

### Video games have an opportunity to challenge traditional gender stereotypes.

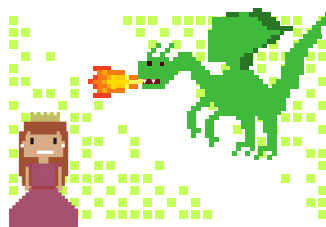
Research on adolescent socialization suggests that stereotypic representations of hyper-masculinity and -femininity in games influence gender-role development in adolescent girls and boys in ways that reinforce gender stereotypes.<sup>1</sup>

With women comprising nearly half of gamers worldwide, video games should reflect a more balanced vision of gender roles, move beyond outdated stereotypes, and create a more inclusive experience for all players.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

### Be mindful of backstories that rely on common tropes.

The “damseling” trope refers to when a male hero character is on a journey to save a female character in crisis.

In these stories, the women lack agency because they cannot save themselves, and they are reduced to a prize to be won or a treasure to be found.<sup>6,7</sup>



The “fridged woman” trope involves a male hero whose backstory includes the violent murder of a beloved woman. This trope

highlights women's trauma and depicts the hero's struggle with guilt for not fulfilling an assumed patriarchal role as a protector.<sup>8</sup>

### Examine how female characters' visual design impacts objectification of women.

Visually, objectification can manifest in terms of unrealistic body proportions (e.g., exaggeratedly large breasts, an unrealistically skewed waist-to-hip ratio), sexually revealing clothing (e.g., lingerie, cropped or ripped clothing), or programmed mannerisms (e.g., submissive, coquettish, promiscuous).

For example, game mechanics often reveal a gender disparity between skill and survival. Male characters typically gain protective armor as they level up, while female characters remain in revealing, impractical (and non-protective)<sup>9,10</sup> clothing despite becoming more powerful.

Consider the following questions when designing characters of all genders.

- Do they have unrealistic body proportions?
- Do they wear revealing clothing?
- Do they have clothing that falls off or rips in certain scenarios?
- Do they appear physically submissive or dominant in their standard poses?
- Do they appear sexually objectified?



### Seek opportunities to broaden portrayals of women in game design.

- Are female characters in control of their choices? Are women important to telling the story and not just an accessory?
  - Strong and interesting female characters have agency: the power to control their goals, actions, and destiny.
- Are there predictable gender tropes, like oversexualized female characters?
  - Enhance players' connections with the experiences of female characters in ways that do not rely on their physical appearance or sexuality.
- Do the skills and abilities assigned to characters reflect and/or reinforce stereotypes? Do they challenge them?
  - Create playable female characters who are equal in skill and ability to their male peers.

### Positive Portrayal In-Game Example: Aloy, *Horizon Zero Dawn*

In the post-apocalyptic game *Horizon Zero Dawn*, it was important to the women-led development team that the game's female protagonist, Aloy, had an interesting and complex personality, regardless of her gender. She is not defined by her female identity, nor are her abilities or achievements diminished by comparing them with those of men. Her physical features are realistic, as is her attire – which is actually suitable to her tasks!



Image credit: Guerrilla Games

Bonus: The narrative interrupts the “fridged woman” trope when another female character, Ersa, not only survives being captured for a sacrifice but also goes on to lead an army that eventually defeats the king who was responsible.



<sup>1</sup> Dill K., & Thill K. P. (2007). Video game characters and the socialization of gender roles: Young people's perceptions mirror sexist media depictions. *Sex Roles*, 57: 851–864.

<sup>2</sup> Newzoo. (2021, May 10). *Spotlighting women gamers and how they play and spend on video games*. Newzoo. <https://newzoo.com/resources/blog/spotlighting-women-gamers-and-how-they-play-and-spend-on-video-games>

<sup>3</sup> Sarkeesian, A. Nine Tips for Designing Better Characters in Video Games.

<sup>4</sup> Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., & Ivory, J. D. (2009). The virtual census: Representations of gender, race and age in video games. *New media & society*, 11(5), 815–834.

<sup>5</sup> Lynch, T., Tompkins, J. E., Van Driel, I. I., & Fritz, N. (2016). Sexy, strong, and secondary: A content analysis of female characters in video games across 31 years. *Journal of Communication*, 66(4), 564–584.

<sup>6</sup> Burgess, M.C.R., Dill, K. E., Stermer, P., Burgess, S.R., Brown B.P.(2011). Playing with prejudice: The prevalence and consequences of racial stereotypes in video games. *Media Psychology* 14(3): 289–311.

<sup>7</sup> Dyer, R. (1999). The role of stereotypes. In P. Marris & S. Thornham (Eds.), *Media studies: A reader* (2nd ed.). Edinburgh University Press.

<sup>8</sup> Reay, E. (2023). The kid in the fridge: Sacrificial children and vengeful masculinity in contemporary videogames. *Journal of Game Criticism* 5(1).

<sup>9</sup> Yee, N. (2014). The Proteus paradox: How online games and virtual worlds change us- and how they don't. Yale University Press.

<sup>10</sup> Connor, K. nd. The male domain: Exclusion of women in video games. Digital America. Retrieved from <https://www.digitalamerica.org/the-male-domain-exclusion-of-women-in-video-games-kayleigh-connor/>

