

Feminism in Popular Video Games: an Analysis of Female Protagonists in their Representation of Feminist Values

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ABSTRACT

Representation of women in video games is an important issue as it contributes to the consumer's perception and understanding of the group. Particularly, the modern female protagonists in video games widely challenge the sexist premise of women's physical and intellectual inferiority to men, showcasing the heroines' strengths and personal qualities. The following essay considers acclaimed titles such as *Tomb Raider*, *The Last of Us*, and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* in their depiction of the female protagonist from the perspective of feminism. The studied heroines manifest a series of feminist values like independence and freedom of expression. However, the lack of diversity in the presented women implies the need for improvement in the industry to fully encompass contemporary feminism.

Introduction

Today, the role of media in society has gone beyond plain entertainment. It has become a powerful tool for influencing the consumer's values and interests, as well as impacting their perception of certain issues. For this reason, female representation in media is crucial. The way women are represented contributes to the consumer's understanding of the group. The following is a study of one of the fastest growing media industries – gaming – in its approaches to representing women. In arguing this thesis, the essay examines titles such as *Tomb Raider*, *The Last of Us*, *Horizon*, and *Resident Evil* through their female protagonists from the perspective of feminism.

We begin with an overview of the evolution of female representation in video games, followed by an analysis of modern heroines from a feminist outlook. The female protagonists are, finally, examined through the perspective of intersectional feminism, as we discuss the ongoing issue with diversity in the industry. Alluding to figures like Kimberle Crenshaw, Judith Butler, and Sarah Ahmed, this study uses feminist theory to define the movement's timeline and values. Significantly less sexualized compared to the past, today's female protagonists in popular video games challenge the sexist premise of women's intellectual and physical inferiority to men; however, whether they truly represent the values of contemporary feminism is still debatable.

The Evolution of Female Representation in Video Games

Previously, women characters in video games have rarely been a priority. In fact, *Statista* reveals that just 2% of video games in 2016 had female protagonists (Clement, 2022). The figure reached 18% in the year 2020, yet the situation remains upsetting – representation of women is still an area for improvement. In the rare case of a woman appearing in a game, historically, the heroine would be depicted as an overly sexualized, borderline objectified creature. Compared to the men in the story, the character widely lacked impact on the plot, her primary role revolving around

pleasing the male gaze. The weight of this issue is studied by Marika Skowronski in her article “The effects of sexualized video game characters and character personalization on women’s self-objectification and body satisfaction.” She underlines the common trend of sexualized representations of women in contemporary video games, from the cult *Grand Theft Auto* series to fighting games like the *Street Fighter*. Making an argument about the media-induced body image issues, Skowronski points out the tendency’s injurious effect on women.

The issue with representation of women in media is similarly discussed by Carlos Pacheco in a *Medium* article on “The Rise of Female Protagonist in Video Games.” Pacheco argues the role of the previously mentioned “male gaze” in this topic. “In the past, the few female protagonists appearing in games were built specifically with male gaze in mind,” he writes, “In order to be relatable to a male player (and the assumption seemed to be that there were *only* male players), their characters were either neutered or sexualized.” Indeed, the demographics of video game consumers are an influential variable to representing women in the media. For instance, statistics show that almost half of the American gaming audience (48%) was made up of women by 2022 (Clement, 2023). The effect of this gender inclusive trend in the industry is observable, as female characters underwent adjustments to a more gender-diverse audience. In his article, Pacheco suggests that the era of hyper-sexualized heroines in video games may be behind us. Naively optimistic, perhaps, but I agree.

Modern Video Game Heroines from a Feminist Outlook

Tomb Raider’s Lara Croft

For instance, the gradual evolution of the female protagonist in video games is evident through Lara Croft’s character in the *Tomb Raider* series. First released in 1996, the game is notable for introducing a cult female protagonist to an industry of primarily male characters. “She was iconic from the jump because we hadn’t seen a lot of female heroes in video games,” comments Dallas Dickinson, the franchise executive producer for *Tomb Raider* (Powell & Blake, 2021). However, Croft’s popularity wasn’t solely from her brains and strength. Originally intended to be a male character (based on the legendary Indiana Jones), early Lara Croft was severely sexualized by the developers in an attempt to appeal to a certain demographic (Fitzsimmons, 2021). Her tomb raiding outfit consisted of tight, semi-revealing clothing, which accentuated her highly unrealistic silhouette. The 90’s “it girl” even appeared on the covers of men magazines, teasing the fans with a partially nude look.

