FROM PIXEL BABES TO ACTIVE AGENTS – HOW TO FIX THE LACK OF DIVERSITY IN FEMALE DIGITAL GAME CHARACTERS

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Introduction

One of the current gender issues in gaming is the lack of diversity in female character representations in digital games. To find a solution for this problem, first the current female character representations have to be critically examined and analysed to pinpoint the recurrent issues in them. It is not until then that it will be possible to find ways to improve the visibility and diversity of women in games.

In my master's thesis (Friman 2013a) I examined how characters, especially female characters, are constructed in some of the most popular digital games of 2010 and 2011 (1). During the study I found some remarkable recurrences in the ways women are and are not represented in those selected AAA titles in my data. In this essay I will describe my findings on how female character representations are constructed and interpreted in digital games.

For the purpose of gaining a wider understanding on how digital game characters are constructed, I have also developed a model through which digital game character representations can

be examined and analysed. The model is based on five character construction themes: 1. presence, 2. background and role, 3. participation and goals, 4. speech, and 5. gendering. The model also locates the character construction process to the interactions between characters and between the characters and the player. In addition to the recurrent patterns found in female character representations in my study, I will also describe this model and how it can be used to analyse and improve female characters in digital games.

More than Pixels: What Game Characters Are Made of

To be able to examine the lack of diversity and other potential issues in female character representations, we should start by looking at what digital game characters are made of. For the player, they are much more than pixels, sounds and skills. Because of this, they should also be considered more than that from both design and research points of view. Here I will describe the model which I have developed to examine the representations of female characters in digital games, more specifically the five character construction themes it contains: 1. presence, 2. background and role, 3. participation and goals, 4. speech, and 5. gendering. I will explain what each theme means in the context of female characters in digital games, what kind of questions the themes include, and what they can tell about the character representations.

Presence is the first requirement for representation. In my study I measured the presence of female characters in the games in my data with four questions: are there named female characters, are the female characters playable, are there female allies, and are there female opponents. Additionally, I examined if the game had a female main protagonist or a female main antagonist. Exploring the questions in this theme revealed that while every single game contained named female characters and also female allies, playable female characters were not present in all games, and female main characters were significantly rarer than their male counterparts. Out of the sixteen total games

in my data, only two (12.5 %) forced a female protagonist, and additionally a female protagonist was an option in five games (31.35 %). Furthermore, only four games (25 %) forced at least one playable female character, although playing with a female character was also an option in five more games (31.25 %).

It was interesting to notice that female characters working against the player (in 10 games, 62.5 %) were a bit rarer than female characters working on the player's side (in all 16 games, 100 %), and that female main antagonists (in 4 games, 25 %) were similarly a bit less common compared to mandatory or optional female main protagonists (in 7 games, 43.75 %). Even though female characters have become more common than they were for example fifteen years earlier (Dietz 1998, 433–434), women are still not as strongly present in games as men are, and this lack of presence naturally translates to lack of diversity. As such, the first and perhaps the most obvious step to ensuring the diversity of female character representations in digital games would be to make sure there are female characters in games in the first place.

The second theme in my model for character representation analysis is used to examine how female characters in games are defined by the descriptions of their **backgrounds** as well as by the **roles** they are showed acting in during the game. In most cases in my data, the backgrounds of the female characters were defined by their profession or status. The roles I divided in two categories: action roles and relationship roles. Relationship roles referred to the relationships the female characters were shown to have with other characters (e.g. wife, sister, daughter) and action roles referred to the roles in which the female characters were showed acting in (e.g. damsel in distress, victim, assistant) during the game. In this classification, one female character could only have one background (e.g. politician), but she could have several different action and relationship roles (e.g. sister, friend, rescuer). A character's roles may be tied to her background, but it is not necessary. While a character's background defines who that character is through her position and profession, her various

roles are defined by what kind of relationships she has with other characters as well as by what she does.

