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character design, culture, debate, feminism, stereotypes [<http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=7852>],  
October 21, 2012 [<http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=7852>] by Anjin Anhut.  
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This article is filed under [game criticism](#) and [game semiotics](#).



Depictions of gender in video games generally don't work. Actually in most of geek culture they suck – yeah, I'm looking at you comic book industry. Why? Because they create hostility between two parties who really don't need to be at each other's throats.

Feminist critics and gender issue aware members of the gaming community decry the blatant sexism in video games, while growing in numbers and in relevance. On the other side, not so gender issue aware game devs, gamers and journalists feel threatened, blame it all on those who speak up, get defensive, retaliate or engage in preemptive attacks.

Female gamers and LGBTIQ gamers are here to stay, which is wonderful, enriching, progressive... and admittedly – for male caucasian heterosexual 29-year-olds like me – also challenging. We need to drastically reform the way we depict gender in our oh so mature and oh so progressive medium, people.

Here is my long excessive attempt at analyzing how character design around gender works, how it currently fails and how to fix it. Let's discuss!

## Signifiers In Character Design

Let's look at characters and what their design tells us about them and about the intellectual property they belong to. Every design element of a character – every sign, which tells us something about the protagonists or NPCs and the games they appear in is furthermore referred to as a signifier.

Signifiers are used by designers to articulate a character's ethnicity, age, personal style, psychology, past, occupation, social status and much more... including gender. But the thing with signifiers is – though designers aim at using them effectively – they emerge in the eye of the beholder. Designers simply can't control how a viewer reads their design... they can only somewhat guide it.

The implosion of the Hitman Absolution killer nuns trailer is one very prominent example of this miscommunication. And while many folks feel like they should tell the gender issue aware members of the gaming community to suck it up and be happy with what they get... you know, stop ruining games... I see the onus on the shoulders of the designers to listen to feminist criticism, learn, and work hard to get their gender depictions working again.

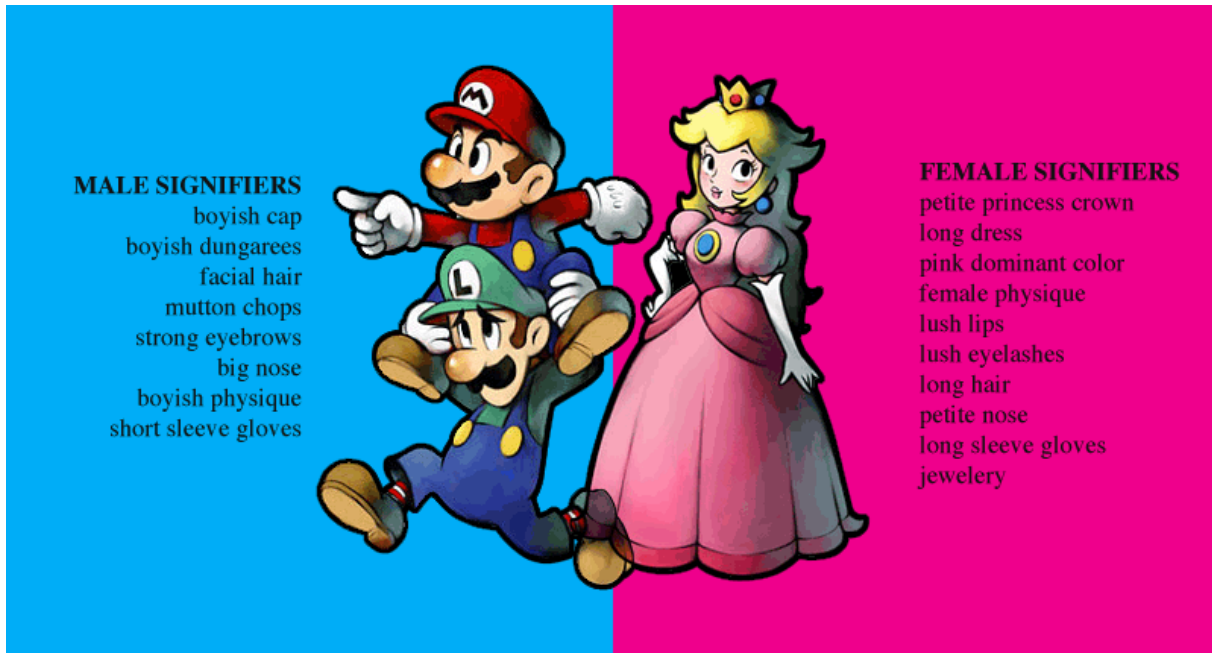
### Gender Signifiers

When it comes to signifying a character's gender and also their sexual orientation, designers can dig into a big library of signs to do so. In most cultures clothing is gendered, hair cuts are gendered, there are clear expectations of what a male or female body looks like, even going as far as common expectations what role a person of each respective gender

should play in a society.

In short, gender signifiers come in two forms:

- artefacts of gender norms and stereotypes
- or simply displays of male or female body parts.



#### Cisnormativity Heteronormativity

All those kinds signifiers are usually easy to read but not always valid or accurate. They are based on ideas of gender normativity. And lets be real here: there is no such thing as a definitive visible feature to determine a person's gender identity in real life. There are women with penises and men with vaginas out there, cross-dressers, tom boys, androgynous people and so many more.

When it comes to LGBTIQ issues, games are horribly normative. They don't reflect those issues very much or when they do, it's played for effect.

For example gender ambiguity seems to be in general a total no go:



Edit:

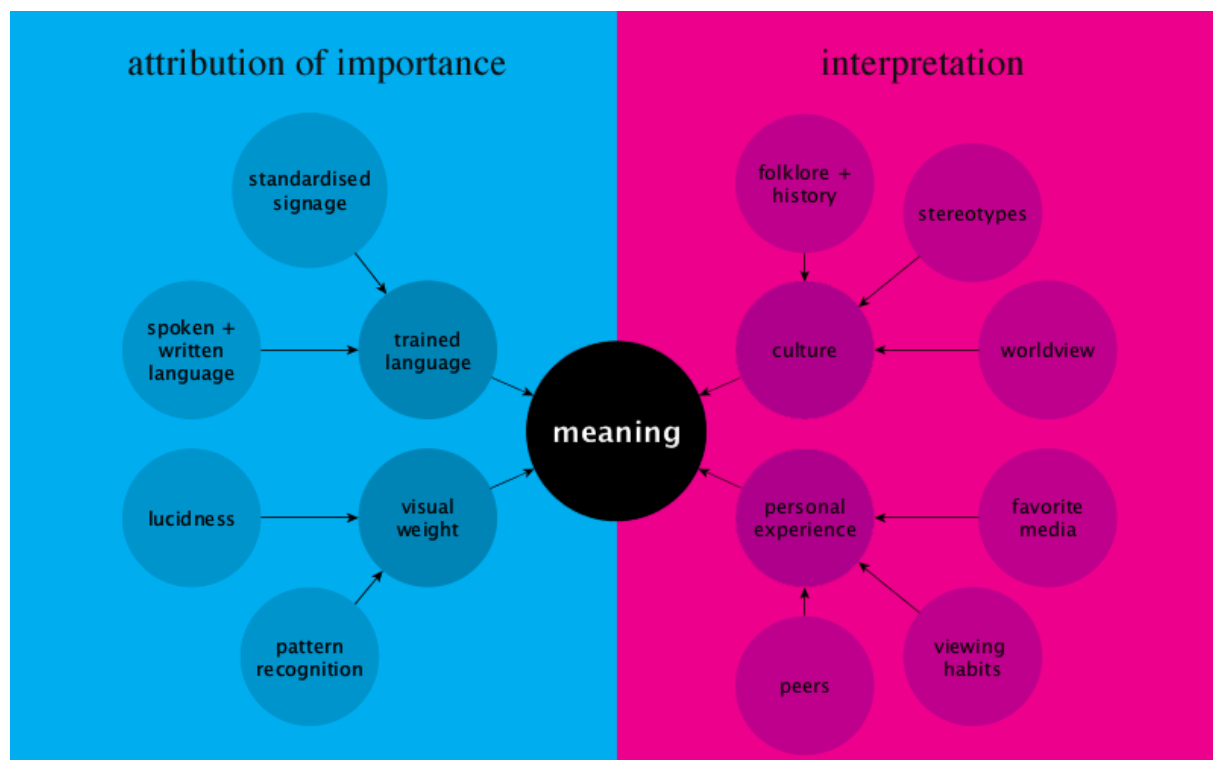
Reader Ivory Oasis and some others mentioned, that Birdo's original transgender identity should have been mentioned for greater context. I agree. Birdo's is originally a transgender character, but in later western releases got somewhat stripped of that part of the character's history. For more, I recommend [this article](#).



I understand that this paragraph does not address the issue as much as it deserves. I'd like to reserve the issue and expand on it in another article maybe. Unfortunately, there is more than enough to resolve for one article, when just looking at the design of cisgender and heterosexual characters.

## Dynamics At Play

Like mentioned, the actual meaning of a signifier (and therefore it's existence) gets ultimately created by the viewer. Signifiers get recognized, attributed with importance and interpreted depending on the preconceptions and cognitive habits of the individual audience member. Looking at some of the factors that influence the meaning of a gender signifier for individual players, no wonder there is so drastic disagreement about what's a proper way to depict a gendered character:



There are many methods to guide the average member of a designer's target audience to the desired understanding and emotional response and many dynamics to keep in mind. I'd like to highlight three of those principles, because I see them to be at the core of most botched gender depictions.

### Dynamic 1: Exposure Versus Unequivocal Signifiers

If you give a character some amount of exposure, the player has time and opportunity to get to know the character. You don't need to bomb the viewer with first glance information, you can roll it out slowly. You can be subtle and organic with your visual signals and in addition express the characters personality via her words and actions. Games characters are

most of the time not so lucky.

In games, many characters don't get much exposure. Most NPCs are confined to their roles within the game's mechanics and narration. Shopkeepers are just shopkeepers, palace guards are just palace guards, pedestrian are just pedestrians. They never leave their designated area, have no names, sometimes no faces, no background story. Enemy units just appear in the player's view to get popped and disappear again. Knowing friend from foe in games is about unequivocal visual signals, which allow the player to react in an instant.

This goes as well for many protagonist or related characters. They need to click with the audience on screenshots, cover artworks, trailers or within the limits of a demo. They need to sell themselves to the target group before the individual player invests money and time.

Like with any strong visual medium (comics, tv shows and films included), games have taught their audience to be satisfied with first impressions and move on. This goes as far as even if you plan on giving a character proper exposure, satisfying the player by covering the character in unequivocal signifiers will drown his interest in getting to know the character.

Rule of thumb here: If signifiers of a character are more unequivocal and therefore satisfying, the viewer will look for less information beyond those signifiers. And vice versa.

Here are a couple of common female signifiers (mostly displayed on distaff counterparts), which tend to limit characters to their femininity aspect, especially in combination. Ribbons, flowers, hearts, girlish mannerisms and a lot of pink:





### Dynamic 2: Symbolic Creativity

Every signifier in a character design is an artifact of that character's self-expression. Everything you see at a person – no matter how much a result of outside forces – is influenced by that person... We can expect, that a character did not choose to lose a leg for example. But we can derive information about that character's self-image and how he wants to be seen by the way he either hides, shows, compensates or decorates his prosthetic limb. We can derive information from his posture, his choice of clothing, level of hygiene, and so forth.

Even if the person did not choose his physical gender features, he or she decides how to deal with it. So when a character has breasts for example, it is a matter of self-expression how they are displayed, how much the character wants them to dominate the overall appearance. Does the character not want them to be part of self-expression (dismiss), accept them as one of many aspects of own self-expression (adopt) or does the character make them a central part of own self-expression (present)?

It's common and should be expected, that the player will conclude, whatever the character shows on the outside correlates with what's inside. Except when told otherwise, the player will expect, that the character wants to look like he does.



### Dynamic 3: Patterns Versus Distinctions

Signifiers aren't just seen and interpreted on their own merits. They dim or shine in the framework with other signifiers. Looking at a group of characters within one game or when looking at all characters of a genre, the audience responses to patterns and distinctions. When multiple characters share a strong signifier – creating a pattern – this signifier is no longer representative for the individual character but for the whole group. On the other hand the signifiers, which are exclusive to each character – creating a distinction – become extra-relevant for the assessment of the individual character.

The same goes for derivative characters like clones, sons, daughters, evil twins, successors, and so on. All signifiers which are shared between the original character and the derivative character are representative for the qualities of the original character. But the signifiers, which help us distinguish the new one from the old one are now extra-representative for the derivative character and basically provide the justification for its existence.



