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European Journal of Media, Art & Photography, 2025, Vol. 13, No. 1

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Abstract

This study explores the application of *écriture féminine* within the realm of digital gaming, focusing specifically on the digital game Gris. Rather than viewing feminine writing as a rigid methodological framework, this research conceptualises it as a creative approach characterised by fluidity and adaptability, capable of traversing various media forms. By examining Gris, a platform-adventure game created by Spanish developer Nomada Studio and published by Devolver Digital, the study identifies core elements of feminine writing present within the narrative, such as fluidity, challenging identity, cyclicity of motifs and the subversion of traditional narrative structures, and illustrates how these elements are manifested within the game. The analysis reveals that the creative processes inherent in feminine writing challenge the masculine coding that is often prevalent in digital games. Through a detailed examination of Gris, this study demonstrates how digital games can serve as a medium for feminine writing, offering new perspectives on identity, narrative, and representation that transcend conventional gender norms and encourage a more nuanced engagement with the concept of femininity in digital spaces. The present analysis thus recognises feminine writing in digital games as a fluid, creative process through which any single work of art can capture only a fraction of its potential meaning and true significance.

Key words

Creative Process. Digital Game. Écriture Feminine. Female Body. Feminine Writing. Game Mechanics. Gris.

Introduction

The term "écriture feminine" (sometimes also translated as women's or feminine writing, for the purposes of this study translated as feminine writing) was first introduced by the French post-structuralist feminist theorist Hélène Cixous, yet it remains challenging and controversial to define. The text *Le Rire de la Méduse* [*Laughter of the Medusa*], widely considered a manifesto of feminine writing, is notably fictional in nature. Cixous's style is characterised by its intense use of metaphors, poetic expressions, and an explicitly anti-theoretical stance. "Her central images create a dense web of signifiers that offers no obvious edge to seize hold of for the analytically minded critic […], texts themselves make it abundantly clear that this resistance to analysis is entirely intentional" (Moi, 2002, pp. 102-103). French feminists, including Cixous, have rejected various labels and names, arguing that the impulse to categorise and compare belongs to the domain of phallogocentrism. They assert that naming imposes a predefined reality by confining it within clear categories (Moi, 2002). The obscurity and ambiguity in Cixous's texts have influenced other media industries and expanded the perspectives of feminist theory. Hanáková (2007), for instance, references this complexity in her discussion of "jellyfish films", which further evolves the viewpoints of female audiences. Thus, efforts to precisely define what constitutes feminine writing often result in oversimplification and lead to the very phallogocentric categorisation that the concept seeks to oppose.

For the purposes of this study, we need to mention at least a few fundamental creative practices associated with feminine writing. However, it is necessary to consider that this brief overview is far from exhaustive, only outlining the concept of feminine writing, and it is also limited to signs that we can consider purely literary. Based on the works of Švachová (2022), Matonoha (2008; 2009), Schewczuková (2020) and Cixous (1995), we identify the following key components of the creative process in feminine writing:

- **Body writing**: This involves using the female body as the canvas for the entire work, while understanding the body in a way that precludes its sexualisation.

- **Writing from the body**: This approach emphasises the process of text creation, highlighting its fictiveness, disruptions in narrative, and moments of indeterminacy. The openness of the composition refuses to provide the reader with a definitive meaning or conclusion. Cyclicality manifests itself at various levels of the text – such as motifs and tension – thereby inviting continual return and re-engagement.

- **Challenging language and identity**: The creative process itself questions identity and the perception of oneself and others. Given that language is

often perceived as "masculine", the text seeks an alternative in rhythm and song – a form of language that is not necessarily clouded by traditional meaning.

From our perspective, the focus on the user or spectator seems to deviate from the core concept of feminine writing, which is fundamentally rooted in the creative impulse. Moreover, within this framework, the author's gender is considered irrelevant to the definition of feminine writing. With this study, however, we want to point out that texts created under feminine writing require a different kind of reception – thus breaking phallogocentric thinking.

