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Seeing Through a Feminist Lens:
How Female Character Visualisation Shapes Player Interpretation in Video Games

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Abstract

This study examines how different approaches to female character visualisation in video games shape the way players interpret, emotionally engage with, and make sense of those characters. While research has shown that traditional, hypersexualised designs contribute to female players feeling excluded from gaming spaces, less is known about the specific mechanisms through which visual design produces these effects at the level of player reception. Using a feminist data visualisation lens (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2016), this research addresses that gap through a triangulated, mixed-methods design. Twelve mixed-gender adult gamers responded to four existing game characters, two traditionally designed and two feminist-inspired, through vignette-based semi-structured interviews and a Likert-scale survey, analysed across three dimensions: interpretation, emotional engagement, and sense-making. Six themes were found. Feminist-inspired designs enabled coherent character reading, produced identification in female players, and were perceived as broadly inclusive. Traditional designs obstructed character reading, produced felt exclusion in female players, and were consistently read as addressed to a specific male audience. The study identifies two contributions the existing literature does not contain. First, the gender asymmetry in response is structural rather than a difference in sensitivity: many male players engage with characters as tools for gameplay rather than as figures of identification, a position that insulates them from the exclusionary signals female players detect. Second, feminist-inspired design operates through subtraction rather than addition, succeeding by removing the elements that compete with the character for the viewer's attention rather than by adding a progressive marker. Inclusive character design is therefore a lower and more actionable threshold than the literature often implies.

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1. Introduction

Video games have evolved into a mainstream cultural medium, making their scientific analysis not only relevant but essential. Over the past five decades, gaming has transformed from a niche hobby into a global mass medium, influencing the identities, behaviors, and social dynamics of billions of people worldwide. According to the Newzoo 2025 Global Games Market Report, the global player base now stands at 3.6 billion, or 61.5% of the world's online population. Platforms like Roblox attract 119 million daily active users (Newzoo, 2025), showing the medium's near-universal appeal. This transformation underscores gaming's role as a dominant cultural and social phenomenon.

The demographic reach of gaming extends across genders and age groups, challenging outdated stereotypes of gaming as a male-dominated activity. Data from Statista (Q2 2025) reveals that 91.5% of females and 93% of males aged 16-24 engage in gaming, while participation remains high even among older groups, with 76.8% of females and 81.2% of males aged 45-54 identifying as gamers. These statistics highlight gaming's broad inclusivity, yet they also raise critical questions about how representation within games aligns, or fails to align, with the diversity of its player base.

Despite the broad demographic reach, gaming remains a space where gender stereotypes, sexism, and exclusionary norms persist. Research by Fox and Tang (2014) reveals that online gaming environments often reinforce masculine norms and social dominance, creating a hostile atmosphere for female players. Their study found that conformity to masculine ideals, such as the desire for power over women and heterosexual self-presentation, predicts sexist attitudes toward female gamers. This hostility is further amplified by the anonymity of online interactions, which facilitates dispersonification and more aggressive or discriminatory behavior (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2014; Lea & Spears, 1991).

The pervasiveness of sexism in gaming is not only a reflection of societal inequalities but also a consequence of game design and industry practices. As Fox and Tang (2014) argue, the gaming industry itself remains male-dominated, with women comprising only a small fraction of developers and designers, thereby carrying on exclusionary norms in video games and community dynamics. These structural conditions contribute to a culture where female players are perceived as outsiders,

facing harassment, exclusion, and diminished self-belief (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Fox & Tang, 2014).

Feminist data visualisation (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2016) offers a critical framework to challenge these norms by centering marginalised perspectives, incorporating contextual annotations, and emphasising affective dimensions in design. It offers a pathway to reimagine character visualisation in ways that reflect the diversity of player experiences, foster inclusivity, and reshape cultural narratives within and beyond gaming.

How character visualisation shapes player experience is not only an academic question but also an issue for game design and culture. Until we fully understand how visual design influences interpretation, emotions, and sense-making remain underexplored, the gaming industry lacks the empirical foundation to move beyond superficial representation toward genuinely inclusive design practices. Addressing this gap is therefore a necessary step toward creating gaming cultures that reflect the full diversity of their audience.

The purpose of this study is to examine how contrasting approaches to character visualisation, traditional versus feminist-inspired, shape player interpretations, emotional engagement, and broader sense-making processes. While previous research has primarily relied on content analysis and surveys to assess player perceptions (e.g., Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Fox & Tang, 2014), these methods capture what players think but tell us less about how and why they give those responses. This study addresses that methodological gap through a triangulated approach. Vignette-based interviews provide rich, contextualised insight into the meaning-making processes players engage in when encountering character design, while the survey component captures measurable patterns across participants, allowing individual depth and broader trends to inform one another. By integrating a feminist data visualisation lens (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2016), the research examines how design choices in female character representation either reinforce exclusionary norms or actively challenge them.

If we better understand how visual design influences player interpretation of female characters, the findings can inform more intentional and inclusive design practices. This means not only expanding the diversity of female characters players encounter, but also reshaping the cultural assumptions embedded in games themselves,

contributing to a gaming culture that reflects and respects the full diversity of its audience.

The following Section will review relevant literature across gender, video games, feminism, and player reception. Section 3 presents the research statement, questions, and hypotheses. Section 4 outlines the methodological approach. Section 5 presents the findings, and Section 6 discusses their implications and draws the study's conclusions.

2. Related Work & Literature Review

To understand contemporary gaming and female representation in video games, this literature review explores four key areas:

1. Gender
2. Video Games
3. Feminism
4. Player Reception and Backlash

2.1 Defining Gender: A Social and Cultural Construct

Gender is a foundational concept for this research, as it shapes both the design and reception of video games. Unlike biological sex, gender is a socially constructed and performative identity, enacted through behaviors, appearances, and interactions (Butler, 1990). This performative understanding of gender challenges essentialist assumptions, emphasising that identities are not fixed but continually produced and negotiated within cultural contexts. In the context of video games, gender is not only a descriptive category but a dynamic and debated part of player identity, influencing how characters are designed, perceived, and interacted with.

Traditional game narratives and character design often reinforce binary gender norms, positioning male characters as active heroes and female characters as passive objects or sexualized sidekicks (Shaw, 2014; Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012; Hahn, 2017). Such design choices reflect and maintain stereotypes, embedding gendered power dynamics into character roles, narratives, and gameplay mechanics. This binarisation of gender in game design limits the diversity of player experiences and continues exclusionary norms.

Beyond binary representations, gender in gaming is also deeply intersectional. An intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1989) reveals how gender intersects with race, class, and sexuality to shape player experiences in unique and often compounded ways. For example, women of color and LGBTQ+ players may face more discrimination, further limiting their participation and representation in gaming cultures (Hahn, 2017). While female players may use strategic adaptations, such as avoiding voice chat or using gender-neutral usernames to navigate hostile environments (Huh & Williams, 2010), these coping mechanisms highlight systemic barriers rather than individual resilience. This intersectional perspective on gender highlights the need for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to gender in game design and community dynamics.

2.2 Video Games: Definition, Gendered Differences, and Representation

Video games are interactive digital media that combine narrative, game mechanics, and player agency, making them a unique cultural form (Juul, 2005). As artifacts, games reflect and reinforce societal values, norms, and ideologies, functioning as both mirrors and engines of cultural expression. Ludology, the study of gameplay mechanics, and narratology, the study of storytelling show how games construct meaning through interactivity, immersion, and player participation. Unlike passive media, video games require active engagement, allowing players to co-create experiences and interpret narratives in ways that resonate with their personal and cultural contexts. This interactivity positions games as powerful tools for exploring complex themes, including identity, power, and social dynamics (Murray, 1997).

2.2.1 Gendered Socialisation and Gameplay

Gender shapes gaming experiences from socialisation to gameplay. Boys are typically encouraged to engage with competitive or action-oriented genres, while girls are steered toward social or casual games (Homer et al., 2012). This divide is institutionalised by the so-called “pink games“ movement of the 1990s, which attempted to design games specifically for girls by leaning into stereotypically feminine aesthetics and themes like pastel colors, fashion, and nurturing narratives (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999). As Cassell and Jenkins (1999) argue, this approach reinforced rather than challenged gendered assumptions about what girls want, reducing female gamers to a niche market defined by narrow stereotypes. These

gendered expectations limit the diversity of gaming experiences and contribute to the marginalisation of female players in genres coded as masculine, establishing the idea that certain games are not meant for them.

2.2.2 Female Representation and Resistance

While female characters have historically been underrepresented or downgraded to secondary roles, the inclusion of female protagonists in games has evolved over the past decades (De la Torre-Sierra & Guichot-Reina, 2024; Hahn, 2007). However, this progress is uneven and often debated, reflecting broader cultural discussions about gender, agency, and representation. This section looks at the evolution, challenges, and critiques of female protagonists in games, and how their design and narrative roles either challenge or reinforce gendered stereotypes.

2.2.2.1 The Evolution of Female Protagonists

Early video games predominantly featured male protagonists, with female characters confined to limited and reductive roles. The most dominant of these was the “damsel-in-distress“ trope, exemplified by *Princess Peach* in *Super Mario* (1985) and *Zelda* in *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), in which female characters existed primarily to motivate male heroes rather than to drive narratives themselves (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999). Where women did appear as active figures, they were frequently hyper-sexualized, as seen in characters such as *Street Fighter's II (1991) Chun-Li*. These representations reflect the industry's early assumption of an exclusively male audience, with female characters designed to appeal male fantasies, not to be independent (Downs & Smith, 2010; Ivory, 2006).

