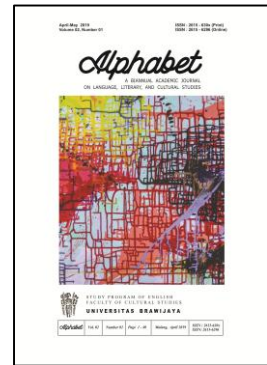# ALPHABET

A Strong Independent (Video Game) Woman? Examining Red from *Transistor* (2014)

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A Strong Independent (Video Game) Woman? Examining Red from *Transistor* (2014)

Najma Litany Adhyaksana [1]

Abstract

In the 21st century, gender representation in video games has improved as a response to growing criticisms of stereotyped, denigrating portrayals of women. Despite this progress, some of these depictions persist in female characters who appear in the medium, even within the independent (indie) video game scene. Examining Red as the protagonist of the independent role-playing game *Transistor* (Supergiant Games, 2014) through a semiotic lens, this paper investigates whether her character is in accordance with the prevailing trend of gender representation, especially as it pertains to sexualization and objectification. This paper argues that rather than sexualizing Red, the narrative and visual aspects of *Transistor* characterize her as a complex, powerful heroine. Moreover, she initially expresses a high level of autonomy in the game, subverting the damsel-in-distress trope. However, she ultimately loses her agency and succumbs to her dependency towards her male lover. As such, Red embodies contradictory concepts of empowerment and helplessness. This indicates that despite originating from an independent studio, the portrayal of *Transistor*'s protagonist is still in line with the broader paradigm of gender representation in video games. Specifically, it challenges certain harmful stereotypes of women while reaffirming some of them.

Keywords: video game, gender representation, sexualization, objectification, Transistor

Regarding the purpose of her work, feminist critic Sarkeesian (2013) once said, "The power of pop culture stories should not be underestimated and there is an enormous potential for inspirational stories that can have a positive transformative effect on our lives". Owing to this power, video games have become a prominent force in popular culture that helps to shape its sociocultural and ideological currents. Offering a unique narrative experience, the element of interaction in video games enables the audience to engage with the game world (Eichner, 2014). It is precisely due to their prevalence that video games have come under scrutiny for their portrayal of female characters, depicting them as sexualized, objectified, or powerless stereotypes. This was brought to public attention by the Tropes vs. Women video series,

spearheaded by Sarkeesian in 2013. Such criticism has encouraged video game developers to improve gender representation over the years, evident in Lynch et al. (2016).

Part of this new trend is the independent video game *Transistor* (Supergiant Games, 2014). Developed by Supergiant Games, *Transistor* is an isometric action role-playing game (RPG) set in the sci-fi city of Cloudbank. It follows the footsteps of a singer named Red, losing her voice and lover in an attempted assassination orchestrated by a mysterious group called the Camerata. She wields the eponymous Transistor sword while she fights an apocalyptic threat known as the Process and seeks answers from the Camerata's members. The game has been acclaimed for its compelling protago-

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nist. In fact, this paper was inspired by blog entries of fans discussing Red's agency, lauding her as a positive example of women in video games (Campbell, 2014). Despite this, it remains to be seen whether she lives up to this popular reception, since academic discourse that studies Red's character in relation to the broader pattern of gender representation in video games is limited.

As with other types of mass media, there is an abundance of research into the state of gender representation in video games. Male characters have been found to outnumber their female counterparts, with the latter more often cast as supporting characters or plot devices (Lynch et al., 2016; Friedberg, 2015). Furthermore, female characters are now more fleshed out (Friedberg, 2015), while still showing a tendency of sexualization (Mou, 2007; Jansz & Martis, 2007) and objectification (Downs and Smith, 2009; Rajkowska, 2014). Even so, this has declined after 2006 (Lynch et al., 2016; Friedberg, 2015). Notably, Mou (2007) finds no proof that female characters are more likely to be depicted as victims than as heroes, possibly due to the 'Lara phenomenon' of empowered, albeit sexualized, female characters in leading positions, named after Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* (Jansz & Martis, 2007).

Even so, Lara Croft's earlier incarnation still exhibits unrealistic proportions and objectification through the player-controlled camera, as indicated by Han & Song's (2014) study of the characterization of different versions of Lara Croft. In line with current studies, the research contends that Croft's character reinforces gender roles, alternating between the roles of damsel and heroine as well as experiencing sexualization. These findings echo those by Friedberg (2015), who asserts that game narratives rely on male fantasies of power and vengeance as themes, even in stories that are centered around a female protagonist. Apart from Croft, however, there is little research that focusses on one female protagonist from mainstream and independent video games (i.e. video games produced by small studios) alike.

