



SCHOOL OF
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There is still a long way to go

An exploratory study on the factors contributing to the inclusion and exclusion of female character representation in video games

by

Erika Lybe & Arantxa Rufrancos Luna

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Supervisor: Javier Cenamor

Examiner: Magnus Nilsson

Abstract

Title: There is still a long way to go: An exploratory study on the factors contributing to the inclusion and exclusion of female character representation in video games.

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Authors: Erika Lybe & Arantxa Rufrancos Luna

Supervisor: Javier Cenamor

Examiner: Magnus Nilsson

Keywords: Inclusion, Diversity, Video Games, Female characters, Representation

Thesis Purpose: This thesis aims to explore the complex phenomenon of female character representation, both quantity and portrayal, in video games and which factors either inhibit or enhance the creation and how.

Methodology: A qualitative study with an inductive approach, designed to answer the research question “How do different factors contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games?”.

Theoretical Perspective: In order to address the research question, an extensive review of the literature is conducted, drawing upon market orientation, female video game characters and product development theory. Specifically for the later, the influence of organisational structure, risk behaviour and workforce on decision-making within the product development process is discussed.

Empirical data: The gathered data consisted of 11 in-depth semi-structured interviews with industry experts.

Findings & conclusion: The research discovered that market forces, video game storylines, organisational structure, risk behaviour, team diversity, and top management support simultaneously function as barriers or enablers in the representation of female characters in video games –depending on their interplay. Namely, these factors exhibit a dual role; thus, their impact on female character representation is not fixed but changes with regard to the interactions among all other identified factors. Furthermore, not all factors are equally weighted, some have a bigger influence than others.

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Interviewees & the video game industry

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Arantxa Rufrancos Luna

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1. Introduction

The following chapter presents the background, problematization, purpose of the research, intended contribution and outline of this thesis. The background provides the reader with a better understanding of the phenomenon, the problematization highlights why this study is relevant and the purpose of the research explains the study's scope. The intended contribution discusses how this study can extend existing literature and research, and the outline of the thesis presents a summary of the thesis.

1.1 Background

Diversity and inclusion (D&I) have increasingly become more popular in organisations. There are several reasons for this such as to attract talent and diverse employees, to benefit from a diverse workforce, and to enhance skills among employees (Jonsen, Point, Kelanc & Griebled, 2021; Pemberton & Kissamore, 2023). In addition to this, a greater diverse and inclusive workforce may result in more favourable attitudes and behaviours from consumers towards the organisation (Khan & Kalra, 2022). Diversity refers to all of the possible differences and similarities of individuals (for example race, religion, gender, age, and sexual orientation) while inclusion refers to the engagement with diverse individuals and actions taken to include and value these groups (Burgess, Wilkie & Dolan, 2022; Eisend, Muldrow & Rosengren, 2023; Jonsen et al., 2021). Social movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, Gamergate and gender equality efforts have shown brands that consumers' awareness of D&I issues is increasing and has pressured brands to transform their brand and marketing practices (Burgess, Wilkie & Dolan, 2022; Tomkinson, 2022).

Marketing practices often begin with a consumer need that has been identified by a business, and further aims to explain how that consumer need can be met by a product or service. When organizations expand globally into new markets it is to connect with new and diverse consumers (Hassan & Yazdanifard, 2019). Diversity marketing emphasizes practices and actions that implement an approach to represent and include diverse groups and deconstruct marketplace discrimination (Burgess, Wilkie & Dolan, 2022). Consumers come from diverse demographic and religious backgrounds and thus have different experiences, values, and expectations. This also involves subgroups of different demographics, and diversity marketing recognizes that marketing practices must adapt to these diverse groups to communicate effectively (Hassan & Yazdanifard, 2019).

D&I in the entertainment industry has been a noticeable issue for several years (Appel & Gnambs, 2022; Karniouchina et al., 2023; Wilson, 2022), seen as diverse advertisers by only 29% of consumers in the United States in 2019 (Statista, 2023a). Casts in movies written or directed by women are allegedly more diverse than those written or directed by men and fundraising is harder for women and people of colour (Boorstin, 2022). In 2021 only 21.8% of movie directors were female (Statista, 2023b) and neither Paramount Picture nor Lionsgate, two film studios in the industry with over \$100 million in revenue the same year (Statista, 2023c), released any LGBTQ inclusive movies (Statista, 2023d). While women and people of colour are underrepresented in writing and directing roles in movies, numbers have increased of the groups' representation as lead roles and actors (Boorstin, 2022). Furthermore, movies with diverse casts have been claimed to perform better at the box office (Valentowitsch, 2022; Wilson, 2022). Eight out of the ten top movies in 2021 had at least 30% non-white actors (Wilson, 2022). The industry has been put under a magnifying glass because of the D&I issues that are a main concern to both social sciences and society (Appel & Gnambs, 2022; Karniouchina et al., 2023).

Video games are one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the world, with the industry making a total revenue of \$335.50 billion in 2022 (Statista, 2023e). In this thesis, we will refer to people that play and enjoy video games at any level (casual or competitive) as *gamers*, since this term has most commonly been used throughout research (Shaw, 2011). The video game industry and its consumers are strongly associated with the male gender (Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2017; Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022; Chen, Zeng & Zhang, 2022), even though the distribution between female and male gamers is approximately equal with 46% of gamers identifying as female (Newzoo, 2019). This can be connected to males being the more visible gender in the form of protagonists in-game, developers and producers of video games, and professional players in e-sport (Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2017; Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022). Hence, the number between the two genders is approximately equal among consumers, but the industry is highly male dominated with 71% of the workforce identifying as males in 2021 (Paul, 2021). In this thesis, we will refer to companies developing video games as *studios*.

Furthermore, females in the online gaming community often experience toxic behaviour, sexual harassment, and bullying (Chen, Zeng & Zhang, 2022). In early 2023, Maybelline New York partnered up with the mental health initiative Brave Together in a campaign called 'Through Their Eyes'. The campaign showcased the harassment many female gamers face online while playing games and streaming (Maybelline, 2023). A survey showed that 83% of female gamers

in Australia experienced identity-based harassment and offensive behaviour while playing online video games (Bastion Insights, 2023). The results of this toxic online environment have pushed some female gamers to conceal their gender online, mute their mics not to reveal their gender, or quit playing video games completely (Chen, Zeng & Zhang, 2022). Actors in the video game industry have acknowledged D&I issues and work with initiatives to address the challenges this creates in the industry and the community. This is to encourage more females to step into the industry and raise their voices in the community (Game Habitat, 2023; Women In Games, 2023), however, females have felt a lack of role models in the industry (Ochsner, 2019). Furthermore, video games are not acknowledged as inclusive by both consumers and non-consumers. A global survey in 2021 showed that only 7% of females and 10% of males stated that video games were seen as inclusive (Statista, 2021).

One of the consequences of the male-dominated video game industry is the lack of females finding accurate character representations of themselves in video games. Female characters in video games are often hypersexualised and portrayed as caregivers more often than heroes (Ochsner, 2019; Waddell, Moss, Holz & Ivory, 2022). Furthermore, females might feel alienated by male character traits which may result in lower engagement, and it has been reported that 47% of gamers do not consume video games they feel are not made for them (Newzoo, 2021). Ochsner (2019) proposes a vicious circle, emphasizing that if more video games existed that were attractive to females, more females would work in the industry hence if more females worked in the video game industry, there would exist more games that would attract females. In addition to this, female character portrayals in video games are more crucial than might meet the eye since gamers' judgement might be influenced by how genders frequently are portrayed in-game (Waddell et al., 2022). Female representation in video games is often stereotypically portrayed as damsels in distress and sexualized. Male characters outnumber female characters in-game and are often the default gender for the protagonist (Perry, 2022; Lindner, Tribble, Pilato & Ferguson, 2020). However, there has been an increase in female video game protagonists from 9% in 2015 to 18% in 2020 (Statista, 2020).

1.2 Problematization

The portrayal and number of female video game characters do not match the span of its consumers (Perry, 2022; Statista, 2020; Lindner et al., 2020). Many organizations fail to serve diverse consumer markets, intentionally or unintentionally. However, demographic trends in addition to societal pressures stress the importance of diverse consumers (Park, Voss & Voss, 2023). Previous research has found significant similarities between females' and males'

preferences in video game experience. The similarities found were the choice of console, the type of video game characteristics, and the motivation to play (Terlecki, Brown, Harner-Steciw, Irvin-Hannum, Marchetto-Ryan, Ruhl, & Wiggins, 2011). The overlap in preferences between the two genders highlights the importance of balanced gender representation in video games, and to pay attention to female consumers. Consumers' rising awareness of present inequalities in character representation in video games may result in consumers becoming more critical of the industry and consequently, the demand for less stereotyped video games might be crucial for studios. To reach the female audience studios need to create more video games with diverse representation (Behm-Morawitz, 2017). Furthermore, a more diverse workforce within video game development and creation can lead to game worlds that are less male-focused. To obtain this, the video game industry must recruit, outreach and mentor women in the industry (Terlecki et al., 2011).

In general, research on video games has mainly focused on the effects of video game violence (Anderson & Ford, 1986; Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2007; Greitemeyer & Mügge, 2014; Prescott, Sargent, & Hull, 2018), video game addiction (Fisher, 1994; Weinstein, 2010; Van Rooij, Schoenmakers, Vermulst, Van Den Eijnden, & Van De Mheen, 2011), and the negative and positive cognitive effects of gaming (Green, & Bavelier 2006; Bejjanki, Zhang, Li, Pouget, Green, Lu, & Bavelier, 2014; Kozhevnikov, Li, Wong, Obana, & Amihai, 2018; Welker, 2022); thus, limited research has focused on gender representation in video games, particularly female portrayal. Within this finite area of research, the persistent findings suggest that female characters in video games are infrequently present and, when present, often portrayed stereotypically –as passive or sexual beings. The validity of these findings may come into question under the critique that the research is outdated, with most studies conducted between the late 1990s and early 2010s. Furthermore, the significance of this critique increases when accounting for the year-by-year incremental trend in video game releases. In Steam, the leading online gaming platform for PC, there were 5,997 video game releases from 2010 to 2017, and from 2018 to 2022, there was an average of 9,371 video game releases per year (Statista, 2023f). To date, there are about 93,880 released video games in total when considering all console and online platforms (Prodanoff, 2023). However, institutional studies carried out in the last two years continue to support the findings from previous academic research with male characters still being the most visible gender in-game, and female characters continuing to often be portrayed as stereotypes and sexualised (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media,

2021; World Economic Forum, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022). Thus, the findings from academic research are still relevant to date.

This thesis will focus on video games created for PC and consoles, and in-game characters that are not replicated after real-life persons. Despite the increase of female consumers (Paaßen, Morgenroth & Stratemeyer, 2017; Kivijärvi & Katila, 2022; Chen, Zeng & Zhang, 2022) and the increase in released video games, research still points to an unbalanced and stereotypical representation of female characters (Perry, 2022; Lindner et al., 2020). However, there is a limited understanding of why video games are unequal in the representation of genders and the portrayal of females. This necessitates the importance of investigating the causes of lacking female representation instead of the outcomes. This study will further aim to contribute to existing research by exploring the identified research gap.

1.3 Research purpose

The video game industry has struggled with D&I for several years, being a male-dominated industry which is reflected in its product range which targets mostly male consumers. Females are underrepresented in-game in terms of characters and protagonists, yet they represent almost half of video game consumers. Furthermore, female characters in video games are seldom the protagonist and are often portrayed as damsels in distress or supporting characters. Therefore, this thesis aims to explore the complex phenomenon of female character representation, both quantity and portrayal, in video games and which factors either inhibit or enhance the creation and how. The research question for this thesis is:

How do different factors contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games?

1.4 Intended contribution

By exploring how different factors contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation the research can broaden the knowledge of female representation in video games. Previous research is limited on this subject and has mainly focused on the effects of video games on consumers' behaviour and mental abilities (Prescott, Sargent, & Hull, 2018; Van Rooij et al., 2011; Welker, 2022), thus a research gap has been identified. Furthermore, it has been highlighted that further research on this subject is of significance for video game developers to better meet the needs of female gamers (Terlecki et al., 2011; Park, Voss & Voss, 2023; Perry, 2022). This research intends to contribute with which factors contribute and how, to the

inclusion and exclusion of female representation in video games. This might be valuable for both practitioners and researchers since the research can provide insights into how studios and managers can move forward in the industry and enhance their female representation in-game, as well as provide stepping stones of where future research can focus studies in this field. The relevancy of the research is connected to the rising subject of D&I in the video game industry. Previous studies have emphasized the future importance for organisations, in this case studios, to pay attention to their diverse consumers (Burgess, Wilkie & Dolan, 2022; Hassan & Yazdanifard, 2019; Tomkinson, 2022).

1.5 Outline of the thesis

This thesis is divided into six chapters each contributing to the study's exploration of the previously presented phenomenon. The first chapter provides the reader with a necessary foundation and presentation of the phenomenon. Further are the thesis purpose and research question presented and intended contribution. The second chapter aims to provide the reader with the theoretical concepts related to the phenomenon and lays a foundation for the upcoming analysis. The third chapter describes the research philosophy as well as the research approach, the methodological choices that were made and the research design. In addition to this, is the data collection method presented together with the choice of analytical method followed by a thorough discussion of the research's trustworthiness and ethics. The fourth chapter presents our key findings from the research. The fifth chapter provides the reader with an analysis of the empirical findings from the research discussed with previous research and theoretical concepts from the second chapter. At last, the sixth chapter summarizes the study's findings and highlights key takeaways together with practical implications, theoretical implications, further research, and limitations of the study.

2. Literature Review

This chapter covers the literature review. It offers a critical examination of the relevant literature and theoretical concepts related to the research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The first part of the review discusses market orientation, a concept that highlights the importance of satisfying consumer needs. Then, the second part examines video games as a product, focusing on female characters as one of its product features. Lastly, the literature review looks into product development, highlighting the potential impact of organisational structure, risk and workforce on innovation in the product development process.

2.1 Market orientation

Market orientation is a business strategy in which an organisation obtains and develops market intelligence on current and latent consumer needs to satisfy them (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990; Ruekert, 1992). Under a market orientation strategy, market intelligence is focused on, but not limited to, consumer needs. Namely, a market-oriented organisation analyses consumers' expressed preferences and tastes as well as the factors that may impact them –for example, government regulations, technology and competition, among others (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990). A central element of market orientation is consumer focus. Under this principle, a company must satisfy the needs of consumers to succeed in the market (Shapiro, 1988; Jaworski & Kohli, 1990). Thus, in a market-oriented organisation, market intelligence guides decision-making across each function and department, providing a unified focus and guiding individual efforts towards delivering value to consumers (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). For product development, this implies having consumers' needs as a departure point for creation (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013). In other words, through market intelligence, businesses must identify and understand current and future needs and design products accordingly (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990; Armstrong, Adam, Denize & Kotler, 2014).

Multiple studies support the idea that market orientation positively affects business performance (Jaworski & Kohli, 1996; Kirca, Jayachandran, & Bearden, 2005). Its positive influence on financial performance (Slater & Narver, 1990; Avlonitis & Gounaris, 1997; Slater & Narver, 2000), employees (Jaworski & Kohli, 1993), innovation (Atuahene-Gima, 1996; Baker & Sinkula, 2009) and consumers (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000) is well-documented and supported. Specifically, for consumers, market orientation proposes that companies benefit from long-term consumer relationships based on value and satisfaction (Armstrong et al., 2014).

Market-oriented companies are well-positioned to satisfy and anticipate consumer needs (Slater & Narver, 1994). Given their nature, they can predict and learn new demand patterns quickly (Grewal & Tansuhaj, 2001) and effectively coordinate departments to implement changes (Slater & Narver, 1994; Homburg & Pflesser, 2000). As a consequence, a market-oriented organisation is predisposed to achieve high consumer satisfaction and loyalty, attracting new consumer, and subsequently achieving market growth (Homburg & Pflesser, 2000).

The market orientation perspective has dominated the marketing field over the past few decades (Shapiro, 1988; Slater & Narver, 1990; Jaworski & Kohli, 1993; Kirca, Jayachandran, & Bearden, 2005; Van Raaij & Stoelhorst, 2008). However, it has not been without criticism. Concerns have been raised about the potential negative impact of market orientation on an organisation's strategy, operations, and overall success, given its narrow focus (Macdonald, 1995; Christensen & Bower, 1996; Frosch, 1996; Foss, 1997; Connor, 1999). Nevertheless, multiple studies on market orientation have addressed the criticism by stating the difference between consumer orientation and market orientation (Slater & Narver, 1998; Slater & Narver, 1999; Lafferty & Hult, 2001). Unlike consumer orientation, which only focuses on expressed consumer needs, market orientation considers the long-term. It adopts a generative learning culture that permeates the whole organisation, enabling all departments to act in a coordinated and focused manner. Overall, resulting in a competitive advantage that is difficult to replicate (Shapiro, 1988; Slater & Narver, 1998).

