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What Does It Mean to Be a Female Character in “Indie” Game Storytelling? Narrative Framing and Humanization in Independently Developed Video Games

Mildred F. Perreault
East Tennessee State University, perreaultm@usf.edu

Gregory P. Perreault
Appalachian State University, gperreault@usf.edu

Andrea Suarez
Appalachian State University

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What does it mean to be a female character in “indie” game storytelling?

Narrative Framing in Independently-Developed Video Games

Abstract

Video games have long held a spotty history in their narratives regarding women. Most research has examined large budget games and identified issues of simplification, oversexualization, and a general lack of agency among female characters. The present study explores the gaming niche of “indie”--or independent game developer--video games in their representations of women in particular with *Never Alone*, *Gone Home*, and *Her Story*. These games were released around the time frame of the GamerGate controversy—a controversy which drew attention to the treatment of women in gaming culture—and hence, the games are used to reflect on a potential shift in games culture following the controversy. This paper argues that these game narratives emphasized multilayered female characterizations, female-to-female interactions, and internal dramas as a way to potentially reach female gamers and present an alternative narrative on women.

Keywords: gender, narrative framing, indie games, qualitative research, identity

Note: This is the ACCEPTED version of the manuscript. Hence, there may be minor changes not represented in this document.

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Equal representation of female characters is not necessarily a given in any genre of video games despite the increased number of female game players—for example, 41% of women in the United States (ESA, 2020), 46% in Canada (ESAC, 2012) and 45% across the European Union (Bosmans & Maskell, 2016). When female characters did appear in the late 1970s to early 2000s, depictions were often sexualized (Dietz, 1998; Downs & Smith, 2010; Perreault et al., 2018, 2020) or fell within expected gender-norms and roles (Heintz-Knowles, Henderson, et al., 2001). However, indie video games offer the potential for alternative perspectives on female representation given that indie games present a “more variegated and diversified sector” compared to big-budget video games (Crogan, 2018, p. 673). Instead of female nudity, hypersexualization, or stereotyping, *Gone Home* (2013 and 2016), *Her Story* (2015), and *Never Alone* (2014) provide empowering narratives that foreground strong female agency and choice. Female representation in these three indie video games offers more nuanced gender descriptions, deeper relationships, and descriptive identity. Their status as outliers necessitates elaboration: what does it mean to be a female character in indie game storytelling?

In this study, we will use narrative theory to explore female representation in the often-overlooked genre of indie video games. This approach is best suited to our studies not only since it provides a meaningful way of encapsulating the complicated relationship between player and characters, but also because it also us to more fully explore the themes of agency and identity that exist in each of these games. This approach is markedly different from previous research because it foregrounds these issues in a way that acknowledges both past trends, systemic gender representation issues, and critical discussion of female characters.

While video games have long been studied as an expressive medium, the idea and concept of video game design did not become a topic until the late 1990s. Gender is often a consideration when determining game play dynamics (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998), and character identity has become more integral as games and popular media have become more interactive (Scott, 2012).

Game Sample: *Never Alone*, *Her Story* and *Gone Home*

The game sample for this study included three indie video games -- video games created by smaller niche market studios -- created for multiple platforms: *Never Alone*, *Her Story*, and *Gone Home*. These games were selected as a purposive sample in order to “provide important information that cannot be obtained from other choices” (Taherdoost, 2016, p. 23) and as a method of exploring, lesser-explored avenues: in the case of understanding the presentation of female characters in indie games. The three cases selected offer narratives that foreground strong female agency and choice. The depth of the game’s plots and characters provide views on gender, relationships, and identity that differ from the games in the mainstream video game industry.

