

The Evolution of Female Character Representations in Video Games from a Feminism Perspective

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Abstract: As a form of artistic cultural product, video games exert a subtle yet profound influence on societal culture and value systems. In an era where video games have become an integral component of popular culture and entertainment, the depiction of female characters within these virtual realms not only reflects the individual perspectives of game designers, but also serves as a mirror to broader societal attitudes and inclusivity towards women. This paper conducts a comprehensive analysis of iconic games spanning different eras since the inception of video games in the public eye, adopting a feminism perspective. The aim is to elucidate the diverse characteristics of female characters and their corresponding manifestations of societal ideologies. The research will meticulously trace the evolution of video game development from the 1980s to the present, dissecting mainstream representations of female characters across different epochs. Through this analysis, this study endeavors to unravel the intricate interplay between video game narratives and evolving societal values, shedding light on the dynamic process of shaping these portrayals in relation to prevailing cultural norms. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the multifaceted role of video games in influencing perceptions and conversations surrounding gender representation and empowerment.

Keywords: female game character, video games, feminism, stereotypes, misogyny

1. Introduction

Video games have undeniably become a powerful cultural phenomenon since their integration into mainstream society [1]. Yet, with their ascent, the portrayal of female characters within these virtual worlds has come under intense scrutiny and critique within feminist discourse. This scrutiny arises from a glaring gender imbalance between male and female characters, coupled with a prevailing tendency to objectify and hypersexualize the latter. These manifestations are viewed as reflections of entrenched patriarchal norms within the gaming industry [2].

With the continuous advancement of technologies and the watchful eye of the feminist movement, there emerges a discernible evolution in the representation of female characters. This evolution marks a departure from conventional, often one-dimensional depictions, towards more nuanced and empowered representations of women. This transition underlines the industry's responsiveness to the escalating demands for diversity and inclusivity, driven by both technological capacities and the influence of feminist advocacy.

As this study embarks on an exploration of iconic games spanning different eras, this study endeavors to unpack the intricate relationship between video games, feminism, and evolving societal values. Through a meticulous examination of titles such as *“Pac-Man,” “Super Mario Bros.,” the “Legend of Zelda” series, “Tomb Raider,” “League of Legends,” “Bayonetta,”* the reimagined *“Tomb Raider” series, the “Horizon” series, and the “The Last of Us” series,* this study aims to illuminate the diverse characteristics of female characters and the corresponding reflections of prevailing societal ideologies within these digital realms. By tracing the developmental arc of female game characters from the 1980s to the contemporary landscape, this analysis seeks to unveil the evolving role they assume in shaping and advancing feminist discourse. In doing so, this study sheds light on the pivotal role of video games in the ongoing narrative of gender representation and empowerment.

2. Early Era of Gaming (1970s - 1990s)

2.1. Overview of Female Characters in Early Video Games

Due to the limitations of early game development technology and hardware conditions, the design of female characters during this period was typically relatively simple. The gender of the characters was often implied through visual cues such as the color pink, long hair, and so on. In *“Pac-Man”* (1982), the color pink and a bow were used to indicate the female character, Ms. Pac-Man. In *“Super Mario Bros.”* (1985), the only female character, Princess Peach, is depicted with long golden hair and a pink dress. She is often depicted as being trapped in a castle, waiting for Mario, the player-controlled character, to rescue her. A similar character also appeared in *“The Legend of Zelda”* (1986), where Zelda is the main female character who serves as a princess in need of rescue by the player. However, she makes only infrequent appearances throughout the game, and her princess status is primarily conveyed through her name *“Zelda”* and the location of the palace. Additionally, in early fighting games, optional female characters were often characterized by features such as long hair and the color pink, serving as symbolic traits.

2.2. Societal Values of Female Characters in Early Video Games

In the Early Era of Gaming (1970s - 1990s), female representation in video games was notably lacking, painting a vivid picture of their marginalization within the medium. These early portrayals tended to reduce female characters to simplistic, often limiting, feminine stereotypes [3]. These characters were frequently cast in roles characterized by passivity, vulnerability, and a perceived need for male protection. This narrative design not only perpetuated outdated gender norms but also hindered the exploration of their personalities and backgrounds, rendering them one-dimensional and devoid of agency. Even in instances where female characters were granted playable roles, their abilities and capacities were often artificially constrained. This only served to reinforce the prevailing notion that female characters were inherently less capable and impactful compared to their male counterparts [4]. This stark underrepresentation and limited characterization underscored the urgent need for a transformation in the portrayal of female characters in video games, marking a crucial juncture in the evolution of their representation.

