

“How is it that Someone Like You: paragon, Damn Near Saint; Could Love this World so Damn Much but No One in It?”: *Horizon Zero Dawn*’s Aloy and the Disruption of Hetero-Amatonormative Benevolent Sexism in Female-led Games

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Abstract

While recent data from the Entertainment Software Association indicates there is close to a 50/50 split in gender identification of gamers between men and women, the environment created by stereotypical depictions of women in games as well as negative community interactions continue creating a hostile environment for women who identify as gamers. Since the 2010s, the presence of female playable characters in major studio games began to appear with polarized reception. *Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017) and *Horizon Forbidden West* (2022) require players to assume the role of Aloy, a female machine hunter and outcast without a male playable character option. Using Glick and Fiske’s concept of benevolent sexism and the three frames outlined in Schröter and Thon’s video game narrative analysis framework (narrative, ludic, and social), Aloy’s narrative was analyzed to highlight how it disrupts amatonormative benevolent sexism in female-led games.

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Despite the lingering effects of GamerGate and gender-based harassment in multi-player spaces (Kuss et al., 2022; Paaßen et al., 2017), the climate surrounding women and games is changing given the rise in women identifying as gamers with 48% of self-identified gamers in the United States identifying as women as well (Clement, 2023). While the inclusion of female characters increased in games released in the 2010s and beyond when the gap between male and female gamers began to close (Clement, 2023), the integration of well-rounded female *playable* characters (PC) has not been seamless. From the speculation surrounding Evie Frye's inclusion in *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate* (2015) as a response to sexist rhetoric about women being too hard to animate (Farokhmanesh, 2014) to the violent rhetoric directed towards voice actor Laura Bailey (Bailey, 2020) due to her character Abby's subversion of traditional norms regarding femininity (Tomkinson, 2022) in *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020), and despite an increase in representation and inclusion, female PCs are still often rooted in the androcentric norms in games, perpetuated by developers (Bulut, 2021; Tompkins & Martins, 2022) and consumers alike (Kelly et al., 2023).

While the gaming industry may have moved beyond egregious hyper-sexualization, female characters still often comply with male-centered expectations of beauty and behavior, and games in general are designed with a male consumer in mind (Lynch et al., 2016; Perreault et al., 2018; Tompkins & Martins, 2022). Given the increase in women who play games and the rise of a discourse surrounding the historic mistreatment of women as players and characters by the gaming industry in GamerGate, depictions of women rife with hostile sexist stereotypes have given way to a more subtle version plaguing depictions of women in media across media type (Brewington et al., 2022). Thinking back to Evie Frye, her presence and import cannot be ignored even though Evie's narrative choices reflect a culture where sexism, even if more benevolent than hostile (Glick & Fiske, 1996), remains endemic (Bulut, 2021; Tompkins & Martins, 2022); however, Evie opened the door for other major developers to create games led by women despite pushback from some consumers. One such character is Aloy from *Horizon Zero Dawn* (HZD; Guerilla Games [GG], 2017) and *Horizon Forbidden West* (HFW; GG, 2022).

Throughout Aloy's narrative, her gender is often unacknowledged in lieu of her status as an outcast which is a far more defining characteristic in this world, allowing her to define herself instead of being defined by her relationship with men, something not often seen in female characters in any media form. Because of this lack of emphasis on her gender, tropes, and expectations regarding gender were subverted because Aloy had more possibilities than other female characters. Aloy presents the opportunity to

analyze what happens when gender is not the primary identity for a female character and how that allows for subversion of other gender and sexuality-based tropes. This article explores how decentering romance in Aloy's narrative across both games disrupts and subverts the hetero-amatocentric narrative expectations in female-led games that function as a form of benevolent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Because Aloy is depicted as an empowered woman who is neither defined by nor focused on romantic connections to male characters, her narrative pushes back against the benevolent sexism present in many depictions of women in video games. As a result of this disruption, Aloy's narrative presents the opportunity to explore how the dominant hetero-amatocentric narratives in games and culture at large that define women based on their relationships with men and center their narratives around male-female romantic relationships can be subverted.

Women in Games and Gaming Culture

While the representation of women in games is increasing (Bryter, 2022), there is still an overarching sentiment that there is room for further improvement. In a 2022 survey of 1,500 women who game, 69% of participants felt female characters were oversexualized and 56% felt the amount of representation of strong female characters was lacking (Bryter, 2022). At the same time, these data showed the amount of time spent gaming per week for men and women reached equal levels, but women were less likely to identify as gamers given the climate of the sexism still rampant in gaming spaces as "gaming is still primarily perceived a male activity by the society and community around them" (Kuss et al., 2022), something that continues to be socialized through the depiction of women.

Video games are sites of socialization where attitudes and views are shaped by the media we consume (Genner & Süß, 2017). Because of this, characters who challenge the norms associated with gender are increasingly important so women and girls who game are able to see their gender depicted in an empowering and strong way, particularly when thinking about media through the uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973; Sherry et al., 2006) where we "seek our specific media and content genres in those media in order to receive sought-after gratifications" (Greenberg et al., 2010, p. 240). If women are depicted positively in media, including video games, then regardless of the gratification being sought, consumers will engage with a female character who is not dependent on stereotypes rooted in sexism; however, positively depicting women could be the impetus for engaging with a video game. If there are more well-developed female characters, then perhaps more women and girls will engage in games for the gratification of enjoyment. Forni (2019) explored how specifically *HZD*'s female characters, in particular Aloy, can serve as "effective tools in reconsidering gender norms and standard identities through their characters" (p. 82) given how the narrative is dominated by women who actively subvert gender-based norms and expectations we have been socialized to internalize. Even if someone is engaging in video games for a reason outside of seeking empowered female

characters, Aloy's norm-challenging nature could have the unintentional impact of decreasing sexist attitudes towards women through engaging in her narrative (Forni, 2019).

