

**WHEN GIRLS TURN INTO MEN AND BOYS INTO WOMEN: A POSTFEMINIST
READING OF *THE LAST OF US* AND *BIOSHOCK***

by

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**Submitted for the degree
Magister Artium (Visual Studies)**

in the

Department of Visual Arts

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

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AUGUST 2015

ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which certain societal anxieties regarding femininity and masculinity surface in post-apocalyptic video games *BioShock* (2007 2K Games) and *The last of us* (2013 Naughty Dog). A postfeminist perspective is employed in order to explore the privileging of so-called 'masculine values' in late neo-liberal societies, and the subsequent negation of the (seemingly) binary opposite of stereotypical femininity. This explorative study is situated within a broad framework of postfeminism, and focuses on providing alternative understandings of the representation of gender in video games. By considering video games as a medium that is firmly rooted in traditional masculinity, I argue that anxieties regarding the subordination of so-called 'feminine values' in society as a whole, manifest visually in *BioShock* and *The last of us*, in both the gameplay as well as in narrative structure. In an attempt to gain a better understanding of how these anxieties surface, I explore the ways in which a disillusionment with 'masculine values' become evident in the post-apocalyptic settings of the two games under discussion. This study aims to highlight the ways in which *BioShock* and *The last of us* attempt to subvert normative constructions of masculinity, and instead posit feminine values as positive, desirable and necessary in order to acknowledge and realise a broader sense of 'being human'; one that does not depend on culturally sanctioned notions of gender.

Title of dissertation: When girls turn into men and boys turn into women: a postfeminist reading of *The last of us* and *BioShock*

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KEY TERMS: postfeminism, masculinity, femininity, video games, societal anxieties, post-apocalypse, *BioShock*, *The last of us*, neoliberalism

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was in part financially supported by The University of Pretoria. Opinions expressed in this dissertation, and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the University of Pretoria.

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at, are those of the author, and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Dr Jenni Lauwrens, for her insightful comments, as well as her patience and excellent guidance throughout the course of this study. I truly appreciate her support, understanding and motivation. It has been nothing but a pleasure to work with her.

Besides my supervisor, I also owe my sincere thanks to Prof Amanda du Preez for sharing her expertise and providing opportunities for me to develop my research in meaningful ways. I will forever be indebted to her for her kindness and support.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my husband, Corné du Plessis, for his neverending support, encouragement and useful insights into my research.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background to the study

According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the entertainment software industry is the fastest growing industry in the United States of America (US) (The Transformation of the Video Game Industry 2012:3). The American video game industry is estimated to be worth almost \$21 billion. Although already three years old, these figures give an indication of the extent to which video games are being consumed, if not in a global context, then certainly in the US. Furthermore, these statistics provide sound justification for the stance taken here: that video game studies is an imperative area of research particularly when analysed through the lens of visual culture studies.

Video games provide a particularly interesting and important area of study owing to the unique engagement that they produce between players and media. Video game players must continuously provide direct, active input in order to progress in the game, as opposed to television and film where a consumer sits back and experiences the images on screen. If a video game is played through to the end, much more time may be spent playing the game than when, for instance, watching a film or television programme. In addition to the amount of time and input provided by the player, the investment that the player possibly has in a game might also be influenced by the idea of the 'magic circle', which refers to the space that a player enters when playing a game (Salen & Zimmerman 2004:96). The magic circle creates a 'new' reality for the player, which is "... defined by the rules of the game and inhabited by its players" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004:96). For instance, the physical piece used to play a boardgame, represents the player in such a way that the plastic token virtually *becomes* the player the moment when the game begins (Salen & Zimmerman 2004:96). This might indicate a deeper investment by a player

in the medium, resulting in a more powerful way in which certain ideologies and discourses are constructed, maintained and perpetuated.

The ideological construction and representation of gender in visual media are topics that have been extensively researched in various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences and from various perspectives. Postfeminist theorists such as Rosalind Gill (2007a, 2007b, 2008) and Angela McRobbie (1994, 1999) have contributed greatly to the understanding of gender construction in visual media such as film, television and advertising. Even though several quantitative studies have been done on the representation of women in video games (Dietz 1998; Beasley & Standley 2002; Jansz & Martis 2007), it seems as if comprehensive qualitative studies on this topic are still limited. In addition, one can argue that since the video game industry is expanding at a rapid rate, it becomes essential to deal with new developments continuously within this field. In other words, the study proposed here argues that postfeminist theory can productively be utilised in order to analyse current representations of gender, and particularly women, in specific examples from the video game industry. For this reason, the narratological, and to a lesser extent, the ludological (gameplay) aspects of, the two video games under analyses here, namely, *BioShock* (2007) and *The last of us* (2013) are analysed from a postfeminist perspective. This is done in order to explore the ways in which each mode serves to perpetuate and maintain hegemonic gender ideals, as well as the privileging of particular values culturally associated with men and (most often patriarchal versions of) masculinity, and the subsequent subordination of signifiers traditionally attributed to women and femininity.

One of the ways in which certain values¹ in society is gendered, is the dominant cultural idea that a “natural” polarity exists between male/female, rationality/emotion, hard/soft and so forth (Gamble 2006:66). This polarity

¹ The term ‘value’ is used in this study in a general sense of designating principles or standards of behaviour, as well as judgements of what is considered important in society.

often results in particular signifiers being identified with either men or women. For the purposes of this study, I work from the assumption that character traits such as aggression, rationality, violence and domination are often gendered as male, and are thus associated with men and patriarchal masculinity (Sawyer 2004:25). On the other hand, values such as emotionality, nurturing, irrationality and compassion are often attributed more strongly to women and femininity (Gamble 2006:[sp]). It is important to clarify that these associations are culturally constructed, and should not be considered biologically determined. In other words, masculine traits are not necessarily inherent to men, just as feminine traits are not necessarily inherent to women, but are rather attributed to specific genders based on cultural and historical contexts. Moreover, stereotypical characteristics associated with traditional and normative masculinity are mostly privileged over the characteristics associated with normative femininity. It is precisely these normative categories – or myths – of gender that are examined in this study.

The link between the long-standing oppression of women in society, and character traits that are often stereotypically associated with women, becomes clear in Sarah Gamble's (2006:[sp]) argument that women,

... purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society which is organised to prioritise male viewpoints and concerns. Within this patriarchal paradigm, women become everything men are not (or do not want to be seen to be): where men are regarded as strong, women are weak; where men are rational, they are emotional; where men are active, they are passive; and so on. Under this rationale, which aligns them everywhere with negativity, women are denied equal access to the world of public concerns as well as of cultural representation.

Not only is the cultural alignment of women with 'negative' values in society problematic, but the fact that these values are positioned as undesirable and unacceptable in the first place should also be thoroughly interrogated and criticised. Therefore, this study argues that the long-standing oppression of women in society, as well as the interconnected negative connotation of

signifiers such as emotion, intuition and nurturing, produce anxieties in both women and men over their gendered identities, and that such anxieties manifest visually in popular culture. In this particular study, I argue that the anxiety regarding the subordination of so-called feminine values, potentially results in a feminising of masculinity, with the signifiers of femininity now being positioned in a relatively positive light in the realm of *BioShock* and *The last of us*.

With this being said, I argue that general feminist concerns regarding the role of women in video games are often focused on the inclusion of female characters in video games, marketing towards female players and supporting female developers in the video game industry respectively. However, these approaches often do not thoroughly consider and criticise the underlying masculine framework of video games. Thus, in a sense, girls and women are encouraged to 'become' men, by adopting stereotypically masculine characteristics such as aggression, competitiveness and rationality, in order to be included in the male oriented video game realm.

On the other hand, both *The last of us* and *BioShock* can perhaps be understood as counter reactions to the highly masculinised framework from which video games emerge. By positioning culturally ascribed feminine traits as relatively positive, both of these video games encourage their (assumed male) players to become more feminised themselves, in order to gain as much as possible from the experience. Even though the foundation of these video games remains masculine, I argue that since certain feminine values are repositioned as relatively desirable, this might result in a 'transformation' of boys who play these games, in order to 'become women' when they are urged to embrace feminisation to a certain extent.

This study is underpinned by a postfeminist theoretical framework. Even though there is no consensus among scholars as to the exact definition of

postfeminism, Gill (2007b:147) considers it to be “... one of the most important [notions] in the lexicon of feminist cultural analysis”. Gill (2007b:148) states that postfeminism should be considered a sensibility, rather than a fixed, static system from which to analyse particular popular media texts. Likewise, Stéphanie Genz (2009:28) considers the prefix ‘post-’ to signal an opportunity to explore different potentialities in terms of feminism and femininities, rather than “... assuming a predetermined frame of reference”. In similar fashion, Genz’s notion of exploring different potentialities can also be applied to the study of the various constructions of masculinities. This study follows Genz’s approach, but applies it to the ways in which different masculinities are constructed in *BioShock* and *The last of us*.

In contrast to third-wave feminism, postfeminism does not emerge as a political movement, but rather developed from a number of different contexts such as academia, the media and consumer culture (Genz 2006:341). Even though postfeminism can, on some levels at least, be seen as a backlash against second-wave feminism, Genz (2006:341) maintains that reducing the term to a simple ‘backlash’ movement is unhelpful. Genz’ (2006:341) notion of postfeminism, which supports Gill’s idea of a ‘sensibility’, is relied upon throughout this study, in order to analyse and explore the chosen video games. According to Genz (2006:341), postfeminism can be considered an approach that

... refuses to be immobilized through polarization [and] resist[s] dichotomous formulations that want to fix and define postfeminism’s directionality and politics as either feminist or non-feminist, academic or popular, subversive or contained, neo-conservative or radically revolutionary. A criticism that insists on the necessity of binary distinctions is doomed to conclude with unsatisfactory generalizations and simplifications that do not take into account postfeminism’s plurality and contradictions.

Since there are several overlaps in third-wave and postfeminist theory (Genz 2006:341), certain third-wave ideas also form part of the argument put forth in this study. According to Shelley Budgeon (2011:282), the theme of

'empowerment' features strongly in both third-wave feminism and postfeminism. She critiques the emphasis placed on the notion that female empowerment equals female *success* (often in terms of employment, financial independence and access to education). This idea forms an integral part of the stance that I take in this study: that female empowerment does not necessarily mean that women should simply take on traditionally considered masculine roles (i.e. turn into men), but that ways to empower culturally constructed feminine values themselves within a late capitalist, neoliberal society should also be explored.

In order to explore the construction of femininity in a productive way, it is important to consider and discuss the ways in which the construction of masculinity pertains to, and influences femininity. Genz and Brabon (2009:134) identify and distinguish between several prevalent constructions of masculinity in recent popular culture, where the focus also lies on consumption. Some of these masculinities include the 'metrosexual', the 'new man' and the 'new lad'. Genz and Brabon (2009:142,143) maintain further that these constructions of masculinity amalgamate and mesh into the 'postfeminist man'. Furthermore, Budgeon (2011:280) argues that third-wave feminism "does not privilege gender or sexual difference as its key site of struggle nor does it limit itself to any one issue". Thus, the construction of femininity can productively be analysed and explored from a postfeminist perspective, since it recognises and acknowledges the complexities and contradictions involved when exploring constructions of femininity.²

Most of the earliest video games produced in the 1970s such as *PONG* (1972) and *Computer space* (1971) do not portray any human characters, and can therefore be considered gender neutral. *Ms. Pac-man* (1982), characterised by her pink bow and red lips, is generally recognised to be the first female avatar in video games (King & Krzwywinska 2006:179). According

² The exact way in which this study implements postfeminism is explained in more detail in the research methodology section of this chapter.

to King and Krzwywinska (2006:179), many 1980s video games exhibit the 'damsel in distress'³ trope, where a female character is stereotypically portrayed as a victim in need of saving by a male protagonist, for example in *Donkey kong* (1984) and *Dragon's lair* (1983). Alicia Summers and Monica Miller (2014:1), however, note a change in the depiction of women in video games where female characters are not often represented as victims anymore, but more frequently portrayed as aggressive, sexualised heroines, such as Lara Croft in the *Tomb raider* (1998 - 2013) franchise. The study undertaken here investigates *BioShock* and *The last of us* as games in which the main female protagonists are portrayed neither as victims, nor heroines, but rather as substantially more complex characters.

Similarly, in the majority of recent video games the representation of the male characters also tends to align with stereotypical models. As Patrick Kolan (2011:[sp]) states: "[t]hey all have shaved heads, frowns and featureless mugs. They're cookie-cutter, archetypal action heroes - and they all look like each other". These male characters usually appear in first person shooter games, where the main aim of the game is to shoot as many enemies as possible. This overly aggressive, one dimensional portrayal of men perpetuates and privileges traditionally constructed masculine values such as aggression, strength and dominance (MacInnes 1998:47). In light of such portrayals, this study argues that owing to their particular narratological and ludological structure, a type of 'feminising' of the masculine has taken place in both *BioShock* and *The last of us*, which might be the result of an underlying societal anxiety regarding the oppression of signifiers often associated with women, such as emotionality, irrationality and intuition. Even though at first both the main characters in the respective video games appear to fit into the stereotypical, masculine mould described above, I contend that the game environments, their narratives and their ludological configurations provide an opportunity for an alternative reading of gender identity, which potentially

³ Video game critic Anita Sarkeesian's exploration of prevalent female tropes in video games is discussed in Chapter 3.

destabilises traditional ideas particularly regarding the values and signifiers associated with femininity. A brief synopsis of the two selected video games is provided before the research aims are discussed.

1.1.1 Overview of *The last of us*

The 2013 Naughty Dog zombie horror video game *The last of us*, has been hailed as the ‘Citizen Kane’ of video games by several video game review websites (Poole 2013:[sp]; Kamen 2013:[sp]). *The last of us* presents the player with a post-apocalyptic landscape, where a fungus called Cordyceps has turned 60% of the human population into zombies (The Last of Us Wiki 2013:[sp]). Only pockets of human resistance still remain. The majority of the narrative is set in 2033, 20 years after the fungus first broke out. Joel, the male main character in *The last of us*, is described as a “violent, brutal killer and a torturer” (The Last of Us Wiki 2013:[sp]), who will go to any lengths to survive. As a smuggler, Joel is tasked with transporting a 14-year old girl, Ellie, to an anti-government group called the Fireflies. At first it is not clear why Ellie needs to be transported to the Fireflies. After an initial suspicion and distrust of Ellie when he meets her, Joel becomes attached to her and forms a tight bond with her. In the end of *The last of us* Joel is forced by the Fireflies to sacrifice Ellie as a cure for the zombie infection. The Fireflies believe that Ellie might be immune to the Cordyceps fungus, and in order for them to manufacture this cure, they must kill her. Joel refuses to sacrifice Ellie, and instead chooses to rescue her from the Fireflies, and save her from certain death.



Figure 1: Ellie in *The last of us* (Naughty Dog 2013).

Ellie (Figure 1) is described on *The last of us* wiki (2013:[sp]) as impulsive and temperamental in her behaviour. Ellie also cares deeply for Joel, and displays wisdom beyond her years, taking on the role of protector and provider as she cares for Joel when he is impaled in the abdomen, and hunts for food in order to sustain them both.

Joel's character develops from aggressive, detached and unemotional, to displaying traits such as compassion, caring and spontaneity. This progression appears to be facilitated by, and relies upon, his close relationship with Ellie. Joel recognises in Ellie what has been lost in society. As the ending of the narrative suggests, Joel has evolved from exhibiting limited emotional range, mostly displaying calculated and rational actions, in other words, traits suitable to the male action hero or soldier, to someone who embraces irrationality and compassion in order to save Ellie, even though it will mean the end of human civilization as they know it.



Figure 2: Joel in *The last of us* (Naughty Dog 2013).

1.1.2 Overview of *BioShock*

BioShock (2007) on the other hand, is set in 1960 in a dystopian underwater city called Rapture. The complex narrative begins where the male protagonist, Jack, who is the sole survivor of a plane crash in the Atlantic Ocean, discovers the entrance to Rapture. Jack finds the city in a state of ruin as a consequence of a civil war between the inhabitants. According to the *BioShock* narrative writer, Ken Levine (in Gillen 2007:[sp]), the game is strongly influenced by Ayn Rand's philosophical work, particularly *Atlas shrugged* (1996). The city of Rapture was founded by Andrew Ryan, one of the main antagonists in *BioShock*, and the societal system implemented in the metropolis is based on Rand's "... objectivist ethic of rational self-interest" (Watts 2011:253). Ryan's goal was to create a purely capitalistic society free from people that he saw as 'parasites', such as politicians and religious organisations. Ryan aimed to provide an isolated city where the world's "best and brightest" (*BioShock* 2007) could live without restrictions. Ryan (*BioShock*

2007) describes his vision of Rapture as “a city where the artist would not fear the censor. Where the scientist would not be bound by petty morality. Where the great would not be constrained by the small”. According to Levine, the video game was intended as criticism against blindly adhering to any philosophical theory (Gillen 2007:[sp]).



Figure 3: A ruined town square in Rapture (2K Games 2009).

The lack of any moral restraints on scientific research in Rapture lead to the modification and ‘improvement’ of DNA to such a degree that the citizens become supernaturally enhanced. Unfortunately this modification renders the user’s cells unstable, and turns them into ‘splicers’: violent, degenerated human beings with irreversible mental and cosmetic damage. This mutation of humans resulted in a civil war, and left Rapture in ruins (Figure 3), which the player has to navigate in order to finish the game (Watts 2011:245).



Figure 4: A Little Sister harvesting a corpse (2K Games 2009).

Of particular interest to this study is the representation of the female characters in this game who are called 'Little Sisters'. The scientists of Rapture considered it morally acceptable to gather all of the city's young girls and use them as 'incubators' to host the sea slug that produces the substance (called ADAM) that makes genetic mutation possible (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]). Although the narrative of *BioShock* does not explain in detail why young girls specifically were used for hosting the sea slug that produces ADAM, it is mentioned that it has to do with their pre-pubescent reproductive systems. The slugs force the girls into a trance-like state, where they become completely oblivious of their surroundings, and are only intent on harvesting ADAM from corpses. These young girls are protected by 'Big Daddies': large, male, armoured bio-mechanical beings specifically created to assist and act as guards for the Little Sisters (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]). Evan Watts (2011:255) argues that the Little Sisters themselves can be seen as manifestations of ruin brought about by "competitiveness [which] helps promote exploitation of people all over the world, as men strive to achieve 'success'" (Sawyer 2004:27). The girls have, therefore, been turned into abject symbols of what was once repressed in the masculine era of the original Rapture. Having had their humanity taken away from them, the Little

Sisters – protected by the Big Daddies – travel around Rapture to harvest ADAM from the corpses of splicers. Watts (2011:255) considers them:

... reminders of a culture that was, and as the most striking visual embodiment of that culture's downfall. The apparently patriarchal image of the female needing protection by the male is disrupted by the fact that the Big Daddies are actually subordinate to the Little Sisters – they were once men, but have now been genetically and cybernetically transformed into little more than robots designed to obey not just females, but female children. The Big Daddies, many brandishing large phallic drills, seem almost a parody of traditional masculinity.



Figure 5: Big Daddy (2K Games 2009).

The Little Sisters were created by the scientist Dr. Brigid Tenenbaum in order to mass produce ADAM and sell it to the public of Rapture. After realising the mental damage that the slugs impose on the little girls, Tenenbaum starts to regret her decision and attempts to help the Little Sisters, instead of exploiting them for her own financial gain. The transformation that Tenenbaum undergoes throughout the game is significant to the argument of this study. As

mentioned previously, Rapture was founded on values such as rationality, competition and technological progress. Initially, Tenenbaum follows these so-called masculine and patriarchal values that underpin the original philosophy of Rapture, but later adopts a more traditionally accepted 'feminine' approach; one where she values the girls, shows compassion towards them and abandons her selfish quest, in order to save them.

Moreover, a player needs the ADAM that grows inside the girls, and can choose to either 'harvest' or save each Little Sister. When harvesting a Little Sister, the player receives a total of 160 ADAM, but if the player decides to save the Little Sister, by removing the slug from her stomach, only 80 ADAM is received. If a player decides to save the Little Sisters, after every three girls saved, the player will receive 200 ADAM from the Little Sisters as a gift. The player also receives extra abilities that enhance gameplay if they decide to save the girls. Thus, the player is rewarded for displaying compassion, a trait not usually associated with first person shooter games, or video games in general. The choice between saving and harvesting the Little Sisters determines the ending of the game. If the player decides to kill all the Little Sisters and harvest their ADAM, Jack lives the rest of his life alone, and eventually dies lonely in his bed. Alternatively, if the player makes the choice to save the Little Sisters, Jack takes the little girls away from Rapture, and raises them as his own daughters, eventually dying from old age in his bed surrounded by the loving Little Sisters. Therefore, based upon the choices made by the player throughout the game, Jack either becomes more feminised, by displaying compassion and emotion (stereotypically associated with femininity) towards the Little Sisters, or becomes dehumanised when killing the Little Sisters for his own selfish gain.

1.2 Research aims

The main research question dealt with in this study, concerns whether the construction of femininity in *The last of us* and *BioShock* can be read from a

postfeminist perspective in order to provide an alternative understanding of traditional constructions of femininity and feminine values. Furthermore, the study aims to investigate the ways in which video games can be considered a site of resistance in terms of hegemonic gender constructions already circulating in popular culture and video games. By decentralising and problematising normative gender roles, video games can potentially provide a new, less definitive way of understanding gender that might move beyond reductive dualistic categorisations. Many mainstream video games are based on normative masculine values such as “... competition, aggression and anxiety” (Kimmel 2004:183). The main aim of the majority of video games is to obliterate one’s opponent in order to win the game, and in doing so, values that are traditionally associated with femininity, such as compassion, are undermined, negated and ultimately positioned as undesirable. As Charles Soukup (2007:172) points out:

To put it simply, these video games are not ‘gendered’ as merely masculine; these video games normalize a patriarchal (heterosexual) masculinity defined by the exertion of physical domination and mastery via violence and aggressive competition. Further, in video game systems, gamers rarely embrace alternative values such as equality, empathy, or compassion.

In both *BioShock* and *The last of us*, however, values such as empathy, nurturance and compassion that are traditionally associated with femininity in the popular media are crucial elements in the game narrative. Therefore, these particular games are explored in this study in order to show that they subvert, at least to some extent, the traditional construction of masculinity and femininity evidenced in video games (Connell 1987:188). In order to do this, a postfeminist perspective is applied to the proposed video games. As Genz (2009:14) notes, instead of viewing the “gender template”⁴ as a homogenous structure, postfeminism opens it up as “a more complex and fragmented set of

⁴ “Gender template” refers to a set of ‘rules’ that certain genders adhere to, including traditional, binary gender stereotypes that are perpetuated in Western society (Genz 2009:14).

signposts that allow the individual to disengage from the roles of an apparently naturalized femininity/masculinity”. It is important, however, to point out that I do not propose that certain character traits are intrinsic to a specific gender, but rather that these can be considered ‘human’ traits that can be found in different individuals to varying degrees. In this sense, this study critically explores the privilege attached (through cultural association) to certain values often associated with masculinity (such as rationality, competition and dominance (Sawyer 2004:25)) and the subsequent negation and repression of values often culturally associated with femininity (such as intuition, compassion and gentleness (Gove & Watt 2004:46, Knight 2010:xv)).

In light of the above, this study explores whether video games, in particular *BioShock* and *The last of us*, as visual and interactive media, have the potential to act as a site of resistance to hegemonic gender constructions. To this end, both the ludological and narratological structures of the relevant games are discussed and explored as sites of subversion.⁵ By analysing and unpacking the respective narratives and ludological elements of *BioShock* and *The last of us*, this research argues that a long-standing anxiety regarding traditional gender roles in society has led to their inversion in the post-apocalyptic settings of both *BioShock* and *The last of us*. Furthermore, this research explores how this anxiety gives rise to a ‘new’ representation of feminine values in video games, and in so doing challenges and subverts normative, culturally constructed ideas of gender, and poses values that have been traditionally associated with femininity as values that might potentially come to the fore trans genders.

By analysing *BioShock* and *The last of us* from a postfeminist perspective, this study aims to contribute to and broaden the field of gender studies in video games. This approach can be useful in providing an alternative reading of traditional (arguably misogynistic) video game narratives such as can be

⁵ As explained later on in this chapter, this study attempts to avoid favouring either a narratological or ludological analysis, and rather integrates the two different approaches.

found in a multitude of video games currently in circulation. Since both *BioShock* and *The last of us* feature female characters that need to be ‘saved’ by a male protagonist, it might be tempting to read both of these video games as ‘typical’ games where feminine values are excluded, and privilege is given exclusively to masculine values. However, this research suggests that the narrative of *The last of us* can be read from an alternative perspective, according to which it is argued that Ellie represents human characteristics which are repressed in society such as compassion, intuition and expressiveness and which are traditionally associated with femininity in Western societies (Sawyer 2004:26, Gove & Watt 2004:46). Likewise, the Little Sisters in *BioShock* can be seen as embodying values that have traditionally been associated with femininity, such as compassion, irrationality and emotion. This study considers these characteristics as ‘human’ values, rather than being inherent to any particular gender, and suggests that video games can be seen as a medium with which to ‘undo’ cultural perceptions that connect certain character traits with a specific gender.

In light of this position on the subversive potential of the video gaming platform, the proposed research explores and unpacks the ways in which these video games may influence and modify traditional and popular perceptions and constructs of femininity. Jon Dovey and Helen Kennedy (2009:36) argue that computer games have developed from a highly masculine context, where the concepts of science, mathematics, technology and the military have been privileged, thereby automatically repressing more feminine elements. This study aims to highlight the ways in which *BioShock* and *The last of us* attempt to subvert normative constructions of masculinity, and instead posit feminine values as positive, desirable and necessary in order to acknowledge and realise a broader sense of ‘being human’; one that does not depend on culturally sanctioned notions of gender. As Jack Sawyer (2004:26;27) argues, “... a fuller concept of humanity recognizes that all men and women are potentially both strong and weak, both active and passive,

and that these and other human characteristics are not the province of one sex”.

1.3 Literature review

The literature drawn from in this study can be separated into two overlapping categories. The first category includes sources on gaming discourse in general, and deals with what has already been written about the representation of women in video games. The second category consists of postfeminist theory, in order to ascertain how this theoretical framework might inform the analysis of *BioShock* and *The last of us*. Many of the sources used in this part of the study deal with the representation of women and femininity in popular culture and visual media in general. The limitations of this body of literature are taken into account, and a critical engagement with ‘postfeminism’ is undertaken in this study.

1.3.1 Gaming discourse and history

In *Computers as theatre* (1993), Brenda Laurel suggests that human-computer interactivity should not only be studied and researched from a purely technical standpoint, but also from the perspective of the dramatic arts. According to Henry Jenkins ([sa]:[sp]), *Computers as theatre* can be considered “... one of the few truly transformative books to emerge from the heady early days of the ‘digital revolution’”. Laurel’s insights on human-computer interaction are used in this study in order to understand the subversive potential that video games might have. Laurel’s research on games as interactive narratives eventually gave rise to a type of ‘narrativism’, as identified by Espen Aarseth (2004:49), where the idea of a narrative is privileged and seen as our only mode of understanding.

On the other hand, ‘narrativism’ is critiqued by several game studies, scholars such as Gonzalo Frasca and Markku Eskelinen, who argue that narratology is in no way adequate to understanding video games (Juul 2009:363). The term

'ludology' – coined by Frasca – refers to the study of games as distinct from narratives, and that acknowledges the specificity of the medium and the mechanical aspect of gameplay (Juul 2009:363). According to Dovey and Kennedy (2009:23), ludology serves to remind game theorists that games are not static texts, but rather activities.

With this being said, it is tempting to divide the approach of this part of the study into the traditional oppositional levels of narratology (dealing with the story told by the game), and ludology, (the play aspect of the games) separately. But as Thomas Apperley (2009:354) points out, "in light of the narratology/ludology debate, video games may no longer be unproblematically analyzed as simply 'texts' that produce 'meanings', as this is only a part of their operation". Video games have their own "particularity" (Jenkins 2004:119), and therefore need to be approached from an entirely different perspective from, for instance film, literary or theatre studies.

Likewise, according to Frans Mäyrä (2008:313), game studies have largely been based on existing theories based in other academic fields such as literature studies, narratology and psychology. Mäyrä (2008:314) suggests that the reasons for this include the short history of video games, as well as their highly interdisciplinary nature. Even though much of the research done on video games is rooted in a variety of academic disciplines, video game studies is steadily emerging as an independent field of study in its own right. This study approaches *BioShock* and *The last of us* from a perspective that acknowledges the complex nature of the medium of video games, and keeps in mind the uniqueness and potential embodied in this platform.

Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan's *First person: new media as story, performance and game* (2004) assists greatly in this study's attempt to integrate narratology and ludology, to approach the chosen video games from a more complex perspective. *First person* includes chapters by several

prominent game studies scholars such as Jenkins, Janet Murray, Espen Aarseth and Jesper Juul. This book proves invaluable to this study, as it provides solid theory from which to understand video games. Jenkins' (2008:119) chapter titled "Game design as narrative architecture" for instance addresses the ludology/narratology debate directly, and proposes a 'middle-ground', suggesting that stories are not merely narratives, but rather "... spaces ripe with narrative possibility".

