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# Changing the Narrative

Why Representation in Video Games Matters

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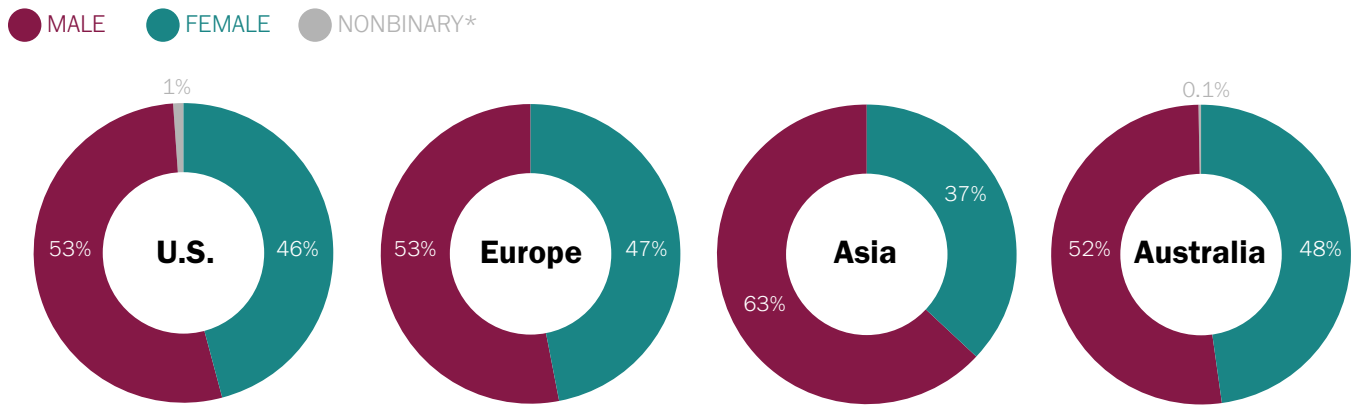
## Introduction

The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (GDI) is a research-focused organization with a mission to use data and insights to encourage broader representation in media. We understand the far-reaching effects that media has on our social, cultural, and individual values and perspectives—and this includes video games. Video games are an important cultural touchstone that also influences other forms of entertainment, and like other media, they play an important role in socialization. According to an Entertainment Software Association (ESA) survey from 2023, 62% of U.S. adults and 76% of U.S. youth (under age 18) say that they play video games.<sup>1</sup> And while that same survey found that the vast majority of players said video games bring them joy (86%), stress relief (83%), and community (71%), other surveys indicate that women and other marginalized communities report feeling excluded or that their identities are represented inauthentically in video games,<sup>2</sup> even as the share of female gamers rises across the globe (see Chart 1).

Limited characters and narratives create inequality in who feels represented. In his talk at the 2023 Game Developer Conference on the history of Latinx representation in video games, Joe Tirado of Latinx in Gaming explained, “Not all representation is equal.” Merely including Latinx characters isn’t enough, he said, if their portrayals boil down to merely “punching stuff ... and looking hot.”<sup>3</sup> Tirado and Latinx in Gaming are working to broaden the representation of Latinx characters in games: “We can do better. We can give them realistic motives. We can give them cool backgrounds and touch on all the really cool culture Latin America has.”

CHART 1

**Share of gamers who identify as men and women in the U.S., Europe, Asia, and Australia**

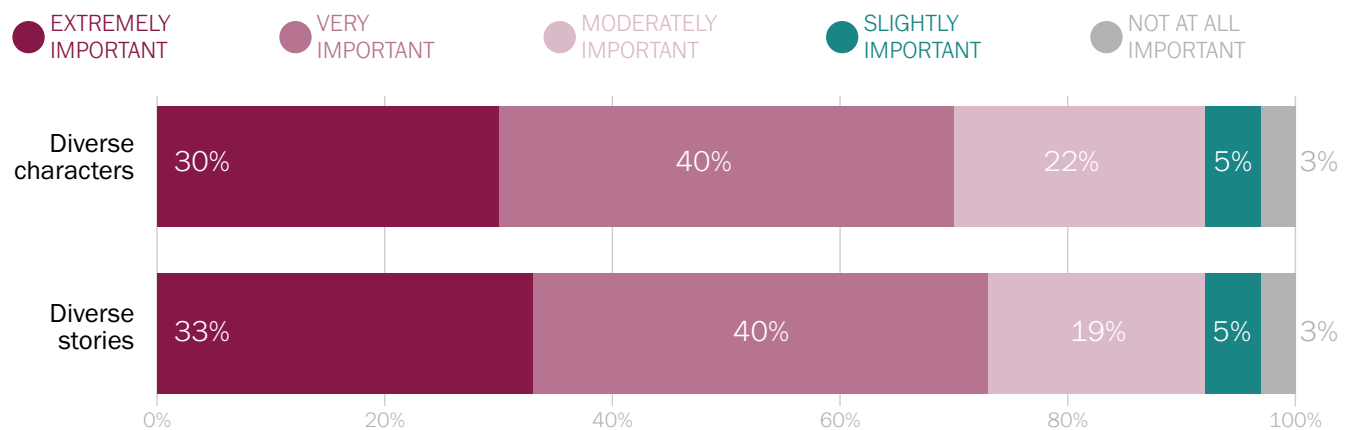


U.S.: According to a 2023 ESA report [https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ESA\\_2023\\_Essential\\_Facts\\_FINAL\\_07092023.pdf](https://www.theesa.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ESA_2023_Essential_Facts_FINAL_07092023.pdf)  
 Europe: According to a 2022 Video Game Europe report, <https://www.videogameseurope.eu/data-key-facts/key-facts-from-2022-europe-video-games-sector/#responsiblegameplay>.  
 Asia: According to a 2023 Niko Partners report <https://nikopartners.com/female-gamers-in-asia/>  
 Australia: According to a 2023 IGEA report [https://igea.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/IGEA\\_AP2023\\_FINAL\\_REPORT.pdf](https://igea.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/IGEA_AP2023_FINAL_REPORT.pdf)  
 \*Since nonbinary was not explicitly asked in some surveys, we used “other” or refused to answer as a proxy, when necessary.

