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Bonnie Ruberg

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Representing sex workers in video games: feminisms, fantasies of exceptionalism, and the value of erotic labor

Bonnie Ruberg

Department of Informatics, University of California, Irvine - Irvine, CA, USA

ABSTRACT

This article critiques the representation of sex workers in “AAA” video games, with a focus on the devaluing of erotic labor. Existing feminist commentary has interpreted these representations as examples of the objectification of female game characters, perpetuating harmful misconceptions of sex work as fundamentally exploitative. By contrast, taking cues from feminist media studies, porn studies, and sex workers rights activism, I argue that what makes these representations of sex workers problematic is not their engagement in erotic labor but the ways that the games in which they appear devalue that labor, through both dialogue and interactive elements. Across their many appearances in AAA games, it is strikingly common for sex workers to offer their services to player-characters for free or at a discount, or for games to allow players to take their money back after erotic labor has been performed. This contributes to a gendered fantasy of exceptionalism in which a player-character’s masculinity is tied to being too attractive or too powerful to pay for sex. Critiquing these representations demonstrates how AAA video games prompt players to reenact widespread cultural biases against sex work. It also points toward the need for a diversity of feminisms within game studies.

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From the early 1980s to the present, sex workers have appeared in a notable number of commercial video games. As Kaeleigh Evans and Emma Tarver write in their article “Sex Workers and Video Games,” “sex worker characters have been present since the popularization of medium itself” (2017). One of the most widely consumed media forms today, video games were played by 155 million Americans and 1.8 billion people around the world in 2015 alone (Entertainment Software Association 2015; Kirk Skaugen 2015). Though video games are often mischaracterized as being entertainment for children, adult themes—primarily violence, but also sex—are common in contemporary games, especially “AAA” titles. Indeed, sex workers, usually escorts or exotic dancers, have appeared in video games from across a variety of genres and moments in video game history—from classic point-and-click adventure games like the original *Leisure Suit Larry* (Sierra Entertainment 1987) to more recent interactive narrative games like *The Wolf Among Us* (Telltale Games 2013). The rise of consumer-grade virtual reality devices is even bringing the representation of sex workers into immersive, three-dimensional environments, with game-inspired experiences

like *Gold Club VR* (Janice Blaze Rocke 2017). Sex workers also make occasional appearances in small-scale “indie” games, such as *The Oldest Game* (Lisa Lynch and Sandra Gabriele, in progress), which seeks to raise awareness about the effect of antisex work legislation on sex workers (Jen Zoratti 2014). However, sex workers are still most commonly found in first- or third-person action-adventure, shooter, or open-world games. In these large-scale, mainstream video games, sex workers are typically depicted as minor, nonplayer-characters (NPCs) and are almost always women. Often dismissed in existing feminist commentary as exemplifying the objectification of women in video games, the representation of sex workers in these games is, I argue here, actually most notable for its devaluing of sexual labor *as labor*. By stripping sex worker characters of the value of their work, through both dialogue and interactive elements, these games highlight the ways that video games can replicate and reinforce existing social stigmas, as well as the importance of bringing multiple feminist perspectives to the study of marginalized figures in video games.

Mainstream video games represent a particularly valuable site for addressing and critiquing the representation of sex workers in contemporary media because they reach such large audiences, and therefore have a considerable capacity to influence the ways that sex workers are perceived outside of the medium. In addition, because these games are oriented toward “mainstream” consumers (traditionally imagined, within the North American games industry, to be young, white, straight, cisgender men), they offer a particularly revealing window onto the dominant cultural beliefs held by both the development teams who make these games and the players for whom they are designed (Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce 2007). As Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum have argued, games reflect the values of the societies that create them; whether or not developers intend their games to communicate social meaning, all games impart messages about what and who has worth (2014). To date, most prominent examples of feminist commentaries on the representation of sex worker in video games, such as those from media critic Anita Sarkeesian, have focused on interpreting sex worker characters as sexualized victims created for the pleasure of straight male players. In these readings, it is the basic fact that these characters *are* sex workers, i.e., women who exchange erotic labor for money, that makes their inclusion in video games problematic. I believe that this particular feminist perspective is not only narrow-minded and overly simplistic, but also potentially harmful to real-life sex workers, since it perpetuates discriminatory cultural narratives about sex work as exploitation that put actual sex workers in jeopardy. To counter this antisex work approach to understanding sex worker characters in video games, I offer an alternative feminist perspective, one that foregrounds a different set of values: labor politics. I argue that what makes the representation of sex workers in many mainstream video games problematic is not the inclusion of women characters as sex workers *per se*, but rather the ways in which these games systematically strip these characters’ work of its value.

To demonstrate how this devaluing of sexual labor operates in many mainstream video games, I look at three representative games that model key trends in how sex worker characters are often represented. These games are *Fallout: New Vegas* (Obsidian Entertainment 2010), *Sleeping Dogs* (Square Enix 2012), and *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar Games 2013). While there are a number of differences in how these individual games and others like them depict sex workers, they have this striking similarity in common:

either their sex worker characters offer to give their services to the player-character for free or at a discount, or these games themselves provide players with opportunities to take their money back from sex workers after they have completed their services. This literal devaluing of sexual labor contributes to what I call a “fantasy of exceptionalism,” in which the player-character and by extension the player is encouraged to see himself as special—either especially attractive or especially powerful—because he does not need to pay for sex. The fantasy of exceptionalism is also explicitly gendered. Performing its own cultural labor, this fantasy works to establish and uphold a vision of masculinity in which being a “real man” and a “good guy” means not compensating sex workers for their labor. Masculinity as it is enacted through these in-game interactions is inherently performative, anxious, and precarious. In this way, it can be understood as part of a larger crisis of masculinity taking place within games cultures today, where participants in online harassment campaigns like #GamerGate are lashing out against women, queer folks, and people of color in reactionary attempts to delegitimize the voices of those who are seen as “different” and ensure that video games remain the territory of men (Katherine Cross 2017).

