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Literature Review

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Tentative title: “Further Questions of Female Suffrage”: The Characterization of Sadie Adler in *Red Dead Redemption II*

*Red Dead Redemption II* sent shockwaves through the video game industry almost instantaneously following its 2018 release (King). Tacking onto the success of its predecessor, *Red Dead Redemption*, the hotly anticipated Western epic promised the type of open-world navigability and exploration found in the most popular games on the market, and it delivered on all fronts. An enormous commercial success, *Red Dead II* was praised for its game mechanics, the intricate, realistic pre-programmed abilities of its of non-player characters, its stunning visuals and lighting, and its emotion-laden soundtrack (King).

Of particular note was the game’s wide cast of diverse characters, whose realistic backstories played into a storyline that unfolded in remarkable detail and brushed on social issues such as historical racism, sexism, the oppression of Native Americans by the American government in the late 19th century, and the effects of industry on the environment. With this title, Rockstar Games took on the challenge of developing a game cognizant of the modern social climate set in a time when marginalized people were barely recognized as participants in the fabric of society. One character that defies expectations for the time—as well as for gaming itself—is Sadie Adler, one of the most recognizable side characters in the game. Sadie emerges as a strong, independent, determined protagonist in a genre and in a world that has not always been kind to women (Harveston).

The portrayal of women in video games has been historically problematic in various ways throughout the decades (Harveston). The video game industry has always been male- dominated, with men largely being both the creators and consumers of content produced across

gaming platforms (Fisher and Jenson 87-89). Such an environment devoid of diverse perspectives has time and again resulted in content that reduces women to the projections of socially-held gender stereotypes (Lynch, Teresa, et al. 565-566). Female characters were largely absent altogether in the infancy of the video game industry, and increasing numbers of female characters through the 1990s and into the 2000s did not equate with increasingly accurate representations of those women (Lynch, Teresa, et al. 567). From the oversexualization of token female characters to the relegation of other women to “damsels in distress” in need of saving by a male protagonist, video games have historically played to and reinforced arbitrary gender stereotypes (Harveston). Characters like Sadie Adler, however, are working to break these stereotypes.

For my paper, I will use feminist theory in communication to explore how the characterization of Sadie Adler in *Red Dead Redemption II* defies typical representations of women within the video game industry. Feminist theory in communication explores how content produced by the media empowers or disenfranchises women within an inherently unbalanced society prioritizing the masculine over the feminine (Cuklanz 1-3). Research on this topic and the identification of games that break with the norms are vital for the future of the video game industry, which is reaching a wider audience than in recent years in the age of the COVID-19 pandemic (Witkowski).

With larger audiences come more diverse expectations for content and characters across all aspects of the media sphere. Research conducted over the previous two decades has consistently shown that media representation does, in fact, matter (Ward 560). When women are objectified, sexualized, and brutalized in the media, such actions and expectations become normalized and heighten perceived disparities between the value of masculinity versus

femininity (Ward 560). Video games represent a form of media with an enormous audience, and content producers have a responsibility to recognize both their own shortcomings and those of their predecessors in failing to promote content that is cognizant of the effect that portrayals of marginalized groups have on those individuals in the social climate at large. Sadie Adler is the exception to the portrayal of women in video games, but such portrayals should be the norm.

# Literature Review

Feminist theory within the field of communication is an offshoot of feminist theory overall; an understanding of the broad tenets and historical development of feminist theory is helpful to an analysis of its more specific application to the communication discipline (Foss 83). Feminist theory has largely developed alongside the three waves of the feminist movements dating back to the late 1700s (“Feminist Criticism”). The first wave, often thought of in reference to historical figures like Susan B. Anthony, featured movements like women’s suffrage as a reaction to a growing social awareness and rejection of the imbalance of power between men and women in society (“Feminist Criticism”). Moving into the mid-to-late 1900s came the second wave of the feminist movement (“Feminist Criticism”). This wave described femininity as a male-constructed concept designed to assert control over women by devaluing that femininity in a male-centric society (Schippers et al. 31). Building on the concept of societal power imbalances, the third wave feminism of the late 1900s to the present conceptualizes power as “...relational [...] and as available to subordinate groups and not just the possession of dominant groups” (Schippers et al. 32; “Feminist Criticism”). Women and other minority groups have the power to forge their own identities under the tenets of third wave feminism (Schippers et al. 32).

Feminist theory is the theoretical framework providing for an analysis of the society that allows for, or in some cases constructs, these power imbalances. It is concerned with “...what it

means to call one aspect of human experience female and another male” (Foss 83). Who decides what is what, and who has the power to impose their view of the world and norms onto others? Unmasking the patriarchal system that has ascribed subjective ideals of femininity or masculinity to individuals is a primary concern of feminist theory overall (Foss 83).

These questions about what it means to be female or male, and the power structures at play that reinforce these conceptualizations, play into feminist theory as it applies to the field of communication (Cuklanz 1). Out of feminist theory has developed a more specific theoretical framework for the critical examination of the *texts* produced by the society these movements see as inherently patriarchal (Cuklanz 1). Feminist theory in communication (feminist theory) explores how the artifacts produced by our society reflect, reinforce, or subvert the gendered power structures of our society (Cuklanz 1). Feminist theory has been interested in various branches of inquiry since the 1970s; two areas of emphasis for this paper are an examination of how the mainstream media reinforces dominant gender ideologies, and the mechanisms at play behind sexualized visual depictions of women in the media (Cuklanz 2).