The good news is that most players agree that inclusivity in games benefits all audiences; the Google for Games 2022 “PC & Console Insights Report” found that over 70% of respondents agree it is very important or important that games feature diverse characters *and* stories (Chart 2).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, according to a 2023 Niko Partners report, over half of surveyed gamers in Asia reported dissatisfaction with how women are represented in games.<sup>5</sup> And a recent survey from Australia found that the majority of respondents noted the importance of portraying diversity in video games, inclusive of accessibility, age, culture, language, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.<sup>6</sup> These surveys show a demand for more character diversity and more nuance in how these characters are represented.

CHART 2

**Demand for more diverse characters and stories**



Data source: Google/VGM, “PC & Console Insights Report,” January 2022. Online survey.

But inclusion alone is not enough. How diverse characters, cultures, and their narratives are shown also matters. For example, according to a survey from 2020, female gamers were 13 percentage points less likely than male gamers to say they can relate to the characters that match their gender (35% compared with 48%).<sup>7</sup> In that same survey, 62% of female gamers said female characters are oversexualized, which may be why many female gamers feel like they can't relate to characters of their same gender. About half (48%) said that there are not enough strong female characters in video games, signaling frustration with how women in video games show up. (Although ascribing traditionally male qualities to female characters [e.g., being physically strong] who are then positioned as aspirational reinforces the idea that feminine qualities are unheroic and that women are valuable only because of their adherence to male standards, a pitfall we will discuss further down in this paper).

Limited character development impacts all players because it can influence gamers' enthusiasm, retention, and more. As gaming scholar Dr. Adrienne Shaw explains, "[R]epresentation provides evidence for what forms of existence are possible."<sup>8</sup> More so than noninteractive media, video games create spaces that invite identity exploration and allow players to rehearse social encounters.

Recognizing that representational pitfalls create a chilly or hostile climate for some players is important, and this report is an effort to discuss some of these pitfalls, their effects, and opportunities for change. Many video games, especially indie games, are breaking the mold, but inclusive and authentic representation can be embraced more broadly.



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## Why Should We Broaden Inclusivity in Character Development?

Video games have historically catered to a white, able-bodied, young, male, cisgender, heterosexual audience, and research demonstrates that this is reflected in the characters within the games.<sup>9</sup> A study of best-selling games from the U.K. in 2017 found that women accounted for just 22% of characters and that people of color accounted for 20% of characters.<sup>10</sup> Another study of video game trailers found that about 18% of games showed a disabled character in the trailer and that about 1% of all characters shown were a playable disabled character.<sup>11</sup> In a study of video game dialogue, researchers found that male characters speak twice as much as female characters, with almost 94% of games including more male-dominated conversations. While the authors note this is in part due to fewer female characters in games, they also discuss the bias with to whom women speak and the content of what they say. Biases could even be traced to some game algorithms; for example, non-playable character (NPC) roles, like “guards,” are encoded male by default.<sup>12</sup>

How different groups are represented in media has an impact at both social and individual levels because representation is part of how we produce and share meaning within a culture.<sup>13</sup> Individuals use media figures to satisfy some of our need for sociality; the connections we feel to characters in media can help make up for social needs that aren't being met by traditional face-to-face experiences.<sup>14,15,16</sup> For playable characters in video games, these levels of identification can be even deeper since they serve as a sort of “digital identity” for their players throughout the experience of gameplay.<sup>17</sup> When characters from marginalized identities are missing from games or are represented in ways that affirm negative tropes and stereotypes, games may unintentionally send the message that those groups hold less cultural importance or value. Representation of historically marginalized groups may even be more consequential,<sup>18,19</sup> especially if it strengthens harmful group stereotypes that contribute to or reinforce negative judgements.<sup>20,21,22</sup>

Consequences of underrepresentation manifest in a number of ways. For example, players from marginalized communities are often shoehorned into “playing the enemy” rather than playing the protagonist because characters that represent their identities are less often heroes.<sup>23</sup> Gamers who do not have many opportunities to connect with characters that share their identities are also not well represented in other forms of media, which is why representation in video games is important. For example, members of the queer community, especially those who experience hostility from their families and/or communities, experience weaker face-to-face social support and are at greater risk for anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues than non-queer peers.<sup>24</sup> When creating a social connection to queer characters they see in video games, or to communities around video games with queer representation, LGBTQIA+ people can find sources of identification and belonging.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond players’ connections with video game characters, many games are designed to be played with others. This helps to simulate interpersonal trust and bonding,<sup>26</sup> which has been associated with improved self-esteem and social competency as well as decreased loneliness.<sup>27</sup> Games enable players to engage with others without many of the stressors and anxieties of everyday, in-person interactions while also providing opportunities for anonymization.<sup>28,29</sup> Additionally, many players use video game references in their offline lives as a part of constructing their group identity.<sup>30</sup> Having the space to develop these connections virtually can be especially important for marginalized players who may lack in-person role models or physical communities of support.