Never Alone (2014) was developed in collaboration with the Iñupiat, an Alaska Native people. Native elders, storytellers, and community members contributed to the development of the game. In *Never Alone*, the player plays as a young Iñupiat girl, Nuna, who adventures with an arctic fox through a life-threatening blizzard. The girl must save a variety of people including her family, and herself. This story is narrated by a Iñupiaq language storyteller with English subtitles. The fox, portrayed in reflection of indigenous stories, represents a noble messenger with the ability to summon ethereal beings. On her journey, Nuna uncovers a villain

terrorizing the Iñupiat. The Manslayer, when given the opportunity, attacks and kills the fox. As Nuna mourns the fox, the spirit of a child in a fox costume emerges from the animal's corpse. This spirit helps her find the giant causing the blizzard and stop him. Upon returning her home, the spirit tells her that if she is ever lost again, to look to the night sky for him before disappearing. Narratively, the story is a presentation of the Iñupiat identity, with the primary antagonists, the Manslayer and the Ice Giant, presented as male.

Her Story (2015) plays out as several shorter videos pieced together in puzzle fashion by the player. In order to find the videos and piece together the story, the player types search terms to the search bar. These videos help the player solve a mysterious death. The player solves it by putting together the complex narrative drawn from the videos. The plot that includes children, imaginary friends, murder, love and other tropes. The videos present seven interviews that police conducted with Hannah, whose husband—Simon—has gone missing and is later found dead. Through the course of examining the videos, it becomes clear that Hannah had an identical twin, Eve, who carried out an extramarital affair with Simon. Simon is allegedly killed by Hannah. Confirmed at the end of the story is that the player is acting in the role of Eve's daughter. What remains unclear is whether the police were actually interviewing Hannah, or her identical twin Eve, or a mixture of both.

Gone Home (2013, 2016) is set in rural Oregon in 1995, and involves a young college-aged woman whom the player takes on the role of, named Katie. Katie arrives at her parents' home in a storm and examines objects as she moves through the home to reveal what happened in her absence. There are not any goals for the game, but the player is rewarded by piecing clues about her family together. The central question motivating the story is why no

one picked up Katie at the airport and why no one is home upon her arrival. Most foreboding is the message on the answering machine. The recorded message reveals a desperate, frightened woman's voice calling for Katie's sister, Sam. Through the course of the story, it becomes clear that Katie's parents have been distant and disconnected since they moved to Oregon—resulting in them leaving for a couple's retreat the weekend Katie returned. Sam, isolated by her parents' drama and in a new environment, finds refuge in a romantic, lesbian relationship with a junior ROTC cadet. The story concludes with Katie finding Sam's diary. The diary reveals that the voice on the answering machine was Sam's romantic partner, who went AWOL from the armed forces in order to be with Sam. Sam's absence then indicates that she had gone to pick up her partner and create a new life for the two of them outside of Oregon. Noteworthy in this game is that only one noteworthy male character is presented: Katie and Sam's father, who is depicted as weak and troubled as a result of family trauma from his youth.

While the games this study do not contain primary male figures, these games do have plot lines that include men (fathers, husbands, and a villain) as secondary characters to the plot. That said, primary plotlines and agency depend on the female protagonists.

Video Game Narratives

Video games allow the player to interactively navigate plots, encounter digital characters and undertake game-based decision making. Stories inform the way we think about the world and help culture reflect on how it presents certain groups or experiences (Berger, 1997). Video game storytelling mixes text and visual, therefore narrative theory is an apt way to examine the development and interaction of visuals and texts. Human beings often understand more through stories than they do through reality (Juul, 2011). Video games and other mass

media are a part of the everyday life which “presents itself as a reality interpreted by [people] and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world” (Berger & Luckmann, 1967, p. 164). Hence, in this paper, *reality* will be invoked primarily in regards to a social reality, the reality shaped by the individual players’ experience that would then necessarily result in a different experience of the video game itself (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). By extension, the experience of that game would add to the overall collective experience of social reality. All three games tell stories that challenge certain societal norms concerning gender, and reflect and challenge cultural constructions of gender.

