

## The reassertion of hegemonic masculinity through videogames

### La reafirmación de la masculinidad hegemónica a través de los videojuegos

<http://dx.doi.org/10.32870/Pk.a11n20.547>

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Received: May 12, 2020

Accepted: November 2, 2020

#### ABSTRACT

The article analyzed the reassertion of hegemonic masculinity that videogames can favor in their videogamers. The study took *Gears of War* as a reference and its objective was to determine if gender stereotypes are diffused through the characters of this videogame and how this influenced the vision of hegemonic masculinity perceived by the gamers of this saga. For this purpose, a Likert instrument was used, which allowed access to the perception of gamers on key aspects in the reassertion of hegemonic masculinity included in the game, such as violent behavior, the use of offensive language, the importance of physique, among other. From the analysis it was established that, despite the fact that the protagonists are violent, chauvinists and hegemonic men, most of the participants did not perceive these traits as such in the characters. The conscious non-identification of this type of aspects reflects that there is a normalization of hegemonic discourse that favours its invisibility.

#### Keywords

Masculinity; hegemonic masculinity; male stereotypes; masculinity in video games; standardization; gamers

#### RESUMEN

*En este artículo se analiza la reafirmación de la masculinidad hegemónica que pueden favorecer los videojuegos en sus videojugadores. El estudio tomó como referencia Gear of War y su objetivo fue determinar si a través de los personajes de este videojuego se difunden estereotipos de género y cómo esto influyó en la visión sobre la masculinidad hegemónica que percibieron los jugadores de la saga. Para este propósito se empleó un instrumento Likert, que permitió acceder a la percepción de los videojugadores sobre aspectos clave en la reafirmación de la masculinidad hegemónica incluidos en el juego, como el comportamiento violento, el uso de lenguaje ofensivo, la importancia del físico, entre otros. A partir del análisis se pudo establecer que, a pesar que los protagonistas del juego son hombres hegemónicos, violentos y machistas, la mayoría de los participantes del estudio no percibieron como tal estos rasgos en los personajes. La consciente no-identificación de este tipo de aspectos refleja que existe una normalización del discurso hegemónico que propicia su invisibilización.*

#### Palabras clave

Masculinidad; masculinidad hegemónica; estereotipos masculinos; masculinidad en los videojuegos; normalización; videojugadores

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## Introduction

In recent decades, gender theory has deepened the study of inequalities between women and men. By using different approaches, these studies have made it possible to understand their behaviors as the result of certain cultural practices that favor divergences between the genders. Within the universe of issues and problems addressed by gender theory is hegemonic masculinity, understood as that “traditional masculinity” that characterizes behaviors, to a greater or lesser extent, violent and insensitive, and which is generally related to little or no self-care, both in terms of hygiene and health, as well as personal image. This masculinity is seen as a “common” way of being a man, with all that this implies, including the behavioral patterns established by the context in which man finds himself.

Behaviors associated with hegemonic masculinity, despite being mostly negative – equally for men and women– are considered “traditional” and, therefore, end up being accepted and assumed in various social and cultural contexts. In view of this, it is important to be aware that the characteristics and behaviors that may be associated with this conception of masculinity are neither natural nor characteristic of the male gender, but are learned –and apprehended– as a form of “inheritance” from the prevailing culture in which men develop.

In order to understand the harmfulness of behaviors related to this type of masculinity, it is necessary to analyze the context that allows the perpetuation of the hegemonic message, as well as the reaction and acceptance of the men who receive the message. For this purpose, the research presented here delved into the world of video games, after finding that certain electronic games contribute to the reaffirmation of hegemonic masculinity.

In this context, the study consisted of two aspects: a theoretical basis and field research. The first one included a literature review focused on gender theory, in order to culturally contextualize the phenomenon to be analyzed. Secondly, a field exploration was conducted with male gamers of the first three episodes of the *Gears of War* saga, with the intention of determining whether the hegemonic masculinity presented in the game reaffirmed these ideals in the players. The results obtained show that, indeed, among video gamers there is a veiled acceptance and reproduction of these values that underpin “traditional” masculinity.

## The concept of masculinity

Gender is defined by Colás and Villaciervos (2007) as “a cultural representation that contains ideas, prejudices, values, interpretations, norms, duties, mandates and prohibitions about the lives of women and men” (p. 38). Specifically, gender refers to the characteristics that socially determine what men and women should be at a given time and place. This is

related to the behavior that society expects of each of the sexes, that is, to the particularities and expectations that “should” permeate their actions. Both the social attributions and the predetermined conceptions of individuals are very different for men and women, given the assumed belonging to one or the other gender.

Gender stereotypes affect people's attitudes from birth to death, in a permanent process that implies general rejection by the group if they decide not to fulfill the assigned role. Serret (2004) states that: “identity, as we understand it, is precisely a perception which develops at the level of socially shared images, organized by codes that the community reproduces, sanctions and accepts” (p. 43). Gender is constructed on the basis of people's genital differences, as a set of different actions and attitudes that define the group called “men” and the group called “women”, which gives rise to many inequalities.

Gender manifests itself in many areas of everyday life. By adapting to the discourse and context of a given era, various tasks and obligations are configured, both for men and women, in each geographical location and historical time, although always considering the biological difference (sex) as the basis for these discrepancies. These behaviors are internalized, assumed and lived as their own, which generates a continuity in the ways of acting that are learned throughout life. In this sense, Bourdieu (2000) states the following:

Habitus as a system of dispositions in view of practice, constitutes the objective foundation of regular behaviors and, by the same token, of the regularity of behaviors. And we can foresee practices [...] precisely because the habitus is what makes agents endowed with it behave in a certain way in certain circumstances (p. 40).

Within families, roles are assigned at a very early age. From birth, people are stipulated colors, games, languages and expectations based on their gender. As children grow up, they are clear about the type of toys they should use, the games they are allowed to play, as well as the clothes, designs and colors used to distinguish between boys and girls. Upon reaching adolescence, the learned gender differences are, to a certain extent, normalized, and become reaffirmed in the individual's actions; an example of this is the skills of courtship and flirting, acquired in very different ways according to gender, where men play a predominant role.

Regarding the relevance of approaching masculinity from the perspective of gender relations, Minello (2002) points out that this approach makes it possible to understand both the individual and social levels, history, structures, norms, social practices and their cultural meanings; it also implies the articulation of gender with other axes of social inequality (such as ethnicity, race, etcetera).