Diversity in gaming is important not just through the absence or presence of characters from marginalized groups but also through how those characters are portrayed. Discriminatory and stereotypical messaging can be communicated via several dimensions of their characterization, from their design to their personality traits.<sup>31</sup> In games with nonhuman characters, creators may default to real-world stereotypical analogs when conceptualizing these characters, such characteristics that are rooted in racial and ethnic stereotypes.<sup>32,33</sup> For example, in many fantasy games, orcs are often stand-ins for the racialized “other” and are characterized as brutish, violent, and primitive, or otherwise animalistic.<sup>34</sup>

Disabled characters in games are often represented in terms of disability-related tropes and stereotypes.<sup>35</sup> One of these common tropes is the “Super Crip,” which is a character who compensates for their physical disability with superior intellect or some other unique skill. A second disability-related trope is a character who is depicted as a medical oddity or an object of curiosity. This trope is common in the genre of horror games, where disabled characters are often depicted as unnatural or as medical experiments gone awry. Although disabled characters are uncommon in video games, their personalities are disproportionately represented as either violent villains or helpless victims. These representations can further stigmatize disabilities and have a negative impact on how disabled people view themselves.<sup>36</sup> Collectively, these tropes reinforce negative conceptualizations of disability.

Stereotypes can also be perpetuated through vocal inflections and performances.<sup>37,38</sup> For example, entertainment media has a long history of using exaggerated African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to engage in “linguistic minstrelsy”—that is to say, using parody and caricature to reinforce racist anti-Black stereotypes.<sup>39,40</sup> In sum, increasing the visibility of marginalized communities can cause harm if the way those characters are portrayed reinforces stereotypes or falls into reductive tropes.

The way a character is embodied, including customization options for playable characters and avatars, also has a significant impact on players’ experiences and can serve to reinforce or disrupt biases. This is discussed further in the next section.



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## Avatars Aren't Merely Ornamental

Visual aspects of representation in gaming can reinforce tropes and stereotypes about underrepresented groups. Sexual objectification is an important aspect of visual representation in which a character is defined primarily in terms of sex appeal and sexualized behavior. Such characters are portrayed as “sex objects” rather than fully fleshed-out and autonomous. Visually, objectification can manifest in terms of unrealistic body proportions (e.g., exaggeratedly large breasts, unrealistically skewed waist-to-hip ratio), sexually revealing clothing (e.g., lingerie, cropped or ripped clothing), or programmed mannerisms (e.g., submissive, coquettish, promiscuous).<sup>41,42,43</sup> Several years ago, a video surfaced that used animation switching to swap the bodies of Catwoman and Batman, drawing out the stark contrast in their movements, mannerisms, and how the audience was meant to view them.<sup>44</sup> To see the figure of Batman moving like Catwoman is a useful lens for thinking about gender, sexual objectification, and the “Male Gaze,” which is the tendency of visual media to cater to the perspective of a heterosexual male audience.<sup>45</sup> Analyses of sexual objectification at the intersection of gender and race find that Asian women are especially likely to be disembodied,<sup>46</sup> and women of color more broadly are fetishized and depicted as uncivilized and hypersexual.<sup>47</sup>



## The Sexualization of Characters in Gameplay

Research suggests female characters are more likely than male characters to be sexually objectified. For example, GDI's 2021 study "The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming" analyzed 27,564 characters featured in 684 15-minute segments from gameplay sessions with the top-20 Twitch streamers in October of 2020.<sup>48</sup> Differences in the representation of male and female characters were striking. Female characters were 10 times more likely than male characters to be shown in revealing clothing (25% compared with 2%). In addition, female characters were nearly five times as likely as male characters to be shown with some level of nudity (12% compared with 3%). This disparity also shows up in other aspects of media surrounding gaming. For example, an analysis of character images from popular American gaming magazines found that female characters were presented in a sexualized manner more frequently than male characters (60% compared to 1%); female characters were also more likely than male characters to be depicted as wearing less clothing (39% compared to 8%) and more likely to be featured in a way that combined sex and aggression (39% compared to 1%).<sup>49,50,51</sup>

Male characters are often depicted in a physically and behaviorally exaggerated fashion as well, although less commonly through a sexually objectified lens.<sup>52</sup> According to one study, Black men in video games are portrayed as physically strong and behaviorally aggressive in non-socially-sanctioned ways, while white men are also portrayed as aggressive but more often in socially sanctioned ways (military, law enforcement). In sum, many video games reify harmful stereotypes about men, simultaneously legitimizing prejudicial beliefs and broader racial injustices.<sup>53</sup>

Another important element of character embodiment is how it changes as characters level up. For example, male characters typically acquire more protective armor, but female characters continue to be portrayed in revealing and impractical clothing.<sup>54,55</sup> Research on adolescent socialization suggests these heavily stereotypic representations of masculinity and femininity in games influence gender-role development in adolescent girls and boys in ways that reinforce gender stereotypes.<sup>56</sup> Because adolescents spend so much time playing games (96 minutes a day on average for teens ages 13 to 18), and because games marketed to children in particular tend to be very strongly gender-coded,<sup>57</sup> the images they encounter and the messages these images send about gender, sex, and power can have a significant and lasting impact on their beliefs about gender roles and their own developing sense of masculinity or femininity.<sup>58</sup>