Examining female characters' backgrounds tells us what kind of professions and positions of power and status women are associated with in digital games. In the games in my data, the female characters most often came from professional fields which were commonly defined as masculine and which were often related to either maintaining security and public order (e.g. police officers, soldiers) or endangering it (e.g. thieves, assassins). It was also interesting to note that even though the female characters were occasionally placed in positions of power and expertise, they were rarely shown as actually using power or acting as experts. In fact, the most common action roles for the female characters in my data were rescuee (in 12 games, 75 %), victim (in 11 games, 68.75 %) and assistant (in 11 games, 68.75 %) – a result alarmingly similar to the study of Dietz (1998, 434–436) from fifteen years earlier. At the same time, the least common action roles for the female characters in my data were expert (in 1 game, 6.25 %), hero (in 2 games, 12.5 %) and rescuer (in 5 games, 31.25 %).

Comparing the backgrounds and action roles of female characters to each other reveals us that placing female characters in positions of power and expertise is not enough to make the characters actually powerful or experts – they have to be able to act in those roles as well. As a rather tragicomical example, in *Starcraft II: Wings of Liberty* (Blizzard Entertainment 2010) a medical doctor and researcher called Ariel Hanson – who is also described as a genius (2) – does not come to think about examining the zerg-infection threatening her colony until the male main character of the game advices her to do so. Unfortunately, this was far from the only case in my data in which the expertise and agency of a formally competent female character was overridden by a man. Fortunately, there were also more positive examples to be found, although those seemed to be rather rare. One of these positive examples can be found

from *Halo: Reach* (Microsoft Game Studios 2010) where another medical scientist Catherine Halsey is seen to show not only real expertise, but also initiative and authority. These contradictory examples show us that positions of power and expertise cannot be stamped on female characters with titles and descriptions, but they need to be seen from their actions and also from the way the other characters relate to them.

Looking at the relationship roles in the games in my data, the most common roles for the female characters were mother (in 9 games, 56.25 %), daughter (in 9 games, 56.25 %) and wife (in 8 games, 50 %). The other, less common relationship roles for the female characters in my data were friend (in 4 games, 25 %), sister (in 5 games, 31.25 %) and lover (in 6 games, 37.5 %). Relationships between characters are important because they make the characters more human. The games in my study were lacking in meaningful relationships between characters, especially such that were based on something else than family relations or romantic interest. In essence, the characters often did not seem to have any friends. These kinds of relationships were especially rare between the female characters, and the female characters were also significantly more often presented as potential targets of romantic interest than as long-term friends or companions.

My third theme for analysing game characters is **participation and goals**. These can firstly be used to measure if female characters are taking part in the events and action in the game – or if they are just following from the sidelines as they mainly were around fifteen years ago (Dietz 1998, 436). Secondly, they tell us if the actions of female characters are motivated by their own goals or if they are dependent on other, possibly male, characters, as was the case in Grimes' (2003) study on action game heroines. To measure participation, one has to find the central forms of character action in a game, as it may vary by genre, for example. In the case of the games in my data, each

of them included fighting, so in my study I chose to measure participation in terms of participating to that.

I examined if the female characters took part in the fights in the game, and if they did, were they fighting alongside or against the player character. It was delightful to notice that the female characters were not simply observers in the games in my data, but instead took part in action in the majority of them (in 12 games, 75 %). In more than half of the games (in 9 games, 56.25 %) the female characters also had some goals of their own, which motivated their actions, independent of any other characters. However, in just as many games (in 9 games, 56.25 %) the actual actions of the female characters had no effect on the game's events or plot. As such, in some of the games in my data, even though the female characters were active agents whose actions were motivated by their own goals, their actions stayed ultimately meaningless in the context of the game's story.

Earlier I noted that presence is the first requirement for representation. Here I will add that participation should be considered the second requirement for representation, as participation turns characters from passive observers to active agents. Furthermore, it is important to examine if a character's actions are motivated by her individual goals, or if the character is only acting dependent on other characters. Lastly, it is worth considering if a character's actions have any effect or real significance in relation to the game's story.

