

Grannies against Militarized Masculinity. Inspecting Target Audiences in Video Game History through Large-scale Marketing Analysis

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This article centers printed adverts as a privileged corpus of documents in the inspection of video game history. In the context of a research project examining the cultural history of video games, our team coded thousands of adverts published over 34 years in *Computer and Video Games* (6216 adverts) and *Level* (1424 adverts) in order to document the evolution of marketing discourse and target audiences. The article provides some answers to the following research questions: who are the privileged audiences of mainstream video games? What can be said of the other visible audiences left at the margin? How do these marketed audiences evolve in time? And with what messages are they addressed? The article also provides an overview of the intricate coding methods developed by the research team to provide reliable statistical results and highlight the use of dedicated visualization tools guiding our inspection of the data and historical observations. The data emerging from this process allowed us to revisit the dominant cultural paradigm of “militarized masculinity” (Kline et al., 2003), providing more specific information about target audiences and recurring messages. This large-scale analysis also provides the necessary context to present close readings of adverts featuring one of the least prevalent target audiences in magazines: elderly women.

CCS CONCEPTS • Marketing studies • Video game history • Paratext

Additional Keywords and Phrases: Videogame history, Marketing, Gender studies, Ageing studies

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of paratext has attracted a lot of attention in the field of game studies in the past 15 years (Švelch, 2020). In 2017, (Consalvo, 2017) argued that video games should be de-centered in favor of a wider understanding of how people engage with gaming culture, notably in the context of streamers. Building on Jean Baudrillard’s study of consumer society (1968), (Therrien and Lefebvre 2017) made a similar argument about the central role of advertising in our collective appreciation of game culture. As the title of the 2017 *Kinephanos* special issue proclaimed, adjusting a famous Electronic Arts tagline, “It’s [not just] in the game” (Vollans et al., 2017). Regina Seiwald and Ed Vollans went one step further in the edited collection (*NOT in the Game*), in which even history can be read as a sort of paratextual element in a series of “networked texts” (2023). Many of these peripheral texts could be analyzed as props in a form of proxy-play, since they provide access to many games that we might not have the time to experience otherwise. In this article, we seek to center adverts as a privileged corpus of documents in our inspection of video game history, and more specifically the cultural associations emerging in these documents between target audiences and framing messages.

In the last ten years, historical contributions in game studies have made good use of paratextual or peritextual documents to extend our understanding of the medium’s history (Kirkpatrick, 2015; Newman, 2018; McDivitt, 2020; Cote 2020). The video game magazine – in itself an assemblage of networked texts such as previews, reviews and adverts into one convenient and engaging format – has been analyzed from multiple perspectives in the edited collection *Lire les magazines de jeu vidéo* (Ammouche and Dozo, 2022). Many authors from this collection have developed mixed quantitative and qualitative methods in order to explore these expansive networks of texts.¹ In the context of a research project examining the cultural history of video games, our team coded thousands of adverts published over 34 years in *Computer and Video Games* (6216 adverts) and *Level* (1424 adverts) in order to document the evolution of marketing discourse and target audiences. The goal of this project was to develop methods to provide consistent empirical data pertaining to cultural inquiries, and more specifically to answer the following research questions: who are the privileged audiences of mainstream video games? What can be said of the other visible audiences left at the margin? How do these audiences evolve over time? And with what messages are they addressed?

After presenting relevant academic contributions to properly frame and understand our data in the next section, this article will provide a detailed overview of methods in the third section, from the project’s intercoder validation process to its novel data analysis assisted by visualization tools. We seek to emphasize the development of these intricate methods as a contribution in itself, and the relevance of data visualization to monitor the prevalence of specific cultural frames and target audiences in history. The statistics emerging from our inspection have allowed us to revisit the dominant cultural paradigm of “militarized masculinity” (Kline et al., 2003), providing relevant data to analyze specific components and significant historical changes in this paradigm. These results will be presented and articulated with relevant literature in the fourth section.

¹ See, in particular, Bernard Perron and Christopher Ravenelle’s chapter on the form of review systems, Björn-Olav Dozo and Yannick Rochat’s network analysis of professionals in the press sector, and Boris Krywicki, Pierre-Yves Hurel, François-Xavier Surinx and Sophie Bémelmans’ contribution on the visibility of homebrew games (2022).

In the fifth section, this large-scale analysis will provide the necessary context to introduce a few close readings of adverts featuring one of the least prevalent target audiences in magazines: elderly women.

2 ACADEMIC CONTEXT: MEDIATION OF IDENTITY AND GENDER IN VIDEO GAME CULTURE

Our main corpus of adverts emerges from the pages of *Computer and Video Games* (henceforth *C&VG*), one of the earliest and longest running magazines in the field with more than 270 issues printed from 1981 up until 2004.² After gaining widespread adoption in the United Kingdom, *C&VG* was widely circulated in Europe, acting as a global ambassador surfing on the early waves of the domestic video game craze. In his article “The Britishness of ‘British Video Games’,” (Webber 2018) presents the evolution of cultural policy around video games in the United Kingdom. The author points out how this new industry in the 1980s came to play a role in the promotion of the State; British video game culture acted as a form of soft power, prolonging strategies of cultural diplomacy established in the film sector. Beyond the distant reading of a dominant gamer identity that emerges from our large-scale review, our paper will also offer a closer reading of adverts emerging from UK studios and circulated primarily in this region, revealing specific sociopolitical tensions.

