

# Paving the way towards gender inclusion in video games

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## Introduction

Since its origins in the 1970s, the video game industry has grown to become a multibillion-dollar industry, which generated \$180.3 billion dollars in 2021 (Newzoo, 2022). Video games have become one of the preferred leisure options in today's digital society. The video game industry has especially thrived during the COVID-19 pandemic (The Washington Post, 2021), when people in lockdown played games to pass the time, enjoy themselves and have social contact with others when playing online. The reasons why video games have become so popular are numerous and varied: they provide us with entertainment, they allow us to experience new things and to become the protagonists of stories set in different worlds, the outcome of which will change depending on our actions and decisions. Thus, interactivity is key and one of the main features of video games, which distinguishes them from other story-telling media. However, despite the power video games have to tell stories and immerse players in them, the issue of gender inclusion remains unsolved in the game industry:.

In this paper, after briefly describing the main features of video games as a storytelling medium, the main gender issues in games will be described, such as the underrepresentation of female characters and their objectification and hypersexualisation. Next, examples of video games with leading female characters will be presented. The paper concludes highlighting the need to promote gender inclusion through video games in order to pave the way towards a fairer and more inclusive society.

## **Video Games as Storytelling**

Video games are a storytelling medium which reshape “the spectrum of narrative expression, not by replacing the novel or the movie but by continuing their timeless bardic work within another framework” (Murray 1997, p. 10). Due to their interactive nature, players are in charge of the unfolding of the story, and their decisions have an impact on the development of the narrative. According to Jansz & Martis (2007), interactivity has two main consequences for the reception of game content. First, players are drawn into the represented world and have a stronger sense of presence, which may “intensify the gamer’s reception of game content in order to construct personal meaning” (Jansz & Martis, 2007, p. 142). Second, interactivity allows players to identify themselves with the characters represented in the game. Players control a character’s actions, “which is fundamentally different from passively witnessing the actions of a hero on a movie or television screen” (Jansz & Martis, 2007, p. 142).

Thus, the issue of representation becomes crucial in video games, as players identify themselves with the characters they are playing. As Shaw (2015) states: “People do not want to feel alone and unseen. Representation is important because it is an external acknowledgement of one’s existence. (...) people want to see themselves in media texts because they want people like them to be seen” (p. 192). However, character representation in video games has been traditionally dominated by White, male characters (Jansz & Martis, 2007). There is an underrepresentation of playable female characters, non-binary and LGBTBIQ+ characters (Di Biase, Morales, Panero & Terceros, 2021), as described in the next sections.

## **Gender Issues in Video Games**

In addition to the issue of representation, which will be explored in more detail in the next section due to its importance, there are other gender issues in the video game industry, which traditionally has been a male-dominated and male-oriented industry, addressed to a heterosexual male audience. There is a predominance of male roles in the industry, and partly due to the underrepresentation of women in game development, the game industry has largely failed to provide game content that

is relevant, relatable and not offensive to female players (Kowert, Breuer & Quandt, 2017).

However, it should be highlighted that the gap between male and female players is closing, as 47% of European video game players are women and women represent 53% of all mobile and tablet video game players (ISFE, 2021). In addition, in early 2021 the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFE) and the European Games Developers Federation (EGFD) established a Diversity Working Group “with the goal of committing to advancing gender equality and diversity within the industry; promoting best practices of our members, and serving as a resource for information on diversity-related policy and legislative issues” (ISFE, 2021).

Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go before true equality is achieved in the video game industry, as according to the ISFE (2021), only 20,38% of estimated employees are women. In addition, women who play online video games are often verbally harassed and often have to play without revealing their gender (Fox and Tang, 2014).

