



by admin 05/09/2014

#011 Press X to make sandwich – A complete guide to gender design in games

This document is a pdf version of a long blog post essay by Anjin Anhut on howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com. Thanks to volumes of constructive comments by the community, contents of this essay are currently in revision for a later publication. This document serves as a backup of the original version of the essay and contains some outdated concepts.



- Table of Contents

This article is huge and actually not intended to be read in one sitting, so I made a table of contents thing.

The article is separated into chapters and paragraphs, which are all directly linked through the table of contents below. This allows you to read the through the article at your own pace, link to certain points, quickly jump around, treat this like a master posts and share the bits you find interesting.

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Introduction

Hey, everybody.

This rather huge article is intended to collect and structure a complete overview of how gender design works and how gender design is currently done in games.

We will explore gendering language, connotations and subtext, problematic industry habits and I will also provide a quick guide for instant improvement, all from the perspective of a professional game designer and artist and also design teacher.

I hope the article equips you with powerful tools to discuss matters of gender in games and helps you in your own creative efforts.

trigger warning.

The content will be updated from time to time with new concepts and resources, so that tis article serves as a central place for me to collect and organize my knowledge about gender design. Please feel free to add useful ideas in the comment section. Good suggestion will be featured in the main article.

Please note, that this article deals with issues of discrimination and features descriptions/images of sexual assault and gender violence, so consider this a

Also note, that this article is written from the perspective of a cisgender straight man, so I'm in no way suggesting to be able to speak for women or members of the LGBATIQ community. My article is also no substitute for engaging women and LGBATIQ people directly to learn more.

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Chapter 1 – Working With Gender



Why gender? Before we dig into how gender design works, let's discuss first why. What are the narrative goals and possible effects of bringing gender into your game or any other fictional scenario?

Gender is a key factor in human-to-human interaction and also a strong – though arbitrary – factor in the way societies and communities are structured. Simply put, we care about gender and we connect a lot of relevant feelings and ideas with it. So how can we work that into the games we make and the stories we tell?

This chapter discusses gender in media in a fairly uncritical way. There is a whole chapter dedicated to deconstructing the current use of gender in media later. Let's just for a second be a little naïve and talk about what gender can be good for in storytelling.

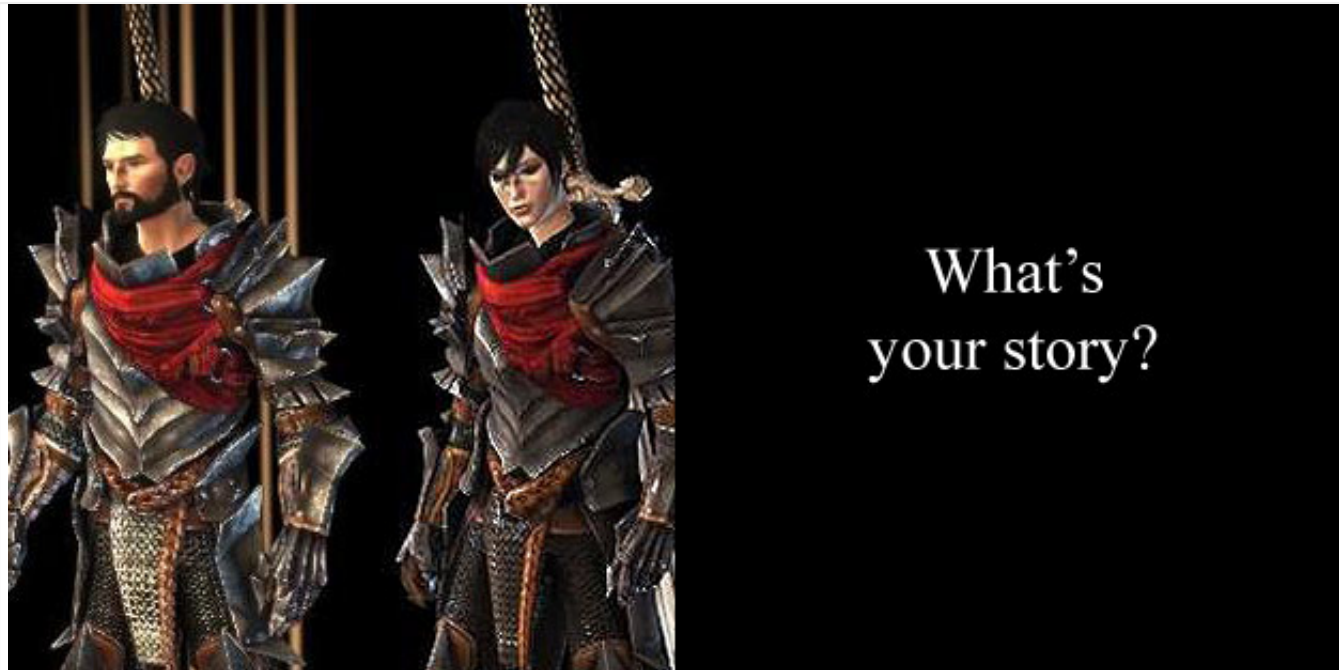
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1.1 Player Identity – Creating empathy and kinship

Our gender (and sexual orientation) is a huge part of who we are. It comes with all sorts of desires and struggles. The search for companionship and sexual fulfillment, coming of age, wanting to become a parent or simply being recognized and accepted for who you are.

If the gender of a fictional character matches your own, it can be quite easy to identify with their

desires and struggles and it can be quite easy to build an emotional connection.



Gender and class selection in Dragon Age 2

This emotional connection allows us to tell inspiring stories to people of all genders and the interactive nature of games allows us to address as many genders as we like in one single game release. Character customization allows every player to present as male or female or inbetween as they like. Branching stories, interactive dialogue sequences and options allow player to play with whatever sexual orientation they want.

Like in a movie, a young girl could see herself becoming the hero of the day with a female protagonist on screen. But uniquely to games as an interactive medium, the options presented allow one game release to make everybody see themselves become the hero.

However, some experiences and stories are intimately tied to gender identity, so that genders cannot just be switched. But if we give people of all genders and orientations access to the tools, knowledge and platforms to make and share games, we can have access to many stories and experiences and can learn to understand each other better.

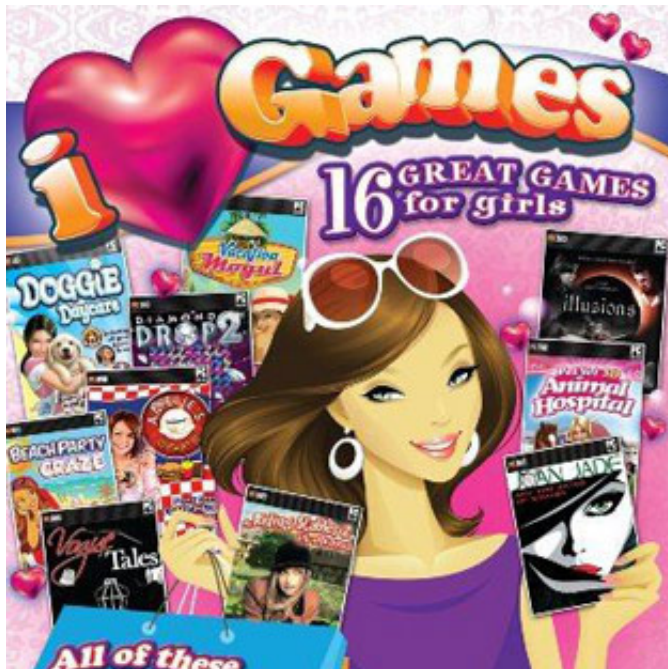
Playing through the stories of people who are not you, experiencing what it means to have a different identity can be an eye-opening experience. ...if you are willing to invest a little empathy.



Aveline – Assassin's Creed Liberation

What's
her story?

Please note: Kinship does not necessarily require a specific character of the same gender in the game. Many people attach gender identity to the choices they make as a consumer. A game as a whole – IP, logos, fonts, GUI, color scheme, themes – can be gender coded, even if there is not much of a protagonist to talk about. Kinship can come as “This is like me.” or as “This is for me.”.



Who would
feel kinship with
this gendered
product?

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1.2 Advocacy – Challenging current gender norms

Unfortunately, gender is still used in our patriarchal society to put people into categories and then treat them in a generalizing fashion. Equal opportunity to prosper, to pursuit happiness and to express oneself are still not a reality.

Current systems heavily privilege cisgender heterosexual men and any deviation from that comes with a cost. Cis women are already at a disadvantage here, but the problem is exacerbated drastically once you find yourself even further removed from the privileged group by being transgender and/or homosexual. Oh and yeah, don't forget that race, disabilities, class and other issues give people excuses to put you at a categorical disadvantage in addition to whatever gender you identify with.

These harmful paradigms can be challenged through the use of gender in media, if creators don't sleepwalk through their gender design. Games can provide counterexamples to common ideas, opening them up for discussion or inspire people by giving the fictional role models.



How did
this character
change the image
of video game
heroes and
players?

Lara Croft's first appearance in 1996.

Gender conscious designers can use games to deconstruct the current systems. The interactive nature of games allows us to use mechanics to make societal dangers, limitations and opportunities tangible. And designers can create autobiographical games to gain more visibility for the struggles and challenges of their gender.



Dys4ia by Anna Anthropy

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1.3 Gender As Shorthand – Establishing complex contexts instantly

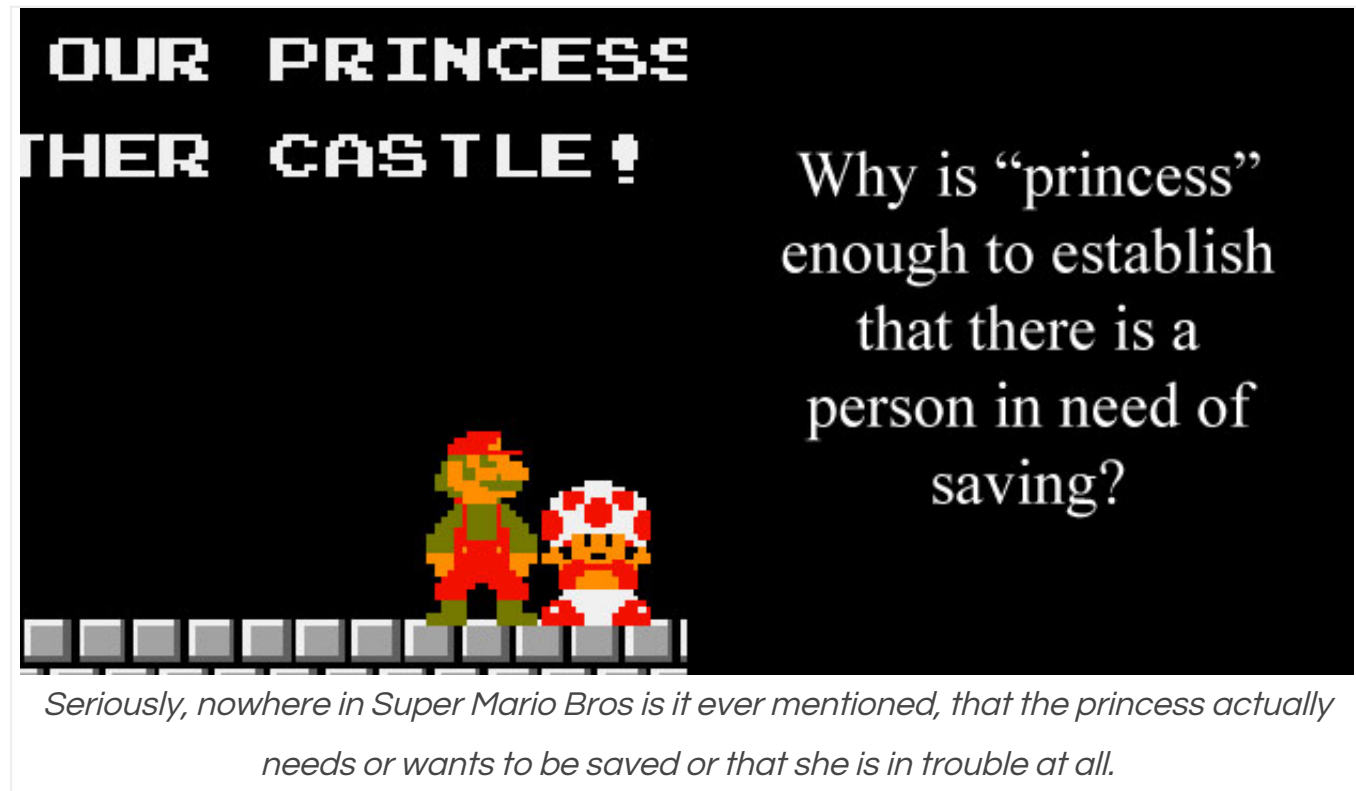
With all the personal meaning attached to gender and all the cultural expectations piled onto it, gender is a very effective shorthand to establish complex ideas really really quickly. You can condense a lifetime of companionship into a single frame and have everything threatened within the next one.