Narrative theory provides a useful lens for evaluating and interpreting depictions of gender (Bak, 2001). Narrative theory (Foss, 1996) emphasizes how humans tell stories by viewing the world according to varied heroes, villains, and plotlines. However, we understand that while stories challenge cultural norms with their stories, humans rarely tell new stories. Stories are retold in new ways, using new media—and therefore the stories told in video games are no different (Bascom, 1965). Narrative theory helps identify how applying previous contexts to culturally ingrained stories can help explain what’s happening in society (Chess, 2016; Perreault & Paul, 2018, 2019). Therefore, we will use narrative theory as a theoretical lens to examine the ways women are presented in these three games, released around the GamerGate controversy. GamerGate, which began in 2014, offered a cultural controversy in which issues of the presentation and inclusion of women in gaming culture were foregrounded (Massanari, 2017; Perreault & Vos, 2018, 2020). The controversy resulted in systematic harassment of women in all aspects of games culture, but also drew attention to the mistreatment and misrepresentation of women throughout gaming culture. Given that narratives serve as a

method of working through reality (Couldry & Hopp, 2017; Daniel et al., 2020), the goal of this study is to look at three specific games—developed in conditions more friendly to women and minorities—released from 2013-2015 in order to explore the presentation of women in the culture. As media messages, these would necessarily represent individual aspects of reality “to the achieved sense of a social world” to which media contribute (Couldry & Hopp, 2017, p. 3). These games were classified as multi-platform puzzle games with female protagonists featured in the narrative. Each were produced by independent video game companies The Fullbright Company (*Gone Home*), Climax Studios (*Her Story*), and E-Line Media (*Never Alone*). Moreover, by situating this study within narrative, we hope to better understand how the individual presentations of women in this sample are related to the “power of this figuration more broadly” (Couldry & Hopp, 2017, p. 68).

Women in Game Narratives

Scholarly work emphasizes several manifestations of the kind of sexism that seems, at times, all but inherent in the video game genre. Female representation in game narratives in general constitute an identity based on absence: an absence of agency, narrative power, and, in some cases, clothes. The absence of narrative in particular is a common thread in game studies scholarship. Female characters, for example, rarely have the same level of plot import, or character depth as their male counterparts (Lynch et al., 2016). Women, in other words, are more likely to appear as secondary characters, framed solely in terms of the male experience. Female characters are more likely to be secondary than primary (Lynch et al., 2016): 52.3% were primary characters from 1983-1991 but this number decreased to 41.7% from 2007-2014.

The overt sexualization of female characters has decreased overtime, although some genres of games remain problematic (Lynch et al., 2016). Furthermore, when this sexualization occurs in video games, it is explicitly tied to agency; as female sexualization increases, so often does female “empowerment” with such characters applying their agency in order to be “sexually manipulative and dangerous” (Tompkins et al., 2020, p. 248). In other cases, empowerment is granted to “sweet, innocent characters” in Japanese game depictions that “resonate with benevolent sexism, because they delimit women’s empowerment to the realm of fantasy” (p. 248). Similarly, female characters tend to be dressed in “revealing clothing and hypersexualized with disproportionate breast size to waist ratio” (Gestos et al., 2018). Gestos, Smith-Merry and Campbell (2018) note that when not sexualized, female characters tend to fall into a few stereotypes: as the love interest, as innocent and cute, and as the “victim in need of a male character’s rescue” (Gestos et al., 2018, p. 538).

The question many scholars wrestle with is whether the traditional, misogynistic female representation in digital gaming is changing, and to what degree. Kondrat (2015) presents promising results that female representation is becoming more nuanced and more intentional. Certain kinds of representation, like benevolent sexism, are declining. However, there is also a corresponding increase in a hostile sexism portrayal over time (Summers & Miller, 2014). Dietz (1998), however, indicates that negative female stereotypes persist, often through violence directed at female characters. At least one other study has revealed similar findings about continued negative female character stereotyping. (Dickerman et al., 2008). A study of video games with scenes depicting violence toward women also found players were more empathetic towards female characters (Ferguson & Colwell, 2020). A study of college students found

women were more impacted by certain fear experiences in video games than others (Lynch & Martins, 2015), although the study did not code for the gender of characters in the games experiencing threatening or fearful situations. The way women process immersive experiences might be different because of socialization and historical depictions of women in certain roles within narratives in literature, popular media and even video games (Perreault et al., 2018). For example, Zillmann et al. (1986) noted that in culture males are expected to be brave, females are expected to be fearful, and they are socially rewarded for fulfilling their expected role in line with those expectations (Lynch & Martins, 2015, p. 313). Hence, as Lynch and Martins (2015) noted, women tend to report less enjoyment for horror video games than men.

