

## Female Representation in Videogame Protagonists

Growing up, I always thought of videogames as a club that I wasn't invited to join. All the boys seemed to be up in their "no girls allowed" treehouse, hoarding all the Xboxes and PlayStations for themselves. Even when my family got a Wii, which was supposed to be the "family system," my brother would never let me play *Super Smash Bros* with him and his friends. The few times I was let in to the club for a moment, it was only so my brother could watch me fail at live multiplayer in *Halo*. Other than a *Zelda* game that came with my Nintendo DS, the only games my parents ever bought me were themed around puppies or shopping. Even if I had been presented with a more traditional first person shooter, I would have been intimidated by it to the point of not playing it. I was convinced that I would be terrible at traditional videogames. It seemed to me that everyone else (i.e., boys) was born with a natural talent for shooting and punching—a talent that I lacked.

This all changed for me the first time I played *Portal*, a first person puzzle game where the player uses a Portal Gun to solve platforming puzzles in a science facility run by a sarcastic and homicidal AI. The game was the opposite of the videogames that I thought I couldn't play; there were no enemies to shoot and no opponents to fight. Instead, the mechanics of the game were based on my ability to problem solve and apply the techniques that I had been taught. I immediately fell in love with the game, and the genre of games that had just been revealed to me. But I didn't realize at the time how rare a certain aspect of *Portal* is in modern games; it has a female protagonist who isn't sexualized.

In an era of heightened social and cultural awareness, it's rather obvious to most people that the representation of women in videogames is severely flawed. For most of gaming history, there has been a clear bias towards what marketers view as "masculine" themes. Even when publishers began to turn out games that were marketed towards women, the assumption did not change. Instead, we saw an influx of games about shopping, cooking, and fashion. This is insulting to both genders, as the underlying implication is that boys will only be attracted to violence and sex, and girls will only be entertained if there is a kitten or a dress on the screen. In reality, people's interests are more nuanced than that, but the assumptions marketing teams make are only a small part of the larger issue.

The idea that publishers refuse to consider is that women, like men, enjoy a challenge. We enjoy the same themes that pop up again and again in the most popular single player games: conquest, battle, emotional investment, and compelling narratives. Even as a kid, I was able to understand this fact on a basic level. When I was given one of the all-too-common high school dating simulators as a gift, it gathered dust in my closet while I played *The Legend of Zelda: The Phantom Hourglass* on my Nintendo DS. The imitation of suburban teen life that is so prevalent in videogames marketed towards girls had no appeal to me. What I wanted was to use gaming as an escape from everyday life. I wanted to pretend that I was an adventurer or an assassin; someone who is highly capable and ready to kick ass. What I didn't want was to pretend that I was a slightly different white teenage girl living in a slightly different neighborhood going to a slightly different high school. But that "fantasy" is what I was presented with time and time again.

The lack of female representation in games also does damage to the male fan base. When people are only presented with the voices of others who are just like them, it creates an echo

chamber. This isolation from diversity cultivates a culture that is less accepting of outsiders. It's difficult to affect change when your community doesn't believe that you belong or that you're sincere in your interests. Once I was in high school and I began to attempt to socialize with people over our shared interests, I was met with two different kinds of responses. Some boys would treat me as a mystical being, e.g. "a girl who likes videogames! Let's ask for her autograph." Others would simply not believe me and insist on testing my knowledge, e.g. "Oh yeah? Well she can't name every Mortal Kombat character, so she isn't a *real* gamer." Both of these responses were fostered by communities that sincerely believe that women do not belong to their "club." There are, of course, examples of more extreme misogyny in the gaming community, such as online gaming harassment and the infamous "Gamergate." These issues stem from an inherent assumption that videogames are and should continue to be accessible only to males.

When it comes to the qualities that videogames offer consumers, it seems that both men and women should be equally enticed into playing. Videogames offer people a chance to be involved in stories in a way that no other medium provides. When you actually control the main character in a story, it's easier to empathize with their struggle and to become engrossed in their narrative. Videogames are inherently non-gendered, but the same cannot be said for videogame marketing.

In 1986, the videogame market crashed after it was flooded with low-effort and generally terrible games. Consumers lost faith in the industry, and adults stopped buying games for fear of being ripped off. Prior to the industry crash, videogames had been marketed towards both genders, but that trend was broken by Nintendo. The company's solution to the crash was to move their products from the electronics section of store into the toy section. But while the

electronics section was gender neutral, the toy section was split into a “boy’s side” and a “girl’s side”. Ultimately, Nintendo chose to sell their products on the boy’s side, and soon all of their ads were clearly geared toward a young male audience. Following Nintendo’s success, other companies followed suit (Peone, 2015).

