Geena Davis Institute 4 on Gender in Media
If she can see it, she can be it.®

OAK FOUNDATION

The Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (GDI) is a research-focused organization with a mission to reinvent, transform and inspire how global content creators and media tell stories through authentic portrayals of the population in entertainment.

Video games have far-reaching effects on our social, cultural, and individual values and perspectives, and like other media, they play an important role in socialization. By 2024, experts anticipate that 4 billion people worldwide will play video games. How many of them will see themselves reflected in the games they play? Following are key highlights from the full, free report available at **seejane.org**.

Changing the Narrative
Why Representation in Video Games Matters

A Gaming Gap

- 62% of adults and 76% of youth in the U.S. say that they play video games.[1]
- Women make up just under half of gamers across global markets (46% of American gamers, 47% of European gamers, 48% of Australian gamers, and 37% of Asian gamers).[1][2][3][4]
- In mobile games, 74% of women are playing daily, based on data from a U.S. and UK survey.[5]

But, women and marginalized communities are underrepresented, or inauthentically represented, in the games that they play.

- Female gamers are 13% less likely to say they relate to characters that match their gender.
- 62% say characters are over sexualized.
- 48% say there are not enough strong female characters in video games.[6]

The good news is that most players agree that inclusivity in games benefits all audiences; the Google for Games 2022 "PC & Console Insights Report" found that over 70% of respondents agree it is very important or important that games feature diverse characters *and* stories.[7]

By the numbers

In the top 100 best-selling games in the U.K. in 2017,

22% of characters were women   **20%** of characters were people of color

A video game dialogue study of popular RPGs revealed

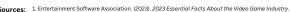male characters speak **twice** as much as female characters

In top 10 trailers for games with most reviews (2006 - 2016),

1% of characters were disabled

In a GDI study of video games played by top Twitch streamers

3% of characters were identified as LGBTQIA+

Source 1: Harrisson, A., Jones, S., Marchessault, J., Pedraça, S., & Consalvo, M. (2020). The virtual census 2.0: a continued investigation on the representations of gender, race and age in video games. AoIR selected papers of Internet research. **Source 2:** Shell, J. (2021). What do we see: An investigation into the representation of disability in video games. arXiv:2103.17100. **Source 3:** Rennick, S., Clinton, M., Ioannidou, E., Oh, L., Clooney, C., T., E., Healy, E., & Roberts, S. G. (2023). Gender bias in video game dialogue. Royal Science Open Society 10: 221095.

Sources:
1. Entertainment Software Association. (2023). *2023 Essential Facts About the Video Game Industry.*
2. According to a 2022 Video Game Europe report, https://www.videogameseurope.eu/data-key-facts/key-facts-from-2022-europe-video-games- sector/#responsiblegameplay.
3. According to a 2023 IGEA report https://igea.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/IGEA_AP2023_FINAL_REPORT.pdf
4. According to a 2023 Niko Partners report https://nikopartners.com/female-gamers-in-asia/
5. GameHouse. (2023) Survey.
6. Bryter. (2020). Female Gamers Survey.
7. Google for Games. (2022). PC & console insight report. Retrieved from https://games.withgoogle.com/reports/2022-pc-console- insights-report/

The Sexualization of Characters in Gameplay

According to a GDI study of games played by top Twitch streamers,[8]

Female characters were:

10X more likely than male characters to be shown in revealing clothing

5X as likely to be shown with some level of nudity

Adolescents 13-18 spend an average of 96 minutes a day playing video games.

Sexualized images send messages about gender, sex, and power leaving significant and lasting impact on adolescent beliefs about gender roles and their own developing sense of masculinity and femininity.[9] [10]

Characters' embodiment in games has real world consequences: a player's virtual embodiment can shape the way they think and behave.

Men exposed to sexualized avatars through long-term gameplay had a greater tolerance for sexual harassment and showed higher rates of rape-myth acceptance.[11] [12] [13]

Women who play sexualized avatars in video games internalize this objectification, leading to depressed personal efficacy, decreased body satisfaction, and in some cases, depression and disordered eating.[14]

To avoid harassment, women will opt not to play female characters, and report avoiding feminine screen names or voice chat functions that would reveal their gender.[15]
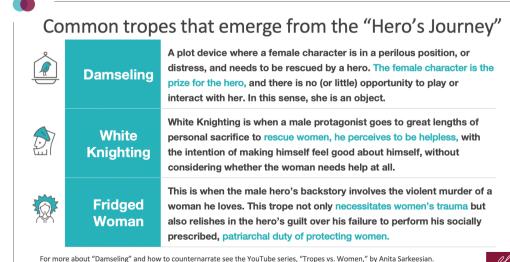
Avatars offer opportunities to challenge social expectations by exploring new identities and give players a tool to navigate uncomfortable social aspects of online spaces.