Furthermore, in comparison, studies on gender representation in independent video games are scant. Nicholl (2017) states that independent games mirror some of the aforementioned trends such as the sexualization and underrepresentation of female characters, although not to the same extent as found in mainstream titles. Red, the protagonist of *Transistor,* is cited by Nicholl (2017) as one example of female sexualization in independent video games. Mears (2017) compares various silent player characters and notes that the characterization of *Transistor*'s Red is "expressive", i.e. fully developed and separate from the player.

Keeping this in mind, this paper seeks to broaden current knowledge on female video game protagonists by studying Red's character in *Transistor.* This stems from the fact that her characterization has not been thoroughly outlined in Mears' (2017) study. As such, this research seeks to shed light on whether she breaks stereotypes associated with female characters in video games, specifically those of sexualization and objectification. In addition, this paper aims to re-examine Nicholl's (2017) argument that Red is an instance of female sexualization since it overlooks her characterization in the game, a crucial element as it pertains to camera framing, animations, traits, and relationships.

This paper intends to examine Red in *Transistor* from a semiotic perspective and investigate whether her depiction subverts tropes that sexualize and objectify her. This framework was selected to accommodate for the fact that the game conveys meaning through various ways, including images, gameplay, sounds, and writings. A semiotic reading can contextualize these elements and derive a deeper meaning from them (Seraphine, 2014). The paper is divided into two sections. The first argues that Red experiences no sexualization in the game (according to the 2007 definition from the American Psychological Association), as evidenced by the narrative and visual aspects of *Transistor.* The second part studies Red's character and narrative in relation to Nussbaum's (1995) notions of objectification and Vella's

(2016) model of the characterization of player characters. It is assumed that Red exemplifies a more progressive incarnation of Jansz & Martis, (2007) concept of the Lara phenomenon, due to her dominant role in the game and the lack of a sexualized portrayal as experienced by other characters that are part of the phenomenon.

RED AND SEXUALISATION

As with other media, concerns regarding female sexualization have often accompanied discussions of representation in video games. The problem lies with the fact that sexualization is frequently interrelated with objectification. Therefore, when studying Red's character in *Transistor*, it is worth making comparisons with wider trends in gender stereotypes and video games. This was done in Nicholl's research (2017), which claims that Red is an example of female sexualization in video games. As evidence, the study cites her partially clothed status and the composition of scenes that emphasize her sexual attractiveness.

However, due to the praise that surrounds Red's character, it seems that this notion is worth a revisit. Specifically, it is possible to view Red from another angle that extends beyond labelling her as sexualized. This section intends to demonstrate that she is valued in the narrative as a multifaceted person instead of a sex object, thus breaking with the stereotype associated with female characters in video games. This is made evident in the narrative and visual elements of the game, including Red's characterization, her visual representation, and the manner in which the camera frames her. In clearing this question, the paper will use the American Psychological Association's (APA) 2007 definition of sexualization, which consists of four points of criteria. If any of the criteria is fulfilled, it can be said that the subject in question experiences sexualization.

The first definition of sexualization provided by the APA (2007, p. 1) is as follows: "a person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics". Contrary to this, it can be argued that Red's significance in the narrative arises from the power of her music, compounded by her status as a high-profile musician. This is, in fact, highlighted in her fictional biography. It explains that Red studied at Traverson Hall, more widely known for its civic planning program. She selected music and linguistics as her disciplines, a move seen as unconventional in the academy. Drawing upon these skills, she later made herself known in Cloudbank as a popular yet mysterious singer. Somehow, there was something powerful about her music that sparked unrest in Cloudbank's society, to the point where she denied claims that she planned to cause controversy. Even so, this incident helped her realize the impact of her work. Red's fame was also what drew the notice of the Camerata, whose mission was to gather the trace data (implied to be the soul) of influential figures like Red and use their point of view to bring about the Camerata's own vision of Cloudbank. Therefore, it can be surmised that before the events of the game, Red's most distinguishing characteristic has been her musical career, surging in acclaim due to the influence of her work rather than her appearance or sexual mannerisms.

Additionally, while Red's characterization is somewhat different during the events of *Transistor*, the narrative still values her as a mysterious, capable hero rather than a sex object. She takes on the role of a fighter and seeks to hunt down the Camerata, although her reasoning and motives are unexplained at first. She cannot communicate them to her companion by virtue of having her voice stolen, which makes her inscrutable, mysterious nature apparent as he attempts (and sometimes fails) to make sense of her actions. In other words, she is unable to openly express her thoughts about her situation, leaving her lover (and the player, by extension) to guess them. For instance, this trait is evident when Red's lover expresses bewilderment at her decision to return to Cloudbank and face the threat of the Process, imploring her to stay close to him: "Look, whatever you're thinking, do me a favor. Don't let me go". This secretive aspect of Red seems to be

persistent, since it is also mentioned in her biography: "She remained reticent even after gaining the spotlight". Further in Cloudbank, however, she gets the chance to voice her thoughts through the OVC interface, typing out comments that her lover can understand. For example, when he becomes ill as a result of the Spine's appearance in Highrise, she shows concern for his well-being and resolves to solve the problem herself:

> "Hey. It's me. It's me. Are you still there? Answer me. Look we're going to get ourselves out of this OK? Hold on you just try to hold on all right? Hold on, you have to hold on, I'm going to..." (Red backspaces the comment).
> "I'm going to find the thing that's doing this and I'm going to break its heart".