It is important to clarify that, as we interpret it, the concept of "feminine writing" should not be conflated with feminist practices – whether literary or otherwise. Instead, we perceive it as a mode of thinking and creative process that often intersects with feminist themes and motifs but which can also diverge from certain feminist theories. One reason for this is that Cixous could be seen as an essentialist. Cixous's defence of women was largely based on celebrating inherent "real" differences between the sexes, which contrasts with the current approach in our feminist research. As understood by Matonoha (2008; 2009) and interpreted by Schewczuková (2020), feminine writing is inherently rooted in phallogocentrism, from which it is impossible to fully extricate itself; it can only exist within its

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ruptures. In other words, women and their language of creating remain fundamentally "the other". Feminist practice, in contrast, aims to emancipate, focusing on narrating women's stories and striving for gender equality (see also: Hurajová et al., 2023). Feminine writing, however, interrogates language, identities, and the notion of a universal truth, which is why it sometimes indirectly critiques feminist practice itself. Nevertheless, both feminine writing and feminist criticism serve to uncover the underlying practices of masculine discourse.

Although the term "feminine writing" might suggest a text-centred approach (in terms of literature), our work seeks to examine feminine writing as a creative method that transcends the boundaries of literature, finding new forms of expression in entirely different media, such as digital games. Interdisciplinary approaches have already been applied successfully in film studies (Fischetti, 1988), theatre (Berger, 2016), and even computer animation (Hosea, 2019). To illustrate how the feminine writing method might be translated into a visual medium, we will discuss the digital game *Gris* (Nomada Studio, 2019).

1 Writing the Body and Writing from Body

The digital game under discussion is characterised by its imaginative and fantastical elements. At the outset, the main female character without name, but recognised by the fandom as "Gris", awakens in the hands of a colossal female statue. She cries and attempts to sing, but her voice fades, causing the statue to crumble and cast her into a nearly empty, grey world filled with ruins. The primary objective for gamers is to navigate through a series of logical puzzles and platforming sequences to collect fragments of light that ascend to the night sky as stars.

With the completion of each chapter, colours are released from the protagonist's body, flooding the monochromatic world with vibrant hues. As Gris progresses, the initially grey and barren landscape transforms into an organic, fluid world full of plants, water, but also sounds and music. Towards the conclusion of the game, Gris regains her voice and reassembles the fragments of the female statue that had appeared in various forms throughout her journey. When the distinctions between foreground and background, as well as above and below, begin to blur, gamers can accompany Gris as she ascends into the night sky, bringing the game to its ending.

The game's description makes it clear that the environment is a crucial element. Gris can navigate and overcome various obstacles by transforming her body into different shapes. For example, in the desert, she turns into a cube, anchoring herself against the strong winds like a solid rock. Throughout the game, the trees and creatures that Gris encounters also adopt a cubic form, emphasising a deep connection between the protagonist's body and her surroundings. As the game progresses, Gris's ability to transform her body becomes increasingly inventive and playful. The motif of the female body's transformation throughout the game can be interpreted as an effort to redefine the self beyond conventional norms. Although the player controls the protagonist's body, the game restricts camera movement, ensuring that the environment occupies most of the screen. As Švachová (2022) points out, in feminine writing the body functions as a significant recurring motif within the text, employed as a strategy for subjectivisation. This motif underscores the individuality and irreplaceable nature of personal experience, highlighting its unique and incommunicable aspects. In practice, texts are thus created using means through which the female body cannot be sexualised.

The way in which corporeality is perceived in the game is very unconventional for the medium itself. Female protagonists in digital games point to many of the issues feminists are concerned with: female characters who exist only as support for men; a woman who exists only as a fulfilment of male fantasies and male-gaze; they also present exclusively heterosexuality, or homosexuality as an element that can be overlooked or eliminated (see Krampe, 2018; Malkowski & Russworm, 2019; Gray et al., 2020; Rees, 2023, etc.). The game appears to challenge the so-called male gaze in several ways. For example, it does not allow gamers to customise the appearance of the main character, thus preventing her from being altered according to the sexual fantasies of gamers. Instead, the protagonist wears a two-layer grey dress resembling a cape or poncho, which evolves into organic shapes as the game progresses and remains visually neutral.

