

# GENDER IN PLAY ARTICLES

Representations of  
Gender in Games



# Gender in Play – large-scale content analysis about the character representation and diversity in Finnish games



Following the publishing of the literature review about character representation and diversity in games, the next step in the analysis phase of the Gender in Play – Representations of Gender in Games project consisted of a large-scale analysis of character representation in the Finnish game industry.

## Setting the base: examined content and analysis guidelines

The base of the analysis were games made by Finnish developers, released from 2018 to 2020. This list of around 240 games in total has been provided by Neogames. Considering the large sample and the short timeframe available for the analysis, the first step needed to be taken was deciding on the selection (i.e. exclusion) criteria which would make the workload realistic, on the one hand, and bear fruitful results in line with our project aims, on the other. Thus, when taking into account the large number of games featuring exclusively animal or abstract characters, the decision was made to only examine games with human characters, or those humanlike enough, with the presumption that those will bring out valuable results considering aspects of gender representation and gender-based violence in games. “Humanlike enough” refers to when despite not being hu-

man, the characters expressed decidedly human behaviors and performed human actions, such as going to work and having relationships. One example of such characters can be found in the game *STONE*, with its protagonist being a “hungover koala detective [who] wakes to find his lover Alex has been kidnapped.” (*STONE* on Steam, May 8, 2021) Additional to the games with no human or humanlike characters, educational, virtual reality and iWall games as well as games based on intellectual property were excluded from the analysis. Limiting the number of games to one per company per year, our final sample size was reduced to the total number of 117 games.

With that still being quite a large sample, the following strategies were agreed upon: 1) the focus will be put solely on the controllable characters and 2) the games won’t be played. Instead, the information was gathered from sources such as the marketing materials provided by the developers/publishers and, when available, gameplay videos, limited to 15 minutes of gameplay. This information, although very limited, paints the picture of the Finnish industry “at a glance”, as well as shows the general insight and provides key information to any interested person before buying or downloading the game.

Once the list of 117 games was finalized and the examination materials agreed upon, the different aspects of the analysis were organized. As the name of the project says, our interest lies in understanding representations of gender in games. As we also understand that there is a number of different factors that can affect how gender is experienced in society, we opted for a more intersectional approach, which in the context of this research meant looking not only at gender representation, but also the sexual orientation, the skin color, age, religious symbols and disability connected to the characters. Those were followed by specific questions regarding the presence of violence and possibly violence against women. The choice of, at this point, focusing on skin color rather than ethnicity was due to the brief nature of this analysis, which focused more on the visual and the “apparent” features in games, and thus does not allow going deep enough into the games to understand the ethnicity of the characters.

The analysis was based on the visual, written or audio materials provided by the game companies with a special attention dedicated to finding as much publicly available information as possible about the examined characters. In terms of gender, for example, with this approach a character simply looking feminine, androgynous or masculine was not enough for us to mark them as a woman, non-binary or man. Instead, an effort was put into looking mainly for character descriptions and pronouns used. This led to many characters being marked as “unspecified” as we could not assume the intent of the developers when the descriptions were not clear enough. With that in mind, after the analysis was completed, the results were shared with companies whose games were analysed with a chance to comment on the results and notify us

in case of misinterpretations. Although the findings presented in this article are those resulting from the conducted analysis, the information gathered from the developers’ feedback will also be provided where relevant as separate insights.

## Results

### Gender

Most of the games did not specify the characters’ gender (68). 39 games had character selection or creation offering at least one man and woman option. The ratio between games that offer men and women characters is almost equal, with the number of 63:51 in favor of men characters. Non-binary characters are recognized, however, in a small amount of only 3 games. Our analysis showed no indications of transgender characters.

### Skin color

The skin color of examined controllable characters is presented based on the colors’ hexcodes (Picture 3). The samples were collected from the area of the skin most representative for the character (i.e. avoiding shaded areas, bright spots etc.). However, it is important to note that the samples were not collected from the games themselves but from the available materials and YouTube videos which indisputably had an influence on the quality of the sample and the overall end results. Additionally, in some cases the in-game scenes and characters were distinctively stylized, which influenced the skin color sample and might lead to possible non-realistic depictions of those characters (Picture 4).

### Religious symbols

Religious symbols were rarely depicted and often difficult to recognize and de-

fine. A total of 14 games included some religious symbols, specifically from Christianity, paganism, shamanism, or African and Ancient Egyption elements (e.g. Gods). Of particular note was the game Raanaa – The Shaman Girl which has the player playing as the titular Sámi girl as she goes through levels inspired by Sámi gods and shamanism. This was also the only game where we found Sámi characters.

**Sexual orientation**

It was not easy to tell the sexual orientation of characters, as it was mostly unspecified and irrelevant to the gameplay and story, with only one game having a character described as homosexual (Your Royal Gayness). Because of that, we chose to also look for the characters' intimate relationships. This approach was not flawless, however, as a character being in a homosexual or heterosexual relationship does not necessarily mean they are homosexuals or heterosexuals themselves, for example. Taking all that into account, we found 8 games with playable characters involved in heterosexual relationships and 2 games with characters either described as gay or in a homosexual relationship. Finally, an interesting view on the expression of sexual orientation was found in the virtual world game Hotel Hideaway in which the players communicate and interact with others freely and have a possibility to express their own sexuality.

**Age**

This was the category most difficult to determine and gather information on; it was found that specific age of the characters and their age group is something developers do not often bring up in discussions or clearly state in the promotional materials. Therefore most of the characters in our analysis were mar-

ked as unspecified (108 games in total). However, in such cases an estimation of age has been added, so that a general view and indication of the most represented age category could be brought up and discussed. It might not come as a surprise that most of these characters were estimated to resemble the age category of young adults or middle-aged persons. Personal interpretation, however, can be misleading as it was shown in the example of the character Audrie Smoothspy from The Spy Who Shrunk Me. Audrie, who based on our interpretation seemingly fit the adult category, is actually in her 50's as it was confirmed by the developers.

Cases where characters' age or their age category was explicitly mentioned in the game itself or the promotional materials were only a few, concretely: child (1), teenager (1), young adult (1), adult (2). Table 1 gives an overview of all age categories and their respective age ranges.

Table 1. Age categories with respective age ranges (as defined by United Nations for Youth and Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Category	Age
Child	0-12
Teenager	13-19
Young adult	20-24
Adult	25-44
Middle-aged	45-64
Elderly	65+

**Disability**

*The analysis showed only 2 cases of explicit disability, one game included a character with a physical disability (a wheelchair user) while the other incorporated a character with mental disability (depression). The existence of disability (among other features such as sexual orientation or age) was very*



*difficult to determine without playing the games. It is, however, important to note that in some games we have indeed noticed potential representation of characters with disabilities, which we unfortunately could not tell for sure from the examined materials. One such example, Lotus, a monk character from Friends & Dragons, was actually confirmed to be blind by the developers of the game.*

## **Violence and violence against women**

Violence is a feature often present in games today so most of the examined games (87) also incorporate or depict some form of violence. Violent actions or behaviors found in these games mostly reflected the core game mechanics of fighting enemies and trying not to get hurt. When it comes to violence against women, violent actions or indications of violence against women were found in 8 cases. In-game violence is directed at women characters in different forms and it is important to make a distinction about how the character's gender motivates these actions. Games were marked as depicting violence against women when they involved imprisonment of women characters (that needed to be saved), used gender-based offensive language towards women (e.g. "that old hag" or "the dread wizardess Galatax was rearing her ugly head"), or when violent actions were directed towards women heroes and/or villains. As it was the case in the previous category, this feature was also very difficult to determine based on the small sample of materials and the limitation of not playing the games. This limitation emphasized the need for a closer examination of the games where the examples of gender-based violence against women were found. Therefore, in the next phase of the analysis we will examine the aspects of gender-based violence against

women characters in more detail, by playing the games and analysing them from a player's perspective.

## **Limitations**

As already mentioned, our main limitation in analysing such a large sample of games in such a short period of time was finding the best and most representative source of information. Making a comprehensive overview was rather difficult considering we were not playing the games and were basing our information solely on published materials and walkthroughs. This means that the examined content was largely influenced and our analysis steered by the choice of the providers of gameplay videos (e.g. often the videos will start only after the character selection has been made, which made it difficult to determine which characters were available at start; the character selection often depends on the person playing and as most of the video creators were men, data gathering about women characters was scarce). Furthermore, getting to know the characters, their stories and identities was not possible with just 15 minutes of observed gameplay. For this to be possible, one would need to watch/engage in full gameplay, do a thorough research of published materials and/or even ask the developers directly.

## **Future Steps**

Considering the limitations of the large-scale analysis, a need for a more focused approach in examining character identities and the narrative elements in the games has emerged. Therefore, the next segment of the analysis will be an examination of a smaller sample of games with a special focus on:

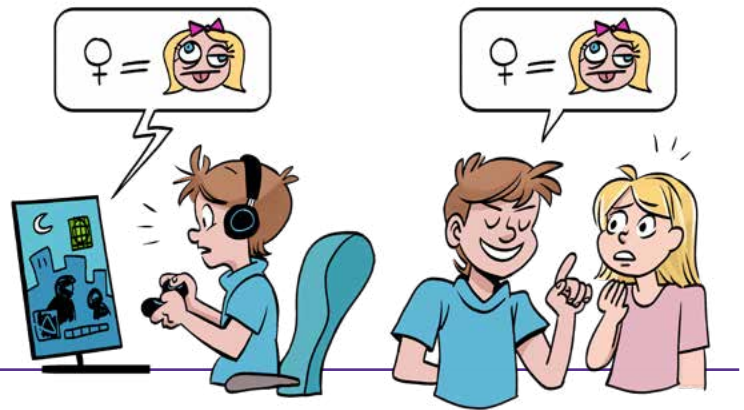
**1)** representation of women characters and character diversity in Finnish games

**2)** gender-based violence against women in Finnish games

The selected examples are games from the large-scale analysis which appeared as interesting and/or relevant examples of features mentioned above; they will be played and analyzed from a player's perspective. As within the scope of this analysis we cannot play all 117 games and therefore will not be able to address all interesting cases and efforts devoted by the Finnish companies, we also find it important to bring this topic into a discussion with developers themselves. While the presence of some specific groups was found to be lacking in the games analysed, there is interest and initiatives (such as this project) aiming to improve that. Therefore, in the next stage of the project, we will conduct interviews with the developers, discuss their good practice examples and challenges in creating diverse characters in the gaming industry.

Our findings about underrepresented features, as well as good examples of women and diverse characters and possible cases of gender-based violence will be added to the information gathered from the interviews and will be a source to inform and assist developers in creating and designing their future characters.

# Review of Character Representation and Diversity in Games Research



In 2021, We in Games Finland and The National Council of Women of Finland will implement a project “Gender in Play – Representations of Gender in Games”, funded by the Finnish Ministry of Justice. The aim of the project is to encourage the Finnish game companies to take into account the gender roles in games and to diversify these into their own games. The project will identify obstacles creating equal game worlds and stimulate discussion about gender stereotypes and gender-based violence in games as well as how those are constructed within the game industry. The project activates the Finnish game industry to promote gender equality and diversity.

This will be achieved in multiple steps taking place throughout 2021. First of all, an analysis will be conducted to examine the representation of women game characters in games made by Finnish games studios with special attention towards gender-based physical or mental violence towards women game characters. The analysis will consist of two parts: 1) a broader, quantitative, analysis (representing existing tendencies in the Finnish game industry) and 2) a more focused, in-depth analysis based on the framework created by game culture researcher Usva Friman.

Secondly, interviews with Finnish game developers will be conducted. The purpose of this step will be, on the one

hand, to further examine and find explanations of the findings of the study, and on the other, to raise awareness of the existing practices and to collect best practice examples. These examples will, finally, be disseminated in form of implications for companies and game developers to support diversity and inclusion in the Finnish game ecosystem.

As the very first step to initiate this change, the following article will present how character representation and diversity in games have been researched until now and will draw upon some of the key findings and most relevant aspects examined globally. It will show that some important steps into examining the issues of characters’ representation in the game industry have clearly already been made. More importantly, it will discuss the lack of true diversity and will emphasize the limitations which are yet to be overcome on a global scale. At the end of the article, a full list of references will be included (with links for open source publications, when possible) for everyone who searches for inspiring and thought-provoking literature about the examined phenomena.

