

# GENDER IN PLAY

## Representations of Gender in Games



# Game character diversity in Finnish games\*

\* during years 2018-2020

We analysed games made by Finnish game developers during 2018-2020. **Read more** from <https://weingames.fi/gender-in-play>

## Good representation of women characters



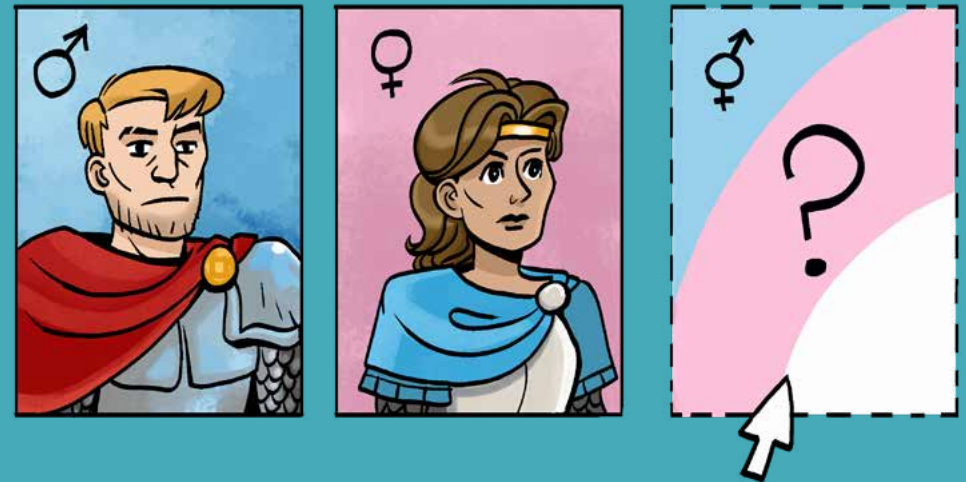
44% games had playable women characters, and 54% games men characters.

Women protagonists are often a strong and powerful leads in Finnish games.

*Play Control (Remedy Entertainment 2020), Small Town Murders: Match 3 Crime Mystery Stories (Rovio Entertainment 2019), or Ignis Universia: Eternal Sisters Saga DX (Random Potion Oy, Hologram Monster Oy 2020).*

## Lack of non-binary and transgender characters

### CHOOSE YOUR AVATAR



**Only 2,5% of games had non-binary characters, and there were no indications of transgender characters.**

Bringing underrepresented genders in games could offer positive role models, lessen the societal alienation, and offer game makers fresh perspectives for storytelling.

## Disability in Games: MISSING

Only few cases of disability in game characters were found.

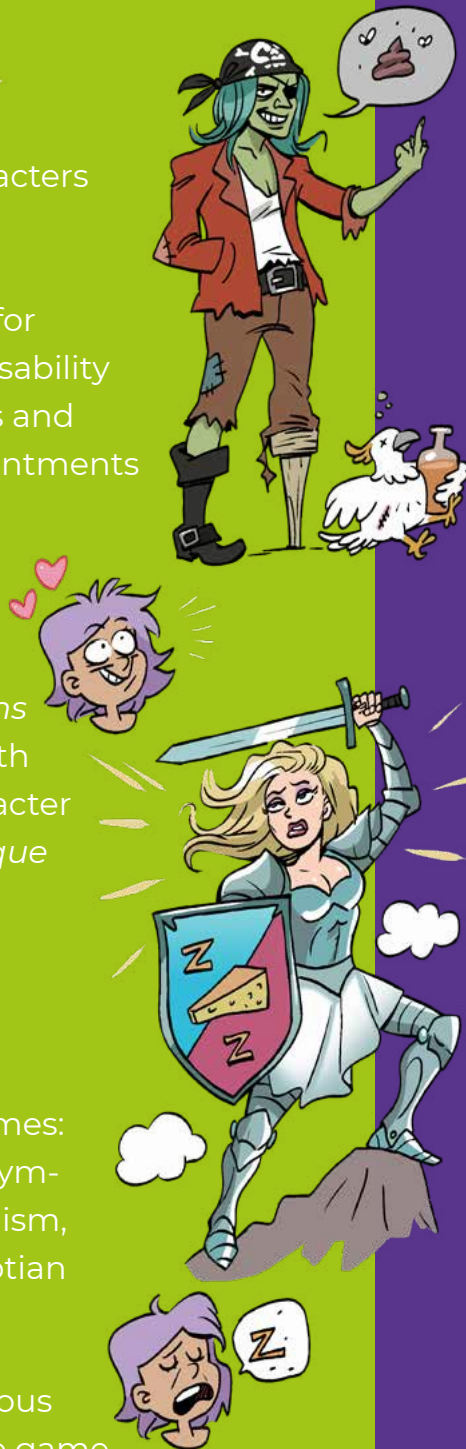
Positive representations are meaningful for disabled people, and for game makers disability can open a new kind of game mechanics and gameplay options. Disabilities and enchantments were highly requested by the players.