In seeking to push feminist critiques of the representation of sex workers in video games in new directions, the present work draws inspiration from sex workers rights activism, feminist porn studies, studies of gendered labor in digital spaces, and writing that highlights the importance of sex work as labor. This piece also contributes to a current push to expand and diversify the conversations taking place at the intersection of video games, gender, and sexuality. Within the academic field of game studies, many long-standing discussions have focused on the experiences and representations of cisgender women in games, with debates about the objectification versus empowerment of sexualized female characters as a notable thread (Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins 1998; Helen W. Kennedy 2002). However, more recent work is broadening scholarly considerations of gender in video games to include such topics as: gamer masculinity (Betsy DiSalvo 2016; Carly A. Kocurek 2015), transgender experiences (merritt kopas 2017), the markets that shape women’s identities as players (Shira Chess 2017), and interplays between gender and race (Yasmin B. Kafai, Gabriela T. Richard, and Brendesha M. Tynes 2016). My work here contributes to this broadening of the field by calling for a multiplicity of feminist perspectives within game studies, and by pushing for more nuanced understandings of marginalized characters in video games. As Adrienne Shaw writes in her book *Gaming at the Edge*, this work is part of “moving beyond sexy sidekicks and damsels in distress” (2015, 1). To talk about the representations of sex workers in video games, it is not enough to talk about gender and power; we must also talk about labor and money. As many sex workers themselves have argued, feminist media critics must shake off the discriminatory belief that sex work is fundamentally exploitative and instead recognize that addressing labor politics, as they are reflected and reinforced through their representation in mainstream media, is its own crucial feminist project.

Representing sex workers in popular media and the devaluing of sex work as labor

Attending to the representation of sex workers in video games adds an important dimension to critiques of erotic labor as it is depicted through popular media. Often,

scholarship on the representation of sex workers in fictional works has focused on literature and film. Writing on representations of sex in European literary history (Charles Bernheimer 1997) and twentieth-century cinema (Russell Campbell 2006), for instance, has looked primary at how the figure of the prostitute has shifted across artistic traditions. Yet, the politics of sex work as a lived practice, as well as the voices of sex workers themselves, have rarely entered into this genre of analysis. More recent examples of scholarship on the representation of sex workers in popular media have demonstrated a stronger engagement with the politics of sexual labor (Nisha James and Shubha Ranganathan 2016; Jo Doezema 2010; Carrie N. Baker 2014). However, this work has largely taken as its object not voluntary sex work but sex trafficking and the contemporary cultural narratives that surround it. Most of the writing circulating today on representations of voluntary sex work in popular media is being published online at feminist websites, such as Bitch Flicks. Writing of this sort, as well as the selection of scholarly articles that do address representations of voluntary sex work through the lens of sex workers' experiences, offers valuable contributions (Moshoula Capous Desyllas 2013). However, these readings remain limited in that they tend to approach the representation of sex work through a prescriptive lens, arguing for "better" depictions of sex workers rather than deconstructing existing representations in order to understand their underlying meanings.

Video games represent a valuable addition to discussions of sex workers' representations in popular media because, as an interactive digital medium, video games enact these representations in ways that differ from other media forms. Because games are designed around rule sets and mechanics, they not only portray characters and narratives on-screen but also translate social constructs into playable systems that can themselves be analyzed for their social meaning (Ian Bogost 2007, 3). In video games, cultural values often become literalized in the form of play affordances, incentive structures, and point systems. At the same time, video games also prompt us to consider not just how sex workers are represented in-game but also what it means for players to play *with* and play *along* with cultural attitudes toward sex workers. It is common for games researchers, especially those invested in making empirical claims about the effects of games on players, to argue that video games' interactivity gives them a unique capacity to influence player behavior. In their study on misogynistic violence in video games, for example, Alessandro Gabbiadini et al. write, "Unlike images in traditional media, game characters are designed to respond to a user's actions, which can promote a powerful experience that goes beyond passive media consumption" (Alessandro Gabbiadini, Paolo Riva, Luca Andrighetto, Chiara Volpato, and Brad J. Bushman 2016). While I remain wary of the claim that other media forms require only "passive consumption," or that video games have an unprecedented capacity to change a player's behaviors, I would argue that attending to video games as sites of the representation of sex workers does indeed merit an approach that accounts for the specificities of the medium, such as its interactive elements and the contemporary cultural contexts of video games.