When referring specifically to hegemonic masculinity, we have identified various approaches. Some authors (Connell, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) point out that masculinity should be understood as a sociocultural process that is inscribed in a set of practices related to power relations and social gender relations in a given society. For

Héretier (1996), the categories of femininity and masculinity are linked to imaginaries and concrete social practices that materialize in bodies. Along these lines, Gordo (2000) asserts that thinking about masculinity refers to a model of society based on sexual difference, as a productive instance and government of bodies.

The concept of masculinity is relatively new; it derives from gender studies that appeared in the last third of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, and alludes to certain characteristics of human sociability. In this sense, it has to do with the configuration of gender roles and control of the body.

Téllez and Verdú (2011) argue that masculinity, as a concept, currently represents a topic of social interest, in light of the transformations in gender roles that have taken place in recent years. These same authors affirm that masculinity is, at the same time, the position in gender relations, the practices by which men and women commit to that gender position, and the effects of these on bodily experience, personality and culture (Téllez and Verdú, 2011).

On the other hand, Madrid (2016) postulates that what is central in the study of masculinities is to understand that the simultaneous production of hegemonic and dominant class masculinities is not the individual in himself, but the institutions in which these unfold and develop different collective practices. Bard (2018) completes this idea, by arguing that no masculinity emerges if it is not in a gender system, and this is not an object, nor a norm nor an essence, as it involves processes and relationships through which sexualities live.

### ***Gears of War: context and plot***

Video games began to become popular in the 1970s, and were defined as an easily accessible means of entertainment for children and teenagers. Arcade systems (known in Mexico as *maquinitas*) became popular in public spaces –such as service stores, cafeterias or restaurants–, which turned video games into an important means of entertainment and recreation. At the end of 1978, the first successful console for home use appeared: Atari 2600. During the 1980s, while video games were making their way into the market and consumption, the company Nintendo emerged in Japan in 1983 and decided to bet on home consoles.

This brought with it the NES (Nintendo Entertainment System), and with it one of the most iconic characters in the history of video games: Mario Bros, which marked the beginning of the era of video games as a means of home entertainment. Later came the “16-bit generation”, also dominated by Nintendo with its SNES (Super Nintendo Entertainment System). There were several companies that bet on the creation of this type of consoles, such as Sega, Mega Drive and NeoGeo, but they would later become video game developers, leaving the design of consoles in the hands of Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft. In this period

another emblematic title appears: *Street Fighter II*, known for revolutionizing the concept of video games and popularizing the fighting genre in these, besides being the first to include a woman (Chun Li) as a relevant character.

In the late nineties, there came the so-called third generation of consoles, or 64-bit generation. This marked the beginning of competition for Nintendo, because it rejected Sony's offer to manufacture the SNES PlayStation, which was intended to use Nintendo's console and include a CD reader peripheral for games. In view of this decision, Sony decided to launch its own console (Sony PlayStation), thus opening the competition for the video game market worldwide. In 2000, Microsoft launched the Xbox console, which marked its entry into the video game market and made the company the leader in home console sales. With the three video game brands in the market, the supply of video games multiplied, as there were exclusive licenses and titles that could only be found on certain consoles.

The breadth of the offer made the emergence of a video game culture. Within these possible, the assignment of simple tasks to fulfill a specific objective was surpassed, and the theme, treatment, development, plot, visual aesthetics and music became an essential part of the product. Thus, video games were no longer just a means of entertainment, but also introduced the player to a universe with its own rules, specific languages and diverse characters.

In this context, and in view of the great success that Third Person Shooter (TPS) video games began to have, *Gears of War* was launched by the video game developer Epic Games in 2006. The game's plot can be summarized as follows: aliens called Locust confront the human race on the planet Sera, where they had arrived as part of their expansionist interests. The plot revolves around four characters: Marcus Fenix, Damon Baird, Dominic Santiago and Augustus El Tren Cole, members of the Coalition of Government Ordered (CGO) Army.

The story follows Marcus Fenix, who finds himself sentenced to prison after rebelling against the orders of a direct superior. Years later, when the planet Sera is in ruins, Fenix is freed thanks to a pardon and receives the order to confront the Locust and keep the survivors safe; to achieve this he joins an infantry squadron. The premise of the first three episodes is similar, "to advance through hostile terrain with the intention of freeing space and finding some kind of element (mineral) that will allow them to build a weapon of mass destruction to exterminate the Locust" (Ruiz and Molina, 2020, p. 5).

### Methodological strategy

As part of the research, fieldwork was conducted with the objective of determining whether hegemonic masculinity –in terms of stereotypes, behavioral patterns or values associated

with the traditional idea of masculinity– was reaffirmed by video games in video gamers. For this purpose, the first three titles of the *Gears of War* saga (released in 2006, 2008 and 2011, respectively) were selected. The selection of the video game was made based on the observation that it is a product played primarily by men, and because the protagonists resemble the characterization of masculine identity proposed by Moore and Gillette (1993), whose proposal is taken up again in this work.

The needs of the research made it more convenient to carry out the study with a non-probabilistic sample, since only by taking a limited universe –not applicable to the entire possible universe, that is, to all Mexican male players of *Gears of War*– it is possible to have a representative sample. For the correct selection of the sample, 30 participants were chosen, who were contacted through video gamers with whom they had a previous relationship, who served as a link to connect with the informants; they had to meet the following characteristics:

- 1) Define themselves as men (this in relation to gender identity).
- 2) Have residence in a city in the interior of Mexico.
- 3) Be between 20 and 35 years old.
- 4) Have completed the titles *Gears of War* 1, 2 and 3 on their own and in campaign mode.
- 5) Belong to the subculture known as gamer (that were regular video gamers).

The average age of the sample participants was 34 years old. The titles selected were from 2006 to 2011, a period in which the video gamers were in their adolescence. Before proceeding to the application of the questionnaire, the players were asked the age at which they had first played the video game, thus confirming that the informants were adolescents when they accessed these, an important aspect to take into account in determining the degree of influence they obtained from their experience with these titles.

To collect the information, a Likert-type questionnaire<sup>1</sup> was designed to obtain the contributions and opinions of the video gamers with respect to the three games in the saga. It should be clarified that although the results were presented numerically and statistically, the focus of the research was of a qualitative nature, since it is a perception study. The variables used for the analysis of the results were: the myth of the real man, violent behavior, the value of work, the use of offensive language, male sensitivity, the importance of manly physique and the importance of skin color.

