

# Multiple Femininities and “Unruly Woman” as Theoretical Framework

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JESSICA RUTH AUSTIN

**Abstract:** Scrutiny of representations of gender in video games has increased in academic scholarship in recent years. Scholarship has moved beyond the early questions of whether video games promote violence simply for showing violence but now question how representations of acts and ideas within video games can have importance to cultural understanding as well. The *Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* was released by CD Projekt Red in 2015 based on the novels by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski. The game was universally well received and has shifted more than 10 million copies worldwide. Critics of the game stated however, that as with criticisms of previous games in the franchise, that representations of women could be viewed as sexist. This article analyses the representation of women in *Witcher 3* in particular and argues that these women are often examples of the ‘unruly women’ as theorised by Kathleen Rowe. This article argues that representations of women in *Witcher 3* are narratively driven rather than for sexist shock value and that they are active characters rather than being passively carried through the storyline. This article argues for using “unruly woman” as a theoretical framework as it provides deeper analysis than content, which has previously been used in video game analysis. This article argues that multiple femininities and plural identities are identified using “unruly woman”.

**Keywords:** Game Studies, Femininities, Representation, Sexism, Gaming, *Witcher 3*

## Introduction

In popular culture analysis, we have found ourselves at a crossroads in feminist critique when it comes to female sexuality on screen. Kathleen Rowe states that this has come from a generational gap between older feminists and those who were born in the millennium. She notes that many older theories decry any female sexuality or sexual interaction as solely for the male gaze. However, this focus on negative aspects of female sexuality has led to a gap in our knowledge, especially when it comes to representations in video games. It is difficult in 2021 to argue that female characters are solely there to satisfy the male gaze when gamers are just as likely to be female as they are male.

In this article I suggest that analysing female video game character cannot simply be done by evaluating what these characters look like and that placing video game characters into a simple sexist vs non-sexist binary can inhibit deeper academic analysis. I argue here that the “unruly woman” created by Rowe is a theoretical framework which can be used for female characters in video games and use *The Witcher 3* as a case study to demonstrate its strengths as an analysis tool.

I also evaluate why the Bechdel Test is too simplistic when it comes to video game characters. Although it has been used effectively in evaluating films, it precludes the discussion of different types of femininities and the pluralities of gender found in the video game medium. *The Witcher 3* has been chosen to demonstrate this because it does in fact pass the Bechdel Test, despite being derided as sexist due to the state of undress of some of the female characters and dialogue choices. I recommend that the Bechdel Test should be abandoned for video game analysis in favour of using the “unruly woman” as theoretical framework instead.

### The Unruly Woman as Theoretical Framework

The “unruly woman” was described by Rowe in her book *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (1995) to examine “the conventions that govern gender and laughter – or rather...the spectacle-making unruly woman and the comedic genres of laughter” (4a). Rowe articulates that what makes the unruly woman important (and feminist) is that she “lays claim to her own desire” (31a). Characters that she specifically points out in comedy texts are Miss Piggy and Roseanne as she notes that these characters do not have to be ‘nice’ to work towards their goals. In doing so, these female characters subvert the traditional stereotypes of female characters being overly feminine, polite and often (most offensively) being the “damsel in distress”. Importantly, Rowe states that although these characters are the pinnacle of “unruly” that there is a scale as to ‘how much’ different characters achieve these attributes. Thus using the “unruly woman” as framework allows the female characters to not be held in a binary. As noted in the introduction, by using binaristic feminist theory, we limit our analysis to whether a female character is either sexist or non-sexist and this is usually because we are investigating these characters as showing traits that are too masculine or overly feminine. Therefore, using the framework suggested here, we are able to highlight characters who have some the “unruly” aspects, even if we academically comment that there are still portions of their characterizations that could be sexist.

