, p. 517). According to Beasley and Standley research (2002, p. 289), female characters are over-sexualized because “it carries strong sexual meaning for the young boys who predominantly play these games”.

However, while video games have mostly been a male form of entertainment for the past few decades, recently the number of female video game players has started to rise. Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA) assumed that 43% of the US gamers were females in 2001 (Interactive Digital Software Association, 2001). The video game industry market was mainly dominated by the games with patriarchal stereotypes that promote various forms of violence, such as shooters and action games. However, the industry realized that girls (most girls) do not like these kinds of the games, so they have decided to create games for females as well, with Barbie Dolls and Sims (life simulation game where you create and control characters)<sup>3</sup>. Most of these games were based on the stereotyping that girls like to play with dolls, dress them and buy things (of course, some girls enjoy doing these things, but it is not the only thing they can and want to do). Stereotyped roles for women and men, such as household keeper and breadwinner, do not only inhibit the development of the gender equality, but also maintain inequalities

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thesims.com/game-info/overview>



(Marinova, 2003). The male breadwinner model suggests that man is responsible for the income in the family while women take care of the household and children (Lewis, 2001). Therefore, based on this model, females, who play video games, would be interested in playing games which are more related to the feminine interests. Previous research suggest that “children tend to prefer toys that are stereotyped as appropriate to their own sex rather than toys that are identified with the other sex” (Cherney & London, 2006, p. 717). However, according to Cherney & London research, there is a tendency where girls with age decrease their preference in playing with gender-stereotyped toys (Cherney & London, 2006, p. 722).

The industry was not (and it seems like is still not) interested in creating video games for both genders. As it was said at “ABC Nightline” news program by Sherry Turkle (1997) “If you market to girls and boys according to just the old stereotypes and don’t try to create a computer culture that’s really more inclusive for everyone, you’re going to just reinforce the old stereotypes... We have an opportunity here to use this technology, which is so powerful, to make of ourselves something different and better.”

It is important for the game industry to carefully develop games for girls so that they show the diversity of women’s lifestyles, interests and identities (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). Sadly, it is easier for the industry to produce games for girls based on stereotypical views because they will sell better. On the other hand, the increasing popularity of sports among women, such as football, shows that there is a market for sport-oriented games for girls. Furthermore, the common belief that girls cannot stand violence is wrong as well (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). The growing amount of action movies and games with female protagonist, such as “*Xena: Warrior Princess*” TV series and “*Tomb Raider: Lara Croft*” video game and movie, shows that females are attracted to this kind of representation of them and are willing to watch/play and follow such media (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000).

Fortunately, some game companies do understand the importance of integration of female gender into video games. Sega, one of leading and main game industry company (Sega), agreed that there is a need for the creation of video games that are attractive to both genders. They tried to introduce a lot of new female heroines into their fighting games, which were originally targeted only to the male gender, and gave them powers which will be engaging for female and male players (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). Another solution can be better marketing of the existing male based games to females, such as a fantasy role-playing games which are already popular among girls (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). “*Tomb Raider: Lara Croft*”, which was already briefly discussed in this paper, is a good example of the game industry’s attempt to create a game for both genders. As it was mentioned, Lara Croft is the female protagonist of the game called “*Tomb Raider*” created in 1996 by Core Design Company. She is independent, strong, smart, wealthy, and has an amazing body and countless skills. It is a perfect fantasy for both girls, who want to be like her, and boys, who want to be with someone like her. A big mistake of the company was that they market the game extensively to the male audience and less so to the female. When the game was advertised to the public it was represented by half-naked female models at trade shows.

After feminism became a strong movement, males and females learned that women's interests, pleasures and views can be affected and shaped by various cultural forces (Castell & Bryson, 2000). The problems of stereotyping are that most of the beliefs and explanations about gender and gaming are based on incorrect data, which are used to represent the female gender. The wrong sample of the age group of women that do not have time to play video games or prefer to play something short such as puzzle or Tetris can be used as a representation of the whole female gender. Based on this statement it can be presented that women do not like playing action or first-role games. In a similar way, teenage guys are used to represent the whole male perspective (Hayes, 2005).