The late 1990s and early 2000s introduced female-led games like *Tomb Raider* (1996) with *Lara Croft* and *Metroid* (1986) with *Samus Aran*. While these characters were groundbreaking in placing women at the center of action-driven narratives, their representation remained constrained by the male gaze (Downs & Smith, 2010; Ivory, 2006). *Lara Croft's* exaggerated physique was explicitly designed to appeal to a male demographic, and *Samus Aran's* femininity was framed as a reveal, a reward for completing the game, rather than an aspect of her characterisation (Hahn, 2017). As Downs and Smith (2010) and Ivory (2006) show, even pioneering female protagonists of this era prioritised sexual appeal over agency, reflecting the industry's continued failure to move beyond objectification.

In the 2010s, female protagonists became more complex and diverse. Games like *Portal* (2007) with *Chell*, *Mirror's Edge* (2008) with *Faith*, and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), with *Aloy* presented women as competent, independent, and central to their narratives. *Aloy*, in particular, is celebrated for her intelligence, resilience, and leadership, subverting the damsel-in-distress trope (Allen, 2024).

Beyond the trend toward narrative complexity, some titles reveal a persistent tension between female protagonists' agency and their visual objectification. *NieR: Automata* (2017) features *2B*, an android warrior whose stoic demeanor, combat skills, and philosophical depth challenge conventional femininity. Her narrative, which explores themes of identity, sacrifice, and humanity, positions her as the emotional and ideological center of the game, and her characterisation is not subordinated to male characters or romantic subplots. Yet, her character design remains highly sexualized: her short skirt, thigh-high stockings, and exposed midriff adhere to anime-inspired tropes that prioritise aesthetic appeal over functional attire for a soldier. This contradiction is made explicit by the game's own creative director: when asked why a combat android wears such a design, Yoko Taro stated simply that he "just really likes girls," with no narrative justification offered (Giuseppe, 2017). Her character exemplifies how even progressive narratives can be undermined by visual tropes that objectify women (Vela, 2024).

2.2.2.2 Challenges and Critiques of Female Protagonists

Despite the progress outlined above, female protagonists continue to face significant challenges. One persistent issue is the tokenisation of female characters, where they are included to appear progressive but lack meaningful development. A related pattern is the "women in refrigerators" trope, by Simone (1999), where female characters are killed, assaulted, or stripped of agency not for their own narrative arc but to motivate male protagonists or advance plots. For example, *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) features *Ellie*, a complex female protagonist, but her story is also marked by extreme violence and trauma, reinforcing the trope that women in games must suffer to be taken seriously (Hahn, 2018).

The visual design of female protagonists remains a separate but equally persistent site of critique. While some characters become less sexualised than their predecessors, they often adhere to conventional beauty standards: slim,

able-bodied, and young. This excludes diverse representations of women, such as older women, women of color, or women with disabilities. This narrow visual vocabulary signals to diverse players that games were not designed with them in mind, and limits the range of female experiences that games can meaningfully represent.

However, some games have begun to challenge these norms by centering female protagonists whose identities are defined by diversity and emotional complexity rather than appearance or suffering. *Celeste* (2018) protagonist *Madeline's* struggles with anxiety and depression are not only backstory but are structurally embedded in the game's mechanics, with her psychological “dark self“ being a gameplay obstacle players must confront and overcome. While *Madeline* is not explicitly framed as disabled, her representation normalises neurodivergence in gaming and challenges the expectation that protagonists must be mentally and physically “perfect“ (Güldenpfennig, Reitberger & Fitzpatrick, 2023) The game's commercial success demonstrates that emotionally vulnerable protagonists can resonate broadly, even in a platformer genre traditionally dominated by male heroes.

Intersectional representation has similarly advanced through titles such as *If Found...* (2020), which follows *Kasio*, a trans woman navigating gender identity, family rejection, and self-acceptance. Presented through the format of *Kasio's* personal diary, the game avoids sensationalising her experiences, instead treating her transition and relationships with sensitivity and authenticity. By centering a trans protagonist without reducing her story to tragedy or victimhood, *If Found...* challenges the erasure of trans women in mainstream media and offers an intersectional perspective on gender identity in games (Ruberg & Pow, 2022).

In action-combat-centred representation, *Ghost of Yotei* (2025) shows a notable development. Its protagonist *Atsu*, a ronin in a mythological Japanese setting, is defined by martial skill, cultural heritage, and personal tragedy rather than sexualisation. *Atsu's* inclusion challenges the historically male-dominated samurai genre and signals a broader willingness within the industry to place women at the centre of settings that have long excluded them (Wilde, 2025; Aruya, 2025). Similarly, *Grace Ashcroft* in *Resident Evil: Requiem* (2026) represents a departure from the franchise's history of sexualising or sidelining its female characters. As an FBI intelligence analyst, Grace drives the narrative through competence and resilience rather than physical spectacle, with her actress Angela Sant'Albano

describing her as “a more truthful version of who the heroine is in everyday life, someone who feels fear and still decides to stand up for themselves and others“ (Sant'Albano, cited in Popverse, 2026). Her character arc is not subordinated to male characters or reduced to a romantic subplot, marking what critics have described as a major evolution for the franchise's approach to female protagonists (The Phrasemaker, 2026). Her character reflects a wider industry shift toward more complete and respectful representations of women in the horror genre, often exploiting female trauma for shock value.

2.3 Feminism: Theoretical Frameworks and Applications in Gaming

Feminism is not a single unified theory but a diverse set of intellectual and political traditions united by a commitment to understand and challenge gender-based inequality. Feminism examines how patriarchal structures, systems in which male perspectives and interests are treated as normative, shape social institutions, cultural representations, and individual experience (Hooks, 2000).

While liberal feminism focuses on equality and representation and advocates for more inclusion of women within existing institutions, radical feminism takes a more structural position, arguing that inequality is systemic rather than incidental and patriarchal systems require fundamental rather than surface-level change. Intersectional feminism, developed by Crenshaw (1989), extends this analysis by demonstrating that gender cannot be understood in isolation from race, class, and sexuality. Poststructuralist feminism, drawing on the work of Butler (1990), further destabilises the category of gender itself, arguing that gender is performatively constituted rather than biologically fixed. Together, these frameworks provide useful ways to examine how power works in culture, institutions, and media.

2.3.1 Feminist Theories in Gaming

Applied to gaming, these feminist theories provide critical tools for analysing gender inequalities in gaming, each offering different perspectives on how power and identity operate within the medium. Liberal feminism advocates for greater inclusion of women as both characters and creators in games. Shaw (2014) argues that increasing the visibility of female protagonists and developers can challenge the

industry's male-centric norms, though this approach risks overlooking the deeper systemic barriers that shape the industry.

Radical feminism, by contrast, critiques the patriarchal structures inherent in gaming that actively reinforce male dominance and female subordination. Intersectional feminism reveals how these dynamics are further compounded by race, class, and sexuality. Gray (2012) shows that Black female gamers face more discrimination in online spaces where racial and gendered stereotypes mutually reinforce one another. Poststructuralist feminism, finally, challenges the binary gender representations that dominate mainstream games, with Bardzell (2010) arguing that feminist design should actively disrupt normative gender roles and embrace fluid, diverse identities across all dimensions of game development.

2.3.2 Feminist Interventions in Gaming

Feminist interventions in gaming draw on feminist data visualisation and critical character design theories to challenge the patriarchal, heteronormative, and exclusionary structures in game development. These interventions are not only about increasing the quantity of female or queer characters but about redefining how characters are visualised, contextualised, and experienced by players, ensuring that their design reflects intersectional identities and resists reductive stereotypes.

Feminist data visualisation, as developed by D'Ignazio and Klein (2016), critiques the assumed neutrality of data representation. In gaming, this translates to a critical examination of how characters are designed and narratively framed, exposing the power dynamics that shape their creation and reception. Applied to game design, this framework emphasises contextual annotations, ensuring that characters are not reduced to one-dimensional tropes but are instead situated within social, historical, and cultural frameworks, avoiding the pitfalls of tokenism or stereotyping.

It further calls for pluralism in the design process itself, including more marginalised creators and players rather than defaulting to the dominant norms of a male-centric industry. By doing so, feminist interventions challenge the assumptions of traditional game design, which often defaults to white, male, able-bodied protagonists as the "neutral" standard. Instead, feminist data visualisation increases underrepresented voices and disrupts the systems of oppression that dictate who is visible and whose stories are told.

Feminist character design builds on these principles by subverting the male gaze, which historically reduces female and queer characters to objects of visual consumption. Instead, feminist character design focuses on agency, complexity, and relatability, ensuring that characters are defined by their roles, relationships, and personal journeys, rather than their appearance or sexual appeal (Rommes, 2013).
Design justice, as theorised by Costanza-Chock (2020), further builds on this by insisting that marginalised communities, those most affected by oppressive design, should lead the co-creation of characters and narratives. This framework positions intersectional storytelling and accessibility not as optional additions but as foundational design principles.

Ultimately, feminist interventions in gaming can offer a pathway to liberatory storytelling. As D'Ignazio and Klein (2016) argue, feminist data visualization is not just about what we see but how we see it, and in gaming, this means designing characters and narratives that reflect the full complexity of human experience.

