THE MOTHER SERIES: A STUDY OF GENDER
IN ROLE-PLAYING VIDEO GAMES

A Thesis
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in
Art

by

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ABSTRACT

THE MOTHER SERIES: A STUDY OF GENDER
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This thesis is a study of gender in role-playing video games, and how the Mother series breaks away from the use of traditional gender roles. By utilizing the performative theories of Judith Butler, it can be established that there is a harmful gender binary based on heteronormative values present in role-playing video games. However, the Mother series, created by Shigesato Itoi, is an example of a set of role-playing video games that present to a player in a positive manner identities that fall outside of traditional heteronormative gender roles. Posthuman theories are employed to show how these games create a dialogue with the concept of the cyborg, which is essentially a tool utilized for the erasure of difference. By navigating through the Mother series’ narrative and mechanics, players may interact with a game that allows them to create a self in a world not limited to a harmful gender binary.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the early 1990s, marketing for video games began its sharp shift from the idea of “family fun,” embodied largely in puzzle games such as Tetris, to games made specifically for a gendered binary. Various developers mass-produced masculine-oriented games featuring male protagonists aimed directly at males aged 13-25, leaving a large portion of the gaming community—females in particular—underrepresented.¹ Some notable examples include the violence-centered Street Fighter and Mortal Kombat series, and a slew of first-person shooters, starting with Doom.² With much difficulty, publishing companies such as Her Interactive started releasing what they called “video games for girls.”³ These games, such as Barbie Fashion Designer and Cosmo Virtual Makeover presented the masculine-dominated game market with a variety of titles specifically aimed at female (or feminine) youths.⁴ However, dividing the video game market into two unequal parts in a way that mirrored patriarchal societal beliefs concerning gender norms seemed to perpetuate a distinct gender binary within the content of video games,

¹ Sheri Graner Ray, Gender Inclusive Game Design: Expanding the Market (Hingham: Charles River Media Inc., 2004), xiii.
⁴ Graner Ray, xiii-xv.
with traditionally masculine traits such as violence and action directed at males, and tra-
ditionally feminine attributes such as beauty and passivity at females. While games struc-
tured around “family fun,” those that were abstract and thus largely gender-neutral, were
still being produced, more often than not a published game was aimed at one of these two
gendered markets, and most toward males.

Coinciding with the perpetuation of a distinct gendered binary in video game
content was the rise of the console-driven\(^5\) visual role-playing game that followed in the
steps of the tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons*, and was pioneered by the
publishing company Square Soft and their hit game, *Final Fantasy*.\(^6\) Many games
followed in the footsteps of *Final Fantasy*, such as the two popular titles *Chrono Trigger*
and *Secret of Mana*, and, of course, many other titles in the *Final Fantasy* series.\(^7\) These
games presented the player with an avatar\(^8\) to control and complete tasks within a
fantasy-driven virtual environment. These tasks, such as fighting enemies, would most
often culminate in a serious and complicated quest in which the avatar and his or her
friends would end up changing the (fantasy) world in some dramatic way, ultimately
serving as heroes.\(^9\) The avatar functions as an agent for the player, and allows the player
to create a self to identify with in his or her manipulation of the avatar’s actions.\(^10\) Later
games, particularly those that are categorized as digital (accessible through the internet

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5 Consoles allowed these games to reach a wide audience, including those who were not
familiar with computers at the time.
7 Kent, 539-41.
8 An avatar is the representation of a character in a virtual environment.
10 Waggoner, 11.
on various different media) and MMORPG (massive multiplayer online role-playing game) allow players quick access to interactions with several other players, and most, often than not, feature customizable avatars. However, for the purposes of this thesis, single-player role-playing games will be focused on for their ability to connect a single person to a created and narrative-driven world.

Since the avatar and the world of the role-playing game is represented in a visual and interactive manner, the representation of the avatar and its actions, combined with the elements of escapism that a fantasy realm offer, may also serve as agents for gender socialization in the creation of a virtual self. Gender socialization, the process through which the values and normative behaviors associated with particular genders (usually a gendered binary: male and female) in a society are learned, is no stranger to the realm of video games. Video games function as gendered play spaces, and distinct genres of games have developed and are marketed according to the previously-mentioned gendered binary. Alongside the division of masculine and feminine among game genres, games marketed toward males are generally linear and goal-driven, whereas games marketed toward females are typically non-linear and exploratory.11

A vast majority of the more popular role-playing video games are marketed to males and feature a core concept that is archetypically masculine, focusing on violence, action, and heroism. These games also marginalize and sexualize women in both representation and concept, offering to the player a hyper-masculine avatar with which to create a self. Combined with a game’s ability to draw a player into immersion through

interactivity and fantasy elements (escapism), the creation of a self becomes problematic as heteronormative values are perpetuated. However, I would argue that there is one series that is an exception, which serves as the subject for this thesis. The video game series *Mother* provides mechanics, an interface, and a setting that parody most fantasy narratives and role-playing games, creating a world in which immersion and escapism are challenged and conceptualized in the forefront of the gaming experience. This creates an outlet through which the fiction of the gender binary is made present in the creation of the self. It will be argued that all of these factors allow the *Mother* series to highlight the construction and instability of normative gender values, even while it appears to, at times, promote them.

An examination of how *Mother* highlights the construction and perpetuation of gender norms and the resistance of gender socialization through the interactive medium of video games may also present an interesting and largely underrepresented field of study. Video games are a type of interactive media that convey symbolic messages about gender roles and social reality through both the physical depiction of both female and male characters, and the occupation of certain roles by these characters. Studies have shown that the video games which have gained the most popularity among consumers most often focus on violence and portray femininity in problematic ways; female characters are shown as hyper-sexualized, with exaggerated feminine features and scant clothing (such as in later titles in the *Final Fantasy* series), often also playing a passive or supportive role such as submissive or victimized characters, mirroring trends found in
other pop culture media, such as comic books.\textsuperscript{12} The secondary or supportive roles of female characters, combined with overtly problematic portrayals of females in video games that promote violence, reinforce gender stereotypes such as the valuation of beauty over intellect. These concepts discourage many females (and others as well) from playing video games, as they struggle to identify with these characters. This further perpetuates the idea that the marketing for video games should be aimed toward males, or the masculine.\textsuperscript{13} By working through the structures that \textit{Mother} has used to both highlight and break down these constructions, I hope to develop a method for understanding and articulating how gender socialization functions within video games by promoting an awareness of the gender binary and how it may be overcome. This game serves as a potential model for changing both the gendered content of video games and the marketing decisions of the industry that produces them, and might ultimately lead to a more pronounced genre of games which focus on the deconstruction of the harmful gender binary.

\textsuperscript{13} Cunningham, 408.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

I consulted several sources in an attempt to discover how gender is defined within the role-playing genre of video games. I found that it is a widely accepted tenet of gender studies that the traditional system of a heteronormative gender binary is harmful. This system only recognizes two genders, and equates those genders with biological sex through the constructions of femininity and masculinity. Ultimately, the gender binary defines those that subvert traditional gender roles, through their behavior, clothing, or actions, as outliers.\(^\text{14}\) These outliers seem to have very little positive recognition in video games, as well.