The Bechdel test (3) is a non-academic popular method used to evaluate if a movie is "feminist". The test bases its evaluation on three things: if the movie contains 1. named female characters, that 2. talk to each other 3. about something other than men. Even though the test cannot be straightforwardly applied to academic research and evaluation of cultural products such as movies or games, the questions it poses and the implications of their answers can still be considered when exploring questions of character representation. In my study I examined if the games in my data included female characters and were the female

characters named. Unlike some of the most popular games fifteen years earlier (Dietz 1998, 433), all the games in my data did contain named female characters. I also examined **speech** as the fourth theme in my model for female character representation analysis. I examined speech from two perspectives. Firstly, I examined if the female characters in the games talked, and if they did, to whom did they talk to. Secondly, I examined if the female characters were talked about, and if they were, how they were talked about.

Examination of speech revealed that the female characters talked in all but one of the games (in 15 games, 93.75 %) in my data, and that the female characters talked to men in all of the games in which they talked. However, only five games (31.25 %) contained discussions between female characters – on something else than the male main character of the game. Additionally, while the female characters were talked about in eleven games (68.75 %), in only three (18.75 %) the talk was about what they actually did instead of estimating their appearance, sexualising them or belittling them. For example, in *Portal 2* (Valve Corporation 2011) the female main character Chell is constantly called fat in various imaginative ways, and in *L.A. Noire* (Rockstar Games 2011) a police detective expresses doubt about the reliability of a female crime witness. Speech is an important element to consider when we examine character representation, as it can tell us a lot about the relationships between the characters. The lack of conversations between female characters further adds to the lack of meaningful relationships between them as well as to the dependence of female characters on male characters. Additionally, speech is not only a question of who has a voice in a game, but also whom are being talked about, and what the tone of the discussion reveals about attitudes towards them.

The last theme in my model for analysing female character representations is **gendering**. It is a theme present in all the other themes and aspects of character representation, but it should

also be examined separately to explore the various aspects of gendering game characters. In the games in my data, I found three ways of gendering the female characters: romanticising them, sexualising them and emphasising their femininity. I examined these different aspects of gendering by asking do the female characters express romantic interest towards the main character of the game, do the female characters flirt with other characters (and if they do, are the targets female or male), do the female characters dress in revealing outfits, are the female characters portrayed from sexualising camera angles, and finally, is the femininity of the female characters emphasised in terms of their personality or appearance.

In the games in my data the female characters were gendered by presenting them as potential targets for romantic and sexual interest for both the main character of the game (who was usually an implicitly heterosexual male) and at the same time for the player (who was also assumed to be a heterosexual male). In half of the games (in 8 games, 50 %) at least one female character expressed romantic interest towards the main character of the game, and in four games (25 %) female characters flirted to male characters in the game (in one of these games also to female characters). In nine games (56.25 %) female characters were portrayed from sexualising camera angles: the image was focused on the female characters' breasts, bottom, or under their skirt, or they were portrayed in sexualising positions. Five games (31.25 %) included female characters dressed in particularly tight or revealing outfits. In ten games (62.5 %) the physical femininity of female characters was emphasised by their feminine faces, body shapes or outfits. On the other hand, there were also a few female characters with practical outfits and less normative body representations, but the less normative bodies were strongly sexualised, as was the case with Isabela in *Dragon Age II* (Electronic Arts 2011) and Jack in *Mass Effect 2* (Electronic Arts 2010; figure 1).

Figure 1. Jack and the male Shepard in Mass Effect 2 (Electronic Arts 2010). Screen capture from a gameplay video by Usva Friman 2013.

In some games female characters were also gendered on the level of their behaviour, by having them act in an overly empathic or panicky manner – in other words in a stereotypically feminine manner. Female characters seemed to show their emotions more often than male characters, and in some games and in some situations the female characters were used as mirrors for the emotions of male characters of the game – and through them, the assumedly male player. For example in *Gears of War 3* (Microsoft Studios 2011) the two female soldiers in the player's team, Anya and Samantha, fight alongside the male soldiers, but unlike their team mates, they are also often seen expressing empathy towards both their team members and civilians.