2.3.3 Patriarchy in the Gaming Industry

The gaming industry is structurally male-dominated, with women comprising only a small fraction of developers, designers, and leadership roles (Fox & Tang, 2014; Shaw, 2014). This lack of diversity has direct consequences for the content the industry produces. When development teams are homogeneous, the perspectives and experiences that inform game design are similarly narrow, reinforcing gendered stereotypes rather than challenging them. These structural biases are revealed in the recurring representational patterns where female characters are represented as passive, sexualised, or subordinate, which reflect the assumptions of a predominantly male creative workforce (Ivory, 2006; Downs & Smith, 2010; Hahn, 2017).
Beyond the industry, these structural inequalities shape the experiences of players in gaming communities and online spaces. Female players who engage in multiplayer environments frequently encounter sexist commentary and social exclusion, particularly in voice chat contexts where gender becomes immediately audible (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009).

The result is a self-reinforcing cycle, where an industry shaped by patriarchal norms produces content and communities that alienate female players, whose underrepresentation in turn reduces pressure on the industry to change.

2.4. Player Reception and Backslash

Despite the industry's movement toward greater representation, the reception of female and queer protagonists continues to face significant backlash and hostility from parts of the player base. Inclusive design has been framed as “forced diversity“ or “political correctness,“ claiming that diverse representation is not a natural evolution of storytelling but an ideological imposition that disrupts established gaming conventions (Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2017). This pattern of reception reflects how traditional gaming culture remains rooted in patriarchal norms.

The biggest expression of this backlash was the “Gamergate controversy“ of 2014, in which female developers, game critics, and journalists were exposed to coordinated harassment campaigns involving death threats and doxxing (Mortensen, 2016). Although framed around concerns of journalistic ethics, Gamergate was primarily a coordinated campaign to harass women and silence feminist voices in gaming (Chess & Shaw, 2015). “Gamergate“ was covered widely by mainstream outlets such as the New York Times and The Guardian as a symptom of broader cultural tensions around gender and identity (Wingfield, 2014; Dewey, 2014). *The Last of Us Part II* (2020) became a target of this pattern, facing review bombing and harassment campaigns directed at its queer female protagonist and LGBTQ+ themes, with critics dismissing the game as “woke“ or agenda-driven. Similar *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020), where the option to play a female protagonist sparked debates about “historical accuracy“, despite the franchise's long history of taking liberties with history for male characters (Eklund & Zanescu, 2024). In both cases, female protagonists were held to standards of justification that male protagonists are never required to meet.

These examples demonstrate how female protagonists are often received through a lens of skepticism or hostility by the male gamer community, who perceive their inclusion as a threat to traditional gaming narratives. Such reactions highlight the ongoing need for structural change in both game design and gaming communities.

The research reviewed gives a foundation for understanding how character visualisation in video games reproduces or challenges exclusions and inequalities. It shows that gaming culture, industry structures, and design practices remain shaped by patriarchal norms, while feminist frameworks offer critical tools for contesting them. However, existing research tends to approach representation as a question of quantity or stereotype, leaving underexplored the specific ways in which visual design shapes player interpretations and emotional responses. This gap is where my research starts.

3. Research Statement

This study investigates how traditional versus feminist-inspired approaches to female character visualisation in video games shape the interpretations, emotional responses, and sense-making processes of mixed-gender adult players. By applying a feminist data visualisation lens (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2016), the research examines how specific visual design choices, including body representation, costume, and narrative framing, either reproduce or challenge the exclusions and inequalities documented in the literature review. Feminist data visualisation provides a critical framework for questioning what is made visible, how, and for whom, principles that translate directly into questions about how female characters are constructed and received in games.

3.1 Research Question

The main research question is:
How do different approaches to character visualisation, specifically traditional and feminist-inspired designs, influence the ways players discuss, interpret, and engage with video games?

This question is supported by three sub-questions, each corresponding to a different dimension of player response.

1. Interpretation:
   How do players construct meaning from character visualisation at an

individual character level, and what implications do they get about a character's personality, backstory, and narrative role based on visual design alone?

2. Emotional Response:
   What emotional responses does character visualisation trigger in players, and how does design influence feelings of identification, empathy, or detachment?

3. Sense-Making
   How does character visualisation shape players' broader contextual judgements, including assumptions about a character's skills, genre fit, intended audience, and narrative function within the broader game world?

Having grown up playing video games, I became aware of how differently female characters were designed and presented compared to their male counterparts, and how rarely those designs reflected the diversity, complexity, or agency of women in reality. This personal experience of feeling at the same time drawn to gaming culture and alienated by many of its representational practices motivated the central questions of this study. I am especially interested in whether players, regardless of their gender, consciously register these design differences and whether feminist-inspired approaches shift how players think about and relate to female characters.

3.2 Hypotheses

The hypotheses translate these questions and motivations into testable predictions. Each hypothesis corresponds to one of the three analytical dimensions and is based on the theoretical frameworks and research from Section 2. The following hypotheses are proposed:

H1 (Interpretation): Players will attribute greater personality complexity, narrative depth, and autonomy from feminist-inspired character designs, compared to traditionally designed characters. Female players are expected to show stronger differentiation between the two design approaches.

H2 (Emotional Response): Feminist-inspired character designs will produce stronger emotional identification and empathy in players, while traditionally hypersexualised designs will produce higher levels of detachment or discomfort. These responses are understood as two scales: one ranging from identification to detachment, and one ranging from empathy to discomfort. Female players are expected to show stronger negative responses with traditional designs than male players.

H3 (Sense-Making): Players will make broader and more diverse contextual judgements about feminist-inspired character designs than about traditionally designed characters, attributing a wider range of skills, a stronger sense of genre fit, and a more inclusive intended audience to feminist-inspired characters. Differences in these judgements are expected to vary across participant gender groups.

To see potential variation across gender groups, participants will be asked to indicate their gender at the start of the survey. For the purpose of this study, gender is understood as a social and cultural construct rather than a biological category, as established in the theoretical framework in Section 2. This data will be used as an analytical variable in the interpretation of findings, allowing the study to explore whether and how participant gender shapes responses to the two design approaches.

3.3 Research Scope and Delimitations

The study focuses exclusively on female character design. While a similar traditional versus feminist-inspired comparison could theoretically be applied to male character design, the representation of male characters in games operates within a fundamentally different cultural dynamic. Male character design has historically functioned as the unmarked norm in gaming, meaning that traditional male designs are rarely looked at or discussed in the same way as female designs. The inequalities, stereotypes, and exclusionary practices documented in the literature review are directed at female characters and female players, making female character visualisation the more pressing and theoretically grounded focus for this study.

My research focuses specifically on the reception of character visualisation, rather than on the production practices or intentions of game developers. The study does not aim to evaluate the quality of specific games or make prescriptive claims about

what feminist game design should look like. Rather, I seek to generate empirical insight into the relationship between visual design choices and player experience, contributing to a broader understanding of how representation shapes meaning in interactive media. The study is further delimited to adult players with some familiarity with video games. It does not account for variation in gaming experience, cultural background, or platform preferences beyond what emerges from the data, though participant gender is collected and used as an analytical variable.

4. Methods & Materials

This study uses a qualitative method with experimental elements, combining a controlled research design with methods drawn from cultural inquiry. Rather than measuring responses through numbers and statistics, the research prioritises the depth and richness of what participants say, focusing on how players actively construct meaning from female character visualisation. This aligns with the feminist framework outlined in Section 2.3.3 (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2016).

4.1 Vignette-Based Interviews

The main data collection method is vignette-based interviewing, as developed by Hughes and Huby (2002). A vignette is a short selected stimulus, in this case a visual presentation of an existing female game character, that is presented to participants as a basis for discussion. Rather than asking participants to reflect on abstract concepts or general experiences, vignettes connect responses to a specific, shared stimulus, making discussions of representation and design more grounded and tangible than abstract questioning alone would allow (Hughes & Huby, 2002).

Commercial video games are used because they are widely played and culturally familiar, offering a realistic and relatable way to study character design conventions in their natural cultural context.

Each participant will be shown a set of character vignettes from commercial video game titles, selected to represent two contrasting design approaches. One set will feature characters whose design follows traditional tropes, such as hypersexualisation, while the other will feature characters whose design aligns with feminist principles. The specific characters selected are documented and justified in section 4.4. After each vignette, participants will be asked to respond freely before

being guided through semi-structured interview questions covering the three dimensions of the study. Comparative questions will be asked after all four vignettes have been viewed and freely discussed. To minimise order effects, the sequence in which vignettes are presented will be randomised across participants using random.org.

The interview questions (see Appendix B) are developed using the frameworks from existing literature mentioned in Section 2 rather than constructed from scratch. Questions relating to interpretation are informed by the content analysis dimensions developed by De la Torre-Sierra and Guichot-Reina (2025), who identify body proportion, clothing suitability, and dominance positioning as key variables in how female characters communicate meaning to players. Questions relating to emotional response are grounded in the experimental work of Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009), which shows the measurable effects of sexualised character design on player self-concept, and in the work of Paaßen et al. (2017), whose review of stereotype threat informs questions about whether players feel addressed as the intended audience. Questions relating to sense-making come from the work of Fox and Tang (2014) and De la Torre-Sierra and Guichot-Reina (2025), both of whom examine how gaming spaces and character designs signal who belongs and who does not. The questions inspired by existing measurement tools or frameworks were adapted and reworded to suit the vignette-based format of this study. Rather than asking participants about their general gaming experiences, questions were connected to the specific characters shown in the vignettes.

