Halo: Combat Evolved on the Feminine and Fertility in Video Games

Videogames are a driving economic force in this country and, like all other media, are purveyors of popular culture. Nevertheless, videogames as a whole to do not lend themselves to theoretical examination because the term "videogame" refers to a plethora of genres uniquely delineated both by fictional category and player interactivity. *Plants vs. Zombies*, *Battlefield Bad Company 2*, and *Rock Band 3* differ drastically in their goals, design, and player perspectives, but are still considered to be related. To further complicate matters, videogames have been called "games" from their inception. Such an assumption is problematic at best, particularly in regard to more recent works such as *Bioshock* and *Mass Effect* and their upcoming sequels, whose narrative complexity and depth rival most long works of Science Fiction. For this reason, I will analyze only one of the more popular and strongly narrative videogame series on the market today rather than attempt to draw any conclusion on the whole. In particular, I will consider how the *Halo* game series reinforces the underlying patriarchal representation of women within popular culture, and its corresponding ecological values in order to illustrate how such values are imprinted unwittingly on the predominantly male audience.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with videogames, *Halo: Combat Evolved* as well as its successors – *Halo 2*, *Halo 3*, and *Halo 3: ODST* – are Science Fiction-based First-Person Shooters (FPS). The term "First-Person Shooter" derives from the perspective of player interactivity. The point of view is limited to a solitary character in whom the player is supposed to unequivocally identify, even though the majority of the character is unseen throughout the game. Often, the only element of the character represented on the screen is the character's hands and weapons. This restriction, in addition to the focus on player identification with single perspective, has some serious consequences on player perception and association.

Set in latter part of the 26th century, the *Halo* series revolves around the exploits of Master Chief Petty Officer John-117, a genetically enhanced cybernetic warrior, and his companion, a highly intelligent and heuristic computer A.I. named Cortana. Similar to other videogames of lesser complexity, such as *Mario Bros.* or *Donkey Kong*, the player is tasked with protecting Cortana, as the proverbial damsel-in-distress. However, the subordination of Cortana to an object needing protection is disturbingly subtler than in previous games. As an incorporeal entity, albeit an extremely adept entity, her very existence, or possible nonexistence, is tied entirely to Master Chief's actions and discretion since she resides entirely in a single, crushable chip *within* Master Chief's helmet. To further reduce her self-autonomy in the player's perception, Cortana is also a highly sexualized creation. Appearing as a naked woman clad in glowing code that accentuates her femininity, she is often pictured in passive and powerless positions from which she must to be extricated. The clearest depiction of this is in the penultimate chapter of *Halo 3*, aptly called "Cortana," where the player can hear the screams and begging of Cortana as her entire entity is digitally raped by the alien Gravemind—a monster who would not be out of place in the tentacle erotica of seijin-manga (成人漫画).

While Cortana is reliant on Master Chief for her very existence, Master Chief is not dependant on Cortana for anything of value beyond strategic intelligence and companionship. At most, she provides exposition and commentary that help humanize the Master Chief at the cost of her personal autonomy. If Cortana is the patriarchal idealization of a female companion, Master Chief is defined as the masculine ideal. Master Chief is the epitome of the strong and silent male caricature who relies solely on brute strength to prevail in every situation. At one point during "Cortana" in *Halo* 3, when Cortana questions how they will escape, he even ironically remarks that "Thought I'd try shooting my way out, mix things up a little."

Although there are positive uses of the cyborg imagery, as demonstrated bin Donna Haraway's 1984 "A Cyborg Manifesto," Master Chief's cybernetic enhancement is little more than a depiction of the success of colonization. As a stronger, smarter, and longer-lived replacement of humanity, John-117 is akin to the original concept of a cyborg as "an exogenously extended organizational complex functioning as an integrated homeostatic system" outlined in Clynes' and Kline's "Cyborgs in Space" published in 1960 (26). He is also the literal and figurative result of callous disregard, combativeness, and insecurity inherent in the ideological framework of global capitalism and modern militarism (Crittenden 130). John-117 was abducted from his parents at 6 years-old and raised in a military facility where is name, identity, family, and heritage were systematically annihilated in order to transform him into the perfect soldier. As such, Master Chief is the epitome of colonization—his mind, body, and very identity have been subjugated by those in power. The fact that the player never sees Master Chief's face illustrates how fully his individuality and humanity has been stripped from him.