Scholars are also re-evaluating how to analyze gender representation as a whole. Rughenis, Rughenis, and Toma (2016) argue that the metrics the academic community traditionally uses to measure female representation should actually be broadened, and that other contextual elements should be included in representational analysis. Shaw (2014) likewise urges a re-evaluation of the entire approach to representation, ultimately arguing that *representation* is not nearly so important to players (of either gender) as solid, nuanced characters and narratives. She thus emphasizes both male and female character development as opposed to what she views as nuanced female characters to attract female players to gaming. Shaw (2014) argues, essentially, that representation does not necessarily equate identification and undermines the emphasis traditionally placed on the importance of identification of the player with a video game character.

In another work, Shaw (2012) discussed the hurdles feminist theories have to overcome in the face of newer, male-dominated technological spaces (digital games being one of them).

“For many non-feminist researchers, feminism is often seen as only relevant when women are at issue, and much of the emerging technology spaces are constructed as cisgendered male-only zones” (Shaw, 2014, p. 273). Again, she raises the issue of gender identity and online spaces specifically, but this insight is also applicable to the world of gaming in general which, as Cote (2015) indicates, is male-dominated. Feminist theory, Shaw (2014) argues, is just as applicable in a space which is lacking females as in a space that it is not. Similarly, since 2013 when women have been the main characters in mainstream video games, they often take on a supportive role to a male character or have a father figure present as part of the game plot (Perreault et al., 2018). Perreault et al. (2018) note some promising areas of female representation in their findings, such as a lack of “sexualization and eroticized aggression” in the presentation of women in their sample, and that the women are “integral to the games’ narrative” (p. 857). That said, this study raises the question, which we seek to address here, of the nature of a female characters’ presentation if men are in a secondary role.

This leads us to pose the following questions:

RQ1: What narrative frames regarding the female identity are created in *Never Alone*, *Her Story*, and *Gone Home*?

RQ2: How do *Never Alone*, *Her Story*, and *Gone Home* narrate the role of women?

Method

Studying media depictions of women in games provides context for how women’s stories are narrated in society, ideally through case studies of games containing those narratives. Indie games—away from the structural constraints that typically guide big-budget games—provide a potential avenue for strong female characters in narrative. Hence the

present study undertakes a narrative analysis. Narrative analysis is “a family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). Narratives provide context for how future stories are understood and interpreted within culture (Foss, 1996) and can aptly contextualize stories, metaphors, and other literary elements (Carr, 1986; Fisher, 1995). Yuval-Davis (2010) states that “identities are narratives” and the stories people tell and do not tell are narratives (Riessman, 2008, p. 8). This study dissects the narratives told through female characters as unique character identities. Narrative brings the imagined into the real world because “narrative is the proverbial ferry between the abstract and the concrete, between cognition and behavior, and between symbolic and the material” (Riessman, 2008, p. 16), helping to make sense of lived experiences (Bold, 2011, p. 121). For the purpose of this study, narrative theory, will be used to identify narrative frames within the texts of *Gone Home* (2013, 2016), *Her Story* (2015), and *Never Alone* (2014).

