NAVIGATING WOMEN'S CULTURAL REPRESENTATION THROUGH VIDEO GAMES IN THE OBAMA ERA

by

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ABSTRACT

Navigating Women's Cultural Representation

Through Video Games in the Obama Era

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While the representations of women in video games have remained disappointingly negative since the 1980s, America's political shift from the presidencies of George W. Bush to Barack Obama in 2007 had important cultural implications, particularly impacting the representation of women in popular culture. This thesis will examine the cultural depictions of women from 2002-2011, providing a particular focus on the unique cultural factors prevalent during this time period—including the expansion of pornography, a conservative cultural backlash to Obama, and the rapid deterioration of 'political correctness'—that impacted how images of women in video games were received. Analyzing the cultural atmosphere of this time period will demonstrate whether or not Obama's democratic presidency had an impact on the representation of women on American culture as a whole. An analysis of the first two installments of the video game series *BioShock* and *Dead Space* will demonstrate that women are first valued for their sexual availability while simultaneously being discursively excluded from any cultural agency. Once Obama takes office and makes several advances toward gender equality, *BioShock 2* and *Dead Space 2* join other reactionary products of popular culture at the time by depicting how women abuse their power to threaten men.

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IN A DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXT

In her assessment of the cultural impact of the HBO television show *GIRLS*, April Householder suggests that "as feminism has filtered into mainstream consciousness, Millennials have come of age in a time when feminist theories have been absorbed by pop culture in a way that makes Beyonce's lyrics almost indistinguishable from the writings of Simone de Beauvoir" (19). If this is true, and as feminist concerns about the treatment of women in the media have become more mainstream, I am prompted to wonder whether one medium in particular—video games—has been impacted by this more feminist-minded culture. Figures like Belinda Van Sickle, president and CEO of the *Women in Games International* advocacy group, argue that nothing has changed. While discussing the sexist objectification of women in games, Van Sickle claimed that "it's boring that we're continuing to have this conversation…I started in the industry nine years ago and it seems like we're having the same conversation with the same responses from industry insiders, gamers and the media. It needs to be more substantive." (Associated Press).

However, the question of whether or not video games perpetuate demeaning depictions of women has increasingly been the focus of certain empirical studies. In the study by Lynch et al. entitled, "Sexy, Strong, and Secondary: A Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years," sexualized representations of women appear to be on the decline. Lynch, et al. examined 571 video games released from 1983-2014 that featured women with speaking roles. They examined whether or not each female character's sexuality was used as

their defining characteristic, for example when "female characters had prominent breasts, emphasized buttocks, and provocative clothes" (567). The study then noted the larger trends over time to determine whether or not this form of sexual objectification had increased over the last three decades. The study found that although "throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the industry introduced more sexualized female characters than other periods,…data reveal a decrease in the sexualization of female characters after 2006" (576). Therefore, "a decrease in sexualization from 2007 to 2014 suggests that the widespread, overt sexualization of females is on the decline" (580).

This is good news; however, it is important to point out one caveat offered by this study: "Video games may now feature female characters more positively and the number of playable female characters has generally increased; however, over time the percentage of primary female characters has not grown. Other scholars found that female characters most frequently appear as secondary or tertiary characters…[and] the sexualization of nonprimary characters underscores their secondary role by reducing their importance to their physical appearance" (577). This comment indicates that demeaning representations—in this case sexualization—remain an issue for women occupying secondary roles in video games—which is, of course, the vast majority of female characters in video games. Furthermore, the study's sample indicated that "over time the percentage of primary female characters has not grown…as only 42% of characters were primary in the most recent years of our sample—down from 52% in the earliest years of our sample" (577). This statistic is supported by other studies that "have consistently shown that at least since the 1990s, the percentage of female characters in video games has remained steady at around 15%" (Gittleson). While the sexualization may not be increasing, women's place in video game narratives is still largely absent from view. Lastly, this study only examined sexualization,

leaving a host of other issues facing women's representation unaddressed, including violence against women, the removal of agency, illegitimating female power, and naturalizing women's resignation to subservient roles. Clearly, there is still room for improvement.

While scholars have acknowledged that the representations of women in video games has remained consistently negative over time, American culture has certainly not remained static since the 1990s; the many cultural facets that have changed over the years influence how we interpret those images of women in games. President Barack Obama has had a significant impact on the country's political atmosphere, making considerable strides towards women's rights and gender equality. Have video games been impacted by the cultural reverberations of his Democratic administration? I am interested in whether or not the rise of liberal policies under president Obama had any effect on the American culture at large, specifically in relation to representations of gender. I will examine this effect as it is manifested in the first two installments of the video game series *BioShock* and *Dead Space*. The production and release of each original game and their accompanying sequels span from 2002-2011; as such, these games will provide an effective comparison of American culture before and during Obama's administrations, each one acting as a microcosm of culture and presenting a snapshot of America at the time of their release.

Studies show that "people learn more from media than any other single source of information. So if we want to understand what's going on in our society in the 21st century, we have to understand media" (Newsom). To that end, I will collect evidence from multiple cultural arenas in order to examine the various forms of female representation during this time period. This will allow me to consider how the political climate operates in concert with other cultural products to produce knowledge about women. I will then analyze how those cultural factors

manifest within each video game to impact the design of their female characters, as well as how these games both reflect and contribute to the American cultural environment.

Cultural Factors Shaping the Reception of Women in Video Games

When examining the attitudes toward women and gender equality over time, this decade in American history seems to exhibit a decisive improvement for women's social standing. Referencing studies conducted by the Council on Contemporary Families, Alanna Vagianos points out that "other than the low point from 1996 to 2000, Americans' support for progressive gender roles has increased consistently across the board" (Vagianos). The study created a Gender Attitudes Scale measuring the degree of gender egalitarian attitudes across time on a four point scale. This scale indicated that the American support of progressive gender roles rose from 1.5 points in 1977 to 2.8 points in 2012. (Vagianos). While these results provide positive indications that Americans have an increasingly positive attitude toward women, whether or not these attitudes are reflected in their representations in the popular culture is another question entirely. Before detailing the relevance of video game studies for this thesis, I'd like to elaborate on the far reaching cultural influences that shape how women are valued from 2002-2011, including the political climate, the influence of pornographic images, advancements in gaming technology, and the waning influence of political correctness. These representations will, in turn, impact what images of women are included in video games developed during this time, as well as how we interpret those images.

While the presidency of Barack Obama has certainly been historically monumental, it has not been without controversy. From the time of Obama's campaigning in the 2008 election primaries and throughout both of his terms, Americans expected an incredible shift toward

liberal ideologies significantly different from the conservative leadership of George W. Bush and Dick Cheney. Many expected that Obama's election would signal a new post-racial America more accepting of diverse populations. While steps toward such a vision have been taken, there has also been an increased effort from conservatives to counteract the liberal policies and attitudes that spread with Obama's popularity. This backlash stemmed from a deep-seated anxiety and discomfort on the part of conservatives that their way of life would be forever altered and their ideologies—along with their power in America—irreversibly damaged. This response had a drastic impact on the cultural products created during the near decade of Obama's presidency, including film, television, music, and—as will be the focus of this thesis—video games. This backlash impacted the larger American culture by contributing to an atmosphere of worsening attitudes towards and representations of women in popular culture.

One of the most pervasive culture factors that influence attitudes about women is pornography. While commercial porn has been around for quite a while, it was the invention of the internet that secured its ubiquity. Porn has never been so widely available as it is now because "before the Internet, porn meant foil-wrapped magazines on the top shelves of service station newsagents, dark, plain-fronted shops full of erotic literature and pay-per-view satellite channels…It was hushed, hidden and private. It was something you did in secret" (Jackson). But during the 2002-2013 time period, the pervasiveness and consumption of internet pornography expanded considerably. Furthermore, the "emergence of YouTube in 2005 brought this experience of freely uploading and downloading content, sharing and consuming digital video into the mainstream. Porn copycats, what are now known as the Tube sites, like YouPorn, RedTube, TubeGalore and the like quickly proliferated" (McCullough). This time period is important in porn's development because these Tube sites allowed a significant amount of online

pornography to be viewed for free, expanding the degree to which "the internet has given everyone easy access to pornography. Pornography these days is not just accessible, it's really inescapable, and therefore more acceptable, and the language and images of porn have become mainstream" (Kilbourne). In 2008, 92% of Americans had internet access, a number which drastically expanded in the last decade and which has only grown since (Berberick 3). Furthermore, "there's somewhere north of a billion people that use the internet every single day. That's just a reach that hasn't existed before in terms of media" (Newsom). When examining porn specifically, *Daily Infographic* reported that in 2013 the porn industry made 2.84 billion dollars a year, 2 out of 3 porn viewers were men, and 12% of the internet is dedicated to pornographic content (Willingham). The vast majority of the public has access to the internet, much of which is dedicated to the trafficking of pornography. This is important because porn's impact on the culture is demonstrated by the fact that its influence does not remain solely within pornographic material because "pay-per-view television and the internet removed the final barriers between consumer and product. Once these barriers were removed, images of women in popular media not only grew increasingly suggestive, but they began to mirror attitudes, body language, and behaviors seen in actual pornographic fare" (Levande 296). Because porn's prevalence expanded throughout our culture, its positioning and mistreatment of women became just as pervasive.

Why is pornography damaging to the culture, and especially to women? The answer lies chiefly in its violence and domination. According to Gail Dines in "Growing Up in a Pornified Culture," one study that examined 304 pornographic scenes found that "90% contained at least one aggressive act if both physical and verbal aggression were combined" ("Growing Up"). Another study from Italy found that "boys were '5 times more likely' to view porn than their

female counterparts, adding to the idea that watching pornography is part of socially constructing adolescent masculinity" (Gutierrez 14). Since the vast majority of pornography is targeted at straight males and, as statistics indicate, the vast majority of porn's audience is men, "pornography harms all women because it defines women as subordinate to men. Pornography violates and possess women, and by sexualizing this concept male dominance becomes perceived as sexy" (13). It is "by teaching young boys that women are sexually subordinate—objects that can be violated and humiliated for sexual enjoyment—pornography creates a violent view of sexuality" (16). This male-centered and degrading view of sex is made even more dangerous "because pornography sexualizes violence, it renders violence invisible—extremely violent and abusive behavior is seen as 'sex,' and not seen as violence" (Dines, "Putting the Text in Context" 57).

Video games are certainly not immune to the influence of pornography, especially given that "an examination of the gender representations commonly seen in gaming shows that games have taken many of the gender tropes common in other visual media and used them in their own narratives" (Friedberg 19). This idea is mirrored in "Beauty and Misogyny: Harmful cultural practices in the west," when Sheila Jeffreys describes the ways in which pornography proliferated itself into the world of fashion. Jeffreys writes that "the values of pornography, and its practices, extended outwards from magazines and movies to become the dominating values of fashion and beauty advertising, and the advertising of many other products and services," including video games (67). Just as "the pornographizing of fashion photography in its most extreme forms…has a negative impact on women in general," pornography negatively impacts the way we interpret imagery of women in video games (75). Studies like those quoted by Jared Friedberg in "Gender Games: A Content Analysis of Gender Portrayals in Modern, Narrative

Video Games" determined "that young women who continuously see their likeness in video games being imperiled or sexualized will associate these tropes with their gender. Individuals who accept these representations of women will come to view and understand their personal interactions with these media portrayals in mind" (19). Given the incredible increase in porn's distribution and accessibility after 2005, its ubiquity becomes that much more influential in shaping how we view and value women in games, as well as how women value themselves. It was during the time period in which *BioShock* and *Dead Space* were developed that saw an explosion in the availability of pornographic images of women online—and spread throughout the rest of the culture—and those images to a great extent indicate how women are to be interpreted and valued in other contexts.

Another reason I chose to study video games as the textual sources for this thesis is because the 2002-2011 time period saw a drastic enhancement in the quality of video game graphics and design. Due to technological advancements both in video game production software and consoles like the Playstation 3 and Xbox 360, video games began exhibiting both cinematic and realistic qualities, which significantly increased their popularity and appeal. Realism in games has even been addressed in the popular culture as a negative aspect of gaming. As *Fox News* comments, having been "spurred by technological advances that have pushed the envelope of processor speeds, games like "Call of Duty: Ghosts,"…offer their legions of fans an increasingly immersive and realistic experience. But in an era when the horrors of war are brought so vividly to anyone inclined to purchase,…the question becomes, "How real is too real?" " (Jaccarino). This question reveals the anxiety that gaming realism can have negative impacts on gamers because it can too vividly recreate traumatizing experiences during gameplay. But if games include photorealistic representations of women in negative ways, it becomes much

easier for a gamer to transfer those attitudes about women into the real world. Furthermore, if pornography is dictating how those women should be viewed, it is a particularly pernicious and violent association that video game realism is propagating.

Yet another factor that impacts the cultural attitude toward women during these years relates to political correctness (PC). Similar to the poor representation consistent in games over time, sexism certainly has not waned across the country. However, what changes during this time period is the comfort people have in expressing derogatory comments about women. This comfort partly stems from the conservative attack on political correctness.

Laurence Berg defines Political Correctness as using "language that's more correct—not 'politically correct'—that more accurately represents reality" (Price). However, the concept has been used in a negative context as "a reactionary term…created by people who were worried by [social] changes…that affected their everyday understanding of the world in ways that pointed out their role in creating or reproducing dominance and subordination" (Price). Robert Folsom charts the "Demise of Political Correctness" which really began its decline during this time period following the rise of Anti-Immigration rhetoric in 2003, the Birther movement in 2008, and the founding of the Tea Party in 2009. Despite a slight increase in 2012, the popularity of political correctness has never been able to surpass its peak in 1999 during the Clinton administration (Folsom). As the PC trend lost popularity, "political correctness and the collective tendencies it epitomizes have given way to a new normal of exclusion, polarization, impenitence and more wide-open speech," including a relaxed stance toward the open degradation of women (Folsom).

We can see a refusal to be politically correct growing in sentiments from many different public arenas. For example, in the 2005 *Fox News* address on the idea of saying "Merry

Christmas" instead of "Happy Holidays", correspondent John Gibson claims "that the political correctness police have come down on Christmas" (Gibson). Further evidence of the stigma placed on political correctness could be seen in the 2010 controversy involving school textbooks in Texas. One "Rasmussen Poll shows that 60 percent of Americans with children in elementary schools say most school textbooks are more concerned with presenting information in a politically correct manner than in accuracy" (Mephibosheth). Comments like this contribute to the cultural discourse that opposes political correctness and accuracy, suggesting that being PC does not involve telling the whole truth. Political correctness has even been cast as an oppressive political force. As Michael Snyder asserts in "20 Outrageous Examples That Show How Political Correctness is Taking Over America," political correctness belongs to the "thought Nazis", and "the goal of the "thought Nazis" is to control what people say to one another, because eventually that will shape what most people think and what most people believe" (Snyder). While this author recognizes the importance of language in shaping cultural concepts and knowledge, he attributes politically correct and non-offensive language to an oppressive force akin to Hitler's military or Orwell's thought police.

As it becomes more culturally appropriate to abandon political correctness, so too does it become acceptable to make discriminatory and offensive comments about any other population out in public. This trend can be seen in the political arena when Rush Limbaugh commented that "I'm a huge supporter of women. What I'm not is a supporter of liberalism. Feminism is what I oppose. Feminism has led women astray. I love the women's movement — especially when walking behind it" (Foster Jr.); or when Don Imus referred to the Rutger's University women's basketball team as "nappy-headed hos" (Chiachiere); and when, in a segment on *Fox News*, Bill Cunningham told Tamara Holder to "shut up. Know your role and shut your mouth" (Misener).

This greater public tolerance for derogatory language produces an environment in which there is no fear of reprisal for the open harassment and abuse of women. This is an attitude that will permeate each of the years I am examining, and which will contribute to the different forms of poor female representation given that, without political correctness, those representations are deemed culturally permissible.[1]

The consequences of the cultural proliferation of pornography and an anti-politically correct rhetoric culminated with #GamerGate. In 2012, Anita Sarkeesian began a "series of videos that would examine the way women are represented in games. The project was called *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*" (Sarkeesian and Cross 106). However, her initiative soon became entangled in the #GamerGate controversy as "all [her] social media sites were flooded with threats of rape, violence, sexual assault, and death" (107). The #GamerGate—which had begun targeting its harassment at another critic—Zoe Quinn—was "an anti-feminism campaign that wore an 'ethics in gaming journalism' mask to cover up its misogyny and harassment" (Kleeman). Even though male critics were involved in addressing issues of misogyny in games, the controversy still saw the "female developer receiving 14 times as many outraged tweets as the male journalist" (Wofford). This proves that these hateful attacks were a direct attack on women's involvement in video games.

Many of the comments Sarkeesian received suggested that women have no place in video games: "That isn't misogyny. It's just that computers, and video games as well, were never meant for women;" "Anita is not a gamer. REAL gamers don't nick pick things that don't matter to the overall enjoyment of the game;" and "Women don't belong in video games" (Sarkeesian

[1] The further collapse of political correctness is embodied more recently in the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald Trump. His stance against political correctness secured his support from 77% of Republicans. This validated his public expression of almost every form of discrimination, which many ignored by claiming he was just "telling it like it is" (LaFata). Even though Trump expressed almost every form of discrimination, his anti-politically correct rhetoric was nationally validated upon his election as president.

and Cross 117). Though this example originates from a population with radical views about women and gaming, their existence still proves that large segments of the gaming community—and the culture at large—remain misogynistic and threatening.

These attacks were also impacted by the cultural permeation of pornography. As Sarkeesian describes, part of her harassment included "pornographic images [that] were drawn and fabricated of my likeness being raped by video game characters. These images were posted publicly on various websites and sent to me repeatedly, often disguised as fanmail" (107). Sarkeesian notes the impact of the growing influence of pornography, stating that in pornographic scenes, as well as in video games that use the same imagery, "the sexualized women are mainly there to be looked at, consumed. It shouldn't surprise us if real women gamers are in turn looked at in much the same way" (122). And this is precisely how this subset of male gamers treats women online during these years.

