

## Playing Like a Girl: Establishing a Virtual Female Social Position through Discourse Building Tasks

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*This paper analyzes the video game *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* (2010), a Nancy Drew Adventure game, through James Paul Gee's approach to discourse analysis. This game positions players within a virtual female social position. This position is constituted by the discourses of the other in-game characters. These characters attempt to place the avatar, Nancy, in various female social positions through Gee's discourse building tasks. Due to the non-visual nature of first-person avatars, Nancy and the player are gendered through these societal roles. Existing literature fails to explore how characters are gendered, and does not examine the unique features of first-person female avatars. Highlighting and examining unique portrayals of women in video games is important due to the hostility toward women found in the gaming industry and within mainstream video games. Nancy Drew's long-held position as America's favorite girl sleuth makes her a useful vehicle for exploring the complexities of gender in video games.*

Keywords: female avatar, first-person, girl games, gender and sexuality, Nancy Drew

Recent developments, including 2014's Gamergate, have highlighted current video game culture's problematic relationship with female players, developers, and characters. Naturally, previous research has focused on the problem of gender in video games. Just as video games can promote gender differentiation through hypermasculine and hyperfeminine characters, they can also destabilize the gender binary and allow for gender play. To explore all the possibilities of gendered characterization in video games, games with unique gendered portrayals must be examined. *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* (Her Interactive, 2010), a Nancy Drew-themed PC point and click video game, utilizes a first-person female avatar. The avatar, Nancy, lacks the visual cues that often plague female video game characters (scantly-clad bodies, large breasts, small waists, long legs, etc.). Despite the absence of these cues, she is still consistently coded female throughout the game. This study analyzes *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* through James Paul Gee's approach to discourse analysis to establish how this game positions players within a virtual female social position despite the absence of visual gender cues.

While there exist hordes of studies examining sexism in video games, I believe it is also important to examine how gendering is accomplished in games without overt sexist characterization (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kafai, 2009; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008; Provenzo, 1991). Simply focusing on the problems of a medium offers no practical solutions. Looking at games existing on the periphery of the market, ones not specifically geared toward young adult males, reveals displays of gender that are less rigid and hypersexualized than the portrayals found in mainstream, hardcore games.

Nancy Drew Adventure video games feature a first-person female avatar. In these games players, through Nancy, solve puzzles, interrogate suspects, and search for clues. By having Nancy face sexism, challenges, and deception in the games, players navigate through a female social position. Players are consistently marked as female by other game characters and occupy a position of female agency often absent in the medium.

The current hostility toward women both in games and in the gaming community, which came to light during Gamergate in 2014, makes studies like this imperative. It is crucial to find and encourage diverse presentations of women in video games in order to diminish misogyny in the industry. The goal of this study is to examine a video game which places the player in a virtual female social position without the use of visual cues. By examining how this video game genders its first-person avatar, one can explore the possibilities of female portrayal in a medium with consistent problems of gender.

## Literature Review

### Nancy Drew: Girl Sleuth turned Video Game Heroine

*Secrets Can Kill Remastered* is part of the Nancy Drew Adventure video game series by Her Interactive. Examining any game within this series requires an investigation into the national phenomenon that is Nancy Drew. Nancy made her debut in the 1930 novel *The Secret of the Old Clock* by Carolyn Keene. Carolyn Keene is a pseudonym for a collective group of authors working under the guidance of the series' publisher Stratemeyer Syndicate (Parry, 1997).

Despite her lasting popularity, Still (2017) explains that Nancy was largely ignored by scholars until the 1990s, sixty years after her debut. Even with a renewed interest in the phenom, scholarly work has focused on a narrow set of inquiries. The majority of Nancy studies investigate her independence and sexuality or illuminate the racial stereotypes prevalent throughout the series (Still, 2017). While these subject areas are important and worthy of examination, Nancy's persistence and cultural influence warrants further and more diverse investigations. The Nancy Drew Adventure video game series provides a new lens to understand the amateur detective's complexity and significance.

Throughout her reign as America's favorite girl sleuth, Nancy, a sixteen then eighteen-year-old, has exhibited an impressive and extremely unbelievable set of skills. From providing psychiatric evaluations to repairing speedboats, Nancy's skill set inexplicitly increases with every new adventure. Her professionalism and autonomy cause many fans and scholars to label her a role model for girls and young women.

In addition to being respected by fans, inhabitants of Nancy's world also admire and fear her. Villains feel they have met their match in the attractive teenager while officers and officials repeatedly call on her for help. Nancy largely works independently and seems uninterested in familial duties or romantic pursuits. Parry (1997) explains that Nancy spends most of her time in the public sphere rather than the traditionally feminine private, domestic sphere. She labels traits, such as seeking recognition, masculine and feels Nancy is feminine while enjoying the benefits of masculinity (Parry, 1997).

