Technically Witches:
In Witch We Discuss Witches in Video Games

What is better-- to be born good, or to overcome your evil nature through great effort?
—Paarthurnax,
The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

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ABSTRACT AND INTRODUCTION

There is a new frontier. Not the wild west, not even space; no, something much closer to home is sweeping through the nation and has been for decades: video games. Video games have taken the world by storm, exponentially growing in popularity. There are games for everyone and everything, from being stranded in the ocean to hitting a white ball back and forth. There are now hundreds of different genres of video games and, now commonly stocked with writing teams, video games are considered a literary art form as they craft storylines and adventures into a brand new experience that is different than their original paperback counterparts. These new experiences are full of creative characters and endless escapades, but these characters have yet to be fully scrutinized. Thus, the question has yet to be asked: How are witches portrayed in video games? To attempt to answer this question, there must be a sampling from the three major genres of video games: role-playing games known as RPGs , farming simulation games known as farming sims, and multiplayer platform / adventure games (Tassi). Thus, the games *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, *Stardew Valley*, and *Trine 3: The Artifacts of Power* were chosen to represent these respective genres and their portrayal of witches. All three of these games also pass an equivalent of the Bechdel test (a test that was originally formed to test the competency of women in movies) (Shaw 208). This new, witchy Bechdel test is as follows: One: does the game have a witch who, two: speaks to someone non-aggressively about, three: something other than their magic? Through analysis and research, it is clear that the witches in popular video games have not changed from their 17th century counterparts, reinforcing the toxic witch stereotypes for gamers today.

SKYRIM

To clarify, in this essay, the word "witch" is used loosely. For all intents and purposes, "witch," "wizard," and "mage" are all equivalent terms. While witches are generally female, wizards are generally male, and mage generally denotes a medieval-fantasy-esque setting, they are used synonymously.

The *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is a fantasy RPG based in a medieval-like setting but on a fictional land called Skyrim on a continent called Tamriel. Since this is an open-world RPG, the main character is the player.[1] Throughout the game of *Skyrim*, there are call-backs to 17th century witches in the use of magic and the Mages' College.

Magic throughout Skyrim is feared. In a fantasy world, it would seem natural to have magic; but while walking around with a flame-spell ready and open in one hand in a non-threatening manner (See Figure 1A), the player is met with scared guards in the capital city of Skyrim:

"You've got that fire under control… right?"
"Woah, woah, watch the magic!"

(*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition*)

Some guards are more abrupt with their comments, just trying to get the player to put their spells away. One guard asks the player to "'go cast [their] fancy magic someplace else'" while another guard shakily asks the player to confirm that the player will "'not set anything on fire'" (*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition*). Even a child reprimands the player about their magic, yelling: "'You're not supposed to play with fire, you know'" (*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition*). This hatred and fear of magic is surprising in a fantasy setting, but it is not in Tamriel; any knowledge about magic is hidden behind the walls of something called the Mages' College. Because of this, most of the common folk in Skyrim do not know where the magic they see comes from. This is uncannily similar to witches in the 17th century who had powers that other people could not understand. Just like witches of years past, "it [is] the ambiguity" of the magic in Skyrim that is the "downfall" of the magic-users (Thomas 64). And so, magic-users in Skyrim are still subject to the tribulations of witches of the 17th century.

The other majorly witch-like aspect of *Skyrim* is the Mage's College, as mentioned above. Located in the top right-hand corner of the map, protected by snowy mountains on one side and a river that surrounds the entirety of Skyrim on the other, the Mages' college is housed in Winterhold ("Winterhold (Skyrim City)"). Winterhold was once a great city but now it is all ruins, accompanied by only a few still-standing buildings and houses as well as the College itself (which is not in great shape, either) (see Figure 1B). Similar to the status of 17th century witches, just the *location* of the Mages' College has a "rejected" vibe to it, as though it is "rejected by [its] neighbors with nobody to turn to" (Cohn 50). Even asking about the College while in Winterhold elicits some negative words from characters in the game, including but not limited to:

> "'Keep clear of the College, and keep yourself out of trouble.'"
> "'It's no secret that the College's reputation in Skyrim is… *tainted*.'"
> (*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition*)

The game itself even tells the player to avoid the College. On the loading screen (which is displayed whenever the player moves from one location to another), one of the randomly selected lines that can be shown in the corner of the screen is as follows: "Once a source of pride for the people of Winterhold, the College is now shunned and feared" (*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition*). This is incredibly similar to witches being ostracized in England for trying to educate themselves. More specifically, to the witch-hating English townspeople, "a conjuror who invoked spirits to gain occult knowledge was a 'witch' so far as they were concerned, no matter how innocent his own intentions" (Thomas 48). This fear and "tainting" of the educational center for magic-users is evocative of the lives of witches in the 17th century.

As for gender, Skyrim does not really draw a line between male and female. There does not seem to be much difference between playing as either gender besides some flirting or assumptions of romantic relationships in completely magic-less settings ("Does Gender Affect Anything?"). But there is a clear distinction between mages and non-mages. It is not required that the player be a mage-- because, again, this is an open-world RPG where the player's character is almost entirely customizable-- and yet there is a bias from non-player characters (NPCs) about being a mage. This is reflective of the bias that witches had against them in the 17th century (Cohn 50). Thus, even though gender is not necessarily a key factor in being a mage in *Skyrim*, there are still drawbacks to being a mage at all, thus reinforcing the witch stereotype.

Throughout *Skyrim* there is magic and constant references to it. It is impossible to play the game without running into some kind of magical being, mage, or other suggestion of magic. With that said, there are parallels between *Skyrim* and the stereotype of witches that was propagated throughout the 17 century, especially in reference to *Skyrim*'s use of magic and the Mages' College. There has, at least for *Skyrim* and open-world RPGs, been no real advances in witch culture, with the exception of a lack of bias against gender.

Figure 1: Skyrim

Figure 1A
Skyrim, May 02, 2018.

Figure 1B
Skyrim. April 24, 2018.
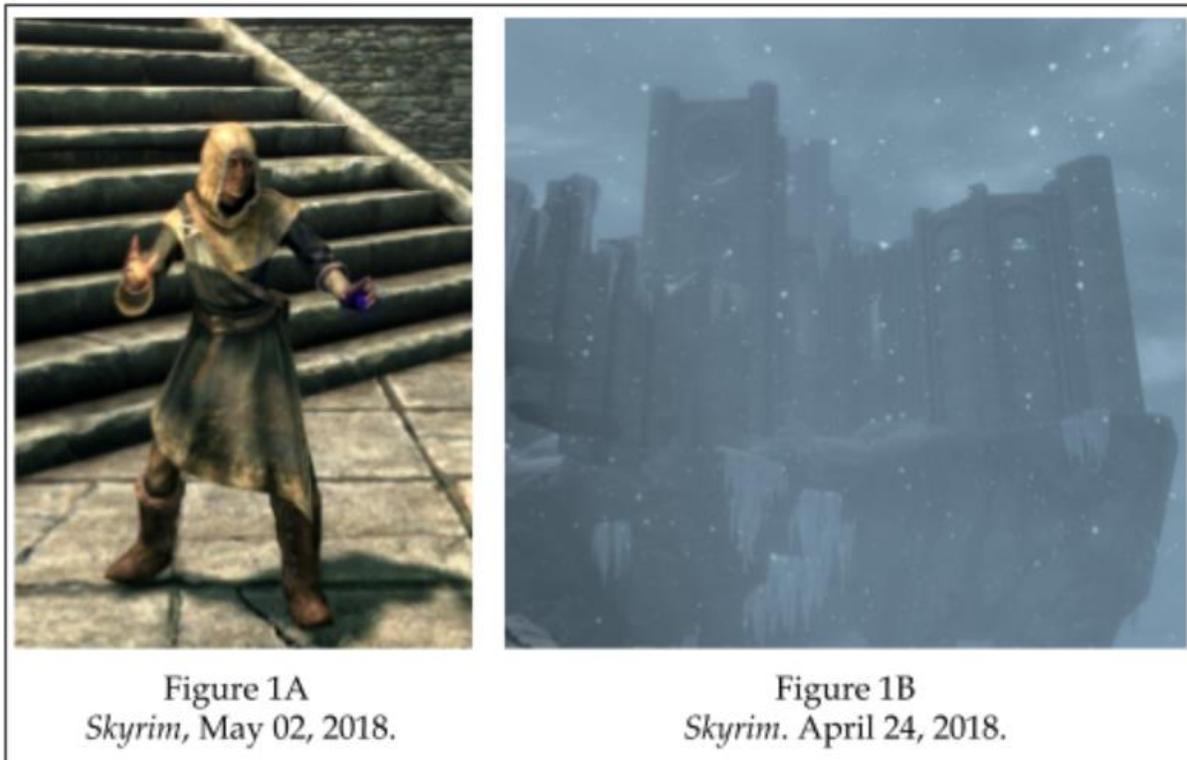
STARDEW VALLEY