Inspecting the development of technological habitus in UK bedrooms during the same period, Alex Wade highlights the role of magazines in ethnographic studies of children socialization. In this “home-from-home,” girls discussed topics and shared fantasies by looking at the latest issue of *Jackie* magazine, while boys would be more likely to perform solitary play in the same space (Wade, 2016, p. 61-62). Wade emphasizes the gender implications of different play contexts: the “home environment, being a place where females co-create and congregate is viewed as preferable to the testosterone darkness and threat posed by the arcade [...] and therefore a more suitable setting for children – of both sexes – to play video games” (2016, p. 63). In this domestic space, girls enjoyed competitive video games with their siblings and parents, and some corporations like Atari targeted them directly in printed adverts or TV commercials.³ In the pages of the specialized video game press, however, the gender disparity increased. This gap becomes most evident in our analysis of printed adverts, in which the prevalence of masculine figures over feminine figures at times reaches a ratio of over 12 to 1.

The cultural paradigm of “militarized masculinity,” defined from a historical perspective in *Digital Play* (Kline et al., 2003), has been productive for scholars studying core audiences and gender in video games. Many contributions from *Masculinities in Play* (Taylor and Voorhees, 2018) build on this concept, most notably Aaron Trammel’s chapter “Militarism and Masculinity in *Dungeons & Dragons*.” Trammel

² Our team had access to all *C&VG* issues from 1981 to 2000, five issues from 2001 (issues 230, 231, 232, 239 and 240), and a few other issues in the following years: issue 246 (2002) and issue 277 (2004).

³ To learn more about the rise of video games in American arcades, including gender dynamics, see *Coin-Operated Americans* (Kocurek, 2015). Erica Sharrer (2004) provides an overview of video game usage in light of gender and age at the onset of the 21st century in the domestic context. *New Media & Society* recently published *The virtual census 2.0*, presenting similar data emerging from the analysis of major releases in 2017 (Jones et al., 2025).

highlights how this paradigm was already established in the culture of tabletop role-playing games, and the struggle to become more inclusive: “For all of the great strides that *Dungeons & Dragons* has made in promoting a more inclusive player base, this sense of inclusivity problematically reaffirms the patriarchal, militaristic, and masculine structures of our society.” (2018, p. 129) More recently, a RUSI investigation led by Jessica White on radicalization through gaming culture, built from a large survey with 2200 respondents in seven countries and the inspection of 15 million user posts on Steam, points to the prevalence of radical messages emphasizing misogyny and the social contagion of exclusionary attitudes associated with the gamer identity (White et al., 2024).

The large inventory of adverts we have coded supports the global gender bias identified by scholarly literature, providing more specific quantitative observations about the dominance of militarized masculinity, and the relative marginalization of other groups and themes. Our methods also make it easier to discover exceptions to these norms both in terms of micro-trends and individual cases. After introducing the methods of this project and the results from our inventory, we will perform closer readings of a few adverts featuring older women, one of the most invisible groups in this marketing culture.

3 METHOD DEVELOPMENT

In a similar large-scale study of adverts, Erica Scharrer points out that analyzing marketed messages is fundamentally different than analyzing the promoted object; “An advertisement for a video game is likely to depict the most exciting, stimulating, potentially provocative, and attention-grabbing elements or representations of the game,” she writes (2004, p. 398). Our inspection reveals that adverts often include framing messages that are not relevant to the experience of the game at all. As we made clear in the introduction, we consider printed video game marketing an ideal object to study the evolution of video game culture, even a central type of document to inspect in order to reconstruct intended audiences. Adverts can be found easily in the pages of numerous magazines from the specialized press, whose business model relied on the inclusion of publicity pages to a large extent. *C&VG* was selected because it is one of the longest running dedicated magazines and platform agnostic (meaning multiple brands of computers and consoles could be featured in its pages). In order to expand on the timeframe even more, we collaborated with another team in Czechia, who agreed to replicate the methods described below for the *Level* magazine (from 1995 to 2015). Since the project received funding for a five-year period, our team had the time and the means to develop intricate methods, seeking to achieve an extensive inventory of adverts and high agreement score between all the coders involved. Every advert of at least one-quarter page in size was inventoried and coded in both magazines.⁴ In effect, we did not create randomized samples for every year to document the evolution of these concepts; we coded a large number of relevant historical documents, achieving significant statistical strength.

⁴ This minimal advert size emerged from a simple criterion of relevance: most of the time, smaller adverts didn’t feature clear information about target audiences or the marketing frames we were looking for.

3.1 Structuring a Codebook

Inspired by the work of Dmitri Williams (2003) and Graeme Kirkpatrick (2015), we developed a codebook dedicated to the analysis of printed video game adverts, through the notions of target audiences and types of messages framing the games. In his study of the emergence of gameplay appreciation in video game magazines, Kirkpatrick highlighted the emergence of sexist elements in the timeframe and magazines he inspected (2015, chapter 5). Building on the concerns about marginalization found in game studies literature, our codebook included common demographics categories for gender expression, age groups and ethnicity. It also integrated over 20 typical framing discourses found in printed adverts, hoping to establish correlations between the two. These framing messages echo ongoing discussions in game studies; to give but a few examples, the notion of “damsel in distress,” the holy grail of “immersion,” or the community’s “canonization” of specific games are all featured in our codebook.⁵

Framing discourses were defined both from the bottom-up, by inspecting hundreds of adverts from several magazines in order to uncover recurring elements, and top-down, through a literature review of publications on the historical study of video games to highlight relevant notions (Therrien and Lefebvre, 2017). As we hinted above, the coding system includes many concepts inspired by the notion of militarized masculinity. Our extensive dataset allowed us to monitor the evolution of target audiences for this cultural paradigm and its co-occurrence with specific framing devices such as “bellicosity” (representation of armed conflict), player “antagonization” (through textual mentions such as “you cannot beat this game!”), and “sexualization” of women (suggestive pose or clothing, or partial nudity). At the same time, we wanted to stay open to the possibility of finding additional cultural paradigms by defining frames that appear as direct opposites to this culture of militarized masculinity; “cuteness” and “accessibility” for instance can be seen as antithetical to “bellicosity” and “antagonization” (respectively). Instead of presenting all the concepts in this section, we will introduce demographic categories and framing discourses throughout the results and discussion sections.

