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Villains and Vixens: The Representation of Female Vampires in Videogames

Abstract

Vampires populate our culture and have become a recurrent presence in fiction and the media. In all cases the inclusion of the vampire has given voice to “socio-culture issues faced in particular times and places; issues that may otherwise remain repressed” (Dillon and Lundberg 2017, 47). This socio-cultural subtext is complicated when the vampire is female, for she is now doubly othered by her gender. Her monstrosity is seen as twofold: as a vampire and as a transgressive woman.

While many studies address female vampires in popular culture, their portrayal in videogames has been recurrently overlooked. Games potentially help shape gender attitudes in thousands of players; therefore, it is particularly relevant to examine the varied representations of these monstrous or othered female figures and to understand how they adhere to or challenge misogynistic readings of women and their bodies. In light of this, and interpreting videogames as a narrative medium, this article provides an analysis of significant vampiric videogames and discusses the female vampire in relation to violence against women and postfeminist agendas, following a narrative rather than ludology approach.

Keywords:

vampires; videogames; gender violence; postfeminism; representation

Resumen

Los vampiros están muy presentes en nuestra cultura y se han convertido en una presencia recurrente en la ficción y en los medios de comunicación. En todos los casos, la inclusión de los vampiros ha dado voz a “problemas socioculturales afrontados en momentos y lugares determinados; problemas que, de otra forma, se hubieran mantenido reprimidos” (Dillon y Lundberg 2017, 47). Este subtexto sociocultural se hace más complejo cuando el vampiro es femenino, pues se somete a una doble otredad por su sexo. Su monstrosidad se percibe por duplicado: como vampiresa y como mujer transgresora.

Si bien otros estudios han afrontado la cuestión de las vampiresas en la cultura popular, su representación en los videojuegos ha sido omitida de forma recurrente. Los juegos han ayudado potencialmente a formar las reacciones hacia el género de miles de usuarios; por tanto, es de especial relevancia examinar las múltiples representaciones de estos personajes femeninos monstruos o sometidos a la otredad, así como entender cómo se someten o enfrentan a las lecturas misóginas de las mujeres y sus cuerpos. Por todo ello, y concibiendo los videojuegos como un medio narrativo, este artículo ofrece un análisis de videojuegos significativos de temática vampírica y pone a las vampiresas en relación con la violencia contra la mujer y los objetivos posfeministas, adoptando para ello un enfoque narratológico más que ludológico.

Palabras clave:

vampiros; videojuegos; violencia de género; posfeminismo; representación

Vampires populate our culture and have done so for centuries. As other popular monsters, the vampire is a creature built of myth and, hence, prone to experience “cultural metamorphos[e]s,” becoming a metaphor of what is at once feared and desired at different times (Wisker 2017, 151). And yet, unlike the zombie, which has been emptied of semiotic significance and embodies many different readings, the vampire has remained firmly associated with racial and sexual challenges to the status quo. In that sense, Bram Stoker created with *Dracula* (1897) a male vampire that embodied Victorian England’s xenophobic fears, but who was also the “hyper-masculine male” (DuRocher 2016, 45) with a heightened lust for young girls. Stoker started a long tradition that is experiencing a renewed life in many and varied remediations (Crawford 2014). Even before Stoker, in his ground-breaking *Carmilla* (1872) Sheridan Le Fanu had already envisioned an even more subversive character: a female vampire, a disruptive creature that undermined the notions of female “passivity”, “conformity” and who is perceived as a destabilizing force of the “constructed gender identity resulting from social and cultural hierarchies” (Wisker 2017, 150). In their hypersexualized reading, female vampires become a blend of violence, seduction and voracious female sexuality (Hobson 2016, 12), a pornographic male fantasy, but also an uncontrollable force which had to be contained by the very patriarchy they threatened. Hence, the female vampire’s story is usually mediated by a third-person male narrator – a victim, a witness –, while she dies or is killed at the end (Borham-Puyal 2020, 24). Whereas recent adaptations of the myth continue to exploit the sexualized reading of the vampires, other remediations offer more nuanced approaches to this figure.

Although female vampires in literature, television and film have been amply considered and their significance in popular culture acknowledged (Anyiwo 2016), videogames have been recurrently neglected in these discussions. Nevertheless, videogames have become important narrative frames that have deserved attention as new forms of storytelling, while they are also acknowledged as products that reflect societal values and interests (Bogost 2007). In particular, as an increasingly popular medium that informs generations of players, videogames have become an important field for research on the portrayal of women and its impact on gender attitudes. Recent studies have concluded not only that female characters are still vastly outnumbered by men, but also

that they recurrently play the role of damsel in distress or are becoming increasingly sexualized (Summers and Miller 2014, 1030–7). In this tendency towards overt sexualisation and hostile sexism, the representation of the female vampire in videogames gains relevance as a valuable source of information to understand the constructions of gender in such an important form of media.