We would like to indicate here how game creation can break away from long-standing criticism. The motif of the shapes and fluidity of the female body is connected to the game mechanics themselves. In our opinion, it is precisely this mechanism that embodies, as Bray claims, that in feminine writing "putting the (female) body back into discourse, inscribing a repressed female sexuality, playing with metaphors and images of femininity [...] about recapturing an immediate connection to a body which has been colonised by phallocentric language" (2004, pp. 71-72). Cixous's thinking was based on the opinion that we are at a point in history where women are awakening to undertake a work of reflection upon and re-appropriation of femininity, starting precisely with a thorough re-thinking of the body, of sexuality, of the rapports between the sexual and the culture (Cixous & Makward, 1976). Although almost half a century has passed, we live in a time when digital games are undergoing a major reform related to the acceptance of femininity.

The game's narrative is deeply intertwined with representations of the female body. At the outset, the female statue appears only as a background motif but gradually integrates into the entire environment. The sculpture's fragments repeatedly connect and separate until they naturally merge with nature, ultimately transforming into an ever-expanding palace. Here, the female body serves as a metaphor for the world and symbolises the protagonist's inner world, emotions, and unique perspective, as well as representing various roles such as lover, sister, or mother. If players manage to collect all the light fragments, a memory of a short-haired girl and the woman from the statue, likely the mother, is revealed. This suggests that the reconstruction of the protagonist's self inevitably involves the reconstruction of the maternal image.

The archetype of the mother is a central element in Cixous's work, where she often engages with Lacan's theory of identity through wordplay, using the concept of the "m/other" (for more information, see Khosravi Balalami, 2023). However, the concept of mother for Cixous is not a glorification of some kind of universal femininity. On the contrary, femininity should not be perceived as fixed attributes or roles, but rather as the ability to maintain the plurality (Švachová, 2022) of mother-daughter-sister-poet-other. Interpreting the statue as a figure of the mother is not essential to the game; it appears only as an Easter egg, akin to intertextual references in literature. In our view, this element alludes to the theme of cyclicality mentioned earlier. The reconstruction of the self is thus connected to the reconstruction of the "m/other".

We can observe how the concepts of "writing the body" and "writing from the body" are employed in the game *Gris*. The female body, intertwined with nature, serves as the foundation of the game world. This approach, however, directs the focus towards intimacy, emotional response, the celebration of femininity, and the disruption of masculine codes. The notion of "writing from the body" is also represented through the cyclicality of motifs. Even the choice between short and long hair signifies a cycle. The statue becomes a reflection of Gris's emotions but can also symbolise all the female figures in her life – from herself, her mother, to a lover or friend, etc.

Digital games have a natural ability to unite their users and characters into one and thus create an experiment with oneself, with an alternative identity and gender (see also: Greer, 2013; Süngü, 2020). Traditionally, however, we talk about trying out new roles by playing a different gender. We can see that here the question of identity and subject breaks down at the level of the text.

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2 Game Mechanics, Mirrors and Female Voice

Texts of feminine writing emphasise their own rhythm. In the sense of structuralism, where language is never perceived as innocent, Cixous looks for neologisms and does not rely on Lacan's theory, although clear parallels could be found there – female expression is close to singing, the first music (Švachová, 2022). In *Gris*, in our opinion, this motif can be perceived at two levels, at the level of the audio side of the game and at the level of game mechanics.

As previously mentioned, the protagonist loses her voice at the start of the game and remains silent. A digital game that emphasises sound, or its absence, effectively creates an immersive atmosphere. In the opening scene, when the heroine falls into a grey desert, the music ceases, leaving only environmental sounds and the echo of her footsteps, which have a pronounced impact. As the world becomes more colourful, additional sounds and bird songs emerge, with birds serving as a recurring motif linked to Gris's body. In one sequence, the protagonist's shadow takes on a physical form, transforming into a bird-like entity – one of the bosses in the game. Upon defeating it, the protagonist's clothing during jumps begins to resemble swallow wings, allowing her to leap farther. This demonstrates how the work creates thematic patterns, from background sounds to the metaphor of the swallow, and the dress that takes on the shape of bird wings, to the mechanics of the long jumps associated with it.