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## Character representation and diversity in games

“We’re a nation that believes in the power of play. No matter who you are or where you’re from, there’s a game for everyone”, are the words opening the Entertainment Software Association (ESA)’s Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry published in July 2020 (ESA 2020). According to the same report, 41% of all gamers in the United States are women; therefore it shouldn’t come as a surprise that games today are constituted by a rising number of playable women characters (Lynch et al. 2016). Gaming is also a popular activity among women in Finland, with 75.4% of them playing digital games and 54.5% of them playing digital games at least once a month (Kinnunen et al. 2020). However, the question of whether contemporary games can speak to each individual player still remains. Moreover, do we even dare to assume that the diversity of human identities and features that can be observed among the players is to be expected within the games, too? This issue has to a certain extent been closely researched and discussed among academic circles; mostly through the examination of the representation of men and women characters in games, depicted by the viewpoints of their (men and women) players.

Over the last two decades, women’s representation in digital games has been a rising interest of academic researchers and games studies scholars. Back in 1998, a research examining 33 Nintendo and Sega Genesis titles popular at that time has given important implications for the future researches dealing with this topic (Dietz 1998), stating that there is “[an] overwhelming tendency to neglect to portray [women] characters at all or to portray them in stereotypical traditional female roles” (p.439), portraying

them as victims or “damsels in distress” (p. 434). This tendency does not seem to be a mere zeitgeist of the past millennium. The question of the over-dominant presence of men characters and protagonists has been examined and confirmed multiple times in the following decade (see examples: Janz and Martis 2003, Burgess et al. 2007, Williams et al. 2009, Hitchens 2011). Additionally, Dill and Thill (2007) found that there is a significant difference in players’ perceptions of men and women characters where the former were described by using the words “warrior”, “superhero” and “cool” whereas the latter were characterized as “helpless”, “victim” and “pretty” (p. 860). An interesting insight into the relation between women’s representation, sexualization and societal changes has been provided by Lynch et al. (2016) while, on the other hand, a (limited although) thought-provoking discussion about the traditional beauty ideals and non-traditional gender roles can be found in an article about the woman protagonist in action-adventure video games by Grimes (2003).

However, with time passing, a noticeable shift was to be seen in the games creation and, consequently, in the games research; the option for character customization (Richard 2012) and genderless character selection (Fecher 2012) seemed to have ambitiously opened the space for diversity and inclusion within the gaming realm. Unfortunately, success of these efforts remained scarce due to the poor implementation of the new features. In case of the former (Richard 2012, p. 75), things like game glitches and unsynchronized animations lead to an inadequate addressing of the game towards the player (e.g. by using the wrong pronoun). In case of the latter and on the example of Leo (an androgynous character in Tekken 6), Fecher (2012) discusses how such efforts can



backfire, emphasizing the importance of the game context and the limitations set by the traditional gender binary.

In terms of diversity and representation, features such as race, ethnicity and age have also found room in academic research. Unsurprisingly, the results in the studies about the characters' race reveal that the majority of characters could be depicted as "Anglo" (Dietz 1998), "Caucasian" (Janz and Martis 2003) or "White" (Williams et al. 2009). It is perhaps unsurprising, yet still worthy of noting, that in the study of Janz and Martis (2003), a large number of even 83% of all leading women characters was Caucasian. In their study, Williams et al. (2009) examined the representation of different age, race and gender groups in comparison to the proportion of the same groups in the actual US society. The result of this analysis witnessed an over-representation and over-popularization of white, adult men in games.

Lastly, another important aspect of game research that must not be disregarded is the depiction of aggression and violence in video games. Even though the researchers do agree that the existence of aggression and aggressive behaviors in games is evident (see Dietz 1998, Dill and Thill 2007, Edens-tad and Torgersen 2003, Henning et al. 2009, Brennick et al. 2007), their effect on players' violent behaviors is disputed. For example, the mentioned article by Dietz (1998) examined violence and gender stereotyping and concluded that 80% of the examined games included some form of aggression or violence with 21% of the depicted violence directed at women (p. 437). Dill and Thill (2007, p. 859) elaborate on this finding by introducing the phenomenon of eroticized aggression, a combination of sex and violence which could pose as a threat towards real women. There are

also findings, however, which state that there is no clear connection between gaming and violent behaviors (Edens-tad and Torgersen 2003) or that playing video games doesn't affect players' attitudes considering that the players do not actually replicate the observed behaviors (Brennick et al. 2007). The study by Brennick et al. (2007) does, however, acknowledge a correlation between the intensity of playing and view on negative behaviors, stating that high frequency players (and particularly males) are more likely to condone and be less critical towards negative stereotypic images (p. 411). While it is clear that playing violent games does not automatically lead to violent behaviors outside of those environments, the relationship between game activities, behaviors and cultures is a complicated one. Games are both part of our culture and reflect it, which is why it is important to critically analyze the meanings, values, and behaviors depicted by them.

Throughout the history of feminist game analysis, a common figure often found is the one of Tomb Raider's Lara Croft, the so-called "First Lady of games". Much of the criticism of Lara has focused mainly on her sexualised appearance (MacCallum-Stewart 2014). The criticism of this voyeuristic appeal of Lara can be understood in connection with Laura Mulvey's (1975) landmark film theory of the Male Gaze. Other articles, from as early as 2001 (see Schleiner 2001, Kennedy, H. W. 2002, MacCallum-Stewart 2014) attempt to look at her through different lenses, trying to understand the differences in the process of identification that goes on in movies and video games. This may be seen as part of the process in which the discipline of game studies formalised itself as a separate entity from film studies, a process discussed by Amanda Phillips in the book *Gamer Trouble* (Phillips 2020). In the book, Phil-

lips also analyzes a few games and playfully problematizes the limits of Mulvey's theory in the context of video games, even going back to Lara and criticising her not for her looks, but for her coloniser attitude in the latest games in the series. The limitations of Mulvey's theory when applied to videogames was a topic also studied by one of our researchers in their previous work (Rodrigues da Silva Neto 2020). Among the new analysis methods tailored specifically for game characters, one that will be particularly relevant continuing this project is Usva Friman's model for analyzing women character representations in digital games (Friman 2015).

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that games and their characters do not appear from a vacuum, but from real-life companies and real-life developers. The lack of diversity within the games industry is something that has been well documented (e.g. International Game Developers Association 2019, Interactive Software Federation of Europe 2020, European Games Developer Federation 2020), where in Finland the number of women employees in the game companies makes just a little over 20% (Neogames Finland 2019). Issues with misogyny within the gaming community came to mainstream attention during 2014's Gamergate harassment campaign, which saw attacks focused against several women in the game industry, notably developer Zoë Quinn and feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian, along with conspiratory accusations against game researchers (Mortensen 2018). Moreover, reports of sexism, abuse and harassment in the industry have been cropping up in the media at alarming rates in the past years as a part of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements (Lorrenz and Browning 2020, Orr 2019, Schreiber 2020). The matter of diversity in the games industry is a global one and the

media silencing of women's disadvantage in the game industry has been observed both in the US and Finland (Kivijärvi and Sintonen 2021). If, as Philips puts in her book "critique is an important and vital part of achieving justice" (Philips 2020, p. 169), then the textual analysis and criticism of representation can be an important tool in achieving equality in game worlds. However, this improvement in representation should go hand-in-hand with improvements in equality within the industry itself. This is something this project will also seek to address in its next stages, firstly through interviews with the Finnish game companies about matters of diversity in their games and development teams. We will compile the results of these interviews with the findings from our game analyses and present them as a collection of good practice examples and implications for the developers. These implications will, finally, be disseminated nationally and shared with the whole Finnish game industry in form of a series of lectures and workshops advocating for and promoting equality and diversity among the Finnish game companies and their games.

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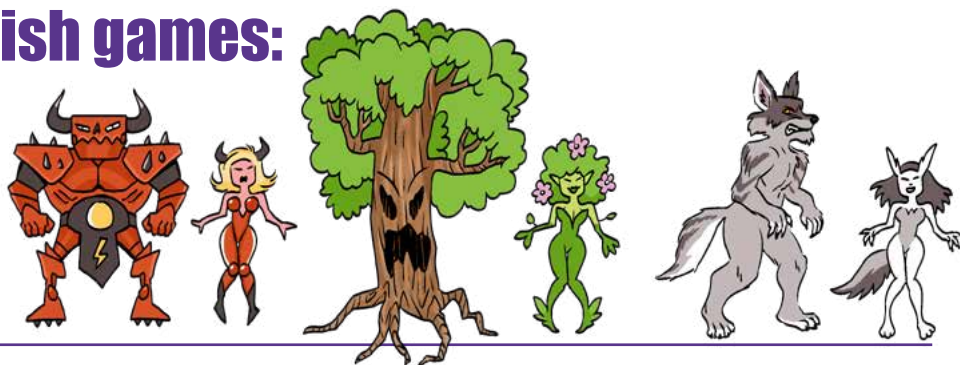
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# Women character representation and diversity in Finnish games: a qualitative analysis



## Introduction to the Blog Post Series on Representation of Women Characters and Character Diversity in Finnish Games

As the Gender in Play project continues, after our large-scale analysis of Finnish games released from 2018 to 2020, the next step was to take a closer look at several selected games from the previous sample. The games were selected for standing out as positive examples of gender and diverse character representations. The objective of this analysis was to look for what those games did well in terms of gender and diversity representation, as well as possibly identify spaces for improvement in that regard. Those insights were summarized in this blog post as a useful reference for developers interested in good practices for the representation of their own women and other minority characters.

Unlike the previous large-scale analysis, which consisted of 117 Finnish games, this one focused on a smaller sample of selected games (6), thus providing space for a more detailed approach in the analysis. Each game was played through at least once (with one exception explained below), with a second playthrough being also done when possible and deemed necessary. By playing the games we were able to gain deeper

insights and a more holistic understanding of the games, which was not possible during the previous analysis, considering that with a large sample of 117 games we were not able to play all the games and our complete data was gathered from gameplay videos, wiki pages and other marketing materials available for each of the games. Moreover, differently from the large-scale analysis, this time around we did not look for the same things in every game, instead we chose to focus on what was most interesting in each one in regards to our topics.

The games chosen for this analysis were the following: Your Royal Gayness (Lizard Hazard Games 2018), Small Town Murders: Match 3 Crime Mystery Stories (Rovio Entertainment 2019), Raanaa – The Shaman Girl (Miksapix Interactive 2019), Ignis Universia: Eternal Sisters Saga DX (Random Potion Oy, Hologram Monster Oy 2020), Control (Remedy Entertainment 2020) and Returnal (Housemarque 2021). Most of the games were published by Finnish game companies in 2018–2020, and they were selected based on our previous quantitative analysis. The selected games stood out as distinctive examples relevant for our analysis due to their addressing of positive representation of women characters, inclusion of underrepresented features (in terms of characters' gender,

sexuality, age, ethnicity and disability) or showing a perspective on how gender-based violence against women can be addressed or found in games. The game *Returnal*, however, stands out for having been released in 2021 and therefore not being present in our previous analysis. Nevertheless, as an internationally acclaimed title which had just been released and features an interesting woman lead, it had been agreed to include it in the analysis. In the case of *Small Town Murders*, an online mobile game with an ever increasing number of levels, a limitation on the sample was needed, so for the scope of this analysis we decided to examine only the first two murder cases in the story.

This blog post series is divided in three parts; the first part focuses on the representation of women characters, the second on the representation of diverse casts and other minorities, and the last one on aspects of gender based violence against women in the selected games.

## Representation of Women Characters

This qualitative analysis follows the principles of the framework to examine and analyze women characters in games by Usva Friman (2015), which suggests the following five character construction themes: 1. presence, 2. background and role, 3. participation and goals, 4. speech and 5. gendering. More specifically, we analyzed the way women characters are represented in Finnish games by answering a number of pre-created open questions focused on how the representation of women characters is being carried out and can be seen in the selected Finnish games.