3. 3D Gaming Era (1990s - 2010s)

3.1. Changes in the Portrayal of Female Characters in Transition Period

With the advancement of 3D graphics technology, there was a qualitative leap in the portrayal of character images in games. *“Tomb Raider”* (firstly published in 1996) marked the first AAA-level

game with a female protagonist. As one of the most iconic female characters, her image broke through the traditional stereotype of women in games, demonstrating that women can also play leading roles in adventure and action games. In the game, Lara is portrayed as an extremely independent, confident, and capable archaeologist and combat expert. She often faces danger alone, showcasing formidable survival skills and courage [5]. However, Lara's image sparked some controversy in its early days due to the overtly sexualized appearance, with criticism directed towards the excessive emphasis on the curves of the female body.

In *“League of Legends”* (firstly published in 2009), which became one of the most played MOBA games worldwide upon release, the majority of female characters are often criticized for being overly sexualized and objectified [6]. Controversial heroes like Ahri, Ashe, Katarina, among others, are characterized by revealing outfits that accentuate strong secondary sexual characteristics, projecting a seductive and deadly femme fatale image. Additionally, in the initial versions of the game, the number of male heroes far outnumbered female heroes (30:10), and female heroes were predominantly assigned to support roles, further reflecting gender stereotypes within the specific context of *“League of Legends”*.

The game *“Bayonetta”* (firstly published in 2009) stands out as the first widely recognized hardcore action game with a female protagonist. The main character, Bayonetta, is known for her extremely provocative appearance. As a witch capable of shape-shifting and employing various weapons, her iconic image features a backless bodysuit and high heels. She showcases visually striking body curves through exaggerated combat poses. Simultaneously, Bayonetta possesses a witty and humorous personality, along with a complex backstory. In the game, she displays a strong sense of independence and autonomy, being a character capable of resolving problems on her own rather than relying on others for rescue. This makes her a compelling and charismatic character

3.2. Societal Values of Female Characters in 3D Gaming Era

During this stage, an increasingly diverse range of female game characters are witnessed. These characters departed from symbolic features from an aesthetic perspective, becoming more varied. In terms of game mechanics, this was specifically manifested by the emergence of female protagonists, narratives centered around independent female characters, an elevation of their status within the game, and a more diverse range of aesthetic styles and visual expressions.

However, an outstanding issue during this stage was the tendency to design female game characters in a way that overly catered to male aesthetics [7]. This included exaggerated physical features and revealing attire, making the sensual qualities of the characters a prominent characteristic. Female characters were often categorized into simplistic archetypes of virtuous, pure heroines or villainous, seductive femme fatales [8], reflecting societal values that prioritized physical attractiveness in female representation.

4. Modern Gaming Era (2010s - Present)

4.1. Transformation of Female Characters in Modern Video Games

After 2010, the video game industry entered the modern gaming era, and female characters in video games began to exhibit noticeable diversity and complexity. In comparison to earlier times, they became more independent, powerful, and characterized by distinct personalities. Additionally, there was a trend towards desexualization and neutralization in their appearance. These transformations were particularly evident among influential mainstream game developers [9].

In the trilogy of the *“Tomb Raider” reboot series* (firstly published in 2013), the character of the protagonist, Lara Croft, was further enriched. It narrated Lara's first adventure at the age of 21, providing her with a deeper background and a more well-rounded character image. It depicted her

vulnerability and helplessness, her growth trajectory, making Lara more authentic and relatable. She experiences fear of the unknown, just like an ordinary person, yet she is strong and resilient.

In *“The Last of Us” series* (firstly published in 2013), one of the main characters, Ellie, displays formidable survival and combat abilities. Her character is crafted as a determined, intelligent, and brave female figure, striving to survive. In terms of appearance, she also lacks excessive sexualized features, instead reflecting a closer resemblance to the appearance of real-world women.

In the *“Horizon” series* (firstly published in 2017), the protagonist, Aloy Sobeck, is a female hunter and adventurer in a post-apocalyptic world. Aloy’s physical design aligns more closely with real-world women. Her skin texture and color are more naturally realistic, devoid of intentionally exposed bodies or strong secondary sexual characteristics. Some even argue that the character adopts a slightly androgynous female image. In the game, she showcases powerful combat skills, embodying courage, wisdom, and independence. It’s worth noting that both Aloy and Ellie are depicted as lesbians in the games, representing an early attempt in AAA games to include LGBTQ+ protagonists.