Her companion's reply is supportive, saying, *"*Go get 'em". Red's determination surfaces again during her interaction with Asher Kendrell, one of the members of the Camerata. She types to him, *"*When I get up there, you're going to tell me everything if you want my help". In other words, instead of highlighting her sexual attractiveness, the narrative frames Red's character as strong-willed and somewhat inexplicable.

The second definition of sexualization, according to the APA (2007, p. 1), occurs when, "a person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy". It is true that Red is designed to be conventionally attractive, being gender-conforming, youthful, and thin in figure. Her appealing body shape is also highlighted by her attire, which leaves some parts of her skin bare. Upon further examination from a diegetic perspective, however, this seems to be insufficient an explanation for other characters' attraction towards her. There are at least two characters in *Transistor* that display romantic interest in Red: her unnamed companion and Sybil Reisz. In both cases, they imply that they are drawn to her because of her personality traits.

In relation to the previous point, Red's companion and Sybil express their attraction to Red in different ways, yet both seem intrigued by her distinctive character. This is specified in Sybil Reisz' in-game biography, which claims that she has written diary entries about Red's *inscrutable and confident* attitude. As for Red's companion, he at first admits his attraction towards her in an inebriated, half-conscious state brought about by the Spine's presence. He compliments her talent for battle after a combat encounter in Highrise, saying, *"*That's my star. Could always handle yourself. Just fine*"*. After this, he confesses that this is why he loves her: *"*I love you so much Red. You know that right?*"* He repeats, *"*It's true*"*. Therefore, it can be surmised that both characters are attracted to Red not because she is 'sexy' or otherwise physically attractive, but rather because her personality is appealing to them. This affirms Friedberg's (2015) argument that female protagonists are still designed to be attractive but experience less sexualization overall. It should also be noted that this does not prevent the audience from seeing Red's character design as sexual, per Nicholl's (2017) study, but this view is discouraged by the narrative itself.

Next, the third definition provided by the APA (2007, p. 1) is that sexualization occurs when "a person is sexually objectified—that is, made into a thing for others' sexual use, rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making". One instance of this can be observed in *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft, who is occasionally viewed through voyeuristic, sexually titillating scenes or camera angles that are controlled by the player (Han & Song, 2014). In *Transistor's* case, however, it can be argued that Red is not presented in such a sexually objectifying manner. This is evident in the fact that the majority of *Transistor* takes place in an isometric perspective, where Red appears as a small sprite against the backdrop of Cloudbank. The camera follows her footsteps from a distance, with the player being unable to control it, saved by moving Red to another location in the map. In certain areas, the camera might appear closer to her, although not to the degree that her body dominates the shot. Essentially, the environment of Cloudbank remains the focus of the game's camera. One exception to this appears

during Red's encounters with the Snapshot, a type of Process enemy that captures pictures of her to obscure the player's view. These pictures depict her in a medium shot, dazzled by the camera's blinding lights. Her body is turned away, and her cleavage is barely visible in the shot. This demonstrates that even when the game zooms in on Red, it does so without sexualizing her.

Furthermore, the potential for sexualization within in-game cutscenes in *Transistor* seems minimal, as they last for only several seconds and depict Red using long or medium shots. Instead of a 3D model, these cutscenes make use of still 2D art, of which there are around 20 that portray Red. An example of this is the opening scene, which shows her kneeling over the body of her dead companion and donning his jacket. The focus of the scene is the Transistor itself, glowing in the dark. In another scene, Red is seen flying with the Transistor in Fairview. A long, tilting shot is used. It should be noted that the composition of this shot makes an effort to prevent Red from being sexualized. The Transistor covers part of her body, whereas her arm obscures her cleavage. Had it been the intention of the game to highlight Red's sexual appeal, it could have done so by using a zoom or a close shot, but no such attempt is seen. Hence, *Transistor* does not frame her in a sexual manner.