## Results

### *The myth of the real man*

The first variable refers to the myth of the real man, which responds to the position of hegemonic masculinity represented in various cultural aspects. The real man can be represented from the essential definitions established by Kimmel (1997): being a man means not being a woman (which translates as not being weak); being a man means not being a boy (i.e., not being afraid); and being a man means not being homosexual (not being effeminate). Similarly, Vela (2018) suggests that the idealization of what a real man is, is reflected in different cultural aspects that, in one way or another, evidence or manifest any of these three strands.

For Díez (2008), in video games, a deformed idea of masculinity is given the category of universal, which includes traits such as power, strength, courage, control, honor, revenge, challenges, adventures and pride. In the *Gears of War* saga, practices and patterns of behavior that replicate these attributes are easy to identify at different times, even as representative characteristics of some of the characters.

This is exemplified by Marcus Fenix, a sergeant in the CGO's armed forces and the main character of the first saga, and his best friend, Dominic Santiago, a commando soldier. In their projection, these characters seem to lack feelings –which could be interpreted as a sign of weakness–, since at no time do they express emotions that contradict, or question, their strength, power or courage. Thus, their inexpressiveness is maintained in the leaving of the prison, the combats, the constant confrontation with danger and the deaths of their comrades.

In addition to this, the notion of the *true man* also permeates the relationship that develops between the characters. Despite the brotherhood that exists between Dominic and Marcus, at no time is there any sign of homoaffection –that is, affection between men–; on the contrary, the struggle of egos that the characters have with the soldier Damon Baird is evident throughout the video game.

In conclusion, it is considered that the myth of the real man symbolizes the ideal of masculinity that, in this case, is held in the West: a white, middle-aged, heterosexual man, endowed with dominant physical qualities, strong, rational, insensitive, sarcastic, without fears or doubts, always ready for combat and confrontation, who in addition to being tough and violent, is protective. From the combination of these characteristics, the guild of true men is formed.

The results of item 1 (I believe that the behavior of the *Gears of War* characters is a manifestation of masculinity) show that most of the informants position the video game characters as neutral with respect to the characteristics and traits of the myth of the real man;

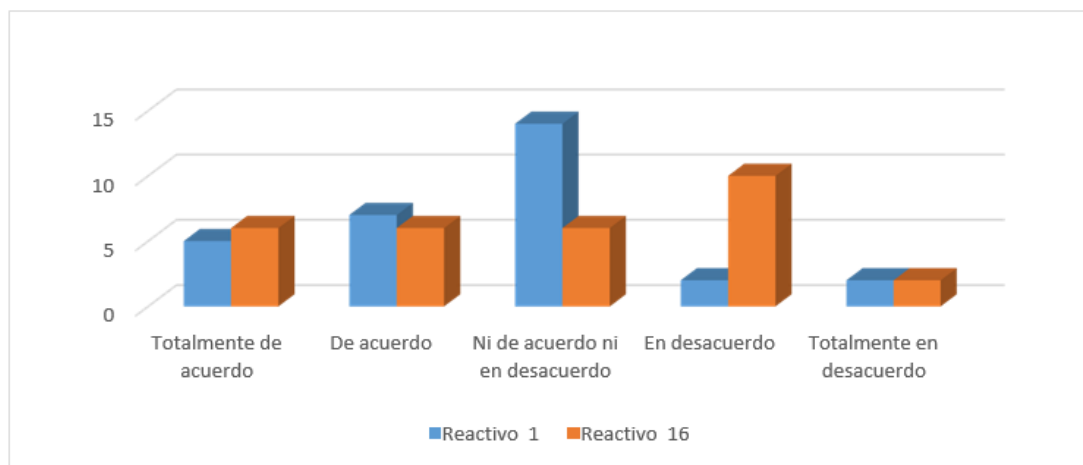


that is, they consider that they do not fully represent the myth, but they are not so far from the peculiarities of male hegemony (chart 1).

However, as already exemplified, it is evident from the analysis of the content of the video game that the characters (Marcus Fénix, Dominic Santiago, Damon Baird, among others) are representations of hegemonic masculinity –diverse, with different configurations, but, in the end, part of the same conception of “traditional masculinity”–, evidenced in their actions, motivations, comments, gestures, physique and behaviors.

Despite the negative opinion of video gamers in the sense that the characters' traits do not correspond to those of hegemonic masculinity, it is verifiable that the characters broadly respond to the myth of the real man; according to the data collected, certain characteristics possessed by the characters correspond to the archetypes of hegemonic masculinity pointed out by authors such as Kimmel (1997), Bonino (2000), Moore and Gillette (1993) and Vela (2018). At this point it could be shown that video gamers internalized the programmers' idea, in the sense that the characters shown are the good guys, as it is inserted in this Western ambivalence of good and evil so coined by North American entertainment producers.

**Chart 1.** The game reinforces the myth of the true man.



In item 16 of the questionnaire, the daily exercise of the myth is implied, by posing a scenario in which a male must behave as a “real man” in the face of an aggression. Given this, the video gamers' responses were polarized: twelve responded that they would take a violent attitude in the face of an aggression, while twelve responded the opposite and six remained in a neutral position. Two elements arise from this to analyze:



- (a) A group of males considered it normal to react violently to physical aggression, which could be interpreted to mean that they agree that there are situations that would warrant violent or aggressive behavior.
- (b) A group of men considered that a situation in which aggression is suffered should not be responded to with aggression in return, that is, they disagree with a violent response to a violent situation.

This is interesting; the majority of the sample agrees that violent behavior of the characters in the game does not obey the myth of the real man, but there is a divergence of opinions as to whether violent behavior (presented by the characters and typical of hegemonic masculinity) is justified in a situation of aggression (such as those occurring in the game, but on a more everyday level closer to the players). By contrasting the results of these two items, it was possible to interpret that the lack of knowledge about masculinity and what it implies, as well as the internalization and normalization of the tough behavior of males, prevent the visibility of aspects related to hegemonic masculinity.

The cultural approach allows us to understand that the normalization of male roles and stereotypes perpetuates the existence and repetition of these models, which hinders different constructions or rejects behavioral alternatives that do not belong to this hegemonic approach.

This normalization usually occurs in such a subtle, gradual and focused way that the reproduction of stereotypes is seen as normal. Insofar as hegemonic behaviors have become part of the daily life of the players, and permeate their conception or judgment, the polarization of opinions among the sample when faced with a violent situation is discordant among the participants. This can be explained by the limited recognition by many men of the existence of certain behaviors that can be classified as violent.