Most recently, the idea of market orientation difficulting brand management has been discussed, with brand orientation emerging as the alternative (Urde, Baumgarth, & Merrilees, 2013). Under a brand orientation strategy, the organisation's strategy centres around its corporate brand identity. In other words, an organisation's mission, vision and values guide decision-making above consumer needs (Urde, 1994; Urde, 1999). However, in the video game industry, branding is particularly fragmented. Focusing its value proposition towards specific market segments, video game studios and publishers have multiple games or franchises under their portfolio, each with its own brand identity and often no interconnection (Huntemann & Aslinger, 2013; Zackariasson & Dymek, 2016). In other words, they follow a house-of-brands approach, which leads to a highly fragmented brand architecture (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000). Under these circumstances, adopting a brand orientation strategy is contradicting and challenging (Leijerholt, Chapleo & O'Sullivan, 2019). Each game and franchise has its own brand equity and market segment, and applying the single brand orientation strategic focus from

the publisher or studio could result in dilution (Aaker & Joachimsthaler, 2000; Loken & Ahluwalia, 2023).

In sum, market orientation emphasises understanding latent and current consumer needs to achieve market success (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990). Following the market orientation perspective, video game studios should incorporate a more diverse and inclusive array of female characters in their games. Over the past years, consumers have become more aware and critical of female representation (Storey, 2018; Trier-Bieniek, 2019), appealing for a less stereotypical female depiction in entertainment media (World Economic Forum, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022). Thus, with the trend expected to continue (Passport, 2022), games should incorporate more diverse and inclusive female portrayals to satisfy consumers and remain competitive.

2.2 Product: Video games

A product is a marketable commodity designed to create value for the consumer (Kotler, Keller & Chernev, 2022). Product is a vital element of the marketing mix, acting as the cornerstone towards creating and delivering consumer satisfaction by facilitating value exchange (Houston & Gassenheimer, 1987; van Waterschoot & van den Bulte, 1992). Accordingly, product quality is synonymous with meeting consumer needs (Garvin, 1984). Product quality can be defined as a consumer's overall evaluation of a product's excellence or superiority (Zeithaml, 1988). Therefore, quality is a function of the aggregate of different product elements (Kuehn & Day, 1962; Snoj, Korda, Mume, & 2004), such as price, marketing, features, reliability and durability, to name a few (Garvin, 1984; Dawar & Parker, 1994). Product quality and consumer satisfaction are closely linked (Armstrong et al., 2014), as satisfaction is a result of the perceived value received throughout consumption (McQuitty, Finn & Wiley, 2000).

Within the video game industry, video games are the primary product, offering a digital interactive experience that delivers enjoyment to gamers (Zackariasson & Dymek, 2016). As a product, video games are composed of multiple elements such as graphics, gameplay mechanics, sound, camera controls, and characters, to name a few (Huntemann & Aslinger, 2013). These features shape the player's gaming experience, thus, determining the level of entertainment, enjoyment and satisfaction derived from the playing (Zackariasson & Dymek, 2016). Specifically, characters play a significant role in defining the gaming experience, as they are the principal mediators between the gamer and the virtual world (Rogers, 2010); thus, characters establish how the gamer perceives and engages with the video game (Ubisoft, 2021).

On a basic level, a good character is responsive in terms of technical abilities, reacting to the gamer's input, and inductive, grounding the gamer into the storyline and experience (Rogers, 2010; Ubisoft, 2021). Furthermore, video game characters themselves are composed of other features such as appearance, backstory, personality, abilities and skills, dialogue, and actions, to name a few (Salmond, 2017).

2.2.1 Female characters

Researchers have examined the presence and features of video game characters by analysing in-game content (Gailey, 1993; Dietz, 1998; Downs & Smith, 2009; Lynch, Tompkins, van Driel & Fritz, 2016), video game magazines (Miller & Summers, 2007; Miller & Summers, 2014), introductory films of video games (Jansz & Martis, 2007), video game covers (Provenzo, 2000; Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007), and video game reviews (Ivory, 2006). Regardless of the medium of analysis, there are recurring and supported findings regarding the presence, role and characteristics of female characters (Smith, 2006).

The first recurring finding is that male characters significantly outnumber female characters (Braun & Giroux, 1989; Haninger & Thompson, 2004; Miller & Summers, 2007). An analysis of the 33 most popular video games in the 1990s revealed that female characters were completely absent in over half of the games (Dietz, 1998). Similarly, in a sample of the 60 most popular video games of 2003, out of 489 identified characters, 419 (86%) were male and 70 (14%) female (Downs & Smith, 2009). The lack of presence of female characters in video games is further supported by an analysis of 133 popular games for nine major gaming consoles from 2005 to 2006, with the study identifying 4966 characters, of which 85.23% were male (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). Research findings demonstrate how the gender gap further increases when accounting for playability (Ivory, 2006), with 88% of leading characters being male and 12% being female (Downs & Smith, 2009). Overall, the academic literature illustrates how the lack of presence of female characters has been a consistent matter throughout the years.

The second recurring finding regards the physicality and personality of female characters. Female characters often possess exaggerated or unrealistic body measurements, specifically in the chest, buttocks and waist area (Downs & Smith, 2009; Lynch et al., 2016). An analysis of nine female characters (six protagonists and three secondary characters) showed that, along with thin body frames, 77% of characters had large breasts and buttocks (Janz & Martis, 2007). Similarly, a study of 225 game covers from the three most popular video game consoles in 2005

showed that female characters are more likely to be super-busty than males super-muscular – with 49% of the females having unrealistic proportions compared to 25.7% of males, demonstrating a gender difference in unrealistic body portrayals (Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007). In terms of personality, female characters are often depicted as delicate, innocent, or victims, with "damsel in distress" being a common trope (Dietz, 1998; Provenzo, 2000; Miller & Summers, 2007). Alternatively, sexy is another common personality trait within female characters (Miller & Summers, 2007), which, in turn, gives rise to the trope of "femme fatale", a seductive and strong female character (Smith, 2006).

Lastly, the third finding focuses on clothing or lack thereof. Examining female video game characters from 1988 to 2007, revealing attires have significantly increased over time (Miller & Summers, 2014). From a sample of 60 video games, 41% of female characters wore sexually revealing clothing, compared to 4% of males; furthermore, 16% of the attires worn by female characters were deemed inappropriate for the completion of the game's mission or task (Downs & Smith, 2009). Multiple studies found that half of the female characters in video games wear outfits that accentuate and bring attention to their bodies, particularly the breasts –such as tank tops, crop tops, or halter tops. On the other hand, about a third of male characters wear military uniforms (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Miller & Summers, 2007). Similarly, female characters are more often shown in partial or full nudity (Haninger & Thompson, 2004), with 41% showing a level of nudity compared to 4% of males (Downs & Smith, 2009). In conclusion, multiple studies support the notion that female characters wear fewer clothes or more revealing costumes than their male counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2001; Haninger & Thompson, 2004). With most female characters exhibiting exaggerated and unattainable body measures, the clothes or lack of help to further emphasise the character's sexuality (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007), reinforcing sexual stereotypes (Dietz, 1998; Beasley & Standley, 2002) and feeding character tropes such as "damsel in distress" and "femme fatale".

In sum, the persistent findings suggest that female characters in video games are infrequently present and, when present, often portrayed stereotypically –as passive or sexual beings. However, as previously stated in the problematisation of the thesis, research is yet to find a plausible explanation as to why this phenomenon continues.

2.3 Product development

Product development, interchangeably known as new product development, is the holistic process of conceptualising, designing, producing and selling a product (Mital, Desai, Subramanian & Mital, 2015). The product development process aims to create a desirable product that achieves market success; in other words, to design a product that people desire enough to purchase (Mattson & Sorensen, 2020). Product development is vital for any organisation as a product is the baseline for achieving consumer satisfaction (Kotler, Keller & Chernev, 2022). Successful new product development can help serve various strategic goals (Victory, Nenycz-Thiel, Dawes, Tanusondjaja, & Corsi, 2021), such as profit increase (Roberts, 1999), market share growth (Banbury & Mitchell, 1995) and market diversification (Tauber, 1981).

Moreover, product development is increasingly crucial these days, as it serves as a means for organisations to match and adapt to technological advancements (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995). Consumer satisfaction is paramount in product development (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1987a; Hoyer, Chandy, Dorotic, Krafft, & Singh, 2010), as organisations with "off-the-mark" products are likely to fail (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995), either directly or through carry-over effects – such as consumer distrust or desire to hurt the business (Folkes, 1984; Darke, Ashworth & Main, 2010). Thus, the relationship between market orientation and product development is clear, with multiple academic research supporting it (Slater & Narver, 1994; Souder, Buisson, & Garrett, 1997; Wren, Souder, & Berkowitz, 2000; De Luca, Verona & Vicari, 2010). Organisations that understand consumer needs and the factors that affect them (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990) have a higher probability of successfully developing and introducing new products (Wren, Souder, & Berkowitz, 2000). In this regard, product development is the process of transforming market intelligence into a product ready for sale (Krishna & Ulrich, 2001).

Given the importance of new product success for an organisation, a significant amount of research has been conducted since the 1990s to identify and assess the factors that affect the process (Ernst, 2002; Evanschitzky, Eisend, Calantone & Jiang, 2012). Some of the most studied factors are market conditions (Calantone, Garcia & Dröge, 2003; McCann & Bahl, 2017), supply chain (Petersen, Handfield, & Ragatz, 2005), product advantage (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1987a) and internal organisational factors (Kandemir, Calantone, & Garcia, 2006; Evanschitzky et al., 2012). The first one, market conditions, regards the business's external environment, incorporating aspects such as competition intensity, market uncertainty and market growth (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995). The second, supply chain, looks into the effect

of the suppliers' activities and level of involvement along the different stages of product development, including aspects such as speed, development time, supply chain management and supplier relationships (Krishna & Ulrich, 2001; Johnsen, 2009). The third one, product advantage, refers to the product attributes that add to consumer value –such as quality, innovation, price, and consumer benefits (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1987a; Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995). Lastly, internal organisational factors accounts for the numerous elements within an organisation affecting product development, including, but not limited to, technical competencies (Kusunoki, 1997; Haeussler, Patzelt, & Zahra, 2012), organisational structure (Damanpour, 1991; Ekvall, 1996; Eklund, 2022), organisational culture (McLaughlin, Bessant & Smart, P., 2008; Naranjo-Valencia, Jimenez-Jimenez & Sanz-Valle, 2017), and teams (Sethi, 2000; Slotegraaf & Atuahene-Gima, 2011).

For the purposes of this study, we focus on the factors under the control of the studio, that is, internal organisational factors. These elements will have a direct impact on the creative decisions of a video game –a critical component of the product's success. We further limit our scope by excluding technical competencies, which refer to the technical skills and resource adequacy needed to design a game (Wren, Souder, & Berkowitz, 2000). Nowadays, game engine software platforms allow for multiple layers of customisation when developing new characters (See: Cryengine, 2022; Reallusion, 2023; Unreal Engine, 2023); therefore, there are no significant technical limitations to creating a diverse array of female characters in video games. The rest of the literature review will discuss organisational structure, risk behaviour and workforce as the intra-organisation factors that affect product development.

2.3.1 Organisational structure

Organisational structure is the hierarchical configuration of the roles and activities within an organisation, which defines how it operates and functions (Ranson, Hinings, & Greenwood, 1980; King & Lawley, 2019); in other words, it is the organisation's anatomy, serving as the foundation under which it functions (Dalton, Todor, Spendolini & Fielding, 1980). An organisational structure determines an organisation's decision-making process; consequently, it directly impacts performance and individual behaviour (Tolbert & Hall, 2009). In terms of new product development, an organisation's structure can affect the process by moderating the levels of freedom and, thereby, innovation (Damanpour, 1991; Ekvall, 1996; Eklund, 2022). Namely, within the organisational structure, authority (Damanpour, 1991) and bureaucracy (Thompson, 1965; Hlavacek, & Thompson, 1973) are the principal factors impacting product development.

Authority and hierarchies are significant in product development as it determines decision-making and, consequently, who has the final say over the direction of the product (Damanpour, 1991; Menguc & Auh, 2010). Based on where in the organisation structure the decision-making power is concentrated, organisations can be classified as centralised or decentralised (King & Lawley, 2019).

Under a centralised structure, authority is concentrated at the top, leaving critical decision-making to senior management. This structure allows for accountability, a clear direction and consistency (Tolbert & Hall, 2009; King & Lawley, 2019). However, centralisation may inhibit innovation within product development as it limits the input from lower-level employees, potentially making employees feel restricted and unmotivated to contribute (Sherman & Smith, 1984; Van de Ven, Polley, Garud, & Venkataraman, 2008). On the other hand, decentralisation allows for a flat organisational structure, distributing decision-making across the organisation (Dalton et al., 1980; Tolbert & Hall, 2009). In turn, employees may feel empowered and motivated by greater involvement, potentially leading to a surge in innovation (Sherman & Smith, 1984; Ecker, van Triest, & Williams, 2013); however, decentralisation may bring about a lack of clear direction as a consequence of the freedom of action (King & Lawley, 2019). Small organisations tend to be more decentralised because of their size. Given the number of employees, there tend to be fewer layers within the organisational structure, thus, allowing for more flexibility in decision-making (Tolbert & Hall, 2009; King & Lawley, 2019). Overall, whether an organisation is centralised or decentralised determines, to an extent, the level to which employees can pursue and execute their ideas when creating a new product (Eklund, 2022).

Under the model of bureaucracy, organisations develop administrative mechanisms to organise and coordinate their activities (Blau & Scott, 1962). Bureaucracy helps by providing stability and structure to an organisation's functions, reducing friction by clearly outlining the bounds of authority and decision-making (Merton, 1963; Gajduschek, G., 2003). However, excessive amounts of it –otherwise known as red tape (King & Lawley, 2019), can hinder the product development process by slowing decision-making and inhibiting innovation (Damanpour, 1991). The latter being a result of reduced organisational flexibility and limited employee autonomy from strict compliance and regulations (Thompson, 1965; Hlavacek, & Thompson, 1973). Given their size and need for control over numerous teams and departments, some of which are international, large organisations are likely to have high levels of bureaucracy (Grinyer & Yasai-Ardekani, 1981; Astley, 1985). As a result, innovation might hinder, with

ideas having to pass through various layers for approval. In contrast, with fewer layers in their organisational structure and, consequently, a more direct line of communication, smaller companies are more often characterised by an entrepreneurial or informal culture over a bureaucratic one (Astley, 1985; Menguc & Auh, 2010). Overall, being less prone to extensive bureaucratic processes allows small companies to be more flexible towards innovative ideas.

2.3.2 Risk

Risk is a function of uncertainty; it arises when there is no certainty of an outcome or its likelihood (Sitkin & Pablo, 1992). While successful products can help an organisation reach its goals, new product development is often regarded as a high-risk activity with no guarantees for success (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1987b; Victory et al., 2021); thus, the need to understand the relationship between risk and decision-making. The new product failure rate, in other words, the percentage of products introduced in the market that fail to meet commercial objectives, is around 80% to 90% (Gourville, 2006; Castellion & Markham, 2013); consequently, organisations creating products operate under an uncertain context.

Risk behaviour encompasses decision-making during risky activities; in other words, it is the choices made when faced with uncertainty (Sitkin & Pablo, 1992; van Winsen, de Mey, Lauwers, Van Passel, Vancauteran & Wauters, 2016). Therefore, risk behaviour plays a crucial role in product development as the choices made throughout the process directly impact its success or failure (Blauth, Mauer, & Brettel, 2014). In terms of risk behaviour, organisations can be classified as risk-averse or risk-prone. The former is likely to partake in activities with high risk, while the latter acts conservatively towards risk by avoiding and mitigating it (Shapira, 1995). Throughout the years, academics have identified multiple predictors of risk behaviour –such as perceived risk (Sitkin & Pablo, 1992; Forlan & Mullins, 2000), risk propensity (Stewart & Roth, 2001; Hung & Tangpong, 2010), risk attitude (Eckel & Grossman, 2008), risk preferences (March & Shapira, 1992; Miller & Chen, 2004), among other numerous elements (Baird & Thomas, 1985; Sitkin & Pablo, 1992; Pablo, 1997). For the purposes of this study, we'll focus on risk propensity and organisational context as the determinants of risk behaviour.