Finally, the APA (2007, p. 1) outlines the fourth definition of sexualization as follows: "sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person". In the context of combat-centric video games like *Transistor*, this can be interpreted to mean that it is inappropriate for a character to exhibit sexuality in a battle. One well-known example of this is Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series, whose earlier incarnations were shown wearing outfits that expose her skin (Han & Song, 2014), thematically inappropriate due to the dangers she faces as a combatant and field archaeologist. Instead, the impractical attire of Lara Croft serves to gratify the audience. In the case of *Transistor*, however, it can be argued that Red's outfit is not intended to sexualize her. Instead, it should be noted that unlike Croft, Red's role is that of a singer, for which her dress would not be an inappropriate attire. As she assumes a more active role, the disparity between her heroic status and her now-impractical costume becomes apparent. To address this, Red tears out the skirt of her dress and dons her lover's jacket, making it more suitable for traversing Cloudbank. Had she kept her outfit the same, it would leave her arms and back exposed, making it unsuitable for her new role and arguably titillating for the player.

Sexualization may also occur in a video game in other ways, one example of which is *Bayonetta* (2009). The game's eponymous protagonist fights her foes with highly sexualized techniques and movements, even undressing for certain attack animations (Gitelman, 2014). By depicting sexualized animations in the context of combat, *Bayonetta* corresponds to the APA's definition of inappropriately emphasizing a person's sexuality. This does not happen in *Transistor*, however, since Red's animations characterize her as a driven, emotionally complex heroine. For example, her combat animations convey her agility in wielding the Transistor. Depending on the player's choice of attacks, she may plunge the Transistor into the ground, swing it upwards, or spin it rapidly with surprising ease, given the size of the sword. Each of these animations serves to characterize her as competent in battle without highlighting her body or sexual appeal. Outside of combat, Red's movements convey a different and more tender side of her, again without relying on sexualization. For example, the player may encourage her to hum and hug the Transistor, a ray of light falling on her while she does so. She may also fling the Transistor up in the air and catch it with a flourish. Moreover, she embraces the Transistor at times to express her yearning for her trapped lover. Thus, one can conclude that Red's animations demonstrate her capabilities and emotional states, whether in combat or outside of it, without imposing sexuality upon her. It is also worth keeping in mind that compared to cutscenes, there is a greater potential for animations to impact Red's characterization, since the player is constantly exposed to them.

OBJECTIFICATION AND RED'S AGENCY

Aside from experiencing sexualization, female characters in video games are more often assigned secondary roles (Lynch et al., 2016). These roles commonly involve the damsel-in-distress narrative trope, which has appeared in various media. As its name implies, women are disproportionately made to be damsels-in-distress in video game stories, awaiting a hero's rescue (Dietz, 1998; Friedberg, 2015). Even heroines in primary roles such as Lara Croft are still subject to this plot device, according to Han & Song (2014). The damsel-in-distress trope is one of the ways that a female character can be victimized and objectified in the story. When examined in relation to Nussbaum's (1995, p. 257) theory, the trope may conform to some of the notions that constitute Nussbaum's (1995) definition of objectification:

1. *Instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes.
2. *Denial of autonomy*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. *Inertness*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.
4. *Fungibility*: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.
5. *Violability*: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary- integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. *Ownership*: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.
7. *Denial of subjectivity*: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account.

By treating female characters as helpless victims, the narrative consigns them to inertness, denies their autonomy, and treats them as an instrument to motivate another character, in accordance with Nussbaum's (1995) definitions. In terms of gender representation, the problem with the damsel-in-distress plot device becomes clear given these objectifying tendencies. As such, its depiction in *Transistor* will be explored in this section.

By assigning an active role to Red, the narrative subverts the damsel-in-distress trope. Before the start of *Transistor*, she is an influential figure in Cloudbank, already a powerful individual even without possessing the Transistor. However, her position has made her vulnerable for the Camerata to exploit her voice for their political goals. She is ultimately saved from this fate by her unnamed lover. It is true that her story parallels the damsel-in-distress trope to some degree. However, what is notable is that *Transistor* reverses this by having Red survive the encounter, whereas her lover is instead trapped in the Transistor. In other words, the narrative switches the roles of damsel and hero, with Red's lover becoming a part of her goal of seeking the Camerata to free him and avenge her loss. While on the way to Fairview, she reveals this motivation by typing in an OVC terminal in Goldwalk: *"You're all I have. There has to be… a way to get you out of there"*. Red's lover responds, *"We'll figure it out when we get there [Fairview]"*. She reassures him: *"Yes we will"*.