While there is a moderate amount of literature discussing gender disparity and the sexualization of female characters in video games, there are nearly no writings which link the subject of gender performativity and the heteronormative gender binary to the medium of video games. Because of this, I turned to both Judith Butler and volumes on video game and gender theories, with the ultimate purpose of understanding how the performative carries over into the gaming sphere.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler disagrees with Foucault’s claims that gender is an effect rather than a cause. She argues that gender is fluid, and only parsed into a binary due to cultural mechanisms that work with a

heteronormative system of power.\textsuperscript{15} In essence, these cultural mechanisms make gender performative, as we continue to reiterate and solidify our gender through norms. This system seems very limiting, as it leaves little room for social constructions and relationships that defy the gender binary.

I explored the other works of Butler to further make a connection between video games as agents of gender socialization and the construction and reiteration of gender through performance. Although there are those who criticize Butler’s proposed solutions to a limiting heteronormative gender binary, her basic groundwork on performativity is helpful in understanding how gender is constructed, and may be deconstructed within the medium of video games.\textsuperscript{16}

I also consulted literature concerning a player’s interaction with a game’s avatar, or the creation of an alternate self during game-play, to draw connections between the motivations of a player and the motivations of his or her character within a given video game. The relationship between a player and his or her virtual self is an interesting dynamic, as it represents a type of interactive virtual performance. The ways in which these two selves constantly inform each other during game-play is critical to the understanding of how a player is susceptible to gender socialization in a video game.

I researched the history of both computer and console role-playing games, which was important for establishing a timeline of the developments within video games. I used a number of different sources, including \textit{Gamasutra}, an online journal for game development.

\textsuperscript{15} Judith Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity} (New York: Routledge, 1990), 94-6.

developers. I also consulted the works of game developers with a history of academic writing, as there is currently a distinct lack of literature concerning the specifics of the history of role-playing video games. Even though there is a wealth of writing on the internet which focuses on gaming, I avoided other sources such as blog entries from gamers and gaming fans, as there are little verifiable critical analyses involved with fan-generated gaming sites. I also avoided gaming publishers, as marketing bias inevitably hinders objective analysis.

Lastly, I consulted works in dialogue with posthumanism, mostly concerning the concept of the cyborg. There is an interesting correlation between the fusing of human and machine and the deconstruction of the gender binary as explored with other feminist ideologies. Both N. Katherine Haraway and Donna Hayles propose the cyborg as an agent of change with regards to traditional ideas about the body and how it relates to gender. The idea of the cyborg is used often in posthumanist theory to represent a merging of information with humans, and a subversive element of that merging is a deconstruction of the gendered body.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This purpose of this section is to explore various theories concerning performativity, feminism, and posthumanism, and how these theories relate to the construction of gender within the Mother series, an atypical video game series within the Japanese role-playing genre. Within this particular genre, and the video game industry as a whole, a binary exists that reflects the contemporary socio-cultural values surrounding the concept of gender. This binary separates and defines male from female and masculine from feminine within games, and often places the behaviors associated with these genders in opposition to one another. While there are some notable exceptions, more often than not males are associated with traditionally masculine behavior, and females are associated with traditionally feminine behavior. These behaviors contribute to gendered roles, which are valued differently as well. There is no primary cause for this polarized gender binary that seems to influence every aspect of our social spheres outside of gaming, but rather, many causes that are influenced and perpetuated by gender socialization. The practices that regulate gender formation and difference contribute to the creation of an identity. However, these practices also have largely succumbed to the values which constitute heteronormativity, making it culturally impossible for certain identities to exist, such as those which do not fall into the oppositions of male and female, or masculine and
feminine.\textsuperscript{17} The \textit{Mother} series, as examined through the methods by which society culturally constructs gender, may serve as an example of media pressing back against culturally imposed limitations on gender identity, offering to a player the chance to experience alternate identities that are not strongly represented within our cultural landscape or many other video games, which far more often feature stereotypical masculine heroes (using brute force, suppressing emotions, and taking command) such as Cloud from \textit{Final Fantasy VII}, and the stereotypically supportive females (using magic, overly-sensitive, and subservient) such as Marle from \textit{Chrono Trigger}. While the \textit{Mother} series may not have been well known when it was first released, it is currently gaining popularity almost eighteen years after the release of \textit{Earthbound}, the first game in the series released in North America, and may serve to act as a subversive agent even today, or, at the very least, a model for other games to strive toward. Video game gender theories will lay the groundwork for this argument.

\textbf{Video Games and Gender}

Video games as gendered play spaces, or agents of gender socialization, serve as interactive reflections of our cultural systems, practices, and socio-political causes, and as such, may either perpetuate or challenge the normative values of a particular society concerning sex and gender. I utilized semiotics to understand further how video games present gendered ideologies and values. Like any other medium that presents visual images, video games offer constructions based on symbolic associations. Certain signifiers may become associated with various values that promote and perpetuate a gender

\textsuperscript{17} Butler, \textit{Gender Trouble}, 2-14.
binary tied to biological sex. My analysis of semiotics and video game gender theory leads me to conclude that promoting the ideas that uphold a gender binary based on masculinity and femininity limit societal roles, and the imagination of players.18

A player’s identification with, or more specifically, creation of an alternate self while playing video games represents how this medium functions as an agent of gender socialization. Zach Waggoner, a scholar of video game theory, has explored players’ virtual and non-virtual selves, concluding that the relationship between the two is complex and dynamic, as both continually inform each other.19 This process may be explained by games offering motivation, control, and immersion to a player. Torben Grodal, a scholar of media studies, explains the first two factors:

Video games may have some high-order motivations, but for a series of reasons games will often also have a strong focus on the execution of low-level (sub)goals like simple navigation and handling processes. An intro to the game may provide the superior motivation, say, to crush an evil empire, and this will provide motivation for the lower-order processes.20

In short, the player will have an emotionally motivated experience with the simulation of game-play, based on the motivations that the interface and story of the game provide. The motivations of the character become the motivations of the player, connecting a player’s virtual self to his or her “real” self. This often leads to immersion, which Waggoner links to Janet Murray’s explanation of the importance of game-play:

In games we have a chance to enact our most basic relationship to the world—our desire to prevail over adversity, to survive our inevitable defeats, to shape

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19 Waggoner, 1.
our environment, to master complexity, and to make our lives fit together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Like the religious ceremonies of passage by which we mark birth, coming of age, marriage, and death, games are ritual actions allowing us to symbolically enact the patterns that give meaning to our lives.21

The creation of a virtual self, led by motivation and immersion, becomes susceptible to gender socialization, especially when video games promote an unhealthy and gendered binary.