Elizabeth Hills noted that “limitations and consequences of discussing active heroines from within binaristic frameworks...position active female characters as phallic or ‘figuratively male’”. (40). This seems unfair to women themselves, to be continually compared to often hegemonic masculinity, which the “unruly woman” as frameworks actively avoids. The “unruly woman” is not positioned as “figuratively male” and allows for its positioning in not just femininity but a plurality of femininity. Mimi Schippers argues that allowing for multiple femininities (such as hegemonic/subordinate and others) gives more scope for seeing how portraying a certain kind of femininity can benefit men or the women themselves (95). And this I propose, is the crux of the “unruly woman” in that we should be analysing what a female character positively gains from using their ‘feminine wiles’. This “use” of their sexuality and femininity has become a problem for some academics when analysing film:

Feminist film theory will not readily dispel the ennui that now troubles it without engaging itself as fully in women’s laughter as it has in their tears, and without expanding its scope beyond the familiar terrain of melodrama and television soap opera to a wider range of cultural texts and the models of subjectivity they might suggest (Rowe, 5a).

This focus on negative aspects of femininity is found in video game scholarship with a bulk of research evaluating apparent harmful or sexist attitudes towards female body image via character design (Martin et al.; Kondrat; Dietz; Downs and Smith). Interestingly, many studies conducted on sexualisation in video games have been conducted using content analysis of image only. These are statistically relevant in that studies provide evidence to show that women are still woefully underrepresented when it comes to opportunities to play as a female; there is more opportunity to play as a non-human than a female character (Downs and Smith, 723). However, these analyses can lack nuance because they do not account for what the female characters are doing in the narrative. I propose that this can be more important when it comes to analysing whether these female characters are sexist stereotypes or not. Taking a character specifically identified by Rowe as the “unruly woman” character; if we were just to look at Miss Piggy through *just* content analysis, we would think her portrayal sexist due to her overly feminine dress sense, blonde flowing hair and large breasts. But, once you take into account what Miss Piggy says and does, we realise she is a strong female and feminist character.

The “unruly woman” as theoretical framework also negates another problem with some feminist analysis frameworks in that it subverts arguments on whether a text is ‘feminist enough’. Jaeyoon Park, drawing on Merri Lisa Johnson’s book *Third Wave Feminism and Television: Jane puts it in the box* (2007), discusses that “shifting from this focus.... transcend[s] such polarizing dichotomies of

positive/negative, progressive/backlash, and feminist/antifeminist representations” (Park, para 2). Therefore, the “unruly woman” framework argues that we think in a new way about how women make themselves visible. For Rowe:

We might examine models of *returning* the male gaze, exposing and making a spectacle of the gazer, claiming the pleasure and power of making spectacles of ourselves, and beginning to negate our own visibility in the public sphere. [original italics] (12a)

This framework then, advocates for female characterization to ‘re-appropriate’ what had previously been used as a negative representation. This justification is strengthened in Rowe’s newer volume *Unruly Girls, Unrepentant Mothers: Redefining Feminism on Screen* (2011), especially when analysing women in popular culture:

Media icons as Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Xena the Warrior Princess, and the Spice Girls challenge familiar representations of femininity by affirming female friendship, agency, and physical power. While my audiences were usually entertained by my examples, many could not see past the violence, overt sexuality, and commercialism in the chips I showed and were troubled by my argument (6b).

For Rowe, “failures to understand new models of femininity and feminism that in fact may be expressions of unruliness” (4b) has hindered the study of positive feminine representations. And that in fact “a cluster of attributes that challenge patriarchal power by defying norms of femininity intended to keep a woman in her place” (10b) is why what some would consider to be overly-sexualised video game characters should be addressed from an “unruly woman” framework. As I will analyse in relation to characters in *The Witcher 3*, choosing to be sexual or ‘attractive’ can actually create “disorder by dominating men” (10b). Utilizing work by Jennifer Higginbotham, she notes that some feminist framework would analyse female characters by “seeing a progression from ‘naturally’ bad femininity to ‘naturally’ good femininity, or from ‘constructed’ femininity to ‘natural’ femininity” (65). However, we need to stop using competing “models of femininity”. Schippers claims that this mindset leaves us with less conceptual room “to identify multiple femininities within race and class groups, and more importantly, which raced and classed femininities serve the interests of male dominance and which do not” (89).