Games were chosen with the purposive sampling criteria of (1) female protagonists, (2) a gameplay style shown to appeal to female gamers, specifically puzzle games (Flanagan, 2003), (3) developed by an independent game studio, and (4) within the 2013-2015 time period. Among that criteria, the selected games reached critical acclaim for their storytelling. The female protagonist criteria and gameplay style criteria privilege games that would be more likely to have gender-oriented narratives. Indie games were chosen for analysis to focus on developers willing to experiment both narratively and interactively and focus on games developed for a niche rather than mass audience (Crogan, 2018)—in short, developers will try to a different approach to building a female gaming player base. That said, indie games also make for worthwhile sample in that while they tend to be more experimental, they also have

structural constraints related to lower-budgets and man power. Indie game companies still maintain “a socially and culturally shaped economic impulse that forms in response to risk” and hence, may still avoid presentations they fear might not sell (Srauy, 2019, p. 809). As a result, prior research indicates that indie games may be no more likely to present diverse characters (Passmore et al., 2017).

The researchers observed video game texts and considered the narrative elements identified (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000; Perreault & Perreault, 2019). Narrative framing analysis involves sifting through long pieces of text (Riessman, 2008), although what is truly considered *text* does not have to be just writing or language (p. 15).

This “sifting” process informed the playing of the three games presented in the study and identifying preliminary frames. Researchers watched the full video game movies as presented via unnarrated “Let’s Play” walkthrough videos on YouTube. The overarching qualitative meaning is based on what the researchers found in the entire text (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008, p. 960). When identifying narrative frames, the researchers drew boundaries to determine how the framing elements interacted in order to more deeply solidify the boundaries between the frames (Riessman, 2008): temporality- how narratives develop over time (p. 29-30), people: heroes and protagonists change the narrative (p. 30), actions: expressions of these are considered narrative (p. 31), and context: setting in terms of both time and space (p. 32). Each of these elements contributed to an overall constructed narrative frame.

Results

Women as Active Agents

In RQ 1, the question was posed “What narrative frames regarding the female identity are created in *Never Alone*, *Her Story*, and *Gone Home*?” Researchers identified three narrative frames in these indie games: a frame regarding the centrality of choice, a frame regarding the crisis of identity, and a frame regarding the creation of new reality. These three frames provide insight into the more comprehensive plot designs of indie games, but also character development of the female protagonists following the GamerGate controversy in gaming culture.

The first narrative frame identified in this sample circumscribes attention to the power of choice. Each of the games emphasizes the choice either narratively or structurally. Indie games in this sample represent an avenue through which female characters hold the agency to make meaningful choices.

Her Story emphasizes choice through the gameplay itself. In order to uncover the mystery of the game, the players’ only power is the ability to make choices through a search-based video archive. Players decide what search terms to put in except for the first term, which is auto-populated: “murder.” Following that video, the player selects which videos they want to watch from what comes up in their search. In short, the players not only decide the shape of the story but the order in which they receive it. As such, players have a sort of choose-your-own adventure. The female protagonist is later revealed to be the daughter of the woman in the videos, is only seen through the reflection on the ‘90s-era computer screen. The player assumes her identity in piecing the story together.

In *Gone Home*, the player plays the role of Katie Greenbriar, a 21-year-old who comes home to find the house empty and the power off. As an exploratory game, the player chooses

continually where to take Katie, what to examine, and what to read. And so, the structure of the game revolves around player choices to move the plot forward. Narratively, the game is also structured around choice, in that central question of the story is “where is Sam?” (Katie’s sister). Through the course of uncovering artifacts, Katie learns that her sister has developed a same-sex relationship with a friend named Lonnie. This relationship was coming to close in that Sam still had a year of high school ahead of her whereas Lonnie had boarded a bus to join the army. Before Katie’s story begins, Lonnie chooses to get off the bus and calls Sam to ask her to elope with her. Sam chooses to go and this choice not only is the culmination of Sam’s character development, a young teenager girl trying to find her place, but simultaneously provides the impetus for the entire game. Sam’s choice to leave with Lonnie is why Katie comes home to an empty house, and as a result, learns about her sister’s journey during the year she’s been gone.