## **Women’s Representation in Video Games**

There have been numerous studies about the portrayal of gender in video games, which concluded that most titles were dominated by male characters, while female characters appeared in submissive roles (Jansz & Martis, 2007). According to Díez et al. (2004, p. 4), traditionally women have been represented in video games following three main stereotypes:

- a) Masochist: They are passive and submissive women, who need to be rescued by men, damsels in distress, like Princess Peach in the *Super Mario Bros* games (1986 to present).
- b) Sadistic: These are women who reproduce masculine archetypes, behave like men but have hypersexualised designs, such as Lara Croft and Ivy Valentine from *Soulcalibur IV* (2018).
- c) Barbie: These are superficial women, who are mainly concerned about their looks. This stereotype reproduces the more traditional role of women and is included in games that are designed to attract a female

audience to video games, although in reality most female players do not find such games appealing.

Jansz & Martis (2007) refer to the second type of female representation as the “Lara phenomenon”, that is, the depiction of powerful, female characters with leading roles in games, even if they are still hypersexualised. It should be noted, however, that Lara Croft’s portrayal has changed through the years, from a more hypersexualised, exuberant character, to a more petite and ordinary looking girl, but still strong and capable. Such change in representation has taken place both in the video games and the movies, where Lara Craft was originally played by Angelina Jolie and by Alicia Vikander in the latest movie, with the objective of portraying a more realistic and relatable character.

Jansz and Martis (2007, p. 144) also analysed twelve successful games which had a strong narrative component and included a diverse cast of characters in terms of gender and race, in order to determine the role and position of the characters. Their analysis confirmed the trend observed in previous studies: games are dominated by white characters, although the number of female characters in recent games is far larger than in earlier games (Jansz and Martis, 2007). Also, they observed that most male characters were depicted with extreme musculature, while female characters were hypersexualised.

More recently, authors such as Lynch et al. (2016) and Gardner and Tanenbaum (2018) have studied the representation of women in video games extensively and have come to similar conclusions. Lynch et al. (2016) analysed 571 games released between 1973 and 2014. They concluded that in the early years of the video game industry gender disparity was indeed an issue. However, in those early days, corresponding to the period from 1983 to 1990, female characters were less sexualised because of simple graphics. The period from the 1990s to the 2000s was the period with more sexualised graphics. From 2006 to the present, Lynch et al. (2016) have observed a decrease in sexualisation, such as the previously mentioned example of Lara Croft in the latest games. These authors also found out that although the number of female characters has increased over the years, the number of primary female characters has not increased significantly.

Lynch et al. (2016) also argue that there has been a positive cultural shift in the portrayal of female characters over the years, with an increase of strong, capable, and attractive female characters who are not overtly objectified. The authors believe that such portrayal may be an important factor for encouraging women to become interested in gaming. In turn, the growing interest of girls and women in gaming seems to be influencing game content in positive ways and may also contribute toward achieving gender parity in the industry (Lynch et al., 2016).

As regards Gardner and Tabenbaum's study (2018), they analysed 200 games, including both indie and AAA games, the blockbusters of the game industry, with high development costs and high revenue. They found out that 72% of the playable characters were male, 13.33% were female and 15.67% were "undeterminable", which means that their gender was not specified and was left to the players to interpret. Although this data still shows a clear underrepresentation of female characters in games, the trend seems to be improving, with more female characters populating games.

More recently, Shell (2021) did a survey of gamers in the UK concerning character representation in video games. Although the main object of the survey was to research the representation of disability in games, the issue of gender was also included. He obtained 76 answers from gamers, who felt in general that there has been little change in character representation in games, although there has been an increase in the representation of women. However, the increase in the portrayal of women in video games was not always perceived as positive, as participants felt that it was a more sexualised representation, which seems to contradict the results from Lynch et al.'s study (2016). It seems that although in recent years there have been substantial advances, there is still a long way to go as regards a more inclusive and non-sexualised portrayal of women in video games.

### **Leading Female Characters in Video Games: Some Examples**

In this section several examples of video games which portray females in leading roles in a non-sexualised way are presented. One of the first

games to offer the possibility to play with a female leading character was Bioware's *Mass Effect 3* (2012). Players could choose a male or a female leading character. However, according to data from Bioware, 82% of players preferred to play with the male protagonist, Commander Shepard (Makuch, 2013).