When asked to describe typical male characters in video games, teenagers used adjectives like "physically powerful, dominant, violent, mean and cocky." These descriptions reflect a vision of manhood that is "hypermasculine" and endorses "hardened sexual attitudes toward romantic partners, a desire for action and danger, and acceptance of physical violence" as an intrinsic part of masculinity.<sup>59,60</sup> Adherence to certain ideas about masculinity (e.g., natural dominance over women and the importance of heterosexual self-presentation) coincides with sexist beliefs in the context of gaming, including the endorsement of statements like: "Video games are a man's world, and women don't belong," "Women who play video games just do it to get attention from men," and "Women are too sensitive about sex jokes and nude pictures of women that circulate in games."<sup>61</sup> When male characters in games are depicted in these ways, these types of attitudes are likely to be more salient and consequential.

## Characters' Embodiment in Games Has Real-World Consequences

The effects of characters' embodiment on players are both external (contributing to beliefs about a group's social status or power relations between various groups) and internal (shaping a player's personal self-concept).

Past research suggests that sexual objectification of female characters in games and exaggerated, hypermasculine representations of male characters can influence players' beliefs about gender and power. For instance, experimental research shows that gameplay characterized by both sexism and violence (but not violence alone) amplified support for statements like "It is OK for a guy to use any and all means to 'convince' a girl to have sex," and depressed empathy for female victims of violence among a subset of male players who strongly identify with their in-game character.<sup>62</sup> Other research reveals that men exposed to sexualized avatars through long-term gameplay had a greater tolerance for sexual harassment and showed higher rates of rape-myth acceptance.<sup>63,64,65,66</sup> These findings track with research outside of gaming, which suggests that objectification makes women appear less competent and less than fully human in political and workplace contexts,<sup>67</sup> linking objectification to violence against women.<sup>68,69,70</sup>

A common thread in this research is that not all players respond to highly stylized and/or sexualized gender representations in a negative fashion. For most players, the enjoyment of games that include violent gameplay isn't grounded in sexism or sadism but is instead motivated by factors related to skill and mastery or to social relationships tied to the game.<sup>71</sup> Negative effects and problematic behavior are more common for players with particular predispositions or socialization experiences that can be activated by highly stylized and limiting gender representations.<sup>72,73</sup> For these players, stereotypical and even sexist beliefs can be reinforced and even magnified through gameplay.<sup>74</sup> While it's important not to paint with a broad brush, this subset of players can have an outsized impact on the gaming community through sexist and homophobic commentary, trolling, and even harassment.<sup>75,76,77</sup>

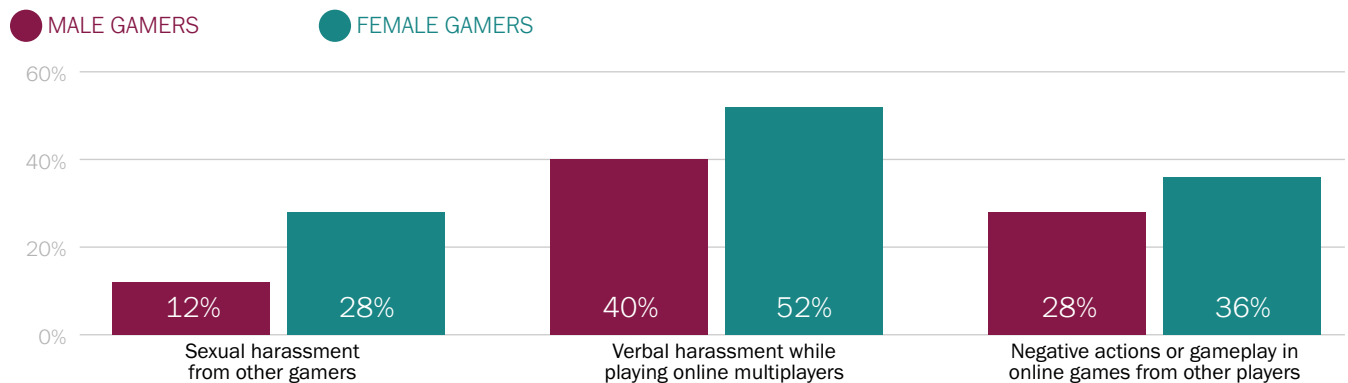
While both male and female players encounter negativity on game-centered streaming platforms, research suggests negative comments aimed at women tend to be focused on physical appearance, whereas negative comments aimed at men tend to be focused on skill and aspects of gameplay.<sup>78</sup> In GDI's previous gaming report, "The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming,"<sup>79</sup> we analyzed the comments sections from 684 15-minute gameplay segments from the top-20 Twitch streamers in October of 2020. Our content analysis revealed that sexist language (e.g., "bitch") appeared in about 38% of gameplay segments, and that sexually degrading language (e.g., "suck my dick") appeared in about 24% of segments. In that report, GDI also conducted a survey of 1,050 boys and men ages 10 to 26 who identify as regular gamers. Forty percent of those surveyed reported regularly witnessing sexism, ableism, ageism, and sizeism in online gaming spaces.<sup>80</sup> The Anti-Defamation League's recent report "Hate and Harassment in Online Games" makes a similar point, highlighting gender as the most frequently cited reason for identity-based harassment and abuse in online games between 2018 and 2022.<sup>81</sup>