3.2 Training and Intercode Agreement

This section introduces our training procedure and intercode validation process, developed under the supervision of the Mathematics and Statistics department consultant’s office at Université de Montréal. Initial training between two coders led to the refinement of our conceptual base on the Notion platform (including definitions, textual and visual examples, and exclusions). This tool has been essential to handle the numerous ambiguous cases present in our corpus, mitigating the impacts of coder hesitation. We will introduce some interesting borderline cases that led to the refinement of our methods in the next section.

⁵ The full codebook, featuring both textual and visual examples, can be accessed on the Notion platform: <https://even-gull-326.notion.site/Videogame-Marketing-Analysis-2abebbf97fd9819088c5dd281feefebc>

Every region was assigned two coders who were trained in three separate phases.⁶ In phase one, coders were sent a document describing the research project, providing guidelines concerning the advert coding process and how to use our online platform, as well as definitions and examples for the different marketing frames and demographics to analyze. The principal investigator and coordinator then met with each team of coders to go over the document, make sure there were no ambiguities, and answer questions. Test coding was conducted using three sets of ten adverts (randomly selected) created by the project coordinator; coders were sent the same set of ads and would analyze them separately. Once coding was completed, the project lead and coordinator would meet with the coders to compare the results for each advert and discuss discrepancies. The online platform Notion allowed us to create a wiki and ensure we could rapidly and effectively amend and clarify definitions in order to help coders disambiguate borderline cases.

The data entry interface used for the first phase of training is the same that was used to code all relevant adverts in the project. For each ad, coders would complete a data sheet (see Figure 1), first filling in the general information (year and month of publication, the issue and page number, the name of the developers and publishers of the game, etc.), and then paying particular attention to the framing discourse and demographic information about target audiences. This category was subdivided into three, reflecting an important observation emerging from our corpus: actual target audiences are rarely represented directly in adverts. On top of depicted players, we decided to note down demographic information about presumed protagonist(s), and other accentuated character(s). For example, the advert for *Wolfenstein 3D* (figure 1) features “bellicosity” (the characters are holding weapons); “power fantasy” (the presumed protagonist is muscular); “industrial rivalry” (the text under the first screenshot from the top belittles a competitor – “technically it spits over the 3D sections of *Jurassic Park*”); and “hyperviolence” (the text under the third screenshot from the top mentions “lots of blood”). In terms of demographics, both the presumed protagonist and the other accentuated characters can be related to the “adult,” “masculine,” and “ethnic majority” categories.

The ultimate phase of training was designed with the goal of calculating agreement scores according to the kappa index, following recommendations from the consultant office. Three kappa tests were created, each consisting of 40 to 46 adverts. These were not randomly selected; in order to evaluate agreement globally, we needed to make sure that each code in our book was present in at least 10% and up to 90% of the selected adverts.⁷ Once a primary list of ads was amassed, the project coordinator would code the

⁶ C&VG was coded by Laïla Courchesne and Samuel Poirier-Poulin, under the supervision of Carl Therrien and Dany Guay-Bélanger. The Czech magazine *Level* was coded by Jan Houška and Klára Kropáčková under the supervision of Jaroslav Švelch, Therrien and Guay-Bélanger.

⁷ Due to the large number of frames encompassed in this project (21 marketing frames and 9 demographic categories), staying away from extremes was not fully possible. Some less popular frames were represented much closer to the minimum of 10%, while others were extremely common and were therefore overrepresented compared to less popular ones. For instance, in the third kappa test, which consisted of 40 ads, the “canonisation” and “cuteness” frames only appeared five and six times respectively, while technological attraction and bellicosity both appeared twenty-five times.

adverts, counting each frame and demographic category, adding or removing adverts in order to keep the test within these parameters, and as short as possible. The coding of each test was then revised by the principal investigator, leading to a few adjustments in discussion with the coordinator.

Figure 1: Data entry sheet for the *Wolfenstein 3D* advert (id Software, 1994) *Computer and Video Games* 147 (February 1994), 55. Available online via *The Internet Archive*

Finally, each test would be sent to the research assistants who coded the adverts without consulting each other. Once completed, results were sent to the statistical consultant office, which would make calculations and send a report on intercoder agreement. For these tests, a kappa score over 0.6 is considered “substantial” (Landis and Koch, 1977), and this is the minimum agreement we wanted to achieve for this project. Overall, the agreement scores were very high, and having three separate tests over the course of the project allowed us to make sure these scores remained above 0.6. Several of the marketing frames and demographics categories had a kappa index of over 0.8, which is considered to be almost perfect agreement, and this was even more common among the Czech coders.

3.3 Borderline Revisions

In the course of the three kappa tests, when a concept agreement score dipped below 0.6, the project lead and coordinator met with coders to review their understanding of specific frames and categories, addressing lingering misconceptions to quickly move forward with coding. We also designed two procedures to improve agreement for the frames with scores under kappa 0.6 to make sure our datasets remained highly reliable.