Hey, I have a wife/girlfriend. Happy! Damn, she got kidnapped! Sad!

If storytelling is just a formality in your game, you can just piggyback on already familiar setups, like the damsel in distress, or the girlfriend in the fridge. These setups have been around for centuries,

treating the bond between a man and a woman as a given and skipping directly to the call to adventure.



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1.4 Tease – Catching the player’s eye and providing titillation

People love to look at people they find hot. People love to interact with people they find hot – at least when it is safe. Safe means, there is no painful rejection involved, no judgmental views from peers, no potential for negative consequences.

Games allow for safe interaction with virtual hot people.

life people.

You get to ogle a sexy person without having to fight for that intimacy first and without fear of getting caught. You get to make people get naked for you, you get to conquer a virtual person's heart and subsequently their pants. You can have as much sex with as many partners you want. You can explore sexual desires, which you would never try to explore with real

life people. Titillating images and scenes can be used as rewards or unlockables for player actions and that additional factor of "I scored!" and player's choice add a whole new layer to it. In those cases, it's not even necessary to show something visually appealing, just making something naughty happen is enough.



Why is
this image used
as a reward for
fast playing?

The “best” ending for Metroid on NES, for finishing the game within an hour. [via](#)

It's important to remember that titillation completely depends on what the player in question finds attractive. A player can not bridge that gap with their empathy, if they happen to be interested in another gender than the one presented or if they are asexual. Using titillation in your game or in its advertising therefore makes a really clear statement about who you want as your target audience.



Is the girl in
the ad supposed
to attract female
players?

The girl is not a playable character in GTA5.

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Chapter 2 – Gender Signifiers



Chapter II

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Gender Signifiers

How to gender? In order to gender something you need to attach elements to your design, that allow the viewer to determine the gender of whatever you have designed or at least associate a certain gender with it. We will further refer to these elements as gender signifiers.

Signifiers are a concept found in semiotics and describe the form of a sign (image, word, sound etc.) that we can read and then connect to the sign's meaning (the signified). It's important to keep in mind, that a signifier can be interpreted in many different ways, and not necessarily communicates gender to everybody equally well. This makes not only the design elements themselves interesting to discuss but also who uses/reads them as signs for gender and why.

To do just that, I separated all possible gender signifiers into two types: Indexes and symbols. But first let's talk about gender coding.

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2.0 Gender Coding – Meaning and signs

Every person's gender is a matter of their own identity, and no person's identity is for somebody else to define. No matter how you look, what kind of body or voice you have, how you dress,... nobody can look at that and define your gender for you. You do that for yourself.

There are men with vaginas and women with penises, men shaving their legs and women with beards. So, if no signifier let's us determine a person's gender conclusively, what does that mean for using signifiers to articulate gender in our character designs?

It means that there are actually no true male or female

signifiers. There are only male coded and female coded ones.

Coded means, that the designers and their audiences have learned to define certain traits as male or female. Gender coded signs only work because we basically collectively agreed to jump to the same conclusions whenever we seen them.

Most people think they are able to discern a person's gender just by looking at them. In design this idea is exploited to articulate gender in characters and objects to audiences. A creator can expect their audience to read a beard for example as a male signifier – we have learned to do this our whole life. ...even though women can have beards as well. It works but it's not without problems.

We have learned that certain traits are intrinsically male or female. The existence of transgender people, intersex people and gender fluid people however exposes that idea as wrong. This conflict between the culturally enforced perception of what gender should look like and reality comes with a range of harmful consequences. Mostly for the gender-nonconforming people out there, whose existence is constantly diminished, erased, tabooed and hidden in media.

Some of these consequences are discussed in further sections.

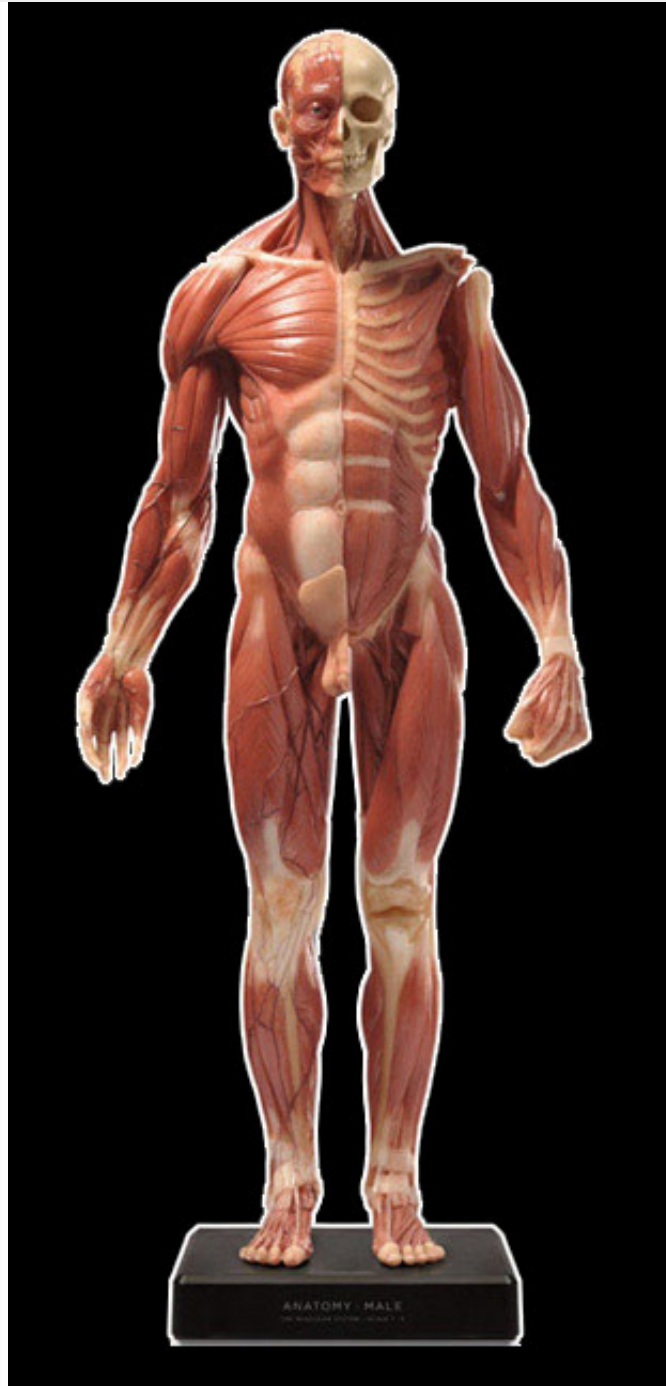
The same applies to sexual orientation, which is a huge part of this article as well. Fortunately, we have a bit more practice with the concept of *coded signifiers* when it comes to sexual orientation.

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2.1 Gender Indexes – biological gender-coded signifiers

Indexes are the respective physical features we expect someone born with one or the other gender to have. We expect someone who is born as male to naturally have a penis and someone who is born female to have a vagina. We expect different amount of facial and body hair, different bone structures, breasts, voices and different chromosomes. Therefore we expect someone with facial hair to be male and someone with breasts to be female. Showing those signifiers on characters and objects is a pretty reliable way to conclusively articulate gender to most audiences.



via www.anatomytools.com

The effectiveness of gender indexes is strictly based on cis normativity or outright transphobia.

The aforementioned expectations are of course very cis normative and in fact not representative for everyone out there. People with penises can be as female as people with vaginas are and vice versa.

However, audiences read physical gender coded signifiers (indexes) as signs for the gender identity of a character almost all the time. They do this because they do not expect a

character to be transgender or intersex, they expect characters to be cisgender. And because most audiences do not distinguish between gender and sex in that moment. More on why that is problematic later.



Are the different
body shapes enough
to articulate gender
to you?

Original concept art for the Halo series.

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2.2 Gender Symbols – cultural gender-coded signifiers

Now this type of signifier is where it gets really interesting. Symbols are signifiers, which are invented by humans. They are based on languages, laws, memes and other conventions, not on sex. For example, there is nothing inherently male or female about names like Eric and Erica, not even male and female in regards to sex. It's just that we imbue those names with a gendered meaning.



How
can a key be
female?

Everything around styling, clothing, accessories, colors, hair cuts, cosmetics are symbols. Also certain colors, names, labels and other elements which one would consider male or female but aren't body parts. We also need to put certain hobbies, activities, behaviors, professions and manners on the gender coded symbol list as well, based on the preconception, that people from one

or the other gender are more likely to be doing certain things or are socially expected to be doing them.



Is this a
gender neutral
image?

Is racing a gender neutral profession? Is interest in cars generally perceived as a hobby for all genders?

Most people expect women to wear nail polish and men not to. But no physical condition brings men or women to relate to nail polish in that way, ...culture does. Also there is nothing distinctively pink about women or blue about men, these colors are read as gender signifiers because people tell other people to do so.

Gender coded symbols are never just a signifier for what gender a character has. They always (!) carry ideas about gender roles, gender expectations and personal relations to gender with them.

Symbols – in contrast to indexes – always make a statement about gender as it relates to culture. They are used by people to articulate gender expectations and how they relate to those expectations.

Symbols carry subtext and connotations, and make a statement about what one thinks a man or a woman has to do or be and how they have to be treated.



What does the design of the female soldier tell you, beyond her gender?

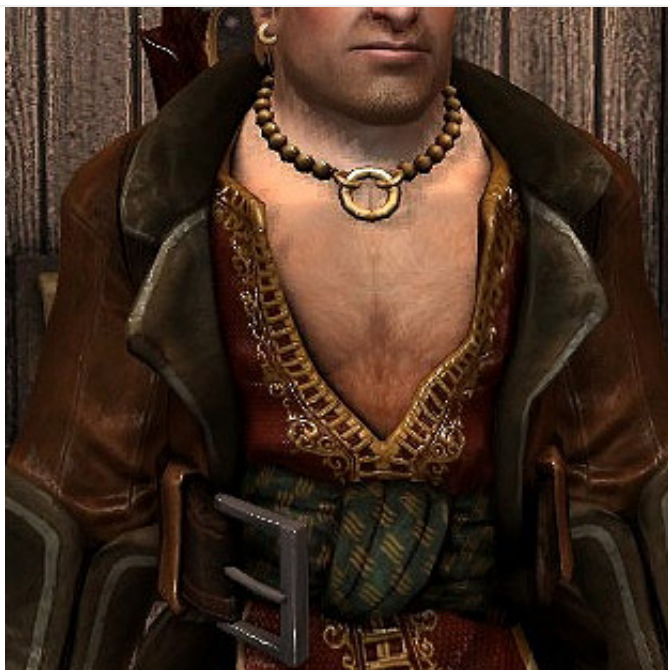
Halo concept art, edited by me.

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2.3 Symbolic Creativity – characters

presenting their gender

Symbolic creativity is another concept of semiotics. It deals with how people shape their appearance and their environment. Much of the way people dress and style is designed to accentuate gender indexes or to hide them. This brings us to an interesting subgroup of symbols: Indexes, that have to be read as symbols.



Why is this character not shaving or covering his body hair?

Varric, Dragon Age series.

Men can decide to let their facial hair grow, to get a more masculine appearance. Women can decide to pick clothing, that accentuates their physique. Leg shaving, breast implants, revealing

clothing, muscle gain, mutton chops. Even if a person decides not to be concerned with where and how much hair covers his or her body, this still communicates a certain relation to their own gender and to societal gender expectations.



Samus Aran, Metroid series

How much is
this character
concerned with
being feminine?



Nilin, Remember Me

How does this
character feel
about her body
and gender?



Is this police
officer concerned
with dressing
professionally?

Sonya, Mortal Kombat series

The way people are dealing with the indexes nature gave them to associate with one or the other gender (or not associate at all) is a symbolic act – referred to as symbolic creativity. This is why even though stronger growth of facial hair is an index for male, a fully grown beard or mustache is a symbol, carrying all the respective cultural connotations and expectations.