Despite the rise in representation, depictions of women still rely on harmful stereotypes and we continue to see games where "heroic protagonists are predominately white men while female characters are often portrayed in a secondary and sexualized manner" (Tompkins & Martins, 2022, p. 400). While Lynch et al. (2016) found in their content analysis sexualization of female characters peaked between 1990 and 2006 and decreased between 2006 and 2014, the ratio of primary and secondary female characters in games released in those eras remained the same, 40:60. Even though representation was less hypersexualized, there was still a lack of growth in terms of female characters. Because the growth in technology between 1990 and 2006 led to a sharp increase in graphical capabilities, the fact those capabilities were likely used to "feature more sexualized females as a sales tactic to entice male players" (Lynch et al., 2016, p. 576) reflects how even in design, decisions about female characters are made based on their relationship to men both in and out of the game.

These "stereotypical and sometimes demeaning representations of women" (King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 183) reflect a continued effort to center the male gaze in game design. With the rise of characters like Ellie in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) and Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite* (2011), a shift in the depiction of women in triple-A games began in the 2010s with the creation of characters like these who reflect agency and strength without being depicted in overly sexualized ways (Perreault et al., 2018; Solska, 2021). By analyzing characters who break stereotypes and sexualized norms we can highlight how we are able to engage with characters who subvert the male domination of the gaming sphere as well as bring to light the developers, particularly those who are making triple-A games, who are using their power within the industry to shift the narrative and combat both the hostile and benevolent sexism in all facets of the gaming industry.

Benevolent Sexism

As sexist rhetoric surrounding women began to take the form of adoption and enforcement of positive stereotypes (e.g., women are uniquely qualified to nurture and fill care-centered roles; women are inherently weak and need to be protected, etc.), this softer and subtextual sexism was used in place of more blatantly violent rhetoric to justify male dominance over women. Ambivalent sexism theory (AST; Glick & Fiske, 1996) posits sexism functions differently than other forms of prejudice given the interdependent nature of men and women that require these groups to intermingle. Glick and Fiske (1997) define *hostile sexism* (HS) as behaviors and attitudes that aim to "justify male power, traditional gender roles, and men's exploitation of women as sexual objects through derogatory characterizations of women" (p. 121). HS enforces old-fashioned views about women from a negative perspective and is directed at

women who do not comply or conform to traditional norms regarding femininity and submissiveness associated with women (Mastari et al., 2019; Ramos et al., 2018).

Benevolent sexism (BS) reflects “a set of interrelated attitudes towards women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 491). While HS often targets women who defy cultural norms due to perceived competition on the part of men, BS “targets women viewed as warm and supportive, who therefore deserve men’s protection and provision” (Bareket et al., 2018, p. 520). HS and BS together stratify women based on their compliance with sexist norms and attitudes about gender and gender performance (Butler, 1990), elevating women who comply with gender norms to a pedestal while casting out those who do not comply and furthering the belief that “ambivalent sexist men bear no dislike towards women in general but only towards those who ‘deserve it’” (Glick et al., 1997, p. 1333).

While HS and BS manifest in the same three subcomponents, *paternalism*, *gender differentiation*, and *heterosexuality* (Glick & Fiske, 1997), each does so in a way that relates to sexism’s subjectivity. Where manifestations of HS take stereotypical forms of sexist aggression, BS appears in ways more nuanced, requiring deeper interrogation than their HS counterparts. While HS would approach the power relationship between men and women through *dominative paternalism*, BS’s *protective paternalism* views women as inherently needing to be protected, and “because of their greater authority, power, and physical strength, men should serve as [those] protectors” (p. 122). While protection in a relationship is not inherently bad, the extent this is used to justify subordinating women ultimately forces women to view a dyadic relationship with a man as an integral part of their lives, reinforcing the view of interdependence between men and women’s underlying AST as a whole; however, only women who comply with gender stereotypes and norms deserve male protection while those who disrupt and defy those same expectations are the targets of HS’s dominative paternalism.

Unlike HS’s *competitive gender differentiation* which draws upon negative stereotypes of women as weak and less competent to elevate men’s social status, *complementary gender differentiation* reflects the “dyadic dependency of men on women (as romantic objects, as wives and mothers), [that] fosters notions that women have many positive traits that complement those of men” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 493). In BS, traits men often lack or are culturally expected to repress, such as emotional intelligence and an ethic of care, are lauded in women but in a way that attempts to justify keeping them subordinate by highlighting only what makes them men’s “better halves.” By calling women “men’s better halves,” it connects men and women based on the potential for a romantic relationship to develop, intrinsically situating the male–female relationship in an expectation of heterosexuality.

Heterosexuality serves as the underlying force driving the continued perpetuation of both HS and BS as “heterosexuality is, undoubtedly, one of the most powerful sources of men’s ambivalence towards women” (Glick & Fiske, 1996, p. 493). Because heterosexual men are dependent on women to have children and for sexual satisfaction, any attempts to ensure women remain dependent on them allows sexism to continue to

occur without disruption. This relationship in itself reflects the main reason sexism can be benevolent by allowing for continued male dominance without alienating women to the extent they would leave this relationship because, as [Glick and Fiske \(1996\)](#) note, *heterosexuality* highlights how “men’s dyadic dependency on women creates an unusual situation in which members of a more powerful group are dependent on members of a subordinate group” (p. 493).