## Presence

Before proceeding to examining how women characters are represented, it is important to determine whether there is any representation at all. Therefore, the first category in the analysis questions was whether women characters are present in the games at all and if yes, to which scope. The features examined in this part of the analysis were the existence of women characters (including women main protagonists, allies, opponents and main antagonists), existence of named as well as playable women characters.

Considering that the games were selected due to their incorporation of women characters, in this part of the analysis we will provide a list of all named women protagonists in the examined games. Five out of six games included at least one named playable women main protagonist (including *Small Town Murder's* Nora Mistry, a character indirectly controlled by players through solving match-3 puzzles). To define a character as a woman, we looked beyond physical appearance or names, taking into consideration their own expression and the pronouns used.

### Table 1.

The list of women main protagonists in the examined games.

Control: *Jesse Faden*

Ignis Universia: *Eleanna, Mordina, Silvanna, Zena (The Chosen Sisters)*

Raanaa – The Shaman Girl: *Raanaa*

*Returnal*: *Selene Vassos*

*Small Town Murders*: *Nora Mistry*

Women allies and antagonists were also present in the named games. For example, in order to save the world, the four Chosen Sisters of Ignis Universia need to fight the wizardess Galgatax

and one of the first suspects in *Small Town Murders* is the first case victim's daughter. On the other hand, women allies, like Mrs. Mangroove in *Small Town Murders* or Emily Pope in *Control*, are also there to support the main protagonists, mostly by providing important information relevant to the story and player's progress in the game.

**Table 2.**

Women allies and other prominent women characters in the examined games.

*Control*: **Emily Pope, Helen Marshall, Raya Underhill**

*Small Town Murders*:

**Mrs. Mungroove, Bonnie Pirello**

*Your Royal Gayness*:

**Drakemaster Magda, Princess Roxanne**

**Table 3.**

Women antagonists in the examined games.

*Ignis Universia*: **Witch Galgatax**

*Small Town Murders*: **Chelsea Higgins**

## Background and role

The background of women characters varied from game to game. Looking at the mentioned protagonists as well as the allies and antagonists we saw that their backgrounds were defined based on their professions, statuses or relationships they had with other characters. Depending on the game genre and complexity, the women characters (be it protagonists, allies or antagonists) were developed to a larger or a smaller extent and the information about them was shared in a larger or a smaller amount. In that context, in *Control* we got to meet several prominent (and accomplished) women characters in high positions or in positions of power: director, head of research, head of ope-

rations, threshold specialist. Nora Mistry (*Small Town Murders*) is a crime novelist who helps the police solve crimes and we meet Selene Vassos (*Returnal*) at the beginning of the game as a space scout. The four Chosen Sisters of Ignis Universia are destined to save the world while Raanaa uses her magic to save the Goddesses of the Sámi mythology. Finally, the Drakemaster Magda of *Your Royal Gayness* is Prince Amir's trusted advisor and an expert on war and battle.

The actions of women protagonists in these games also represented their backgrounds. For example, the Chosen Sisters (Ignis Universia) are fierce fighters destined to save the world. They are an opposite of "being silent, being subdued", as the game introduction told us. Their mission is to fight the evil witch and save the world from destruction. Their actions are following this goal, they go on adventures, engage in combat and slay dragons and other fantastic creatures. Jesse (*Control*) as the Director of the Federal Bureau of Control uses her powers to defeat enemies and cleanse the Bureau taken over by a hostile force referred to as "the hiss". Nora (*Small Town Murders*) is asked to give professional inputs in murder case investigations; she inspects the crime scenes, searches for the evidence, connects the clues and solves murder mysteries. Her actions often overpower her background – as "only" a crime novelist she takes on the role of the investigator in the cases and even throws herself in dangerous acts, such as posing as Bonnie Pirello, the target of a what is believed to be a hitman sent directly to take out the wife of an Italian mobster. Magda (*Your Royal Gayness*) carries her sword all the time and is always ready for action. On Amir's command she attends different matters to keep the situation in the kingdom calm. She controls the guards and leads the army.



## Participation and goals

As it could be seen from the examined representative sample of Finnish games, women characters are no longer merely following from the sidelines, they are equally participating and are as important for the narrative and gameplay as are the men characters. They are influencing the story and the events in the game and their actions have consequences. This positive development is noticeable in video games since the past decades, both in games creation and games research which calls for more diversity and inclusion of underrepresented groups (which we also noted in our literature review of character representation and diversity in games). To illustrate this on a few examples; faced with his first dead body on the job, Deputy Shanahan of *Small Town Murders* might not have been able to solve the cases without Nora's inputs; in *Ignis Universia*, the world was destined for doom without the Chosen sisters; Magda's actions in *Your Royal Gayness* directly influenced the story and the course of the game.

Women characters in the examined games mostly followed their own goals, such as Nora who self-willingly offered her help to solve crimes as a means to gather inspiration and fight off her writer's block, or Selene (*Returnal*) who defied orders and was determined to follow her own path (be it in real life in terms of following her career, or in the never-ending space mission she kept waking up to). However, there were examples when the action of women characters was dictated by the choice or upon a request of another character – who was often a man. In *Ignis Universia*, the Chosen Sisters were gathered and led by a man; in *Control*, Jesse's objective was directed by the search of and finding answers about her missing

brother; *Small Town Murders*' Nora decided to join hands in solving crimes as a helping hand to an incompetent deputy whereas Drakemaster Magda of *Your Royal Gayness* served her liege Amir to keep the kingdom safe and protected. This does not, however, mean that women characters did not have autonomy while pursuing these goals and actions. For example, during her journey to find her missing brother, Jesse realizes that she was also searching for information about herself, and when asked to train prince Amir with the sword, Magda refused stating that she had a different, personal priority at that moment.

Nevertheless, our findings do show that, although we are seeing a positive representation of strong and powerful women leads in Finnish games, their goals are still directly or indirectly often set out by or related to men. This shows that men characters are still very important key figures in games, also in Finland (according to our large-scale analysis of Finnish games, the ratio of games which include playable men characters is approx. 10 % higher than those including women, with 63 games having playable men and 51 games playable women characters from a total of 117 analyzed games). What should be ensured in this case is that the actions of women characters are important gameplay features on their own and not only necessary if they are aimed towards supporting men characters.

## Speech

When examining women characters representation in games, it is also important to include the aspect of speech and to examine whether women characters speak, to whom, as well as whether and how they are talked about. All main women characters and protagonists in the analyzed games spoke and were spoken

to, more importantly, they were given a voice. They spoke in a curious, witty, often charming and clever way. Some were snappy, direct and sharp (e.g. Silvana and Zena of Ignis Universia, when speaking with other characters, often in a sarcastic or cynical way) while some were more rational (e.g. Nora Mistry when solving the crimes) or reflective (Jesse Faden of Control in conversations with others and in her thoughts/conversations with the entity Polaris, often accompanied by a zoomed-in shot of Jesse's face).

It is important to state that there was a noticeable difference in the language used to speak about women protagonists and women antagonists in the examined games. This trend is not uncommon in contemporary video games and often relates to the gender role of a woman character, as Sarah Stang also points out in her speech about gendered monstrosities in games. Although the following example from our analysis refers to a human being and not a fantastical creature, one finding was the use of an epithet "old hag" by which the spendthrift son of the first murder victim in *Small Town Murders*, a wealthy woman Elisabeth Higgins, spoke of his mother when he found out who was the sole beneficiary of her testament. Additionally, in the opening screen of the game *Ignis Universia* we saw the words of a Null Brother (man main protagonist) that "wizardess Galgatax was rearing her ugly head once more". Following Sarah Stang's point, the language to describe women characters in our examined games also depended on things such as their sexuality, gender role or age, so in that context a young and attractive woman character was referred to as "sweet" and "nice" while an older one became "ugly" or "a hag", especially when spoken of by a man.

## Gendering

When it comes to gendering, the aspects we looked at were whether women characters were romanticized, sexualized and objectified and how, as well as whether their physical or behavioural femininity level was emphasized and in which way. Sexualization and objectification of women characters in the examined games was present to a certain extent. The most prominent examples were the Chosen Sisters of Ignis Universia whose physical appearance and other features were an important aspect of the game's narration. Considering the game's parodical nature, sexualized scenes and references were used to emphasize and ridicule how women characters are often objectified and sexualized in Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs). The following images show some examples of objectification and sexualization of women characters in this game.

Another example of a character represented as an object of desire could be found in the character of Chelsea Higgins, one of the suspects in the first case of *Small Town Murders*, the girl of Deputy Shananah's teenage dreams, with her lustful feminine figure, emphasized breasts, wide thighs and a tiny waist. As an isolated example, such representation is not necessarily negative. Having in mind that the story of *Small Town Murders* is located in the United States and that Chelsea was said to have been a cheerleader, we can see that the character of Chelsea was designed to follow the same famous trope from the US cinematography: she is shallow and superficial, beautiful, young, focused on her looks and popularity, she is the object of men's desires and the evil antagonist of the woman non-cheerleader protagonist.

On the contrary, the figure of the woman protagonist of the same game, Nora Mistry, remains hidden from the eyes of the player, thus showing that women characters can be developed as powerful, accomplished and likeable through emphasizing their backgrounds and actions and not their physical or sexual appearances. The comparison between the representation of Nora and Chelsea goes in line with the conclusion made by Lynch et al. (2016) in their Content Analysis of Female Characters in Video Games across 31 Years, which stated that women in secondary roles are more likely to be sexualized than primary characters. According to the same authors, nonprimary characters are not as important to the game's story as the primary characters, and therefore the designers might sexualize them to make them more appealing to the player (or to be able to convey a specific message, as it might be the case in *Small Town Murders*).

When it comes to the women protagonists, the same article argued that the portrayal of [women] characters had been influenced by an increasing interest of women players in video games as well as the criticism aimed towards the industry which had been, and still is, largely dominated by men. Therefore, over the course of time we may be witnesses of an ever decreasing number of sexualized women protagonists.

“Conversely, a primary character is central to the story and aspects of the narrative give her significance beyond her physical attributes” (Lynch et al., 2016). In triple-A games, such as *Control* and *Returnal*, the bodies of women protagonists were not overexaggerated nor put in extremely revealing outfits, which is a positive development and an important finding that shows that the examined world-wide popular titles did not turn to

hypersexualization of their women protagonists.

Selene Vassos is equipped with high-tech weapons and wears a strong space suit. The suit is moderately tight and follows Selene's body shape. Although it could be argued that the suit is seemingly tight and possibly not suited for a space scout, Selene's outfit is part of the game narrative. Resembling a contemporary sports outfit, the suit allows her to move fast, to avoid enemies' attacks and other objects, and is as such consistent with the gameplay. This is a very important finding when having in mind that the bigger emphasis in the game is set on dodging and escaping damage and not as much on being protected from it.

An intention to objectify and sexualize women protagonists in these games was not found neither in the death scenes nor in the camera work and angles. Overall, this finding shows that there is a positive attitude towards women characters in the Finnish game industry when it comes to the aspect of gendering among big and popular titles.

The following images represent the camera angles in the mentioned two games; they were taken during the gameplay, in a “safe spot” (e.g. at the beginning of a level or right after a checkpoint), meaning that there was no action happening at that time in the game and that the examiner had enough time to navigate the camera freely and take screenshots. The only angle which shows a tendency towards sexualization is shown in the last segment of Picture 12. This image was taken while positioning the camera to show Selene's back, moving it to the lowest angle in the screen and facing up. Although this angle clearly puts Selene's buttocks in the focus, it needs to be stated that this ang-

le is not favored by the game nor is the player ever encouraged to use it (on the contrary, it makes the game unplayable). However, by comparing this image with the same angle of Jesse in Control (Picture 11, segment 2), we can see that Control offers a good practice example on how to program the camera in a way which doesn't insinuate objectification, i.e. by focusing on the character's back rather than her buttocks.

## Academic literature:

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## Games:

Housemarque. (2021). Returnal. Published by Sony Interactive Entertainment.

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## Gender in Play: character diversity



This article is the second part in our blog post series on representation of women characters and character diversity in Finnish games (click here for the first part and the introduction to the series). In this post, we will highlight some positive examples and good practices regarding character diversity and representation in Finnish games.