In the frame of the narrative arches that the designers conceive for the games, the inclusion of a vampire figure gives voice to “socio-culture issues faced in particular times and places; issues that may otherwise remain repressed” (Dillon and Lundberg 2017, 47). This socio-cultural subtext is complicated when the vampire is female, for she is now doubly *othered* by her gender. As will be subsequently evinced, many games return to the well-known tropes of the female vampire mentioned above, maintaining the narrative perspective of the player aligned with the patriarchal gaze. The female vampire is given little or no agency in these products. However, other games develop the more complex narratives of Le Fanu’s foundational novella, portraying more empowered female characters, and sometimes framing the player’s narrative within the female vampire’s perspective. The latter games, then, often raise questions on gender violence, the power of the gaze and how far these developers are willing to take their (post)feminist agenda.

Postfeminism has become a much discussed and contested term in recent years, yet it is of particular relevance in the discussion of the transformation of contemporary media culture, and how it responds to, and also shapes, changes in feminisms (Gill 2007, 148). For Gill postfeminism can be described as a sensibility that characterizes an increasing number of cultural products (2007, 148), a sensibility that some scholars conceptualize as a historical shift in feminism (Hollows 2000), and others as a backlash against it (Faludi 1992). The tension between both visions is what defines postfeminism for Angela McRobbie, who understands it as the sign of a new hegemonic process shaping contemporary womanhood, in which new forms of gender entrapment are presented under the form of a “spurious and superficial ‘sense of equality’” (2011, 180). For Robbie, this “new gender regime” focuses on “female individualisation” and empowerment rather than collective feminist struggles (2011, 181), and is strongly articulated through a “consumer culture” that acknowledges the “power of media and popular culture” to shape societal values (182). All

these considerations support Gill's claim that postfeminist media culture should be a critical object of inquiry (2007, 148), especially as regards its relation to neoliberal consumerism and its limited questioning of structural inequalities. Consequently, videogame narratives featuring female vampires, understood as cultural artefacts framed in a wider (popular) cultural paradigm that ranges from chick-lit and romcoms (Radner 2011) to advertising and reality shows (Gill 2007), become a relevant object of study to address the complex, and often contradictory, nature of postfeminist discourses, together with the "entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes within them" (Gill 2007, 149), as will be evinced in the subsequent analysis of these games.

Given the reach and relevance of these new forms of storytelling, this article will analyse the presence of female vampires in mainstream videogames in order to address the following research question: how are women portrayed in these (mainly male) products of mass consumption and what implications does this have for the struggle on gender equality?

Methodology

The current analysis of the presence and representation of female vampires in videogames mainly addresses the aesthetic construction and narrative weight of these characters within the game. Therefore, it does not focus on gameplay, but rather works from the perspective of the videogame as a sociocultural and artistic phenomenon. It does approach, however, the user's influence on the role-playing games that provide avatar characterization freedom, for this is a differentiating attribute of this medium understood as a ludic and creative space (Frasca 2009). These player options give shape to a development of the ergodic "sign factory" enunciated by Aarseth (1997), given that the level of the user's modification can formally influence the meaning. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that in most cases the characters are fixed designs and their actions and decisions follow the script, except when the opposite is indicated in the analysis below. Therefore, the aforesaid capacity to generate signs is limited by the narrative and visual message of the original design.

With this in mind, the article follows Heintz-Knowles and Henderson's (2002) line of analysis of videogame content focused on the characters and avatars. To carry out this examination, we have played these games adopting the active role of a gamer with expertise in their playable language, for it was believed that directly engaging with the product was essential to understand the experience of reception. On the basis of this familiarity, a referential and sociocultural qualitative analysis has been conducted, following Konzack's model (2002), and Aarseth's revision (2003). When feasible, this methodology has been supplemented with gameplay videos by expert streamers to ensure our ludic experience was analogous to that of other gamers. Yet this has only been possible in the more recent games.

Regarding the corpus, it includes mainstream videogames for PC and game consoles up to 2018, selected among those that portray a vampire without comedic intent (thus excluding products such as *Kid Dracula*) and paying particular attention to those that display a significant presence of a she-vampire, beyond her role as a mere foe with no defining character traits. It can therefore be claimed that the corpus, although small compared to the number of titles featuring male vampires, is qualitatively relevant, as it

highlights the lack of real quantitative and qualitative equality in representation. In order to respond to the needs of the proposed analysis, the focus has been placed on close *reading* and intertextual relationships (Kristeva 1980) applied to these videogames as a narrative medium; a method not originally envisaged in Consalvo and Dutton's catalogue (2006), but especially relevant for the correct understanding of the treatment of characters and cultural objects in this type of media.