Additionally, the narrative's treatment of the Camerata also serves as a critique on the notion of instrumentality itself. Although it is not mentioned in character interactions, it should be noted that three out of the four members of the Camerata are men: Asher Kendrell, Grant Kendrell, and Royce Bracket. Whether deliberately or not, their attempt to turn Red into a tool for their use arguably suggests gendered power relations between them. However, the story calls attention to the injustice of their deeds by having them fail to assassinate Red instead, to the point where they lose the Transistor to her. In other words, their plan backfires and ultimately confers the Transistor's formidable powers to Red. She uses her newfound abilities to eliminate the Process and find her way in Cloudbank, with the goal of tracking down the Camerata. She encounters two of its

members, Sybil and Royce, and triumphs over them in combat. Her attacks against them can be interpreted as vengeance for their assassination attempt, and she spares no moment to mourn their deaths after battle. As for the other two members, Grant Kendrell becomes unresponsive while taking refuge in Bracket Towers with Asher, who publishes a broadcast confessing that the Camerata was to blame for bringing calamity to the city of Cloudbank. The two men are overwhelmed with guilt, to the point where Grant commits suicide, with his husband Asher following suit. Before doing so, Asher left a desperate and heartbroken farewell note in Bracket Towers, which Red later discovers. He ended the note with *"See you in the Country."* She replies by typing these last words, a rather unsympathetic response to his emotionally tinged message. Ultimately, the Camerata's failure and demise in the story, as well as Red's treatment of them, indicate that their objectification of Red along with the other influential targets is misguided and unacceptable.

For the next part of the analysis, Vella's (2016) structural model will be drawn upon. According to the model, one form of *characterization statement* that may give clues to the player character's personality is their *role* in the narrative, which entails their occupation, relationships with other characters, and group memberships. Another form of characterization statement is the *character action*, defined as acts that the character commits in the game with no prompting from the player. Such acts may include dialogue, cutscenes, and idle animations. On the contrary, *player actions* require the player's input to be executed by the player character and are limited to a choice of actions that are thematically fitting for the game world. It can be said that in the case of *Transistor*, the lyrics of Red's music should be viewed as a character action, a form of musical dialogue that circumvents her silence. In fact, the act of interpreting her songs as part of her character seems to be encouraged by the story, since Red's fictional biography quotes her on how "her work spoke for itself".

One of Red's songs, *We All Become*, plays when she returns to the Empty Set in Goldwalk. It characterizes Red as having an independent attitude and highlights her high autonomy in the narrative. She endeavors to stop being a victim and change her circumstances, even if it means going against the wishes of other people. This is echoed in the lyrics of the song: "Think I'll go where it suits me" and "You tell yourself that you're lucky / But lying down never struck me / As something fun, oh, any fun". She even encourages others to do the same, taking action instead of dwelling on their sorrow: "Stop grieving, start leaving / Before we all become one... / Run!" It can be argued that this free-spirited mindset subverts denial of autonomy and subjectivity (Nussbaum, 1995). That *We All Become* embodies Red's personality is also reflected in other characters' perception of her. For instance, upon encountering Sybil Reisz, the player may hear her repeat the first verse of the song to Red in a distorted voice (quoted below). The lyrics imply that Sybil views her as someone who, despite being robbed of her voice, nevertheless finds a way to assert it in the story.

> "When you speak, I hear silence
> Every word a defiance
> I can hear, oh I can hear"

In conjunction with the previous point, Red's self-determination is also made explicit in her actions throughout the story, rejecting other characters' attempts to control her. For instance, in the beginning of the game, her lover assumes that she will flee Cloudbank and gives her directions to do so: "East 64 onramp, five blocks down, take the second right. Do not turn left". He voices his disapproval when she turns left instead, towards the city and the dangerous Process enemies that lurk there. However, he is left with no choice but to accompany her. Further in the story, Red learns that Sybil interfered with the Camerata's objective to assassinate her by having Red's lover take the blow. However, Sybil's motivation is a selfish one, as the game implies that she was jealous of Red's companion and wished to have Red for herself. Likely because of this, Red refuses to save or spare Sybil in their fight, even though Sybil technically saved her life earlier. Her sentiment is echoed in the lyrics of *In Circles*, heard

in her combat encounter with Sybil: "I see you hurting, I do what I can / But I won't save you". In the end, Red proves herself victorious against Sybil Reisz, again exhibiting her fiercely independent attitude.

However, Red's autonomy seems to diminish by the end of *Transistor*, as demonstrated by her actions after defeating Royce Bracket. After discovering that she is unable to restore his soul to his body, Red commits suicide and joins her lover in the Transistor's realm. Nussbaum (1995) stated that the concepts involved in her seven notions of objectification require further definition, hence Mackenzie & Stoljar's (2000) theory on autonomy will be used here as well. Their concept of relational autonomy considers the individual's internal factors such as agency as contributing to the act of making choices, whereas there are social aspects, relationships, and limits that may also restrict these choices. By acknowledging these aspects and making decisions based on them, one can become an autonomous person and demonstrate agency.