How might video games like the Mother series resist this promotion of a gendered binary through interactivity and socialization? The answer may be in its blatant portrayal of this binary through both character representations and actions, and also through the subversive elements that seek to undermine this portrayal, all of which will be returned to at a later point. Most analyses of the relationships between video games and gender focus on two main concepts: the dominance of what are considered masculine game themes, and the representation of a gender (predominantly that which is considered female) within games. For the second issue, combined with a general lack of character presence, females in games are most often represented within narrow stereotypes, such as damsels in distress or subjects of the male gaze. These characters are also linked to what are considered feminine attributes, characteristics, and actions, such as passivity in the face of male action or the undertaking of supportive caretaker roles.22

Sexuality must be taken into account when considering issues of gender. Most often in video games, heterosexuality functions as a normative social value, and strongly

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affects how characters are developed and how storylines are formed. A multilevel approach must be taken when studying sexuality in games and the ways in which represented sexuality plays out in the depiction and reception of the concept of gender. Character representation—appearance, mannerisms, dialogue, and situations—must be taken into account, as well as game-play performativity, or the experience of manipulating a character and performing actions under a given sexual identity or gender.\textsuperscript{23}

The genre in which the \textit{Mother} series functions is also important. The genre of fantasy role-playing games allows the playing of a character (either chosen, customizable, or fully pre-determined) who generally gains experience points for performing tasks or participating in battles. These games, more often than not, portray male heroes that encourage a player to explore a masculine role as he or she performs actions relevant to the game-play. Heroism, as presented in video games, as in other pop culture media such as comic books, reflects various cultural understandings of the roles of women and men when it comes to both fighting the “bad” and upholding the “good” in any given society. These presentations might reflect traditional gender roles or contradict them entirely.\textsuperscript{24} Male action heroes are often presented as masculine, active, goal-oriented, and aggressive, using violence to fight enemies. Being young or handsome does not seem to matter for this role, but having the ability to captivate the women they are rescuing or assisting does. While male heroes may express sensitivity and warmth at given moments, they


generally do not give in to these feelings. Female action heroes tend to offer a more mediated and negotiated gender representation. They often possess traditionally masculine attributes such as aggressiveness and strength, yet also reflect at the same time a type of hyper-femininity in their beauty, youth, and sexuality. They play masculine roles, and yet, at the same time, are expected to operate within traditionally-outlined structures that support male power and reinforce the patriarchal notion that beauty, sexuality, and other such traits constitute the feminine. Ultimately, female heroes are depicted as stronger, faster, and more aggressive than normal human beings, and yet still remain trapped within traditionally and stereotypically defined gender roles.

While female heroes are often present in role-playing games, they are outnumbered by the male characters and mostly serve to support the male characters in the storyline, through their attributes or pre-defined actions. Experience points that are gained by completing goals are spent in different ways on male and female characters to advance certain traits. Male characters are often given boosts in strength and agility, while female characters are more likely to be given magical boosts that enable them to support the male characters, such as magical spells that may grant a male character higher defense.

Gender and Performativity

An overview of Butler’s feminist theories will further cement the groundwork for understanding the study of the construction of gender within the video game medium.

25 Camacho, 161.
26 Ibid., 162.
Butler argues that gender, sexuality, and the body are all constructs defined by the heteronormative systems of power, systems that put constraints on what is perceived as viable in our society. She states that gender is not inherent or automatic. It involves doing and performing, even if within sets of boundaries. Most of this performing occurs for something or someone outside of one’s self, just as the constraints and terms defining gender performativity also exist outside of one’s self. The qualifications for the subject of gender, that which traditionally and stereotypically designates one either a man or a woman, are the unstable products of social systems. Some have theorized that the totality of the systems represents an inherently masculine and oppressive normative value through which everything else (such as femininity and women) is judged. However, to vertically combine all of these systems is to unnecessarily designate a linear and polarized universal path that contributes to the identification of gender.

Butler applies phenomenological views to feminist theory to further explore the non-linear construction of gender. Phenomenology is interested in the separation of the physiological and the biological with regards to issues of embodiment, just as certain aspects of feminist theory take an interest in distinguishing gender from sex. Butler’s theories of gender and performativity may be compared to Merleau-Ponty’s theories concerning bodily experiences, in which he states that the body is historical rather than

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natural, and may embody cultural possibilities rather than essential facts.\textsuperscript{32} If the body takes on gendered aspects, it is because they are performed rather than simply existing as an essential component of sexual identities. Butler states that gender is ultimately constructed through “specific corporeal acts,” much like a character is constructed through dialogue and performance in theatrical situations.\textsuperscript{33} Susan Kozel states that through performance mediated by technology (such as video games), embodiment as we know it may be lost, for technology allows the performer to generate new thoughts and actions concerning gender, moving beyond simply importing normative values into performance.\textsuperscript{34} While Kozel’s assessment is ultimately negative, as she fears the loss of distinction of the performing arts from “everyday” performative values, this loss of embodiment may also work toward the (helpful) deconstruction of the notion of the gender binary.

Butler’s theories concerning kinship also highlight the power that video games have to display different types of relationships that fall outside of the normative, namely those that do not exist along what are traditionally thought of as heterosexual lines (or the nuclear family model). As Butler states in *Undoing Gender,*

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Kinship is neither a fully autonomous sphere, proclaimed to be distinct from community and friendship—or the regulations of the state—through some definitional fiat, nor is it “over” or “dead” just because, as David Schneider has consequentially argued, it has lost the capacity to be formalized and tracked in the conventional ways that ethnologists in the past have attempted to do.\textsuperscript{35}
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\textsuperscript{33}Butler, “Performative Acts.” 393.  
\textsuperscript{35}Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 102-3.
Just like any other medium that has the ability to depict visual representations of people, video games can highlight and strengthen different types of ideas concerning interactions between people, or can challenge and undercut these ideas. Types of kinship that are based solely on models of heterosexuality or the nuclear family structure (such as the notion that relationships between boys and girls always allude to future marriages) limit our social sphere and serve to strengthen the binary between gender identities.

However, the exploration of and exposure to ambiguous gender identities, and the relationships that may arise from interaction with these identities, may serve to helpfully deconstruct such a rigid gender binary. John M. Sloop, in *Disciplining Gender*, responds to a study of gender ambiguity by Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub, noting that, “In such works we are shown how the transgendered phenomenon and queered performances could potentially work to loosen, to make fluid, gender binaries and heteronormativity.”

Amelia Jones states that it is difficult to create or know ourselves without imagining a visual representation (a form of virtual embodiment), for these representations both render and confirm the notion of an embodied self. However, with new technologies offering much more variety in the mode of visual representation, we may move past traditional notions of embodiment and create identities, or selves, that break away from the rigid gender binary. Posthuman and cyborg theories argue yet more forcefully for the abandonment of this artificial binary, utilizing the idea of a consolidation of information through the process of becoming disembodied.