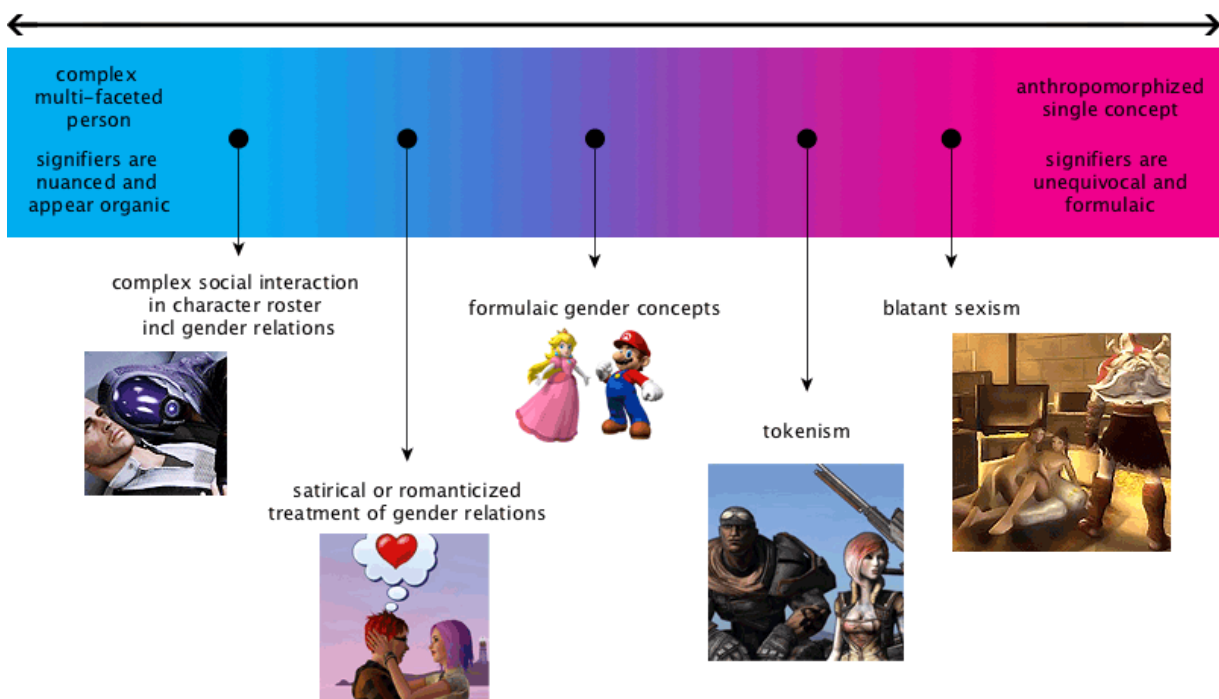
## Gender Signifier Imbalance

Now those dynamics can work in both directions. Designers could utilize them to either make gender an issue or non-issue for characters of both genders. Unfortunately they don't. There is a severe imbalance between the ways the genders are depicted.

### Dynamic 1: Exposure Versus Unequivocal Signifiers:

The dominant use of unequivocal gender signifiers on characters – therefore the reduction of those characters to not much more beyond their gender – is with female characters way more frequent and severely stronger than with male ones. Most of the time these signifiers limit the respective character either to the concept of femininity or to a sexual entity. There are also by far fewer female protagonist, which puts female characters at a severe disadvantage, when it comes to exposure.





### Dynamic 2: Symbolic Creativity

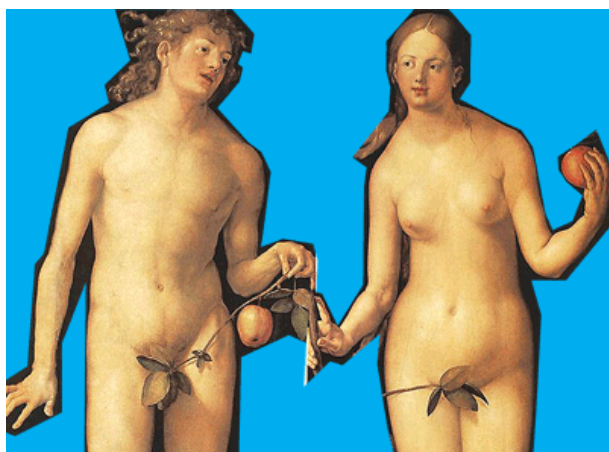
When it comes to characters presenting their gender signifiers – therefore putting them at the center of their self-expression – female characters do it also way more often and more excessively than male ones. Female characters put their femininity or their sexuality at the forefront without demanding attention for qualities beyond that.



### Dynamic 3: Patterns Versus Distinctions

In most groups, female characters just appear as one single member or as very very few members of that group. This is referred to as the "Smurfette principle". It makes the gender of that female character a distinguishing factor, drawing special attention to the character's gender or limiting the character to her gender.

The same goes for derivative characters. There are little to no instances where there is an original female character spawning a male one. On the other hand, on the subject of "distaff counterparts", there are tons and tons of popular male characters spawning female counterparts.



### Distaff Counterpart

"...taking the main character ... creating an equivalent that's mostly the same except for being the opposite sex..." – [tvtropes.org](http://tvtropes.org)

# For Example...

Here is a common example of the imbalances taking place in mainstream games. Not only is the female character the only of one kind (dynamic 3), the designers made sure we have unequivocal gender signifiers (dynamic 1) and that we understand how much she herself considers her gender to be the most defining thing about her (dynamic 2):

 <p><b>MALE SIGNIFIERS</b> facial hair named after male bible figure</p>	 <p><b>MALE SIGNIFIERS</b> shaved head emphasis on muscles emphasis on physical strength nickname for bulky man grunts a lot</p>
 <p><b>MALE SIGNIFIERS</b> male physique male name</p>	<p><b>FEMALE SIGNIFIERS</b> long hair hair is dyed pink female physique named after female mythological figure class named after female mythological figure shows cleavage shows belly skin emphasis on ass wears makeup blows kisses struts seductively strikes seductive poses lush lips lush eyelashes male gaze camera angles only female in group de-emphasis of physical strength</p> 
	

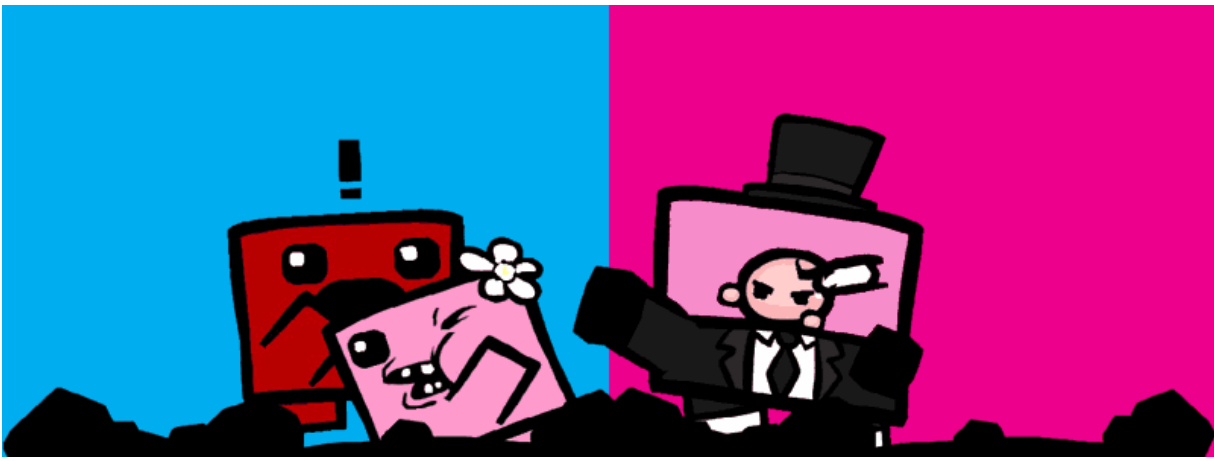
Absolutely the same imbalance applies to the Koopakids. Wendy O'Koopa is the only female, wears pink, make-up, a ribbon on her head, lush lips and lashes, jewelery, high-heels. She makes distinctively feminine poses and blows kisses. On the other hand, her brothers almost have no gender signifiers at all. You can count Morton's and Ludwig's eyebrows. But that's it.



Super Meat Boy is only a boy in name. Nothing about his character design includes any sort of male signifier. He is just a red square with stumpy arms and legs and a smiley face. His derivative character Bandage Girl on the other hand gets pink coloring and a flower on her head. Here again the makers felt they needed to articulate her gender far more



explicitly than his.



## Virtual Patriarchy

This imbalance and its manifestations add up to strong implied ideas, which are prominent in a dominant portion of popular games and the surrounding popular cultural (advertising, licensing, journalism, conventions, memes). No matter if intended by game designers, writers, culture makers or fans... these ideas are here and they are misogynistic at their core.

### I. It's A Man's World, Women Just Live In It

- Groups mainly consist of men, but for some reason one or two women are there too.
- Whatever these women do or are is what it takes to be welcome in that group.
- That woman is burdened to singlehandedly represent her whole gender.
- It's ideal, when a woman has no female peers. Doesn't need them or want them.
- It's ideal, when she is forced to only relate to and interact with men.
- It's ideal, when women have only male leaders, reference points or role models.

### II. Men Be Everything, Women Be Women

- Men need to distinguish themselves from the mainly male rest of the group with their personality, interests and skills. Women don't. They are already special because of their gender.
- It's ideal, when a woman is satisfied with being a woman and only works to play that out instead of acquiring any sort of skill beyond that.
- It's ideal, when women actively promote their gender, so they add the female element to the group. This is what they are there for.
- It's ideal, when a woman is only demanding to be viewed and treated as a woman and nothing beyond that.
- It's also completely okay, if the woman has not much skill. Men are there to get her out of trouble.

### III. Women Are A Subspecies Of Men

- With distaff counterparts, the male was there all along, the female is just a derivative.
- It's admirable, when a woman tries to be like a man. But the man will always be the original.

### IV. Women Are Easy

- Due to heterosexual normativity and the fact that she is the only female in the group, members of the group have only one person to be attracted to and to make a move on.
- She therefore can not be part of the group without also being a potential love interest.
- It's ideal, when she accepts that role and plays her female sexuality out.
- It's understood, that she is always and constantly desiring a man's sexual attention.
- Therefore, no matter how inappropriate for the moment, she shows off her hot body and sends sexual signals at all times.

### V. Women Owe Men

- Women are dependent on the skills of men, since they themselves are too occupied with being women.
- Women thrive on being a distaff counterpart, an imitation, of a male original.
- Women need male approval, because there are no female peers to get it from.
- Women need to be accepted in male dominated groups, because there aren't much other types of groups.
- Women need to accept that and contribute to the group with what they can do best, by being feminine, hot and available.

### How problematic are those ideas?

Well it depends how much power you ascribe to those ideas. When you consider them just qualities of an entertainment product, you at least need to see, that there is not much reason for female audiences to jump in. I personally have a hell of a lot respect for geek girls, who find a way to be passionate about games, despite the fact, that games are generally

not made with them in mind.

You could also consider games to be devices for escapism. A collection of virtual spaces, scenarios and activities to flee to from reality. Enticing fantasies. Then it get's kinda creepy to contemplate, that these ideas about women represent mainstream desires of the gaming community. The key word is mainstream here, we are not talking about niche interests or kinks. And here as well, there is not much incentive for women to join such a community.

I suspect that some female members of the gaming community are able to draw parallels between their own real life experiences and the ideas promoted by heavily unbalanced gender representation.

How they are treated like they represent all women.  
How they need to prove that they are more than pretty faces.  
How they are expected to conform to be accepted in the male dominated culture.  
How they have to deal with male entitlement.  
How male geeks treat females like imitators.  
How they are treated as fair game, when it comes to uncalled for sexual advances.  
How they per default are considerate less able.  
How women who are good looking and play that out get more attention.  
And how they get ostracized, when they publicly reject and criticize the standards above.

If you think that ideas in media, explicit and implicit, do not influence our thinking and behavior... you probably never ever bought anything because of advertising and Mitt Romney and Barack Obama are just wasting hundreds of millions of dollars on campaign ads, just for shits n giggles.

Edit:

Reader Bel pointed to me in a [comment below](#), that this article contains a lot of subtext, which supports the notion that feminine traits are somewhat inferior to masculine traits or neutral traits. I'd like to point out that I do not think female signifiers are generally inferior to others and furthermore don't think that femininity as a concept, female sexuality or the proud expression of one's own femininity, are an inferior set of qualities.

I'm just trying to discuss prevalent design habits, which collectively create a very questionable and overall very limited representation of women.

## Fixing It!

The most important thing to do is get more women into the industry and into the community. I've learned in my years of teaching and working with people, that women are much better at coming up with fair and women-friendly scenarios and concepts, than the guys are. And the kicker: Those concepts are super interesting, refreshing and a total enrichment for the art form.

Many botched gender depictions are a result of male designers aiming at including women, but somehow just adding one female character and then overcompensating with female signifiers or falling into the trap of listening to marketers, who told them, that all women actually have pink as their favorite color.

Develop some appreciation for female critics, stop being surprised by the mere presence of women in your interest group and have some courtesy. And make sure you support gender inclusive efforts, like female centered conventions, education and projects.

**Now on the design side, here are 3 simple rules to follow:**

1. Pass the fucking Bechdel test! Pass it magna cum laude.
2. Design female characters as interesting and competent persons first and as females later. Just remove female signifiers until the personality of the character is uncovered.
3. Add female characters with non-idealized body types, add old ones. Don't make good looks a raison d'être.
4. Tilt the scale. Be equal by the numbers. Both genders get the same amount of characters, the same amount of sexuality, the same amount of respect and relevance...

Of course not every game needs to be like that. There is room for male-centered exploitation and porn (be honest that's what mainstream games are, just without the maturity to actually show sexual acts). But we need some diversity on the shelves. Just imagine what Mass Effect would have been like with this gender signifier overload bullshit:



Edit:

A reader took issue with the statement about mainstream games being porn without the maturity to show actual sex acts. While I see this quality in many mainstream games, the statement in my opinion is too generalizing. Of course mainstream games do not in general deserve that criticism. Many do, but there is also a growing number of mainstream games and franchises getting it right.