Cultural factors like politics, pornography, technology, and language each intertwine to produce a unique cultural environment during the time period of 2002-2013. With enhanced video game graphics making video games more believable, along with the prevalence of pornographic imagery spreading throughout the culture and dictating the way we should view women, we can begin to understand how "video game characters are an agent of gender socialization in youth popular culture, even for those who are not avid gamers" (Dill and Thill 861). Both video game developers and pornographic distributors target young male audiences; as such, images of women in both formats will often appear strikingly similar and perpetuate the same message of male domination. Given the rapid increase in accessibility of porn—through the internet—and video games—through different consoles, computers, and mobile devices—people are trained to view women as primarily sexual, and the increasing realism of these women in

video games makes it that much easier to transfer those attitudes from the digital world to reality. Furthermore, the anticipation that a Democratic president would pursue liberal legislation created a conservative reaction that furthered the collapse of political correctness, validating those who argue that this sexualization is natural and acceptable.

Using Video Games to Navigate Cultural Anxieties

In order to explore the cultural representations of women from 2002-2011, I will examine two video game series that belong to the survival horror genre: *BioShock*, which was first released in 2007, and *Dead Space*, released in 2008. Each of these series contains three entries that span this significant cultural period in America's history. For the purposes of this thesis, I will examine the first two entries in each series: *BioShock* and *Dead Space* were developed during George W. Bush's second term, and as such they reflect the American culture before the 2007 primaries. The second entries in each series, *BioShock 2* and *Dead Space 2*, were released in 2010 and 2011 respectively; as such, these games were created during the 2007 primaries and the first term of president Obama. This time period challenged traditional ideas of women's place in society: Hillary Clinton led an influential bid for the Democratic nomination and inspired more women to run for public office, and Obama made several steps toward improving women's political and cultural clout in America using policy and appointments. Both of these game series were produced simultaneously by different companies; however, they each reflect cultural constructions of women in different ways. Each entry was created in uniquely different cultural moments; as such, they are appropriate for this thesis because they are each a microcosm of American culture. I will examine how these games both reflect and contribute to the wider discourse on gender in America, as well as the implications behind those problematic

constructions. However, it is first important to understand why video games have the potential to be such a powerful cultural medium.

Video games have reached a new height of popularity in America. It is reported that "63% of U.S. households are home to at least one person who plays video games regularly" (Essential Facts 2016 2). Their popularity has also created an incredibly lucrative industry. Video games grew from earning 3.7 billion dollars in 1996 (Essential Facts 2005 11) to earning 15.4 billion dollars in 2013 (Essential Facts 2016 12). Video games are also very clearly not the exclusive domain of men, given that "59% of gamers are male and 41% are female," (3). Video games are so pervasive in American culture partly because they are—along with the phones, computers, and other technology that inundates our lives—a digital medium, and that "digital space is embedded in the larger societal, cultural, subjective, economic, and imaginary constructions of lived experience and the systems within which we exist and operate" (Mesch 55). With their high degree of distribution, video games have become a form of mass media, and these "media narratives do have a powerful cultivation effect helping to shape cultural attitudes and opinions" ("Damsel in Distress Part 2"). Furthermore, games not only respond to and participate in a society's anxieties, but they also have a hand in predicting and prompting changes in cultural attitudes. Video games are a component of "mass media entertainment [that] doesn't just reflect our culture, it also works to create it…[Games can] in particular serve as a form of cultural permission, which help entrench toxic preexisting attitudes and opinions" ("Damsel in Distress Part 3"). By directing the player to act out a particular set of values during gameplay and effectively condition players to embody those positions, video games have the potential to heavily influence how cultural attitudes will evolve.

Additionally, *BioShock* and *Dead Space* in particular are effective at influencing cultural anxieties because they belong to the survival horror genre; this is a subset of the larger horror genre that is marked not only by depicting horrifying scenarios, disgusting monsters, and a terrifying atmosphere, but often features gameplay mechanics such as a "lack of health and ammunition, high-pressure puzzles and an intense sense of pressure based on overwhelming odds" (Habel and Kooyman 3). The latter contributes to the "survival" element and creates more terrifying gameplay by making the player unable to confront every situation adequately, often forcing them to flee to safety—which is itself often difficult to accomplish. At a theoretical level, this type of game is effective for examining how cultural anxieties shape video games because "by exteriorizing doubts and anguish…the horror genre helps us to understand and express these feelings" (Perron 3). This genre of game morphs a culture's fears into a physical form and forces the player to interact with them. As evidenced by the representations of women in each of the games I will be examining, contemporary survival horror video games construct women as either devoid of any legitimate authority or as complicit in crafting the genre's stressful and horrific situations to the detriment and danger of male protagonists.

If video games have so large a cultural weight as to claim billions of dollars each year and to influence cultural perceptions, why is it that we have only recently started to see more critical approaches to their content? The answer lies in technology. Goldberg and Larsson argue that since "video games are highly dependent on, and to a certain extent an offshoot of, advances in computing and digital technology...games have traditionally been engaged with and discussed as products of technology rather than products of culture" (8). Indeed, even today a large number of video game reviews being written focus on their design and production elements, prizing a game's technical achievements over its narratives or characters. Many popular and influential

game developers have even made remarks that deemphasize the importance of a game's story or themes: Ken Levine, the creator of *BioShock* and a well-known figure in the gaming industry, has claimed that when making a game, "I don't start with Story, because games are *not* story. Games are gameplay. Games are interactive" (Gillen). Additionally, John Carmack, who made the widely popular *Doom 3D*, commented that "story in a game is like a story in a porn movie. It's expected to be there, but it's not that important (Johnston 179). Not only do Carmack's comments indicate his disinterest in crafting a meaningful story, but his allusion to pornography also hints at the misogyny and violence toward women that characterizes many video games and that, like much of pornography, is designed for a straight male audience. So it is no surprise that the history of video game scholarship has neglected a critical approach to the content of their narratives when its creators—who in themselves are hugely influential not only in shaping public opinion, but in creating the narratives of their own video games—do not view the stories within a game as worthy of proper development.

Fortunately, however, there has recently been a "newfound willingness among both game designers and critics to engage with games in the context of the world they exist in, as opposed to considering them in a vacuum devoid of social or political forces" (Goldberg and Larsson 10). This interest has spanned political, academic, critical, and scientific disciplines, some of which I would like to highlight.

In her critique of the impact of technology, N. Katherine Hayles notes that "research indicates that the small habitual actions associated with web interactions—clicking the mouse, moving a cursor, etc.—may be extraordinarily effective in retraining (or more accurately, repurposing) our neural circuitry, so that the changes are not only psychological but physical as well" (2). In this same vein, repeated video game play—which requires the physical direction

from the player to drive narratives forward—can have a significant impact on a player's beliefs and behaviors. She goes on to say that as technology becomes pervasive in our culture, consequences include "faster communication, more intense and varied information streams…and more interaction of language with code. These environmental changes have significant neurological consequences, many of which are now becoming evident in young people and to a lesser degree in almost everyone who interacts with digital media on a regular basis" (11). Hayles' discussion of technology, which certainly applies to video games, is a useful way of considering the lasting psychological impacts that games can have on players and on the larger culture. Thinking of games as "social products that embody power relationships and social goals and structures" (Mesch 53), as well as the impact they can have as pieces of technology that saturate our lives, it is easy to see how video games should be critically examined so that the ideologies they employ are not passively implanted in the gamers they reach.

The effects of video games on culture are not only noticed by a select few on a theoretical level. Empirical studies have also emerged that attempt to quantitatively assess a video game's impact on its player. Some of these studies specifically intersect with feminist concerns about violence against women. As seen in the study by Dill, Brown, and Collins, "Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment" subjected players to sexist video game content in order to test how such exposure impacted their beliefs. Afterward, when asked to describe the game's characters, "teens described female characters as being sexually promiscuous, wearing revealing clothing and as thin with large breasts. In contrast, they viewed typical male characters as physically powerful, dominant, violent, mean and cocky" (1402). These findings concluded that "media images of demeaned women cause men to advocate keeping women ''in their place," while they cause women to advocate for social

justice" (1406). For men, the long-term exposure to sexist content and gender stereotypes also garnered greater tolerance of sexual harassment and a greater acceptance of rape myths (1403). Games designed with such negative content have critical cultural implications, for instance "if a boy learns that males are powerful and dominant and women are objects to be subjugated and used, these ideas will take root in his developing social conscience and broadly influence his attitudes and behaviors towards women" (1403). In this way, sexist video game content and pornography communicate the same message. Such a study proves the significant impact that video games as a medium can have on their audience, as well as demonstrates that the scientific community has begun developing an interest in video games beyond their supposed shallow entertainment value.

Methodology and Organization

There are many different methodologies available to use when approaching the study of video games. However, I have found that combining the approaches made by Anita Sarkeesian and William Knoblauch is most effective.

Of the many authors that place video games under a critical feminist lens, I would consider the best example of video game scholarship to be the work of Anita Sarkeesian—the same woman harassed during #GamerGate. Her non-profit program, *Feminist Frequency*, creates content that examines the treatment of women in media. Her video series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* is particularly effective at examining a large range of feminist concerns and how they are handled across an incredibly diverse range of commercial video games. She has examined topics including women as background decoration, women used as rewards, objectification through the clothing women are designed to wear, body language and the male

gaze, and the damsel in distress trope. The structure and depth of her feminist cultural analyses that treat video games as texts will be a useful methodological model for considering how the first two games in the *BioShock* and *Dead Space* series each engage with their respective cultural climates to reify attitudes about women.

William Knoblauch's essay, "Game Over? A Cold War Kid Reflects On Apocalyptic Video Games," effectively incorporates the cultural implications of a video game and provides a useful model of how to situate a game in a particular historical context. His essay reflects on his childhood playing video games like *Missile Command* and how certain games at the time were impacted by the Cold War. He argues that, "like films and books, video games are cultural texts. They say something about the society in which they were made" (Knoblauch 187). He references several social and political occurrences that influenced the American cultural consciousness at the time, including the Cuban Missile Crisis, Ronald Regan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and the disbanding of the Soviet Union, among others. In his discussion of apocalyptic video games, Knoblauch asserts that we can look to cultural influences as having a significant impact on the content and themes that video games will incorporate. He even points to the ways in which video games directly incorporated the events mentioned above into their narratives, for example in the way that 1984's *Wargames* featured Regan's SDI technology. In his analyses, Knoblauch begins by situating a particular game within the time period in which it was developed and released, and he explains how the video game both reflects that time period as well as navigates and reacts to concerns embedded within the culture. As seen in Knoblauch's analysis, this method has proven an effective way to analyze the potential sources and implications of video games on culture. For this thesis I will couple Knoblauch's method of cultural historical studies with the style and depth of Sarkeesian's feminist media critiques in

order to consider how video games both reflect and perpetuate cultural anxieties. I will begin by examining how women are represented in the culture at large within a given time frame, and then discuss how each video game produced during that time can be seen reflecting this culture and engaging with certain ideas about women.

This thesis will consist of two chapters and will be organized chronologically. The first chapter will deal with the time period leading up to Obama's first election. Ranging roughly from 2002 to 2008, the American culture's attitude toward women is reflected in the conservative leadership of President Bush and Vice-President Cheney. Evidence from music, movies, politics, and advertising all indicate that women were valued for their youth and sexual availability. Furthermore, this time period is steeped in an obsession with a physical beauty standard that both precedes this era and dominates the culture today. This chapter will then analyze how such a cultural climate impacted *BioShock* and *Dead Space*, specifically in the ways that each game employs ideas about physical beauty and women's sexuality, as well as women's duplicity and their supposed connection to nature. While *BioShock* critiques conservatism at one level, it consistently exploits women's bodies as commodities valued only for their sexual availability or for the economic abuse to be made from them. *Dead Space*, on the other hand, only features a very small number of female characters that take part in the narrative, but each of them are constructed to be deceptive and threatening to the male protagonist.

The second chapter of this thesis will contrast the first by examining how America's cultural atmosphere was impacted by the 2007 primaries and Obama's first term. As the elections grew closer, Obama contended with presidential hopeful Hillary Clinton, both of whom promised a drastic departure from the previous two conservative administrations. Both candidates, however, promised to make substantial strides for women. Once Obama was elected,

he began following up on those promises. As a result, the fear of women gaining power over men began to fester even more; this fear can be seen in almost all forms of media produced from 2008-2011. *BioShock 2* and *Dead Space 2* respond to this fear by portraying the horrors caused by women in power, specifically faulting them as grotesque and failed mothers. This comparison then demonstrates that, despite a liberal cultural shift initiated by Obama's political administration, the cultural response reacted by strengthening its negative concepts about women, particularly women in leadership.

Though the images in the video games themselves may not have changed much over the years, the culture in which they are presented has certainly undergone significant changes that impact how those images are received and interpreted. As this thesis will prove, video games are strongly influenced by the larger culture that produces them. When used to promote damaging, exploitative ideas about women, "gaming offers players the unique opportunity to use or exploit female bodies themselves. This forces gamers to become complicit with developers in making sexual objectification a participatory activity" ("Background Decoration Part 1"). On the flip side, games can help readjust attitudes because "just as their interactivity makes them a powerful tool for reinforcing male entitlement, so too could that interactivity be harnessed to disrupt antiquated gender dynamics and engage us with game mechanics that explore more equitable interactions between people of all genders" ("Women as Reward"). This progress, however, cannot begin until we start taking video games more seriously and invest in the study of their narratives, characters, and gameplay, as well as the implications of their design choices.

CHAPTER 1

ESTABLISHING WOMEN'S PLACE IN EARLY 21ST CENTURY CULTURE THROUGH *BIOSHOCK* AND *DEAD SPACE*

In this chapter, I will examine America's cultural atmosphere from 2002-2008, citing examples from politics, advertising, and television to understand the discourse surrounding women in this period. I will then discuss how these events influenced the representation of women in two survival horror video games released during this season in America's history, *BioShock* and *Dead Space*.

When considering the cultural attitudes toward women at the beginning of the 21st century, it is important to begin by examining the cultural influence of the political climate established by president Bush. A significant amount of legislation put into action during Bush's administration had detrimental effects on women. Though Bush portrayed himself as an advocate for women, he promoted policies preventing women from receiving counseling on abortion, as well as enacted tax and budget cuts that prevented programs like the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program from providing services to low-income women. Additionally, he ended the Equal Pay Matters Initiative in 2002, which was originally created to help federal agencies effectively enforce equal pay violations (Morelli). Barbara Berg explains that these maneuvers stem from the national loss of masculinity that Americans faced during this time period. She argues that "the sneak, devastating terrorist attack on our soil, the seemingly endless and unwinnable wars in Afghanistan, the tarnished American image abroad, and, of course, the recession have all threatened manhood and manliness in America. And historically, whenever we

see a threat to masculinity, we see a greater rollback of women's rights and a subjugation of women" (Berg). In such a way, Bush's restrictive policies represent an attempt to revitalize national masculinity; however, this is done at the expense of women's agency, which at the same time created a culture of female oppression that could be seen in popular media.

In her piece "Women, Pop Music, and Pornography," Meredith Levande traces the growing ubiquity of pornography in popular culture. She cites legislation in 2003 that altered the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and further deregulated media ownership, meaning that companies "have virtually no restrictions on cross-ownership of newspapers, TV stations, and radio stations" (296). As Levande points out, the majority of those companies, including Time Warner and AT&T, acquired pornographic channels, and so began directly benefiting from profits coming from pornography. Since these companies own multiple different media outlets, the airways reflected their interests and were chosen to yield the highest profits. Levande notes that these companies "repetitively promulgate images of women that are remarkably constant with pornography's practice" (298). Therefore, pornography was effectively allowed into the hands of the mass media, including music, television and film, magazines, and advertising.

This legislation impacted the music industry, for example in the intensification of "programs such as *Uncut*, a late-night television program featuring racy and uncensored music videos" (298). Music during this time period also contributed to defining women in sexual terms. "Candy Shop" by 50 Cent, released in 2006, involves the rapper enticing his female companion into oral sex, which, interestingly enough, is entirely centered on male pleasure. Other songs in this vein that topped the charts during this time period include "Gold Digger" by Kanye West in 2005, 2006's "Promiscuous" by Nelly Furtado and "Temperature" by Sean Paul, and "Smack That" by Akon in 2007 ("Charts-Year End").

Levande argues that as “more media mergers occurred, the representations of women and music have grown more intense and pornographic, and have moved in parallel with the increasingly intense and violent fare shown in actual pornography” (300). This idea can be seen in the music videos for tracks released during this time. In one interview, Jewel described her experience filming a music video which "opens with her shirt flying open and ends with the ultimate "money shot" as a fire hydrant sprays her with water (308). Jewel herself expressed her discomfort during filming, describing that “I had to take my robe off and there's traffic behind me and my butt's hanging out. It was so embarrassing" (308). Women are also seen as transactions for sexual pleasure, as is the case “in the video for Nelly’s ‘Tip Drill,’ when a credit card is swiped through the crevice of a black stripper’s backside” (302). These images perpetuate the “notion that demeaning women’s bodies in exchange for profit is acceptable” (302). Both of these examples only hint at the multitude of instances in the music industry wherein women, much like in pornography, are depicted as the property of men and commodified, dehumanized, and humiliated.