The first procedure follows the most common practice in case of coder disagreement: our team of coders met and reviewed relevant adverts together. For instance, the “antagonization” frame scored lower than substantial agreements during one of the early intercoder tests. The two coders met and inspected all ads for which one of them had noted this code. They discussed each case until they agreed, modifying the advert’s coding if necessary. In addition, since an important source of discrepancy came from omissions due to coding fatigue, we designed a second procedure to refine the dataset: in order to find missing occurrences, an OCR-converted digital version of *C&VG* was inspected using a controlled vocabulary associated with every concept.⁸

It is important to acknowledge that it was not always possible to reach perfect agreement for every advert. While relatively rare, borderline cases provide fascinating examples from our corpus, and so we take the time to analyse a few of them in this section. In the advert for *Spot* (see Figure 2), it is impossible to infer the gender, age or ethnicity for the protagonist, but the dominant gender bias in video game culture might lead some viewers to see the figure as male. This is a rare occurrence; in general, even abstract creatures, such as the protagonists from *Adventures of Lolo* or *Kirby Superstar* (HAL laboratory, 1989 and 1996 respectively) communicate gender information through simple cultural or linguistic codes (name, color or pronouns, for instance). Furthermore, the frames “remediation” and “immersion” are both present according to our coding criteria due to the visual depiction of film stock and the textual emphasis on the addicting nature of the game. It is not as clear, however, if the frame “cuteness” should be associated with this ad. The character has an “O” shaped body, which is one of the main defining elements of this frame, but it does not fall perfectly within the kawaii aesthetics since the eyes are hidden by sunglasses.

The ad for *Winter Olympics* (see Figure 3) is another interesting case in relation to gender expression. When we discussed this advert during a team meeting, we realized that the gender of the skater on the right was perceived quite differently: for two team members, the skater was clearly a masculine character, for one team member it was a feminine character, and for the last team member it was ambiguous. This situation highlights the complexity of gender expression and how difficult it can be to determine the gender of a fictional character.⁹ We ultimately decided to put the tag “other gender expression” for this specific occurrence. It is also worth mentioning that the two pages of the magazine on which this ad appears are not exactly the same color, probably a consequence of the scanning process; it is easy to imagine how this discrepancy could influence how we perceive the ethnicity of a character.

⁸ These controlled vocabularies are also included on the project’s Notion for each concept.

⁹ In their article “Counting Queerness in Games: Trends in LGBTQ Digital Game Representation, 1985–2005”, Adrienne Shaw and her collaborators highlight this challenge and their time-consuming methodological workaround: “our coders were focused on what interpretations fans and producers have offered for the characters’ sexualities and gender, in addition to representational codes used within the games” (Shaw et al., 2019, p. 1550).



Figure 2: Advert for *Spot* (Virgin, 1990) *Computer Gaming World* 72 (June 1990), 10. Available online via *The Internet Archive*

A last example worth mentioning comes from the advert for *Resident Evil: Code Veronica X* (see Figure 4). The scene features a mother talking on the phone and playing with her baby, while a father is reading the newspaper. As the advert states, this represents “Life without Resident Evil.” Based on our coding criteria, we should consider the mother, the father, and the child as the target audience for this game, but doing so feels counterintuitive. As a team, we wondered if the tag “adolescent” should be used instead, since the advert evokes the common teenage goal of withdrawing from habitual family sociality to experience the true exciting bits of life afforded by video games. Despite being an interesting guess, such an analysis gives too much space to the coder’s interpretation of the ad compared to what we have done for the other documents in this project.



Figure 3: Advert for *Winter Olympics: Lillehammer* (U.S. Gold, 1993) *Computer and Video Games* 147 (February 1994), 2-3. Available online via *The Internet Archive*

4 RESULTS: MASCULINITY CHARACTERIZED AT A DISTANCE

Scharrer's study of video game marketing, focussing on three North American magazines in circulation at the beginning of the 21st century,¹⁰ concluded that masculine figures outnumbered feminine ones by a ratio of more than three to one (2004, p. 403). Our project sought to provide more specific information about the role of characters featured in an advert. For example, a damsel in distress presented in the background, or in a textual description, cannot hold the same significance as the central heroic figure taking up more space on the page. This illustrates the relevance of the distinction between "presumed protagonist" and "other accentuated characters" (as mentioned in the methods section), which led to a major finding: considering the presumed protagonist category specifically, the actual ratio of adverts featuring a masculine vs. a feminine central figure went up to 12,5 to 1 in *C&VG* (see Table 1). A timeline view leads to a slightly more positive observation: the overall prevalence grew from the early 1980s, to a spike of almost 19% in 2000 (see Figure 5).

¹⁰ Scharrer focused on the adverts from *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *Game Now* and *Game Informer* (six issues for each magazine, leading to 1054 adverts).

