

Damsel in distress or sexy sidekick? The representation of women in video games has changed

18 February 2019, by Ida Kathrine Hammeleff Jørgensen



In the video game Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, the female protagonist Senua fights Surt, the God of fire. Credit: Ninja Theory press kit

A slender woman draws her sword and confronts Surt, the God of fire. Compared to the terrifying God, the woman appears small and fragile. Nevertheless, she throws herself into the battle without hesitation.

As she fights, a choir of inner voices are heard. Some voices whisper supporting encouragements, while others scream in panic.

The scene is from the video game Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, which was released last year. A character like the woman Senua would hardly be found in a mainstream video game just 15 years ago.

If we look at video games from a historic perspective, female characters have been oversexualized if not downright absent.

Yet, even though mainstream games are still dominated by bulky, muscular men, recent years

have brought us female game characters that are noteworthy because of their personality and backstory, rather than the size of their bust.

But what does this development suggest and why do we see these female characters now? Before I answer this question, let us just take a quick look at how women have usually been represented in video games.

From 8-bit graphics to hyper-realism

In order to understand how women are represented in video games, we can look into several different parameters.

First of all, we may look at how the female body is visualized. Here, researchers have focused on how the body is sexualized, for example by equipping characters with enormous breasts and skimpy outfits.

However, the visualization of the female body is also related to the state of the art in computer graphics. The limited graphics technology of the early days of video games, for example, often necessitated simple and crude graphics compared to modern video games.

However, as graphics technology improved, the [game industry](#) began to strive for more realistic representations in video games. Only, this didn't apply to the female body, which was still represented with unrealistic proportions.

This development is also reflected in an extensive study of over 500 video games that came out between 1983 and 2014. The study shows that the sexualization of the female body peaked in the second half of the 90s and has decreased significantly since 2006.

Damsel in distress or sexy sidekick

Beside the visual appearance of female characters, it is also interesting to look at their roles and functions in the video games.

In the last 20 years, several studies have looked at the number of female characters in the most popular video games and found that female characters are largely outnumbered by male characters.

If we then take a closer look at their roles in these video games, we then see that they are typically cast in secondary roles, often as damsels in distress or sexy sidekicks to the main male protagonist.

Studies have also found significantly more male than female playable characters. That said, even in early video games we find notable female characters.

Since the release of the first Metroid game in 1986 for example, the series has featured the female playable character and protagonist, Samus Aran. The most prominent female game character, however, is probably Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series. More about her shortly.

Gender realized through game mechanics

Video games is a complex phenomenon and research has not yet systematically looked at all aspects of gender representation in games.

One of the subtler aspects are the ways in which a character is realized through game mechanics. Game mechanics determine what the player can do and how as well as how the game reacts to player inputs.

The game Super Princess Peach, for example, for once allow the player to control princess Peach in her quest to save the Mario brothers. Still, the game is ripe with gender stereotypes. The game mechanics are built around four emotions – joy, rage, gloom and calm – which functions as Peach's special powers in the games.

In this way, the game depicts a princess whose strongest weapon is her emotions.



In recent Tomb Raider games, Lara Croft is no longer portrayed with wasp waist and hot pants. Credit: Shutterstock

Is Lara Croft a feminist icon?

Let's go back to Lara Croft. The archeologist has been a controversial woman since the release of the first Tomb Raider game back in 1996.

On one hand, Lara is the playable character and protagonist of the game, and she is represented as a strong, independent and decisive woman. This way, she marks a departure from the secondary, victimized roles that women all too often have been assigned in video games.

On the other hand, Lara is also an example of the sexualization of the female body in video games. Lara's characteristic wasp waist, big bust and miniscule hot pants are not easily ignored and complicates the image of her as a feminist icon.

Instead Lara is reduced to a body that is subject to what film theorist Laura Mulvey has described as a male gaze of desire.

Other strong women follow in the footsteps of Lara Croft.

Recent Tomb Raider games, however, signal a shift toward less sexualized female video game characters. In *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, which was released earlier this year, a less voluptuous Lara Croft is now modestly dressed in long sleeves and long cargo-pants.

And even though Lara is still the symbol of the strong, female avatar, we have seen more notable women in video games in recent years.

In addition to aforementioned Senua from *Hellblade*, both *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *Uncharted: The Lost Legacy* feature strong female leads. An even more recent example is Solveig from *Battlefield V*, which was released in November 2018.

Almost half of players are women

This brings us back to the question of what drives this shift in the representation of female characters.

Even though many may think that only teenage boys play video games, studies show that this is actually not the case.

Each year, the American trade organization ESA publishes a report of the American video game industry. If we take a look at these reports, we see that in the last 15 years, women have comprised between 40-48 percent of American [video game](#) players.

Nevertheless, researchers suggest that many female players have not defined themselves as real gamers and therefore not as the target audience of the mainstream game market. These female players may have chosen to overlook the stereotypical and often sexist representations of gender in video games.

Representation on the agenda

All this, however, may be changing. In the last six years, the working conditions in the game industry has been under heated debate.

The hashtag #1ReasonWhy revealed sexism and harassment of women in the games industry

whereas #gamergate exposed a misogynistic culture in what is probably a small but vocal group of gamers.

However, by bringing attention to these problematic aspects of gaming culture, these debates may also have created a momentum for players to express their dislike with sexist gender representation in video games and to insist that they are to be taken seriously as players.

And maybe we are now seeing the result of this as more game companies brand themselves on social responsibility and promote games with strong, intelligent and decisive women.

Will video games become more diverse in the future?

Even though we have seen an increased focus on gender representation, the diversity of video games is still limited.

Many more or less marginalized groups are subject to problematic representation, if they are even represented at all. In addition to this, male characters are often represented in a highly stereotypical way as well.

What the future will bring is difficult to predict. However, if the strong female game characters are symptoms of a change of culture in the [game](#) industry, the future looks good.

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