As the game progresses, female singing becomes an important game mechanic. Flowers respond to the singing, creating platforms for jumping sequences. However, the singing is not solely for advancing in the game; it also serves as an expression of pure joy, reflecting the joy of female identity as interpreted by Cixous and explained by Morris (1993). Gris uses her singing to transform her surroundings; when gamers use the song without a specific purpose, the surrounding flowers bloom, adding more colours and sounds to the environment. This is visually echoed in Gris's dress, which resembles petals when she sings. Singing and working with sounds leads *Gris* to a core element for feminine writing, namely rhythm. The pace and rhythm itself become a part of logical passages, which the players solve intuitively and by perceiving motives rather than strictly using logic and learned game mechanics, as is typical for the game. Likewise, rhythm affects the gamers, suggesting how to proceed.

It is interesting to note that *Gris* requires a different way of reception than other digital games, which gradually teach the users mechanics, reward them for collecting items, and guide them in the right direction with maps, voice prompts, other characters, etc. A review on one of the game portals also talks about a different way of reception. "But the dreamy flow through locations is so subtle that it rarely feels as if you're completing specific tasks. [...] Being lost in *Gris* is different from other games, though. Whenever I wondered if I was going in the right direction, I wandered into a

new location just as beautiful as where I had been, and I set off to wherever it felt like I was being led." (McShea, 2018, para. 3)

While in other games getting lost and finding your way again is usually perceived as a result of poor design, here it is part of the gaming experience. We would like to argue that *Gris* is doing this on purpose. At the end of the game, the player can now freely move between the ground and the reflection, which is created in the sky and on the water's surface. Here we can see the text highlighting its fictiveness. The girl leans towards a postmodern text, where the elements of fantasy are used more as a tool to obfuscate the world. In the advanced stages of the game, Gris transforms into a ray, which allows her to explore the depths of the underwater world. Interestingly, gamers would have seen this same ray flying in the sky earlier in the game, which challenges the conventional logic of the environment and blurs the distinctions between what is above and what is below. In this way, the game creates a mirroring of motifs. They are motifs that the player can see and which are then transformed into game mechanics or visuals:

- flowers (Gris's dress made of petals) – mechanics for developing flower platforms,
- poses of the statue – placing the feelings of the main character,
- cliffs underwater looking like a palace – a real palace in the sky, a palace built in statue, and so on (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Mirroring of motifs and writing the body in the digital game *Gris*
Source: Nomada Studio (2019)

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore the possibilities of feminine writing in digital games. Defining feminine writing is a challenging process that inevitably leads to its simplification and a departure from the mode of thinking it seeks to represent. It is crucial to recognise that feminine writing is no methodology; it is a creative process in which any single work can capture only a fraction of its full potential. In the digital game *Gris*, we identified several elements that align with feminine writing. The design of the game world is intricately connected to the female body, evident in both the statue that

transforms into a temple and in the protagonist herself. The fluidity of her body is reflected in the game mechanics, and we have shown that the shapes she assumes find their counterparts in nature.

While mainstream games often depict sexualised female characters, independent games like *Gris* may portray representations that resist sexualisation altogether. The questioning of identity, a hallmark of feminine writing, is expressed through the mirroring of the entire game world and the relationship between Gris and the statue as a maternal figure. Although the narrative

can clearly be interpreted as a story of coming to terms with a mother's death, this interpretation is revealed only through an Easter egg and, in our view, does not disrupt the thematic structure. Instead, it enables further possibilities, especially from the perspective of feminine writing, where this approach is used to explore the plurality of identities through "m/other". The way *Gris* is made disrupts, maybe even breaks any male coding. The game itself relies on rhythm rather than typical hints like in-game maps and pictograms. It gives players a human experience that is clearly feminine through motifs, but universally human, nonetheless. The character of Gris does

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not appear as simple element of entertainment, although transforming her own shapes, jumping, or singing can lead to joyful experience.

Morris (1993), while interpreting the *Laughter of the Medusa*, writes that in the moment when identity is not formed based on *I* or *you*, it questions any systems of power that are determined on the source of such concepts as identity, truth or knowledge. Maybe, even thanks to digital games, "we live in an era where millions of moles are undermining the conceptual basis of ancient culture" (Cixous & Clément, 1986, p. 65) after all.

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