Through an examination of the series' popularity, Chamberlain (1994) calls this double identity, "having their cake and eating it too (p.1)." The Nancy Drew series offers its, mostly female, readers the fantasy that they can be independent while retaining all the comfort and security that comes from dependence. This myth asserts, "...that they can help the disadvantaged and remain successful capitalists, that they can be both elitist and democratic, that they can be both child and adult, and that they can be both 'liberated' and 'Daddy's little girls (Chamberlain, 1994, p.3)."

Just as Chamberlain (1994) labels Nancy's portrayal as fantasy, Mason (1995) critiques the character for her unrealistic character traits. Nancy embraces her femininity in a way that would likely dampen her social clout. However, the girl sleuth remains glamorous and gracious while breaking laws and outwitting criminals. While a perpetual teenager, Nancy acts closer to thirty. She exhibits exceptional maternal instincts despite being motherless, and rivals any pageant queen while maneuvering around a room (Mason, 1995).

Nancy has also been critiqued for her role in an ideological order that lauds wealth accumulation. Parry (1997) explains that Nancy's lawyer father connects her to a system privileging material possessions and ownership. Nancy is often returning lost or stolen goods to their rightful owners, calling out people who attempt to lie about their class status, and fighting on behalf of people with "good" families and upbringing. Parry (1997) views Nancy's capitalist ideals as a need to restore status quo gender and class roles.

One reason Nancy is able to restore social order with such efficiency is due to her desexed nature. Nancy has a steady boyfriend, Ned. However, while the couple has been dating close to ninety years, they have yet to progress beyond first base. Ned appears crazy for Nancy, but she rarely pays him the same amount of attention or care. Parry (1997) explains Ned's role as convenient. Nancy keeps Ned around when she needs doors busted in, but she would much rather search for clues than explore Ned's nether region. Marshall (2003) feels the original series actively denies the possibility of Nancy's adolescent female sexuality. Nancy never gets distracted by attraction to others nor has to stop pursuing a criminal due to menstrual cramps (Marshall, 2003)

In addition to being desexed, scholars criticize Nancy for her ahistorical nature. The original series, and its legion of offspring, function as escapism and naturally ignore, or skirt, serious social problems. Though she appeared at the height of The Great Depression, Nancy's pleasant suburb remained virtually untouched by financial

hardships. Nancy rights wrongs while completely unaware of the material realities shaping the lives of her readers (Siegel, 1997). Nancy upholds justice in a world where true injustice is never acknowledged.

Not all scholars feel Nancy is an empty, capitalist shell. Nancy has also been upheld as a feminist icon. She remains active and assured while thwarting criminals and facing sexism. While Chamberlain (1994) criticizes the unrealistic portrayal of Nancy's adolescence, Parry (1997) feels this suspended place between teen and adult gives the sleuth power. Nancy is fairly unrestrained by her father, and independent thanks to her disinterest in men. She is able to be strong and active due to her independence from familial and romantic ties (Parry, 1997).

While Nancy is active, she is also extremely resilient. She faces physical danger in every adventure. She has been bound, gagged, and locked up endless times over the past ninety years (Parry, 1997). Nancy is remarkably, and inexplicably, able to free herself from restraints, go days without food nor access to a restroom, and capable of tripping up and chasing down adults of various builds and ages. The mythic, unbelievable quality some chastise Nancy for is the very reason others laud her as a strong, feminist heroine. Parry (1997) notes that Nancy needs very little help in any situation.

Woolston (2010) goes further to label Ms. Drew a "subversively positive role model for young female readers (p. 173)." Nancy's body is not merely a beautiful object of desire, though she is strikingly attractive, it is also a vehicle that allows her to act on her desires. In a culture that places women and children in passive roles, the teenage Nancy promotes action and self-sufficiency (Woolston, 2010).

Whether a feminist icon or tool of the patriarchy, Nancy does not appear to be going anywhere. She has starred in multiple book series from the classic Nancy Drew Mysteries to the Supermystery series where she teams up with sleuthing duo The Hardy Boys (Parry, 1997). Nancy has spawned several movies and television series and even appears in an app based game which attempts to teach young girls how to code.

While Nancy's circumstances and cases have changed over the years, her characterization remains largely consistent. She fluctuates in age and location, but has always been composed, confident, and wise beyond her years. In the 1930s, she returned stolen goods in her midwestern hometown. In the 80s, she chased jewel thieves around the globe (Siegel, 1997). Now, she takes extended vacations to remote locations like Iceland, where she uncovered the mysteries surrounding an ancient Viking ship.

