

14 Big Problems With The Portrayal Of Females In Video Games

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Textbox excerpts from Friedberg (2015) <http://bit.ly/2sNljHn>

(1) Ah. Video games. They've gotten to a point where they can offer the challenge of a game and full cinematic experience of a film at the same time. Some games are even released in more affordable installments in an episodic fashion, much like a television program. Unfortunately, video games still seem to be a little lost in the past when it comes to being more inclusive of other genders and races. While a lot of games sport customizable characters that allow the user to play as an avatar that looks almost exactly like them, many games still offer the spotlight to generic, white, well-muscled males that should have names like "Dirk Manhandsome".



(2) There are statistics floating around out there that women make-up about half of the gaming community. This is technically true. What these statistics don't come out and say outright is that women aren't half of the community that plays expensive AAA games on expensive consoles. These statistics come from women that are playing cheaper games on their phones.

(3) This is not to say that women don't "game" in the traditional sense of the word. That isn't even remotely true – but can the women that don't be blamed for not playing these big money-making AAA games? They have very little to choose from in terms of awesome female heroes. The female gender isn't shown much love in traditional gaming even as secondary characters. Let's take a look at how female characters have been (and still are) treated in the world of traditional gaming. Maybe if some of the studios eased up on some of these tropes, more women would be playing the big expensive titles on expensive systems.

14. Female Characters Aren't Relatable To Many Actual Females

(4) It's pretty difficult to relate to a character when they're a Princess nine times out of ten. Many gamers aren't royalty and a single video game console could be the entire focal point of entertainment in the home. This issue of 'every female character being a princess' is mainly a flaw in older games that has more or less been righted, but it took a rather long time for that to happen. The object to many games of the past was 'saving the Princess'. In the modern era, we finally have some kick-ass female characters, but they're still loaded with problems in an industry that's still trying to be more inclusive to females and follow less sexist tropes.



Figure via: nintendo.wikia.com

13. You Can't Tell They're Female

(5) In many cases where a female is a main character, you can't even tell they're female. The most notable example of this is probably Samus Aran from the *Metroid* series. Samus wears a full high-tech

suit that covers her from head-to-toe and doesn't leave much room for speculating gender. In fact, when the first *Metroid* game came out on the NES, there was one line in the instruction manual that referred to Samus with a feminine pronoun. Many kids were oblivious to the fact that they were playing a female character.

(6) A more modern example is Vandal from *Dead Space*. Anyone could be under all that armor. This could very well be a move to keep male players interested in playing a female character.



Figure via the talko.com

12. Sometimes It's A Little Too Obvious They're Female

(7) One the other end of the spectrum, it can be a little too obvious that the character is female. Games in the *Dead or Alive* series are pretty heavy handed with the concept of using heterosexual male fantasy to model their roster of female characters. They aren't making these games for women (and that's okay), but many games that are targeted at a much wider audience do the same thing.



Figure via: gamedynamo.com

(8) Nariko from *Heavenly Sword*, Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series, and Rayne of the *BloodRayne* series are all supposed to be strong, female protagonists that break the mold of the traditional video game hero, but they're rarely wearing clothes that leave much to the imagination.

(9) Many argue that men are given unrealistic bodies as well, but those strong and handsome male characters are created to fulfill male self-image fantasies, and not female sexual fantasies.

(10) While the observed characters in my sample do not completely line up with previous findings regarding sexualization, these preceding results still remain a part of very recent gaming history. Although the protagonists appeared less sexualized than in previous studies, they are all still slim, fit, and attractive. They represent a physical ideal of beauty that, while less exaggerated than in previous studies, still has ramifications for how audiences identify with these characters. In the perspective of cultivation theory, a player would learn from playing games that men are meant to perform and intimidate, while women should be more preoccupied with their physical appearance. Men who are not characterized by strength or women who are indifferent to their appearance fall outside the norms presented by gaming protagonists, and may therefore be devalued or openly reviled. This sets up men as dynamic actors while women wait to be acted upon. (from Friedberg, 2015, p. 46)



Figure via: megaman.wikia.com

11. They Serve As 'Second Banana'

(11) Many female characters in games are secondary to the male heroes. Even when strong females are included, they're always a bit weaker or merely assist the males. Probably the all-time worst example of this is Roll, Mega Man's little sister. Not only does she not follow Mega Man on his adventures, but she is relegated to a very traditional female role: the housekeeper. Mega Man goes on adventures, Roll stays

home and does the laundry. In fact, her character quote on her Mega Man wikia entry is: “I still have cleaning and laundry to do, so let’s make this quick!”