## Benchmarks

I asked my twitter and facebook friends to send me female characters, which were memorable to them. I gave no additional qualifiers. I just wanted to know which characters impressed them or stuck with them for any other reason. I got roughly 300 responses from women, men, gay and straight and a few transgender people.

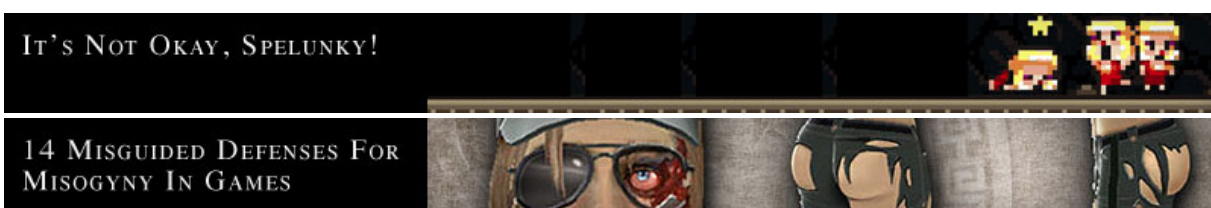
Here are the ones that managed to get at least three mentions:

Ellen Ripley (13 mentions)  
Buffy Summers (6 mentions)  
Sarah Connor (5 mentions)  
Faith from Mirror's Edge (4 mentions)  
Jade (Beyond Good & Evil) (4 mentions)  
Pippi Langstrumpf/Longstockings (4 mentions)  
Starbuck (Battlestar Galactica, reimagined) (4 mentions)  
Alyx Vance (3 mentions)  
Amelie Poulain (3 mentions)  
Arya Stark (3 mentions)  
Commander Shepard (3 mentions)  
Hermoine Granger (3 mentions)  
Juno MacGuff (3 mentions)  
Lara Croft (3 mentions)  
Major Motoko Kusanagi (3 mentions)  
Ronia the Robber's Daughter (3 mentions)

How many of them fit into the narrative of the virtual patriarchy above? Not many and none of them cleanly. Many characters maintain their gender as an integral part of their identity, while never valuing their gender over their personality and skills.

Thanks for reading. Please share, like and add your thoughts in the comments below.

## Related posts:



91 THOUGHTS ON "SIGNIFICANT OTHER – GENDER SIGNIFIERS IN VIDEO GAMES"





Jen  
on **May 15, 2013 at 7:51 am** said:

Thank you for this article. Sorry about the comments, dude. You've brought up some points I didn't really encounter before.



admin  
on **May 15, 2013 at 5:42 pm** said:

Hey, thanks for the kind words. No worries about comments though. Everything you read here has been personally approved for release by me, even the bullshit ones. They all contribute something to the issue, may it be unintended confirmation for feminism by being ignorant assholes. ;)



Bill  
on **May 9, 2013 at 3:27 pm** said:

Female characters who are designed to be more realistic rather than being over-the-top caricatures tend to be pretty boring. It's probably because most women really are quite boring in real life. I know a lot of people will instinctively lash back at this but it's true. How many women really are emotionally strong, or witty, or humorous? How many actually do interesting things? Let's not forget that most video games revolve around conflict of some kind and your average woman is just not the type to fight. So, sorry ladies, but most of you are lacking personalities and that is reflected in mediums such as video games.

Even characters like Ripley are pretty boring. She's just a cookie cutter male hero in a woman's body. There's not much else there. I couldn't imagine a woman ever pulling off a character like Ash from the Evil Dead, or any Clint Eastwood character or any other character with a really discernible personality. Women just don't develop them. Guys develop personalities to get girls (with their huge personality trait check lists) and girls look pretty to get guys. Just the way it is.



admin  
on **May 9, 2013 at 4:00 pm** said:

You are a despicable human being.



Durer's Rain Of Crosses  
on **June 14, 2013 at 2:25 pm** said:

While I'd wager the above comment is just trolling there is one point that could be explored further – "most women really are quite boring in real life". Most PEOPLE are quite boring in real life. They're stereotypes of one sort or another, largely driven by insecurity.

There is an immediate knee jerk reaction by the public that any portrayal of any character portrayed as other than smart, witty, sophisticated and "different" is somehow derogative. UNLESS it's a muscled white male sporting a rifle who responds to every problem with violence and hee-haw/stoic wise cracking; because hey you know, us muscled white males are all like that, bro.

But, I digress. Most of us are a stereotype. And most of us, when it comes down to it, are pretty ugly and ordinary on the inside irrespective of the goofy self-objects we've hung around our bodies to delineate us as somehow unique. We're all the same. We cheat on exams, or taxes. We gossip. We desperate to impress. Or one-up our fellows by owning more than them. We betray confidences. We buy products made in countries where the working conditions are so poor that the actual t-shirt on our back may well have a body-count. We drive dangerously. We lie. We lie. We lie. To ourselves and others.

But not always. sometimes we do extraordinary things, and we rise above ourselves. And this is the human-condition at the heart of great story-telling. Not that of honorable, can-do, characters like Ellen Ripley, or Clint Eastwood. Sorry. Those are cartoons. I've never had a job where I worked alongside these people, or served beneath them. They don't exist anywhere but our heads. People may have the capacity for valor, kindness, humility, sacrifice, and unconditional love, but it's not a default setting. Nor is a particularly interesting mode for a story. Unless...

If you want to really get to the bottom of why game characters suck. Start delving into why people suck in general. And then write the story of how that person can stop sucking. Keep the signifiers as a starting point then explore why they're there. That there is the secret of great storytelling.

In order to tell any kind of decent story dealing with the human condition you need to start with a stereo-type. Someone familiar who seems to be everywhere and that we dismiss as somehow typical. "Normal" in the adolescent pejorative sense. Because Heaven F\*\*\*ing forbid once you start with an uncomfortably realistic portrayal of somebody who abounds in our society and that we categorically dismiss as beneath us and our interests, what may develop from there is a "character arc" whereby they are shown to grow in maturity, overcome their flaws, and do the impossible – act valorous, or with kindness and self-sacrifice and show us as the audience exactly how their world, and their humanity, in all it's goofy, self-deceiving, stereo-

typical banality – is no different than our own. And that we we too can be great.

Games need to get off the Joesph Campbell Mono-myth treadmill of catering towards our ego's fun-house mirror image of itself as a mythological archetype and show us as we really are – capable of wonderful things. Then we'll get somewhere. As an artform and as a culture. And for F\*\*\*s sake enough of the (F)'ing (P)enis (S)imulators.

Thanks for reading.



John

on **May 8, 2013 at 7:30 am** said:

Blah blah blah FEMINIST INDOCTRINATION BECAUSE EVIL PATRIARCHY



Jason

on **May 8, 2013 at 1:13 am** said:

Great read, all I was thinking of was Lightning from FFXIII and how everyone hates her BECAUSE of her masculine manners. I think it will be a tough road to create a female character who doesn't portray "femininity" as a stereotype but can still be accepted by the gaming community.



**oaktree**

on **April 22, 2013 at 11:57 pm** said:

This was a terrific article, and I very much appreciate the effort it must have taken to write it, both emotionally and in terms of the work itself.

That said, it could sure use a copy-editor. If you're interested I'd be more than happy to do it for free.



Gerhard

on **April 7, 2013 at 5:16 am** said:

Wow, great stuff here! I'm really interested in designing my own indie games and have wanted to appeal to female as well as male players so seeing all this has been extremely enlightening to me as an older straight geek guy. While I've always tried to be conscious in my character designs and illustrations of not making my females stereotypical and sexist, I realize that the pervasiveness of these stereotypes in the media still continues to affect so much of my art and writing. Often I'll try to design a "cool" looking female character and show it to my mom and sister (who are both gamers and love Lord of the Rings Online) and get comments like, "wow she sure has big breasts", or "why is she showing so much cleavage". Then I look at it afresh and see how I've fallen into the typical sexual stereotypes without even intending to. It's like it's been programmed into my head from comics, sci-fi, movies, and games to such an extent for so long that this is acceptable that even when trying to avoid those stereotypes they creep in. Yet I want my games and art to appeal to people of all sorts and avoid such things. So this article as well as all the informative opinions of all the female commentators showing their side of view has been a real eye-opener. I found it interesting how someone had made a comment about how men are depicted in romance novels and how 'these same women seem to be okay with that,' as if to say that women wanting less sexism in games and a focus on more meaningful characters are being hypocrites so therefore we should ignore their opinion and keep on making games with large breasted women with guns and fighting in what basically amounts to lingerie. I find that attitude very hard to understand. The thing with novels and fiction, and films, are that they are very diverse and that there're lot's of choices. It's not like the world of fiction is saturated with nothing but romance novels. I like the point made about how even exploitation movies made by people like Micheal Bay are only a small piece of the film world. There's plenty of variety in films, at least to some extent. But in games, and especially in big budget games there really aren't a lot of alternatives. And developers are missing out on a large potential market by not trying to make games that appeal to woman gamers. I know there's lot's of casual games on places like Big Fish that appeal to many female gamers, but not all women like hidden object games. My mom and sister can't stand them. They love beating up orcs on Lord of the Rings and they like dressing their female characters any way they want, sometimes in cool armor (fer orc killn') and sometime in cute dresses and outfits they've collected to go craft. I'd like to see more games, especially single player games, have more variety and focus on making compelling characters first, then work on the male or female aspects

in design. Well, I realize that the big developers probably won't listen for a long time to come, but as an aspiring indie game developer (or at least hobbyist) I'm really going to try to put this info to good use. Something that it just made me think of though is how narrow American comics are in who they try to market too. It's similar to the gaming industry. It's like they think the only ones who'd like the medium of comics are preadolescent males with power fantasies and sexual repression. Yet look at all the female artists doing indie webcomics and graphic novels. There's obviously a big potential market there. Same with games. Also I was reading about manga in Japan and how for ages they've had a huge variety of genres appealing to all sorts of readers. There are manga for housewives, fishermen, golfers, baseball, in addition to the stuff that gets imported here in the states. So again, it's not like the medium is only good for males who like superheroes. There's so much potential for making great games with compelling female characters. Well, I'm gonna stop myself there. I tend to blather when I comment on something that really interests me. I don't know if anything I said made sense or had anything of value to add, but the article definitely got me thinking really hard about how I want to make my own female characters. So thanks! This is great stuff.



FBW

on **December 14, 2012 at 6:17 pm** said:

As I read this article, poster comments, and your response to said comments I can't help but think that you see yourself as some champion of feminism. Would you care to elaborate on why no one other than yourself can have an opinion on this topic of discussion if it does not align with yours?



admin

on **December 14, 2012 at 6:22 pm** said:

Nope, I would not care.

I try not to waste my time with answering loaded questions.

Bye.



Agnes

on **December 14, 2012 at 5:48 am** said:

for some reason, I completely missed the publishing of this article... shame on me, here I go then. I'm afraid I'm not adding anything substantially new to what you said, just my own perspective on these matters.

you raise a lot of very valid points, among them the smurfette problem (and yes, for me that is a problem) which strikes me as the most annoying, personally. so that is where in my eyes a lot of the issues concerning women in media (I'm thinking broad here) are concentrated and made truly visible.

looking at the "dismissed, adopted, presented" graphic you present gives me thinky thoughts for 3 reasons:

1) "dismissed" features king, who in my opinion started out as an amalgam of 80s/early 90s women fashion (broad shoulders, loose shirts, etc.) and the then-need to validate having a woman in a fighting game – well, she must be muscle-packed, right? right. (nowadays, her breasts cushion any fall, little need for muscle mass) so king is actually a really interesting design with an aim towards functionality, thrown in with a side serving of drag king (wait...actually canon) which also gives us her reasons for this: it's a mens world, women need to be men if they want to be taken seriously (as fighters).

in my opinion, a very interesting approach, as they take her smurfette role into consideration, allow her to be a transvestite or maybe a transgender person (because of professional AND personal reasons) and make that a personality issue. so presenting king as a more stereotypical woman in mens clothes as time goes on (your graphic of her evolution) basically goes against her initial character design and character origin story. which I found much more interesting. okay. well done. -\_-

2) in "adopted", there are alyx and rochelle, and I'm going into word vomit mode now.

as you pointed out, these two women (who I must admit to not actually knowing before reading your article) are not defined by their female parts. alyx, on the left (and keep in mind I have no idea about this character at all, so you as the designer of this article took a picture which I now trust to include all or most her signifiers and therefore draw all my conclusions from this one little piccie) is actually defined by nothing much, when I look at her. she has no significant posture, no weapon, accessory or gadget, no indication of what game she might come from or role she might play in it. rochelle features a distinctive pose, a weapon, hot pink shirt (and let it be known I have no problem with pink per se and own a top that looks exactly the same and do not object to EVERY use of pink out there), confident looks and(!) dark-ish skin. hm.

so while rochelle is obviously a woman on a mission, alyx...waits? walks? has profound internal monologue? maybe just an unfortunate screenshot, but what I'm aiming at here is that, usually, IF women are consciously designed as regular, not-sexed-up ladies, they end up...bland. a bit boring. not much of ALL. it sometimes seems to send the message: if a gal isn't sexy, or a creepy little girl, or a virgin holy ideal (...sounds familiar? the holy trinity of stereotypical womankind?) she can't be very interesting, right?

yeah, right. we are all vaguely scrubbed-clean pastiches of the girl next door, and all men are...wait! so many kinds of men out there! nerds and gang bros and mad scientists and we need to show them all to appeal to our demographic!



okay, back to the smurfette....she's still bland if she's not sexy, or creepy, or virgin innocent. so i went and had a look at females in mass media (tv and films and books and games and comics and you get it) and guess what i saw: if the smurfette is there, she is surrounded by guys with funny faces, wacky clothes, outrageous poses and she is...bland. she usually has not much of an expression at all, maybe scowls a bit or smiles a bit (or, if we're talking lara croft she might even bare her teeth! the excitement!), usually stands with crossed arms or hands on her hips in a vaguely feminine, not too sexy pose. she has an average face and average clothes and an average personality. so if you want to make women that women can relate you you make women who are...not much at all? NO.

you make women that are as multifaceted as the men you are already so good at diversifying! you make women with scars. you make them with big ears or tattoos they got during a drunken night. you make them with splintering nail polish or mismatched socks. you make them with funky hobbies and shoes they can kick ass in. you make them with backstory wounds that include more than getting raped or abused, you make them heroic and you make them fragile. you make them morally ambiguous and you make them with silly faces.