While HS views heterosexuality as intrinsically linked to men’s desire to dominate women through *heterosexual hostility*, *intimate heterosexuality* “romanticizes women as sexual objects, viewing a female romantic partner as necessary for a man to be complete” ([Glick & Fiske, 1997](#), p. 122). For women, intimate heterosexuality may be experienced through being “adored and cherished by a male partner, but also [by] feeling an expectation they fulfill the partner’s intimacy and relationships needs, whether that be through physical, emotional, or sexual intimacy” ([Oswald et al., 2019](#), p. 364). Not only are women defined by the roles they are expected to fill based on complementary gender differentiation (e.g., mother and caregiver) they are simultaneously defined by their relationship with men due to intimate heterosexuality (e.g., wife and girlfriend). Viewing romantic relationships as what makes a person complete not only centers but prioritizes the male-female romantic dyad over all other relationships and connections an individual makes throughout their life, reflecting the *hetero-amatonormativity* of male-female relationships in the United States.

Intimate Heterosexuality and Hetero-amatonormativity. Amatonormativity refers to “assumptions that a central, exclusive, amorous relationship is normal for humans, in that it is a universally shared goal, and that such a relationship is normative, in that it should be aimed at in preference to other relationship types” ([Brake, 2012](#), p. 89). Centering female norms and experiences around relationships with the goal of romance reifies the expectation that desiring relationships and romance are “normal” and any resistance is deviant. From an amatonormative perspective, the caring in romantic relationships or “within marriage and families is the only caring that counts” ([DePaulo, 2006](#), p. 133), particularly that which occurs in the context of a heterosexual relationship.

BS is, inherently, amatonormative as it centers on the romantic dyadic relationship between men and women where women are seen as carers and men as providers and protectors. When characters’ gender performance ([Butler, 1990](#)) does not meet these expectations, it destabilizes the traditional heterosexual romantic dyad. As a result, BS is also inherently heteronormative as it centers the importance of a male-female romantic dyad above all other relationships, romantic and platonic alike. Because heteronormativity is an integral aspect of amatonormativity, particularly from an ambivalent sexism lens, queer relationships threaten the dominance of heterosexuality.

As a result, queer women often receive more hostile sexism than their heterosexual counterparts because they will not enter into the ever important male-female romantic dyad. Queer relationships, even romantic ones, threaten the grasp of heteronormativity on depictions of romance within media, so while those relationships are romantic in nature, the clear challenge to heteronormativity often makes them function without

watering female characters down to their relationship with a male love interest. By propagating the centrality of male-female romance while ignoring platonic relationships that serve a similar source of connection and commitment along with the quasi-requisite nature of romance exclusively between male and female characters, any deviation from that, such as a relationship between two women, is notable.

While [Perreault et al. \(2018\)](#) mark 2013 as a pivotal year in representation in games, given how lengthy game design can be, there are examples before and after that reflect how hetero-amatocentrism and benevolent sexism are challenged and destabilized such as Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite* and Ellie in *The Last of Us*, and Abby in *The Last of Us Part II*. Added to this list is Aloy. Up until the most recent DLC release, *Horizon Forbidden West: Burning Shores* ([GG, 2023](#)) romance was not even a possibility in Aloy's narrative and when it was added, the only possibilities resulted in Aloy being queer. Because of this, Aloy's narrative not only disrupts the three tenets of benevolent sexism but its underlying heteronormativity as well.

Aloy, Anointed of All-Mother ... Disrupter of Benevolent Sexism?: An Analysis

While HS is often more visible, given its focus on justifying male domination through any means necessary, both HS and BS share common ideas and assumptions about women and "presume traditional gender roles ... [and] justify and maintain patriarchal social structures" ([Glick & Fiske, 1997](#), p. 121). Like other forms of media, video games are socializing agents, and assessing the extent to which sexism is present allows us to critically evaluate the media we consume; however, identifying and celebrating characters and narratives that subvert sexism provides consumers with the ability to engage with media that does not reinforce it. In a community that has historically catered to men, it is potentially more important to address the endemic nature of sexism and misogyny illustrated through benevolent sexism and hetero-amatonormative narratives.

HZD and *HFW*'s Nora outcast machine hunter Aloy presents a strikingly different female protagonist from many of her predecessors. Unlike many female characters, Aloy's characterization resisted compliance with gender norms and expectations. Her creator, Elisabet Sobeck, noted she hoped her daughter "would be curious. And willful—unstoppable, even... but with enough compassion to ... heal the world ... just a little bit ..." ([GG, 2017](#)) and by making a clone of herself, ensured those qualities would be present in Aloy. While Aloy's empowered and self-sufficient nature is impressive for a female PC, Guerilla also did one thing that deviated from video game norms for female characters: her narrative arc did not center on a romantic relationship.

Given the interactions between players and PC in video games where players assume their perspective, narrative analysis of video games needs to go beyond their story. Game mechanics provide an additional consideration because they impact how the character acts and what they are able to do, providing another source of information players use when determining if a character resonates with them or not. [Schöter](#)

and Thon (2014) note video game character analysis must acknowledge the “medium-specific representation and the mental processes involved in their intersubjective construction by video game players” (p. 41) before outlining a “three-fold framing of player consciousness” (p. 49): the narrative experience, the ludic experience, and the social experience. By analyzing Aloy narratively as an “identifiable fictional [being] with an inner life” (p. 49), ludically through the “game mechanics, as game pieces that are defined by game-related properties such as ‘health points’, ‘speed’, ‘special abilities’” (p. 49), and socially through discourse about the game through gaming website news articles, the decentering of romance and hetero-amonormativity in Aloy’s narrative was analyzed to illustrate how it subverts and ultimately disrupts the tenets of Glick and Fiske’s benevolent sexism, providing a rebuke of the gender-based narrative expectations in video games.