When looking for diversity of characters, three games were of particular note, *Your Royal Gayness*, for its portrayal of its gay protagonist and a non-binary support character, *Raanaa*, for its Sámi main character and themes, and *Control*, for its leading women characters and subversion of a common videogame trope.

### Your Royal Gayness

*Your Royal Gayness* is a game that puts the player in control of Amir, a gay prince, who is left in control of a not-too-LGBTQ+-friendly nation when his parents leave for two months. Besides being the only game found in the previous analysis to have characters explicitly described as gay, YRG also puts the protagonist's sexuality as an important part of both the game's plot and mechanics.

Instead of going for the more utopic option of having the game set in a place

where there is no prejudice, the game chooses to go for a more “realistic”, yet still humorous, approach to LGBTQ+ issues. At the start of the game homosexuality is illegal in Amir's kingdom, and throughout the game the player must balance a “suspicion meter” in order to avoid being discovered by the people beyond his close circle of advisors (who are very much supportive of him). These choices in plot and mechanics bring experiences relatable to many queer players into the game. While most LGBTQ+ people have not had to rule a kingdom for a couple of months, many have had to hide their identities from the world. The close circle of advisors, who know about Amir and help him navigate through the game, is also something relatable to the “queer experience”.

Despite touching on those heavy subjects, however, the game is not a heavy drama in any way. Instead, it has a tongue-in-cheek narrative through and through using parody as a way to expose the absurdities of homophobia, such as when the prince is brought to judgement accused of being “really, really gay” and the judgement itself involves the prince having to quickly choose between objects related to stereotypical ideas of sexuality.

The prince is not the only LGBTQ+ cha-

racter in the game, as there are a number of other such characters in the cast. One deserving special recognition is Seraph, the non-binary spymaster and advisor of prince Amir.

Seraph is a non-binary character who uses they/them pronouns. While not every character really understands their identity, through the game the matter is always handled with respect. Depending on the player's choices, Amir can talk with Seraph about their identity and what being both non-binary and pansexual means to Seraph. Once again, those conversations are handled in a natural and sensitive way, with Seraph scolding the prince when he brings up their deadname (i.e. name they were assigned at birth) and explaining that it is hurtful to do that, the prince listens to Seraph and learns from them.

Another interesting way in which Your Royal Gayness promotes the portrayal of a diverse cast is with its random body generator, used to create the other kingdoms' princesses and princes. Those are secondary characters which are different in every playthrough, as the game creates new ones every time, taking from a pool of different body shapes, skin colours, hairstyles and outfits. This is a very interesting and well-meaning idea, which in most cases seems to work as intended. However, a few times it seemed to backfire, as some kingdoms had random characters all with the same skin color or some characters who looked exactly alike.

### **Raanaa – The Shaman Girl**

Raanaa is the only Finnish game found in the previous analysis to have a definite Sámi character. This is especially noteworthy as the Sámi people are a historic minority as the indigenous people in Finland. In Raanaa the player takes

control of a young Sámi girl who is called in her sleep by the Foremother Goddess Máttaráhkká to come and help her in the spirit world.

Throughout the game Raanaa finds other figures of Sámi mythology like Ruonánieida, the Maiden of Spring and Barbmoáhká, the Guardian of the Birds. With their assistance, as well as with her shaman abilities and magical dress, Raanaa helps to maintain balance and protect both the spirit and the human world.

The game not only is inspired by Sámi mythology, but it also has an interest in being accessible to Sámi players, having the option to be played in Northern Sámi language. The game was also supported by the Sámi Parliament in Norway and Sámi people were involved and consulted during the development of the game, which is a good practice if the intent is to have positive representation. The game's narrative designer and producer is also Sámi.

Both the recognition of the Sámi players by giving them the option to play in their native language, as well as the involvement of Sámi people in the development of the game are meaningful and imply an interest in a sensitive portrayal which does not fall into the sometimes caricatural depictions of Sámi people found in media.

### **Control**

In Control, you play as Jessie Faden, a young woman with strange powers who is investigating the headquarters of the Federal Bureau of Control (FBC) while searching for her missing brother. Shortly after arriving there, Jessie ends up receiving a new weapon, and with it, the position of Director of the FBC. From then on she has to defend the building

against the invasion of a paranormal entity known as The Hiss, while finding out more about herself, her brother and the friendly paranormal entity called Polaris.

Control is a game with a strong cast of women in different positions. Not only the main character, Jesse, but also three notable side characters: Helen Marshall, the African American, grey haired, Head of Operations for the Federal Bureau of Control, Emily Pope, who is the FBC Head of Research, and genius scientist Raya Underhill.

While these three characters require assistance from the protagonist to achieve their goals, they are generally represented as capable in their own roles, and retaining some sense of control despite the exceptional events happening during the game. Pope wants to research Jesse and understand what is going on with The Hiss, while at the same time organising the survivors in the building and assembling protection equipment. Underhill is in the building's basement focused on her own research, about a different type of entity than the game's main enemy, and does not seem to care much about the problems happening above ground. Finally, Marshall is commanding the larger group of security officers in the defense against the Hiss, and has her own objectives which are further explored in the game's downloadable content (i.e. expansion), The Foundation.

Beyond that, Control subverts one particular trope of videogames with a woman protagonist. It is often the case in such games that the player exists as a "protector" of the protagonist. Whereas in games with a man as the main character the player gets to "be" the character, games with women often focus on the idea of "helping" or "defending"

them. This can be understood as part of the male gaze at work in video games.

In the start of Control, it seems that the game is following that trope, as Jesse appears to talk to the player about how they have helped her get in the building. As the story progresses, we learn that the invisible presence that is assisting and watching Jesse is not the player per-se, but Polaris, an entity from another dimension who has been with her since her childhood and is in fact gendered as a "she". To an extent Polaris can still be understood as a stand-in for the player, as she is not seen by the camera, but still always present in the game and assisting Jesse, who constantly speaks to her. In that way, the gaze of the camera/player is also the gaze of Polaris. This turns what could have been seen as a paternalistic/male-gazey relation with the camera into what can be seen as an alliance between women.

Narratively, Polaris also works as a motherly figure, with Jesse's original mother having disappeared when Jesse wished her and her father away with strange magic. This idea of motherhood is further seen when the player eventually finds the body of Polaris, which is a construct in the shape of a womb/egg which eventually bursts, appearing to die.

After the burst of Polaris, Jesse seems to experience a rebirth experience (accepting her role as the Direct of FBC) and realises that even if that form (womb/egg) of Polaris died, the Polaris she knew was still with her and had never left her.

This is of note because it does not assume the player as a man. The recognition of an audience other than the stereotypical straight man is valuable and opens possibilities for more diverse games and characters. While research points out

that the distribution of women and men in gaming are much more even than what common stereotypes still point to (as noted in our literature review of character representation and diversity in games), games themselves often seem to be interested in catering primarily to a mostly hetero-masculine audience.

## **Returnal**

In *Returnal*, you play as Selene Vassos, a space scout who is stranded on mysterious planet Atropos after crash landing her spaceship, *Helios*. Selene quickly discovers that she has been on the planet before, and that she cannot escape it, not even through death. As death on the planet only means that she wakes up again at the crash site.

The story of *Returnal*, and Selene, is not told in a straightforward manner. Instead, it is inspired by the roguelike mechanics of the game and told in little pieces, which are unlocked as the player advances through the death/rebirth cycles of the game. The narrative and gameplay help connect the player with Selene, as she experiences the frustrations of failure — the game is not easy — in a similar way to what the player may be experiencing. Many of the pieces of plot uncovered through the game are also mysterious, and highly symbolic, and the player may not get a full sense of what exactly is happening to Selene, until finishing the game for the second time.

The nature of *Returnal*'s narrative leaves much of its understanding up to the player's interpretation. Much of its imagery, cutscenes and even action is highly evocative and metaphorical. Therefore, much of what is discussed here reflects the interpretation of the authors and seeks to raise discussion points and considerations about the character in

the context of the game, and games in general, rather than provide objective facts.

What is learned, however, tells an interesting story, with themes unusual to a triple-A game. Themes of mental health, motherhood and guilt, which are discussed through the complex character of Selene.

As the story advances, it becomes clearer and clearer that Selene has depression, there are references to medication and grief spread throughout the game. Selene handles depression actively, if indirectly, by battling the actual monsters inside her mind.

Mother protagonists are rare but they are not unheard of in video games, for example: Kara from *Detroit: Become Human* (Quantic Dream, 2018), Sally from *We Happy Few* (Compulsion Games, 2016); woman main character in *Fallout 4* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2015); Bayonetta in *Bayonetta* (PlatinumGames, 2009), Edith Finch in *What Remains of Edith Finch* (Giant Sparrow, 2017). A middle aged mother who can kick ass in an action game is significant and opens the door to new possibilities in a genre and medium where mothers are not usually present or are relegated to supporting roles when they do appear. As mothers in games go, Selene is even more unique in the fact that she is not only a mother, but a bad one.

Selene can also be read as disabled within the narrative frame, despite not being so gameplay-wise. As the end of the game is reached, we learn that the action scenes are not happening in the real world, but in her mind. Even more, she was in a car accident which led to the death of her son, *Helios*. It is clear that that loss has left her severely depressed, and while the extent of the phy-



sical consequences are not clear, the wheelchair is a common motif in different scenes in the game. In the true ending of the game, Selene's mother, Theia is shown in a wheelchair.

The game seems to be very interested in harming Selene. Not only will she die over and over, she will also experience many forms of physical and emotional pain throughout the game. Her moans of pain when grappled by tentacles are particularly gruesome. This pain caused upon Selene is expected when considering the death/rebirth tropes of the roguelike genre, and the overall themes and narrative of the game itself, which focuses on the repetitive nature of grief and guilt. As we learn that all of the action is taking place in Selene's mind, in a way all the violence in the game could be interpreted as a metaphor for self-harm, something made clearer when we see Selene shooting down her own ship. Mental health and self-harm are sensitive topics rarely approached in mainstream gaming and the choice of a triple-A game to address them, even if not explicitly, is a courageous one.

It could be argued that the choice of a woman protagonist makes it easier for the audience to digest such topics; Carol Clover's theory of the Final Girl mentions how a woman protagonist in horror movies can make it easier for the audience to experience feelings of pain and fragility. A few other games which explore themes of mental health also choose for women protagonists, such as *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory 2017), *Life is Strange* (Don'tnod Entertainment 2015) and *Gris* (Nomada Studio 2018). It is important to note that this is not a criticism of such characters or games, as the exploration of these topics and existence of these characters is a positive thing that expands preconceptions about games. On the contrary,

this might indicate a limitation in the way men are portrayed, attached to the sexist idea that men do not cry or feel emotions as strongly.

Taking all that into consideration, as well as the complexity of the narrative and the way it is explored, the extent to which Selene's pain follows the trope of women having to suffer pain and punishment in order to be allowed as action heroes is not clear-cut but her representation is multilayered.

## Games:

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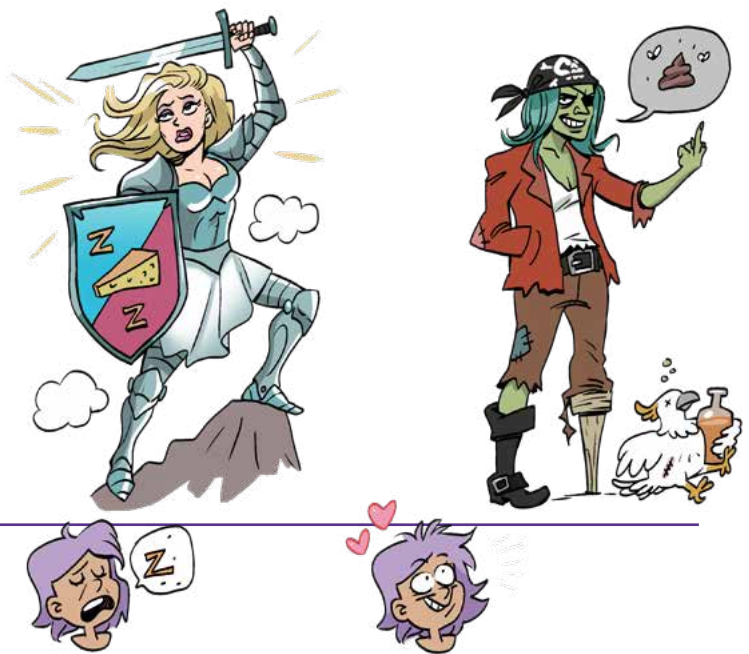
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# Make game characters more interesting, unique, diverse, and approachable



It is easy to miss the good news around these days when the information flow is massive, but one of the recent Bloomberg's posts by Jason Schreier got my interest immediately with the title "Video Games Are Slowly Opening Up to More Black Characters".