For representation of capable blind character, seek *Lotus in Friends & Dragons* (Playsome 2020). Themes of mental health are discussed through the complex character of *Selene Vessos in Returnal* (Housemarque 2021).

## Religion is seldom highlighted

Religion is seldomly visible in Finnish games: total 14 games included some religious symbols, specifically from Christianity, paganism, shamanism, or African and Ancient Egyptian cultures.

A good example of dignified use of religious and avoiding caricatural depictions is the game *Raanaa – The Shaman Girl* (Miksapix Interactive 2019).



## Majority of the characters are white

Ethnical and racial diversity is more than just visual representation and skin colour, but studies show that it is important for a self-esteem to see oneself reflected in media at positive manner. Positive representations hold a power over negative stereotypes too.

Colorism, a preference for light skin over dark skin, might be tempting in games due to the lightning and shaders, but it should be a positive challenge to be able to mimic realistic lightning and tones rather than a reason to do only fair-skinned characters.



## Sexual orientation is irrelevant

Sexual orientation was mostly unspecified to the gameplay and story.

8 games involved in heterosexual relationships, and 2 games either described as gay or in a homosexual relationship.

*Your Royal Gayness* by Lizard Hazard Games discusses LGBTQ+ issues and homophobia with a humoristic approach, but sensitive way. It also includes a non-binary character as one of the main side characters.



## Forgotten old folks in games



Characters age was difficult to determine. Most characters resemble young adults or middle-aged persons, but personal interpretation can influence to the approach.

In games, the age does not bring respect. A young and attractive women character is more easily referred to as “sweet” and “nice”, while an older character became “ugly” or “a hag”, especially when spoken of by a man.

*Returnal's Selene Vassos is a middle-aged mother who can kick ass in an action* (Housemarque 2021).

# Gender-based violence in games

Gender-based violence (GBV) is violence directed against a person due to their gender. Acts of violence are not only physical; they can be sexual or psychological harm or suffering also.

## Examples of gender-based violence in games

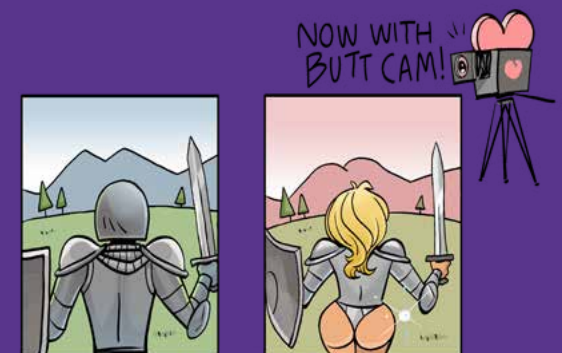
- Unnecessary physical violence against women or gender minorities due to their gender.
- Sexualisation and objectification of a body, like pornographic images or sexualised views on violence in video or audio materials, overemphasised feminine body features, voyeuristic camera angles focused on private 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”.

**Gender-based violence in games, if not blatant, is well hidden in structures, as in everyday life.** Pay attention to the context of the game world and gameplay.