4.2. Societal Values of Female Characters in Modern Video Games

In the modern gaming era, a palpable shift in societal values towards female game characters has emerged, markedly distinct from earlier periods. This era places a premium on diversity and inclusivity, reshaping the portrayal of women within the gaming landscape. Now, female characters exhibit a striking range of ethnicities, body types, and backgrounds, presenting a far more authentic and encompassing representation of women. This progressive evolution is not limited solely to gender; it extends to encompass the intersectionality of gender with other facets of identity, such as race, sexuality, and disability. This nuanced approach results in a richer and more inclusive tapestry of female representation, resonating more authentically with the diverse experiences of real women. Moreover, some modern games deliberately challenge entrenched gender norms, delving into explorations of gender identity and expression. By doing so, they contribute to a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of gender dynamics in society, pushing the boundaries of conventional discourse and broadening the horizons of inclusivity in the gaming world. This seismic shift in the portrayal of female characters in contemporary games underscores not only the industry’s responsiveness to evolving social values but also its pivotal role in shaping a more equitable and inclusive narrative for women in the digital realm.

5. The Role of Female Video Game Characters in Feminism Development

5.1. Breaking Misogyny and Stereotypes

For a long time, female characters in games have often been overly sexualized or objectified, which may have negative consequences for female gamers, such as internalizing negative attitudes and beliefs towards women [10]. However, modern games tend to showcase the inner abilities and qualities of women, reducing their positioning solely based on appearance. Seeing positive, empowered, and influential female characters can inspire female players to enhance self-awareness and confidence. They can find role models in games, leading to increased confidence and determination in real life. Some game narratives and character designs deliberately avoid traditional gender roles, challenging stereotypical impressions of women by highlighting their active performances in various roles [11]. Additionally, modern games increasingly portray female figures from diverse racial, cultural backgrounds, and sexual orientations, contributing to the reduction of stereotypes and promoting a more diverse and inclusive perspective.

5.2. Promotion of Women's Self-awareness

When female players encounter female characters with whom they resonate and who possess well-rounded personalities, a sense of identification and empathy arises. They may see aspects of themselves reflected in these characters, thereby enhancing their self-awareness and sense of belonging. Simultaneously, strong, capable, and complex female characters have emerged as positive role models. They demonstrate to players, regardless of gender, that women can be leaders, problem solvers, and catalysts for change. This can inspire women to pursue their own aspirations and goals. Some games incorporate feminist themes or present thought-provoking narratives about gender issues, encouraging players to engage in critical thinking and discussions. This can lead to a deeper understanding of the challenges related to gender. Witnessing a diverse range of female characters can motivate women, both within and outside the gaming industry, to create their own stories and characters. This can result in a more diverse and inclusive representation of women in games and other forms of media.

By providing a platform to showcase diverse and well-developed female characters, video games have the potential to play a significant role in challenging societal norms and fostering self-awareness and empowerment among players. Games, as a powerful cultural product, have the capacity to subtly influence perceptions. In contemporary gaming, there is a growing trend towards portraying resilient, intelligent, and independent female characters. Such portrayals allow players to see women taking on active, decision-making roles within the game, thereby promoting the core values of feminism. Modern games are increasingly striving to reflect the principles of diversity, inclusivity, and equality that exist in the real world. This is crucial for advancing feminism.

6. Conclusions

This study has meticulously examined the evolution of female characters in video games since their emergence in the public eye, delving into their role in the development of feminism. Through a systematic analysis of prominent female figures across three distinct eras—the Early Era of Gaming, the 3D Gaming Era, and the Modern Gaming Era—a discernible positive trend in the portrayal of female characters emerges, marked by an increasing emphasis on diversity and inclusivity. However, despite these strides, a persistent disparity exists between the representation of male and female characters, with the latter often relegated to subordinate roles and subject to the objectifying lens of the male gaze. This discrepancy is reflective of broader issues within the gaming industry, where female professionals face marginalization and discrimination, perpetuating a production landscape that caters primarily to male preferences. The depiction of female characters, in many ways, mirrors societal expectations and perceptions of women, giving rise to recurrent themes of compliance, vulnerability, and objectification. These findings underscore the imperative of feminism within the realm of video games. Yet, within this context, female characters wield immense potential to challenge prevailing norms, dispel stereotypes, and bolster women's self-awareness. Through intentional character development that prioritizes diversity, video games serve as a powerful platform for advancing feminist consciousness. This progressive trend not only contributes to cultivating a more inclusive and equitable gaming culture but also exerts a positive influence on society at large. In summation, the evolving portrayal of female characters in video games not only reflects the shifting dynamics of the industry but also mirrors broader societal attitudes towards gender. By acknowledging the progress made thus far and recognizing the work that remains, this study charts a course towards a more inclusive and empowering future for female representation in this influential medium.

Due to time constraints, not all representative game samples can be analyzed. This study leans towards selecting three to four of the most popular and widely recognized female game characters

from each stage, which may restrict a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of female game characters. In future research, it will be imperative to take into account different cultural and societal backgrounds. For instance, conducting separate analyses of the status of women and gender cultures in East Asia and the Western world can provide a more comprehensive and specific understanding of the relationship between female game characters and their respective cultural environments. This approach will yield insights into how cultural context shapes the portrayal and representation of female characters in video games.

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