Another game involving witchcraft (or in this case wizardcraft) is *Stardew Valley.* This game is not meant to be realistic as it is a farming sim with a simple, 8-bit art-style (see Figure 2A).[2] Upon reading the "golden scroll," the Wizard will start sending mail to the player, beginning with a request to meet him at his tower. This Wizard is similar to 17th century witches in that he is shrouded in mystery, he lives in a secluded house, and researches unknown topics.

While playing, there are not many non-player characters who speak about the Wizard, similar to witches of the 17th century. The few who do, however, speak about him very mysteriously. Caroline, one of the townspeople, tells the player she used to go to the Wizard's tower sometimes but she immediately requests that the player not tell her husband about it. Other characters have off-handedly mentioned that there is a Wizard in town, but no one goes on to explain it any more ("Wizard"). This simultaneous lack of knowledge and lack of curiosity around the Wizard is incredibly similar to the ostracizing actions of neighbors towards so-called "witches" in the 17th century.

Unlike the rest of the buildings in Stardew Valley which are clustered together in sensible groups (like houses grouped near the pub, near the hospital, etc.), the Wizard's tower is secluded (see Figure 2C). The tower rests on the edge of town, really on its own section of the map known as the western edge of Cindersap Forest ("Wizard's Tower"). This is uncannily similar to witches who are commonly seen as living on the edge of town, ostracized by all their neighbors (Cohn 50). His house on the edge of the forest is not exactly the most welcoming, and the neighbors know it, too, similar to the witches in years past.

The Wizard provides a small variety of quests, mainly consisting of slaying monsters or collecting some kind of essence, all for some unknown magical purpose. These quests are generally on the more difficult side, since instead of fruits and vegetables the Wizard usually requests specific essences that can

only be found in the mines or certain places (*Stardew Valley*). The Wizard claims to be using all of the material for "magical research" ("Wizard"). This is incredibly similar to witches because "a conjuror who invoked spirits to gain occult knowledge was a 'witch'" (Thomas 48). And so, just through his requests for items, the Wizard is following the witch stereotype.

Meanwhile, the Wizard's research is also kept a mystery. While everyone else in town seems to have a specific, explicit job (running the Community Center, working at the museum, owning a store, etc.), the Wizard is simply that: a Wizard. Perhaps he is some kind of "'wise woman'" (or in this case, man) who owes "any power [he] might possess to the pact [he] made with Satan" (Thomas 49), as illustrated by the inside of the Wizard's toward which, among other things, includes a pentagram with candles surrounding it (see Figure 2D). There is no description provided and it is never investigated any further throughout the game but rather the pentagram is simply part of the Wizard's house. This mystery around the Wizard's house and research is, again, incredibly reminiscent of the witches-of-old's "ambiguity" (Thomas 64). The Wizard even meets the standard criteria of an "elderly widow" (Cohn 50) as he is actually a widower himself (*Stardew Valley*). This mystery around the Wizard's job and backstory not only raises many questions about his origins but also strongly relates him back to 17th century witches.

Figure 2: *Stardew Valley*

Figure 2A
Stardew Valley. April 23, 2018.