As a wide-reaching medium (*Grand Theft Auto V* alone, one of the games I analyze below, has sold nearly two million copies), games have the potential to significantly impact the public perception of the sex workers whom they represent. Dimitri Williams et al. have argued that the representation of marginalized groups in video games can

notably shape the ways that players think of those groups (Dmitri Williams, Nicole Martins, Mia Consalvo, and James D. Ivory 2009). It is reasonable to expect that a game's ability to affect a player's perception of sex work might be amplified even beyond these documented effects. Given the core demographics for players of these mainstream games, it is likely that many players have not been exposed to accurate and informed narratives about sex work. This means that video games have a real potential to promote harmful stigmas about sex workers. As Hallgrímsdóttir et al. write, "Media representations [are] important conduits of stigma against those working in the sex industry. This is because it is through media that most of us, including academics and policy makers, acquire much of our knowledge about sex work." Whether or not this directly effects player behaviors, the potential repercussions of this perpetuation of stigma are real. "The (mis)representation of sex workers found in mainstream media outlets ha[s] the potential to shape both day-to-day interactions sex workers have with the public and their clients as well as the legal and policy environments that shape their lives" (Helga Kristín Hallgrímsdóttir, Rachel Phillips, Cecilia Benoit, and Kevin Walby 2008, 120). For this reason, even a medium like video games, which is often dismissed as being "just for fun," can have a serious impact on the sex workers whom it represents.

Of the many stigmas that surround sex work in twenty-first-century North America, the specific misconception that makes representations of sex workers in mainstream video games so pernicious is the denial of sexual labor *as labor*. In this discriminatory cultural narrative, sex work does not count as legitimate work. By this logic, economies of pleasure should not be allowed to intersect with economies of capital; sex work is seen as deplorable specifically because sex workers get paid. As Brooke Meredith Beloso writes in "Sex, Work, and the Feminist Erasure of Class," this attitude communicates the message that the true "sin" of sex work is not sex itself but the demand to have that work valued (2012, 66). Like writer and sex workers rights activist Melissa Gira Grant (2014), author of *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, Beloso stresses how neoliberal feminism's adoption of this antisex work logic actually endangers sex workers. Beloso writes that the "declassification" of sex work is part of a long history across otherwise divergent schools of feminism in which sex workers are as victims but "never workers" (50). Similarly, within the academic sphere, sex work is often theorized apart from considerations of labor politics and broader socioeconomic systems (Laura María Augustín 2005, 619). Even recent research that *has* framed sex work through economic concerns still strips this labor of its value by describing of sex workers themselves as consumable products, rather than workers with agency whose efforts merit compensation (Melissa Farley 2018). These attempts to devalue the work of sex work, as Jizz Lee and Rebecca Sullivan write in their introduction to the "Porn and Labour" special issue of *Porn Studies*, are "rooted in a respectability politics of sexuality that suggests it is commercialization alone which causes abuse, conveniently ignoring the fact that all facets of our lives are commercialized to some extent." For porn performers, as for other sex workers, this attitude "erases the fact that performing is labor" (Lee and Sullivan 2016, 104). As illustrated below, it is this erasure of sex work as valued commercial labor that also that characterizes representations of sex workers in mainstream video games.

With this work on video games, I am echoing a larger call from within feminist media studies and porn studies to attend to the labor of sex work. Lee and Sullivan articulate the importance of reframing sex work as an economic practice:

Why emphasize the “work” in “sex work”? Studies of pornography have long trained their focus mostly on the sex side of the equation, concerned with bodies and their pleasures through analyses of consumption, reception, distribution, and audience. Questions of work have tended to be more about industry and technology. Yet the performers themselves often remain elusive, removed from studies of the relations of labor and economic exchange. (104)

Exemplifying this approach to scholarship that highlights sex workers’ labor, Mireille Miller-Young asks in *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography*, “What is the labor of the black female body in pornography?” (2014, 9). Arguing for the importance of surfacing this labor as part of a larger project of “recover[ing] and redress[ing] an untold dimension of black women’s sexual lives,” Miller-Young writes that work of black women porn performers takes many forms (22). “One strategy for black women in pornography is to work extremely hard to carve out space and fabricate themselves as marketable and desirable actors.” They also “rework” myths and stereotypes about black women as sexual subjects “in order to assert the value of their erotic capital” (10). At the same time, the performances of these women enact the “work of racial fantasy” (9). In this way, writes Miller-Young, “These women *work* on representations of black sexuality by using their own bodies and imaginations” (13). Miller-Young’s enumeration of the forms of work that underlie black women’s roles in the production of pornography models how feminist scholarship can surface rather than dismiss sex work as labor, and how it illustrates how sex work itself often entails not one but multiple types of labor.

Feminist commentary on sex workers in video games and the need for alternative perspectives

Though many topics within the study of gender in video games have inspired divergent opinions, feminist commentary on the representation of sex workers in games has, to date, shown surprisingly little variety. The most prominent examples of such commentary come from popular critics who have largely focused on condemning the depiction of sex workers in games because they see sex worker characters as fundamentally objectified. Such criticisms operate from the premise that depicting sex workers in games inherently promotes the exploitation of women and further marginalizes women characters in an admittedly already sexist medium. In their attitudes toward sex work, these criticisms echo widespread antisex-work sentiments that have long been perpetuated by researchers and cultural narratives alike in the name of feminism. These sentiments are founded on the premises that sex work is by nature “sexist exploitation,” that clients who pay for sex (presumed to be heterosexual men) have aggressive tendencies and treat women like objects, and that sex workers themselves are victims waiting to be saved (Jackson Katz 2006; Melissa Farley, Jacqueline M. Golding, Emily Schuckman Matthews, Neil M. Malamuth, and Laura Jarrett 2015; Rochelle L. Dalla, Yan Xia, and Heather Kennedy 2003). However, these attitudes toward sex work are deeply misguided and even harmful. It is this problematic feminist framework that has structured existing commentary on the representation of sex workers in video games. For this reason, these critiques demand to be challenged by alternative feminist perspectives—ones that are not moralistic or patronizing, and which value the labor of sex work—underscoring the importance of making space for multiple feminisms within the study of video games.