“Everyone calls me ‘Aloy of the Nora.’ It should be ‘Aloy, despite the Nora’”: Aloy the Nora Outcast and Disruption of Protective Paternalism. When we meet Aloy, Rost, her adoptive father, is bringing her to a traditional Nora naming ceremony, despite both having been cast out of the Nora tribe, and he points out all he is going to teach Aloy as she grows up. While this serves as a quick way to introduce the world to the player, it also creates the expectation Aloy is going to be raised in a way to defend herself as opposed to relying on those around her to be her protectors. As an outcast forbidden to talk and interact with other members of the Nora tribe who harbor animosity toward her due to her mysterious birth in All-Mother Mountain, Aloy is subjected to harsh treatment by the Nora. One of the earliest events we experience with Aloy is a group of Nora children throwing rocks at her in the tutorial, setting the stage for the obstacles Aloy will face throughout the game where she needs to be able to protect herself as opposed to relying on others to protect her.

Aloy’s status as an outcast is mirrored in her relationship with Rost who was tasked by the Nora High Matriarchs to “raise it, not love it” (GG, 2017). While Rost was protective of Aloy as a child, he allowed her to explore and learn as a way to gain skills and knowledge, both of which would prove integral to Aloy’s mission to finish the work of Elisabet Sobeck and Project Zero Dawn and restore order (and life) to the world. *HZD*’s tutorial section not only introduces players to game mechanics but it allows the player to see how Aloy was raised, what her relationship with Rost was like, and how the combination of her personality and Rost’s empowerment of her abilities allowed her to face the challenges of growing up shunned by the Nora. After becoming angry about how she was treated by a Nora woman and her children, Aloy runs away and as she does, trips and falls into the ruin of the Old Ones, the name for humans who were alive as the plague of sentient machines destroyed humanity. In one of Aloy’s first lines as the player takes control notes Rost told her “never go in places like this ... but [she has] to find a way out” (GG, 2017), indicating even though Rost set limits, he taught Aloy how to get out of a situation and survive. Providing Aloy with the skills to successfully remove herself from a dangerous situation, Rost’s parenting challenges the assumption women are inherently weak and need to be protected. Aloy is naturally curious and her inquisitive nature guides her

decisions throughout her narrative as she learns to use her Focus, a device that allows her to see the lingering technology and electronic signals from before the end of the world but also gets her into precarious situations.

As Aloy ages, Rost continues to prepare her to live as a Nora outcast. When Aloy returns to Rost after exploring the Old Ones' ruin, he tells her they are dangerous and she should not go in them as he tries to take the Focus from her which she refuses. Instead of punishing Aloy and demanding she destroy the Focus, Rost accepts arming Aloy with the skills to survive as opposed to mandating she stay home is a better way to ensure her safety and prepare her for the future. Rost's actions in teaching Aloy to hunt ultimately provide her with the abilities not to just survive but to do so in a way that does not require male protection as she explores the world beyond her home. Even as a small child, the player is able to make Aloy run and jump, accomplishing dangerous tasks with the press of a button. We are not restricted by boundaries from Rost or the game environment as the player can make Aloy climb to the tops of high peaks and glide down using a futuristic hang-glider taking advantage of the open-world nature of the games. With the move of a joystick, players have total control over how physical and bombastic to make Aloy in their world. Had Rost parented from a space of protection simply because Aloy was a girl, it would have reinforced the protective paternalism described in Glick and Fiske's ambivalent sexism theory and we would have been presented with far less dynamic ways to move Aloy around the vast expanses of the post-apocalyptic United States.

One cannot argue Rost is not protective of Aloy but he is in a way evocative of a teacher who does not want Aloy to find herself in situations she is unable to get out of. This is notably different from the protection mentioned in Glick and Fiske's theory because it is not done with the intent to highlight authority given to him simply because he is a man but because he possesses knowledge and skills Aloy does not yet. This is particularly important given the father-daughter relationship between Rost and Aloy as [Glick and Fiske \(1997\)](#) note "protectiveness is particularly strong between men who are dyadically dependent on or over whom they feel a sense of 'ownership'" (p. 122) including the father-daughter dyad. Because he imparts his knowledge and skills to Aloy as she grows up, he starts to become less protective of her, culminating in her entry into the Proving where all young Nora people prove their skills and join the tribe, even an outcast if they were to successfully pass.

Knowing the Proving is dangerous, Rost does not prevent Aloy from participating even though she could die or get seriously hurt. In fact, he encourages her. This eschewing of his own fears for her safety as well as acknowledging Aloy is growing up and will leave reflects how not all protection falls under protective paternalism. Instead, Rost's protection stems not from a desire to keep Aloy subordinate to him but to make sure when she chooses to engage in the Proving, she has the skills to do so successfully, even if it results in her being embraced by the tribe while he remains an outcast. Even with efforts from her competitors to sabotage her run, Aloy wins the Proving despite the shunning and negative treatment at the hands of the Nora. But, it was Rost who helped shape Aloy into the great hunter she is in

large part because he did not try to shield and protect her under the guise of keeping her safe, something that often occurs in female-led narratives where there is a father-daughter relationship. As she notes to Talanah Khane Padish, Aloy's ally, and friend who similarly challenges gender norms present in her own Carja tribe, Aloy is the strong and powerful woman she grew up to be "despite the Nora" thanks to Rost's eschewing of protective paternalism throughout his raising of Aloy.