In addition to music, television is also an influential cultural product that plays a significant role in normalizing ideas about women. Apart from television shows like *Girls Next Door* which directly dramatize and normalize the porn industry itself, several other TV shows aired during this time reinforce the harmful notions about women that were perpetuated with pornography—particularly that they should adhere to a particular body type so as to successfully be won by men. *The Swan*, which premiered in 2004, “shows women going under the knife for an absurd number of potentially dangerous plastic surgery procedures” to transform 16 contestants from ugly ducklings into beautiful swans (Pozner). This is only one of many shows produced during this time period—including 2002’s *Extreme Makeover*, *America’s Next Top*

Model in 2003, and *Dr. 90210* in 2004—that reinforce notions of a physical beauty standard—one that is so difficult to achieve that it requires cosmetic intervention, yet is still hailed as an ideal at the end of each show. This physical beauty standard is one defined by men and influenced by pornographic imagery:

> As the pornography industry has grown and become normalized to the extent that women are being exposed to it in their homes by male partners, it has spawned new "beauty" practices of its very own. The upsurge in the requirement that women should have large breasts, and the concomitant profits of the breast implant industry, owe a great deal to pornography. (Jeffreys 78)

The physical beauty standard is also employed in advertising, which has long been a source of influence in popular culture. As Jean Kilbourne points out in *Killing Us Softly 4*, "the first thing the advertisers do is surround us with the image of ideal female beauty" (Kilbourne). This image, not coincidentally, is also perpetuated by mainstream pornography, which makes our association of women in pornography with women in reality even easier to connect together.

Pornography is coupled with this physical beauty standard to sell products. In 2005, Carl's Jr. released a commercial wherein Paris "Hilton is shown eating The Spicy BBQ Six Dollar Burger while washing a Bentley in her swimsuit" (Carl's Jr.). The camera lingers over her body in voyeuristic ways as it equates sexual pleasure—reinforced by Hilton, whose famed sex tape began her celebrity career—with the sandwich. This particular ad caused a lot of controversy for its content. Melissa Caldwell, research director for the Parents Television Council, stated that "this commercial is basically soft-core porn" (James). But such a declaration only seemed to garner the ad more attention. As more people began to talk about the commercial, "rumors abounded that the spot was "too hot" for network television…and a hotter internet-only version was posted on the mini site, www.spicyparis.com. Visitors flooded the site, which was unequipped to handle the unexpected traffic volume, and the host servers crashed" (Carl's Jr.).

Inspired by the attention this ad earned the company, Carl's Jr. has since reproduced this same type of advertisement with a carousel of sexualized celebrities, including Padma Lakshmi, Kim Kardashian, and Kate Upton (M. Davies).

Kilbourne argues that "ads sell more than products. They sell values, they sell images. They sell concepts of love and sexuality, of success, and perhaps most important, of normalcy. To a great extent, they tell us who we are and who we should be" (Kilbourne). Ads from 2002-2008 and beyond are very effective at using the culture's standard of beauty to privilege the thin, mostly white body type. The crushing consequences of advertising have since been documented, and they seem to have a particular impact on women. It was reported that "the number of cosmetic surgical procedures performed on youth under age 19 more than tripled from 1997 to 2007" (Newsom); many women experience "low self-esteem, depression, eating disorders, sexual assault and/or harassment, and an overall feeling of discontent as a result of a desire to emulate a visual standard that is near impossible to achieve" (Berberick 13). Despite these alarming trends, however, the body standard is still encouraged across the culture by advertisers and even models themselves, as in 2009 when popular model Kate Moss stated that "nothing tastes as good as skinny feels" (Kilbourne).

The imagery of advertising and pornography have also been adopted by popular magazines like *Cosmopolitan*. An article on the *Cosmo* website describes its purpose by asserting that "what made it so desirable is that it outlined an American dream for single, working women. It provided them with a vision and detailed advice on how to live a better life — on their *own* terms" (Benjamin). However, despite an emphasis on women creating their own identities, upon closer inspection we can see that these magazines "create a personality for the consumer and reinforce the sexist belief that one gender (male) is superior to the other (female).

Thus, the female has a set of guidelines that instruct her how to behave, when to wear make-up, how to dress, what her body should look like, and how to treat her lover" (Berberick 5).

For a magazine targeted at women, every single cover article of *Cosmopolitan* magazine from 2003 to 2007 mentions men in some form—most often how to please them. With titles like "The Thing Every Man Needs a Woman to Say," "The Girlfriend Habit That He'll Love You More For," "Sex Treats for Him," and "We'll Teach You How to Give Him the Most Intense Pleasure Possible" (Cosmopolitan), this publication reveals a one-sided sexual dynamic that focuses entirely on men. Rather than discuss what men should do for women, these articles encourage women's submission, indicating that their value is based upon a man's approval or desire. Furthermore, every cover from 2003 to 2007 featured a slim, young woman, 5 out of 6 covers featured white women, and every single cover emphasized the word "sex." These covers indicate that sexuality is solely for women—mostly white—that are not very old and conform to the cultural standard of physical beauty.

Cosmo is an excellent example of how "popular magazines are often gendered discourses, aimed at either women or men, yet regardless of intended audience, magazine narratives are predominantly patriarchal in nature" (Nettleton 5). In one study that examined 837 images from 8 popular magazines, *Cosmo* featured the highest number of traditionally sexist images compared to the other magazines in the study (Letts 11). Furthermore, "when compared with images of women in pornographic magazines, the fashion magazines used in the study exhibited more similarities—in terms of gesture, posture, and body cant—than differences in the way that they depicted women" (Letts 12). This is yet another instance of how "the image of what is beautiful for young women and girls has become inextricably intertwined with the sex industry" (Jeffreys 86). While there is certainly nothing wrong with owning your sexuality,

sexuality for women in this context means to "be an object, to be passive, to have your sexuality defined in a rigid, shallow, limiting, and clichéd way" (Kilbourne)—in this case one that limits sexual desirability to young, thin, often white women.

This is the cultural environment in which *BioShock* and *Dead Space* were developed. As we will see in the following sections of this chapter, these games reflect this culture by normalizing a discourse centered on disrespect and subjugation, one that attempts to link women to the natural realm, and which manipulates bodies in abusive ways.

Establishing Rapture's Patriarchy in BioShock

BioShock opens in the year 1960 as the player's character, Jack, survives a plane crash over the Atlantic Ocean. Jack surfaces near an eerie lighthouse and, venturing inside, discovers a bathysphere—a sort of submarine. Upon entering, the bathysphere takes Jack to the underwater city of Rapture, whereupon he is introduced via video to the city's creator, Andrew Ryan. Jack soon discovers that Rapture, a city built shortly after World War II, was created as a haven from the government, censorship, and even morality so that it might allow its citizens to live as freely as they pleased. But despite its utopian intent, what Jack finds inside the city is far more disturbing. The player enters Rapture during a massive civil war and must navigate their way through the city. With the help of Atlas—a mysterious man Jack speaks with over a radio—the player must survive attacks from crazed citizens and overcome eccentric city leaders in order to finally return to the surface.

In this section I will discuss the contradiction between the game's storyline and the ways it has designed its female characters. Furthermore, I will detail the ways in which *BioShock* attempts to naturalize negative concepts about women, uses language to exclude and oppress its

female characters, and mimics the cultural obsession with beauty by abusing women's physical bodies. I will end by considering the implications of *BioShock*'s popularity and its status as a prestige game.

It will first be beneficial to understand the larger thematic messages that *BioShock*'s narrative employs, and whether or not its characters and design support that same message. As part of the cultural progress made in the city, Rapture's scientists have used a genetic material called Adam to create injectable superpowers called plasmids; these range from the ability to shoot electricity and fire from your fingertips to the power of telekinesis. However, the strong addiction that accompanies Adam has driven Rapture's citizens insane, forcing them to violently attack one another in search of more Adam so that they can continue oversplicing themselves with new genetic modifications—leading others to name those citizens Splicers.

At the same time, one ambitious businessman, Frank Fontaine, is intent on taking advantage of the Splicers for his own profit. After developing a company that specializes in plasmids, Fontaine convinces the Splicers that he is their benevolent leader, providing them with Adam in return for their loyalty. Fontaine eventually employs the Splicers as his own personal army and leads an attack on Rapture in order to overthrow Andrew Ryan and take control of the city. When Jack arrives in Rapture, the war between Ryan and Fontaine is well underway.

The player soon discovers that Ryan himself is no benevolent leader. Similar to Fontaine, Ryan employs oppressive means to maintain his power over the city. Though he endorses a free market, Ryan is described by some as the "King of Rapture," indicating his tyrannical form of control. Ryan also installed cameras throughout the city, and being spotted by any one of them directs a squad of drones to kill Jack. This form of institutional surveillance demonstrates the extent of Ryan's hold over the city.

When describing his concept of the Great Chain that balances all forces and directs the world, Ryan himself says that "it is only when we struggle in our own interest that the chain pulls society in the right direction" (*BioShock*). By his own admission, Ryan pursues only his own goals and protects himself as the city's leader, including leading assaults on Fontaine's properties, and—as is rumored—manipulating citizens as "he pumps some kind of chemical scent in the air, pheromones they call it, makes them all dance to his tune" (*BioShock*). These are only a few of countless instances were Ryan's confessed self-interest contradicts with his similarly professed vision of Rapture as a city free of tyranny. Though the city was created to be a place "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" (*BioShock*), it is by depicting how this ideal society is systematically destroyed from within by its own leaders that the game employs its critique of conservative leadership.

Ryan works to ensure that he remains in power; by the same token, Fontaine's schemes to usurp Ryan's power, and his violent self-interest suggests that his rule over the city would be no less oppressive than Ryan's. In this way, Ryan's and Fontaine's control both reveal Rapture's governance as a patriarchy. We can see this, for instance, in the fact that the only way to move around Rapture is by using the bathyspheres, which are only accessible to those with Ryan's DNA. Though any person with Ryan's genetic material, including sisters or cousins, can have access to the bathysphere, the ability to travel in the first place is defined relative to the man. Furthermore, Ryan doesn't have any family in Rapture; therefore, conceivably no one but Ryan should be able to travel throughout the city. In this way, women are completely immobilized, both hierarchically and spatially. From here, we can begin to understand the ways in which this

game employs the cultural methods of female oppression prevalent in America during this time for the benefit and empowerment of Rapture's men.

"A Man Chooses. A Slave Obeys.":

The Discursive Denial of Women in Rapture

The player's time in Rapture is often spent lurking through dimly lit passages, confronting or avoiding splicers, and collecting the different ammunition, money, or medicine kits scattered throughout the city's ruins. Since much of the game's action lies in the confrontations with splicers, attitudes about the roles of women can often be found in less obvious places. It is when the player begins paying attention to the specific words and phrases being used throughout the city that Rapture's opinions about gender become more fleshed out. A critical discourse analysis, as performed by Paul Baker in "Acceptable Bias? Using Corpus Linguistics Methods With Critical Discourse Analysis," will be effective in examining *BioShock* because it "studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context" (247). Seemingly innocuous conversations between splicers, as well as the audio diaries left by other citizens—among other sources—each contribute to a larger discourse that naturalizes negative ideas about women in an attempt to stabilize their roles and identities within the city. The alignment of women with nature, accompanied by a language that excludes and denies femininity are the hallmarks of Rapture's gender discourse.

One way that the game naturalizes ideas about women is by comparing them to nature itself through comments from other characters or by the jobs that women fulfill in the city. Sherry Ortner's "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" is useful in revealing the

implications of the ways in which "women are being identified or symbolically associated with nature, as opposed to men, who are identified with culture. Since it is always culture's project to subsume and transcend nature, if women were considered part of nature, then culture would find it "natural" to subordinate, not to say oppress, them" (204). It is then important to first point out that the city of Rapture itself embodies this analogy through its penetration of the natural landscape of the Atlantic Ocean. Ryan built Rapture as a place where progress of all kinds would flourish; a triumph of American culture that would not be impeded by politics, morality, or the depths of the ocean itself. The game demonstrates the constant struggle between Rapture's workers—repairing leaks throughout the city—and the enveloping water that so desperately fights back against the city, flooding districts, filling passages between buildings, and pushing through airlocks.

Rapture itself serves as an example of culture's attempt to penetrate and exclude nature, and this comparison follows inside the city itself and is applied to its female citizens in different ways. For example, when the player enters Arcadia, the district that houses Rapture's lush garden and primary source of oxygen, they encounter Julie Langford. When Ryan, in an effort to kill Jack, releases a toxin that kills all of the trees and threatens to suffocate all of Rapture, the player hurries to Langford's office for assistance. Atlas explains that she was the one who planted the trees and that she might have a way of bringing them back to life. This portrayal constructs Langford as the Mother Nature character, and the game indeed supports this characterization.

Despite her importance in restoring the city's oxygen, Atlas only mocks Langford. He calls her "an old betty"—suggesting her old age and senility—and says that "she's gonna want to save her trees" (*BioShock*). He suggests that she would restore the oxygen in the city not because

it would save everyone inside, but because it would bring her plants back to life. Though this suggestion seems ridiculous, the game reinforces his derisive characterization. When the player meets Langford, she yells at Jack, screaming, “My trees! It wasn’t you, was it?” Langford never once mentions the threat of suffocation or saving everyone in the city; instead, she frames the renewal of the city’s oxygen in terms of saving the tress, proclaiming that “I think I've got just the thing to put the green back in this forest” (*BioShock*). She is even made to wear a green dress, further suggesting her connection to nature. With an emphasis on her stronger connection to plant life over humans, the game designs Langford with a discernable alignment with nature, one that starkly conflicts with that of the men in the game. When she attempts to put together a solution to restore the trees, Ryan intervenes and kills Langford by poisoning her with the same toxin he used on the plant life. Due to her identification with her plants, she is abused and killed in the same manner by an oppressive male force. The player is then tasked with putting together the solution. Jack’s success at this task robs women of the chance to demonstrate their agency, as well as displays man’s control over nature, both in his ability to destroy and resurrect it.

Langford is the not the only female character constrained by stereotypical gender associations. Brigid Tenenbaum is one of Rapture’s most instrumental scientists, and her genius is given a great deal of praise throughout the game—for instance in the several audio diaries that demonstrate her ability to refute Ryan and Fontaine and defend herself. She is also the woman responsible for creating Little Sisters. Adam, the genetic material used in plasmids, was produced using a unique species of sea slug found deep in the ocean. When Tenenbaum implanted little girls with this slug, they were transformed into eerie creatures that resemble children, but with haunting voices, pale skin, and glowing eyes (see Fig. 1). Once implanted, the

Little Sisters are taught to gather Adam from corpses scattered around the city. Eventually the Little Sisters become targets of violence from splicers desperately seeking Adam.

(Fig. 1)
Jack's encounter with one of Tenenbaum's Little Sisters
Ken Levine, *BioShock,* 2K Games, 2007

Tenenbaum comes to regret having created the Little Sisters and leaving them vulnerable to abuse, robbed of the chance of a life of their own. Once Jack enters Rapture, she urges the player to rescue the girls.

Not only does her connection to the Little Sisters make Tenenbaum the game's maternal figure, but she is also denied agency. No matter how brilliant and independent Tenenbaum is made out to be, the game ultimately never lets her out to play. During each interaction with Jack, Tenenbaum is always physically separated. Whether on a balcony or in a separate room and visible only through a window pane, she is removed from any action taking place. She also sends Little Sisters to run errands for her, including giving supplies to Jack at different times or asking Jack to complete different tasks himself. When Jack finds Tenenbaum's safehouse within the

city, she is depicted taking care of the Little Sisters as they play—almost resembling a macabre daycare. Limited to the stereotypically maternal role of protecting the Little Sisters, Tenenbaum's gender is used as the justification for the male character's agency and control in every situation.

The same use of nature and culture to justify women's subordination can be seen in the popular culture from 2002-2014. For instance, in one *Fox News* segment, Erick Erickson asserts that "when you look at biology, look at the natural world, the roles of a male and a female in society, and other animals, the male typically is the dominant role" (Misener). Additionally, as collected by *The Gender Ads Project*, a significant amount of advertising supports the notion of women's intimate connection with nature by placing them in forests and other landscapes (Lukas). *BioShock* plays on these cultural stereotypes in constructing its female characters, which severely limits their options for agency and representation within Rapture.

BioShock not only aligns women with nature to their detriment; it also uses language to systematically exclude them from participating at all. Andrew Ryan's philosophies permeate the city, all of which focus solely on men. When the player enters the lighthouse at the beginning of the game, the lights flicker on to reveal an enormous statue of Ryan's face (see Fig. 2). The red banner below it reads "No Gods or Kings. Only Man" (*BioShock*). In this instance, the first thing we learn about Rapture is that men, having displaced monarchs and deities, are the highest level of authority in the city; we are, however, left to speculate as to the place of women since they are linguistically disqualified from such power.

Another of Ryan's quotes is the infamous comment he makes to Jack when he reveals that not only was Jack born in Rapture, he has also been mentally controlled by Atlas—who is actually Fontaine in disguise. In this scene, Ryan claims that "a man chooses. A slave obeys"

(*BioShock*). However, what does a woman do? Since she is not a man, according to Ryan, she must therefore be a slave.

(Fig. 2)
Ryan's Lighthouse Decor
Ken Levine, *BioShock*, 2K Games, 2007

The Little Sisters are also linguistically objectified. Atlas tells Jack that "them things aren't people no more" and refers to them as "Tenenbaum's little Frankensteins" (*BioShock*). Since Atlas encourages Jack to harvest the slug inside of them and kill the Little Sisters in order to receive a greater amount of Adam, he values them solely for their economic potential. Therefore, dehumanizing the Little Sisters through language makes it easier for him to objectify and abuse them. As Kilbourne argues, "turning a human being into a thing is almost always the first step towards justifying violence against that person" (Kilbourne). Since this objectification is only enacted on little girls, the game suggests that women alone are best manipulated into filling such a role.

Language is an instrument for normalization. As we have seen in *BioShock*, it is used to define the roles that women are allowed to have inside the city, as well as their linguistic

rejection from its benefits. As a city both physically and ideologically separated from American culture back on land, Rapture has the potential to represent and engage with women in completely new and unoppressive ways. However, as Ortner argues, "changing the social institutions…cannot have far-reaching effects if cultural language and imagery continue to purvey a relatively devalued view of women" (210). By the same token, "efforts directly solely at changing cultural assumptions…cannot be successful unless the institutional base of the society is changed to support and reinforce the changed cultural view" (210). Rapture has failed on both of these fronts, allowing systemic sexism to follow from above the water and into the city's social sphere.