In their book *Rules of play: game design fundamentals* (2004), Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman (2004:1) approach games as systems of meaning. The main focus of *Rules of play* revolves around creating meaningful play. According to Warren Spector (in Salen & Zimmerman 2004:2), "[i]t is absolutely vital that we start to build a vocabulary that allows us to examine, with some degree of precision, how games evoke emotional-intellectual responses in players". This is exactly what Salen and Zimmerman aim to achieve with *Rules of play*, which constitutes an important part of contemporary gaming discourse, and can therefore be considered a fundamental source for this study. Even though this source leans more towards a purely ludological approach, it is still useful to understand the design process and the complex elements at play when a game is created.

1.3.2 Postfeminism

Raewyn Connell's work on masculinity and femininity, especially *Gender and power* (1987), *Masculinities* (2005), "Hegemonic masculinity: rethinking the concept" (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005) and *Gender in world perspective* (2009) informs this section of the study. Connell (1987:30) provides an overview of the historical development of the terms 'sex role', 'male role' and 'female role', which is integral to understanding the contemporary construction of 'femininity' and 'masculinity' in mass culture and their relation to normative behaviour in terms of gender. Furthermore, even though Connell (1987:54) recognises the usefulness of 'sex role theory', she extensively critiques this

approach and explores its limitations. By unpacking ideas of gender formation, this study aims to explore the visual representation of mainly women (and to a lesser extent men) in *BioShock* and *The last of us*. Connell's work therefore proves useful for understanding the dynamics of the construction of masculinity, specifically the ways in which it pertains to femininity in visual culture.

Tracy Dietz' essay "An examination of violence and gender role portrayals in video games: implications for gender socialization and aggressive behaviour" (1998) is extensively used in exploring the quantitative information available on the portrayal of women in games. Dietz uses content analysis to research the portrayal of women and violence in video games. Whilst Dietz' research is mainly quantitative, it is relevant to this research because it provides useful insight into the great number of people that are influenced by games and gaming. This contributes to the position taken in this dissertation that video games can potentially profoundly influence ideas regarding normative behaviour in terms of gender in the social realm.

Postfemininities in popular culture (2009), by Genz provides a valuable contemporary perspective on how women and men are portrayed in various areas of popular culture. These arguments are critically analysed in order to expand on existing gender analyses in the video game sphere, and to provide an alternative perspective on the construction of femininity in video games. In *Postfemininities in popular culture* (2009) Genz analyses various popular films and television series such as *Buffy the vampire slayer* (Whedon 1997). Genz (2009:152) argues that the tough female superhero that has become increasingly familiar on our screens can be seen as a feminist role model. She does, however, also take an in depth look at characters such as Buffy in *Buffy the vampire slayer* (Whedon 1997) and notes that several female characters

have evolved to represent a new kind of female protagonist that combines femininity and skill to become a hero.⁶

In addition to this, Amanda Lotz (2001:106) considers postfeminism a valuable approach for understanding and recognising shifts in the representation of women in popular culture. Even though several feminist theorists such as Susan Faludi and Andrea Press consider postfeminism a term that indicates an opposition to feminism and an increased focus on traditional femininity and female roles, Lotz (2001:111;112) argues that the complexity of the term must also be taken into account. This means that postfeminism should be broadened to acknowledge that some aspects of the theory are in opposition to feminism, but many of these aspects also build on feminist concepts. The literature used in this study takes the complex nature of postfeminism into account, as well as the complexities involved when dealing with gender constructions and gender identities.

1.4 Theoretical framework and research methodology

The research undertaken in this study is qualitative and of a speculative and exploratory nature. This study does not seek to find objective answers, but rather aims to draw conclusions based on the application of the theoretical frameworks provided by the study's close reading of the construction of femininity in *BioShock* and *The last of us*. This study explores the potential of video games to alter and subvert normative constructions of femininity. *BioShock* and *The last of us* are used as examples of how an alternative reading of the narrative as well as the gameplay of video games can facilitate a different view of gender construction in this visual medium. This research involves my own interpretation of *BioShock* and *The last of us*, grounded in a

⁶ *Buff the vampire slayer* is the focus of many academic studies, and is even considered the "... vanguard of academic acceptability, a hot topic for textual analysis" (Weigel 2003:18), in terms of television studies. Texts such as Rhonda Wilcox and David Lavery's *Fighting the forces: what's at stake in Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (2002) and Roz Kaveny's *Reading the vampire slayer: the unofficial critical companion to Buffy and Angel* (2002) deal with the television series in depth.

postfeminist framework and combined with my own experience of playing the games and does not involve audience studies, interviews or questionnaires.

As mentioned previously, this study applies video game theory to *BioShock* and *The last of us* on two different levels, namely a ludological and a narratological level. From a ludological point of view, this study examines the ways in which the game mechanics, and visuals in the games function to produce meanings and create particular experiences for the player. The critical visual methodology used in this study, is one that focuses on the site of the images specifically (Rose 2012:20). On the narratological level, this study deals with, and unpacks the narratives of both *BioShock* and *The last of us*.

More specifically, this study employs a postfeminist framework through which gender construction in video games can be better understood. As already argued, postfeminism can be seen as a part of the cultural sphere, and its meaning is constantly mediated (Genz 2009:28). Genz (2009:28) clarifies the difference between feminism and postfeminism by stating that the prefix 'post' can be understood as an "... interrogation and active rethinking" of definitions and interpretations regarding feminism and femininity. Postfeminism therefore opens up a field of unexplored ways of looking at feminism and constructions of femininity in popular visual culture.

Postfeminism can prove useful in the understanding of popular culture (Gill & Scharff 2011:3). Gill (2007b:148) argues that the term postfeminism is best approached as a type of 'sensibility', neither as "... an epistemological perspective nor as an historical shift, nor (simply) as a backlash in which meanings are pre-specified". This means that even though postfeminist discourse is embedded in and reliant upon previous meanings established by feminism, it can now be used as a tool with which to understand specific constructions of gender in popular culture (Gill 2007b:148;149).

In the proposed study postfeminism is implemented and applied to *BioShock* and *The last of us* in the following way: firstly, the theory that is applied to the relevant video games is drawn from various areas of feminist and gender studies, such as third-wave feminism and postfeminism. In this way, the prefix post- does not refer to a stance that is ‘anti’ or ‘after’ feminism, but rather one that includes different perspectives on current gender issues. Secondly, this study considers postfeminism a “... site of interrogation” (Genz 2006:341) that opens up new ways of understanding and analysing gender representations in video games. Postfeminism, as defined in this study, acknowledges and recognises the contradictions and ambiguities that inherently form part of gender studies. Lastly, postfeminism is employed in this study as a way in which to explore the construction of femininity and the representation thereof in *BioShock* and *The last of us*. This means that, in order to provide in-depth analyses of femininity in these video games, masculinity is also discussed in terms of its relation to the construction of femininity. Thus, postfeminism recognises femininity as well as masculinity as important aspects to consider when exploring gender representation in popular culture.

1.5 Outline of chapters

Chapter One sketches the introduction and background to the study. Thereafter, the research aims are explained and what this study wishes to achieve is made clear. A literature review follows, which includes a detailed discussion of the seminal texts from which this study draws. After the literature review, the research methodology and theoretical approach are outlined, and the significance of this study is contextualised.

Chapter Two firstly provides an overview of the historical emergence of different strains of Western feminism, as well as the historical context of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ and their importance to identity formation. Secondly, the role that feminist theory plays in the study of visual culture, as well as its limitations are discussed. Thirdly, this chapter explores how postfeminism can

be seen as a continuation of feminist thought, which can be employed productively as a framework in which to understand the role of gender identity in subject formation. In addition to this, the roles of scientific development and neoliberal socio-economic environments in the gendering of values are also analysed. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the ways in which postfeminism is useful for visual culture studies specifically.

Chapter Three firstly outlines the historical development of video games in Western culture, with specific emphasis on existing research regarding the representation of women in video games. This is followed by a discussion dealing with the ways in which video games influence gender identity formation, including analysing various female stereotypes that are commonly seen in video games. Moreover, this chapter provides an overview of narratology and ludology as theoretical approaches, and explains how they are implemented in the analyses of the video games. Finally, this chapter concludes by identifying and exploring prominent postfeminist themes that surface in contemporary popular culture and video games specifically.

Chapter Four applies the theoretical frameworks dealt with in Chapters Two and Three to *BioShock* and *The last of us*. These two video games are put forward as examples of games that display the postfeminist themes identified in Chapter Three, as such positioning them as ideal texts to analyse according to a postfeminist perspective. In an attempt to provide a productive reading of *BioShock* and *The last of us* in terms of gender representation, this chapter explores the relatively progressive ways in which stereotypical feminine values are portrayed in both video games.

Chapter Five concludes this study with a summary of the arguments and theories discussed throughout. Possible further studies are suggested and identified.

CHAPTER 2: FEMINISM, GENDER CONSTRUCTION AND POSTFEMINISM IN VISUAL CULTURE

In an attempt to arrive at a postfeminist framework that can be utilised as an approach to gender representations in video games, this chapter discusses the historical development of feminism and contemporary notions of 'sex' and 'gender'. As Lotz (2010:105) points out, the general media plays an important role in influencing general opinion of what 'feminism' means, as well as general conceptions of gender identity. As such, it is crucial to explore the context within which visual texts are created, as well as the underlying structures that inform the creation of these texts.

This chapter provides the theoretical background and context in which this study is situated, in terms of both feminist and postfeminist theory. As an introduction to this chapter, an overview of the historical developments of different types of feminism is provided, followed by an outline of the historical emergence of ideas regarding 'sex' and 'gender', and how these notions potentially influence identity formation in contemporary society. Following this, existing feminist approaches to visual culture studies are discussed, which leads into an exploration of postfeminism as a useful continuation and expansion of feminist thought.

The second part of this chapter deals with postfeminist conceptions of identity formation, and the roles that neoliberalism and scientific development potentially play in this process. This chapter concludes by discussing postfeminist approaches to visual culture, and the ways in which feminist thought is developed in order to provide a potentially more in-depth understanding of current gender relations and gender representations in popular media, especially video games.

2.1 Historical overview of feminism

First and second-wave feminism (whose main protocols are discussed in more detail below) were practice based in the sense that they addressed obstacles and the oppression that women faced on practical, everyday levels as a direct result of their sex. Since then, the term ‘feminist’ has transgressed into the academic sphere (Byerly & Ross 2006:1). The aim of this section of the chapter is to explore academic research specifically within visual culture from a feminist perspective. First and second-wave principles and values form the foundation for frameworks such as third-wave feminism and postfeminism, and it is therefore important to sketch a background to the historical development of these movements. Since there are several debates and disagreements, academic and otherwise, regarding the exact definition of the term feminism, the following section relies heavily on historian Estelle Freedman’s account of the development of feminism in Western culture.

According to Freedman (2007:xi), a simple definition of feminism is “... the belief that women have the same human capacities as men”. Even though this claim might not be contested directly in contemporary society, it proves problematic on several levels. Firstly, it constructs ‘women’ according to ‘men’, thereby relegating women to the position of Other in the binary opposition male/female. Secondly, it does not account for potential differences in capacity – not only in terms of gender, but of human beings in general. This definition can be seen as an attempt to homogenise and standardise human capacity. While this might form the basis of the feminist movement, it is clear that there is now a need to think about gender differences in more complex terms. Traditionally, the history of feminism can be divided into three broad consecutive categories, often referred to as ‘waves’. Even though several theorists (Harnois 2008:122) have argued that the wave metaphor presents some problems in terms of accurately and adequately encompassing the depth of feminism, it nevertheless proves useful to gain a broader understanding of the historical development of feminism.

For at least the past two centuries,¹ questions have been asked by both women and men about the deeply entrenched Western beliefs concerning the inferiority of women in terms of their moral, physical and intellectual capacity (Freedman 2007:xi). These beliefs were used to justify “... patriarchal laws requiring female obedience to fathers and husbands” (Freedman 2007:xi). In reaction to this oppression, critics argued that “... the common humanity of women and men far overshadows the biological distinctions of sex” (Freedman 2007:xi). From this first resistance to male domination, several feminist ideas were born and inspired throughout the following centuries (Freedman 2007:xi).

From the inception of the word ‘feminism’ in the 1890s in France, the concept was considered controversial because of its links with radicalism, as well as the lack of consensus about what exactly the label referred to (Freedman 2002:3). Freedman (2002:4) states that in the 1800s, activism promoting women’s inclusion in educational and economic activities was simply called “the women’s movement”. Furthermore, many participants of this movement considered motherhood as one of the main reasons for women to have independence from patriarchal law (Freedman 2002:4). Between 1910 and the 1960s, a different politic became evident, since a younger generation of activists deliberately distanced themselves from the idea that motherhood renders women equal to men. Instead, they insisted that the basis for equal rights is a common human identity between men and women (Freedman 2002:4). Several dramatic public protests demanding that women should have equal education, voting and economical rights, served to cement the link between feminism and extremism (Freedman 2002:4).

The 1960s constitutes a critical shift in feminist history; a revival in women’s politics in the West, at first called “women’s liberation” took place in Western

¹ Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the rights of women* (1792) is often considered to be a “... founding text of British and American feminism” (Hannam 2007:xi).

countries such as the United Kingdom as well as the United States of America (Freedman 2002:4). This movement is known in retrospect as the second-wave of feminism, and had a significant impact on women's economic as well as political positions in society. Similar to first wave feminist thinking, the women's liberation movement argued that the genders are equal in economic and political spheres, and are entitled to the same education and employment opportunities. But at the same time, it was argued that women are different to men in terms of reproduction and sexuality, and therefore have additional concerns such as the need for affordable contraceptives and the right to legal abortion services. Some of the criticism levelled against second-wave feminism includes the inclination to deal only with issues faced by upper-middle-class white women (Walters 2005:117,118; Hannam 2007:151,152). As a result, over the past 25 years, the terms feminism and feminist have evolved to include people from different contexts of oppression and marginalisation, and aims to also include people that are excluded on the basis of their race and ethnicity, religion, sexual preference and social class among other descriptors (Freedman 2002:6). In the early 1990s, Rebecca Walker coined the term Third-Wave feminism (Freedman 2002:6), and explicitly aligned herself with a feminist movement that she saw as one that could "... go beyond the second wave of feminism by forging a more racially and sexually diverse movement that emphasized female empowerment rather than male oppression" (Freedman 2002:6).

Freedman (2002:5) argues that at the end of the twentieth century, "[a] generation of Western women came of age influenced by feminism to expect equal opportunities". Even though the majority of women of this generation often claim that they are uncomfortable with the label 'feminist', they still expect to be included in political and economic activities in the same way as their male counter parts (Freedman 2002:5). This rejection (and arguably misinterpretation) of the term 'feminist' is still evident in contemporary popular

opinion. For example, *TIME* magazine included the word ‘feminist’² in a ‘light-hearted’ poll where readers could vote for a word to be ‘banned’³ in 2015 (Steinmetz 2014:[sp]). The word appeared on the list with other options such as ‘basic’, ‘kale’ and ‘bossy’. Even though the poll was intended to be playful, this illustrates not only the extent to which members of the general public have a problem with being labelled ‘feminist’, but also highlights the negative way in which the general public think of feminism. Genz (2009:2) refers to this distantiation from feminism as a sort of “... intellectual fatigue and exhaustion as we seem to have run out of steam debating the state of women in twenty-first-century culture and society”. It would appear that postfeminism has developed in light of, and perhaps in response to, such “intellectual fatigue” (Genz 2009:2). For this reason, it has become important to distinguish postfeminism from feminism, as the former may enable a productive rethinking of gender relations.

In order to explore the complexities involved when dealing with gender identity formation, the next section provides a historical context for contemporary uses of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, and shows how these concepts may influence contemporary identity formation.

2.2 History of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ and its influence on contemporary identity

In order to understand contemporary notions of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ better, the following section provides a brief overview of the historical emergence of the terms. According to Myra Hird (2004:16,17), even though in contemporary Western society, the term ‘sex’ refers to biological difference between men

² According to *TIME* Magazine’s website (Steinmetz 2014:[sp]) , the definition of a feminist is: “[to] have nothing against feminism itself, but when did it become a thing that every celebrity had to state their position on whether this word applies to them, like some politician declaring a party? Let’s stick to the issues and quit throwing this label around like ticker tape at a Susan B. Anthony parade”.

³ ‘Banning’ words refers to the hypothetical removal of specific words from everyday conversation, that is words that the respondent to the poll considers overused and irritating.

and women, and the term 'gender' indicates cultural differences between these two groups, in pre-Enlightenment Western society, 'sex' was not considered as important a descriptor as it is in contemporary society. Hird (2004:18) claims that:

[i]ndeed, what we understand as "sex" today more closely resembles what, during the pre-Enlightenment period, we would term "gender." The change from "gender" to "sex" as a foundational ontology was achieved through a slow epistemic shift - not in the body itself, but in the meanings attributed to this body. This epistemic shift was made possible by the emerging discipline of science, and biology more specifically.

Hird (2004:18) goes on to explain that, for instance, Greek mythology describes how Zeus, the father of all gods, relocated the penis inside half of the human population, thus enabling internal reproduction. This means that "... women's genitals were seen as simply male genitals displayed internally rather than externally" (Hird 2004:18). Women's bodies were seen as inferior versions of men's bodies throughout the pre-Enlightenment era, since it was believed that a man's body had the necessary 'heat' to bear the penis and scrotum externally, and women apparently lacked this heat (Hird 2004:18).⁴

Furthermore, in the pre-Enlightenment era, since there was believed to be only one sex, and all human beings 'naturally' strove towards the perfect body (male), individuals were "... freer to express variations of character which would become highly problematic once the ... 'opposite' sex model was adopted" (Hird 2004:19,20). As Laqueur (1990:124) argues:

... there was but one sex whose more perfect exemplars were easily deemed males at birth and whose decidedly less perfect ones were labeled female. The modern question, about the "real" sex of a person, made no sense in this period, not because two sexes were mixed but because there was only one to pick from and it had to be shared by everyone, from the strongest warrior to the most effeminate courtier to the most aggressive virago to the gentlest maiden.

⁴ Thomas Laqueur (1990:197) also refers to the pre-Enlightenment idea of the 'one-sex model' according to which women's bodies were considered as lesser versions of male's.

In the Enlightenment era, with the rise of scientific disciplines such as biology, the body was increasingly seen as the only concrete signifier of ‘sex’ (Hird 2004:20). As Foucault (in Hird 2004:22) observes, during this time period, there was a focus on the physical body “... revealing its secrets through visualization”. This idea of uncovering the ‘truth’ inside the human body, through the scientific study of anatomy, led to the new binary classification system of genitalia, according to which males have penises and females have vaginas. This was in contrast to the previously mentioned belief that all human beings have penises, either on the outside of the body or on the inside (Hird 2004:22).

This dichotomous classification of all humans focused on the sexual and physical ‘differences’ between men and women and endeavoured to further highlight a variety of ways in which men and women were supposedly opposites. Subsequently, the differences between men and women would also be constructed in terms of intellect. As Schiebinger (in Hird 2004:22) points out: “... by the 1790s, European anatomists presented the male and female body as each having a distinct telos – physical and intellectual strength for the man, motherhood for the woman”. Hird (2004:22,23) argues that these seemingly natural physical and mental ‘differences’ between men and women, enabled and justified the continued subordination of women in society. The naturalisation of this categorisation was made possible by the shift to “... biology and science as the ultimate purveyors of knowledge and ‘truth’” (Hird 2004:23).

By using the concept of ‘nature’, the discourse of science placed men and women in opposition to each other on two completely *different* scales, instead of (as in the pre-Enlightenment time period) as two opposing ends on the same scale (Hird 2004:23). Thus, as Hird (2004:23) observes:

... this new politics sought to maintain old hierarchies, not through notions of the divine rights of men, but through the newly emerging biological foundation of sex complementarity.

Specifically, sex complementarity held that women and men were, biologically, better suited to different roles, and that these roles complemented each other to form the optimum living, working system. Women were to maintain the family and household while men controlled the public and political sphere. Sex complementarity maintained the gendered division of labor between private and public spheres by taking up the new sciences of biology and anatomy that were already at work emphasizing “sexual difference.” In this vital way, biology, as the purveyor of stable, ahistorical, and impartial “facts” about “sexual difference,” became the foundation of political prescriptions about social order.

Hird (2004:24) claims that the contemporary notion of the sex/gender binary is inextricably linked to identity formation. By classifying humans into men and women, the focus is immediately placed on the differences, instead of the similarities between these two groups of people. Additionally, anyone that does not fit biologically into the two defined categories (for instance intersex and transsexual people), are summarily excluded and marginalised from normative society.⁵ Hird (2004:24) explains the result of this dichotomy, which according to her was only established fully in the 1950s in the following way:

[t]his bifurcation served a number of functions, most immediate of which was to provide a convenient, tangible means to constitute identity and proceed with the immediate concern of challenging the hierarchical relationships that subordinate women to men.

In light of the above, it becomes clear that current ideas of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ are based in scientific verifications, as well as cultural discourses. In terms of science as the alleged source of ‘truth’, male/female is explained as a ‘natural’ category by which to classify individuals. Subsequently, in cultural terms, as a result of this biological classification, the gender, as well as the gender role

⁵ In addition to this, Connell (2009:10) argues that with a definition of gender that is based on difference, even homosexual desire, for instance, cannot be recognised, since it is based on gender similarity.

(either male or female) of an individual in society can supposedly be easily determined (Connell 2009:9).⁶

To only consider gender as a direct result of one's sex has been thoroughly unpacked and discredited by more recent scholars of gender. Connell (2009:10,11), for instance, states that her concern with this definition of gender lies with the "... squeezing of biological complexity and adaptability into a stark dichotomy, and the idea that cultural patterns simply 'express' bodily difference." Therefore, instead of gender being rooted firmly in a biological base, Connell (2009:11) argues that gender rather refers to "... the way [in which] human society deals with human bodies and their continuity, and the many consequences of that 'dealing' in our personal lives and our collective fate".

In addition to this, Connell (2009:5) claims that being either a man or a woman, is a "... *becoming*, a condition actively under construction".⁷ At the same time, as Connell (2009:6) also points out, this becoming, is not only influenced by cultural structures, but simultaneously by the individual's relationship with their body as well. As a result, and as Connell (2009:6) argues, "... we cannot think of womanhood or manhood as fixed by nature. But neither should we think of them as simply imposed from outside, by social norms or pressure from authorities". Therefore, sex and gender should be understood as being influenced and shaped by both biological and cultural structures.

Although the strength of biological impulses must not be denied, the impact of cultural conditioning should not be underestimated. For, certain values and behaviour are undoubtedly culturally instilled and encouraged by institutions

⁶ It is important to note that the two-sex model is being challenged in contemporary society by, for instance, information and discussion about intersexuality becoming more widespread (Sussman 2012:7).

⁷ This idea was already expressed much earlier by Simone de Beauvoir (1956:273), who famously stated that "[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman".

such as the nuclear family, schools and the mass media. These different values and behaviours are acquired by means of direct lessons, and by the emulation of role models. Children will grow up to become members of society, and act according to what society deems appropriate for their gender. If a subject does not conform, s/he is often physically beaten, marginalised and shunned by society.

Although this model of gender formation – that is, its cultural construction – holds some merit (Connell 2009:95), severe problems regarding this exclusive approach must be pointed out. The notion of gender being solely determined by culture, does not clarify or even question the fact that one side of the difference, that is, the ‘masculine’ side has consistently been privileged throughout history (Connell 2009:58). To consider that gender is only constructed on a cultural level situates the subject as a passive receiver of examples of gender roles that they must ‘perform’ and does little to clarify why there has been a clear and constant resistance to hegemonic ideas of gender. As Amanda du Preez (2009:46) points out, “[t]he sexed body is ... not a pure given or clean slate, waiting passively to be produced by the inscriptions of the supposedly active gendered mind”. Instead, a subject’s (biological) sex should not be discounted as a site where identity formation constantly takes place. In light of this, Du Preez (2009:46) does not consider “... gender entirely amputated from sex, but rather propose[s] that gender and sex are mutually, although not prescriptively, instantiated”.

Notwithstanding such nuanced positions on the relationship between sex and gender, many reductive assumptions based on physical differences between genders are still widely made in society, influencing and shaping everyday lived experience. Such assumptions consider the body a “machine that manufactures gender differences ...” (Connell 2009:52), with the result that ‘natural’ differences are assumed to exist between men and women. These differences include assumptions such as: men are physically faster and

stronger than women, men have a stronger sex drive than women, women rely more on intuition, while men are more rational and that men and women have different recreational needs (Connell 2009:53). The main problem with this Cartesian (which can be seen as decidedly scientific and masculine) dualism, lies not only in the fact that these purported biologically determined gender differences rest entirely on speculation and generalisation and in the tendency for one of these poles to be privileged (Connell 2009:54).

Therefore, instead of assuming that gender traits and behaviour are only either socially learned, or biologically determined, this study takes the position that the complex nature of gender roles, gender norms and gender values must be taken into account when exploring identity formation. Because it is clear that bodies are affected by social processes such as sexual customs, food distribution and education, it is limiting to think of gender production as stemming only from either cultural or biological aspects. Furthermore, I argue that not only individuals, but also certain social activities, and certain values are culturally gendered and also privileged in Western societies, and thus influence and determine the ways in which different genders are viewed in society. Moreover, subject formation through the commodification of gender, as well as through socialisation is to a large extent facilitated by the mass media and in particular, visual technologies. Therefore, it is important to critically explore and investigate the role of technology – particularly video games in the context of this study – in society (which is discussed later on in this chapter). By taking the complexities of sex and gender constructions into account, the following section discusses existing feminist studies regarding the visual (i.e. cultural) construction of femininity and feminine values in the popular media.

2.3 Feminist studies and the representation of women in visual culture

The representation of women in the mass media has been an important focus area in feminist media scholarship over the past 30 years (Byerly & Ross

2006:17). In the last few decades, feminist activists and scholars started investigating the portrayal of women in several forms of popular media (Carter & Steiner 2004:1). Carter and Steiner (2004:2) claim that the main concern of these studies were how “... the sexist messages of these media forms socialized people, especially children, into thinking that dichotomized and hierarchical sex-role stereotypes were ‘natural’ and ‘normal’”. One of the earliest publications to problematise the representation of women in the media is Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels and James Benet’s *Hearth and home* (1978) (Byerly & Ross 2006:17). This collection deals with women’s absence from positions of power and agency in the mass media as well as the stereotyped versions of women often found in popular culture between the 1950s and late 1970s.

Dominic Strinati (2004:167) reiterates the position taken by the authors in *Hearth and home* (1978), arguing that when women are indeed represented in popular culture, they are often stereotyped, with the focus being placed on their sexual attractiveness and the performance of domestic chores and labour. Strinati (2004:167) goes on to argue that, in the sphere of popular culture

...women are ‘symbolically annihilated’ by the media through being absent, condemned or trivialised. Cultural representations of women in the mass media, ..., support and perpetuate the prevailing sexual division of labour and orthodox conceptions of femininity and masculinity. The ‘symbolic annihilation of women’ practiced by the mass media confirms that the roles of wife, mother and housewife, etc., are the fate of women in a patriarchal society. Women are socialised into performing these roles by cultural representations which attempt to make them appear to be the natural prerogative of women.

For example, in early television representations, especially in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, women were not only largely under-represented but also represented in very limited ways – often being depicted as incompetent, ineffectual and unimportant (Strinati 2004:167).

Likewise, June Hannam (2007:134) notes how the image of the “contented wife and mother”, who focuses all her attention on the daily household chores and caring for her children and husband, became widespread in visual texts such as popular magazines and advertisements from the 1950s onwards. One of the key influential texts dealing particularly with these issues is Betty Friedan’s influential text *The feminine mystique* (1963) which encapsulate the frustrations of the unfulfilled white, middle-class housewives of suburban America at that time (Hannam 2007:136). Friedan explores the ways in which these suburban women internalised the belief that they *must* be good wives and mothers, and explains how they blamed themselves for not being content with their roles. The images examined by Friedan seemed to her to represent and celebrate a particular version of femininity, one that operates in an entirely different sphere from that of men (Carter & Steiner 2004:1). Furthermore, such images served, and largely still serve, to naturalise the idea that women belong in a space that is not only separate from, but also less valuable than men’s (Carter & Steiner 2004:1). In *The feminine mystique* however, Friedan encourages women to break out of these roles by taking up paid employment (Hannam 2007:137). Even though this might not have been an entirely realistic solution to the issue at the time,⁸ it nevertheless opened up debates and placed emphasis on the fact that women have been restricted to the private, domestic sphere by culture, and not necessarily as a result of biological makeup (Hannam 2007:137).

Stacy Gillis and Joanne Hollows (2009:1) point out that many of the early second-wave feminist texts, such as Friedan’s, analyse how “...‘false’ images of women were created within popular culture, socializing girls into restricted definitions of femininity that were based around [the domestic sphere]”.

⁸ Gillis and Hollows (2009:6) indicate that in 1950s and 1960s America, men were considered to be the sole breadwinners, which “... both limited women’s opportunities to engage in paid employment outside the home on an equal basis to men and made women economically dependent on men.”

Furthermore, these early feminist writers often argued that these ‘negative’ images of women should rather be replaced by more ‘realistic’ or ‘accurate’ depictions of what women are like, or at least by depictions of women with a feminist-oriented mindset focusing on “... achievement in the public sphere” (Gillis & Hollows 2009:1). Since one cannot discount the realities of a late capitalist, economy driven society, it might be beneficial to encourage young girls and women to strive to fit in, and be able to be successful in a male dominated work place. But on the other hand, this approach seems quite limiting, since it categorises ‘women’ as a homogenous group, which ought to have the same interests and aspirations. This view also assumes that there is a ‘right’ way for women to act, and ‘good’ values to which they should adhere – apparently we just need to identify what they are, and convey the message to the masses.