As Aloy traverses west of the Nora lands and into the Forbidden West, Aloy's actions begin to gain the notice of many, including those who become her allies. As she gets to know people like Erend, Varl, and Kotallo, they eventually see how capable Aloy is and trust she will be able to succeed without their guidance outside of what they would give a fellow warrior. In *HFW* in particular, when these three characters express concern for Aloy's safety, it comes from a place of wanting to support and help her as they know she is capable but does not need to do everything alone. Despite this, Aloy actively resists their aid, leaving Varl in Meridian at the start of *HFW* to attend the Tenakth embassy meeting alone and then again after he is injured, choosing to adventure on her own into the Forbidden West. It is not until she is injured in a fight with Far Zenith enforcer Erik, an *HFW* villain, and she washes up on the shore, hallucinating Rost when the figure is, in fact, Varl, does she understand their concern comes from a place of wanting to help instead of wanting to protect. Over the course of *HFW*, Aloy realizes accepting the help of her friends does not prevent her from doing anything but instead allows her to do so with a greater chance of success due to her friends' help and support. Whether through relying on Erend's strength and abilities to win people over or Kotallo's battle knowledge and connections to the Tenakth clans, Aloy begins to see protection is not inherently paternalistic. While male allies' concern about Aloy's safety could read as male protection over a female character, it truly functions as a reminder for Aloy that she will need her friends if she is to be successful and depicts nonprotective paternalistic concern for safety.

Rost's teachings prepared Aloy to be self-sufficient and survive in the cold and uncaring world he expected her to navigate through given her outcast status. As she completes feats of strength and intelligence, Aloy demonstrates to those she meets, including those who become her allies, that being a woman does not inherently mean she needs to be protected while also demonstrating significant challenges to gender norms and expectations in the various cultures throughout her travels. Alongside restricting women from dangerous situations through protective paternalism, Aloy's willingness to embrace qualities of herself often reserved for male characters such as physicality and assertiveness challenges a second BS tenet.

"Keep flapping your mouth. It makes a nice target!": Aloy the Savior and Disruption of Complementary Gender Differentiation. Throughout both games, Aloy accomplishes feats of strength, wills, and athleticism unmatched by characters in other video games. The fan response to Aloy and her abilities reflects the expectation women comply with socially-constructed norms regarding ability and gender performance, which Aloy actively subverts, and what happens when a character no longer

complies with those expectations. While some celebrate Aloy's abilities, there are those who call her a Mary Sue, a label given to female characters (but not male ones) when they have unexplained abilities, and took to social media to denounce not just her abilities as unrealistic but, in the case of *HFW*, complain her character design was not "feminine enough" (Nightingale, 2021). Because Aloy is so skilled and threatens constructions of masculine as synonymous with strong and feminine with weak, social rhetoric surrounding Aloy, especially for *HFW*, focused on her appearance as seen in the frequent news articles describing fan responses to her updated character design reflect an "onslaught of terrified, angry and confused reactions from gamers who are just now realising what women look like" (Lewis, 2022). Aloy's skills challenged a foundational element of masculinity when she was able to best her male foes in combat and as a result, the discourse needed to shift to center on her femininity and it shifted into hostile sexism territory. The social response to Aloy clearly depicts the dichotomy of venerating women until they challenge male social statuses and positions, after which they are met with hostilely sexist critiques.

Between bows, tripcasters, shredders, and more, the player selects whatever type of weapon best complements their own play style for Aloy to use. While there are times particular weapons will be more advantageous against machines or bandits alike, the game mechanics do not force Aloy to be a particular type of adventurer and fighter. By allowing Aloy the agency through the player to select a fighting style, it opens up the possibility of having Aloy fight in extremely physical and athletic ways often restricted to male characters in video games. Just like Erend or Kotallo, Aloy does not shy away from fighting up close and personal, her spear being modified to be particularly strong in those situations but she is also good with a bow and other more stealth-centered combat options. Combined with her speed and her quickness on her feet, Aloy's willingness to be an active part of the fight and the choice on the part of the developer to make her competent in a variety of fighting styles push back against complementary gender differentiation. Benevolent sexism often lauds what is seen as women's inherent gentleness, meekness, and dependency on men for help, none of which Aloy demonstrates. In actuality, Aloy is more likely to be the first to run into a fight than to not engage and wait for her male allies. This almost lack of forethought does result in Aloy finding herself in precarious situations, but reflects how down to Aloy's core, she rebukes expectations built upon complementary gender norms.

While both games serve as a testament to Aloy's strength and athleticism, this shines even when Aloy is outnumbered or not favored to win a fight as seen in the first fight with Erik in *HFW* at a HADES testing facility. Aloy remarks she is not going to win because her weapons are not damaging Erik et al. Despite this, her tenacity and unwillingness to give up allow her to devise another plan to ultimately escape. As she does this, Aloy never loses her characteristic hot-headedness, yelling to him "keep flapping your mouth; it makes a nice target!" (GG, 2022) as she starts to weaken the structural integrity of the facility. While benevolent sexism does not say women are not smart, it does argue women are weak and do not have the skills to survive without men which has been imprinted through adopting gender scripts that

prevent women from engaging in potentially dangerous tasks because they simply were not made to succeed in those arenas.

While few and far between, there are instances where the player is able to choose one of three responses for Aloy to take in social situations: compassionate (heart), strategic (brain), or physical (fist). While these choices do not result in major story changes, they do allow the player to indicate what they feel is guiding Aloy's actions. Does she make decisions strategically or with her heart? Is she quick to incite a conflict? While data on player choices are unknown, threads on message boards indicate players often choose the compassionate response for Aloy. Whether an unconscious choice because Aloy is a female character or a conscious one being made to make Aloy more feminine given her lack of classically feminine traits is unknown, but benevolent sexism would argue it could be either. By choosing the heart, players could be forcing Aloy to act in a particular way in social interactions that reflect the socialization regarding women as gentle communicators.