Figure 2B
Stardew Valley. April 23, 2018.

Figure 2C
Stardew Valley. April 15, 2018.

Figure 2D
Stardew Valley. April 15, 2018.

The Wizard is the closest the player gets to magic and it is curious that the only exposure to magic is a male figure. Unlike *Skyrim*, *Stardew Valley* has a set gender for their magical aspect. That is, the Wizard is the only magical person in the game and he is indeed male. This is a break from the usual witch as they are "usually a woman" (Cohn 50). Although this may seem slightly progressive to improve the image of witches in video games, there are quite a few setbacks that the Wizard lives with throughout the game, like being a widower and not being included in normal town activities nor conversations, that still set him back and do not add to the image of witches.

In the end, while there is definite derivation from the female witch-myth with a male Wizard, *Stardew Valley* reinforces the old ways of looking at witches. The 8-bit art style may be cute and calming, but there is an underlying stereotype that is kept alive within the game. An excluded widower conducting secret research all culminates to strengthen the bias against witches in modern culture.

TRINE 3

The last game considered, *Trine 3*, is similar to *Skyrim* in art style and setting but is unlike *Skyrim* (and more like *Stardew Valley*) in that Trine 3 is not trying to be realistic. There is a distinct, cartoon-ish style to the art in this game (see Figure 3A).[3] This game has a linear storyline and set characters, one of whom is a wizard named Amadeus. Amadeus, while living inside of a video game, is not safe from the stereotypes of witches, as he is still mysterious and a researcher like the witches before him.

While Amadeus does not live in a secluded house (as far as the game portrays), he does have a mysterious magic as he "was only ever good for conjuring boxes" (see Figure 3C and Figure 3D) (*Trine 3: The Artifacts of Power*). This does turn out to be helpful, but it is also reminiscent of a common aspect of witches in the 18th century: mystery (Thomas 64). Even though it is uncertain exactly how this magic works, it is known that the power comes from a specific person / spirit known as Trine, the Artifact of Soul. When approached by this spirit, Amadeus literally thanks Trine for "'all the magical powers [it's] stowed upon [him], and all the marvelous adventures'" (*Trine 3: The Artifacts of Power*). During this one-sided conversation between Amadeus and Trine, Amadeus cowers away from Trine (see Figure 3E). Even though Trine is given a more welcoming color of blue, there is a distinct correlation to some evil being or, more specifically, Satan. This relationship with Satan is very specific to satanic cults and, even *more* specifically, witches. Because "the witch owed any power she might possess to the pact she had made with Satan" (Thomas 49). This satanic relationship is nothing new to 17th century witches, showing the lack of advancement in video games since Amadeus is reduced to a wizard who pledge something to a larger being in return for power.

The Wizard in this game also meets the standard of a mysterious researcher as the player originally meets Amadeus on a beach while he is going to watch the turtles migrating (but there is no explicit reason *why*). The opening of the game also includes a description of the general plotline, lamenting for a school for Wizards that is under attack and in need of "heroes" (one of which is the Wizard). This tie to education is reminiscent of witches as "'wise women'" and "'cunning'" men (Thomas 60). So not only is Amadeus educated, but he is also a mysterious researcher. With all of these callbacks to 17th century witches, it is really no wonder why the witch narrative has not died down.

As for gender, this game also sets the "witch" figure as male, similar to *Stardew Valley*. The wizard being male may seem like a step in the right direction for "witch" images as the previous games have portrayed, but unlike the previou games this Wizard has preassigned accomplices-- specifically a knight and a rogue. The rogue is a woman (a minority, since the other two are male) and she is incredibly sexualized (see Figure 3F). While the men's outfits fully cover their bodies and appear to be functional for their given classes, the rogue is given a white, slim-fitting robe with long, flowing ends. Tight clothing could be seen as an asset considering that the rogue does quick maneuvers and is constantly jumping or tumbling somewhere, but the ends of her robe flowing around her make no sense. Practically, the ends could get caught on anything and be more of a hindrance in her operations. With that said, it may seem like a plus to have the "witch" be male, but if the "witch" was female in this game, it would dissolve the image even more rather than build it up to a respected position as it once was and should be, since it would likely be overly sexualized, similar to the rogue.