One of the ways in which this message is communicated for instance, is through toys – one of the first contexts in which children learn how to ‘perform’ femininity and masculinity – it becomes clear that the messages about gender portrayed to children from a young age include the notion that there are very specific ways in which women and men are supposed to act in society in order to be acceptable and ‘normal’ (Carter & Steiner 2004:12).⁹ Carter and Steiner (2004:12) assert that, even though it often appears as if a male character, in for instance, a children’s programme, can outwit his enemy with his intellectual ability, in the end the most important and valued attribute is the man’s physical power, which is used to assert his superiority. On the other hand, girls are encouraged from a young age to identify with an entirely different set of characteristics, aspirations and values (Carter & Steiner 2004:12). For example, early fairytales such as *Sleeping beauty*, *Rapunzel* and *Cinderella* portray young beautiful women, whose main aspiration in life is to find the perfect man to protect them (Carter & Steiner 2004:12). This

⁹ See also Inness (2004:10) who argues that toys teach children how to act in society as either a man or a woman. Furthermore, toys also teach children who is “... supposed to be the hero” (Inness 2004:10).

representation of timid women, whose identity rests in their ability to find 'Mr Right', is still prevalent in many forms of popular media, such as films, magazines and fiction.

As a result of nineteenth century industrialisation and urbanisation, 'private' and 'public' spheres developed to create gendered spaces which are still in imbalance (Carter & Steiner 2004:12). Although such conventional stereotypes are increasingly being challenged, in general, public spheres continue to be associated with male activities such as politics, and the private sphere (the home) is largely still considered to be the domain of women. As Carter and Steiner (2004:12) argue "[g]irls [have been] raised to be the consumers of the future – domestic, caring, and objects of beauty – rather than producers. This idea [has been] widely cultivated and promoted by newspapers and women's magazines". In this regard, one can also consider the influence that the 'Barbie' doll has had on young girls' perceptions of femininity. The doll, which was launched by Mattel in 1959, remains a popular toy for young girls, and embodies 'ideal' white and heterosexual femininity (Carter & Steiner 2004:13). Furthermore, Barbie's body is unreasonably thin, and her main focus in life is to acquire the latest fashion and accessories.¹⁰ This provides girls with a very specific image of what femininity is, what it should be and how to 'act' it. In short, women should either be at home or the mall, and the most important aspect of being a woman is to be attractive, and also spend money on consumer goods.¹¹

¹⁰ Sharon Hayes and Stacey Tantleff-Dunn (2010:415) argue that Barbie and similar dolls, may influence young girls' body image in a negative way. Young girls might see Barbie as a model of what they themselves should aspire to become. Since the emphasis is always on Barbie's physical appearance, this might teach young girls that being pretty and thin are the most important goal that they should strive for.

¹¹ According to Marlys Pearson and Paul Mullins (1999:230), even though Barbie has always had many career options that she could choose from, she still embodies and endorses a "... distinct construction of domesticity". Furthermore, as Pearson and Mullins (1999:230) point out, Barbie's main interest and reason for living has always been high fashion and accessories.

Although many overtly gendered stereotypes still exist in contemporary popular media, Carter and Steiner (2004:13) argue that the "... rigidity of such hierarchical feminine gendered identity has nevertheless begun to break down". Of course, these 'new', often challenging alternative representations of femininity should also be interrogated and explored. As Genz (2009:4) explains:

The question of "what makes a woman?" has never had so many different and competing answers and women of the new millennium have been the subjects/objects of countless enquiries (fictional, political, media and academic alike) that have come to a number of conclusions: the "new women" of the bimillenary are hapless "singletons" looking for Mr Right; confident "chicks" who wear their lipstick with pride; political eye candy ("Blair's Babes"); "power feminists"; third wave feminists who relish difference and diversity; postfeminist traitors/saviours (depending on your viewpoint). Indeed, we seem to be trapped in a labyrinth of (re)significations and we can no longer say with confidence and certainty what it means to be female, feminine and feminist in the twenty-first century.

In light of the above, this study does not aim to suggest new or alternative femininities, or categories thereof, but rather to explore an alternative angle from which we can understand the complexity of existing gender structures portrayed in visual culture. This aim ties in with Gillis and Hollows' (2009:1) observation that:

[m]ore complex understandings of the relationships between feminism, the media and lived experience emerged from the mid-1970s onwards, influenced by structuralism, psychoanalysis and poststructuralism. Often diverse in their intentions and outcomes, these approaches rejected the idea that texts could simply represent or misrepresent 'reality' and focused on how the meaning of gender differences was constructed through advertising, television, films, women's magazines and novels. These approaches played a crucial role in shaping a more complex and theoretically rigorous understanding of the relationships between feminism and popular culture.

These complex understandings that Hollows and Gillis refer to are incorporated in the postfeminist approach discussed in the next subsection.

2.4 Postfeminism as continuation of feminist thought

Postfeminism is a relatively new academic field with many contradictions and paradoxes. In a sense, it is precisely *because* of this precarious, undefined status of postfeminism that renders it useful to opening up new ways of understanding gender relations and representations. Instead of attempting fully to explain the multitude of ways in which postfeminism has been understood, which is a task far beyond the scope of this study, certain postfeminist elements and concepts are employed in order to reveal a new understanding of the representation of women and feminine values in video games.

In the early 1990s, feminist theory became more self-reflexive. Attributing part of this shift to Michel Foucault's widespread influence, McRobbie (2004:256) identifies a move away from a feminist interest in centralised power relations such as in politics, to more dispersed sites, such as how power relations function on a discursive level, for instance in popular media. With these shifts, the concept of 'popular feminism' became widespread. Important issues in the women's movement, such as domestic violence, sexual harassment and equal pay were now being addressed in the mass media such as in magazines and in television series. Thus, feminism became a popularised concept that had bearing on the general public and was itself represented in popular culture. Consequently, this created the prevalent idea that feminism has 'succeeded' in its cause to empower women. But, as McRobbie (2004:257) rightly observes, the definition of 'success' (as well as 'empowerment') is, of course, relative to the context in which it is used, and quite difficult to gauge. Furthermore, as discussed earlier in this chapter, feminism as a political concept, as well as a personal stance has garnered a

decidedly negative connotation amongst both women and men. This negative connotation might be attributed to the cultural, political and economic shifts that have taken place in Western societies in the past few decades.

In addition to this, Gamble (2006:[sp]) suggests, it appears as if feminism is seen by the general public as a concept belonging only in the academic sphere, and is separate from "... an internalised, actualised belief". By contrast, even though feminism is clearly a phenomenon that can be explored on an academic level, for Gamble (2006:[sp]) it is also a movement committed to changing the world outside universities. The different spheres in which feminism operates contribute to the multifaceted and often contradictory nature of the movement (Gamble 2006:[sp]). In other words, feminism can now be understood as a broad and diverse movement which encompasses many differing viewpoints and approaches in the struggle to "... increase women's access to equality in a male-dominated culture" (Gamble 2006:[sp]).

It is because of these complexities that it is potentially useful to approach feminism from a postfeminist position. By understanding feminism as a complex, diverse and dynamic movement, postfeminism can be considered to contribute and enrich the movement, while simultaneously "... negotiating fruitful relationships with postmodernism, drawing on theories of difference, identity and deconstruction in order to interrogate the ways in which the category 'woman' is constructed" (Gamble (2006:[sp])). Similarly, Lotz (2010:105) argues that even though there are contradictions and misunderstandings when writing about feminism on both a popular and academic level, "... feminism remains a vital perspective for recognizing and addressing contemporary oppressions and inequities", and thus remains relevant in both spheres. In addition to this, Dow's (in Lotz 2010:111) assertion that postfeminism is a discourse that: "... increasingly defines what it means to be a feminist by factors of lifestyle and attitude rather than politics and activism" strengthens the argument that postfeminism can indeed be

understood as a continuation and development of feminism as a way in which to analyse popular culture.

In the interest of understanding postfeminism in a way that proves most useful for this particular study, Ann Brooks' (in Lotz 2010:113) conceptualisation of postfeminism is considered the most comprehensive:

[p]ostfeminism as understood from this perspective is about the conceptual shift within feminism from debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference. It is fundamentally about, not a depoliticization of feminism, but a political shift in feminism's conceptual and theoretical agenda. Postfeminism is about a critical engagement with earlier feminist political and theoretical concepts and strategies as a result of its engagement with other social movements for change. Postfeminism expresses the intersection of feminism with postmodernism, poststructuralism and post-colonialism, and as such represents a dynamic movement capable of challenging modernist, patriarchal and imperialist frameworks. In the process postfeminism facilitates a broad-based, pluralistic conception of the application of feminism, and addresses the demands of marginalized, diasporic and colonized cultures for a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms.

This conception of postfeminism recognises the integral part that existing feminist theories play in understanding postfeminism, and broadens the scope and reach of the movement. Brooks' emphasis on the importance of difference and complexities, positions postfeminism as an ideal perspective from which to interrogate underlying oppressive frameworks represented in visual culture. Throughout the rest of this study, Brooks' definition of postfeminism is used when I refer to postfeminism. In addition to considering postfeminism a theoretical framework from which to analyse texts, the term may also be understood to refer to the texts themselves. In other words, postfeminist texts, which offer women a variety of versions of femininity to choose from, can be unpacked from a postfeminist position.

2.5 Postfeminist conceptions of subject formation through gender

Before attempting to understand gender representation at a visual level, it is useful to explore the role that neoliberal society plays in terms of subject formation on a cultural level. In order to do this, I will discuss gender as a commodity, and the ways in which this influences societal notions regarding femininity. Budgeon (2011:279) argues that, since "... the lived experience of femininity has become increasingly complex", second-wave feminism has become limited in terms of understanding current gender relations and the visual representation thereof. Therefore, an alternative approach has become necessary in order to provide an understanding of identity formation through gender. As previously mentioned, postfeminism potentially provides the tools to come to terms with and interpret different gender representations in contemporary visual culture.

In order to form a postfeminist approach to identity formation through gender, some prominent theories on identity formation are discussed in this section. Some of the key ideas in sex role theory suggest that girls and boys are taught from a very young age by various societal institutions how to act according to their gender in order to become a woman or a man. Gender identity is also developing alongside capitalist ideals in a late neoliberal society, with gender often being seen as a commodity; as something that can be bought.

2.5.1 Gender as commodity in a neoliberal society

Neoliberalism has become so influential and interwoven in contemporary, globalised societies, that Alfredo Saad-Filho and Deborah Johnston (2005:1) argue that "[w]e live in the age of neoliberalism". The term neoliberalism is complex, and can be understood, among others, as an economic and political ideology or philosophy that endeavours to

... further expand global capital accumulation through free trade, financial deregulation, privatization, and other tenets of the so-called Washington Consensus, spearheaded by the

World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization (WTO), and kindred organizations” (Mensah 2008:1).

These tenets that Mensah refers to, contribute to the uneven distribution of wealth and resources that exists globally (Bush 2007:xiii). Furthermore, neoliberal thought is firmly underpinned by traditionally considered masculine values such as competition, rational expectation and utility maximisation (Birch & Mykhnenko 2010:5). Similarly, Gill and Scharff (2011:6) consider neoliberalism to be “... a force for creating actors who are rational, calculating and self-motivating, and who are increasingly exhorted to make sense of their individual biographies in terms of discourses of freedom, autonomy and choice ...”. In other words, neoliberal systems, which are mainly focused on economic efficiency, monetary growth, as well as production and industrial development, promote and privilege values that impoverish a major part of the world’s population, especially women (Bush 2007:xiii; Eaton & Lorentzen 2003:iix).¹²

Moreover, neoliberal activities are placing serious strain on the natural world, which is currently being used as an unlimited supply of resources (Norberg-Hodge & Goering 1995:11,12). With this being said, the gendered dimension of neoliberalism, as well as the prominent role that the popular media play in neoliberal societies, are important areas of study in order to arrive at an understanding of the ways in which gender is presented and constructed in the media as a commodity.

According to Eva Chen (2013:449), many ‘women’s genres’ in contemporary popular culture make specific reference to traditional humanist conceptions of “... freedom, choice and agency as unbounded, absolute, given and emancipating” (Chen 2013:449). These understandings of the term freedom are applied to our contemporary, materialistically driven society, and in this

¹² The links between neoliberalism, women and the exploitation of the environment are discussed throughout the next chapters.

way situate apparently endless consumer choices and agency as 'real' freedom. This idea is evident in several advertising campaigns aimed at women, which includes slogans such as the "You're worth it" (L'Oreal) and "Who says you can't have it all?" (Pantene) campaigns and so forth.

But as Chen (2013:449) points out, in this climate of competition, where the subject is always encouraged to come out ahead, and 'win', there are bound to be losers as well as groups of people that are excluded and marginalised. This illuminates the inherent contradiction in a neoliberal capitalist society. On the one hand, it promises equality and empowerment to all individuals, but at the same time it excludes a number of people that do not 'meet the standards'. The 'losers' are simply motivated by the system to try harder in order to eventually reach the ideal normative level, and in this way the system is perpetuated indefinitely, without providing value (other than material) to the subject's life. In essence, the neoliberal subject is constructing their identity through mass consumption. In this way, femininity is offered by the neoliberal society as a commodity to be used and consumed in the guise of 'authentic' identity construction.

Furthermore, Michelle Lazar (2011:37) argues that the commercialised beauty industry plays an integral part in the 'selling' of gender – especially femininity.¹³ The narrow, oppressive notions of physical beauty displayed and encouraged by the advertising industry, serve to create and reinforce normative ideals of beauty and femininity. Lazar (2011:37) points out that even though the beauty industry is often criticised for the unhealthy and extreme bodily ideals it perpetuates, some feminist writers have "... reclaimed beauty practices as enjoyable, self-chosen and skilled feminine pursuits". This stance indicates a shift away from the second-wave feminist tendency to polarise 'femininity' and 'feminism' in favour of an approach that blends the idea of beautification with a "feminist consciousness" (Lazar 2011:37). Even

¹³ Since advertising is an integral part of visual culture, it remains an important area of study in order to explore the representation of gender in visual culture.

though the idea that striving towards normative physical beauty in order to be 'feminine' remains questionable, the idea that femininity and feminism are not considered polar opposites, is an integral part of my argument. In order to explore identity formation through gender, it is imperative to investigate the nature of femininity as it is portrayed at various times and in various contexts. Similar to the advertising industry, video games also play an integral role in shaping ideas and notions about gender and gender roles. Therefore it is important to investigate the influence that video games might have on societal ideas about gender.¹⁴

The notion of gender as a commodity is largely facilitated by the rise of the mass media, which in turn is enabled by technology. Mary Jane Kehily and Anoop Nayak (2008:325) argue that globalisation presents the opportunity for the development and emergence of 'new femininities'. Even though several 'new' tropes of femininities can be observed in the popular media, my contention is that these representations of women are read in a way that is not limited to previous understandings of traditional femininity, but rather with a view to considering these constructions as possible spaces in which the complex structures underlying and informing these representations can be explored and analysed. For instance, by considering that these simplified and often negative representations and categorisations of women and men in both traditional and postfeminist texts, may point towards an underlying social anxiety in terms of subject formation, opens up more complex ways of thinking about gender in a neoliberal society. When approaching femininity and feminine values in a new and more nuanced way, hegemonic masculinity also becomes destabilised, and can lead to alternative understandings of masculinity.

¹⁴ Similar to the commodification of femininity, but in a perhaps less prevalent way, masculinity is often also commodified and presented as something to consume. According to Beynon (2002:98, 103), this process of commodification was most visible in the 1980s, and continues to influence contemporary ideas regarding masculinity.

Budgeon (2011:280) identifies several key aspects that influence the formation of gendered subjectivities, including the rise of the capitalist system and the proliferation of technological innovations. In addition to this, Helena Norberg-Hodge and Peter Goering (1995:13) argue that “[t]he economic paradigm goes hand in hand with modern science and technology; together they form the driving force behind industrial society”. Therefore, it is important to explore the ways in which these aspects might affect gender formation. The following subsections provide an overview of the influences that these phenomena have had on gender identity and its representation in visual culture.

2.5.2 The myth of scientific progress and gender

In order to explore the role that modern Western advancements in science and technology play in the gendering of values, this subsection discusses the mainly masculine oriented scientific foundation from which technology has emerged. As Sandra Harding (2008:2) argues:

... the institutions of Western modernity and their scientific and political philosophies, designed by and for men in elite classes, persistently create meanings and practices of modernity which create fearful specters of "the feminine" and "the primitive".

In other words, values that are considered ‘undesirable’ in society are often associated with women and femininity. Furthermore, Harding (2008:3) points out that the desirability of modern values such as rationality, objectivity and civilisation “... are all measured in terms of their distance from whatever is associated with the feminine ...” (Harding 2008:3). This situates traditional feminine values as undesirable and negative, thus often suppressing these values, and also women as a group. By examining the belief that science “... alone among all human knowledge systems [is] capable of grasping reality in its own terms” (Harding 2008:3), this subsection argues that science as a discipline plays a major role in encouraging the positioning of feminine values as inferior and undesirable. As argued throughout this study, precisely

because the gendering of values often results in societal anxieties, and can manifest visually in popular culture, it is important to explore and critique (and potentially also resist and challenge) the broader cultural frameworks within which the gendering of particular values takes place.

Since a society's advancement and progress are often judged according to its scientific and technological achievements, it stands to reason that the group of people seemingly in charge of these achievements will be privileged in a given society (Wajcman 1996:1). As Judy Wajcman (1996:1) claims: “[o]ur icons of progress are drawn from science, technology and medicine; we revere that which is defined as ‘rational’ as distinct from that which is judged ‘emotional’”. But as Wajcman (1996:1) proceeds to point out, a certain disillusionment has been taking place in the past few decades in terms of the presumed infallibility of science and technology. There is a widespread questioning of the place of science in society, and whether it can be considered a potential contributor to solutions to the world's problems, or if it can be seen as a major part of the cause of many problems (Wajcman 1996:1).

According to Wajcman (1996:1,2), feminist critiques of the male-dominated disciplines of science and technology, only started as recently as the 1970s. Even though these inquiries initially focused on science specifically, similar approaches were later followed when analysing technology (Wajcman 1996:1). Furthermore, instead of limiting research to attempting to uncover important (and exceptional) contributions to the field made by female scientists, feminist approaches expanded in order to examine the general participation and exclusion of women in science as a profession (Wajcman 1996:2). In Wajcman's (1996:2) opinion, even though a substantial amount of research has been done on the specific obstacles facing women in terms of their inclusion in scientific and technological fields, this type of research mainly argues that more women should have the opportunity (with regard to

education and employment) to enter these domains. As Wajcman (1996:2) points out, this approach is considered problematic by several theorists, such as Harding, since this:

... locates the problem in women (their socialization, their aspirations and values) and does not ask the broader questions of whether and in what way science and its institutions could be reshaped to accommodate women. The equal opportunity recommendations, moreover, ask women to exchange major aspects of their gender identity for a masculine version without prescribing a similar 'degendering' process for men ... In order to succeed women would have to model themselves on men ...

Furthermore, since science and technology are often stereotyped as "... inextricably linked with masculinity" (Wajcman 1996:3) it becomes clear why girls and women rarely, or at least as recently as two decades ago, consider it appealing to hone the skills and behaviour that would be required of them to succeed in science and technology related careers (Wajcman 1996:3).

In terms of women's inclusion in economic activities in a neoliberal society in general, remarkable progress has been made in the past 50 years (Budgeon 2011:284). Kehily and Nayak (2008:325) refer to a popular representation of the 'modern' woman often seen in advertisements, television series and the like:

[i]t could be argued here that late modernity unshackles women from the patriarchal past. No longer subservient to the male breadwinner, the new female subject is economically independent, liberated from the confines of the domestic sphere and, with the help of new reproductive technologies, can realise the possibility of 'having it all' and 'doing it all'. The fuschia-pink hue of late modernity can be seen as part of the prevailing Zeitgeist, giving young women licence to become agentic, assertive and 'out there'.

On the other hand, Budgeon (2011:285) also points out the ambivalence that this shift brought about, namely the anxiety and uncertainty regarding gender roles in society. The feminisation of education, work and consumption

spheres, has contributed to these anxieties, and thus blurred the previously more clearly delineated gender roles. The idea of female 'empowerment' and 'success' is often associated with women's rights and ability to choose consumer products, embrace their sexuality, as well as being able to choose and pursue careers which were previously reserved for and associated with men. This particular construction of female empowerment (in terms of the place of women in a capitalist system), not only depends on focusing on the notion that all genders ought to be seen as equal (according to certain capitalist ideals), but inevitably also promotes the apparent irrelevance of gender differences (Budgeon 2011:285). In other words, the image put forth by capitalism is that gender differences seemingly become unimportant and negligible. By considering gender difference to be irrelevant in an economic context, the complex ways in which gender operates in terms of identity formation (specifically femininity) are overlooked (Budgeon 2011:285).

In contrast to the apparent focus on gender equality in terms of economy, contemporary society often still associates certain values as well as certain character traits with either the female or male sex. This adherence to a binary system perpetuates and facilitates a culture of exclusion, where male values (and thus men) are generally still privileged. In order for women to participate successfully in capitalism, they would have to adopt certain traditionally considered male values such as aggression and rationality. Budgeon (2011:288) argues that "... third-wave feminism must go beyond advocating for women's right to choice and self-expression and interrogate the substance of those choices in a critical way ...". In order to do this, the values that contemporary neoliberal society is based on, must be thoroughly explored and critiqued. This study proposes that by understanding selected visual texts in popular culture in a different and subversive way, normative hegemonic values in society can be destabilised and challenged. Even though the video games analysed in this study could be understood as simply reinforcing limiting stereotypes of women, I argue that these games can be interrogated

from a postfeminist perspective in order to reveal more complex constructions regarding gender representation. By analysing the ways in which certain signifiers associated with women are constructed as positive in *BioShock* and *The last of us*, it becomes clear that these games depict societal anxieties regarding the dismissal of feminine values.

In addition to the theoretical positions discussed above, a variety of ecofeminist views are also taken into account in the analyses of *BioShock* and *The last of us* undertaken in the next chapter. Karen Warren (in Lorentzen 2003:58) considers ecofeminism to be an “umbrella term” that includes many complementary and contradictory perspectives and concepts. However, ecofeminism can be broadly defined as: “... an intellectual and activist movement that makes critical connections between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women” (Eaton & Lorentzen 2003:1). Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen (2003:2) provide a clear overview of an ecofeminist position:

... [W]omen and nature are connected conceptually and symbolically in Euro-western worldviews. These connections are articulated in several ways. According to ecofeminists, Euro-western cultures developed ideas about a world divided hierarchically and dualistically. Dualistic conceptual structures identify women with femininity, the body, sexuality, earth or nature and materiality; and men with masculinity, the mind, heaven, the supernatural, and disembodied spirit. Dualisms such as reason/emotion, mind/body, culture/nature, heaven/earth, and man/woman give priority to the first over the second. Ecofeminists refer to these pairings as hierarchical dualisms and claim they point to a logic of domination that is entrenched in Euro-western history and world-views. Religion, philosophy, science, and cultural symbols reinforce this world-view, making male power over both women and nature appear ‘natural’ and thus justified. Social patterns, including sexual norms, education, governance, and economic control, reflect this logic of domination.

In other words, Eaton and Lorentzen point out that the connection between women and nature, the body, materiality, emotion, and presumably

irrationality (with all of these categories being regarded as subordinate to masculine values) are culturally entrenched associations and not 'natural'. Since ecofeminism is regarded as a form of third-wave feminism (Eaton & Lorentzen 2003:5), it proves useful in analysing postfeminist texts such as *BioShock* and *The last of us*. In addition to this, ecofeminism's focus on the link between gender oppression and environmental destruction renders it helpful in order to better understand post-apocalyptic texts specifically, since these texts depict the destruction and ruin of the world that we live in.

On this basis, I have chosen postfeminism, with elements of third-wave feminism as the main framework to analyse and explore *BioShock* and *The last of us* in order to explore the potential of video games to modify and influence societal constructions of femininity. As mentioned earlier in this study, elements of third-wave feminism are also utilised, since several third-wave ideas and arguments prove useful in order to analyse and explore video games. These respective frameworks are not considered here as contradictory, but rather as complementary, and also overlapping. The following section deals with postfeminist frameworks, and how they can be used to understand prevalent themes in visual media, and in particular, video games.

2.6 Postfeminist approaches to visual culture

Even though Lotz (2010:109) distinguishes between several different academic feminist approaches that can be used to analyse television programmes, these approaches can also be applied to visual culture in general. Some of the areas of study that she identifies include the study of female audiences and the genres that are traditionally considered to appeal to women, such as soap operas. Lotz also identifies research dealing with the representation of women, femininity, and feminism in television programmes. Furthermore, she considers the history of the inclusion of women (as content

producers) in the television industry, as well as the role that women play as consumers of television to be important areas of study.

Lotz (2010:109) claims that several theorists agree that liberal feminism is the strain of feminism that is currently most often represented in US television series.¹⁵ Valerie Bryson (in Lotz 2010:109) defines liberal feminism as an approach which “... concentrates on rights in the public sphere and does not analyze power relationships that may exist within the home or private life; it assumes that the justice of its cause will ensure its success and that men will have no reason to oppose it”. Even if specific television programmes do not directly deal with feminism as a concept, the underlying structures and discourses that inform the majority of television programme narratives with female lead characters, are still considered by many theorists to be based on mainly liberal feminist concepts (Lotz 2010:110). A reason for this might be that liberal feminism fits neatly within the dominant societal discourse of neoliberalism, and therefore provides television networks with a comfortable depiction of women that represents the values of the status quo (Blum in Lotz 2010:109 and Dow in Lotz 2010:110).

Furthermore, by mainly representing liberal feminism as ‘real’ feminism, limits the “... more revolutionary potential of other feminist theories” (Rabinovitz in Lotz 2010:110). Rabinovitz (in Lotz 2010:110) further argues that:

[f]eminism’s capacity to disrupt and upset cultural categories has always been so ambiguously presented on television that it lends itself to a range of political interpretations ... Television allows for the expression of a feminist critique but represses feminism’s potential for radical social change.

Since much research during the past few decades considers the representation of feminism in television series to be underpinned by liberal feminist ideology, it is important to analyse these visual texts from a

¹⁵ Lotz refers to several examples dating from the late 1980s, but contemporary examples include *The honourable woman* (2014), *Scandal* (2012) and *Homeland* (2011), all of which centres around female protagonists in traditionally masculine careers.

postfeminist angle, in order to account for and consider the shifts that have taken place in feminist theory (Lotz 2010:110,111). As previously discussed in this study, a postfeminist approach to visual narratives, would include an emphasis on the complexities involved when exploring gender relations, as well as on the need to criticise the values that underpins societal structures, rather than placing the main focus on the inclusion of women in an inherently masculine system.

The discussion in this chapter regarding the diversity of feminist approaches, shows that there is no unitary feminist position from which to approach visual texts. Therefore, it might be useful to approach and explore visual texts from an alternative (yet still feminist) angle. In other words, while visual representations in visual culture can be read from a liberal feminist perspective, one can potentially also approach it from a postfeminist framework. As already argued, from a liberal feminist perspective, the concern lies with the equal representation and empowerment of women. On the other hand, a postfeminist approach considers the underlying complexities often linked to the value system of neoliberalist societies. Thus, postfeminism can be considered a broadening of feminist concerns, in an attempt to adapt feminism as a theoretical framework in order to remain relevant to the study of visual culture, and specifically, video games.

2.7 Conclusion

In order to arrive at a useful conception of postfeminism, it was important in this chapter to delve into the history of feminism. With the rise of the mass media, it became clear that the once mainly practice based first- and second-wave feminist movements also needed to transgress to the academic sphere. In other words, where feminism once broadly referred to women's struggle against 'practical' obstacles, such as their deliberate, physical exclusion from economic, political and educational spheres, it progressed to include the struggle against more insidious and covert instances of oppression, such as

the construction and naturalisation of certain dominant types of femininity in visual media. Precisely because the visual construction of femininity in media such as magazines, film and television has changed and evolved over time, it remains an area that needs to be unpacked in order to further understand gender relations. The approaches to these images have also progressed and changed, and instead of assuming that there is a 'right' or realistic way to portray women in the media, postfeminism can be used to rather approach existing visually constructed femininities in a different way and even perhaps, as Consalvo (2012:[sp]) states, find a means to produce "a more welcoming kind of game culture for everyone — not simply girls and women players".

Furthermore, the importance of understanding the historical context from which the terms 'sex' and 'gender' emerged, was established in this chapter. In so doing, it becomes possible to fruitfully explore the ways in which contemporary notions of sex and gender are influenced and formed by masculine oriented systems such as neoliberalism and an emphasis on progress and development in the domains of science and technology. These systems, which privilege and promote masculine values at the cost of feminine values, play an important part in the current state of degradation of our natural environment. In addition to this, by acknowledging and recognising these dominant systems as inherently masculine, it becomes possible to consider and rethink the way in which supposedly opposite feminine values have been suppressed in society.