Finally, in *Never Alone*, the narrative is motivated by a young girl’s choice. Seeing the weather change in her village, she makes the choice to go find what has caused the winter. Structurally, there is little choice to be made by the player, in that the central choice has been made on the player’s behalf. But as a narrative, the story is motivated by this choice to attempt to help her village.

The narrative and structures of the stories emphasize the agency of the female protagonist. From the standpoint of extant literature, this is a stark contrast with most video games given that women are often depicted as having little personal agency (Williams et al., 2009); yet what we see in this sample is that women are making choices that motivate the story. Furthermore, they make choices that help resolve a sort of identity crisis. In *Gone Home*,

Sam chooses to elope with Lonnie and embrace her sexual identity. In *Her Story*, it is clear at the conclusion of the game that the female protagonist knew that her mother was a murderer-- but she chose to try to understand it, and in doing so develop her own story.

Each game contains a theme of identity crisis, evaluation and reconstruction. This process is part of a discovery and retelling of the stories that existed before the games began. Women must form an identity within the game and through interactions and stories centered around other characters. The female characters in the study provided a plot and storyline, which develops along-side the game time line but the character's understanding of themselves and those they are related to changes even within the bounds of the game plot.

In *Gone Home*, Katie must confront what has happened with her family after studying abroad as a college student. She combs through her family's new house (one she has never lived in) to discover clues about her sister and parents in the process. She investigates items reminiscent of her upbringing, but all boxed up and relocated to unfamiliar rooms. This process of uncovering and investigating provides a context for the player to understand her relationships with her family and understand what has happened to her family in the past year. However, as a student she has been absent from certain narratives and must rejoin them through this process of discovery.

In *Her Story*, the process of identifying who the game player is and how she is involved in the story is crucial to discovering the identity of the character (who we discover is the daughter of the main character). We also learn about the main character, Hannah, and her relationship with her identical twin sister, Eve. Through several unlocked video tapes, the game

player uses search terms to finally reveal her relationship with the murderer and her sister who were separated at birth.

In *Never Alone*, the main character, Nuna, must find who she is outside her camp through a journey to bring fire and safety back to her Iñupiat family. Her identity is also revealed through game play, adventures, and interactions with the fox and the other characters with whom she interacts.

These represent a challenge and crisis of identity, because there is no base line through which to see the characters before the game begins. As the characters are revealed and oriented to their worlds so is the game player. The shaping of the characters' identities is not something realized while playing the game, but rather illuminated as the character develops understanding, learns from in-game artifacts and interactions, and the game player becomes aware of relationships with other characters in the plot line. The identity crisis surfaces as a result of the character eliminating obstacles, eliminating preconstructed understandings, and examining dependencies on other characters.

All three storylines are similar in that they unfold in the order that the player chooses, foregrounding the importance of player, and character autonomy within the limits of the created world of the game. Two players, for example, who play *Gone Home* separately may find out about the milestones of Sam and Lonnie's relationship in a different order. While the information players learn is ultimately the same, the order in which the discoveries take place would likely be slightly different, meaning that no two player's experience is likely to be exactly the same. This new reality developed by the player is a highly-individualized one, yet reflective

of Berger and Luckmann's (1967) assertion that "society is built up by activity that expresses subjective meaning" (p. 18).

This reality reflects female avatars with almost unprecedented understanding of their own choice and agency. The players experience freedom by directing the characters to enter one room instead of another (as in *Gone Home*), or use one search term instead of another one (as in *Her Story*). The new realities that the players make with the characters occur within a universe rife with potential and with choices and choice combinations that are seemingly endless.

Yet while the choices made in the game can vary, the perspective does not. Both *Gone Home* and *Her Story* use a first-person perspective; the characters and players viewpoint and conception of reality is the same. Since the characters are female, each normalizes female agency in the creation of reality. *Never Alone* also participates in this normalization despite using a third person. If anything, the third perspective even more strongly reiterates that the lead character is female since the player's viewpoint is outside the character's body. The main characters' freedom of choice to creates a female-driven reality.