### *Reinforcement of violent behavior*

Cabra (2013) suggests that video gaming can be considered as a fundamental element for the management of emotions, creative forces and aggressive forces for both men and women. Because of this, exposure to video games becomes a factor of utmost importance for understanding the dynamics and possible transformations of contemporary masculinities.

As already mentioned, violent behavior is an essential part of hegemonic masculinity, as it demonstrates bravery and a certain superiority. In this sense, within this hegemonic conception, men are expected to act violently in certain scenarios, and if they do not do so, they lose points in their masculinity rank.

In view of this, it is necessary to understand symbolic violence as a phenomenon that shapes social relations, in which perception and recognition between agents in a given social space are intertwined, where there is an exchange of elements –such as codes and language–. A fundamental aspect that determines this symbolic violence is the unequal power relations based on male domination (Bourdieu, 2000).

This type of violence is invisible (Muñoz, 2016), but it can be considered as a foundation for other types –such as physical and emotional violence–, contributing to its naturalization. One of its characteristics is that it is introduced into the body and reproduced through discourse; thereby laying the foundations for the configuration of relations of domination in a given society.

The Warrior model, from Moore and Gillete's (1993) classifications of masculine identities, is inserted within this context. The characters in the game belong to this type of man of privileged physical attributes, active, protective, fearless and especially violent. However, because violence is an important part of the video game, that the characters are violent is not fortuitous.

The three Gear of War titles considered are shooting, survival and confrontation games; from the programming of the controls and the actions of the players, to the theme, the plot and the narrative line that the game follows, violence is present in the characters, the scenarios and the situations –an example of this is that in order to advance in the game it is necessary to kill enormous amounts of enemies–.

For this reason, at the time of the analysis and the establishment of the reagent regarding violent behavior, we sought to make this visible to the players so that they could observe that, regardless of the sympathy they may have for the characters, their behavior within the game far exceeds the violence contained in other titles of the same nature –such as *Halo*, for example–.

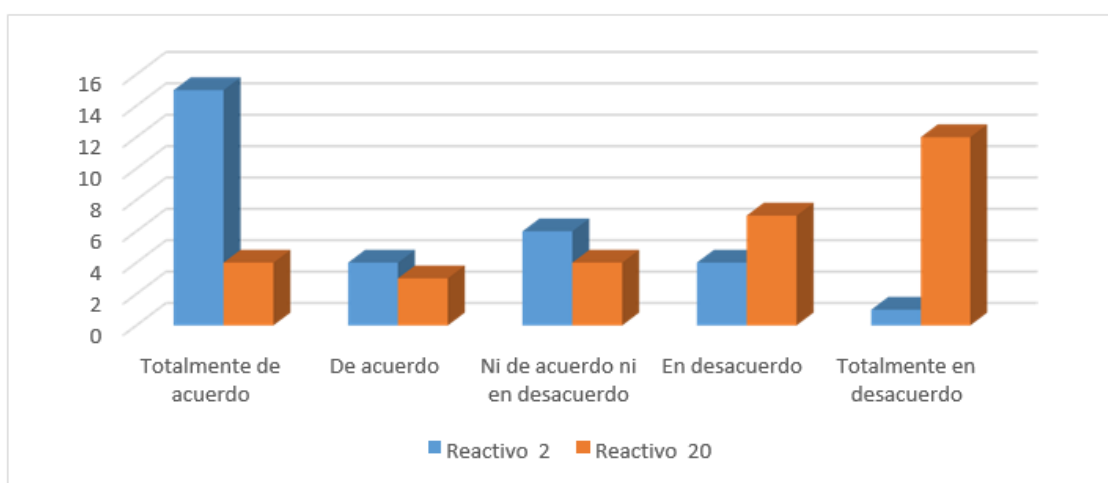
In item 2 (I prefer science fiction stories to romance stories), we inquired about the participants' genre preferences in the daily consumption of entertainment media –movies, series, video games, etcetera–. In this question, participants showed their preference for science fiction.<sup>2</sup>

It is important to clarify that not all content in this genre is violent. For the purposes of the research, science fiction was related to less romanticized themes and plots, some with high levels of violence, where the protagonists usually face dangers, enemies or situations that push them to the limit. Although this predilection does not explicitly reflect the violent nature of the players, it does help to establish the existence of a certain affinity for content with violence (in a previous survey with the informants, they stated that they had a predilection for games and movies with violent content).

The normalization of violence is also due to media consumption, which desensitizes viewers and lends to the idea that violence (meaning death, murder, dismemberment, execution or any other violent act that appears in the game) is more every day, close and typical of our environment. That is, it contributes to the strengthening of violence as a “mechanism of coercion” (Navone, 2016, p. 34), which is justified in view of a greater good.

In contrast to this consumption and apparent preference of violence for violence, in reagent 20 (chart 2) players were questioned about their preference in game modes: campaign versus online multiplayer mode. In this aspect, the majority expressed their preference for the campaign mode, a relevant result since it shows that players prefer the game's story, which they can explore from the campaign mode, rather than the online gameplay, which only allows them to confront and kill each enemy team.

**Chart 2.** The game reinforces violent behavior.



This preference reflects an interest in the narrative, in the characters and the plot, as opposed to the fluidity and dynamism of the online mode, which does not have cinematics or specific dialogues, and where the characters do not have a real contribution to the game.

The comparison of the reagents gives a broader view regarding the reinforcement of violence that the game may have on video gamers. Both are related to the preference for the consumption of audiovisual materials with high violent content; however, the answers may seem contradictory: in one case they affirm a predilection for science fiction, and in the other, they prefer the campaign mode (the story) over the multiplayer (violence).

In this sense, and as stated in variable number one, it is possible that players have normalized violence, to such an extent that they make it invisible to the extent that they do not perceive its presence in entertainment content or in the behavior of the fictional

characters presented in it with a negative approach. In contrast, it is also evident that in the approach to the video game under analysis, elements unrelated to the presence of violence (the story, the characters, the game modalities, etcetera) become involved in the analysis.