Thus, *Trine 3* is not much of an improvement for the witch's image, either. The wizard is a classic caricature of the "witch" with their genders switched and a nice art style. But even though Amadeus is male, it would be an even larger step *backwards* if he were female. So, unfortunately, *Trine 3* does not improve the image of witches.

These games are all works of art in their own rights. Countless people have put care into these pieces and they are well-crafted entertainment experiences. Unfortunately, they are not played in isolation; there are real human beings who experience this art and will take away different lessons and ideas from them. So while the goal of most of these studios and developers is to make great, lasting games that can be played over and over or games that portray especially powerful messages, these developers should still take into account the stereotypes they are promoting in their games. These witch stereotypes are not dying down for a reason; they are being propagated time and time again through different means, and a video game is just one avenue for that. There are children and teens playing these games, investing their time in the characters and storylines, and having "emotional experiences" with the games they connect with (Homer). In a 2012 study of adolescents playing video games, boys played video games for well over 60

hours a week and girls played just over 40 hours per week at their highest, with ages ranging from 10 to 15 (Homer). This equates to about 5 to 8 hours *per day* on average. With witches so prominent in the games observed and children preferring these game genres over others (Homer), it is no surprise that the image of witches has not died down.

Witches are nothing new. For years-- centuries-- witches have been woven in and out of stories, whether it be to scare women, children, or men. The only thing that has changed for the modern-day story teller is *how* the story is told. In video games, while the player may enter an entirely new world, that world has been shaped by events on earth. It has been shaped by the history and experiences that have come before; no storyteller speaks in isolation. Whether the story takes place in Tamriel, Stardew Valley, or some unnamed location, there is a definite relation back to the real-world because these games are played by real people. Each of the games mentioned all have either a witch, wizard, or mage within the game, an image that has been prominent since at least the 17th century.

Figure 3: *Trine 3*

Figure 3A
Trine 3. April 17, 2018.

Figure 3B
Trine 3. April 23, 2018.

Figure 3C
Trine 3. April 17, 2018.

Figure 3D
Trine 3. April 17, 2018.

Figure 3E
Trine 3. April 17, 2018.

Figure 3F
Trine 3. April 17, 2018.

These games, whether intentional or not, use the stereotypical definitions of a witch. In *Skyrim*, magic is not only feared, but those studying magic are also hated. In *Stardew Valley*, the Wizard conducts mysterious research (even though no one knows exactly what he is researching) and he is living on the edge of a thriving town, practically ignored by all of his neighbors. *Trine 3*, while it has three "heroes," one is a wizard who is trying to educate himself but who is given all his power from some kind of Satanic spirit. Even though all of these games take on the task of portraying a witch in some form, these games differ in the arena of gender. *Skyrim* attempts to tackle the subject by not offering any differences between the male and female experiences for the player in a seemingly choice-filled world. *Stardew Valley* has a similar approach, except the ostracized "witch" figure is male; this seems to be a more proactive choice, but the Wizard is still treated like the stereotypical witch. *Trine 3* handles it the worst, with the wizard being male but the female in the game being incredibly revealing and clothed insufficiently. In their own ways, each game portrays the stereotype of witches for a new generation to experience.

CONCLUSION

Video games are truly a new frontier. There is a direct correlation between the advancement of technology and the improvement of video games. With more and more consoles and ways of experiencing video games coming out and becoming more affordable, game studios need to become more conscious of the images they are putting in the minds of players, especially younger players. Fascination with witches will not be disappearing any time soon; their mystery has intrigued societies for countless years and will continue to do so. What can be stopped, however, is the *way* that witches are portrayed in the media. There is no real need for the down-on-her-luck widow to be ostracized anymore; this is a new era. Video game developers can spend a little extra to give their witch-like characters more dimension and respect because, after all, kids and teens are playing these games, seeing weak female figures. So despite their portrayals in these video games, yes, empowered female figures are also *technically* witches.