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Posthuman Theories

N. Katherine Hayles defines a common theme of the posthuman as that of the merging of the human with machine. She characterizes the following four assumptions as (non-exhaustive) elements of one variant of posthumanism:

First, the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life. Second, the posthuman view considers consciousness, regarded as the seat of human identity in the Western tradition long before Descartes thought he was a mind thinking, as an epiphenomenon, as an evolutionary upstart trying to claim that it is the whole show when in actuality it is only a minor sideshow. Third, the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born. Fourth, and most important, by these and other means, the posthuman view configures the human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines. In the posthuman, there are no essential differences or absolute demarcations between bodily existence and computer simulation, cybernetic mechanism and biological organism, robot teleology and human goals.\(^{38}\)

Posthuman theories are interested in defining the essential nature of the human body as a series of informational processes. Information has no body, and to align the human with these processes is to imply that embodiment is not a necessary condition for humans. While many feminist and postcolonial theories do not emphasize disembodiment on the same levels that posthuman theory does, they do align the self with a rational mind, connecting processes of information to the erasing of bodily categories, such as race and sex, which form the foundations of difference that oppressive systems of power rely upon.\(^{39}\)


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 4-5.
The result of a merging of a human with a machine is more commonly referred to as a cyborg. Donna Haraway defines a cyborg as “a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction.” She then defines social reality as both a construction and a fiction, complementing Butler’s definition of gender as performative and created. Haraway hopes to use the idea of cyborgs as a socialist-feminist counteractive agent against oppressive systems of power revolving around sex and gender. Cyborgs exist as constructions in a world that is post-gender and post-sexuality, and serve to equalize the status of all.

Cyborgs challenge what is considered natural, or the very idea of nature itself. Cyborgs also challenge the boundaries between physical and non-physical, much like video games. As Hayles has stated, information has no body and thus embodiment is de-emphasized in the age of the posthuman. Haraway similarly defines the cyborg as that which makes the definition of the body imprecise, challenging social identities. The state of being either male or female contains no natural bindings or essential unities. Haraway defines both biotechnologies and communications technologies as some of the tools that will redefine the body in a posthuman and cyborg (post-gender) world. These technologies, which video games complement, have the ability to create new social relations among humans.

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41 Ibid., 475-78.
42 Ibid., 478-79.
43 Ibid., 485.
CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH

I will now outline the origin and perpetuation of themes and trends that contribute to the gendered binary present in many video games through the history of role-playing video games, out of which the *Mother* series grew. I will also provide an analysis of the games that serve as the basis for these trends, followed by an analysis of the *Mother* series with applied theory, which will lay the groundwork for the main argument of my thesis.

Computer Role-playing Video Games

As a genre, the roots of role-playing video games may be traced back to the early 1970s to the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons*, a pen and paper game that introduced the idea of rolling dice to determine character statistics, leveling up, and the exploration of dungeons. In essence, *D&D* utilized the concept of role-playing being dictated by a set of rules, merging the creation of identities with game-play. This would serve as the starting point for computer role-playing games, allowing players to virtually take part

44 Computer games were largely limited to being interacted with solely on a computer. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, consoles offered a cheaper opportunity to play video games, as many were not familiar with computers.
in the expression of another identity.\textsuperscript{47} While this and the following section focus on the distinction between console-driven Japanese role-playing genres, these pen and paper games have a direct connection to the lineage of computer role-playing games.

Many of the earliest computer role-playing games, having been at the very least inspired by the structure and game-play of \textit{D&D}, feature a fantasy setting complete with dragons, castles, and dungeons. One of the more popular computer role-playing games, \textit{Rogue} (1980), contained an elaborately complex interface that managed gameplay and tracked character statistics as players navigated and fought their way through various procedural dungeons.\textsuperscript{48} It featured typical high-fantasy elements such as magic spells, enchanted armor, and mythical beasts. However, the visuals within the game were largely abstract. \textit{Rogue} featured ASCII-based artwork, with a player’s avatar represented as an “at” sign (@). Enemies were often depicted as the first letter of their name (such as “F” for Frog).\textsuperscript{49} While these visuals were integral to gameplay and strategy, they did not give players any sort of naturalistic representation with which to associate their characters. The back-story to the game was also simple, and gave players little incentive to create a fleshed-out role. \textit{Rogue}, and the games that were inspired by it, focused heavily on strategy as opposed to narrative or the creation of a rich, alternate identity. Rather than encountering situations in which the player would have to make decisions concerning the


\textsuperscript{48} Keith Burgun, \textit{Game Design Theory: A New Philosophy for Understanding Games} (Boca Raton: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 79.

development of the storyline or his or her character, *Rogue’s* game-play consisted of managing equipment, fighting monsters, and navigating traps, which basically boiled down to manipulating numerical values.\(^5^0\) While this may have left room for the imagination to run wild, this game was largely about the rules themselves. Other computer role-playing games that were released during this time period, such as *Akalabeth* (1979) and *Dunjonquest: Temple of Apshai* (1979), were structured in a similar manner. Although these visual role-playing games grew out of a masculine-dominated tradition (fantasy role-play in which the male or masculine characters were the ones likely to engage in battle), the development of an alternate gendered identity seemed to be hindered by a lack of narrative or player choice.

This shifted radically with the creation of games such as *Ultima I: The First Age of Darkness* (1980) and *Wizardry* (1981). *Ultima* was the first computer role-playing game to utilize tile-based graphics, allowing a player to witness visually the expansive game-world and elements of the narrative within game-play.\(^5^1\) In addition to this, a more complex back-story was introduced, and rather than the goal of the game consisting of simply traveling through various procedural dungeons and fighting off monsters, a clearly defined mission was presented to players to complete. Players could also determine their character’s class and alignment. A gendered avatar was also introduced, and players found themselves controlling a male character within the game-world.\(^5^2\) Later games in

\(^{50}\) Barton, “Computer Role-Playing Games Part I,” 2.


\(^{52}\) Loguidice and Baron, 340.
the *Ultima* series would allow a player to choose his or her own avatar’s gender.⁵³ The *Wizardry* series followed this same path, allowing players more choices with regards to the characters they were controlling.⁵⁴ The genre of computer role-playing games seemed to be developing with regards to the creation of a virtual identity, allowing players to make their own decisions (within a framework) concerning moral alignment, class, race, and gender. While the graphics within these games were still rather abstract, the design and structure of these two series opened up a gateway for the connection of visuals and attributes to various different (created) cultural categories, such as gender and race.

A few years following the first installments of *Ultima* and *Wizardry*, computer role-playing games entered what many gamers and developers call “The Golden Age,” which loosely falls within the years of 1985-1993.⁵⁵ During this period, more role-playing games that followed similar structures as their predecessors were being developed further. One such game, *Oubliette* (1977), served as an early model for this time period, giving players more options with regards to character development and offering players more choices within a wide variety of classes and attributes. It also allowed for multiple players, creating the opportunity for interaction between characters.⁵⁶ It was during this “Golden Age” period that computer role-playing games began to attract a wider audience. *Tales of the Unknown Vol. 1: The Bard’s Tale* (1985) was the first installment of a series that offered players a simple yet engaging interface, allowing those new to the

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⁵³ Graner Ray, 27.
genre to learn how to play easily. Game narratives and themes were also reaching out further, offering more complicated storylines and character development that broke out of the Tolkien-inspired high-fantasy landscape. The third installment of Tales of the Unknown (The Thief of Fate) allowed players to explore different universes on their game-journey, even offering travels to Nazi Germany. The niche market that had developed out of D&D was expanding rapidly, offering to a wider variety of players numerous worlds outside of dragons, monsters, and wizards, in which characters, or alternate identities, could be developed.

