Video games need more women – and asking for that won't end the world

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Developer Bioware provided both male and female versions of its lead character in the Mass Effect series of sci-fi role-playing adventures

I've been a Woman Who Exists in the Games Media for a pretty long time now, and female representation in games is something that, y'know, comes up quite often. The latest example involves the futuristic dungeon-crawler Deep Down, which Capcom is set to release on PlayStation 4. Recently, the developers appeared on a live web stream and seemed to suggest that there are no women characters in the game for story reasons. In response, VG247's Brenna Hillier unleashed a hilarious and white-hot tirade that beautifully skewers that mentality – do go and read it, it's highly enjoyable. (Capcom has since clarified the comments stating that there is only one

character, not 12, but he is still male, of course.)

Here's something I've noticed: whenever you talk about female protagonists in games, you always hear exactly the same responses. Always. I'm not talking about the absolute meat-heads here; the ones who genuinely think that women aren't really proper people and don't welcome their presence online or anywhere. I'm talking about the people who don't seem to understand why this stuff is even an issue. Why is having female characters such a big deal? Aren't we living in a post-race, post-feminist world where we don't need to get so angry about these things?

Well, no, we're not, unfortunately, and though great progress is being made, it is important to keep these issues in mind if we're ever going to break through the narrow marketing-defined definition of what games and gamers are. So here are five of the most frequent responses to recurring requests for more playable women in games, and why they're misguided.

Adding female lead characters doubles the art budget

This is only true if the art budget is predicated on having one character, who is a man. In most other circumstances it would not magically cost more to make some of the characters female. It does not take more time to design and write a female character. Female actors do not cost more to employ. If you're doing unique performance capture for, say, four different male characters, it would not cost more to do unique performance capture for three male characters and a female character. Or even two of each! Bear in mind, too, that the budget for characters is only a fraction of a whole art budget for a game.

Sure, with heavily narrative-based games that include lots of cinematic sequences, there are budgetary considerations when providing players with a gender choice for the lead character. "In the case of something like Uncharted, you've got mesh data, texture data and possibly mo-cap data to duplicate," says the indie developer Byron Atkinson-Jones, who previously worked at Lionhead on the Fable series. "Also, would character interactions

change based on gender? Would you have to ensure that the proportions of the male and female character are the same so that all gameplay elements remain the same – ie being able to jump and grab a ledge? But nothing is really that difficult to do in games, it's all down to resources, planning and willingness to do it. If the designer stipulates that the main character can be male or female from the start then the development team would build it that way."

Atkinson-Jones is currently having to consider this problem himself with his current title, Containment Protocol. He needs to get voice acting for the lead, but can't afford to employ both male and female actors. For larger studios, though, it's about thinking of story in a different way. The later Saint's Row titles, for example, allows for male and female characters, even letting players swap gender throughout the game. "I think all this requires is better self-awareness from developers," says Mitu Khandaker-Kokoris, of one-woman studio Tiniest Shark, recently responsible for the fascinating sci-fi social media parody, Redshirt. "If you are spending money on all kinds of variety with your male characters, then why is your budget not designed from the ground up to account for female characters too?" Rhianna Pratchett, lead writer on last year's Tomb Raider reboot, agrees. "It seems sheer madness that the industry is striving for more realistic (and expensive) graphics, but not more realistic worlds that actually depict half the Earth's population and an increasingly large chunk of gamers."

Thomas Was Alone designer Mike Bithell is currently working on a new game, Volume, and has decided to add the option to play as a female character. He reckons this will take less than two weeks of work to implement. There's a strange assumption that female characters would inherently change a game to the point where it requires a ton more work and money to create. Unless your entire code base is set up around interchangeable male characters (which is what, say, Infinity Ward claimed was the case with the Call of Duty series before the launch of CoD Ghosts) this just isn't true. "I don't recall seeing anyone even mentioning that the

Titanfall beta has female avatar options," says Bithell. "It has zero effect on the enjoyment of the game for players who don't care, and a massive effect for those who do. Everyone wins."

Asking for more women characters will lead to tokenism and positive discrimination

In 2009, researchers at the University of Southern California carried out a comprehensive study of the 150 biggest video game releases – they discovered that less than 10% of game characters are female. Acknowledging the existence of women and reflecting that in video games is not positive discrimination. People are not asking for every single game to star a female protagonist; they are asking for more than literally one or two titles a year to star a female protagonist. They're asking for it to be an option. In no way is it tokenism to politely request that games more accurately reflect the makeup of the game-playing public and indeed society, instead of existing in a strange alternate reality where 90% of noteworthy people are white and male and have a number two buzzcut.

It's not just women who are fed up with always seeing the same kinds of protagonist in video games. It's pretty much everyone. Back in 2011, IGN superimposed different game characters' faces on each other and found them to be almost identical – a production line of young white men with cropped hair and tribal tattoos.