4.2 Triangulation: Survey Component

To strengthen the validity of the findings, a short structured survey will be given to participants after each vignette. The survey will use a 5-point Likert-scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) to measure responses across the three dimensions of the study. While the vignette-based interviews capture how and why players respond to character design, the survey captures how strongly and how consistently those responses occur across participants. This distinction is important because open-ended interview responses allow for rich individual answers but are difficult to compare directly across participants, whereas the survey enables cross-participant and cross-character comparison, including analysis of whether responses differ

across participant gender groups. The two methods are therefore designed to complement rather than duplicate one another, and their findings will be triangulated to produce a more complete picture of how character design shapes player experience (Denzin, 1978).

4.3 Data Analysis

The Interview data will be transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes will be organised around the three dimensions of the study and developed from the data rather than decided in advance. The survey data will be analysed descriptively and then used to contextualise and triangulate the qualitative findings, rather than to test hypotheses through inferential statistics. Given the exploratory nature of this study and the small sample size, inferential statistical analysis would not be appropriate, as the sample is neither large enough nor randomly selected to produce statistically generalisable results.

4.4 Character Vignette Selection

The character vignettes are selected on three criteria: they must clearly represent either traditional or feminist-inspired design approaches as defined in the literature review; they should be visually and narratively recognisable enough to reason participant responses without prior knowledge; their visual presentation must be realistic enough to allow participants to respond to character design principles rather than to art style. The last criterion leads to the deliberate exclusion of heavily stylised, cartoon, or pixel art aesthetics, which can risk introducing responses where participants react to the visual language of the game rather than to the design of the character herself. All four selected characters appear in titles with realistic or semi-realistic visual styles to ensure a degree of visual comparability across the vignettes.

Four characters have been selected (see Table 1 and Appendix A), two representing traditional design tropes and two representing feminist-inspired approaches. This selection is grounded in the feminist data visualisation framework of D'Ignazio and Klein (2016). The two traditional characters make women visible primarily through sexualised appearance and visual appeal directed at a male audience, reflecting the patriarchal norms that the framework critiques. The two feminist-inspired characters

however, make women visible through agency, competence, and narrative complexity, resisting the reductive visual tropes that D'Ignazio and Klein identify as central to exclusionary representation. In this sense, the four characters are not chosen randomly but are theoretically motivated cases that embody the tension between traditional and feminist-inspired visualisation practices that this study wants to examine.

Lara Croft^{T}*,* from *Tomb Raider Underworld* (Crystal Dynamics, 2008) serves as the first traditional character (as indicated through a superscript ^{T}), representing hypersexualisation through physical design. Her exaggerated proportions and revealing costume have been documented in the literature as an example of female objectification in games (e.g. Downs & Smith, 2010; Dill & Thill, 2007; Hahn, 2007), making her a well-justified and academically grounded choice. *2B*^{T} from *NieR: Automata* (PlatinumGames, 2017) represents a distinct but related form of traditional design, in which sexualisation operates through costume and visual framing despite the character's narrative complexity. As established in Section 2, *2B's* design exemplifies the tension between progressive narrative intent and visual objectification, making her a theoretically grounded and interesting case for this study (Vela, 2024).

Atsu^{F} from *Ghost of Yotei* (Sucker Punch, 2025) serves as the first feminist-inspired character (as indicated through a superscript ^{F}), representing an approach to female design centred on martial agency, emotional complexity, and cultural depth. Her characterisation avoids sexualisation in favour of combat skill and psychological interiority, and her role as the franchise's first female protagonist in a samurai setting carries broader cultural significance as discussed in Section 2. *Grace Ashcroft*^{F} from *Resident Evil: Requiem* (Capcom, 2026) represents the second feminist-inspired design, prioritising narrative competence, intelligence, and psychological depth over physical design. Her design has been explicitly framed by the developers as a departure from the franchise's history of sexualising female characters, with her model actress describing her as an entirely new type of heroine defined by emotional authenticity rather than appearance (Sant'Albano, cited in Popverse, 2026; Goldberg, 2026).

It should be noted that both *Atsu*^{F} and *Grace*^{F} are recent releases for which peer-reviewed academic literature is not yet available. Their inclusion is justified on

the basis of documented developer intent, grey source, and their relevance to the study's theoretical framework. This reliance on non-academic sources for these two characters is acknowledged as a limitation and discussed further in section 4.5

Table 1 *Used Video Game Characters in the Vignette*

Design Category	Traditional (T)		Feminist-Inspired (F)	
Character	Lara Croft	2B	Atsu	Grace Ashcroft
Game	Tomb Raider: Underworld	NieR: Automata	Ghost of Yotei	Resident Evil: Requiem
Developer	Crystal Dynamics	PlatinumGames	Sucker Punch	Capcom
Release Date	2008	2017	2025	2026
Genre	Action-Adventure	Action RPG	Action-Adventure	Survival Horror
Key Characteristics	Hypersexualised physical design; exaggerated proportions; revealing costume	Narrative agency and philosophical depth; sexualised visual design through costume and framing	Martial skill; emotional complexity; functional attire; cultural depth; avoids sexualisation	Narrative competence; psychological depth; avoids hypersexualised design
Design Trope	Hypersexualist through physical design	Tension between narrative agency and visual objectification	Agency through martial and cultural identity	Competence and resilience over appearance
Picture				
References	Downs & Smith (2010); Dill & Thill (2007); Hahn (2017)	Giuseppe (2017); Vela (2024)	Popverse (2026); Wilde (2025)	Aruya (2025); Goldberg (2026)

4.5 Limitation of Vignette Selection

Several limitations to the vignette selection are worth acknowledging. First, using recognisable commercial characters means that a participant's familiarity with a character's broader narrative may influence their responses, making it difficult to fully isolate reactions to visual design alone. This applies across all four vignettes and is a constraint of using existing characters rather than purpose-designed ones.

Second, there is a notable asymmetry in cultural familiarity across the four selected characters. The two traditional characters have existed for significantly longer than the two feminist-inspired characters, and had therefore more time to generate cultural discourse, media representations, and player opinions surrounding them. This does not reflect a difference in popularity or commercial success, as all four characters come from major commercial releases. Rather, it means that participants are more likely to approach the traditional characters with pre-formed opinions and associations built up over years, while responses to the feminist-inspired ones are more likely to reflect fresh reactions to the visual design alone. This asymmetry means that responses across the two design approaches may not be fully comparable in terms of prior exposure, and findings should be interpreted with this imbalance in mind.

Furthermore the sample size is appropriate for qualitative research, but limits how widely the findings can be generalised beyond the participant group. Lastly, although participant gender is collected as an analytical variable, the study does not systematically control for other individual differences such as cultural background or prior attitudes toward gender representation, both of which may shape responses. These are acknowledged as boundaries of this methodological design and will be discussed further in Section 6.3.

4.6 Participants

Participants were recruited through gaming communities, university, and friends, targeting mixed-gender adults (aged 18 and over) with some familiarity with video games. I deliberately decided to require a basic level of gaming familiarity rather than no experience at all. Participants who have some awareness of video games and their characters are better positioned to contextualise what they are seeing and to explain why one design feels different from another, producing more informed and meaningful responses. Additionally, those working professionally in game

development or design were excluded, as their industry expertise may override their responses as players.

All participants provided informed consent before taking part, and all data were anonymised and handled in accordance with ethical guidelines. At the start of the study, participants were also asked to indicate their gender via a short question, as described in Section 3.2.

5. Results

This section presents the findings of the study across the three analytical dimensions interpretation, emotional engagement, and sense-making, based on the thematic analysis of twelve semi-structured interviews and descriptive analysis of the accompanying Likert-scale survey data (N = 12, N^W = 6, N^M = 6). The findings are organised around six themes that emerged from the coding process, two for each dimension. The survey data is presented alongside the qualitative findings as triangulation. No inferential statistics are used, and all quantitative results are descriptive. The four characters assessed were: *Grace Ashcroft*^{F} (Capcom, 2026) and *Atsu*^{F} (Sucker Punch, 2025) as feminist-inspired, *2B*^{T} (PlatinumGames, 2017), and *Lara Croft*^{T} (Crystal Dynamics, 2008) as traditional designs. All survey items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale.

5.1 Summary of Survey Findings across all Characters

Table 2 and Figure 1 below summarises the key survey categories across all four characters, split by gender.

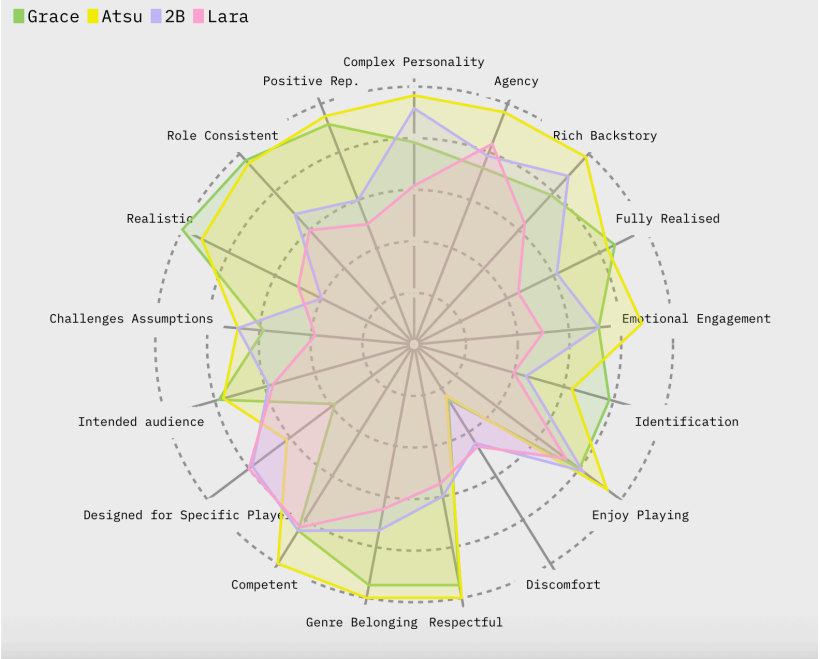

Figure 1 *Mean Scores Across All Survey Items by Character*
Radar chart showing overall mean scores N = 12 (N^W = 6, N^M = 6) across all seventeen survey items, on a 1-5 scale. Values plotted further from the centre indicate higher scores.