### *Reinforcing values about work*

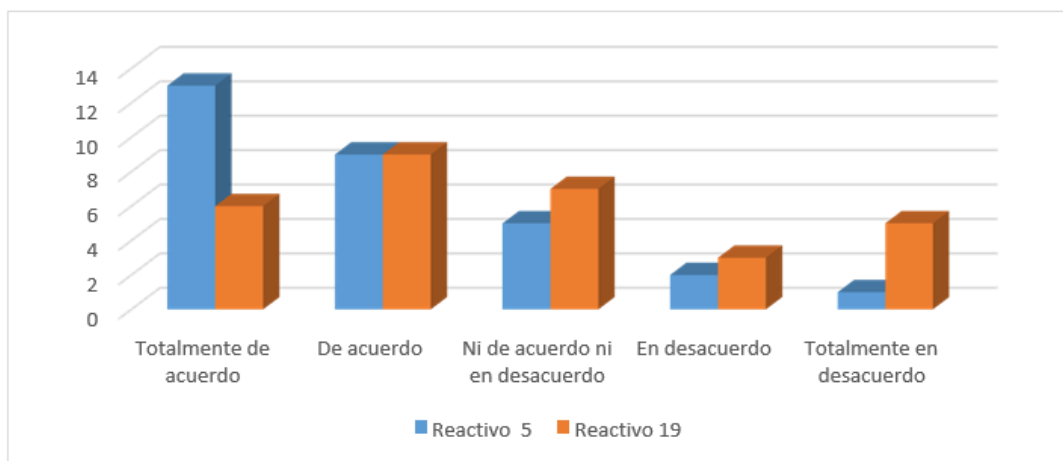
Within the parameters of hegemonic masculinity that have been examined thus far, work implies much more than an activity in itself. The hard-working characteristic in men provides them with a quality that is extremely necessary in the social circles that wield traditional masculinity. This idea of the male protector and provider is so great and assumed that when it is violated, the hegemonic masculinity of each male is significantly diminished.

Work can symbolize the success or failure of a hegemonic male. Being a breadwinner, having the possibility of positional growth on a job ladder or the possibility of economic independence are fundamental factors in the traditional definition of manhood. To delve deeper into this milestone in the exercise of hegemonic masculinity, a variable related to work was incorporated into the questionnaire.

In item 5 (I think it is appropriate that Marcus Fénix has been promoted in rank despite having been a prisoner of war), the players were asked for their opinion on the job climbing of one of the characters. At the beginning of the game, the character is a prisoner of war, after getting out, and after some war exploits, he is promoted to leader of Delta Squadron and, shortly after the death of Lieutenant Minh Young Kim, he becomes the head of the operation under the rank of sergeant, which leads to the animosity of another member of the platoon for it is unfair that he be awarded that rank.

Most of players considered this promotion to be fair (chart 3), which leads us to think that personal considerations of the players are interwoven in this assessment. This is due to the fact that, when analyzing the game's cinematic content, Marcus Fénix's promotion is not fully supported; the decisions he makes together with Control (the military group that gives him orders) are few, and his impulsive, foolish or short-sighted character stands out in his actions. In other words, in this assertion, the sympathy that the players have with the character had preponderance, beyond his real achievements or the efficiency of his actions.

**Chart 3.** The game reinforces values about work.



For item 19, a question was posed about the players' eagerness to demonstrate that they are better than others in different areas of their lives (family, work, academia, etcetera), established as a parameter of individual competence. The affirmative answers were in the majority, which reflects that these men consider it important to demonstrate to others that they are the best in various scenarios; this attitude, understood from the perspective of hegemonic masculinity, evidences a sense of competition, effort and constant approval of individual attitudes.

When the link between the items and the variable on work was established, it was observed that the players associated deservedness in cases of effort: the greater the work or achievements, the greater the work reward should be. Due to the responses, it is clear that the players believe they deserve a better space (work, academic) if their work requires sacrifices, which is reaffirmed with the idea of the provider man. The conjunction of both opinions confirms that for hegemonic masculinity the value of work is extremely important.

### *Using offensive language*

The use of language is another important aspect to consider in hegemonic masculinity. In traditional language, masculine terms are used without any consideration for the inclusive intention of the language—which attempts to homologate the discourse for men and women—, a tendency that can be qualified, in this sense, as sexist. Historically, the feminization of language has been used as an offense, particularly to offend heterosexual men, since the feminine and, therefore, the words used to refer to this gender are considered inferior.

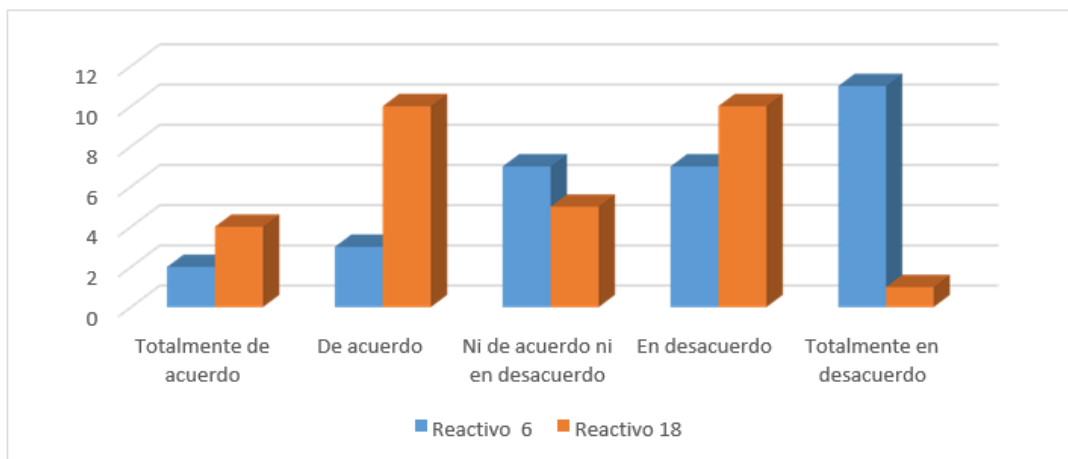
Hegemonic masculinity not only constantly promotes the idea of feminizing language as an insult, considering that it dwarfs the other person, but at the same time fuels the need to defend against it. That is, hegemonic men use feminized language to offend other people; however, if someone speaks to them with feminized language, men usually respond violently.

Item 6 (The language of the characters discriminates against women) deals with offensive language, and seeks to make visible these common characteristics in the communication processes among men (chart 4). In this line, the item raises the scenarios in which the characters used offensive language against women, present in phrases throughout the saga such as: “what’s up, bitches”, “stop crying, ladies”, “can’t you shut that bitch up?”

Despite these explicit displays, gamers positioned themselves as disagreeing that *Gears of War* has offensive language against women. This opinion shows an internalization and normalization of the use of violent language by video gamers. On the other hand, item 18 raised the use of feminine language to insult or offend other men in everyday life; to exemplify this, expressions such as “you look like a girl” or “you hit like a girl” were presented. A slight majority of the players recognized that they use feminine language to offend other men in their daily lives.