One final example of *BioShock*'s discourse of disrespect involves the Little Sisters. When Jack first happens upon a Little Sister, Tenenbaum tells him that he can rescue the child, returning her to a human state by removing the sea slug from her body. Doing so will earn Jack Adam that he can use to buy plasmids. Atlas, on the other hand, encourages Jack to harvest the slug and earn even more Adam that he would by saving the child; however, in doing so, the Little Sister will be killed. When the player chooses to rescue a Little Sister, a cut scene begins that depicts Jack picking up the child. The girl pushes away from him and screams "No!" repeatedly until the slug is removed. She then thanks him and runs away (*BioShock*). Despite the heavenly string music that plays during this scene to indicate that the player is healing the child, the fact remains that the scene initially resembles assault and, more importantly, the little girl has not given consent of any kind. This scene suggests that consent is not required from women, regardless of their age. It also supports the cultural notion that adults know better than children, and that since Jack was helping the player without the child knowing it, the fact that he was rescuing the child justified his decision to act without consent.

This scene is also troubling because of America's larger infatuation with pornography, which increasingly includes child pornography. *The Demand Project* reports that "child pornography is one of the fastest growing crimes in the United States right now. Nationally, there has been a 2500% increase in arrests in the past 10 years, according to the FBI" (The Demand Project). Similarly, Kilbourne notes that the sexualization of children is very prominent in advertising during this time, whether it is a Lee Jeans poster "meant to evoke child pornography with the man with the camera in the background…[or] the increasing sexualization of little girls" (Kilbourne). Jack's assault of the Little Sisters, regardless of the intention to save them, works to reward—and as such teaches the player to derive pleasure from—their sexualized abuse.

This sexualization becomes even clearer as fans of the game cosplay as Little Sisters. This phenomenon involves people creating elaborate costuming and make-up visuals to vividly reproduce characters from popular culture. While this is not in and of itself a dangerous activity, in a great deal of advertising "women are told that it's sexy to be like a little girl" (Kilbourne). Combining their appreciation for the Little Sister character with other common depictions of women in advertising and in pornography, the depictions of cosplay that imitate Little Sisters are often pornographic—or are at least meant to be read in sexualized ways. These women are often infantilized by sucking on the bottle at the end of the syringe that the Little Sisters carry. Additionally, the camera angle often looks down at them; though this is meant to indicate their smaller stature as children, it also places them under an oppressive male gaze (see Fig. 3). Pornography's influence in sexualizing fan-made depictions embodied by real women proves that the "regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality

of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" (J. Butler, "Bodies" 2).

(Fig. 3)
Little Sister Cosplay
lAmikol, *Deviant Art*, 2007

"Tenenbaum's Frankensteins":

Objectifying Women's Bodies as Sexual and Economic Commodities

BioShock does not rely exclusively on discursive forms of female oppression; rather, it uses the video game's interactive format to force the player to engage with corporeal manifestations of sexism and discrimination. Female bodies are used to communicate that a woman's value is determined by its sexual availability, is condemned for its inability to adhere to a cosmetic standard, and is uniquely subjected to exploitation. Since America grapples with its obsession with a physical beauty standard, the player encounters this issue in Rapture as well; however, to a different effect.

As the player walks through Rapture's various neighborhoods, they can overhear splicer's conversations about Adam, Ryan, and what their lives used to be like. At one point, a certain crazed female splicer can be overhead discussing her craving for sexual variety in men. She goes on to lament that gentlemen have stopped coming to call on her, leaving her all alone. When she spots Jack, she attacks, screaming "My youth! My rose! I want it back!" (*BioShock*).

The meaning of this splicer's "rose," especially when so closely connected to the idea of youth as she expresses it, can be taken in multiple fashions. She misses her gentlemen suitors, which is a euphemism for her sexual encounters. As such, she suggests that her youth is responsible for attracting other men, and now that it is gone, the rose of her sexuality virility and desirability has been stripped from her. This metaphor of a flower has also been used to connote sexual maturity given that her flower has already bloomed—and in this case, withered away. Then again, we might read her lamentations on the loss of her "rose" to indicate that her sexuality has ruined her; as such, she misses the virginity and accompanying sexual innocence that she once enjoyed in her youth. This double-bind has interesting societal implications. Kilbourne comments on how, in American advertising, "girls are constantly told by the popular culture that they should be sexy, but innocent; experienced, but virginal" (Kilbourne). The same double standard is enacted here, and the splicer's punishment for her failure to achieve either and both indicates that what was most valuable about her was her sexual youth, which simultaneously indicated her purity and attractiveness to men. Since virginity and sexual experience are impossible to achieve simultaneously, she is destined to fail; without those things, she is erratic and violent.

A focus on the value of sexual desire is repeated when Diane McClintock, Ryan's former lover, suffered facial disfigurement when she was injured during Fontaine's attack on the city.

She underwent surgery, but later reveals through an audio dairy that she hasn't been able to get a date since her facial reconstruction (*BioShock*). This particular example defines her by her sexual desirability, which is itself determined by a standard of physical beauty. These are merely two of countless instances throughout the game that reinforce a standard of desirability founded on physical, racial, and beauty standards.

As a representative and participant in American culture, *BioShock* embodies "a patriarchal system [that] values women as childbearers, period. So it limits their value to the time that they are sexually active, reproductively active, and become much less valuable after that" (Newsom). We see this same issue in popular culture as older women are deliberately excluded from mainstream visibility, particularly in how "women in their teens, 20s and 30s are 39% of the population, yet are 71% of women on TV" (Newsom). For *BioShock*, this would not be an issue if the game in some way challenged the cultural obsession with youth and sexuality. One option would have been to depict an older character whose sexuality and desirability is still intact, even in her advanced age—advanced here meaning older than about 30 years old. However, the game chooses not to complicate in any way the idea that "sex and sexuality belong only to the young and beautiful. If you're not young and perfect looking, you have no sexuality" (Kilbourne). In this way, *BioShock* is as hegemonically prescriptive as an issue of *Cosmo*.

Even the design of the splicers is used to communicate this same message of value through desirability. Young splicers are given more revealing clothing, specifically short skirts that accentuate their bare legs; this contrasts with the older splicers that are often wearing floor length dresses. Furthermore, the younger splicers can be identified by their higher pitched, younger sounding voices, whereas older female splicers have lower, raspier voices. Such designs further the stereotype that sexuality—meaning women's social capital—correlates with their

youth. What is even more disturbing are the several instances where Jack approaches a young female splicer that has already been killed and her body is designed to be sexually inviting. She is obviously bloodied and beaten, her face given the pale lifelessness of death; however, her legs are spread curiously wide open, extending far beyond believability (see Fig. 4).

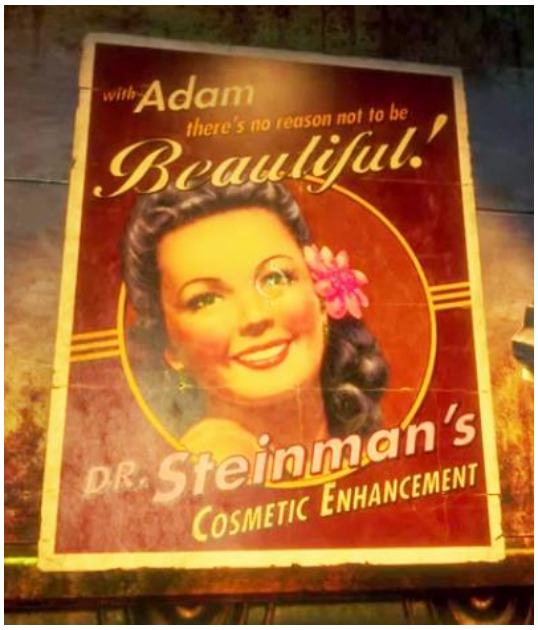
In instances such as these, the game caters to the presumed straight male player, even using corpses for sexual titillation. This was not a character that had recently been running around for the player to shoot; rather, she was created to sit in that posture, whether or not the player even walked by her. This design reinforces damaging notions about the function of women, communicating that, even in death, they are to be looked upon and consumed for their sexuality availability to men. Furthermore, this scene is troubling because it attempts to make a dead woman seem sexy. This creates the problematic notion that masculine sexuality is defined by its violence. As can be seen in the larger cultural atmosphere discussed by Kilbourne, this notion normalizes a dangerous form of socialization in "that masculinity is so often linked with violence, and boys grow up in a world in which men are constantly shown as perpetrators of violence, as brutal" (Kilbourne). These types of images teach us "that men derive great sexual pleasure from hurting women and seeing women be hurt" (Dines, "Antipornography" 55).

When violence is eroticized—in the same manner used in pornography—the equation of aggression and sexual satisfaction conditions men to derive pleasure through violent domination. These brief scenes can be easily overlooked if a player does not fight a certain splicer or listen to a certain audio diary or walk down a certain hallway; but these seemingly insignificant episodes each work to normalize a disrespectful discourse about women that significantly restricts their social agency and, in some cases, brutalizes them.

(Fig. 4)
Deceased Splicer oddly positioned
Ken Levine, *BioShock*, 2K Games, 2007

One possible source for Rapture's obsession with youth and sexuality is actually offered in the game. J. S. Steinman, Rapture's famous cosmetic surgeon, runs Dr. Steinman's Aesthetic Ideals. This portion of the game, which focuses on cosmetic surgery, hearkens to the cultural popularity of hit shows like 2004's *The Swan* or *Nip/Tuck*, which ran from 2003-2010. Jack's encounter with this cosmetic surgery service provides several indications about Rapture's guiding beauty standard. The hallways surrounding Steinman's office are decorated with posters that read "With Adam there's no reason not to be beautiful" (*BioShock*). These posters, of course, are accompanied by pictures of women that are meant to define what is beautiful and desirable, in this case a young, clear skinned, white woman (see Fig. 5). This poster in particular suggests that the ideal beauty standard is something that every woman should attain now that Adam can be used to produce it. It is conceivable that those who do not meet this standard are labeled as more deviant since they have no excuse for not meeting the standard. Such an image directly mirrors those seen throughout American culture in advertising, magazines, film, and

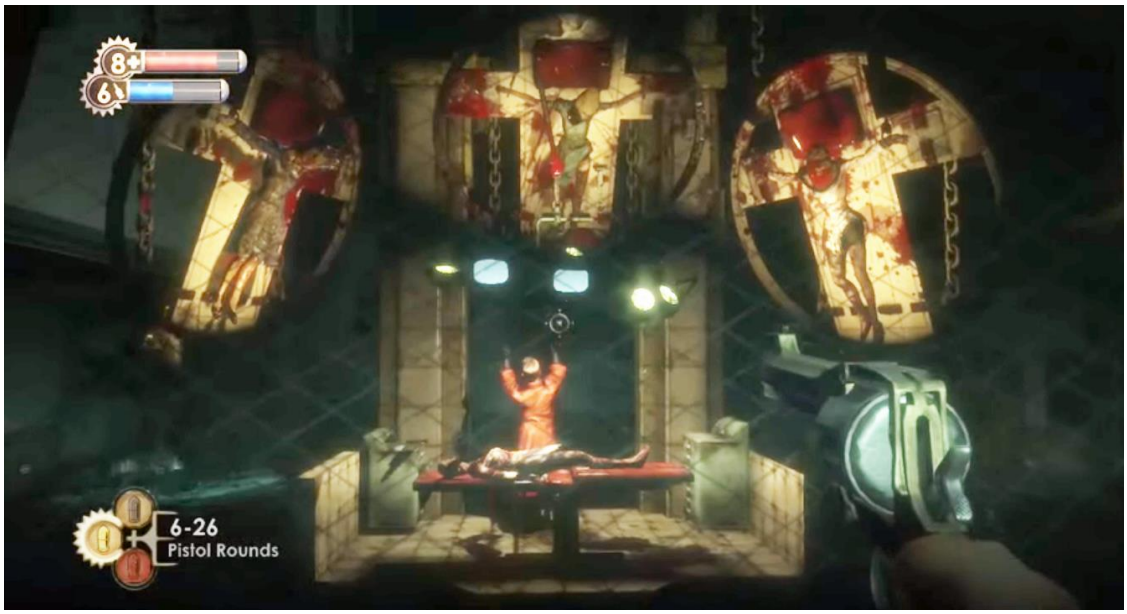
more. Since Rapture can be seen as a microcosm of the larger American culture in 2007, these posters indicate that Steinman's cosmetic surgeries are both based on and validate the damaging notion that "women are acceptable only if we're young, thin, white, or at least light skinned; perfectly groom and polished, plucked and shaved" (Kilbourne).



(Fig. 5)
Steinman's Cosmetic Enhancement Poster
Ken Levine, *BioShock*, 2K Games, 2007

BioShock does, however, come to prove that such a standard is not so easily attainable, even with Adam. The player soon finds that Steinman himself, the one responsible for helping women meet this ideal, is indeed crazed. He can often be heard muttering to someone he calls the "goddess." It is clear that this person is the product of his imagination. This goddess is Steinman's muse and she drives his impression of how women should look. He shapes women's bodies according to the standard established by his goddess, the picture of ideal womanhood. However, it is important to point out that this standard is not an objective benchmark of beauty; rather it represents a male definition of female sexuality and desire that is imposed upon the

women of Rapture. This standard then becomes normalized and is used to justify violence against women. When the player confronts Steinman, he has just murdered three women (see Fig. 6). He complains that "I want to make them beautiful, but they always turn out wrong. That one…too fat! This one…too tall! This one…too symmetrical!" (*BioShock*). In one way, his failure to "fix" these women critiques the impossibility of achieving the cultural beauty standard. Even if perfection is achieved, it is still never enough for him. In one audio diary, the player hears Steinman operating on an unconscious patient; however, he continues cutting her in different places as he spots new imperfections. He performs a surgery that she was not scheduled to receive, eventually ending in her death. This scene demonstrates the violent and penetrative lengths that the cosmetic beauty standard justifies, whether or not consent is even given.



(Fig. 6)
Steinman's Operating Room
Ken Levine, *BioShock*, 2K Games, 2007

Steinman's obsession with physical alterations would certainly not be unfamiliar to players in 2007. In Susan Bordo's "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," she adapts Foucault to examine how "through the organization and regulation of the time, space, and movements of our daily lives, our bodies are trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, femininity" (460). From Steinman's posters displayed throughout the city, the player is given an image of what women should look like, the outcome of the city's beauty standard; they also come to understand the consequences of not meeting that standard by overhearing the aforementioned conversations and audio diaries. It is then "through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity…female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation" (460). This then might explain how, when looking at the number of cosmetic operations performed in America, "from 1997 to 2007, these procedures overall rose 457%, to almost 12 million per year" (Kilbourne). Steinman's advertisements insist on the necessity of his operations, and women—both in Rapture and in the real world—lay themselves down on the operating table in hopes of becoming beautiful and socially validated.

In this regard, I would argue that *BioShock* uses Steinman as a perfect critique of the ways in which "cosmetic surgery, driven by gender ideology and market demand, now enforces feminine body ideals and standardizes female bodies toward…the corporeal incarnation of culture's collective, unmarked, normative characteristics" (Garland-Thompson 534). The game comments that we will never be able to meet this goal, that "failure is inevitable, because the ideal is based on absolute flawlessness" (Kilbourne)—one that not even Steinman can attain. It is

in Steinman's failure to achieve that standard that the game critiques how damaging our obsession with it can ultimately end.

As I have demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, advertising in American culture "tells us, as it always has, that what's most important is how we look" (Kilbourne). This obsession with physical perfection makes its appearance in Rapture and, just as in America, it is accompanied by the same cosmetic modifications that are encouraged in real life. This time, however, the game uses the same obsession with surgical modification and takes it to the extreme. Even though women in both Rapture and America die in pursuit of this ideal, the game works much harder to present this issue in horrific ways.

I would like to end this section with a discussion of Rapture's Little Sisters. After several encounters, the player quickly realizes that these characters are only ever portrayed using little girls. The game, however, never answers why this is so. At one point Tenenbaum states, "I know why it has to be children, but why just girls? This I cannot determine why, but I know it is so" (*BioShock*). Left with only her argument, the player is supposed to simply accept that only women are used for this function. However, Little Sisters do not actually exist in the real world; they were specifically designed to be girls by the game's producers.

We can look to *BioShock*'s creative director, Ken Levine, for answers. First of all, "the Little Sisters of Rapture actually started out as a kind of sea slug, and over the months, morphed from a slimy creature to the small child that is such an iconic figure of *BioShock*" (Elizabeth). In his explanation of why he chose to exclusively use girls for these characters, Levine argued that "it's not more controversial to have someone who may or may not be a Little Sister rather than a Little Brother in the environment" (Elizabeth). Here Levine argues that the game would have been no different if he had used boys. I argue, however, that by using little girls as opposed to

little boys—and certainly instead of sea slugs—the game intends to elicit a stronger feeling of empathy from the player that will encourage them to rescue the Little Sisters. I would also argue that since the Little Sisters are continuously hunted by (mostly male) splicers, the game makes use of the threat of pedophilia to encourage the player to rescue the girls. However, it is by exclusively using little girls that the game defines women as more vulnerable specifically because of their sex. Here Levine genders the game's issues of manipulation and oppression, exploits the player's sympathy, and suggests that they rescue the Little Sisters not only because they are children, but because they are female children.