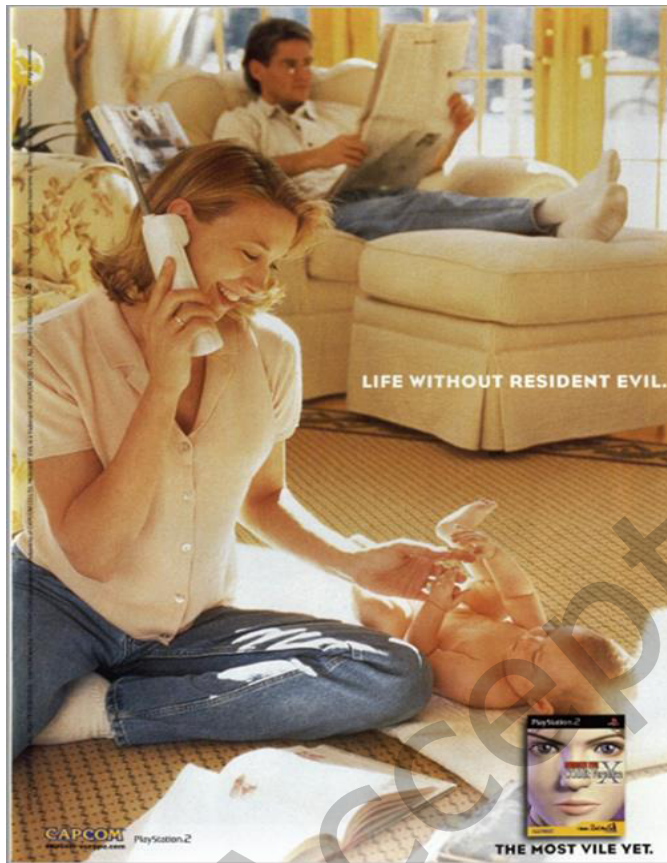


Figure 4: Advert for *Resident Evil: Code: Veronica X* (Capcom, 2001) *Computer and Video Games* 239 (October 2001), 19. Available online via *The Internet Archive*

Table 1: Masculine vs. Feminine presumed protagonist(s) in our corpus

Category: presumed protagonist(s)	<i>Computer and Video Games</i> (1981-2004)	<i>Level</i> (1995-2015)
Masculine gender expression	50%	55%
Feminine gender expression	4%	11%
Ratio	12,5 – 1	5 – 1

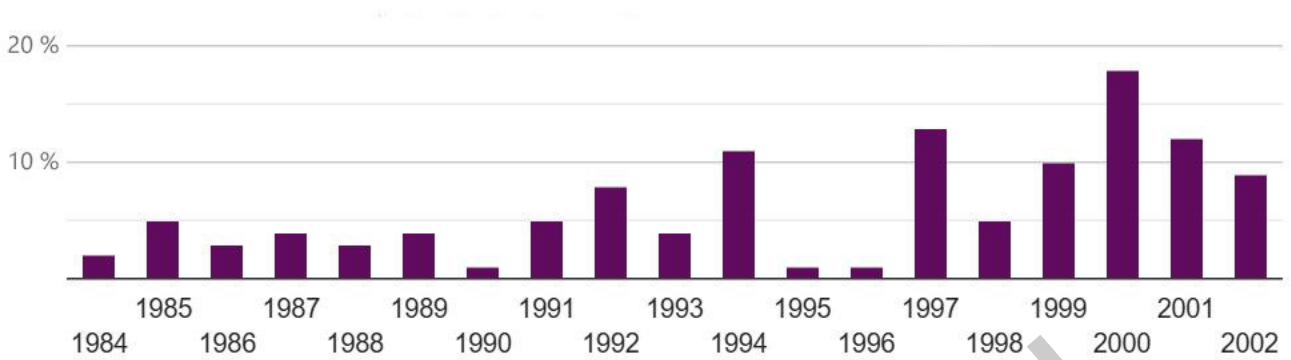


Figure 5: Timeline view of feminine presumed protagonist(s) in *Computer and Video Games*

Another aspect worth noting from our inspection in *C&VG* is the similar discrepancy between “ethnic majority” (understood as white / European passing; 41% of the adverts) vs. “visible minority” protagonists (which encompasses all characters featuring any other ethnic signifier; 5% of the adverts). For the latter, we note a spike in the early 1990s up to 12%, thanks to popular sport franchises, as well as the *Prince of Persia* franchise (Brøderbund Software) and *The Bruce Lee Story* video game adaptation (Virgin Interactive). One of the most interesting observations comes from our subdivision of the age demographic into four groups. While the video game sector and by extension its specialized press are commonly associated with younger demographics up until the mid-1990s, our data indicates a clear prevalence of adult figures, in both magazines (see Table 2). Of course, adults were also part of the target audiences, especially for computer games, but these numbers are a clear indication of the fantasized adulthood enacted on these publicity pages.

Table 2: Age groups for presumed protagonists

Category: presumed protagonist	<i>Computer and Video Games</i> (1981-2004)	<i>Level</i> (1995-2015)
Adult	44%	61%
Child + adolescent	5%	5%
Senior	2%	1%

These findings are consistent with elements analyzed by Trammel (2018) in the realm of tabletop role-playing games. According to the author, the depicted social order in *D&D* rulebooks affords players an imaginary world in which they have access to social and economic power, features of an adult life (2018, p. 140). Trammel’s analysis emphasizes the patriarchal aspects of the original rulebooks; players “are assumed

to be male, interacting in a world where men are the primary social actors” and they “are given the agency to act through violent and sexual fantasies with rules that focus on combat and construct women as seductresses looking to control men” (2018, p. 137). Both violent combat and sexualization of women were accounted for in our study. In the two magazines, “bellicosity” was, by far, the most common frame integrated in adverts (see Table 3). As we noted above, multiple frames were included in our codebook in order to expand on militarized masculinity, and four of the most prevalent frames in *C&VG* can be associated with this cultural paradigm: bellicosity (49%), technological attraction (27%), power fantasy (15%), and antagonization (15%). One of the most interesting observations comes from the fact that six of the most prevalent frames are the same in the two magazines we have analyzed, that is to say, in two different European regions, and in two timeframes (with an overlap of nine years out of 34). This indicates that marketing culture in printed adverts was highly mimetic for a long period of time.