Risk propensity is the organisation's willingness to take risks; in other words, it is its tendency to take or avoid uncertainty (Sitkin & Pablo, 1992; Sitkin & Weingart, 1995). An organisation's risk propensity is a critical determinant of its risk behaviour, as it determines its likelihood of participating in risky activities (Hung & Tangpong, 2010); accordingly, risk propensity

influences product development as it moderates an organisation's willingness to embrace innovation and, correspondingly, its inherent risk (March & Shapira, 1987). Risk-prone organisations have a positive predisposition towards risk as they consider the potential gains or benefits of undertaking a risky action over the potential losses (Schneider & Lopes, 1986; Huff & Prybutok, 2008); in other words, given their nature, risk-prone organisations are better positioned to identify opportunities within uncertain contexts (Cui, Sun, Xiao, & Zhao, 2016). Accordingly, risk-prone organisations are more inclined to partake in high-risk behaviours, such as innovation in product development. Overall, by being risk-prone, organisations can create an environment for innovation to thrive, which can, in turn, affect the success of product development (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1995). In a high-risk propensity organisation, employees might feel safer and, thus, more motivated and committed to exploring new ideas, allowing for continuous innovation and improvement (De Jong & Den Hartog, 2010; Elsayed, Zhao, Goda, & Elsetouhi, 2023). On the other hand, risk-avoidant organisations focus on the potential failure and losses of undertaking risky activities (Schneider & Lopes, 1986; Huff & Prybutok, 2008). Therefore, risk-avoidant organisations are cautious and act in ways that minimise uncertainty. Under a risk-avoidant mindset, an organisation may be more conservative in decision-making, sticking to what has worked; consequently, innovation in product development hinders as the organisation avoids ideas where perceived uncertainty, such as unproven demand, is involved (Schneider & Lopes, 1986; Hung & Tangpong, 2010).

The other determinant of risk behaviour can be regarded as the organisation's context (Nystrom, Ramamurthy & Wilson, 2002). This element is an aggregate of the current situation in which the organisation operates, encompassing internal factors, such as its size and available resources (Rosner, 1968; Moses, 1992; Herold, Jayaraman, & Narayanaswamy, 2006), and the organisation's current market situation, such as its competitors (Bromiley 1991) and market position (Bowman, 1984; Fiegenbaum & Thomas, 1988). For starters, organisational size influences the risk behaviour of an organisation as it determines the availability of resources for risk management (Gopalakrishnan & Damanpour, 2000). Large organisations tend to benefit from greater financial resources and knowledge (Nystrom, Ramamurthy & Wilson, 2002).

First, in terms of financial resources, large organisations are more likely to possess larger and more diverse revenue streams, which could translate into a greater risk mitigation budget for counteracting any failure or unexpected hazards while undertaking risky activities, such as product development (Rosner, 1968; Herold, Jayaraman, & Narayanaswamy, 2006). Second, in terms of knowledge, large organisations are more likely to benefit from large pools of talent

and expertise given their sizable employee base, which can translate into better access to specialised information and knowledge (Argote & Ingram, 2000; Nystrom, Ramamurthy & Wilson, 2002). This level of expertise and knowledge can, in turn, provide valuable insights for decision-making and the organisation's risk management strategy, which could result in the organisation feeling more confident towards approaching innovation (Durst, Hinteregger, & Zieba, 2019). In sum, the resource availability that large organisations tend to benefit from may act as a cushion in product development, enabling them to counteract unforeseen situations or absorb potential failures when innovating (Nystrom, Ramamurthy & Wilson, 2002). In contrast, small organisations tend to be more financially limited; consequently, they might have narrower risk mitigation budgets or be less capable of absorbing losses from failure, which leaves the organisation more vulnerable towards risk (Moses, 1992; Nystrom, Ramamurthy & Wilson, 2002). In terms of knowledge, smaller organisations may cater to a niche market and, thus, benefit from specialised knowledge (Gordon, 2011); however, this might not fully mitigate their vulnerability from limited financial resources.

The second determinant, an organisation's context, impacts risk behaviour in that threats to survival significantly influence decision-making (March & Shapira, 1992; Singh, 1986). Firstly, the competitive landscape. Intense competition may alter an organisation's risk perception, that is, it might affect its assessment of the level of risk within a given context (Sitkin & Pablo, 1992). A market with intense competition may result in a higher risk perception for the organisation (Xia, & Xiao, 2023), which, in turn, may prompt the organisation towards a more risk-prone approach to product development (Bromiley 1991; Wiseman & Bromiley, 1996). In other words, in a highly competitive market, an organisation may be more willing to approach innovation in an attempt to capitalise on opportunities and remain competitive (Hecker & Ganter, 2013). In contrast, an organisation may have a low-risk perception in a market with limited competition (Bromiley 1991; Wiseman & Bromiley, 1996), which might lead to feelings of complacency and inhibit innovation in product development.

Second within context is an organisation's market position. An organisation that presently enjoys a successful or strong market performance or benefits from a stable market position may be more risk-averse. The organisation may be reluctant to deviate from its existing strategy for fear of jeopardising its current status (Fiegenbaum & Thomas, 1988; Kliger & Tsur, 2011). Consequently, the organisation may become more cautious about risk and, ergo, innovation with the aim of preserving its present success (Miller & Friesen, 1982). On the other hand, an organisation seeking to improve its market position may be more risk-prone, opting for

innovation as a means of competitive advantage (Bowman, 1984; Kliger & Tsur, 2011). Overall, the combined influence of competition and current performance creates different scenarios in which the risk behaviour of an organisation can differ (Treacy, 1980). For instance, in principle, a large organisation should be more risk-prone given its available resources; however, if the organisation is currently capitalising on strong market performance or stable market position, it might be hesitant to partake in risky activities and, ultimately, act in a more risk-averse way. Under the same logic, a small organisation whose market position could benefit from being risk-prone, and innovating and capitalising on market opportunities, might not be able to act accordingly as its resources limit their risk behaviour.

Altogether, an organisation's risk propensity and context shape its risk behaviour; in other words, they are key determinants of the decision-making of an organisation in uncertain times (Sitkin & Pablo, 1992; van Winsen, de Mey, Lauwers, Van Passel, Vancauteran & Wauters, 2016). In turn, risk behaviour determines whether an organisation is among the first to innovate or not. Although innovation can result in positive results for an organisation, pioneering, by nature, involves risk (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988; Garrett, Covin & Slevin, 2009). Namely, uncertainty arises from a lack of information on consumer preferences (Bhattacharya, Krishnan & Mahajan, 1998) and demand uncertainty (Shepherd, 1999). Thus, an organisation that is among the first to explore new ideas in product development faces the highest level of product failure (Robinson & Min, 2002; Min, Kalwan, & Robinson, 2006). A way to decrease this risk is through latent markets (Wasson, 1976), regarded as potential markets with partially identified consumer preferences and demand in which no organisation actively operates. Operating within a later market reduces the risk of product failure as there is a moderate pre-understanding of consumer preferences and demand (Bhattacharya, Krishnan & Mahajan, 1998; Shepherd, 1999); nonetheless, latent markets are scarce, so this is not a strategy that is always available.

Contrary to pioneering, an organisation may opt to capitalise on an idea only after it has been tested in the market by others and proven successful; consequently, organisations are less vulnerable to failure from uncertainty (Robinson & Min, 2002; Min, Kalwan, & Robinson, 2006). Furthermore, later entrants can free-ride from the pioneers, imitating their product characteristics (Lieberman & Montgomery, 1988) or improving the product offering with the now-available market information (Robinson & Chiang, 2002). However, while avoiding the risk of innovation, late entrants may find it harder to compete and obtain consumers if the pioneer organisations have established a strong market presence (Parry and Bass, 1989).

Overall, risk-prone organisations are more likely to pioneer in product development, while risk-averse organisations may opt to wait and observe the market before entering, reducing the risk.

2.3.3 Workforce

Product development, as with any other organisational task, relies on the efforts and abilities of individuals and teams for its execution and success (Sethi, 2000; Wright & McMahan, 2011). Specifically, given that innovation is a knowledge-intensive activity, the role of human capital is particularly significant (Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005; Chen, Liu, Chu, & Hsiao, 2014). The aggregate creative input and knowledge of individuals and teams guide and dictate the design and characteristics of a new product, directly impacting its success rate (Sethi, 2000; Slotegraaf & Atuahene-Gima, 2011). Therefore, it is in the best interest of an organisation to employ top-notch personnel to build its innovative capabilities and, consequently, improve its competitive advantage (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1995; Subramaniam & Youndt, 2005).

Multiple studies support the influence of teams on innovativeness (Sethi, Smith, & Park, 2001; Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson & Jundt, 2005; Akgün, Lynn, & Yılmaz, 2006). A team is a group of people within an organisation that shares the responsibility towards a common task (Kozlowski & Bell, 2003). In the case of product development, this responsibility is the creation of a new product (Mital et al., 2015). Over the years, organisations have become increasingly diverse in terms of demographics (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity) as a consequence of globalisation (Meyskens, Von Glinow, Werther, W.B. & Clarke, 2009.) and societal transformations (Taneja, Pryor, & Oyler, 2012); accordingly, organisational teams have also become increasingly diverse (Jackson, Joshi, & Erhardt, 2003; Mannix & Neale, 2005). One of the core benefits of increased diversity within teams is knowledge transfer and integration (Akgün, Lynn, & Yılmaz, 2006; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; van Knippenberg, 2017). In essence, the diverse information, knowledge, ideas, and perspectives of the different team members get passed down and embedded within the collective, establishing a foundation for more innovative team performance as a vast and broad amount of resources is shared among the team (Akgün, Lynn, & Yılmaz, 2006; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007).

Furthermore, exposure to diverse knowledge and ideas may also stimulate the thinking of other group members (Richter, Hirst, Van Knippenberg & Baer, 2012), further increasing the innovative team performance. Related to this idea is the concept of reflexivity, as diverse and contrasting viewpoints may stimulate team reflexivity (Schippers, Den Hartog, Koopman & Wienk, 2003); in other words, it may induce careful consideration and discussion about their

ideas, actions and function, consecutively, enabling the team to improve their performance and make better-informed decisions (West, 1996). In sum, the general notion is that diverse teams may possess a varied and broad set of information, knowledge, ideas, or perspectives that could improve their performance.

Furthermore, there are several moderators between team diversity and innovation (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007), two significant elements being support and commitment (Ernst, 2002). For starters, support, while team diversity may result in rich and innovative ideas, the next critical step is execution (Sethi, Smith, & Park, 2001). For an idea to materialise to completion, support in terms of adequate resource allocation, approval, and guidance is needed; thus, team leaders and management play a vital role (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1995; Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1996; Ernst, 2002). In the case of senior management, given their authority, they can make strategic budget and resource allocation decisions to fund the project. Furthermore, in case of a dispute, they can help overcome internal resistance and advance the idea throughout the organisation, reducing the likelihood of its termination (Balachandra, 1984; Ernst, 2002). On the other hand, team leaders are vital in fostering an environment where the idea can be fully developed by supporting the pursuit of innovation, setting a vision and common goals to achieve it, and providing a safe space for everyone in the team to contribute to the project (West & Farr, 1990; van Knippenberg, 2017). Overall, support from team leaders and senior management towards an idea in product development reduces the possibility of its termination (Balachandra, 1984) and increases the project's likelihood of success (Ahmed & Philbin, 2022).

Finally, in terms of commitment, individuals need to be dedicated to the project for it to succeed (Song & Parry, 1997; Ernst, 2002). They need to believe in the idea, advocating for it across the organisation and working towards its realisation (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1995). The notion of commitment applies to the different levels and roles of the organisational structure, as each role plays a critical part in advancing the project (Ernst, 2002; Akgün, Lynn, & Yılmaz, 2006). For instance, team members may develop an innovative idea, while the team leader advocates for it across the organisation, and the senior manager secures funding for it. Overall, for a project to materialise and succeed, different individuals and roles within an organisation must be committed to it.

2.4 Chapter Summary

In order to address the research question, an extensive review of the literature was conducted, drawing upon market orientation, female video game characters and product development theory. As a product, video games are composed of multiple elements such as graphics, gameplay mechanics, sound, camera controls, and characters, to name a few (Huntemann & Aslinger, 2013). These elements shape the player's gaming experience, ergo, the level of entertainment and enjoyment that the player gets to experience (Zackariasson & Dymek, 2016). Thus, these elements hold significance on the performance of a video game and the success of a studio, as they directly impact consumer satisfaction (Shapiro, 1988; Jaworski & Kohli, 1990). Specifically, for the purposes of this research, we focus on female characters –one of the critical elements in defining the gaming experience, as characters are the principal mediator between the gamer and the virtual world (Rogers, 2010). The constant findings of content analysis on video games suggest that female characters are infrequently present and, when present, often portrayed stereotypically –as passive or sexual beings (Dietz, 1998; Miller & Summers, 2007; Downs & Smith, 2009).

Nowadays, the distribution between female and male gamers is approximately equal (Newzoo, 2019), and it has been reported that about half of gamers do not play video games they feel are not made for them (Newzoo, 2021). Under a market orientation perspective, where understanding and fulfilling latent and current consumer needs is detrimental to market success (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990), video game studios should incorporate more female representation in their games to remain competitive. However, to this day, female representation in video games still lacks (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022). Therefore, to identify how different factors contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games, the literature review incorporates principles of product development theory –specifically, how organisational structure, risk behaviour and workforce might impact the product development process.

3. Methodology

The following chapter presents the methodology used to conduct the research for this study. Firstly, we will explain the research philosophy, research design and research approach. Secondly, the data collection method is presented with information about the sampling, the interview guide, and the interviewees and is followed by the analysis process of the gathered data. Lastly, the trustworthiness of the research is discussed and as well as the ethics of our study.

3.1 Research philosophy

To explain the methodology of the research in this study we must first understand the philosophical assumptions regarding our ontological and epistemological considerations. Philosophical assumptions are an important root of research strategy since it shapes researchers' understanding of knowledge and explains their view of the world (Easterby-Smith, Jaspersen, Thorpe & Valizade, 2021). Ontology refers to our understanding of what reality is and epistemology refers to our understanding of how we can know reality (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The nature of this research and the explored phenomenon proposes that there are many truths and that facts depend on the observer's viewpoint, which resembles the relativistic position of ontology. In line with the relativistic position, this research aims to understand human behaviour and how they make sense of the world with a social constructionist view of epistemology (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Philosophical assumptions are essential for research since they guide researchers in their choice of method (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

3.2 Research design

The design of the research is the choices made of what will be researched and how. These choices are influenced by the researcher's philosophical assumptions, the context of why the research is conducted and the purpose of the research (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The study's research question is how different factors contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games. To answer the research question, which is derived from a field where the research is scarce and not widely explored, an exploratory stance is preferable. Furthermore, our research is within the lines of social sciences which is the study of people (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The nature of this study further suggests that a qualitative research design would be the most suitable choice to investigate the phenomenon.

A qualitative research design usually focuses on words and images in the collection of data instead of numbers, which is the focus of a quantitative research design. It is a research design that puts the spotlight on spoken words about behaviour and experiences (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). Two advantages of qualitative research are that the researcher is enabled to view things from the perspective of others and that the research design offers flexibility because of the open-ended nature of qualitative research questions (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We wanted to study people within the video game industry to explore female character representation, both quantity and portrayal, in video games and which factors either inhibit or enhance the creation and how. Hence, the qualitative design enabled us to fulfil this goal by exploring the phenomenon with a flexible structure through qualitative interviews. Furthermore, the choice of research design made it possible to discover findings which could not be predicted at the start of the study. One disadvantage of the chosen research design is that the researcher is the main instrument of the data collection. As a result, the researcher is highly influential in which findings are deemed as interesting and significant for the study which is the consequence of his or her own preferences. Therefore, findings from qualitative studies are hard to replicate (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Since this study was not supposed to replicate any previous study the disadvantage was assumed to not be an issue. However, it was of relevance to acknowledge that our findings would be affected by our perspectives and that as far as we could, needed to aim for objectivity in our analysis.