**Nancy in video games.** Since 1998, Nancy Drew has continued her never-ending work in a virtual space. Nancy Drew Adventure video games are produced by Her Interactive, an independent game studio based in Bellevue, Washington (Jong, 2000). The company has garnered consistent success through the Nancy Drew series, and boasts a dedicated and active community of fans. This community is comprised of primarily female gamers ranging from young girls to middle-aged women. The company has a lively Nancy-themed social media presence where they provide specialized and largely nerdy content to their equally enthusiastic followers. For example, their social media accounts and website often hold contests for fans including pumpkin carving, costume, and cookie decorating competitions. Fans are praised and rewarded for entries that exhibit an in-depth knowledge of, and dedication to, the series.

Nancy Drew Adventure games exist within the history of "girl games." The girl video game movement began in the 1990s. In an attempt to scoop up a new demographic, developers mirrored traditional girl toys. These games are often referred to as "pink games" because of their perpetuation of gender stereotypes and their traditional values of femininity (Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012; Kafai et al., 2008).

A second category of girl games became known as "purple" games. These games are differentiated from pink games because they deal with real life issues and are less ultra-feminized. However, these issues are often based in stereotypes. Purple games tend to focus on relationships, dating, and social status. This game genre has been criticized for continuing gender hierarchies by implying that girls prefer games that reflect social expectations tied to gender roles (Kafai et al., 2008). I would label Nancy Drew Adventure video games as post-purple. They exist within the trajectory of girl games and deal with real-life situations, but their content goes beyond stereotypical considerations of dating and relationships.

As of early 2018, there are 33 Nancy Drew Adventure titles. All games in the series contain similar ideals and gameplay. These games implement a first-person female avatar. The player navigates through the virtual worlds as Nancy Drew. To complete the game, the player must interview suspects, solve puzzles, and search for clues. While interviewing subjects, players decide what questions to ask and how to respond from a set of choices. Players read through their speech options and click on their desired responses.

Following Nancy's continued trajectory into the world of video games offers new insights into both the phenomenon of Nancy Drew and the status of female subjects in virtual spaces. Nancy has faced many challenges throughout her term as an amateur detective, maybe none as daunting as being a woman in the world of video games. By examining studies of gender and video games, I can investigate how *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* genders its first-person female avatar.

### **Video Games and Gender**

Most existing literature on gender and video games focusses on negative portrayals of women. More recent studies have moved away from pointing out the flaws of mainstream games to examine how online games allow for gender play. Between these two areas of focus there exists a gap. The literature ignores the possibility of female character existing in single player offline games who are not hypersexed. While scholars are excited about the possibility of gender play online, they ignore that first-person female avatars in medium-circulation games can combat the sexist presentations in AAA (big budget, widely-circulated) video games.

Despite some dissenting opinions, gender still matters in video game studies. James Paul Gee recognizes that video games tend to contain sexualized female characters. Gee argues that as more girls and women play video games these problems will correct themselves (Gee, 2003). While examining a tween gaming club, Kafai (2008) notes this is not the case. Women now make up a significant portion of video game players (Kafai et al., 2008). However, little has changed in terms of game content and the game design industry is not easily accessible to women (Kafai, 2009; Consalvo, 2008).

Video games' presentation of gender has also not improved with the influx of female gamers. In a content analysis of video games in the early 1990's, Provenzo (1991) found that female video game characters are often presented as victims or prizes. Unfortunately, today's most popular, big budget video games encourage the brutalization, sexualization, and objectification of women. Video games also tend to display hyper-gendered characters (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2008; Kennedy, 2007). The majority of female characters in mainstream video games are non-playable characters (NPC), meaning they cannot be played by the gamer but can often be interacted with socially and physically. Playable female characters are often overtly sexualized. They are typically provocatively dressed and presented as objects to be looked at and used (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009).

The portrayals of women in games marketed toward girls and women are also problematic. Most pink and purple games present women as hyper-feminine and preoccupied with consumerism. Some believe these games run the risk of naturalizing hyper-femininity and gender-polarized play (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998).

While these video games place players in rigid gender roles, others can allow for gender play (Jenkins, 1998; Kafai, 2008; Suden & Sveningsson, 2012; Turkle, 1995). Kafai suggests gender play in online video games as an alternative to these stereotypical portrayals without considering the possibility of a non-stereotypical gendered avatar (Kafai, 2009). I fully support the introduction of gender play into the realm of video games. I think the medium is perfectly suited to destabilize the gender binary and highlight the social construction of gender. However, I believe the field's sudden push for this type of game ignores the offline games that present gendered characters in unique ways.