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2.4 Character Canvas – the available space for gender signifiers

Treating a character design as a canvas – a space filled with design decisions – is a concept I developed for my game art classes. It allows us to view a design as a limited space for ideas and messages and we can then check how well we use that space. Understanding what all the spaces are that are part of the canvas is necessary to allow us to get a complete understanding of where gender signifiers can be placed/found.

Usually, when people talk and think in terms of character design they mean what's on the model sheet. The character's face, body, costume and hair cut.



But the character's canvas is much bigger than that. Everything that represents or references the character or puts the character into a gender specific context can be used and read as a gender signifier.

Such as:

- Expressions, gestures and mannerism. Also the voice.



- Any object they own or thing they prefer, and any places they call home.



- Their names, titles, role in society, professions.



- Backgrounds, GUI, soundtrack, logo design and other non-diegetic elements.



... and finally – exclusive to games – the mechanics around the character.

Mechanics are insanely relevant to gender design in games. It's not just a writer's or game artist's job to decide how to use gender in the game. Culturally we associate a lot of actions, professions, roles, tools and behaviors with certain genders and this colors gameplay as well.



One of many gender coded special moves of Princess Peach in the Smash Bros series.

The options and actions a designer chooses to make available with a playable character, the kind of collectibles and power-ups they have to get, the interactions you allow with NPCs or gender coded enemies, certain win states, achievements and bonuses... all this can be symbols for gender, including all the related cultural expectations.



Is crying to get
what you want a
thing women do?

Strategic mood swings as one of the core mechanics in Super Princess Peach

PLEASE SELECT
PLAYER

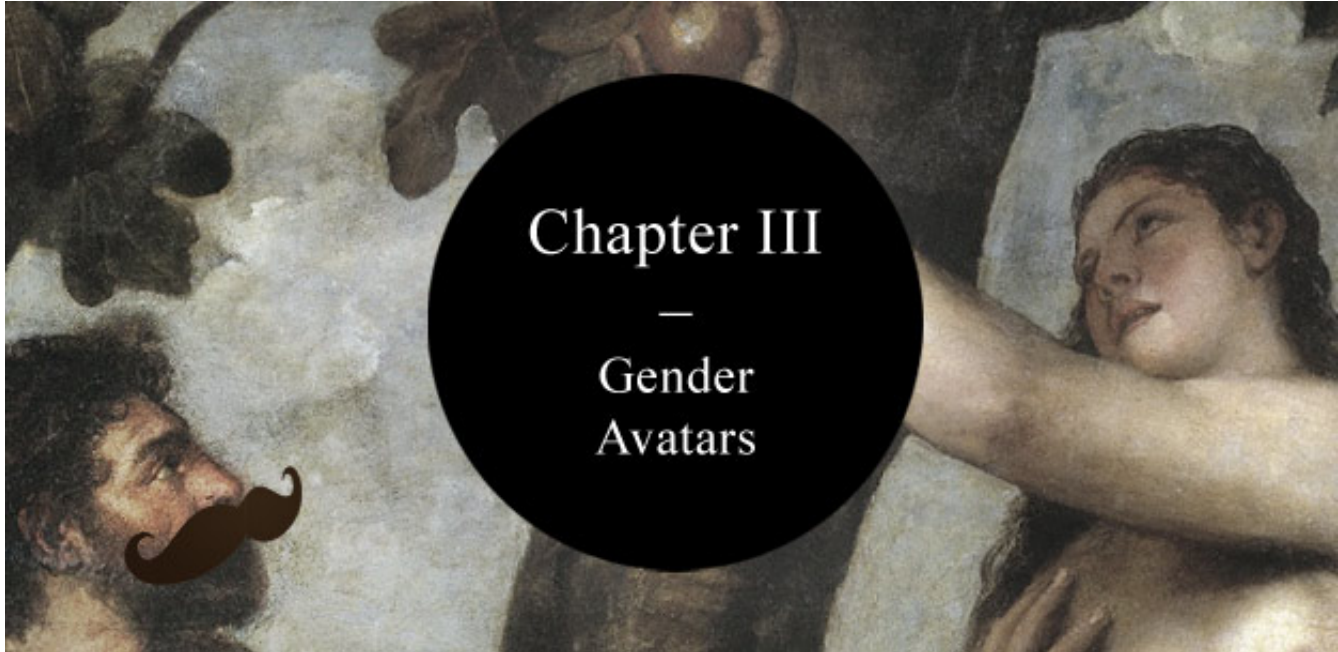
Do you know
male heroes with
special powers
based on their
gown?



She can float, thanks to her princess gown in Super Mario Bros 2, NES.

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Chapter 3 – Gender Avatars



Chapter III — Gender Avatars

This is where much of the criticism for gendered characters comes from: The idea that the character in question is not just

Using a gender coded signifier successfully genders a character or any other design element. So far so good.

You can however use them to make a design not only gendered but about gender. A design then would not only include a gender as one of many aspects, but would make a statement about that gender as a whole.

If characters end up in this position, anything that is said about

an individual
design, but a
representative of its
gender.
A gender avatar.

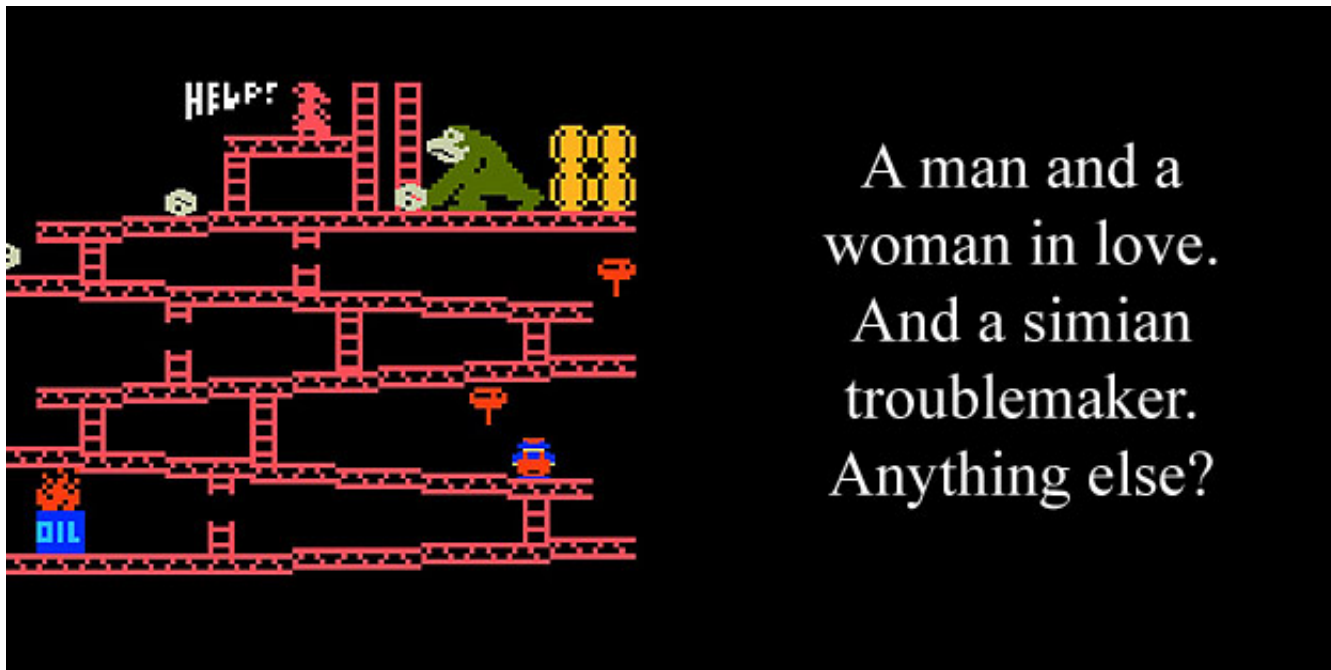
them or with them is by proxy a statement about the respective
gender. It can be a very powerful tool for empowerment as
much as a tool for perpetuating sexist paradigms.

Here are some ways in which characters become avatars of
their gender:

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3.1. Context – When the story or scenario deals with questions of gender.

Family, relationships, sexuality, romance, equal rights, sexism... If these subjects are core to a story
or scenario, the characters involved are already written as avatars. This is then not necessarily
dependent on how the characters are designed. Romeo and Juliet could be two talking potatoes
and the story would still turn them into stand-ins for young boys and girls in love.



Something similar happens in other stories and scenarios as well, when a character is relegated to
play a role that only exists in context of one the listed subjects. If a character is just *the boyfriend* or
just *the wife* and never does anything outside of this context, it becomes a gender avatar with a
specific role.



Is Marston's wife more than a representation of the abstract idea of "wife"?

Abigail Marston only exists in the context of being John Marston's wife. For large parts of the game, she is only referenced, not shown. And once we see her she does stereotypical wife stuff (chores, keeping company, sex, parenting).

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3.2. Scarcity – When there are very few or just one character from a specific gender present.

Okay, this one is easy. If amongst the relevant characters only one character is from gender *A* and the rest of the cast is from gender *B*, then this character is the odd one because of its gender. Same goes for being the only character on a roster, that is not cisgender.



Is it sufficient to say "the woman" to reference a specific character here?

Is the same true for "the man"?

In order to reference a specific male character in this picture, we have to think beyond gender. Simply because there is more than one man in this picture. We don't have to do this for the woman however.

Being the odd one draws extra attention to the gender and it makes gender a defining trait of the character, because it is an exclusive feature. It generates questions concerning why the character is there in the first place or why there aren't much more of them.

Having only a few or even just one character to work with severely limits the ability of creators to present more than one idea of what a person from gender A could be. Diversity is hard and sometimes impossible to pull off under these circumstances and characters in that position often are idealized to make the best out of the limited space available.



How many
different pictures
can you paint on
just one canvas?

Women are limited to one idealized body type in Enslaved. Men are presented with vastly different body types, giving us a range.

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3.3. Theme – When everything about a character is about their gender.

Imagine throwing a Halloween party. You get scary decoration, put pumpkins in your yard, play creepy music, show horror movies, prepare gross-looking food and everybody is in costume. To make the party perfect you try to make as much elements as possible as halloween-themed as possible.

This happens with gender as well. The canvas of a character gets almost completely saturated with gender signifiers. Everything from the model to mechanics says "gender".



Is this race kart
race-themed or
gender-themed?

This of course heavily depends on how much of the signifiers on a character you read as gender related – so there is some subjectivity to it. But there are many very clear cases of a gender themed character out there.



Is this baby's
gender incidental?

Official baby version of Saxton Hale, Team Fortress 2. Comes with already developed mustache and chest hair, plus Cooper Pedy hat.

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3.4. Regendering – When a concept gets presented with a new gender.

This is when we start with a character having one perceived gender and then transitioning to another. It can happen with characters actually changing their gender or just going out in drag. This can be done with a character having an unreadable gender until it is revealed.

However, it is most commonly done via copy, meaning we start with a character from one gender and then create another version of that character with a different gender.



archetype
Ryu



young
Ryu



evil
Ryu



american
Ryu



girl
Ryu



demon
Ryu



goofy
Ryu



“urban”
Ryu

Ryu from the Street Fighter series and variants. Including one regendered version.

The gender becomes the relevant new development and everything is now viewed in a new context. The before gender gets compared to the after gender, again making gender a defining factor.



Sheik, Ocarina of Time

Did your view
of Sheik's heroics
change once the
true gender was
revealed?