Then, Croft’s appearance along with her entire character was modified by Crystal Dynamics during the reboot in 2013 (Nolfi, 2018). The protagonist was granted a simpler silhouette, and the emphasis shifted on her skill rather than her body. Rhianna Pratchett, writer and scripter for the series, explains the changes with the need for a relatable character. “It was great escapism, but we’ve seen a lot of characters like this, living in fantasies,” she says. “With this Lara, I wanted to bring her down to earth a little bit more, and think about her as an average London student ... someone more in line with young women in London today.” Despite the controversial marketing tactics applied by the early developers, Lara Croft remains a crucial figure in the history of female protagonists.

Horizon’s Aloy

The introduction of such a strong, fearless heroine was a major breakthrough in the unbalanced industry. Although a big step towards a more diverse video game market, *Tomb Raider*’s success didn’t ultimately solve the issue of female underrepresentation in media. This is highlighted by the *Ubisoft* controversy that unfolded in 2014. In an interview with Polygon, the company’s creative director Alex Amancio stated that the lack of playable female characters in *Assassin’s Creed: Unity* is caused by the developers’ reluctance to go through additional work. “It’s double the animations, it’s double the voices, all that stuff and double the visual assets,” Amancio reasoned, “It was really a lot of extra production work” (Campbell, 2014). The way an entire demographic – comprising half of the world population

– is regarded as an unnecessary burden shows the industry’s continuous marginalization of women. Taking place less than a decade ago, this incident reminds us that inequality is not an ancient problem. As writer Sarah Ahmed said: “Focusing on sexism *now* and *here* matters because too often sexism is identified as either in the past tense (as what we dealt with, what we have overcome) or as elsewhere (as a problem ‘other cultures’ have yet to deal with). Sexism is *present*. That is one starting point.” Nevertheless, the increase of video games with female protagonists is undeniable.

The Last of Us’ Ellie

Recent titles have been displaying a positive trend – with a rising percentage of playable heroines and, more significantly, women as main characters. With this trajectory, it is important to reflect: *What values do the heroines represent?* and, consequently: *How do these characters affect the consumer’s perception of women?* A feminist assessment of today’s female protagonists in video games helps to outline the ideas and presumptions conveyed by the media about women. For instance, one common motive uniting popular heroines nowadays is empowerment via emphasizing their intellectual, physical, and moral edge. This practice resonates with the ideas raised in Sarah Moore Grimke’s works. In her revolutionary *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes, and the Condition of Woman* (1838), the American abolitionist wrote: “Man has inflicted an unspeakable injury upon woman, by holding up to her view her animal nature, and placing in the background her moral and intellectual being.” So, the issue of women’s belittled personal value was already prominent in feminist theory of the nineteenth century. Today’s depiction of female protagonists in video games actively challenges the mentioned “animal nature” held up by men to women according to Grimke. Girls in modern gaming titles are brave and strong; they are determined to arrive at their destination, regardless of the obstacles.

A vivid example is Ellie from *The Last of Us*. Although not the protagonist in the first release, she is a complex character showing wrath and guilt contrasting with hope and pun-filled humor (Gross, 2020). Throughout the plot, Ellie is forced to mature as she gradually becomes corrupt by violence (Druckmann, 2020). Ashley Johnson, the heroine’s voice actor, shares that she had a lot of anger to put into her character – a notable instance of “female rage” broadcasted through media. This subject is raised in *The New York Times* Critic’s Notebook by Maya Phillips, where she notes that female rage in recent media is held “within a culture that still prefers women to carry their anger calmly and silently.” Ellie’s unapologetic rage in *The Last of Us Part II* can hence be considered an empowering move from the developers. Still, it is worth noting that Ellie’s portrayal heavily relies on that of Joel. After all, he is her mentor and father figure, which places him above the girl in their power dynamic. Consequently, brainstorming Ellie’s personality was based on her effect on the male protagonist: it was vital that “she could be a foil to Joel (a gruff man of few words) and an opposite to him,” according to Neil Druckmann, co-director and writer of the games. In conclusion, Ellie is a prime example of a heroine conveying feminist values like freedom of temper and the sharpness of her “moral and intellectual being” (Grimke, 1838). Nevertheless, the girl’s dynamic with her male co-lead raises questions to her attribution as an ultimate feminist figure