Among those feminist commentators who have condemned the inclusion of sex worker characters in mainstream video games, the best known is Anita Sarkeesian. As part of her work with Feminist Frequency, Sarkeesian produced a series of videos identifying common misogynistic game tropes called “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games.” These videos have come to hold a prominent place in contemporary debates around feminism and video games because Sarkeesian herself became, unfortunately, a prime public target for #GamerGate. In June, 2014, Sarkeesian released a pair of videos titled “Women as Background Decoration.” The topic of these videos is what Sarkeesian sees as a widespread trend in which female NPCs in AAA video games are “hypersexualized,” dehumanized, and rendered into “passive objects of heterosexual male desire.” To demonstrate this trend, Sarkeesian uses clips from a wide selection of games. Yet, what is arguably most striking about these clips is that an overwhelming percentage do not simply include representations of sexualized women, as Sarkeesian claims; rather, they explicitly represent sex workers. These are professional women who appear on screen offering sex, erotic dances, or other sexual services to the player-character. Sarkeesian does not explicitly address the notable presence of sex workers in her selection of clips, yet her video becomes a testament to the prevalence of sex worker characters in video games.

When Sarkeesian does talk about these sex worker characters, she describes them as objectified, exploited, and victimized: “prostituted women” and helpless “toys.” Sarkeesian characterizes them as “a decorative virtual sex class who exist to service straight male desire ... nonplayable sex objects ... to be used and abused.” These characters, says Sarkeesian, “can usually be found on the sidelines of role-playing or open-world style games, populating the many virtual strip clubs, red light districts, or brothel locations that have become almost obligatory in many so-called ‘mature’ titles.” While Sarkeesian does critique specific elements of these characters’ portrayal, such as their relative narrative insignificance, her biggest problem with these characters is the basic fact that they are sex workers. In her definition of sexual objectification, Sarkeesian states: “Sexually objectified women are valued primarily for their bodies ... which [exist] for the pleasure ... of others.” For Sarkeesian then, sex work (using one’s body to create pleasure in exchange for value) is fundamentally objectification. Sarkeesian is not alone in condemning these sex worker characters. Echoing Sarkeesian’s interpretation, other feminist commentators have claimed that the inclusion of sex workers in video games teaches male players to treat women as “playthings” or even to “hate” women (Sarah Ditum 2014; Yannick LeJacq 2014). This tendency to equate the inclusion of sex worker characters in video games with women’s objectification is widespread even in academic discourse. Gabbiadini et al. begin their study on misogynistic violence, mentioned above, with the following statement: “In some video games, such as the very popular *Grand Theft Auto (GTA)* games, female characters are treated as sex objects ... usually prostitutes or pole-dancers ... rather than individuals worthy of respect.” In this quote, as in Sarkeesian’s videos, we see a worrying conflation of sex work itself with the belief that sex workers are by nature objects and not “individuals worthy of respect.”

Some of Sarkeesian’s critiques of the representation of sex workers in video games are indeed important. She is right, for instance, to point out the disturbing frequency and unforgivably cavalier attitudes with which sex worker characters are abused and even murdered in many mainstream games. However, ultimately, Sarkeesian’s particular

feminist perspective perpetuates harmful stigmas that affect sex workers far beyond their inclusion in video games. Sarkeesian's videos reinforce the misconception that women who do the labor of sex work are by definition oppressed—as a number of sex workers themselves pointed out with concern via social media in the weeks following the release of the “Women as Background Decoration” videos (Noah Berlatsky 2014). In addition, Sarkeesian's denouncement of sex worker characters as “sex objects” obfuscates what they really are: not just sexualized women characters, but women *at work*. By refusing to recognize these women as “workers,” these videos participate in the broader cultural devaluing of sexual labor. As Beloso explains in her writing on sex work and socioeconomics described above, in order to “honor the central tenets of the feminist standpoint,” we must acknowledge that “knowledge production is never objective and must always be checked against dissenting perspectives” (65). Therefore, in contrast to Sarkeesian's interpretation, I offer an intersectional feminist perspective—that is, one that recognizes that the politics of labor as well as gender and power are inextricable from the concerns of social justice.

Discounts and freebies: devaluing sexual labor through dialogue

Rather than condemning mainstream video games for their basic inclusion of sex worker characters, I believe we must consider *how* sex worker characters are represented. Specifically, I am interested in the fact that, across the many clips of women sex workers that Sarkeesian includes in her videos, a striking theme emerges (that Sarkeesian herself does not address): nearly all of these characters offer their services to the player-character for free or at a discount. Exploring these games and others like them in further depth reveals that these offers of free or discounted sex work are part of a larger trend in mainstream video games of allowing player-characters to receive sexual labor without paying for it—either because the player-character is supposedly so enticing that the eager sex worker does not charge, or because the game itself offers players opportunities to recuperate their costs. In these ways, these games systematically devalue the work of sex work. Video games are complex media objects that must be understood as dynamic assemblages of narrative, images, mechanics, interfaces, and player inputs. It is fitting then that AAA video games perform the devaluing of sex work in multiple ways, some related to traditional forms of representation and others which are explicitly interactive.