When male characters are powerful and talented, it is not critiqued in the same way as Aloy that questions the lack of realism in the character. Player's response to Aloy's lack of compliance with traditional female gender norms does not end at the choice of responding compassionately but extends into the discourse surrounding the character in community spaces, particularly about Aloy's personality. Aloy is quite assertive and blunt when speaking to others and often does not express her feelings well. She is hot headed and often acts before she thinks. Erend is one of the first to note this, stating Aloy and his sister, Ersa, would get along due to their directness. The rhetoric surrounding Aloy and her competency is rife with examples where she balks at traditional gender norms where women are supposed to be weak, depend on men to save them and exist in a constant state of pleasantness for male enjoyment.

However, Aloy also received criticism from some players for being too masculine in design in trailers for *HFW*. Most notable were "complain[ts] that Sony is making 'masculine as hell' female protagonists with 'barely no [*sic*] curves or rough non feminine features'" (Nightingale, 2021). The social element of narratives perpetuated and created through community spaces, such as message boards and forums, can spiral into an echo-chamber where characters are interrogated for their compliance with the expectations players have regarding video game characters. Most notably, a since-deleted Tweet, immortalized in articles like Nightingale (2021), went as far as to create a more classically feminine rendering of Aloy because her more athletic build did not align with some fans' latent benevolent sexism. Because Aloy was strong and successful, they needed to shift the narrative to something they could critique.

Critiques of Aloy bring ludonarrative dissonance into the discussion which has been explored in the context of games like the *Uncharted* series (Naughty Dog, 2007). Players are able to reconcile their pulling of the trigger to commit the many murders of Nathan Drake's with his quippy personality and boyish charm, accepting it is simply part of the game and players need to suspend their disbelief, treatment not given to Aloy (Glas, 2015). Because Nathan's masculinity complies with expectations of physicality and violence, being able to accept that his actions are unrealistic is easier than with Aloy who

presents a character who actively eschews complementary gender norms. Because of this, benevolent sexism no longer applies to Aloy so the rhetoric surrounding Aloy's abilities becomes increasingly hostile because she disrupts the male-dominated culture we still live in today. So while pushing back against benevolent sexism within the narrative earns Aloy the respect of leaders like Sun-King Avad and Chief Hekkaro, it results in the real-life social discourse surrounding her character reflecting hostile sexism because she challenges the schemas and scripts from which gender expectations stem. This social response intensifies when characters, like Aloy, do not comply with romantic schemas and expectations of female characters.

"I mean, you're smart, you're obviously capable, and well, I mean, look at you": Aloy the Alpha Prime and Disruption of Intimate Heterosexuality. Even when romantic interest in Aloy is brought up in *HZD* and *HFW*, the character does not pressure Aloy into returning their affections. For example, when Aloy and Erend first meet at the Proving, he comments multiple times on her appearance, indicating he is attracted to her and "[he's] starting to get jealous" (GG, 2017) when Aloy interrupts his blatant flirting to ask about his Carja companion, Olin. After Erend attempts to ask her on a date stating he would "also be around after that Blessing thing, if that'd be a better time to talk" (GG, 2017), Aloy quickly changes the subject to ask what he knows about the Carja, brushing off his attempts at romance. When he again asks Aloy on a date under the guise of telling Aloy about his sister, Ersu, and her heroics, he quickly course corrects when he reads Aloy's body language:

ALOY: How did she survive?

EREND: Oh, it's a story all right, but it takes a while to tell. Maybe another time, over a drink or three? (Pause) Or just come to Meridian and meet her yourself. I think you'd like each other. You're both rather, ah ... direct. (GG, 2017)

Erend ultimately accepts Aloy does not return his affections, even though he notes "it's obvious that you don't belong in this backwater. I mean, you're smart, obviously capable, and well, I mean, look at you" (GG, 2017), reflecting a male character who does not think he deserves Aloy's affections even if he harbors his own for her. It would not be out of the realm of possibility for a character like Erend who is depicted as a classically masculine and physically strong to harbor malice toward Aloy for turning him down. If he did, he would not be displaying intimate heterosexuality but heterosexual hostility; however, his actions display neither. While he yearns for the psychological closeness heterosexual men often find in intimate relationships with women, that is, part of intimate heterosexuality, he understands Aloy is not interested and accepts her turning him down with grace.

Aloy's lack of romantic entanglements does not mean she is alone or does not find comfort in her friends. A major thread of *HFW*'s plot is Aloy realizing she is not alone despite the loneliness of her childhood and adolescence. Varl even comes to Aloy for advice about his relationship with Zo to which Aloy playfully responds, "what makes

you think I know anything about this?” (GG, 2022), indicating her relationships with these allies, particularly Varl and Erend given she has known them longer, are strong enough for her to let her guard down a bit. This closeness of Aloy and her allies is best highlighted in a monologue directed toward the spirit of Elisabet at the end of *HFW*. As she speaks, setting up the conflict for the game(s) to come, Aloy states she no longer views her battle as solely her own but one she can only win with the support of her friends:

ALOY: I think it’s because they’ve always known what I’ve only just started to understand. That the people of this world have the strength to fight any battle ... the ingenuity to solve any problem ... the courage to overcome any obstacle ... and the resilience to rise after any setback. As for me—I can’t say I’m not afraid. What lies ahead will be harder than anything we’ve faced before. But I know I can put the fear aside. Because for the first time in my life ... I feel like I’m not alone. (GG, 2022)

For Aloy, the love she feels for her friends is just as central to her narrative as romance is for other female characters. But when the most important relationships are platonic and not romantic, they are automatically viewed as less important and more juvenile than romantic ones, even if they are depicted as fulfilling in the narrative.