The obsession with gender and the differences might be actually reasons for complexity, stereotyping and separation between female and male gamers (Reynolds, 2005). However, it is impossible to ignore its importance in our daily life, including our identities and social experiences (Hayes, 2005). This shows that there is a need for finding a balance in representing female gender (as well as male) for both genders and creating video games for everyone and not only one gendered target groups. There are still going to be video games, which are designed directly only for females and only for males. It is impossible to avoid that, but it is important and necessary to create video games or at least start advertising them in such a way that both genders will be interested in playing them.

The theories, which were previously discussed, give a clearer view of the current situation in the game industry market and its research. Very little research has been conducted into video games and gender representation, although, there are a substantial number of articles about video games, violence, and childhood obesity. Thus, it is important to analyze if there is a negative or positive representation of female gender in video games.

Additionally, it is worth mentioning that, even if video games give both genders equal opportunity to be the protagonist, the selection by the players is not. It might be that marketing is one of the reasons why female protagonists are not well-known and desired in video games.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to change the perception of marketing campaigns of video games as well as possible negative representations of female gender.

### **Findings and conclusions**

This research was conducted in cooperation with the Game Design Department of Uppsala University and its lecturers, Gamer League and participants from Facebook posts. The research included a mixed methodology based on quantitative and qualitative research of the questionnaires and interviews.

The questionnaire is a key part of this research. It was targeted at video game players and distributed among various Social Media tools. The final amount of respondents who participated in the questionnaire was 234 people. At the same time, there were two interviews held with two professors from Uppsala University, Sweden.

The questionnaire included closed-questions, which can be considered as a part of the quantitative methodology, and open questions which are part of the qualitative methodology.

A main limitation of the closed-questions or quantitative methodology is that the respondent is left with fixed set of possible answers. He cannot ask anyone any explanations or questions or interpret the question (answer) in a different way and is forced to choose one of the answers. It also becomes difficult to ask many different questions which are linked and this might directly limit the amount of collected data (Bryman, 2012, p. 234). So in overall, the respondent might fail to answer the question truthfully which might affect the research. To avoid this, most of the questions were designed in a neutral, non-suggesting way with short and precise sentences.

The limitation of open-ended questions is time. It is time consuming for interviewee to answer the questions as well as for a researcher to interpret it. The respondent might give a short, not necessarily truthful answer or skip the question. The interviewer completely relies on the respondent's honesty and his personal experience. The same issue might appear with the interviewing. The answers of the respondent are heavily depend on his/her believes, memory and personal attitude towards the topic of the discussion (Punch, 2014, p. 152). Another limitation of qualitative research is an interpretation of the received results which might be affected by the researcher's opinion.

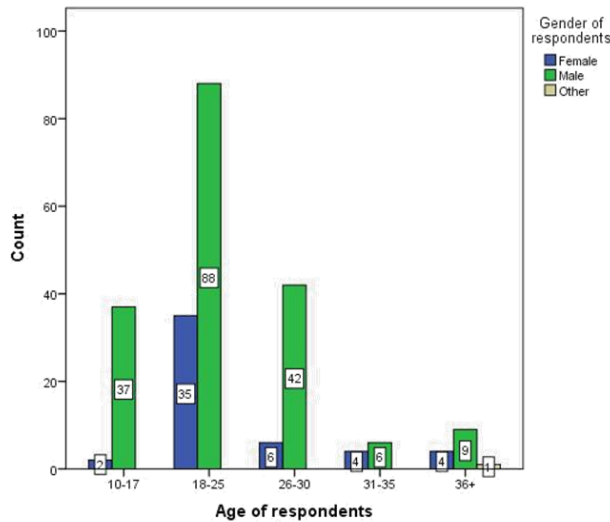
Lastly, there is one more limitation for both methodologies (more primarily qualitative) in this research. The questionnaire was created on an online platform. The website does not ask a respondent to register and provides an easy and simple layout. When the survey was conducted, a technical mistake happened. Some of the answers of the respondents, especially ones which were asking to specify the answers on questions with Yes/No answer, were not fully recorded due to unknown character limitation in these questions. This mistake was realized only after the survey was finished and due to the anonymous settings of the questionnaire, it was impossible to ask the same respondents to answer the questionnaire again by using another service. Therefore, it was decided to use these answers carefully and to not constitute important decisions based on them.