In mainstream video games that represent sex workers, the devaluing of sexual labor is often performed through in-game dialogue: the rhetoric that surrounds the interaction between sex worker and player-character. In these verbal exchanges, it is common for a sex worker character to make a direct offer to “do it for free” or at a reduced rate, often as an expression of the sex worker's exceptional desire for the player-character, who is told that he is so appealing that the sex worker will forego payment for him alone. An example of this genre of exchange can be seen in the game *Fallout: New Vegas*. *Fallout: New Vegas* is part of the popular *Fallout* series, comprised primarily of postapocalyptic open-world games. Player-characters emerge from fallout shelters to navigate future worlds where society is rebuilding itself after being devastated by nuclear war. The fourth game in the series, *Fallout: New Vegas* takes place in a reimagined Las Vegas. During a side quest, the player meets Dazzle (Figure 1), a prostitute who works at the Gomorrah casino. Wearing a black bra, short-shorts, and a collar,

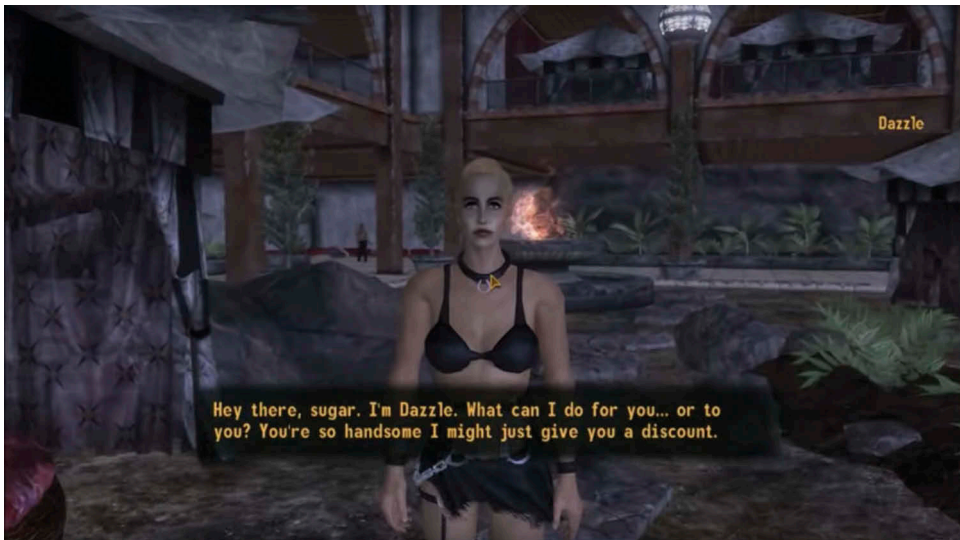


Figure 1. Dazzle, a sex worker in *Fallout: New Vegas*, offers the player-character a discount.

Dazzle greets the player by saying, “Hey there, sugar ... What can I do for you ... or to you? You’re so handsome, I might just give you a discount.”

This offer, to give the “handsome” player-character a reduced rate for sex, may seem like a calculated line, designed to drum up business with a generic compliment and the promise of a good deal. However, it quickly becomes clear that Dazzle’s offer is quite literal. The player can choose to have sex with Dazzle for a certain number of caps (*Fallout*’s in-game currency), and discounted rates are indeed available. By haggling, the player can quickly get the charge down from 100 to 50 caps. “Yeah, you are different than my usual guys,” Dazzle coos. Dazzle’s real function within the game—as is also the case for Joana, *Fallout: New Vegas*’ other sex worker character—is to pass off information the player-character needs to complete an upcoming quest. Whereas in some other mainstream games, where engaging with sex workers restores player health or improves other stats, sex itself in *Fallout: New Vegas* offers little practical reward for the player; the player-character does not need to interact with Dazzle sexually in order to receive this information. In this way, sex work in the game is double devalued. Not only can Dazzle’s services be purchased at a discount, but the game does not present these services as having intrinsic worth.

The devaluing of sex work through dialogue plays out in similar ways in the game *Sleeping Dogs*. *Sleeping Dogs* is an open-world game in which the player takes on the role of a Chinese-American police officer in present-day Hong Kong. Among the many businesses that dot the in-game city are massage parlors, where the player-character can stop for what is euphemistically referred to as “a little relief.” Women in understated yet revealing outfits stand in the street in front of the parlors; speech bubbles above their heads indicate that they are available for verbal interactions. At first glance, it would seem that sex work in *Sleeping Dogs*, as compared with that in *Fallout: New Vegas*, is indeed valued. Unlike in *Fallout: New Vegas*, where the player can haggle, in *Sleeping Dogs* the cost of a trip to the massage parlor (\$1,240 Hong Kong dollars) cannot be

negotiated. The player also draws value from the encounter, gaining points on a meter that correlates to the player-character's key abilities within the game.

However, the devaluing of sex work in *Sleeping Dogs* manifests not through the game's economy or its point systems, but through the language that surrounds the encounter between player-character and sex worker. One massage parlor employee, after receiving her payment, eyes the player-character and says, "Mmm, I may have to do a double session" (Figure 2). This suggests that she is so attracted to her client that she is considering doubling her labor at no extra charge. Another massage parlor worker, in the postcoital moments after she escorts the player-character back to the street, tells him, "I may just have to find a new job. You know what they say about coming with the customers"—suggesting that the player-character's sexual prowess is so great that it actually renders the sex worker unable to work. Thus, even though the player-character pays full price for sex in *Sleeping Dogs*, the value of sex work as work is undermined through these comments, which offer a sense of self-worth to the player-character at the (literal) expense of sex worker characters.