Gender representations also have implications for players' self-conceptions. Research suggests that women internalize objectified representations of other women through repeated exposure to objectification in media. This psychological process of self-objectification is associated with depressed personal efficacy,<sup>82</sup> increased preoccupation with one's appearance, decreased body satisfaction, and in some cases, even depression and disordered eating.<sup>83</sup> While self-objectification can be triggered by any kind of media consumption, researchers have identified a connection specifically between playing sexualized avatars in video games and self-objectification in young women.<sup>84,85</sup> In a survey of young women gamers conducted as part of a collaboration between Dove, Women in Games, and the Center for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England, Bristol, 35% reported feeling lowered self-esteem based on the lack of body diversity in female characters.<sup>86</sup>

Women sometimes opt not to play female characters, and report avoiding feminine screen names or voice chat functions that would reveal their gender in games, due to negative experiences while playing.<sup>87,88</sup> In a 2020 survey of female gamers, 1 in 4 said they experience sexual harassment (compared with 1 in 10 men) (Chart 3), and 1 in 3 women said they play only while alone and offline (compared with 1 in 4 men).<sup>89</sup> At times, female players are gender-swapping (i.e., playing male characters), therefore capitalizing on customization to thwart objectification and to avoid detection given the undesirable behavior they sometimes encounter in gaming spaces.<sup>90,91,92</sup>

### CHART 3

#### Different experiences with sexual harassment for male and female gamers



Source: Bryter. (2020). Female Gamers Survey.

Question: “Which of the following types of abuse or discrimination have you ever experienced in and around gaming?” Base: Gamers who have experienced abuse (1114); women (530), men (582).

These findings about gender expression in gameplay have important implications for game design. Avatars aren’t merely ornamental. Avatars offer users the opportunity to explore new identities and/or to allow them to strategically navigate uncomfortable social aspects of online spaces. Social psychologist Nick Yee coined the phrase “the Proteus Effect” to explain the ways that the characteristics of virtual worlds, and especially virtual embodiment, shape the way players think and behave in ways that fall outside of their conscious awareness. In Greek mythology, Proteus was a god of the sea who was able to change form. In a series of studies where players were randomly assigned to different avatars, Yee and his colleagues demonstrated that an avatar’s age, attractiveness, height, skin color, and gender influenced aspects of players’ behavior, including their extraversion, aggression, and risk-taking.<sup>93</sup>

The basis for these connections between one’s in-game appearance and behavior is something known as “self-perception effects.” Bodies, even virtual ones, have a way of importing stereotypes and social norms from the physical world because people rely on the same cognitive architecture to navigate online and offline spaces. Research on gender-swapping in games highlights this connection. In studies where players were randomly assigned to play a male or female avatar, players with a male avatar demonstrated more aggression in an unrelated partner activity conducted in the lab after gameplay, suggesting one’s character activates stereotypes linking gender and aggression.<sup>94</sup> These associations work both ways. Another study evaluated healing activity, which is a stereotypically feminine behavior in most games, and found the gender of the character shaped healing-to-damage ratios. When male players played female characters, they engaged in more healing-related behavior, and when women played male characters, they engaged in less healing-related behavior. In this fashion, players enacted the social expectations linked to their character’s gender.<sup>95</sup>

A character’s embodiment, in addition to their identity, personality, and voice, is tied to a game’s narrative because its narrative foregrounds matters of identity, identification, and agency.<sup>96</sup> In this manner, character representation and narrative are inextricably linked. This is discussed further in the next section.



Carlos Barquero/Moment via Getty Images

## Counternarration and Representation

Video game storylines and narratives are key to understanding the state of identity and representation because they set the stage by establishing context and themes for the characters (although the purpose of storytelling in games is debated<sup>97</sup>). As Dr. Adrienne Shaw argues that identification “occur[s] largely through the narrative, non-medium aspects of games rather than through their interactivity.”<sup>98</sup>

### Narrative Tropes Can Reinforce Exclusion and Inequality

Game developers often rely on the traditional “Hero’s Journey” story structure, focusing on male characters in the hero’s role and relegating female characters to be “acted upon, most often reduced to a prize to be won, a treasure to be found, or a goal to be achieved” by a male hero.<sup>99</sup> This trope is known as “Damseling,” and it is an example of the prominence of narratives that center masculine heteronormativity. Popular characters, especially princesses, are largely damsels in their games, lacking the agency to save themselves or others. Another narrative trope in which female characters are assumed to lack agency is “White Knighting.” White Knighting is when a male champion comes to the rescue of a woman he perceives to be helpless, and these actions are deemed feminist.<sup>100,101</sup> Another narrative trope in which female characters lack agency is the “Frigged Woman,” which is when the male hero’s backstory involves the violent murder of a woman he loves. This trope not only necessitates women’s trauma but also relishes in the hero’s “guilt over his failure to perform his socially prescribed, patriarchal duty of protecting women.”<sup>102</sup>