This methodological approach, which results from uniting literary analysis and gameplay experience, is needed so as to emphasize the narratological power of videogames (Planells 2015), clearly established by Picucci through his examination of narrative structures in interactive media. Picucci validates approaching the plot as the main axis for cultural analysis within videogames "by applying the traditional tools and notions of narratology to video games [to] show how not only the traditional story constituents emerge across a wide range of game titles, but also how the fundamental narrative components (narrator, narration, narratee) are maintained and adapted to the medium's technology" (2014, 100). Picucci's work, like ours, follows the question posed by Ensslin: what concepts and discourses are embedded in the videogame (2012, 107), in the present case approaching the portrayal of female vampires in consonance with narrative and its capacity to establish a bond with the player (Toh 2018).

Last but not least, it should be mentioned that the videogames in the corpus are not discussed chronologically. Instead, these are presented in terms of the narrative weight of the vampire character(s) in them.

Erasing the Female *Other*: Vampires as Objectified Villains

Addressing the duality that has traditionally characterized women's representation in popular culture, the "virgin and the whore, the saint and the vampire," Bram Dijkstra concludes that these are "two designations for a single dualistic opposition: that of woman as man's exclusive and forever pliable private property [...] and her transformation, upon her denial of men's ownership rights to her, into a polyandrous predator indiscriminately lusting after man's seminal essence" (1986, 334). This over-sexualized predatory woman becomes an enemy of the male hero in conventional adventure narratives, in which women become "motives for the actions of men," as damsels-in-distress, or in the case of the negative female other, as "the disturbance [...] for the heroes of [adventure's] male enterprise" (Green 1991, 72, 58). If these women gain agency, it is by performing the role of adversary, usually with the sexual connotation of the *femme fatale*. This traditional foe, existing since the alluring sirens or lamiae of ancient mythology, had to be controlled, silenced and erased, which involved forms of violence against these female figures illustrated by the recurrent impalement of the she-vampire in fiction. This erasure is also achieved by the aforementioned framing of her story, by reducing her to silence.

In general terms, the presence of female vampires in videogames can be characterized by their subordination, often becoming mere enemies subjugated to the designs of a superior male vampire, especially Dracula or his likeness. This subordinate role transforms them into characters divested of all entity or agency, just numbers in the myriad of usual enemies destined to be massacred by the player's avatar. Given that she-vampires are not depicted in most games advertised as featuring vampiric characters, their

inclusion indicates a conscious intention on behalf of the developers to give visibility to these characters, yet fulfilling the negative sexual stereotypes of the voracious woman that shape the tradition of female vampirism. That is, games challenge neither Stoker's reductionist portrayal nor his violence against both the brides and the eventually vampiric Lucy: the powerful woman is still a "disturbance," an enemy to be fought.

Brides appear, for instance, in the point-and-click adventure *Dracula: Resurrection* (1999), in which the main character, Harker, seeks to save damsel-in-distress Mina from a tower guarded by them. He must confront these female vampires, who play no role other than that which implies obeying Dracula's commands to keep Mina under his control. They also appear in *Van Helsing*, a videogame that adapts the 2004 film of the same title. These plots, as stated above, are directly inspired by Stoker's novel, as well as by previous games developed in 1993 under the license of Francis Ford Coppola's film (1992). In them, the brides have no relevant storyline besides appearing as the final level-three foes: they have no impact whatsoever on the narrative structure of the game. In addition, they respond to the sexualized representation of these creatures that films such as Coppola's adaptation or *Van Helsing* reproduced without questioning. This representation epitomizes what critics have identified as one of the main weaknesses of postfeminism, namely the reduction of women's identities to their (attractive) bodies (Gill 2007, 149). Hence, they fulfil the prototypical role of a final adversary in any action and platform game out of the many that were published in those years, yet with the added attractiveness of an alluring woman that must be destroyed, a disturbing aim in the context of the endemic violence against women's bodies. In fact, the videogame reproduces Van Helsing's violent disposal of the Brides – described quite graphically as "butcher work" –, for whom he felt equal attraction and repulsion. Of this passage, Fong comments, "[a]s the sensual pleasures and dangers offered by the female vampires intertwine even in their deaths, it is difficult to tell what produces the greater horror: the monstrosity of the Brides themselves or Van Helsing's treatment of them as nothing more than meat" (2016, 113). Stoker's objectification is then not challenged in this new narrative. Nor is his violence against the female body.

More relevant to understand the depiction of these characters, and more obvious in its commodification, was *Brides of Dracula* (1992), designed for Amiga. It is a split-screen platform game in which the player controls either Van Helsing or Count Dracula, while watching on the other side of the screen what the rival/machine does. If the players choose Count Dracula's narrative focalization, they must find thirteen women who will then be turned and transported to the crypt. Van Helsing's perspective has a similar playability, although instead the player must find the same number of weapons with which to kill the vampire. Despite their prominence in the title, the brides of Dracula are then nothing but commodities for the player to collect; in fact, in the split game they are equated with other objects, namely the weapons. They have no individuality, no back story or relevance in the narrative arch. They are merely the "motives" for the action, while their lack of individuality recalls pre-feminist values rather than the aforementioned postfeminist and neoliberal emphasis on the self (Gill 2007, 153–4).