Postfeminism is a theoretical framework that builds on feminism, in order to open up new ways of understanding gender relations and anxieties. Postfeminism provides a perspective from which critical analyses can be made, while still being feminist in some senses. Even though several definitions of postfeminism involve the notion that it negates feminism,¹⁶ and

¹⁶ Gill and Scharff (2011:3) argue that postfeminism is often considered to be a backlash against feminism, where the discourse involved frequently suggests that "... 'all the battles have been won'".

takes the position that feminism has succeeded in its goals, this study considers postfeminism to be a more intricate and nuanced notion, taking into account that 'success' and issues such as the empowerment of women are complex, and need to be understood in relation to the relevant context. Furthermore, postfeminism is a concept that implicitly suggests and represents several paradoxes and contradictions. This is part of what renders postfeminism useful, since paradoxes and contradictions are often found in visual culture, and can be understood from a variety of perspectives.

In order to form an understanding of the link between gender roles, social expectations and visual culture, this chapter explored how identity is formed through gender from a postfeminist view. The main areas of exploration included the formation of identity in terms of essentialism and socialisation, and gender as a commodity. Technology and science are important social phenomena that need to be taken into account when dealing with the cultural context of gender complexities. In terms of essentialism and socialisation, for instance, scientific and technological progress has made it possible to determine a baby's sex before their birth. The implications of this potentially resonate in the upbringing of the child. For instance, parents often prepare a child's physical environment according to their sex, which in turn might influence the way in which the child constructs their gender identity (Dietz 1998:427). Furthermore, technology can be considered one of the most important factors that facilitated capitalism and globalisation. In this way, gender has been situated as a commodity that can (and apparently should) be bought and consumed.

For the sake of illustrating the visual manifestations resulting from the cultural context discussed, this chapter discussed the link between postfeminism and visual culture. Currently, the main representation of feminism in television series (and arguably also in other forms of visual media), is liberal feminism. The popular media therefore constructs 'feminism' as a uniform, definitive

concept, which can be considered from an academic perspective as specifically 'liberal feminist'. According to several theorists, this undermines the potency and potential of feminism to be subversive, since it substantiates and reinforces the existing *status quo* in contemporary neoliberal society. In other words, by presenting feminism to mass audiences as simply a movement geared towards the inclusion of women in economic activities, it fails to acknowledge the more subtle and undoubtedly insidious forms of gender inequalities still operating in culture. Postfeminism therefore presents a framework from which to explore contemporary popular visual culture and the broader societal and economic context in which it is situated, in order to provide a critical account of the influence of the representation of women and femininity on gender perceptions and gender relations.

The following chapter deals with the masculine-oriented historical context from which video games as a medium has emerged, and the possible implications this might have on the representation of gender and gendered values in video games.

CHAPTER 3: VIDEO GAMES AND THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

The first part of this chapter deals with the historical context from which video games emerged, and explores the importance of the roles that video games potentially play in identity formation. The second part of this chapter explores different postfeminist themes that appear in contemporary video games, and how these themes may be understood as postfeminist phenomena.

This chapter begins with a brief history of Western game development, including the ways in which the visual representations of women and feminine values within games have changed throughout the medium's short history. Following this, the roles that video games potentially play in identity formation are explored and unpacked; this subsection includes an outline of stereotypical representations of women that commonly appear in contemporary video games. Furthermore, the two dominant approaches in video game studies, namely narratology and ludology, are discussed, as well as the contributions that each of these make to this study.

The second part of the chapter builds on the postfeminist theory established in Chapter Two, and explores and unpacks the societal disillusionment with traditional masculine values and the resulting anxiety regarding normative masculinity. Lastly, this chapter deals with the visual manifestations of these anxieties, by discussing the feminisation of masculinity, and by providing an analysis of post-apocalyptic settings in video games.

3.1 A brief history of video games in Western culture

Even though video games have been part of main stream culture from the 1980s, they only became a pervasive entertainment medium in popular culture in the early 2000s (Hjorth 2011:9). Gaming and game development have many different histories, depending on the perspective from which they

are approached (Hjorth 2011:19). These different, interdisciplinary histories can be traced “... through various shifts across hardware and software, industry and academia” (Hjorth 2011:20). The history outlined in this section focuses on the changing visual representations of characters in video games, with the emphasis on gender representation.

According to the ESA, the amount of active female gamers – at least in America – has risen in the past decade and is currently almost equal to that of male gamers (The Transformation of the Video Game Industry 2012:2). Even though this statistic is problematic on several levels, (for instance the type of games that are taken into account) it still provides insightful information on how the demographic of gamers has changed specifically with regard to women. When one considers how large the gaming industry has become, and also takes into consideration the fact that more women and young girls are increasingly exposed to the visual imagery, narratives and gameplay structure of video games, then it becomes clear that the cultural impact, especially in terms of the representation of women and femininity, must urgently be explored and unpacked.

The inherently masculine framework that underpins technology, and in this case, video games, has influenced the types of values associated with video games (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:36). This can be seen in the inception of video games which is often associated with the birth of computer science – a generally accepted male domain¹ – as an independent discipline in the 1950s and 1960s at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (Hjorth 2011:19). Furthermore, at the same time the US military heavily funded research in artificial intelligence (AI), and in so doing not only provided the technological

¹ Even though women such as Ada Lovelace and Grace Hopper are generally considered to have had significant influences on the development of computer sciences, the problem with this, as Du Preez (2009:52) argues, is that “... [by] inserting these female inventors into science and technology that have overwhelmingly been governed by male-defined notions and aspirations, these women will be valued in terms of the male standard as producing inventions which are ‘not-bad-for-a-woman’.”

tools to create digital games, but also arguably laid the foundation for the largely masculine values associated with video games, such as competition, aggression and violence (Hjorth 2011:19, 20). As a result of this mainly masculine-oriented mindset, with a strong focus on the representation of men, masculinity and values traditionally considered to be masculine it is not surprising that the representation of women, femininity and traditional feminine values in video games have been largely ignored and marginalised (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:36). In order to trace the visual privileging of men and masculine values and the relegation of women and feminine values in video games to inferior and subordinate positions, the following section provides an historical account of the development of video games and gender representation, with reference to specific video games and their characters.

It might prove useful to have an understanding of the development and conception of earlier video games, in order to analyse the prominent position that video games currently occupy in Western visual culture (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2008:49). Although early video games do not include visual representations of recognisable characters (neither realistic nor figurative), the masculine principles on which they are mainly based, including rationality, reason and competitiveness, are nevertheless evident, as can be seen in the arcade games *Computer Space* (1971) and *Pong* (1972) which were first introduced to the entertainment industry in the 1970s (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2008:20, 52)². Thus, video games were first introduced in public spaces, as opposed to the private domestic spaces in which video games are generally consumed today. Since public spaces have been associated with men and male activities (Van Eeden 2006:44), this further established video games as a male dominated phenomenon.

² The earliest video games portrayed objects rather than characters that the player had control over. For instance in *Pong*, the player has control over a paddle, and in *Space Race* (1973) the player controls a spaceship. Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al* (2008:54) describes *Space Race* as a "... very simple, competitive two-player game formula which served as a template for so many early game successes."

In 1976, the car racing game *Night driver*, became one of the first video games to employ a first-person perspective, thereby constructing a digital world for the player to experience (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2008:54). *Night driver* also generated graphics as the character moved, thus simulating the feeling of moving around in a game 'world', instead of being confined to one screen as was the case with earlier games. These factors solidified the notion that the player can 'enter' a digital game world, and participate more directly as a character in the virtual environment.

In 1980, a few years after the development of *Night driver*, another revolutionary video game was developed, namely, *Pac-man* (1980). The game mechanics used in *Pac-man* were not necessarily regarded as cutting edge, but it was the first video game that featured an identifiable main character (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2008:63). *Pac-man* went on to become one of the most popular arcade games of all time, and is still recognisable today (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith & Tosca 2008:63). *Pac-man* prompted many subsequent arcade platform games such as *Ms. Pac-man* (1980), with an identical version of *Pac-man*, but with a hair bow and pink lips, thereby supposedly rendering her unmistakably female. *Ms. Pac-man* is an example of one of the earliest female main characters in a video game, even though her status as a main character in her own right remains somewhat dubious. Some of the other platform games that were developed as a result of *Pac-man's* success, include, Nintendo's *Donkey kong* (1981) and the spin-off *Mario* (1982). In both of these games the (male) main character's goal is to save the damsel in distress. The female characters in these games act in a supporting role to advance the story line, and are not playable characters.

In 1986, Samus Aran was introduced in gaming as one of the first main female playable characters in the Japanese video game *Metroid*. While playing the game, the gender of the character is not clear. The player assumes that the armour clad figure they are controlling is male; this being

implied in the instructions and also the norm in the 1980s (Samus Aran [sa]:[sp]). When the game is completed, the character strips off her clothes to reveal that she is in fact a woman. Samus' representation in *Metroid* is problematic, since the scene where Samus is revealed to be a woman shows her standing in a pixelated pair of boots and a bikini, which is often considered to be a gratuitous scene for the enjoyment of the (male) player. But, despite this, Samus arguably introduced the idea that females can be 'useful' playable main characters in video games, as associate editor for IGN, Audrey Drake (2011:[sp]) argues:

[Samus] was amazing - brave, strong, smart, inventive. The lady single-handedly destroyed an entire alien race, and all based on her own talent and resourcefulness. Best of all, the developers didn't feel the need to justify why a woman was so cool. She just was. It wasn't the result of magic or some contrived scenario, and it wasn't with the help of a man - it was all Samus, and that's another reason her character was so meaningful.

It is interesting to note that Samus' main character traits pointed out by Drake in tones of approval, are traits that are traditionally linked to men and masculinity. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the only way that the player ever knows that Samus is in fact a woman, is to complete and win the game. These traditionally considered masculine traits are simply super-imposed on a female body, and in essence promote these values as more desirable. In other words, the game suggests that ultimately a "meaningful" (Drake 2011:[sp]) female character is one that has turned into a man.

Samus is still a popular character in contemporary video games, and Nintendo has since released several new *Metroid* sequels, mostly featuring Samus in a non-gender specific set of armour. On the other hand, it can be argued that Samus is still sexualised and objectified, as this entry from a *Metroid* fan (Samus Aran [sa]:[sp]) on the *Metroid* wiki reflects:

Although Samus wears the Power Suit throughout most of the *Metroid* series, it has become a tradition to depict her in much more revealing attire at the end of each game, often as a

reward for satisfying certain conditions such as completing the game quickly or with a high percentage of the game's items collected or even both.³

By arguing that the player is 'rewarded' when Samus takes off her clothes, *Metroid* also clearly represents some of the first, and most persistent examples of the problematic nature of the representation of women in video games, namely their sexual objectification, and the trope of the masculinised female.

Another major influence on the representation of women in video games was the introduction of Lara Croft to the gaming world. *Tomb raider* (Core Design & Crystal Dynamics) was first released in 1996 by Eidos Interactive (Jansz & Martis 2007:1) with Croft, the main character in the video game, since becoming a household name. Schleiner (2001:222) notes that until 1996 mostly male avatars or characters appeared in 'shooter/adventure' role-playing games. As in most other video game genres, the only female characters in this genre were the "... princesses offered as battle trophies" (Schleiner 2001:222) in games such as *Prince of Persia* (1989) and so forth.

The appearance of Lara Croft on the video game scene thus embodies a very important shift in computer games with female lead characters now starting to feature and star in shooter/adventure video games. The obvious question that this raises is how this female character is represented and what possible meanings and values this representation facilitates. Even though Schleiner (2001:222) is of the opinion that Croft is a "... monstrous offspring of science: an idealized, eternally young female automation, a malleable, well-trained techno-puppet created by and for the male gaze", she also concedes that this male constructed version of femininity, can be considered an invitation to women to also play video games (Schleiner 2001:224).

³ It is unclear whether or not Nintendo actually intended for this scene to be a 'reward', but nonetheless, this is the common perception amongst fans, as can be noted in the quote.

Lara Croft is the topic of many academic, feminist inquiries, and as Claudia Herbst (2004:23) puts it, "... the amount and range of attention Lara Croft has received is an indication that she exemplifies more than a visual phenomenon or a fleeting trend in the representation of the female". Furthermore, Jansz and Martis (2007:1) refer to the increasing appearance of female characters in a competent and dominant position in video games as the "Lara phenomenon". Like both Lara and Samus, these female characters are not portrayed as simply competent, but competent in a traditionally masculine way as well as in terms of traditionally male activities. For example, much like Samus, Lara uses physical as well as intellectual prowess to overcome, and dominate her enemies, and even nature.⁴ Lara is also overly sexualised with unrealistic bodily proportions, that is, breasts, waist and hips, which seems to be merely for the purpose of gratifying the male spectator.

However, this approach to designing female characters in video games has increasingly come under scrutiny by developers, critics as well as players. It has become clear that a shift in the representation of women in video games is taking place since the turn of the century. Even though the overwhelming majority of video games still feature generic white male main characters (Kolan 2011:[sp]), there has been a definite increase in consideration regarding the representation of women from the game developers themselves. For instance, in video games such as the *Dragon age* series (2009-2014) and the *Mass effect* trilogy (2007-2012), a player can customise the main character in terms of appearance as well as gender and race. Of course, there are still problematic aspects regarding this approach. For example, BioWare only used the male version of the main character in their *Mass effect* marketing campaign, therefore, once again representing the normative male, white version of the main character. In addition to this, the female versions are essentially only a superficial alternative version of the

⁴ Generally in visual representations of women, for instance in art, women are often portrayed as being linked to nature, and placed in such a position that they can be dominated by a male artist (or protagonist) (Parker & Pollock 2013 [1981]:116,119).

same heavily masculinised character. In other words, the base character is rooted in masculine values and traits, and the player can only change the visual aspects of the character.

Furthermore, whether the character is female or male is of little consequence to either the gameplay or narrative of the games. In other words, although superficial changes are being made on the level of gender representation, the underlying values portrayed by these characters and their actions are still associated with traditionally constructed ideas regarding men and masculinity. Nevertheless, I argue that this consciousness about the representation of gender, although not nearly adequate, provides a base from which to include not only women as players and well-rounded characters, as many critics suggest, but rather, to portray traditionally considered feminine values and traits in a more positive light.

Therefore, this study focuses on the recent emergence of different femininities in video games. By looking at gender representation from an alternative perspective, perhaps a new understanding of femininity in video games can be developed. In order to do this, the next section provides an overview of the current representations of women and femininity in video games specifically.

3.2 Gender representation in video games

As already mentioned, the majority of research on gender representation specifically in video games is of a quantitative nature. This might be attributed to the fact that early feminist studies conducted on the representation of women in the media in general, attempted to gather empirical evidence of sexism and also to provide an explanation for why more women were not successful in work spaces dominated by men (Carter & Steiner 2004:2). Following this, many studies focus on the *number* of female characters represented in video games, how they are represented and also the number of female video game players (see Downs & Smith 2009 and Summers &

Miller 2014). Even though it is useful to gain quantitative knowledge of the representation of women in video games, this study suggests that the values that underpin these portrayals should also be interrogated and explored in depth. In other words, rather than attempting to explain why women do not perform as well as men in a masculine-oriented society, we should rather question and explore the values that are privileged and assigned to a specific gender. I argue that the continuing privileging of masculine-oriented values has resulted in societal anxieties about femininity and gender roles. It is important to note that although societal anxieties surrounding gender roles have been documented since the mid-17th century (Kimmel 2005:xi), this study explores a particular current version of this anxiety and the ways in which it influences gendered identity and manifests visually in popular culture.

One of the earliest and most significant studies of gender portrayal in video games was conducted by Dietz in 1998 (Burgess, Stermer & Burgess 2007:420). Dietz' (1998:426) study focuses on identity formation through play, stating that: "It is through the process of socialization that boys and girls are encouraged to adopt and develop certain personality traits that are often referred to as masculine and feminine". But, as discussed in the previous chapter regarding the essentialism/constructivism debate, the complexity of identity formation through gender must be kept in mind when exploring the ways in which video games constructs femininity and masculinity and, thereby, influence its players' conceptions of gender identity. Therefore, this study takes into account and acknowledges that gender formation takes place in complex ways on both biological and social levels.

When looking at video games from a quantitative perspective, it is clear that the current representation of women is – similar to that of the 1950s magazine culture, as discussed in the previous chapter⁵ – either lacking or highly stereotypical (Layne & Blackmon 2013:1). In contrast to the widespread visual

⁵ See subsection 2.3, titled 'Feminist studies and the representation of women in visual culture'.

images of women and femininity portrayed in popular media in the 1950s and onward, female stereotypes most often seen in video games (from the 1990s onwards, including the majority of contemporary video games) are hypersexualised, rather than domesticated. In other words, a different, yet equally problematic stereotype of femininity has surfaced in the realm of video games. This can be seen as problematic, since being exposed to these stereotypes can potentially influence the player's identity formation, and ultimately, their actions (Mead in Dietz 1998:426).

Furthermore, even though several studies have also been done on the representation of both male and female homosexual, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual characters in video games, it still remains an under-theorised topic.⁶ Although this topic does not form part of the scope of this study, it is important to note that the representation of GLBTQIA characters in video games has increased dramatically in recent years. Some examples of this include the *Mass effect* trilogy (2007-2012) and the *Dragon age* series (2009-2014), in all of which a player can choose their character's sex, and also have romantic relations with characters of the same sex. On the other hand, one can also argue that these characters are nothing more than "... simply a female 'skinned' version of the male protagonist" (Layne & Blackmon 2013:1), since the character's abilities, choices, reactions and the values for which they stand stay the same, whether the character is male or female. Therefore, the character still mainly embodies a specific type of masculinity, while in the body of a woman. Nevertheless, in some ways these developments may be considered an improvement in terms of the overall gender-consciousness of the gaming sphere.

In an effort to gain a measure of understanding about the potential influence that gender representations might have on players in terms of how they

⁶ As Adrienne Shaw (2009:249) points out, GLBTQIA characters are considered rare and new in video game discourse.

understand themselves, the following section explores the role that video games have on identity formation through gender.

3.3 Gender identity formation and video games

According to Nic Crowe and Mike Watts (2012:1), massively multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) provide a space where players have the opportunity to change and experiment with their identities – especially in terms of gender identification. Even though the majority of research on identity formation in terms of video games has been done by examining online video games, this study nevertheless recognises the importance of the contribution that these studies can make by considering identity formation through single player games such as *BioShock* and *The last of us*. Tobias Greitemeyer (2013:499) argues that by actively playing video games, the potential influence they can have on the player might be more profound than in other, ‘passive’ media. This can be attributed to the fact that a player potentially identifies with the media content on a deeper level, since she/he has to actively take control of the character (Greitemeyer 2013:499).

Even though research conducted on identity formation often focuses on the violence displayed in video games, and the negative behavioural effects on the players, Greitemeyer (2013:501) argues that playing certain video games can influence the player in a positive way and encourage positive social behaviour. Furthermore, Greitemeyer (2013:500) contends that playing certain video games can influence a player’s perceptions of their own humanity,⁷ as well as the perceived humanity of others. I argue that the virtual simulation of onscreen violence in video games is not necessarily the only contributor to the dehumanisation of other players, or the players themselves. Rather, one might consider the exclusion and negation of the ‘feminine’ in the highly masculinised video game sphere as one of the main contributors to the dehumanisation process. Nevertheless, when one considers recent

⁷ Greitemeyer (2013:500) defines humanity as “... qualities that set humans apart from animals or objects”.

developments in video games, as mentioned throughout this study, it becomes clear that a certain societal anxiety comes to the fore in terms of the disregarding of traditionally considered feminine values such as compassion and emotional expressiveness. This might have the potential to position video games as a medium in popular culture as a site of resistance, when specific narratives in video games are understood from an alternative perspective.

Jenkins (2006:334) considers the change in contemporary living conditions experienced by most urbanised families as an important factor that contributes to gender identity formation in both boys and girls via the video game platform. Especially in America, but to a certain extent in South Africa as well, many families with young children reside in apartment blocks, with little to no access to a backyard, or play space outside (Jenkins 2006:334). Therefore, it has become commonplace for children that are confined to an indoor space, to find entertainment and refuge in video games (Jenkins 2006:334). But even though one might argue that video games have the potential to "... expand the space of their [children's] imagination (Jenkins 2006:334)", the wider implications underlying video games must also be taken into account and considered. As discussed in the previous chapter, the images and concepts that children are exposed to on a daily basis in popular media, can have an important and lasting effect on the way they see and experience the world, as well as their behavioural tendencies (Greitemeyer 2013:500).

Furthermore, when players are constantly subjected and exposed to specific representations of different groups of people, these stereotypes potentially create prejudices against certain groups, and perpetuate discrimination against these groups (Deskins 2013:20). Stereotyping is a common way of categorising groups of people that "... allows people to better cope with the vast quantity of information they are constantly being bombarded with at any given moment" (Brown in Deskins 2013:22). Deskins (2013:21) further argues

that, “[u]nlike television or movies, stereotypes in video games offer a much more dynamic element, for they allow people to pretend to be a different person”. By using stereotypes, the plotlines in video games move much faster (Deskens 2013:21), and in this way rely on a player’s pre-knowledge . In other words, a sort of repository of stereotypes has been built up not only by video game creators, but also other types of visual culture, and game developers assume that players are familiar with different ‘characters’. In this way characters are ‘recycled’ and presented as familiar. Stereotypes used in this way include stereotypes regarding race and gender.

With this being said, some of the most common female stereotypes and tropes represented in video games have been interrogated and explored by female media critic Anita Sarkeesian. Sarkeesian’s web video series, *Feminist frequency: conversations with pop culture*, was started in 2009, and includes criticism of the representation of women in popular culture in general. The following subsection discusses Sarkeesian’s categorisation of female stereotypes, and femininity. These tropes are dealt with on two levels, firstly with regard to how female characters are visually represented as stereotypes, and secondly the possible social and cultural influence that these representations might have.

3.4 Different stereotypes in video games

3.4.1 Damsel in distress trope

According to Sarkeesian (2013a), the ‘damsel in distress’ trope is one of the most widely used plot devices in video games. This trope uses female characters as ‘objects’ to be offered as reward to the male protagonist, as part of the ultimate goal to be achieved by the male protagonist, or as a ‘treasure’ to be cherished and protected (Sarkeesian 2013a). Usually, in these video games, the female character is “... reduced to a state of helplessness from which she requires rescuing, from a typically male hero for the benefit of his story arch” (Sarkeesian 2013a). In this way, female characters are

disempowered, and robbed of the chance to act as heroes in their own narrative (Sarkeesian 2013a). Sarkeesian (2013a) refers to more than 60 games in total, from the 1980s up to 2012 where this trope has been used. As Sarkeesian (2013a) explains, the woman is relegated to an object in these plots, and becomes something to be acted upon. Furthermore, the woman is usually the central object between the (male) protagonist and the (male) antagonist (Sarkeesian 2013a).

Sarkeesian (2013a) notes that usually when a male character is captured in a video game, he has to rely on his intellect, cunning and/or physical power to facilitate his own escape.⁸ This process is usually an important part of the protagonist's transformation to become a heroic figure. On the other hand, by portraying women and female characters as generally helpless, ineffective and incapable, her journey is framed within the male hero's journey, and not her own in any way (Sarkeesian 2013a). She simply waits for the male character to save her from another male character. This robs the woman in question of any opportunity to engineer her own escape, and therefore to become a hero in her own right (Sarkeesian 2013a).⁹

As Sarkeesian (2013a) points out, the representation of women in this way has social and cultural ramifications. Even though not all games that incorporate this trope are necessarily sexist or misogynistic, the portrayal of women as weak and in need of protection, serves to strengthen and normalise existing myths about women as the 'weaker' sex in society (Sarkeesian 2013a). Sarkeesian (2013a) suggests that in order to eliminate and overcome this trope, the solution would be to include more female heroes. As previously suggested in this study, this is not necessarily a viable or desirable option, since it once again implies that the fault lies within

⁸ This can be seen in *Prince of Persia* (1992), *Legend of Zelda: the wind waker* (2003) and *GoldenEye 007* (1997).

⁹ This idea is closely linked to, and can perhaps be understood as a continuation of, the historical practice of exchanging women as brides (Ortner & Whitehead 1981:11).

‘women’, and that women should go through a degendering process in order to become masculinised, to fit into the mould of the archetypal (male) hero. In other words, Sarkeesian’s ‘remedy’ does not question the underlying values inherent in the idea of a hero that overcomes obstacles in a stereotypically masculine way.

3.4.1.1 ‘Euthanized damsel’

One particular version of the damsel in distress trope, is the ‘euthanized damsel’ trope, which combines the traditional damsel in distress trope with the idea of a mercy killing – in other words, killing the character ‘for her own good’ (Sarkeesian 2013b). The damsel in question, most often has been mutilated, tortured or cursed to a point where she begs the (male) protagonist to kill her and ‘put her out of her misery’. Some examples include *Gears of war 2* (2008), where the main protagonist sets out to rescue his wife from a war prisoner camp, but finds her in a catatonic state as a result of torture. The character then shoots her in a presumable act of mercy. In both *Pandora’s tower* (2011) and *Prey* (2006) the male protagonists have to kill their female love interests who are both in the process of transforming into monsters, and are begging the men to end their lives.

Sarkeesian (2013b) suggests that video game developers employ this trope in an attempt to put an ‘edgy’ and dark twist on the traditional damsel in distress trope used in so many games, in order to make themselves more visible, and thus make more profit. This trope might be considered even more problematic than the traditional damsel in distress trope, since as Sarkeesian (2013b) points out, these women:

... submissively accept their grisly fate and will often beg the player to perform violence on them – giving men direct and total control over whether they live or die. Even saying ‘thank you’ with their dying breath. In other words these women are ‘asking for it’ quite literally.

As mentioned previously, these types of representations that construct women as disempowered victims, relying on men, while actively condoning and encouraging violence against themselves, have real consequences on society's perceptions regarding issues such as gender roles and responsibilities (Sarkeesian 2013b). These tropes specifically serve to promote stereotypical male fantasies, and in the process continue to relegate women to an inferior position in society (Sarkeesian 2013b).¹⁰

3.4.2 Ms. Male character

The second female stereotype that Sarkeesian (2013c) analyses, is what she calls the Ms. Male character. Sarkeesian (2013c) defines this character as “[t]he female version of an already established or default male character. Ms. Male characters are defined primarily by their relationship to their male counterparts via visual properties, narrative connection or occasionally through promotional materials”. The previously mentioned *Ms. Pac-man* falls under this stereotype.

Even though this trope did not originate with video games, and has been used in other visual texts, especially animation pictures such as *Mickey Mouse “The picnic”* (1930), it is often employed in video games. For example, Minnie Mouse is a virtually identical version of Mickey Mouse, with an added flower on her head, high heels and a skirt (Sarkeesian 2013c). Feminine gendered signifiers used in these video games, such as long eye lashes, red lips and childlike hair accessories are employed as a sort of ‘shorthand’ to quickly identify the character as female by drawing on our “cultural vocabulary” (Sarkeesian 2013c). Some examples of this trope include *Ms. Splosion man* (2011) and *Bit.Trip presents runner 2: future legend of rhythm alien* (2013).

¹⁰ The euthanized damsel stereotype can also be linked to Sigmund Freud's construction of the fetish/fallen Magdalen dichotomy in *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (1962), which cannot be explored in detail in this dissertation.

Since these characters establish the male version as the 'default', this trope perpetuates the 'othering' of women. Furthermore, this trope can be read as a way in which women are represented, but simply masculinised. In other words, women are encouraged to 'become' men, and adopt masculine qualities in order to be included in a system that values and privileges masculine characteristics.

3.4.3 Women as background decoration

Sarkeesian (2014) also analyses video games that depict women as non-playable insignificant characters whose

... sexuality or victimhood is exploited as a way to infuse edgy, gritty or racy flavoring into game worlds. These sexually objectified female bodies are designed to function as environmental texture while titillating presumed straight male players. Sometimes they're created to be glorified furniture but they are frequently programmed as minimally interactive sex objects to be used and abused.

Sarkeesian's argument here links up with Laura Mulvey's (1975) work regarding the representation of femininity and the male gaze in cinema. Mulvey (1975:9) argues that the representation of women on screen is often "... an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation". Similarly, women as background decorations in video games can also be considered as ineffectual elements of spectacle, included in the game purely for the visual pleasure of the (assumed male) player.

According to Sarkeesian (2014), video game advertising, mainly aimed at male consumers, contributed to the idea that women are ornamental and peripheral when it comes to gaming. This hyper-sexualised depiction of women in video games is ubiquitous in the racing game genre (Sarkeesian 2014). For instance in *Need for speed: prostreet* (2007), *MX vs. ATV alive* (2011), and *Forza horizon* (2012) the camera shots often focus, and zoom in,

on women's breasts, bottoms and legs (Sarkeesian 2014). This implies that these body parts are considered the most important aspects of a woman (Sarkeesian 2014).

Sarkeesian (2014) focuses specifically on what she calls "non-playable sex objects". This refers to NPCs (non-playable characters) in video games that have little to no purpose or identity beyond their hyper-sexualised appearance. Many other NPCs in video games play an important function in the advancement of the plot, as side-kick, or fulfil other purposes that do not include their sexuality or visual appearance (Sarkeesian 2014). Regarding these non-playable sex objects, these female characters will never "be anything else than set dressing or props in someone else's narrative" (Sarkeesian 2014). This means that many of the female characters that appear in video games exist solely for the gratification of the player, who as previously mentioned, is presumed to be heterosexual and male (Sarkeesian 2014).

Sarkeesian (2014) refers to the interactive nature of video games, and claims that since players are expected to actively take part in the process of storytelling, the player is also directly taking part in the objectification of women. Therefore, games "... move the player from spectator, to participant in the media experience" (Sarkeesian 2014). Sarkeesian (2014) claims that media such as film exposes the viewer to "passive looking", whereas video games require players to become participants, and to initiate and partake in the actions on screen. As Sarkeesian (2014) points out, level designers often include brothels, women's dressing rooms and strip clubs as scenes through which the player has to move in order to advance the narrative.