3.3 Research approach

An inductive research approach refers to when theory is the outcome of research rather than the starting point. The inductive approach allows the researcher to search for patterns in the data to discover underlying principles or theories. Induction can be related to studies conducted in fields where previous research is little to none, and when the researcher needs to track back and forth between theory and data (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2017; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). This process of induction is called iterative. An iterative qualitative analytical approach is when there is a repetitive interplay between the data collection and the analysis. This refers to that it is possible to explore emergent themes that are derived after the data has been gathered and can shape the ideas and the next steps in the research process (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

The chosen research approach allowed us to start the interview process before the literature review was completed. As previously mentioned, both literature and research related to this complex phenomenon are scarce which made it difficult to have a fully outlined literature

review before the data collection started. Therefore, while collecting the data for this study, new insights and theoretical concepts came to light deemed necessary to include in the literature review. We used a theoretical background when the data collection was conducted, but it was important to enhance the literature review both during and after the interviews were conducted to provide a better framework for the research. One disadvantage of iterative induction is that the researcher might try to follow every trail of theoretical concepts that emerge from the gathered data, which can affect the treatment of the concepts to become superficial (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). To avoid this, we chose to only follow theoretical concepts that emerged from the interviews assumed to be of that great importance that they would enhance the research for the better.

3.4 Data collection method

A qualitative research design is often associated with interviews. Interviews enable the researcher to discover and access information about a phenomenon that otherwise could be impossible to observe. There are several interview techniques in qualitative research in terms of how they are structured, with the strictest structure called structured interviews and the least structured unstructured interviews. A mixed technique of the two previously mentioned is called semi-structured interviews (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). To truly understand how different factors contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games, we chose to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with industry experts. Semi-structured interviews refer to when a researcher has a list of preset questions with specified topics to be covered during the interview. The interviewees have a great deal of freedom in their replies since this type of interview allows them to elaborate freely. The preset of questions that are used in semi-structured interviews, which in this thesis is referred to as the *interview guide*, is more viewed as a guideline of what is supposed to be discussed. Follow-up questions not specified in the interview guide can be asked if the interviewee discusses anything that is deemed to be of importance and interest by the researcher during the interview (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews enabled us to conduct an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon to answer the research question. By conducting interviews, we could develop an understanding of the video game industry and get a glimpse of the phenomenon through the interviewee's eyes. Interviews were further believed to be the best choice for our research since the method allowed us to discuss directly with industry experts and they could share their ideas, opinions and priorities related to the phenomena (Denscombe, 2018). One disadvantage of interviews is the

gathered data's trustworthiness since interviews are based on participants' words rather than actions (Denscombe, 2018). We were interested in our interviewees' thoughts on the research subject rather than their actions and thus, the disadvantage was assumed to not affect the interviews.

We chose to start with 11 interviews to collect data and further decide if it was necessary to conduct more interviews to collect enough data to base the analysis on. After the ninth interview was conducted, we did not experience that any new information of significance was discussed relevant to the study. Hence, we proceeded with the scheduled interviews, and it was decided to not book new interviewees. In other words, we conducted interviews until the point of theoretical saturation (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The interviews were conducted face-to-face with the participants located close to Lund in Sweden, and through the online platform *Zoom* with the participants located either abroad or in distant Swedish cities. Four of the participants we located in Denmark, three in Sweden, two in France, one in Norway and one in the United Kingdom. One factor to take into consideration when performing face-to-face interviews both physically and online is that the interviewee may be affected by the researcher's physical appearance (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). For our research with the focus on female representation, the interviewees' answers might have been affected by our gender as we both identify as females. This was acknowledged by us, and to the best of our ability to avoid this chance of biased answers, we ensured our interviewees that we were interested in their own opinions regardless of their characteristics.

3.4.1 Interview guide

An interview guide, see Appendix A, was prepared before the interviews were conducted. The questions and topics in the guide are based on previous research and parts of the literature review. Bell, Bryman, and Harley (2019) argued that researchers should consider questions based on what may be of significance to the interviewees related to the researched phenomenon. Therefore, some of the questions are based on the phenomenon and are not derived from the literature review. A first draft of the interview guide was made and used for the first interview. After reviewing the results from the first interview and being provided feedback from our supervisor, we made some minor adjustments to enhance the clarity of the questions and created the final version of the interview guide. The final version was used for the 10 remaining interviews and provided us with appropriate coherence throughout the process. The questions were divided into three themes to gain different insights and perspectives on the phenomenon. Before each interview, we decided on clear roles of who was going to lead the interview and

who was going to take notes. This decision was made to create a smooth flow during the interviews and to not create confusion for the participants.

Each interview started with an intro statement that welcomed the participant and thanked them for their contribution to our research. The first question was used as an icebreaker to make the conversation start to flow and make the participant feel comfortable. We then moved on to the questions that were of importance to the research and followed each theme in the interview guide with the flexibility of the conversation's direction. We encouraged each participant to discuss anything they could think about related to the questions and emphasized that we were interested in their own opinion about the phenomenon. The interviews lasted from 40 minutes to one hour and 40 minutes, with the average duration of an interview being 1 hour and 5 minutes.

3.4.2 Sample method

We chose to adopt a non-probability sampling approach which is characterised by that the probability of the chosen sample is not possible to state. As a result, it is not possible to generalise findings from a non-probability sample to the larger population (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). There are different sampling methods connected to non-probability sampling. Since we reached out to industry experts in the video game industry it is most in line with a purposive sampling method. In purposive sampling, the researcher selects participants in a strategic way with the research goals in mind. In purposive sampling, the researcher has a clear objective of what sample is required for the study's purpose and the chosen participants have relevance to the stated research question (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019; Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The sampling method was regarded as appropriate because of our choice to explore the complex phenomenon from the perspective of industry experts.

In purposive sampling, the researchers need to have clear criteria of which participants are relevant to include in the research (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Because of the aim of this research, it was natural for us to choose participants working in the video game industry. The selected participants were recruited through networking at two events, LinkedIn, and e-mail. Arantxa Rufrancos Luna attended the Nordic Game Jam event in Copenhagen on the 13th and 14th of April, 2023 and Erika Lybe attended the Game Developer Meetup event on the 19th of April, 2023. In addition to this, we reached out to people on LinkedIn who worked at video game studios and reached out to people through e-mail with whom we had common contacts.

Furthermore, one of the participants was found through a video game documentary and was contacted via e-mail.

We decided to include both male and female interviewees in our sample to gain an objective view of the video game industry. Worldwide 29% of the industry workforce identifies as women (Paul, 2021). Thus, excluding males would result in an unrepresentative sample with a limited and inaccurate view of the phenomenon. Specifically, our research analyses aspects of decision-making for which senior role respondents are critical for the validity of the data and the richness of our understanding. In the video game industry, the gender gap significantly increases when accounting for seniority. For instance, in *Super Mario Odyssey*, there were 136 people in the development team, of which 22 were women, none of which were in a leadership position. Similarly, there is often one or no woman on the board of directors in the top studios in the industry (Bailey, Miyata, & Yoshida, 2021).

3.4.3 Interviewees

Before starting the research, we conducted an exploratory interview with an HR Business Partner responsible for D&I at an AAA studio with six years of experience in the video game industry. The interview lasted 43 minutes and the questions were exploratory, see Appendix B for the interview guide. We conducted the interview to understand studios' perspectives on D&I in the video game industry and female representation in video games. Overall, the purpose of the exploratory interview was to help us define our research's scope and confirm its need. In our research, it was essential for understanding the differences between video game studios. There are three different types called indie studios, AA studios and AAA studios. Because of the lack of specific definitions for each studio type, we confirmed with our interviewees what would be an accurate description. Indie studios are smaller studios with a lower number of employees, often not more than 50 people and have no funding or outside help. AAA studios are the biggest studios in the industry with a large number of employees, often around 500 people working on a single game, and spending more than \$100 million on a new game.

Table 1 presents a list of our interviewees. The average duration of an interview was 1 hour and 5 minutes, and our sample consisted of five females and six males. The years of experience among participants ranged from 3 to 20 years, the average being 10 years, with six participants working in senior roles. Interviewees with different levels of experience give us a longitudinal view, allowing us to evaluate how the complex phenomenon has evolved and the power dynamics within studios. At the time of the interview, seven participants worked at studios, one

at a venture capital firm specializing in video games, three at game engine companies, and one as a streamer at the streaming platform Twitch. Among the participants working at studios, four worked in an AAA studio, one in an AA studio, and two in Indie studios. Allowing different roles within the industry provides us with a holistic view. Interviewing people working in game engine companies helps us establish the technical, or lack of, challenges when creating female characters. Furthermore, our sample can be deemed as consumers as well as industry professionals since they consume video games. This will aid market-based questions to be answered from both perspectives.

Excluding P9, all of our participants have former or current experience in a gaming studio. We decided to include a streamer in the sample because of the indirect influence of their role on product development. Under the market orientation strategy, organizations aim to create products that best satisfy consumers; thus, consumer views significantly influence product development (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990). However, consumers can, in turn, be influenced by opinion leaders (Flynn, Goldsmith, & Eastman, 1996) –such as streamers. Given their influence on consumer decision-making (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2020), streamers play an indirect role in product development from a market orientation perspective. Thus, including a streamer in our sample could provide us with a unique perspective on the subject and complement our holistic view of the industry.

Table 1

List of interviewees

Code	Date & Duration	Gender	Current Position	Current Company	Experience
<i>P1.</i>	25.04.23 81 min	Male	Game Developer	Game Engine Company	11+ years. Currently an internal game developer at a game engine company. Former Indie developer and previous work at one of the leading game engine companies in the industry.
<i>P2.</i>	26.04.23 100 min	Male	Lead Character Artist	AAA Studio	30+ years. Experience in AAA, AA, and Indie. Participated in the creation of multiple award-winning games. These include “Game for Impact” at The Game Awards and “Best Game” and “Artistic Achievement” at BAFTA.

<i>P3.</i>	27.04.23 40 min	Male	User Research Manager	Venture capital firm specialized in video games.	10+ years. Experience in AAA, AA, and Indie. Participated in the creation of over 60 video games, multiple of them being award-winning games or part of a high-grossing franchise.
<i>P4.</i>	27.04.23 75 min	Female	Game Designer	AA Studio	7+ years. Experience in AA, Indie and e-sports marketing. Former e-sports presenter, streamer, and professional e-sports player. Previous top 4 global champion for Hearthstone.
<i>P5.</i>	28.04.23 69 min	Female	Senior Game Designer	AAA Studio	8+ years. Experience in AAA and AA. Participated in the creation of high- grossing franchises.
<i>P6.</i>	28.04.23 84 min	Male	Lead Developer	Game engine company	12+ years. Currently an internal game lead developer at a game engine company. Former university technical tutor, Indie developer, and previous work at one of the leading game engine companies in the industry.
<i>P7.</i>	01.05.23 60 min	Female	Art Director	Indie Studio	7+ years. Experience in Indie. Experience in senior and entry- level positions within the Art Department.
<i>P8.</i>	02.05.23 59 min	Female	Software Engineer	Game engine company	7+ years. Experience in Indie. Former developer for Indie studios.
<i>P9.</i>	03.05.23 61 min	Female	Streamer	N/A	6+ years of streaming. 1.9k followers on Twitch. Public speaker at international gaming events.

<i>P10.</i>	03.05.23 42 min	Female	Junior Game Designer	AAA Studio	3+ years. Experience in AAA and AA.
<i>P11.</i>	05.05.23 53 min	Male	Creative Director	AAA Studio	17+ years. Experience in AAA. Participated in the creation of a high-grossing franchise with 135+ million players. Worked on the release of 10 of its titles.

3.5 Data analysis

Before each interview, a consent form was signed by both the interviewee and the researcher. The consent form gave us permission to record the interviews and use the material for our research. All interviews were held in English and the recorded audio was transcribed after the interviews were conducted. The transcribed material resulted in a total amount of 183 pages and was analysed with a thematic analysis method since one of the researchers was familiar with the method from previously conducted research. Firstly, we familiarised ourselves with the material by reading it thoroughly and interpreting it to extract what was deemed important for our research. We went through the material several times to ensure that we did not miss anything of interest. From the gathered data, we identified patterns of meaning and assigned interesting quotes to different themes and codes. Codes are the smallest unit of the analysis and function as a base for a theme. A theme consists of codes with a shared core idea and provides structure (Clarke & Braun, 2017). When searching for themes with a thematic analysis the researcher looks for repetitions, similarities and differences, and theory-related material to name a few. However, the analysis has a flexible nature and several techniques can be used (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). We chose to identify recurrent and similar topics in the transcribed material, which were collected under a common code and assigned a theme, which consisted of several codes.

Secondly, we conducted a re-coding process where similar codes and themes were merged. The intention of the re-coding process was to avoid confusion and to make the analysed material easier to manage. After a thorough examination of the analysed material, we were satisfied with the results. The aim of thematic analysis is to identify key features of the gathered data and interpret the meaning of it, assisted by the research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Because of our research's inductive approach, the focus was to identify codes and themes related to the

research purpose rather than to draw them from the literature review. The finalised document was deemed to be of importance for this study's research purpose and further believed to aid us when presenting our findings.

3.6 Trustworthiness

A qualitative study's trustworthiness is reliant on different factors, and it is of utmost importance to thoughtfully examine the quality of gathered data (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021). The methodological choices in this research affect the quality of our data and ultimately the trustworthiness. The results of this study are based on what was deemed as important and of interest to us as researchers since we were the main measuring instrument. Four criteria can be used to establish trustworthiness for qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Further, we will argue for each criterion.

Credibility is one of the key criteria when establishing trustworthiness and refers to internal validity (Shenton, 2004). This criterion is established if research is conducted according to good research practice for the findings to be deemed credible and confirm that findings are in line with the different perspectives of the social world of the studied context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To fully understand the complex phenomena we studied, we took actions aiding us to understand the video game industry to the best of our ability. Firstly, the exploratory interview provided us with insights of the industry that we were unfamiliar with, thus helping us to further understand the context of the studied phenomenon. Secondly, extensive research of previous studies, literature, and articles related to female character representation was conducted to enhance our knowledge of the industry. Lastly, the conducted interviews were allowed to take as much time as was needed to assure that we understood the perspective of the interviewee. After each interview, we took the time to discuss further interesting aspects from the interviews, not necessarily related to our research, with our participants and informed them that the thesis will be available to them once accepted.

Transferability is the second criterion and refers to external validity and focus on the possibility to apply a study's results to a wider population (Shenton, 2004). Because of the given nature of qualitative research and hence, this study, findings tend to be specific to the social world being studied. Thus, if a researcher wants to know if a study's results can be transferred into other studied contexts, the researcher needs to compare the studies have to be compared on their defining factors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We have acknowledged the fact that it will not be

possible to generalise our findings to a larger population because we used a non-probability sample. Furthermore, our interviewees' answers have most likely been influenced by their environment and knowledge, such as their current employer, cultural background and experience in the industry. As a result, differences in participants' environment and knowledge must be acknowledged before this research's findings can be applied.

The third criterion for establishing trustworthiness is dependability, which refers to the assurance of complete records kept of the entire research process (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). The research process should be described as thoroughly as possible for future researchers to replicate the work. Furthermore, a detailed description of a study allows a reader to determine to which extent good research practice has been followed (Shenton, 2004). The research process of this study has been documented from start to finish. Every step of the way has been described in this chapter and all relevant documents such as transcribed material, were stored on our computers. The documents were available for both our supervisor and our examiner for assessment until this thesis was approved.

The last criterion is confirmability which ensures that a researcher has recognized that complete objectivity is not possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The human elements of business research have an inevitable effect on a study. Therefore, must actions be taken by the researcher to ensure that a study's results are as far as possible the outcome of the participants' experiences and not the researcher's preferences (Shenton, 2004). We have followed the suggested procedures recommended by research literature authors to be as objective as possible to not influence our interviewees in their answers. The exploratory nature of this research and the complex phenomenon required an open mindset from the start, which necessitated the importance of several truths in the social world. We did not look for specific answers to our research question thus, the risk of us steering the research was considered minimal.

3.7 Research ethics

When conducting research, it is important to acknowledge research ethics to ensure that the research is respectful and does not harm the participants or the research community. Important aspects related to a research's participants are informed consent, privacy, and anonymity. Essential aspects related to the research community are avoiding deception and misleading (Easterby-Smith et al., 2021).