Other games that portray varied creatures as enemies directly erase the she-vampires' presence, in another form of obliteration. Hence, the strong tradition of female vampirism in popular

culture prior to the dawn of videogames is obviated. It is even removed in the case of Stoker's novel, the inspiration behind the majority of these games. Thus, Lucy's important narrative arch or even the more anecdotal role of the brides of Dracula in Stoker's work lose relevance in the conception of these products, which reduce the novel to its eponymous male character. This invisibility is manifest in recent games, namely *Vampire Rush* (2011) and *Vampire Season* (2012), but also in classics such as *The Count* (1981), *Vampire Village* (1983) or *Dracula* (1986). In those classic games which included a greater diversity of monstrous creatures, for example, *Ghost House* (1986), the same invisibility occurred and the first reference to female vampires took place in 1987 with *The Astonishing Adventures of Mr Weems and the She Vampires*, where the title itself identifies them as the enemy to be overthrown.

The player controls Mr Weems, whose goal is to reach and defeat the Great She Vampire. While the graphics of the eighties do not make it possible to develop a very detailed description of her during the game, the cover for ZX Spectrum nevertheless displays the recurrent objectification: it portrays two blue she-vampires with wings for arms and ample busts, clothed in revealing short, green, décolleté dresses. The popular sexual allure of the female vampire is used in this game to attract potential buyers, while the Great She Vampire once more lacks three-dimensionality. Again, she has no individuality: she is the ultimate foe to be defeated because she incarnates absolute evil, an expression of the aforementioned Manichean reductionist dichotomy, equating her with Lamia, Medusa, Lilith and other monstrous temptresses connected to fall, sin, sex and death.

In this category is Carmilla, from Le Fanu's homonymous novella. Probably one of the most influential female vampires in popular culture, her foundational role has been amply acknowledged. Her myth has also been adapted to videogame narratives. In Konami's Castlevania saga, which started in 1986, she merely played the role of a common foe. Her first appearance as a more individualized adversary was in *Castlevania II: Simon's Quest* (1988), although then in the original Japanese manual she was denominated simply *Onna Kyūketsuki* ("female vampire"), and her name was not employed until the emergence of the official books of clues (Hancock 2019). From then onwards, she is often introduced with her maid, Laura, and is portrayed as a woman of great beauty who wishes to seduce and fool the vampire-hunter before killing him. On other occasions, without losing her identification as a female creature, she appears as a much more spectral entity, naked or partly naked on a giant skull. In both these rewritings of her character, the games highlight the seductiveness and danger of the female temptress, who must then succumb to a male force – the interpretation that had been predominant in previous adaptations of the novella.

Despite this apparent oversimplification of the character, in the game *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* (2010), Carmilla reappears and she is granted full entity. However, some elements from the original novella are changed so as to fulfil the heterosexual erotic fantasy of the female vampire, highlighting the limitations of popular culture narratives imbued in a postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007, 152), in which men are both objects of desire and the target spectators. If in Le Fanu's novella Carmilla displayed lesbian tendencies – as her victims were exclusively women and she had a strong physical and emotional bond with Laura –, in the game the homoerotic (and subversive) reading has been erased. Instead, the seduction game has the hero, Gabriel, as opponent,

who is trying to resurrect his dead wife, Marie. Reminiscent of the virgin figure that opposes the vampire, Marie, requesting Gabriel's repentance, highlights the saint-vampire dichotomy. On this mission, then, Gabriel must confront Vampire Queen Carmilla, a title that probably pays homage to the relevance of Le Fanu's character in the vampiric tradition. She first appears as an extremely pale female figure, with clothes that cover her head and neck as a nun, but which later open from her chest to her lower abdomen, revealing her body. Carmilla stereotypically attempts to seduce Gabriel. In their combat, if the player in fact defeats Carmilla, she also turns into a monster. Her wings grow and the attractive female body becomes that of a deformed humanoid bat with great claws. That is, the female vampire is a destructive siren, attempting to seduce the hero while concealing a monstrous self, which recalls previous stories revolving around siren-like vampires (Borham-Puyal 2020, 22–3). In addition, as she grows more powerful, she also loses her female (and human) appearance: in this case an increase in power and women's attractiveness are inversely proportional, which emphasizes their monstrous role as foes to be eradicated.