These two examples illustrate how the labor of sex workers is often devalued through dialog in mainstream video games. Yet, it is worth noting that, even as this work is devalued, these same verbal exchanges do make sex work as a financial exchange notably visible. In such moments, games like *Fallout: New Vegas* and *Sleeping Dogs* draw attention to the explicit relationship between sex and money. These sex worker characters are frank about the fact that their services have a cost—even if they then reduce that cost for the player-character. In these games, sex itself typically takes place behind the scenes; the player-character and the sex worker usually slip away from sight, or the screen goes momentarily black. By contrast, what takes place in the full light of day is the business exchange. In the place of seeing actual sex with sex workers represented in video games, what players really see is sex workers talking, collecting,



Figure 2. In *Sleeping Dogs*, a massage parlor worker suggests a "double session."

or foregoing payment. This makes the financial aspects of sex work as work explicit in these games, even as the value of that work is often undermined.

Getting your money back: devaluing sexual labor through interactive play

In addition to in-game dialogue, interactive elements of mainstream video games often contribute to their devaluing of sexual labor. This is nowhere more vividly illustrated than in the infamous *Grand Theft Auto* series. Sex workers have appeared in the *Grand Theft Auto* games beginning with *Grand Theft Auto III* (2001) and continuing through the most recent release in the series, *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013). No game series carries more baggage in popular culture than *Grand Theft Auto*. These games have been so widely and frequently cited as examples of violent content that the words “Grand Theft Auto” themselves have come to function as a synecdoche for problematic video games (Malika Saada Saar 2014; Simon Parkin 2013). The treatment of sex workers in the *Grand Theft Auto* games, which devalues not only their labor but also their right to life as human beings, has been a central theme in the debates that surround the series. Yet, the representation of sex workers in *Grand Theft Auto* games, while deplorable for its casual encouragement of violence against sex worker characters, is also more complicated than most critiques of the game have acknowledged. *Grand Theft Auto V*, for example, helpfully illustrates how a game can both value and radically devalue sex work through its interactive elements.

In *Grand Theft Auto V*, interactions that players have with sex workers can be broken into two main stages. In the first, sex work is directly associated with monetary value. To solicit a sex worker, a player pulls their car up to a line of women standing on the sidewalk. One woman will enter the car, and the player is prompted to drive to a secluded spot in order to avoid being seen. This is where the money talk begins. Rather than offering specific services, the sex worker asks the player-character whether he would like to spend \$50, \$70, or \$100 (Figure 3). These options appear plainly in the upper-left hand corner of the screen. Whichever amount the player selects is deducted from their running earnings. In the noninteractive sequence that follows, the player watches from a first-person view as the sex worker performs either oral or vaginal sex on the player-character. Here, there is no discussion of discounts or free services, though the sex worker’s midcoitus “dirty talk” does include seemingly tongue-in-cheek proclamations of the player-character’s exceptional sexual skill. In *Grand Theft Auto V*, sex workers mean business, and the only way to engage with their erotic labor is to pay them. These services in turn pay back the player with a rejuvenated health meter—a direct “value” assigned to the work of sex work.

However, if it initially seems like *Grand Theft Auto V* offers a more ethical vision of the client-worker exchange than the games described above, this is far from the case. The game’s initial valuing of sexual labor is quickly and dramatically disrupted by the second half of the player-character’s interaction with the sex worker. After a sex worker exits the vehicle, players are incentivized to follow her, kill her, and take their money back. Whereas, only moments before, the game assigned value to the labor of sex workers by requiring players to pay for their services, *Grand Theft Auto V* swiftly and decisively shifts to devaluing sex workers in the extreme, allowing players to strip them of both their pay and their lives. In this way, the *Grand Theft Auto* games invite players to play



Figure 3. Prices for a sex worker's services, clearly listed in *Grand Theft Auto V*.

out a cultural stigma that presents sex workers as disposable. Via the game's interactive affordances and economic systems, players are instructed to treat the bodies of sex workers as resources from which value can be extracted, whether in the form of sex or currency. We might say that this does not constitute a devaluing of sex work so much as an abject devaluing of the basic human rights of sex workers themselves. The potential negative impact of these representations on the real lives of actual sex workers is clear—not because committing violence against sex workers in a video game necessarily makes players more violent, but because it normalizes the deeply troubling belief that violence against sex workers is acceptable, “fun,” or even funny, and that sex workers themselves have no worth.

Grand Theft Auto V demonstrates how a video game's interactive elements can deeply affect its representation of sex workers. Games like this one invite players not simply to witness the devaluing of sexual labor, but to actively play *at* it. In such scenes, play becomes a form of practice: a rehearsal of cultural scripts, like the scripts that say that sex work does not deserve to be fairly compensated, that powerful, potent men do not pay for sex. and that those who exchange their sexual labor for money no longer enjoy status as equal human beings.