This didn't used to be the case, you know. Back in the 80s and 90s, people were just making stuff – the budgets and teams were smaller, and lead protagonists varied enormously as a result. It's only in the last console generation that marketing has developed such a tight hold on games that it defines what they are allowed to be before they're even made. Developers are told things like, "this kind of protagonist resonates with the demographic", "this kind of box art is best", "games with prominent women don't sell". Jean-Max Morris, creative director on Capcom's interesting sci-

fi adventure Remember Me, claims to have been told by publishers that they wouldn't sign the game because of its female lead. It's a self-perpetuating circle that limits what games can do.

I've had people tell me, look, we've got the newly re-humanised Lara Croft and we've got FemShep and maybe Faith, can't we just be happy about that and celebrate it? Yes! Yes we can celebrate that. But we can also ask for more of it, please. That's not positive discrimination. And what's really frustration is the way that male gamers on Twitter and in comments sections tend to try to derail the argument by reaching ridiculous conclusions. Ask for more female characters and suddenly we're apparently demanding for all games to include women, or for strict government guidelines on representation. There is a lot of fear and insecurity. I am fairly certain we will avoid a future in which developers are sent to special gender awareness prison camps for not meeting their quota of female antagonists.

Women don't play RPGs/action adventures anyway so what does it matter?

This just straight-up isn't true any more. Look at me, look at my colleagues, look at Twitter, look at the audience of major games websites, look at the many, many pieces of research that show that women are 50% of the gaming audience in total and more than 20% of even the most traditionally male-dominated genres, look at Bioware and the Mass Effect series, look at the ever-increasing number of people who read and share articles like Brenna's, and tell me women don't care about video games, or that female characters don't matter to them (and plenty of men, too).

Also - and this is so obvious it's barely worth pointing out - more relatable characters would bring more women and more money into these genres. "Even if you accept the line of thinking that 'women just don't play these games' (which is obviously untrue!), then surely it would also make sense to accept that making your games less actively unwelcoming to women will potentially widen your audience," says Khandaker. "I am loathe to mention

this kind of argument, because I think making diversity a 'business case' is really the wrong approach… I advocate for better representation and diversity in games not because it's a good business case for games, but because, simply, it is the right thing to do."

Fewer women than men play games in these genres, still. But ask yourself: isn't a lack of aspirational female characters in these genres likely to be a significant reason for that? I looked up to Lara Croft when I was a little girl. I looked up to her because she was all I had. It does matter.

Developers are afraid to put female avatars into games in case their clothing is criticised or they are accused of violence against women

Fear of doing something badly is a terrible excuse for not doing it at all. If you're scared that your female character will be ill-received, there are simple things you can do to minimise the chances of that happening: dress female characters like human beings rather than a teenager's wank fantasy and don't make them objects of fetishistic violence. For example, don't dress them up as slutty nuns and then make a trailer about a bald man graphically murdering them. Don't dress women soldiers in skimpy tops because members of your community fancied seeing some pixelated cleavage. Writing women is not some kind of dark art. If you've got a compelling male character in a story, changing the pronoun isn't going to change who they are.

"I understand this comes from a well-meaning place, but at the same time, we have a responsibility towards better representation," says Khandaker. "We need to take ownership of that responsibility, and while I understand that it might be extra work, it's worth putting in that work towards doing your research, or even dedicating some budget to hiring a consultant (they do exist!) who can talk to you about your ideas for representing women and minority characters – it'll lead us all to a better, more inclusive, and compassionate place."

"There could well be a 'squishiness' factor behind putting female characters into violent scenarios, particularly in terms of AI," acknowledges Rhianna. "Developers can be a little bit nervous about getting female characters wrong (in fact getting any character who is not white, male and straight, wrong.) I think that involving writers and other narrative professionals early on in the process could help. We're used to imagining ourselves into the shoes of people who aren't us. I think that old phrase 'write what you know' unnerves people sometimes. It's more a case of 'write what you understand'. You understand a thing or two about living on this pale blue dot with other complicated, wonderful, maddening homo sapiens? Great, that's half the battle. Go forth and write interesting humans."

But it's not realistic to have all these powerful women

OK. So it is realistic for, say, Cole MacGrath to run around shooting lighting bolts out of his hands, but if he were a woman that would be preposterous? Here's what's actually unrealistic: fiction in which more than half of the population of Earth simply isn't present, or is only present in the background, as passive entities. That makes no sense.

I'm being a wee bit facetious, but the point stands that not having women in games is jarring. LA Noire, for instance, actually makes its version of 1945 more sexist than it was in reality. Cara Ellison goes into great detail on this here, but the LAPD was one of the most progressive police forces in America at that time and employed numerous female officers, and in postwar society there were many women doing the jobs that men had left behind – all of which is reflected in noir films of the period. The fact that LA Noire has no prominent women at all except dead ones and the lead character's mistress isn't an accurate reflection of history, it's deeply strange.

"Women are now able to become soldiers on the front lines for real, yet it seems impossible to get them into virtual warfare," says Pratchett. "It's a sad day when imagination is lagging behind real life."

Or, as Bithell succinctly puts it, "Tell that to the many women who serve in the military, in law enforcement, in any one of the relatively small number of professions depicted in video games. Or don't, because they have guns."

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