Nancy Drew is very clearly gendered as feminine and she is perceived by others as a heterosexual woman. However, she is able to possess agency without being paralyzed by her femininity or stereotypical female preoccupations (like fashion or dating). I believe it is important to show that gendered women can exist in virtual worlds as people and not merely as sex objects or hyper-feminine consumer-bots.

### ***Secrets Can Kill Remastered* (2010)**

Nancy Drew Adventure video games are point-and-click PC games in which players navigate a 3D virtual space through a first-person avatar. These games feature several locations relevant to each game's narrative.

*Secrets Can Kill Remastered* is a 2010 remake of the series' original game *Secrets Can Kill* (1998). The 1998 version of the game features 3D animation and 2D character design. The remastered version updates the original animation with 3D characters, contains new puzzles, and alters the game's final events. The original game was discontinued on August 1, 2010 due to compatibility issues with sound cards in newer computers. On August

24<sup>th</sup> the same year, the remastered version was released to coincide with the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nancy Drew (Her Interactive, 2013).

In *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* Nancy goes undercover to investigate a murder at a California high school. Players can visit several locations including the high school, Nancy's Aunt's house, and a local diner. In these spaces, the player clicks the screen to advance forward, interact with objects, and interview subjects. Players have an inventory in which they gather objects for future use. The game also requires players to take physical notes while playing the game in order to keep track of important, puzzle-solving information. The game typically takes a couple hours to play, though game length varies widely depending on the style of gameplay (e.g. if one wants to explore the world of the game or simply complete all necessary tasks). Completing the game requires players to collect items, complete various types of puzzles, and interview subjects multiple times.

### Methodology

In order to evaluate the use of a first-person female avatar in Nancy Drew Adventure video games, I conduct a discourse analysis on one of the games from the series. I analyze *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* (2010). This game is a remastered version of the very first game in the series: *Secrets Can Kill* (1998). Because this game is a reissue, it illustrates the brand's original design and values as well as its current ideals. This game is the most logical choice for analysis because it spans twelve years of the series' history.

### Discourse Analysis

Much of the games' actions are based on speech and conversing with other characters, making discourse analysis the most appropriate way to analyze Nancy Drew Adventure video games. There are many different approaches to discourse analysis. These approaches contain different tools and ask different questions of the text. Discourse refers to groups of communication that structure one's thinking. It serves as a basis for our actions and shapes how the world is understood. Discourse also produces subjects; it differentiates people and establishes/maintains hierarchies (Rose, 2001).

Since I am specifically concerned with the presentation of a virtual female social position, I implement James Paul Gee's approach to discourse analysis. This approach examines the way language enacts activities, perspectives, and identities.

Gee's approach combines considerations of the mind, interactions, activities, society, and institutions to dissect different instances of communication. Gee does not present a step-by-step procedure for how to implement his approach. This approach changes and mutates as it is used by different theorists. Instead of providing a formula, it presents tools of inquiry, or thinking devices, and strategies for utilizing them (Gee, 1999).

Gee (1999) presents a D/discourse framework for analyzing language. This approach is interested in how language is used to enact activities and identities. Language-in-use is identified as discourse with a little "d". All the culturally-specific attributes that combine with discourse to communicate a message constitutes Discourse with a capital 'D'. Big 'D' Discourse involves ways of believing that establish the self as meaningful. Life is a series of discourses, or interactions, within larger Discourses.

D/discourse analysis illuminates why language works the way it does. This allows for the identification of problems in applied areas. Gee's theory states that language only has meaning through actions and practices. If these language practices are not called into question, we can unknowingly contribute to Discourses of harm and injustice (Gee, 1999).

Gee's method requires asking various questions of the text. The questions arise from many different fields of analysis. Together they offer a full-bodied and diversified analysis of the text. The questions are organized into six categories: semiotic building, world building, activity building, socioculturally-situated identity and relationship building, political building, and connection building.

Gee's approach allows me to recognize the institutions of power and control represented within *Secrets Can Kill Remastered*. Due to the game's first-person avatar, Nancy is gendered through the interactions she has with other, onscreen characters. Not only is she gendered through discourses of control, she also possesses agency and asserts her own identity throughout the game. Gee's method illustrates the Discourses at play in the virtual world and allows me to compare them to real-world Discourses.

Within *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* there are five characters that the avatar, Nancy Drew, can have multiple conversations with. I analyze the conversations with these characters separately. By looking at all of the conversations Nancy has with one particular character, I am able to recognize differences in discourse between the characters and code these interactions.