Returning to Red's suicide, at first glance, it seems to be an empowering expression of her autonomy, as this is evidently an unpopular decision within the narrative. For example, her choice to recreate parts of Cloudbank in turn builds player expectation that she would restore the rest of the city. Red defies this expectation in her final act. In addition, once her lover realizes what she is about to do, he voices his objections, exacerbated by the fact that Red has disregarded his advice before. Even the player is not afforded the opportunity to interfere, in spite of previously having the ability to control her. Judging by this evidence, her final act appears to be another choice made in her own volition, in defiance of other characters' wishes. However, this is contradicted by the lyrics of her final song, *Paper Boats*, which appears in the ending scene after her suicide. The song's central theme is Red's attraction towards her lover, with the first verse illustrating how even she feels that she has no choice over her actions:

> "The river always finds the sea
> So helplessly
> Like you find me"

The song implies that Red's actions stem from a nature she cannot control rather than any deliberate choice to commit them, per Mackenzie & Stoljar's (2000) concept. It denies that she has autonomy by using metaphors of natural phenomena, which are in fact repeated throughout *Paper Boats*: "Like the moon that makes the tides / That silent guide / Is calling from inside", "We are magnets pulling from different poles / With no control" and "We are paper boats floating on a stream / And it would seem / That we will never be apart". Essentially, this song serves to emphasize Red's lack of agency. The message of *Paper Boats* also negates the free-spirited sentiment expressed in *We All Become*. Here, Red seems to experience negative character development, from resolving to carve out her own path to surrendering to her fate. *Paper Boats* also makes it explicit that her loss of autonomy is intertwined with her longing for her distant companion. Ultimately, she becomes objectified not by the Camerata or even her lover, but rather by the narrative.

One may argue that there may be other justifications for Red's suicide that do not specifically involve her lover, such as wanting to escape the now-desolated Cloudbank. After all, its citizens were either consumed by the Process or otherwise gone. Another reason may be that Red wishes to regain her voice, a critical aspect of her identity. It is indeed restored to her when she meets her lover again. However, the content of the ending scene undermines the likeliness of these motivations. For instance, Red begins the act by attempting to restore her lover's body, previously transformed into Process blocks. Failing to do so, she subsequently embraces the Transistor sword, with his soul contained inside it. Before she ends her life, she lies next to his body. These actions indicate Red's yearning for him, which he recognizes when he tries to reassure her: "That's not me. Not anymore. I'm still with you. In here". After this, he realizes that she is about to commit suicide and voices his protests, though she ignores him and impales herself with the sword. In doing so, she reunites with him in what is implied to be the Country, a version of the afterlife in Cloudbank that apparently exists

within the Transistor. After Red's death, the ending scene follows, accompanied by the song *Paper Boats* while it shows various snapshots of Red's life with her significant other. Taken together, the narrative implies that her final decision is based on a longing to be together with him again. In other words, she cannot bear to live any longer without his physical presence, to the point where she is willing to relinquish her freedom by joining him in the Transistor's realm.

Therefore, Red's empowered status is ultimately undermined by her lack of autonomy, making it an ambivalent portrayal. It should be noted that the ending of *Transistor* is an echo of the demeaning stereotype of female dependency towards men, in this case founded on the ideal of 'true love'. Red's need to be with her lover becomes so overpowering that it motivates her to end her life to be with him again, glamourizing the act to some extent. This romanticized view of suicide is not a novel trend, as it has been found in other types of media (Pirkis et al., 2005).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the depiction of Red's character from *Transistor* is in accordance with the current paradigm of gender representation in video games, namely in terms of sexualization and objectification. It has been found that the game's diegetic and visual elements do not sexualize her. Instead, they highlight her personality traits, capabilities, and emotional states. In this regard, she departs from the stereotype of female sexualization and thus suggests a shift towards a more progressive view of women in the video game scene. The narrative also reverses the damsel-hero relationship between Red and her lover and punishes the Camerata's attempt to objectify her. In doing so, it criticizes the notion of instrumentality as defined by Nussbaum (1995). Red's empowerment is further reinforced by her self-determination throughout the game, defying the will of other characters. In the end, however, the narrative inflicts helplessness on Red by making her dependent on the companionship of her lover, to the point where she confines herself within the

Transistor to reunite with him. It imposes objectification on her by depriving her autonomy in the climax of her story. Consequently, *Transistor* portrays Red as a heroine who exhibits opposing ideals of female empowerment and victimhood. To an extent, these findings complicate the popular reception that surrounds her character, namely that her representation is feminist (Sainsbury, 2016). Additionally, these results seem to run parallel to Han & Song (2014), which states that Lara Croft, even as a heroic female protagonist, still conforms to some aspects of patriarchal ideology by embodying a damsel/hero binary. It should be noted that since Red's character experiences no sexualization and does not retain her dominant position, she deviates from the trends that constitute the Lara phenomenon as outlined by Jansz & Martis (2007).