The freedom of choice in the world that the character inhabits shapes the player's experience, but the character's abilities guide the player's choices. While this is true in many video games, in these three games the emphasis of on female reality generates new observations about gendered perspective that other games do not. All three create realities that broaden the horizons of what female protagonists can traditionally do. Katie is the only one who knows the truth about her sister Sam at the conclusion of *Gone Home*. In *Her Story*, a daughter gradually learns the truth about her mother.

In *Never Alone*, a girl conquers physical challenges to save her community with the help of a guiding spirit. Hence, these games emphasize the female power to not simply shape, but to create reality based on an inner impetus. They emphasize the ability to create new reality through the acquisition of knowledge and power in the face of internal or external challenges.

Thus, the new realities presented are framed from the female perspective and in which female voices succeed in doing something deemed worthwhile by the character herself. The potential for individuated reality, or multiple legitimate experiences (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), of one game allows an emphatically female-dominated space which foregrounds feminine agency. The lead character's unlimited creative potential for choice and consequence foregrounds the new female-centric reality in which agency and power are a given.

Women as Narrators and Preservers

In RQ 2, the question was posed "How do *Never Alone*, *Her Story*, and *Gone Home* narrate the role of women?" This research identified two ways women were narrated: as the narrators themselves and as preservers. *Never Alone* had more narrative content which spoke to this theme than those discussed in RQ1. Indie games in this sample reflected the ability to empower female characters through the characters' ability to narrate.

The women the games center around, both as storytellers and listeners, are empowered to tell the stories about who they are and where they come from. These roles move forward and develop along with the complex, puzzle solving and quest plots. They provide a clear location in time and space for the story to take place. Our role as the player is to uncover not only who we are in relation to the other characters we interact with, but also reveal our personal agency in the story. Each character is empowered by their interaction with the clues

about other female characters, traditions, and locations throughout each narrative. These female characters are strengthened through the quest to discover their role in the overarching story and plot. For Katie in *Gone Home's*, Sarah in *Her Story*, and Nuna in *Never Alone*, there are a number of challenges and revelations throughout the game. These central clues reveal information about the plot, but also about the protagonist.

Female characters are not only presented to players as narrators who shapes the game experience, but also as preservers. The role of preserver functions in two main ways: a preserver of one's own life by way of personal history, and a preserver of others' lives. For instance, in *Gone Home*, Sam records her romance with Lonnie and her interactions with her parents in her diary. She becomes, in a sense, a record-keeper or preserver of her perspective of the seen (and unseen) things that are happening in her life and in the lives of those around her. Likewise, the main character in *Her Story*, Hannah Smith, preserves her own story through the video snippets the player encounters. While her record-making is obligatory since it is an interrogation, *Her Story* in all of its ambiguity and complexity nevertheless functions as a preservation of her unique perspective.

The lead character of Nuna in *Never Alone* shows the other manifestation of preservation. Instead of merely preserving her own story, Nuna preserves the lives of her people by fighting and vanquishing the Ice Giant.

Yet it is worth noting that even as Nuna accomplishes this philanthropic goal, she is also creating her own individual story, though in a much different way than the two games previously discussed. *Her Story* is not written in a diary or recorded digitally, yet it is inscribed in the mind of the player. Her act of physical preservation has narrative and creative ramifications

as well. Insofar as she saves her people, she also saves herself - and this preservation of life naturally allows the potential creation of (and subsequent preservation of) her tribe's stories.

Observations concerning these games and their respective characters provide a platform for examining gamer autonomy and empowerment beyond the pre-2013 trends for female characters in games. The gamer's orientation toward female characters and development of deeper female character roles provides more potential for female characters and the relationships gamers establish with them. During the GamerGate controversy, the male-supremacist movements proponents were "largely motivated by desires to exclude female gamers from gaming culture" (Perreault & Vos, 2020, p. 161), hence the empowering presentation of a women in these games provides some sense of (1) what narratives GamerGate proponents disliked, and (2) what narrative indie game companies continue to promote.