### **Immersion as Method**

Since this discourse analysis takes place in a virtual environment, I must address my role and experience within this space. Discussing virtual engagements in MOOs, Gajjala and Altman (2006) explains the nature of a researcher's virtual presence. More than inhabit a space, the research also codes themselves into existence by interacting with objects and building spaces. This results in the production of a cyberself, a "real" identity that enacts change within a virtual space.

Analysis of virtual texts must involve a self-reflexive engagement that involves observing the Self within "technospaces," in addition to observing other in-game phenomena (Gajjala & Altman, 2006, p. 2). Virtual and "real world" identities do not exist in a one to one ratio. A distance exists between the game subject (avatar, player character) and the player (Sunden, 2003). This distance, both physical and cognitive, alters interactions, making self-reflexivity imperative to game analysis.

A neutral playthrough is impossible due to the nature of gameplay. Video games require users to enact the text, to set off algorithms, and to generate their recursive space. Therefore, one's socioeconomic, cultural, racial, gendered positions must be acknowledged and taken into consideration during both data gathering and analysis.

While I may have never occupied the elevated socioeconomic status Nancy Drew inhabits as a young adult, both my female-identified and white markers afford me an affinity with the avatar. This affinity naturally inclines me to accept a dominant reading of the text. To assuage this bias, I exhaust all possibilities of the text, rather than simply playing through with my initial, personality-driven choices. Nancy Drew Adventure games provide players with multiple response choices during each character interaction. By examining the ramifications of every possible choice through multiple gameplays, I can determine the consistency of the text across multiple styles of gameplay.

### **Findings**

In *Secrets Can Kill Remastered*, Nancy Drew can hold multiple conversations with five characters: Detective Beech, Daryl Gray, Connie Watson, Hector "Hulk" Sanchez, and Hal Tanaka. Using Gee's method to analyze D/discourses within the text, I found that the conversations associated with each specific character aligned with both a specific female social position and one of Gee's building tasks. My coding led me to examine Nancy's interactions with each character separately.

Gee identifies six building tasks. Through these tasks people use language to construct a situation network (Gee, 1999). While these building tasks all take place simultaneously, the discourses of the individual characters in *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* each serve as a clear example of one of these tasks and can be analyzed as such. The building tasks found in the game are: political building, socioculturally-situated identity, connection building, world building, and semiotic building. The female social positions observed are: woman as subordinate, woman as object of desire, woman as confidant, woman as physical non-threat, and woman as intellectual threat.

The game is structured largely around interviews. In these interviews the player, as Nancy, is able to choose how to respond during the conversations. Not every interaction prompts a choice. Some interactions involve a set script that moves the narrative along. In these instances, the player has no control over how Nancy responds to other characters. The structure creates many conversational possibilities within the game. I played through the game multiple times to exhaust its discursive possibilities.

Below I analyze the discourse of each game character separately based on how they interact with Nancy. The analysis considers all conversations Nancy has with each character throughout the game. Through this analysis, I assign a discursive mode that each character exhibits, and a female social position inscribed on Nancy through this mode.

### **Detective Beech - Political Building- Woman as Subordinate**

Detective Beech is presented as Nancy's contact for her undercover sleuthing mission. Detective Beech consistently asserts his authority during his interactions with Nancy. He points out Nancy's position to him by stating that she is a girl, teenager, and amateur detective.

Nancy's interactions with Detective Beech follow Gee's political building task. Gee questions a text's political building function by asking what social goods (status, gender, class, race) are relevant within a situation and in what way these goods are made relevant. Gee's approach also examines how these social goods are related to big 'D' Discourses.

Detective Beech builds a political discourse and views Nancy as occupying a subordinate position in many of their interactions. Nancy's first interaction with Detective Beech takes place over the phone. In this interaction the detective struggles with gendered labels and makes his position of power clear. While the detective's superior attitude likely arises from his social position as Nancy's boss, his continual reference to Nancy's age and gender illustrate his attempt to place the sleuth in a subordinate role predicated on her gender identity:

DB: Nancy Drew? Detective Beech here. How are you?

ND: Good and yourself?

DB: Frustrated, Nancy. I need some leads and you're my man...er...woman, teen, student, whatever...I'll be at Maxine's Diner- come see me when you've found out anything. All contact should be through me.

ND: Can do- so what's our cover?

DB: Our what?

ND: Umm...our cover. Who should I say you are if anyone sees us and asks?

DB: Oh...right. I'll be your uncle. Uncle Steve. ...I gotta go now- if you need anything else comes see me at Maxine's. I'm wearing glasses and a green striped shirt.