As one can see in the second section of Table 3, some of the dominant frames were not as prevalent in both magazines, indicating potential historical evolutions. The practice of taunting (“antagonization”), inherited from the culture of sports and common in the context of arcade and online competition, follows a fairly steady decline in the pages of *C&VG* (from 30% to 2% in 2000), and is less significant in the Czech magazine.¹¹ This surprising change could be related to the rise of casual gaming and cooperative game design in video game history (Juul, 2012; Therrien, 2014), but our data also indicates consistent low scores for the frame of “accessibility” (coded when an advert emphasizes the game’s casual appeal, or targets family audiences) in both magazines (respectively 2% and 3%). In 2003, the authors of *Digital Play* noted that game makers competed to gain market shares by integrating gruesome violence (Kline et al., 2003, p. 251), which indeed peaked at 12% in 1996 (*C&VG*) with notable adverts for *Worms* (Team 17) and *Final Doom* (id Software), and then at 32% in 2011 (*Level*). It is interesting to articulate these results with Scharrer’s (2004) findings emerging from the United States in the early 2000s. In our European corpus, “hyperviolence” remains marginal overall (6%), especially considering the number of games/adverts focusing on armed conflict; in North American magazines, Scharrer found that 29.8% of her sample integrated blood (2004, p. 403), one of the main elements associated with hyperviolence in our codebook.

¹¹ It should be noted that outside of our corpus, inside real or virtual video game arcades and arenas, the practice of taunting or trash-talking led to infamous episodes of harassment and exclusionary attitudes towards marginalized people, including female players. See [Harper, 2014](#), and Witkowski, 2018.

Table 3: Most prevalent frames in our corpus¹²

Most prevalent framing discourses	<i>Computer and Video Games</i> (1981-2004)	<i>Level</i> (1995-2015)	<i>Percentage from all adverts</i>
Most Prevalent frames			
Bellicosity	49%	63%	51%
Immersion	26%	34%	27%
Technological attraction	27%	21%	26%
Power fantasy	15%	22%	16%
Recognition from the press	14%	10%	14%
Cuteness	12%	11%	12%
Prevalent frames with significant discrepancy between the magazines (2x or more)			
Antagonization	15%	7%	14%
Notoriety (creator)	15%	5%	13%
Canonization	7%	15%	8%
Sexualization	5%	10%	6%
Hyperviolence	5%	14%	6%

¹² These numbers are not limited to adverts featuring a masculine protagonist: they reflect the number of adverts containing these frames from the totality of the corpus. In a context where men are targeted so heavily, the prevalence of certain themes in the whole corpus can also be related to this audience, even if it is not always targeted directly by an ad.

Table 4: Overview of target audience demographics in *Computer and video Games*

	Depiction of target audiences	Presumed protagonist	Other accentuated characters
Masculine	2%	50%	26%
Feminine	1%	4%	11%
Other gender expression	0%	0%	0%
Ethnic majority	2%	41%	23%
Visible minority	0%	5%	5%
Child	2%	3%	1%
Adolescent	1%	2%	1%
Adult	2%	44%	25%
Senior	1%	2%	2%

Going back to gender concerns, the frame of “damsel in distress,” still prevalent in recent academic discussions (Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant, 2017; Droumeva, 2018; McDivitt, 2020) and in our historical imagination through major video game franchises, is not as visible as expected (3% of adverts in *C&VG*; only 1% in *Level*). Similarly, our initial hypothesis was that the “sexualization” of feminine figures would score much higher (5% in *C&VG*). However, it is interesting to relate this frame directly to feminine protagonists on a timeline; Figure 6 reveals that these powerful heroines appear to address the heterosexual male gaze to a large extent for some years, and not at all for others.¹³ Sexualization was featured more frequently in the pages of *Level* from 1997 onwards, peaking just above 15% in 2003.

¹³ For a detailed historical overview on the relationship between sexualization of feminine figures and game graphics, see Mejia and LeSavoy (2018)

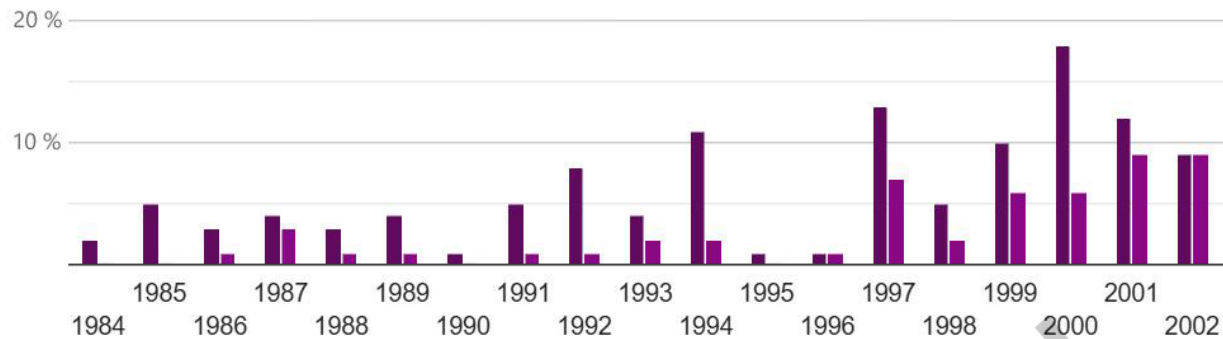


Figure 6: Timeline view from *Computer and Video Games*. The first column highlights feminine protagonists and the second the percentage of sexualization featured in this subset of adverts

In short, the imaginary ideal audience of video games in our main corpus (*C&VG*) could be described as masculine, white, with a keen interest for technologically advanced, immersive power fantasies into competitive armed conflict, featuring cute creatures occasionally. The portrait evolves, including more gruesome and sexualized depictions, if we look at the *Level* corpus up to 2015. Obviously, over the years, a lot of people have enjoyed video games featuring these elements, despite their association with white masculinity. Yet, as Table 4 highlights, few other groups were officially invited to play along.