From then on, games were designed and sold with a male audience in mind. Soon the whole industry was viewed as a masculine medium, and women were excluded from participating. It was this decision by Nintendo that placed the modern gaming industry in its current state where women are seen as a rarity or a novelty.

Personally, I have experienced every side of modern gaming sexism. I’ve had people at GameStop ask me if the game I’m buying is for my brother. I’ve had “friends” quiz me on game trivia in order to prove that I’m a “real gamer.” I’ve had to listen to people defend sexist depictions of women in games for a whole Pandora’s Box of reasons. And while I’ve gained much from these conversations (e.g., tactics for shutting those futile arguments down), I’ve grown tired of constantly having to prove that I belong to a club that shouldn’t be exclusive in the first place. But I have learned that most of the sexist ideas about women in the gaming industry stem from a lack of representation.

The gaming community is an echo chamber. Until recently, it was isolated from the rest of media. While a person who doesn’t watch many films might still be able to quote lines from a blockbuster movie, a person who doesn’t know anything about videogames probably can’t name any major game characters besides Mario. Because gaming culture has been so secluded for so long, it’s easier for development studios to get away with things that wouldn’t fly in different major media markets.

For example, in the 2015 game *Metal Gear Solid 5* there is a female character named Quiet who is the poster child for the objectification of women. Quiet is a sniper who almost never speaks and wears only a bikini and fishnet stockings. She also lives inside a cage on a military base, where the



*Quiet's character design in Metal Gear Solid 5*

player can watch her shower for no apparent reason at all. At one point in the game, there is a moment where Quiet will give the player a halfhearted lap dance, again with no context or reasoning behind it.

These activities take place in a game that is otherwise completely unrelated to sex. The developers of games like these do not attempt to hide their blatant pandering to misogynistic male gamers, who, in my experience, do not make up the majority of consumers. It is unnecessary to most people's enjoyment of the game, and seems to serve no purpose other than to please a very small segment of the audience.

This blatantly dehumanized "dream girl" depiction of femininity would be almost expected in a fetishized niche game with a small release, but *Metal Gear Solid 5* sold upwards of six million copies and belongs to one of the highest-selling franchises in all of gaming history (Dunning, 2016). Furthermore, when there was some public outcry at the ridiculousness of Quiet's character, the game's lead designer Hideo Kojima's response demonstrated just how deep sexist ideas in gaming are ingrained. He was quoted as saying "I created her character as an

antithesis to the women characters [who] appeared in the past fighting games [and] are excessively exposed...but once you recognize the secret reason for her exposure, you will feel ashamed of your words & deeds” (Wilson, 2015).

When it was later revealed that Quiet had to be almost naked on full combat missions because she “breathes through her skin,” Kojima showed just how blind he is willing to be to his own sexist ideas. Even if you ignore the fact that a person who breaths through her skin would probably shave her head before running around in a thong, Quiet’s character design is still ridiculously objectifying. Kojima presented Quiet to his audience as a present wrapped in fishnet stockings, and then he shamed them when they found her to be grotesquely over-sexualized.

All of the examples of dehumanized female characters in videogames become all the more insulting when you realize that most were created by men to serve their purposes. They are not given agency, and their character traits and personalities are completely ignored in order to sexualize them. Many defenders of these single-purpose characters point out that some women do choose to dress this way. They say that if you shame the creators for making these choices, then you’re shaming a women’s choice to dress in a provocative manner. But the real women who dress provocatively are able to make the choice to do so. They make the decisions for themselves and they aren’t created for the sole purpose of selling sex to a male audience. And on top of that, many women don’t dress provocatively, which you wouldn’t be able to gather from most videogames.

However, there are instances where female characters are treated with the same respect as their male counterparts. In the new game *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, the protagonist Aloy is dressed in a way that makes sense for her story and character traits. She is a hunter, and so she wears

hunter's clothes. On top of that, she is a well thought out character who received the same amount of care and respect in her development as any male protagonist would.



*Aloy's character design from Horizon: Zero Dawn*

Producing more games with strong female leads like Aloy is important for many reasons. For one, it allows male gamers to emphasize with female characters. This would hopefully allow apprehensive male gamers to become more accepting of female gamers in the future. But more importantly, female protagonists attract female gamers. Playing videogames is beneficial in many aspects, and making it easier for women to reap those benefits could have a huge impact on their lives.