It is hoped that this research will help in examining more narrative trends in the independent (indie) video scene, especially as they relate to gender representation. The increasing demand for more diversity in the medium, along with the potential for indie games to challenge the dominant discourse on certain issues, warrant more investigation on how they portray marginalized groups such as women and queer people. Due to the limited scope of this paper, however, the subject of queer representation in *Transistor* has yet to be addressed. Given the game's explicit depiction of LGBT characters like Sybil Reisz, it seems that it will be beneficial to conduct more research into this matter and how, for instance, it relates to the stereotypes associated with their identity. Likewise, further inquiry should be made into the portrayal of masculinity in *Transistor*, specifically in the case of Red's companion.

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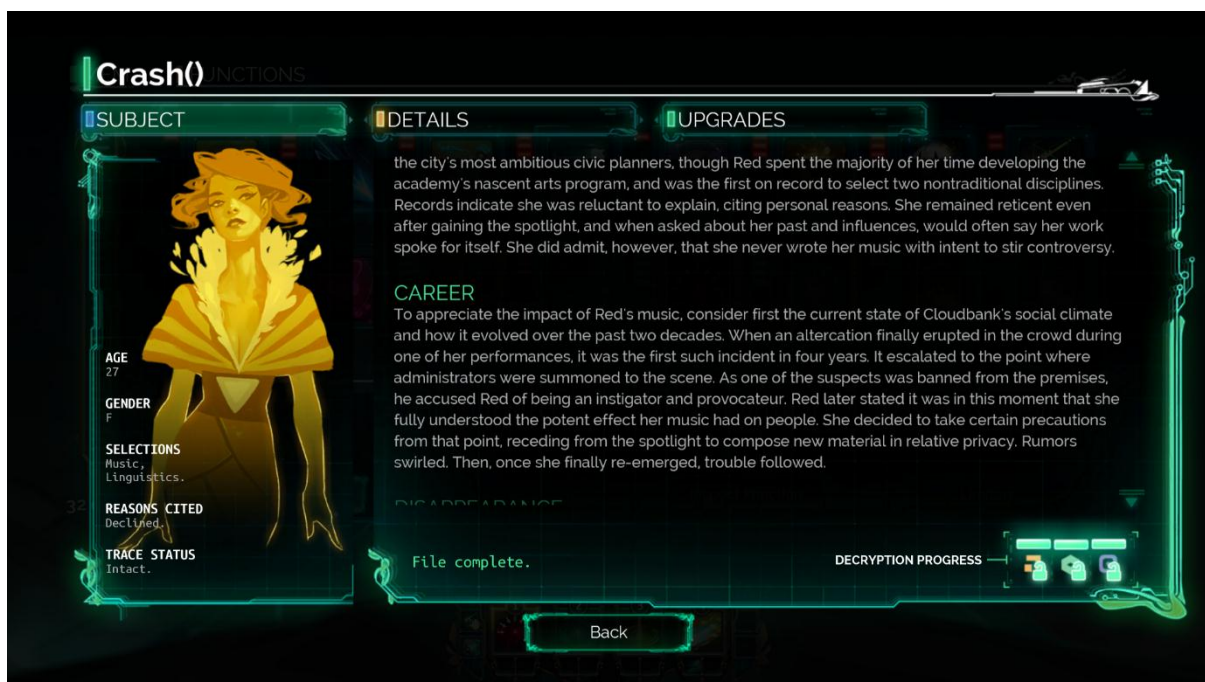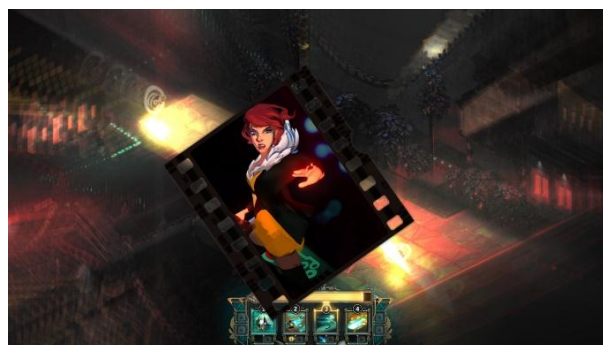Vella, D. (2016). *A structural model for player-characters as semiotic constructs*. Digital Games Research Association. Retrieved from http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/37/94