To ensure good research ethics in our study, we have taken several actions. Before each interview, a consent form was signed by our interviewees to ensure that they possessed the

correct information. This included informing the interviewees that at any time during the research, they could withdraw their consent without a specific reason. Furthermore, all our interviewees were encouraged to mention any concern about the research to fully feel comfortable. The participants in our study are all industry experts, and discussing the industry where they are currently working might be sensitive. Thus, to ensure their privacy we chose to anonymise all our interviewees. The provided information of each individual is of a general nature and only years of experience and achievements are mentioned. However, we had a mix of interviewees given consent for the use of their name and current employer in the published research or not. Regardless, we chose to anonymise all participants including company names or video game titles that could be traced back to the interviewee. One exception was made for the franchise Just Dance; however, we only included the name of the franchise in quotes where the mention of the game would allow for richer findings and a more in-depth analysis.

4. Findings

The following chapter presents the findings from the conducted study. Four themes emerged from the thematic analysis which constitutes different aspects of the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games. Furthermore, codes were identified in each theme which provides a deeper connection to the research purpose. The following order of the themes is gamers' influence on video game creation, the representation of female characters, inclusion of female characters and the intra-organisational elements in female character creation. Each theme is presented together with quotes from the interviewees that emphasize the findings. The chapter ends with a summary of the key findings of the study.

4.1 Gamer's influence on video game creation

The first theme that emerged from the interviews was gamers' influence on video game creation. This theme focuses on the influence of gamers in video game development –specifically, how gamers' preferences and opinions shape the video game and how catering to these can lead to market opportunities for an organization. The codes “understanding”, “resistance”, “demand” and “opportunity” constitute this theme.

4.1.1 The importance of understanding gamers

Under the code “understanding”, a prominent finding was the focus on understanding consumer needs and wants when creating characters in video games, with nearly all participants highlighting the importance of gamers and the gaming community as they are the ones that determine the success of a game through their consumption.

“Now, it's pretty clear that it has to be taken into consideration because the players can make or destroy the game.” – P2

“I think you know the community definitely has a loud voice today, you know. Then, depending on the studio, they're listening. And I think it's proven for [AAA studio] that, once they've done that, sales have been better.” – P3

Furthermore, a few interviewees noted the use of marketing research methods, such as focus groups, when creating video games, highlighting the value of consumer input in game creation. Supporting this notion, P2 explained that a game he worked on was released on early access, which means that the game is released to the public before it is fully finished to “hear the full force of the voice of the community” and implement further changes accordingly.

“This new generation of developers are ready to expose the secrets to their audience, and to actually hear what they have to say, to actually meet them with their wants” – P2

“We do lots of studies, we discuss a lot with the community of the game, we take lots of feedback [...] for Just Dance it's super key. Like myself, I always have the players in mind. I'm really looking at all their suggestions –the background characters, the features that they would like to see. So for me, it's really central.” – P11

“[...] reading up a lot on, what does the player like? What didn't they like? Because then I can get a better picture of what I should do.” – P5

4.1.2 Gamer resistance towards change

Under the code “resistance”, interviewees discussed how, at times, gamers can be defiant towards female characters or struggle to adapt to change. For instance, they might be accustomed to the stereotypical portrayal of female characters and express discontent towards change, or they might misgender characters from lack of familiarity. In particular, P.10 identified gamers' resistance as one of the main challenges towards achieving in-game diversity.

“I feel like players are used to a standard and they're sometimes resistant to change, but they're slowly modifying their behaviour.” – P1

“I remember the first time League of Legends¹ released a monster character that was supposed to be female, and everybody kept misgendering her because they just weren't used to it. So, it takes time to sort of override these assumptions that gamers make about characters that look a certain way.” – P4

“The main challenge is usually to adapt it off to the audience because the audience is very used to the stereotypical and what we have seen through games before.” – P10

Furthermore, P6 suggested that there are gamers that are adamant about playing as characters that are different to them. The interviewee further discussed that this is a type of gamer that will always exist and will be reluctant towards playing female characters.

“I think there's always going to be a spectrum of people who are from one extreme [...] people who are like, I only want to play as these white, male, buff military guys. I only play as those characters. Why do I have to play as a woman in this game?” – P6

¹ Multiplayer online battle arena video game with over 140 characters, released in 2009.

However, P1 noted that, in some cases, consumer criticism should not be considered to the extent that it pushes game creators to alter an already existing game. Instead, it can be used as an advantage in the creation of future video games to cater more to consumer wants. P1 further stated that he believed this approach would encourage ongoing conversations that might lead to something more sustainable, instead of a quick fix that does not solve any problems.

“Oh, true, you know, let's just jump some female characters in this game, because now we want diversity [...] I don't think the studio should solve it by modifying the game itself, but by thinking for the future” – P1

4.1.3 The demand from gamers

Under the code “demand”, interviewees expressed demand for female characters. They voiced interest from their personal view as gamers themselves and from the consumer based on their market knowledge. The interviewees described the stereotypical video games with male characters as boring and dull.

“As a player of games, I think it's boring just playing as the same characters all the time. Like, it's boring playing as the same white army guy. It's just kind of dull. It's been sort of done too many times.” – P6

Furthermore, P7 highlighted how specifically in the case of female gamers, the choice of video games might be a reflection of the available product supply rather than a preference.

“I feel like there is a demand [for female characters]. There are more and more women who play video games that find a lot of the stories that we tell kind of boring. They play them despite of the stories, not for the stories, and despite of the characters, not because of the characters.” – P7

Moreover, interviewees emphasized that female characters can spark curiosity and interest because it is different from the norm gamers are used to.

“I don't think people will be off put by having women [in games]. I think like, rather the opposite. Like I think it attracts more attention and more curiosity.” – P5

“And a lot of my guy friends also like to have female characters, because it's more interesting and usually has more to its story than just like “Oh, here's some sad angry man, that's it”.” – P10

It was highlighted by P9 that, in her opinion, more female characters should be included in games as well as a more diverse representation of them. She expressed a demand from the community to create more female character protagonists and how it at times could feel like the industry is struggling to meet the demand.

“[...] there were still people in the industry believing that she could not sell if she [Aloy² in Horizon Zero Dawn³] was a woman. And we know that that isn't true. That game sold to be one of the most sold games” – P9

4.1.4 Wider audiences and profit opportunities

Under the code “opportunity”, most interviewees shared their belief that including more female characters in video games is a market opportunity for studios. They noted that, including more female characters, could enable studios to gain access to a larger audience that already exists but is not necessarily targeted.

“Because when you have women relating to female characters, then you have women relating to games as a whole [...] it's convenient for people making games because the market just grows [...] the number one thing would be just to make a bigger pool of players.” – P1

“You can afford to have these games that are diverse when it comes to character creations and then you have more players playing the game because of that reason.” – P3

“You see a lot of Indie studios starting to make really creative and cute games that talk to a whole new audience. Especially a lot of women.” – P9

Furthermore, the interviewees suggested creating new video games for a new target audience could be good for business. This decision could create a possibility for a higher profit than if studios stay limited to their previous target group.

“I think the larger companies are kind of seeing that there is still a profit to make while having something challenging, maybe not from the previous audience that they have had, but make it more so that you can welcome new players into the game that they create.” – P10

“I think it's a very great way to have the game open to a wider amount of people. Which could be good, just for the human that uses it, but also business-wise.” – P11

4.2 The representation of female characters

The second theme that emerged from the interviews is the representation of female characters. This theme focuses on the portrayal of female characters, exploring their presence, physical appearance and personality and presents how these have evolved throughout the years. The codes "physicality", "personality", and "progress" constitute this theme.

² Protagonist in Horizon Zero Dawn.

³ Action role-playing video game released in 2017.

4.2.1 Stereotyped physicality

Under the code “physicality”, interviewees discussed the physical characteristics of female characters. The majority of the interviewees referenced the stereotypical sexualised depiction of female characters and expressed how this has been a norm in many video games. It was further emphasized by most interviewees that the stereotypical female character often had an unrealistic body, not corresponding with the activity that was performed.

“There are sort of classic tropes with female characters of video games that you will always see, for example, very perfect perky boobs, usually pretty large and round. Female characters that aren't as muscular as they should be based on the amount of physical activity that they're doing.” – P4

*“Female characters, that usually are extremely sexualized. For example, in League of Legends, where the girls wear super skimpy bikinis when they fight, while the men have huge muscles and always fully coated armour.”
– P10*

Furthermore, some interviewees remarked on specific games in which female characters were depicted in a non-stereotypical way. Ellie⁴ from *The Last of Us* and *The Last of Us II*, was a frequent example of this remark.

“They still keep her [Ellie] in, like in the more normal spectrum. Like they don't make her boobs super oversized, or her butt super oversized. They make her feel like kind of a real human in that proportions.” – P5

4.2.2 Personality makes the character

Under the code “personality”, interviewees discussed the personality traits of female characters. Most respondents commented on common stereotypes, with P4 mentioning “hyper-feminine” and P8 the “damsel in distress” trope. Likewise, most interviewees expressed that other representations of females in video games were sought after. Salient is P6, who made a distinction towards Bayonetta⁵ from the Bayonetta franchise, noting how her backstory and voice make her distinct.

“Another thing I wish I would see more of is [...] female characters that aren't hyper-feminine or hyper femme.” – P4

“I quite like the backstory and concept of Bayonetta because of how chaotic it is and how that character has such a distinct voice and personality.” – P6

⁴ Deuteragonist in the single-player action-adventure video game *The Last of Us* released in 2013, and protagonist in the sequel *The Last of Us Part II* released in 2020.

⁵ Protagonist in the action-adventure video game *Bayonetta*, a franchise with its first game release in 2009.

“Like Super Mario⁶ “oh, she's [Princess Peach⁷] the princess that needs to be saved”, that the men need to save somehow. So, of course, it's nice to also show her as a hero, as a main character that is doing the actions and not being the victim.” – P8

4.2.3 Some progress has been made

Under the code "progress", interviewees explained how they perceived female characters' evolution throughout the years. A prominent finding was that, although still stereotyped, some progress has been made towards a more diverse and inclusive female representation in video games over the years. Furthermore, there seemed to be a level of agreement on the time of these changes, with most respondents putting the time frame around 10 years ago.

“[...] if there were female characters, they were secondary characters, you know what I mean? That was the standard, but it's changed over the last 10 years.” – P2

“I think we've seen a big improvement in terms of moving away from all female characters being this kind of certain type of big-breasted and hourglass figure and not at all athletic [...] I think that over time, we're seeing improvements when it comes to better representing strong female bodies.” – P4

All participants agreed upon this notion, however, there were discrepancies to the extent and level of the evolution, with some interviewees noting big changes while others remarked marginal ones.

“But I wouldn't say there is a huge revolutionary change in the way that female characters are being presented now versus before. There used to be so few of them too that the examples are hard to find.” – P7

“I say before, it's very much damsel in distress and skimpy outfits. So, kind of weak characters [...] While the male characters were a lot like boost, force, and punchy. While now [...] they are including more and more that there are different types of female characters. But they still have that problem that they are very skimpy dressed.” – P10

Regardless of their opinions on the levels and magnitude of perceived change, all participants expected the trend to continue. All interviewees agreed that the pace of change is gradual and slow; still, they are unanimous on the notion of female characters becoming more diverse.

⁶ Platform video game franchise with its first game release in 1985.

⁷ The damsel in distress character of Super Mario.

“We see more women even though the rise is very slow and it also experiences dips sometimes. Hopefully that the general trend is still upward. So the industry is probably reflecting that. [...] It is not like it's heading somewhere, because it's special in any way. It's just a reflection of where the world is heading itself.” – P1

“I think for very scripted story games will probably see more, you know, characters of different backgrounds, not just your typical white male. So, I think that'll just continue to trend like it's trending now.” – P3

“I think in the future, we're gonna keep probably going towards this direction, to like having something a bit more diverse and a bit more balanced [characters and gender].” – P8

4.3 Inclusion of female characters

The third theme that emerged from the interviews is the inclusion of female characters. This theme focuses on the right approach to incorporate female character diversity in video games. Specifically, interviewees discussed the role of a video game's storyline or setting to the character's design; likewise, the effects of a rightful character depiction in the gaming experience were discussed. Furthermore, some interviewees noted that diversity and inclusion without a clear objective or apparent reason is an incorrect approach towards female characters in video games. The codes "realistic", "immersion" "connection", and "forced" constitute this theme.

4.3.1 If it is not realistic, gamers will not believe you

Under the code "realistic", interviewees explained the correspondence between video games' storylines and characters' depiction. The significance of a video game's storyline or setting to a character's design is stressed, with interviewees indicating how the character must fit into the storyline in a logical way. Time setting was a commonly expressed idea under this code, with interviewees often mentioning how a character's design should reflect its historical context. War video games were a frequent example as, historically, women were not allowed to fight in wars; thus, a video game with female soldiers set during an early war could receive criticism for its lack of logic.

“If it's not in some historically accurate setting where it makes sense that there aren't any women, then I don't know why you wouldn't have any female characters in your game.” – P4

“Because like if a woman can grow a tail, I don't care if I have like a beard or not, it depends on the game.” – P9

“[...] the player could be a female character [Battlefield⁸]. But that got a lot of backlash from the audience because women weren't supposed to fight in wars during WWI.” – P10

Still, interviewees noted that, under the same rationale, games with more fictional storylines and settings could have more diverse characters as they are not bound by the laws and logic of our actual reality.

*“[...] if the objective is to represent reality, I think it's better to base yourself on the real statistics [...] If you are doing a fantasy game for example, it's not the world as it is. It is the world as you would like to dream of it. And then, I think it's better to have a much better representation”
– P11*

4.3.2 Immersion is key in the gaming experience

Under the code "immersion", interviewees discussed the importance of a realistic or believable character –specifically, how the interplay of a character's overall identity, qualities, and attributes and storyline defines the gaming experience. Namely, interviewees explained how misalignments between the character's motives or actions and the video game's storyline or setting detract from the game's believability and realism. In turn, a disrupted reality might hinder the gamer's ability to achieve complete immersion or active engagement with the game, thus, detracting from the gaming experience.

“But when you have a game that's based on story, then you need to always like, motivate a reaction a bit more. Like, the character is doing that. Why are they doing that? If it becomes very unbelievable, then it breaks the immersion.” – P1

“What I see is players complaining about the character's identity. They don't believe that that character would do that. They don't believe that's the character's background. They don't believe that this character would be in that situation.” – P3

“One example is Mass Effect⁹ where you could choose the main character to be male or female. But then the female character was using all the male animations. So it just completely broke the whole character [...] it's not a case of going like half the way, we have to go 100% of the way to make the characters more believable.” – P6

Similarly, it was further stated by the interviewees that when a character's story was aligned with the game's storyline, it created a sense of credibility. P2 discussed a female lead character

⁸ First-person shooter video game franchise with its first game release in 2002.

⁹ Action role-playing shooter video game franchise with its first game release in 2007.

and how the fact that she was well-written created a fusion of the character and the game's storyline.

"[...] it was female-driven. It was also her story. At the same time, her real story. [...] I like well-written female characters. She was one, really, the fusion of her own story and the story created for the video game." – P2

"You're not gonna want to climb around on rocks and mountains in a miniskirt. She [Aloy] doesn't do it. She actually has real clothes. It feels functional. That feels real." – P5

Furthermore, P6 argued that a good background story was one thing that distinguished one character from another. The interviewee further stated that characters with a lack of backstory could be equal to a skeleton with no significant value in a game.

"Why is background so important? I think it splits the character from just being another generic [...] Overwatch¹⁰, they sculpt the entire backstories, entire history, lore, family [...] It adds so much flavour and so much richness." – P6

4.3.3 The connection between the gamer and the character

Under the code "connection", interviewees explained the importance of the connection between a gamer and character, and its influence on the gaming experience. Furthermore, the role of diversity and inclusion in making a broader audience feel connected was highlighted. The idea of connection was explored from the interviewees' personal experiences as gamers themselves and from the market based on their market knowledge.

"That was the first game in which I played a partially Asian character. And I connected with that game so much more because of it [...] I remember very vividly actually how much more interesting it was to me to play female characters." – P4

"It kind of almost unlocks doors, because then they have something to connect with. [...] an old lady [Ana Amari¹¹] in a shooting game. I don't know how many old ladies get to see like, Oh, there's an old lady, I could play as an old lady in a shooting game, this is pretty cool." – P6

"I think that's very important if we talk about female players, to make them feel like they're playing somebody that they can relate to. Yeah, that kind of representation makes people stick around to play. The few games that do it well they have huge fan bases of women." – P7

¹⁰ Team-based multiplayer first-person shooter video game released in 2016, with its sequel Overwatch 2 released in 2022.

¹¹ Support character in Overwatch and Overwatch 2 portrayed as 60 years old.