## **Findings – Questionnaire**

### ***Gender and age***

Most of the respondents of this questionnaire were males, 77.78%, while 21.79% were females. The questionnaire was sent out through different Social Media channels so it was impossible to predict the amount of female and male gender participants. According to the previous statistics, which were mention in the background research, there are more male than female players. Therefore, these numbers are not surprising and match the real numbers of video game players. From these 77.78% of male players there are 88 males who belong to the age group 18-25 years old. This is the biggest age group of male

respondents in this research. It is the same situation for females. The biggest age group of female respondents is 18-25 years as well. The chart below shows, in detail, the age and gender of the 234 participants. Only one participant preferred not to state his/her gender.



Graph 1. The correlation of gender to the age of the respondents of the survey

### ***Frequency and duration***

According to the results of the survey most of the participants spend more than four hours per game playing a video game. The percentage of the respondents that are playing more than four hours is 36.32%. 31.62% spend 1-2 hours per game and 25.64% spend 2-4 hours. This means that if the participants start to play a video game then they are most likely to spend at least two hours on this video game.

When it comes to the frequency, most of the participants (39.32%) preferred to answer “Very often”. The possible answer “Always” received 20.51% and “Fairly often” 19.66%.

### ***Type of genre of video games***

Adventure and Role Playing Games (RPG) are the most played games according to the survey results. Adventure was chosen by 156 respondents (12.4%) and RPG 151 respondents (12.0%). First person shooters and Strategy are also quite popular video game genres among the participants, with 10.4% and 10.0%, respectively.

22 respondents additionally specified other genres of video games that they like to play. Below, there is the list of them. These genres of video games are not ranked and are shown in random order:

- (Car) racing
- Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA)
- Stealth

- Horror
- Rougelikes
- Turn based strategy
- Puzzle
- Card games
- Indie games
- Muds & survival

### **Gratifications**

Question based on the Uses and Gratification theory shows us that most of the respondents play video games for relaxation (20.1%) and fantasy (13.1%). As it was predicted relaxation is one of the most important and popular gratification among the respondents, since video games allow players to relax and enjoy the game. Although, surprisingly, the percentage of respondents which indicated avoidance as motivator to play their video games is lower than expected. The avoidance gratification got only 4.7% or 41 participants. Below you can find a list of all the gratifications per percentage:

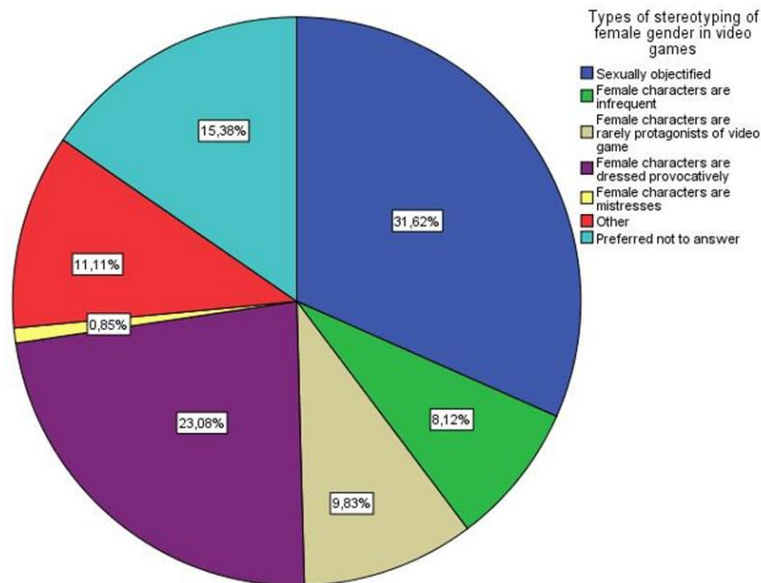
- Relaxation – 20.1%
- Fantasy – 13.1%
- Diversion and escape – 11.1%
- Competition/Self-Challenge – 9.6%
- Filling time – 9.3%
- Emotional release – 8.1%
- Social contact – 7.2%
- Education – 5.9%
- It's a habit – 5.4%
- Avoidance – 4.7%
- Identifying yourself – 3.0%
- Other – 2.6%

23 respondents also answered on “Other” as a gratification where they needed to specify what kind of other gratifications might be their motivator to play video games. Some of them had almost the same gratifications as mentioned above but with a little bit more detailed information.