Based on Martha Nussbaum's objectification theory, Sarkeesian (2014) identifies the following "fundamental aspects of objectification", namely instrumentality, commodification, interchangeability, violability and

disposability. According to Sarkeesian (2014), these aspects are all built into the narratives and mechanics of the majority of contemporary immersive titles. Furthermore, Sarkeesian (2014) claims that video games where the player can buy a lap dance, or sexual favours from prostitutes, are commonplace. Examples of these video games include *Metro: last light* (2013), *Fallout: New Vegas* (2010), *The witcher 2* (2011), *Fable: the lost chapters* (2005), *Dragon age: origins* (2009) and *Sleeping dogs* (2012). In many of these games the player is rewarded with power ups, health boosts and other benefits. Sarkeesian (2014) notes that these women therefore, fulfil the same function as the beverages that the player can purchase from vending machines and convenience stores. These female characters' worth is "measured entirely by what they can give to the player" (Sarkeesian 2014).

Furthermore, Sarkeesian (2014) points out that the actions of the male protagonist in these games are part of what makes the character seem powerful, and by extension makes the player feel powerful. Sarkeesian (2014) claims that "... these interactive algorithms transmit cultural messages of near constant affirmation of male, heterosexual dominance, while simultaneously reinforcing the widespread regressive belief that women's primary role is to satisfy the desires of men (either literally or voyeuristically)". Moreover, by reducing sexual intimacy and sexuality to a transaction, it frames women's sexuality as something that belongs to others, and not the women themselves (Sarkeesian 2014). Producers and writers of video games are therefore selling a fantasy that revolves around the control and possession of women in an entirely patriarchal vein (Sarkeesian 2014).

For Sarkeesian (2014) the objectification of women is closely linked to violence, since the woman is not considered a human anymore, but rather an object that 'belongs' to the male character. In many video games, developers build the world in such a way that players can sexually assault NPCs (Sarkeesian 2014). Examples of this can be seen in *Sleeping dogs* (2012) and

Fallout: New Vegas (2010). This casual encouragement of violating women's bodies for fun, ties in with Nussbaum's descriptions of violability and disposability. Violability, according to Nussbaum (in Sarkeesian 2014), is when "... [t]he objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into". Even though it is not always mandatory for the player to participate in this sort of behaviour, the fact that it is even possible and often implicitly encouraged is problematic (Sarkeesian 2014). Moreover, there are rarely severe, if any, consequences that the player must face after having acted violently towards women (Sarkeesian 2014). Sarkeesian (2014) believes this "... work[s] to facilitate male violence against women by turning it into a form of play, something constructed to be amusing and entertaining".

Sarkeesian (2014) places emphasis on the fact that even though a player can typically kill most NPCs in a video game, the murder and brutalisation of sexualised female NPCs are gendered and eroticised in a way that male characters never are. Sarkeesian (2014) explains that since the default player is considered to be a heterosexual man, male NPCs "... are rarely designed to be sexually inviting or arousing". Even though male prostitutes do appear in some video games, it is often tongue in cheek, and caricatured, rather than genuinely eroticised (Sarkeesian 2014). In other words, even though male prostitutes are present in some games, there is still a definite gendered inequality between the representations of male and female prostitutes.

In an attempt to criticise and address these stereotypes of women in video games, many self-proclaimed online feminists (both female and male) have spoken out against the misogynistic nature of video games, and have proposed that the focus should be on the inclusion of women in the gaming industry, both in terms of development processes and in possibly more complex representations of women.¹¹ But as was previously discussed, simply

¹¹ See for instance Levy (2014), Zecher (2014) and Alexander (2014).

including women in an inherently masculine system, is not necessarily the most effective approach to encourage change in the video game sphere.

Even though, as previously mentioned in this chapter, several studies have been done in terms of the representation of women in video games, and an emerging gender-consciousness is evident in the gaming industry, there is still a lack of in-depth research on the role and nature of feminine values in video games. Before exploring prominent postfeminist themes that are surfacing in contemporary video games, the main theoretical approaches to video games, namely narratology and ludology, are briefly discussed in the following section.

3.5 Narratology and ludology

According to Frasca (2003:221), one of the earliest ways (which is still popular today) of understanding and analysing video games, is by approaching them as “... extensions of drama and narrative”. Narratology in terms of game studies, focuses on the textual and intertextual aspects of video games, often approaching them as digital or interactive stories (Corliss 2010:4). As stated in Chapter One, narratology draws heavily from literature and film studies (Corliss 2010:4). Since both literature and film studies are broad, well established approaches, it becomes self-evident as to why this approach would be followed to some degree in relation to video games. As ludologist Aarseth (2004:45) notes: “[w]hat better way to map the territory [of game studies] than by using the trusty, dominant paradigm of stories and storytelling?”.

However, Aarseth (2004:49) argues that the need to insist that games are narratives is based on three motives. Firstly, Aarseth refers to the economic viability of games that employ a well-written storyline. In short, games with better (or more popular) stories are considered better products, and can thus make more money. Secondly, Aarseth identifies an ‘elitist’ motive, where

game theorists tend to approach games (a form of 'low-art') as mainly narratives, in order to attempt to achieve 'literary' qualities, and in so doing perhaps elevate the status of video games to that of a 'higher' form of art. Lastly, Aarseth argues that a form of academic colonialism is at play when games are approached as narratives only. In other words, academics might make the argument that "... computer games *are* narratives, we only need to redefine narratives in such a way that these new narratives are included" (Aarseth 2004:49).

However, as mentioned in the first chapter, approaching games as narratives only, and analysing games in the same way as either written texts or film narratives, proves to be a limiting approach, since the narrative of a game necessarily makes up only one aspect of the entire play experience. Narratology does not take the particular nature of video games into account, and excludes several other layers, of what makes video games unique. Therefore, Aarseth (2004:49) is of the opinion that the general argument that games are simply "interactive films" stems from an ideology that he calls "narrativism". Aarseth (2004:49) explains the term 'narrativism' in the following way: "This is the notion that everything is a story, and that story-telling is our primary, perhaps only, mode of understanding, our cognitive perspective on the world". But as Aarseth (2004:49, 50) argues, even though narrative remains a dominant form of cultural expression, it is not the only discourse through which people can convey certain messages, and facilitate (and experience) understanding. Furthermore, Aarseth (2004:50) considers it not only possible, but *necessary* to acknowledge and use different modes of expression as alternatives to storytelling. As Mäyrä (2009:314) puts it:

... for most uses and purposes, the analysis of a game as an abstract structure without any consideration of its playing practices would be deemed insufficient, as would a study of game players not informed by some systems-oriented analysis and understanding of the ludic nature of this particular game and its gameplay.

Furthermore, Mäyrä (2009:317) continues this line of thought by referring to *Pac-man* as an example to demonstrate the difference between watching, for instance, a video of someone playing, and the researcher playing the game themselves. Mäyrä (2009:317) claims that watching a video recording of a session of *Pac-man* might result in a stereotypical analysis of *Pac-man* as a metaphor for consumer society and the evils of capitalism. When the researcher plays the game, however, suddenly the game takes on new meaning:

The “drama” taking place at the representational level of the maze, ghosts, and hunt does not necessarily vanish, but it is displaced or superseded by the dominance of gameplay—all those feelings, considerations, and actions that come along when accepting the challenge of trying to navigate a maze while eating dots and avoiding ghosts. The prominent structures in the game are no longer the precise shapes in which its graphical surface appears, but rather the underlying dynamic system of forces and counter forces in which player actions are opposed to programmed challenges, or (as in multiplayer versions of games) the actions of other players.

Moreover, Mäyrä (2009:317) argues that both the representational (or visual) level of a video game, as well as the gameplay (simulational) process influence and add to the gaming experience. Mäyrä (2009:317) also considers the fact that games can be seen as a series of processes and events, which make up the video game experience. Therefore, in contrast to a written text, which exists even when it is not being read, a game is only a game while it is being played (Mäyrä 2009:317).

Frasca (2003:224) agrees with Mäyrä, that while narrative is a way of structuring representation, video games are a way of structuring simulation. The difference between narrative and simulation is the mechanic structure on which they rely (Frasca 2003:222). Both of these paradigms can offer a platform for authors to portray a particular message, opinion or feeling (Frasca 2003:222). The predominant formalist approach when analysing the simulation aspect of videogames is called ludology. Frasca (2003:222)

defines ludology as “... a discipline that studies games in general, and video games in particular”. Since 1999 the term has been used to imply a perspective which is against the common opinion that video games should be viewed as extensions of narrative (Frasca 2003:222). Frasca (2003:222) insists that ludology does not wish to deny the importance of narrative, merely that video games do not consist of a narrative structure alone. Furthermore, Frasca (2003:222) concedes that even though ludology is a formalist approach, and its limitations should always be kept in mind, it does not mean that it is not useful. Frasca (2003:224) claims that:

[t]o an external observer, the sequence of signs produced by both the film and the simulation could look exactly the same. This is what many supporters of the narrative paradigm fail to understand: their semiotic sequences might be identical, but simulation cannot be understood just through its output. This is absolutely evident to anybody who played a game: the feeling of playing soccer cannot be compared to the one of watching a match.

Central to the ludological approach is the notion of play. Several studies have been done on what exactly *play* refers to, what a game is and how it can be understood as a part of cultural systems.¹² However, even though Huizinga and Callois consider games to be “... separate from the outside world” (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et al* 2008:28), theorists such as Marshall McLuhan¹³ for instance, argue that games should be considered cultural reflections.

When the ludological aspects of video games are analysed, the gendered nature of the medium and context within which these media emerged, must be taken into account. For instance, Dovey and Kennedy (2009:36) confirm that computer gameplay “... takes place within and forms part of a culture that is not gender neutral. Gendered structures of inclusion and exclusion are at work in the mediation of access to both games and play in a number of

¹² See for instance Huizinga 1938, Callois 1958 and McLuhan 1994

¹³ McLuhan (1994:235) considers games to be a *reaction* to cultural activities, and contends that “... [a]s extensions of the popular response to the workaday stress, games become faithful models of a culture.”

different ways". Dominant models used in this medium, as well as the rewards given for certain behaviour, no doubt teach children how to assume 'appropriate' social roles (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:36). Therefore, when children play male-coded computer games for instance, they are more likely to view the particular display of femininity and masculinity as 'normal' and socially acceptable. Furthermore, certain video games that attract more female players, such as *The Sims* series (2000-2015), and *EverQuest* (1999-) are often considered as deviations from the 'classic game model' (Juul in Dovey & Kennedy 2009:37). Such a claim implies that these games are not 'real' games, and the people playing them are not 'real' gamers (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:37). In addition, these supposedly 'feminine' games are often focused on consumption and activities related to consumption, for instance Mattel's *Barbie fashion designer* (1996) and *The Sims* (2000-2015) (Graner Ray in Dovey & Kennedy 2009:37).

Although this study primarily focuses on the narratological elements in both *BioShock* and *The Last of Us*, the ludological layer (or structure) of the games is also considered and discussed. In addition, the postfeminist perspective that is used in combination with the narratological and ludological approach assists in understanding the nature of the representation of gendered subjects in the games. The following section identifies and unpacks postfeminist themes that are prevalent in contemporary visual culture, particularly video games.

3.6 Postfeminist themes in visual culture

In order to emphasise the role that a postfeminist analysis can potentially play in exploring video games, the following section discusses a potential shift in terms of gender consciousness in society, as a result of contemporary societal anxieties about gender, and how this shift can be observed in video games specifically. According to Sadie Plant (1998:45, 46), the rise of technology in Western society, especially in areas such as media, intelligence

gathering and telecommunications, have coincided with “... an unprecedented sense of disorder and unease, not only in societies, states, economies, families, sexes, but also in species, bodies, brains, weather patterns, ecological systems”. Plant (1998:46) furthermore observes that the result of this unease, or turbulence, which is so widespread and operates on so many levels, is that “... reality itself seems suddenly on edge” (Plant 1998:46).

Although identified more than a decade and a half ago, the turbulence to which Plant refers, continues to manifest visually on several different levels in popular culture. When looking at the video game sphere specifically, this anxiety is clearly observed in terms of both hostility towards women active in the gaming industry (as either game developers or game critics), as well as on a thematic, narratological and ludological level in video games.

With this being said, it is important to note that by far the most characters in contemporary video games are male (Kuchera 2012:[sp]). This means that in order to explore the construction of femininities in video games, it is equally important to take into account the existing ways in which masculinities are represented in video games. The following sections discuss the emergence in video games of what appears to be a disillusionment with stereotypical constructions of masculine values and masculinity. This disillusionment may indicate a much larger distrust of masculine values in Western society in general. Firstly, I broadly investigate some uneases regarding masculinity and masculine values that have surfaced in Western society in the past few decades, in order to show that these concerns are given visual manifestation in *BioShock* and *The last of us* in the form of the feminisation of masculinity. The final section of this chapter explores post-apocalyptic themes in video games as examples of societal anxieties regarding masculinity and male-oriented values. In other words, this part of the study considers how masculine values are potentially undermined and subverted in favour of a more feminine approach in some postfeminist texts

3.6.1 Disillusionment with masculine values and masculinity

Owing to the limited scope of this study, the issue of masculinity cannot be dealt with in much depth. The limited discussion of masculinity in this section of the study, is focused on the particular way in which masculinity is possibly feminised in some video games, specifically *BioShock* and *The last of us*. Genz and Brabon (2009:135) argue that technological changes since the 1960s resulted in men often being seen as “... redundant in a biological, social and economic way as the historic roles of ‘heroic masculinity’, ‘old industrial man’ or simply ‘old man’ have been phased out ...”. This ‘crisis’ in terms of masculinity and the role of men in society, may also point towards a shift from the traditional privileging of male values in society, to a new space, where feminine values are manifesting visually as ‘desirable’ values in popular culture. This can be seen in popular media such as *BioShock* and *The last of us*, which visually depict a capitalist, rational, ‘civilised’, male-oriented society, that has been destroyed as a result of the absolute adherence to male-oriented values. The downfall of a capitalist, rational society in these representations can be read as visual manifestations of the social discontent regarding the longstanding oppression of feminine values in society. In other words, in these games, a resignification of stereotypical feminine traits and behaviours has taken place.

Lynne Segal (1997:ix) helpfully explains the complexity of the crisis of masculinity, arguing that “[a]s the twentieth century draws to its close, men appear to be emerging as the threatened sex; even as they remain, everywhere, the threatening sex, as well”. Moreover, Segal (1997:xi) points out that even though the majority of wealth, prestige, corporate power and political authority are still linked to men, on a global scale, only specific groups of men wield the power and authority in a society. But as Segal (1997:xi) also claims, this “... is precisely what secures rather than undermines the hierarchical structuring of gender through relations of dominance: the

symbolic equation of ‘masculinity’ with power, and ‘femininity’ with powerlessness” [original emphasis]. Therefore, even though women have clearly gained a certain degree of economic independence and inclusion in economic activities, the concept of femininity and thus also values associated with femininity in Western culture are still being undermined and relegated to an inferior position in favour of hegemonic masculine values. Although more women are being included in a fundamentally male-oriented system, men still wield the vast majority of the power and authority in this system, and have more access to economic, social and cultural spheres (Barak, Leighton & Flavin 2010:131).

What this means is that, despite the dominant role that men still play in society, a distinct ‘crisis of masculinity’ in terms of “... personal doubts, social anxieties and conceptual fragmentations” (Segal 1997:xii) also still exists. However, the matter is not so simple either. As John Beynon (2002:75) points out, “... [a]lthough claims that men and masculinity are currently in crisis are constantly and vociferously made, the precise nature of the crisis in masculinity (that is, how it manifests itself and is actually experienced) is ill defined and elusive”. One of the main contributors to this crisis is the already existing prescribed gender roles constructed in society, and the expectations that come with them. The pressures of these expectations may lead to some men being unable to express their emotions, resulting in destructive behaviour (Segal 1997:xiii). As Segal (1997:xii) points out, however, rather than analysing and addressing the

... appallingly destructive consequences of inequalities and differences *between* men and their contrasting milieus – which have a serious gender dimension as boys and men anxiously compare themselves and compete with each other – we are far more likely to read largely spurious reports of contrasts between men and women [original emphasis].

In other words, for Segal it is necessary to acknowledge that competition between men plays a large role in the creation of anxiety over gender identity.

One of the prominent manifestations of such underlying male anxieties can be observed in the large contingent of the ‘gamer’ culture that often acts out in extreme displays of misogyny in reaction to women’s inclusion in gaming on most levels. As online journalist Julie Bort (2014:[sp]) claims, the gaming industry seems to be the most misogynistic when compared to other technologically oriented industries. I would argue that the extreme masculine culture from which video games have emerged, and in which they are still firmly entrenched, contributes to the backlash that can be observed in contemporary gaming, in the video game industry, video game narratives, as well as in the gaming community (that is, people that play games).

Gender debates and especially instances of sexist attacks on women in the gaming industry are not unfamiliar topics in video game studies, and have been prevalent in popular media such as blogs and online articles for some time now. As Mia Consalvo (2012:[sp]) argues, the harassment of female game players is not a new occurrence, and has been a part of the gaming culture for the entire history of video games. Moreover, Consalvo (2012:[sp]) maintains that the extent and intensity of female harassment in gaming culture have increased in the past few years.

For instance, Sarkeesian’s Kickstarter project discussed earlier in this chapter, where she looked specifically at female stereotypes in video games over the past few decades, created a severe backlash in the gaming community. Sarkeesian received death and rape threats and was constantly harassed by male gamers for daring to create videos that criticise the representation of women in video games (Consalvo 2012:[sp]). Similarly, Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, both successful video game developers, were also involved in separate misogynistic campaigns, where they received threats of rape and death (Hudson 2014:[sp]). These are extreme examples that have recently dominated popular video game blogs and review sites. As Consalvo

(2012:[sp]) points out, many cases have been documented in the history of video games, where female players, critics and other game professionals were either publicly humiliated, disregarded and/or marginalised by male members of the gaming community. Furthermore, Consalvo (2012:[sp]) notes that:

Each event taken in isolation is troubling enough, but chaining them together into a timeline demonstrates how the individual links are not actually isolated incidents at all but illustrate a pattern of a misogynistic gamer culture and patriarchal privilege attempting to (re)assert its position ... Slowly but surely and building upon one another in frequency and intensity, all of these events have been responding to the growing presence of women and girls in gaming not as a novelty but as a regular and increasingly important demographic.

Consalvo's observation regarding the misogynistic nature of the gaming sphere, places emphasis on the importance of challenging the values that underpin video games as a medium. In addition to this, Laura Hudson (2014:[sp]) argues that one of the reasons why a large part of the male component of the gaming community is acting out in such an extreme and violent way against the inclusion of women in video games (both on screen, and as game developers, producers, critics, and so forth) might be because many gamers do not consider gaming a hobby, but rather a part of their identity. The idea of a modern gamer (as seen from the perspective of the majority of game development companies), still revolves around white, male, middle class consumers, even though as previously mentioned, female players now make up almost half of the total of people playing games (Hudson 2014:[sp]). Hudson (2014:[sp]) comments on the reaction of many gamers with regard to this influx of female presence in the gaming sphere:

... for some gamers, this has been experienced not as cultural growth, but personal loss. They see the growing visibility of women, not to mention their incomprehensible insistence that games cater to their perspectives as well, as an unwelcome intrusion in a space that does not belong to them – even an existential threat. Even more fascinating is how these insecurities have allowed some gamers to consider

themselves a downtrodden minority, despite their continued dominance of every meaningful sector of the games industry, from development to publishing to criticism.

Hudson's claim that male gamers often consider themselves a minority, while simultaneously enjoying dominance and privilege, again underscores the covert, underlying anxieties regarding the construction of gender in contemporary society. For this reason, interrogating and critiquing the privileging and gendering of certain values in society, is a matter of great urgency.

Although a number of video game studies have explored the link between the rise in online female gamer/developer harassment in recent years, and the masculine culture in which video games are rooted (see Fox & Tang 2014), the values underpinning the broader socio-economic environment in which video games are based (such as neoliberalism) are seldom questioned in game studies. With this being said, since violence is inextricably linked to the largely masculine oriented medium of video games on several levels (not only visual), one cannot ignore the role that the gaming community itself plays in preventing women from becoming part of the 'group' as a result of their sex (Fox & Tang 2014:315). As Jon Back and Annika Waern (2013:3) state, the "... gaming community remains strongly male-coded". Thus, as a result of being excluded, girls and women are less likely to pursue a career in designing and developing video games. According to Fox and Tang (2014:314, 315), it is hardly surprising that women are underrepresented in video games, since women only make up a fraction of the game industry workers.

These extreme reactions to the 'threat' of feminisation, and the inclusion of women in a traditionally male dominated arena, might have come about as a result of the emphasis that video games place on values such as aggression, competition and violence. Segal (1997:xxv) points out that many men would prefer a traditional societal order, where men are dominant and secure in

most spheres of life. According to Segal (1997:xxv), some male efforts to resist the inevitable societal shifts incurred by the fight for gender equality, include the support of the Men's Rights Movements and other anti-feminist groups.¹⁴ This is evident in the reaction and attitude of many (hardcore) male gamers to the inclusion of women in gaming as equals. Of specific interest to this study, is not the overt manifestation of anxiety that can be observed in male gaming groups, but rather the unconscious and subtle signs of anxieties regarding women and femininity that manifest both visually and in terms of narrative in certain contemporary video games. The following subsection explores the ways in which the societal anxieties discussed above, can potentially lead to a feminisation of masculinity, and how this feminisation emerges in visual texts.

3.6.2 Feminisation of masculinity

Segal (1997:xxi) argues that the 'new Men's Movement'¹⁵, highlights the paradoxes of the concept of masculinity, rather than affirming or defining it in any way. Segal (1997:xxii) refers to some of the activities that men in this group took part in, and identified these as stereotypically 'feminine' acts such as "... sometimes crying in each other's arms, hugging, reading poetry, same-sex dancing" and so forth. Furthermore, these expressive acts apparently enabled the men to "... cope with their anxieties in positive and non-abusive ways" (Segal 1997:xxii). Similar to this idea, I contend that in order to cope with some of the anxieties regarding masculinity, and men's roles in society, men are taking on ideas and values once traditionally defined as feminine, in visual culture and specifically in the realm of video games. Most interestingly,

¹⁴ Some examples include Internet forums such as Angry Harry and The Red Pill on Reddit, as well as several 'conferences for men' that have become popular in Western societies. A South African example is the 'Mighty Men Conference', that teaches and encourages "men how to be men" (The Message Simply [sa]:[sp]). The conference has over 350 000 Facebook followers (The Message Simply [sa]:[sp]).

¹⁵ The 'new Men's Movement' refers to a mythopoetic group of men, active in the 1990s that involved rituals and meetings in an effort to "... reclaim and reaffirm the imagined origins of true masculinity" and which was analysed extensively by sociologist Michael Schwalbe (Segal 1997:xxi).

since the overwhelming majority of video games on the market today are developed by men (Dovey & Kennedy 2009:36), the relatively positive representation of feminine values such as emotion, nurturing and irrationality, as well as the feminising of masculinity in some video games, are therefore largely facilitated by male game developers.

Although some men (such as the creators of *BioShock* and *The last of us*) are contributing to a new representation of masculinity, throughout history women have often been blamed for men's problems and anxieties. According to Carole Leathwood and Barbara Read (2009:12), discourses surrounding the feminisation of culture and society tend to not only situate men as victims of these 'feminised' structures, but as victims of women and feminism directly (although this is not the case in the video games under discussion here). Women's inclusion in areas previously reserved for men, such as economic and political circles, challenges and threatens men's power and authority.¹⁶ These ideas might be part of the reason that traditional notions of masculinity and manhood are changing at a relatively slow pace. This is in contrast to the constant construction and reconstruction of 'new' femininities that are evident in both popular media and in feminist and postfeminist theory (Genz 2009:31).

Moreover, John MacInnes (1998:47) argues that the public's view of traditional masculinity has indeed shifted in a noticeable way:

... [w]hat were once claimed to be manly virtues (heroism, independence, courage, strength, rationality, will, backbone, virility) have become masculine vices (abuse, destructive aggression, coldness, emotional inarticulacy, detachment, isolation, an inability to be flexible, to communicate, to empathize, to be soft, supportive or life affirming).

¹⁶ Additionally, in the fin-de-siècle period in France, the growing feminist movement posed a threat to the political and economic dominance of men, especially since the country was embracing a liberalist mindset at the time (Offen 1984:672). In other words, as Karen Offen (1984:672) points out, women's independence and autonomy seemed to be "... the inevitable consequence of a liberal ideology".

Similarly, Beynon (2002:79) claims that traditional masculinity is “out of fashion”, and even goes so far as to argue that a reversal of female and male traits has indeed taken place in society (Beynon 2002:79, 80). To substantiate this claim, Beynon (2002:80) refers to Anthony Clare’s explanation of how masculine values (such as rationality, aggression and competitiveness), in presumably both men and women, are

... now seen as the stigmata of deviance ... [whereas], the very traits which once marked out women as weak and inferior – emotional, spontaneous, intuitive, expressive, compassionate, empathetic – are increasingly seen as the markers of maturity and health.

In other words, the signifiers of healthy masculinity have recently come to signify men’s inadequacy, a situation which has no doubt contributed to the so-called crisis of masculinity. In addition, when used to define men, the signifiers of femininity – previously considered evidence of women’s inferiority – have been transformed into markers of men’s maturity. Despite the transformation of gendered signifiers in the visual domain, however, as previously argued, men continue to dominate the public sphere, especially in terms of politics and economics. The ideological and material influence that thousands of years of patriarchy have had on the inequality between men and women is undoubtedly still clearly evident in society (MacInnes 1998:48). Nevertheless, shifts in what masculinity means, and therefore what is expected from men in society, can be observed. This study argues that these shifts are deeply influenced by traditional ideas of femininity, and can therefore be seen as the feminisation of masculinity.

According to Leathwood and Read (2009:10) the term ‘feminisation’ can be used to refer to several ‘concerns’ emerging in society. Firstly, and perhaps most often, feminisation is used to describe an area, or field, where women are in the majority; therefore, in this regard feminisation refers to the presence of women in relation to men in a particular sphere (Leathwood & Read 2009:10). Even though it can be contended that the video game industry, as

well as video game audiences are undoubtedly being feminised in relation to the number of women entering the video game sphere, my main concern is how male (and female) anxieties surface as a result of the existing masculine foundation of video games. In other words, even though more women are being included in the video game sphere, the values on which the medium is based, remains aligned with traditionally considered masculine concepts.

The second use of the term feminisation that Leathwood and Read (2009:10) describe, is the indication of “... cultural change or transformation, whereby ‘feminine’ values, concerns and practices are seen to be changing the culture of an organization, a field of practice or society as a whole” (Leathwood & Read 2009:10). This transformation is usually attributed to the increase in the number of women in a given field (Leathwood & Read 2009:10). This approach can be seen as gender essentialism, since it implies that women are innately more inclined towards being nurturing, cooperative and so forth, and thus their inclusion in, and contribution to any given field will apparently change the way in which the field operates in order to accommodate these inherent traits.

On the other hand, it does stand to reason that, along with the inclusion of more women in the video game sphere, a rise in female characters and female narratives will be inevitable.¹⁷ This does not necessarily mean that traditionally considered feminine traits will also be consciously included, and situated as positive in games. Women are, once again, simply included in an inherently male system, since more women gamers and developers translate into a bigger consumer market, and thus a bigger profit for companies. Furthermore, could it not be argued that the inclusion of women in video game

¹⁷ According to a Bloomberg Business article by Mark Milian (2014:[sp]), entitled *Video games can't afford to ignore women*, even though leading video game developers have ignored and dismissed requests from players to pay attention to female audiences, they have apparently now decided to “... show more interest in cultivating female players”. Additionally, Keza MacDonald (2014:[sp]), Stephen Totilo (2015:[sp]) and Leah Burrows (2013:[sp]) are all of the opinion that women should be included in the production and development of games on all levels.

spheres does not necessarily *induce* anxieties about the feminisation of the medium, but may rather bring existing human anxieties regarding the *values* underpinning video games as a medium (as well as Western society in general) to the fore? These human anxieties potentially manifest in the form of a feminisation of masculinity, where male characters in video games inadvertently undergo a ‘feminisation’ process that enables character development, with the character potentially becoming more ‘human’ as a result of this transformation.¹⁸

Even though the feminisation of masculinity can potentially emerge within a variety of narrative environments in video games, a post-apocalyptic world may indeed provide the most conducive setting for such a transformation. The following subsection provides an overview of the post-apocalyptic theme, and the ways in which it serves as a convenient backdrop from which societal anxieties emerge in video games.

3.6.3 Post-apocalyptic themes

From the discovery of records of ancient Mayan predictions of the apocalypse, to fictional accounts of the end of the world in popular culture, people living in post-industrial societies in the twenty-first century are constantly confronted with various scenarios that could supposedly lead to the demise of humanity and inevitably the end of civilisation as we know it. Watts (2011:248) argues that post-apocalyptic settings (as seen in *BioShock* and *The last of us*) can be read as a symbolic subversion of existing social structures. The visual representation of the physical ruin and degradation of human-made structures can metaphorically represent the destruction of a society, including all the rules and norms that are associated with it (Watts

¹⁸ Moreover, it can be argued that the player is also feminised on a physical level as a result of the passivity that video games generally induce. In other words, players are rendered as passive users of technology, and their actions are limited to a game world. However, this arguably undesired feminisation is outside the scope of this study, but this irony once again highlights the complexities of the underlying structures of gender construction in video games.