-> let them open their mouth!!

how many men can you name that are presented on ads/box covers/etc with a wide grin, an enraged scream or a stupid grimace? and how many women?

the thing about women in our society is that they are often still viewed as staffage to the amazing adventures men go on. - see, but don't hear them. - which is basically what some people say about kids.

hmmmm. right.

so back to alyx and rochelle. at first glance, from the pictures you provided me with, i'd totally go for rochelle. because if i play alyx, it seems there isn't much to do at all, and if games are escapism, well, WHY WOULD I WANT TO BE A BLAND EVERYGIRL? no, no, no. i'd like to go on grand adventures with my weapons of mass destruction or aim to heal the plague. i'd like to be a character with more than one trait (female! nuff said!) and with more than a set of gravity-defying breasts to save me from harm (as i said, cushions the fall?)

i don't think i need to say much about the blow-up dolls in the "presented" category. there are girls in real life that try to present their "assets" too, and are encouraged to do so by most media (because, as mentioned, "normal" girls are boring) and that is mostly just sad and makes me think of people who look down on animals because those are guided by their instincts only. yeah. right.

3) samus has breastplates that can probably cut steel. Is that a valid form of attack in the game? if so, totally valid. because obviously boobs are weapons (as we are often, regularly, and completely unnecessarily reminded that a woman's favourite and best weapons are lipstick and high heels and a wonder bra (i'm looking at you, TDKR)) then that would finally be some neurotic game designer coming out and yelling "i'm afraid of breasts, okay!" and we could all go on discussing how appendages of the upper body designed to feed babies caused whole generations of men to cover in fear or drive them into flame-wars and start on fixing those poor wacky heads.

your article makes me want to go on read more (as you pointed out yourself, fodder for many more) and i hope the slow (tectonic-plates slow sometimes) shift in the presentation of women as distaff counterparts of men (thanks a lot, bible) to human beings of equal function and worth continues to a satisfying degree in my lifetime.



Matt

on **December 13, 2012 at 7:22 pm** said:

Great article! Thanks so much for it! Would love to see more of your thoughts on Birdo and Sheik/Zelda. Birdo's transgender history, in my opinion, is still known enough in western game culture to be worth more discussion. Growing up in the 90s, I vaguely remember Birdo and Sheik/Zelda as characters who bent gender with no negative consequences. I didn't give it much thought as a child, but thought it was cool and kept playing. With so much Nintendo in your article, i'd love to see your thoughts on Birdo and Sheik/Zelda even if aspects of their characters may not support the entire argument? It would seem a shame not to acknowledge them more?



sky0ts

on **November 11, 2012 at 10:30 pm** said:

i'm not too worried about these things. i've played video games my whole life, and i certainly know more female gamers today than i did as a kid. i think the more we purchase video games and express a preference for nonsexist characters, the more games will reflect that. And fortunately there are developers like Bioware, who have gone out of their way to represent women fairly for years. Things are getting better. Just look at Lydia in Skyrim... that had the opportunity to go REALLY badly (scantily-clad sex slave,) but she was actually badass and carried hundreds of pounds of equipment at a time. :P



Ruka

on **November 9, 2012 at 12:25 am** said:

Love this! I'm a female gamer fed up with how woman are portrayed in games. I love games like Mass Effect and Halo because you have the option of playing as a female without having to deal with looking like a whore or wearing lots of pink! I Don't like pink! I like having a feminine face, with a slimmer body, and a female voice without looking like my character will fall out of her costume when fighting ;)



Jessica

on **November 7, 2012 at 3:35 pm** said:

my english is not good enough to understand all of your article, i'm afraid. And i didn't read these crazy long comments. (So if i got anything wrong – please forgive me)

i just want to say: Woman are generally made up “wrong” in most games, but i don't mind. I would just wish there would be more woman in games. i personally feel ignored in some way ...

oh. by the way. i am one of the kind woman, that gets included in mens groups, not just for my good looking ;- ) You dont have to be “available” to get recognized.



Sasha

on **November 5, 2012 at 10:45 pm** said:

Finally people who understand that the issue is not the appearance of femininity and masculinity, it's the over-exaggeration of said characteristics, and how there's so much importance put on them. For example, you wouldn't need someone to be wearing pink from head to toe to know that they're a girl, and not every guy has muscles the size of Jupiter. When you put these characters together, you usually end up with the female character looking weak, and often their actions reinforce that view.

As a girl gamer it's extremely irritating when all you see everywhere is either no female representation at all, or a horribly, horribly biased one. Luckily there has been an increase in girl gamers and characters in games, and I'm finding guys at school gradually less surprised when my friends and I say we game/watch gameplay. But it's taking too damn long!



Maverynthia

on **November 2, 2012 at 10:56 pm** said:

“Every signifier in a character design is an artifact of that character's self-expression.”

Eh, no. Characters are created by people and this the character have no real “self-expression” as you elaborate later. The characters are just a fantasy of designers. This the signifiers are the artifacts of the designers fantasies and less of a characters self-expression. You can argue the male characters get more elf expression because they are allowed to be whatever they want to be, but for the women.. no.

Also under signifiers I would have added “boob plate” or “armor that specifically enhances the breasts”. As we can see in the Mass Effect character, she has her breasts emphasized for no damn good reason considering real world combat armor doesn't work that way.



Tao Jones

on **November 2, 2012 at 4:07 am** said:

Appreciate that you've actually given us as developers a practical example of how to tackle the issue of sexism in character design, one that honestly is very achievable and just requires less laziness from us as artists. I'll certainly be linking back to this article in the future.

Really, in a lot of ways, I see it as a call to quality more than a call to equality – stop leaning so heavily on cliches, and make your characters less one-dimensional and less a stereotype and start introducing more variety. Books and film and TV have all improved in these stakes and reaped the creative rewards for it – what's more interesting, a character who is a girl first and scientist as an afterthought, or a scientist who's a bit of a kleptomaniac and estranged from their family because of it, oh and by the way is also female? Which one is an accessory and which one spawns an

interesting story in their own right? This is the most basic elements of character creation that successful authors and screenwriters have taken for granted for years, and yet all but a few game developers persist in ignoring. Apparently when we wanted to be more like Hollywood we only wanted to be like the tiny Michael Bay corner of Hollywood.

Reading the comments has made me depressed at how many people seem perfectly happy to wallow in the creative mediocrity of lazy, sexist character design by either making excuses or denying it's a problematic pattern at all. We as developers can do better and should strive to do so. Not because it's the mature and moral thing to do, or even to make gaming more friendly to female audiences – but because it will make games better and more interesting, period. If we start by removing the crutch of cliché gender signifiers, I think that improvement will happen organically – but we need to kick it off somehow.



**Claire Blackshaw**

on **November 1, 2012 at 8:08 pm** said:

Speaking as a queer female game designer / programmer in the industry who loves games and is constantly frustrated with the status quo, "THANK YOU!"

No seriously brilliant article I really enjoyed and shall share lots :)



**Mizahnyx**

on **November 1, 2012 at 1:31 am** said:

Teenage male geeks didn't were exactly popular amongst the girls before the current 'geek is cool' era. So what is so wrong with games giving them an escape, a bunch of parallel realm where oversexualized girls are everywhere and available? If girls rejected geeks beforehand... Which right do they have to decide how games should be? There are prominent woman in the industry, like Brenda Romero, that instead of complaining are creating games according to their own dreams. We choose and buy the fantastic universes we want. And no feminist propaganda will change that.



**Jordan**

on **November 3, 2012 at 12:53 pm** said:

Feminism is not misandry. Being a feminist means you believe that women are people too, who, like any other human being, deserves respect and fair treatment.

Propaganda? Discussing character design and ways to create characters not wholly defined by cultural expectations of gender (read: pink shit and eyelash extensions) is not propaganda. Attempting to stifle healthy discussion on how to make games better does not result in anything positive for anyone.

There were teenaged female geeks, just as there are teenaged female geeks now. Geek girls weren't exactly popular before the current "geek is cool" era, either. Anti-intellectualism and disdain isn't restricted to one sex, having a uterus does not make one part of some female hive mind. We're all people, and we've all had our passions made fun of.

You ask "what right" do women have "to decide how games should be". First, nowhere in the article is it stated that women should be the sole rulers of the game industry. Second, the writer is male. Third, no one is calling for the abolition of sexy women in any media. Fourth, discussions like these actually help people make the games they want to make, so that others can actually get the games they want to get, instead of being limited to oversexualised girls—which themselves are of a limited variety. Where are the MILFs? Where are the muscular women? Where are the zaftig ladies? Where are the breasts that actually move realistically and don't cause people who actually have breasts to wince as they wonder what sort of parasite has invaded those chests?

No one's taking away your games. No one's asking for Team Ninja to stop making Dead or Alive. If anything, people are asking for more of things, more Skullgirls, more games—more people.



**Mizahnyx**

on **November 4, 2012 at 1:16 am** said:

Supposedly, feminism is not misandry, but if so, why even call it feminism? It's not simply humanism, the notion of that every human being has the same rights, disregarding external differences?

Maybe this article is not propaganda per se, but inadvertently is adding up to a tendence to label gaming as is as sexist without understanding the history of geek/gamer culture. Look at the Hitman scandal, by example... So, in the context of the times, even an insightful and well-thought study about character representation can become a weapon for them. To cite an example... The case of the girl that was sexually harassed at the party thrown after PAX was taken by feminists as sort of a proof of the prevalence of a 'rape culture' in videogaming.



Yes there are female geeks too. And I agree that they surely have had their passions mocked by peers and other girls. And yes, they deserve too to have their dream worlds coded into games they would like to play. Funny thing, oversexualized males are never seen as a problem in this article. Nobody complains about Joe Higashi showing his muscled behind as a taunt in KOF series, by example. Marcus Fenix from GoW is unrealistically masculine and muscled too. And most of the male videogame characters have strong leadership traits, that women in general find attractive. So, geek girls have had their dream worlds built too. And male gamers doesn't complain about objectifying or inequality.

And yes, feminists want precisely that, to change the way games are created, to force everyone making a game to wait for their 'seal of approval'. They cannot understand that games are alternate fantasies, that no real harm is done to real world women with games like Bayonetta, DoA, etc. They will take every new game with a sexy female in it and use it as an excuse to label the gaming culture as a rape culture. Look at the overreaction at the Hitman trailer. It shows that they are really pushing to censor games that they don't like. Yes, they are trying to take away my games.

I agree with variety in character types. I strongly disagree with trying to push to impose an agenda over the state of the industry.



admin  
on **November 4, 2012 at 1:28 am** said:

And yes, feminists want precisely that, to change the way games are created, to force everyone making a game to wait for their 'seal of approval'. They cannot understand that games are alternate fantasies, that no real harm is done to real world women with games like Bayonetta, DoA, etc. They will take every new game with a sexy female in it and use it as an excuse to label the gaming culture as a rape culture. Look at the overreaction at the Hitman trailer. It shows that they are really pushing to censor games that they don't like. Yes, they are trying to take away my games.

You have a severely distorted perspective on things and are creating a straw man argument which is impossible to address... Nothing here is remotely true or in the slightest evident. Not one single thing.



admin  
on **November 4, 2012 at 1:54 am** said:

I apologize for being so patronizing but this illogical nonsense really infuriates me.

Do you even know what censorship is? Obviously not. Censorship is a matter of laws... censored content is content which is deemed illegal. No one is suggesting, petitioning or running for office with the goal of making Hitman illegal. How the fuck should that even work? In USA you would have to ignore the constitution to do that.

Even if you use the word "censor" just as some sort of colorful language, suggesting that protests and blogposts will somehow force publishers to self-censor in order to avoid the wrath of feminists or something... It is just criticism. And every publisher decides for himself who they want to cater to and who's protests they ignore. It's a free market. If you buy games like Hitman, they will produce games like Hitman. No expression of anger or frustration from the feminist community will change that.

There is no mechanical possibility for feminists to take your games away. None whatsoever. And let me tell you the overwhelming majority of vocal feminists understand that and most importantly understand how fucking hypocritical it would be to demand equality only to them be an oppressive force themselves.

"Yes, they are trying to take away my games." This. Is. Bullshit.