The monstrosity of the Little Sisters also has theoretical implications. Horror genre narratives commonly incorporate monsters, which are defined by their abjectivity. In borrowing from Kristeva, Barbara Creed defines the abject as "that which does not 'respect borders, positions, rules'. . . that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' " (68). Little Sisters certainly embody the abject according to this definition; they are unsettling because their monstrosity is "produced at the border between human and inhuman…or the monstrous is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not" (71). The player's required interactions with the Little Sisters demonstrate how "abjection, as a source of horror, works within patriarchal societies, as a means of separating the human from the non-human and the fully constituted subject from the partially formed subject" (68). This issue is problematic in that this violent separation—enacted by either saving or harvesting the Little Sisters—is wrought solely upon women's bodies. Furthermore, Little Sisters can only be granted the higher status afforded to humans and end their economic exploitation—through their collection of Adam—by first allowing themselves to be assaulted, and then handing over their Adam to their male assailant—in effect paying Jack for the abuse that they did not ask for.

However, *BioShock* complicates this separation even further. Playing a horror game "signifies a desire not only for perverse pleasure (confronting sickening, horrific images, being filled with terror/desire for the undifferentiated) but also a desire, having taken pleasure in perversity, to throw up, throw out, eject the abject (from the safety of the spectator's seat)" (71). By virtue of the game's genre, we are meant to take pleasure in destroying the monstrous Little Sisters; however, *BioShock* encourages the player not to, instead insisting that they save each one. Through their positioning in the game in this way, the Little Sisters embody the same double bind of innocence and experience noted by Kilbourne. This depiction simultaneously invokes either the player's violence—by killing the Little Sisters—or their arousal—through the girl's return to humanity that the player is taught to sexualize as dictated by its allusion to child pornography. In either instance, the Little Sisters remain objectified, merely acted upon for the economic gain of the male protagonist and the pleasure of the player.

With these disparaging representations in mind, I'd now like to briefly point to *BioShock*'s immense popularity. *BioShock* is culturally considered a piece of art because it has earned the label of a "prestige game," meaning that it "has served as a catalyst for critical discourse and a common reference point in much broader discussions about the cultural value of games" (Parker 3). As such, *BioShock* has been lauded by players and video game developers alike. Winner of 28 different gaming awards, including Game of the Year, *BioShock* has enjoyed a great deal of positive attention that also ensured a playership spanning the globe ("BioShock"). Even the game's creative director, Ken Levine, won a lifetime achievement award at the Golden Joystick awards in 2013 (Gillen). It was so well received that "Bioshock has been included in a number of institutional exhibitions of historically or culturally important games, including The Smithsonian American Art Museum's much-publicized touring show *The Art of Video Games*"

(4). It was even considered for adaptation into a movie, signifying that its popularity extends outside of the gaming community.

Much praise has been written about *BioShock,* but its issues with women have been not as strongly emphasized. This is because prestige games are often considered closer to art than to entertainment, and "legitimate art is supposed to be produced at a distance from the corrupting logic of the marketplace, and artists are supposed to seek symbolic, not economic, capital" (3). However, when games are perceived as somewhat separated from cultural influences, they become dangerously less prone to scrutiny. Having established the cultural attitudes and portrayal of women in America during the time of this game's development, its clear reproduction of those values indicates that art cannot escape its surrounding cultural factors; AAA video games, *BioShock* especially, are not immune to the cultural attitudes or marketing forces that exert an influence on their production.

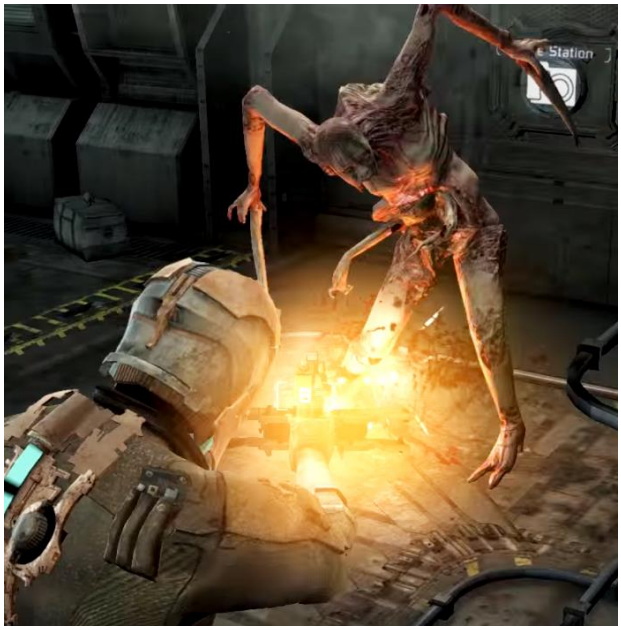
On the surface, *BioShock* appears to trouble the notion of a perfect society completely free of regulation, warning against the damages that political leaders can cause when they abuse a free market system for their own gain. However, when it comes to the use of its female characters, *BioShock* retains the broader negative representations of women that permeate American culture during the game's production. The troubling definitions of female sexuality that pervade American magazines, music, and advertisements filter into the city of Rapture to produce damaging interactions with splicers and Little Sisters. The game also reproduces the sexist limitations placed on women in the 1950s as a way of communicating to the player what life was like in that time period; however, the game does not effectively challenge those ideas, which, as Judith Butler points out, does not sufficiently trouble them. She argues that the reproduction of sexist tropes for parody alone is not enough to criticize them, and we must be

sure to discern "what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (J. Butler "Gender Trouble" 440). Given its inability to effectively challenge the tropes that it reproduces, *BioShock* remains an artful, yet problematic experience of sexism and political oppression.

In Space, Women Make You Scream:

Dead Space's Reliance on the Femme Fatale

Released in 2008, *Dead Space* opens as static fills the screen. It eventually clears to reveal the face of Nicole Brennan, girlfriend of Isaac Clarke, the story's protagonist and the man the player controls during gameplay. The player learns that Nicole is in some form of trouble aboard her space mining vessel, the USG Ishimura, which had been mining the nearby planet of Aegis VII until they suffered a communication blackout. Isaac, along with a small crew, has been dispatched to make contact with the vessel. Among the repair crew is Chief Security Officer Zach Hammond and computer specialist Kendra Daniels. Upon arrival, the crew finds the ship in disrepair. They are also quickly ambushed by necromorphs, horrific anthropomorphic monsters swarming the ship (see Fig. 7). Isaac and his crew become separated during the attack. Given that Isaac is an engineer, the player spends the game repairing different parts of the ship in order to escape, as well as uncovering the mystery of the necromorph monsters and searching for Nicole.



(Fig. 7)
Necromorph Attack
Ian Milham, *Dead Space*, Electronic Arts, 2007

In this section I will explore *Dead Space*'s representation of its female characters. Given that the only women of note in the game are Nicole and Kendra, it will be important to pay attention to all of the ways that these women are depicted and treated since they will be representative of the game's construction of women as a whole. I will specifically study how this game constructs a discourse about women that simultaneously denies their authority and establishes their duplicity. I will then look to the design of the Ishimura's environment, focusing in particular on how *Dead Space* engages with cultural representations of women outside of the game by creating depictions of women throughout the ship that define them as sexualized trophies.

The narrative of *Dead Space*, like *BioShock*, deceptively veils its thematic intentions. At first glance, it appears to be a liberal critique of big business greed and the destruction of the environment. The Ishimura belongs to the Concordance Extraction Corporation (CEC), which

cracks open planets and mines the minerals within. Even the company's logo resembles a clamp crushing a planet. Hammond tells Kendra at the game's opening that "deep space mining is a lucrative business, Ms. Daniels. Aegis VII is a gold mine according to prospector's reports" (*Dead Space*). However, it is later revealed that Aegis VII was a restricted planet and that the CEC began mining illegally since the planet was rumored to be rich in minerals. It was when the planet was cracked open that the CEC discovered the Marker, the alien artifact that transformed the crew into necromorphs. Had the CEC been able to contain its greed, the necromorph plague may not have spread.

However, once the game gets going, its more subtle themes prove much more insidious. *Dead Space* makes use of a subtle discourse to communicate the value and function of women in that universe. The conversations between Hammond and Kendra indicate that women's authority is altogether denied. When Hammond is initially unable to communicate with the Ishimura while onboard the crew's repair shuttle, Daniels offers a helpful comment, telling him, "You're going to need to boost the signal if their power is low;" however, Hammond responds with a quick "Yes, we know" before turning to the pilot and saying "Boost the signal" (*Dead Space*). In this scene, Hammond talks down to Kendra as if what she said was obvious, but then repeats her same suggestion to the pilot. This action suggests that Hammond is incapable of acknowledging when Kendra is correct. Hammond also makes it clear that he is the one giving orders. In almost every scene that Kendra and Hammond share, they are bickering about what action to take. At one point Kendra tells him "You're out of your league, Hammond. This is suicide! We're going to die out here." He responds by saying "You're lack of confidence in me is duly noted, Ms. Daniels, but I have a mission to complete and that's exactly what I am going to do. With or without you" (*Dead Space*). The game creates sympathetic ties with Kendra early on since she

offers comforting comments to Isaac about seeing Nicole; Hammond, on the other hand, is depicted as a stern, decisive, commander during each interaction. In the example above, he even threatens to abandon Kendra, even though as the mission's commander he is responsible for each member of the crew. His consistent tone of derision and domination, along with the occasional threat, indicate that Kendra's cunning and authority are not taken seriously; instead, she is devalued and her place on the team is more often questioned than validated.

One of the other messages that *Dead Space* attempts to naturalize about women centers around their inherent deceitfulness and untrustworthy nature; furthermore that their femininity is a gendered threat specifically targeted at men. To understand this femme fatale function in the game, I will need to introduce the Unitologists. When scouring the Ishimura in search of Nicole, Isaac discovers that the vast majority of the ship's crew were Unitologists, a religious group that worships the alien Marker. Unitology spread very quickly throughout the universe and gained considerable power as influential leaders in politics and business joined their ranks. The Ishimura was sent to Aegis VII not only because of the profits to be made from its mining, but also so that the Unitologists could obtain the Marker that they knew was hidden beneath the planet's surface.

By the end of the game, Isaac escapes the Ishimura to the surface of Aegis VII. However, it is revealed that Nicole, also a Unitologist, has long been dead, having killed herself as a sacrifice for the Marker. Even though Isaac has been hearing Nicole talking around the ship, as well as actually seeing her in person, this has only been a hallucination created by the Marker in order manipulate Isaac into helping it spread the necromorph plague.

However, this is not the only treachery that Isaac suffers; for Kendra is soon after exposed as a secret CEC agent sent to bring the Marker back to her employers. Kendra strands Isaac on the planet's surface as she attempts to leave with the Marker; but once she is stopped,

the Marker then uses the form of Nicole to summon an enormous necromorph that tries to kill Isaac. Women in *Dead Space* are not only deceitful, but "the seductive allure of feminine peril is additionally compounded by the constant betrayal of Isaac at the hands of living female characters who promise guidance and security but who end up intending his ruin" (Williams, "Visceral Games").

The evidence of these women's deceit permeates the game. Kendra berates Hammond when they find the Marker on board the ship, saying "When were you going to tell us about the artifact, Hammond?...CEC didn't know anything about it? You're lying" (*Dead Space*). She uses misdirection to make the player question Hammond's orders when in reality she is the only one who has known about the Marker the whole time. Additionally, her betrayal is made even more shocking after the game initially suggests to the player that Kendra is the more empathetic and relatable character; this also bolsters her deceitfulness by realizing that she knowingly connected with Isaac, only to try to kill him later on.

Furthermore, Nicole is used as the motivation for Isaac's actions. Throughout the game, Isaac occasionally finds audio logs recorded by Nicole during the necromorph outbreak, saying "Isaac…where are you? Help me…" (*Dead Space*). This heightens the player's sense of urgency to find and rescue the imperiled damsel. Even other characters use Nicole to convince Isaac to continue risking his life. Hammond leverages Nicole's supposed safety to get Isaac to repair part of the ship, saying "You fix the tram and I'll help you find Nicole" (*Dead Space*). Through its representation of Nicole, *Dead Space* combines two video game tropes often used to denigrate women: the damsel in distress and the woman in the refrigerator. The damsel in distress "is a plot device in which a female character is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing a core incentive or

motivation for the protagonist's quest ("Damsel in Distress Part 1"). Additionally, the woman in the refrigerator trope sees female "characters who are routinely brutalized or killed-off as a plot device designed to move the male character's story arc forward" ("Damsel in Distress Part 2"). Both of these tropes "involve female characters who have been reduced to states of complete powerlessness by the narrative" ("Damsel in Distress Part 2"). *Dead Space* combines these two tropes—into what Sarkeesian calls the Damsel in the Refrigerator—by establishing Nicole's helplessness and then killing her off to incite Isaac's rage against the Unitologists. *Dead Space* brutalizes Nicole's body in order to prompt Isaac's heroic actions; it also adds insult to injury by later positioning her as the game's ultimate antagonist.

The game had an opportunity to challenge this portrayal by depicting the real Nicole—instead of the Marker's manipulative version—and demonstrating the ways in which she was a rich character with agency of her own. However, no such attempt is made. Instead, the game ends with Isaac, having escaped the planet and destroyed the Marker, sitting back at the helm of his ship. He looks to his side to find Nicole sitting at the foot of his seat. This version of Nicole, however, appears to be made of the same static shown during her video logs, as well as several symbols from the Marker. She jumps up at him and the screen cuts to black. This ending not only provides one more jump scare for the player, but also symbolizes that the Marker still haunts Isaac through the form of Nicole. This is the form that causes him the most guilt and grief. By the end of the game, women are a form of terror and oppression, symbolizing the loss of sanity and control.

Dead Space hints at Kendra and Nicole's deceptions in other less obvious ways. For instance, Hammond is very transparent. Isaac meets up with him in person several times throughout the game. Hammond is seen standing right next to Isaac and helps him fight in

certain situations. Kendra, on the hand, is only ever seen talking through a video screen or heard over the radio. Once the crew becomes separated at the game's outset, she is never seen again in person until her true identity is revealed; even then, she is seen on the other side of a door. This suggests that she has instituted a barrier between herself and the other men, preventing them from seeing all that she is doing. Her body and her ulterior motives are similarly kept from view. In the same way, Nicole is initially seen through videos or audio diaries. Though the player does see her in person several times, she is often surrounded by the same symbols written on the Marker. These symbols usually appear on the walls or on nearby screens, suggesting that there is more to Nicole than the player realizes.

Taken together, these tropes appeal to conservative cultural stereotypes by "perpetuating false notions that women are inherently misleading and manipulative, and that female sexuality is something to be shamed, feared and controlled" ("Sinister Seductress"). Although "it is possible to imagine fictional worlds, even of the dark, twisted dystopian variety, where the oppression and exploitation of women is not framed as something expected and inevitable," *Dead Space* chooses to employ discursive signals that unnecessarily paint women as simultaneously unqualified, objectified, and duplicitous ("Background Decoration Part 2").

Killing Them Softly:

Sexual Trophies and the Male Gaze

There is not a considerable amount of dialogue throughout the whole of *Dead Space*; rather, much more information about the culture of the Ishimura is communicated by the ship's environment, primarily by the posters hanging in almost every corridor. As David Johnston discusses in "The Making of *Dust*: Architecture and the Art of Level Design," game designers "strive to create a world the player can understand and relate to, but then we add elements—not

for their function—but because their presence is indicative and convincing of a deeper, richer world than the one we have actually constructed" (179). It is necessary to pay attention to such details since these "spaces constitute the material signs or discourse through which the player mentally constructs the game's story" (Kirkland 71). However, when we examine evidence of life on the Ishimura, we find—rather than a rich life representative of the possibilities of futuristic space travel—a culture based on the voyeuristic consumption and sexual objectification of women.

The prime example of this phenomenon in the game is Peng. She begins as a cryptic poster which often depicts her in her underwear or emphasizing her breasts and buttocks (see Fig. 8); the accompanying text reads "I love my Peng" (*Dead Space*). If a player is dedicated enough, they will eventually find a small trophy in a hidden corner of the game. This trophy, of course, is named Peng.

(Fig. 8)
Peng Poster
Ian Milham, *Dead Space*, Electronic Arts, 2007

Peng is a great example of the Women as Reward trope that so many games too often employ. This trope "occurs when women (or more often women's bodies) are employed as rewards for player actions in video games. The trope frames female bodies as collectible, as tractable or as consumable, and positions women as status symbols designed to validate the masculinity of presumed straight male players" ("Women as Reward"). Peng's eroticized advertisements exploit her body to suggest that finding her trophy will reward the player with sex. Since "everyone wants Peng," as many posters read, Peng is also defined by her possession to someone else (*Dead Space*). Emphasizing her sexual availability and desirability, Peng is objectified as one of a series of "pornographic images of women contorted and proportioned for maximum stereotypical viewing pleasure. This differs from the bulky space-marine idealization of male characters because the latter are designed to be fantasies of action and power for the (presumably male) player. The sexualized women are mainly there to be looked at, consumed" (Sarkeesian and Cross 122). The cultural proliferation of pornography that developed during *Dead Space*'s creation is reflected in the image of Peng. This influence directs the player to view and understand her as singularly sexual, which is then supposed to fuel their quest to obtain her.

These posters reveal that the game was designed with the expectation that its primary players would be male; as such, the game's point of view revolves around the male gaze, which "refers to the tendency for the visual arts to assume, and be structured around, a presumed masculine viewer, or in this case, player" ("Body Language"). When games create experiences that cater to and reinforce a particularly negative and objectifying view of women, the psychological and cultural repercussions can be far reaching. Peng's transformation from sexual object, to trophy, and then to status symbol in the gaming community demonstrates that the world of *Dead Space* is built upon male power fantasies that in turn hinge upon the oppression of

women. It is especially important to recognize that every one of Peng's posters were individually designed by the game's creators with the intent of using her sexuality to entice players to discover the location of her trophy. Just as magazines and advertisements are well known for manipulating photos of women through airbrushing or Photoshop, it is important that the player "takes into consideration the 'beauty' we see are fabrications. These images are designed by graphic artists commissioned to change appearance and stimulate desire" (Berberick 2). In Peng's case, every element of her appearance was digitally created for the game; her posture not only borrows from pornography, but the sexual associations surrounding her consumption bases her desirability on a young, slim model. Once again, "since we're talking about interactive gameplay within a three-dimensional environment, we need to consider the fact that players are encouraged to participate directly in the objectification of women through control of the player character, and by extension control of the game camera. In other words, games move the viewer from the position of spectator to that of participant in the media experience" ("Background Decoration Part 1").