Table 2 *Mean Scores per Survey Item Across All Four Characters*
N = 12 (N^W = 6, N^M = 6). All items rated on a 1-5 Likert scale. Higher scores indicate more positive ratings.

	Design Category							
	Traditional *(T)*				Feminist-Inspired *(F)*			
Character	*Grace Ashcroft*		*Atsu*		*2B*		*Lara Croft*	
Publisher	(Capcom, 2026)		(Sucker Punch, 2025)		(PlatinumGames, 2017)		(Crystal Dynamics, 2008)	
Survey Category	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Complex personality	4.33	3.50	5.00	4.67	4.67	4.50	2.33	3.83
Fully realised	4.83	3.83	4.67	3.67	2.67	3.50	1.50	3.00
Realistic	5.00	5.00	4.83	4.33	1.67	2.33	1.67	3.33
Appearance/ role consistent	5.00	4.67	5.00	4.50	3.00	3.83	2.33	3.67
Emotional engagement	4.00	3.17	5.00	3.83	4.00	3.17	1.83	3.17
Identification	4.67	3.17	3.67	2.67	2.17	2.33	1.67	2.33
Discomfort	1.00	1.50	1.00	1.33	2.83	1.67	2.67	2.00
Respectful	5.00	4.50	5.00	5.00	2.67	3.33	2.17	3.33
Belongs in Setting & Genre	5.00	4.50	5.00	5.00	3.33	4.00	2.50	4.00
Specific player	1.83	2.00	3.00	3.17	4.50	3.33	4.67	3.33
Intended audience	4.50	3.33	3.83	3.83	2.33	3.50	2.00	3.67
Challenges assumptions	3.00	2.83	3.83	3.00	3.17	3.67	1.67	2.17
Positive representation	4.83	4.33	4.83	4.67	2.50	3.50	1.83	3.17

5.2 Interpretation

This dimension looked at how participants read and made sense of each character's design in terms of personality, backstory, narrative role, and design intent.

5.2.1 Theme 1: Design Legibility

Across all twelve participants, feminist-inspired characters produced more consistent and reasonable character readings. Participants were able to conclude personality, backstory, and narrative roles directly from the visual design of both *Grace*^{F} and *Atsu*^{F} (feminist-inspired). For *Atsu*^{F}, participants identified cultural embeddedness, a history of battle, and a disciplined personality. For *Grace*^{F}, participants described an ordinary background, practical preparation, and emotional vulnerability. The traditional characters produced a different pattern. With *Lara Croft*^{T} and *2B*^{T}, multiple participants noted that the design redirected their reading away from the character and more toward an external agenda. This pattern was described independently across participants without being prompted by a specific question.

Participant 9 (male) stated that *Atsu's*^{F} design made him “trust that the people behind her put real care into the game as a whole.“ Another participant (female) similarly noted that *Atsu's*^{F} design felt entirely purposeful, stating “everything she's wearing and carrying feels like it means something“ and “nothing feels like it's there just to fill space.“ Similarly, *Grace*^{F} was described as a character whose “design doesn't have any element that exists for a reason that is external to her “(participant 8, female). By contrast, female participant 4 described being unable to read *2B's*^{T} personality because “the design isn't really about her.“ Another participant (female) offered a formulation of this pattern, describing it as “the difference between a character who exists and a character who is displayed.“

The survey data supports this pattern (see Table 2). Appearance and role consistency scores were highest for *Grace*^{F} (4.83 overall) and *Atsu*^{F} (4.75), and lowest for *Lara*^{T} (3.00) and *2B*^{T} (3.42). The gender gap on this item was largest for *Lara*^{T}, where women scored 2.33, and men scored 3.67 (gap: 1.33). The fully realised category showed the same pattern: *Grace*^{F} 4.33, *Atsu*^{F} 4.17, *2B* 3.08, *Lara*^{T} 2.25. Women's score for *Lara*^{T} on this item was 1.50, the lowest individual item score in the dataset.

5.2.2 Theme 2: Critical Design Literacy

A second pattern within the Interpretation Dimension was participants' awareness that traditional designs communicated the designer's assumptions rather than the character's identity. This was expressed most clearly in relation to *Lara*^{T} and *2B*^{T}. Female participant 8 named this directly as “cognitive dissonance,“ describing a character “framed as a capable adventurer who is dressed in a way that has nothing to do with survival and everything to do with looking attractive.“ Participant 3 (male) noted uncertainty about whether the confidence he read in *Lara*^{T} was genuine or a familiar trope: “I don't know if I'm actually getting confidence from her or if it's just another stereotype that has been used in games.“ A female participant observed and compared that “nobody sat in a design meeting and said how do we make *Nathan Drake's* (Uncharted franchise, Naughty Dog) shorts as short as possible so that female players enjoy looking at him“, framing traditional female character design as subject to a requirement that male characters are not. Female participants 8 and 12 added an observation about visual wear and dirtiness as a gendered design standard, noting that “male characters are allowed to have very wrecked and dirty clothing“ while “female characters have this very clean aesthetic.“

A counter-position to this was expressed most fully by male participant 10, who explicitly rejected practical logic as a relevant criterion for fictional characters. He compared *Lara's*^{T} outfit to *Master Chief's* (Halo franchise, Bungie) armour, saying “I'm not expecting her to be dressed for actual field work. Nobody complains that Master Chief's armor doesn't make physical sense either. It's a game, it's fine.“ He applied the same reasoning to *2B*^{T}, describing the skirt and high boots as “a stylistic choice for a stylised game“ and noting that “2D fighting game characters wear all kinds of things that make no practical sense and nobody really loses sleep over it.“ This position that fictional characters are not subject to real-world coherence requirements, was the most used counter-argument to the practical logic pattern in the dataset, and was unique in its degree of explicit theoretical grounding.

5.3 Emotional Engagement

This dimension looked at the emotional responses participants described when viewing each character, including feelings of identification, aspiration, connection, discomfort, and exclusion.

5.3.1 Theme 3: Identification and Aspiration as Distinct Modes of Engagement

Participants described two qualitatively different emotional relationships with the characters. The first was identification, a sense of personal connection, and the feeling of inhabiting rather than watching a character. The second was aspiration, appreciation, and admiration without a felt connection. Both were present across the dataset, but they did not map evenly across characters or genders.

Identification responses were most often in relation to *Grace*^{F}. Participants described *Grace*^{F} as “the kind of character I can actually relate to rather than just try to be“ (participant 4, female) and “a version of experiences I recognise rather than a fantasy of someone I'm supposed to want to be“ (participant 8, female).

Aspiration responses were most common for *Atsu*^{F} and *Lara*^{T}. They were described as “more aspiration and not really relatable“ (participant 1 on *Lara*^{T}, female) and “I don't need a connection with her [*Atsu*^{F}], her design is so interesting that I instantly want to know more about her“ (participant 5, female).

A third position was mentioned across multiple male participants, describing a different mode of engagement with game characters in which personal identification with a character was not considered a relevant criterion for enjoyment. For example, participant 10 expressed this, distinguishing between players who “want to inhabit the character“ and players who use “the character as a tool to experience the gameplay and the world,“ placing himself in the latter group. This position was expressed by other male participants as well “I don't need to personally connect with the character to enjoy playing a game, [...] what matters is whether the character is well written and fun to control“ (participant 6, male). This mode is referred to throughout the remainder of the section as the “tool-use mode”.

Lastly, participant 10 (male) acknowledged the identification mode as “real and valid too,“ saying that he understood that “some players, especially female players, want to see themselves reflected and that's completely fair“. This acknowledgement, combined with the pattern across male participants, shows why identification and discomfort responses to design differed across gender groups in the dataset. The “tool-use mode“ of engagement means that design features that produce felt exclusion for female participants are processed as aesthetically neutral or genre-appropriate choices by male ones.

Despite all three positions in the dataset, identification, aspiration, and tool-use engagement all produced willingness to play. The difference between them was not in whether participants wanted to engage with the character but in the quality and nature of the emotional relationship described. The survey data reflects this as well (see Table 2). Identification scores were highest for *Grace*^{F} overall (3.92) and lowest for *Lara*^{T} (2.00). The gender gap on identification was largest for *Grace*^{F}, where women scored 4.67, and men scored 3.17 (gap: 1.50). Women's identification score for *Lara*^{T} was 1.67, producing a gap of 3.00 points between *Grace*^{F} and *Lara*^{T} within the female participant group alone.