The story expands with two DLCs (Downloadable Contents) in 2011, in which another traditional monstrous aspect of the female vampire is developed: her power to “give birth”, to create new monsters, which recalls an atavistic fear of the maternal body (Mulvey-Roberts 2005, 150). In the first, *Reverie*, the player returns to Carmilla's castle with Laura's help, who introduces herself as Carmilla's daughter. Laura makes Gabriel drink her blood so he can become a vampire. In *Resurrection*, the final chapter, Gabriel, now corrupted by his vampiric side, craves for limitless power. Thus, turned by the blood of Carmilla's daughter, Gabriel will become the vampire known as Dracula. In the saga's vampiric mythology, this turns Carmilla into another form of monstrous mother: the original vampire who gives birth to Dracula, in a nod to Le Fanu's influence on Stoker.

Carmilla, however, is not Laura's real mother: she took her away from her biological parents and turned her into a vampire several centuries before the events in the game. Laura is depicted with a childish appearance, which also evokes the focus on physical identity and eternal youth that accompanies the she-vampire myth, from Carmilla to *Twilight*'s Bella (Borham-Puyal 2020, 23–4), as well as the present focus on physical self-surveillance which defines both postfeminist and neoliberalist sensibilities (Gill 2007, 155). The infantilized Laura refers to her as “mother” and completely disowns her humanity. Nevertheless, Laura helps Gabriel because she regrets having become a vampire, which provides an implicit criticism to the monstrous form of maternity – and hence femininity – that Carmilla represents, and with which she infects Laura. However, Carmilla's abduction of Laura and the subsequent filial treatment of her charge might suggest the aforementioned maternal drive which, as a vampire, she cannot resolve, triggering the impulse to separate Laura from her family and turn her. Their relationship in the game then resembles the mother-daughter dynamic that Le Fanu also implies in his novella. In the urtext, Laura has lost her mother, but Carmilla belongs to her ancestral family, they share the same name and blood. In Laura's relationship with Carmilla there are certain allusions to the long-lost mother, so while the game rewrites the characters, their names and back stories are not coincidental. This game, then, develops other underlying issues in Le Fanu's urtext concerning female sexuality and reproduction.

In *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2* (2014) the players learn about Carmilla's past: she was originally a human full of life and devotion to God. Now, as a vampire all those values have been corrupted and deformed, she is manipulative and seductive, and again employs deceit in order to retain Gabriel in her castle, given her obsession with him. There is therefore no character development. Yet, interestingly, in the second part, Carmilla presents a different appearance: she is no longer deadly pale for she has returned as a witch, and not as a vampire. Therefore, another recurrent representation of a powerful female conflates with the vampire as a natural enemy of the hero, or of the patriarchal narrative he embodies. Despite this change, she is still represented in an alluring costume (a corset and a red hood), and playing coy submission to Dracula only to have him drink her blood, hence feeding her power as a witch and enabling her to progressively possess him. She expresses her wish to be “inside” of him and drain him of his strength, so fulfilling the fears of the voracious woman described by Dijkstra as lusting after his “essence” (1986, 334). The only cure will be to find the resurrected Marie and drink her blood.

This dichotomy clearly reflects the double binary structure that lies at the heart of Western thought. On the one hand, the assumption of the opposition between masculinity and femininity, in which women become “the eternal...other” (Braidotti 1994, 83). Carmilla is the other in the gendered mind/body dualism: she is a mere victim of her desires, a monster subjugated by the hero. On the other hand, this sensuousness transforms her into “the other within the categorical other” (Bell 1994, 2), that is, a woman who is doubly *othered* in the “derivative couples inside the category of ‘woman’” (40). While her blood corrupts, Marie's can save. Carmilla, in her association with mythological monstrous females, is then the nemesis of the Madonna figure, embodied by a Mary-like character, with whom she even shares the name. Moreover, Carmilla is fully and very explicitly embodied, fully present and exerting her agency, while Marie is dead, she is a nobody, a passive entity, therefore placing no danger whatsoever to the hero's life or masculinity.

The importance of distinguishing the virgin from the vampire in this patriarchal discourse gains importance as the avatar's life becomes endangered by the conflation of both. In their final confrontation, Carmilla uses her magic to morph into Marie and the player must decide whom his real wife is. If the player chooses the right option, he will drink Marie's blood and the final battle against Carmilla will begin. If he is wrong, he will drink her corrupted blood, the adventure will be over and Dracula will become her servant. If the battle is reached, although Carmilla is now a witch, at a given moment she can invoke a spectral entity which reminds the players of the monstrous vampire form of the previous game. This suggests that although she came back as a witch she preserves at least some of her vampiric powers, again conflating both. In the end, Carmilla threatens to kill Marie, her virginal *other*. Dracula finally slays her by brutally impaling her through the mouth.