Another reason as to why the “unruly woman” framework should be utilized when analysing female characters is because it is more appropriate and in-depth for video game analysis rather than The Bechdel test. This framework states that a work must pass three separate points to be considered feminist; 1) there must be two female characters, 2) they have one conversation and 3) their conversation is not about a man (Bechdel, 1985). Like content analysis, these points give a good starting point on how to begin analysing whether a narrative is sexist but the Bechdel test has been criticised for being overly-simplistic (O’Meara, 1120). Therefore, for the “unruly woman” framework here, the following must be considered as suggested by O’Meara to combat simplicity:

What do they discuss? When and where do they discuss it? How do they phrase it? How it is performed? are their words acknowledged, praised, or dismissed by other characters? are their words repeated by film-goers, and immortalized in lists of memorable dialogue? (O’Meara, 1121)

This creates a more comprehensive understanding of the characters and also a more “pluralistic” notion of female dialogue and also does not “reduce all female speech to a single set of norms” (1121). I have specifically chosen a video game for analysis because video games have typically been coded as male spaces. However, this is starting to change in quite a rapid way in terms of more women playing video games and so we should not still be reducing female video game characters down to simply being “hyper-sexualised”. This is especially because “games are an influential type of media, and the stories they tell have far reaching effects” (Lucas 10). I chose *The Witcher 3* for analyse in particular due to there being many female characters within the game franchise and the source material (books) which makes it rich for analysis. As well as this, early in 2020 when Netflix released their televised version of the books, it was lauded for featuring “incredibly strong women in significant roles” (Monique, np).

The game, which is my focus, is based on the novels of Andrzej Sapkowski whose main character Geralt is a monster hunter known in the series as a Witcher. Although Geralt is the titular character in the franchise, there are many female characters who appear frequently throughout the novels, sometimes with whole chapters devoted to them. Many of these women make appearances in *The Witcher 3* video game as well. The storyline of the base game is to find a young girl called Ciri who has gone missing while playing as Geralt. Although the player controls Geralt (and occasionally plays as Ciri) the female characters in the game can be just as important for moving the narrative along. For example, many of the game endings that the player may end up with are dependent on whether the player chooses positive or negative interactions with the female characters. Encounters with the important females sorceresses within the game such as Triss Merigold, Yennefer of Vengerburg, Keira Metz and Phillipa Eilhart, present an interesting narrative and indeed feminist paradox. They are all conventionally attractive and at first glance just conform to characters created for the male gaze. However, using the “unruly woman” as framework, we can see that these women are much more than damsels in distress, and can be positive, feminist female representations.

### Unruly Women in *The Witcher 3*

The seminal work which is often attributed to theorizing gendered stereotypes of violence in video games (and is consequent attribution to misogyny in real life) was produced by Dietz (1998). In this work they found that the “most popular ways of stereotyping females in video games is by creating female characters which are sexually provocative” (188). They also proclaimed that at the time characters were mostly damsels in distress rather than active characters (188). The focus on the body of these women characters continued in much work with researchers pointing to a link between video games “perpetuating an unrealistic ideal of thinness as attractive” (Martins et al. 824). Researchers also claimed that these ‘unrealistic’ and sexualised versions of women in games can affect social relationships stating that “if males are disappointed that women cannot achieve these proportions, this may hinder relational development” (Downs and Smith, 731). However, this kind of research is too reductive as it seems to portray all sexualisation of female characters as overwhelmingly negative.

Sexualisation of female characters can be portrayed as a positive through the “unruly woman”. When describing the character of Medusa, Rowe noted that “her sexuality is neither evil and uncontrollable like that of the femme fatale, nor sanctified and denied like that of the virgin/madonna.” (10–11a) and this can be applied to *The Witcher 3* narrative and characterizations. Many of the women in the game dress provocatively and in a way that would be considered conventionally attractively and Rowe describes this as “excessiveness” and “preening femininity” (27a). I propose here then, that the women within *Witcher 3* display a lot of their ‘excess’ in the way they display or ‘make visible’ their femininity with the way they dress. A part of this is due to canonical narrative; in *Time of Contempt* (Sapkowski, a), the sorceresses attending a banquet use their bodies, and the sexualization of their bodies, as a power play when dealing with other sorceresses and mages. A sorceress who appears in the game, Philippa Eilhart, alludes to the way in which the women are using their femininity to gain this political power in the game as well. This is a typical trope of the “unruly woman” and of O’Meara’s notes about the Bechdel test when it comes to performance and what is gained; these women are using their bodies as a performance to get what they desire rather than simply being part of the male gaze.