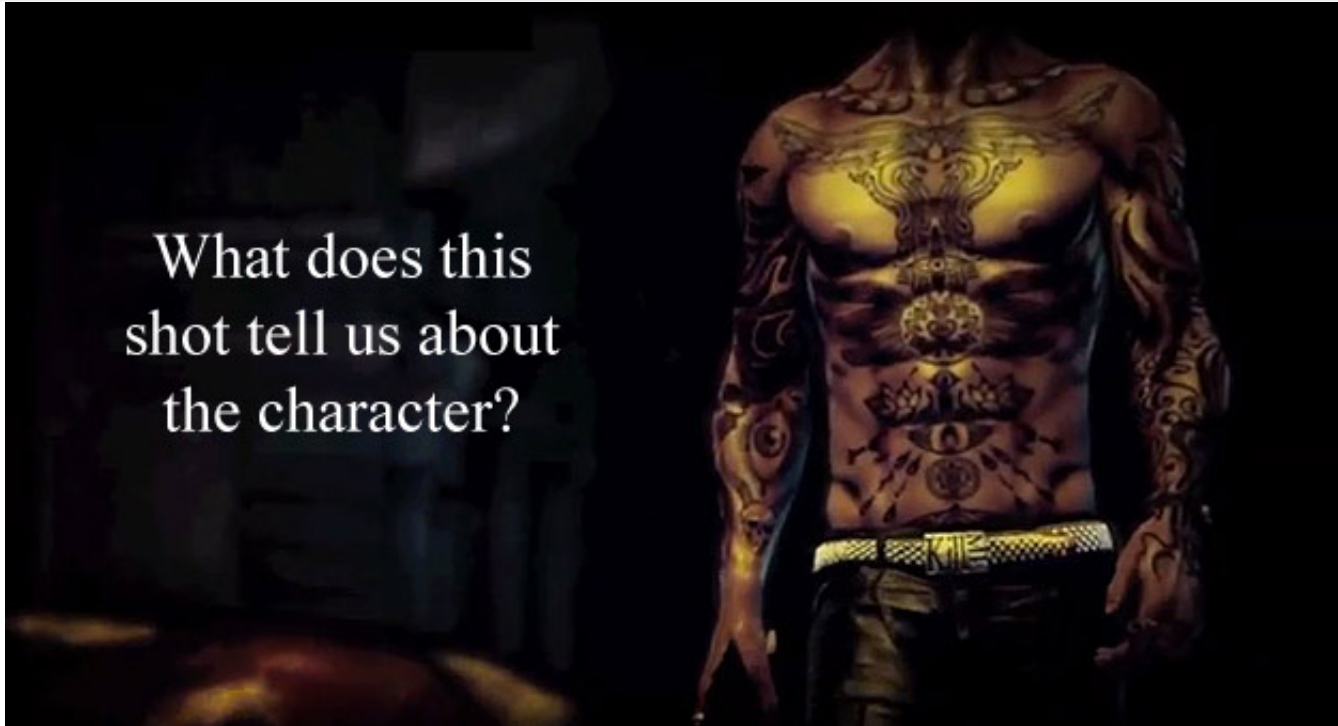
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3.5. Fragmentation – When gender signifiers are presented standing alone.

Fragmentation references a cinematography technique. It's when a shot only shows parts of a character – only fragments – instead of giving us a whole understanding of the character. This can be done via cropping, close-up, by having parts of a character obscured in frame or by showing unattached parts.

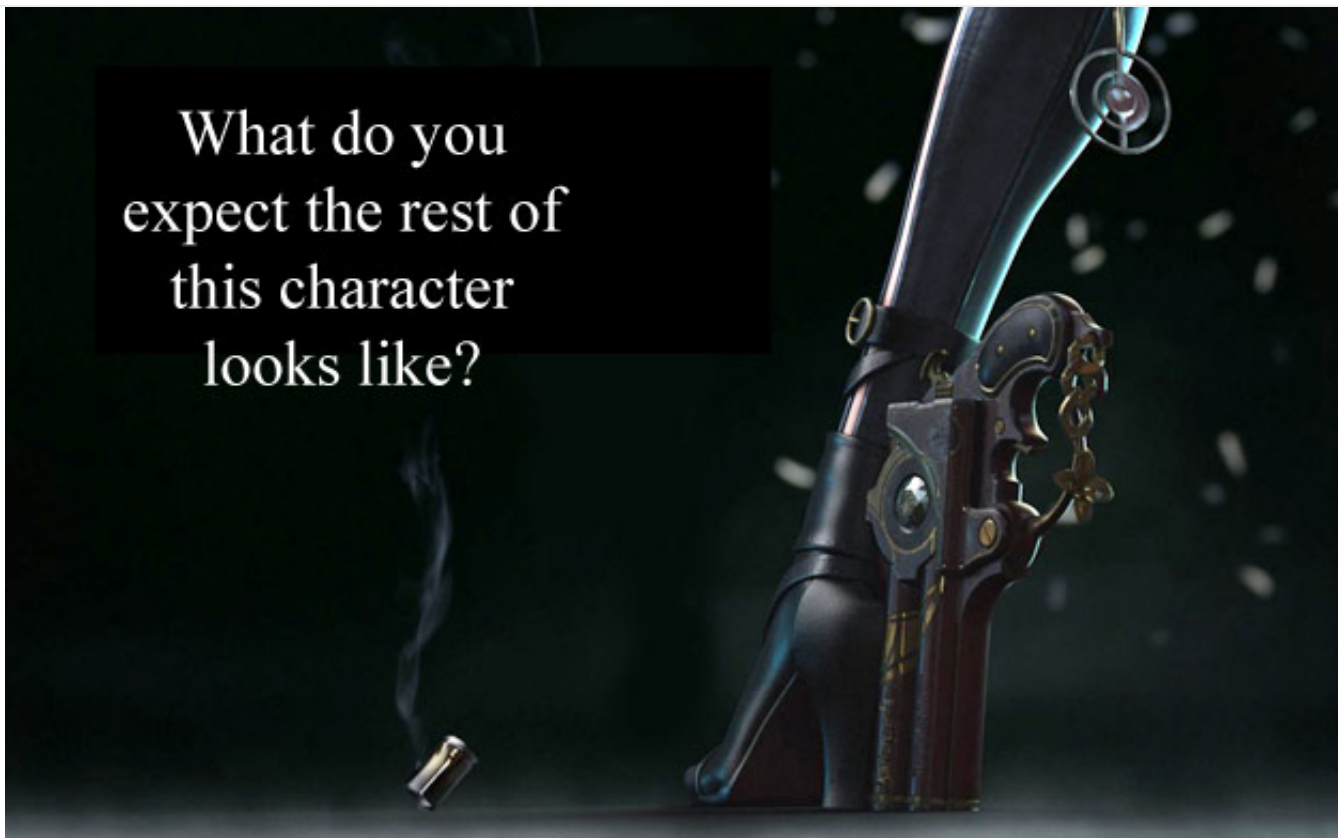
Even if characters have very few gender coded signifiers, you can make those signifiers central to a character by showing them as fragments. The thing with fragments is, that they cause audiences to fill the rest of the character up themselves. We understand that the fragment is part of a bigger whole and we use the fragment as a blueprint to imagine the rest.

What does this shot tell us about the character?



Unedited Shadows Of The Damned screenshot.

What do you expect the rest of this character looks like?



Unedited Bayonetta promo art.

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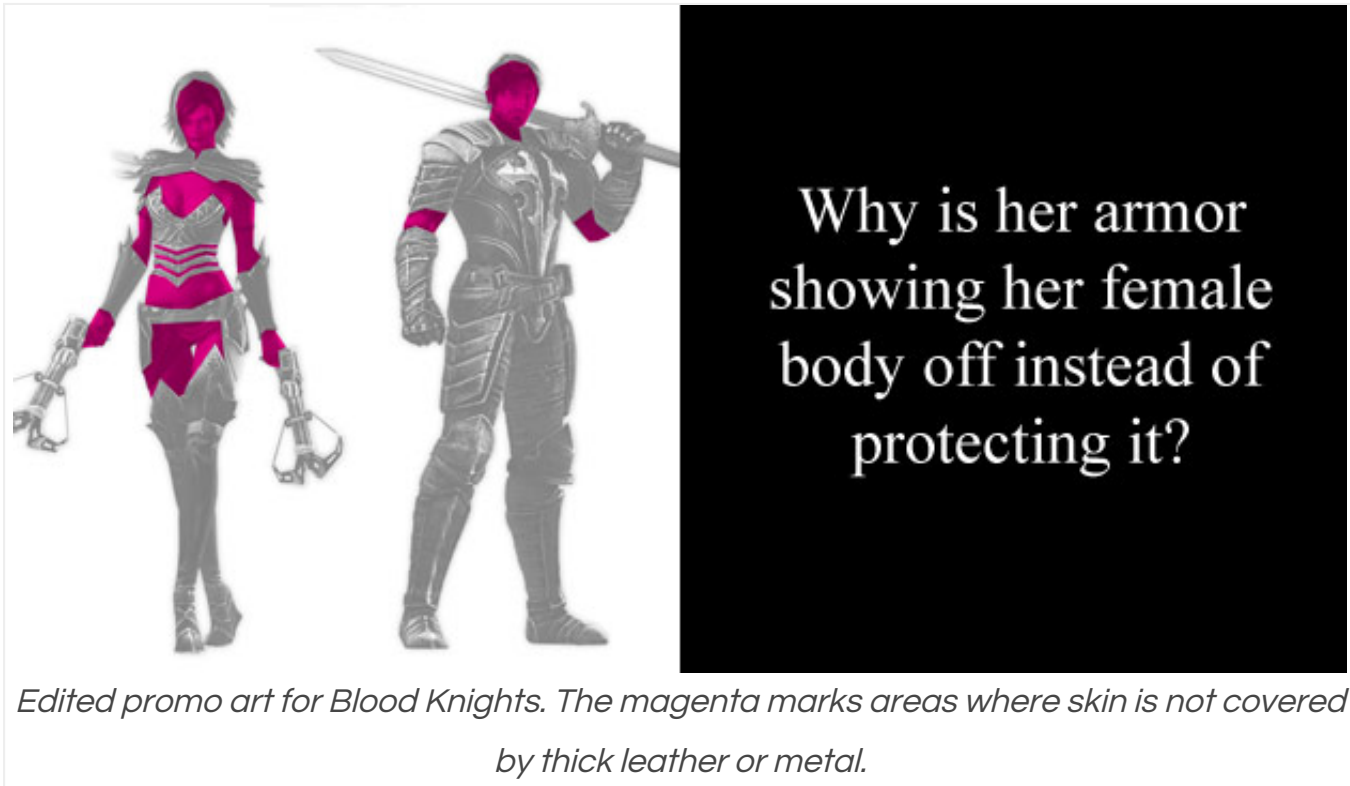
3.6. Dissonance – When gender signifiers feel out of place.

This happens in two ways...

Firstly, a scenario is established in which excessive presentation of gender sticks out like a sore

thumb, because it absolutely makes no sense for a character to dress or behave in that kind of extremely gender coded fashion.

In these kind of situations the character in question is either made that way for comedic effect or the creators value titillation over believability. This gets especially obvious if the phenomenon only applies to one gender and not the other.



The second way in which this happens is completely predicated on hetero normativity and cis normativity. I have trouble listing this practice here, since I really don't want to endorse it, but it is done a lot and I think it's important to deconstruct how it works.

Culturally, most people want to be able to discern somebody's gender quickly and conclusively. That's why they expect everybody to be and look unequivocally male or female. So, if a person or character has mixed gender signifiers – is gender nonconforming – it appears off or dissonant to most audiences and creates confusion and a feeling of otherness. In games, this is usually done in a way that severely discriminates against LGBTIQ people as we will further discuss in the next chapter.

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Chapter 4 – Inequality By Design



Chapter IV

— Inequality By Design

Bigotry happens when privileged people uncritically accept comfortable stories.

This is now seriously the point to remind you of the **trigger warning** I issued earlier, as we explore common design practices around gender and sexual orientation, and their often harmful subtext and connotations.

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4.1. Cisgenderism And Heterosexism – The expectation to be cisgender and straight.

Gender design in games (and pop culture media in general) is per default based on the idea that it is normal to be cisgender. Being LGBATIQ is viewed a special trait, which leads creators to use it strategically, like they do with, race, age, body type ect.



Why is
evil sorcerer Yuga
appearing to be
female?

Facial shape, hairline, hair cut, make up, jewelry, lashes. Designers unequivocally chose to give this character a female appearance. Yuga from The Legend of Zelda: A Link

If a character is created with either just male-coded signifiers or just female-coded signifiers, it will be read as cisgender and straight. If a character has mixed coded signifiers, it will be read as either a straight cisgender character who does not conform to gender roles or it will be read as a cisgender gay or bisexual person. However, transgender characters are basically invisible to the cis-normative lens of the observer.

A character with male coded indexes and female coded symbols will most likely be read as a cisgender man in drag and almost never as a transgender woman. But the character will almost all the time be read as someone who is not like men or women normally are. This way of reading a characters gender – defaulting to cis and straight – poses already a huge representation problem, which basically can only be offset through smart and empathetic writing.



Unfortunately, smart and empathetic writing for LGBATIQ characters is not something many game creators are good at or even care about at all. On the contrary, the prevalent use of insulting and demonizing stereotypes exacerbates the representation problem massively.