Detective Beech remains patronizing toward Nancy regardless of the actions chosen by the player. For example, one student asks Nancy why she is asking so many questions. The player has a choice of revealing she is working for the police or the player can choose from one of two "cover stories." When choosing a cover story, the interaction between Nancy and the detective is as follows:

DB: Good recovery on Daryl's question about Jake's locker.

ND: Thanks, Uncle Steve.

DB: But 'reporter for school newspaper'? It's not that great of a cover.

ND: I had to think on my feet.

If Nancy tells the student she is working for the police, Detective Beech becomes angry:

DB: Did I overhear you telling Daryl that you're an undercover detective?

ND: Yes...

DB: (angrily) What did I tell you about not revealing this information?

ND: I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that.

DB: Need I remind you that this is a serious murder investigation and we are counting on you to act responsibly? Is that clear?

ND: Yes. Very clear.

In both situations, Detective Beech instructs Nancy on correct behavior. Even when Nancy uses a 'cover story' the detective tells her it was a poor choice. Detective Beech also becomes angry with Nancy if she asks for his help:

ND: How can I get into the teacher's lounge?

DB: Look, Nancy. Maybe this assignment isn't for you. I can't be holding your hand all the time. Your job is to come to me with solutions, not problems.

ND: Could you tell me the combination to Jake's locker?  
DB: Like I said, we already looked in his locker. There's nothing there.  
ND: I know, but I'd like to see for myself.  
DB: Then you'll need to figure it out by yourself.

Detective Beech views Nancy as occupying a subordinate social position through his implementation of political building discourse.

### **Daryl Gray - Socioculturally-Situated identity- Woman as Object of Desire**

Daryl is one of the students at Paseo Del Mar High. Nancy interacts with him at Maxine's Diner where he works. Daryl views Nancy in a position of desire through Gee's socioculturally-situated identity building task. This task asks what relationships and identities are relevant in the situation and how these relationships are stabilized or transformed.

During their interactions, Daryl consistently flirts with Nancy even after she tells him multiple times she has a boyfriend. The player has an option of ignoring these advances or telling Daryl about Nancy's boyfriend Ned. Despite the responses chosen by the player, Daryl continues to make advances toward Nancy:

ND: Who did it?  
DG: No one knows, and the police are keeping pretty clammed up about it. But my resources say that they're calling some special detective, maybe even the FBI.  
ND: Wow- you must have some special contacts.  
DG: Just special enough to see beautiful women like yourself.  
ND: What do you mean?  
DG: Get it? Contact? \*points to eye\* I'm wearing contacts that let me see pretty women?...I should get back to work. Nice meeting you, Nancy.

Daryl sometimes gets embarrassed and ends the conversations on his own. At other times he recognizes that Nancy has a boyfriend but continues to flirt with her regardless:

ND: Do you know Connie Watson?  
DG: Not that well- she keeps to herself a lot. I've always thought there's something...mysterious about her. Kind of the same way I feel about you.  
ND: Thanks for the compliment, but I'm already seeing someone.  
DG: That's cool- I'm just saying, not playing.

Nancy, the player, can continually tell Daryl about her boyfriend but this does not stop the advances:

DG: Hey gorgeous. Glad you stopped by.  
ND: Daryl- I appreciate the compliment but I'm seeing someone else.  
DG: Hey I'm just saying what I'm seeing.

Dealing with persistent, unwanted sexual advances is a common challenge of those occupying a female social position. Through Gee's socioculturally-situated identity building task we can see that Daryl identifies Nancy as an object of desire and attempts to stabilize this identity by ignoring Nancy's wishes and continuing to flirt with her.

### **Connie Watson-Connection Building- Woman as Confidant**

Connie Watson is the only female character Nancy can interact with in the game. Connie recognizes Nancy as female and attempts to build homosocial bonds based on this commonality between them. Connection building implies that there are ways of communicating typical in woman-to-woman conversations. Once Connie perceives



Nancy as a trustworthy confidant, she continues to gossip about other students. These interactions constitute “coherence” in that they perpetuate the assumptions surrounding female conversation.

During their first interaction Connie attempts to establish a homosocial bond:

CW: Hi, I’m Connie. You’re not from around here are you? Usually, Paseo Del Mar High is really quiet and boring. Lately it’s been totally out of control.

ND: Is it that obvious I’m not from around here?

CW: I’m a school monitor, so I have to notice these things.

ND: You’re very observant.

CW: We girls have to stick together. There are a lot of wolves walking around campus.

ND: What do you mean?

CW: You wouldn’t want to waste your time with any of the guys at this school. Trust me. They’re all a bunch of self-centered jerks.