That is not to say that CD Projekt Red did not take some liberty with the state of undress with some female characters; Triss Merigold in the books wears high collars and covers her chest due to an injury suffered in a battle established in *Blood of Elves* (Sapowski, b) but wears a low cut top in the game. But, CD Projekt Red do address the issue of a stereotypical trope of women’s armour in an exchange between male character Vernon Roche and female character Ves. In some games it has been comically noticed that female ‘fighter’ characters are often put in armour that would not protect them at all. Characters such as Ivy in *Soul Calibur 2* wear armour that shows cleavage,

stomach, legs, and so they would be quickly dispatched if worn in real life combat. However, within a game cut-scene Vernon pointedly chides Ves for “running into battle without a breast plate” (CD Projekt Red). This brings a point of realism to the game which is not often seen in other video game offerings. Jansz and Martis have noted how the success of video game franchise based on Lara Croft has empowered female gamers in that “the female characters they are playing may look odd, but they are competent and occupy a powerful position in the virtual world of the video game.” (142). It is important to note that in the main quest line there are several instances where the player (as Geralt) has to rely on female characters or take their advice. One female character in particular who has prominent placement by the developers in the narrative is Cerys an Craite. CD Projekt Red developed this character as she does not appear in the books (although her brother Hjalmar does):

The character Cerys, Crach’s daughter, was designed from scratch for the purposes of this game. Called Sparrowhawk by some, this brave, strong-willed, and yet at the same time prudent young woman takes after her father more in manner than appearsin. (The Official Witcher Wikia-witcher.wikia.com)

Cerys’ character is clearly portrayed as the better choice for Geralt to choose when playing the quest ‘The King’s Gambit’. In this quest, banquet attendees have been slaughtered by Berserkers, lycanthropic men who turn into bears rather than wolves. The player is given two choices on how to finish this quest. The first is to choose Cerys, who will take a calm and collected approach to gathering evidence to whom is responsible. The second is to choose Hjalmar, who takes a more rash approach and rides off to confront a druid he thinks is responsible. Interestingly, if the player chooses Hjalmar they will not find out who organised the atrocity and the following passage will appear in their quest notebook:

Geralt tried to get the druid who conducted the ceremony to tell him who was responsible for the Kaer Trolde massacre. The druid refused to answer - and Hjalmar showed that it was vengeance more than testimony that interested him. He killed the druid, who took the knowledge of his patron’s identity with him to the grave. (CD Projekt Red)

Cerys not only proves to be the best option within this quest in that the player will find out who the organiser really was and sees them punished, but she will be crowned Queen and in the end credits of the game and it will be revealed that Skellige prospers under her reign. It makes sense in regards to canon for the established female characters (Triss, Yennefer, Philippa, etc.) to be powerful characters; many of the sorceresses were advisors to Kings and governments. What is interesting about the women of *Witcher 3* that have been made for the game is that they are not ‘stereotypical’ when it comes to female representation. Cerys an Craite was developed to be the better choice and has intellectual dominance over Hjalmar. This is similar to the way in which Rowe describes Miss Piggy: “This dominance over the apparent leader of the Muppets is central to Miss Piggy’s persona. It is also central to a larger tradition of female unruliness – that of the woman on top – which resonates in her image” (Rowe 26a).

And the “woman on top” is seen in the romance options within the game as well. For most players, their first encounter with romance option will come from a sorceress called Keira Metz who appears in previous games. In the quest ‘A Favour for a Friend’ there is an option to have sex with Keira. Interestingly, this interaction turns out to be a ruse for Keira to cast a sleeping spell on Geralt for her own benefit. This is not the last time in the game where a female character essentially lulls Geralt into a trap using sex as an incentive. What makes the portrayal of sex and sexuality interesting in *Witcher 3* and the women in these portrayals as the “unruly woman” is the consequences that the player faces if they try to romance two witches at the same time. During the gameplay, a player has the opportunity to tell both sorceresses Triss and Yennefer that they want to be with them. If the player tries to choose both these gaming options they will trigger a quest called ‘It Takes Three to Tango’. In this quest the player will have ended up with romance scenes with both women but this quest ends with

Geralt manacled to a bed with both women leaving. Ultimately, any further attempt to speak romantically to either Triss or Yennefer will let the player know that, in no uncertain terms, that Geralt will not be part of their life.