The implication of presenting a male character in a feminine way or vice versa will be discussed in the next block on androcentrism. Let's for now look at the implications of LGBATIQ characters used as abnormal characters in fiction. Heterosexist cisgenderist bias not only considers being cis and hetero an expected state but also a superior one.

A character that is designed in a way that is read as gay or gender-ambiguous regularly is framed as a morally depraved and/or mentally ill person, usually resulting in that character being violent.



Does a character need to be explicitly gay to be a gay stereotype?

Disney commonly uses mixed gender symbols to remove villainous or shady characters from the expected gender binary.

Being gay or bisexual regularly is used as a shorthand for a person who does not care about moral boundaries. As if homosexuality is an unscrupulous exercise of hedonistic pleasure, it gets thrown in together with pedophilia, pleasure in violence, cannibalism and bestiality. Also even if you are transgender or intersex, you get lumped into that stereotype as well, since most audiences do not distinguish between the LGB and TIQ.

In video games, these stereotypes often are mapped on characters, which then have to be killed by the heroes to progress in game.

This trope ends up confirming a lot of negative real life ideas about Homosexuality and being transgender or intersex. These ideas inform legislation and serve as a justification for violence. Adoption battles and the fight for marriage equality in the States, as well as persecution in Russia provide plenty of examples how these connotations result in tangible harm.



Why is the male
body hair so
prominent in this
design?

Why is the makeup
sloppy?

GTA5 as some of the most vile and gut-wrenching transphobic "humor" out there.

Another discriminatory way of using a character read as LGBATIQ is for some sort of hybrid sexist-ableist humor, in which the character in question is ridiculed for being unable to decide or recognize if they are male or female. In those case the contrast between male coded and female coded signifiers is cranked up to eleven, to "expose" them as some sort of gender-confused clowns and make the visually jarring in their appearance.



Does the
option to romance
another man make
maleShep effectively
bisexual?

Depending on how you interpret the dialog system in Mass Effect, you could argue that the option of romancing Cortez means maleShep is contemplating hitting on a male crew member even if the player is not eventually choosing to confirm it.

There is a severe lack of LGBATIQ characters who are not ridiculed, demonized or otherwise exploited as a *them* or an *other*. I have so far played two games with a transgender protagonist, BOTH are autobiographical and produced by transgender people themselves. Many on the surface

positive representations of homosexual characters can be quite token-ish, but at least there is some movement away from cisgenderist and heterosexist defaults.

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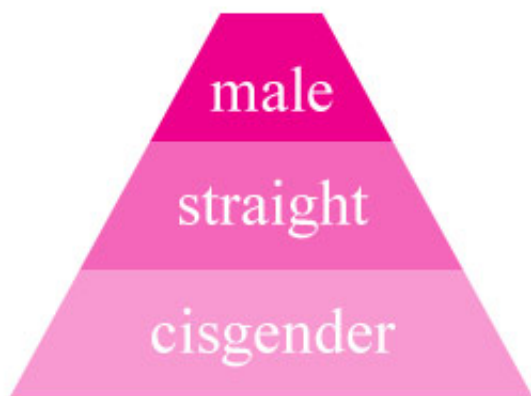
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4.2. Androcentrism – The expectation to be a man.

Okay, this is the big one – a culture designed in service of the perspective of men.

I tackled cis normativity and hetero normativity first because they build the foundation for the male-centric design that is dominating popculture and especially games culture. You do not only have to be a man to be in the privileged group, you have to be straight and cis as well. Any deviation from that set of prerequisites and you are target for discrimination.

The cisgenderism and heterosexism issues also had to be discussed outside of androcentrism because discrimination against LGBATIQ folks is not exclusive to men. Women can be as oppressive here as men are, and cisgender gay people can be as oppressive as any cis straight person is, with transgender people as a target.

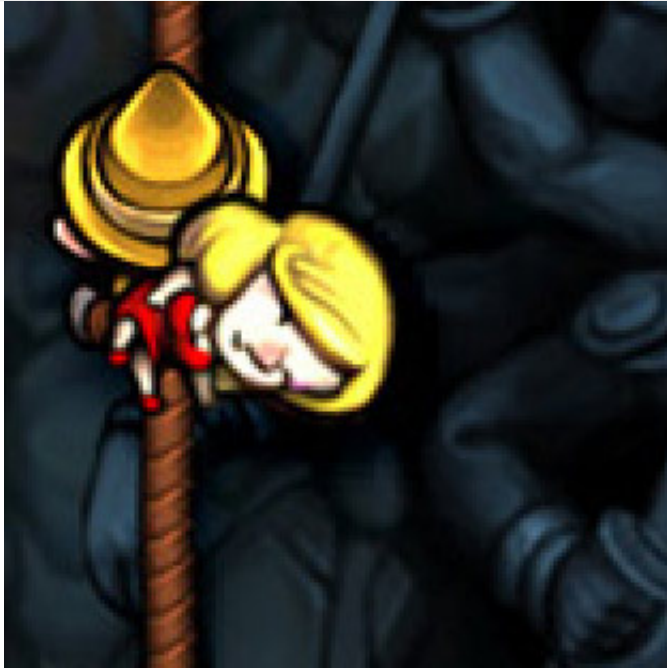


Are you man
enough to be at
the top, bro?

I will further refer to cisgender hetero sexual males as just *males* or *men* where the two other properties are implicit values, only occasionally bringing them up explicitly if necessary.

Why is games such a male centric form of media – from AAA to indie? Because mainly men are in charge and mainly men get to work in games, most games are made from a mainly male perspective. Common marketing practices target male gamers, since female gamers or *gasp* gays and transgender people are an unexplored customer group and marketing mostly bets on already gathered sales results. Finally, many people who want to make games – this goes mostly for indies

now – are channeling games that influenced and inspired them. So they repeat androcentric design tropes as homage, throwback or just because that is what they have in their mental libraries.



Is this a
nostalgic homage
to a trope that has
been popular back
in the days?

Is it even possible to pay tribute to a trope that is alive and well, and not endorse that trope at the same time?

Androcentric premises:

A. Men care about getting stuff done.

B. Women care about men.

The basic idea of men having to be strong and capable, and women having to be there for men is core to androcentrism. The idea is furthermore simply referred to as *the premises* or *premise A and B*.

This approach to gender roles manifest diegetically with stories that feature male problem solvers as protagonists and more passive but attractive or otherwise emotionally rewarding

females as peripheral characters. It also manifests non-diegetically with men being the expected gamer – the one who plays, and an industry/culture creating content including advertising to titillate that expected male gamer with depictions of attractive women.



His job is
to shoot at stuff.
What is her job?

He brings a gun, she brings flimsies

When examining widely spread gender design habits a couple of stark disparities between designing male characters and designing female character become apparent. These disparities are all filed under androcentrism here, but are big or relevant enough to give each their own block in this chapter. We will also further dive into cisgenderism and heterosexism issues in regards to the established premises.

It's important to note, that androcentric design is not limited to games aimed at men.

Games aimed a women or girls come with the same gender roles and are build under the same premisses as the games I discuss below. It's the exact same idea of women having to serve and to take care of men, to be pretty for men and to do not much beyond that. It's just that this narrative is presented from the female perspective with playable characters serving as role models and win states serving as confirmation for expected behavior.

What especially questionable about this perspective shift is that they create a competitive angle for the expected behavior. In those games, you need to be the best at looking good, the best at preparing food, the best at dancing sexy, the best at taking care of babies (sometimes animals as a variation), the best at cleaning up...

There is nothing wrong about these activities. Men and women and anybody from the rest of gender spectrum who decides to take care of the family or who feels that being beautiful is part of their self-expression is totally in their right to pursue these activities and try to excel at them. Having these ideals limited to women or having women limited to these ideals however is an infringement on

individual personal expression and self-determination.



Who limits games for girls to themes like achieving beauty, housekeeping, caregiving and performing sexy/pretty?

Men decide this most of the time. Go figure.

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4.3. Infantilization – Taking agency away.

To make the androcentric premise work, women need to be incapable of taking care of stuff themselves.

If women could save themselves or even go out and save a bunch of other people, men would not be the ones who would do the saving all the time... ..and women would not be in the position of being all thankful towards men all the time.

This need for women to be useless in order for men to feel needed takes on ridiculous dimensions in games. Infantilization of women – the act of turning women into children – is a common phenomenon in games, usually referred to as the

damsel-in-distress trope. It's either done by incapacitating women, having her overwhelmed by a strong male abductor or by making her simply inept in nature.

Sometimes it goes so far as to turn a woman into a metaphorical baby, incapable of walking around on her own, needing a man to carry her around. If agency is taken away so much that a female character is no longer able to act in a self-determined way, so that other characters act upon her, then the character is objectified.



How did the
helpless princess
survive and stay
relevant as a trope
and not become
fatally outdated ?

Fat Princess – another attempt at being nostalgic for trope that never got out of style in the first place.

A clear indicator for this male focussed trope to be in full effect is the fact that only a small fraction of video game protagonists are female. Even in games with multiple playable characters, men outnumber women significantly. In addition to writing, the playability of a character is a unique determining factor of character agency, exclusive to games. In games the most agency usually lies with the player and playable characters serve as agents to bring player agency into the game world.

A variant is the girlfriend-in-the-fridge trope, which means a woman has to die to drive the male protagonist's story arc. In these cases we have the same infantilizing setup, but the man failed to fulfil his responsibilities as a member of the adult gender and then exacts brutal revenge to compensate. Another variant – a more nuanced approach to infantilization of women, but infantilization no less – is the use of female sidekicks and assistants or giving a female damsel a moment of inconsequential power. In these cases the man still remains the one taking care of things but the female characters do not appear to be totally useless, which is done to make them less annoying and more worthy of being cared for.



Does a character
need to be playable
to have agency?

In the final scenes of The Walking Dead, one could argue Clementine turned into the actual playable character.

The choice of signifiers matters here as well. Many female gender symbols are commonly found in kids clothing or dolls clothing, most notably cute dresses, schoolgirl uniforms and the bow in the hair. The color pink is in real life mostly found in articles and toys for girls from toddler's age up. This visually marks characters as infantile, as well as female. In Japanese culture, being kawaii – cute and childlike – is considered a way of being sexy, so that plays into infantilizing sign language as well.



Which of Baby
Pac-Man's signifiers
find common use in
gendering female
characters?

Pink, ribbon, lace are commonly used as female coded symbols as well.

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4.4. Gender Allocation – Who gets which gender

and how much of it.

How many women does it take to satisfy androcentric needs?

Men severely outnumber women throughout all branches of mainstream popular culture. You probably have heard of the smurfette principle, a trope referring to the phenomenon that many popculture IPs are perfectly content with having one female in a roster of relevant characters. Studies suggest, the ratio of male to female characters is a staggering 3 to 1.

Why does this happen?

The list of functions a female character needs to fulfil in androcentric design is very short: sexual interest, love interest, helpless damsel to reenforce male superiority. So you need good looks, attractive habits, and a general lack of abilities and agency. Sometimes female characters get plugged into a scenario as a token, to throw a bone to potential female fans. Anyways, all this can easily be covered with one female character, no problem.



As Spelunky or games like Super Meat boy show, even indie darlings are not beyond exploiting women for male-centric scenarios.

Male characters on the other hand need more effort. Male characters aren't sexual or love interests for cis straight men. They also aren't very interesting to men as damsels. Male characters needing to get saved is just a random occurrence, since it does not play into a desired narrative. So, you need to go beyond gender when designing male characters for male audiences to find anything interesting about them. Being a man is not remarkable in male centred design, it's the starting point.

This idea of characters being male per default often goes so far in games, that a male character arguably has no gender coded signifiers at all, while the female version of the same kind of character

gets noticeably more gender coded, because it's her raison d'être.



Little Big Planet

What
makes Sackboy
male, except his
name?



Little Big Planet

What
makes Sackgirl
female, except her
name?

The male default is why in a smurfette scenario, the male characters differ from each other through personality traits and abilities, which needs a whole lot of special signifiers. But the female odd one is already special enough thanks to her gender, so she gets stuck with mainly gender signifiers. Whatever makes a character special gets used as a theme to provide material to fill the character canvas with. ...women are women-themed.



One fighter is
distinctively average
compared to the
others. One is big,
one is wild.
What is her
distinctive feature?

High heels, bows, hearts, pink, sexy clothing, female figure, long hair, cleavage, makeup... yup, it's a chick alright.