A Comparative Overview of the Protagonists

As a female protagonist, Ellie manifested an uplifting sense of curiosity, optimism, and wonder (Druckmann, 2020). Many may equate these traits to femininity. In reality, the term “femininity” carries numerous meanings across contexts and thus cannot be defined with a fixed set of qualities all women must possess (Windsor, 2015). Womanhood remains a subjective experience for everyone. However, as a society, we’ve assumed the habit of recognizing certain concepts as either bearing masculine or feminine nature (Caro, 2019). Arguably, an example of a character with strong feminine energy would be Aloy from *Horizon: Zero Dawn*. At times similar to Ellie, Aloy is a determined, fierce, nuanced character (Henley, 2020). John Gonzalez, the game’s narrative director, identifies her difference from the other protagonists by Guerrilla Games (like in *Skyrim* or *Fallout*) as being a fully “written character” with her own

story arc and pre-defined ending (LaunchCannon, 2023). As Stacey Henley writes in her *PC Gamer* feature, “There’s potential there, but Aloy is not a character with potential: she’s the real deal already, and the most interesting turns in Horizon happen through her.” Thus, Aloy is a significant case for female representation in media due to the thorough nature of her creation and the development of her arc.

Aloy shows deep care and affection for her community as she advances in her heroic journey. She is nurturing and emotionally intelligent, which is evident in her interactions with others. Even Gonzalez portrays Aloy as “the symbol of all that is still good and righteous about humans.” All of these qualities describe Aloy as a character with abundant feminine energy (as is defined by our societal standards). Importantly, none of this weakens or undermines her strength. Aloy skillfully defeats the animal robots inhabiting her world, defying enemies with equal success regardless of their gender. Moreover, she is able to peek into other dimensions, like the past and the present, via her devices. It is revealed that Aloy is a clone of the Earth’s creator, which ultimately emphasizes her character’s vitality in her universe. This is key, as it shows that bearing conventionally “feminine” traits does not take from one’s value, strength, or weight. The consumer seems to share this standpoint, admiring the way “Aloy is fresh and raw and magnetic” (Henley, 2020) and recognizing that “We draw inspiration from Aloy’s determination in the face of her challenges.” (LaunchCannon, 2023)

Lara Croft, Ellie, and Aloy are revolutionary cases within the male-dominated gaming industry. They are independent, multifaceted, strong heroines capable of impacting their universe and the narrative arc. Media scholars have long studied the presumption that “games depict women in a manner that is both polarizing and marginalizing: as either sexual objects or damsels in distress.” (Gray & Voorhees & Vossen, 2018) The mentioned heroines actively challenge this historical tendency, inspiring a change in the market and, consequently, the consumer’s perception of the field.

Feminist Values Conveyed Through the Heroines

So, what are the feminist values conveyed through modern female protagonists in video games? To start with, many heroines don’t conform to “traditional” gender and family roles. From *Resident Evil*’s Jill Valentine to *Heavy Rain*’s Madison Paige, women are depicted succeeding in their career, single-handedly providing for their own wellbeing. The games showcase women’s vital contribution to fields like law enforcement (Jill Valentine) and journalism (Madison Paige). Consequently, titles with such storylines reflect the value of institutional reforms. This speaks to the “feminist institutionalism” approach – a branch of feminist theory aiming to “understand and explain how power is distributed within institutions” in context of gender inequality (Holmes, 2020).