Nevertheless, in and of themselves, such depictions do not necessarily equate with the videogame advocating misogyny and male supremacy and, therefore, creating such attitudes in the players outright (Squire 20). The various images of domination and subordination would have limited impact on the player if they were able to consider the issues presented critically. Unfortunately, the assumption that videogame interactivity necessitates player agency within the narrative fiction is erroneous. Similar to the player's limitation of perspective and identification to the Master Chief, the *Halo* series restricts the player's choice to killing other living beings or be killed in the process (Golubmia 184). Although the player has the choice of which entity to kill at any given moment, the narrative itself is rigidly determined and linear (Golumbia 184). This lack of interactivity within the scripted play, leaves the player with little choice but to submit to the issuance of orders and following them as efficiently as possible (Golumbia 184).

With no demand placed upon the player's critical faculties, other than concentrating on the physical acts required for game play (i.e. the manipulation of the controller), the mind can be completely absorbed by the coded construct of the game and influenced by it (Golumbia 185).

This is not to say that we should completely disregard a player's actions within the narrative structure, or that the player does not construct meaning through these actions, just they are necessarily limited and/or singular in nature. Choice is reduced to a binary opposition with a clear "right" and "wrong" choice. As a result, the player is unaware of their complicity in the construction of the experience and its ideological underpinnings. The *Halo* series is not designed to allow the player to reflect or contemplate on the relative value of the decisions they make. The games are designed to coerce the player into acquiescence and absorption (Sanford 449). Rather than allowing for thoughtful consideration of the inequities and injustices that exist within the game universe, *Halo: Combat Evolved* actually stabilizes and encourages them by removing any ability to change them (Sanford 449). And this is not simply limited to the human relationships within the game, but encompasses all aspects of the created world.

The *Halo* series attempts to depict a unique and cohesive world, but simply constructs a digital world that is ideologically identical to the analog world that created it. As a world, *Halo* has its own particular rules that give consequence to individual actions. To survive and succeed in this world the player needs to learn the underlying rule systems and how they function and interact (Squire 20). The issue here is that the game world, as a whole, is just as biased toward Western hegemonic and masculine values as any one component. Consider the factions, or groups, which exist with the game. The first adversary of the humans in the game is the Covenant. Despite the fact that the Covenant is a theocratic military alliance comprised of various divergent species from across the galaxy, there is no indication that there are females among them. The Covenant is run by an elite, and nearly extinct, group of all-male individuals

known as the Prophets who impose a rigidly hierarchical and totally masculine system of control. While there is limited information regarding the sexuality of the other Covenant species within the game, it is clear that they are not asexual and that every member of the alien horde you face is quintessentially male and demonstrably an embodiment of negative masculinity from the dumb but powerful Brutes to the talkative and timid Grunts.

The humans, who supposedly stand in contrast to the Covenant, are no less militaristic than the Covenant, though their hierarchical structure is more open. Controlled by the United Nations Space Command (UNSC), the humans are organized in what appears to be a military dictatorship. While power is strictly enforced through chain of command, there are a few women in positions of power within the structure. Characters such as Cortana and Commander Miranda Keyes, as well as a few unnamed female marines, do exert control to a certain degree. However, their power is limited and they are always subservient to a male authority. To take this point further, the women are generally young, strong, and at the height of their physical beauty which indicates their primary purpose is to function as objects of male gaze and provide entertainment or sexual enticement to the player (Golumbia 200). Ultimately, with the exception of Cortana, all the women are visibly and viciously slaughtered. None of them survive through the series.

Of course, this depiction of women serves another purpose as well: separation and binary opposition. In order to provide polarization between these two patriarchal societies so the player does not accidentally realize their similarity, the aliens in the Covenant are purposefully designed to be extremely ugly, frightening, and physically brutish humanoids (Golumbia 200). The Covenant troops, even with their technological prowess, seem unable to speak coherently and are reminiscent of outdated visual representations of "savages" rather than intelligent, spacefaring creatures (Golubmia 200). Often, in *Halo* 2 and *Halo 3* the player will hear Covenant troops cry out grammatically incorrect phrases as: "I kill the demon," or "If I chase him, then I catch him,

and then I don't know what I do." While there are individual aliens who do speak with clarity and even eloquence, as is the case with the Arbiter or the Covenent Prophets, they words are designed to illicit either sympathy or anger. The speech of the majority of the alien soldiers are reduced to incoherent, animalistic grunts or screams of rage. Killing in computer games, as in all of human history, is justified because those who are killed are understood to be less than oneself (Golumbia 194). The opponents are othered. Since the *Halo* games revolve around an almost pure Nietzschean lust for power, there must be have and have-nots, there must be colonizers and colonized otherwise the system cannot function (Golumbia 189). The player must see the Covenant simultaneously as competition and less-than themselves to justify conquest. In so doing, Halo ultimately and overtly reinforces the current capitalist structures of domination. (Crittenden 142).