Studies mentioned previously in this article have noted how negative attitudes may be enforced by video games, but other studies have shown that the opposite can be true. Katsarov et al. argue that ‘scientific evidence shows that video games can have positive effects on the morality and prosocial competences of players’ (Katsarov et al. 2017; p. 2). Therefore, I propose that the fact that Triss and Yennefer will reject romance with Geralt entirely can instill moral virtues in the player. If the player tries to be with both of them (essentially cheat on them) this will reinforce to the player that this is wrong in real life too due to the bad in-game consequences; as Adams and Rembukkana note it “posits Triss and Yennefer’s offer not as a potential mutually satisfying sexual experience or romantic triad, but rather as a foolish dream of male access to multiple female romantic partners” (para 29).

Triss and Yennefer subvert the patriarchal concept of ‘standing by your man’ and become the “unruly women” because of this. Rowe describes “the essence of conventional femininity is the pursuit of heterosexual love” (27) and although romance is an option in *Witcher 3*, the female characters are not defined by it. These characters have a multitude of cutscenes where (taking notes from O’Meara), they discuss important details of world politics; how they can manipulate events to their own advantage; scenes that show that their words are often acknowledged and praised by other characters both male and female; and these are discussed in typically ‘masculine’ locations such as lodges and stately courts; and finally, there are many strong female characters who are represented without a man by their side. Furthermore, when playing as Ciri, the player has the option to state that they ‘prefer women’ in main questline ‘The Calm Before the Storm’. This is an important homage to canon, where Ciri has a lesbian relationship with bandit character Mistle (*Time of Contempt*- Sapkowski). This option means that the game is able to display progressive attitudes and makes Ciri, in this instance, the “unruly woman”, uninterested in “conventional heterosexual love”.

However, some commentators had issue with certain aspects of the game in regards to Ciri in other ways. In May 2015 the Feminist Frequency Twitter account took issue with the fact that when you play as Ciri within the game insults become “gendered” in that enemies can be heard calling her a whore. The Feminist Frequency account stated that in a fantasy game these insults were inappropriate; “Also, the “it’s realistic for enemies to sexually harass female characters” excuse is nonsense in fantasy games filled with ghouls & wraiths” (Feminist Frequency). I would disagree however, and this disagreement is in turn important to how analysis of feminist elements in video games, especially *Witcher 3*, should be approached. Because, a true feminist portrayal woman in video games should not be held in a binary and although I have resisted only focusing on negative aspects in this article, these are inherently a realistic part of many women’s life around the world. As well as this, the male playable character is Geralt is “constantly confronted with discriminatory comments by non-player characters who call Geralt a ‘mutant’ or a ‘freak’ and makes it clear that as a *Witcher* he counts as less than human” (Ostritsch 123). Slurs and insults are levied at both male and female characters and so is not only used for the character of Ciri. Furthermore, for Ostritsch, this is where some critics are confusing representation as endorsement:

I believe that the insults that Geralt faces can be said to have a morally condemnable, incorrigible social meaning... Does this in itself make *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015) a game that endorses discrimination and/or racism? Such an allegation seems very farfetched, because even though discrimination and racism are part of the fictional world of *The Witcher 3*, it is clearly not embraced by the main protagonist Geralt of Rivia (123).

The world of *Witcher* is inherently discriminatory, not just when it comes to women. For Feminist Frequency to claim it is not realistic in the context of a ‘fantasy game’ misses the mark, as the games are based on a world where sexism is present. For Hye-Won “as a popular narrative medium, video games feature female heroes to represent gender values of the time” (Hye-Won 27). So, is it not then

realistic that Ciri, although being a powerful and the “unruly woman”, would not still suffer from sexism, especially in a medieval world setting? For Rowe, the unruly woman’s visibility draws attention to the fact that the female character breaks the norms of the patriarchy. A reading of *Witcher 3* then that the sexism experienced by Ciri should then be expected of the non-playable characters who shout these gendered slurs. Ciri is not a simpering damsel in distress and the very point is that Ciri proves herself to be a far superior combatant to these attackers and she can cut down all those who use gendered slurs against her.