Brake (2012) notes “the significant friendships that amatonormativity wrongly devalues serve many functions of traditional families—material support, emotional security, and frequent companionship” (p. 92), each of which Aloy’s relationships with her allies demonstrate. In *HFW*, her allies restock her supplies (material support), serve as sources of comfort as seen in the interactions between Aloy and Varl when she becomes frustrated and confused with Beta and the prospect of having a sister (emotional security), as well as provide moments of levity and companionship as illustrated with Erend’s consistent offer to play the game *Machine Strike* or talk about whatever new information about humanity before the destruction of the world (frequent companionship).

By including robust friendships for Aloy that fulfill the expectations we culturally assign to romantic relationships between men and women, Aloy’s relationships with her allies push back against the notion platonic relationships are somehow less integral or important than romantic ones. It also challenges the implicit acceptance of amato-centric narratives for female characters by resisting the norm that sees female characters “in the pursuit of righteous violence often end[ing] up in a love triangle that is the pinnacle of their narrative over the actual important plot points they move forward” (Henley, 2022), tying their narrative progression directly to romance, particularly in a game with a character like Aloy who is objectively attractive and attracts the attention of many, romantic and platonic alike.

“And what if I do?”: Aloy the Unsure and the Disruption of Hetero-amatonormativity. While there are a few examples of romantic relationships between women in narrative-driven video games, such as Ellie and Dina in *The Last of Us Part II* (Naughty Dog, 2020) or Max and Chloe in *Life is Strange* (Dontnod Entertainment & Deck Nine, 2015), the most important relationship in terms of

narrative progression for female characters is often their romantic one with a male character. For example, Elena Fisher's character arc in the *Uncharted* series is wholly dependent on her romantic relationship with Nathan Drake, particularly early on in the series, and that relationship largely defines her character. The main relationship that defines Aloy is between her and Elisabet Sobeck as the latter's Alpha Prime. This centering of romance as the cornerstone of the female characters development and narrative progression reifies not only amatonormativity but heteronormativity as well. While not an explicitly noted tenet of benevolent sexism, heteronormativity is deeply woven into Glick and Fiske's theory, particularly through the propagation of intimate heterosexuality.

In an article exploring romance (or lack thereof) in both *HZD* and *HFW*, [Henley \(2022\)](#) notes "it's not like Aloy is short of options." From Erend, the Oseram Vanguard, to the mysterious Tenakth warrior, Kotallo, or even Talanah, the Sunhawk of the Hunting Lodge, there is potential for romance with characters across the gender spectrum. Despite this, Aloy's narrative long avoids romance with characters, instead focusing on her connections to Elisabet Sobeck and her allies in a platonic way, until players are given the option for romance between Aloy and Seyka, her new Quen ally and companion during *Horizon Forbidden West: Burning Shores* ([GG, 2023](#)). Despite the introduction of a romance option, Aloy narrative actively disrupts and subverts the hetero-amatocentrism in media because her only potential romantic interaction is with a female-identifying character. Aloy's now-canonical queerness combined with the narrative focus on the strength of Aloy's platonic relationships, particularly those between men and women, shows they are just as strong and impactful as romantic ones without reinforcing the manipulative nature of intimate heterosexuality. Games that have openly queer characters, especially queer female leads in triple-A games, demonstrate that queer relationships have the same narrative strength as their heterosexual counterparts.

While players have had relative agency in this open-world game to choose what Aloy does, players are unable to have Aloy engage in romance until *Burning Shores*, well into Aloy's narrative. By delaying this particular choice until we have played as Aloy for about 60 h and have effectively had total control over how to make Aloy fight, where she goes next, and what she engages in, it ludically subverts hetero-amatonormativity as it not just "enable[s] the player to perform alternative identities" ([Biscop et al., 2019](#), p. 26) but forces them to act in a way that resists hetero-amatonormative scripts. The subversive-ness of the lack of romance in *HZD* and *HFW* that players are unable to force their hetero-amatonormative scripts upon is intensified when the only romance choice is queer. The lack of romance in *HZD* and *HFW* that players are unable to force their hetero-amatonormative scripts upon them. If players want to engage in romance, then their choice will make Aloy engage in a queer relationship. The developers used the mechanics to both allow the player to make a decision that reflects their construction of Aloy and also to make sure the choice they made regarding romance subverted the hetero-amatonormativity of female video game narratives.

Henley (2022) writes in their article on romance in *HFW* “if Aloy could kiss Talanah [they’d have Aloy] do it in an instant, but [they’d] settle for the game explaining why Aloy wouldn’t be into that.” While Henley’s need to have justification for a lack of romance does somewhat reinforce amatonormative expectations, it highlights how impactful the ultimate inclusion of queer romance in Aloy’s narrative is as a challenge to heteronormativity. While frustrating for some, like Henley, the delay of romance within Aloy’s narrative allowed her to be defined by her abilities as opposed to a relationship with another character, particularly a male one, which lets players to decide who Aloy is before romance is even a possibility. While *Burning Shores* does bring romance into Aloy’s narrative, it does so in a way that challenges the heteronormative underpinnings of *AST*. *Burning Shores* presents players with the option to choose how they want Aloy to destabilize the presence of a male–female romantic dyad within video games. Is their Aloy attracted to women or is she simply not interested in romance at all? This is effectively the choice that players are given in *Burning Shores* and it can only be resolved in a way that affirms queerness and challenges heteronormativity. Aloy either continues a lack of expressed interest in romance entirely or kisses a woman. Instead of presenting players with a heterosexual romance option in addition to queer possibilities, Aloy’s narrative demonstrates how hetero-amatonormativity can be subverted through the intentional inclusion of queer narratives.