2011:248). Similarly, Jörn Ahrens (2009:53) describes apocalyptic themes as “... a particular narrative that describes a process of transformation resulting from crisis”. Subsequently, the post-apocalyptic worlds in video games opens up new avenues from which one can explore the representation of possible alternative social structures and values that might emerge from the destruction of existing societies.

Ahrens (2009:56) argues that post-apocalyptic narratives in popular media often obscure the moral intentions of the protagonist, even though it is “... always about the salvation of manhood” (Ahrens 2009:56). Furthermore, post-apocalyptic narratives generally depict a ‘common’ enemy that the surviving humans have to deal with in order to survive, and as Ahrens (2009:56) points out, “... in each case it has been man’s own moral ignorance and stubborn trust in technical progress that is most responsible for the post-apocalyptic situation...”. Since the desolate post-apocalyptic world is a result of human actions, the enemy that the remaining population has to deal with is in some sense also part of themselves (Ahrens 2009:56).

Moreover, when analysed from a postfeminist perspective, post-apocalyptic narratives hold much promise in terms of the representation of gender roles and relations. Watts (2011: 250) even goes so far as to argue that:

[w]hen the concept of social structures is narrowed in focus to the specific social structures related to gender, these connections between ruin imagery and liberation may become less obvious, but they remain conceptually sound. If a building is taken to be representative of a culture that tirelessly marginalizes women, forcing them into roles of domesticity, passivity, and subordination, then the demolition of such a building signifies a liberation from these oppressive cultural constraints. When looking at digital games, these cultural forces may be those within the narrative of the game, but also those within which the game is produced and played. Should this theme persist into digital game re-creations of the ruin aesthetic, one would expect these ruin images to be accompanied by subversive performances and representations of gender

Therefore, as Watts argues, by setting a video game narrative in a post-apocalyptic environment, it can open up the potential of the text, and allow for multiple subversive interpretations of traditionally sanctioned constructs regarding gender, amongst others.

Zombie themes in popular culture are inevitably strongly linked to post-apocalyptic settings. Since literature, including popular culture can be seen as “... nothing less than a barometer for measuring an era’s cultural anxieties” (Magistrale in Bishop 2010:9), post-apocalyptic themes can reveal several insights about a society’s concerns and fears. Furthermore, Gothic visual texts (such as texts set in a post-apocalyptic world) fulfil the function of ‘cultural barometer’ particularly well. This is confirmed by Jerold Hogle (in Bishop 2010:9) who states that: “[gothic fiction] helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural”. Kyle Bishop (2010:9) identifies several such anxieties, and links them with an actual apocalypse scenario: “... wars, natural disasters, financial crises, and other political and social tragedies affect cultural consciousness as much as the blast from a high-yield explosive or a massive earthquake, and the ensuing shockwaves reach far and wide”. These examples may be relatively easily associated with the visual representation of a post-apocalyptic narrative, but more subtle and complex underlying anxieties can potentially also be identified when analysing post-apocalyptic literature.

As Bishop (2010:11) states, the zombie genre in popular culture in particular presents an interesting view on the “cultural consciousness” of contemporary Westernised society. Bishop (2010:11) argues that the recent rise of the zombie genre (or “zombie renaissance”, as he puts it) can largely be ascribed to the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA. Bishop understands the resurrection of the zombie genre in the twenty-first century to function predominantly as a form of social commentary on the ‘war on terrorism’, although another popular

and perhaps more prevalent interpretation of the zombie genre, is the idea that zombies represent mindless consumerism in contemporary society (Schott 2010:62).

Earlier zombie films such as *White zombie* (Halperin 1932) and *I walked with a zombie* (Tourneur 1943) mainly dealt with themes of anxiety in terms of colonialism and slavery, while more recent zombie films most often depict a desolate world where modern infrastructures and technologies have been destroyed (Bishop 2010:13). Not only can one observe a change in the themes dealt with in the zombie genre, but also a progression from cinema to other forms of visual literature such as video games (Bishop 2010:17).

It could be argued that the underlying current of anxieties that are seen in the representation of zombies, potentially also includes an unease concerning the destruction of the environment, which is linked, by ecofeminists, to women. For instance, ecofeminist Mary Mellor (2003:16) argues that:

[t]he ecological destructiveness of the Western socioeconomic system has been seen by many ecofeminists as the result of the dualist nature of Western society. Western society is seen as being divided in ways that prioritize one aspect of society through the denigration of its opposite or alternative. Scientific knowledge is valued over vernacular or popular knowledge; the public world of institutions and commerce is valued over the private world of domestic work and relations ... [t]hese divisions are summed up in two crucial hierarchical dualisms: man, the masculine, is prioritized over woman, the feminine, and human society and culture are seen as superior to the world of nature. In these hierarchical relations, woman and nature are thrown into a contingent relationship as the despised and rejected by-products (or precursors) of 'modernity'.

According to this view, the oppression and domination of the environment can be closely linked to the subordination and oppression of feminine values in society. In other words, at its most extreme, a world filled with zombies can be

understood as a representation of society stripped from all feminine characteristics, demonstrating the results of such a situation.

When taking the argument regarding the disillusionment with masculine values put forth in the previous section into account, one can argue that the current prevalence (and rise) of apocalyptic themed video games might be a way in which not only male anxieties regarding masculinity, but rather societal anxieties about the privileging of male values surfaces. In an attempt to deal with the deeply masculinised nature of video games specifically, it appears that feminised themes have come to the fore, and become part of the representational, narratological and ludological layers. Therefore, even though, on surface, certain texts such as *BioShock* and *The last of us* might seem driven by male-oriented values, certain elements can potentially also be read as a manifestation of a type of disillusionment with hegemonic masculinity leading to the feminisation of masculinity, as explored further in the next chapter.

3.7 Conclusion

The historical development of video games plays an integral part when analysing gender representations in games. By taking into account the context from which digital technology emerged, it can be argued that video games are mainly based on values traditionally associated with masculinity which includes rationality, aggression and competition. The masculine nature of the medium undoubtedly influences the ways in which gender is constructed in video games, and this, in turn, influences identity construction.

In terms of gender identity in video games, players have the opportunity to experiment with and explore different identities. This might lead to a different understanding of gender and gender relations in society. Although existing research on identity formation in video games often focus on the violent, negative aspect inherent in video games, some theorists claim that video

games can potentially also provide a space for positive identity transformation and development (Greitemeyer 2013:500). Therefore, in order to explore gender identity in video games, it is important to critically assess the different representations of women and femininity in video games. One of the main influences on gender formation is the constant representation of stereotyped versions of women and men in video games.

Furthermore, this chapter discussed a general societal disillusionment with masculinity and masculine values that has taken place in Western cultures. At the same time, it was shown that masculine values are still privileged above values that are traditionally considered feminine. One of the main reasons that masculinity can be considered to be in 'crisis', is the unrealistic societal expectations placed upon men via the popular media, leading to uncertainties about what it means to be a so-called 'real' man. According to Segal (1997:xiii), this situation might lead to destructive behaviour. I argued in this chapter that one of the manifestations of these resulting male anxieties can be observed in video game culture as well as in the video game industry in general.

As a result of the disillusionment with masculine values, certain societal anxieties are potentially produced, and may lead to the feminising of masculinity. In other words, an unintentional shift from masculine values to a more feminine approach can possibly be observed in some areas of visual culture, and video games specifically. One of the themes where these anxieties and the resulting feminising of masculinity can be observed, is post-apocalyptic themed video games, and in particular zombie games. The prevalence of this theme in video games, and other forms of visual culture alike, might indicate an emerging unease about the 'destruction' of existing social structures and hierarchies. Even though zombie themed visual texts are often read as cultural commentary either on social anxieties such as terrorist attacks, or on mindless consumerism that is ubiquitous in our Western

societies, this chapter argued that the prevalence of zombies in video games can also indicate that anxieties concerning the negation of feminine values are emerging on a societal level.

Furthermore, in post-apocalyptic narratives, certain existing social structures, and the subversion thereof, can be explored from a postfeminist perspective. The fictional 'destruction' of social structures and the environment can enable and encourage a rethinking of traditional notions about gender. Since the actual degradation of the environment can be closely linked to the oppression of feminine values in society, post-apocalyptic worlds potentially represent societal anxieties regarding both the negation of feminine values, and the future of the environment. In addition to this, a post-apocalyptic setting provides a space where the feminisation of masculinity can potentially take place and be explored. Since masculinity is considered to be in crisis by several theorists, post-apocalyptic themes can provide a sphere where the role of men in society, as well as the role of values coded as masculine, can be re-evaluated and investigated. In other words, some post-apocalyptic video games may be considered as postfeminist texts may be productively analysed from a postfeminist perspective.

Even though video games are heavily masculinised on many levels, a new way of approaching existing visual representations can be beneficial in understanding gender roles and relations. By analysing video games such as *BioShock* and *The last of us* through a postfeminist lens, perhaps a different understanding of the representation of women, femininity and specifically feminine values can be revealed. The following chapter applies the theories discussed thus far to the relevant video games, and aims to provide an alternative, yet still critical and thoroughly feminist perspective.

CHAPTER 4:

BIOSHOCK AND THE LAST OF US THROUGH A POSTFEMINIST LENS

As explained in the previous chapter, the inherently masculine framework in which video games are rooted, generally promotes and privileges a very specific set of values. These values are mostly culturally ascribed to men and versions of ideal masculinity operating in Western culture, and in the process often devalue and negate seemingly opposing values that are associated with women and versions of stereotypical femininity. I contend that traditional masculine and feminine values should not necessarily be considered mutually exclusive, but rather as ‘human traits’ that are potentially present in both men and women. This chapter explores the anxieties and uneases possibly produced by a predominantly masculine medium such as video games. It also investigates how these anxieties surface in terms of narrative, and in some cases also on a gameplay level in both *BioShock* and *The last of us*.

Anxieties regarding gender are constantly surfacing in many video games in different ways. For instance, Sarkeesian’s analyses of the variety of female stereotypes in video games, reveal that the majority of these tropes frame women in a negative way, and promote hostility towards women by men, as well as traditionally considered feminine characteristics and values. But as I argued in Chapter Three, since the video game industry is expanding, and female gamers, developers and critics are becoming more prominent in the gaming sphere, different perspectives regarding issues such as the representation of female characters and so forth, are also being considered and included when it comes to game development. Even though the inclusion of women in the game industry has been met with opposition from several hard core, male gamers, some developers have nevertheless recognised the growing need (as well as the expanded market for their games) to incorporate more well-rounded, humanised female characters in more prominent positions in their games.

But despite the ongoing efforts of game developers, I want to suggest that the masculine values that underpin video games as a medium constitute a complex and challenging platform on which to adequately and progressively include and represent women, as well as characteristics and values commonly associated with women. The pressure placed on developers to produce ‘balanced’ video games while working with an inherently masculine medium, can lead to the emergence of anxieties and concerns which often surface visually in video games. I would further argue that even though these anxieties can surface in a negative way, certain recent video games have adopted a more positive approach towards women, and in particular feminine values. Although both *BioShock* and *The last of us* can be read from a feminist perspective as reinforcing patriarchal ideas regarding gender, I would argue that by considering these texts as representative of a wider culture, and by applying a postfeminist perspective, an alternative understanding can be gained about the state of social anxieties regarding gender and gender roles. The following subsection analyses *BioShock* in terms of narrative and ludology and the ways in which societal anxieties emerge visually in the games.

4.1 *BioShock* overview

In the 2007 video game *BioShock*, it becomes clear that the video game industry is maturing on many levels. *BioShock* provides a critical look at the dire consequences of a society exclusively promoting certain masculine values, and in the process completely negating a variety of feminine values. This analysis of *BioShock* begins with an overview of the narrative and gameplay of the video game.

In terms of setting, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, *BioShock* takes place in a fictional, alternative imagining of the 1960s. The majority of the plot takes place in a ruined underwater city called Rapture, originally

conceptualised and built by capitalist visionary Andrew Ryan in the late 1950s. The city's extreme free-market, capitalist system eventually led to its downfall when the inhabitants started abusing an unstable substance called ADAM, which turned the majority of the population into 'splicers' (Figure 6), who are degenerate human beings, resembling monsters rather than the world's "... best and brightest" (*BioShock* 2007) which they once were, according to Andrew Ryan.



Figure 6: A Splicer in *BioShock* (2K Games 2009).

The player inhabits Jack, the main protagonist, a man that survived a plane crash, and searches for safety by entering an abandoned lighthouse on an island in the middle of the Atlantic ocean. The lighthouse conceals a bathysphere,¹ which Jack uses to enter the city of Rapture. Once Jack reaches the underwater city, a stranger reaches out to him on a radio system in the bathysphere, and identifies himself as Atlas. Atlas provides Jack with information about the rise and downfall of Rapture, and asks Jack to help him

¹ According to the *BioShock* wiki ([sa]:[sp]), "... bathyspheres of Rapture are very small, comfortable submersibles, allowing travel between the city's different areas. They are part of the city's transportation network, the Rapture Metro...".

and his family escape from the Rapture ruins, and in return he will guide Jack safely through the city.

The main goal in *BioShock* is to navigate the ruins of Rapture and escape from the city. In order to do this, the player must face several enemies and obstacles, such as Splicers and Big Daddies. The player needs to constantly upgrade their weapons and Plasmids (genetic abilities) in order to overcome and kill these antagonists. Atlas informs Jack that the only way to escape the city and defend himself against the Splicers and Big Daddies, is to kill Little Sisters and harvest their ADAM which can be used for various upgrades. However, as mentioned in the first chapter, the choice lies with the player whether to kill the Little Sisters, or to save them by removing the ADAM producing sea slugs.

Regarding the gameplay in *BioShock*, the game is considered a first-person role-playing game, which refers to a combination of first-person shooter (FPS)² and role-playing game (RPG)³ elements (Perry 2006:[sp]). The video game enables the player to develop the character in terms of weapons and fighting abilities, and at the same time is set in an environment that employs violence as a means to overcome obstacles. According to Levine (Perry 2006:[sp]), violent interaction is an important part of *BioShock*, and the player cannot simply avoid enemies in order to progress in the game, but needs to kill them in order to complete the game goals.

Furthermore, the gameplay as explained on the *BioShock* wiki ([sa]:[sp]) is mainly geared towards the violent and aggressive domination of the sub-human characters roaming the city:

² Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et al* (2008:251) defines an FPS as a game centered on shooting enemies, in which the player navigates the game world from the perspective of the character.

³ According to Egenfeldt-Nielsen *et al* (2008:153) RPGs are often focused on the development and advancement of a character in terms of abilities, as well as on exploring the digital game environment.

[w]hile exploring the underwater dystopia, Rapture, the player is urged to turn everything into a weapon: biologically modifying their own body with Plasmids, hacking devices and systems, upgrading their weapons, crafting new ammo variants, and experimenting with different battle techniques are all possible.

This description of *BioShock* further emphasises the focus that the game has on violence and violent behaviour in order to progress in the game.

In addition to the above, Kirkland (2009:168) argues that most formal video game approaches “... do not consider the extent to which ‘gameplay-affecting characteristics’ might themselves be gendered”. As argued throughout this study, video games as a medium are firmly rooted in a masculine oriented foundation, as Charles Soukup (2010:172) argues:

... even as video games are played by hundreds of millions of males and females of diverse ages, ... these video games are not "gendered" as merely masculine; these video games normalize a patriarchal (heterosexual) masculinity defined by the exertion of physical domination and mastery via violence and aggressive competition

Even though the overall gameplay of *BioShock* can be considered firmly based on masculine values, the following subsection explores the ways in which an unease regarding this masculine medium comes to the fore specifically in the narrative of *BioShock*. In other words, I contend that the inherent patriarchal, masculine framework of video games, and *BioShock* in particular, produce certain anxieties regarding the gameplay of the medium in general, and that these concerns emerge mainly in the narrative. This might be ascribed to the fact that developers generally have more freedom when it comes to narratives, as opposed to rigid systems regarding the gameplay. In other words, even though the gameplay remains thoroughly violent, some aspects of the narrative seem to subvert the underlying masculine structure of the game.

4.2 Disillusionment with masculine values and masculinity in *BioShock*

This subsection explores how masculine values and concepts regarding patriarchal masculinity are questioned and challenged in the *BioShock* narrative. These concerns in terms of dominant, patriarchal masculine traits emerge in several ways. Firstly, the dystopian setting of *BioShock* can be considered to be a visual representation (as well as a warning) of the consequences of the overwhelming domination of patriarchal power and the exclusive emphasis on scientific progress, rationality, production and competition. Secondly, the characters depicted in the game can be understood as products of a hyper-masculine society, and the decrepit conditions of their environment can indicate an anxiety regarding this version of masculinity. The characters of Tenenbaum and the Big Daddies are specifically investigated in order to highlight the ways in which the disillusionment with patriarchal masculinity and its associated characterisation as aggressive, competitive, violent and focused on domination and power, come to the fore. Finally, Jack's character is revealed to only be a puppet of one of the antagonists, Frank Fontaine, which may indicate a way in which the player might become disillusioned by masculine values her/himself.

In terms of the setting of the video game, the extreme implementation of the free market system in Rapture led to a substantial divide between the rich and the poor. Since the construction workers that built Rapture were not allowed to leave after the completion of the city, they had to find menial jobs in order to survive (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]). Many of the unemployed construction workers lived in crowded housing that was meant to be temporary, but which has become their permanent home out of necessity. Ryan mostly ignored this issue, and assumed that these groups of people would be able to find employment (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]). As stated on the *BioShock* wiki ([sa]:[sp]): “[a]s per Ryan's philosophy, unfortunates were left to find their own way to prosperity”. This utter disregard for the wellbeing of the people that actually performed the physical labour to bring Ryan's dream to realisation,

indicates a negation of characteristics such as compassion, and an extreme privileging of values such as domination and aggression.

The ruined state of Rapture (Figure 7) can be read as having occurred as a direct result of the social privileging and advancing of values culturally constructed as masculine. The main values underlying the hyper-capitalistic system implemented by Ryan are production, competition and rationality. This is evident in the way that Ryan conceptualised Rapture, and its economic structure. The most accurate way to describe the philosophical underpinnings of Rapture is as a “gulch”, derived from

... the Ayn Rand novel *Atlas Shrugged*, which refers to a localized underground economic and social community of free-minded individuals. It differs from a commune in that it is uniquely freedom-focused and so upholds individual and property rights rather than operating by the rules of a collective community (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]).

According to Ryan’s vision, Rapture would not adhere to the moral and traditional rules put in place by restrictive institutions such as governments and religion, but rather “... values such as logic and scientific reason were to guide the inhabitants in their pursuit of achievement” (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]). It is precisely because of the masculine values on which the city was based, that eventually led to its destruction.

The narrative of *BioShock* clearly positions Ryan’s philosophy as problematic, and doomed to end in ruin; perhaps this reflects an anxiety that contemporary society might also end in ruins as a result of an increasingly masculine oriented value system. In other words, even though this ruined city might be considered an extreme example, it can nevertheless be read as a reflection of an existing disillusionment in Western society regarding the privileging of masculine values such as these (Watts 2011:248).



Figure 7: Jack killing a splicer in the ruins of Rapture (*BioShock*, 2K Games 2009)

An example of the direct privileging of ‘the masculine’, and the subsequent subjugation of ‘the feminine’, is when Tenenbaum discovered ADAM. She initially intended to use it as a healing substance, but her benefactor, Frank Fontaine, encouraged Tenenbaum to research the possibility of using ADAM as a weapon. ADAM became a much sought after commodity and played a major role in the ruin of the city. Among other things, ADAM granted the user physical powers such as ‘Incinerate’⁴ and ‘Enrage’,⁵ which are directly associated with violence, power and domination. Therefore, the more feminine approach for using ADAM (which would be using it as a medicinal substance), was negated by both Fontaine and Tenenbaum, in order to make a bigger profit, gain social status, as well as to eventually dominate the city with violence (in Fontaine’s case).

It must also be pointed out that Tenenbaum developed the technology necessary to produce more ADAM from the sea slugs, by using young girls as

⁴ According to the *BioShock* wiki ([sa]:[sp]) the effect of this Plasmid is that it “[s]ets the target on fire, dealing damage over time. Also ignites any flammable object in the firing radius”.

⁵ This Plasmid is usually used on enemies, and causes the target to attack another enemy (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]).

hosts (Figure 8). In other words, Tenenbaum had no objections towards the exploitation and abuse of these girls, in order to achieve her goals, and make a profit. Again, this negation of compassion and empathy – usually gendered as female traits – for selfish, monetary gain, reflects the patriarchal, masculine values that underpin the socio-economic system of Rapture whether by male or female characters (at least, initially). But Tenenbaum increasingly became distressed, and also disillusioned by her work for Fontaine, and especially the exploitation of the girls (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]). The girls had to be mentally conditioned in order to gain a measure of control over them after the civil war had started, and to encourage them to harvest the ADAM from dead splicer corpses. As Watts (2011:255) observes, in this way, the Little Sisters had “... their innocence and their very humanity stripped from them”. However, Tenenbaum undergoes a character transformation that can be read as a feminisation, which is discussed in the next subsection.

The disillusionment with masculinity and masculine values is also evident in the depiction of the Big Daddies, as well as their relationship with the Little Sisters (Figure 8). As mentioned in the first chapter, the Little Sisters are protected by Big Daddies (Figure 8): large bio-mechanical beings specifically created to assist and act as guards for the Little Sisters as they travel around the ruined city to collect ADAM from corpses (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]). Even though this might seem to be a stereotypical patriarchal depiction of a female figure in need of male protection, Watts (2011:255) points out that the Big Daddies are genetically modified adult men⁶ that serve the Little Sisters by protecting them with their lives. In other words, the Little Sisters are in no way Sarkeesian’s ‘damsels in distress’ because they are not subordinate to the Big Daddies, but rather have a complex relationship with them.

⁶ According to the *BioShock* wiki ([sa]:[sp]), mostly (male) exiled criminals and political dissidents were used as Big Daddies. These men were genetically modified and enhanced, and their skin and organs were grafted into large diving suits (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]).

Watts (2011:255) considers the Big Daddies (Figure 8) to be a “parody of traditional masculinity”; this is in stark contrast to the erstwhile domination of men and masculine values in Rapture. In some senses the Little Sisters are now the most powerful group in Rapture, while still displaying traditionally feminine qualities such as empathy and emotion.⁷ Watts (2011:255) argues that “... the message seems to be that with dominant structures of culture literally and figuratively destroyed, the role of men as powerful disappears, allowing new forms of social order to arise.”



Figure 8: Big Daddy and Little Sister (*BioShock*, 2K Games 2009).

In addition to this, one of the plot twists of *BioShock* reveals that Jack is actually a genetically enhanced human (similar to the Big Daddies and Little Sisters), and is used and manipulated by Atlas (who is in fact Frank Fontaine, Ryan’s nemesis), to locate and kill Ryan, who is still in Rapture. Therefore, as Watts (2009:256) observes:

[t]he implications of this are that the assertive male protagonist is actually nothing more than a subordinate, emasculated slave, as

⁷ Whenever the player kills a Big Daddy, the Little Sister visibly mourns him for some time.

well as the illegitimate son of Andrew Ryan. The ‘masculine’ satisfaction accompanying gameplay mechanics of dominating one’s environment using violence and aggression is granted in *BioShock*, but then snatched away through invalidation.

This ‘invalidation’ to which Watts refers, results in a destabilising of the neoliberal context, and its related emphasis on domination, aggression and competition, from which the player is interacting with the video game. Therefore, by representing Jack as simply a puppet of the ‘masculine forces’ still evident in Rapture, the video game levels a strong criticism against the masculine values that inform and shape Western society. Understood in this way, Jack can be seen as a metaphor not only for men (or ‘masculinity’), but also for humans of all genders that are influenced and formed by a society that is fundamentally built on the premise that masculine, patriarchal values outweigh values associated with women.

This depiction of the few dehumanised surviving characters in Rapture can be read as the manifestation of existing societal disillusionments regarding traditional conceptions of masculinity and male values, as well as men’s roles in society, as discussed in Chapter Three. But at the same time, the power to either kill or save the Little Sisters, still lies with the (male) protagonist, and the choice that she/he (that is, the player) makes, results in either the further dehumanisation (of potentially both the character and the player), or a feminisation of both Jack and the player. The next subsection provides a close reading of the ways in which the feminisation of stereotypical masculinity can be observed in *BioShock*.

4.3 Feminisation of masculinity in *BioShock*

In order to gain a better understanding of the ways in which the feminisation of masculinity surfaces in *BioShock*, this subsection firstly discusses Tenenbaum’s journey (transformation) from her erstwhile masculine-oriented character to a more feminine aligned one. Secondly, the role that the Little Sisters and Big Daddies play in the feminisation of the main protagonist, and

by extension the player, is explored. Furthermore, it will be shown that the feminisation of the player is not only facilitated by the roles of the Big Daddies and Little Sisters, but also by the choices that they make during the game.

According to the *BioShock* wiki ([sa]:[sp]), the majority of people involved in the physical construction, as well as the economic growth of Rapture were men. For instance, almost all of the businesses that are either referred to, or make an appearance in *BioShock* are owned by men.⁸ Furthermore, besides the Little Sisters, the only significant female character in *BioShock* is Tenenbaum, who plays an important role in the start of the civil war and the subsequent fall of Rapture through her research on ADAM. In many ways, she comes across as a masculinised character that believes in ideas about progress, competition and self-gain. In other words, at the outset, Tenenbaum's character has already 'turned into a man'. According to the *BioShock* wiki ([sa]:[sp]), Tenenbaum, a German Jew, was sent to Auschwitz by the Nazis at the age of sixteen. While in the concentration camp, Tenenbaum not only witnessed, but also apparently assisted willingly in horrific medical experiments on prisoners. Furthermore, she is described as "indifferent" to the Holocaust (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]). This lack of emotion and compassion in the name of science can be considered 'masculine' as this category has been constructed in Western society as discussed in Chapter Two.

As the history of Rapture and its downfall unfold throughout the narrative of *BioShock*, it becomes clear that Tenenbaum started regretting her decision to exploit the Little Sisters, and she underwent a shift from a cold, calculated individual driven by profit, to a more compassionate and caring character focused on saving the Little Sisters. Even though Tenenbaum created the technology that enabled the use of Little Sisters as incubators, and thus exploited them to produce more ADAM, she also eventually created the

⁸ One of the few businesses owned by a woman is 'Lisa's candies', which does not play a prominent role in the events of *BioShock* (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]).

technology to remove the slug without hurting the girls. Moreover, Tenenbaum becomes the guardian of the girls, caring for and protecting them after the fall of the city. Tenenbaum now displays character traits such as nurturing and emotionality which Clare (in Beynon 2002:80) considers to be positive signs of a well-rounded personality.

The most profound example of the potential feminisation of both male characters and female characters that initially display masculine traits is perhaps most pertinently demonstrated by the choices that the player has to make regarding the Little Sisters throughout the game. After the civil war and the subsequent destruction of Rapture, the Little Sisters and Big Daddies live in the vent system of the ruins of the city and spend their days travelling through the city harvesting ADAM from the corpses of Splicers. Many of the Little Sisters have been taken in by Tenenbaum, who cares for them in a safe house located in some of the tunnels underneath the city (*BioShock* wiki [sa]:[sp]). Whenever the player sees a Little Sister and her accompanying Big Daddy in the streets of the city, she/he can decide to either avoid the pair, or fight and kill the Big Daddy. As the player progresses in the game, it becomes clear that in order to gain enough ADAM to upgrade Jack's weapons and abilities, the player must confront and kill the Big Daddy.

As explained earlier, whenever the player kills a Big Daddy, they are left with the choice to either kill and harvest the Little Sister of her ADAM (which would be a logical choice, since it would benefit the player in terms of gameplay), or to cure her and remove the slug, in the process receiving less ADAM. In the short term, the player is rewarded with more ADAM if the Little Sister is killed and harvested, but receives gifts and more ADAM later on in the game if the girl is saved. In addition to this, these choices eventually lead to one of two endings that the player can experience. If the player chooses to kill some or all of the Little Sisters during the game, the final cut scenes show how the now evil Jack takes over Rapture, and controls the splicers in order to bring

total destruction to the city. If the player chooses to save the Little Sisters on the other hand, the ending of the game shows how Jack rescues the Little Sisters from Rapture, and raises them as his own children. This scene ends with Jack dying from old age in a warm bed, surrounded by grown-up Little Sisters showing him love and support. The game therefore rewards the player that displays feminine-oriented values such as empathy and life-affirming actions (MacInnes 1998:47), rather than outright violence and domination,. In this way *BioShock* clearly challenges the first-person shooter genre, which conventionally only rewards hyper-masculinised behaviour such as mastery, aggression, dominance and violence (Beynon 2002:81).

Even though it has been argued that the act of saving the Little Sisters can be seen as a moral choice, whereby the player takes on a traditional male role of saviour (Watts 2011:256), I contend that this is not necessarily the same as rescuing the damsel in distress, or the euthanized damsel as in many other video games. Firstly, as discussed in Chapter Three, Sarkeesian (2013a) argues that in video games that employ the traditional trope of saving the damsel in distress, the damsel is offered to the player as the *end* reward and forms part of the main obstacles to overcome in order to complete the game. This is not the case in *BioShock*, where killing the Little Sisters in fact makes it easier for a player to complete the game. Secondly, in video games depicting the traditional trope of the damsel in distress, a player would not have anything to gain for themselves by killing the damsel rather than saving her, since this is often the main aim of the game. The player conventionally does not have a choice in the matter, and is forced to save the damsel, except in video games that employ Sarkeesian's (2013b) notion of the euthanized damsel, as explored in Chapter Three, where the player is forced to kill the damsel out of mercy.