In many ways the female characters retell a story which critiques stories told in other video games and game player culture. These games approach the very introduction of a narrative as a process rather than an event. Each female protagonist must experience the game anew with open eyes, having already been part of a story which the game player does not yet understand. While this method of game play is familiar for many video game players, often women are not the initial seekers of the story. The stories of the women's families help to construct the way the women interact with their own identities. They become oriented to where they initially came from and they journey past where they are comfortable. This niche provides a new perspective of a deeper and perhaps realistic, emotional, and investigative role for female protagonists. The protagonist is woven into the plot and, similarly, the experience of

the character is woven into the identity of the protagonist. Indie games provide the capacity to investigate different, complex, and perhaps unfamiliar tropes of female agency through the protagonist discovering their own identities.

Each of the narratives in these stories makes the storyline relatable by uniquely engaging internal drama. All three games are driven by the search for identity, albeit in different ways. In *Her Story*, as the player/main character explores the identity and history of the woman being interrogated, the player likewise discovers that the main character is her daughter. The path for identification of the two characters is the same; the discovery of one, leads to the other. The familial nature of identity is mirrored in *Gone Home* in how Katie discovers information about each family member's hidden struggle. Each successive discovery changes her normative role as daughter and sister: the hints of her mother's emotional affair casts doubt on the reliability of her parent's marriage, and thus the Katie's relationship to them. Some of the more poignant revelations in Sam's notes would likely cause Katie grief about the role of her own absence on the pain that her sister has experienced. Each discovery about the other creates new possibilities for the self, or main character.

Familial and individual identity plays a similarly significant role in *Never Alone*. As Nuna endeavors to preserve her community identity, she shapes her individual identity. While some members of her community are likely family, she relates to her community as she would to family because of her willingness to sacrifice on their behalf. As she leaves safety to battle the elements in order to preserve her community's way of life, she becomes her own savior, thus forging a new identity for herself. Although many of Nuna's challenges are external to her, the inner impetus for her actions is one of protection and service.

These indie games allow players to find new ways of thinking about and discovering identity as they function multi-relationally. There is a relationship between the player and characters as the player learns the character's capabilities, but the player also learns with the character who she is and about those around her. There is also a relationship between characters within the games, and their storylines further the lead character/player's storylines. As we learn about Sam, we learn about Katie; as we learn about Nuna, we also learn about her people and their beliefs, as we learn about Hannah we learn about her sister Eve. The community and individual exist in co-dependence and independence as their identities develop often simultaneously. The contextualizing of identity within relationship is something that most players naturally participate in by nature of existence. In all three of these games, the drama in the search for and discovery of authentic identity is a theme that is widely appealing to players regardless of background. The struggle of each of the main characters, though inevitably different in specifics, achieves something unique in that it asks the player to think about problems in terms of relationships and individual identity.

Conclusions

Women in indie games are complex and different compared to the female characters of big budget games the 1990s and even 2000s in that they provide complexity of narrative. They allow for women to identify new identities. Sam, Katie and Nuna provide individually complex stories. They provide an avenue to learn about different times, as well as people and beliefs. While women have more ability to speak than they have been privileged to speak before, they

have always been telling stories. Because indie games do not have to answer to a mainstream, male-dominated audience they are able to open doors into how women tell stories in a way that is relational, immersive, and connected.

Studies of female characters in mainstream games have found these complexities are often subverted in favor of game play, action sequences, or plot. In addition, in contrast, to the structural concerns regarding video games noted by Srauy (2019), the indie games in this sample provide positive deeper platforms to understand women and their involvement in fantasy world of games, as well as the realities they have faced. As a woman has the freedom to choose in game play, so does the female character have the opportunity to change their story into a deeply developed one, with facets beyond the bounds of traditional video game storytelling. As female characters have agency, so do the women or non-gender conforming players playing the female characters. This sense of autonomy and empowerment moves beyond the boundaries of traditional gaming roles, and perhaps opens conversations about the potential for female characters beyond the traditional spaces.

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