When I first saw gameplay footage from *Horizon: Zero Dawn*, I was elated to finally be able to completely relate to the protagonist of a mainstream videogame. I saw that Aloy is a young woman with red hair, freckles, and a round face, just like me. But besides being excited about our physical similarities, I was happy to see that Aloy was presented to the audience in a respectful and realistic way. I was especially enthusiastic about the fact that she wasn't overly

sexualized. But while I was expecting to be able to put myself in Aloy's shoes, I wasn't prepared for how meaningful my emotional connection would be.

About a week before *Horizon* came out, my mom passed away unexpectedly. This was obviously extremely difficult for me, and so I turned to my comforts in order to cope. One of my main comforts is playing videogames, and the heavily stylized and high-concept world of *Horizon* was especially alluring due to its immersive qualities. I wanted to escape from reality, and *Horizon* seemed like the perfect way to do that. So I started playing.

What I didn't know was that Aloy's character arc is entirely based on the loss of her father figure, Rost. When the scene came where Aloy is unable to prevent Rost's death, I was overcome with emotion. I had been using *Horizon* as a form of escapism, but the game's narrative was forcing me to grieve. Had I known beforehand what happens to Rost, I probably wouldn't have played. But being able to grieve the loss of my own parent along with Aloy allowed me to feel the emotions that I had to face in order to continue on in my day-to-day life. Never before had a game's story been so vital to my mental well-being. Never before had I felt so connected to a character in any form of storytelling.

This experience reminded me of why it's so important to make videogames with heroes of varying genders, sexualities, and races. Had Guerrilla Games, the development company behind *Horizon*, decided to go with a male character instead of Aloy, I wouldn't have had the same experience. Besides being fun and entertaining, good videogames provide a chance for the audience to experience emotions at a healthy distance. They allow us to relate the troubles of the main characters to ourselves, much in the same way that we relate to a good book or movie. That powerful connection is amplified when the player can see themselves in the hero of the story.



Unfortunately, this level of connection isn't that common for me due to the lack of realistic female protagonists in videogames. According to a survey of the games shown by AAA publishers and developers at the 2015 E3 conference, only 9% of the titles shown featured an exclusively female playable protagonist. This is in contrast to the 32% of titles shown that featured an exclusively male playable protagonist (Sarkeensian, 2015). To me, these numbers are both ridiculous and in dire need of change.

Some would argue that allowing the player to choose the gender of the main character is good enough. While it is a step in the right direction to create games that allow you to play as either a male or a female (which made up 46% of the titles shown at E3), those types of games do not allow for the same level of emotional connection that games with only one gender option provide. Having to design stories around heroes who can be played as either gender produces characters that are one dimensional and storylines that aren't unique. Two very similar characters, one male and one female, could go through the exact same situation and have very different perspectives and experiences. I have yet to encounter a game with both gender options that is able to create an emotional connection with me that is as effective as a game with only one well-designed character option.

The obvious answer is to push for a more even split between male and female protagonists, but many people are still against this solution. The reasoning I've heard the most often is that male gamers don't want to play as female characters. I find this argument ridiculous, especially given the fact that *Horizon: Zero Dawn* sold more than 2.6 million copies in its first two weeks alone (Makuch, *Horizon Zero Dawn Sells 2.6 Million Copies In Two Weeks*, 2017). In addition, *Horizon* is slated to sell more than 8 million copies in its lifetime, which is on par with the lifetime sales of *Uncharted 4* and *Metal Gear Solid 5*, both of which are games with

male protagonists (Makuch, *Horizon Zero Dawn Predicted To Sell 8 Million Units, Close To Uncharted 4*, 2017). On top of that, both *Uncharted 4* and *Metal Gear Solid 5* were additions to already well-established franchises, while *Horizon* achieved its impressive numbers without the benefit of familiarity.

Nevertheless, when talking about what causes gender disparities in games, it's just as important to talk about the culture surrounding games as it is to talk about how women are portrayed in the games themselves. After all, the culture is a huge part of what drives the industry. The online and offline communities surrounding videogames greatly impact the types of games that publishers are willing to take a chance on. If videogame culture does not become more inclusive towards underrepresented groups, it will remain difficult for publishers to feel comfortable publishing games that feature women and minorities in a starring role.

But as it stands, the videogame community is doing a very poor job of letting women in. A good example of this institutionalized sexism can be found in the story of Anita Sarkeesian's 2011 Kickstarter campaign. Sarkeesian set out to create a crowd-funding project that would allow her to produce a series of YouTube videos about the portrayal of women in videogames. The project was asking for a modest amount of money, and to quote Sarkeesian's 2012 TEDx talk, "the idea was that if you were interested in the project, you could donate, and if you weren't interested, you could choose not to donate" (Sarkeesian, 2012).