**Androcentric
character design
says that women
willingly accept
their dependency
on male approval.**

Considering the symbolic creativity aspect of character design adds a whole new layer of creepiness to this.

It's always important to remember, that a female character is women-themed and acts in service of men because a most likely male designer decided to make it so. Okay. But within the fictional universe – diegetically – we assume these female characters decided how to dress and behave for themselves.

This means the character is designed in a way that says that the girl or woman in question wants to be seen as a sometimes inept but always sexy and loveable female and nothing more.



Why is the design
of Amy Rose's car
dominated by female
coded symbols?

Within the story universe, she makes a point out of making her car look girlish. Why would

In accordance to premise B, there is however a reason to add more than one female character to any given roster. Men may want to have the attention of many women at once or may want to pick and choose what kind of women cares for them. A selection of female characters to romance, to save or play provides options and variation, reducing individual women to not much more than different flavors of the same thing.



Does
“naughty or nice”
turn these female
characters into two
distinct individuals?

Depending on what moral gameplay path you choose in Darkwatch, you get “rewarded” with one or the other character.

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4.5. Stylization – Gender segregated art styles.

Okay, this one is rather quick. It is easy to observe, that in many games with a stylized presentation, female characters end up being portrayed in a more naturalistic fashion. This is usually done to make them more conventionally attractive for the perceive male viewer/player.

This is especially pronounced with antropomorphized characters, like humanoid robots or talking animals. Female characters have much more human proportions or when having fur also feature a wig-like hairdo as well.



Why is the woman not made of green plastic as well?

Army Men



Why is her design less exaggerated?

Joe And Mac



Is she wearing a wig?

Why is she walking upright?

Another issue related to stylization and idealization of female characters is the range of available body types for each gender. Female characters are usually limited to being conventionally sexy for the eyes of a male player, while male characters can be all sorts of things depending on the special trait or theme.

In any case, attractiveness is prioritized over style or personality to put the female character in service of the male characters and perceived male player audience. Since this type of limiting body standards are only applied to female characters most of the time, it carries very harmful body issue connotations.



Why is a
Big Sister not as
deformed as a
Big Daddy?

Bioshock series.



Do the men have
equally idealized
body types or do they
represent a range?

Maybe with more than just one female character, we'd have variety in enslaved as well.

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4.6. Sexualization – Making someone sexual in nature.

Being sexualized is not the same as being sexy or sexual.

We have to make a clear distinction between being sexualized by somebody else and being sexual as a matter of personal expression. Criticism of sexualization often gets confused with being prudish or somehow anti-sex. That is not accurate.

Sexualization reduces a person to their sexual aspect or at least prioritizes their sexual appeal above anything else. It

reduces a person to what somebody else wants.

Sexualization happens when somebody treats somebody else as a sexual entity – no matter if the sexualized person is comfortable with that treatment or not. Being the focus of sexual attention makes you the target of somebody else's wants and desires and is – contrary to popular misogynistic myths – not empowering but severely disempowering, if you don't want the situation to be about sex.



Why is the camera forcing us to gawk at their butts?

"Subtle" fragmentation in Mass Effect 2, Arkham City and Borderlands.

Being sexual is presented as a quality exclusive to and essential for women.

If we have a gender avatar presented in a sexual context, then the whole respective gender gets framed as sexual. This happens most of the time because of premise B and gender allocation issues, with all female characters serving as a love interest or being presented to the male player as sexy. In those cases the non-sexualized female characters are missing to bring us meaningful interaction with women not predicated on

sexual interest.

Another way is applying segregated dress codes or body standards for male and female characters or other disparate stylization practices, which frame male characters in a less sexual context than female characters. This disparity is often especially obvious in class based games, where players can pick a class and choose gender as well.

Androcentric design frames women as sexual in non-sexual scenarios – like when armor should be about protection in combat but for women it's about presenting your body – and it only frames women as sexual, since male characters are not sexually interesting for the expected cis straight male gamer.



Do you expect the
male version of
this soldier to have
no pants as well?

Well, the male soldier has pants. – Resident Evil series.

Considering symbolic creativity again, the way sexualization is frequently realized through the use of female coded symbols presents female characters – and by extension women in general – not only as viewed by men as sexual in nature but also by themselves. Gender coded clothing and habits signify a fundamental and universal desire for sexual attention and male approval.



Just a typical female gesture or a symbol for sexual interaction?

Once a character is sexualized, basically every encounter with that character has a sexual layer to it. This can become quite irritating once an encounter with a sexualized character happens in a violent context – such as combat scenarios, stealth games, damsels in distress and others. A potential problematic mix of sexual and violent imagery emerges.

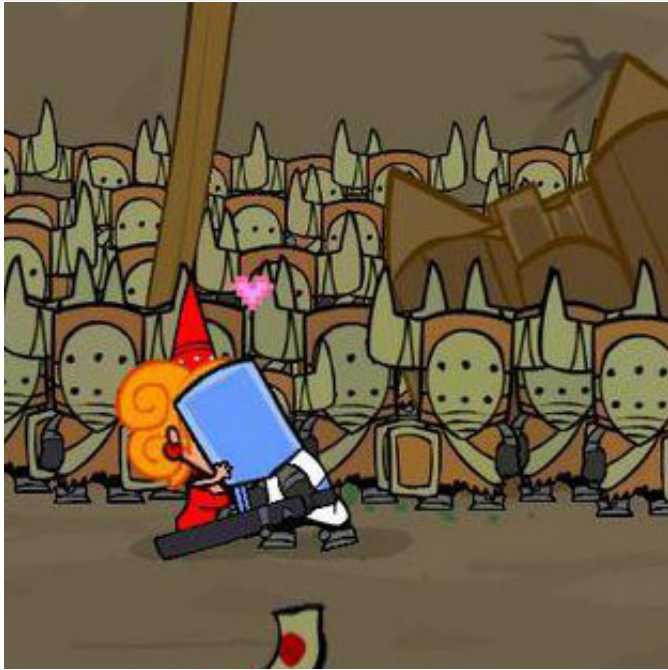
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4.7. Sexual Objectification – Sexual exploitation and assault.

In androcentrism, a woman's consent is either treated as a given or treated as irrelevant.

Objectification is for many hard to grasp, since it describes human-to-human interaction. How can human-to-human interaction be like human-to-object interaction and why would that be problematic?

Let's talk about a coffee shop for a second. Baristas make and sell coffee there and patrons buy coffee there. If both parties only interact to make that transaction – coffee for money – work, they are somewhat objectifying each other. One is just a source of coffee and the other is just a source of income. The barista could just as well be a vending machine and the patron is just the sum of his orders. In the context of the transaction, both are just devices that need to be operated to spit out money and coffee.



Is her kiss an
exercise of sexual
self-determination or
something we expect
to get as a reward for
saving her?

Typical smooch of victory from a damsel in distress, here in the game Castle Crashers.

The coffee shop in the example establishes a context in which each party is expected to act in a specific way to make the transaction work. And if one party decides not to do as expected, it's considered a transgression with whatever negative repercussions that entails.

**Androcentric
games establish a
context in which
women are
expected to reward
men with sexual
favors or intimacy
for their heroics,
wealth and/or
status.**

In that context, women are devices which if obtained and operated properly give sex to the man using them. Sexual objects. If a game does that with female gender avatars, then the game objectifies women.

The context is established through narrative means, such as establishing that the kidnapped damsel and the male hero have a relationship already or through gender roles, such as princesses, which are often promised to the brave knight rescuing her. Visually it is supported by the traditional attractiveness of the female character, the idealized looks and often aggressive sexual images, like wardrobe malfunctions,

cleavage and other titillation shots.

It also happens mechanically. Any sort of romance or flirting gameplay is played with the natural expectation of an achievable win state. This means the male player will eventually get into the female character's pants, he just has to jump through hoops first.

Other forms of objectification through mechanics include collecting, buying, carrying, throwing, grabbing, using to heal or any other action you would normally do with an item. Also any mechanic that would allow you to ogle a female character model, such as camera modes, zooms, xrays,

stealth sections in private spaces or interactive sequences in strip clubs and bordellos.

Generally objectifying mechanics are inevitable when it comes to video game characters, since they all are in fact objects – game objects. The question is who are the characters representing and what kind of actions can you perform with them or on them? Is the character representing women as a sexual or romantic interest? Are we performing actions related to sexual or romantic activities? This is where we can dive into sexual objectification.



Why are beauty and a wardrobe malfunction integral to the design of this damsel?

In child-friendly games like Donkey Kong, the implication of sex as reward is usually coded much stronger, but it's still there.

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4.8. Misogynistic Cisgenderism and Heterosexism



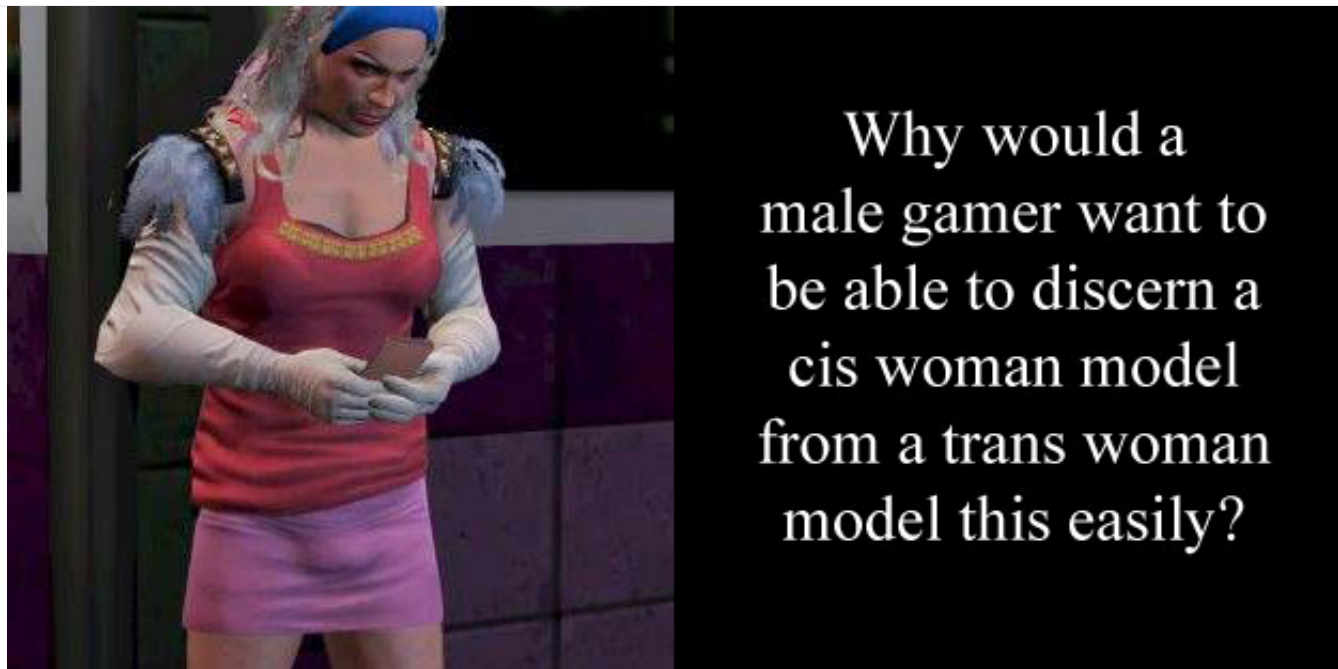
Why is it considered a funny oxymoron to have a gay knight?

Just for the record: The Pink Knight kicks as much ass as any other knight, chucking

I'd like to expand on cis normativity and hetero normativity in the context of androcentrism. It is easy to observe, that when it comes to being gay or bisexual, it is totally okay in androcentric media for women to express that. Lesbians – or even more effectively bisexual women – are titillating for men, so a twisted sexualized version of this finds its way into much more media than gay male characters do.

And if gay men are present, they are usually shown in a negative light. We already discussed the moral corruption angle, but androcentrism gives us another one: Effeminate gay men as a shorthand for weak men. Effeminate men are removed from a male ideal towards something more female, which is associated with a lack of strength.

I really struggle to come up with characters in games who are transgender men. Why is that? Because straight cis men commonly don't care about trans men. Androcentrism says, they only care about women and if they are sexually interesting. And this is where transgender women get demonized in a really nasty way.



Oh, come on, Rockstar games? Really now?