Fantasies of exceptionalism and constructs of masculinity

In addition to perpetuating harmful misconceptions about the value of sexual labor, the representations of sex workers in mainstream video games described here do a second form of cultural work: they promote a fantasy of exceptionalism. Within these games, the devaluing of sexual labor that manifests through both dialogue and interactive elements is used to make the player-character, and the player by extension, seem special: different, better, more desirable, and more intrinsically full of worth than those

around them. Some form of this fantasy is arguably at play in many types of video games, where player-characters are often given exceptional abilities to affect the game's narratives and environments. Yet, through the representation of sex workers in games like the ones described above, this fantasy takes on a direct expression; it is literalized, translated from an unspoken sense of superior self-worth into a value that can be measured in dollars and cents, and spent at the expense of sex worker characters. "You're so handsome, I might just give you a discount," says Dazzle in *Fallout: New Vegas*. The massage parlor worker in *Sleeping Dogs* proclaims, "I may just have to find a new job. You know what they say about coming with the customers." These compliments imply that the player-character is exceptionally good-looking or exceptionally good in bed—qualities that act like an inexhaustible currency that gives the player-character the ability to enlist sex workers without actually paying them or otherwise undermining their labor. Even *Grand Theft Auto V*, where the player-character must initially pay full price for sex, promotes its own version of the fantasy of exceptionalism. In the game, sex workers seem to be doing a thriving business; there are many of them, and they appear to have a codified pricing system that suggests a stable market of supply and demand. In short, lots of people in the *Grand Theft Auto* universe must be paying for sex. It is presumably only the player-character who is so exceptional that he can enact violence against sex workers, take his money back, and evade the law.

The fantasy of exceptionalism as it is offered through these games is directly linked to erotics. In these instances, the devaluing of sex workers' labor is deployed as evidence of the player-character's sexual potency. The extent to which the player-character is exceptional is the extent to which he is desirable—or, in place of his desirability, the extent to which he has the power to do harm and reclaim the money he has spent. To call this a "fantasy" of exceptionalism is not to dismiss it. Rather, I mean this idea of fantasy, with its sexual associations, literally. In the examples discussed here, to feel exceptional is a matter of desire: how much one desires, how much one is desired, how much one can fulfill those desires without paying in full. The devaluing of sex work becomes a means of quantifying that desire and its value. For a player-character, one's own self-worth can be measured in the amount of money that is *not* paid to the sex worker. This suggests an economics of erotics within video games of this sort where not just sex but also desirability and power move in systems of fungible exchange.

Recognizing this fantasy of exceptionalism also brings to the fore the importance of gender in representations of sex workers in AAA video games. It is no coincidence that so many of the sex worker characters seen in these games are women, or that the vast majority of games that include these characters have straight, cisgender male protagonists. The fantasy of exceptionalism that these games offer their players is itself highly gendered. Through their efforts to make player-characters seem special, they construct a specific vision of masculinity that they invite players to participate in—a masculinity that is fundamentally linked to the devaluing of sex work. The player-character's desirability, power over sex workers, and intrinsic self-worth is part of what makes him a "man." Specifically, the masculinity that the player-character enacts through these exchanges with sex workers is characterized by the fact that he does not "need" to pay for sex work. In this way, the representations of sex workers found in such games and the fantasies of exceptionalism they promote function as tools for establishing and upholding a masculinity that is already precarious, anxious, and constantly in need of reaffirmation. Write

Joseph A. Vandello, Jennifer K. Bosson, Dov Cohen, Rochelle M. Burnaford, and Jonathan R. Weaver, “Manhood, in contrast to womanhood, is seen as a precarious state requiring continual social proof and validation. Because of this precariousness ... men feel especially threatened by challenges to their masculinity” (2008, 1325). Along with many other representational and interactive elements, the devaluing of sex work in AAA video games offers players the opportunity to earn “social proof and validation,” both in-game and out, in the face of the unspoken threats these representations of women at work may themselves, ironically, pose to masculinity.

This idea about masculinity expressed through these games and others like them—that “real men” do not pay for sex—echoes hegemonic beliefs about gender from outside of their game worlds. Take, for example, a 2016 article titled “Why I Don’t Pay for Sex Work,” published at “The Good Men Project,” a website where men perform their “enlightened masculinity.” The author writes:

One of the reasons I have not been with a prostitute is because I never thought the women enjoyed it ... I want the woman to be with me because she wants to, not because of how much I am paying her ... I was having this discussion with a friend, trying to talk him out of paying for sex. I would say, “Dude, we are way too fly to be buying it” ... I feel that when a guy gets into the habit of paying for sex, it can do something to you. A voice in the back of your mind says you can’t get any better than a prostitute ... Your self-esteem lowers. (LeRon Barton 2016)

As this quote demonstrates, arguments about being a “real man” or a “good guy” that reject the notion of paying a sex worker for her labor are rarely grounded in moralistic imperatives (as often seen in the rhetoric of antisex work feminists). Rather, this quote speaks to a set of anxieties around the precarity of masculinity that are being expressed through questions of sex work. The author needs to see himself as desirable: “I want the woman to be with me because she wants to, not because of how much I am paying her.” He measures the worth of the men around him, as well as his own worth, against the money he would pay for sex; he and his friends are “too fly” to pay for sex—suggesting that, among a larger network of men who would perhaps “be with prostitutes,” they are themselves exceptional. If he did pay for sex, he imagines himself losing self-esteem. What kind of man would he be, he suggests, if he “can’t get any better than a prostitute?”