However, certain members of the gaming community were not happy that Sarkeesian was attempting to point out one of the flaws of the industry. Sarkeesian was bombarded with vile comments, messages, and hate mail. Many comments contained rape and murder threats, and most centered on Sarkeesian's gender and status as a feminist.



*A few examples of the many vile tweets that Sarkeesian received*

The abusers were able to organize their efforts using anonymous forums, and they were able to leverage the power of numbers to find Sarkeesian's address. Some members of the hate group even made videogames of their own that depicted Sarkeesian being raped by various popular videogame characters. There was also an online game created by an anonymous member of the community called *Beat the Bitch*. The game featured a picture of Sarkeesian's face that became progressively bloodier and more bruised each time the player clicked on it.

These anonymous, on line miscreants were able to hide behind their community in order to terrorize one person who had not and was not intending to cause any harm to them in any way. This instance demonstrates how certain parts of videogame culture can become echo chambers of hate and misogyny. In their isolated corner of the Internet, the perpetrators of this online abuse were able to justify their actions by relating it to their favorite activity. "They referred to their abuse as a game," Sarkeesian said in her TEDx talk. "In their minds, they concocted this grand fiction in which they are the heroic players of a massively multiplayer

online game working together to take down an enemy, and apparently they cast me in the role of the villain.”

By not allowing women into their community, these people were able to harm another person without having their actions questioned. They were able to effectively dehumanize a person and focus all their hate on her.

But while this incident is an obvious example of the rampant sexism surrounding some videogame communities, it also shows us that it's possible to overcome. After the extreme amount of cruelty that Sarkeesian went through at the hands of an online community, different online communities showed an overflowing amount of support for her cause. While Sarkeesian was being bombarded with abhorrent images and threats, other people were fighting back in her support. To top it all off, the Kickstarter campaign that started it all was funded at \$158,922, which is twenty-five times what Sarkeesian originally set out to raise.

The outpouring of encouragement and funds that Sarkeesian received show us that there is a large amount of interest in having better representation of women in games. It also seems that the issue remains unsolved not due to a lack of solutions, but due to the refusal to change by a small (but vocal) part of the community. These people seem to think that allowing women into what they view as “their club” will lead to the end of videogames as they know it. They seem to think that women who voice their opinions about the community's sexist issues are doing so because they hate videogames and want to destroy them. But the reality is that the women who are attempting to change things are doing so because they love videogames. They simply want to be able to participate in something they are passionate about without being attacked or feeling like they are only valued for their sexuality.

The result of allowing women in and changing the way we depict female characters will not be the end of videogames as an art form. In fact, the more people we can involve in gaming, the better the games will become. Jane McGonigal even argues that getting more people into the hobby will result in a better world, overall. In her 2010 TED talk, McGonigal stated “when we’re in game worlds, I believe that many of us become the best version of ourselves — the most likely to help at a moment's notice, the most likely to stick with a problem as long as it takes, to get up after failure and try again” (McGonigal, 2010). She then argues that we as a culture can harness the time that we spend playing videogames to solve real-world problems. McGonigal and her game development team have created multiple online games that generate progress, including one game called *Evoke* that teaches social innovation skills and actually allows the player to be certified as a Social Innovator by the World Bank Institute upon completion of the game.

While we already spend three billion hours a week playing online games, McGonigal argues that this number should be higher. She intends to raise that number to twenty-one billion hours by involving more and more people in the world of online gaming. While that number may seem high, McGonigal insists that it is the amount of hours required to be able to affect real, worldwide change. That number would be impossible without the inclusion of women in videogames.

McGonigal’s goal may seem far-fetched, but there have already been instances of solving real-world issues with the power of videogames. Take the University of Washington’s online game *Foldit*. The game used a puzzle-based game design to get players to figure out the structure of a retrovirus enzyme that had mystified scientist for decades (Gray, 2011). By harnessing the power of thousands of man-hours, gamers were able to solve the folding structure of the AIDS-

like virus in only three weeks. This groundbreaking research is being used in the development of AIDS medication, and will possibly lead to the saving of lives in the future.

Nonetheless, we can't ignore the fact that videogames are, primarily, an entertainment medium. It's important to remember that women deserve a chance to play not only because of what they will bring to the table, but also because of what they will gain from the experience. I know firsthand how important it is to make videogames accessible to everyone, regardless of gender. I know what it's like to play a game that makes you feel strong when you're at your weakest and powerful when you're starting to lose hope. I know how impactful a good story in an interactive medium can be. It is absurd that a woman could be discouraged from playing a game that would positively impact her life. Everyone should be able to join the community without feeling excluded or unwanted. Everyone should be able to experience the joy that videogames provide.

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