In popular culture, transgender women are usually presented as sexual predators hunting for men. They are basically used like vampires or succubi would be in fantasy tales. They present themselves as attractive females only then to reveal themselves as having a penis (which for most men means being actually a man, since the whole gender identity thing is normally not very well understood).

Why is that so scary for men to find themselves falling for a woman, which to their understanding actually is a man? Answer: Homophobia. For them it means they now fell for a guy – a guy in

women's clothing, but a guy non the less. And since being gay means being weak and a coward, even having just an episode of being attracted to a man for second counts as a threat to their manliness.

Ironically, the actual threat to their manliness comes from their male peers who will use an incident like this to humiliate and exclude them, as if the man in question is now infected with gayness.

A similar sexual predator threat to men is the idea of getting raped by a gay cis man. This usually is used in the context of prisons. Interestingly the threat of getting coerced into a gay sex act – either through trickery or force – is used as a scary prospect as well as a way of humiliating other men, commonly used in rape jokes or exclusive to games in online multiplayer as a taunt (tea-bagging for example). ...which brings us to the final block in this chapter.

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4.9. Gender Violence – Gender-based violence and rape culture.

Violent acts by a man against a woman or vice versa are not automatically gender violence.

In a combat scenario, the gender of the combatants can be completely incidental. Having women fight against men can even be a crucial element of a pro-equality story. Also if NPC civilians are targets of violence, their individual genders do not have to be an issue.

But if the violence is a display of power of one gender over another – through the use of gender avatars or a gendered

context – then we have something potentially problematic.

A huge percentage of games use violence to contextualize gameplay. It establishes stakes and goals quickly, and the distinctively spacial and physical nature of violence makes it a pretty easy motive to translate into mechanics. In androcentric design, violence unfortunately gets mixed with themes of cisgenderism, heterosexism, sexualization and sexual objectification, which is a recipe for disaster.



This woman just got punched in the guts, became unconscious and now gets abducted by violent criminals. Why the panty shot?

Double Dragon – another video game classic with questionable mixed images.

The industry's inhibitions about dealing with sexuality in a mature or explicit way makes many game creators resort to sexualizing established and more comfortable gameplay scenarios with nudity and innuendo. ...such as violent conflict.

It begins with images. To make the promise of sexual rewards for achieving game goals work, creators need to make a damsel sexually interesting to the expected male player. This can be done through subtle wardrobe malfunctions or sexually coded clothing and makeup for example. Sometimes the image of a damsel being in distress and hot at the same time ends up being a rather ugly mix of messages as women being victims of violence get displayed to titillate the male player.

Images of women being beaten, assaulted, unconscious, bleeding, getting raped, getting tortured, in pain, in fear, dying, being a corpse... are combined with nudity, wardrobe malfunctions, sexual acts, suggestive poses, sexual clothing and other sexual signals. Androcentric games frequently sexually fetishize helpless and powerless women for entertainment purposes and for marketing, creating and popularizing a rather disturbing conflation of sexuality and power over others, which is a pillar of rape culture.



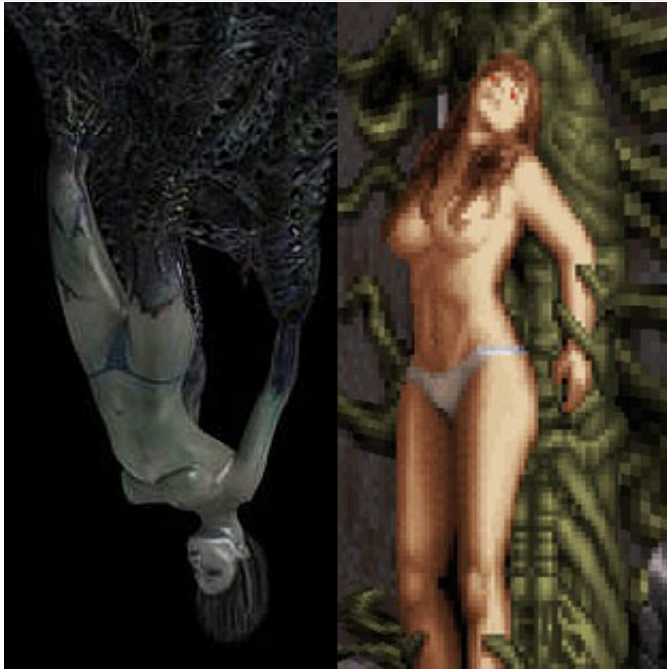
Is the player supposed to empathize with the abducted woman who got sexually assaulted (stripped) or is the player supposed to think she is hot?

Final Fight intro – Capcom



This image of two victims of abduction, both constrained, half-naked, one visibly scared – Why is it superimposed on a heart?

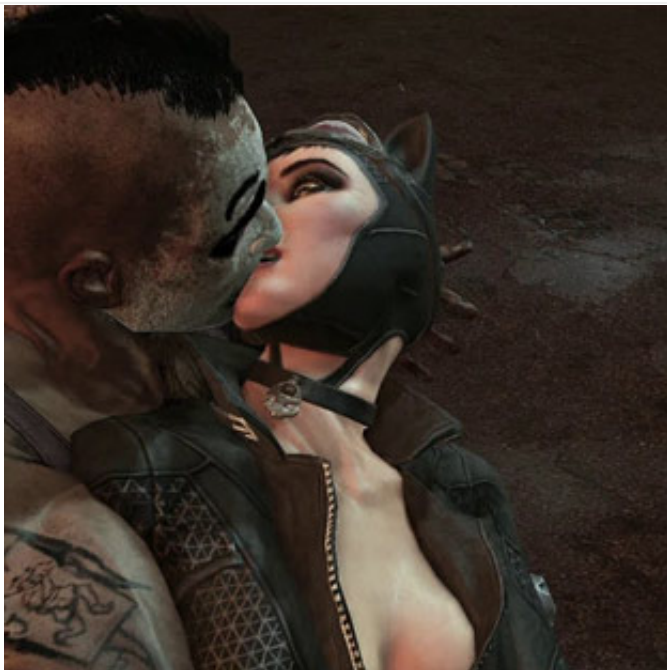
Chiki Chiki Boys arcade – Capcom



Exposed
rape victims
in Duke Nukem:
Necessary plot
element or
exploitative set
decoration?

From Duke Nukem Forever and Duke Nukem 3D.

Images of female on male assault are also used frequently, but with a significant difference. Male on female assault is a form of power fantasy for the male player – accentuated by helplessness, discomfort and horror in the faces of the female NPC victims. On the other hand, with male victims the female offender is designed to be really attractive, so that the incident is framed as something the male victims should appreciate.

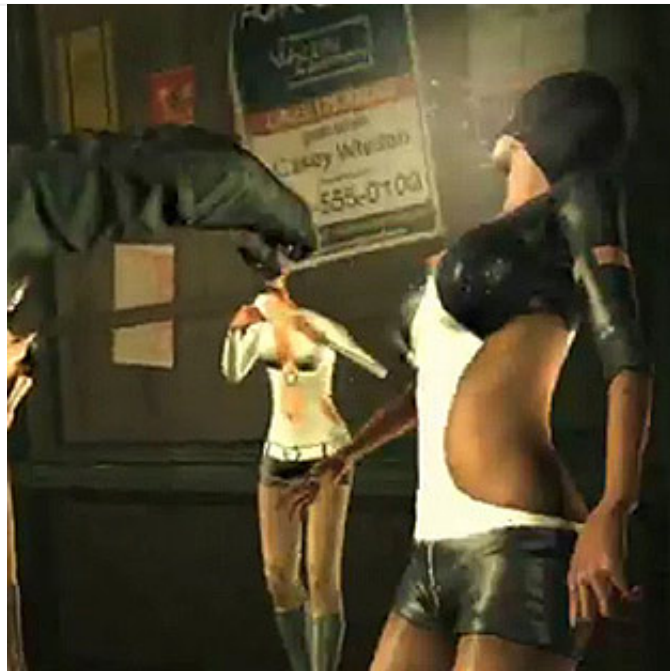


How would you
feel about a man going
into a women's prison,
exposing his junk,
brutally beating up
female inmates and
forcing them to kiss
him?

Catwoman's combat moves and other interactions with enemies are sexualized, ranging from sexual harassment to outright assault. All this is done to titillate.

Of course games can also allow the player to participate in the violence on screen or even initiate it. Designers have multiple ways to create scenarios in which the player can act violently based on gender and even force the player to do so.

Games that have systems which enable the player to be violent against civilians – such as most open world games – can have gender violence as an optional play activity. Of course the gender of a NPC can be completely incidental. Game designers of androcentric games however often deliberately create situations in which seemingly random violence is sexually charged.



Is punching
prostitutes in
Deus Ex HE gendered
violence, when you
can punch anybody
on the streets?

Prostitutes are a distinctively gendered in contrast to male pedestrians or other female pedestrians. They have more female coded signifiers and are sexualized.

Most games in question do this through the use of female sex worker characters or obligatory sequences in bordellos and strip clubs. Female sex workers are presented sexually through their attire and suggestive behavior, and simply by virtue of their role. Attacking a female sex worker in a game has vastly more gender connotations and sub text, than attacking any random female pedestrian has. Similarly female NPCs who express sexual interest in the male player character are then also removed from the incidentally gendered NPC pool. Same goes for characters who stand out by being stereotypically female and considered annoying for that, such as by talking too much, by being needy or vain.

If the opportunity of violence against female NPCs is framed in a sexual manner or if it is framed in a stereotypical male-female-relationship manner, the opportunity is no longer gender neutral. ...it becomes an opportunity for sexual assault or domestic violence roleplay.



Is this context sensitive action relevant to game progression or just there so the player can toy around with a helpless woman?

You have no idea how out of character that is for Batman to leave a woman tied to a pole in a prison full of violent men who he already has overheard saying that they will rape her.

Many game devs go even a step further and incentivize gendered violence through gameplay mechanics or even make it mandatory to progress.

As established in the block about cisgenderism and heterosexism, gender non-conforming characters are often used as enemies or villains, this then often gets combined with unsolicited sexual advances by those characters. This forces the player to act violently towards LGBATIQ gender avatars for game progression and at the time it is designed to make that violence a bit more satisfying for the perceived male player by making the LGBATIQ enemy sexually creepy first.

This of course is a bit ironic since sexual objectification of the male player by an NPC is put there to make the player feel uncomfortable or justify violence, while sexual objectification of female NPCs by the player is put there to titillate. Funny how that goes, huh?

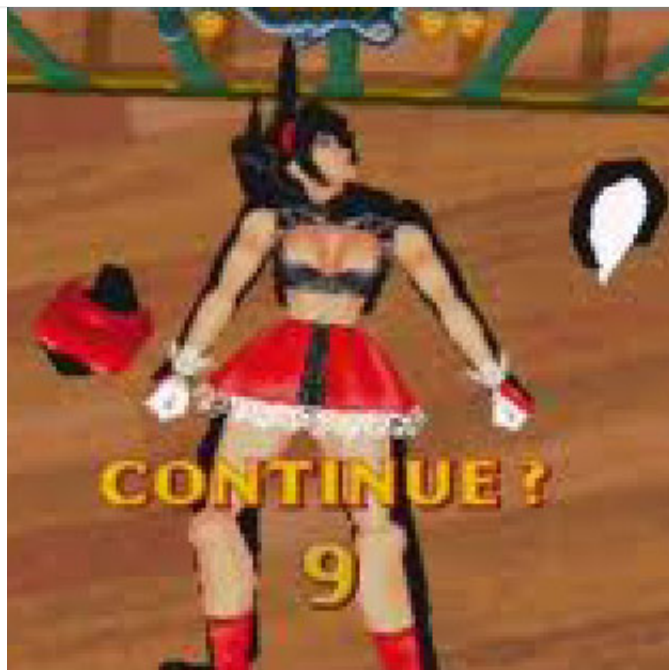


Why is this character's pre-fight taunt a form of sexual harassment?

Heike Kagero taunting the male player before the player can beat him up in the upcoming fight.

Violence to deflect unwanted sexual attention from LGTBTIQ characters or conventionally unattractive women is one thing, another thing is violence to get sexual gratification. Sexual objectification implicit in the sexualization of damsels is already really problematic, such as opportunities for optional gender violence are.