It is this precarious masculinity, always in need of being reasserted and reassured, that attempts to establish itself by playing at the devaluing of sex work in AAA video games. Male player-characters in these games do not need to worry about not being wanted or have low self-esteem. This is not because they refuse the services of sex workers, however, but rather because they do not pay sex workers for their labor. This allows these characters to seem both “gritty,” to use Sarkeesian’s word, and also like “good guys.” By not paying in-game sex workers for their work, these player-characters and the players who control them sidestep the ethical questions that paying for sex raises, allowing them to see themselves as “good” as well as exceptional. Far from making them particularly “good guys,” however, this attitude can be tied directly to toxic masculinity, which Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner in their work on the trending hashtag #MasculinitySoFragile describe as “a (heterosexual) masculinity that is threatened by anything associated with femininity” (Banet-Weiser and Miltner 2015,

171). In this sense, the experience of masculinity that these games offer by inviting their players to devalue sex work is constructed in direct opposition to the games' vision of femininity, embodied by women sex workers themselves and their associations with money. Women's work is getting paid for sex; real men, however, do not pay. The devaluing of sexual labor that takes place in these mainstream video games is doubling tied to precarity, then. These representations reflect the precarity of gaming masculinity. At the same time, by perpetuating the misconception that sex workers do not deserve financial compensation, it contributes to the precarity of real-life erotic labor.

Sex work in video games and the value of (digital) labor

To conclude, I turn to consider how we can both complicate and deepen this discussion of the representations of sex workers in mainstream video games by framing it through questions of labor, gender, and the digital. It is no coincidence that these examples of the devaluing of sexual labor can be found in video games. Indeed, the intersection of undervalued labor and the digital has emerged as a key site of study in contemporary scholarship around dynamics of agency, compensation, and exploitation. Work from scholars in this area also explicitly ties the practice of undervaluing labor in digital spaces to longstanding concerns around the devaluing of "women's work." Lisa Nakamura, for example, has written about how the undervalued labor of women, especially women of color, has made possible many of the technologies and online cultures that we have come to see as integral to the current landscape of digital media. Writes Nakamura, "Cheap female labor is the engine that powers the internet" (2015, 106). For Nakamura and others, video games are a common touchstone in debates around digital labor—whether these discussions address the labor of countering hate speech in online gaming communities, or "gold farmers" who labor within massively multiplayer online games, or the emerging class of Esports gamers who play video games professionally, blurring the divide between work and play (Kylie Jarrett 2014; T. L. Taylor 2009). Within these digital spheres, work that is coded as feminine is the most likely to go undervalued or uncompensated—or rendered invisible, as Amanda Menking and Ingrid Erickson have argued about women's affective labor on Wikipedia—continuing a history in which "women's work," seen as immaterial and nonmonetized, has gone unrecognized as labor (Menking and Erickson 2015; Jarrett 2014).

Placing the representations of sex workers in video games in dialogue with this nexus of gender, labor, and the digital suggests a number of additional avenues for identifying meaning within these representations. Such work highlights the gendered aspect of the devaluing of sex work in games and indicates that these representations should be understood within the context of the devaluing of women's work more broadly. As Nakamura writes, much of the uncompensated labor that women perform in digital spaces is categorized as "passion projects" or "passionate work," implying that the pleasures that women derive from this work should be their own compensation (2015, 106, 110). This concept of "passionate work" clearly resonates with the representation of sex workers in video games, as well as broader discriminatory attitudes toward sex work; devaluing sexual labor is seen as acceptable because the pleasures of sex should be their own reward. Scholarship on the labor and the digital also helpfully points toward the ways in which these representations of sex workers do their own work in upholding

hegemonic norms. As Kylie Jarrett writes, “Women’s work ... has historically involved the generation and maintenance of appropriate social and cultural dispositions ... [There are] myriad women who, in their role as domestic managers, mothers, or wives, quietly work to normalize a social and cultural standard of living” (Jarrett 2014, 22). The representations of sex workers in video games performs a parallel labor, in which discriminatory notions about the relationship between sex and money are performed, upheld, and renormalized through play.

Building from feminist media studies, scholarship around labor and the digital, porn studies, and sex workers rights activists, this work stands as a call to establish alternative feminist perspectives within game studies. In contrast to existing predominant feminist attitudes toward the representation of sex workers in video games, these alternative perspectives push back against harmful misconceptions about marginalized subjects in games, recentering and revaluing the work of these individuals rather than characterizing them merely as objectified, victimized, and in need of saving. By critiquing representations of sex workers through the lens of labor politics, this work has sought to both articulate and deconstruct the common practice of devaluing sexual labor in games, whether it manifests through in-game dialogue or interactive play elements. In contributing to a fantasy of male exceptionalism, these representations of sex workers speak to a precarious masculinity reflected and enacted in video games. This masculinity establishes its own self-worth through the denial of the worth of erotic labor—part of a larger culture of toxic masculinity within games today as well as broader cultural attitudes that devalue the work of sex work. Ultimately, addressing the labor politics of these representations is an important part of a larger feminist project, one that stands behind those who perform sex work and the value of their labor, both as it is done in the world and as it is represented through media forms like video games.

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Notes on contributor

Bonnie Ruberg is an assistant professor of Informatics at the University of California, Irvine. She received her Ph.D. from UC Berkeley with emphases in New Media and Gender and Sexuality Studies and completed a postdoctoral scholarship at the University of Southern California in the Interactive Media & Games Division. She is the coeditor of the volume *Queer Game Studies* (2017) and the author of the forthcoming monograph *Playing Queer: Sexuality, Gender, and Identity in Video Games beyond Representation*. E-mail: bruberg@uci.edu

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