Mizahnyx  
on **November 4, 2012 at 2:32 am** said:

Ok. My perceptions may be terribly wrong and I apologize for that. And yes, its not censoring because its not done by a government authority. But as I see the things (correct me if I am wrong), now there is a sort of tendency to address the representation of females in videogames as something inherently oppresive to women. By example, the videos by Anita Sarkeesian, that show the fact of Princess Peach as a princess in distress as something inherently degrading for a woman. I'm not a troll and I don't write this to engage in any sort of pointless debate. I accept constructive criticism and if I am wrong I want to know it and why. I've following the subject of gender and videogames from several months and frankly I'm not happy with how feminists are trying to push things ('Push' is the right word, not 'censor'). So I have to become a rational voice in the opposite direction. Maybe what I've read isn't the voices from the whole feminist movement but of the ones that are most closely following the same subject, or just the ones that are very vocal about their agendas (hence the strawman). Yes they have no known way of effectively blocking the distribution of a game. But nonetheless I've read articles, linked in the Gamasutra feeds, that reinterpret things and create other sorts of strawmen. Look at all the blog articles that spawned back when the Hitman incident, or the ones derived from the post-PAX party incident. Yes there are people that want to label the gaming/geek culture a 'rape culture'. Yes, probably they don't represent the majority of the feminist movement. As they have the right to speak and be very vocal about how they see things, I have exactly the same right.

My points are:

- Yes, we need different kinds of characters in games, not only the stereotypical ones.
- But even the cliched, stereotypical ones are needed, because some of us want to escape to that kind of worlds.
- There are people that have an agenda to label the gaming/geek culture as a 'rape culture'. I oppose strongly that point of view, but I'm opposed in a rational, mature, respectful way.



admin  
on **November 4, 2012 at 3:37 am** said:

Be sure I don't see you as a debater for sport or a troll... otherwise I would have ignored you. You are clearly trying to articulate your points well and keep a debate friendly tone. I appreciate that.

Considering the Princess Peach example: If you create a fantasy universe, like the mushroom kingdom and in that universe most or all female characters are just damsels in distress types... yeah, then it is inherently degrading for women (objectification to be precise). Same goes for most or all female characters are suggestive and dress and act in a sexually charged way ... yeah, then it is inherently degrading for women (sexualization to be precise).

This is just how this goes... this is what those terms like objectification and sexualization describe and it is a degrading depiction of women. And yes, it is part of a latent rape culture. Because it is rape messaging and rape symbolism. If we all could be mature about that fact, like the movie industry is, we could deal with that in a way, that suits all parties... Feminist could have their game culture non-rapey and you could have you killer ninja nuns in hitman absolution.

The movie industry is grown up enough to understand what objectification is, what sexualisation is and how it relates to rape culture and they diversified to deal with that. In movie world the images and stories prevalent in games would fall into certain genres, like exploitation for example... Nobody can complain about the movie industry having a rape culture problem, because they did put rapey content into it's own corner also nobody can complain to not get the rapey content they desire because in that corner the market is big enough to satisfy fans.

This would be so fucking sweet in games. But somehow well minded guys like you and waaaaaaayyyy more crazy people have trouble acknowledging that games are in fact largely perpetuating rape images and rape messages and rape symbolism. This denial serves as an absolution of those rape perpetuating content, sometimes manifesting itself in harrasment and severe victim blaming. ...and this is where the problem sits and where feminist have to speak up.

You sitting there and getting outraged about people criticizing game culture as rape culture is the problem. You -like I did- grew up with rape symbolism and rape messaging treated as everyday ordinary unobjectionable content, you never had any reason to critically examine what that constant peach gets abducted by bowser, mario gets her back thing is and actually means. It was just a working explanation for why you had to go from left to right and enjoyed your play time.

But now more and more people do understand, what that symbolism and messaging actually is.... you have to deal with people complaining about what you like and never saw any problems with and have them label it rape culture. Well tough luck. You could start dealing with that like an adult instead of feeling threatened by that new perspective.



Mizahnyx  
on **November 5, 2012 at 8:34 pm** said:

About the Princess Peach: What is so degrading? She is a ruler. She wasn't raised to personally fight Bowser's army, but to rule the Mushroom Kingdom. She is worth hundred of lives of jumping plumbers. What is so degrading? Clearly she is the most valuable being in her game universe. About suggestively dressed females on other games, the only ones i find degrading could be the girls in the Duke Nukem universes. They are clearly helpless, only existing to contrast with Duke's manliness. But in videogames there are plenty of characters that are both empowered and having sexualized features. What is so degrading of that? By example: Sarah Kerrigan in Starcraft, she starts flirting with Raynor, ends up being the queen of the most powerful alien force on the end of Brood War, Bayonetta in another case, is overtly sexual but she is so sexual because she is so powerful as a witch, martial artist and gunfighter that... she can afford to be as she wants... Thats obviously not degrading. Stereotypical maybe but not degrading.

I fail to see the connection between those stereotypes and rape. Studies have shown that rape incidents decreased with the widespread availability of explicit erotic material. Woundn't be then possible that by providing geeks with an escape for their sexual urges, those games with erotic components are really helping to prevent rape instead of generating a 'rape culture'? Yes, a feminist could not feel very happy with the overall concept of eroticized sexy female game main characters. But in practice, that very kind of games is providing a healthier escape for geeks that aren't good enough at socializing / seducing. And again... What is the connection between some 'symbols' and 'themes' in games and rape? For you seems to be somewhat obvious, but for me

really isn't. Unless you are talking about games explicitly about rape, of which there are very few really.

The movie industry got to that point not by complaining about its own state, but by searching for new ways to create compelling stories. People that criticize gaming culture, like Anita Sarkeesian, could bring a change more quickly if instead of complaining and finger-pointing, they developed games. I actually would play a game created by Anita Sarkeesian or any other detractor of the gaming/geek culture. Because I want to know both sides of the story, I'm not blindly fixated in my own point of view.

I have trouble when someone suggest that by engaging in a hobby, alone in my room with only my computer or console, I am somewhat related to such an ugly word as 'rape'. I haven't raped anyone, otherwise I wouldn't be here answering a post, but in jail. I'm not a rapist, I'm just an average gamer guy, And yes, I occasionally enjoy fanservice in games, and all this fuss is like someone coming out of the blank and yelling 'RAPIST!' at me. That's probably the reason of all those crazy guys reacting in crazy ways, posting degrading images of those women that share that view on games. I understand them, even if I decided not to engage in their ways of react. I understand the problems of harassment and victim blaming, and I personally think that they are NOT caused by games with erotic fanservice. They are caused because people isn't taught how to handle their urges in a healthy way. If a game somewhat tells me to rape, then the issues are with me, not with the game, because I should be able to differentiate between a fantasy and reality.

You expect me to accept that games convey rape messages without an explication, almost as a dogma, and I don't believe in dogmas. Show me a chain of causality, backed up by peer reviewed studies, and I should immediately change my point of view. As a geek with a hacker mindset, I tend to question everything, not taking the mainstream-believed 'truths' until having proof. I have told you my interpretation of the Mario-Peach-Bowser thing... Peach is so valuable that is worth for Mario to risk his life a thousand times only for the chance of having her safe, and she doesn't fight because her skillset is the skillset of a ruler, she has control over every general aspect of her kingdom. No rape at all. Maybe some inequality because Peach is of royal blood, and Mario is a foreigner, a peasant, an improvised knight in a plumber's suit.

I refuse to accept any relationship between gaming and rape until a plausible chain of causality linking both two is shown to me. But studies like the one showing that the use of erotic material actually decreased rape incidents, seem to imply otherwise.



Anonymouse  
on **November 13, 2012 at 5:22 pm** said:

"Clearly she is the most valuable being in her game universe."  
That is precisely the problem. Peach is qualitatively the same as an exceptionally large set of gold coins. This is the dictionary definition of objectification — reducing a person to an object, lacking agency or active capability, entirely passive.

"Peach [...] doesn't fight because her skillset is the skillset of a ruler"  
However, she doesn't use that skillset either. She doesn't attempt to secure a truce, or negotiate a ransom for her release, or establish mutually beneficial mushroom-for-koopa-shell trade routes. She doesn't do any ruling, only passively awaits rescue. No agency, no activity, just an object that serves as a goal, functionally identical to the Star Cures in Bowser's Inside Story.

"I refuse to accept any relationship between gaming and rape until a plausible chain of causality linking both two is shown to me."  
How's this: objectification => dehumanization => rape? When you reduce a person to a sexual object whose choice is not valued, that choice can be overridden for your own sexual gratification.

1) Sexualized objectification of women leads to dehumanization:

"Overall, the present set of studies show that only sexually objectified women are dehumanized by both men and women but for different reasons. Whereas sexual attraction shifts a men's focus of a female target away from her personality onto her body triggering a dehumanization process, women are more inclined to dehumanize their sexually objectified counterparts the more they distance themselves from these sexualized representations of their gender category."

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ejsp.824/abstract;jsessionid=173E6BA0F9FB337D29BD536B7DAD5A10.d01t04?deniedAccessCustomisedMessage=&userIsAuthenticated=false>

2) A dehumanizing mindset leads to increased rape proclivity:

"men who automatically associated women with animals (e.g., animals, paw, snout) more than with humans scored higher on a rape-behavioral analogue, as well as rape proclivity."

<http://psp.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/02/28/0146167212436401.abstract>

These came up on the first page of google and google scholar searches for objectification dehumanization rape. Both come from peer-reviewed journals.

Part of the issue here is that as much of this is invisible to those on the dominant side of the society, and lack-of-oppression is more difficult to recognize as existing than oppression. If I've never been sexually harassed, it makes it hard to imagine what it would be like living in a world where I was sexually harassed frequently. Crossplaying as female in one MMORPG made things quite clear — other players frequently approached my character with pandering comments and a/s/l requests, assumed I needed help or handouts, and generally diminished my accomplishments. I was just a casual girl playing around, and they were MEN! with serious quests to accomplish. That anyone would be made to feel that way is a community issue in all of geekdom. But the point in this post is there should be a wide range of experiences available for people to not feel actively excluded. Having less than 20% of our games' characters be female when our playership has been a near-even split for years is a deeply unfortunate mismatch.

<http://americanwiki.pbworks.com/w/page/33469502/Women%20Characters%20in%20Video%20Games>

To be clear, I only read the abstracts from the linked articles, and haven't delved into reviewing their methodologies. Hopefully peer review covered that.

Please reply here regarding whether this forms a sufficiently clear chain of causality. Having some scientific rigor behind this argument makes it significantly stronger, IMHO, and if that's what it takes to give us more princesses like Yggdra and fewer like Peach, I'm all for it.



Mizahnyx

on **December 1, 2012 at 8:51 pm** said:

Sorry for the delay.

Yes, the documents you provided, or at least the abstracts from their pages, seem to indicate that the correlation between objectification and rape does indeed exist.

But in the other hand, sex is a human need. And when there is a need, there will be supply and demand. Read this other peer reviewed essay, located at a feminist site:

<http://www.femininebeauty.info/suppression.pdf>

Basically it says that most of the sexual repression exerted over women comes from other women, in order to keep an 'economy of sex' where their sex is valued higher (kind of reinforcing the article cited on your point 1). What has this to do with the role of women in videogames? Games with strong sexual fan-service (and thus, with women in objectifying roles, by example Duke Nukem) are providing an escape valve for the sex urges of males that have some sort of sexual frustrations..

Games are then in direct competence with women for the resources men provide, so women now have to rush and attack games to keep their control on that 'economy of sex'. So, in brief:

- 1) For women to feel safe in games, games that women like have to portray women as multidimensional and realistic.
- 2) But some men with repressed urges will want games where women are sexual objects. And their immersion of this kind of games will provide some sort of escape that will deter them to do real harm to real women.
- 3) Women, as a collective, will have issues with point 2) because then games are in direct economic competence with women.



iCeleste

on **April 25, 2013 at 4:32 am** said:

I...I just...I'm sorry, I had to comment.

"Men will want games where women are sexual objects."

Isn't that what we're trying to get rid of? Men seeing women as sexual objects? Because newflash- we aren't. Where are the games where men are sexual objects? Did you read the article? Yes, many male characters are buff and muscular, but keep in mind- those are the main characters. How many video games can you name with female main characters? For every one you name, I'm sure someone else could name 20 more with male protagonists. And not one of them would be oversexualized as women are.

If you are truly for equality in games, give women what you give males: men in sexy outfits, lots of skin showing, etc.



No? Does that make you uncomfortable? How do you think it makes women feel? That is part of the reason I don't play games other than things like Minecraft and Mario- every time I play a more advanced game I get some woman's tits or ass in my face. I don't need that.

If what you're looking for is porn, fine- go on the internet, wank it out. But for video games, where it's not just for males, lets see it become more balanced, yes?



iCeleste  
on **April 25, 2013 at 4:37 am** said:

Another point- Not every man is deterred by the sexual women in games. I'm not sure if you've ever been to a convention, but so many cosplayers have said (who, by the way, are cosplaying the only kind of female characters in games- nothing covered, barely there armor, which is unrealistic in ANY sense- you wouldn't go in to a battle naked) anyway, so many cosplayers have said that they get hit on, harassed, inappropriately touched- all because they look like the female characters for games. And yes, there are cases of rape. Women don't go around touching men in Halo suits; and I'm sure women cosplayers would love to be able to wear what they want- whether it be revealing or not- and not have to worry about being objectified and harassed. There's your rape culture.



jason  
on **October 31, 2012 at 9:05 pm** said:

you mean, gasp, the smurfs aren't an accurate portrayal of reality? i've been living a lie!



admin  
on **October 31, 2012 at 9:10 pm** said:

Yeah... it's all a lie! All you have been told, that smurfs are real, that the earth is just 6000 years old and that your comment was clever and witty.... all lies!



Tomás Queiroz  
on **October 31, 2012 at 7:29 pm** said:

Hey, congratulations, just a great text and ideas about the ways we have been taking our industry. But in some points you sounded a little bit sexist. "I personally have a hell of a lot respect for geek girls, who find a way to be passionate about games, despite the fact, that games are generally not made with them in mind."