(12) Besides functioning as a catalyst for the plot, many women in video games also work in a caring or nurturing capacity toward the protagonist. They collect information on which the protagonist can act, they nurse them back to health when they are wounded, or they attract the attention of the villain while the protagonist launches a surprise attack. Akin to the damsel in distress trope, this still means that the bulk of the agency in the narrative comes from the protagonist, who is most often male. These character functions can likely be traced to the abundance of women in “supportive” professions such as nursing and secretarial work. Women still experience the repercussions of unequal career representation to the point where, even now, some careers are still thought of as “women’s work” (Shapiro & Williams, 2011; Rogers & Menaghan, 1991; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Essentially, women as secondary characters are present to move the story forward or support the protagonist in their mission. (from Friedberg, 2015, p. 43)

10. They’re Just A Re-skin Of A Male Character

(13) Many lead female characters that we get in games are simply re-skins of other male characters. We use the term “re-skin” pretty loosely here. Many female protagonists were simply a female version of a pre-existing male character. A good example of this might be Nariko from *Heavenly Sword*.



Figure via: heavenlysword.wikia.com

(14) *Heavenly Sword* is so similar to the *God of War* series that it seems like an attempt to simply do a “female version” without creating a unique gaming experience around a new female character. Though the games don’t exist in the same universe, there are quite a few easter egg references to *God of War* within *Heavenly Sword*.

(15) We see a lot of this sort of thing done more directly and obviously in older games. Ms. Pac-Man is just Pac-Man with a bow. Amy Rose is just a pink version of Sonic. Roll is just a weaker, female version of Mega Man.

(16) Men PPAs are all fully fleshed out, realized characters. They have back stories, fears, and goals that help the player relate to them (Newman, 2013). However, narrative games largely cater to a male demographic due to their overrepresentation of male protagonists, their reliance on the male power fantasy of strength and violence to advance the gameplay, and casting women in supporting roles rather than primary roles (Ivory, 2006). Based on this evidence, one could assume that female PPAs would be under-developed characters, or exist solely as stereotypes of women. Even though women PPA representation is still heavily overshadowed by men PPAs, in the games I studied, women PPAs enjoy similar character portrayal to men PPAs. The female protagonists in this sample even follow the same trajectory as men: beginning in a place of powerlessness, collecting new weapons and tools, and finally triumphing over the adversary in the end to claim victory. This equal characterization also has its complications. Since women follow similar character arcs as men (i.e. powerless to

powerful), one can argue that game developers disregard gender in character development. Any character can fill the role of the protagonist if they begin, evolve, and end in the same places. Lara [of *Tomb Raider*] starts out powerless, but she begins eagerly killing and attacking as soon as she has a weapon in her hands, despite reportedly never holding a gun or fighting prior to the story. Chell is confused and unsure at the beginning of *Portal 2*, she wakes up in an underground laboratory years after the events of the first game with no knowledge of what transpired. However, she quickly adjusts to completing her tasks without hesitation. Aside from physical appearance there is very little characterization separating a female protagonist and a male protagonist. (from Friedberg, 2015, p. 46-47)

9. Even Legacy Characters Weren't Always Playable

(17) There are many games that have included the same roster of female characters throughout decades of games, without once having them be usable as a proper playable character. The *Mario* series only had Princess Peach appear as a playable character one time in the proper line of the series (excluding games like *Mario Party*) and this was largely due to the fact that *Super Mario Bros. 2* was just a re-tooled game called *Doki Doki Panic*. Bodies were needed to fill in the roles of all four characters, and Mario's roster wasn't very full yet.

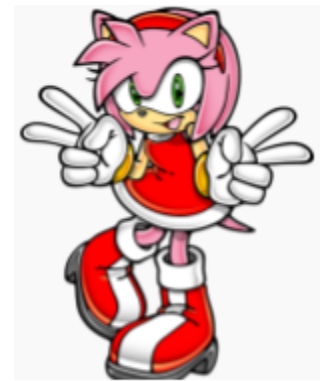


Figure via: sonic.wikia.com

(18) Roll has been playable in a few *Mega Man* games, but never in the series proper as a true hero. The same goes for Amy Rose in the proper *Sonic the Hedgehog* series. She's never been playable on the same level as characters like Tails or Knuckles.