While *Burning Shores* provides continued narrative development after the cliff-hanger ending of *HFW*, it also allows players to see the emotional growth Aloy went through continue to shift and change as she wrestles with feelings beyond the platonic. In *Burning Shores*, Aloy remarks to Seyka that her understanding of herself has changed over the course of events in *HFW*, reflecting uncertainty for the first time as she finds herself feeling attracted to someone for the first time. Throughout the DLC’s narrative, players witness this shift in Aloy as she begins to understand her romantic feelings for Seyka. When Seyka runs off after a battle when she learned Aloy had been less than fully truthful about the impending cataclysmic threat to humanity, Aloy notes out loud “Seyka...she seemed so...lost. Why do I feel that too?” (GG, 2023). While Aloy had kept information from allies in the past believing it would keep them safe, she notes how that feels different with Seyka, showing the player that her relationship with Seyka is somehow different from those with others. Aloy’s feelings for Seyka are something new and she does not fully understand what she is feeling.

This uncertainty continues at the end of *Burning Shores* when Seyka asks Aloy to meet her where they first met. As Aloy flies over on her Sunwing, she remarks that “there’s no need to be nervous...right?” (GG, 2023) before landing and walking over to Seyka. As they talk, Seyka reveals her feelings for Aloy and states she hopes Aloy feels the same way. Like in the main game, the player is presented with the heart-fist-head choice again. Selecting the heart allows the two to kiss after Aloy softly responds “and what if I do?” before Seyka quells Aloy’s uncertainty telling her “I think I know how to handle it” (GG, 2023) and pulls Aloy into a gentle

kiss. By delaying this romantic interaction until the player has spent a significant amount of time with Aloy, it makes this moment and relationship feel important to the narrative without making it the *only* important part of Aloy's story. While the other two options do not result in the same level of queer intimacy they still resist heteronormativity as neither option results in Aloy engaging in romance with a male character. Whether players choose to have Aloy and Seyka kiss in *Burning Shores* or not, the outcome still disrupts the heteronormativity that underlies intimate heterosexuality.

By creating a game with an openly queer female lead in Aloy, it disrupts the years of gaming as a space unwelcome to those outside of straight men. This subversion is then reinforced by the choice to have the only possible romance for Aloy be with another female character, taking the expectation of romance as the central narrative arc for women, delaying it, and contextualizing it in queerness. Regardless of player choice, Aloy's burgeoning feelings for Seyka are clear throughout the DLC's story. Whether clearly shown through Aloy and Seyka kissing or simply through Aloy becoming increasingly flustered by and endearingly awkward around Seyka, the introduction of romance in *Burning Shores* actively subverts the heteronormativity reified by the centrality of romantic narratives between male and female characters in games. When Aloy's queerness is combined with the narrative importance of her platonic relationships, both the heteronormativity and amatonormativity present in intimate heterosexuality are challenged.

"Is it risky to do a female character?": Implications and Conclusion. Regardless of the depth of her story and the multifaceted nature of her character, Aloy's existence still posed a risk in the eyes of Shuhei Yoshida, the Sony Interactive Entertainment president at the time of *HZD*'s development and release, who noted, despite positive results of focus tests, he was "still a bit nervous about the game's first broad unveiling" (Crescente, 2015) in part because of Aloy's gender. Had *HZD* not been successful then perhaps the answer to Yoshida's asking "is it risky to do a female character?" (Crescente, 2015) would have had a different outcome. Pairing how it was still risky for a female lead in a new intellectual property, the choice to deviate from the norm of centering romance as a focus for women in games upped that risk significantly. At no point in her narrative is Aloy rescued or saved but she succeeds "without the script calling attention to her femaleness again and again" (Williams, 2020). Aloy's ability to ultimately save the world (for now) is neither in spite of nor because of her womanness; instead, she is successful because she possesses the ability to do so.

Because media is a socializing agent (Genner & Süss, 2017), depictions of women who are strong and empowered narratively and ludically, like Aloy, have the ability to provide depictions of women for players that can combat the negative impacts of exposure hypersexualized media for players of all genders (Bègue et al., 2017) that in turn creates hostile environments for women in gaming spaces (Kelly et al., 2023; Kuss et al., 2022; Perry, 2022). While Aloy is a strong female character, she is strong in a way that does not constantly remind the player of her gender, distinguishing her from other female characters in games. By allowing Aloy to be successful without

constantly calling attention to her gender, it presents a depiction of a strong, successful woman that mirrors how the industry depicts strong, successful men. Because representation is a “key factor in maintaining player engagement and growing the player base” (Bryter, 2022), simply increasing representation is not enough to truly make gaming equitable. It needs to involve the creation of characters like Aloy who center female narratives but in a way that actively subverts sexist stereotypes and developers’ (intentionally or unintentionally) catering to the male gaze.

In *HFW*, Travis Tate remarks “how is it that someone like you: paragon, damn near saint, could love this world so damn much but no one in it?” (GG, 2022). While he asks this in the game to Elisabet, he is also asking the player the same as Aloy. How can Aloy save the world without loving another person? Throughout *HZD* and *HFW*, Aloy clearly shows she loves others as seen in her friendships with Erend and Varl, beginning in *HZD*, and Alva, Kotallo, and Zo in *HFW*. While many, like Travis, equate love with romance, Aloy deeply loves her friends and the world but in a distinctly platonic way, a way not often illustrated in media, including video games. Even when romance was introduced into her story, Aloy was already well defined by her abilities and actions as opposed to a romantic partner. While Aloy’s story has not finished and we do not know how her potential relationship with Seyka will progress, the design of a female character whose narrative arc is not centered around romance challenges the norms of connecting women to romance. Aloy presents players with a female character who defines herself on her own terms as opposed to one that defines her in a relationship as a love interest and opens up the door for future female-led narratives to do the same despite the supposed risks of deviating from the norm.

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