The results obtained through the variable on language showed the normalization of the offensive use of language in daily life –used as another resource of violence towards other males– and its presence –with the same characteristics and intentions– in the video game. It can be said that this occurs because the reaffirmation of masculinity is a process that is based on the reproduction of gender roles and stereotypes, which are disseminated through communication and entertainment devices, and are consumed by individuals without any kind of filter.

**Chart 4.** The game reinforces the use of offensive language.



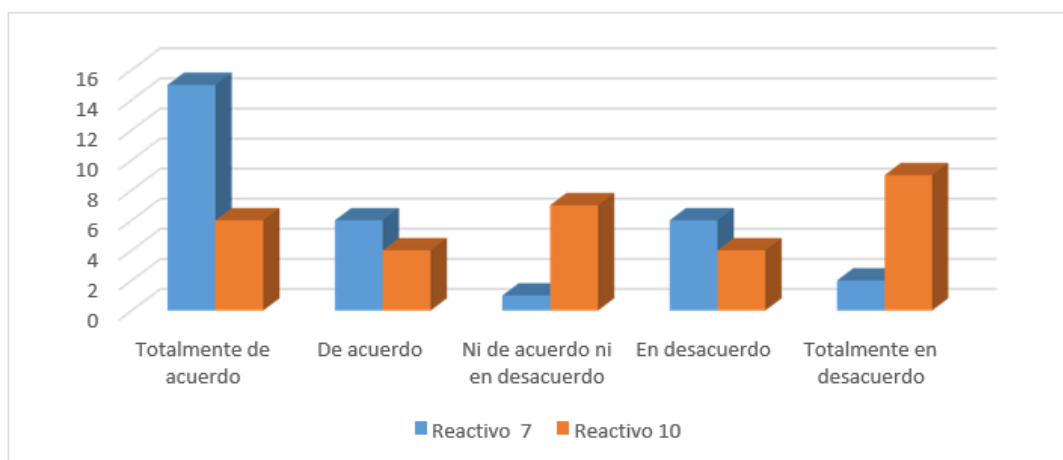
### *Reinforcing sensitivity*

Men are placed at the center of the debate in the face of two of the transcendental axes of masculinity: power and non-weakness (Palacio and Valencia, 2001). Under hegemonic criteria, sensitivity in men is synonymous with weakness; it is argued that by expressing emotions, men lose their dominant masculine character.

The socially accepted idea that men are more rational and, therefore, less emotional, forces men to demonstrate a constant peaceful character, where the thoughtful and not very visceral are prioritized, and they are forced to keep their emotions (let them come out as little as possible). In the video game, the sensitivity of the characters is limited, it is only present in certain narrative moments, which gives a certain degree of drama to the story and weight to the protagonists, by making their personalities more complex.

In response, 7 players were asked whether they believed the death of Dominic Santiago as the moment in which the character Marcus Fénix was most sensitive – considering this death one of the most emotional ones in the game– (chart 5). Throughout the saga, the friendship of both characters is strengthened and shown –very much in their own style– in different ways; for example, Dominic is the one who gets Marcus out of jail, and Marcus is the one who consoles Dominic after the death of his wife.

**Chart 5.** The game reinforces sensitivity.



Near the end of *Gears of War 3*, Dominic sacrifices himself for the group to reach the final stage and win the war; he says goodbye to his friends and his deceased wife, and then crashes a tank into a gas station, which generates an explosion that annihilates the enemy battalion, opening the way for his friends to move forward.



Faced with Dominic's death, Marcus momentarily loses his sanity; he screams, becomes enraged, and in his grief tries to go for his friend in the middle of the explosion, but, unable to do anything, he ends up fleeing with the group. It was proposed that this moment in the history of the saga is the most emotional for the character of Marcus Fenix, as not even with the death of his father (later in the third episode) does he have a similar reaction.

Most players agreed with this assertion; it is easy to understand the influence that the cinematics had on these responses: during the game the character shows no pain or sadness at the deaths of his colleagues, but suffers an emotional outburst at the loss of his friend.

When exploring the affective side, in item 10 (Showing love for another person places me in a position of vulnerability), the players were confronted with the assertion that expressing feelings of love for another person implies a situation of vulnerability. This assertion goes hand in hand with hegemonic masculinity's idea that men should maintain a status of reasoning –of non-emotionality– at all times, and that in the face of romantic love they should dose feelings.

Participants' positions varied, but a majority disagreed with this assertion. This –including the considerable number who maintained a neutral position– begins to imply a rupture with respect to the traditional discourses of masculinity, which may be a response to the exercise of the so-called alternative masculinities, which allow men to exercise their masculinity in a freer and safer way (in this specific aspect, giving a significant place to the recognition and expression of their own feelings and those of others).

The analysis of this variable allows us to interpret that although the characters in the game show a reaffirmation of the inexpressiveness of feelings and emotions typical of hegemonic masculinity –while the game is played, the protagonists remain more or less immutable in the face of death and all types of violence–, this is broken in dramatic moments in favor of the story, in which they are allowed to externalize their emotional and sensitive side.

This display of sensitivity in the characters, who had been handled throughout the gameplay as tough, is not perceived by the players as a negative element that questions the power and bravery of the characters. Thus, certain rigid conceptions that make up hegemonic masculinity can –and are– contested by men themselves.

### *The importance of the manly physique*

Within hegemonic masculinity, physique and personal presentation are given an important role; men are expected to have a certain body type, wear certain clothes, be physically active,

use certain personal hygiene products (lotions, deodorants, hair and facial hair products). According to the conceptualizations of Moore and Gillette (1993), the Warrior man archetype is defined, among other things, by his physical strength; the physical qualities possessed by this type of male allow him to demonstrate his power, exercise dominance and enable him to withstand pain. Another approach to the manly physique is given in the prototype of the loving man, characterized by the gallantry and grooming of his person which, in combination with his charisma, give him the power to conquer.

These typifications of men exemplify that physique plays an important role in the performance of masculinity within the hegemonic vision. The body plays a fundamental role in the construction of masculinity, due to the fact that it is a previous factor around which differences are generated, and then naturalized (Díez, 2015). Therefore, in this variable we sought the position of men on the male body –both the ideal and the desired and rejected–, and based on these, the vision they have about their own and other men's bodies.