Figure 1. Excerpt from Red's biography

Figure 2. Red being attacked by a Snapshot
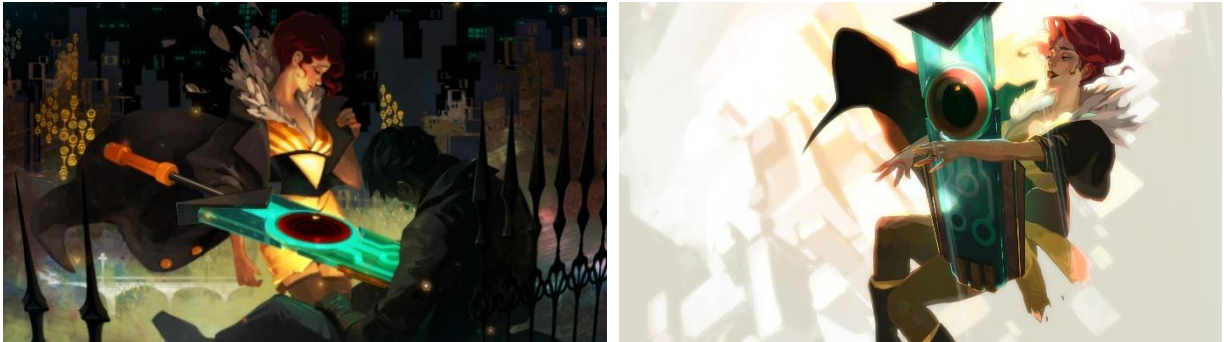
Figure 3. Two cutscenes depicting Red (left: the opening scene, right: in Fairview)
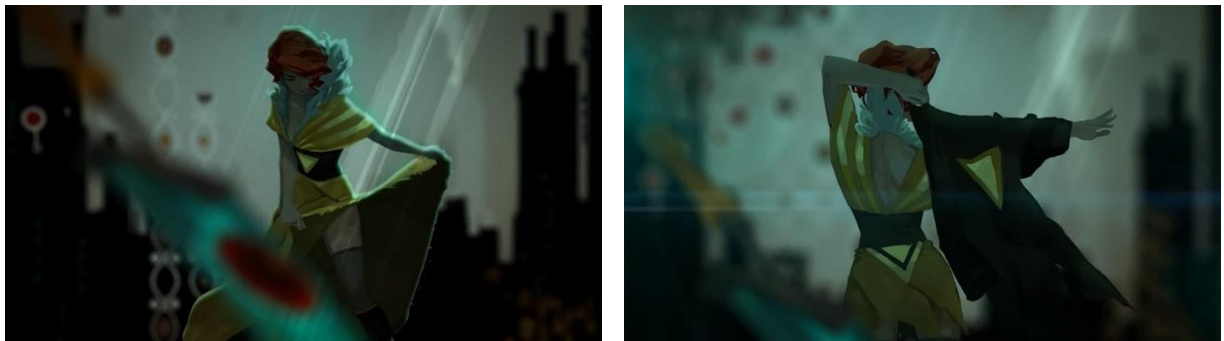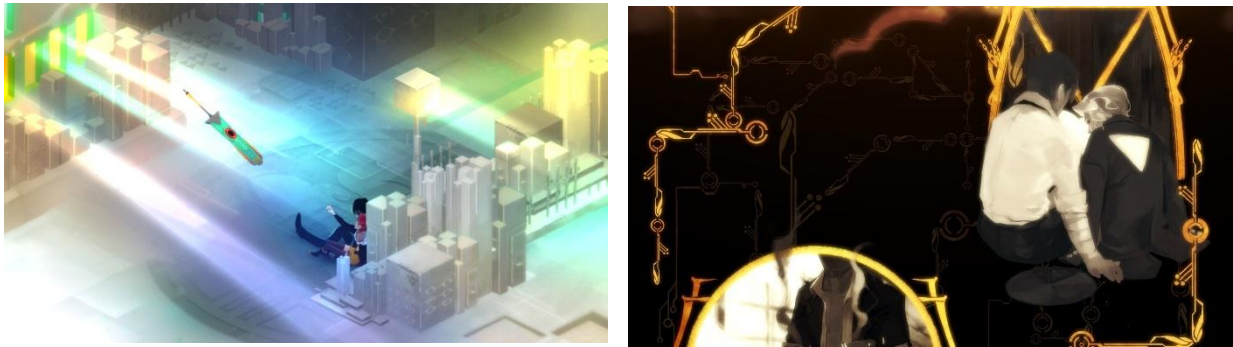

Figure 4. Red modifying her dress (from *Transistor – Launch Trailer: Supergiant Games* YouTube)

Figure 5. Asher Kendrell's confession

Figure 6. Two scenes (left: Red's final act, cropped; right: Red shares a moment with her lover)

Figure 7. Red holding hands with her unnamed companion