You are applying girls signifiers for the geek girls, why geek girls would need to have strong female characters to like a game? Why do they have to like pink?

I don't play games because i see myself in the leading roles, but because i like the storyline and characters.

Just pinpointing something that bother me, of course that a better written female characters would be better to everyone, not just girls. I'm kind of tired to have to rescue the princess, why don't we try the other way around for a

change of pace? =)

Keep the good work.



Jordan

on **October 31, 2012 at 8:41 am** said:

Just discovered this blog today. I've bookmarked this post. Thanks for the article! The breaking down of the expression of physical gender features was especially helpful.

I've always seen and noticed that female character designs (over)emphasise femininity, and that male characters are more varied and don't nearly as often (over)emphasise masculinity, but I've never asked /why/ that's so. Why are bows and ribbons seen as necessary on distaff counterparts? Why are these characters often designed in such a way that suggests that they are actually disparate to the original male characters?

The picture of King's decreasing gender ambiguity reminded me of Master Chief's concept art. His MJOLNIR armour was made bulkier and blockier due to concerns that he looked "effeminate". Now, though, there are playable female Spartans in Halo: Reach. They've got more slender armour similar to the original design but no pink shit carelessly tacked on, which is great.



ISB

on **October 31, 2012 at 3:03 am** said:

Ah, thanks for this wonderful writeup. I've always had some sort of confusion about what those who look for better representation of women in video games are actually looking for — because people I know tend to only focus on a small subset of "issues", like marketing characters with gigantic breasts and revealing outfits. They tend to get across the impression that the only issue is female characters having big breasts, but upon reading deeper it turns out that there's more than the issue of big breasts. It's actually pretty interesting how much goes into making a "good" representation of a character with any given "classification", such as gender, race, and anything else really.



Aaron

on **October 31, 2012 at 2:14 am** said:

Birdo is a boy..



NDenizen

on **October 31, 2012 at 1:49 am** said:

I'd hate to be a character designer and have some guy tell me how to change my craft to appeal to a demographic that barely matters to my industry. I'd say, "what's the point?".

Video Games are marketed at young males.

This is not wrong, no matter how you try and spin it, it's the way things work. Still, women are NOT excluded from the industry, and just because some say they are (such as a certain scam artist on Kickstarter), it does not make it true.

I don't see you campaigning for more realistic male representation in Erotic Novels aimed at women. Men don't intrude in the pursuits of women, so why is it both allowed and expected to happen the other way?

The majority of girls who have played video games that I know of like the most sexualised females the most anyway. They understand it's not meant to be taken seriously, as do most men — and they don't remember the Chells or Alyxs. Also it's funny to CTRL+F "Mari Shimazaki" and get no results. You know, the female character designer behind Bayonetta and various SC5 costumes? Strange how she gets no mentions. It's almost as if she proves that women want women in suits as much as men do — ie not very much. And whilst it's true that she, as a woman, bring a certain flair to the industry, it's through the same means that's apparently "wrong" for men to do.

Just, stop. There are more important things to worry about, such as human beings hurting other human beings in real places, rather than the representation of one kind of human being in comparison to another kind in a media form that only vaguely influences wider society.



admin  
on **October 31, 2012 at 2:50 am** said:

...a demographic that barely matters to my industry.  
Your values are screwed or your data is screwed. Whatever. What's the point? To you? None.  
How do you expect me to explain to you why it is important, when you simply lack the understanding and/or empathy to accept the most basic premise of everything I wrote?

Sorry, can't help you there. There truly are more important things to do.



Vergatti  
on **December 7, 2012 at 7:27 pm** said:

If you ask a doctor to make a list of problems he sees in the world, he'll probably list health issues at the top. If you ask a judge, he'll say laws. If you ask a game designer... well. Do the math.

We can only talk and concern about things that resonates with what we care about, what we've got knowledge and so forth. I could'n solve hunger crisis around the world, but I could point out that games are, in it's majority, misogynistic – wich \*by definition\* shouldn't be something disregarded at all. Same way as @Anjin won't talk about romance novels aimed at women – hint: he doesn't writes it.

I think dismissive arguments like this sets us back way more than we can imagine. We need to criticize that wich we take part on, else we're losing a great possibility of making something better.

We simply cannot stop criticizing stuff. And I mean it in every subject and everywhere.



Anixdps  
on **October 31, 2012 at 1:49 am** said:

Birido's a girl.



withheld  
on **October 31, 2012 at 1:48 am** said:

Spent most of my life with people ragging on me for my hobby from the outside. It's not real life, it's kiddie, it'll rot your brain, you need a girlfriend, blah blah blah. Now we've reached the point where it is being shit on from the inside.

I don't go to golf courses and tell them it'd be better if you could tackle other players. This shit is out of hand.



Red  
on **May 13, 2013 at 3:03 pm** said:

Your analogy is incorrect. This isn't teaching wrong methods to go about a profession, it's about teaching ways to improve it. A more accurate analogy would be if you were to see golf players tackling each other and then showed them how to play properly.



Greg  
on **October 31, 2012 at 1:32 am** said:

Hello, I have a couple of questions for you.

1) You say that not all games have to be all things for all people so then:

A) Why is there a need for more gender diversity in gaming?

B) why isn't the current number sufficient?

C) At what point has this threshold been met? Is it 50/50? I think the notion of adding some quantitative measure is silly.

2) I read in one of your comments, you said that women represent (roughly) 50% of the gaming market, but what percentage of that plays AAA titles as opposed to iOS games such as angry birds? I would think this would greatly effect the marketing teams of big publishers... I do not think they would exclude a market without reason.

3) What if developers want to make games about "manly men doing manly things with hot babes n gunnzzzz"? I understand you are urging developers to make titles broader, but I not you mention "male privilege/entitlement". I agree with the notion that the resistance to change is in some ways motivated by "b-b-b- this is how videogames have always been!" and think that this way of thinking is bad for the growth of the industry, however, I don't see how women/transgender/black etc wanting games to be directed at them is any different from male entitlement. I don't think that I agree with the idea that games should be made as a means of appeasing as opposed to the expression of the people who made it.

I think you do a good outlining some problems that exist in the community and are informative about the various signifiers. What I ultimately don't agree with, though, is how you have decided to fix the problem. I would argue that the problem STEMS from the community level as opposed to the content of the games. The very real problem is how people treat each other on xbox live, not Lilith's ass.



Froog

on **October 31, 2012 at 1:42 am** said:

No one is trying to take Duke Nukem away from anyone, that's a pretty absurd line of reasoning. Saying that game developers should design more well rounded characters which don't rely entirely on tropes only means more diversity within the industry, it doesn't mean the games that cater pretty exclusively to males will no longer get made or cease to exist. No one (well, except for men, right?) is saying that games should be catered to them exclusively.



Greg

on **October 31, 2012 at 2:24 am** said:

Good thing that isn't my argument.

Condensed version:

1) why isn't what we have enough? ie why does every novel need to be the next great american novel

2)publishers want money, if the money isn't there they won't publish

3) video games = art form = developers should be able to make what ever they want  
asking developers to change EXISTING games(hitman absolution fiasco, God of War 4 no longer has female enemies etc) is pretty anti-art



admin

on **October 31, 2012 at 2:46 am** said:

Hey Greg..

Thanks for chiming in. Here is a reply to your condensed version:

1) Because there is an audience saying "it is not enough". I'm arguing from a perspective of that audience and for that audience, being one of that audience myself. Designers and artists and marketers, makers of all sort can decide for themselves, if they wanna listen to that audience and work to bring that audience closer to satisfaction.

2) Arguing with market dynamics is just a chicken and egg dilemma. I understand, that my demands are so called disruptive ideas. They disrupt current market paradigms, challenging what sells so far. But disrupting markets is how you reach new audiences, become a meaningful brand and make shitloads of money.

3) They are. I'm just giving criticism. There is no proposal to police anything or limit the means of free expression for designers and artists. Criticism is just an echo for the artist to adopt, reject, ignore or whatever the artist thinks is most appropriate for his expression and financial interests.

An audience saying "we don't have enough x" is the best thing that can happen to an artist or business man. Demand is opportunity. Dissatisfaction is opportunity. And criticism like this article I wrote here is just articulating this demand and dissatisfaction. And then guys like you come along and question it by wrapping themselves in a pro-business and pro-art costume, while completely failing both. In short you object to criticism and you object to demands for progress. You do it arguing with values of markets and with values of art... Your efforts here are anti-market and anti-art, because challenge, criticism and demand is what drives both fields. Embrace it.





Greg  
on **October 31, 2012 at 4:53 am** said:

You've shifted your position in multiple ways here.

Economics is never mentioned in your piece. It's all a discussion about how games have X character/quality/representation that creates some or all of the problems you listed. Here is where my point comes in. The games like you want are already made, and will continue to be made. If all this article was about was telling the devs, "hey guys can you make some games like this?", I would be in agreement with you.

"No matter if intended by game designers, writers, culture makers or fans... these ideas are here and they are misogynistic at their core."

This would very concisely indicate that if these misogynistic games continue to be made, even if the market you are (allegedly) talking about has been satisfied, the problems you talk about would continue to exist.



admin  
on **October 31, 2012 at 7:46 am** said:

**Economics is never mentioned in your piece.**

What? Huh? you brought that in. "2)publishers want money, if the money isn't there they won't publish" remember? You can scroll up, if you like.

**"hey guys can you make some games like this?", I would be in agreement with you.**

The article is precisely about that. The article is about imbalance. About imbalance within individual titles and the overall catalog. "make some like this" is precisely what's need to shift that balance.

**This would very concisely indicate that if these misogynistic games continue to be made, even if the market you are (allegedly) talking about has been satisfied, the problems you talk about would continue to exist.**

Absolutely correct. There will be tons of misogynist content. But that's very much okay with me and in my opinion also should be okay with the audiences I circled here. The problem is not existence of misogynistic content, the problem it's its latent dominance... the sexism, which hides in plain sight as default, as industry standard or even as weird attempt at reaching women...

We can have all the racist, sexist, ableist, whateverist games anyone craves to play or to make.. for the sake of art and diversity and for the sake of tapping markets, let's have em. In movies there are genres for this, they are called exploitation... in games this is "what games are"... we need to diversify, but for that we first need to recognize that the default is not working.



Greg  
on **November 1, 2012 at 6:26 am** said:

Here is why I am talking about economics or rather, how you are not.

"An audience saying "we don't have enough x" is the best thing that can happen to an artist or business man. Demand is opportunity."

You claim you are presenting these criticisms in order to present the need of an audience, but what you've written is very explicit about solving the problems you've outlined. I was merely trying to refocus the topic.

"the problem it's its latent dominance... the sexism, which hides in plain sight as default, as industry standard or even as weird attempt at reaching women..."

You see, this is why I fundamentally disagree with you. Your article entirely ignores the litany of existing games that are not sexist. Look at the indie game scene. Hell, look at a lot of main stream games. Look at games on the iOS. For literally any misogynistic game you name, I can name one that isn't, in any category, any genre.

This brings me back to the first point I made:  
Why isn't the current number enough?



Michael  
on **November 1, 2012 at 8:20 pm** said:

"For literally any misogynistic game you name, I can name one that isn't, in

any category, any genre.”

Why should there be any number of misogynistic games on the market?



Jesse  
on **November 2, 2012 at 11:17 pm** said:

I read this article out of curiosity, and I wish I hadn't. I find the article itself, as well as the comments, to be incredibly tedious and overtly one sided. Yes, indeed, it is a tragedy that they are subjecting Birdo, an egg-vomiting monster, to heteronormativity by giving her/it a bow and this (subjectively) makes Yoshi less sexually ambiguous. The horror. I have looked around my workplace, my classroom, and you better believe I'll be looking around my gym later, and damned if I have not seen that women usually seem to be trying draw attention to their gender signifiers of breasts, backsides, coifed hair, makeup, feminine clothing and feminine body language. I'm willing to bet, too, that at my gym, which is predominantly gay, I'm still going to see a lot of shaved or close-cropped hair, facial hair, and clothing that will accentuate mens typically larger physicality and strength. This is called contemporary Western culture. Welcome. It's not perfect, but progress is being made and even homosexuality (which has a national average of 12% of the population identifying as such) is becoming more and more "normalized" despite still being a huge minority any way you look at it.

Ugh, I can't believe I've entered into a debate online. How far I have fallen.



Hugh Marker  
on **October 31, 2012 at 1:10 am** said:

This is the most stupidest thing I have ever come across. If developers make a character how they see fit then let them do what they want. Don't tell them what to do because you need to tell them. If you actually play video games you would not care who you play as because you are enjoying a game. Clearly people like you sticking you nose where it don't belong should stop with this crap. Video games are there for people to enjoy them and not to cater to your needs. Either deal with how things are or move on because clearly you are just doing this for the attention and have no idea how game development works. If you don't like what people do then make your own game and proves us wrong. Again video games are video games, they are not here to cater to you or anyone else. Find something else to do than to complain about stupid subjects. Please stop with this pandering bull crap about gender and even sexual orientation. It's not gonna get you anywhere.



admin  
on **October 31, 2012 at 1:16 am** said:

Well, okay... you came into my house and pissed all over the carpet. What now?



Froog  
on **October 31, 2012 at 1:38 am** said:

But they cater to you, which is why you have no problem with it.



Jac  
on **November 2, 2012 at 9:51 pm** said:

Romance novels cater to women and yet... I don't have a problem with it. Should I? It's the best selling genre for books and men are showed in gender stereotypes all the time in their pages.