Another innovation during the “Golden Age” was the creation of teams, as shown in the Phantasie (1985) series. Rather than controlling one avatar, the player could now control many, micro-managing several different characters’ attributes and roles. Phantasie also introduced the idea of the “mini-game,” a game (or games) that could be included within the main game to offer players even more character-choices. Graphics continued to develop, and players were offered even more worlds that started to look like real places, locations that were not endless dungeons or recycled fantasy-scapes. A few computer role-playing games that were blatantly non-high-fantasy in theme were also developed, such as Alternate Reality: The City (1985). Real-time movement and battle, and three-dimensional game-play were also introduced. As computer role-playing games developed alongside technological innovations, they continued to reach wider audiences.

58 Ibid., 3.
59 Ibid., 5.
Japanese Role-playing Games (Console Gaming)\textsuperscript{60}

With many more character attributes, non-abstract graphics, and rendering now available, computer role-playing games could offer to players limited representations of characters that featured visual constructs of gender (female sexualization plays a limited role, as rendering at the time was not capable of producing nuanced representations). While the majority of these video games focused on high-fantasy elements and strategic game-play rather than role-play (players did have the chance to use their imagination in creating a character and storyline, but this was not necessary or encouraged to progress within the game), having grown out of tabletop text-driven games, some Japanese developers decided to expand the genre further, creating a categorical split between “western role-playing games” (WRPG) and “Japanese role-playing games” (JRPG).\textsuperscript{61} Today, these terms are most commonly defined (although not at times particularly accurately) according to the linearity of a game. WRPGs are generally thought of as non-linear with regards to game-play (and are usually computer-based), whereas JRPGs feature a linear goal-path (though there are exceptions, such as \textit{Suikoden} and \textit{Dragon Quest}), are narrative-driven, and are usually console-based.\textsuperscript{62} This expansion (and split) may be represented at its earliest with a title called \textit{Dragon Quest} (when released in 1986 in Japan, and re-titled \textit{Dragon Warrior} in 1989 when released in the U.S.), which was released for the Nintendo Entertainment System.

\textsuperscript{60} A comprehensive list of RPGs and their release dates may be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_role-playing_video_games.
\textsuperscript{61} The definition of this categorical split was likely created by gamers, and suspiciously mirrors the East-West binary construct. Nonetheless, at present, many games are developed according to the definitions of both WRPG and JRPG.
*Dragon Quest* combined the overhead view used for exploration of the world map with a battle system that was menu-based, features that had appeared separately in both *Ultima* and *Wizardry*, respectively. With its heavily text-based game mechanics and a unique combination of visual perspectives, it was received well in Japan but failed to gather a large player-base outside of the country. Over time, various sequels to the original *Dragon Quest* were released, and it gained popularity in Japan and in the rest of the world. The narrative flow of the game was based on small episodic encounters with non-player characters that the avatar meets along his or her journey. It is worth noting that this series allowed players to choose the gender of their avatars (gender choice does not affect game-play in any meaningful manner with regards to character attributes).

One year after the release of the first *Dragon Quest* in Japan, the first game of the *Final Fantasy* series emerged, developed for the Nintendo Entertainment System. This series exemplifies the narrative structures that most JRPGs follow to this day with regards to storyline and character building. The creator of the game, Hironobu Sakaguchi, stated,

I started with the story and the overall worldview of the game. I had the graphics designer do the drawings. Initially, the process was different from what we do now. Currently, we write the story completely and work from the storyline. When we first started *Final Fantasy I*, we were really limited, technologically. So what I had to do first was make a basic rough idea for the game [then we would test it]. We had to deal with the hardware first. By doing

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so, we would come up with the graphics on the screen and figure out, based on the limitations and the capabilities of the hardware, how big the world was going to be and how many locations I could have. After that, I would incorporate my rough ideas and build up a story based on what I had to work with. It was kind of working backwards.66

The narrative structure and character development of this game, along with other console role-playing games being developed at that time, was severely limited by technology. Rather than having a story or script written, and developing the game’s mechanics around that, the narrative, world, and character progression of Final Fantasy was built around technological specifications. The characters in the game were mostly pre-determined, and players could not choose their gender, moral alignment, or other such attributes. While players were able to name their characters, they would remain both male and masculine in appearance and mannerisms. They could, however, choose to place their characters in one of four classes, developing character attributes by engaging in battles.67 A player’s progression through the game consisted of journeying through a pre-determined storyline, and the winning conditions were based on how well a player could navigate through quests and manage battles.

As more titles within the Final Fantasy series were released during the 1990s, female avatars were introduced, but also remained largely static with regards to customization. Since graphical limitations during this time dictated that character sprites,68 animation, and background scenery would remain abstract, the depiction of the female (or male) body would not be the main determinant of gender stereotyping during actual

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66 Kent, 541.
67 Final Fantasy.
68 A sprite is a digitally-rendered visual representation of a character or object in a video game.
game-play, though trends were already emerging, and many rudimentary depictions of female characters with sexualized clothing and features existed. What did contribute largely to a gendered binary between male and female characters were the dialogue, predetermined narrative, the distribution of skills and attributes that are used in battle scenarios, the roles given to characters, common gendered tropes, and most importantly, the lack of influential female player and non-player characters.

Evidence of the formulaic construction of this gendered binary in graphically-limited role-playing games of the 1990s may be found in games outside of the Final Fantasy series as well. Chrono Trigger (1995), while representing a Japanese-made game that broke away from the stereotypical linear progression of earlier JRPGs, nonetheless employs gendered conventions that pervade this video game genre. Players may control several characters in this game, and while there appears to be more of a balance between what is traditionally thought of as male and female (there are two humanoid males, three humanoid females, a male frog and a masculine robot) as compared to other JRPGs, these characters possess stereotypical masculine and feminine attributes that are traditionally linked to sex. The player’s main character, Chrono, is the “hero” of the group, and is represented as a male youth. One of the first quests the player must complete as Chrono involves saving the princess Marle, a female youth, from the clutches of an evil demon, representing one of the most common tropes in both fantasy fiction and video games.

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69 Camacho, 161.
70 Johnson, 411.
(even outside of the role-playing genre), the damsel-in-distress. Marle is also a playable character, and may assist Chrono in various battles. Chrono fights with an improbably large sword, and possesses powerful magic that deals damage to enemies. Marle may also attack, but her blows are considerably weaker, and cause little damage. Her main role during battles is that of a healer-mage, supporting the male characters as they deal massive amounts of damage. Another female character, Lucca, also possesses magic, and is only really effective in battle when supporting Chrono with fire-based supportive skills. A male frog, simply named “Frog,” also wields a sword and deals damage quickly. As with many other role-playing video games, the magic and support roles are delegated to the females, whereas the males are privileged in the close-up weapon-based fighting that is the core of game-play and narrative. The one female character whose main attacks are physical and damage-based, Ayla, is represented as a scantily clad prehistoric warrior who manipulates enemies with her seduction skills. M. Burgess, Stermer, and S. Burgess sum up this situation with relation to violence portrayed in video games nicely:

One could argue that the relative lack of illustrated action on the part of the female characters is actually a positive portrayal given that much of the action male characters portray is violent. Unfortunately, as video games currently exist, violence connotes power. No characters, male or female, are portrayed as central to a game by stopping violence, or offering peaceful solutions. By excluding women from the action roles, they are relegated to groupie status.