### **Stereotyping of women in video games**

According to the results of the survey 180 (76.9%) participants out of 234 think that female gender is stereotyped in video games. As it was mentioned before, 51 respondent of this survey identified themselves as females. 78.4% female participants agreed that there is stereotyping of female gender in video games when 21.6% did not. When it comes to males, which are 182 respondents of the survey, 76.4% of them replied “Yes” and 23.6% said “No”. The participants who replied “Yes” were asked to specify what kind of stereotyping of female gender they think or they meet in video games. If the participants

answered “NO”, he/she was asked to specify why he/she thinks so. The chart with the types of stereotyping can be found below:

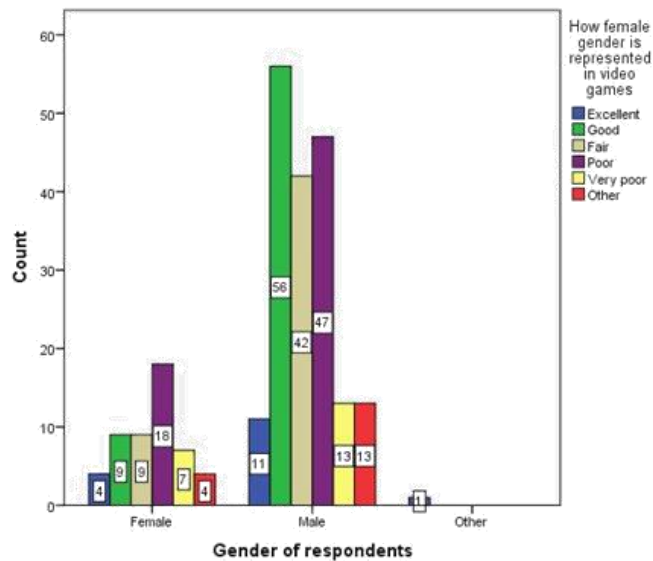


**Graph 2. Types of stereotyping of female gender in video games according to the replies of the respondents**

31.62% of respondents agreed with the statement that female gender is sexually objectified in video games and that female characters are dressed provocatively (23.08%). The participants who did not choose “Yes” as an answer in the previous questions and respondents who preferred not to answer composed 15.38% can be found on the chart under “Preferred not to answer”.

Some of the respondents answered “Other” and mentioned “All of the above” or “Mostly all of them” as a detailed answer.

The question “Based on your gaming experience how do you think female gender is represented in video games?” showed that answers “Good” and “Poor” received the same amount of responses. Of the 65 people for “Good” 17.6% of the respondents were females and 30.8% for males, and for “Poor” 35.3% were females and 25.8% males. More detailed information about this question and its answers can be found in the Appendix, Figures, Graph 8. Below, there is a chart showing correlation between gender and opinions about female representation in video games among the respondents of the survey. It shows that females are more unsatisfied with the amount of female gender characters in video games rather than males. Most of female respondents (18 out of 51) replied that they think there is poor representation of female gender in video games, while 56 out of 182 male respondents think that the representation is good. However, the percentage of unsatisfied males is pretty substantial as well – 47 respondents. Other 42 males think that there is fair representation.



**Graph 3. Correlation between gender and views about female gender representation in video games**

The respondents could also answer “Other” as a reply to this question. It seems like some of the participants did not clearly understand the question and described different way of representing females. For example:

- either someone who you sleep with and/or need to save, or the almost naked female sexy superhero
- I think both genders are represented equally stereotyped. Men are all muscle-bound and violent and women are curvaceous and sexy.
- physically unrealistic
- like bi\*\*\*es (the word was censored due to the rude language)
- Exactly like in movies
- Depending on a game or even a particular developer. Some might be represented quite realistically, while others focus more on gaining attention for male gamers

But these answers give more information about the way women are stereotyped so these statements can still be used in this research.

Others preferred to specify their choice of answer by these statements:

- I don't know, because I play every time only male character
- It depends on a game so far.. tomb raider for example is pretty good otherwise call of duty and etc
- Poorly but it's improved vastly in the last few years.
- All characters have a back story, and in none of the stories the female characters are really put in a less favorable light than male characters
- Quantity wise: poor. Quality wise: Fair - Good. Like Lara Croft, Fighting characters, Customization in MMO, it's up to the player though, etc

- It varies but many games have some weird objectification going on.
- I like it but I think it's better with more female characters
- Varying greatly
- It depends. I want more variation that is for sure.