Bejay  
on **April 15, 2013 at 12:42 pm** said:

Well I don't read those novels so I can't fully comment on what you're saying, but if you GENUINELY care about the romance genre for its subject matter/social commentary/relationship-based plots etc (as the women here GENUINELY enjoy and care about most aspects of video games, outside of the portrayal of their gender) and would like to see less stereotypical male characters, then more power to you.

I seriously doubt that if you do so, you'll be submitted to a barrage of rape and death threats from their existing fanbase, as happened with Sarkeesian et al.



Caracol  
on **October 29, 2012 at 8:48 pm** said:

Although I agree with the fact that most female characters are "over-gendered", as someone mentioned before, you have to take into account the targeted audience. The number of female gamers is on the rise, but the majority of gamers are still male. An even slimmer portion are trans-gender, gay, lesbian, etc. Because of that, and because game development is a business, most of their products are targeted to males. Does it make it "right"? No, but the morality of it seems simply ambiguous. As more females begin to game, a shift \*will\* occur in the industry, although it will probably be terribly sluggish partially due to the fact that games are... well, games. They aren't an integral part of our society, they are completely optional and superfluous.

And just as a side plug, Yoshi is a male name in Japanese, and therefore was never sexually ambiguous. Birdo was in fact referred to as male, I believe, in the Mario Bros. 2 manual in the U.S.



admin  
on **October 30, 2012 at 7:32 am** said:

Hey, Caracol...

Male-to-female-ratio with gamers is rough 50% to 50%... the impression that a majority of gamers is male is a false impression and not backed up by data. But the impression that most games are marketed towards straight men and most game culture events and outlets are targeted at straight men is backed up by data however. The imbalance is already there.

And even if.. egg or chicken... do we let marketing stand which actually repulses female audiences because we don't have much female audience? Where is the reason in that?

And games are socially important. They are as important as any other popculture medium and multiplayer/online/social gaming provides an interactive social space as important as any other social media. Don't dismiss it so easily, you are missing out on how games influence you, your peers and the world around you. And you are missing out on influencing games in return in a positive way...



Froog  
on **October 31, 2012 at 1:36 am** said:

You know nearly half the owners of Gameboys were women, right? I'm sure men like to pretend that the reason games are so heavily marketed to men is because they're the only ones playing them because the truth of the matter sucks a great deal more than that.



mathk\_  
on **October 27, 2012 at 6:56 pm** said:

I widely agree with your observations. I have some thoughts on how sexism in video games may change over time. There will always be sexism in video games as long as pubescent boys make up a profitable market share. This is sadly a natural result of violent capitalism and we see it in every industry of mass entertainment, be it cinema, TV, music or whatever. I don't complain about sexism in Transformers or the like because they use sexism very consciously to gain more money off of their creation. We know that beforehand and can simply avoid such movies and watch something

good and to a degree meaningful most of the time even in mainstream cinema.

The thing is: We have to look really, really hard in the mainstream (aka. AAA) game industry to find something which doesn't seem to stem from a 15 year olds brain. The medium is so anchored in its one dimensional and exploitive bubble of fantasy escapism that it will not change. The decision makers in these companies are neither artists nor persons with a sense of societal perspective and telling them to be will not change a thing.

All I dare to hope for is a proper divide of the mainstream market into the equivalent of Michael-Bay-action movie like games for horny teenagers and dumb people (no need to talk around it) – and intelligent, multidimensional games for intelligent and multidimensional people (the majority? hopefully...?).

Sexism in video games is not a singular problem, rather than one of many symptoms of a lack of maturity in the mainstream industry. You not only see this lack of artistic ambition in gender depiction but in every aspect of games, mechanically as well as audiovisually.

We definitely need fresh people who are not men in their 20s, deeply rooted only in what you describe as geek-culture. We need more people who actually have something to say other than "GUNS, TITS, EXPLOSION, (ORKS)!" If we had that, than something like gender signifiers wouldn't even matter because a game would have something to offer other than its shiny surface.

I hope my point came across at least a little. Keep up your good work!



nine

on **October 26, 2012 at 12:44 am** said:

An incredibly comprehensive overview of gender signifiers in games — well done! This is going into my mental file for "things to link back to as much as possible in future".



Charles W

on **October 25, 2012 at 11:46 pm** said:

"I asked my twitter and facebook friends to send me female characters, which were memorable to them. I gave no additional qualifiers. I just wanted to know which characters impressed them or stuck with them for any other reason. I got roughly 300 responses from women, men, gay and straight and a few transgender people."

I just wanted to note that there's a lot of self-selection bias going on here. Your twitter and facebook friends are hardly a random sample, so they're probably going to skew towards people who are similarly minded to yourself. In this case, since you have the capability and inclinations to write an article like this, we wouldn't be surprised to find them to be more aware of gender issues than the average consumer of media.

I'm not saying that the other points aren't valid, but i suspect that the request for "memorable female characters" listed here is hardly representative.



admin

on **October 26, 2012 at 12:01 am** said:

Hey Charles...

Yes, you are right it is a selection of favorites of people who are to various degrees similar minded to me... I was not expecting to need to spell that out. Qualifying the participants of that poll as my friends and followers was enough, I thought. Anyway, now you spelled it out for me. Alright.

Regarding "hardly representative"... representative of what? I'm not sure what you are missing. There is no claim what so ever of any sort of general applicability, being representative for the public or large audiences or something like that.

So, yeah, it's a totally biased aggregated opinion of a group of people who are like minded enough to choose to subscribe to my posts, to add me as a social media contact and are gender aware enough to engage debate with me on that subject... and that's what this lists represents. I apologize for coming off patronizing, but I'm really confused about what you think you discovered here?



Charles W

on **October 26, 2012 at 3:52 pm** said:

I wasn't trying to make any kind of big point, but I think that when you're applying analysis to mass-market products, you should be taking the intended audience into account.

I guess I'd turn it around: what was the purpose of including the list at the end of the article? I assume that you're trying to make a point about how less gendered female characters are more memorable, but if you're only asking people who already tend to be aware of gender issues, they're obviously going to skew towards that interpretation.



It would be more convincing to take a random sample of the general population, and establish that even for people who aren't consciously aware of the signaling (or at least, have an average level of awareness), less gendered characters make a bigger impact. That would then have implications about the general desirability of choosing those designs when creating new characters. If the general population doesn't report a difference along those lines, then it might be worthwhile to note that and explore why.



admin  
on **October 26, 2012 at 6:18 pm** said:

Hey, charles, thanks for getting back at me...

**I guess I'd turn it around: what was the purpose of including the list at the end of the article?**

I invite you to re-read the first paragraph.

The purpose of the whole articles was to explore (and make a suggestions about) why gender depictions don't work.. for this specific situation: "Feminist critics and gender issue aware members of the gaming community decry the blatant sexism in video games, while growing in numbers and in relevance. On the other side, not so gender issue aware game devs, gamers and journalists feel threatened, blame it all on those who speak up, get defensive, retaliate or engage in preemptive attacks."

I'm specifically limiting the relevance of the depicted problems to people who already tend to be aware of gender issues and people who are not but are criticized for their sexist output. I don't adress general desirability, general popularity or anything like that at all. So a sample from a random audience or a sample from everyone in the world would not be relevant for the issue at hand.

Then in the last paragraph I give benchmarks for memorable characters, which are precisely a result of polling the already gender issues aware audience. That's the whole idea.

**If the general population doesn't report a difference along those lines, then it might be worthwhile to note that and explore why.**

The general public wont report a difference along those lines. Not at all. We don't need to poll them on this. Marketers don't do sexist design because it's hard to sell to the general population. It's nothing special and not worthy of note. If you poll them on issues like this they vote to install Prop8. Society is latend sexist, sexually normative or even explicitly sexist and horribly unaware of gender issues... And I don't need anymore exploration on "why". I need change.



Renee  
on **October 25, 2012 at 3:28 pm** said:

While I agree women are a bit to itemized in video games, I think it goes both ways. Designers also need to look at their creation of male characters and how it impacts how they are looked at as well. I'm sure there is an impact on men after playing Brick, or my husband is a strange anomaly that goes from a well spoken individual to a grunting madman for the next few hours.

I have no problem with women being pretty in video games. I do have a problem with them insinuating that I can not be strong. I'm an emergency responder, I have to be strong, don't make me play a character that suddenly is not. Or try to send these messages that only men can save the day. Or the only women who can save the day have perfect measurements and barely wear clothes. If I ran into a fire like that...well...it certainly wouldn't work now would it?

It isn't as if people can tell I'm a women with all that gear on anyway.



Wardog  
on **October 24, 2012 at 7:47 pm** said:

I definitely think everyone should be reading this, devs especially. I think everyone creating a character should first understand what all those signifiers mean and what the implications are when using them. It's actually weird how much of the gender discussion we would have finished if we could just double the amount of female characters in games and halved the amount of pink and ribbons. I'm not sure if that makes me happy or sad. This piece blends really well with what Extra Credits was trying to say about this same subject. To be honest, I think they never really managed to make their point clear, but this article is pretty clear.



Jamie

on **October 24, 2012 at 4:21 pm** said:

All very good stuff, but I think you're missing the point that equality cuts both ways and that the unrealistic depictions of male videogame characters in terms of build, physical endurance and also emotional stoicism have a big role to play in forming the self-perceptions of young men in our society and perpetuating many of the gender problems that have a negative impact on men.

Also, I'm a female to male transsexual. Ironically, geek culture was where I fitted in best before transition; and my experience of it is that many of the (cis) women who do make it in geek culture do so because they genuinely don't identify with the mainstream feminine norm. In fact, they're often unacceptably masculine to a mainstream eye. Women like my girl-geek friends are not acting like boys because they have to, they've found a world that works for them. I wouldn't like to see gaming start to exclude those women in favour of the conformist types.

In terms of what I experienced myself as an apparently female geek and IT industry employee:

How they are treated like they represent all women. – I generally found that my colleagues treated me more like some sort of bizarre and possibly explosive alien artifact. I found that frustrating, but to my mind it speaks more about an endearing lack of social skills than sexism.

How they need to prove that they are more than pretty faces – yep, that one's true. Though geeks as a group almost always consider themselves outsiders and male geeks are definitely expected to show their credentials in order to gain admittance to the in-group too.

How they are expected to conform to be accepted in the male dominated culture. – Conformity isn't a hallmark of the geek culture I know (and see above), in fact quite the opposite, but as a woman I had to be very careful about how I loaded visual gender signifiers in what I wore if I wanted to be taken seriously as an IT worker. I used to take a malicious pleasure in diving under people's desks to fix their PCs while wearing glittery jeans.

How they have to deal with male entitlement. – I didn't have issues with this, but then as a future trans man I was distinctly on the assertive side for a girl. Same reason I never got weirdos sitting next to me on buses either, probably.

How male geeks treat females like imitators. – Never saw it.

How they are treated as fair game, when it comes to uncalled for sexual advances. – Never saw it. While I am attracted to men, most of my geeky work colleagues and university friends seemed to think they weren't good enough for me. The longest relationship I ever had with a geek – a man who was by a lot of standards a genius – started with me asking him out because he couldn't believe I was genuinely into him. I think it's a very valid point that gaming constitutes escapism for men – imagine what a wonderful world it must be to get away into, where women \*aren't\* unattainable, scornful and disinterested.

How they per default are considerate less able. – yes, it often surprised my male colleagues when I turned out to know my stuff.

How women who are good looking and play that out get more attention. – BZZT, wrong. Human beings who play up their looks get more attention, not just women. I know a trans man who went from being daddy's little princess to being the most flirtatious man I've ever known – and it's astonishing (and incredibly irritating) how often his vapid manner gets him his way.

And how they get ostracized, when they publicly reject and criticize the standards above. – again, not in my experience. Locally, the geek men I knew exhibited a practically slavish devotion to understanding and learning feminist norms – largely because it made them more acceptable to the aforementioned strong-minded geek girls who hung out with my crowd.



admin

on **October 24, 2012 at 5:15 pm** said:

Wow, thanks for sharing your experiences here. I really appreciate you taking the time to add a different perspective here for all to read.

With all the sexist stuff going on and getting so much attention it is a nice reminder to look at what the culture has to offer for female geeks.

I have to say though, concerning some points you replied: It's great that your personal experiences thankfully do not match, but it seems like you are either missing or ignoring reports from the community. For example:

"How male geeks treat females like imitators. – Never saw it." – <http://www.google.com/search?q=fake+geek+girl>

"How they are treated as fair game, when it comes to uncalled for sexual advances. – Never saw it." –

<http://www.themarysue.com/black-cat-cosplay-harassment/>

"And how they get ostracized, when they publicly reject and criticize the standards above. – again, not in my experience. " –

<http://www.google.com/search?q=anita+sarkeesian+harassment>

This is not to make your personal experience any less valid. But I think it is important for readers to keep in mind, that the

experiences differ and what the possible correlations between negative representations and negative behavior are.

Again thanks for chiming in, it was great to read your thoughts here.



Meena  
on **October 29, 2012 at 6:34 pm** said:

—> "Also, I'm a female to male transsexual. Ironically, geek culture was where I fitted in best before transition; and my experience of it is that many of the (cis) women who do make it in geek culture do so because they genuinely don't identify with the mainstream feminine norm. In fact, they're often unacceptably masculine to a mainstream eye. Women like my girl-geek friends are not acting like boys because they have to, they've found a world that works for them. I wouldn't like to see gaming start to exclude those women in favour of the conformist types."