The primary support of the gender binary within these role-playing games is the storyline, dialogue, and pre-determined character development. In Chrono Trigger, back-stories are provided for many of the main characters that Chrono encounters. Both

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72 Bryce, 303.
Frog and Magus (a male enemy who later joins the team) have connecting storylines and
are represented as heroic figures in positions of power before joining Chrono on his
quest. Robo, the masculine robot, is given his own story arc within the game, and players
learn of his life inside of a futuristic factory. Marle’s history as a princess is glossed over,
and players are given very little information on her character. Lucca’s personal back-
story is also absent, and players only learn of her family’s history of making machines,
and of her mother as a hampered victim who became trapped in a machine and had her
legs sliced off, after which she was confined to the domestic space of her home. Ayla, the
prehistoric warrior, is depicted as a belligerent clan leader with almost no sign of
character development (she also turns over leadership of the clan to a young male just to
join Chrono on his journey). The narrative of the game seems to follow in the footsteps of
each character’s battle attributes, turning the female characters into Chrono’s “groupies.”
These themes are common throughout role-playing games of both the past and present,
and while there are those that deviate from the seemingly formulaic construction of
gender, more often than not at least one of these major themes (females as supporters,
sexualized damsels-in-distress, characters with less influential roles, and males as action-
oriented, heroic, direct, and rich in character) will fall into line with the model that
Chrono Trigger exemplifies.

The Mother Series

The Mother series, consisting of Mother 1 (1989), Earthbound (1995), and
Mother 3 (2006), was released over a seventeen-year period of time, and its totality
represents a rare break from the gendered ideologies that role-playing video games that
depict abstracted (technologically confined) characters represent. While *Mother 3* was released much later than the previous two titles in the series, the character and world design within the game fit the representational style of the rest of the series. Although there are some elements that conform to previous models of gender stereotyping present in role-playing games, the *Mother* series—especially *Earthbound* and *Mother 3*—contains characters, settings, narratives, and themes that seem to subvert a heteronormative value system, offering to a player the chance to experience virtual interactions with concepts (and characters) that do not fall into a neatly divided gendered binary. The remainder of this essay will focus on the last two games in the series, as the first title, *Mother*, was never released outside of Japan.\(^7\)

On the surface, *Earthbound* seems to follow tradition with regards to character stereotypes and narrative development. A player may control four different characters, three male and one female, all of whom are given attributes that correspond to traditional masculine and feminine gender roles, consisting of actions performed within the narrative and items and abilities that may be utilized during battle scenes. All of the characters have their own distinct personality and battle commands.\(^8\) Two of the males, Ness and

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\(^7\) The name *Mother 2* is used in Japan for *Earthbound*. Fans have speculated that this is due to the game being referred to as “Mother Earth.”

\(^8\) Fans have offered ROMs (a computer file containing a copy of the data from a game cartridge) of this game, but its bad translation, limited technical specifications (there is significantly less text than the original), and buggy interface have dissuaded many from playing it. *Mother 3* was also never officially released outside of Japan, but its ROM has received excellent translation and is virtually bug-free. It also has a significant cult following, much like *Earthbound*.

\(^9\) The main character, Ness, participates in dialogue sequences but does not actually possess a “voice” (he never speaks). This is likely due to the developers wishing him to remain a “blank slate” for players to fill in their own dialogue. Nonetheless, he is given a back-story that positions him as an “average” and masculine young male.
Jeff, possess stereotypically masculine character developments that are performed through both the items they may use in battle and the actions that each take to progress the storyline.\textsuperscript{77} Ness is positioned as an “average” enterprising male youth who has the full motherly type support of the female members of his family (his mother and sister), and the monetary support of his father (who is absent throughout the entirety of the game and may only be contacted via the telephone).\textsuperscript{78} His signature weapon is a baseball bat, and he is the main character and also the leader throughout the game. Jeff comes from an all-male academy, and is able to build and fix various different types of machines. The weapons that he utilizes consist of rocket launchers, air guns, and laser beams. Jeff is clearly associated with science and intelligence. In these two characters we see the attributes of leadership and scientific knowledge connected to both the masculine and males.

The other two members of the group that the player may control provide the counterpoints to Ness and Jeff, rounding out the stereotypical Western heteronormative gender divide. These two members are Paula and Poo. Paula, a young female, is under the careful watch of both her mother and her father, who run a pre-school. Both Paula and her mother act as caretakers to the young children of the school, positioning Paula as a “motherly” type. She joins the party of youths after being rescued from a cult by Ness (fulfilling a requirement for the “damsel-in-distress” trope), and must gain permission

\textsuperscript{77} The main character in \textit{Mother 1} was named Ninten (a reference to Nintendo), so it is quite possible that the name “Ness” is a reference to the Super Nintendo, which was abbreviated as the “SNES.”

\textsuperscript{78} David Popenoe, \textit{Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies} (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1988), 58.
from her father to go adventuring. Her main weapon in battle is a frying pan, and she also provides magical support to the team through both her healing spells and her element-based attacks. In Paula we see the concept of female connected to the feminine through her caretaking and “motherly” attributes (and more directly through her use of a frying pan as a weapon). Her magical abilities also connect her to nature through the element-based spells that she may use. Poo’s character development is a bit more complex. Poo is a young male character who comes from a setting called Dalaam that contains what appears to be a mash-up of architecture and objects that are stereotypically thought of as Eastern. He is a prince, and has captured the attention of all of the young females within this area. Poo’s main weapon is his body, as he uses martial arts to fight against foes. He is also in possession of the same elemental magic spells that Paula is able to use. Poo’s masculinity is affirmed by the strength of his body and his ability to captivate females, but he also represents the stereotype of the effeminate East through his sexual attraction and possession and use of elemental, nature-themed magic. The actions that all of the characters possess, such as magical spells and physical attacks, are able to be performed by the player (or not), possibly reaffirming the notion of a stereotypical and gendered grouping of people. While the appearance and back-story of each character is unable to be changed, players may choose whether or not they wish to have the characters perform specific actions.

80 Iver B. Neumann, Uses of the Other: “The East” in European Identity Formation (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 2-7.
Non-player characters follow the same trends. There are significantly more males in the game, and these characters are generally associated with strength, leadership, and physical power. Females that are significant to the storyline are few in number and often fill supporting roles. The storyline of the game is linear and follows a pre-determined narrative. The four main characters that the player may control in this game affirm the concept of a performed and heteronormative gender binary (as well as an East-West binary). This all seems fairly standard for a JRPG.