And this justification of oppression is not limited to the entities with which the character interacts. It is superimposed on every element of the constructed world from the moment the elongated frame of the human space ship Pillar of Autumn is first superimposed over the Halo Ring Array in the opening scene of *Halo: Combat Evolved*. As the single most popular image of femininity, Mother Earth, or in this case the Halo Ring Array itself, is not excluded from male domination and capitalist patriarchy. Depicted as an overgrown, lush, and mysterious jungle region, interspersed with large separating bodies of water, the Halo Ring is nothing more than virgin territory quickly conquered. The colonizing *modus operandi* is clearly visible with its focus on subjugation and optimization of an object that can be efficiently harnessed as a resource for the betterment of the conquerors (Crittenden 142). In fact, the entire premise of the first and second games in the series is to conquer the Halo Ring before the Covenant while the final installation is about preserving what has already been conquered from them.

While current feminist theory, with the rise of Ecofeminism, seeks to identify women with nature and strengthen the bonds between them through examination of their parallel oppression, *Halo* seeks to combat such concepts on every level (Cuomo 7). The interconnectivity of femininity and nature is associated with a wide variety of characteristics, ranging from fecundity to vulnerability, and is dependant on the concept that femininity and nature are similarly valuable, but wrongly and repeatedly violated by men (Cuomo 7). However, Halo attempts to destabilize this connection by justifying that such violation is necessary in order to ensure the survival of the species and, in so doing, encourages the nature/cultural dualism that grounds the oppression of both women and nature.

Halo does this through the final adversary revealed in the game series, known as the Flood. They are a form of hive-minded sentient plant life whose sole purpose is to eliminate all sentient animal life. Found and accidently released by the Covenant deep within the first Halo Ring Array, the Flood are represented as a purely parasitic entity and an overgrowth of poisoned fertility and unchecked reproduction. They rapidly multiply on a massive scale in attempt to fully consume both the human and Covenant and supplant them as the dominant intelligence in the galaxy. What originally was defined as battle for supremacy of the Halo Ring Array as an object of conquest is soon overturned when the Flood spread and the object begins to dominate the subject. However, rather than simply kill, the Flood literally subverts the bodies of all sentient hosts and turns them into unwilling puppets to further propagate the spread of the Flood.

Over the course of the series, the humans and the Covenant patriarchy end up joining forces in an effort to eradicate this virulent strain of femininity from displacing and eradicating their power completely. While the patriarchy is successful in eliminating the threat, the Flood consumes the home planet of the Covenant, High Charity, two Halo Ring Arrays are destroyed, and half of planet Earth suffers vitrification in the process. Such ecological damage is a direct

result of the player's actions and, regardless of its implications, these destructivce actions are praised in the game. Master Chief, and the player through him, is lifted up as a savior of not just mankind, but all intelligent life. The destruction, the domination, and the conquest are all justified for the sake of preserving the masculine hegemony of the galaxy.

For this reason, the Halo series does more than merely resemble the patriarchal structures of domination, but directly satiates them and trains the male players to become willing participants of those systems (Golumbia 194). More disturbingly, the dominant hegemonic masculinity found in the *Halo* series is designed for and absorbed by the male adolescents who make up the majority of the audience. Adolescence is the period of the greatest discord between body image and lived body, between its immutable idealized self-image and bodily changes (Grosz 75). Since the player can only interact with the world of *Halo* in a controlled way that promotes male aggressiveness and conquest, the game world conforms and limits the male audience to the encoded system of subjugation of both the feminine and nature (Golumbia 201). The series then is not simply a game, but provides practice for, and is a simulation of, the insertion of the imperial masculine subject into the world of ownership and gender superiority (Golumbia 201). The series conditions males to patriarchal domination under the guise of harmless entertainment and "good" fun. We can only hope that the games to come, like the recently released *Mass Effect 2*, do not follow the *Halo* games in this regard.

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