It is important to emphasize that the paradigms of men's physical beauty have changed in recent decades; the incorporation of the so-called metro sexuality has paved the way for a much neater, cared-for and “fashionable” practice of masculinity.

This exercise incorporates aspects usually considered feminine care –the use of beauty products, treatments for the body, skin and face, the use of clothes not only as clothing but also as a symbol of elegance, care and status–, which break with the stereotype of the dirty, practical man, unconcerned about his appearance. This concept opens a panorama to new ways of expressing heterosexual masculinity, without so many prejudices about physical care or hygiene and cleanliness habits historically attributed to women or homosexual men.

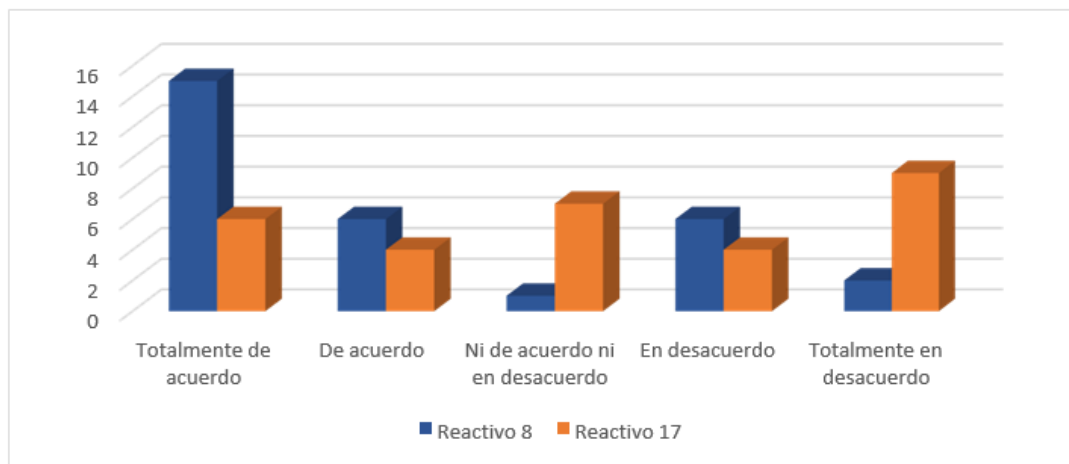
In view of this new approach, it is clear that the ideas about physique that hegemonic masculinity considered are gradually changing; neglected but strong bodies are no longer the ideal, and bodies whose appearance has been worked on (in aesthetic matters) and cared for (with beauty treatments, for example) are considered equally valid in terms of masculinity.

In item 8 (I would like to have the stocky body that the characters have), video gamers were asked if they would like to have the physique of the *Gears of War* protagonists, who are extremely muscular (chart 6). The intention of this item was to know the opinion of the participants regarding the physique of the characters (which responds to an ideal of traditional masculinity). The majority responded affirmatively to the question; this opinion can be interpreted as an aspiration regarding the possession of a hyper masculinized corporeality on the part of the participants (influenced by traditional masculine ideals).

To ground this apparent preference in real life, in item 17 the participants were asked if they exercised on a daily basis, whether for health, wellness or some other reason. The intention of this was to contrast the reality of the manly body with the ideal, well-built bodies

presented in the video game. In this case, there was a majority negative response, which shows that the players in the sample do not exercise or engage in any physical activity.

**Chart 6.** The game considers manly physique important.



It is important to emphasize that a sedentary lifestyle is common within the gamer community, since the informants themselves recognize that they spend many hours playing, which is why this situation was fairly predictable.

The results obtained in the variable on the physical appearance of the males present an interesting contrast: the participants showed a marked interest in having the body of the characters, but stated that as a general rule they do not exercise, because for them it is not important.<sup>3</sup>

Although this posture of not being concerned about the ideal physique is far from the reaffirmation of the conceptions of traditional masculinity, it is possible to understand it from the idea of male privilege, where the physique of men is not transcendent in the conceptions or opportunities they may have in real life—a not very athletic physique is not an obstacle to position themselves in labor or academic spaces, for example—.

In this sense, although the ideal of a strong body was introjected in some of the players, there was no need for them to reach that goal. It follows that masculinity also harbors conceptions that support the fact that men are not constantly concerned about their physique (weight, musculature, hygiene, presentation, etcetera).

### *Importance of skin color*

In hegemonic masculinity, the hierarchy in the treatment of men is marked not only by physical strength, or by economic and competitive power, but also by racial and ethnic baggage. At a symbolic level, the implications of these elements in masculinity define the place in which different men are positioned; this implication of reality seeps into works of fiction, where the masculinity of a character depends on his physical features (muscularity, height, age), his behavior (tough, insensitive, violent), but also on his skin color.

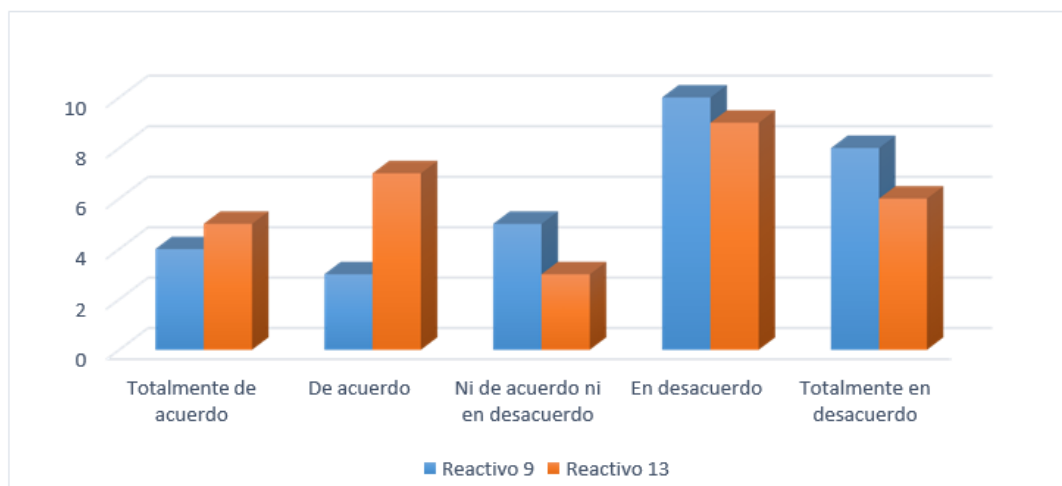
*Gears of War* features a range of ethnicities in the characters: Marcus Fenix is a white, blue-eyed man; his best friend and battle buddy, Dominic Santiago, is a dark man, with Latino features and somewhat “festive” behavior (as part of the Latino stereotype present in the American imaginary); Damon Baird is another Caucasian man, but obeys the type of intelligent male, skilled with words and seductive character; Tren Cole is a black man, stockier than the rest, professional trash ball player (sport practiced in the video game based roughly on American soccer), and within his characteristics is to be uneducated, coarse and very violent, but with a good heart.