The subversive elements of the game are contained within its setting, various chapters of the narrative, game-play mechanics, the introduction of Jeff as a gay character, and also characters with no discernible gender. The first three elements are parodic in nature. *Earthbound* does not take place in a medieval high-fantasy or science-fiction setting, but is set in Eagleland, a world full of highways, malls, and cults. It seems to be a parody of American culture. The name *Earthbound* itself implies that the game will not be fantasy-themed. The team of Ness and his friends do not rescue princesses and fight dragons, but rather, bypass roadblocks, check out books from the library, and shop at malls. Game-play mechanics and the battle system also serve as parodic elements, deviating from more traditional role-playing games. Ness’s team does not drink potions or seek out wizards to provide them with magical tonics to aid in battle. Status ailments do not consist of paralysis at the hands of a basilisk, or curses found in ancient swords. When someone loses health in a battle, eating a hamburger will serve to restore it. Ness and his team may catch colds and have sunstroke, both of which are curable with over-the-counter items from any drugstore. The world that this team lives in resembles the real-life world of many people who play this game.
Even battles, which are a necessary component of progressing within *Earth-bound*, are tame in comparison to other role-playing games. The ultimate goal of the game is to defeat an alien force that has influenced the people of Eagleland. This alien force causes these people to attack Ness and his team at times. The player is not allowed to kill anyone outright, however, and winning battles consists of “bashing” people (or animals) until they regain their senses. The team does not use swords, staves, or even guns to fight, but is able to purchase baseball bats, frying pans, and yo-yos from department stores to use in their battles.

Another major point of subversion is that Jeff, from the academy, who joins Ness’s team after Paula, is positioned as gay. While the inclusion of non-heterosexual or transsexual characters in role-playing video games is not confined to the *Mother* series (*Chrono Trigger* introduces a transsexual character, Magus’s henchman Flea, who is positioned as a narcissistic enemy within the game), Jeff, and his academy roommate Tony, represent a minority in video games. What makes Jeff’s case interesting is that he is not referred to as gay, nor does he possess markedly different behavior, dialogue, or mannerisms that would distinguish him from the rest of the group regarding his sexual orientation. There is only one moment that serves to hint at Jeff’s sexuality. Nearing the end of the game, Ness’s team receives a batch of letters from friends. One is for Jeff, from his roommate Tony. In the letter, Tony expresses how much he cannot wait to see Jeff again, and makes some endearing comments. This letter has sparked fans of *Earth-bound*, on various gaming websites, to speculate about Jeff’s sexuality. The game’s designer, Shigesato Itoi, confirmed their speculations in an interview: “I designed him to be a gay child. In a normal, real-life society, there are gay children, and I have many gay
friends as well. So I thought it would be nice to add one in the game, too.” What makes Jeff significant is that the player, controlling Ness, is not reminded of his sexuality throughout the game, nor do Ness or his friends treat Jeff any differently from anyone else. The player, positioned as Ness, essentially has a gay friend within the story, and he is no different from any other friends.

Perhaps the most significant subversive element that *Earthbound* introduces is a group of humanoid figures with no discernible gender. Ness and his friends encounter a village where all of the denizens are called “Mr. Saturn.” Mr. Saturn is visually depicted as a round, flesh-colored spherical shape with a face that dominates its figure. Its features include a large nose, feet, and long, feline whiskers. It has one hair with a large red bow attached protruding from the top of its head. Eyebrows and two small dots for eyes complete the figure of Mr. Saturn. All of Mr. Saturn’s characteristics seem to mimic human features, but do not coalesce into an actual human figure. Mr. Saturn breaks down those clear boundaries and presents the player with a figure that is important, yet unclear with regards to gender. Its prefix is “Mr.,” which denotes male, yet it wears a larger version of the same red bow as Paula. Mr. Saturn is gentle and generous, serving at times as a caretaker for the team, yet it is also intelligent, providing Ness with information and insight that is unable to be garnered elsewhere. Even the text through which Mr. Saturn speaks is different from the text providing the rest of the speech and narrative for the game, depicted in strange, almost child-like scrawl. Mr. Saturn is highly influential and becomes important to Ness’s team at two points in the game, one of which determines the outcome of the most important battle. The village offers Ness and his team items that are unparal-

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leled, granting immense health boosts and powerful weapons. Mr. Saturn, with its unde-
cipherable gender and strange circumstances, brings to the forefront the issue of gender
instability in this constructed parody world.

*Mother 3* also contains elements of parody that work to subvert both gender
roles and role-playing games as a genre. Most of the game takes place in a land reminis-
cent of American suburbia and rural countryside. The storyline seems to parody the histo-
ry of American capitalism, with the quaint town that the team of main characters resides
in becoming overwhelmed with mass media, greed, and money. The narrative and main
objective of the game is still linear, but also considerably grittier than *Earthbound*, with
death and violence highlighted rather than subdued.

Like *Earthbound*, *Mother 3* introduces a number of characters that do not fall
into neat and clearly gendered categories. Players are able to control a series of characters
that progress through the game, including a young boy, a dog, a monkey, an elderly hu-
man father, a fumbling man, and a masculine woman (who happens to be a princess, but
conceals her identity). Unlike *Earthbound*, *Mother 3* does not provide many clear values
(through character traits and battle actions) that define gender within a heteronormative
society. Both Lucas and his father utilize sticks to fight with (the value “stick” will fill in
the weapon value within the game’s user interface). Duster’s main weapon is his own
pair of shoes (he throws them or kicks enemies with them) as well as a giant stapler and
various other quirky “thief tools.” Kumatora’s weapon is a pair of gloves, as her main
attack is the punch.\(^82\) She also possesses psychic magical spells. Lucas is the only other

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\(^82\) While shoes and gloves may not be considered weapons, they do affect battle statistics
and fill in the “weapon” equipped slot within the game.
character that players are able to perform spells with, and it is interesting to note that while Kumatora possesses all of the element-based spells, only Lucas is able to perform support-spells such as “shield” and “defense up.” Kumatora is also in possession of spells that hinder enemies, such as “hypnosis” and “paralysis,” and only she is able to perform them (through player interaction). Aside from a few minor health-regenerating spells, Kumatora possesses the bulk of the offensive magic, while Lucas carries the main supportive and healing spells.

Character traits and back-stories in *Mother 3* tend to be a bit more fluid as well when compared to *Earthbound*. Flint is known as the silent and strong type, but Lucas is positioned as a weak and sensitive crybaby. Duster is clumsy, has a limp, and his halitosis is emphasized throughout the game. Kumatora is a princess, yet she is masculine (evidenced by her short hair, her tough persona, and her violent tendencies), and is also known for being both wise and strong. A player must perform actions with all of these characters that reaffirm these attributes and abilities within the narrative of the game, giving him or her control over a wide range of personalities and gendered traits that are not as polarized as the characters in *Earthbound*.