Our historical findings provide an interesting counterpoint to Scharrer's (2004) synchronic study of magazine adverts at the beginning of the 2000s. In the main corpus of *C&VG*, our inspection reveals a stronger prevalence of militarized masculinity as embodied in the figure in the presumed protagonist, and a comparative scarcity of sexualized feminine figures. Our data seems to echo the marginalization and invisibilization of women in this marketing culture, more than a systemic use of their attributes to attract heterosexual male players. However, results emerging from *Level* (from 1995 to 2015) do point towards the same direction as Scharrer's study when it comes to the rise of hyperviolence and sexualization. It is possible that these results simply reflect the target audience's coming of age in the early 2000s, when a majority of players were adults. Another hypothesis is that marketing culture in the United States was more permissive around this pivotal moment. More research on video game adverts will be useful to document the historical evolution of these elements, which now appear widespread in the marketing of popular media.

In the final discussion section of this paper, we introduce one of the least prevalent target audiences in our corpus – elderly women – in order to analyze how this improbable figure offers a fascinating counterpoint to the mainstream gamer marketed identity presented above.

5 READING CLOSELY WITH THE GRANNIES

Trammel's inspection of the original *D&D* rulebooks, and more specifically of the infamous Harlot table (2018, p. 138-139), highlights how women were mostly conceived as antagonists, as side characters defined

by their marital relations with men, or simply as juvenile sex objects. All these figures became visible through our inspection of other accentuated characters, but none of them could be said to be prevalent in our corpus. While the Harlot table mentions aged or “elderly madam” only in passing, our inspection reveals a more versatile, polysemic figure.

One of the first games in history to feature a playable elderly woman might be Andrew Morton’s *Granny*, one of several amateur games that existed as code printed on the pages of magazines in the early 1980s, waiting to be copied on one’s personal computer. This original title is heavily inspired by *Frogger*, as the author openly admits in a long introductory description. Many images are scattered over the four pages featuring the complete code (see Figure 7).¹⁴ The cheerful protagonist is depicted through a series of interlocked “O” shapes, following the conventions of the Disney style. This granny, in fact, would be a perfect example for the frame of “cuteness.” The quality of these drawings shows the amount of care that would go into the promotion of amateur games in the specialized press of the early 1980s. Melanie Swalwell has documented extensively how early magazines were an essential medium for the development of homebrew game making, spreading knowledge in the community and acting as an invitation to code (2021).

The main reference to British national identity in our corpus came in the shape of a powerful adult woman, Margaret Thatcher, who is featured in a few games including another print-to-play exclusive (*Election*, by M. J. Coates; see Figure 8). Here again, the quality of the featured image is remarkable. Thatcher appears to be holding the keys to 10 Downing Street with a grin on her face, casting her as the antagonist. Her attire clearly refers to her social class, and of course this is significant in the context of social conflicts of the mid-1980s in the United Kingdom.¹⁵ As Wade (2016) explains, many games from the United Kingdom engaged in all sorts of interactive political satire at the time. For instance, the creators of *Hampstead* (Trevor Lever and Peter Jones, 1984) went on record to say that this social elevation text adventure game was designed to caricature the high water mark of Thatcherism; they “were convinced that it was the most anti-commercial game that they could conceive, yet publishers queued to sign it to their portfolio, and it won awards on its release” (Wade, 2016, p. 135). Thatcher would appear as the “bad guy” in other critical games of the time, such as the eco-conscious title *Seaside Special* (Taskset, 1984).

¹⁴ While these sections are not officially adverts, in the sense of an editorial epitext as defined by Genette (2002 [1987]), we have decided to include them since their form is very similar to the form of the adverts studied throughout this paper, and because it affords the discovery of many games that would otherwise disappear completely from view, such as this early granny video game.

¹⁵ Wade emphasizes these tensions several times in *Playback*, evoking the “city riots of the early 1980s, where individual and group retorts to what were perceived as state and institutional impingement on everyday life, in ways of working, expressions of ethnicity and traditional hierarchies” (2016, p.129)



Figure 8: Printed code for *Election* by M. J. Coates *Computer and Video Games* 18 (April 1983), 48-49, 51-52. Available online via *The Internet Archive*

Another interesting takeaway from our study pertains to the subversion of the stereotypical gamer identity we have presented throughout this paper. In a few adverts, elderly women are associated directly with a thirst for hyperviolence (*Mad Martha*, Saturn developments, 1983; *Championship Wrestling*, Free Radical Software, 1986; *The Addams Family: Puggsley's Scavenger Hunt*, Ocean, 1992), somehow mimicking a form of desire for edgy content typically associated with the male adolescent gamer at the time. This reversal becomes most obvious in the *Cauldron* franchise: the elderly woman, depicted as an evil crone or vixen figure, is not the antagonist, but a witch protagonist. As one can see in the advert for the first game in the series (see Figure 9), this witch game was praised for its technological and gameplay innovation, canonized as a classic through a press quote.¹⁶ While the witch has been analyzed in terms of the fear it can