While I agree with this, I'd also like to point out that not identifying with a feminine norm doesn't mean a desire to be or act like a boy or man. I'm a geek girl, I've always been a tomboy and a bookish, nerdy type. My daily wardrobe is mainly gym clothes, jeans, and t-shirts, and I enjoy sports as much as I enjoy gaming.

The thing is, I also like going out in a nice dress, wearing makeup, and identifying as a woman. When I watch TV or read books, I gravitate toward books about women. And when I play video games, I enjoy playing female characters. And I feel like that's something that's been really limited for me. It's only recently that games have come out that have an equal number of women playable characters; ten years ago, Shepard would have only been a man and women gamers would have had to deal with it.

When I play games, first and foremost I want to be able to identify with the characters. Often times for me that means women. Even though I don't fit the mainstream feminine ideal, even though I don't identify with it, I don't really want to play a video game as a man. I'm still a girl and I still like being one! It sucks that if I pick up a sports game like FIFA Soccer, I don't get to play as my favorite female athletes. It sucks that fighting games still tend to have less female options than male.

It's just aggravating to me as a girl gamer that it's so hard to find games with female characters in them that I really enjoy playing and getting to know. I think game companies assume that girl gamers are more boyish already and that we don't mind playing as men, and that's not the case. Many of us want to play as women – and not some overly-feminine pink-washed joke, either. A real woman we can relate to.



admin  
on **October 30, 2012 at 7:41 am** said:

Thanks for bringing your perspective in.

Your call for more relatable female characters resonates with me, as a straight guy.. for two reasons:

1. I for one want to slip into a diverse range of alternative personas and playing as a fully realized female character is one way for me to experience that. I by far enjoyed playing FemShep more than MalesShep, because MaleShep was all been there done that in terms of role play. FemShep on the other hand, gave me interesting new bits because of the reversed well written gender dynamics.
2. I want more female creatives in making games and freely contributing to gaming culture. They bring really interesting perspectives on gameplay and narration, which is severely lacking in games today. And I want them to feel welcome as a member of the family and not dump them in the guest room...

And I realize, the overly-feminine pink-washed joke doesn't cut it, in that regard. And it sure loses its charm after a while. :/

Cheers.



Wardog  
on **October 24, 2012 at 2:14 pm** said:

Wow. Is this for a thesis or something? It's very impressive. I can't even comment on it without rereading it properly. Good work. It's seriously easy to talk about these things, lose sight of the goal and end up offering nothing of worth. It's no easy task to look into these pretty nuanced topics, which also tend to incite visceral, negative reactions and come out with some constructive conclusions. I'll comment again later when I have something vaguely intelligent to add, but until then, well done and thanks for the amazing insight.



admin  
on **October 31, 2012 at 2:52 am** said:

No problem. Glad you found it of interest. :)



Bel

on **October 23, 2012 at 10:46 pm** said:

While these design issues are very real, this article over-problematizes the use of feminine and female signifiers in designs for women and severely underplays (or under-recognizes) the masculinization of male characters, contributing to the very idea that it is protesting against: that male signifiers are "normal" and that female signifiers are "other."

The most egregious and explanatory example is the Borderlands 2 breakdown, where points made for the boys are sparse, whereas Lilith is thoroughly dissected for her hair, clothing, everything. This is unsurprising; discussion of this problem always focuses scrutiny on female characters and implicitly discards them for being too sexy, too girly, or too female. However, it's disingenuous. Why is it a gendered signifier that Lilith shows her stomach but not a gendered signifier that Brick shows off his massive arms, or shaves off all his hair, or has heavy scarring and no neck? Why is Lilith's behaviour and body language examined while the other characters' are not? It is abundantly obvious that Brick is as coded for masculinity as Lilith is for femininity; the problem is an intense and mutually exclusive sexual dimorphism, but the presentation of the issue implies that there is nothing about the male characters worth examining and it is only Lilith who could possibly be found lacking.

This isn't the only example that's disingenuous. While MShep and FemShep are hardly the worst examples of extreme sexual dimorphism in the game, there has been significant discussion over the fact that when it came time to pick a canonical FemShep face, going without makeup simply wasn't an option. Her hair is also a lot more coiffed and her breastplate accentuates her breasts and the narrowness of her waist, despite the fact that boobplates are never a practical design and it surely wouldn't make for a comfortable suit of armor. It is easy to overlook this because FemShep and MShep are virtually the same character, with the same lines and body language. However, if you're going to examine the design issue honestly, you have to admit that they are significantly gendered despite being the same character.

The biggest net problem with all of this is that it contributes to the strong cultural imperative to dismiss anything feminine out-of-hand as being inferior. Subtextually, I think that's a premise that this article supports. While the smurfette principle is terrible, feminine coding is neither inherently flawed nor inherently sexual; the problem is one of scale and diversity. The fact that a female character has been designed in pink does not ipso facto slot her into the virtual patriarchy (some cases in point include Aeris Gainsborough and Yukari Takeba).

You also may want to mention that Birdo is male and Yoshi is female, for greater context.



admin

on **October 24, 2012 at 12:04 pm** said:

Hey Bel... thanks for the elaborate comment and adding your thoughts here.

It's actually an issue for me to be as objective as possible in this kind of articles, while I have to be clear about the fact, that I am indeed biased. I really appreciate your second opinion here and you make valid points, though I have to disagree with a few things here.

I don't think that I skipped on male signifiers in my breakdowns.

With Borderlands 2 you list a few things which are mostly already covered in the breakdown or not identified properly as gender signifiers:

I don't see the imbalance in the recognition of male and female signifiers in this article as a result of a biased view, I see them very much parallel to the actual presents of female and male signifiers in the design.

**Why is it a gendered signifier that Lilith shows her stomach but not a gendered signifier that Brick shows off his massive arms,**

- the massiveness is already covered (emphasis on muscles and physical strength)
- showing arms is not a gender signifier, there is not significant difference in showing of arms between male and female clothing norms
- showing her stomach is a gender signifier, because clothing that reveals the stomach is almost exclusively found in female clothing norms.

**or shaves off all his hair, or has heavy scarring and no neck?**

- the first thing I defined about Brick is "shaved head"
- scars are no gender signifier, there is no cultural precedent I know of, where scars are a signifier for male gender
- no neck is already covered (emphasis on muscles and physical strength)

**Why is Lilith's behaviour and body language examined while the other characters' are not?**

- because the body language and behavior of the others is not gendered, except maybe Bricks emphasis on physical strength or his grunting, which are both listed.



It is abundantly obvious that Brick is as coded for masculinity as Lilith is for femininity;

correct...

Why are you correcting statements about Femshep and Maleshep, calling them disingenous? When there is actually no mentioning of how good or bad the two designs are? There is no statement here to be corrected.

So, while I am fine with your reasoning, and also think the reader needs to be aware of potential bias in my arguments, I really wonder how you came to your observations here.

**it contributes to the strong cultural imperative to dismiss anything feminine out-of-hand as being inferior. Subtextually, I think that's a premise that this article supports.**

Regarding your last point, I will actually amend the article to reflect that. This is in fact a danger here and not my intended expressed opinion. I clearly see how my article contains a lot of subtext like this and I will add an explicit paragraph to address and correct this soon.

**You also may want to mention that Birdo is male and Yoshi is female, for greater context.**

You are not the first to point that out and I had a few discussions on Birdo regarding that. Since he is not transgender in western release, it actually enhances my argument and yeah, the context is interesting enough to add.

Thanks.



**Erlend Grefsrud**

on **October 24, 2012 at 6:14 pm** said:

Bel highlights an issue I've always found troubling: Why is it that casting women as feminine using traditional feminine signifiers is wrong? To me, this implies that the concept of femininity is itself defined as a result of masculine dominance, suggesting that women who regard themselves as feminine and express their femininity are implicitly victims of male dominance.

If it is suggested that femininity is exclusive from masculinity and therefore negative, it follows that masculinity is a positive value. While — for the purposes of discourse analysis — this is a useful and interesting position, it is purely academic. While masculine values are certainly privileged, especially in Judeo-Christian Western culture, that is not to say that they are positive.

Conventional masculine values such as competitiveness, strength and authority are sources of conflict, stratification and dominance. None of these outcomes are, in my opinion, positive. On the other hand, conventional feminine values such as caring, nurturing and loyalty are sources of bonding, communion and equality. Obviously, of course, my categories here are heavily biased and does not encompass or exemplify masculinity or femininity — they are offered for the sake of argument.

I agree that defining femininity as that which is conventionally understood as sexually arousing to men is problematic, and that defining women (and femininity) through sexualizing signifiers is limiting and inconducive to equality. But these are questions of sexual (as opposed to gender) roles and power dynamics in male and female sexuality, and not of the relative merits and virtues of masculinity and femininity per se.

In short: What's wrong with femininity? Why is it seen as problematic in relation to masculinity, when the problem is not one of masculinity or femininity, but an unequal society where sexual power dynamics can deeply affect a person's opportunities and experiences in life and where — indeed — there is a clear privileging of masculine values?

If anything, efforts to strengthen the perceived value of femininity and its expression sounds like a better strategy for equality than suggesting femininity is, implicitly, a state of victimhood.



**Bel**

on **October 24, 2012 at 8:14 pm** said:

The objection re: the Borderlands thing is that you have grouped a lot of stuff for Brick under "emphasis on strength." The way the image winds up looking is that there are only 2-3 points for each male character and then this gigantic laundry list for Lilith — the visual presentation of the points and the way that you broke it down problematizes her more than anybody else. I'm sure that if you tried you could come up with as large a list for Brick, for instance, and condensed Lilith's to "Emphasis on flirtatious sexuality." We'd lose, by my count, 12 points off her count, and the whole thing would look less weighted.

As for the femshep/mshep — I'm responding to the article headers and the statement: "Just imagine what Mass Effect would have been like with this gender signifier overload bullshit." It just bothered me because there IS a lot of signifier bullshit going on, a lot of which was unpacked during the whole choose-your-Femshep facebook contest.

Anyway, thank you for the response and sorry for the points I missed. I'm glad the issue was already on your mind and I appreciate that you engaged with me.



admin  
on **October 24, 2012 at 8:20 pm** said:

Ah, alright. I see. Yeah, the way you look at signifiers and group them or treat them like single instances (leaf versus branch versus tree versus forest dilemma) is of course arbitrary. So I admit, that I could have structured the signifiers in a way, where Brick's and Lilith's list would be much closer in length.

Yeah, and with FemShep MaleSHEP... yeah, it could be much more neutral, though I don't see the signifiers as a limiting factor, since the overall character, even at first glance has much more to offer than her gender.

Cheers and thanks for the conversation as well.



Bel  
on **October 24, 2012 at 10:42 pm** said:

"yeah, it could be much more neutral, though I don't see the signifiers as a limiting factor, since the overall character, even at first glance has much more to offer than her gender."

That's a really interesting statement, though. How do you determine what a character has to offer at a glance? Do you think that Lilith or Catwoman or, say, Lara in her heyday have more to offer as characters than just their femininity? And how does the established tendency to dismiss female characters as "the girl" relate to those first impressions? Does male character design in mainstream video games manage to communicate anything other than "dangerous manly dude?"

Food for thought for another article, perhaps.



Mariah  
on **October 29, 2012 at 1:06 pm** said:

Honestly, I didn't have any problem with the way he stated anything, because I thought he was being ironic in his evaluation. His stating that female attributes are so pushed and are looked at as "less than" was like, "see how obviously wrong they were about these things?"

I never thought that the writer himself had any bias toward thinking of feminine signifiers as "bad", but rather, the very article was him saying they are not bad, and are being abused by game designers.



admin  
on **October 30, 2012 at 7:24 am** said:

You are right, I don't have that bias. I'm glad it didn't read for you in that problematic way. However, I totally can understand, that it can read to people as if I'm bashing expressed femininity in general. That's why I was totally fine with Bel's well put criticism about problematic subtext. So I (hopefully) cleaned that up. The criticism eventually helped me make my point clearer.

Thanks for chiming in. :)



Hans Johansson  
on **October 22, 2012 at 2:02 pm** said:

You should checkout the new Tomb Raider game... Character first, gender... not so much.



Nacho  
on **October 21, 2012 at 9:43 pm** said:

Many people do art for love of expression, not for the morals of it. The solution here is for everyone to choose to design

their game's characters however they see fit. If your concerns include gender equality (mine do, btw), your games will make the world a better place.

Art is a void concept, there is no art, only aesthetics. The sexually repressed artist who likes to draw generously chested female characters, is still an artist.



admin  
on **October 21, 2012 at 9:51 pm** said:

Correct!



Bel  
on **October 24, 2012 at 12:46 am** said:

Design isn't art. Design is functional, not purely expressive. Confusing the two will always lead to bad design.



admin  
on **October 24, 2012 at 11:38 am** said:

Also correct.



Cereja  
on **October 21, 2012 at 8:27 am** said:

I am a person – who happens to be female. I am not female first, I am a human. So write me as a person, and let my voice actor worry about the subtleties of gender. -> I wish more studios would get this. I wish more studios would look at successes like Community and see that a multi-racial/gender cast can be full of memorable, realised characters without falling onto racial and gender stereotypes.

Anyways, I can see I'm preaching to the choir, but great article!



admin  
on **October 21, 2012 at 10:02 pm** said:

Amen! ;)



Jenna  
on **November 3, 2012 at 2:10 am** said:

– edited by admin –

Admin note: No, Jenna, not in my house.

These kinds of comments wont be approved here.

Sincerely, Anjin.