However, the Little Sisters do not fit the mould of the euthanized damsel either, since they have no emotional bond with Jack, and even consider him a

monster after he kills their protective Big Daddies. They are terrified of Jack after he murders their body guards, and certainly never ask him to kill them, unlike the euthanized damsel, who asks the main protagonist to put her out of her misery (Sarkeesian 2013b). Whereas the killing of the euthanized damsel is clearly positioned as the morally 'correct' and merciful act in the video games using the trope, both the acts of saving the Little Sister, as well as killing her, can be considered senseless in a way. Both of these acts are forced upon her, leaving her with no choice in the matter. The Little Sisters have been heavily conditioned to experience their surroundings as a sort of 'dream' world, and appear fully content with their situation. Therefore, applying a moral hierarchy to the choice between killing and harvesting her seems more complex than is apparent on the surface. Perhaps the morally 'acceptable' behaviour would ideally have been to just let her be.

Moreover, since the Little Sisters are specifically presented to the player as objects of use, rather than as human girls that need to be saved, the act of saving them despite their dehumanised characters, takes on a different significance. As Grant Tavinor (2009:97, 98) claims, harvesting the Little Sisters of their ADAM is the most obvious and rational choice to make in order for a player to advance in the game. In this way, harvesting the Little Sister can be seen as the 'masculine' choice; where the (female) child has been dehumanised to such an extent that the player can relatively easily justify and rationalise their choice to kill her, thus benefiting selfishly from her death. The fact that the term 'harvest' is specifically used, positions the Little Sister as a 'resource', which the player must use for their own development. In this way, perhaps the Little Sisters can be understood as a metaphor for nature, and the way in which neoliberal societies approach it as an unlimited resource which primarily exists for human use (and abuse) to facilitate 'development' (Eaton & Lorentzen 2003:viii). On the other hand, when a player chooses to save the Little Sister, it potentially shows a different (more feminine) consciousness regarding the use of 'resources'. Instead of approaching

resources in terms of mastery, domination and control, perhaps a feminine relationship based on a logic of reciprocity with nature can be seen in the act of rescuing the Little Sisters (Salleh 1997:55).

Furthermore, the player cannot choose to let the Big Daddy live, which might indicate an existing anxiety regarding the role of traditional masculinity in contemporary society; as if traditional masculinity, and its associated values, have to be completely destroyed in favour of a more feminine (and perhaps balanced) approach. In a world where traditional social and gender structures have been destroyed, the Big Daddies represent a type of extreme masculinity that is subordinate to a twisted (albeit non-threatening) form of femininity (that is, the Little Sisters in their altered state). Even though the Little Sisters themselves are not violent or aggressive in any way, it is directly because of them that the Big Daddies were created. Big Daddies are unnaturally big, strong and aggressive, but do not have agency or free will at all. The only reason for the Big Daddy's existence is to protect his Little Sister from harm. Once the Big Daddy is killed, the 'feminine' that he once protected, must either be destroyed or 'rescued' by the player. Therefore, perhaps the fact that the player is forced to kill the Big Daddy can be seen as a comment on the existing extreme implementation of masculine social structures (represented by the Big Daddies) that must be destroyed before any meaningful choices regarding nature (represented by the Little Sisters) can be considered.

Moreover, the construction of the Big Daddy as an obstacle that needs to be overcome by the player-character, can indicate the ways in which traditional masculinity, not only in Rapture, but in current neoliberal societies as well, has entered an era of crisis and emasculation (represented by the misformed, hyper-masculine form of the Big Daddy), and is now apparently doomed to follow and protect an abject form of femininity (the Little Sisters). It is important to note that this twisted form of femininity has emerged as a product

of a highly masculine society, and the future of this femininity ultimately lies in the hands of a man. This malformed femininity, as embodied by the Little Sisters, can be seen as a visual manifestation of the ways in which certain types of femininity and 'the feminine' are often vilified and demonised in society, and especially popular culture. The following subsection analyses the relatively more extensive and progressive ways in which gender anxieties surface in *The last of us*.

4.4 *The last of us*

As stated earlier in this chapter, the game industry is currently expanding in order to include a more diverse demographic, especially women. Since *The last of us* was released in 2013, it stands to reason that the feminisation exhibited in this game might operate on more complex levels than in *BioShock*. *The last of us* director, Bruce Straley (in Takahashi 2013:[sp]) states that the development team that worked on *The last of us* attempted to approach the production of the game from an inclusive angle:

[w]e were surprised by some of the criticism of our use or execution of the female roles inside of the game, and some of the backlash that we got from it. I think we did an extraordinary job of creating strong characters – men, women, black, white, gay, straight. We're just trying to create completely fleshed-out characters. Yet somehow we were used as a soapbox or something for people to stand on and say that there are still problems with the industry.

In other words, according to the producers of the game at least, *The last of us* ought to be far more representative in terms of gender, race and sexual orientation than it or previous games have been.

Firstly, in order to provide some context regarding the *The last of us*, this subsection presents a short summary of the setting of the game, as well as the gameplay involved. Secondly, some of the criticism mentioned by Straley in the above quote is discussed. Even though this criticism is well-founded in terms of the representation of gender relations in this video game, I show that

a postfeminist perspective can potentially be more useful than a typical liberal feminist perspective when analysing the complex underlying anxieties surfacing in video games, and in the process reveal different ways of looking at the representation of femininity in popular culture. Thirdly, the ways in which the disillusionment with masculine values and patriarchal masculinity manifest in *The last of us* are explored. Finally, the consequences of the disillusionment are investigated in the subsection dealing with the feminisation of masculinity.

4.4.1 *The last of us* overview

The opening scene of *The last of us* is set in Texas in 2013 and introduces the main protagonist, Joel, who survives the outbreak of the mysterious fungal infection caused by Cordyceps that turns humans into aggressive zombie-like creatures. The majority of the game is set 20 years after the 2013 initial outbreak of the infection, and post-apocalyptic America is divided into 3 main areas, namely large Quarantine Zones, abandoned cities and areas dominated by wild nature. The Quarantine Zones are secured areas where the majority of survivors live, and are run by a strict militarised operation called the Federal Disaster Response Agency (FEDRA). Bandits and groups of outlaws, including the Fireflies, reside in some of the abandoned cities across America, but groups of infected people (or zombies) constantly threaten these informal settlements. The wilderness areas are completely overrun by infected people, and are considered extremely dangerous for non-infected people.

These three areas provide the overall backdrop for the post-apocalyptic narrative, and serve as spaces in which, I argue, the disillusionment with masculine values and masculinity becomes clear, as well as where the feminisation of masculinity potentially takes place. In other words, the Quarantine Zones (Figure 10) and abandoned cities can be read as spaces where current Western masculine values (such as rationality, aggression and

violence) are amplified and leads to a disillusionment with these specific values. On the other hand, natural, wild spaces such as the plains and forests in *The last of us* (Figure 11) can be understood as areas where certain values and character traits (such as compassion, creativity and emotionality) are considered paramount and privileged above the aforementioned masculine values. For instance, whereas human beings can certainly survive in Quarantine Zones without any implementation of creativity, in the wilderness it is paramount to be able to produce creative solutions in order to survive. This strengthens the idea that nature potentially provides an opportunity for stereotypical feminine values to thrive.

The first important space that is considered in this study, is the Quarantine Zone. These zones are controlled by soldiers from FEDRA, and strict rules are consistently enforced through extreme aggression and violence. The authoritarian and oppressive regime run by FEDRA in the Quarantine Zones, gave rise to a rebel organisation called the Fireflies (*The last of us* wiki 2013:[sp]). The Fireflies, operating throughout the country, especially in abandoned cities, are waging a war against FEDRA rule, since they view the military as tyrants. Furthermore, the Fireflies are actively searching for a cure or vaccine for the Cordyceps fungus, and "... will do whatever it takes to accomplish it" (*The last of us* wiki 2013:[sp]). In addition to this, they are calling for the return of all previous branches of government and believe that the military should not be in charge (*The last of us* wiki 2013:[sp]).

The final significant space analysed in this study, is the wilderness. These areas make up the remaining majority of ruined America, and is inhabited by the zombie-like creatures (Figure 9) that are the initial cause of societal downfall. The zombie-like creatures in *The last of us* are called 'infected', and the condition is caused by a fungus called Cordyceps. The victim acts as a living 'host' to the fungus, and the infection progresses through four stages before the host is eventually killed, and the fungus 'blooms' and spreads its

spores into the air (The last of us wiki 2013:[sp]). The infection causes grotesque physical deformities in the affected individual, completely demolishing (or destroying) their agency. The fungal infection causes the individual to become exceedingly aggressive, and the infected being will attack and maul any non-infected human being. The Infected can be found in most areas of wilderness, and pose a constant threat to humans everywhere.



Figure 9: One of the infected in *The last of us* (Naughty Dog 2013)

With the broad setting of the game having been outlined, the main narrative starts in this divided post-apocalyptic world of 2033, and depicts Joel and Ellie's journey across America. Joel lives in the Boston Quarantine Zone making a living as a smuggler. Joel and his business partner and friend, Tess, are forced into transporting a 'package' out of the Quarantine Zone. The package turns out to be a teenage girl named Ellie, who is allegedly immune to the Cordyceps fungus. The Fireflies believe that Ellie might be the solution they are looking for in their research in order to develop a cure for the infection. After a long journey where they face many trials, the plot ends when

Joel has to choose to either hand Ellie over to Firefly scientists in order to potentially save humankind (and in so doing kill Ellie), or to save Ellie and escape from the Fireflies. Joel chooses to save Ellie, and thus takes away the only chance of finding a cure for the Cordyceps infection.

The relatively progressive gender dynamics that can be observed in *The last of us*, can not only be observed in the narrative described above, but also in the gameplay of *The last of us*, which is a third-person survival-horror game. A third-person perspective refers to a video game where the player sees and experiences the action in the game from a fixed elevated perspective behind the protagonist (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, *et al* 2008:105). Since the main character is always visible to the player from this view point, this potentially creates a moral distance between the player and the events on screen. As opposed to *BioShock* for instance, the player is playing *with* Joel, rather than playing *as* Jack.

Furthermore, one of the main challenges in survival-horror games that the player faces is to survive with limited resources such as ammunition and health kits. This is in contrast to the majority of first-person shooters, which often focus on providing a large amount of ammunition and health kits to aid the player in killing as many virtual enemies as possible. In *The last of us*, the player is often required to *avoid* enemies by using stealth methods, rather than to engage in combat. Although the 'stealthy' abilities of men are not downplayed in popular representations of male spies and elite corps soldiers, the avoidance of physical combat might nevertheless indicate a further shift towards the inclusion of feminine values in the foundation of gaming, as well as on other levels. The following subsection discusses some of the feminist responses that *The last of us* has received from critics.

4.4.2 Typical feminist readings of *The last of us*

The last of us is one of the most critically acclaimed video games in recent years,⁹ and several video game critics have written about the gender portrayal in the game. One of the leading contemporary female video game critics, Leigh Alexander (2013:[sp]) points out that *The last of us* is one of several recent video games that “... stars a tough male hero in a paternal dynamic with a younger female companion”. This representation is in contrast to the previous popular portrayal of male protagonists as “... the young, muscular striver aiming to procure himself a pneumatic woman-prize through heroic deeds” (Alexander 2013:[sp]). The “tenor” of these earlier versions of male heroes “is now complicated by age and the times” (Alexander 2013:[sp]). Similarly, Keith Stuart (2013:[sp]) claims that “... once it was all about saving the hot love interest, now it's about being a good dad”. Even though both Alexander and Stuart agree that video game narratives and characters are generally progressing in a positive way, they are still concerned about the current representations of gender relations and hierarchies, especially in *The last of us*.

Despite the game development industry seeming to have changed their approach from portraying a “... private power fantasy” to creating games and digital experiences that can be shared with a wider audience (Alexander 2013:[sp]), several critical reviews of *The last of us* argue that “[t]his is another video game by men, for men, about men” (Suellentrop 2013:[sp]). For instance, Chris Suellentrop (2013:[sp]) considers Sarah to be a depiction of the “woman in the fridge” trope in video games, owing to her character merely existing in order to suffer horribly and then die, thereby justifying the male protagonist’s violent actions and emotionless demeanour when he avenges the perpetrators of her suffering. Furthermore, Suellentrop (2013:[sp]) points

⁹ Colin Moriarty (2013:[sp]) from IGN calls the experience when playing *The last of us* “remarkable”, as well as a “...true feat”. Similarly, David Houghton from Gamesradar considers *The last of us* to be “... a bona fide, genre-defining, once-or-twice-a-generation Big Deal”.

out that since the player cannot ‘inhabit’ Ellie for most of the game, she is placed in a subordinate position. Stuart (2013:[sp]) agrees with this perspective, arguing that characters like Ellie can be seen as “... mostly facilitators, reflecting the experiences and needs of the male lead”. Stuart (2013:[sp]) also points out that people “... who argue that *The last of us* is as much Ellie’s story as Joel’s might be correct on a purely narrative level, but in terms of identification and raw experience, we’re with Joel all the way”.

In addition to the criticism levelled against the portrayal of Ellie, several concerns regarding the highly masculine and violent post-apocalyptic setting, of *The last of us*, were also raised by critics. For instance, Stuart (2013:[sp]) claims that post-apocalypse narratives:

... all tell the same story of men coming to terms with violence and the responsibilities of fatherhood – and they all do it in such a way as to confirm the masculine status quo. Self-sacrifice in combat, ruthless violence, the sanguine acceptance that there is no other way.

Similarly, Alexander (2013:[sp]) describes post-apocalyptic themes in general as stories “... about how men are [supposed] to negotiate their social roles as the world’s known structure becomes senseless”. In terms of zombie-apocalypse narratives in particular, Alexander (2013:[sp]) claims that they deal specifically “... with a redefinition and re-examination of what constitutes humanity’s social and gender roles for everyone”. However, as Alexander (2013:[sp]) points out, among recently released big title post-apocalypse games, such as *The last of us*, *BioShock infinite* and *The walking dead*, all of them deal with anxieties involving fatherhood, while the mother is never present, and rarely even mentioned. This critique once again highlights the current male-oriented state of video game narratives.

Furthermore, according to Stuart (2013:[sp]), since “... violence is often the core feedback loop, [and] the defining mechanism” of a game, games rarely break out of this cycle of portraying physical domination, in order to deal with

cultural issues in depth. As Stuart (2013:[sp]) points out, current post-apocalyptic narratives in video games mostly depict

... highly masculinised visions of the dystopian concept. Everything is about society crumbling into tribal warfare, anarchy and slaughter – [where] only the most powerful can survive.

But on the other hand, Stuart (2013:[sp]) argues that even though violence and thuggery constitute a large part of contemporary post-apocalyptic representations in popular culture, this is not necessarily the only way to imagine these dystopian societies. Furthermore, as Stuart (2013:[sp]) points out “... video games do not need to be bound by our sense of reality; game designers have the freedom to present entirely different natural, cultural and social laws.”

From all of the above, *The last of us* can undoubtedly be read as a visual text that strengthens and supports patriarchal and masculine values on several levels. In this sense, it is no different from the plethora of games which adopt a stereotypical approach to the role of men in society. For instance, in his analysis of *Silent hill*, Kirkland (2009:174) notes that the main male protagonist is desperately searching for his adopted daughter, which “... reinforces patriarchal power relations defining men as responsible for the protection of both women and children”. Similarly, in *The last of us*, Joel considers himself as Ellie’s protector, perhaps in an effort to make up for his failure to protect his daughter, Sarah.

Although *The last of us* can be understood as a ‘typical’ post-apocalyptic video game that is inherently masculine, I argue that by approaching *The last of us* from a postfeminist angle, alternative understandings of the gender relations can potentially be opened up. Furthermore, by understanding certain elements of *The last of us* as a form of feminisation of the masculine, perhaps certain insights regarding current societal anxieties can be gained. The

following subsection explores the ways in which I believe the disillusionment with masculinity and masculine values comes to the fore in *The last of us*.

4.6 Disillusionment with masculine values and masculinity in *The last of us*

In order to better understand the ways in which societal disillusionment with masculine values and masculinity surfaces in *The last of us*, this subsection explores the specific ways in which the 'civilised' spaces created by FEDRA and the Fireflies respectively can be read as fundamentally masculine, and on the other hand, how the encroaching, thriving areas of wilderness act as a feminising agent regarding these spaces. The masculine construction of the Quarantine Zones can be understood as representative of the ways in which contemporary Western societies are rooted in stereotypical masculine values (for example the idea of efficiency), and the negative effects this way of thinking has on the environment. Furthermore, I argue that the conception of a post-apocalyptic civil society presented in *The last of us* comes across as a negative space to inhabit, while nature on the other hand holds the potential to re-connect humans to the environment, and thus possibly also their 'lost humanity'.

Much research has been done regarding the extent of the environmental crisis, and the resulting effects it has on humanity.¹⁰ Norberg-Hodge and Goering (1995:11), for instance, point out that most experts attempting to solve these problems recommend

... the same industrial remedy, comprising equal parts economic growth (which today takes the form of 'free trade') and technological advance. Called 'progress' in the North and 'development' in the South, this regimen is commonly believed to offer long-term health for the Earth and prosperity for all its inhabitants.

¹⁰ Bert Olivier (2005:122, 2007:443) argues that the current global ecological crisis can even be considered the greatest crisis that nature, humanity included, has ever faced.

But as Norberg-Hodge and Goering (1995:11) further argue, "... it is clear that the industrial development model – far from offering solutions – is in fact a fundamental cause of present problems". As already established in the previous chapter, current neoliberal, industrial societies can be understood as being firmly underpinned by values commonly ascribed to the masculine. Generally, the assumption is that societies all over the world (specifically 'developing' countries) should strive to reach the same level of 'progress' as the most industrialised societies (Norberg-Hodge & Goering 1995:20). But as Norberg-Hodge and Goering (1995:20) argue,

[a] close look at the limits to resources and at current social and environmental crises shows that the belief in progress is a cruel myth. Leaving aside the question of whether 'modern' lifestyles are really desirable, it is clear that there are simply not enough resources for the entire world to duplicate the consumption patterns of the richest countries, nor indeed are there sufficient resources for the rich countries to maintain their present level of consumption.

Based on the clear practical limits that are inherent in current global ideas of progress and development, it is my contention that the continued privileging of masculine values at the cost of feminine values, creates and sustains insecurities and anxieties regarding the future of humanity.¹¹ These concerns often surface in the cultural artefacts produced by such societies, as evidenced in *The last of us*. A closer look at the specific nature of the environment/s portrayed in *The last of us* will hopefully serve to clarify this point.

As already explained, the Quarantine Zones (Figure 10) in *The last of us*, are all that remain of former neoliberal America. These spaces are depicted as grim, oppressive and dangerous environments in which to live. The zones are heavily guarded by soldiers, and any resident suspected of being infected with Cordyceps, is executed immediately in cold blood. Furthermore, food and

¹¹ Since the broader cultural context undoubtedly shapes an individual's relationship with nature (Olivier 2005:125), it is important to recognise and critically analyse the underlying values that inform a particular culture.

other supplies are extremely limited and very tightly managed by heavily armed military authorities, with civilians needing ration cards in order to receive their share of supplies. Daily curfews are implemented, and people are only allowed to leave the zones during specific times. FEDRA is without doubt firmly entrenched in a stereotypical version of masculine culture, strongly promoting and valuing hegemonic ideas about masculinity. As Wajcman (1996:147) argues, “[i]f there is one institution in society that underwrites the ideology of hegemonic masculinity, it is the military”. War, in this case waged between the infected, FEDRA and the rebel group the Fireflies, can be seen as “... the ultimate test of manliness and is the legitimate expression of male violence” (Wajcman 1996:146). In this sense, “... the armed forces represent and defend the masculine ethic” (Wajcman 1996:146). This becomes clear in the way that FEDRA soldiers dominate the Quarantine Zones with physical violence and intimidation towards both the residents, as well as suspected Firefly agents.



Figure 10: Boston Quarantine Zone, with FEDRA soldiers examining possibly infected civilians (Naughty Dog 2013).

On the other hand, the Fireflies operate from outside the Quarantine Zones, and have several bases located in abandoned cities all over America (*The last of us* wiki 2013:[sp]). While they are an organised para-military group aggressively opposing FEDRA rule, several scientists are also involved with the group, mainly to develop a cure for Cordyceps. As discussed in the previous chapter, science as a discipline is firmly underpinned by the values of progress, rationality and efficiency all of which are highly valued in contemporary Western society and also gendered as masculine (Wajcman 1996:145). Furthermore, the Fireflies act as 'heroic warriors', attempting to 'save' humans from the Cordyceps infection, and simultaneously from FEDRA rule. As Wajcman (1996:144) points out, the concept of the 'heroic' is often constructed around combat and violence between men, thus also establishing this approach as masculine. Similar to FEDRA, the character (or nature) of the Fireflies is also underpinned by masculine values such as domination, aggression and rationality. I would suggest that the Fireflies can be considered to be even more masculine oriented than FEDRA, because of their extreme abuse of violence to reach their goals, as well as their added concern regarding the cure and saving humankind.

In this representation of the downfall of contemporary society depicted in *The last of us*, the pockets of surviving 'civilisation' (both in the Quarantine Zones, as well as those associated with the Fireflies), can potentially be understood as hyperbolic depictions of a society where masculine values such as rationality, violence and aggression dominate almost completely. In other words, while nature – or wilderness – is physically taking back previously 'civilised' and 'progressive' territories by force, these Quarantine Zones represent a final, desperate attempt by the survivors to preserve a 'familiar' (yet extreme) version of previous societal structures. But in the process, values that are traditionally considered progressive in a society (such as order, structure and a separate sense of self, for instance), dominate completely, and values commonly associated with femininity (such as

emotionality, dependence, a focus on community, as well as compassion), which potentially provide a balance to the masculine values are all but destroyed. Therefore, as a result of this equilibrium being disturbed, an inevitable disillusionment takes place.

Both FEDRA and the Fireflies attempt to re-instate erstwhile societal structures and strive for a pre-apocalyptic way of life. FEDRA does this by forcefully imposing arbitrary rules and regulations, that are intended to keep citizens safe from the infected. On the other hand, the Fireflies are attempting to eradicate the fungus at all costs in order to return to a previous way of life. In this sense, these organisations take a similar path to that seen in other representations of post-apocalyptic scenarios. For instance, in Bishop's (2010:131) analysis of the zombie film *Dawn of the dead*, he argues that:

[w]hen given the chance to transcend the framework of a late-capitalist society in an environment that provides them with all their needs, the surviving humans of *Dawn of the Dead* only seem able to attempt a recreation of the lost structures of society ...

In other words, as can be seen in *The last of us*, instead of accepting and adapting to the profound changes that the apocalypse brought about in a way that shows a deeper consciousness towards nature, the surviving population attempts to once again dominate, control and subvert nature by means of subscribing to and enforcing dualistic hierarchies, and in the process continues to privilege values traditionally ascribed to masculine forms of power and oppression. In other words, in such representations, science and technological progress are still considered to be the 'answer' to the 'problem' presented by nature. The result is that the 'civilised' zones based on mainly masculine values become inhumane spaces, while nature and the wilderness on the other hand, are represented as thriving and shown to be potentially more inviting for human life, albeit dangerous and unknown.

The visual depiction of ‘civilised’ spaces as negative and ‘natural’ spaces as a more desirable space to be in, can be read as a disillusionment with current masculine ways of thinking, which potentially results in a societal anxiety regarding the deterioration of nature (and by association also the oppression of feminine values)¹² that surfaces in *The last of us*. Furthermore, even though at first glance it might appear as if nature and civilisation are still considered to be binary oppositions, I would argue that the representation of nature as a form of refuge emerges as an alternative to the oppressive spaces created by FEDRA and the Fireflies. In this way, both FEDRA and the Fireflies can be understood as the embodiment of different disciplines which are associated with traditional masculinity (the military and science respectively).

With this being said, by narrowing the focus, the ways in which individual characters are affected and transformed by the broader societal disillusionment with masculine values, hopefully becomes clear. For example, Joel and Ellie’s journey largely takes place outside of the Quarantine Zones. This means that in order for Joel to undergo a character transformation, they have to leave the heavily masculinised space of the Quarantine Zone, and venture into an unknown wilderness – a world filled with ‘others’ of all kinds. This inversion of the ‘civilised versus nature’ binary destabilises established ideas about social structures by positioning nature (and by extension ‘the feminine’) not as the ‘opposite’ of civilisation, but rather as something else entirely. In this way perhaps the binary way of thinking about nature and civilisation can be challenged and subverted in favour of a more complex approach to understanding the world we inhabit.

In other words, when taking into account the current division between oppressed and privileged groups, it becomes clear that privileged groups in

¹² Greta Gaard (1993:1) draws from a variety of theories, such as feminism, socialism and ecology, when she identifies that “... the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature”.

contemporary society can generally be considered to be “... upper- or middle-class, human, technologically and industrially ‘developed,’ male, and the oppressed are poor or working-class, nonhuman animal, ‘undeveloped’ nature, and female, respectively” (Gaard 1993:1,2). However, in *The last of us*, the distinction between ‘developed’ male and ‘undeveloped’, oppressed female, becomes blurred in the sense that the formerly privileged signifier, in other words masculinity, is represented as destructive and undesirable. On the other hand, femininity, or the ‘other’, is represented as a capable and autonomous force that will re-assert its place in the world in order to potentially restore balance.

In this way, culture/nature and male/female binaries are destabilised, which situates the previously oppressed signifier (nature and feminine values) as something to be valued, while suggesting that a society based entirely on the traditionally privileged binary (‘civilisation’ and masculine values), might not be worth pursuing. However, it is my contention that, contrary to popular representations that construct nature as an authentic place of experience, *The last of us* does not construct nature in an entirely romantic way as a ‘better’ way to live as opposed to civilisation. Instead, the video game represents nature as an inevitable force that cannot be denied and controlled by either organised violence (for instance FEDRA), or science (for instance The Fireflies).¹³ Furthermore, nature can also be understood as a space in which a process of ‘decivilisation’ (in other words, the destruction of traditional masculine values) can potentially take place, thereby enabling a rethinking of gendered values.

The next subsection deals with the way in which the disillusionment with masculine values can potentially result in the feminisation of masculinity, as

¹³ It is important to note that the visual construction of nature in *The last of us* does have similarities to the ways in which nature is portrayed in Romantic art. This link is discussed further in subsection 4.8.

well as how the feminisation of masculinity can be understood as a manifestation of existing societal anxieties regarding masculine values.

4.7 Feminisation of masculinity in *The last of us*

This subsection explores the ways in which the feminisation of masculinity takes place on both an individual and societal level in *The last of us*. The main focus is on Joel's character transformation throughout the narrative of *The last of us*. Joel's character transformation is explored and unpacked, in relation to both the broader infiltration of feminine values in the environment, as well as his increasingly close relationship with Ellie, in order to potentially understand his journey as a form of feminisation. Joel's masculine oriented approach to life, although necessary to survive, becomes problematic for him once he meets Ellie and he is forced to question the values to which he subscribes and that he privileges. In addition to this, the Cordyceps fungus can be read as a way in which nature is responding to industrialised society as a direct result of environmental degradation – which is in many ways caused by the long-standing privileging of masculine values such as efficiency, production and mastery over nature. Therefore, the process of nature re-claiming physical territory, can be understood as a form of feminisation, which is discussed in the following subsection.

In *The last of us*, nature (Figure 11) is visually represented as aesthetically beautiful, and in stark contrast to the 'civilised' spaces. This potentially symbolises a societal need to move away from dominant, stereotypical masculine values, such as instrumentality and rationality in favour of the inclusion of traditional feminine values such as compassion and wisdom. In this way, following an ecofeminist position, the plague itself (which only affects humans) and the resulting thriving natural spaces¹⁴ can be seen as a form of

¹⁴ Since the Cordyceps fungus (which is a product of nature) only affects humans, only the 'civilised' way of life for humans has been threatened. As Olivier (2007:453) argues "... the ambivalence at the heart of the notion of nature ... signifies abundant life but simultaneously also the threat of contagion or infection by those apparently irrepressible life-forms that, paradoxically, threaten civilised, human life". The fungus has reduced

feminisation of hegemonic masculinity in society. In other words, the remaining forms of civilisation can be understood to represent masculinity, and the wilderness/nature can be seen as representative of femininity. Even though these binary ideas regarding masculinity/femininity are problematic, the fact that *The last of us* is a product of a highly masculine medium must be acknowledged when exploring the underlying complexities regarding the representation of gender in video games. In other words, it must be taken into account that, owing to the masculine oriented foundation of the medium, game developers and game players alike might potentially make reductive binary assumptions regarding masculine and feminine values.



Figure 11: Ellie and Joel in the woods (Naughty Dog 2013).

As stated previously, at the beginning of the narrative Joel is portrayed as a stereotypical male character exhibiting culturally sanctioned ‘male’ behaviour such as being dismissive of feelings and emotions, as well as acting extremely violently in order to overcome obstacles and reach his goals. He mostly fits the dominant traditional Western idea of hegemonic masculinity, and exhibits masculine traits such as aggression, rationality and an

human numbers, and human influences on nature significantly, therefore enabling wilderness to ‘take back’ urban areas and other areas previously inhabited by humans.

unemotional demeanour. For example, in one of the early scenes after the apocalypse, Joel kills many henchmen in order to retrieve weapons that belong to him. As Suellentrop (2013:[sp]) points out, killing takes place without “... much consideration or reflection”. The only motivation for this killing spree is business.