### ***Video games and real life***

The results of the survey show that according to most respondents (67.09%), video games do not affect their real life decision and behavior. 24.36% stated that video games affect their real life. If the respondent answered "Yes" on this question, he/she was requested to specify how video games affect his/her real life decisions and behavior. Some of the respondents replied that it is a source of education for them as well as a self-esteem booster. Another stated that video games affected their future job choice and they would like to work in video game industry.

According to Graph 9 in Figures, Appendix most of the respondents do not think that there are any possible consequence of representation female gender in video games. 58.55% said "No" when 41.45% said "Yes". The possibility to explain the choice of "Yes" answer was offered and most of the respondents who replied "Yes" wrote about negative stereotyping which might affect women and men's perceptions, morals and identities.

### ***Findings - Interview***

Both experts answered the interview questions which were sent via private email. One of expert is Ulf Benjaminsson, 28 years old, who is a Program Coordinator for Game Design and Programming at University of Uppsala. The second one is Adam Mayes, 46 years old, who is a Subject Responsible for Game Design at Uppsala University as well.

The experts had to answer the same questions as the game players in the questionnaire with several additional questions which helped to show the opinion of the expert of the game industry.

Both experts agreed that female gender is misrepresented in video games and that there are diversity issues, which include ethnic and race discrimination. Benjaminsson also added that actually both genders are stereotyped and not only females. Based on his gaming experience, which includes video games from 80s, the entire 90s and modern games, there is a lack of characters that "define their own roles, instead of being defined by their role character that are allowed to make personal choices for \*his\* or \*her\* reasons" and "females that doesn't have to give up their femininity (as \*she\* defines it) to advance her aims females that struggle against stereotyping without being completely defined by this activism" (Benjaminsson, 2014). Mayes noted that most common stereotypes of female gender in video games where women are hypersexualised or they are victims or prizes.

Benjaminsson and Mayes agreed that there are consequences of representation of female gender in video games, which are affecting the consumers and game industry. As they said that this is a vicious circle where "We don't have developers creating strong



women, so publishers and developers don't think that games with women sell, so they don't make games with strong women" (Mayes, 2014) and by that "it makes young men (in particular) intellectually lazy" (Benjaminsson, 2014).

The questionnaire collected 234 responses from around the world. As it was mentioned before, it was targeted at video game players to find out what they think and feel about the topic of the research. The majority of the respondents were males. Since the questionnaire was spread out through Social Media channels it was impossible to collect the same amount of male and female participants.

The results of the questionnaire give a clearer view of what the target audience of video games expects from video games and if they want to have changes in video games. The collected data shows that most of the respondents do realize that there is still negative stereotyping in video games and the majority of them do want to have changes. This concerns not only negative representation of female gender but also male. Most of the respondents agreed that female gender stereotyping in video games happens because of the predominant male target audience even though the amount of female game players is growing. Game companies want to sell as much as possible and therefore create a good marketing tool such as undressed or provocatively dressed female character which might not be even in the game in the end.

Another opinion, which was commonly shared, is the lack of professionals in the game industry who are aware of gender studies and are qualified in them. Some of the respondents assumed that the game industry is so accustomed to creating stereotypical characters that it does not want to re-create or change that because it will cost more money and time. At the same time, quite a lot of respondents tried to point out that not only females are stereotyped but also males.

The participants were also asked how the current situation in video games could be changed in order to represent females in a better way, without stereotypes. Based on their open-ended questions, they can be divided in the several of the following groups:

- There is no need to change the representation of female gender in video games
- There is a need to change the representation of female gender in video games but I do not know how
- There is a need and to do that more female game developers should be introduced to the industry
- More female game players should be attracted to play video games
- More female protagonist should be created and if they are they should be not objectified or sexualized by the game designers

These groups can represent the main ideas of the respondents of this survey.

According to the answers of both experts, there is a slow change in the representation of female gender in video games overtime by developing and increasing graphics and creation of new independent game companies, which are interested in creating alternative content for video games. Although, the mainstream game companies, which continue creating video games with the stereotypes, still have the main focus of the game players. However, according to Benjaminsson and Mayes it will

change in the future. Nowadays, most of the game companies are more interested in earning money. There is only hope “for an educated and critical audience to reward and appreciate challenging and thoughtful games” (Benjaminsson, 2014) so it is possible to improve the current situation and to speed up the process of changing the representation not only of gender but also race and ethnicity.