“Since you play as if the character on the screen was a mirror of yourself, for the time you play, you feel like you are the character on screen [...] I think it's true for every game. For every game, having great representation within the game makes you feel good because you relate more.” – P11

4.3.4 Forced diversity

Under the code "forced", interviewees critiqued forcing diversity and inclusion by adding diverse characters as a mere checkbox requirement rather than a purposeful idea with a clear creative reason or purpose. It was further expressed by P7 that design choices might backfire when there is no clear justification for a character's representation.

“I'm not a big fan of this force, like steering the thing towards a balance and doing it in a very forced way. I don't think it produces the final result that one is looking for.” – P1

“[...] that's not part of the story in any way. It was just like, let's just do that because then we have automatic representation, but that's very shallow. And we're trying not to do that.” – P7

Particularly, P8 noted the possible effects of forced diversity on gamers' opinions. P8 remarks how a new game based on a previously released game, with no new creative input other than a change in the gender of the characters, will likely be disliked by gamers –with the blame for the failure going towards the new character. However, in reality, the game would fail for its lack of overall creativity, as gamers have played the storyline before, not because of the character's gender.

“We should not make a copy of the exact same game, but with a different character [...] If it's exactly the same or very similar, people are not necessarily going to like it, because it's not that creative. Then it's going to be blamed because we changed the character, not because that game is not creative” – P8

Similarly, P10 shared this notion by discussing how simply changing the gender of pre-existing characters could be confusing, thus, counterproductive.

“I feel that is a lazy way to do it, not creating a new story and developing just instead like “Oh, we take these male characters, but now they are female”. That's not going to help anything, really. It's more going to be a confusion” – P10

4.4 Intra-organisational elements in female character creation

The last and most prominent theme that emerged from the interviews is the organisational elements affecting female character creation. The focus of this theme is intra-organisational

elements that can both positively or negatively affect the creation of female characters in video games. It was particularly highlighted by interviewees that the structure of a studio had a significant influence on the decision-making power in video game creation. Furthermore, risk-taking and diverse teams were frequently discussed by interviewees as elements considered to influence the creation of games. The codes “structure”, “risk”, and “workforce” constitute this theme.

4.4.1 The structure of video game studios

Under the code "structure", interviewees' comments related to the distribution of decision-making power in video game creation are grouped. Studio size, authority levels, and feedback were the three components most frequently mentioned by interviewees when discussing matters related to this code.

Regarding the studio's size, P2, P4 and P8 discussed indie studios. Specifically, they noted how the studios' small size and composition –sometimes solely consisting of a group of friends, allowed for more creative control. P4 also noted the significance of publishers in decision-making, which indie studios often do not have.

“[...] you have small studios, which have enormous freeway in terms of creativity” – P2

*“Sometimes publishers get very involved and might have a say in these kinds of decisions [...] I think that's why we see more diversity in indie titles. Because you're more likely to have smaller teams of people doing what they want to do and having full control over characters they want to include.”
– P4*

“When you're in the indie industry, it's a little bit different, because the teams are a bit more small. Sometimes it's just a group of friends that just decided to start their own game.” – P8

Furthermore, P2 shared his perspective on how AAA studios often take away creative freedom as a consequence of centralised decision-making.

“As soon as you centralise creativity, and give your power decision to somebody else, you just lose your freedom.” – P2

In terms of authority, P4 shared an experience where an idea did not materialise due to upper management disapproval.

“I know firsthand that a game director I worked with, tried to push for more black characters and more female characters, and was limited in what they could do, because of either a decision from upper management above them, saying that they didn't want that” – P4

Echoing P4's story is P10, who mentioned the significance of the owner of the studio in decision-making, explaining how bigger studios or publishers own other developer studios, thus, often having the last word in every aspect of the game's creation. P10 illustrated this point with a story from a studio that tried to work around its publisher's desires for sexualized female characters, only to be pushed back.

“They wanted to have more sexualized female characters and they tried to work around that to make something better, but they got denied really quickly. [...] So sometimes, we in the gaming industry can't really do anything about it. We always need to check with the people that kind of own the company, and how we can adapt after their suggestions.” – P10

In terms of feedback, interviewees discussed how individuals who lack decision-making power or are simply not directly involved in character creation, could provide feedback and comments that could impact to a certain degree. This notion was echoed by interviewees both for indie and AAA.

“I would say that even if I don't work directly on it, I feel I definitely impacted to a certain degree. But yes, like, raising my opinions on it and also raising awareness on it” – P5

“If you're not really the one to take the decisions, what you could do from your position is always like, give reasons, right? To convince.” – P8

“Maybe [people] can't decide exactly what they want, but more like give feedback and how they can change the character.” – P10

Still, P5 remarked on a distinction based on size. P5 noted that it might be easier to voice an opinion in smaller studios as there are fewer people to discuss with and fewer "politics" when doing so. The latter refers to formalities, such as where to start the conversation and the need to demonstrate benefits for the studio.

“It might be easier in a smaller studio, because in a smaller studio it's less people you need to go through, but in a bigger studio, you might need to go through more people [...] you probably need to be more political [...] talk about the benefits. While in a smaller indie studio, they're more like, yes, let's try it.” – P5

4.4.2 The risks of female representation

Under the code "risk", interviewees' comments relating to risk in incorporating more female characters are presented. In a broad discussion, some interviewees noted a feeling of "fear" of incorporating more diverse female characters within the industry, with the feeling of being "scared" stemming from a sense of uncertainty about the market's response.

“Studios can push whatever they want [...] the only reason why people don't do it is because they have this fear over the response [from market].” – P1

“I think the market wants it, I think it's just the gaming industry is still kind of scared. Because I think there are those biases of what would sell and what won't sell.” – P5

Still, interviewees also noted a level of experimentation happening within the industry. P1 exemplified this idea with the case of Overwatch and Apex Legends¹² incorporating more female characters.

“Developers again start experimenting with more types, and seeing how the players react. And I believe they're finding out that, you know, maybe sometimes a man just enjoys playing as a female character without thinking too much about it.” – P1

A pattern emerged with interviewees frequently classifying risk levels based on studio type. AAA studios were often referred to as big companies dealing with large amounts of money, often choosing the safer path when creating characters and games to guarantee success and profit.

“They [AAA studios] think “we should bet on this thing and not try to bet on something else, which we don't know if it's gonna work or not”. So they activate the marketing machine in a direction which for them, in their mind, is safer.” – P1

“[AAA studios] need to have an example first of somebody who does it right before they will dare to do something new. They rarely explore, they rarely go outside of something that isn't tried and true. And they will always choose a recipe for success over something different.” – P7

“So the best way we can make money back is by sticking to what we know, sticking to what we know is a white military guy fighting zombies [...] I definitely think those games always going to be around because it's kind of like a short bet.” – P6

¹² Team-based multiplayer online battle royale video game released in 2019.

“Because we know that formula somehow works, so we're going to do something a bit similar, and we assume that it's going to work.” – P8

Overall, AAA studios were often perceived by the interviewees as one end of the spectrum, with indie being the other end. Indie studios were often mentioned as the more risk-taking types of studios as they are smaller and do not play with as big sums of money as AAA studios. It was further discussed by some of the interviewees that indie studios might not have as much to lose which could result in a higher diversity of characters.

“In indie games [...] They start off by the lack of representation, for instance, or that they see a hole in the market that they would like to explore. Whilst the big AAA studios, the way that they operate is based on a formula that is already there.” – P7

Finally, a prominent finding among most of the interviewees was the shared notion of indie studios "leading the way" towards more female diversity and inclusion in games, with AAA studios following once success was established.

“Okay, why don't we try something new, and, then, the small companies try it. It actually succeeds. And then the big companies are like, "mmm...what if" [...]” – P1

“There's a lot of popular Indie games that are more aimed towards women [...] hopefully that will give some really nice examples of how to make video games that also women would like to play [...] And then AAA will follow, like they do.” – P7

“Yeah, I think always Indie are gonna be the first to do it. They always head front while AAA is kind of always going more safe route, because they know what will give them money kind of from the audience that they previously have.” – P10

4.4.3 The impact of the workforce on video games

Under the code “workforce”, the interviewees shared their thoughts on the challenges many teams face when creating video games. Recurrent in the interviews were discussions about lack of reference, diverse teams, top management, commitment towards D&I, and marketing. One prominent finding was that many of the interviewees expressed that males may have difficulties when creating female characters because of the lack of references. It was further stated by P7 how the lack of reference could be reflected in female characters.

“Every now and then, they [males] will think "oh, it would be cool to have a woman". But I think it's very normal to, you know, you're sitting down drawing characters, first thing you're gonna do is probably a man.” – P1

“The typical makeup of the team has like one designer. And then several [...] everything comes down to that one designer, and I can't think of a project I've worked on where the designer wasn't a guy. And so they're going to be designing female characters, but not really drawing from like a realistic experience.” – P6

“And they [female characters] usually don't have a lot of personality, and you can tell that they're written by men [...] Their whole personality is usually just that they are female.” – P7

“I think there are like 40 men working at the studio. And they have a problem with just having inclusivity with different types of characters, especially women in their game.” – P10

Furthermore, it was stated by interviewees that the natural solution to incorporating more female characters in video games would be to have gender-diverse teams. This was often mentioned as connected to the notion that teams consisting of more females were believed to provide more perspectives on character representation, which would aid the creation of female characters.

“If you have a very diverse creative team, then the character is probably not going to be a trope character that's used all the time. There's probably going to be some diversity decision within that character creation.” – P3

“[...] I think in order to get this [diversity] in the games, we also need to get more diverse workforce within the different companies that we are having.” – P5

“[...] part of that [diversity in games] is only kind of achieved by having people who have those lived experiences as part of the design team, or as part the art team [...]” – P6

However, a prominent finding was the notion of a general lack of female employees in the industry, with nearly all participants expressing this feeling, especially in the development team. Moreover, female interviewees in developing teams discussed the effects that the lack of female employees could have on other women inside and outside the industry. Specifically, some expressed how it could feel lonely to be a woman in the industry.

“Very often I was the only woman or there were only a few other women. That does impress upon you that it's harder to succeed in this space, [...] you don't have as many other women to look up to, to help you, to basically make you feel comfortable and like you belong.” – P4

“I think approximately about 20% of the workforce is usually female. But that can also be that most of them are working in marketing, or HR and not like in the studio production part of things when it comes to games.” – P5

“I don't think a lot of women apply for positions at places where they will be the only woman at work. You need diversity to breed diversity.” – P7

“It's [the industry] still male-dominated, and it's gonna probably be for a while. Most females are in HR or in the art department.” – P10

Particularly, P8 shared that sometimes she could feel lonely being a female in the industry, but building a network with females working at other studios could enhance her confidence. She further believed that females' industry networks could attract more females to enter the industry.

“[...] they will be like, Oh, it's nice, like, actually, you know, I'm not gonna really feel alone in this, like, I could be part of what they did it. So I can also do it, you know, get into that industry that doesn't seem that accessible for us as women in the first place.” – P8

Furthermore, two of the interviewees highlighted that they had not experienced any significant difficulties in the creation of female characters at their studio, and pointed out that the reason was because of the diverse teams they work in.

“But it's easy for us to include female characters, for instance, because we are in a rare situation where we have more than 50% females on our team.” – P7

“The diverse team is important because the game that we are doing, I would say, what we target is not the same as in most of the industry. We have a slightly more female audience.” – P11

Another aspect that was mentioned by the interviewees was the importance of top management. Particularly, P11 emphasised his responsibility as Creative Director of fostering an environment, where every team member feels safe to speak and share their ideas, even when sharing contradictory views.

“So making sure that the team is diverse, that everyone can speak freely and give contradictory opinions, and that at the end within the game, we have a good balance of diversity in general.” – P11

Furthermore, interviewees noted a lack of female presence in decision-making roles, with most senior roles in the video game industry often being held by males. P4 further discussed a small sense of resistance towards females being considered as leads or seniors in technical and creative roles.

“So that's obviously a big challenge as well, when all of your senior management are men or the vast majority of them are men [...] There's no striving to actually change that. But, yeah, I think, unfortunately, that's probably the case for a lot of studios out there.” – P4

“If it's not a very diverse management team, then, you can kind of see decisions are being made from one perspective and one view [...]” – P3

“In terms of decision-making roles it's still like, the majority all, pretty much all men, like in decision-making roles, which is not great [...] Like my current company, our CTO, my manager, my boss, it's the first time I've had a female boss in like, my whole career.” – P6

“And that will be beneficial even for the games we develop, if we have more females in senior positions. Because it will be, I think a bit easier to develop games for a wider audience and better market.” – P11

When asked how diversity in video games could be achieved, many of the interviewees agreed that the mindset that is needed is not something that can be forced on a team. For instance, P2 shared his thoughts on how D&I has to come naturally for each individual. Similarly, P5 emphasised that in some cases, it's not the team not wanting in-game representation, but rather lacking awareness on the subject.

“You can't force people to realize that, it has to come from yourself to realize that.” – P2

“[...] at least in my experience, people I've been working with, it's not that they don't want diversity and inclusion in the game, it's just that they haven't thought about it.” – P5

Finally, Marketing teams were mentioned by three of the interviewees to have a skewed perception of what type of video game content will sell and not. It was expressed by the interviewees that the marketing function of studios has preconceived notions of what caters to gamers, that developers did not necessarily agree with.

“I would say, sometimes, even though there are women working on it, because of marketing reasons, they are forced to insert like things that they think will cater more to men. But that's just because yeah, again, marketing.” – P1

“There was age, country, and demographics –like female, male [...] I change that when I have discussions with marketing teams [...] that doesn't really matter. At the core, what really matters is the people that play those games or have the motivation to play those games.” – P3

“[...] people in marketing and production did not want to have Ellie as the only character on the front because they thought that the game wouldn't sell as much if they would only represent a female on the cover.” – P5

4.4.4 As presumed, technology is not a limitation

The scenario question in our interview guide (Appendix A) was intended to help us understand if there would be any challenges in developing a game with mostly female characters; specifically, it helped us check our technological assumption mentioned in Chapter 2. None of the interviewees noted any technical challenges in the creation of such a game, but rather some even remarked how it was possible from a technological stance.

“The technological needs are now available. It's very easy to be inclusive now.” – P2

“I mean, there's no issue. There is just people making the game to be honest [...] there's no challenge on actually making it.” – P3

“But I don't see like it would be like, from a game developers perspective, I don't see if there's a challenge to make it like, no.” – P5

4.5 Summary of key findings

Findings from this study have been presented in relation to quotes from the interviewees illustrating the finding. Table 2 presents a summary of the themes, codes, and illustrative quotes which summarise the most significant findings that were identified. The key findings will act as a base for the upcoming discussion in Chapter 5.