Additional examples of this form of objectification can be found among the many documents strewn about the ship's quarters, including different magazines that depict women in bikinis. These magazines work to objectify the women on their covers. As is suggested by the name of one of the magazines, Heavenly Bodies, the focus is entirely on the woman's sexualized individual parts. These magazines—which directly import those from American culture into the gameplay—often decapitate their cover's model and always accentuate her breasts. One other poster contains the single word "Flesh" and features a woman in her underwear (see Fig. 9).

(Fig. 9)
Flesh Poster
Ian Milham, *Dead Space*, Electronic Arts, 2007

Yet again, the imagery and accompanying text serve to sexually excite; they also dismember the woman down to the element made to seem most enticing to the player. In her web short "Women as Background Decoration Part 1," Anita Sarkeesian points out that "these sexually objectified female bodies are designed to function as environmental texture while titillating presumed straight male players" ("Background Decoration Part 1"). Sarkeesian labels these women Non-Playable Sex Objects that "have little to no individual personality or identity to speak of, and almost never get to be anything other than set dressing or props in someone else's narrative" ("Background Decoration Part 1"). By emphasizing women's bodies for the benefit of the presumed straight male player, the game finds a subtle and silent way of "reasserting existing gender configurations against any attempts to shift or transform power relations" (Bordo 460). These bodies are especially privileged when contrasted against the disfigured necromorphs, constructing these monsters as abject Others by comparison.

The representations of women in *BioShock* and *Dead Space* were strongly influenced by the cultural climate in which they were produced, specifically by political attempts to exert

control over women bodies and a preoccupation with defining women's youth, sexuality, and appearance. However, a different cultural rhetoric about the power of women will emerge once American begins the 2007 primary season. Whether or not the representations of women will improve as Obama's liberal administration impacts the wider culture will be the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

THE WAR ON WOMEN:

SUBVERTING FEMALE POWER IN *BIOSHOCK 2* AND *DEAD SPACE 2*

In this chapter, I will examine the American cultural climate during the 2008 election season, as well as the first term of Obama's administration, ranging roughly from 2008-2011. I will then turn to *BioShock 2* and *Dead Space 2* to uncover how concerns about women in power in America translated to the negative representations of powerful women in each game.

As Bush's administration came to a close, the 2007 primaries presented conservatives with liberal opponents that promised four years of drastically different leadership, one of which was a woman. This was the first time in a long time in which a woman, Hillary Clinton, was a serious candidate for President. Her candidacy provided a great deal of visibility and encouragement for more women to run for public office. And even though Clinton failed to secure the nomination, Obama supported policies drastically different from those enacted by Bush. According to Obama's platform, he planned to increase access to contraception, promote women's reproductive rights by supporting *Roe v Wade*, to increase childcare options for working mothers, and to take measures to end job discrimination by better enforcing the Equal Pay Act ("Blueprint"). The 2007 primary season set the tone that the boundaries of traditional constructs of gender were fated to shift in the next four years.

Once elected, Obama's first year demonstrated his dedication to realizing equality with several different policies and orders. The first bill he signed into law was the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, which improves equal pay in the workplace by enhancing protections for

discrimination lawsuits. He also extended health care coverage to gay couples, which impacted millions of women across the country. Finally, during this time women were also installed into prominent positions of influence, including Hillary Clinton's appointment as Secretary of State and Sonia Sotomayor's placement on the Supreme Court ("Timeline"). This was a period of rapid improvements for women that set a more positive cultural tone for women at large. It also proved that Obama was seriously dedicated to issues of civil rights and gender equality.

However, as often occurs, "the more power women gain, the stronger the backlash against them" (Newsom). With many of Obama's policies specifically benefiting women, this early series of political maneuvers created the specific anxiety that men's cultural and political control would be diminished. As a response to this fear, this time period saw an increase in depictions of women abusing the expanded power they had been given. This cultural backlash permeated multiple arenas of popular culture, each illegitimating women's power in a variety of ways. Women's power was invalidated during these years by 1.) controlling their bodies, 2). attacking their femininity, 3). depicting their abuse of power—specifically used to endanger men—4.) committing violence against them, or 5.) removing them from view entirely.

One important element of the conservative response to women's empowerment is the GOP's War on Women. The conservative War on Women began garnering attention after Obama's election due to the drastic increase of legislation aimed at restricting women's reproductive rights. In 2009, legislators introduced 950 different legal revisions focusing on reproductive health, 89 of which were enacted across the country. In 2010, this number jumped to 1,100 new revisions with 135 enacted in 36 different states. Over half of these revisions restricted women's access to abortions by enforcing bans, waiting periods, and insurance difficulties, to name a few ("Proof"). The use of legislation to control women demonstrated that

“the body is not only a *text* of culture. It is also…a *practical*, direct locus of social control” (Bordo 459). This political restriction of women’s bodies was then enacted as a way of disenfranchising women at the level of policy.

Another avenue for the cultural invalidation of women’s power is by resorting to shallow attacks that in some way suggest the woman in question is not feminine. During the 2007 primaries, Rush Limbaugh disrespected Hillary Clinton’s bid for nomination by asking "Will Americans want to watch a woman get older before their eyes on a daily basis? And that woman, by the way, is not going to want to look like she's getting older because it'll impact poll numbers, it'll impact perceptions" (Conte). Here Limbaugh connects her political clout to her physical appearance, one which does not match the physical beauty standard of the youthful woman. Furthermore, once Michelle Obama took her place in the White House, countless articles were written about her outfits, particularly the fact that she consistently revealed her muscular arms, making her appear less feminine (M. Butler). In other attacks, several rumors were spread that Lady Gaga—who had several incredibly popular albums—and Hillary Swank—who had won multiple Academy Awards—were actually men (M. Butler). Attempting to paint women as more masculine on one hand insults these women; but it also soothes anxieties about female leaders by explaining that these women are in power because of their masculinity. Such a viewpoint excludes femininity by suggesting that masculinity is required in order to obtain influence, and then attributes it to powerful women in order to explain their position; curiously, it also simultaneously invalidates women who possess those so-called masculine traits.

When politics shifted toward a more positive inclusion of women in power, the culture responded by suggesting that women would abuse their power, often to the detriment of men. Upon Sotomayor’s appointment to the Supreme Court, multiple Republican men that were

interviewed on *PBS*'s "Reactions to Sonia Sotomayor's Supreme Court Nomination" expressed their concerns that she wouldn't make decisions fairly or free of personal prejudice. One conservative states that "Senate Republicans will treat Judge Sotomayor fairly. But we will thoroughly examine her record to ensure she understands that the role of a jurist in our democracy is to apply the law even-handedly, despite their own feelings or personal or political preferences" ("Reactions"). By suggesting that fairness will be ensured, these comments assume—before she has even taken office—that Sotomayor will act with self-interest; more importantly, they demonstrate the fear that she will promote an agenda specifically benefiting Democrats, women, and minorities.

Additionally, Hillary Clinton's 2007 primary campaign was smeared by attacks that she posed a threat to male power in various ways. Clinton's unpopularity amongst conservatives may have "resulted from an attitude among some that Clinton failed to conform to or respect normative wife-and-mother behavior," prompting concerns that she will inspire women across America to stop buying into the patriarchal stereotype limiting them to domestic work (Parks 329). The specifically gendered threat that Clinton represented could be seen in the sexist merchandise created to ridicule her, including the Clinton nutcracker that "played on the hilarious stereotype that Hillary crushes men's balls" (Schwedel). Additionally, in one of *Fox News*'s discussions about the prospect of having a female president, one conservative newscaster claimed that Clinton has a "female agenda," suggesting that she would promote policies that benefit only women. He even went so far as to suggest, after referencing a case wherein three men were falsely accused of rape, that "men, as you know, have lost a lot of rights in this country" ("He Said, She Said"). These types of products and comments reveal the fear that—as the product of a deeply ingrained patriarchy—Clinton endangers men specifically, threatening to

castrate and deprive them of the power historically afforded to the male sex. This threat is further indicated by one *Fox News* pundit who claimed that "when she comes on television, I involuntarily cross my legs" (Newsom).

Other comments sought to undermine women's rights and to perpetuate the fear that powerful women would annihilate American families; this is best exemplified by Pat Robertson's claim that the "feminist agenda is not about equal rights for women. It is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians" (Newsom). In another instance, one conservative blamed feminism for incidents of rape, stating that "women who [commit statutory rape] feel like it's not as stigmatizing as it was before. There's something about feminism that lets them know 'I can do everything that a man does. I can even go after that young boy. I deserve it.' " (Misener).

Some outlets simply claimed that women do not deserve power, as was asserted by the *Marie Claire* article "Do all women make bad bosses?" When comparing male and female bosses, "men are considered less bullying, egotistical, and overbearing compared to most ladies…[and] a study of 2,000 companies in the U.S. with more female board members experienced lower profitability" (K. Davies). According to this publication, female supervisors simply do not have the character to maintain profitability by virtue of their gender.

Popular films have a history of perpetuating this same message: powerful women abuse their power and manipulate those around them, are icy and emotionless because of the power they have, or are so dominated by their emotions that they use their power to get back at men that have spurned them. *The Devil Wears Prada* from 2005 and *My Super Ex-Girlfriend* from 2006 demonstrate this trend well before Obama took office. Notably, three of the highest grossing

movies during this time period, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* in 2007, *Inception* in 2010, and *The Dark Knight Rises* in 2012 include female antagonists whose power threatens each of the film's male heroes. Of course, this trend is not limited to film; many examples of abusive female leaders in television shows exist during this time, including Glenn Close's character Patty Hewes in *Damages* from 2007-2012 and Vanessa William's Wilhelmina Slater in *Ugly Betty* from 2006-2010.

Additionally, another more subtle form of sexism in film that works to disempower women lies in a "subgenre called chick flicks, which are stories of women's lives which, when you look at them a little more closely, you realize that they generally revolve around men's lives too. They revolve around trying to get a man, trying to get love, get married, get pregnant" (Newsom). Films like *27 Dresses* from 2008, *He's Just Not That Into You* from 2009, and *Valentine's Day* in 2010 purport themselves as female-centered stories, but end up valuing their female characters relative to their ability to attract a man. Lastly, this genre of movies not only disrespects and subverts stories of women; they can, throughout the course of the narrative, effectually disempower their female protagonists. In films like *The Proposal* and *The Ugly Truth*—both released in 2009—we are told that "when it comes to female leaders in entertainment media, we see the bitchy boss who has sacrificed family and love to make it where she is. The whole movie is about bringing her down a peg, and this is generally done by someone who is under her, a subordinate, typically a male" (Newsom).

Of course, chick flicks have been around for many decades and are not unique to this time period. But their cultural popularity at this time in America resonates differently than in the past. With 2008's quick political cultural shift and the several important advancements for women that followed, the production of these films suggests that nothing has changed, that

women are still either inferior to men or undeserving of their influence. They fail to acknowledge any shifts in the cultural gender paradigm and continue to paint women as nagging bosses or egomaniacal monsters who can be 'fixed' by being coupled with a man.

Another way that we see women disempowered is through the violence acted upon them. From 2008-2011, the culture was rife with stories of celebrity domestic violence, among them Rihanna's beating at the hands of Chris Brown in 2009 (Nudd) and Mel Gibson's domestic violence against Oksana Grigorieva in 2011 (TMZ Staff). In the latter case, the domestic violence charges were dropped, becoming another of many cases of violence against women that went unpunished. One still fresh on the culture's mind at this time would have been the case of Kobe Bryant's alleged sexual assault of a 19 year old girl in 2004 that was dismissed because the witness was unwilling to testify (Johnson).

The use of coercion and violence is not only reinforced in popular news stories, but also in other sources like magazines. In one study that examined 10 popular men and women's magazines from 1998 to 2008, it was found that "women's magazines hold women responsible for the violence men do, and men's magazines sidestep male responsibility and make light of physical violence at home" (Nettleton 1). These messages reinforce statements from figures like Phyllis Schlafly who claimed that "by getting married, the woman has consented to sex, and I don't think you can call it rape" (Harvard). This rhetoric succeeded despite statistics that in 2008, it was estimated that one woman per hour was being raped or sexually assaulted in the U.S. (Berberick 12).

One way that violence is ignored is by depicting women's supposed consent to their domination, as was the case in E.L. James's book "50 Shades of Grey," published in 2011. This novel takes the reader through the sado-masochistic relationship of Ana and Christian. Despite

its hypersexual content, the book was wildly popular, selling over 20 million copies shortly after its release. The book began as a fanfiction spin off of *Twilight*, another series featuring a mousy and indecisive female lead obsessed with a mysterious man. This connection allowed the book to tap into the enormous audience of *Twilight* fans, making it even more popular. The success of the book spawned two sequels, a feature film, branded sex toys, and countless references in pop culture outlets like *Saturday Night Live* (Grinberg).

The book, however, is a strong example of how culture eroticizes violence against women, as well as indicating porn's place in mainstream media. In the book, Grey "targets and cajoles an emotionally and sexually unsophisticated 21-year-old, Anastasia Steele…into agreeing to sadistic sex that leaves her sometimes bleeding and too bruised to move. And in true "romance" story style, she keeps coming back for more" (Dines, "Fifty Shades"). These books "eroticize violence against women and render invisible the predatory tactics the 'hero' uses to groom, seduce, and abuse a much younger woman" (Dines, "Fifty Shades"). While it appears to tell the story of a woman becoming empowered through new sexual experiences, it is instead about a woman made powerless, and eroticizing that lack of power to suggest that this is precisely what men should do and what women want men to do to them.

One final method through which powerful women are stripped of their influence in this era is by refusing to include them in any narratives whatsoever. For example, in 2011 during "John Boehner's first four weeks as Speaker of the House, he was on the cover of five national weekly magazines. In Nancy Pelosi's four years as Speaker of the House, she has been on the cover of zero national weekly magazines"(Newsom). Women's power is denied simply by removing it from view. This can also take place by making hiring decisions that favor men, which can be seen simply by the number of female leaders in media during this time. In 2011,

"women own only 5.8% of all television stations and 6% of radio stations,…women comprise only 16% of all writers, directors, producers, cinematographers, and editors, and only 7% of directors and 10% of writers in film are women" (Newsom). Even "the average number of news stories about women and girls is less than 20%" (Newsom).

So few women were influential in the media industry during these years, and one possible reason why is because barriers were kept in place to prevent women from excelling in the workforce. For instance, "70% of women in the workforce are mothers, yet we have no national paid family leave, childcare or flex time policy" (Newsom). This proves that America is not a culture that encourages women's fair participation in the workforce if they are also interested in being mothers. This lack of legislative support perpetuates the cultural idea that women cannot be both mothers and working professionals. Furthermore, we often do not see an interest in changing these policies, for example when one conservative explained "that women are paid less because they want to be paid less" (Patrice). Rather than supporting policies that hold corporations accountable, this author villainizes women who contribute to the workforce. Such criticism "reinforces the fundamental conservative vision that everything would be fine if women would just leave the private workplace" (Patrice). Lastly, the lack of visibility of women in power can impact our ideas of whether or not they are even capable of holding powerful positions, particularly in the minds of children. According to a study by Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, "one in four [elementary school] children in the study stated that it was currently against the law for women, African Americans, or Latinos to be President" (Sato). When women are made invisible, the possibilities for their influence on the culture are rendered similarly undetectable.

The cultural onslaught against women in power has an impact on the public's attitude toward female leaders. According to a Gallup poll in 2011 that asked about gender preference for supervisors, even though almost half of respondents reported that the gender of their boss would not matter, 32% indicated that they would prefer a male boss as opposed to the 22% that preferred a female boss (Newport). These statistics are somewhat hopeful due to the fact that the preference for a male superior in the workplace has drastically reduced—as high as 66% in 1953; however, there still remains a cultural bias toward male bosses that is reinforced by popular media.

As we can see from the extensive examples from popular culture, "media messages are powerful, and their rhetoric is the terrain upon which hegemonic values are reinforced" (Nettleton 5). During the years of 2008-2011, "a woman in power is often seen as a negative thing. We associate all the worst aspects of power and we translate those to a woman seeking to achieve power" (Newsom). As a result, video games like 2010's *BioShock 2* and 2011's *Dead Space 2* homed in on the cultural fear of women overpowering and replacing men. These video games perpetuate such concerns by employing the same methods of disempowerment used in the culture. They demonstrate how different female characters abuse their power to the detriment of men, as well as offer players the chance to violently respond to such abuse, effectively reinstating patriarchal control and soothing anxieties about the loss of male power in reality.

"Lamb is Watching":

Establishing Female Oppression in BioShock 2

BioShock 2 takes place ten years after the first entry in the series. After Jack killed Andrew Ryan, a psychologist named Sofia Lamb took control of Rapture. The player operates

Subject Delta, a Big Daddy. These characters—also present in *BioShock*—are men who have been put into bulky deep sea diving outfits and conditioned to protect Little Sisters as they collect Adam. Big Daddies also share a physical bond with the Little Sisters they protect. Once Big Daddies are assigned to guard a specific little girl, the Big Daddy will die if the two become separated for too long. They are, as one scientist describes, "bonded pairs…connected by a love that kills" (*BioShock 2*).

When the game begins, Delta is attacked and Eleanor, his Little Sister, is taken away by Lamb, Eleanor's mother. Under the power of hypnosis, Delta is ordered to shoot himself in the head; however, he mysteriously awakens in Rapture many years later. His psychic bond with Eleanor still intact, she speaks to him and begs that he save her from Lamb.