NOTES

1. *Skyrim* is the fifth and newest game in the *Elder Scrolls* series from Bethesda Studios. Originally released in 2011, *Skyrim* took the gaming world by storm, winning awards from "Best Original Vocal Song - Choral" for the main theme to "Game of the Year" in 2012 ("Awards for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*"). This game is still incredibly popular, winning the Steam Award for "Test of Time" in 2016 ("The Steam Award Winners!"). The main character, the player, is customizable almost to a fault-- there are literally thousands of options; the player can customize all facial features and multiple other physical aspects as well as the character's race and role / job (or "class"). This allows the player to create a character they relate to (or do not relate to). This also allows for more immersive game-play. *Skyrim* is generally intended for people who enjoy RPGs, open world games, and single-player games ("*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim Special Edition*"). This game, since it is an RPG, has a branching storyline. Among its other features, *Skyrim* and the *Elder Scrolls* series are famous for letting the player complete the game on their own time. While there is a "main storyline", it can be avoided for however long the player wants. With all this choice and customization, there are very distinct endings and also random events throughout the game, leading to a different experiences. This game is basically a choose-your-own-adventure fantasy novel that is played in (nearly) real-time. The plot's premise is that the player is brought to jail for a death-sentence in the town of Helgen. After waiting for their turn at the chopping-block, just before the axe swings, a dragon attacks the small group of guards and the player manages to escape. From then on, the player is a free man (or woman), living on their own in the land of Skyrim.

2. The makers of *Stardew Valley* are what is known as "indie"-- or not a major studio like the studio that made *Skyrim*. The creators of this game are called ConcernedApe and this is their most famous game they have made. *Stardew Valley* is a farming simulation game (farming sim). This game centers around the player whose grandfather dies and bequeaths a farm to the player to take care of. The game *Stardew Valley* takes place in a small crevice between mountains unsurprisingly called Stardew Valley. The town itself is dotted with run-down buildings, especially the Community Center. The player runs a farm, doing everything from buying the seeds to selling the produce they have grown. This game is not a realistic one mainly because of the 8-bit art style (see Figure 2). There are some major character customization options, from skin color to clothing to the name of the player's farm (see Figure 2B) (*Stardew Valley*). This game is really meant for what is called a "casual gamer," or someone who does not like high-intensity games. This game is labeled as "Overwhelmingly Positive" according to their sale page on Steam with over 75k reviews as of this paper. It is also labeled with "RPG", "Simulation", and "Agriculture", all of which are accurate descriptors of the game ("*Stardew Valley*"). *Stardew Valley* is popular, even though it may have some Communist undertones (Wright). Regardless, with a linear storyline and a casual vibe, *Stardew Valley* is the epitome of farming sims.

3. Trine 3 was developed by Frozenbyte ("*Trine 3: The Artifacts of Power*"), known for multiplayer games that are all generally cooperative puzzle games. *Trine 3* is just that: a cooperative (co-op) puzzle game. "Cooperative" here implies that this is generally a multiplayer game, but it can be played single-player to solve puzzles. Like most co-op games, there is not a lot of customization allowed in the characters since there is a set storyline that the characters follow throughout the game. There are clear divisions between

good (the main characters) and evil (demented, crouched-over orcs or other monsters) (see Figure 3B) (*Trine 3: The Artifacts of Power*). There is no friendly fire (meaning players cannot shoot other players but they can shoot NPCs). This game, similar to *Stardew Valley*, is meant for the casual player as it is slow-paced and simple. Since *Trine 3* takes place in a fictional world, the ideology behind the game can be difficult to discern. While the game centers around 3 archetypes in gaming (the knight, the thief/rogue, and the wizard), there does not seem to be much outright commentary made about any of them. As mentioned before, there is a set storyline that the characters move through in the game (thus why there can not be much if any character customization) and so this game is incredibly linear with each character fulfilling the expected role of their archetype. This is basically a book that the player reads in real time, with a narrator giving context for every scene and dialogue from each character developing the story further. There does not seem to be any kind of major choice in the game, so there is only one ending, just like a regular book.

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