Furthermore, heroines like Lara Croft contribute to rebutting the stigma around women’s sexuality. This is done by broadcasting a character with admirable strength and intelligence existing not in spite, but along with outer beauty. Ellie normalizes emotional vulnerability, unapologetically exposing her wrath, guilt, but also hope. She challenges the prejudicial idea of women’s excessive sentimentality, underlining the importance of embracing one’s feelings rather than suppressing them for society’s approval. Aloy, among others, communicates the value of freedom of expression. Her character embraces the liberty of choosing one’s own path – including personal attributes like fondness of technology and science – and remaining confident in her identity (in spite of social segregation of masculine/feminine traits). Judith Butler’s theory supports this concept, as the American philosopher argues that “one’s learned performance of gendered behavior ... is an act of sorts, a performance, that is imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality.” (Felluga, 2011) In conclusion, today’s heroines effectively manifest a range of feminist ideas.

Women in Video Games and Intersectional Feminism

Still, a crucial element of contemporary feminism is intersectionality. Coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, the term refers to the way different kinds of oppression – e.g., based on gender and race – intersect with each other. Intersectionality is not a concept that is elaborated through modern female protagonists. According to *Diamond Lobby's* study of 93 top-charting video games from 2017 to 2021, only 8.3% of titles had a female main character of black, Asian, or other ethnic origin. Modern titles also seem to favor heroines who conform to conventional beauty standards: as a rule, rarely plus-size or showing any divergence in physical or mental capabilities. Abra Pressler's article in *Women's Agenda* also raises this issue, noting: "Muscular and slim are the two extremes when it comes to body shape in female characters – there a few-plus sized characters and when they are represented, they're often the antagonist." Finally, most heroines are depicted pursuing exclusively heterosexual relationships. While *The Last of Us* made a major step forward with Ellie's interest in Riley and Dina, it's more of an exception rather than a common practice in the field. Thus, despite the industry's positive trajectory with female representation, approaching a truly inclusive, diverse market will require extensive improvement. "In the 22 years since Lara Croft raided her first tomb, women have fronted more games ever before, but ... racial and age-based diversity are the next frontiers for polygonal progress," shares Rhianna Pratchett (Nolfi, 2018). Until then, lack of intersectionality remains a vital weakness that impedes today's heroines from being consistent with contemporary feminist ideology.

Conclusions

The Heroines' Contribution to Feminism in Media

This flaw, however, doesn't invalidate the widely positive influence of modern video game heroines. Today's female protagonists portray women in an empowering, inspiring light by accentuating qualities like physical and mental strength, determination, and sharpness of mind. Female characters in gaming are no longer aimless objects of sexualization. Their contribution to plot development is equally important as that of male characters – and in some instances, women even step forth as the driving force of the narrative. Modern female protagonists in video games favorably impact the consumer's perception and understanding of the gender, as they showcase such feminist values as independence, freedom of choice, and unapologetic emotional expression. Such representation reinforces everything that is to be proud of about women, while also fighting towards defeating the misogynistic stigma and harmful prejudice (such as the premise of "the weaker sex"). Going forward, game developers should strive to introduce more admirable heroines to the playing audience. Simultaneously, the issue with the underrepresentation of minorities must be prioritized for resolution. The market will not be truly inclusive until intersectionality is taken into consideration. Still, it appears that society is on the right track. In turn, it's on the consumer to reinforce the industry's diversification attempts by showing interest and positive reception of inclusive castings. For offer will only grow if so does demand.

Two Perspectives

In this regard, two perspectives must be considered. From the consumer's side: is there truly a demand for a diverse market? The audience has seemingly established their preferences by now, and whether people will be willing to adjust their taste is uncertain. Perhaps, rather than converting today's audience, the wiser approach would be to work on expanding the gaming demographic comprised of minority groups. One logical way to achieve this would be to diversify the game-developing industry. People would be more likely to find the content appealing if it were produced by someone knowledgeable of the minority experience. Consequently, this leads to the second perspective, that of the developers. In order to appeal to a wider range of audiences, game-developing companies should strive toward a more diverse workplace. Meaning, the true root of the issue with underrepresentation in media are the lacking opportunities and resources for (women) minorities in the industry. If we demand the broadcast of intersectionality, the question is:

How can we have an intersectional background of people working on our games? Although, this is a sociological thesis for discussion in a different study.

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