This conclusion once more evokes Le Fanu's original text. Laura, the innocent maid, has her life threatened by Carmilla, who also sucks her energy, her self, claiming a union between them. And it is Laura that the men in the novella attempt to protect. Carmilla, for her part, is impaled by the representatives of patriarchy in Le Fanu's text, but also in subsequent adaptations. Her fate, in fact, serves as a template for other narratives. Stoker devised a similar ending for his sexually-awakened female vampire, Lucy, 

whose disruptive body is recurrently penetrated by men. These mirror scenes, in the novels and the game, demonstrate how these narratives “imagine these acts of violence in gendered and, more specifically, male-centred terms;” for while the “female vampires’ transgressions are determined by their ‘deviant’ sexualities, their extermination also reveals the inherent violence typically assigned to masculinity” (Fong 2016, 113). And as the bite of the female vampire reversed the “logic of heteronormative, male penetration” (113), the bite of Dracula and then the staking re-establish the normative sexual order. In this last statement of the phallic power of patriarchy, the witch, the vampire, the sexually powerful woman must die, while the virgin must be preserved and saved by the hero. This second Carmilla becomes detached from some aspects of the original vampire in the first game, and loses the depth that she had gained after her back story with Laura was known. Carmilla, as a resurrected witch, seeks control over Dracula with a sensual obsession towards the prince of the vampires that hinders her empowering characterization.

In all these games, then, the female vampire lacks individuality, agency and a voice. The narrative is usually focalized through a male avatar whose main objective is to eradicate these monsters. The absence of back stories and individual personalities in such narratives hinders any possibility of a motivation behind the vampires’ actions: their only function is to incarnate the ultimate threat, which falls in line with traditional Western narratives of the temptation of the female body, as well as the warnings against the dangers of women’s excessive sexuality or thirst for power. These games miss the chance to question popular narratives of the female vampire, and, consequently, perpetuate the male gaze and prejudiced reading of these characters. Moreover, they perpetuate the stance of the female body as disposable, as a possible threat to be neutralized, offering scenarios of absolute violence towards the female body that recall the later aggressions towards *othered* women equated with the vampires, the prostitutes (Dijkstra 1986, 351), in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, for instance.

New Vampiric Heroines: Powerful Agents or Commodified Cultural Objects?

In part thanks to feminist rewritings of the myth (Borham-Puyal 2020, 23, 25), the figure of the female vampire moved in contemporary narratives from foe to heroine, from the margins to the centre-stage, and responding to this change the videogame industry also developed new approaches to the she-vampire. For instance, as opposed to the previous examples, in multiple role games in which it is possible to control the vampiric avatars, becoming a female vampire is feasible. This enables the player to see the world through her eyes and to live the same adventures as her male counterparts. One of the paradigmatic examples is the saga *The Elder Scrolls*. In each instalment the treatment of vampirism is different; however, the consequences it entails are the same, regardless of the avatar’s sex. In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, for example, both sexes can see their power and resistance increase. Something similar happens in *Vampire: The Masquerade - Bloodlines* (2004), in which it is also possible to impersonate a female vampire. What is relevant in this game is the clan to which vampires ascribe, for each has different powers. However, there is no more impact derived from the players’ choices regarding the character’s configuration that becomes relevant from the point of view of agency or the representation of the vampire as far as his or her sex is concerned. Many of the vampiric powers respond to traditional readings of this

figure in popular culture: sexual attraction or persuasive skills, madness or the ability to foresee the future. While in popular culture these qualities have usually been associated with female vampires, in this example it affects both sexes alike, bringing its narrative closer to the original allure of the male vampire, later assimilated into the traditional narratives of dangerously seductive women (Hobson 2016, 11–12). However, in these games there is no added negative connotation to the figure of the female vampire, which echoes more positive current portrayals (e.g. the *Twilight* saga, etc.), while *Bloodlines* also offers an improvement from its previous instalment, *Vampire: The Masquerade - Redemption* (2000), focused solely on a predefined protagonist, Christof Romuald, who aims to find his love, Anezka, a nun. A female vampire leader, Ecaterina the Wise, is prominent in the story. Unlike previous examples, Ecaterina experiences a certain character development and is relevant in the context of the game and its fictional universe, and so the player becomes aware of her motivations. However, other storylines involving female vampires are underdeveloped. Another vampire, Serena of Cappadocia, joins the hero and has useful abilities in order to progress. Nevertheless, her development is subordinated to the needs of a script that revolves around Christof. Serena is the sidekick, and, despite her relevance for the advancement of the story, as happens so often in role games with female characters, she becomes a flat and dependent character. Her agency is limited by the protagonist and her individuality not fully developed.

Nevertheless, in these games female vampires become more relevant to the storytelling, with the players having access to her perspective as their avatar. They pave the way for games which finally give centre-stage to the female vampire as the main character, with a developed and complex back story. For instance, a female vampire will become the absolute protagonist in the 2001 *Dark Angel: Vampire Apocalypse*. It is a game scripted to revolve around Anna, so the player cannot but act through her. In 1670 she is commissioned to protect three villages from an imminent attack by Shadow Lord and his armies; she is the heroine who will have to enhance the economy of the population, and face thousands of enemies in a hack and slash style. Despite its promising premise, there is barely any back story to Anna. In fact, the game was amply criticized for its poor narrative. Within it, Anna might embody popular notions of female empowerment, but little attention is paid to her individuality.