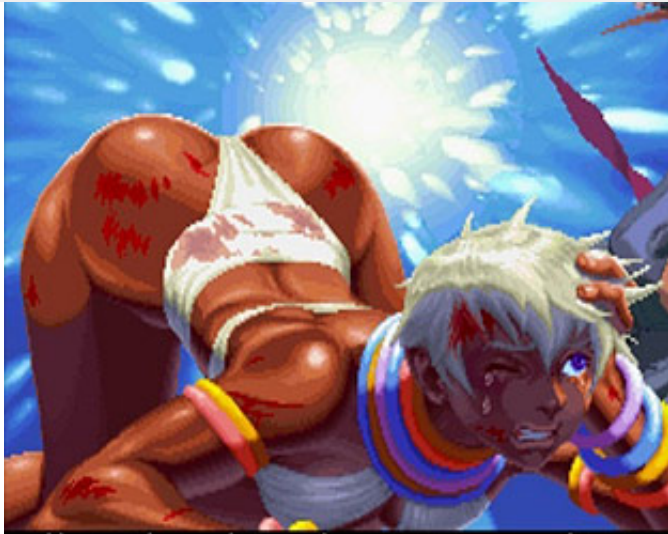
However, game creators sometimes go one step beyond and frame sexual assault on women as a win state. You successfully attack/beat a woman and get rewarded game progression and titillation.



Fighting Vipers has an achievement called "Skirt Destroyer".

What do you think you have to do to get it?

You get the achievement for beating characters up so they loose their clothes.



Is this just an
image of a beaten
opponent or an image
of woman beaten into
sexual submission?

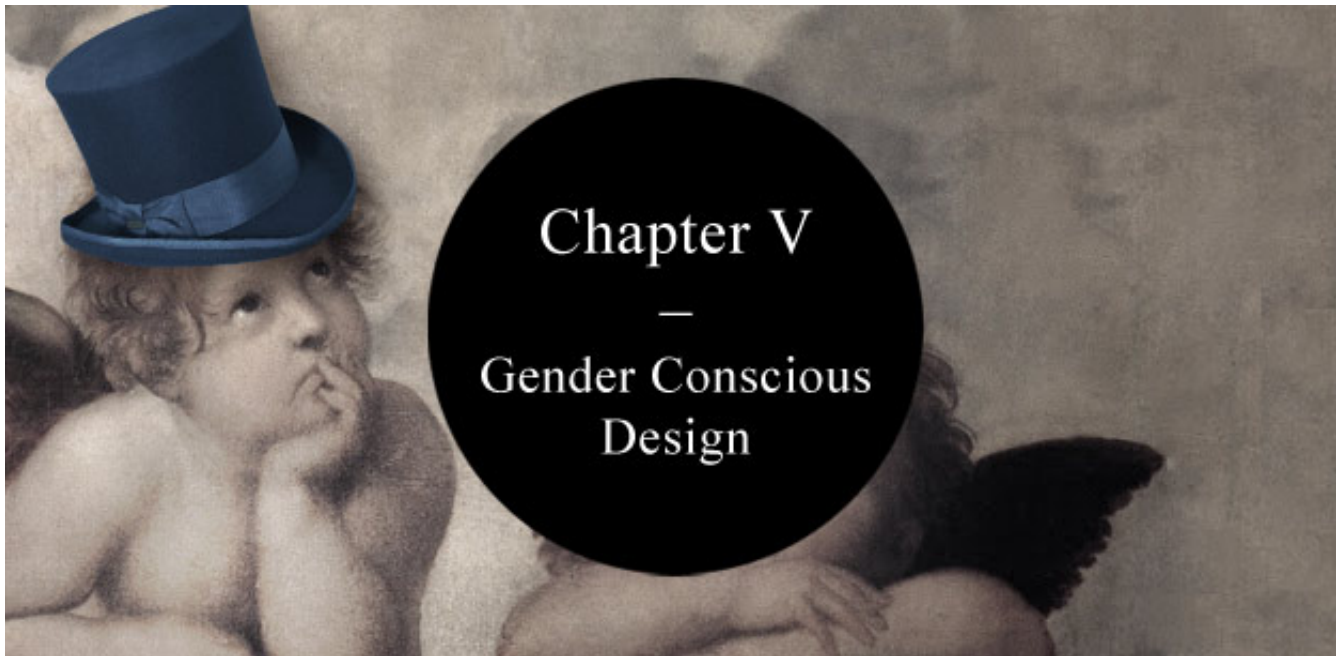
Both?

Now that I've beaten you, do you
street fighting is fun?

Every character in Street Fighter 3 has a unique piece of character art shown when they lose a fight. This is the losing state of Elena.

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Chapter 5 – Gender Conscious Design



Okay, chapter 4 was a rather depressing overview of very much prevalent industry habits – mainstream and indie. This chapter addresses how we as culture creators can deal with that.

This chapter mostly addresses the privileged group – straight cisgender men – since straight women and LGBTIQ people in games already bring their perspective to the table, which shakes things up and the big shifts need to happen with how men behave as part of games culture.

Here are a few thoughts...

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5.0. Apologism – Diffusing common evasive arguments

WIP section

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5.1. Owning Up – If you want to do androcentric games, own it.

Enjoying sexist stories and games is not a bad thing to do. But reinforcing sexism in games culture and subsequently society very much is.

There are a lot of great stories to tell with male protagonists and a lot of great cheesy exploitative stories as well. I have my guilty pleasures and I enjoy a sexy female NPC as much as the next straight guy.

However...

We have something worth calling a game culture and every game that comes out, every piece of marketing, every piece of journalism or fan work and every related tweet, status update or forum post contributes to that culture. When it comes to

gender our culture is pretty broken.

Education opportunities and hiring patterns are privileging straight cis men. The creative preferences of the resulting male-dominated game companies are privileging straight cis men. Market practices – including what kind of games get funded, what kinds of games get covered in journalism, what kind of games get visibility through advertising – are privileging straight cis men.

And worst of all: the privileged straight cis men feel like they own the place. In the best case they treat women and LGBATIQ people as guests – which is still marginalizing them and forcing respectability policies onto those groups. In the worst case – they harass women and LGBATIQ folks and push them out.



In a deeply sexist games culture, is it even possible to publish a game without making a statement about gender?

Nope, not really.

As long as male privilege is a thing, you either support it, ignore it or challenge it.

You as a game creator can prefer to make another game about male protagonists with women as peripheral characters. You can prefer to use female NPCs in your game to add some sex appeal. You can prefer to channel the male-centric games that influenced you to become game creators without changing a thing.

But you have to own up to the fact that you prioritize your preferences over making games culture a more welcoming place for every gender. If you want to make games for men, you have to be ready to be called out for it. Not because people object to you exercising your creative freedom, but because you chose to leave the current harmful sexist status quo unchallenged or even chose to endorse it.

Male privilege exists. Deal with it.

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5.2. Inclusive Design – Making games for every gender.

I really appreciate you reading my article here and all, but I'm not really the person to talk to when it comes to actually improving representation of women and LGBATIQ people in games... ... you have to talk to women and LGBATIQ folks for that. Or better: Hire them! Diversify your teams and if you can't do that get people involved on a freelance basis as consultants.

Still, here are a few rules of thumb and tips on how to make your game more gender inclusive:

Balance gender allocation.

In the real world the ratio between men and women is roughly fifty-fifty, so start with that as a base and think hard about why and how you would divert from that ratio in your game. Don't sleepwalk through that process. What kind of roles typically occupied by male characters can you fill with female ones? Find a way to mix things up and make sure that women never have to be alone in their group.

Do your research. There have been female knights, pirates, ninjas, samurai, female soldiers, scientists and rulers... there is no reason why the role of the hero in your game should default to a man.

Having many women in your game severely improves your chances of getting it right, since you now have many canvases to paint on, many opportunities to show how diverse and interesting women can be.

Include likeable LGBATIQ characters.

Just do it. I mean it, just put LGBATIQ characters there. You know why? Because LGBATIQ people exist.

Don't make it a theme or an othering feature. You don't need to bring much sexuality into it as well, try making it about love or better relegate the character's sexual orientation to a background detail of the character. Don't make it instantly readable, it's totally okay if the player has to get to know the character first before learning that the character is gay or transgender.

Watch out that you don't build correlations between being LGBATIQ and being a deviant or depraved individual.

And there are no excuses why you would not consult a LGBATIQ person about your character design and writing, you can only learn.

Don't sexualize.

Don't sexualize does not necessarily mean "make asexual". A female character can have a vibrant sexuality and still not be sexualized. Make sure to limit expression of sexuality to believable situations, such as dates, sexual relationships and don't have a woman be sexual in combat for example. Be an adult about it.

Really think hard about why a female character should be conventionally hot or not. Is it really

necessary that the president's daughter wears a miniskirt and has jiggle physics? Is it really necessary that your female lead gets hit on by NPCs?

Make sure you have plenty of female characters in your game without any overt sexual signals or actions, so that the player has non-sexual moments with women. Also think hard about framing. What does the upskirt shot and cropped ass shot or that shower sequence add to our understanding of the character?

Be aware that once you sexualized a female character any scene with that character has sexual implications. Do you want the player to ogle the female character in serious dramatic or tragic scenes? Do you want violent situations to have undertones of sexual assault?

Be careful with gender signifiers.

Sure, many women strongly identify with their gender and express that loud and clearly. However, being female is not all there is to a person. Don't push female coded symbols all over your character design and make sure to leave space for other aspects – like professions and character traits.

Also be aware of the connotations female coded symbols have. A bow in the hair is infantilizing, because it is frequently associated with girls and dolls. Do you want to say that that or did you just aim to clearly articulate gender? Yes, a boob window makes her gender indexes visible but it also makes her outfit noticeably sexual. Do you want that?

Again, having many female characters in your game allow you to try various approaches to the use of gender signifiers.

Allow players to self-determine gender.

Even if your vision is to tell an androcentric story, consider giving the player the option to shake things up. Add character customization with gender options – and not just two options, give us a spectrum or at least allow the player to pick "unspecified".

Or make your game easily moddable, let people replace sprites, so that the princess can save the day. Let them edit text to tell their version of gender related stories.

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Appendix

Thank you very much for reading this (or at least parts of it).

If you have anything to ask or add, please shoot me a comment. I would especially like women and people from the LGBATIQ community to add some thoughts, since I totally don't have the proper insight here.

This site is intended to be a safe space for women and LGBATIQ people to discuss and speak up. I'm moderating comments, so be civil, don't derail, try to be constructive.

Also, if you find this article useful, consider supporting my work here with a small donation or a pledge:



Thanks.

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Resources

Gender

[Terminology \(including cisgender, LGBATIQ and many more\)](#)

[sexual objectification at geekfeminism.wikia](#)

[rape culture at geekfeminism.wikia](#)

[Research on gender in popculture media, Geena Davis Institute for Gender in Media](#)

Gender signifiers

[Significant Other – Gender Signifiers in video games \(pdf of article I wrote in 2012\)](#)

[Feminist Frequency – Ms. Male Character \(video\)](#)

[semiotic elements: definition of indexes and symbols](#)

[symbolic creativity \(slideshare by Milad Hajjamiri\)](#)

[about fragmentation and male gaze – by Rantasmo \(video\)](#)

Tropes

[Smurfette Principle on TV Tropes](#)

[Smurfette Principle and tokenism by Nostalgia Chick \(video\)](#)

[Damsel in Distress on TV Tropes](#)

[Damsel in Distress by Feminist Frequency \(video\) \(watch all parts!\)](#)

[Women in Refrigerators on TV Tropes](#)

[Gorgeous George on TV Tropes](#)

[Sissy Villain on TV Tropes](#)

[Depraved Homosexual on TV Tropes](#)

[Depraved Bisexual on TV Tropes](#)

[Psycho Lesbian on TV Tropes](#)

Transgender people in games

[Anna Anthropy](#)

[Mattie Brice](#)

Sites about gender and design

[costumecommunityservice](#)

[repair-her-armor](#)

[eschergirls](#)

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Change Log

- Edited *2.1 Gender Indexes* to more explicitly comment on the transphobic nature of how gender indexes work, in response to this comment [\[link\]](#)
- added a new chapter section 1.0 on gender coding
- Replaced most mentions of gender signifiers and gendering with *gender coded signifiers* and *gender coding* to avoid implications that certain traits inherently belong to one gender or the other.
- expanded the LGTBIQ initials to LIBATIQ to explicitly include asexual people as well
- softened an insult towards rockstar games for their horrendous treatment of transexuals in GTA5. Still feeling it, but the tone was clashing with the rest of the article too much.
- expandet on the positive ways games allow for representation of genders in 1.1. by elaborating on the possibilities provided by the interactive nature of games
- added a new section on apologism. Content will follow soon.



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