5.3.2 Theme 4: Gendered Discomfort and Asymmetry of Response

Discomfort with traditional designs was expressed differently across gender groups. Female participants described frustration, tiredness, and a sense of exclusion in relation to *Lara*^{T} and *2B*^{T}. Male participants acknowledged the same design features without describing a strong affective response. For example, male participants said “never really thought about it [the design choice of *Lara's*^{T} outfit] that much because it's a video game“, (participant 6, male) and “might see how there is a mild unease“ reflecting on *Lara's*^{T} outfit in context but observed that this was something he “noticed now more than in the past“ (participant 7, male). Lastly, participant 2 (male) stated he had “not thought about how female players felt about whether the game was made with them in mind,“ and acknowledged that “it probably matters more for others.“ Another male counterposition was offered by participant 10. He described the broader conversation around female character design as “pretty overblown,“ stating “I don't think *Lara Croft's*^{T} outfit or the last girl's [*2B*^{T}] skirt length is like a serious real world problem. They're not real people.“ He further suggested that critics of traditional design “are sometimes assuming a level of identification with the character that not every player actually has,“ connecting this directly to the “character-as-tool mode“ of engagement described in Theme 3.

Survey discomfort scores show a clear gender reversal across design types (see Table 2). For *Grace*^{F} and *Atsu*^{F}, men scored higher discomfort than women (*Grace*^{F}*:* women 1.00, men 1.50; *Atsu*^{F}: women 1.00, men 1.33). For *2B*^{T} and *Lara*^{T}, the pattern reversed: *2B*^{T} women scored 2.83, men 1.67 (gap: 1.17); *Lara*^{T} women scored 2.67, men 2.00 (gap: 0.67). Emotional engagement scores showed the

largest single gender gap in the dataset on *Lara*^{T}: women 1.83, men 3.17 (gap: 1.33). *Atsu*^{F} produced the highest emotional engagement score in the dataset, with women scoring 5.00.

5.4 Sense-Making

This dimension looked at the broader contextual judgements participants made, including assessments of practical reasoning, intended audience, and the character's place within her genre and game world.

5.4.1 Theme 5: Practical Logic as a Marker of Design Coherence

Across participants, a consistent pattern came up in which participants evaluated designs according to whether the character's appearance followed logically from what she does. This reasoning was applied independently by participants of both genders and across all four characters, though the conclusions and the relevance of the criterion itself differed across participants.

The feminist-inspired characters were consistently described as practically coherent. Participants noted that every element of *Atsu's*^{F} design appeared purposeful and connected to her role and world. Multiple participants described elements as “purposeful“ and noted design elements that “I could see them having a purpose gameplay wise“ (participant 9, male) or “nothing feels decorative for decoration's sake“ (participant 4 on *Atsu*^{F}).

For the two traditional characters, the majority of participants questioned the practical logic of specific design elements. Participants stated that “if it's a setting where you need something practical to protect you, it just doesn't make sense“ (participant 5, female) and asked “why are you so naked, you're going on a big adventure?“ (participant 3, male).

The Survey scores for the respectful representation reflect the majority pattern (see Table 2). *Atsu*^{F} scored 5.00 overall, with both women and men scoring 5.00, the only category and character combination in the dataset with perfect cross-gender consensus. Grace^{F} scored 4.75 overall (women 5.00, men 4.50). *2B*^{T} scored 3.00, and *Lara*^{T} lowest with 2.75.

5.4.2 Theme 6: Feminist inspired Design and Audience Inclusivity

Participants described feminist-inspired characters as more broadly addressed to a wide player audience, while traditional designs were read as targeted at a specific assumed audience. This judgement was expressed across both male and female participants, though the emotional weight of the observation and the terms in which it was made differed by gender.

For *Lara*^{T} and *2B*^{T}, participants from both genders described designs aimed more at male players. Participant 2 (male), described *Lara*^{T} as having been designed “pretty transparently“ for “teenage to adult men.“ Female participants 4 and 12 described female players as “just expected to either not notice or simply not care“, and stated, “I could definitely see this designed by men for men.“ Another male participant identified both *Lara*^{T} and *2B*^{T} as being on the verge of over-sexualisation, noting that “sometimes games focus too much on that aspect when they make a woman in a game“ (participant 3, male).

For *Grace*^{F} and *Atsu*^{F}, participants described broader or more neutral targeting. They were either described as “nothing particularly narrow about the target demographic“ (participant 9, male) or seen as aimed at “a general audience“ (participant 6, male). Participant 12 (female), observed that *Grace*^{F} appeared to reflect awareness that “not all gamers are cisgender straight men“. She further implied that women may have been involved in *Grace's*^{F} design, based on the absence of exaggerated proportions or sexualised clothing. Feminist-inspired characters were also more consistently described as designed for fans of a specific genre or setting, e.g. samurai games, action RPGs, survival horror, rather than for a specific gender. Traditional characters, by contrast, were more often described as designed for a gendered audience first, with genre framing secondary.

Survey data confirms the audience inclusivity pattern quantitatively (see Table 2). The “being designed for a specific player“ category showed the biggest contrast: *Grace*^{F} scored 1.92 overall, *Atsu*^{F} 3.08, *2B*^{T} 3.92, and *Lara*^{T} 4.00. Women scored *Lara*^{T} at 4.67 on this and only 2.00 on seeing themselves as the intended audience, a 2.67-point inversion within the same participant group. The intended audience gap on *Lara*^{T} between women and men was 1.67 (women 2.00, men 3.67), the largest gender gap in the dataset. *Atsu*^{F} was the only character for whom the intended audience score showed no gender gap (women 3.83, men 3.83), and the only

character for whom men scored as highly as women on “challenges assumptions”, showing that *Atsu's*^{F} design was read as broadly inclusive rather than specifically oriented toward female players.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This section puts the findings presented in section 5 within the broader theoretical and empirical context introduced in the literature review. It assesses the extent to which the three hypotheses are supported by the data, and identifies where the findings extend, refine, or challenge the reviewed literature. The chapter ends with a reflection on the study's contribution, limitations and directions for future research.

6.1 Assessing the Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1 proposed that feminist-inspired designs would produce greater personality complexity, narrative depth, and autonomy than traditional designs, with female players expected to show stronger differentiation. The data supports the directional prediction but shows a more specific pattern than the hypothesis anticipated.

Feminist-inspired characters did enable more complex character readings. Participants gave both *Atsu*^{F} and *Grace*^{F} complex backstories, personality, and narrative roles, with survey categories for “fully realised”, “realistic”, and “appearance/role consistency” all scored higher for these characters (see Section 5.2). However, the reason this occurred was not simply that feminist designs communicated more. The findings suggest that traditional designs actively interfered with the reading process by redirecting participant attention away from the character toward an external design agenda. The interpretive gap between design types was therefore driven less by what feminist designs added and more by what traditional designs obstructed.

The gender differentiation prediction is confirmed, but is asymmetric in its distribution. As the survey data in Section 5.1 shows, female participants showed stronger differentiation on traditional character ratings, while ratings for feminist-inspired characters were more broadly shared across genders. This suggests that gender differences in design interpretation are concentrated in response to traditional design rather than evenly spread across both categories.

This finding redefines H1 in a way that feminist-inspired design does not need to communicate more complexity than traditional design. It can remove the interference that prevents complexity from being read. This subtractive mechanism is discussed further in Section 6.3.4.

Hypothesis 2 proposed two scales of emotional response: identification to detachment, and empathy to discomfort. It further predicted that female players would show stronger negative responses to traditional designs. The data supports the hypotheses fully.

Both scales are evidenced in the data presented in Section 5.3. The “identification” scale shows the widest gap between feminist-inspired and traditional characters within the female participant group. The “discomfort” scale shows the predicted gender reversal. Women score higher discomfort than men on both traditional characters. The emotional engagement gender gap on *Lara*^{T} is the largest single gender gap in the dataset.

Two more refinements can be seen from the data that H2 did not anticipate. First, between identification and detachment sits a third emotional position with aspiration, in which participants expressed admiration and willingness to play without feeling a personal connection. This matters because it means that emotional engagement with a character does not require identification, and that commercially successful designs can sustain player interest through admiration even where they fail to produce the deeper connection associated with identification. This distinction can have implications for how the effects of traditional design are measured. For example, studies that use willingness to play as a proxy for positive engagement may be capturing aspiration rather than identification, and therefore underestimating the degree of felt distance.

Second, the data shows a potential explanation for the gender asymmetry in emotional responses that goes beyond differences in sensitivity. Multiple male participants described a different mode of engaging with game characters, treating them as “vehicles for gameplay” rather than as objects of identification. This “tool-use” mode insulates male players from the exclusion signals that female players detect and feel, not because male players are insensitive to design but because they are not engaging with characters through the same relational framework.

Hypothesis 3 proposed that feminist-inspired designs would produce broader contextual judgements across skills, genre fit, and intended audience, with gender differences expected. While the audience inclusivity prediction is supported, the genre fit and skills prediction need revision.

The “intended audience” scores show the biggest contrasts in the dataset. Women's scores on “specific player” and “intended audience” for *Lara*^{T} show a significant inversion within the same participant group, rating it as strongly designed for a specific audience while simultaneously scoring low on feeling like the intended audience themselves. *Grace*^{F} was the only character where women scored higher than men on “intended audience”, and the only character receiving the minimum on “specific player” scores. These patterns confirm the hypothesis's prediction about audience inclusivity.

Genre fit, however, was not where feminist and traditional designs differ. The “belongs in setting & genre” scores were stable across characters and participants. The one exception was women's rating of *Lara*^{T}, which was notably lower than for the other three characters. This exception suggests that for female participants, the sense of whether a character belongs in her world is not fully separable from the sense of whether the design was made with them in mind. This also shows that genre fit is not a primary axis of design differentiation, and rather, it is audience fit that distinguishes feminist-inspired from traditional designs in players' sense-making.