Table 2

Key findings and illustrative quotes

Theme	Code	Illustrative quote
Gamers' influence on video game creation	Understanding	<i>“Now, it's pretty clear that it has to be taken into consideration because the players can make or destroy the game.” – P2</i>
	Resistance	<i>“The main challenge is usually to adapt it off to the audience because the audience is very used to the stereotypical and what we have seen through games before.” – P10</i>
	Demand	<i>“As a player of games, I think it's boring just playing as the same characters all the time. Like, it's boring playing as the same white army guy. It's just kind of dull. It's been sort of done too many times.” – P6</i>

	Opportunity	<i>"I think it's a very great way to have the game open to a wider amount of people. Which could be good, just for the human that uses it, but also business-wise." – P11</i>
The representation of female characters	Physicality	<i>"There are sort of classic tropes with female characters of video games that you will always see, for example, very perfect perky boobs, usually pretty large and round. Female characters that aren't as muscular as they should be based on the amount of physical activity that they're doing." – P4</i>
	Personality	<i>"Like Super Mario "oh, she's [Princess Peach] the princess that needs to be saved", that the men need to save somehow. So, of course, it's nice to also show her as a hero, as a main character that is doing the actions and not being the victim." – P8</i>
	Progress	<i>"I say before, it's very much damsel in distress and skimpy outfits. So, kind of weak characters [...] While the male characters were a lot like boost, force, and punchy. While now [...] they are including more and more that there are different types of female characters. But they still have that problem that they are very skimpy dressed." – P10</i>
Inclusion of female characters	Realistic	<i>"[...] if the objective is to represent reality, I think it's better to base yourself on the real statistics [...] If you are doing a fantasy game for example, it's not the world as it is. It is the world as you would like to dream of it. And then, I think it's better to have a much better representation" – P11</i>
	Immersion	<i>"But when you have a game that's based on story, then you need to always like, motivate a reaction a bit more. Like, the character is doing that. Why are they doing that? If it becomes very unbelievable, then it breaks the immersion." – P1</i>
	Connection	<i>"I think that's very important if we talk about female players, to make them feel like they're playing somebody that they can relate to. Yeah, that kind of representation makes people stick around to play. The few games that do it well they have huge fan bases of women." – P7</i>
	Forced	<i>"We should not make a copy of the exact same game, but with a different character [...] If it's exactly the same or very similar, people are not necessarily going to like it, because it's not that creative. Then it's going to be blamed because we changed the character, not because that game is not creative" – P8</i>

Intra-organisational elements in female character creation	Structure	<p><i>“It might be easier in a smaller studio, because in a smaller studio it's less people you need to go through, but in a bigger studio, you might need to go through more people [...] you probably need to be more political [...] talk about the benefits. While in a smaller indie studio, they're more like, yes, let's try it.” – P5</i></p>
	Risk	<p><i>“I think the market wants it, I think it's just the gaming industry is still kind of scared. Because I think there are those biases of what would sell and what won't sell.” – P5</i></p> <p><i>“In indie games [...] They start off by the lack of representation, for instance, or that they see a hole in the market that they would like to explore. Whilst the big AAA studios, the way that they operate is based on a formula that is already there.” – P7</i></p>
	Workforce	<p><i>“The typical makeup of the team has like one designer. And then several [...] everything comes down to that one designer, and I can't think of a project I've worked on where the designer wasn't a guy. And so they're going to be designing female characters, but not really drawing from like a realistic experience.” – P6</i></p> <p><i>“If you have a very diverse creative team, then the character is probably not going to be a trope character that's used all the time. There's probably going to be some diversity decision within that character creation.” – P3</i></p>

5. Discussion

The following chapter presents a discussion of the key findings. The chapter will highlight findings of interest and those findings will be discussed along with relevant previous research. The discussed findings will aid us to answer our research question “How do different factors contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games?”. Based on the findings, we identified barriers that contribute to the exclusion of female character representation in video games, and enablers that contribute to the inclusion. Furthermore, our findings confirmed the assumption that there are no technical problems related to the creation of female characters in video games, hence, the ability to create representative female characters is fully achievable in terms of technicality. The chapter will be divided into different sections and discussed in the following order: market forces, the video game storyline, studios’ organizational structure, risk, and the role of women in the industry.

5.1 Market forces

This section presents the findings from the gathered data connected to market orientation within the video game industry. It was prominent that consumer needs are taken into consideration when creating and developing video games and characters, which supports that the video game industry is market-oriented (Shapiro, 1988; Jaworski & Kohli, 1990). Conducting marketing research methods when creating characters or video games with consumer needs as a departure point, can be a key factor for market success, which is supported by previous research (Urde, Baumgarth & Merrilees, 2013). Furthermore, our findings indicate that there is a demand for more female character representation in video games than what is being offered today. The current market offering is not satisfying all consumers and can be deemed as “dull” and “boring”. Previous research has highlighted that it is vital for market-oriented studios to identify and understand both current and future consumer needs to guide product development (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990; Armstrong, Adam, Denize & Kotler, 2014).

The notion of female representation being a market opportunity is further supported by the remarks on D&I enhancing the gaming experience, in that, by identifying with the character, gamers can feel more immersed in the virtual world, resulting in more gaming hours. Overall, this suggests the importance for video game studios to focus both game creation and development towards the inclusion of female character representation. However, the findings indicate that resistance towards change can be detected in the market. Some consumers may be

used to the stereotypical representation of characters and satisfied with the current market offerings, thus, not seeing the need for a change in games. The collision in consumer needs may force studios to take a stance on which path of game creation and development they want to take, which can be a critical decision to make since market orientation is long-term and determines focus (Shapiro, 1988; Slater & Narver, 1998). Consequently, the market can act both as a barrier and an enabler of female character representation in video games dependent on which path a studio takes.

Furthermore, our findings on female character representation in video games support that from the previous research, confirming that female characters are still depicted physically in a sexual manner (Beasley & Standley, 2002; Burgess, Stermer, & Burgess, 2007) and as "hyper-feminine" and "damsel in distress" (Dietz, 1998; Provenzo, 2000; Miller & Summers, 2007) personality-wise. However, new to the literature is our finding on the notion of progress being made, albeit slowly, by industry experts. Specifically, the time frame for the start of change is about ten years ago. This last part further supports the notion that the video game industry is market-oriented (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990). The change's time frame aligns with the external market environment, on par with a larger shift within the entertainment and media industry where consumers have become more critical of female representation (Storey, 2018; Trier-Bieniek, 2019) and appeal for better depictions (World Economic Forum, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022). Thus, it could be inferred that the wider trends within the external market environment contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games. In this specific case and societal context, the general demand for better female representation acts as an enabler. Video game studios recognize the latent demand for diverse female characters and work, albeit slowly, towards delivering it to satisfy consumers' needs and remain competitive (Shapiro, 1988; Jaworski & Kohli, 1990; Ruckert, 1992). This notion is further supported by interviewees' expectations of the trend continuing.

5.2 The video game's storyline, a double-edged sword

This section presents the findings from the gathered data connected to video games as a product of consumption. Specifically, our findings illustrate the role of a video game's storyline or setting in the character's design and, accordingly, the inclusion or exclusion of female characters. A video game's storyline and setting indicate the logic and rules under which the virtual world operates; consequently, it determines the type of character and character features allowed in the game. Particularly, time setting and closeness to our actual reality are identified as elements significantly affecting the inclusion of female characters. Under this premise, it is

permissible to lack female characters in video games set in real-life scenarios where females are also absent. For instance, it is acceptable for a game set in WWI to lack female soldier characters as women were not allowed to fight then; similarly, a military game could have fewer female characters based on the statistics as women still constitute a minority in the army (Statista, 2021). Thus, if a real-world scenario lacks female representation, for whatever reason, a game's storyline set within that specific context should reflect this for believability and realism. Otherwise, there is the possibility of discontent and criticism from gamers for the game's lack of logic.

The creative decision of not having female characters depending on a game's context aligns with the theory of the significance of product quality on consumer satisfaction (McQuitty, Finn & Wiley, 2000). Misalignments between a video game's storyline and characters may disrupt the virtual world's reality, hindering gamers' ability to achieve complete immersion or active engagement with a game, thus, detracting from their experience and causing discontent (Rogers, 2010). Therefore, it could be inferred that a video game's storyline contributes to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games dependent on the environmental setting. Video game creators place significance on the storyline when designing characters because the coherence within these two elements directly affects the gaming experience, ergo, gamers' satisfaction (McQuitty, Finn & Wiley, 2000; Rogers, 2010). Under this notion, a video game whose storyline follows the logic of a historical time or real-life context where there is a lack of female representation acts as a barrier. However, a solution for this would be to explore story narratives based on real-life scenarios where women are more present, thus, achieving believability and immersiveness in the gaming experience while simultaneously obtaining female character representation.

Furthermore, our findings also illustrate that, under the same logic, a video game's storyline with fictional elements is more flexible and permissive on what can be included as it follows its own created logic. Interviewees agreed that video games under these circumstances should incorporate better female representation as there is no logical reason not to. This results in a behaviour–attitude gap (Roberts, 1996; Carrigan & Attalla, 2001) among video game creators. Although they express supportive attitudes towards female character representation, there is still no significant materialised alignment to their intentions, as reflected by the literature and statistics (Miller & Summers, 2007; Williams et al., 2009; Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2021). The behaviour–attitude gap could imply that the intention to include female characters is still not given significant consideration in video game creation. Similarly, it may

suggest that while a video game's storyline impacts the decision to include or exclude female characters, other elements have greater influence over the final decision. Nonetheless, it is important to note that even when materialising the intention of increasing female representation in-game, female characters should not be included without a clear creative reason or purpose. Otherwise, the quality of the gaming experience might diminish, possibly leading to player discontent (McQuitty, Finn & Wiley, 2000; Rogers, 2010).

5.3 Studios' organisational structure

This section presents the findings from the gathered data connected to the studios' organisational structure. In line with theory, the findings suggest a relationship between creative freedom and studio size (Damanpour, 1991; Ekvall, 1996; Eklund, 2022), ergo the ability to include or exclude female character representation in video games. For starters, indie studios' small size allows for more creative freedom as there are fewer hierarchies within the organisation. Specifically, there are fewer individuals to consult over an idea; similarly, there is a smaller likelihood of a higher-up dismissing an idea as there is a limited number of individuals in top positions (Dalton et al., 1980; King & Lawley, 2019). Consequently, individuals in indie studios have greater autonomy over their creative choices and are more likely to see their ideas materialise in the final product. Furthermore, it was noted that indie studios were often composed by a group of friends. The nature of this composition could help foster an informal decision-making environment where individuals feel more prone to sharing and exploring their creative ideas as there is a sense of equal footing in authority and mutual support (Menguc & Auh, 2010).

In contrast, it was acknowledged that AAA studios' large size could hinder creative freedom. As most of the authority in AAA is centralised, creative decision-making is relinquished to the higher levels within the organisation (Tolbert & Hall, 2009; King & Lawley, 2019); thus, senior managers or publishers can dismiss ideas for more female representation, acting as a barrier to its materialisation. Lastly, it was discovered that regardless of studio size, individuals are welcome to voice opinions and feedback, even when not directly involved in character creation. However, consistent with the academic theory, bureaucracy and studio size impact the ease of voicing an opinion. In contrast to indie, feedback, and comments in AAA must pass through various layers and be more strategic and diplomatic in where and how they are presented (Grinyer & Yasai-Ardekani, 1981; Astley, 1985). Overall, from the discussion of these findings, it can be inferred that a smaller organisational size could enable female character representation in video games. Individuals in indie studios have more control and autonomy

over creative choices; thus, if they choose to incorporate a wider array of female characters in the video game, it is more likely that their decision will be realised and reflected in the final product.

5.4 Risk

This section presents the findings from the gathered data connected to risk behaviour. The findings revealed a general risk-adversity propensity within the industry towards female representation arising from the fear of an uncertain market response; however, limited experimentation in characters has recently started taking place over the past decade. This notion of a general risk-adversity propensity with little experimentation in the industry is best reflected in the female characters themselves, which are still notably stereotyped but with some slow progress towards becoming more diverse and inclusive. Furthermore, company size emerged as a significant factor in shaping a studio's risk behaviour on female representation; thus, we will discuss the findings with a distinction between indie and AAA.

5.4.1 Indie leads the way

Indie studios were identified as significantly more risk-prone than AAA studios. For starters, it was noted that indie studios could start from the identification of a hole in the market, with lack of representation being the identified market niche in some cases. From a theoretical lens, this could signify a risk-prone nature from indie studios, in that they identify opportunities within uncertain contexts in the market and choose to address them (Schneider & Lopes, 1986; Huff & Prybutok, 2008). Furthermore, contrary to the academic theory in the literature review, the lack of resources was identified as a facilitator rather than an inhibitor of risk behaviour for indie studios (Nystrom, Ramamurthy & Wilson, 2002), providing them with a sense of "nothing to lose" when faced with uncertainty over the market's reaction. However, a plausible theoretical explanation aligned with our academic theory for the "nothing to lose" mentality could arise when considering the current market situation of indie studios.

Organisations seeking to improve their market position may be more risk-prone, acting on uncertain opportunities in an attempt for competitive advantage (Bowman, 1984); thus, being the small players in the market, indie studios may advance more on risks, developing more innovative and niche games as means to differentiate and compete with AAA studios. Lastly, consistent with the theory that risk-prone organisations are more likely to pioneer in product development, it was frequently stated that indie studios would lead the way in female representation (Robinson & Min, 2002; Min, Kalwan, & Robinson, 2006). Overall, the high-

risk propensity of indie studios acts as an enabler for female representation as it drives them to engage in in-game female representation, even though the action is still regarded with some degree of risk to it within the video game industry. Furthermore, by taking a pioneering stance in representation, indie studios create an industry structure towards change. They serve as an enabler or push factor for AAA studios to increase female character representation in their video games by providing these risk-averse organisations with empirical evidence of success.

5.4.2 AAA sits back and waits

AAA studios were identified as significantly more risk-averse than indie studios. It was mainly noted that AAA sticks to formulas that have proven to work; consequently, they are likely to increase female representation in-game only once the uncertainty around it decreases. These findings give us insight into what carries the greatest significance between company size, competition and market position in determining risk behaviour. Firstly, based on theory, large organisations are more likely to be risk-prone given that their resource availability can enable them to counteract unforeseen situations or absorb potential failures when innovating (Nystrom, Ramamurthy & Wilson, 2002). Similarly, in terms of competition, the video game industry is highly competitive and fragmented –in Europe alone, the third largest region in the industry, there were 4,600 studios in 2020 (European Game Developers Federation, 2020; Statista 2022); thus, following theory, organisations should be more willing to take risks to capitalise on opportunities and remain competitive (Bromiley 1991; Wiseman & Bromiley, 1996).

However, in the case of AAA studios, organisational size and competition seem to have little influence on their risk behaviour compared to their market position. Often being leaders or some of the largest companies in the industry, AAA studios tend to benefit from successful or strong market performance. Our findings and theory align in that AAA studios are reluctant to deviate from their existing strategy by increasing female representation out of fear of jeopardising its current status (Miller & Friesen, 1982). Thus, it could be inferred that the current market position is the dominant determinant of risk behaviour for AAA studios. Furthermore, from a market orientation scope (Jaworski & Kohli, 1990), studios' risk aversion directly affects their ability to be market-oriented, so even if there is a latent demand for female characters, AAA studios might be less willing to respond to it given its risk-averse nature (Hung & Tangpong, 2010).

Overall, being risk-averse, AAA studios are more likely to increase in-game female representation only after the idea has been tested by others and proven successful, thus,

behaving in a way to avoid risk from uncertainty and failure (Robinson & Min, 2002; Min, Kalwan, & Robinson, 2006). However, the issue with this is that being market leaders, AAA studios set the standards for what is good and successful among gamers and other studios. Consequently, if AAA, in their role as key industry actors, does not strive and push for a better in-game female representation, no significant palpable change will happen within the industry. Thus, the risk-averse nature of AAA acts as a barrier to female representation.

5.5 The role of diversity in studios

In this section, the findings from the gathered data connected to the workforce are presented. The findings revealed that the role of diversity in studios has an eminent role in the inclusion and exclusion of female character representation in video games. Previous research states that diversity within teams is a core benefit for innovative team performance since it enables knowledge transfer and integration (Akgün, Lynn, & Yılmaz, 2006; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; van Knippenberg, 2017). However, for the video game industry, it was found that more often than not are studios struggling with workforce diversity in terms of gender. The findings will be discussed with a distinction between top management, the development team and the marketing team since this was found to have an important role in the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games.

5.5.1 Senior management

The senior management in gaming studios has a significant influence over the creation of video game characters. Ideas and suggestions in the character creation process from developing teams can be either encouraged or shut down by senior roles, such as game director and creative director. Previous research states that management support plays a significant role in ideas materialising to completion (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1995; Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1996; Ernst, 2002). In line with the research, our findings suggest that when gaming studios' management is committed to fostering an environment where team members can speak freely about ideas and give contradictory opinions, it enables creativity and diverse thinking. Specifically for the context of our research, a diverse environment could enhance the creation of female characters, thus, acting as an enabler of female character representation in video games.

Overall, commitment to diversity from senior management will foster an environment where the workforce is free to express and explore their ideas, in turn, diversity in the development team will act as an enabler for female character creation to represent females more accurately.

These concepts may sound similar, but a distinct difference is that both parts should exist to unlock their full potential. Furthermore, senior management roles are often held by males in the video game industry. Still, the gender of the senior manager does not restrict the creation of a creative team environment where diversity can be fostered, and ideas are explored. What matters is the personal level of commitment to the cause from the individual, not their gender.

However, females in senior positions were viewed as favourable by the interviewees since they may improve the creation of attractive video games for wider markets, which aligns with preceding research (Terlecki et al., 2011). Furthermore, our findings indicate that decisions from a management team lacking diversity might be perceived as being made from only one perspective, which emphasises the importance of D&I awareness in senior management. Our findings support previous studies and highlight how diverse knowledge and perspectives are passed down and ingrained within teams (Akgün, Lynn, & Yılmaz, 2006; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Thus, a diverse senior management team might obtain richer perspectives and act as an enabler for female character representation in video games.