Just reading the topic alone, I mumbled in my mind, "frickin' finally!"

Diversity comes in many shapes, colors and forms, and it has been very insightful to be part of game making, where we, the developers, create these interesting characters from scratch and have the power to affect how they turn out.

**A couple of years ago, I wanted to understand more about what the market thinks about character design, what the players need, and how we could improve our character diversity here at Nitro Games, so I made a study case.**

Honestly, the results shocked me in many ways.

**It became crystal clear to me how much the industry caters to the stereotypes and how simple & doable requests our players have to make them feel happy and considered.** I analyzed hundreds of comments and feedback, which condensed into "normalizing normal things in games".

We could make a drinking game out of stereotypes in games characters; "take a shot every time you see..."

... an evil doctor with eyeglasses

... bikini armor on female

... US navy guy being toxic and arrogant

...You know the drill, so what can we do about this?

My study revealed many significant actions that we developers can take to offer more diverse characters with fewer stereotypes for our players! Here's just a few to chew on!

Consider androgyne characters; plenty of my study's comments highlighted that you often need to pick the busty babe or alpha male. Simple example: often you are allowed to pick either girl's hair or guys hair, or have a muscular body only for the guys and thin torso for girls if you have a customized character builder – Why limit this? I won't be telling you not to wear pink pants because it's a "girls' color."

Disabilities and enchantments were highly requested – not in a funny cartoon way but in a more relatable way:

eyeglasses, a hearing device, braces, cane – and one of the most requested approaches was a character in a wheelchair! Regarding eyeglasses, there were multiple mentions of the harmful swan storytelling that women can be pretty and beautiful only by removing the glasses. It's all about normalizing these instead of making only the evil geniuses or ugly ducklings wearing eyeglasses and, by doing so, reinforcing the stereotypes.

Shades and colors! At the time of the study, we thought we had nailed one example of a dark skin character, but in reality, we were far away from what we were trying to portray. The common ground for the feedback was that developers often go with the “coffee with milk” rather than “dark coffee”, leaving out a vast population without character to relate to. The usual excuse is about the lightning and shaders of the game, which should be a positive challenge to be able to mimic realistic lightning and tones rather than a reason to do only fair-skinned characters.

Don't be scared to do “coarse” characters; many respondents requested to see more options for crippled, harsh, ugly, old, and even mental illnesses in character design. And please, please please, in a more profound way, not an overly caricatured way.

Ever since the study, my eyes have been more open for expanding the traits of our characters and while we still have a lot to learn as a company, developers and artists; we were so happy to hear amazing feedback about some of our characters in a game that's being developed. We organized a playtest session to mostly focus on the technical side of things such as movement and shooting, but the one thing that caught players eyes was our female character with afro

hair. Our female testers mentioned this as a positive thing multiple times. In addition we made one character without a leg, having a mechanical leg instead, with some funny take on it as our game concept was a bit goofy and dystopian, with this choice, we were also able to give the character an unique idle animation.

For some inspiration, please take a look at Fallout 4's scars and pimples in the character creation, Sucker Punch Productions Sly Cooper series with Bentley in the wheelchair or Supergiant Games Transistor for having character(s) like Bailey Gilande brought up as a great example of androgyne character.

When designing the next character, take a moment to challenge your team to think about what would make the character more interesting, unique, diverse, and approachable? What would it take to make it memorable and even cosplayable!

## Gender-based violence against women characters



As our large-scale analysis showed, violence is a common feature found in Finnish action games, just like in most other contemporary video games of the same genre, so it shouldn't come as a surprise that all six examined games depict or incorporate some form of violence, be it explicitly depicted in video or audio materials or implied in the game's story.

Considering that violence can be recognized as one of the key game mechanics of action games, violent acts that were found in our examined games were mostly dealing and taking damage, fighting enemies and destroying objects. Four games in our analysis (Control, Ignis Universia, Raanaa and Returnal) included women protagonists and the violent actions found in these games were examples of combats between women heroes and their enemies with the players' main objectives to fight supernatural forces, bring order and/or save the world. The game Small Town Murders, however, which is neither an action nor a shooter, but a puzzle game, was not violent by definition but nevertheless stood out as a special example in our findings due to the overarching theme of murder and solving mysterious death cases as the main parts of the game's story. The sixth game we analysed, Your Royal Gayness, did not contain any explicit forms of vi-

olence; violence was hinted through dialogue options such as controlling an army or deciding on the fate of grandmas attacked by wolves, among others.

It is worth noting that some other games included in our large-scale analysis of Finnish games released from 2018 to 2020 may also include some forms of gender-based violence that we may have missed due to not playing through all the games, and are thus excluded from this analysis. In the same vein, because different forms of violence are so prevalent in games, and some forms of gender-based violence are very difficult to detect, this is a challenging theme to examine in digital games.

Violence against women is "a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women and shall mean all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in physical harm, sexual harm, psychological, or economic harm or suffering to women" (European Commission, n.d.). We inspected aspects of gender-based violence and violence against women characters from different perspectives, namely by looking at both images and visual portrayals as well as dialogues and narrative. The questions we asked were: which forms of violence are directed towards women characters, are women characters only receivers of violent actions or



also providers, are there pornographic images or sexualized views on violence in video or audio materials (such as the existence of sexualized screams and moanings, overemphasized feminine body features and voyeuristic camera angles focused on specific parts of women's bodies).

Positively, gender-based violence against women was not used as a central mechanic in any of the analyzed games (meaning that no game favored violent actions directed at women characters specifically because of their gender). However, as mentioned in the previous segments of the article, specific examples of aspects or features related to gender-based violence against women characters were found in some of the examined games, as isolated examples in some and more systematically implemented in others.

Based on our analysis, there are three key areas in which features related to gender-based violence against women characters were found and can be discussed:

1. sexualization and objectification of women characters;
2. women characters as participants and targets of violent actions; and
3. misogynistic speech about women antagonists.

Considering that the area of sexualization and objectification of women characters has already been mentioned as an important aspect in the previous article on women character representation, it won't be discussed again. Instead, we will proceed to discuss the remaining two areas.

## **Women characters as participants and targets of violent actions**

Looking into the existence and the features of gender-based violence in games requires the person to pay attention to the context of the game world and to understand the setting in which the game was created. If a woman character is a protagonist in an action game or a shooter, she is very likely to be a target of violent actions made by her antagonists. Through the history of video games, popular franchises with lead woman characters have indulged in violent punishments for them, as can be seen throughout the Tomb Raider (Core Design & Crystal Dynamics 1996-present), Metroid (Nintendo 1986-2017) and Resident Evil (Capcom 1996-present) series, as well as in the more recent The Last of Us 2 (Naughty Dog 2020). This can be understood as an aspect of the male gaze, which often seeks to punish women shown on the screen. Three games from our analysis – Control, Ignis Universia and Returnal – are representatives of the same game genres, however, their women protagonists are not only the targets (i.e. receivers) of violence but they are actively participating in these actions. They are equally trying to counter the enemies and find ways to defeat them in order to progress in their objectives.

When it came to violence, the gender of the characters did not seem to have been put out in the foreground. In other words, if we would exchange the woman protagonist with an imaginary man one, we wouldn't be able to find any aspects which would explicitly state that the violent actions which were targeted towards women protagonists would be gender based. When it comes to the audio effects, however, the example of Selene Vassos in the game Returnal stood out. When the player comes too close to the tentacle-mons-

ter hanging from the ceiling in the first biome, Selene will express a gruesome moaning-like scream while being sucked into it and pulled up from the ground. It is left to wonder whether a man character would have the same moaning reaction in this situation.

The famous “damsel-in-distress” trope (i.e. a woman who is captured and who is waiting to be rescued, most often by a man) is another example of common misrepresentations of women characters which the examined Finnish games seem to have successfully overcome. In the story of Raanaa, the Goddesses were captured by evil spirits; they were, however, not saved by a man, but by a young girl. Bonnie Pirello of Small Town Murders, in an attempt to run away from her mobster husband, firstly tried to defend herself in an armed conflict, and later on, after being put under police’s protection, teamed up with another woman, the game’s protagonist Nora, in a dangerous act of disguise and tricking her attacker.

Seeing the attack on Bonnie and reading about the reasons behind her escape, there were hints which could lead towards the conclusion that Bonnie was a victim of gender-based violence perpetrated by her husband. However, we don’t know much about Bonnie’s history nor did the examined levels provide much information about the nature of her relationship with her husband. What can be stated, though, about Bonnie’s character is that the game did not represent her as a victim. On the contrary, she was introduced as someone who is not afraid and who could take care of herself, which was clearly defying the aforementioned damsel-in-distress trope.

## **Misogynistic speech about women antagonists**

As already stated in a previous part of this article series, when analyzing the representation of women characters in games it is not only important whether women characters speak and are spoken to, but it is also important how they are spoken of. The use of offensive language directed towards women characters, especially when it comes to women enemies and antagonists, is largely present in games, is used to emphasize the antagonism between the characters and often manifests in misogynistic ways men characters speak about or act towards them (relevant examples and perspectives about this can also be found in Sarah Stang’s speech about women monstrosities in games).

In our examined games, there were two examples of misogynistic speech about women antagonists, namely in Small Town Murders and Ignis Universia. It is important to note that these examples were not only directed towards the main antagonist of the game (making them a crucial story feature, such as in Ignis Universia where the man character spoke about the “ugly head of the dread wizardess Galgatax” who brought peril to the world), but also towards less central characters which for some players might go unnoticed. This is the case of Elizabeth Higgins (Small Town Murders) who was, after her death, referred to by her son Jimmy as “that wretched old hag”, which is a misogynistic term often used in contemporary language as a means to offend or degrade women, referring to “an ugly, slatternly, or evil-looking old woman” (Merriam-Webster dictionary, n.d.).

Although the examples of misogynistic and other degrading language towards women characters found in our

analysis were rare and were used as an attempt to emphasize the antagonism between the characters, such representation is nevertheless dangerous and could contribute to the harmful usage of language which showcases women as characters that deserve disciplining and punishment.

### **Conclusion to the Blog Series on Representation of Women Characters and Character Diversity in Finnish Games**

The aim of this analysis was to examine and to highlight good practice examples which contribute to the development of complex, multifaceted and brilliant female characters who have full agency, who are not represented as one-sided stereotypes or only seen as merely a representative of their gender. The six examined Finnish games offer a great deal of positive examples regarding the representation of women characters as well as character diversity. Possibly the biggest variety of good practice examples could be found in the ways the games addressed the women characters' backgrounds and participation; this was both the case among the big titles as well as less known games. The women in these games are accomplished characters whose actions are determined based on their professions or skills: they are in positions of power and their actions influence the course of the story.

However, there are areas in which improvements can be made. Firstly, women characters in Finnish games are often objectified and sexualized in terms of visual, aural or narrative-based elements. Secondly, the women antagonists are gendered through the use of misogynistic language and offensive attributes aimed towards them. With the dissemination of the results, and furthermore

with the upcoming activities in the project, we aim to bring these examples to the surface and engage in a meaningful discussion with the games studios about possible obstacles and challenges they face in developing diverse characters in their games and how these can be overcome.

Some of these aspects were already mentioned in our articles; we found examples of diverse characters not only in regards to gender but also in sexuality, culture, roles and mental health. These cases have been discussed and highlighted as examples of good practices in character creation.