Therefore, based on the results of the questionnaire and answers of the experts it is clear that the current representation of female gender is still negative (in comparison with 80s and 90s), but there is a slight change in this issue. More games are being created with a better image and representation of females and numerous video games include female protagonists. However, these video games with main character as female (or possibility to play for female) not always reach a higher amount of target audience – video game players – because they are mostly created by unknown or less known game companies.

### **Conclusions**

This research paper was directed to analyze the current situation of female representation in video games. The goal of this research was to determine if representations and stereotyping of females in video games are carrying negative or positive image and if the image is negative what are the ways of improving it. For this purpose, the questionnaire was created to interview game players about their thoughts and feeling about this topic as well as two interviews were conducted with two experts in the game industry. The survey and interviews were based on the theories, which are Cultivation Theory, Uses and Gratification Theory and Feminist Theory, that were found and chosen during desk research of previous studies on this topic.

Based on the replies of the respondents of the survey the most popular ways of stereotyping females in video games is by creating female characters which are sexually provocative and are almost undressed or dressed in a seductive way. Also, there is a lack of female protagonist in video games which can represent female as strong and independent. However, according to the results of the Open-ended questions, where participants could express themselves and their thoughts, it seems like the situation, even for the game players, is changing. As many of them stated that there are more and more games which are trying to have equally represented females and males as well as female protagonists. Therefore, it seems like the situation with the mostly only negative representation of females (as mistress, damsel in distress and sexual objects) is slowly changing and improving. Also, according to the experts opinion’s the current representation of female gender in video games is better in comparison with video games in 80s and 90s and it is slowly changing because of the new independent game companies which are interested in creating new types of video games with their diverse characters.

There were mentioned three main reasons by the participants why this process takes such long time:

- e. Marketing. As it was said by some of the respondents “sexuality” and “sex” sell best. The game companies want to earn more money therefore they create characters without story but with stereotyped characteristic such as big breasts, small hips, big eyes and seductive behavior. Until the game companies are going to be interested only in earning money and not bringing other values, the female and other characters are going to be stereotyped. This also depends on the consumers. If they keep buying this kind of video games they are going to stimulate the market. As many respondents in the questionnaire stated, most of their video games that they’re playing do not contain stereotyped characters because “they are different type of video games”.
- f. However, even when female character is created in an equal way as male, e.g. “Mass Effect” from case study which was described earlier, she might not be used in marketing campaigns to promote the video game.
- g. Lack of female game developers and game players. Though, there are more and more female game players it is still strange, especially for male gamers, to see a female playing the same video game as them. As one of the respondents wrote: “Unusual to see a girl shooting a machine gun, crumbling head zombie, etc.”
- h. Lack of game professionals which are aware of gender issues and studies. Some of the respondents agreed that the lack of game developers who know or studied gender studies might cause negative representation of female characters. As many of participants said that “poor writing of the plot/script and characterization” and
- i. “... industry and game creators tend to both repeat based on what they are used to, and to live up to what they believe are expectations from future users...” might lead to the poor representation of females in video games.

Thus, this research and its outcomes show that there is a slow change in the representation of female gender in video games. There is a growing tendency of video games which represent females as strong and independent characters which have equal rights as male ones. Such games as “Mass Effect”, “Tomb Raider”, “BioShock Infinite”, “Final Fantasy” etc. are on the way of changing the typical stereotyping for both genders female and male.

During the desk research and data analysis of the questionnaire and interviews it became clear that video games stereotype not only female gender but also males as well as race and ethnicities. Further research should also focus on analyzing current situation of male representation in video games.