Throughout his journey with Ellie, Joel’s character changes as he develops a deep emotional bond with Ellie. Joel’s shift from a strong masculine mindset to an individual that embraces and values certain traditionally considered feminine traits, can be read as an indication of societal anxieties (over traditional stereotypes of masculinity figured as aggressive and violent) that surface through this narrative. The final act in *The last of us*¹⁵ when Joel chooses to save Ellie, instead of sacrificing her in order to ‘save the world’, signifies the depth of his character transformation, as well as his acknowledgement that the (masculine) world as they know it might not be worth saving. Furthermore, Joel’s character shift is largely facilitated by the ‘uncivilised’, natural post-apocalyptic environment through which they travel, which is inhabited mainly by characters that do not conform to ideas about the ‘norm’, and can therefore be seen as ‘other’ in contemporary Western society. In other words, as Beynon (2002:80) pointed out, Joel’s erstwhile stereotypical masculinity (displaying mainly logical, rational and disciplined behaviour), has transformed into a more feminised demeanour which values traits such as intuition, compassion and empathy, thus portraying these character traits as positive and desirable.

Several characters that Joel and Ellie meet on their journey can be considered as ‘othered’. These characters do not conform to Western society’s conception of normative gender roles, and they do not live in the Quarantine Zones or Firefly settlements. Early in the game narrative they meet Bill, a man living alone in ‘Bill’s Town’. He is portrayed as impulsive and

¹⁵ Unlike *BioShock*, *The last of us* has only one possible ending.

irrational, and Joel even warns Ellie that he is 'unstable'. Additionally, it is implied that Bill is homosexual (even though this is not treated in the game as something noteworthy) – which further situates him as an 'other' to hegemonic masculinity. It is clear that Bill has isolated himself from the remaining groups of society, because he does not want to be part of this hyper-masculine version of civilisation. For instance, when talking about the infected, Bill claims "[y]ou know, as bad as those things are, at least they're predictable. It's the normal people that scare me" (*The last of us* 2013).

Furthermore, even though Bill comes across as erratic and impulsive, he still subscribes to a sense of honour and responsibility, which is clear in the way that he agrees to help Joel and Ellie. Bill is one of the few characters in *The last of us* that have a strong personal and emotional story, and is not just focused on survival and saving humanity. I would argue that since Bill not only undeniably embraces traits often associated with stereotypical femininity, but is also portrayed as a marginalised character in several ways, he contributes, at least in part, to Joel's transformation and appropriation of feminine values.

Joel's character is further feminised by his constant confrontation with the infected. As a white man in a pre-apocalyptic society, Joel was undoubtedly privileged on several levels. But in 2033, with the majority of Joel's world being inhabited by the infected, all humans, including white men, have been relegated to an inferior, powerless position. This destabilising of previously privileged signifiers, can also be observed in Bishop's (2010:108) discussion of Richard Matheson's post-apocalyptic vampire invasion novel *I am legend*, where he argues that Matheson has inverted the traditional invasion narrative on two levels:

[f]irst, he has put the human element in the minority and made the vampires the social norm. Second, rather than othering the monster in the traditional sense, he has challenged notions of subjectivity and turned the human into the Other — literally, not just metaphorically.

Subsequently, the monstrous creatures as imagined in *The last of us*, can be understood as both a representation of nature, as well as a manifestation of an anxiety regarding nature, which might be threatening to bring an end to contemporary masculine society. Thus, the infected in *The last of us* do not just symbolise a threat to Western ways of life, they have already destroyed and taken over most of the former society, except for the most hardened, aggressive humans. Moreover, the anxieties that surface in the depiction of the invasion of the infected in *The last of us*, can potentially also be read as a reflection of an unease regarding the ‘infiltration’ of feminine values, and what that might mean for societal power structures.

In addition to the zombies’ influence on Joel’s way of thinking, Ellie’s contribution to his character development might be considered the most profound, since one can argue that she acts as a ‘link’ and mediator between Joel and nature (and feminine values). Even though Ellie grew up in the urbanised space of the Boston Quarantine Zone, and has never been in nature, she represents and embodies the feminine values that both society and Joel have negated for a long time.

Although Ellie is a relatively well-rounded character, she may still fit the damsel in distress trope in some ways. As Sarkeesian (2013b) points out, “... extra character development tends to make [the damsel in distress] eventual disempowerment all the more frustrating”. Even though Ellie does act autonomously in many instances in the game, and saves Joel’s life as many times as he saves hers, it can still be argued that her character exists only in relation to Joel (in other words to facilitate and assist *his* emotional journey), instead of being a character in her own right, with her own story.¹⁶ Moreover, she is not often portrayed as helpless, except for in the end scene, when she

¹⁶ It is important to note here that one of the sequels to *The last of us*, called *Left behind* (2014), centres specifically around Ellie and her journey prior to meeting Joel. This is discussed in further detail in the following chapter.

is rescued by Joel while she is unconscious. In this way, she can perhaps be considered to be a damsel in distress on some levels.

But on the other hand, as Virginia Roby (2014:[sp]) points out, when a player rescues the damsel in distress in the traditional sense, they conventionally do so in order to simultaneously save the world. In *The last of us*, this idea is destabilised, since Joel specifically chooses *not* to ‘sacrifice’ Ellie, thereby not saving humankind. Taking this argument further, perhaps Ellie is not portrayed entirely as a traditional damsel in distress, although her agency is still, in some sense, taken away by Joel at the end of the game. As discussed in the subsection dealing with traditional feminist readings of *The last of us*, several problematic aspects can certainly be pointed out regarding the game. However, by taking the highly masculinised context from which the game emerged into account, perhaps an alternative understanding of both Ellie and Joel’s characters can be revealed.

Throughout their journey, Ellie constantly approaches nature and the world around her with a sense of awe, while Joel acts indifferent and impatient towards her. For instance, the first time that Ellie enters a wooded area, she is amazed by the beauty, and takes her time to study and appreciate her surroundings. Joel, on the other hand, expresses surprise that Ellie even notices the beauty. This highlights the way in which Ellie can be understood as being closer to nature, and Joel as being removed and distant from the environment.

Ellie is portrayed as a character with a rich, flawed and complex personality often expressing a deep compassion and concern for other people. For example, in a scene where Joel and Ellie are confronted with a grisly site of decomposing bodies, Ellie expresses concern for the families of the deceased. Joel responds by telling her “... best not to dwell on it”, but instead of accepting this, Ellie rejects Joel’s disconnected attitude by asking “... how

can you not?” (*The last of us* 2013). By constantly challenging Joel’s indifferent reaction to the world around them, Ellie forces him to question his own cynical orientation to the world around them. Although gender signifiers have in large part been discarded in post-apocalyptic America, Ellie can be understood as an ‘other’. For instance, as an orphan, Ellie has been marginalised for most of her life.

Ellie’s role in Joel’s emotional journey is further evident in a confrontation with some bandits, where Joel is seriously hurt, and Ellie saves his life by killing the remaining enemies. Ellie takes Joel to a shelter where they spend the winter, while she hunts for food for them and takes care of Joel while he heals. This inversion of their roles can be read as a further feminisation of masculinity, as Joel is forced to take on the role of the ‘feminine’, in other words, the dependent, weak subject in need of protection. This places Joel in a position where he is ‘allowed’ in some sense to reconnect with emotions and feelings that he had for so long negated within himself, such as a deep care and love for Ellie.

On the other hand, Ellie also becomes ‘masculinised’ in some ways, when she is forced to take on the traditionally considered masculine role of protector and provider. Interestingly, during this chapter of the game, the player controls Ellie, in other words, the player is still placed in a stereotypically masculine position, albeit as a girl. When understood in this way, culturally sanctioned ‘masculine’ behaviour, such as violence, aggression and actively taking charge of a situation, is still being positioned as the default signifier, or ‘self’. However, as mentioned before, when the highly masculine nature of video games is taken into account, it is perhaps more productive to focus on the ways in which hegemonic gender ideals are being challenged.

With this being said, the depth of Joel’s transformation is evident in the last scene, where Joel rejects the ‘heroic’ decision of sacrificing Ellie for the good

of humankind. Instead, Joel chooses to save Ellie and take her away from danger. Even though this can be read as a 'typical' ending where 'the hero saves the girl', I suggest that it can be understood differently. Firstly, Joel's actions may point towards a disillusionment with the masculine values and masculinity that have been a part of society, as well as his life for a long time. In other words, Joel might potentially recognise the importance of including certain values in one's life. Secondly, since Joel's character has been feminised to a certain extent, he does not feel the need to do his 'manly', rational 'duty' anymore, which would be to save humankind. Instead, Joel makes an emotional, irrational choice to save Ellie, because he cares deeply for her.

Interestingly, the leader of the Fireflies, Marlene, claims in a conversation with Joel, that she has known Ellie since she was born, and it is hard for her to allow Ellie to be killed in order to reverse engineer a vaccine, but that "there is no other choice here" (*The last of us* 2013). Marlene takes on the heroic role of the saviour of humankind, while Joel insists on saving Ellie. Marlene even tells Joel not to "... waste this gift" (*The last of us* 2013), when she realises that Joel is not in favour of sacrificing Ellie. In other words, Marlene considers the act of sacrificing Ellie's life for a potential cure, as an opportunity to fulfil her own desires. This highlights the way in which Marlene views Ellie: as instrumental to achieving her own goals and objectives. Joel on the other hand considers Ellie to be a human in her own right, who cannot simply be used and exploited for some 'greater good'. In this way, Marlene 'turns into a man' while Joel 'turns into a woman', at least in the traditional senses of these categories.

In addition to this, while Joel is searching for Ellie, he listens to a voice recording of one of the Fireflies' scientists, who claims that Ellie's immunity can "bring the human race back into control of it's own destiny" (*The last of us* 2013). This highlights the hubris associated with this type of scientific

research; as if the human race has been ‘in control of its destiny’ in pre-apocalyptic times. Furthermore, this recording implies, once again, that scientific research and the subsequent technological developments, can and should be implemented to dominate and control our environment,¹⁷ but as Norberg-Hodge and Goering (1995:20) point out: “[h]uman beings are far from able to understand and control the natural world, and are ultimately dependent on natural processes – not technology – for the necessities of life.”

In light of the above narratological discussion of revolving around the prominent roles played by the ‘others’ (specifically Ellie, the infected and Bill) in Joel’s transformation, it is interesting that *The last of us* deviates from other games, in this sense. For, as Soukup (2010:172) argues, usually “[w]hen gamers encounter ‘others’ in video game environments, within the mathematical logic of the system, the gamer typically seeks to conquer all ‘others’ and continue to dominate these ‘others’ until mastering the game”.

Interestingly, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, on a ludological level, in *The last of us* the player is often provided with the choice to avoid confrontation and violence. Furthermore, in some instances the player cannot advance in the game by using violence, but is forced to avoid confrontation with the enemies by using stealth tactics. This can perhaps be understood as a feminisation of the mainly masculine gameplay in *The last of us*. In other words, overt violence is relegated to a less prominent position in the video game, in favour of the avoidance of aggressive behaviour. This is also reflected in Kirkland’s (2009:172) observation of the survival-horror genre in video games in general which:

... evokes a particularly unmasculine sense of helplessness, entrapment and vulnerability – rather than the mastery and control of more militaristic series and genres.

¹⁷ The idea that science is humankind’s saviour (from nature) is prevalent in popular culture, especially in cinema. For example, as Duncan Reyburn (2013:6) argues, Roland Emmerich’s films *The day after tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009) communicates the message that “... if we are to be saved, it is by our faith in science”.

In addition to this, the player has limited resources to advance in the game, and most of the items are crafted from random objects scavenged from the ruins that Joel and Ellie move through. For instance, one of the most useful items that the player needs is a health kit which can be crafted from alcohol and rags. This creative implementation and repurposing of ‘waste’ materials is in direct contrast to the way in which current industrialised societies generate massive amounts of excesses and waste. This can be read as another way in which the use of force and violence is somewhat tempered by creative, and arguably more feminine activities.

This feminisation of the game world and gameplay in *The last of us*, can potentially support and facilitate other forms of feminisation of masculinity. For instance, the video game situates Joel – and subsequently the player – in a position where they are often forced to act in a non-masculine way in order to make progress in the game. For example, as mentioned earlier, Joel often needs to sneak past enemies without being detected, instead of killing them. This direct decentralising and undermining of the traits usually associated with completing a video game, relying on violent competition, struggle and extreme use of force for instance, may strengthen the idea that a shift in the representation of feminine and masculine values is occurring in video game representation to the extent that spaces may be created for minorities and marginalised groups, and in particular women, in gaming culture, if not in society in general.

In light of the above analyses of both *BioShock* and *The last of us*, it becomes clear that nature is a recurring and prominent theme in the narratives of these games. In the interest of exploring the link between nature, gender and current economic systems, the following section discusses the ways in which nature is portrayed in the respective games, as well as the significance that

nature and a post-apocalyptic setting have in terms of potentially subverting current ideas regarding dominant gender roles and power relations.

4.8 The significance of nature in *BioShock* and *The last us*

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the post-apocalyptic settings of both *The last of us* and *BioShock* to some extent provide a 'clean-slate' backdrop from which to explore alternate power relations and societal structures. The anarchic structures of the 'societies' left in the ruined video game worlds, give rise to an inevitable dismantling and decentering of existing power structures.¹⁸ Of particular interest to this study, is the role that nature plays in the dismantling of existing gender roles in both *BioShock* and *The last of us*. As Tavinor (2009:91) observes regarding *BioShock*:

... when the player enters the city at the beginning of the game, it is evident that nature is pushing back, and that the sea is slowly but surely retaking Rapture, while its citizens have become corrupted by the arts and sciences the city was built upon: as genetically manipulated 'splicers' they now creep through Rapture's darkened halls bemoaning their lost humanity. Andrew Ryan 'chose the impossible,' and inevitably his hubris is being repaid by the recalcitrance of human nature and the impermanence of human achievement.

Likewise, in *The last of us* nature is reclaiming the once industrialised areas of late neoliberal America.

Eaton and Lorentzen (2003:x) refer to the work of ecofeminists Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, in order to establish the link between globalisation¹⁹⁵ and the oppression of both nature and women:

... Mies and Shiva engage in a critique of patriarchal ideologies enshrined in both Western science and the

¹⁸ In addition to this, as Reyburn (2013:13) points out "... crisis brings about a question of what truly matters". In other words, in popular texts dealing with either an impending apocalypse, or the challenges of a post-apocalyptic world, it often becomes clear what the individual characters genuinely value in life.

¹⁹ Eaton and Lorentzen (2003:vii) define globalisation as "... the vast human misery and degradation of the environment that is being wrought by the Western corporate domination of the world economy".

‘development’ establishment. They reveal in concrete detail how the policies promoted by the ideologies of these institutions are impoverishing the planet and the majority of its peoples, with women and children as primary victims. Here ecofeminist critique and activism stand in direct relation to the issues of globalization.²⁰

The extreme apocalyptic representations of nature destroying the Western civilisations in both *BioShock* and *The last of us*, may indicate a shift in awareness (in men in general) of the link between the oppression and domination of nature with the negation of feminine values (and also women as a group) in society. The post-apocalyptic worlds in these games can, in this way, be considered a manifestation of anxieties regarding gender roles in society, neoliberalist paradigm and the underlying values of Western society.

With this being said, the ways in which natural spaces are positioned in these games as more desirable and ‘authentic’ than spaces dominated by Western culture and technological development, share similarities with tendencies in Romantic art. Due to space constraints, this study is unable to deal with the idea of nature as sublime in much depth, but it is important to point out that notions of nature as a space in which self-discovery and divine revelation can take place, have been visually portrayed at least since the early nineteenth century. In addition to this, anxieties regarding technological development and industrialisation have also been surfacing in visual art since that time. Perhaps the current widespread concern under the general public regarding environmental degradation can be ascribed to the validation that scientific discourses impart on the issue. In other words, environmental issues have become part of popular discourses. This strengthens the argument that scientific knowledge (which can be considered masculine) is valued in

²⁰ In addition to this, Olivier (2005:131) points out that even though a small percentage of women (mostly in urban areas), have become economically and socially relatively independent, “... the majority of women worldwide have experienced a deterioration in their lives ...”, as a result of the rise of the capitalist system. For example, the majority of sweatshop workers are female and there has been a significant growth in the global sex-trade, as well as a steady rise in rape cases and the abuse of women in general (Olivier 2005:131).

contemporary society over creative, philosophical wisdom (which can be understood as othered, and linked to femininity).

Similar to representations of nature in Romantic art, the representations of the environment in both *BioShock* and *The last of us*, seem to position nature as a force that cannot be tamed and dominated by human actions, and any attempt to do so will end in the destruction or dismantling of the oppressive system. Based on the arguments put forward above, I believe that since 'nature' is often closely associated with 'the feminine', recent representations of nature 'fighting back' after being dominated and exploited for a long time by a masculine oriented society for individual gain (by both women and men), may indicate the latest surfacing anxiety over, or at least critique of, the state of contemporary neoliberal and still largely patriarchal society.

In light of the above, the main inhabitants of the ruined worlds in both *The last of us* and *BioShock* are depicted as entirely dehumanised and abject characters. In *The last of us*, the Cordyceps virus has infected and transformed the majority of the Earth's population into aggressive, deformed creatures without autonomy. Likewise, in *BioShock*, the splicers have been reduced to shadows of their former selves, and are now violent and disfigured beings. These representations indicate, to my mind at least, an underlying anxiety of the eventual consequences of contemporary Western neoliberal systems. Even though the creatures in these games are not typical zombies, in other words they are not 'undead', they can still be studied in much the same way, since they fulfil a similar purpose.

4.9 Conclusion

This chapter analysed *BioShock* and *The last of us* in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the underlying anxieties regarding gender, and gender roles that surface in these video games. These anxieties can potentially be considered indicative of a widespread societal unease regarding the

continuing dominance of hegemonic masculinity and masculine values in Western societies. I further argued that these anxieties might manifest in video games in a particularly overt way, since the video game medium is firmly rooted in a masculine framework, and clearly promotes and privileges values that are stereotypically associated with men and masculinity.

On the other hand, several factors regarding the ongoing transformation of the video game industry have led to the emergence of progressive representations of femininity and feminine values, despite the masculine origins of the medium. I argued in this chapter that *BioShock* and *The last of us*, can be seen as examples of video games where the representations of masculine values are positioned as destructive and negative, and feminine values are depicted in a more favourable light than in earlier video games. In this sense, it is my contention that these games may offer a player new versions of masculinity and femininity that allow novel possibilities for the construction of gender identities in this medium. Although the values underpinning the video games are not overtly linked to either 'masculine' or 'feminine' in these games, my argument links the privileged values in society (such as rationality and competition), that underpin neoliberal society with masculinity, and the seemingly opposing values generally regarded by society as inferior (such as emotion, intuition and compassion) with femininity. By reading these games in terms of the contrasting value systems they deal with, alternative, more complex underlying meanings emerge. Furthermore, this might indicate that a shift is occurring in the video game industry and perhaps in the formerly male-dominated gaming culture.

This chapter also explored the ways in which both the narrative elements, as well as the character portrayals in these games can be understood as a form of feminisation of masculinity. This chapter concluded by discussing the role that a fictional post-apocalyptic environment plays in facilitating and representing societal fears and anxieties. Both *BioShock* and *The last of us*

depict the imagined dystopian result of a hyper-capitalist, hyper-masculine society. In both games, the player navigates the ruins of a former society based on these paradigms, in order to complete the goals and objectives presented by the games. This chapter discussed the ways in which both narrative elements, as well as ludological aspects of the games contribute to the visual depiction of the disillusionment with masculine values, and the resulting feminisation of masculinity.

This chapter concluded with a discussion of the link between the depiction of post-apocalyptic worlds, the destruction of nature and the oppression of women and the feminine in society. I argued that the devastated 'civilised' worlds that were created mainly by male developers in *BioShock* and *The last of us* can be understood as the unintentional surfacing of serious concerns in terms of environmental crises, as well as the devaluing of feminine values in our society. Furthermore, the surfacing of these anxieties might indicate that there is a shift taking place in the video game industry, that can potentially open up new ways of representing women and feminine values in popular culture.

On the other hand, another underlying (and more cynical) reason for the unintentional acknowledgment of feminine values in video games might be an attempt for masculinity to retain its hegemonic position. As Kenneth MacKinnon (2003:15) argues: "... in order for masculinity to remain hegemonic, it must admit the feminine at certain historical moments". Therefore, it might seem as if video games as a popular medium, can potentially be a site of subversion in terms of gender relations, but in reality, the foundation remains firmly masculine, and the inclusion of the feminine remains tentative and suspect.

As argued throughout this study, it would seem that the general concept of equality in current society is to simply include previously marginalised

signifiers into a system that is inherently grounded in masculine values. Instead of potentially challenging and questioning the underlying values held and promoted by society, 'girls turn into men' in order to maintain the *status quo*, keeping the fundamental masculine structures firmly in place. Although traditional feminine signifiers are, perhaps, increasingly being included and acknowledged in popular media such as video games, ultimately, however, the dominant signifier remains masculine. In other words, specifically regarding video games, the default player is still considered to be masculine-oriented²¹ (even though they might identify as female) and in this sense, mainstream video games continue to perpetuate conventional ideas regarding masculine values as being superior to feminine values.

The final chapter of this study begins by providing a summative overview of the first four chapters. Following this, the contribution of the study to a broader context of visual culture studies is discussed and clarified. Furthermore, the limitations of this study are presented and considered, followed by an overview of areas that potentially demand further in-depth research. Since this study mainly focused on the ways in which gendered values come to the fore regarding male characters, perhaps the in-depth study of female characters, and specifically the ways in which both masculine and feminine signifiers manifest in female video game characters in, can possibly facilitate further understanding of the ways in which gender relations are constructed and reinforced by video games.

²¹ As I have argued in Chapter Three, video games are still largely developed for a white, heterosexual, male audience (Sarkeesian 2014).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate the ways in which certain societal anxieties manifest in the video games *BioShock* and *The last of us*. In order to explore and interrogate the underlying values inherent in the medium of video games, this study analysed these games according to a postfeminist perspective. To conclude this study, this chapter provides a summary of the chapters, followed by an explanation regarding the importance of this study to the field of gender studies and video game studies. In addition to this, the limitations of this study are discussed, which leads into suggestions for further research in this specific realm.

5.1 Summary of chapters

The first chapter of this study provided the main aims and goals which this study set out to explore. In order to provide the reader with some background regarding the chosen video games, this chapter included brief overviews of the narratives of both *BioShock* and *The last of us*. Following this, an overview of the literature used in this study was provided, which can be divided into two spheres. Firstly, the relevant sources dealing with video game studies were discussed, and secondly an outline of the sources pertaining to postfeminist thought was provided. This chapter also included explanations regarding the theoretical framework, as well as the research methodology employed in this study.

In order to arrive at a useful conception of postfeminism, the first part of Chapter Two provided a historical overview of feminist theories in Western culture, as well as the historical emergence of the terms 'sex' and 'gender'. The importance of understanding that gender identities are both biologically and culturally constructed was highlighted in this section. However I argued

that this study also recognises and analyses the ways in which certain values in society are gendered and attributed to both women and men.

The final part of this chapter aimed to establish a postfeminist sensibility from which to analyse and consider *BioShock* and *The last of us*. This entailed discussing postfeminist conceptions of subject formation, as well as the important roles that neoliberal society and scientific progress play in identity formation through gender. This chapter concluded with an overview of existing postfeminist approaches in visual culture, and an exploration into how these frameworks can still be considered feminist.

Chapter Three firstly provided the historical, inherently masculine context from which video games as a popular medium has developed. Furthermore, this chapter investigated the ways in which gender identity, and traditional ideas regarding gender are potentially influenced by video games, specifically in terms of stereotypical depictions of women. This chapter included a discussion regarding the current main theoretical approaches to video games, namely narratology and ludology.

The second part of this chapter identified and explored postfeminist themes in video games, including a societal disillusionment with masculine values and how this comes to the fore in popular culture, followed by a discussion of the subsequent feminisation of masculinity that takes place, particularly in the two video games under discussion in this research. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the ways in which post-apocalyptic settings in video games provide a unique backdrop from which to investigate gender constructions.

After having established the masculine foundation of video games as a medium, Chapter Four of this study analysed and explored the ways in which the theories discussed in the previous chapters can be applied to *BioShock* and *The last of us*. This chapter indicated the ways in which the

disillusionment with masculine values, and the resulting feminisation of masculinity are foregrounded in *BioShock* and *The last of us*. In both games neoliberal, masculine societies have been destroyed by nature, and the male main character has to navigate the resulting dystopia in order to reach a specific goal. In both *BioShock* and *The last of us*, the disillusionment with masculinity manifests on multiple levels, including the destruction of the respective former hyper-capitalist societies, as well as the characters inhabiting the ruined worlds. The feminisation of masculinity takes place in a variety of ways in both the games. The ruined environments can, for instance, be seen as a way in which nature (representing traditional femininity) has taken back civilisation (representing traditional masculinity) in the traditional binary oppositions of culture/nature. This chapter concluded with a discussion of the significance of nature in both video games, and the possible connection between the destruction of nature, and the oppression of women in a society that is underpinned by masculine values.

5.2 Contribution of the study

This study contributes to both the relatively new discipline of video game studies, as well as postfeminist theory in visual culture studies. As explained in Chapter Two, the concept of feminism has garnered a negative connotation among the general public, and since liberal feminism is the main type of feminism portrayed in the mass media, it might prove useful to broaden, extend and, in a sense, rethink feminist thought in order to include and acknowledge the more abstract realm of interrogating the values that underpin contemporary society, instead of surface representations of gender alone. In an attempt to move beyond binary conceptions regarding gender, postfeminism takes contradictions and underlying complexities regarding these constructions into account, and in this way, perhaps opens up alternative ways to understand gender constructions in visual culture. In other words, in order to destabilise and challenge the cultural privileging of values associated with traditional masculinity, it might prove useful to question the

cultural and economic systems that continue to uphold and promote these values as positive and desirable.

5.3 Limitations of the study and suggestions for further research

While this study has provided an in-depth analysis of the ways in which masculinity in *BioShock* and *The last of us*, is constructed and in many ways feminised, certain limitations to the study can be identified, and further studies regarding the ways in which gender and gendered values are portrayed can be suggested. Some of the limitations inherent to this study include the limited data available regarding the possible influences that the feminisation of masculinity might have on the identity formation of the player. It can be argued that even though some anxieties regarding traditional masculinity are undeniably present in society, and come to the fore in the games dealt with in this study, it remains difficult to determine what the effects of this would be on the players themselves. Since this study is of a qualitative nature, quantitative data regarding the possible responses of video game audiences might have to *BioShock* and *The last of us* in terms of gender portrayals might prove useful in order to explore identity formation in more depth.

Furthermore, in terms of possible future research, both the video games analysed in this study have led to sequels and downloadable content, which can potentially provide even more examples of the ways in which masculinity is being feminised in popular media. Moreover, the scope of this study was limited to *BioShock*, although follow-up games *BioShock 2* (2010) and *BioShock: Infinite* (2013) also provide rich visual texts to analyse in terms of the representation of social structures and hierarchies. The downloadable content of *The last of us*, *Left behind* (2014), on the other hand, deals with Ellie's experiences living in post-apocalyptic America before meeting Joel, and is one of the few contemporary video games that tells a well-rounded story of a teenage girl.

5.4 Concluding remarks

This study set out to explore the ways in which the representation of women, femininity and the recent feminisation of masculinity in video games might be understood from a postfeminist perspective. Furthermore, this study has aimed to investigate and interrogate the longstanding negativity in the video game community surrounding the portrayal of women as regressive stereotypical characters. By understanding current depictions of women in video games from a postfeminist framework, it becomes clear that even though women are increasingly being included in the video game arena (as players, developers and also on a representational level), this does not necessarily challenge the underlying masculine nature of the medium.

Since video games are firmly rooted in traditionally considered masculine values such as aggression, competition and domination, values culturally ascribed to women, such as intuition, emotionality and vulnerability are only included in video games on a surface level. In other words, even video games that are actively attempting to challenge normative ideas regarding hegemonic masculinity, still rely on the heavily male coded ideas of using violence in order to overcome obstacles, and dominate one's opponent, thus perpetuating a very specific set of values in the guise of the 'inclusivity' of perhaps more positive character traits. In other words, even though men (male game developers and male players alike) might seem to adopt and accept feminine values, the insidious perpetuation of destructive values still continue in a way that makes it even more difficult to recognise and destabilise. In this way, as can also be seen on many levels in society, especially in the political and economic arenas, women (and femininity) are being included in masculine spheres, only to be moulded to fit the existing system, thus essentially turning into men. On the other hand, in certain popular media texts such as video games, an emerging acknowledgement of the social significance of so-called feminine values is taking place and surfacing visually as a form of 'feminisation' of erstwhile stereotypical

masculinity. Although this shift towards uplifting traditional feminine qualities can be considered desirable, this movement is still inhibited and limited by the underlying male-oriented structures from which it emerges. In other words, even though men might essentially also be turning into women in some respects, the majority of current social structures still remain firmly rooted in culturally sanctioned masculine values.

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