## Academic literature:

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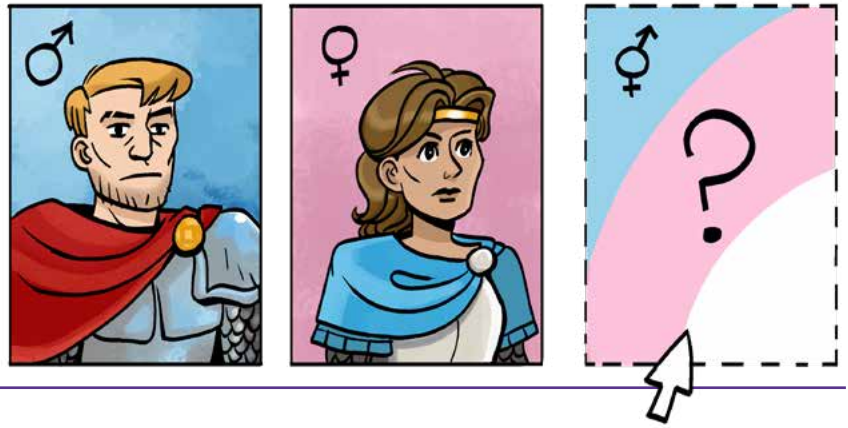
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## CHOOSE YOUR AVATAR

### In games I can be free to express myself



I have played video games for most of my life. It's a way to relax, to unwind, and forget about the rest of the world for a while. As a child, besides having fun, thanks to video games my coordination skills and language skills improved, and I spent time with family and friends while playing multiplayer games. Even nowadays my family and I sometimes pull up our Wii console and have a few rounds of bowling.

In upper secondary, I realized I am interested romantically in women, but it took until I was 20 to find words for my gender identity. Now that I have the words, though, it explains certain things and feelings even from childhood. I loved when games had girls and women as characters, but often I felt more comfortable playing as boys or men. When playable characters had the same skills, I would rather play with male characters. Of course, since most often the games I played as a child were adapted from series, the aspect of favourite characters came into play as well.

The first game I played that had a gender-nonconforming character you play as was Undertale. The happy feeling it gave me is hard to describe. The fans on the Internet using they/them pronouns for the character was euphoric.

Whenever it's possible to choose the character, I like to go with alternative styles, preferably androgynous characters, if the character is spoken to. In Guitar Hero for example, I always went with the cute girl with colorful hair, since the character is more of an avatar while you play, someone you watch, and not someone you necessarily are in the game. Unlike in Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn, a game I have been playing for a few years now, my first MMORPG, and such a good one, even with the scary multiplayer aspect.

The race I played with originally in FF-XIV was Lalafell. They are tiny, and quite androgynous. The only way to know for sure if the character model is male or female, is to ask the player, or if the character is wearing a gender locked outfit. And quite often, no one really cared to ask, because what matters is how you play: being kind to others, doing your best, and having fun. The only time I was asked was when I was hanging out with another Lalafell player, and he asked. But thanks to the safe environment the community had, and still has, I felt safe to tell that my character model is male, but the player is nonbinary. And then I joined the Free Company the Lalafell was in. Nowadays I play as a Viera male, so essentially a bunny boy. While Lalafell was fun, I knew I would love Viera a lot as well. Some clothes look



so much better, I can finally wear thigh boots comfortably!

At one point I made a Viera female to play the story from the beginning, but quickly realized I had to change the character to male. In the game when talking to NPCs, your character is referred to with pronouns, and feminine pronouns even in game made me feel dysphoric. On the other hand, it's good to know it made me react, so I know to avoid playing characters who use she/her for the time being when I have a choice.

Dressing up the characters is one of my favourite things in games. In The Sims 4 I have at least three outfits per character for their daily wear, and since the latest update I have 20 glamour plates in FFXIV! Many options to play with clothing, especially thanks to some gender locked outfits being available to everyone now. It's fun playing with traditionally feminine or masculine clothes, since in real life I like to do the same. It doesn't make me any less trans if I choose to wear a ruffled dress. While in daily life I most often try to wear either masculine or androgynous clothes so I will have a smaller risk of getting misgendered, in games I can be free to express myself.

# What is gender-based violence in games?



Video game violence has been the topic of intense discussions for a long time, but gender-based violence has not been a part of this debate. That was reflected in comments we obtained from game developers when we began our Gender in Play project. The commentators considered whether gender-based violence applies to fighting female protagonists in action games or female fighters in fighting games. To address this discussion, we specify what gender-based violence includes the following:

- Physical violence against women or gender minorities due to their gender.
- Sexualisation and objectification of a body, like pornographic images or sexualised views on violence in video or audio materials, overemphasised feminine body features, voyeuristic camera angles focused on private parts of bodies, and sexualised screams and moaning.
- Misogynistic speech: the use of offensive language directed towards one gender.
- Silencing in dialogues and narrative. Do certain characters speak and are they spoken to? How many lines do they have compared to other characters?
- Not to incorporate similar development options for characters of certain gender

- Repeating negative stereotypes in character design, like the concept of a “weaker gender”, damsel-in-distress, and “exotic sexy savages”.

In our study, gender-based violence did not include physical violence against female protagonists when the female characters had full agency, were able to develop their skills equally to their male counterparts, were as likely to be the saviours as men, and were not represented as one-sided stereotypes or only seen as merely a representative of their gender (Rodrigues & Sićević 2021b).

We planned to include an analysis of gender-based violence in our quantitative research, but came to the conclusion that it was hard to recognise gender-based violence in games just by looking at the marketing materials provided, gameplay videos, or short gameplay (Rodrigues & Sićević 2021a).

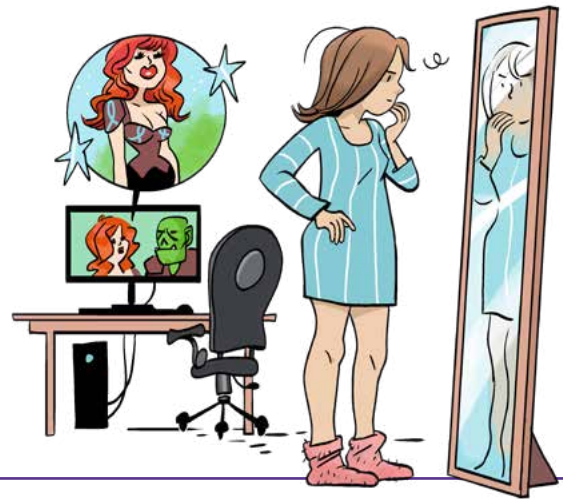
Gender-based violence in games, if not blatant, is well hidden in structures, as in everyday life. Looking into the existence and the features of gender-based violence in games requires the person to pay attention to the context of the game world and gameplay; that is, to play the game. To analyse that more in depth, we conducted a qualitative study that included eight games where we took a deeper look at the different forms of gender-based violence. This can be read here: Gender-based Violence against Women Characters.

## References

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## Diversity matters because you matter



“Strong, independent men are the perfect fantasy boys — the untouchable is always the most desirable.” This exact quote has never been given. We don’t hear this kind of description of men.

Originally, the quote was by character designer Toby Gard in an interview in 1997 about his work, video game character Lara Croft. The creator referring to Lara this way is a good example of a Male Gaze point of view. The world has changed from the interview’s era, but Lara is still, to this day, an iconic example of a female video game protagonist. However, female characters in video games can be more than just a fantasy for men, as half the players are women.

Half the players are women. This was my mantra when I wrote my thesis about the value of female character diversity in video games. The player demographics get forgotten by the public and even by the game studios.

Girls have simply sat down with their households’ computers and consoles and played the same games as boys from the beginning of video game history. However, the archetype of a video game player is still a young adult male. Marketing has been targeted to boys, and game studios are built on cultures most suitable for men. Studies draw out the lack of diversity, and therefore research projects like Gender in Play by the We in Games Finland organisa-

tion are essential. Highlighting the core problems related to gender helps game studios to better understand their audience, so it’s a win-win.

The disparity between character diversity and the audience eventually comes from the male emphasis on game industry employees, and most of all, creative leadership. Solving the puzzle of a modern female character is a task best given to designers who know femininity personally: female designers.

Instead of a burden to game studios, I see diversity as an exciting opportunity for the industry. It does need some extra effort, like finding ways to lure rock hard female talents to work in the studios. Diversity needs to be added to game companies’ brand values and implemented in everyday work, starting from hiring diverse people to create cool diverse games.

In my thesis, one of the peculiar findings is the sexism in character references: in commonly used character design handbooks, character sheets and online tutorials. Introductions to “How to create a conventional pretty face” lead to conventional female characters. Game artists use these references that repeat the narrow image of a female over and over again. Creating a new, out-of-the-box female character needs pioneering work and discarding these outdated references.

Realistically, change is always slow. As a result of my thesis, and to help situations where design teams consist of mostly men, I created a design tool called the flip test. It works the same way as the review of Toby Gard's comment from the 90s. In a nutshell, to see the flaws in the female character design progress, the whole concept of the character is flipped from female to male. The character is then reviewed based on how it appears as a male and the team can make adjustments accordingly. Women are like men; they are humans, and when women are treated as humans, the resulting video game character design feels relatable, regardless of the gender of the player.

I'm not suggesting characters like Lara Croft are better put to rest forever. The market has room for diversity without causing the demise of any characters. When we see female heroes in games with other qualities than just being a woman, things like being funny, complex, loveable (not equivalent to sexy), even vulnerable, and having a reasonable appearance at the same time as being feminine, in the long run, more female talents will be attracted to work in games, which then helps create a positive feedback loop to increase diversity.

I believe diversity in lead characters would help all people to enjoy games more, including men. The issues with male characters' narrow representation persist too, and that's not forgetting how non-Caucasian characters are almost non-existent as video game protagonists.

Most of all, creating new female leads requires risk-taking from game publishers. There is a profitable reward at the end though: standing firmly out from the crowd and making a ground-breaking, everlasting female hero. I can't wait to see and play that game.



# Gender-based Violence in Games: Game Developers' Perspectives



Gender in Play is a project by We in Games Finland and Council of Women of Finland that examines the character development and world-building within Finnish games studios' games from the perspective of gender equality and representation. The project runs 2021-2022 and is funded by the Ministry of Justice.

## Introduction

This article provides insight into how game developers reflect on gender-based violence in games. It is based on interviews conducted as a part of the Gender in Play project among Finnish game studios and connects to a previous article resulting from this project on how gender-based violence is reflected in games made by Finnish developers (Rodrigues & Sićević 2021a).

Gender-based violence in games is not just about physical violence against women characters; it can be, for example, sexualisation, misogynistic speech, silencing, or repeating negative stereotypes about one gender or certain character types in a game. Recognising different forms of gender-based violence usually requires paying attention to the context of the game world and gameplay – that is, playing the game. For a more in-depth definition of gender-based violence in our project, please have a look at our article, "What is gender-based violence in games" (Myöhänen 2022).

## Methodology

As part of the Gender in Play project, we interviewed Finnish game developers about diverse character development and gender-based violence in games.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in ten Finnish game studios during autumn 2021. Participants were selected based on a previous quantitative study on Finnish games during 2018-2020 (Rodrigues & Sićević 2021b), highlighting studios that seemed to put effort into character representation. Studio locations were evenly distributed throughout the country. The size of the game companies varied from small, publicly funded indie studios to the biggest players in the Finnish game industry, and the size of their games ranged from small indie games to large-scale financial successes. Game platforms ranged from mobile to console and PC.

With four of the interviews, two or more people from the game studio were present, making the number of participants 16 persons. Their job titles included CEO, Creative Lead, Narrative Writer, and Game Designer. Interviewees identified as women, men, and transgender, with just over half identifying as women.

Six different interviewers conducted the interviews. Due to Covid-19, all interviews were conducted over Zoom or through a similar online tool, and recorded for

transcription purposes. Interviews lasted between 20 and 80 minutes, with the average length being roughly one hour.

Pseudonymised interviews were coded thematically. Parts containing discussion about gender-based violence were marked, analysed, and grouped; findings are presented in the upcoming chapters.

## **Does this study reflect the whole Finnish game industry?**

The Finnish game industry consists of around 200 active game companies. The median number of studio employees is eight (8), the average being 25. (Neogames 2021.) There are some game studios in Finland that employ more than 100 people (this is considered as a large game company in the Finnish context), but most companies are labelled ‘small’ based on their headcount.