The ties and interactions that various characters share with each other in both *Earthbound* and *Mother 3* may pose a breaking away from normative and traditional values concerning male and female (and other) within relationships. Rather than strengthening a heterosexual and nuclear-family worldview, as with the romance-seeking functions

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in games such as *Final Fantasy VII*, in which the hero completes a sub-game within the
game that determines with whom he is able to go on a date, romance, marriage, and het-
erosexual ties appear to take a back seat. There is no dating sub-game within either of
these games, and the player is not able, through the control of characters, to engage in
either romantic or marriage preparatory behavior. The males and females of the game
share the same relationships to one another, and are exposed to the same amounts of
danger (within the interface of the games).

Lucas encounters a group who call themselves the Magypsies several times
during his journey. Shigesato Itoi, the designer of the *Mother* series, mentioned in an
interview that the Magypsies represented “a fusion of man and woman”:

> It’s because the world in the game is so macho. The good guys in the game
are strong and they fight. The same goes for the bad guys. So in other words,
it’s set up so that might equals right. “Power is Beautiful.” And amid all of
that, there are these non-men yet non-women people who have already gone
so far as to accept their fate of death. If these characters really existed.... I
would want people who play MOTHER 3 not to act hostile towards them. I
would want them to have fun together in a world they both share.85

This statement represents Itoi’s intentions with regards to the character development of
the Magypsies.

The Magypsies consist of seven beings, all of whom possess traditional femi-
nine and masculine features combined, such as groomed facial hair, dresses, make-up,
strength, caring, sensitivity, and power. As with Mr. Saturn in *Earthbound*, the Magyp-
sies are extremely influential and integral to the storyline, giving Lucas information and
objects that are necessary to advance the narrative. Also like Mr. Saturn in *Earthbound*,

85 A translation of an interview held with Shigesato Itoi for *Nintendo Dream*, accessed
the Magypsies live on their own, on the outskirts of towns or villages, reminding the player of their status as outsiders (depicting their role as gypsies within the world of *Mother 3*). The player, as Lucas, encounters the Magypsies both as a group and individually throughout the game, making them highly visible as milestones to the progress of the storyline. Mr. Saturn also happens to be present within *Mother 3* (and largely serves the same role). We see with these two games a push back against both gender stereotyping and the structure of role-playing video games.

In addition to providing elements that seem to subvert heteronormative gender values, *Earthbound* and *Mother 3* introduce the cyborg as a further subversive agent, giving players the opportunity to control an avatar (or interact with a character) that is some form of a blend between machine and human. In *Earthbound*, Ness and his friends are given the choice to have their “essence” implanted into robot forms to be able to travel back in time. This leads to a lengthy procedure within the game, involving both the choice to be made and the surgical procedure that follows. The procedure is depicted as a black screen with an image of each character consecutively being shown, with loud drilling noises. When it is done, the characters’ bodies are gone, having been replaced by boxy robotic forms. This happens near the end of the game, and players are given the choice (the characters’ choice) as to whether or not they wish the procedure to be done, as there is a chance that the characters’ “essence” may not return to their bodies after the adventure is over. The main storyline of the game will not progress unless the player chooses to become infused with the robotic form, although he or she may still explore the game-world, fight enemies, and engage in dialogue with others. If the player does choose to become a cyborg, he or she has the opportunity to travel in time and save the game-
world. The characters must overcome their bodies, gender and difference included (all of the robots look the same, with the exception of Ness’s red hat being placed on the one in the lead), to progress further. This narrative twist within *Earthbound* represents not only a direct reference to the cyborg, but also the ability that video games possess to create various different forms of identities, even inorganic ones. Interestingly enough, this choice and transformation all takes place in Saturn Village, the home of those with very different identities (with the help of Mr. Saturn as well). This represents an interesting set of philosophical choices for the player. It may remind the player of the status of his or her own body, that he or she is a flesh-and-blood body performing actions through a digital representation of a flesh-and-blood body, a body that is given the choice to become a robotic body (to the player, a digital representation of a robotic body). At the very least, the player will be reminded of his or her humanity, and may even be engaged in thoughts concerning the state of the human body and the impact that machines (and perhaps the very console that he or she has been playing on) have on the body and all of its associated values, such as gender.

*Mother 3* takes a different approach to the idea of the cyborg. The overarching theme of the game involves capitalist influences slowly taking over an idyllic, peaceful town. The main villain, Porky (who acts as a sidekick to the main villain of *Earthbound*), uses machinery and robotic body enhancements to attack the playable characters who are working against him. He even re-animates Lucas’s dead brother Claus by using what seems to be mechanical parts, and then turns a much stronger Claus against the party of
heroes. While Claus’s cyborg body is used in a negative fashion against the heroes that the player controls, the machinery has clearly re-animated and empowered Claus. Instead of giving players a standard and heteronormative set of characters who are then transformed and disembodied by their actions and choices with not-so-standard characters, *Mother 3* offers a cast that is diverse from the beginning, and places an emphasis on empowerment through the blending of machinery and human (ultimately, the cyborg). An underlying message may be that the cyborg may make us better and stronger. The use of cyborgs in *Mother 3* also convey the more subversive message that machines may erase difference, as each secondary character that is affected by Porky’s machine enhancements acts with the same actions and purpose.

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86 The two brothers are likely inspired by characters from *The Notebook* by Agota Kristov (New York: Grove Press, 1986).
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

With the *Mother* series, players may encounter alternate, virtual identities, themes, and landscapes that do not fit within the standard stereotypical JRPG landscape. Both *Earthbound* and *Mother 3* take the structure of the role-playing video game and introduce elements to players that mirror and parody aspects of real life, introducing characters that do not quite fit into the clearly-defined socio-cultural categories that serve to support systems of power. Players may explore virtual roles that may serve to enhance rather than stifle their imaginations, and which thereby work to counter the limiting heteronormative values that pervade our society. While the *Mother* series was not well-received upon release, years later it developed a large fanbase due to its quirky personality, and *Earthbound* has even gained a spot on the Wii U’s virtual console, a major feat for a game that sold poorly when it was released. While it still may be classified as a “cult classic” video game, it has recently received much attention from player-driven game and journalistic sites such as *Kotaku* and *Game Informer*, which focus on its narrative and parodic themes, apparently still relevant in the gaming world today.\(^7\)

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Earthbound and Mother 3 are two games in a series that gives players the chance to create and interact with identities that represent both heteronormative values and those that subvert the normative. Earthbound positions the player as a male hero, conforming to norms concerning gender. The game then seeks to undermine these norms by employing parody, introducing the characters of Jeff and Mr. Saturn, and depicting a transformation from human to machine, all of which are witnessed by the player through controlling the actions of characters and having these characters interact with others within the narrative. Mother 3 positions the player in a different world, one in which gender is still performed, but fluid from the beginning. Several characters, most of whom do not conform to normative values, are able to be controlled by the player, who will then interact with other characters (especially the Magypsies) who stray even further outside of the boundaries of heteronormativity. Lastly, Mother 3 also contains elements that are in dialogue with current posthuman theories, taking the idea of combination of the robotic with the human from Earthbound and commenting further on empowerment and the erasure of difference. This series may, therefore, be held as an exemplar of games that do not conform to traditional notions of gender, and thus are less limiting to the imagination of players who experience it.
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