The skill attribution prediction was also not confirmed in the way H3 anticipated. Participants did not attribute a wider range of skills to feminist-inspired characters. “Competent” scores were high for all four characters, confirming that participants did not doubt the competence of any character but they doubted whether the design was expressing that competence honestly.

6.2 Situating the Findings in the Literature

The existing literature documents that traditional female character design contributes to female players feeling like outsiders in gaming spaces and reduced identification in female players (e.g., Fox & Tang, 2014; Paaßen et al., 2017). It also looks at the emotional pathways through which character design shapes self-efficacy and engagement (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009), and the broader question of what is made visible, how, and for whom (D'Ignazio & Klein, 2016). The findings of this study

confirm these patterns and add layers of specificity that the existing literature/reviewed does not have.

6.2.1 Confirming and Extending the Literature

The study of Behm-Morawitz and Mastro (2009) mentioned in Section 2.3.3 identifies identification and self-efficacy as the main emotional pathways through which character design affects players. The findings of this study extend this model in two directions. The aspiration position, felt appreciation without connection, has a space between identification and detachment that the existing model does not explain for. It reveals something about commercially successful traditional design: it sustains engagement through admiration even where it fails to produce identification, which means the commercial success of traditional designs cannot be read as evidence of positive player experience for all player groups.

Behm-Morawitz and Mastro's framework also assumes identification as a universal player goal. The “tool-use” data shows this assumption can not be seen uniformly, especially across gender groups, and that future research on character design effects should look for mode of engagement as a variable rather than treating identification as the default relational framework for all players.

The “tool-use mode” introduced in Section 5.3.1 offers an explanation for the gender asymmetry that prior literature does not provide. Paaßen et al. (2017) describe the male gamer stereotype and its exclusionary effects, but do not account for the engagement mode that makes male players less sensitive to those effects. Treating characters as gameplay vehicles can be seen as not simply a preference, but a culturally available position that male players can occupy without having to articulate or defend it. This explains the gender asymmetry in the data more precisely than the reviewed literature has done.

The framework by D'Ignazio and Klein (2016) asks: what is made visible, how, and for whom? This study gives these questions empirical answers/grounding at the level of player reception, rather than design intent alone. The “for whom” question is answered by the “intended audience” and “specific player” question category. The “how” question is answered by the design legibility theme: feminist-inspired designs make female characters visible through competence, history, and agency; traditional designs make them visible through visual appeal to an assumed male viewer. The “what” question is answered by the findings on practical logic: what is made visible in

traditional designs is the body first and the character second, which participants across gender detected, though with different degrees of felt impact.

The study also quantifies D'Ignazio and Klein's concept of the “view from nowhere” in design terms. Traditional design encodes an assumed viewer without declaring that assumption, presenting sexualised aesthetics as neutral stylistic choices. Male participants' defence of traditional design described *Lara*^{T} and *2B*^{T} design choices as simply “a stylistic choice” and “its a game so its fine”,which is itself an expression of this. The assumed viewer position is so naturalised that it can be occupied without awareness. Female participants, who cannot occupy that position, were consistently aware of it. The asymmetry in awareness between gender groups is not only a difference in sensitivity but a difference in whether the encoded viewer position matches one's own.

6.2.2 New Findings

None of the reviewed literature explicitly discusses the mechanism through which feminist-inspired design produces its effect at the reception level. The findings suggest that this mechanism is subtractive rather than additive. What makes *Atsu*^{F} and *Grace*^{F} design effective was not a feminist empowerment marker or a visible progressive signal. It works by removing the elements that, in traditional design, compete with the character for the viewer's attention. The interview data showed these competing elements are design features that serve an external viewer rather than the character herself: e.g. impractical or revealing clothing that contradicts the character's situation, proportions exaggerated for visual appeal, and framing or camera work that directs attention to the body. In traditional designs, these features are alongside the character's competence and history and pull focus away from them. Participants described reading “the design” rather than the person, or reading the body “first and the character second”. The feminist-inspired designs did not replace these features with something else. They did not include them, which left nothing competing with the character's identity for the viewer's attention.

This explains why *Atsu*^{F} received perfect scores on respectful and competent across all participants, not because of what her design did, but because of what it did not do. *Grace*^{F} received a perfect score on realistic for the same reason.

The implication for practice is that feminist-inspired character design does not require a feminist statement, but only the removal of certain assumptions that

traditional design has. This is a lower and more actionable threshold for the industry than the literature sometimes implies and it reframes inclusive design as a matter of removing interference rather than adding a corrective. *Atsu*^{F} also suggests that subtraction is a necessary rather than sufficient condition: it clears the ground for cultural and narrative content to register. Participant responses to her cultural specificity and purposeful design, show that addition is also at work, but it lands because nothing divides attention from it. Therefore subtraction and addition work together on different levels. *Grace*^{F} illustrates the floor that subtraction creates and *Atsu*^{F} illustrates what becomes possible above it.

6.3 Limitations

Several limitations of this study need to be mentioned.

6.3.1 Sample Size

Twelve participants are appropriate for a thematic analysis of this depth (Braun & Clarke, 2006), but the small quantitative N = 12, means that the survey findings should be seen as descriptive patterns rather than generalisable results. The gender split of 6 women and 6 men is balanced, but the absence of non-binary and other gender identities also represents a gap in the data.

6.3.2 Cultural Familiarity Asymmetry

The four characters differ in prior familiarity among participants (see Appendix C). *Lara Croft*^{T} was known to ten of twelve participants and played by five. *2B*^{T} was known to six participants and played by three, whereas *Atsu*^{F} and *Grace*^{F} were played by no one and known to five participants for *Atsu*^{F} and one participant for *Grace*^{F}. This asymmetry means that responses to *Lara*^{T} in particular may reflect known cultural associations as much as responses to the design itself.

Another limitation in the use of existing commercial characters as stimuli is, that although vignettes were edited to remove UI elements, health bars, and equipment indicators, pre-existing gameplay associations cannot be fully eliminated. The subtractive pattern in the data is difficult to explain by implied gameplay function alone, *Lara Croft*^{T} low identification scores despite her status as an iconic action heroine suggest that gaze orientation is the operative variable, but a fully controlled

design that holds the character constant and manipulates only visual framing would provide an even stronger test of this claim.

6.3.3 Participants Homogeneity

All participants recruited came from a similar demographic (aged 20-35) and cultural context. The findings are therefore contextually situated and may not transfer to players with different cultural backgrounds, gaming histories, or relationships to representation discourses.

6.3.4 My Position as the Researcher

I conducted this study through a feminist data visualization lens. While this framing provided the analytical framework, it also shapes the questions asked and the patterns that were prioritised in the analysis. I would acknowledge this as a tension rather than a flaw because feminist research explicitly positions itself in relation to its object of study, but readers should interpret the findings with this in mind.

Several procedural safeguards were also built into the study design to limit the influence of this position on the findings. The feminist framing was withheld from participants during data collection to reduce demand characteristics and avoid cueing the responses the study might be seen to favour. In the qualitative analysis, themes were concluded from participant language rather than imposed from the theoretical framework. These measures do not eliminate my positionality but they provide a basis for confidence that my core findings reflect participant responses rather than my expectation.

6.4 Future Research

There are a few directions for possible future research that come up from the findings of this study.

The “tool-use” engagement mode needs further investigation as a possible variable in character reception research. If players can engage with a character as a gameplay vehicle rather than as a figure of identification, and if this mode insulates them from design signals that exclude others, then the construct may extend beyond character design. It raises the question of whether the same insulating mode is also in other media where audiences are positioned as either inhabiting or using a

represented figure e.g. in film, advertising, or AI agents. Investigating whether the “tool-use” mode is specific to interactive media or a more general feature of how audiences relate to designed figures would be an interesting direction as well.

The finding that inclusive design is achieved by removing interfering elements rather than adding progressive markers, is empirically testable and future studies could isolate specific removals, e.g. impractical clothing, body-focused camera framing, exaggerated proportions etc., and measure the effect on player response. This would move the field from broad claims about representation toward concrete evidence of which design decisions carry which consequences, giving the industry practical guidance and not just general principles.

A single-exposure study, as used here, only captures initial responses but cannot measure how exclusion collects across hours of gameplay. A research design that follows participants through longer play sessions would provide a more ecologically valid picture of how design choices shape player experience over time.

A related direction to this is the gaming experience itself. All participants here were gamers, so their responses reflect partly not only the designs but also their exposure to the standards and industry practices those designs represent. Comparing experienced gamers with non-gamers to the same stimuli would help separate design-dependent effects from convention-dependent ones.

6.5 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine how contrasting approaches to character visualisation, traditional versus feminist-inspired, shape player interpretations, emotional response, and sense-making processes of mixed gender adult players.

Feminist-inspired designs enable character reading by removing interpretive interference rather than by adding complexity. They also produce identification rather than aspiration in female players, and they are read as broadly inclusive rather than narrowly targeted. Traditional designs hinder character reading, produce felt exclusion in female players, and are perceived as addressed to a specific assumed audience, one that male players can inhabit without noticing and female players cannot inhabit without awareness.

The gender asymmetry in responses to traditional design is more structural rather than a difference in sensitivity. As sections 5.3.1 and 6.2 describe male players can and consistently do engage with characters as gameplay tools, a position that insulates them from features that exclude players who engage through identification. This explains why the same design choices produce different responses and why commercial success cannot be read as evidence of inclusive reception.

The main practical implication is that feminist-inspired character design does not need a declaration of intent or an overtly progressive aesthetic. It requires only the removal of the outdated assumptions that traditional designs still encode: that the player is male, that the character's appearance exists for that player, and that female character competence should be secondary to her visual appeal. When those assumptions are removed, as in the designs of *Atsu*^{F} and *Grace*^{F}, participants across genders read the character more coherently and perceive design as respectful.