The first of these concerns of feminist theory is highly focused on the relationship between the media and representations of women (Cuklanz 2). Research has proven time and again that women have historically been under or misrepresented in the mainstream media for decades (Cuklanz 2-3). In her 2011 *Sex Roles* journal article, Rebecca L. Collins collected prior research on the topic of the portrayals of women in the media and found that women are often entirely absent from the media sphere, and “...when women are portrayed, it is often in a circumscribed and negative manner” (Collins 290). Collins found that depictions of women do not mirror reality; instead, women are typically presented according to gendered societal expectations of the basic functions of a woman:

When women are portrayed, it is often in a circumscribed and negative manner. Women are often sexualized—typically by showing them in scanty or provocative clothing.

Women are also subordinated in various ways, as indicated by their facial expressions, body positions, and other factors. Finally, they are shown in traditionally feminine (i.e., stereotyped) roles. Women are portrayed as nonprofessionals, homemakers, wives or parents, and sexual gatekeepers. (Collins 290)

Women are in this way symbolically stripped of their agency and identities through the mutilation and “parts of the whole” depiction of the female experience as presented in the media.

Collins’ work is consistent with the formative work of Gaye Tuchman, who in 1978 identified and described inaccurate or absent representations of women in the media (Cuklanz 3). This seminal work described how women in 1970s media had been relegated to “window dressing on the set” (Tuchman 531; Cuklanz 3). Tuchman discussed how “underrepresentation and (by extension) trivialization and condemnation [of women] indicate symbolic annihilation,” describing how the media representations of the time were reflective of the lack of power women held in society (Tuchman 533). This hypothesis from the 1970s has been more or less reaffirmed with further research, as modern scholars in the field of feminist theory hold that lack of representation or representation heavily skewed through a male-dominant bias directly result from the power imbalance between men and women in society (Cuklanz 3). Men have the power to make the messages, and those messages reflect this fact.

A secondary concern of feminist theory is how the reduction of women to visual objects results in a proliferation of sexualized imagery of women in the media (Cuklanz 7). It is no question that women are heavily sexualized in the media; ample research has examined this phenomenon, describing exaggerated, unrealistic images of women in scanty or absent clothing,

or visual depictions reducing women to sexualized objects as very common across a range of media platforms (Collins 294). These portrayals reinforce existing sexist social perceptions about the value of men versus women (Ward 560). A 2016 article examining 135 past studies on the effects of sexualized imagery found “...experimental exposure to this content leads both women and men to have a diminished view of women’s competence, morality, and humanity” (Ward 560). These images function to reinforce the same views of women as held by the societies from which they come.

An early explanation for how sexualized media images come to be formed came from Laura Mulvey’s influential 1975 work, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (Cuklanz 7). In it, Mulvey presented the idea of the male gaze as it relates to film, and posited that the depictions of women in film reduce them to sexualized objects for the purpose of entertaining and captivating an audience primed to seek out such representations of the female form (Mulvey 360, 362-365). Mulvey discussed how film as a medium encourages a high degree of audience identification with the main character’s point of view, meaning when a woman is objectified on screen by the male character, the audience adopts a similar viewpoint of that character (Mulvey 365). Within Mulvey’s framework of understanding sexualized portrayals of women, men observe, while women are reduced to the experience of being observed (Trépanier-Jobin et al.

36). That is, men possess the power to look within a society that prioritizes the wants of the male over the agency of the female (Cuklanz 1, 8).

It is within the context of Mulvey’s theory of the male gaze and the discussed branches of feminist theory overall that an examination of the typical representations of women in video games reveals trends and norms associated with the industry’s situation within a patriarchal society. Female video game characters have developed in a medium primarily dominated (or at

least created by and catered to) a “...young, straight, cisgender, and primarily white male audience” (Cote 822). As such, these characters have been shaped by the assumed priorities of such an audience (Cote 822). Since the 1980s, it has been well documented that female characters in video games—much like their real-life counterparts—have been sexualized, demonized, entirely absent, or made to conform to masculine ideals of power within the context of their various games (Lynch, Teresa, et al. 567-568). A 2007 study of the most popular gaming magazines revealed “Female characters are more likely than male characters to be portrayed as sexualized (60% versus 1%), scantily clad (39% versus 8%) and as showing a mix of sex and aggression (39 versus 1%)” (Dill and Thill 851). Overwhelmingly, female characters have been reduced to objects in need of protection by men or possessing an agency that threatens the power of the male character (Tompkins et al. 237-239).

Like film and other forms of visual media, many video games feature problematic representations of women within a medium primed to highlight those representations (Summers and Miller 1030). For film, the camera lens dictates what the viewer sees, while video games feature cut scenes and offer mechanics that allow the gamer to see what game developers emphasize (Mulvey 365, 369-370). The gamer identifies with what their character sees, meaning sexualized, stereotyped, or absent representations of women in video games are indicative of a society where gamers and content consumers are assumed to desire to engage with disempowering media (Cuklanz 8). In other words, “...the implied or preferred viewer is a straight male” who will identify with what the society in which he participates emphasizes—the devaluing of women (Cuklanz 8).

Clearly, the video game industry has a checkered past in terms of female representation. In the course of my research, I uncovered dozens of sources critiquing the industry, developers,

and games themselves for reinforcing gender stereotypes in their portrayals of women. Such research is vital to influencing the future course of video game development. However, there are very few sources documenting when a video game has “done it right.” There are games that have subverted stereotypes with their strong, independent, well-rounded female characters, and more examination of such exceptions to the norms will hopefully normalize these exceptions and positive portrayals of women in games overall. Sadie Adler’s characterization in *Red Dead Redemption II* serves as an example of a positive depiction of a female video game character and how such characters defy and work to subvert the gender norms of a historically patriarchal, resistant industry.

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