Narrative Tropes Can Reinforce Exclusion and Inequality

Some story structures invite relegation of female characters, like the "Hero's Journey."

Narratives that center on or assume white masculine norms also impact men of marginalized racial communities because they reinforce a narrow and exclusionary view of masculinity, contributing to a cycle of underrepresentation and reinforce the idea that certain identities are, by default, "normal," while others are less important or even invisible.[16]

Common tropes that emerge from the "Hero's Journey"

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

For more about "Damseling" and how to counternarrate see the YouTube series, "Tropes vs. Women," by Anita Sarkeesian.

Sources:

8 Geena Davis Institute. (2021). The double-edged sword of online gaming: An analysis of masculinity in video games and the gaming community. Retrieved from https://seejane.org/wp-content/uploads/ gaming- study-2021-7.pdf

9 Collins, K.L. & J.R. Kavanaugh. (2023). What should I know about video games and kids? Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab. Retrieved from https://digitalwellnesslab.org/parents/video-games/

10 Near, C. E. (2013). Selling gender: Associations of box art representation of female characters with sales for teen-and mature- rated video games. *Sex Roles*, 68, 252-269.

11 Dill, K.E., Brown, B.P., & Collins, M.A. (2008). Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44(5): 1402- 1408.

12 Beck, V.S., Boys, S., Rose, C., & Beck, E. (2012). Violence against women in video games: A prequel or sequel to rape myth acceptance?. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27(15), 3016-3031.

13 Driesmans K, Vandenbosch L, Eggermont S. (2015.) Playing a videogame with a sexualized female character increases adolescents' rape myth acceptance and tolerance toward sexual harassment. Games *Health Journal* 4:91–94.

14 Moradi B., Huang Y. P. (2008). Objectification theory and psychology of women: a decade of advances and future directions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*. 32(4):377-398.

15 Bryter. (2020). Female Gamers Survey.

16 Ouellette, M. A. (2021). Playing with the guys: Masculinity and relationships in video games. McFarland.

1 **Diversify across character types**

- Make deliberate choices about character identities, and follow through with authenticity.
- Consider how the sum of different characters (POV, NPC) will impact the player's overall experience of the game.

2 **Create multi-dimensional characters**

- Pay attention to accents, affectations and cadences; these are tools to help build diversity but require cultural sensitivity.
- Remember that neutrality isn't neutral - even in nonhuman characters.
- Apply an intersectional lens to character development and craft complex personalities, rather than a singular, defining trait.

3 **Know how characters' identities interact with world building**

- Be cognizant of how a character's race and gender shapes their experience in their world for more authentic storytelling.
- Intentionally explore complex themes, cultural nuances, and social commentary relevant to the game's world.

4 **Incorporate gameplay mechanics that challenge rigid masculinity**

- Reward gameplay that is nonviolent, such as creativity and cunning.
- Design games that encourage cooperation and empathy.
- Challenge assumptions about gender-coded skills and stereotypical behaviors.

5 **Use gameplay mechanics that challenge stereotypes**

- Challenge identity-based stereotypes with peripheral NPC's interactions with the playable character.
- Surprise people with the character's abilities, especially NPCs, who can be written as if they are the heroes of their own journeys.

6 **Eliminate sexualized violence**

- Question the necessity of reinforcing or rewarding domination of female characters.
- Enhance players' connections with the experiences of female characters in ways that do not rely on her physical appearance or sexuality.
- Eliminate opportunities for sexual violation of female characters.

7 **Broaden characters' body types to tell new stories**

- Pair unexpected body types and personality traits to help players unlearn stereotypes.
- Remember that body diversity isn't about just body size but also gendered self-presentation.
- Include fluid, nonbinary options for avatars.

8 **Hire balanced developer teams**

Inclusive content and authentic representation STARTS with diverse development teams that can speak to the nuances of identity plus supportive leadership and a company culture that encourages speaking up.