Based on the participant selection and small sampling, these interviews do not represent the whole Finnish game industry. Hence, any generalisations drawn from these results or depictions where these results are portrayed as representing the entire Finnish game industry should be cautiously made. However, there are some features in the results that might indicate some of the ideas are becoming more common. It is also worth noting that the interviewee selection includes some major players of the Finnish game industry, whose reachability is many times bigger than average.

Our interviewees had some common features worth highlighting. Most of the people interviewed were well-versed in questions about gender-based violence in games, especially when it came to

physical violence against women or stereotypical characterisation in games. All the people we interviewed intentionally tried to avoid stereotypical representations in their work, in general, giving a lot of thought to different character representations. These and other themes raised in the interviews are presented in the following chapters.

## **Results**

The themes rising from the interviews included four larger themes which break down into smaller sub-themes. The results and notions related to gender-based violence from our interviews are divided into the following main chapters:

- **Breaking harmful stereotypes**
- **Demarcation of real-world and game-world violence against gender**
- **Equal opportunities for all characters, even in death**
- **Writing gender-based violence in games**

In the following, whenever it is not meaningful for the context, all interviewees are referred to as “they” when their gender is not a matter of significance.

### **Breaking harmful stereotypes**

All of our interviewees were well aware of character stereotypes that are typically used in games, and many felt an urge to break them. The reason most often mentioned for that urge was that breaking the stereotype would create more interesting and relatable characters and narrative. If the interviewee was from a minority background, it was

relatively common to list this aim as an intentional goal.

*"It would be easy to always go with the stereotype, but then it's kind of more delicious and story-tellingly more interesting to break the stereotype. If you create that stereotype, then you must break it at some point to turn it into a story. So, they can be used but it has to be done smartly. It must also be respectful, with a meaning to respect that source of the stereotype, or who that person is and what culture he or she is from."*

Stereotypes themselves are not harmful, as many of our interviewees noted. For example, in mobile games, it is important to create characters that are easy to grasp quickly, due to the nature of the platform and game types that are typical to mobile play. One AAA developer said that they do not want to play into harmful stereotypes, but they use a lot of stereotypes and tropes in design by subverting them or using them for effect rather than as the basis for a whole character. However, almost everyone repeated that they intentionally tried to avoid harmful stereotypes which have a negative impact on a certain group of people.

The interviewees' aim in recognising and using the stereotypes was not just to turn the character representations upside down, but to also find some depth and interesting storylines for their characters to develop.

*"When you write and think about those different characters, you don't always even realise what those stereotypes [you are using] are, and still they are always there to be found. It's a huge source of inspiration for you when you realize what those stereotypes are. How can I turn this other way around? How can I make something great out of this*

*and at the same time make people think, 'well, this is not the typical case now'? 'How have I always thought this needs to be the case'?"*

### **Yet another damsel-in-distress**

Among gender-based stereotypes, the damsel-in-distress is perhaps referred to the most in games. It also raised most anticipation among the interviewees. One man producer wrapped up the feeling: "I was terribly tired of these princess characters myself as there was, in every game, a princess with flowing hem who was just smiling." One woman narrative writer thought aloud: "If I would do a princess that needs to be saved, I would rather do... actually, I have written one princess in a game that needed saving. It was a man." These developers wanted to create independent women characters that are capable of acting and solving game quizzes, but even more than that, the character had to have some dimensions. "A paper-thin representation" of a damsel-in-distress was not enough, as one interviewee concluded.

### **Amazonians, a new norm?**

Opposite to a helpless princess, at the other end of the spectrum, is women who are represented as great warriors. This was noted in several interviews, with one narrative writer describing that phenomenon as follows:

*"The role of women and the representation of women in games has plucked us and me so much. The fact that women are always Amazons. They are warriors and tomb raiders. They have super-trimmed bodies and so forth. They are always forced to be either a warrior or a prostitute – or a witch. It largely follows that teenage boy fantasy selection."*

Some interviewees stated openly that representing women as warriors is not necessarily a good thing. As one interviewee pointed out, “We do not want to give an impression that the only way to be cool and valid is to be a soldier or have a masculine role”, continuing, “That’s why it was really important to also have cool feminine characters”.

### **Still sexy b\*tches**

Hypersexualised women characters have been under discussion quite a lot, and continue to be. Our interviewees stated clearly that it is not the way they are interested in continuing.

*“We had that conversation about how sexy and all these characters are. That it would be an easy solution that let’s make these now insanely sexy and sell this game to men. But that was the line again we didn’t want, as the company, to cross.”*

Previous qualitative research conducted in this project showed that the woman protagonists of the examined games were not dressed in extremely revealing outfits (Rodrigues & Sićević 2021b). Still, there is some pressure to use feminine outfits for woman characters. In a similar tone, one of our interviewees asked whether a woman soldier would have time to apply perfect makeup while in the middle of a war.

One game developer shared their worry about how stylised, young, and beautiful woman characters can alienate players from the real world and create unrealistic expectations of real women, thereby paving the road to objectification.

*“My interest here is how some game characters, for example, manga characters or even game characters in general, alienate those who play those*

*games from the reality of what a woman is. I think it’s kind of more complicated violence against women.”*

### **Body as a battleground**

As in real life, women’s bodies in games are expected to follow a specific standard. One game developer listed the requirements for a woman game character: she should have an hourglass figure, a beautiful little chin, big lips and big eyes, long lashes, and pretty hair. Anything breaking this body type will face, if not resistance, then at least questioning.

*“In the early part of the project, when there were just plans for what the main character would look like, there was also feedback from the team about how one can define that it is a woman, since the body does not look like a woman’s body. It’s not very shape-ly. [Our character] has relatively wide shoulders and no makeup and is old and so on. I needed to tough it out that it is a woman, even if it lacks these so-called typical features.”*

The body types or other visible issues were also discussed in terms of game villains. “Why do the bad ones always have scars or a certain kind of clothes”, wondered one game developer who then thought about how seeing a scar as the trademark of an evil character may hurt people carrying scars in real life. These stigmas were something of which our interviewees were aware.

### **Is there a gender-based personality?**

It is not only the body that should follow the stereotyping rules – personalities should also do so. One developer reflected on the design process where they ended up making a forthright and saucy woman character, and a timid and quiet male character:



*"This character design process happened so long ago that [I cannot remember] was it even completely conscious. Partly it must have been conscious, but when it started to develop, we noticed that this was going to be a lot of fun. We were just happy that, well, these all are personality traits that most certainly are not gender-specific in any way."*

One developer noted that personality traits are not gender-specific. Our interviewees did not consider reproducing stereotypical feminine or masculine personality types to be sustainable, partly because such characters were considered boring to play.

A good example of consciously trying to avoid reproducing personality stereotypes was provided by one developer whose game had a character that was a sexual minority. The developer received player feedback praising them for not repeating the clichés attached to this minority. Another example of not repeating gender personality stereotypes can be seen in the character of Selena Vassos in the game *Returnal* from Housemarque (Rodrigues & Sićević, 2021d).

### **Limitations in representations**

Our questions mainly addressed gender, but it seemed equally important for some interviewees to break the harmful ethnic stereotypes present and have their characters represent different ethnic backgrounds.

Even though computer technology has advanced in huge leaps during recent years, it still creates challenges for some representations. Technical difficulties faced in supporting different ethnicities were mentioned: for example, a game engine's lighting options might favour fair-skinned characters.

Some interviewees also discussed language. English is the standard language in games, and for some indie developers, it might be impossible to include several languages in their games at a high enough quality. These technical and production budget reasons will hopefully be solved in the future through further advancements in technology.

## **Demarcation of real-world and game-world violence against gender**

In game making, the real-world and game-world violence might collide from both directions. How much should the fantasy be affected by the limitations of real-world patterns and vice versa, when it comes to something as serious as gender-based violence? Following are the viewpoints our interviewees addressed.

### **Bringing age realism into games**

Several of our interviewees highlighted the need for realism related to the age of woman characters. Age discrimination exists in games (Rodrigues & Sićević, 2021a), and characters that are supposedly older still tend to look remarkably young. As one of our interviewees mentioned:

*"... And to avoid that, the character is visibly rejuvenated at that point. I'm for this idea that if there is a woman in her fifties, goddamn sure she already has wrinkles at this point, and you can't get over it. She can't be visualized as a 30-something fresh face. And if someone manages to be a fresh face in their thirties, they at least have eye bags and similar."*



Another interviewee mentioned how it would be absurd to have a military leader that looks 18 years old, because this position would require experience and that explicitly equates to a higher age. Yet another game developer was slightly devastated as their player feedback showed how players relate more with an older secondary character than the younger main character.

### **Representation versus reality**

A different angle to realism is how much it can be bent in games to favour gender representation. This was especially the case with games based on particular historical times or cultures. A game is not a history book, as one game developer stated: even when the game is based on history, it is still pure fantasy.

Another interviewee analysed the same topic from a cultural perspective. They noted that the culture their game was set in—the interviewee’s culture—had distinctive gender roles, but there were real-life examples of how these roles were broken, with women doing men’s jobs, for example. This developer saw no issue in breaking similar boundaries in their game.

The question of realism also applies to instances when a game maker has to consider how much their game should include violence that is typical in real life. Should the real world violence be reflected in games, if the game character would most likely encounter it in real life, or that is essential for understanding character’s experience?

This case was discussed in-depth in one of our interviews: the game depicted a real place and time and the game character represented a minority gender that faced a constant threat of physical

and psychological violence just because of their gender. The violence was not a core aspect of the game, but excluding the violence could create toxic positivity and distort the reality too far.

### **Women can be violent, too**

In real life, women can be violent, too, yet stereotypes or idealised images might imply otherwise. One game developer received player feedback about having woman soldiers in games, even though this was, in this case, also historically correct. Similarly, another game developer had negative player feedback on women acting violently in their game, even though the game had its roots in real-life events. Yet another game developer noted how representatives of the feminist movement were violent against transgender persons at a certain time in history, raising a question if that is something that should be included or excluded from game words.

### **Harmful player feedback**

One less discussed phenomenon concerning game-related violence is intentionally harmful or threatening player feedback, and how much it affects game development. Some players might fiercely harass game developers, if they do not like some aspects of the game. This process is well known by game developers, as phrased by one of our interviewees:

*"Not everyone dares to bring [diverse game characters] to market, or they bend to make the character as a feminine woman in order not to raise any conflicts with the audience."*

Some interviewees mentioned about comments they got of their characters.

The comments were related to women being feminine enough; homophobic comments about homosexual characters; comments about women acting violently in the games; remarks about ethnic minorities in the game; and woman characters not being sexy enough. Still, many interviewees were almost surprised by how few negative comments their diverse characters had attracted.

## Equal opportunities for all characters – even in death

The interviewees were also asked whether characters receive different treatment based on their gender in the game studio's games. One form of psychological gender-based violence in games is choosing not to incorporate similar development options for certain characters that make those characters weaker and would not encourage players to select them. Historically this was the case with women characters. Characters might have different skills, but it takes careful balancing to give all characters equal opportunities to succeed and develop in games.

Equal opportunities for every character to develop appeared to be something that game studios have considered. The impact of cultural conventions was noted, and many actively tried to challenge their thought processes when designing characters, like the following indie studio leader and designer pointed out:

*"That's the goal. Of course, it's difficult to completely escape the way that society has sort of brainwashed us to think less of many female characters, but I think it is important to try to actively combat those preconceptions that you might have of what a female character should be like and what a male charac-*

*ter should be like. But yeah, of course the goal is that all of the characters have the same opportunities to develop."*

## Publishers for gender inequity

Sometimes it was not just questioning one's own biases, but questioning the attitudes of other remarkable instances influencing the game content. One game developer expressed how they had to defend the decision for equal development opportunities for all game characters to their publisher, and explain to the publisher that it was exactly their intention and how they wanted the game to be.

A publisher might gain considerable power over the game's content. When the publisher finances the entire game development process, the game company's funding is tied to milestones that the publisher needs to approve. A publisher's opinion is not irrelevant to that game company, since that might mean delays in milestone payments.