Yet these games paved the way for *BloodRayne* (2002), which prompted a sequel, three films directed by Uwe Boll, and a comic. The main character is Rayne, a Dhampir – a human-vampire hybrid – who hunts vampires while she searches for her father. She epitomizes the postfeminist celebration of “girl power” (Gill 2017, 607): the game endows her with a great fighting ability and she effortlessly faces all forms of danger. Her context is one of constant peril given her liminal identity – persecuted by humans who wish to eradicate all vampires and by vampires who see her as a threat. Rayne’s back story is also relevant to her portrayal as a female vampire. Her origin is traumatic: her mother was raped by a vampire, Kagan, becoming pregnant with her and illustrating the association of male vampirism with the physical violation of a woman’s body. Moreover, Kagan killed her mother’s whole family to isolate Rayne. Rayne’s world, then, is dominated by the misogynistic cruelty of the vampire: the multiple comics and games develop her story to understand how that violence shapes her life. In particular, the search for her father

torments Rayne, as she seeks to avenge her mother's death. Therefore, her story becomes a "rape revenge" plot in which the female vampire becomes not a victim, but a survivor with agency to fight back against the violence exerted against her as a woman and a vampire, echoing what previous games subjected their she-vampires to.

After a difficult youth, Rayne embarks on an individual quest to persecute for almost a century the figure that incarnates patriarchy and gender violence: her own father. Her search will prove fruitless: Kagan will be the villain of *BloodRayne 2* (2004), in which several circumstances continue hindering Rayne's revenge. The game reaches its climax in their final encounter, but Kagan's decapitation at Rayne's hands does not solve the problem of male vampire aggression, emphasizing the endemic nature of gender violence. As a whole, the female vampire is a strong and determined character who has been subjected to trauma and loss, yet her narrative arch recalls the individual resilience expected from neoliberal (and postfeminist) female subjects (Gill 2007, 163; McRobbie 2008), displaying the current "ethics of responsibility" (Evans and Reid 2014, 65) which "lays on the individual [...] all the burden for overcoming, surviving and thriving through crises, even if these are due to systemic or structural forces that no individual can change on their own" (Fraile 2019, n.p.). This ethics, in turn, connects neoliberal and postfeminist discourses as it contributes to maintain the patriarchal system (and narratives) by not envisioning possible alternatives, requiring women to develop an idea of personal responsibility and resilience, as opposed to the need for a profound social transformation of patriarchal structures highlighted in prior feminist vindications, returning to McRobbie's identification of female individualization, epitomized in the powerful and strongly sexual "alpha girl", as one of the strategies of neoliberal postfeminism (2011, 181).

A similar instance of an attractive female vampire with more nuances appears in the graphic adventure *A Vampyre Story* (2008). As opposed to action games, in this case the genre lends itself to more narrative complexity. The player becomes Mona de Lafitte, a young Parisian who studies to become an opera singer. Her life changes dramatically when she falls victim to a vampire who becomes obsessed with her, Shrowdy von Kieffer. The vampire stalks and finally kidnaps her in another classic act of misogynist violence derived from an uncontrollable obsession which transforms her into the object of his desire. After abducting Mona, he takes her to his castle and turns her with his bite – a not so subtle metaphor for forced sexual intercourse. Then Mona starts her mission to escape the castle while she deals with her new powers and the consequences of her vampiric transformation.

Mona's representation as a rape victim is again empowering, for her actions define her more as a survivor than a victim, and neither the kidnapping nor her new condition stop her professional ambition. In the game, the player must escape the vampiric abuser, but also his overbearing and enabling mother, Vasilia von Kieffer, also a witch. Consequently, while the game portrays a more positive reading of the female vampire, it nevertheless addresses another recurrent enemy, the aforementioned figure of the monstrous mother, so present in popular media that judge, among other aspects, women's performance of maternity (Gill 2007, 157). The cruel and monstrous male vampire is then traced back to and explained by an unfit mother, who in the patriarchal narrative is merely another form of evil woman.