BioShock 2 uses the character of Lamb to employ the conservative fear of women in power. She is aligned with the game's previous tyrants, Ryan and Fontaine; this analogizing serves as a lens through which the player can understand her vicious rule over the city. She is simultaneously depicted as a failed mother through her interactions with Eleanor and the city as a whole, which suggests that women with power lose their feminine and maternal qualities. Finally, the game's narrative attempts to re-exert power over women in a variety of ways, ultimately forcing the player to facilitate Lamb's disempowerment. I will end the discussion of this game by considering how the commercial success of its predecessor impacted the game's development and explains its shift in theme.

Sofia Lamb is introduced to the player in the game's opening when she violently captures Eleanor from Delta. The player learns right away that she is threatening, so when Delta reawakens to find her in charge of the city, the player understands that their physical environment will be hostile as well. In order to further communicate the oppressive nature of her

control, the game directly compares Lamb to Ryan and Fontaine early on; the corruptible actions she takes in order to maintain her power prove this characterization is not a false one. Similar to the ways in which Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama were attacked, the game begins by questioning Lamb's femininity through her alignment with the city's former male dictators.

One of the first messages that Delta receives is one written on a wall, reading "Lamb is watching" (see Fig. 10); similar messages elsewhere picture Lamb's eyes with the words "You are not alone" (*BioShock 2*). Though the latter message is meant to suggest Lamb's benevolent guidance and support, it also implies the same institutionalized surveillance that Ryan practiced during his reign over the city. These images are also strikingly similar to the "Atlas is watching" posters seen in the first game (*BioShock*). Lamb is consistently compared to both Ryan and Fontaine, indicating to the player that she poses the same threat. As an oppressive leader, the game makes it clear that she is also a failed leader.

(Fig. 10)
Lamb is Watching
Jordan Thomas, *BioShock 2*, 2K Games, 2010.

Lamb's own actions further demonstrate that her leadership is no less oppressive than Ryan or Fontaine's. Her ruthlessness is established early on, for instance in one audio diary that reveals she used a torpedo to sink a bathysphere containing a couple attempting to escape the city. Additionally, Lamb's start in the city reveals the extent of her duplicity. She gained power in Rapture by opening a psychiatry practice and counseling citizens. Though she was hired by Ryan to be a source of emotional support to the people, she used her position to convince the splicers that "Ryan's horseshit about always looking out for number one is turning us little guys against each other" (*BioShock 2*). She insisted to her patients that the city was in desperate need of unification; conveniently, this was only possible under her leadership. Once Ryan and Fontaine were killed, she used her vast network of support to take over. Not only did she betray the man that employed her, but Lamb's use of the splicers mimics the way that Fontaine established his plasmid business and supplied splicers with Adam in exchange for their support. Finally, Delta occasionally receives assistance from Brigid Tenenbaum, who explains that she has returned to the city because "Sofia Lamb has taken Rapture, and is responsible for stealing children from the surface" (*BioShock 2*). She enlists Delta's help to protect the Little Sisters from Lamb's plot to reignite the city's trafficking of Adam. Lamb not only misleads the city around her, but her negative influence spreads to the surface, corrupting the youth beyond the city's borders.

Unlike Tenenbaum—who is yet again spatially removed from the violence and asks Delta to act for her—Lamb is given agency and control. This agency, however, is corrupted. Even though Lamb commits many of the same terrors as Ryan and Fontaine, her abuse of power is rooted in her gender. Lamb repeatedly emphasizes that everything she does is for her daughter and for the good of the people in the city. Whereas Ryan and Fontaine were unabashedly self-

serving, Lamb spreads a message of harmony and unity, a message rooted in a sort of maternal care that might be expected of Rapture's first female leader. The game then demonstrates how this message is merely a mask for her own ambition. By using Lamb's message of motherly affection—as I will discuss in more detail below—and then demonstrating her treachery, the game employs Lamb's gender by first appealing to her supposed motherly nature and then proving her duplicity—much like the women in *Dead Space*. Ryan and Fontaine, on the other hand, are not accompanied by the same degree of gendered associations and motivations.

In an interview with *BioShock 2*'s developers, the team describes the inspiration for Lamb's character:

> Shortly after deciding that the father-daughter bond would be central to the story, came the obvious question of: what would make for a meaningful antagonist for that? So, somebody to subvert the traditional definition of family through heavily altruistic filters for the common good, above the individual loyalties, sort of naturally followed, and that's how Sofia Lamb was born. (Williams, "Of Philosophy")

Lamb is not only masculinized by the game itself, but the core of her character was designed relative to a man, specifically as his opposite. This construction privileges and centers the male protagonist by positioning Lamb as the evil and inverse Other.

"A mother to the Rapture family":

Implicating Motherhood in the Abuse of Power

One of the ways that *BioShock 2* communicates to the player that Lamb is a failed leader is by depicting her as a failed mother, implicating her gender in her inability to run the city. The game clearly founds her character in relation to motherhood, but then reveals how this characterization is counterfeit.

Lamb is discursively and symbolically associated with motherhood throughout the game. The phrase "We will be reborn" is written on walls throughout the city, often accompanied by a picture of Lamb's face. Additionally, the symbol most often associated with Lamb is a butterfly, implicating ideas of transformation and change; another kind of rebirth. Lamb perpetuates this language of reproduction and motherhood herself in one of the many messages broadcasted throughout the city that encourages citizens to "think of me not as leader, but as mother to the Rapture family" (*BioShock 2*). The game's beginning also supports this notion as she is seen defending and reinstating her status as a mother when she reclaims Eleanor. The façade of caring and nurturing that Lamb established with splicers in her psychiatry practice not only helped her create her own army, but also masked her drive for power. She positioned herself as a leader that would enact drastic change—not unlike Obama. However, unlike Obama, this characterization received further emphasis and believability by using the gendered assumptions of her maternalistic predisposition.

Though the game establishes Lamb's maternal function in the city, it uses Lamb's relationship with Eleanor—her literal daughter—as the site upon which to indict Lamb for her maternal failures. The player finds several audio diaries that recorded Lamb's interactions with a young Eleanor, as well as Lamb's research notes about the child. She treated Eleanor like an experiment, subjecting her to intelligence tests and teaching her how best to manipulate others. This clinical demeanor is consistent at a physical level as well. In one diary, Lamb reveals that "my physical participation in her birth was…minimized, of course—it is vital that I am unhindered by nature's crude bias. I will be, above all, her intellectual progenitor" (*BioShock 2*).

These depictions are by no means one sided. Eleanor herself describes Lamb as having a profound moral sense, "but dividing her loyalty evenly across the world at large spreads it so thin

as to be invisible to some. Love…I have found, is…beneath her" (*BioShock 2*). Lamb's inability to love, especially her own child, defies the cultural trademark of all mothers. She even goes so far as to strangle Eleanor, momentarily killing her and then bringing her back to life in order to sever her psychic connection to Delta (see Fig. 11).

Lamb's depiction says a great deal about how American culture defines and values motherhood. The cultural construction of motherhood during this time is encapsulated in a 2011 article in *Desiring God* by Rachel Jankovic who argued that "motherhood is not a hobby, it is a calling. You do not collect children because you find them cuter than stamps. It is not something to do if you can squeeze the time in. It is what God gave you time for" (Jankovic). It is ideas like this, ones that prize a reproductive imperative, that pervade the cultural air and certainly influence how we are meant to interpret Lamb's treatment of Eleanor. We can look to her villainous representation to "expose the dark underside of an essentialist view of motherhood: if mother-love and self-sacrifice are the natural expressions of maternity, then anger, violence, and even the mildest acts involving choosing of one's own needs over those of the child are not only wrong but unnatural, even monstrous" (Kawash 983).

Lamb is made to seem even more reprehensible through the details of Eleanor's birth mentioned above, and it is specifically done so because of the cultural preference for natural births. In "New Directions in Motherhood Studies," Samira Kawash discusses the contrived privileging of this method of childbirth:

> Natural childbirth as it is currently practiced is entirely a cultural invention, and technology and conventional medical practice are hardly excluded. The move toward natural childbirth has appealed to some women not only because of the allure of nature but also because advocates of natural childbirth tend to focus on the importance of childbirth as a powerful emotional and physical experience that should be guided as much by the mother and her needs as by the needs of the child." (Kawash 992)

As Kawash explains, a natural birth is perceived as a crucial moment of bonding between the mother and child. During Eleanor's birth, however, Lamb outright privileges her own self-preservation by limiting her physical participation. Lamb's rejection of a natural birth is used to further indict her as a failed mother by demonstrating her intent to distance her emotional connection to Eleanor.

(Fig. 11)
Lamb Kills Eleanor
Jordan Thomas, *BioShock 2,* 2K Games, 2010.

In an interview with the game's creative director, Jordan Thomas, he elaborates on Lamb's selfishness by saying that "her motto is 'Make the world your family' meaning force your mind into becoming loyal to the world in a way usually reserved for your child, and that's intellectually daunting. She starts to make horrific choices between altruism and her own children and that's where we see the mask beginning to slip" (Plant). Not only does she abandon a culturally expected selfless maternal mindset in pursuit of her power, but this abandonment

results in her eventual loss of power by destabilizing her character. This again proves that Lamb's failure as a leader is intricately connected to her failure as a mother and a woman.

The game strengthens Lamb's negative maternal characterization by providing a comparison against which the player can judge her. This comparison involves a series of audio diaries left by a woman named Nina Carnegie. On the night of Fontaine's attack on the city, Nina was leading a group of children through Ryan Amusements—one of Rapture's many venues for entertainment and propaganda. The attack forced the park to seal itself off, trapping everyone inside. The player hears how, as time passed and the park never reopened, food began to run out. Nina, being the loving maternal figure, gives all of her food to the children, explaining in the diary that "I haven't been eating…the children need all the supplies we've got left. Need them more than I do" (*BioShock 2*). Even though these children were not her own, the game uses Nina's sacrifice to support the cultural notion that women, having the ability to bear life, are naturally more nurturing and caring for children. Nina's story creates a very specific definition of motherhood that the player is encouraged to use for direct comparison against Lamb. And when using a definition of motherhood based on sacrifice, selflessness, and a deep emotional love, Lamb fails on all accounts.

These depictions construct Lamb as starkly anti-maternal; this in turn, coupled with her power over the city, effectively proves that she has abandoned traditional gender norms. By depicting how Lamb is a failed mother, the game suggests that Lamb—as Rapture's mother—will fail yet again at leading the city. This idea is reinforced each time the player views the city's obvious state of ruin and corruption. She orders the city's hordes of splicers to kill Delta, and the ensuing battles cause untold damage. In several scenes, rooms become completely flooded, train

cars providing passage between districts are derailed, and neighborhoods are destroyed—all under Lamb's direction.

Lamb's initial reliance on depicting herself as a mother, accompanied with the obvious disrepair of the city, tells us that Lamb is both a failed mother and a failed leader. This distinguishes her from Ryan and Fontaine because, as men, they only failed in their ability to lead the city. Since their masculinity was never damaged, Lamb's failures are a stronger indictment of her character and her sex. These constructs ultimately fault Lamb as a failed woman precisely because of her power, suggesting that women are not supposed to have power in the first place; when they do, they abandon their maternal responsibilities in favor of self-interest. Not coincidentally, these are the same anxieties held by conservatives during this time period.

As the War on Women demonstrated, conservative ideology was threatened by the possibility of expanding abortions because abortion threatens the traditional constructs of femininity. Women who receive abortions are culturally marked as selfish and self-serving, which conflicts with the socially presumed nature of mothers as nurturing and self-sacrificing (King). Websites like *Hope After Abortion* perpetuate this message by using testimonials from women who have had abortions and then suffered "problems such as suicidal thoughts, headaches, cardiac symptoms, anxiety, alcohol and drug abuse, or more verbal abuse toward their children…Some women have restricted range of affect, such as an inability to have loving or tender feelings" (Vandegaer).

However, such a contradiction troubles the stability of the definition of mothers and, in so doing, similarly troubles the definition of masculinity, as well as the naturally-presumed state of power that has historically been given to men (King). *BioShock 2* uses its depiction of Lamb

as a failed mother to mask conservative anxieties about this shifting construct of femininity—meaning their own potential loss of power. This shifting definition of femininity also narrows the gap between men and women by giving women more traditionally masculine qualities, which disrupts the stability of the gender binary that is so crucial to the conservative view of women. This anxiety is deflected by demonstrating instead how, after traditional roles of gender have been abandoned and women have gained the power that formerly belonged to men, they have lost their maternal characteristics in favor of a cold, clinical disposition and a self-centered ambition that is specifically aimed at destroying men. Such a construction seeks to explain why women should not possess power, but it ultimately abuses and limits their potential for the sake of male power fantasies.

A Lamb to the Slaughter:

The Player's Role in the Oppression of Women

By establishing Lamb's tyrannical rule, the game's narrative soothes the cultural fears about women's power by depicting the player's successful reinstatement of traditional gender roles signaled by Lamb's violent disempowerment. Of all of the methods that culture uses to disempower women, this game resorts to the violence that marks the majority of commercial video games available. The primary narrative of Delta's attempt to reunite with Eleanor and replace Lamb as her parent privileges the child's guidance from her adopted father over that of her biological mother. At a functional level, Delta must rejoin Eleanor for his own survival since their separation is lethal to him. In a sense, his pursuit is entirely selfish. However, the game positions him as a better parent than Lamb so that the player becomes concerned not only about Delta's survival, but with Eleanor's as well. This relationship is solidified at the end of the game

when, after Lamb is forced out of the city and Delta is lethally wounded, Eleanor uses Adam to absorb Delta into her own consciousness.

The violent, real world cultural response to women in power has also conditioned players to respond to the same images of powerful women in other contexts, including this game. At *BioShock 2*'s finale, it is Eleanor who decides whether or not Lamb gets to live based off of whether or not the player has rescued or harvested Little Sisters throughout the narrative. If Delta has shown kindness and forgiveness toward others in this way, then Eleanor does so by allowing Lamb to live. This, however, did not go over well with some players. Their response to her abuse of power was so great that in a forum of players, one person proclaimed "I was very much looking forward to heaving my drill through her skull…so I was pretty disappointed that I wasn't able to kill her in game" (Half-dude). Lamb's failure as a leader and a mother is used to justify violence against her. This desire for violence as retribution against an abusive female leader clearly matches the same responses made in popular culture at this time, and demonstrates that gender equality has yet to uproot entrenched notions of male superiority that have become accustomed to violent defenses.

The game also reinstates patriarchal control in ways that implicate the player as a voyeur to the violent subjugation of women. While in Ryan Amusements, the player can hear two splicers—a man and a woman—talking on the other side of a wall. The man is screaming at the woman, saying "Baby, I want a child. End of discussion...making a family is natural. You gotta fight just do to nature down here. You gotta remember, I'm the man of the house, and that means she's gotta behave" (*BioShock 2*). The woman is then heard crying as the conversation trails off.

Interestingly, this scene differs from almost every other encounter with Rapture's citizens. In most instances, the player can listen to splicers talking, and their conversations are

interrupted once they notice Delta and begin attacking. The exchange above, however, can only be overheard. The player never sees these splicers in person or has the chance to interrupt them. As such, this scene represents patriarchal violence against women that forces them to reproduce and to submit themselves to men; furthermore, by refusing the player the opportunity to intervene, the game suggests that instances of domestic violence are unpreventable, or worse, should not be prevented at all. The player's only option is to listen to the scene and then walk away a bystander, complicit in the violence against women through their inaction. This scene also demonstrates that the nature vs. culture distinction discussed in the first chapter is still prevalent, used here to naturalize women's reproductive imperative and to justify violence against them when they refuse to adhere to that decree. Finally, since the violence is not actually seen, this is also an instance of male bullying that demonstrates the cultural presumption that men have a right to their wife's bodies while also naturalizing domestic violence by hiding it from view.

Another example requires the player's complicity in the economic exploitation of women. When exploring The Pink Pearl, one of Rapture's brothels, the player finds several bedrooms that contain windows to private rooms where voyeurs can pay to observe the sexual acts taking place. One bedroom in particular, labeled Peep Show, is locked. The only way to get inside of the bedroom and reap the rewards of the safe hidden inside is to enter through the window in the voyeur's room. Once the player pays to get into the room and opens the window, they immediately see the corpse of a woman strung up in chains above the bed (see Fig. 12).

The mise-en-scène places the woman directly next to the wall safe, which contains money and ammunition. This placement serves to objectify and equate her to the material gain

that awaits inside the safe. In this scene, the player trades the sexualized victimization of women for economic profit.

In this instance, the game forces the player to participate in the economic exploitation and violence against women by paying to become a voyeur to her sexualized death. It also suggests that participating in this system is worthwhile since the player reaps the benefits of the additional money and ammunition inside of the safe. In order to survive, and indeed to take advantage of the city's treasures, the game forces the player to be complicit in a system of violence; furthermore, it rewards them for doing so.

(Fig. 12)
Chained Woman
Jordan Thomas, *BioShock 2*, 2K Games, 2010.

The game does not, however, take the opportunity to challenge this transaction. For example, in *BioShock* the player discovers the corpse of Jasmine Jolene, Ryan's mistress. A nearby audio diary provides an insight into her death, helping the player empathize and mourn

her abuse in that system. In this scene, however, the woman is not identified in any way and the player is not given the chance to sympathize with her; rather than question the validity of the system, the game rewards the player for their participation and the player continues forward, better prepared to confront the next challenge. Similar to the previous example, the player has no opportunity to intervene in this woman's death. Designed in this way, the game "works to reinforce the myth that women are naturally fated to be objectified, vulnerable, and perpetually victimized by male violence. These games also tend to frame misogyny and sexual exploitation as an everlasting fact of life, as something inescapable and unchangeable" ("Background Decoration Part 2"). This also suggests that we do not have the ability to battle systemic sexism out in reality, as well as the idea that violence against women should not be contested because it is beneficial to men. Though this scene is brief—not to mention the fact that some players may not even experience it if they do not search the area well enough—it is material like this that can normalize attitudes about women that marginalize and endanger them, as well as subtly impact how women are valued.