Research by media scholar Emma Reay finds that dead children in video games are also used as a device for legitimizing hypermasculinized violence.<sup>103</sup> These representations contribute to a culture where women and feminized children are seen as passive objects rather than active participants in a story. This characterization reinforces paternalism and fosters

an environment that may discourage women and children from fully engaging in gaming. A similar dynamic emerges when men and women embody animals, via costumes or anthropomorphization: Men largely act as predators and women largely as prey. Tropes that perpetuate the idea that women are always in need of rescue (or to be avenged) reinforce outdated gender roles and diminish the agency and capability of female characters. This not only limits the depth of storytelling but also reinforces harmful societal norms that undermine women's capacity both within and beyond the realm of video games. For these reasons, some advocates for improved representation in gaming encourage development teams to consider alternatives like ensemble, de-anthropocentric, and location-based storytelling.<sup>104,105</sup>

TABLE 1

**Common gendered tropes in video games**

TROPE	DEFINITION
<b>Damseling</b>	A plot device where a female character is in a perilous position, or distress, and needs to be rescued by a hero. The female character is the prize for the hero, and there is no (or little) opportunity to play or interact with her. In this sense, she is an object.
<b>White Knighting</b>	White Knighting is when a male protagonist goes to great lengths of personal sacrifice to rescue women he perceives to be helpless, with the intention of making himself feel good about himself, without considering whether the woman needs help at all.
<b>Fridged Woman</b>	When the male hero's backstory involves the violent murder of a woman he loves. This trope not only necessitates women's trauma but also relishes in the hero's guilt over his failure to perform his socially prescribed, patriarchal duty of protecting women.

Narratives that center on or assume white masculine norms also impact men of marginalized racial communities because they reinforce a narrow and exclusionary view of masculinity. Narrow depictions of masculinity can cause feelings of alienation and inadequacy among boys and young men who don't fit the mold of the stereotypical white man who serves as a protagonist in a popular game.<sup>106</sup> In the case of male protagonists, narrow depictions neglect the diverse experiences and identities among men, sidelining men of marginalized racial backgrounds. Narratives that assume white masculine norms contribute to a cycle of underrepresentation and reinforce the idea that certain identities are, by default, "normal," while others are less important or even invisible. At worst, these kinds of narratives pit a (literal) white knight against characters of color who are set up in the story as the enemy or as evil that must be vanquished, destroyed, or overcome. Breaking patterns of prejudice is an ongoing challenge, but video game narratives can play a role. Simply put, games "do things, and the manner by which they do them matters,"<sup>107</sup> because the actual world and the virtual world influence each other.

## How Can Counternarratives Broaden Inclusion?

Although narratives can be a source of underrepresentation in gaming, they can also be part of the solution, and many activists and organizations have focused on narrative to do that, providing a useful roadmap. For example, activist-journalist Tanya DePass created the initiative #INeedDiverseGames, a movement that advocates for diversity and inclusion within the gaming industry and community. And nonprofit organizations like AbleGamers, Black Voices in Gaming, Dames Making Games, Queerly Represent Me, and GLAAD<sup>108</sup> are working toward more diversity in game design by providing resources for creatives from marginalized backgrounds. Games for Change, a movement that focuses on using video games for social impact and positive change, created a category for “Best Narrative Game” in 2022. The 2022 winner, *Dot’s Home*, is a story about a time-traveling Black woman who learns about her family’s history and the traumas of systemic racism by exploring her grandmother’s house in Detroit. In 2023, the winner was *Gerda: A Flame in Winter*, which is a role-playing game that follows a young nurse trying to rescue her husband from the Gestapo during World War II. Players created these narratives for communities they wanted to see, and to explore who they are.

In short, these are efforts in counternarration. Counternarratives share perspectives that challenge dominant points of view or mainstream beliefs, typically from the point of view of a marginalized voice, and that challenge a status quo or conventional wisdom.<sup>109</sup> But video games can counternarrate against tropes that harm gamers of all identities. Tropes are not necessarily fixed, after all; they change direction by definition – the word “trope” comes from the Greek “trepein,” which means “to turn.” By encouraging resistance, justice, activism, and joy, “gaming ... offers a potential space for change” and invites players to play “against the grain.”<sup>110, 111</sup> Unlike “counterplay,” which is play that interrupts, fractures, or subverts gameplay or the process of becoming a player,<sup>112</sup> counternarration interrupts dominant narratives by creating new worlds and points of view.

In this way, the personal can also be communal. The strength of narratives that center on the point of view of marginalized identities lie in their ability to reimagine, resist, and remake ideas.<sup>113</sup> Moreover, they invite nonmarginalized gamers to see “life otherwise” (that is, differently).<sup>114,115</sup> Although alternatives to the status quo in the gaming industry will likely be met with some level of hesitation or even hostility,<sup>116</sup> diverse narratives are necessary for broadening inclusion in gaming. As digital studies scholar Dr. Kishonna L. Gray put it, “Overarching questions that should guide narrative engagement with games must be who created these games, who are these games created for, and are we collectively okay with the answers to both?”<sup>117</sup>



## Opportunities to Broaden Inclusivity in Character Development and Narrative Design

The insights in this paper shine light on opportunities for game developers and designers to broaden representation and diversify the portrayals of marginalized communities in video games. For creatives, these opportunities will help prevent the reproduction of real-world cultural stereotypes when creating new fictionalized cultures.