The popular football game *FIFA* (Electronic Arts, 2007-to date) added the possibility of playing with women's national teams for the first time in 2016. Female players had requested this for many years, but Electronic Arts had not implemented female teams because of the technical complexity, as they needed tools and technology to differentiate between men and women (Wilson, 2015). However, not many players use this option. For example, only 2,5% of players of *FIFA 20* have played a women's football match (Jackson, 2019).

Another popular video game series that incorporated playable female roles is *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007-to present). The first playable female protagonist was Aveline de Grandpré in the spin-off game *Assassin's Creed III: Liberation* (2012), originally released for the PlayStation Vita. For the games of the main saga *Syndicate* (2015), *Origins* (2017), *Odyssey* (2018) and *Valhalla* (2020), developers wanted a female protagonist, but executives did not let them because they thought "games with female protagonists don't sell well" (Pérez, 2020). *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* (2015) was the first game to have a playable female protagonist, Evie Frye. 50% of the game can be played as her and the other 50% of the game can be played as her twin, Jacob. *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (2018) was the first game of the main saga to include a female protagonist. The game can be fully played as Cassandra or Alexios, who are siblings. However, similarly to what happened with *Mass Effect 3*, most players (66%) preferred to play as Alexios, the male protagonist. Unfortunately, such data reinforce the preconceived idea of Ubisoft executives that games with female leads do not sell well.

Another example of female playable characters can be found in the first-person shooter video game series *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003 - to present). In 2013 *Call of Duty: Ghosts* introduced the first playable female characters in a multiplayer campaign because there were many female players who wanted to play as female characters (Robertson, 2013). The first play-

able female lead appeared in *Call of Duty Black Ops 3* in 2015, and other female protagonists have appeared in subsequent games, such as *Call of Duty Modern Warfare* (2019) and *Call of Duty: Vanguard* (2021). As war games are usually male-oriented and populated by male characters this is another step in the right direction for a more inclusive gender representation in video games.

As a final example, *The Last of Us* series (Naughty Dog 2013 - to present) deserves a special mention because of its portrayal of strong and capable women, who are fighters and survivors (Phillips Kennedy, 2021). In the first game, one of the protagonists is Ellie, a 14-year-old girl. In the *The Last of Us II* (2021) the two main characters are female: an older Ellie and her romantic interest, Dina. Ellie is lesbian and Dina is bisexual, which also departs from more traditional representations of sexual identities in video games. The game became popular and sold four million copies within three days of its release, which contradicts the common misconception in the game industry that if you have women leading characters the game will sell less (Phillips Kennedy, 2021).

## Conclusions

Video games are a powerful storytelling medium due to their interactivity. However, the video game industry has traditionally been a male-dominated and male-oriented industry. Most video games have been populated by white, male characters, with little representation of female, LGTB+, non-white and disabled characters. As regards the portrayal of women in video games, the focus of this paper, they have usually been represented in a stereotyped and hypersexualised way, often playing a secondary role and being dependent on the male protagonists.

However, since the early 2010s, gender equality has started to gain traction in the video game industry, with more women represented in games and a slight increase of lead female characters. *Tomb Raider's* Lara Croft (Eidos Interactive and Square Enix, 1996 to present) provides a good example of how women's portrayal in video games is shifting from a more sexualized and stereotyped representation to a more realistic one, portraying females as strong, capable and independent individuals.

As stated by Lynch et al. (2016), such a portrayal may be an important factor for encouraging women to become more interested in gaming, which in turn can influence game content in positive ways and contribute to achieving gender parity in the video industry. It is important, however, that gamers support this change and start playing with female lead characters as much as they play with their male counterparts. More interesting developments can be expected in the future, as video games strive to portray stories that represent all kinds of persons, paving the way for a more diverse and inclusive society.

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