(19) Recent studies report that male characters still outnumber female characters in video games and that there are still vast inequalities between the depiction of men and women in game narratives (Downs & Smith, 2009). Miller and Summers (2007) note that women appear far less frequently in games than men as both primary and supporting characters. They also pointed out that players will often only be allowed to control a male character through a video game's narrative. (from Friedberg, 2015, p. 7)

8. Sometimes Females Are Barely Even Present

(20) There are many games that are so gosh darn manly you rarely even see women in any kind of role. This is especially strange in the relatively new *Mad Max: Wasteland*. Considering the game was made to be released around the same time as the home release of *Mad Max: Fury Road*, a movie highly revered for its strong female protagonist that out-shined the titular male character, it's a little surprising that *Wasteland* barely features any women. There are some cinematic cutscenes and side quests, but for the most part, Max, his assisting characters, the main villains, and generic goons, are all male. Most women are held captive, need help, or are in weakened states.



Figure via: venturebeat.com

(21) Women are underrepresented as protagonists in narratives but are still present in every game of this sample as secondary characters in the game's narrative. Often, they are a driving force behind the protagonist's quest, someone of great importance to the PPA who is in danger. Her danger is what engages the protagonist in his or her journey. This trope is not a new aspect of video game narratives. In discussing the 1987 game *Super Mario Brothers 2*, Sherman (1997) noted that children were perplexed by the option to play as the Princess, since she was who Mario was trying to rescue in the original game. "...it's really weird...now she's helping you instead of creating the problems," noted a young boy as he played the game (Sherman, 1997). Essentially, female supporting characters in games create the problems that the usually male protagonists have to clean up. (from Friedberg, 2015, p. 44)

7. Always The Damsel In Distress

(22) This one goes without saying. For decades the object of almost every game was to save the damsel in distress. This one is a little perplexing because it happened so early on in video game history you have to wonder how creators just sort of knew most serious gamers would be boys. You almost have to wonder if it's common tropes like this that set the precedent that video games would be a "boy's toy" in the first place.



Figure SEQ Figure * ARABIC 8 Unknown source

(23) While we're out of the era where this was almost always the case, a male character rescuing a female is still a widely used plot.

(24) The "damsel in distress" trope is a consistent facet of literature, art, and film (Sherman 1997). It became a defining aspect of many early video game narratives, such as *Super Mario Brothers*, *Legend of Zelda*, and *Double Dragon* (Sherman, 1997). The prevalence of the damsel in distress trope demonstrates that the belief that women need to be protected, rescued, or kept chaste still resonates with mainstream culture. Two games in this sample also demonstrate an emerging theme with women supporting characters: the death of a woman character as motivator for the protagonist. The murder of Cole's girlfriend, Trish, is a pivotal moment in the narrative of *Infamous* that makes Cole realize that he needs to be the one to kill Kessler, the main antagonist of the narrative. The Empress' murder at the beginning of the narrative of *Dishonored* and subsequent framing of Corvo for the crime starts Corvo on his journey to clear his name and kill the true murderers. Despite the prominent roles that these women had in the lives of the protagonists, we do not see them interact with the protagonists throughout the narrative. Trish is absent through a significant portion of *Infamous*, fearful of Cole's new superpowers, and the Empress is only seen at the very beginning of the narrative of *Dishonored*, greeting Corvo on his return from a long journey. Essentially, the women's role in the narrative is for them to die, to give the protagonist justification for violence and brutality. (from Friedberg, 2015, p. 43)

6. They're Often Used As Rewards

(25) Women are often used as rewards. There have been “adult” games targeted towards heterosexual males that make a point of using female nudity as a reward, but you see it appear in games that aren’t specifically made to be adult or necessarily targeted towards heterosexual males.