### 1.

#### DIVERSIFY ACROSS CHARACTER TYPES

Broadening representation in video games necessitates conscious choices about all character types. Representation can be broadened in games by being deliberate about the identities of protagonists, supporting characters, NPC bystanders, and quest-givers, villains, bosses, competitors, and lower-level antagonists in games, such as attackable NPCs. POV characters are especially important for representation and player investment because these are the players' points of access to the world itself and most often the main character of the story.<sup>118</sup> POV characters are also likely to be embraced by fan communities for derivative art and entertainment purposes, such as fan art, fanfics, and cosplay. The prominent NPCs that support the POV characters are also vital to a game's worldbuilding, narrative, and overall tone because they

are often the sources of information, comedic moments, drama, and heart throughout the gameplay. The identities of less prominent NPCs are also important, and improved diversity among these characters would make a notable difference by more subtly shifting the players' overall impression of the game without much change to the gameplay itself. Similar to the casting of background actors in film and television, thoughtful inclusion among peripheral NPCs can help a game feel more personal to marginalized players. Lastly, broadening diversity among competitors in video games (like villains, bosses, and attackable NPCs), who represent power and often reflect the social anxieties of the context in which they're produced,<sup>119</sup> can add depth and nuance to the game while simultaneously broadening players' exposure to diverse identities.

## 2. CREATE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CHARACTERS

Character dimensions like their voices and personalities are an opportunity to create dynamic characters that represent marginalized communities. Different accents, intonations, affectations, and cadences can change how a character takes shape and how they are received by the audience. Certain races and ethnicities can be implied through the use of culturally specific slang, dialect, and affectations, even if a character is nonhuman. But implying a nonhuman character's race through slang and dialect risks reinforcing reductive stereotypes. To avoid reinforcing reductive stereotypes, follow advice from the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) and Facebook Gaming, which recommends working with experts "to consult on cultural and social sensitivity and content culturalization."<sup>120</sup> Lastly, remember that neutrality isn't neutral. With nonhuman characters, it is easy to default to a perceived "neutrality" when casting voiceover actors, which ends up favoring whiteness and masculinity.<sup>121,122</sup> For example, characters designed without an explicit gender are often still voiced by male actors or given male names.<sup>123</sup> Be conscientious about each character's voice, name, and personality.

In addition to their voice, a character's personality can challenge stereotypes about marginalized communities. The more prominent a character is, the more space there is to make their personality more complicated and multidimensional. For peripheral NPCs representing a marginalized identity who may have only one or two defining traits, make sure to avoid the stereotype trap. For example, if most female NPCs flirt with a main male character, it sends the message that women's interest revolves around heteronormative romantic partnerships. Or if there is only one older male NPC and he is cantankerous and suspicious of the playable character, the stereotype of the "grumpy old man" is reinforced. Adding trait dimensionality so that the character is dynamic rather than one dimensional is one way to avoid this pitfall. If there is not room for character dimensionality, think about flipping stale stereotypes for something unexpected.

Lastly, use an intersectional lens when thinking about character dimensionality. An intersectional lens considers the intersection of gender, race, age, class, etc., and the impact of multiple systems of bias and/or prejudice. For example, attending to characteristics like race, class, and disability among queer characters is necessary to represent the queer community.<sup>124</sup> Quality representation demands looking beyond a simple accounting of character types, and exploring these nuanced intersections. As reviewed, players are interested in and attracted to characters with more nuanced personal qualities and backstories.



### 3.

## RECOGNIZE HOW CHARACTERS' IDENTITIES INTERSECT WITH WORLD-BUILDING

Consider how character design intersects with world-building. Characters emerge from a set of social structures that afford certain traits and limit others. Adding a Black female protagonist to a game, for example, without thinking through how this character's race and gender shape their experience in this fictional world renders it less meaningful. A harmonious blend of character identity and world-building will elevate a game's storytelling potential but also enhance its capacity to explore complex themes, cultural nuances, and social commentary, thereby transforming video games into powerful mediums for both entertainment and introspection. Not only do players want to see themselves in the games they play, but also they look to play games that reflect cultural competency.

### 4.

## INCORPORATE GAMEPLAY MECHANICS THAT ACTIVELY CHALLENGE RIGID MASCULINITY

Incorporate gameplay mechanics that actively challenge existing value systems that reward masculinity and punish femininity.<sup>125</sup> For example, games can reward players for engaging in cooperative, nonviolent interactions. If your game needs conflict to engage players or progress the plot, think about the actual skills required to navigate conflict. What are you trying to train players to do? Stay calm? Compromise? Recruit allies? Conduct strategic research? Take on a different perspective? If your game necessitates physical violence, think about how you can lean into that without glorifying and lionizing *mindless* violence. Similarly, challenge assumptions about masculine-coded skills as being more desirable than feminine-coded skills by using a hero's quest that involves strength, cunning, creativity, and collaboration to prevail. Design games that encourage empathy, cooperation, and gender-counterstereotypical behaviors alongside more traditional gameplay. Mix conflict-driven scenarios with those that emphasize teamwork and communication to reshape the way players perceive what is considered valuable. Characters' personalities can also challenge the assumption that masculine traits are associated with power and that feminine traits are associated with weakness by designing hero characters with a balance of positive masculine and feminine traits. Lastly, gameplay can also highlight "masculinity as constructed, contingent, performed, and played [which] necessarily challenges its stability and inevitability."<sup>126</sup>

## 5. INCORPORATE GAMEPLAY MECHANICS THAT ACTIVELY CHALLENGE IDENTITY-BASED STEREOTYPES

Challenge identity-based stereotypes with peripheral NPC's interactions with the playable character in how they provide useful information or side quests. For example, instead of all scientific exposition coming from a wise old man, flip that stereotype on its head by picking a field dominated by white men but representing it with a Black woman. Some other examples are Black men as "tanks" (dumb brute strength who can take damage), white women as "healers" (women as supportive and comparatively passive), and physically disabled characters as "tech support" or the "brain." When characters of color are mainly NPCs, they can be written in ways that focus on service or support for the main character, which further highlights a racialized status differential. To circumvent this problem, game designer and writer Meg Jayanth recommends shifting focus to write NPCs as if they were the heroes of their own journeys rather than tools to be used by the protagonist.<sup>127</sup> In sum, challenge preconceptions through gameplay mechanics.