CD Projekt Red wrote the narrative of the main questline to test the players morals and, interestingly, if they choose to make choices which make Ciri into a ‘damsel in distress character’ rather than the “unruly woman”, they will end up with arguably a worse ending for her. Katsarov et al. note that ethical challenges for players include prosocial, negotiation, and direct consequences (8–14). The main game ending involves Geralt sending Ciri into another dimension to fight an entity known as the White Frost. At this flash-point there are several endings; Ciri may die; Ciri defeats the White Frost and returns to the world and becomes a Witcher herself; or Ciri defeats the White Frost and returns to the world and becomes an empress. To get an ending where Ciri doesn’t die, the player must not cause her to doubt herself and these actions can happen hours before the end of the game meaning they cannot be changed on a whim. If the player treats Ciri in a sexist way like telling her to ‘calm down’ when she loses her temper in quest ‘The Child of the Elder Blood’, or telling her to ‘Relax, you don’t have to be good at everything’ during the quest ‘Blood on the Battlefield’, or accompanying her to a meeting with the sorceresses rather than trusting her to go alone in quest ‘Final Preparations’, Ciri will die and in turn Geralt is alluded to kill himself via combat (vg247.com). I argue then that players are taught their sexism in this game will lead to a worse ending, and if we are to believe from studies that players can learn misogyny from video games, then I can argue that *Witcher 3* teaches them the negative consequences of this.

## Conclusion

The video game industry has moved so fast in recent years, and has had a major push for more women within gaming and in development and in the last few years there has been massive critical success with games such as *The Last of Us* franchise (2013, 2020), (*Horizon Zero Dawn* (2017), the Lara Croft video game reboot in 2013 heavily involve female main characters. That is not to say that there is not a long way to go. I concede that “culturally, the gaming industry, gaming communities, and the content of video games reflect an adherence to heteronormative, white, and patriarchal societal norms, which require women and minorities to be marginalized” (Lucas 16).

However, although the women in the *Witcher 3* conform to standards of beauty which may seem to draw them away from the “unruly woman” description their behaviours as active characters draws them back into this theoretical realm. The Sorceresses in particular, live to excess and in both the game and canonically in Sapkowski’s novels are famous for their dry humour and quick wits. By using the “unruly woman” as framework we are able to analyse the fact that these women are “laying a claim” to their own desire and in essence are revisiting the male gaze in a subverted manner as suggested by Rowe. Importantly, although Geralt was the playable character in the *Witcher 3*, CD Projekt Red make it clear in the final main quest mission that the game was never really about him at all, it was about Ciri. Before Ciri enters a portal to battle the White Frost she turns to Geralt and says with a caring laugh, “What can you know about saving the world silly? You are but a Witcher. This is my story, not yours, you must let me finish telling it” (CD Projekt Red, 2015). Although the game can be criticised for appearing to over-sexualise the women it cannot be denied that within the narrative, women are seen as powerful and unruly.

That is not to say that the *Witcher 3* does not show an important part of Rowe’s unruly woman in that “The unruly woman’s power is fragile and subject to social and generic forces” (12b). As there are some incidents of sexism within the game but through the “unruly woman” as theoretical frame-

work I can advise that *Witcher 3* gives many good representations of the unruly woman, and thus some believable and positive representations of female characters in video games.

By using the “unruly woman” as theoretical framework we are able to resist analysing video games in a simple sexist/non-sexist binary or deciding to declare certain video games as “feminist” enough. This is especially important with representations of sexuality and how women ‘use’ their sexuality because often declaring a female character as “too slutty” is patriarchal itself as it assumes that women should have their sex and sexuality decided by what is “socially acceptable” which of course is often dictated by cis-hetero men (Petersen).

*ARU College, Cambridge, UK*

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