Even after Nancy exposes some of Connie’s secrets, Connie attempts to appeal to her and Nancy’s shared experiences as females:

ND: Didn’t I hear you were dating Jake?

CW: Hey, a girl can make a mistake, can’t she?

In another interaction Connie opens up about her romantic interest in another character. Since she has just met Nancy, this revelation is prompted solely by the fact Nancy is female:

ND: How well do you know Daryl Gray?

CW: I wish I knew him better. He’s the only guy I’d ever consider dating. He’s student council president, holds a cool job at a diner called Maxine’s and drives a C-Back x80.

ND: Drives a sports car and works at a diner? That doesn’t compute.

CW: Yeah, I don’t get it either. Daryl’s family was rich and used to throw major parties all the time. But not anymore.

Connie views Nancy as occupying the social position of confidant. Her proclivity to reveal personal information to Nancy based on her sex can be understood through Gee’s connection building task.

### **Hector “Hulk” Sanchez - World Building- Woman as Physical Non-Threat**

Hulk Sanchez is a football player at Paseo Del Mar High who consistently performs hyper-masculinity. Hulk makes it clear that he is physically the strongest person in school. He views other students, as well as Nancy, as his admirers. Unlike the other students, Hulk does not see Nancy as suspicious or a threat because he is confident in his physicality. Hulk’s discourse can be understood through the task of world building. Hulk creates his reality and establishes what is possible and impossible through his egocentric world view. In Hulk’s world, Nancy could never be a threat because of her sex and physical stature.

During their first interaction, Hulk illustrates his egotistical nature:

HS: Whoa, a new girl at school. Do you realize what destiny has brought you today? Yours truly, Hector Sanchez, but you can call me ‘The Hulk.’

ND: How did you know I was new here?

HS: Hey, you’re talking to ‘The Man,’ the number one football player in the state of Florida. I know all the beautiful girls at Paseo del Mar High, are you kidding?

ND: How do you know all the other girls at school?

HS: Isn’t it obvious? I’m tall, dark, handsome, not to mention a superstar athlete. Everybody knows Hulk Sanchez and the Hulk knows everybody.

ND: Did you know the guy who was killed?

HS: I knew Jake. But I didn't hang out with him. ... Sorry can't talk now. I gotta go to practice. Later.

Hulk also refuses to admit any weakness to Nancy:

ND: I'm really sorry you got injured. Does that affect your chances of playing college ball?

HS: I had a little sprain, no big deal. Within a week I was better than before, and impressing the football scouts. I'm as strong as ever.

After Nancy has questioned Hulk several times, he becomes impatient and belittles her:

HS: I'm not into pushy girls. Do me a favor and bother someone else.

In this response, Hulk assumes that Nancy cares about his opinion of her and he frames this opinion in a way that establishes her as a female subject that can be dismissed. Hulk views Nancy as a non-threat due to her sex and enforces this view through world building.

### **Hal Tanaka- Semiotic Building- Woman as Intellectual Threat**

Hal Tanaka is a Japanese foreign exchange student at Paseo Del Mar High. Like all the characters, Hal has secrets that he attempts to keep from Nancy. However, Hal, an intellectual himself, sees Nancy as an intellectual threat and recognizes that he cannot get away with lying to her. These interactions can be understood through semiotic building which examines systems of knowledge and ways of knowing. Hal identifies Nancy as privy to the system of knowledge that he had previously occupied alone. Hal is recognized as intellectually superior by the other students which allows him to hide information from them. He sees Nancy as an intellectual threat and does not feel like he can deceive her.

This dynamic between the two characters is most clearly illustrated when Nancy confronts Hal about his plagiarism:

ND: You plagiarized your senior essay on etiquette and Jake knew about it.

HT: Yes, Nancy. I'm very ashamed. My family will be extremely unhappy about this terrible mistake I have made. Somehow Jake found out I copied that old essay. Then he blackmailed me into doing his homework for him.

ND: Why did you copy the essay?

HT: I had no other choice. My family won't let me stay in the United States unless I get a scholarship next year. I had to take extra courses to earn the scholarship. Before I realized what I had done, I was buried in work. I copied the essay because I was desperate.

ND: What happened when Jake found out?

HT: Jake demanded I do all his homework for the rest of the semester or he would tell my family everything. What else could I do? My family was depending on me to succeed.

ND: Were you desperate enough to kill him?

HT: I was not happy about the situation, but I would never kill anyone. I value human life. Please don't tell anyone about this. I beg you. You will gain nothing if you do, and it would destroy my family if they knew what really happened. I regret what I have done. Please let me have this change to become a doctor. I promise to make up for this mistake, even if it takes the rest of my life.