Finally, the end segment of *BioShock 2* represents the game's preferred model of female involvement. After Delta rescues Eleanor, she dresses in armor and offers her help, saying that "now it's my turn to fight for you" (*BioShock 2*). Although she is prepared and willing to fight, she only does so at Delta's request. Rather than allow her to act on her own, Eleanor is literally objectified by being transformed into a plasmid, allowing Delta to summon her to help fight enemies. After a short period of time, she then disappears and must be summoned again for additional support (*BioShock 2*). Designing Eleanor in this way establishes that women are most valuable when their agency is strictly limited and coopted by men for their own benefit.

As I've demonstrated, *BioShock 2* employs a stronger conservative tone evident in its narrative than does its predecessor; this differs from *BioShock*'s veiled attempt at a liberal storyline. This shift in thematic content can be attributed to the context of the game's production.

It is certainly not uncommon for AAA game companies to develop a popular game into a franchise; "because of their mass-market status and because of their extremely high production costs, video games often beget sequels" (Taylor 176). *BioShock* proved popular and profitable enough that a direct sequel was rushed to ensure further profits. However, when the game was proposed, *BioShock*'s creative director, Ken Levine, decided not to be involved in the sequel's development. Levine explained that "the reason we didn't do BioShock 2 is because...the time frame that game had, and the company understandably wanted another game in Rapture... But we felt we had said what we wanted to say about Rapture, about those kind of environments and that kind of feel" (Yin-Poole). This did not, however, slow down production because the developers starting working on the game anyway, "continuing the story of BioShock without the creative input of the team at 2K Boston" (Kohler). Under an entirely new production team, it is then no surprise that *BioShock 2* differed so much from the previous installment. While *BioShock*'s representation of women is certainly problematic, its larger narrative critiques the vulnerability of a free market system, particularly at the hands of selfish men. Though *BioShock 2* essentially reproduces the same narrative about corrupt leaders, its reliance on Lamb's gender as the source of this corruption marks this entry in the series as more directly damaging to women. Additionally, the telling of this particular story about a corrupt female dictator at this time in American cultural history places it among the many other damning depictions of female leaders and contributes to the conservative reaction against granting women greater cultural clout.

Dead Space 2 and the Distrust of Women

The player rejoins Isaac Clarke in *Dead Space 2* as he has been captured and subjected to psychological exams for the two years since his experience on the Ishimura. Isaac finds that his brain, still infected by the Marker, has been used in the construction of more Markers. Trapped inside the Sprawl—a city stationed above Saturn—another necromorph outbreak occurs, and Isaac—pursued by necromorphs, Unitologists, and a governmental military installation called EarthGov—must find a way to break the Marker's control over his psyche in order to survive.

Similar to its predecessor, *Dead Space 2* includes very few women in its narrative: Nicole, Daina, and Ellie are the only women of note in the game, and their treatment represents the larger attitude towards women in that universe. This game compliments *BioShock 2* by similarly imagining powerful women as deceptive and manipulative, matching the tone of the first game. This depiction is extended to all types of women, including real, imagined, and artificial women. The game's narrative also mirrors the cultural contempt for women in power by attempting to reinstate patriarchal control, both through Nicole's violent repression and the privileging of Isaac's heterosexual coupling with Ellie.

Nicole's ghostly appearance at the end of *Dead Space* foreshadows her function as Isaac's primary antagonist in the sequel. She makes several appearances throughout the game, her eyes and mouth replaced by bright lights and the sounds of static. Her clothes are faded and stained with blood, showing obvious signs of neglect, abuse, and decay (see Fig. 13). In this game, she represents a woman with power because she is able to manipulate Isaac, gaining more leverage each time she appears to him. Isaac admits that she is his vulnerability, telling her in one hallucination that "you were my everything. And if I let you go, I got nothing left" (*Dead*

Space 2). However, her power over Isaac is sourced in her gender and in their former romantic connection.

The game opens with a flashback to a conversation between Isaac and Nicole that reveals how he encouraged her to join the Ishimura crew. Nicole tells him that "if it weren't for you, I never would have made it this far, because you made me stick with it" (*Dead Space 2*). This comment not only establishes Isaac's feeling of responsibility for her death by getting her on the ship; it also frame's Nicole's success relative to him, dismissing any efforts on her part and attributing them instead to Isaac. This serves as a representative example of how "on the surface, victimized women are framed as the reason for the hero's torment, but if we dig a little deeper…the pain stems from feelings of weakness and/or guilt over his failure to perform his "socially prescribed" patriarchal duty to protect his women and children" ("Damsel in Distress Part 2").

(Fig. 13)
Nicole Tormenting Isaac
Ian Milham, *Dead Space 2*, Electronic Arts, 2011.

Nicole directly addresses this idea to Isaac in several different instances. In one scene, she comments "You made me die," and in another she holds him up against a wall, asking "Am I your guilt? Crushing the life out of you because you can't get over the fact that I'm dead? That you feel responsible?" (*Dead Space 2*). To Isaac, she embodies his failure to protect her; she haunts his conscience and emphasizes his responsibility for her death. When he eventually accepts this and makes peace with her, she transforms into the clean and lively Nicole the player met at the game's beginning. From this point on, she appears to be a benevolent spirit instructing Isaac how to stop the necromorphs. That is, however, until the end of the game when it is revealed that she has been a creation of the Marker all along, attempting to gain Isaac's trust so that he would obey her and position the Marker for the Convergence that will consume all life.

Nicole is entirely negative: she represents Isaac's instability; a force of negative influence coercing him into behaviors leading to his own demise. In certain hallucinations, Nicole attacks Isaac, often trying to strangle or stab him; however, when the delusion ends, Isaac sees that he is actually attacking himself. Her gendered form in the game equates women to this destructive force.

One of the other women given attention in the game is Daina. Once Isaac initially escapes the necromorphs at the beginning of the game, Daina appears through a video and tells him, "You're suffering from a unique form of dementia Isaac, something you contracted on Aegis VII…but if you can get here I can treat you and get you to safety" (*Dead Space 2*). Since Isaac is without weapons or armor and does not know where he is, he has no choice but to follow Daina's directions. However, Daina later reveals herself to be a Unitologist with plans to use Isaac to create more Markers.

Daina has a specific form of power in the game that she uses to manipulate Isaac. She takes advantage of his vulnerability, knowing full well that he must obey her out of necessity. She reinforces this idea by saying that he can trust her because "I'm not the one shooting you" (*Dead Space 2*). When confronting her betrayal, Isaac asks, "Why did I trust you," to which she responds, "Well you didn't have a choice Isaac. I told you there was a cure and you came running" (*Dead Space 2*). Her deception is again hinted at since, similar to *Dead Space*'s Kendra, Daina's physical visibility is also veiled by video broadcasts and radio transmissions. It is only when she is seen in person that the game reveals her feminine marked body and her malicious intentions to return Isaac to the Unitologists. When women are given power in this world, they abuse it, specifically using it for the endangerment of the male protagonist.

Dead Space 2 extends this same representation to non-human entities given a female form, proving that their femaleness is the source of their threat. When Isaac must repair the city's solar array, he encounters the array's artificial intelligence, given the name ANTI. This automated system appears to him in the form of a woman whenever the two interact. ANTI, whether under the direction of EarthGov or because her system has gone haywire, blocks Isaac's entrance into the array. The only way to proceed in the game is by destroying the computer circuits and forcing ANTI offline, effectively killing her so that Isaac can gain access to the building (see Fig. 14).

This portion of the game begins as Isaac listens to logs recorded by watchman Howard Phillips. Phillips has submitted several requests to transfer outside of the array, but they have been denied by EarthGov. However, Phillips instead suggests that ANTI is holding him hostage, saying "I can't believe anything she tells me" (*Dead Space 2*). Though she is a program representative of a larger governmental entity keeping him there, Phillips specifically blames her

instead and suggests she is untrustworthy. As one of few women in the game, her female form is used to indicate the treachery of women as a whole.

Her name ANTI itself indicates that she—along with women as a whole—is the opposite, dichotomously and categorically opposed to everything. Against the male protagonist, she is the anti-male, both in her representation as a woman and in her antagonistic behavior. Her name, when used in opposition with Isaac, imposes a gender binary that separates them into "two distinctly separate and opposing classes of human being…And within that strict binary women are 'marked' while men get to remain largely 'unmarked' ("Ms. Male"). By centralizing the game's story in Isaac, ANTI's naming represents women as the negative Other to Isaac's male subject.

(Fig. 14)
Isaac Disabling ANTI
Ian Milham, *Dead Space 2*, Electronic Arts, 2011.

We can read the source of ANTI's threat in two different ways: either her software has malfunctioned or she is being controlled by EarthGov to obstruct Isaac's mission. However, since she is depicted as a woman, both options have negative implications for women in leadership. If she is simply malfunctioning—as the game leads us to believe—then her use of power over the solar array can be interpreted as her irrationality and complete lack of control. We see this same idea in popular culture. For instance, in media news coverage, women are "twice as likely to be described emotionally as were men, and by painting women as more emotional than men, we perpetuate the stereotype that women are emotional. Therefore they are irrational, therefore they can't handle a crisis, therefore they should not be in leadership positions" (Newsom). This argument has been levied against countless women to suggest that their innate inability to control their emotions make them unfit for leadership.

On the other hand, if ANTI obstructs Isaac because she is controlled by EarthGov, then we can see her as an extension of that military operation and we "might well understand the boundaries of [her] body as the limits of the socially *hegemonic*" (J. Butler "Gender Trouble" 436). This then suggests that in reality women in power are controlled by a male authority figure higher up. The game uses ANTI's feminine body as the site through which conservative social forces are enacted to indicate that she is not truly the one in control of her body and her agency. The struggle in the array is played out as a conflict between men and women; the player, operating the male, is forced to succeed using a violent response. Lastly, ANTI's naked physical form borrows imagery from pornography, which "contributes to violence against women by normalizing male dominance, fostering feelings of aggression in a sexual context" (Gutierrez 12). The violence the player is directed to enact upon her mirrors and reproduces the oppressive domination of women enacted in pornographic scenes.

Though her power over the array presents challenges and endangers Isaac's life, ANTI is virtually useless in her attempts to stop Isaac. She activates lasers and locks the player out of different rooms, but these are quickly undone as Isaac disrupts the lasers or reroutes wiring to open the doors. ANTI poses no real threat. No matter how much women abuse their power, Isaac's continued success demonstrates that women can always be dominated by men.

In this episode, the game reproduces several of the methods seen in the larger culture to disrespect women's power and uses them against ANTI: it first implicates her femininity, whether by invoking her erratic nature or sourcing her abilities in a greater male power; she is initially posed as a threat to men, e.g. against Isaac and watchman Phillips; her power is illegitimated as the player overcomes her threat with ease; finally the player is directed to violently respond by destroying her software, effectively killing her feminine form.

Dead Space 2 and the Substitution of Threatening Women with Tractable Alternatives

Similar to *BioShock 2*, this installment incorporates many different examples that exhibit men's attempt to re-exert control over women. Importantly, this form of control is always violent, going further than *BioShock 2* by depicting the death of every woman who attempts to use their power against Isaac.

Once Nicole reveals herself to be an agent of the Marker's hallucinogenic effect, she tries to kill him. However, this fight takes place inside Isaac's brain. The player must shoot the neural synapses in his head in order to break the Marker's hold over him. However, this also implies that instead of dealing with his guilt in a healthy way, Isaac simply erases his memories of Nicole so that the Marker cannot use her to manipulate him. This means that Isaac merely

eliminates any memory of responsibility for Nicole's death. Furthermore, this elimination is enacted upon Nicole's body as the player must shoot her in between aiming at neurons. In a manner quite similar to the film *Inception* released a year before *Dead Space 2*, both stories depict a male protagonist who effectively kills his female love interest as a way of resolving his guilt over her death.

In the previous chapter, I discussed *Dead Space*'s combination of the Damsel in Distress and the Woman in the Refrigerator tropes. Since this sequel incorporates Nicole more heavily into the plot, these tropes still have relevance. However, Nicole's position as the antagonist provides different implications. Since Nicole was both damsel and victim in the series' first entry, "the two plot devices used together then allow developers to exploit *both* the revenge motivation and the good old fashioned "save the girl" motivation" ("Damsel in Distress Part 2"). Isaac's guilt over Nicole's death defines a substantial part of his struggle in this game. However, the revenge that the player is encouraged to enact for Nicole's death is directed toward the necromorphs, who are in turn controlled by the Marker. The problematic representation enters here because the Marker is represented by the form of Nicole. Though Isaac attempts to satiate his guilt for Nicole's death, he must do this by attacking Nicole herself. In one way "these failed-hero stories are really about the perceived loss of masculinity, and then the quest to regain that masculinity, primarily by exerting dominance and control, through the performance of violence on others" ("Damsel in Distress Part 2"). It is, however, more detrimental to force the player to regain that masculinity specifically through the brutalization of women.

Just as *BioShock 2* uses Eleanor's objectification to prize women whose agency are contained and constrained for the benefit of men, *Dead Space 2* idealizes women using the character of Ellie Langford. Soon after Daina is killed, Isaac meets another woman named Ellie,

whose characteristics starkly contrast against Daina's. Upon meeting Ellie, she fires a warning shot at him and rejects Isaac's suggestion that the two work together. She instead insists that "other people are just a liability...Please, don't follow me" (*Dead Space 2*). However, the only way for the player to move forward in the game is by following her because there is literally nowhere else for Isaac to walk at this point. At first, Ellie appears a tough, independent woman capable of surviving the necromorph plague on her own; she even communicates this same idea directly to Isaac himself. Though she indicates that she does not want Isaac to follow after, the player is forced to disobey her, suggesting that women have no meaningful voice of influence. Furthermore, Ellie's role in the game soon becomes focused on her relationship with Isaac, teasing the pair's romantic interests in one another. The game's rather arbitrary decision to romantically link the two paints Ellie as a better companion for Isaac than Nicole precisely because of her lack of agency.

At the game's end, Isaac and Ellie find themselves completely surrounded by necromorphs. As a way of protecting Ellie, Isaac tricks her into a shuttle and forces the ship to take off without him. Isaac explains, "I couldn't save Nicole, but I can save you Ellie" (*Dead Space 2*). Even though Ellie is capable of fighting, he removes her agency, idealizing a conservative form of masculinity by forcing her out of the story and re-centering attention on himself. Ellie urges Isaac to stop the ship, but he again ignores her, believing that he has made the best decision for her, even if against her will.

To be fair, Ellie does refuse to be ignored by returning for Isaac and rescuing him in her shuttle moments before the Sprawl explodes. However, even though she does reinstate her agency in this moment, the game still ends with a joke at Ellie's expense. Having escaped the necromorphs yet again, Isaac sits back as Ellie pilots the ship to safety. The player then watches

as Isaac looks to his side, precisely recreating the ending of the first game. Whereas in *Dead Space* he saw Nicole, this time Isaac sees Ellie, who just says "What?" (*Dead Space 2*). But this scene not only provides a moment of humor for fans of the series; it serves to mock Ellie for not knowing Isaac's history and why he was staring at her.

The representation of women in *BioShock 2* and *Dead Space 2* effectively argue for and naturalize the idea that any time women have power, they use it against men; on the other hand, when women are kept under control, they become men's romantic partners. These games exhibit an inherent mistrust of female leadership, an attitude that is prominent in their narratives due to its permeation in the larger culture. The direct attempts at usurping women's power in these games both reflect and reinforce demeaning ideas about women to the player who, out in the real world, is already bombarded with similar messages on all sides.

CONCLUSION

RETURNING TO THE SURFACE

Despite Obama's liberal policies and the considerable power given to women during his first administration, the conservative reaction of the populace sought to ensure that the general attitude regarding women in power would remain negative. Here "the way the symbolic realm has been acting is to take power away from women while women have been challenging men's power in the concrete realm" (Newsom). As a result, popular media remained consistently awash with imagery of women undermined, disrespected, sexually defined, and brutalized by men. Since these video games are a microcosm of American culture, it is then no surprise that the depictions of powerful women in each series remain disappointingly stereotypical and constricted. Finally, the impact of video game interactivity encourages the player to reenact this same disrespect outside of gameplay.

The *BioShock* and *Dead Space* series have great potential in their ability to construct spaces outside of reality that do not necessarily have to be tainted by traditional representations of gender. However, since these games are the product of a larger sexist culture, they join magazines, advertisements, music, film, and more by relying on damaging tropes about women—even as they attempt to critique the tropes. This is especially evident in the *BioShock* series that uses its place in the 1940s to reproduce this decade's restrictive and insulting representations of women. As Anita Sarkeesian points out, "there is a clear difference between replicating something and critiquing it. It's not enough to simply present misery as miserable and exploitation and exploitative. Reproduction is not, in and of itself, a critical commentary. A critique must actually center on characters exploring, challenging, changing, or struggling with oppressive social systems" ("Background Decoration Part 2").

Despite a portion of the culture's dedication to realizing gender equality during the era of Obama, the proliferation of sexism in popular culture continued to promote oppressive depictions of women. As evidenced by *BioShock* and *Dead Space*, "a sizable chunk of the industry is still unfortunately trapped in the established pattern of building game narratives on the backs of brutalized female bodies" ("Damsel in Distress Part 2"). However, if influential cultural products like video games can work to reverse those narratives and present positive opportunities for women to participate, it is possible that culture-wide change can take place. This can only occur, however, when women are allowed to provide input into the content of popular media and when the majority of cultural narratives do not speak to women's inability, their incompetence, or their threat. Video games like 2003's *Beyond Good and Evil* and the independently developed *Sword and Sorcery* in 2011, along with the efforts of media critics like Anita Sarkeesian, provide hope that the popular culture is gradually moving toward more positive representations.

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