Based on this variety of ethnicities, item 9 (Skin color influences the hierarchization of the characters) asked if the importance of Marcus and Dominic in the game was based on their skin tone, that is, if the ethnic and racial group to which they belong influences their hierarchization within the story.<sup>4</sup> The majority of the participants assumed that this was not the case; if we take into account that the participants in the sample are Mexican, we can consider that this position could be a bias –a lack of awareness or recognition– in the visibilization of the discrimination incurred by the video game.

In this order of ideas, item 13 (I believe that white-skinned men have better access to work and academic spaces) focused on these aspects in real life, by asking participants if skin color influences access to different spaces or opportunities. Although the number of responses was close to both considerations (chart 7), the majority of the sample rejected the idea that skin color influences acceptance and inclusion in work or academic spaces.

It is possible that this interpretation combines various aspects, both of apprehended or observed social issues, as well as those related to personal experience (not having experienced, in the flesh or as a reliable witness, a situation of exclusion due to skin color), which may influence the rejection or ignorance of the scope of racism as an element that determines hegemonic positions among men themselves.

**Chart 7.** The game considers skin color important



In this regard, Moore and Gillette (1993) consider that there are certain characteristics that are constitutive of hegemonic masculine identities (the archetypes of the King and the Wizard, in this case), which have to do with the exercise of power and the knowledge that a person possesses, aspects that in the video game are evidenced by the positions of leadership and high rank assigned to Marcus Fenix and Damond Baird, the white-skinned characters of the saga. On the contrary, dark-skinned characters are relegated to inferior positions and to obey orders.

The information obtained from this variable establishes that the racist issues reflected in the video game are not perceived by the players, who, in turn, do not have it or experience it as a problem that affects or worries them in their daily lives. From their responses, it is clear that the perception of skin color does not greatly influence their idea of masculinity, perhaps because it is a phenomenon that has been normalized and made invisible in the context of contemporary society, especially in an environment such as Mexico, where the dimensions and connotations of racism and discrimination have historically been minimized.

## Conclusions

The characteristics of hegemonic masculinity include practices and behavioral patterns related to courage, power, autonomy, independence, domination (both physical, aided by their bodily attributes, and psychological, allowed by their knowledge, as well as sexual and symbolic), economic capacity, insensitivity and inclination towards violence. In this discourse, various cultural aspects are recognized that contribute to this traditional

conception of what it is and implies to *be a man*; items that from the everyday family life in which they are maintained and reproduced are transferred to the entertainment products consumed by the population on a daily basis.

This research questioned whether the contents of video games, as part of these entertainment media, reaffirm, in some way, hegemonic masculinity in those who consume them, especially in males. The aim was to demonstrate that the characteristics of the *Gears of War* characters are typical of hegemonic masculinity and, in this sense, contribute to its reaffirmation in the heterosexual video game community.

The age of the participants in the fieldwork allows us to consider that their current thought processes respond to those of an adult. In this sense, the research contributes to the discussion on the concept of reaffirmation of hegemonic masculinity, since the process of conformation of this in the video gamers who participated in the study occurred in their childhood and adolescence –as they confirmed–.

The significance of this lies in the fact that, although the process of reaffirmation occurs throughout life, in the consumption and internalization of certain discourses or images, adolescence is a period especially vulnerable to the apprehension of these ideas, which contributes to the reproduction of certain stereotypes and patterns of behavior such as those present in the *Gears of War* saga.

In order to analyze the content of the game, the research was based on the normalization of the hegemonic discourse of masculinity, a situation that makes its invisibility possible. Although it is true that gender theory has strongly questioned the shaping of and exercise of traditional masculinity, gender inequalities and dominant male behaviors indicate that the discourses surrounding masculinity are based on patriarchy, which continues to be a cultural and symbolic reference.

In this sense, the invisibility of these hegemonic elements is not strange, considering that throughout history they have been considered as something natural. This context has allowed entertainment devices and products, such as video games, to disseminate and normalize these aspects. To facilitate the exposition of this phenomenon, special reference was made to the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity presented in and through video game protagonists.

The instrument used to collect the responses, judgments and opinions of the players participating in the study allowed us to make a comparison between the elements present in the game and the way they are translated into everyday life; thanks to this, we were able to obtain an initial vision of the traditional behaviors of hegemonic masculinity that are disseminated in this type of product, and the way in which they are sensed by male consumers (both in their individual positions and in the conjectures that can be drawn from comparing one and the other).

In summary, we conclude that the first three sagas of the *Gears of War* video game reaffirm hegemonic masculinity in those who play it, specifically in the population segment selected for this study. However, the results obtained confirm that this process is not conscious in the video gamers, since many of the elements in the game were not identified by them which the literature has pointed out as establishing hegemonic masculinity. This leads to the suggestion that the normalization and invisibility of these behaviors is such that they are not considered to be part of a reaffirmation process, which may be expressed through the daily behaviors of each of them.

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<sup>1</sup> Likert (also known as the summary assessment method) is a psychometric scale widely used in research surveys –especially in matters related to the social sciences–. In these questionnaires a set of items is presented “in the form of statements or judgments, to which the participants’ reaction is requested”; the external subject’s reaction to each statement by choosing one of the five points / categories on the scale, assigned a numerical value (thereby specifying their level of agreement or disagreement with it). “Thus, the participant obtains a score regarding the statement and at the end its total score, adding the scores obtained in relation to all statements” (Hernández, Collado and Baptista, 2014, p. 238).

<sup>2</sup> Science fiction “is a narrative genre that places the action in imaginary space-time coordinates different from ours, and that rationally speculates on possible scientific or social advances and their impact on society” (Biblioteca Nacional de España, 2010, p. 1).

<sup>3</sup> This is referred to in a specific question about the importance that gamers give to the physique.

<sup>4</sup> In a previous analysis of the visual content of the video game, it was found that these ranges are influenced by the ethnic characteristics of the characters, hence the curiosity to know the opinion of the participants (Ruiz and Molina, 2020).