Shrowdy, like Kagan, embodies violence against women. Kagan did not hesitate to rape and then slaughter his victim's whole family to victimize his daughter as well. Shrowdy is a kidnapper and metaphorical rapist who condemns Mona to a life as a vampire in order to possess her and keep her trapped in his castle. Both use their vampirism to exercise violence against women, but then these same women subvert their role as victims: they become survivors, and use the condition to which they have been condemned to gain victory over them. Therefore, these female vampires have a much more clearly defined agency, but also the resilience to overcome terribly challenging and violent situations, so as to, in the end, claim their autonomy as women over their victimizers. What is promoted, once again, is the idea of women as traditional victims of (male) violence in games, and the encouragement of an individual transformation or victory. This does not challenge structural inequality, as emphasis is placed on personal potential and even Mona's professional achievement (McRobbie 2011; Gill 2017, 618), thus echoing neoliberalist ideologies. And, yet, Mona's newfound agency and power do reflect important and positive changes in the "can-do" potential of these young women in games, which, on the one hand, shows that popular narratives are sensitive to the values of their time, and, on the other, that they can shape those same (gender) values (McRobbie 2011, 182).

Nevertheless, despite the positive reading of the agency given to these female vampires, their representation can still be problematic, highlighting the contradictions inherent to that popular culture defined by a postfeminist sensibility. Videogames, amongst other media, have adopted the discourse of women's empowerment by portraying strong, independent characters, such as Lara Croft in *Tomb Raider* (1996), only to undermine its feminist message by reinforcing a sexualized reading of these women (McRobbie 2004, 255), contributing to an increasingly sexualized and consumerist culture (Gill 2007). They are still often introduced as commodities to be consumed within popular cultural objects. While they might have interesting emotional developments or intellectual aspirations, these characters nevertheless fulfil the aforesaid patriarchal reduction of women to their (sexy and fit) bodies in much of today's media (Gill 2007, 149). The iconicity of these characters' physical representation was evident when they were adapted to the silver screen, with Angelina Jolie's (2001) characterization and clothing bent on emphasizing the attractiveness of their game counterparts above all other aspects of their performance. One only needs to consider the representation of male adventurers, such as Indiana Jones or even Croft's allies and foes, to perceive the difference in their lack of sexualization. This places Croft in a liminal position (somewhere between action heroine and object of male desire), proving that the word "adventuress" might still carry the sexual connotations it had in previous centuries for contemporary audiences (Green 1991, 73, 162). After all, in *Star Wars* only Princess Leia was forced to wear a golden bikini to fuel audiences' fantasies, despite the fact that she was the leader of a galactic rebellion.

In the same vein, notwithstanding her empowerment, Rayne's aesthetics respond to the male fantasy of a female vampire – or action heroine in general. She is overly-sexualized; her red hair, fangs and prominent bust play into the traditional female vampire image. Actress Kristanna Loken's casting in the film version (2005) only reinforced this commodification. In this sense, Rayne forewarns other she-vampires imbued with the physical attributes of hypersexualized female characters. Dillon and Lungberg (2017), for instance, recall an example from *Bloodline*: the twin

vampire sisters, Therese and Jeanette Voerman. Their physical appearance is stereotypical – displaying deep cleavages and curvy anatomies – and their personalities recall the dominant or alluring vampire. However, the hint at their story of abuse from a violent father gives them a depth that prior instances did not possess. For these authors, this storyline “involves very dark, mature themes which open up the possibility of players’ self-reflection regarding the seriousness of domestic violence and sexual abuse; topics that are too often avoided, unvoiced or silenced in real life”, so that the vampires in this game “signify the return of the repressed” (2017, 58). The female vampire here is presented as a survivor of abuse, complicating her representation as a mere foe or an object of consumption, yet, paradoxically, still commodified to be marketed to a mainly male audience.

Conclusions

As an important new form of storytelling potentially informing gender attitudes among thousands of players, it is of paramount importance to approach the depiction of women in videogames. In this sense, the discussion of the presence of female vampires in these games makes it possible to perceive that many of the socio-cultural discourses that characterized their traditional portrayal in popular culture still shape the developers’ conception of vampiresses.

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In many games, female vampires are rendered invisible or else objectified. They are underdeveloped and become the object on which to exert masculine violence. They embody a sexual fantasy and are represented as the incarnation of Evil which must be controlled by the male frame of narrative and then erased. In other instances, the player can gain the perspective of the female vampire, although the traits of the avatar remain gender-neutral. More interesting are the games in which the main character is, and can only be, a she-vampire, as she finally controls the narrative frame and her story is increasingly developed.

In Rayne and Mona’s narrative, the back story of gender violence adds a relevant subtext of women’s survival in the face of male violence, as well as their possibility to retaliate against their abusers: the vampires who, in the train of their predecessors, seduce and rape their victims, literally or metaphorically. Carmilla’s predominance in several games also reads as a form of female empowerment in contrast with previous passive and flat representations of the Brides of Dracula, for instance. However, in all these examples developers still felt the need to conform to the traditional hypersexualized representation of the female vampire, thus undermining their challenge to patriarchal stereotypes. Moreover, the presence of other stereotypes of monstrous females – the mothers, the witches – and the contrast established between the vampiress and characters who embody the angelic ideal – the ghostly or imprisoned damsel in distress – evinces that centuries of misogynistic female vampire narratives are yet to be fully overcome.

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