This returns to D'Ignazio and Klein's (2016) framework and question: what is made visible, how, and for whom? This study shows that these are not just abstract questions but can be empirically traced, with answers encoded in the reactions of players. Every design choice is a choice about which viewer to imagine on the other side of the screen. The findings suggest that when designers imagine a wider and more diverse viewer, players across the gender spectrum respond with greater engagement, consistency, and trust.

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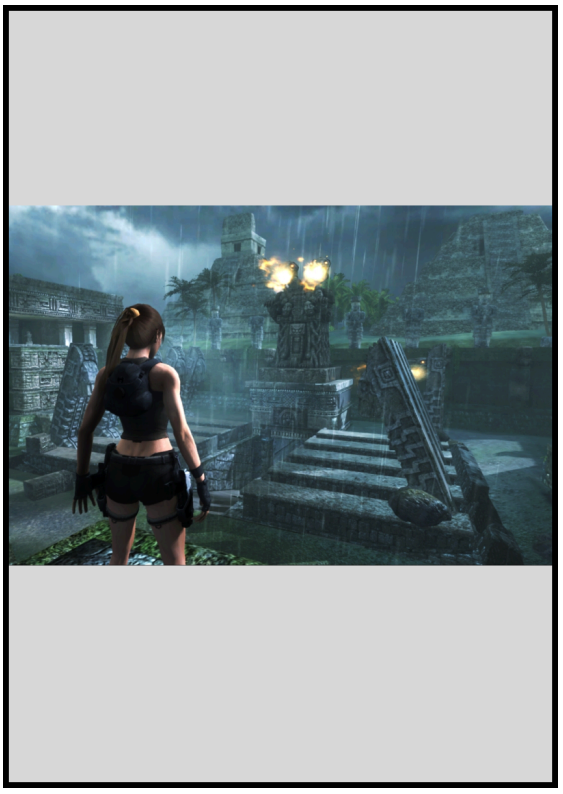
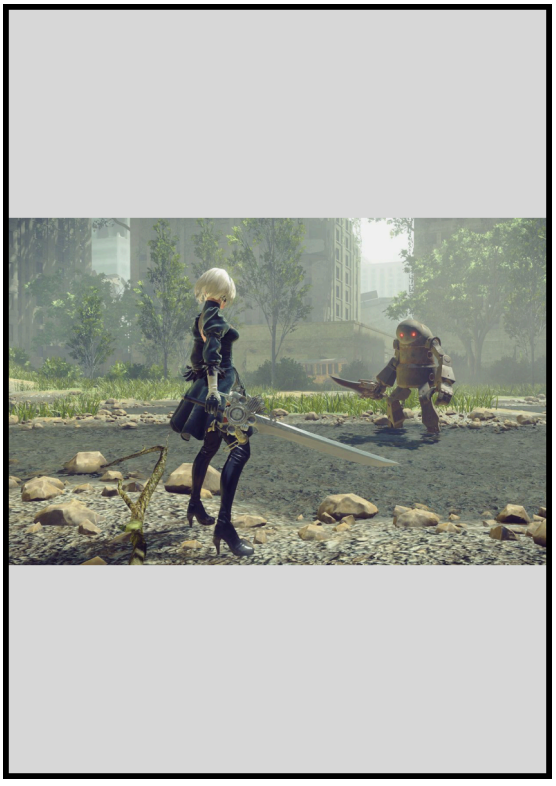
Appendix

A) Character Vignettes

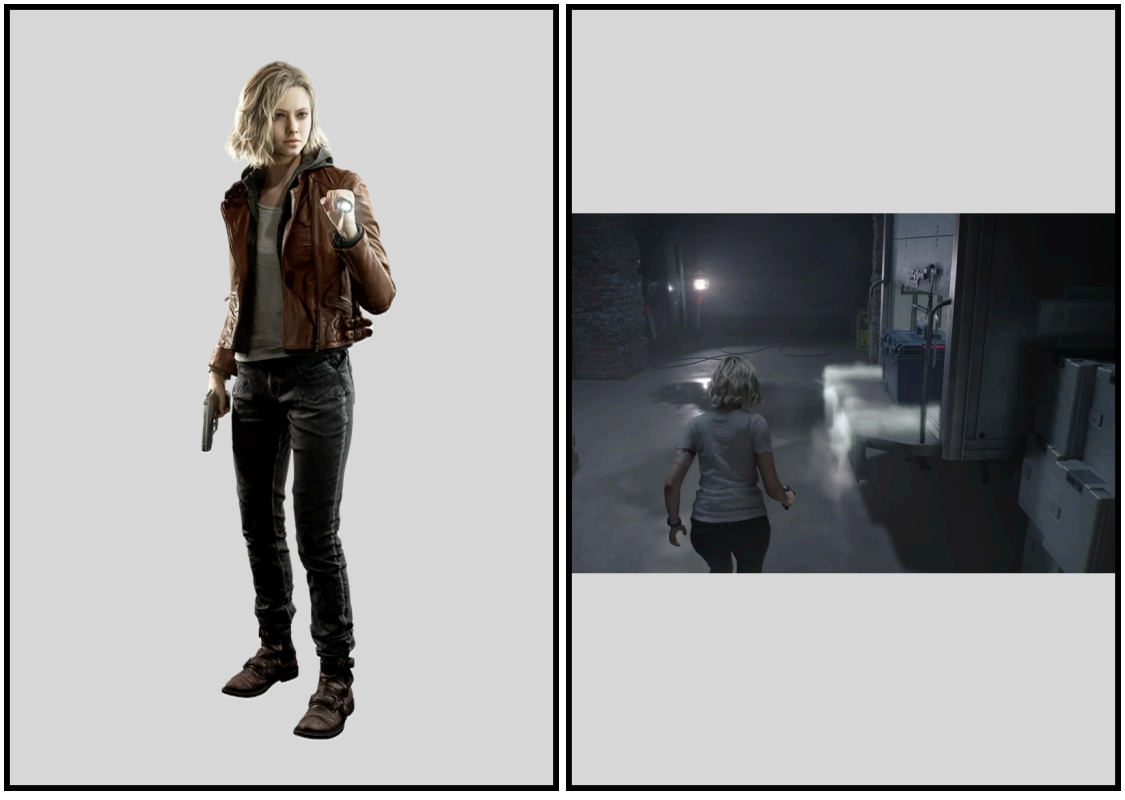


Lara Croft



2B

Atsu



B) Vignette Interview Questions:

After Each Vignette

Interpretation : Who is this character?

- What is your first impression of this character?
- What kind of person do you think this character is, based on what you saw?
- What do you think her role is in the game, is she a hero, a sidekick, a love interest, something else?
- What does her appearance tell you about her personality or backstory?
- Would you want to play as this character? Why or why not?

Emotional Response : How does this character make you feel?

- How did you feel watching this character?
- Did you feel connected to her in any way? Why or why not?
- Was there anything about her design or presentation that made you uncomfortable or that you particularly liked?
- Do you feel this character represents someone like you, or someone very different from you?

Sense-Making : Where does this character fit?

- What skills or abilities would you expect this character to have, based on how she looks?
- Does she feel like she belongs in this genre or setting? Why or why not?
- Who do you think this game was designed for?
- *What kind of story do you think this character is part of?*

Asked After All Vignettes

Comparative Questions : Which character felt most realistic or believable, and why?

- Did any of the characters surprise you in terms of how they were designed or presented?
- Which character felt most realistic or believable to you, and why?
- Looking at all four characters together, what differences stand out most to you?
- Do you think the way these characters are designed matters? Why or why not?
- Has seeing these characters changed or reinforced any assumptions you had about female characters in games?

Closing Question

- Is there anything else you noticed about any of the characters that you would like to mention?

C) Participants Character Knowledge pre Interview

Participant	Gender	Lara Croft	2B (NieR)	Atsu (Ghost of Yotei)	Grace (RE Requiem)
Participant 1	W	Knows / not played	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge
Participant 2	M	**Played**	No prior knowledge	Knows / not played *(recognised as Ghost of Tsushima successor)*	No prior knowledge
Participant 3	M	No prior knowledge *(recognised after Interview was done)*	No prior knowledge	**Knows / not played** *(recognised Ghost of Yotei)*	No prior knowledge
Participant 4	W	Knows / not played	**Played**	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge
Participant 5	W	Knows / not played *(seen online)*	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge
Participant 6	M	**Played**	**Played** *(recognised NieR)*	Knows / not played *(could not name, recognised aesthetic)*	Knows / not played
Participant 7	M	**Played** *(Underworld, Shadow, Rise)*	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge

Participant 8	W	No prior knowledge *(recognised after Interview was done)*	No prior knowledge	Knows / not played *(watched boyfriend play Ghost of Yotei)*	No prior knowledge
Participant 9	M	Knows / not played *(recognised design)*	**Played** *(recognised NieR)*	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge
Participant 10	M	Knows / not played *(watched Let's plays, never played)*	No prior knowledge	Knows / not played *(saw trailer, on wishlist)*	No prior knowledge
Participant 11	W	**Played** *(some games, also YouTube essay on 2B)*	Knows / not played *(YouTube essay, played NieR)*	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge
Participant 12	W	**Played** *(grew up with Tomb Raider)*	Knows / not played *(had not played yet, knew of it)*	No prior knowledge	No prior knowledge