¹⁶ Our codebook integrates multiple “historiographical frames”, such as “Canonization” and “Press recognition”, which highlight attempts by the marketing department to position their game as a landmark in video game history. These frames are relatively rare in our corpus, but they would be useful to analyze the interactions between the specialized press and prominent game studios, and how these interactions might have determined the visibility of specific games and events in the history of the medium.

instill, as a privileged manifestation of Freud's "phallic mother" (Trépanier-Jobin and Bonenfant, 2017), its re-appropriation as a feminist figure in literature and cinema is not uncommon. In his analysis of Elizabeth in *Bioshock Infinite* (Irrational games, 2013), building on Kimberly Ann Wells' (2007) work on magical feminism, James Malazita notes "the centrality of a magical 'witch' character who disrupts a male-dominated world order" (2018, p. 40). Early in video game history, male and female players alike were invited to jump into these pointy shoes, embark on a broom, and mix up ingredients in the hope of coming up with something magical.

PALACE SOFTWARE PROUDLY PRESENTS

CAULDRON

SCREEN SHOTS FROM THE COMMODORE VERSION.

A spectacular new arcade adventure game from Palace Software that sets a new standard in graphic realism.

Commodore 64 and 48K Spectrum. £7.99.

"... will be one of THE games of 1985 ... This one is HOT so don't miss it!" BIG K

Explore an entire world in 'Cauldron' – The first game ever to feature scrolling shoot-'em-up and platform jumping.

Available from all good Computer Games Shops or direct from Palace Software, 275 Pentonville Road, London N1 9NL.

Dear Palace Software,
Please send me the following cassette(s):-

■ Cauldron (CBM 64)	@ £7.99
■ Cauldron (Spectrum)	@ £7.99
■ Evil Dead (CBM 64)	@ £6.99
■ Evil Dead (BBC)	@ £7.99
■ Valkyrie 17 (CBM 64)	@ £9.99
■ Valkyrie 17 (Spectrum)	@ £9.99

Please add 80p P&P to your order. Payment by cheque to Palace Software, Postal Order or by Access/Barclaycard No.

Name: _____
Address: _____
Postal Code: _____

PALACE SOFTWARE

Figure 9: Advert for *Cauldron* (Palace Software, 1985) *Computer and Video Games* 43 (May 1985), 13. Available online via *The Internet Archive*

The final advert presented in this paper is noteworthy for putting much emphasis directly on a depicted target audience, which is relatively rare, especially for senior audiences (1% in our corpus). It features two grannies discussing *RollerCoaster Tycoon* (MicroProse, 1999) while knitting in a cozy traditional home environment (see Figure 10). Much like the *Resident Evil* advert presented above, this ad plays with our expectations about the stereotypical target audience, creating a comical effect in order to capture the reader's attention. It still relies heavily on stereotypes: the two grannies are hard at work on their respective textile projects, which situates their interests even further away from the imaginary core target audience that we have documented through our statistical portrait. At the same time, the conversation bubbles reveal that these elderly women are actually sharing good strategies to tackle this complex simulation game. The advert manages to sidestep its comical effect by highlighting the grannies' ability to take part in the game. The depicted target audience might not be so far removed from the actual players engaging with the game after all; *RollerCoaster Tycoon* was a major hit on personal computers at the turn of the century, reaching out to a great diversity of audiences.



Figure 10: Advert for *RollerCoaster Tycoon* (MicroProse, 1999)
 Computer and Video Games 210 (May 1999), 23. Available online via The Internet
 Archive

6 CONCLUSION

In many chapters of *Digital Memory and the Archive* (2013), Wolfgang Ernst highlights an almost ontological opposition between the methods of media archaeology and cultural history, emphasized by the new affordances of the digital medium. He asserts that “[a] computing culture, from a media-archaeological view, deals not with narrative memory but with calculating memory—counting rather than recounting, the archaeological versus the historical mode” (2013, p. 71). The methods we have developed and presented in this article help us envision less of a confrontation and more of a synergy of methods highlighting the potential of digital humanities. We have centered adverts as a privileged historical document to chronicle the evolution of video game culture. Counting relevant data points and ensuring strong intercoder reliability allowed us to document a medium’s privileged target audience and marginalized identities. But these synchronic portraits can also be integrated within a broader diachronic inspection in order to recount history with greater accuracy and therefore refine our understanding of the cultural history of video games. Our inventory of adverts from *C&VG* (6216 adverts) and *Level* (1424 adverts) allowed us to revisit the cultural paradigm of militarized masculinity and its evolution, in dialogue with the authors of *Digital Play*, Trammel, and Scharrer. Our data confirms the obvious gender bias in video game marketing noted in multiple contributions, while providing nuanced historical observations about sexualisation of women, hyperviolence and targeted age groups. We have also shifted our focus to one of the least prevalent target audiences in this marketing culture: elderly women. While our inspection of a few adverts featuring grannies is obviously limited in scope and by the categories in our codebook, it highlights the interest of our methods to facilitate historical discovery of documents and games that would otherwise likely remain hidden from view.

As Geoffrey Rockwell and his colleagues demonstrate in *Burying Dead Projects* (2014), planning the end and future uses of a digital humanities project should be considered as important as building adequate methods and knowledge production. A next phase of development for this study of video game marketing should integrate more magazines emerging from specific regions in order to develop comparative cultural analyses. More importantly, it should also include the creation of a public interface which would afford easy access to both the data and the adverts themselves, so that more scholars can engage with these historical documents and provide deeper analyses of audiences, discourses, and other marketing strategies.

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