In some cases, the publisher might affect gender representation on a larger scale. One of our interviewees stated the following:

*"Previously, we made an offer for this [similar kind of game they had published later]. One reason for rejection was that we had a girl main character. Boy players don't perceive it as a character they would engage and that drives away boy players, even our girl character was very tomboyish and a fully qualified action character! Apparently, gender-based upbringing is still strong, even though the situation has improved considerably in recent decades. But it is still there, the necessity to think about whether the players agree. Well, the girls agree to play with*

*every character. They don't have any problems. But raising boys is a bit like... you're girly and tit-cheeky and similar, if you play with a girl character or play with girl dolls."*

### **Equal opportunities do not mean similar treatment for all**

One of our interviewees, who had created significantly diverse characters in their game, pointed out that it might sometimes be necessary for the game-play to have some differences in how the characters are treated. When asked if they think that woman characters receive different treatment than man characters in their games, they answered:

*"That is an interesting question.[--] That's maybe not always even a good thing. In some cases, it's very good to not sort of do things differently based on the character's gender, but there are some considerations [--]. It's good to keep in mind stereotypes and everything, when you're working on the game, so you can avoid them in cases where it's going to be harmful, and I guess that's one of the reasons. And also, in a game that actually is about exploring how the world treats, for example, sexual minorities or people of different genders. It is important to know those differences."*

Another developer explained how, in their games, they put extra effort into woman characters and their treatment, even to the extent that woman characters might get nicer treatment than men.

### **Best practices: keep the list**

Best practices are the topic of our next upcoming article, but one deserves to be mentioned here.

If the game has plenty of playable characters, some developers have come to the solution of keeping a list of character qualifications that includes features like gender, ethnicity, body type, or such, to make sure that there is a diverse representation in games. In one case, the list included the deaths of side characters in order to avoid certain genders or ethnicities being numerically over-represented in death.

## **Writing gender-based violence in games**

One of our interview questions was whether gender-based violence in games has been a topic of discussion in the game studio.

Our interviewees claimed that gender-based violence was rarely discussed formally in the studios, but there seems to be informal discussions between creatives in companies about the topic. Some interviewees presented that there was no need for such discussion, mostly because their studio did not make violent games, their design team had representation of various forms of diversity, or they already monitored their production in order to avoid misogynistic or otherwise hateful actions against certain game characters.

The trust of certain individuals in a company, or in a design team, to notify a possible act of violence against a certain group of people was eminent. It is important to note that even though such reporting is good work practice, it would be even better to discuss these practices openly. It can be a heavy extra task for one person to check and follow possible violations of violence against certain, or several, groups of people.

Related to physical violence, there were tendencies to avoid placing women antagonists in action games and, on a larger scale, to represent antagonists as para-natural or otherworldly forces to avoid murdering humans.

### **How would you feel about doing violence for a living?**

Drawing or designing violent games, or hypersexualised characters, for living might not feel emotionally good for some game industry employees. It should be clear that if the game's content makes an employee feel awkward, and they feel unable to work with the topic, they should not be forced to do so. There is still too little information on this issue too, but as in every case, making a generalisation might be misleading. As one of our interviewees mentioned: "I like to play around gloomy stuff because my life is pretty joyful and happy after all. So in a way, I use that as an opportunity to safely research those darker sides."

### **The shadow of Lara Croft**

Lara Croft was mentioned various times in our interviews. It was an extra question at the end of the interview; however, Lara was also mentioned many times spontaneously during the interviews. A typical example of this was pointing out that when a woman protagonist in an action game dies in-game, Lara Croft-kind of deaths that execrate or sexualize the event should be avoided.

Being the first notable woman protagonist, it might be that Lara Croft has set some long-standing standards of do's and don'ts in woman game character design (see also Jenni Varila's article "Diversity matters because you matter"). But many of the studio creatives we interviewed had several good exam-

ples of more relatable, more interesting characters who would set even better benchmarks when creating a game with a women lead character.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we have covered how game makers construct and understand different aspects of gender-based violence in their games. We specifically wanted to understand how different forms of violence were considered and discussed by game developers who have included women main characters, or other characters representing minorities among game characters, in their games.

The developers interviewed were aware of different aspects of gender-based violence, and they considered many aspect of gender-based violence when developing the character. Although discussions around gender-based violence were rarely part of the development process's formal agenda, they were discussed within the development process. All of our interviewees were very much aware of stereotypes and oversexualised women characters, and took into account several intersectional layers too.

Our interviewees saw room for improving character design in games, but on their behalf, they did their part in making game characters more diverse and equal. As one of our interviewees concluded:

*"Our actions will likely change the way these things are experienced. If we, and enough other developers, diversify our designs, even the louder critics will eventually get used to the fact that noticeable breasts, for example, aren't always mandatory in female character designs."*

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# Best practices for creating diverse characters



This article summarises the best practices for creating more diverse characters from Finnish game studios' interviews conducted as a part of the Gender in Play project.

- If you wish to learn more about the basis of the interviews, please look for our previous article, "Gender-Based Violence in Games: Game Developers' Perspectives", and refer to the chapter 'Methodology'.
- If you wonder why you should create more diverse characters, please continue reading.
- If you already know why and are simply interested in tips, jump straight to developers' tips for creating more diverse characters.

## Why bother making more diverse characters?

The main reason is because players would like to play using more diverse characters.

40 % of players in the U.S. prefer full character customisation, and most choose characters that resemble them. Half of the players want companies to take a stance on social causes (1).

A highly diverse audience plays games. According to NewZoo report, 46 % of

players in the U.S. and U.K are women, 20 % are Latinx, 16 % are LGBTQIA+, and 31 % have a disability, often related to mental health. Similar numbers can be found from different sources, casually women making about half of the player base (2).

Another very good reason is to consider how you, as a game maker, can influence the world.

Being the most profitable entertainment industry in the world, 3,5 times more valuable than movies, games have a huge possibility to affect worldviews and either build or break stereotypes (3). Research made in the film industry has shown that stereotypes repeated by media do not only affect the attitudes of others but also the self-image of those belonging to that group (4). If someone like you is always presented as a helpless princess or an enemy, that can have consequences on how you view yourself and how others treat you.

## How well are game companies scoring on making more diverse characters?

Previous research studying game characters' representation has demonstrated that the most typical game character is a white man. Numbers tell the same: according to Statista, in the year 2020, 23 % of game protagonists were men, 18 % women, 3 % non-binary characters, and 54 % of games had multiple

options. Four years prior, women characters were only 2 %, and nonbinary genders did not exist. The year 2019 study of game protagonist by gender from E3, a major gaming event, listed only 5 % of female game protagonists and 2 % gender-ambiguous, compared to 22 % of male protagonists.

## **Best practices for making diverse characters, developers' tips**

All quotes are from the Gender in Play interviews, where we interviewed Finnish game developers about diverse character development and gender-based violence in games.

Aim for diverse characters

When there is a will, there is a way. Setting the diversity of characters as a goal starts to guide the actions toward that. It might provoke some questions; for some of them, you can find the answers below.

### **Aim for a diverse narrative and design team**

*"Have [add here any aspect of diversity] people on your team! Because they are gonna have these experiences, and they can tell you whether something you have written for the game is believable and good and all of that stuff. And they can tell you if there's something that's like big yikes or a big problem."*

Team diversity is the easiest way to add diversity to characters as long as everyone on the team has the right to have their say and the diversity is valued. Adding more diversity to your team adds different opinions, experiences, and knowledge. A variety of opinions can bring great insight and value to game design.

*"The cultural diversity is a challenge for us too. Everyone is native Finns, with very similar backgrounds, middle-class. If we go to a foreign culture, we have to be pretty careful, because we don't have anyone who says that hey, have you considered this aspect? There is a danger in it that no one is going to say that to us."*

Have a look for Jenni Varila's article "Diversity matters because you matter". Varila calls for finding ways to lure rock hard female talents to work in the studios article in order to add more diversity in women characters.

### **Consult the members of the community**

If you can't have enough diversity on your team, no problem! Consult the members of the community you are writing about. There are professionals offering consultancy services, councils that can help, and private people with first-hand experience and background in the culture for which you are writing.

*"It really requires that you dare to ask and dare to contact and throw yourself in, and possibly dare to hire someone who then belongs to that group of people."*

But please pay them for their consultation.

Disclaimer: If you are writing a space odyssey happening in a faraway future, in an alien land, it might be challenging to find anyone to consult. It is still possible to stay mindful of the story and characters, as shown by Housemarque in *Returnal* (2021).

### **Do the background research**

If you are writing a game about existing culture, check the facts! Do not

rely on and repeat the existing, often ethnocentric stereotypes. Rather, seek a deeper understanding. Ask questions like “Why is this important?” and “What is the aim?” Ask an expert if you are unsure; do not assume.

### **Respect your characters and their cultures**

If your character represents an existing culture, and moreover, if it is a minority culture, respect the nature of the culture and your character. It does not mean that the game gets super serious, but you should know what is sacred to the culture. Once again, it helps if you have a person who is from the culture.

### **Do not just place diversity**

While diversity issues have become more widely discussed, we have seen the rise of placing one character in the game that then represents diversity. Diverse characters should have their own story, role and reason to be in the game. Blackface is not okay anymore in real life, either.

### **Give players multiple options**

Let players choose what kind of characters they would like to play! Nowadays, it is getting easier to create a game with a selection of protagonists or even to let the player build the character they like. Leave space in a game for the players to create and develop their characters. Collect data to determine what kind of characters your players prefer.

### **Double-check the gameplay and story**

It is always a good idea to revisit your gameplay and story regularly and seek for stereotypes and gender-based violence – it would be even better if you have so-

meone else doing this. Ideally, it could be someone who does not have similar background to your.

### **Make sure that all characters have similar possibilities to develop**

They do not need to be exactly similar development options as that might be a bit boring, but there should be a possibility to win and advance to the same levels with every kind of character.

Ensure that the actions of characters representing minorities (women, non-binary persons, non-Western ethnicity, sexual minorities) are important gameplay features on their own and not only necessary because they are aimed towards supporting men characters.

### **Take advantage of the body diversity**

Not every woman, man, or non-binary person looks the same. We are different in our bodies, skin colours, height, weights, body decorations, disabilities, scars, and so many other levels. This kind of variety can strongly add to the personality of your characters and make them more relatable.

### **Use character diversity to create new game mechanics**

Diversity can be a source of inspiration for game mechanics too. A few times in our interviews, Bentley, a turtle in a wheelchair from Sly Cooper was mentioned as a great example of creating a new kind of game mechanics and play experience. There is a vast amount of similar new mechanics to be used.

### **Use randomly generated diverse characters when reasonable**

When needed, randomly generated side characters celebrating a variety of ethnic

backgrounds and body types, clothes, hairstyles, and so forth can bring more variety to your game. Still, it would be nice if the main character would not represent the most typical characters in games.

### **Collect ideas and feedback from everyone in the company**

Collect game ideas from everyone in the company. Keep the idea box open; you never know what comes out. Create a company culture where it is okay to comment on others' work in progress, and perform development reviews often, leaving space for everyone to comment.

*"It's very important to us that everyone has a say. And everyone has a spark in that project."*

### **Coming up with new game ideas**

When you want to make your next hit game, you should find interesting stories worth telling. Our interviewees hinted at a couple of ideas: tell stories from a different perspective, break the stereotypes and feel free to break historical or cultural facts – there have always been people who were breaking norms!

## **Endnotes:**

1. For more information, please see the NewZoo's recent article 'Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Games: Gamers Want Less Toxicity in Games and Want Publishers to Take a Stance' (link takes you to NewZoo's page).
2. Statista (2022). Distribution of video gamers in the United States from 2006 to 2021, by gender. Available online at <https://www.statista.com/statistics/232383/gender-split-of-us-computer-and-video-gamers/>.
3. For example Statista: Gaming: The Most Lucrative Entertainment Industry By Far. Available online at <https://www.statista.com/chart/22392/global-revenue-of-selected-entertainment-industry-sectors/>.
4. For example Geena Davis Institute has made a various studies about the media representations and their cultural aspects, see <https://seejane.org/>. Their study "The Double-Edged Sword of Online Gaming: An Analysis of Masculinity in Video Games and the Gaming Community" shares similar findings than our research for Gender in Play project.