Through semiotic building, Hal recognizes that Nancy has found out the truth and she cannot be duped into thinking otherwise. Unlike the other characters, Hal respects Nancy's intelligence and does not lie to her when she first confronts him with the truth. The other characters do admit things to Nancy but only after they first deny them. Hal recognizes Nancy as an intellectual threat and tries to appeal to her sense of reason to keep her from exposing him.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Nancy Drew Adventure video games position the first-person avatar in a female social position through discourse building tasks. Other in-game characters gender Nancy with their language by viewing her through specific female social positions. Just as being viewed as inferior does not make one inferior, Nancy is not confined to any of the roles the in-game characters attempt to place her in. However, their attempts work together to gender her within the game due to the lack of visual cues associated with a first-person avatar. Each of these roles is tied to a specific character with which Nancy interacts and is implemented through a specific building task established by Gee (1999):

Table 1

### *Discourse Building Tasks in Secrets Can Kill Remastered (2010)*

Character	Building Task	Social Position
Detective Beech	Political Building	Woman as Subordinate
Daryl Gray	Socioculturally-Situated Identity	Woman as Object of Desire
Connie Watson	Connection Building	Woman as Confidant
Hector "Hulk" Sanchez	World Building	Woman as Physical Non-Threat
Hal Tanaka	Semiotic Building	Woman as Intellectual Threat

The first-person avatar in *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* is gendered through social roles established by the discourse of other in-game characters: subordinate, object of desire, confidant, physical non-threat, and intellectual threat. These roles are established by the discourse building tasks: political, socioculturally-situated identity, connection, world, and semiotic.

### Agency

While this discourse analysis sought to determine how the first-person female avatar is gendered despite the lack of visual cues, examining the interview sequences within *Secrets Can Kill Remastered* also offers interesting insights into various complexities of the text. One of these insights has to do with female agency, a component often missing in video game content. The player is able to make meaningful choices within the game. While the game's outcome is unchangeable, character interactions can be altered by the decision a player makes during interview sequences. Since the player holds agency within the game, the female first-person avatar also possesses this agency. While other in-game characters attempt to place Nancy in various feminized roles through their discourse, Nancy remains an autonomous agent, capable of asserting her own identity.

### Race

Nancy's interactions with Hal Tanaka illuminate the tainted racial history of the original Nancy Drew series. Hal is clearly stereotyped within the text. He is an overachieving Asian student who worries about the expectations of his family. He spends all his time studying, and is presented next to an open book and notepad. He talks in a hurried, nervous manner, and his wordiness makes his responses less than conversational. This stereotypical presentation works to highlight Nancy's white femaleness. Despite this characterization, Hal is given the same respect, importance, and attention as the other in-game characters. The same cannot be said about Nancy Drew's past adventures.

In the 1950s, previous Nancy Drew novels were reworked, which removed much of the racially insensitive content. Unfortunately, the history of racism is forever ingrained in the girl sleuth's legacy. In the series' first books, "negro" characters are rarely given names. They are subservient to white characters and often involved in criminal activity (Still, 2017).

In addition to the unacceptable representation of African-Americans, early Nancy Drew novels contain other cultural stereotypes. Italian, Polish, Chinese, and Irish characters are all given unsavory characteristics, which the novels clearly associate with their heritages. Characters with Jewish sounding names can rarely be trusted, and

Irish policemen are dumb and ineffective. Marshall (2003) notes that villains are not hard to spot in classic Nancy Drew novels. One must only look for those with non-white markers.

Still (2017) notes that more recent iterations of Nancy Drew adventures are much more culturally sensitive. Portrayals of African Americans are more realistic beginning in the 1980s, and the video game version of Nancy encounters and validates people from diverse backgrounds. However, as seen in *Secrets Can Kill Remastered*, race is always salient when it comes to Nancy Drew. Her WASP-y status affords her many privileges minority characters do not possess.

### **Conclusion**

Nancy Drew Adventure games gender its non-visual female video game character through the discourse of other in-game characters. This game shows how discourse building tasks can be used to establish a gendered social position without the aid of visual markers. Female video game characters have long had problems with stereotypical, hypersexed visual representations. Games like those in the Nancy Drew Adventure series show an alternative way of placing players in a virtual female social position. Additionally, Nancy Drew Adventure games provide examples of female agency, a component largely missing from video game content. These games also offer insights into the long and ugly history of racism in Nancy Drew texts, and provide an opportunity to either perpetuate or challenge this tarnished history. After close to a century of cultural influence, it is clear that Nancy Drew is here to stay. With her move into the virtual realm, she continues to evolve and influence females throughout the country.

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