*In this project, we analysed Finnish games published 2018-2020 on terms of different forms of gender-based violence. Analysed games all had a women protagonist that fight, spoke or were spoken to. Some form of sexualization and objectification existed, namely in audio effects. Stereotypical damsel-in-distress trope was used, in ironical manner, breaking that stereotype down. Misogynistic speech about women antagonists was present, but not directed towards protagonist.*

**Read more** from Gender-based Violence against Women Characters.



## Game developers' views on gender-based violence

We interviewed Finnish game developers about their attitudes and thoughts about gender-based violence in games. Here are their takeaways:

**Breaking the harmful stereotypes:** It isn't just a reasonable thing to do; it also creates more interesting and relatable characters and narratives.

**The damsel-in-distress is a paper-thin representation and used up,** but super-capable women warriors are not the only way to go. *"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".*

There is a need **to present a woman character in a certain, very feminine style**, but also a strong will to make representations more realistic, especially when it comes to women characters' ages. *"If there is a woman in her fifties, goddamn sure she already has wrinkles at this point."*

Sometimes the historical understanding might be against presenting diverse characters in games, but the game is not a history book, and **roles have been broken along the lines in real world too.**

**Every character should have equal opportunities to develop.**

Sometimes this might mean going against the will of the publisher, who holds the power and purse strings.



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

**Read more** from Gender-based Violence in Games: game developers' perspective.



## Best Practices for Making Diverse Characters: 1/2

**Aim for diverse characters.** Setting character diversity as a goal starts to guide actions towards it.

**Aim for a diverse narrative and design team.** Adding more diversity to your team adds different opinions, experiences, knowledge and ideas.

**Consult community members!** If you can't have enough diversity on your team, no problem! Consult the member of the community you are writing about. But please pay them for their consultation.

**Do background research.** If you're writing a game about an existing culture, check the facts! Don't rely on and repeat existing, often ethno-centric, stereotypes. Ask an expert if you're unsure. Don't assume.

**Respect your characters and their cultures.** If your character represents an existing culture and if that's a minority culture, respect the nature of the culture and your character.

**Don't just place diversity** Diverse characters should have their own stories, roles and reasons to be in that game.

**Give players multiple options** Let players choose what kind of characters they want to play! Leave space in a game for players to create and develop their characters.



## Best Practices for Making Diverse Characters: 2/2

**Double-check the gameplay and story.** It's always a good idea to revisit your gameplay and story regularly and look out for stereotypes and gender-based violence – even better if someone else does that.

**Make sure that all characters have similar possibilities to develop.** There should be the possibility of winning and advancing to the same levels with every kind of character.

**Taking advantage of body diversity.** 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 also be a source of inspiration for game mechanics. If you don't believe, check out Bentley from Sly Cooper.

**Use randomly generated characters when reasonable.** Randomly generated NPCs celebrating a variety of ethnic backgrounds and body types, clothes, hairstyles and so forth can bring realism to your game.

**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 might come out. Create a company culture where it's okay to comment on others' work in progress and do development reviews often, leaving space for everyone to comment.



### Finding New Game Ideas

*When you want to make your next hit game, find interesting stories worth telling. Tell stories from a different perspective, break the stereotypes and feel free to break historical or cultural facts. There have always been people who break the norms!*





## About the Project



Gender in Play was the collaboration of We in Games Finland and the Council of Women of Finland during the years 2021–2022. A special grant was received from the Finnish Ministry of Justice for the implementation of the project.

**Project coordination:** Taina Myöhänen, Emilia Machuca (We in Games Finland), Aino Hiltunen, Karoliina Paakkinen, Terhi Heinilä, Liisa Ketolainen (The Council of Women of Finland)

**Researchers:** Antonio Rodrigues, Nevena Sićević

**Research supervisor:** Usva Friman

**Steering group:** Usva Friman (The Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies at Tampere University), Louna Hakkarainen (Women's Line), Nina Järviö (Council for Gender Equality TANE), and Heini Kaihu (Rovio Entertainment Corporation).

**Artwork:** Tuuli Hypén

**Prints and layout:** Nuppu Vehmasalo

**Writers:** Nova Liiho, Maria Maunula, Taina Myöhänen, Antonio Rodrigues, Nevena Sićević, Jenni Varila

**Presentations and lectures:** Usva Friman, Eevi Korhonen, Valtteri Lahti, Miia Seppälä, Elina Sievänen



OIKEUSMINISTERIÖ  
JUSTITIEMINISTERIET