## REFERENCES

- Barlett, C. P., & Rodeheffer, C. (2009). Effects of Realism on Extended Violent and Nonviolent Video Game Play on Aggressive Thoughts, Feelings, and Physiological Arousal. *Aggressive Behavior*, 231-224.
- Beasley, B., & Standley, T. C. (2002). Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an Indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games. *Mass Communication & Society*, 279-293.
- Benjaminsson, U. (2014, 05 29). Gender and Video Games: How is Female Gender Generally Represented in Various Genres of Video Games? (X. Kondrat, Interviewer)
- Blumler, J., Brown, J., & McQuail, D. (1970). *The Social Origins of the Gratifications Associated with Television Viewing*. Leeds: The Univ. of Leeds (mimeo).
- Bryce, J., & Rutter, J. (2002). Killing Like a Girl: Gendered Gaming and Girl Gamers' Visibility. In M. F., *Computer games and digital cultures* (pp. 243-255). Tampere, Finland: Tampere University Press.
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social Research Methods* (4th edition ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Punch, K. F. (2014). *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* (3rd edition ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Cassell, J., & Jenkins, H. (2000). Chess for Girls? Feminism and Computer Games. In J. Cassell, & H. Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (p. 27). Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Castell, S., & Bryson, M. (2000). Retooling Play: Dystopia, Dysphoria, and Difference. In J. Cassell, & H. Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games* (p. 235). Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Cherney, I. D., & London, K. (2006, 10 12). Gender-linked Differences in the Toys, Television Shows, Computer Games, and Outdoor Activities of 5- to 13-year-old Children. *Sex Roles*, pp. 717-726.
- Chong, Y. M., Teng, K. Z., Siew, S. C., & Skoric, M. M. (2012). Cultivation Effects of Video Games: A Longer-Term Experimental Test of First- and Second-Order Effects. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 952-971.
- Cork, J. (2011, 07 19). *BioWare Says 18 Percent Of Mass Effect Players Choose Female Shepard*. Retrieved from gameinformer: <http://www.gameinformer.com/b/news/archive/2011/07/19/bioware-says-18-percent-of-mass-effect-players-choose-female-shepard.aspx>
- Deloitte. (2013). *Media Consumer Survey 2013: Love in a Cold Climate*. Retrieved from Deloitte: [http://www.deloitte.com/view/en\\_GB/uk/industries/tmt/media-industry/media-consumer-survey-2013/](http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_GB/uk/industries/tmt/media-industry/media-consumer-survey-2013/)
- Dietz, T. (1998). An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*(38), 425-442.
- Ederly, D., & Mollick, E. (2009). *Changing the Game: How video games are transforming the future of business*. New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc.

- Entertainment Software Association. (2013). *2013 Sales, Demographic and Usage Data: Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry*. Retrieved from Entertainment Software Association: [http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/esa\\_ef\\_2013.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/esa_ef_2013.pdf)
- Ferris, A. L., Smith, S., Greenberg, B. S., & Smith, S. L. (2007). The content of reality dating shows and viewer perceptions of dating. *Journal of Communication*(57), 490–510.
- Gerbner, G. (1970). Cultural indicators: The case of violence in television drama. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 69-81.
- Greenberg. (1972). *Children's reasons for watching television*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation.
- Greenberg, B. (1974). Gratifications of Television Viewing and their Correlates for British Children. In J. Blumler, & E. Katz, *The Uses of Mass Communication* (p. 72). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications Inc.
- Greenberg, B. S., Lachlan, K., Sherry, J., Lucas, K., & Holmstrom, A. (2010). Orientations to Video Games Among Gender and Age Groups. *Simulation & Gaming*(41), 238 –259.
- Harrison. (2000). The Body Electric: Thin-Ideal Media and Eating Disorders in Adolescents. *Journal of Communication*, 50(3), 119-143.
- Harrison, K. (2003). Television Viewers' Ideal Body Proportions: the Case of the Curvaceously Thin Woman. *Sex Roles*, 48, 255-264.
- Harrison, K., & Bond, B. J. (2007). Gaming Magazines and the Drive for Muscularity in Preadolescent Boys: A Longitudinal Examination. *Body Image*, 269-277.
- Harrison, K., & Hefner, V. (2008). Body Image and Eating Disorders. In S. L. Calvert, & B. J. Wilson, *Handbook of Child Development and the Media*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Hayes, E. (2005). Women, Video Gaming & Learning: Beyond Stereotypes. *TechTrends*, 49(5).
- IBM. (2014, 05 16). *SPSS Statistics*. Retrieved from IBM: <http://www-01.ibm.com/software/analytics/spss/products/statistics/>
- Interactive Digital Software Association. (2001). *State of the Industry Report 2000-2001*.
- Ivory, J. D., & Kalyanaraman, S. (2007). The Effects of Technological Advancement and Violent Content in Video Games on Player's Feelings of Presence, Involvement, Physiological Arousal, and Agression. *Journal of Communication*, 532-555.
- Jahn-Sudmann, A., & Stockmann, R. (2008). Anti-PC Games: Exploring Articulations of the Politically Incorrect in GTA San Andreas. In A. Jahn-Sudmann, & R. Stockmann, *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Games Without Frontiers, War Without Tears* (pp. 150-161). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jahn-Sudmann, A., & Stockmann, R. (2008). *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Games Without Frontiers, War Without Tears*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Katz, E., Blumler, J., & Gurevitch, M. (1974). Utilization of Mass Communication by the Individual. In J. Blumler, & E. Katz, *The Uses of Mass Communication* (p. 21). Beverly Hills: Sage Publications Inc.