## 6. ELIMINATE SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE

Does the gameplay include sexualized scenes, poses, or camera angles that objectify female characters? Does the game supply opportunities and rewards for dominating and violating women physically? Does the gameplay suggest that characters dominated and violated suffer but also show signs of enjoyment? Focus on enhancing the player's connection with female character's autonomous experiences and emotions, rather than defaulting to using women's bodies for titillation or their sexual humiliation and violation for rewards. Past research suggests that sexual objectification of female characters in games (and exaggerated hypermasculine representations of male characters) can influence players' beliefs about gender and power. As reviewed, gameplay characterized by both sexism and violence (but not violence alone) depressed empathy for female victims of violence among a subset of male players who strongly identify with their in-game character,<sup>128</sup> and exposure to sexualized avatars through long-term gameplay led to greater tolerance for sexual harassment and rape myth acceptance.<sup>129,130,131</sup>

Although we sometimes think about recreational gameplay as a form of escapism, our biases bleed into the game world, both through game design elements and the nature of gameplay itself. Much of this crossover is unintentional and operates outside of consciousness awareness, but it can exert a cumulative effect on gaming culture. Learning about these processes can help equip game designers to identify and counteract aspects of games that reinforce pernicious gender stereotypes and sexual objectification. These efforts are necessary as part of a larger effort to address the negative climate facing women in gaming. Often, harassment is explicitly sexual in nature. Intentional game design that limits sexual objectification and gender-based violence is an important intervention point.

## 7. BROADEN CHARACTERS' BODY TYPES TO TELL NEW STORIES

Given the broader effects of characters' physical features on players and gameplay, be deliberate about their embodiment and consider whether these choices are gratuitous. Ditch predictable tropes like overly sexualized female characters, and embrace a diversity of body types in character design to enrich gameplay experiences and create deeper connections for players. Existing studies find video games with avatar creation allow female characters less body-type diversity.<sup>132</sup> Consider the unique stories that different body types can tell, pair unexpected body types and personality traits, and consider the aesthetics of body-size diversity.<sup>133</sup> The unexpected is compelling, and players will appreciate grappling with the unexpected.<sup>134</sup>

Keep in mind that body diversity isn't about just body size but also gendered self-presentation. Provide options that don't fit neatly into the gender binary, and that reflect a fluid conceptualization of gender — one that's inclusive of queer and trans players.<sup>135</sup> Quality representation also means thinking about embodiment in an inclusive fashion that represents a continuum of disabilities.<sup>136</sup> Gaming is a particularly important social and recreational activity for people with limited mobility or other disabilities that limit the time they can spend outside the home.<sup>137</sup>

## 8. HIRE BALANCED DEVELOPER TEAMS

Scarce and sexualized representation of women in games may stem from women's underrepresentation among game developers. Similarly, racialized characters that reinforce harmful tropes, or culturally inauthenticity or insensitive characters may stem from the underrepresentation of people of color among game developers. A recent survey conducted by the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) shows that women constitute about 30% of game-developer positions globally, and just 5% are Black.<sup>138</sup> Improving representation in video games will require a shift within the development side of the gaming industry to facilitate more diverse teams. Authentic representation requires not only awareness among content creators but also the direct involvement of the voices who can speak to diverse perspectives and the nuances of identity. In recent years, this approach has been largely embraced by the industry, with Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion leadership, Employee Resource Groups, mentoring programs, and STEM funding initiatives that provide a direct pipeline into a more diverse development team, but a lasting shift requires a systemic culture change. An industry-wide commitment to the prioritization of inclusive design and culture is the path toward leveling up to become a space that truly welcomes all players.



## What's Next?

While the intent for inclusive narrative and character development is widely supported within the industry, efficacy or internal resources to dedicate to the effort may be highly variable. The general considerations put forth in this report are a first step toward increasing awareness of problematic character and narrative elements, and reducing objectification and dehumanization in gaming. But systemic change requires a collaboration across research, advocacy, and development.

As a part of this initiative, we have established a Gaming Advisory Council of game developers, publishers, and industry experts to help guide the development of an online and free self-assessment resource for game designers. This resource will invite game designers to ground their creative development with a baseline of research best practices, with guidance on how to incorporate research organically into the creative process, exciting new opportunities, and the player experience.

Still, we wish to convey that the complexities of representation and cultural competency are nuanced, so through this resource, we will also connect designers to leading nonprofit organizations that can consult on character representation based on specific identities.

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## **About the Geena Davis Institute**

Since 2004, the Geena Davis Institute has worked to mitigate unconscious bias while creating equality, fostering inclusion and reducing negative stereotyping in entertainment and media. As one a global research-based organization, the Institute provides research, direct guidance and thought leadership aimed at increasing representation of marginalized groups within six identities: gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, disability, age, and body type. Because of its unique history and position, the Institute can help achieve true onscreen equity in a way that few organizations can.

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