Figure via: ea.com

(26) Games in the *Tony Hawk* series (a series that usually offers a playable female option) have had hidden rooms you can break into where you’ll find a female stripper pole dancing. Many games, like *The Saboteur*, have DLC packages that show female characters breasts or even make the breasts larger and bouncier. *Lollipop Chainsaw* has unlock-able outfits that put its female protagonist in fantasy outfits (a sexy cowgirl for instance) and string bikinis. Even older games like *Smash TV* had icons of scantily clad women you could pick up to signify winning a lady as a prize in the game’s fictional high stakes game show.

5. There Is No Female Option, Even When The Character Is A “Blank Slate”

(27) This one is awfully strange. You’d think it wouldn’t be hard to include a generic female avatar in a modern video game. Some games that allow players to choose from a number of races don’t even have female options for every race. Sometimes this may fit in with the lore of the game’s world, but these are exceptional characters your customers are playing. A girl should be able to play a female of any race if she chooses.



Figure via: gamesforchange.org

(28) The most bizarre example of this was in *Ghostbusters: The Video Game*. The player uses a blank slate, painfully average male avatar. There is no physical customization available to the character whatsoever. It seems strange to not just offer just as plain and nondescript of a female avatar as well. Especially since the avatar is often referred to as “rookie” instead of any gender specific pronoun.

4. They Rarely “Save The Boyfriend”

(29) The only time you ever find a girl rescuing her boyfriend is when the game is purposefully trying to turn the “damsel in distress” trope on its head. It isn’t widely used enough that it can ever come off as anything more than an exception to the rule.

(30) There’s a very good chance that this is because most AAA games are played by males. Many males will play as a female, but they’re still not there yet when it comes to rescuing a male love interest.



Figure via: bioshockinfinite.com

(31) *Lollipop Chainsaw* features the playable character, Juliette Starling, rescuing her boyfriend, but this happens very early on in the game and is more of a vehicle for comic relief.

(32) Similarly to the male protagonists, [Lara Croft, *Tomb Raider*] ascends from a place of powerlessness to a place of power. If a female protagonist follows the same character arc as most male protagonists (powerless to powerful through violence and combat), all within the male power fantasy, what are the differences between playing as a male or female protagonist? The agency of the female protagonist is limited due to adhering to a masculinized narrative. In this sample, two games out of the ten have a woman protagonist, with a third game (*Fallout 3*) allowing the player to choose their avatar along binary gender. Of these three games, only *Portal 2* does not result in the woman protagonist becoming a brutal murderer fulfilling a violent power fantasy. (from Friedberg, 2015, p. 38-39)

3. Female Villains Are Rarely Justified – They’re Just Evil

(33) A common trope used in video games these days is a sympathetic villain. We’re given a villain who is clearly in the wrong, but perhaps they’re doing all these bad things for some greater good they perceive, or to save the life of a loved one. This is seen mainly with male villains, but female villains are usually portrayed as a black-and-white idea of evil. They generally hate the protagonist, have a thirst for power, and are borderline devil incarnates.



Figure - unknown source

(34) For example, Mileena in the *Mortal Kombat* series is a scantily clad woman that is quite literally a “man-eater”. This beautiful female is actually a monster. That’s some pretty heavy metaphor.

2. They’re Rarely The Hero

(35) In the world of RPGs, you have access to a large number of playable characters. These characters often run the spectrum of gender, race, and personality types. Unfortunately, the main protagonist is almost always male. The male is the one character you almost always have to keep in your party.



Figure via: zerochan.net

(36) We should mention the fact that the female characters you can choose to put in your party usually fall victim to a number of other items on the list.

1. The Character Being Female Is A “Big Reveal” And Everyone Is SHOCKED

(37) This one is similar to the concept of a hero being so covered up they are effectively gender neutral, but adds to it. These days, it’s still extremely shocking that a badass character turns out to be female. One of the best examples of this “OMG! This character was a girl all along!



Figure via: deadspace.wikia.com

(38) But girl's can't be awesome!" happens in *Dead Space*. The character of Vandal wears armor head to toe and even speaks with a voice synthesizer that for some reason doesn't make her sound like a different woman, but makes her sound more like a man.

(39) Obviously this reveal is to prove to people that women can kick butt too, but it's 2015. Why can't we get a female hero with a muscular build and wearing all her clothes right out the door? Perhaps if the creators of these major titles stopped acting like a woman capable of heroism is such a big shock, it would stop being a big deal and become more of a norm. Hey, the *Portal* series nailed it. Why can't others?

Sources: hastac.org