5.5.2 Development team

The development team in gaming studios have a distinctive role in the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games. Exposure to diverse knowledge and ideas can inspire other group members' thinking (Richter, Hirst, Van Knippenberg & Baer, 2012). Our findings show that a team's own experiences often are reflected in created characters' representation. Thus, a diverse team consisting of both males and females may broaden each member's diverse knowledge and enable the whole team to create female characters with an authentic representation. Team members often use a personal reference frame when creating characters, which leaves males at a natural disadvantage when it comes to female character design and animation. Hence, an all-male team will most likely be limited in their ability to produce female characters and contribute to the exclusion of female character representation.

Our findings support previous research accentuating that creative input and knowledge of team individuals dictate and guide the design and characteristics of new products (Sethi, 2000; Slotegraaf & Atuahene-Gima, 2011). However, women might feel intimidated by entering the industry because of the common likelihood of being the only one or one of few females on the team. This might complicate the process of including more females in all-male development teams and might put studios' aiming for diversity in a status quo. Hence, diverse teams might

act as an enabler for female character inclusion in video games, while the current gender gap (Paul, 2021) in the industry acts as a barrier.

5.5.3 Marketing team

Our findings show that the marketing and development team's vision of what will sell to consumers does not necessarily align. It was perceived by developers that marketing teams might make their decisions from data that is not fully accurate or outdated preconceptions, which may have skewed marketing attempts for games with mix-gendered audiences more towards male gamers. The findings imply that video games are a reflection of society and the world, and the world is becoming increasingly more aware of D&I, in line with preceding research (Burgess, Wilkie & Dolan, 2022; Tomkinson, 2022). For marketers in the video game industry, it might be essential to update diversity marketing practices to communicate effectively, which is stressed by previous research (Hassan & Yazdanifard, 2019).

Furthermore, it was believed that females within the industry more often have roles related to marketing or human resources than in development roles. This suggests that the possibility of diverse marketing teams is higher than diverse development teams. However, our findings indicate that even if a marketing team is diverse, it does not necessarily mean that the team is aided by the fact, hence missing out on the core benefits of diverse teams (Akgün, Lynn, & Yılmaz, 2006; van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). Our findings show the importance of incorporating shared values between marketing and development teams to contribute to the inclusion of female character representation. If not, marketing teams might act as a barrier when communicating an authentic female character representation in video games to the market.

6. Conclusion

The final chapter presents our concluding remarks on the thesis. Firstly, the aim of the research and the research question is discussed together with our findings. Secondly, the managerial and theoretical implications are discussed, followed by the research's limitations. Lastly, suggestions for future research are presented.

6.1 Overview of the research and key findings

This research aimed to explore the complex phenomenon of female character representation, both quantity and portrayal, in video games and which factors either inhibit or enhance the creation and how. A qualitative research design was adopted, and 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with industry experts to answer our research question:

How do different factors contribute to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games?

This research discovered that market forces, video game storylines, organisational structure, risk behaviour, team diversity, and top management support simultaneously function as barriers or enablers in the representation of female characters in video games –depending on their interplay. Namely, these factors exhibit a dual role; thus, their impact on female character representation is not fixed but changes with regard to the interactions among all other identified factors. Furthermore, not all factors are equally weighted, some have a bigger influence than others.

For example, video game storylines. Frequently discussed by video game creators was the notion that a video game whose storyline follows the logic of a historical time or real-life context may lack female representation as it reflects reality; under these circumstances, a video game's storyline could be considered a barrier. However, the contrary is also true. A video game's storyline with fictional elements is more flexible and permissive on what can be included, with video game creators agreeing that games under these circumstances should incorporate better female representation; thus, the storyline in this context acts as an enabler. However, if the latter were fully applied, female representation would already be high, as most video games have an element of fiction. Therefore, it was positioned that the other factors exert more influence over the final decision than a video game's storyline.

Within the research context, the interplay first unfolds at the studio level. It was inferred that indie studios have more control and autonomy over creative choices as, given their size, their hierarchy of authority is limited (Eklund, 2022). Thus, size for indie studios can be regarded as an enabler, as if they choose to incorporate more female representation in their games, it is more likely that their decision will be realised and reflected in the final product. Contrasting are AAA studios, which may lack creative freedom as most of the decision-making is centralised (Tolbert & Hall, 2009; King & Lawley, 2019); thus, senior managers or publishers can dismiss ideas for more female representation, acting as a barrier to its materialisation.

Then, market forces come into play. The wider societal trends in the external market environment act as an enabler for female character representation as there is a general demand for better female representation in media (World Economic Forum, 2021; World Economic Forum, 2022); however, specifically for video games, the collision between latent demand for female characters and discontent over change generates uncertainty about the possible demand and market response to female representation. Under these circumstances, AAA studios place more importance on the market uncertainty, given their risk-averse nature, and opt not to act on female representation –even if their size grants them the resources to overcome the unforeseen circumstances of change, out of fear of jeopardising their market position, AAA studios are redundant to deviate from their existing strategy by increasing female representation (Fiegenbaum & Thomas, 1988; Kliger & Tsur, 2011). In contrast, the risk-prone nature of indie studios allows them to see the opportunity within the uncertainty, enabling them to act even if they don't have the resources to withstand market failure (Schneider & Lopes, 1986; Huff & Prybutok, 2008). Thus, the overall combination of organisational structure and risk behaviour enables female representation in indie studios, driving and facilitating their engagement in the matter. In contrast, the opposite is true for AAA studios, their centralised structure and risk-aversion act as barriers to the proactive increase of female representation in games.

Still, for the female character representation to materialise, the efforts and abilities of individuals and teams are required for its execution and success. Thus, on the final level of the interplay, the significance of the workforce comes into play. For starters, gender diversity within organisational teams is an enabler for female character representation. Much of the creative work is built on the team's knowledge and experiences; thus, to accurately develop female characters, the presence of women in a team is essential. The significance of a diverse team only increases when considering the importance of realism and believability in the gaming experience, which in turn determines the player's level of entertainment, enjoyment, and

satisfaction (Zackariasson & Dymek, 2016). Finally, to materialise an idea to completion, support and guidance to the creative from senior positions is necessary; thus, commitment from senior and leadership positions towards female representation acts as an enabler. By believing in the cause and need for change, senior and leadership roles can foster an environment that enhances the creation of female character representation (Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1995; Cooper & Kleinschmidt, 1996; Ernst, 2002).

Overall, the interplay of the identified factors helps us explain and understand the notion of "some progress has been made, but there is still a long way to go" in the representation of female characters in video games at present. In conclusion, this research explored the complex phenomenon of female character representation in video games, identifying market forces, video game storylines, studios' organisational structure, risk behaviour, senior management, development team, and marketing team as factors inhibiting or enhancing female character representation; thus, the research's purpose was achieved.

6.2 Managerial implications

This research has identified valuable insights for managers and studios in the video game industry. D&I is an increasingly important topic to consider, and it includes several challenges for studios. We will further propose managerial recommendations derived from our findings, which might aid actors to move forward when striving for including female character representation in video games.

Firstly, to truly understand market demands and needs of the quite untapped market of female gamers, thorough market research is needed. In this sense, the present numbers of which type of consumer purchases video games might not be aligned with the real intention. Our findings indicate that there is a possibility of female gamers purchasing video games with characters they do not connect to or find exciting because the current market offerings do not provide better alternatives creating a market research blind spot. Studios tapping into the market blind spot might find themselves a competitive advantage other studios yet need to identify. Therefore, we propose to conduct focus groups in the initial stage of the female character creation process to gain new knowledge of what the untapped market has lacked in previously released video games. Furthermore, it may be of interest to investigate the possibility to release newly created games on early access to unlock the full voice of gamers. This can provide game developers with guidance on which direction consumers wish a game should take to feel immersed.

Secondly, it might be of great importance to create consistency between the development team and the marketing team. The findings imply that there might exist different perspectives of what characteristics of a game would sell and not. This could mean that consumers will not be aware of details enhancing female character representation before actually consuming the game, which might result in missed sales opportunities. This insight should not be underestimated since consistency between product values and communication can be a key element. Not communicating the competitive edge that female character representation and immersive storylines can create, is a missed opportunity.

Lastly, embracing D&I throughout a studio and encouraging conversations on female character representation can be an advantageous strategy. Acknowledging diverse perspectives from employees in an organisation might unlock creative freedom across the different departments such as development teams. It might prove that there is existing knowledge within a studio not previously utilized that can enhance the creation of more authentic female characters, as well as their male counterpart. Furthermore, it is important to note the fact of not aiming to tick off “diversity boxes”. Our findings imply that quick fixes that are made only to be perceived as diverse by consumers are not a sustainable strategy. Instead, careful consideration should be made to strive for as genuinely diverse female character representation as possible. Enablers and barriers presented in Chapter 5 may be used as guidelines for all recommendations.

6.3 Theoretical implications

The research's main contribution to academia is the identification of preliminary barriers and enablers to the inclusion of female character representation in video games. Previous research on female representation in video games has mainly consisted of content analyses exploring female portrayal in games –with most studies reaching common findings and concluding that women are still largely unrepresented and stereotyped in video games. However, to our knowledge, no research had previously attempted to understand the reasons behind the persistent lack of female representation in games. Thus, our research contributes by identifying some of the factors contributing to the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation based on anecdotal evidence from creatives within the industry, serving as a stepping stone for future research.

Furthermore, to explore female character representation in video games and which factors either inhibit or enhance the creation and how, our findings inadvertently support previous academic research on risk and provide an insightful perspective on risk behaviour. As previously

discussed, given their risk-prone nature, indie studios are more likely to increase female representation in games regardless of the market's uncertain reaction; on the contrary, AAA studios are risk-avoidant and likely to wait for proven success. However, of particular interest is what carries the greatest significance between company size, competition, and market position in determining risk behaviour for AAA studios, as well as how this gives rise to friction in the relationship between the market orientation and risk.

6.4 Research limitations

As with every other research, there are limitations. First, the research was conducted with time constraints, meaning that there was a limited amount to find participants, conduct interviews, transcribe, code and analyse. Second, interview responses are susceptible to social desirability bias (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). In particular, our research may be more sensitive to social desirability bias given the social pressure to uphold certain viewpoints about diversity and inclusion; thus, respondents may have overstated their support and actions towards increasing female representation in video games, especially in the presence of two female interviewers. However, given that we sought to provide a rich understanding of an under-studied issue the use of interviews was justified. Lastly, one of the most significant limitations of our research is the decision not to delimit the scope by game genre. As occasionally pointed out by the interviewees, it's hard to make generalisations about games as they vary by genre; thus, not opting for a specific genre may have limited the validity and richness of our findings. However, given the limited previous research and literature on the subject and following the research's exploratory nature, we opted for a broad scope to get a more comprehensive and holistic exploration of the subject, increasing the research's flexibility towards unforeseen or unexpected findings (Davies, 2006).

6.5 Future research

Our research provides various avenues for further research. The first suggestion is to replicate the study with further delimitations; for instance, focusing on a specific game genre, distinguishing between single-player and multiplayer games, or differentiating between protagonists and supporting characters, among other possibilities. Similarly, the research could be replicated by exploring other aspects of diversity and inclusion such as ethnicities, disabilities, sexuality, age and religion –even gender from a male perspective could be studied as male characters are still depicted in stereotypical or unrealistic ways. Second, given the significance of studio type in the findings, the sample could be limited to indie or AAA to gain

a deeper understanding, further exploring the unique challenges and opportunities that each type of organisation faces. Third, while industry experts possess insights as both professionals and gamers, it's best to obtain information from a direct source. Thus, the research could be adapted to explore consumer views on female character representation. Similarly, the role and impact of the gaming community as a factor in the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games could be explored, as the community is often regarded as unwelcoming towards females. Lastly, as previously mentioned, we were exploratory to a highly complex phenomenon; thus, it's only safe to assume that all the factors influencing the phenomenon were not identified, but rather a pre-eliminate set to guide future research was found. Therefore, other factors influencing the inclusion or exclusion of female character representation in video games could be tested. Likewise, future research could identify mediators and moderators for the factors we found. For instance, the role of age or generation in team diversity could be analysed, as younger generations tend to be more attuned to social issues like diversity and inclusion.

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Appendix A – Interview guide

Intro Statement: First of all, thank you so much for letting us interview you. This is an interview for our master's thesis in International Marketing and Brand Management. The aim is to get your opinion about the video game industry, specifically female representation within it. We will focus on games that are not connected to reality (e.g. sport games with real life characters). There are no right or wrong answers, we are only interested in your opinion.

If you need to take a break at some point during the interview, that is okay. Also, if you don't want to answer a question, that is okay too. Just let us know, and we can skip it. No questions asked.

I'll be moderating the interview and my partner, [NAME], will be taking notes. This will be recorded, transcribed, and anonymised. You don't need to refer to any specific games unless you want to and if you wish, we will anonymise the referred games. Do you still approve that the interview takes place? Any questions or concerns?

ICE BREAKER:

- Who is your favourite female character in a video game and why?

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

- What does D&I mean to you?
- Could you give us a brief description of your role?
- How do you achieve D&I in your role when creating a new game?
 - What are the main challenges?
- Do you believe female characters need to be included more in video games?
 - Why?

CHARACTERS (PRODUCT)

- Excluding games based on real people, how realistic is female representation in games?
- How important is it that female gamers can relate to in-game female characters?
- How have female protagonists and characters in video games changed over time?
 - If change:
 - When did you start noticing these changes?
 - How do you feel the trend will evolve?
 - If no change:
 - Do you think any change is needed? Why?
- How do gamers' (the market) opinion influence the creation of new video game characters?
- What is the process when creating a new character within your role?

- How responsible are the studios for creating more realistic female characters within games?
 - In what ways could this be achieved? (e.g. what characteristics should the characters have or don't have)

ORGANIZATION & INDUSTRY

- How included are females in the video game industry?
 - In what ways are they included?
 - Why do you think it is like that?
- How can females be more included in video games?
- What are the main challenges towards achieving female inclusivity?
- The 'traditional view' of gamers is mostly associated with males, however, nowadays it's approximately an equal number between male and female gamers. How has the change in the market influenced the creation of games?
- In what direction is the industry as a whole heading right now?
 - Is it heading towards a more female inclusive direction? Is it just a handful of studios/developers or everyone?
 - What efforts do you see the industry is making towards including more females?
 - Do you feel that the industry is moving towards a more inclusive direction in terms of female portrayal in-game?

MISC.

- Scenario: Imagine that you are creating an RPG with mostly female characters, an intriguing story that speaks to all gamers. What would be the main challenges?
 - What do you think the market response would be?
- Do you have anything else to add about diversity and inclusion in the video game industry, might be something that you find extra important or that lies close to your heart?

Appendix B – Interview guide (exploratory interview)

STUDIO

- Please tell us more about your role at [AAA studio] and your responsibilities.
- What unique challenges does the video game industry have/face in terms of inclusion and diversity?
 - Specify for gender.
 - What steps have [AAA studio] taken to overcome those challenges.
- What are your diversity and inclusion initiatives and how important are these initiatives?
- What are you doing at the “Studio-level”?
- Do you experience that other companies in the industry are following in the same direction as [AAA studio] or are some lagging behind, maybe even reluctant?
 - Is it a mutual desire in the industry to become more diverse and inclusive?
 - Do you believe that bigger companies, such as [AAA studio], have to take the lead to make smaller companies take action? Maybe both types have to exist?
- Do you think it's the studio's responsibility to push diversity and inclusion? (in the industry, to gamers/community)?
- Is there something you're particularly proud of when it comes to diversity and inclusion at your studio?

MARKETING

- How are you working with your gamers' awareness in terms of diversity and inclusion?
- Do the marketing and brand teams actively work with diversity and inclusion questions/issues to promote a more diverse and inclusive player base?
- Both the video game industry and the gaming community are highly male-dominated, however, the trend is moving towards equal distribution between genders of gamers, and as [AAA studio] states on their website you are actively working on including more women in the workforce. Are your developing and marketing attempts translating to this, in a sense of making it more attractive for female gamers?
 - How do you think the trends will evolve?
 - Do you think gamers will be more 50/50 between the genders in the future or do you think it will continue to be a male-dominated community and industry?

GAMEPLAY

- How do you push representation inside your gaming experiences?
 - Particularly, for the player. You have inclusive teams making the video games but at the end of the day how does that translate in games?

- In terms of protagonists and characters in games, how have they evolved over time to be more diverse and inclusive?

MISC.

- Do you think there is a need for research on this topic?
 - What research is more crucial for the industry to become more diverse and inclusive?
- Do you have anything else to add about diversity and inclusion in the video game industry, might be something that you find extra important or that lies close to your heart?