- Kennedy, H. W. (2002, 12). *Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis*. Retrieved from Game Studies: <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>
- Kubic, K. N., & Chory, R. M. (2007). Exposure to television makeover programs and perceptions of self. *Communication Research Reports*(24), 283–291.
- Lethal & Loaded* (2001). [Motion Picture]. Documentary Channel 5.
- Lewis, J. (2001). The Decline of the Male Breadwinner Model: Implications for Work and Care. *Social Politics*, pp. 152-169.
- Lucas, K., & Sherry, J. L. (2004). Sex Differences in Video Game Play: A Communication-Based Explanation. *Communication Research*, 499-523.
- Lundberg, D., & Hulten, O. (1968). *Individen och Massmedia*. Stockholm: EFI.
- Maietti, M. (2008). Player in Fabula: Ethics of Interaction as Semiotic Negotiation Between Authorship and Readership. In A. Jahn-Sudmann, & R. Stockmann, *Computer Games as a Sociocultural Phenomenon: Games Without Frontiers, War Without Tears* (pp. 99-107). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marinova, J. (2003, 10 21-24). Gender Stereotypes and the Socialization Process. *The role of men and boys in achieving gender equality*. Brasilia, Brazil: United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women.
- Martins, N., Williams, D. C., Harrison, K., & Ratan, R. A. (2009). A Content Analysis of Female Body Imagery in Video Games. *Sex Roles*.
- Mayes, A. (2014, 05 29). Gender and Video Games: How is Female Gender Generally Represented in Various Genres of Video Games? (X. Kondrat, Interviewer)
- McNay, L. (2000). *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- McQuail, D. (1987). *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- McQuail, D., Brown, J., & Blumler, J. (1972). The Television Audience: A Revised Perspective". In D. McQuail, *Sociology of Mass Communication*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Mikula, M. (2003). Gender and Videogames: the Political Valency of Lara Croft. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 17(1), 79-87.
- Morgan, M., & Shanahan, J. (2010). The State of Cultivation. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 337-355.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen* 16, 6-18.
- Nielsen, S. E., Smith, J. H., & Tosca, S. P. (2008). *Understanding Video Games: The Essential Introduction*. New York: Routledge.
- Punch, K. F., 2014. Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches. 3rd edition ed. s.l.: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Reynolds, E. (2005). Women in Gaming, and Women's Game Conferences.
- Sega. (n.d.). About Sega. Retrieved from Sega: <http://www.sega.nl/corporate/>
- Soukup, C. (2007). Mastering the Game: Gender and the Entelechial Motivational System of Video Games. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 30(2), 157-178.
- Stellalune. (n.d.). *Tomb Raider Timeline*. Retrieved from Stella's Tomb Raider Website: <http://tombraders.net/stella/timeline.html#1>

- The Meteoric Rise of Lara Croft*. (2014). Retrieved from Tomb Raider Chronicles: <http://www.tombraiderchronicles.com/lara/info.html>
- Thomspon, J. (2004). *Eating Disorders and Obesity: Definitions, Prevalence, and Associated Features*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Turkle, S. (1997, 12 15). Revolution in a Box, Part 12. *ABC Nightline*.
- Video Game History Timeline*. (n.d.). Retrieved from International Center for the History of the Electronic Games: <http://www.icheg.org/icheg-game-history/timeline/>
- Williams, D. C. (2003). *Trouble in River City: The Social Life of Video Games*. *Unpublished PhD dissertation*, 250. Michigan: University of Michigan.

**Xeniya Kondrat** is a postgraduate student in Media Studies: New Media and Digital Culture at the University of Amsterdam. Her paper “Gender and Video Games: How is Female Gender Generally Represented in Various Genres of Video Games?” was a part of her graduation project for her undergraduate study in International Communication and Media at the HU University of Applied Sciences Utrecht. Her current research interests include media depictions of society, gamification and ludification of the culture and Internet culture.