Examining the various ways female characters are gendered reveals us the contrasts between the typical portrayals of female and male characters as well as how it is common for at least female character representations to emphasise the character gender. Portraying female characters as objects of romantic interest and sexual desire, as well as empathic mirrors for the feelings of male characters, construct the female characters as if they primarily exist for the overly masculine and implicitly heterosexual male characters. At the same time, this process also constructs the expected player subject as a heterosexual male.

A Model for Female Character Representation Analysis

The combined five character construction themes presented above can tell how strongly female characters are present in a game as well as what kind of backgrounds they are given, how they are positioned in relation to other characters through their relationship roles and what kind of roles they are showed acting in. They also tell if and how the female characters participate in different forms of action in the game and if their actions are motivated by themselves or if their actions are dependent on someone else. Furthermore, they tell if the female characters talk, if their talk is directed to only male characters, and also if they are talked about – and what how they are talked about tells us about how other characters think and feel about them. Lastly, they tell how much and in which ways the female characters are constructed as gendered and sexualised characters.

To better understand how digital game characters are constructed, in addition to examining the elements they consist of, it is also important to consider the spaces in which this construction process happens. In my study I found that the interactions between the characters as well as the interactions between the characters and the player form the primary spaces for character and player subject construction. The way characters interact with each other, for example the way they talk to each other and behave towards each other, sends messages to the player about who the characters are and what the player is supposed to think and how the player is supposed to feel about them. Similarly, interactions between non-player characters and the player character send messages to the player about the expectations directed towards her. As such, the game can work as a positive fantasy which enhances the player's experience of her own subjectivity. On the other hand, it can also work against the player by setting the borders of the player subject too tight or by defining them wrong compared to the player's own experience (Richard 2012, 80–81).

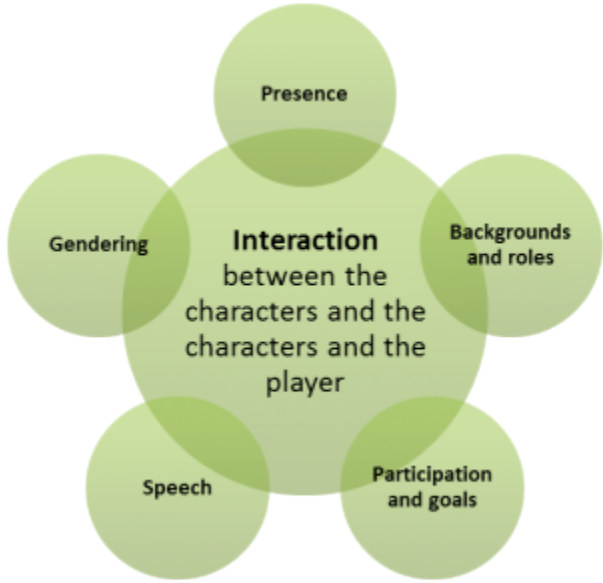

Figure 2: The suggested model for analysing female character representations in digital games.

Based on these findings, I suggest a model for analysing female character representations in digital games (figure 2). The model consists of the five character construction themes presented earlier: 1. presence, 2. background and role, 3. participation and goals, 4. speech, and 5. gendering. It also locates the character construction process to the interactions between the game characters and between the game characters and the player, recognising that the player subject is also constructed in the same process. As seen from the examples presented in the previous section of this essay, the model can be used to pinpoint the recurrent issues in female character representations in digital games, but also to see opportunities for improvement as well as the good practices that have already been established.

Conclusion: How to Make Better Female Characters

Recognising and analysing the recurrent issues in female character representations is the first step on the way towards more human and diverse female characters in digital games. In

conclusion, I describe how the suggested model for analysing female character representations in digital games as well as the findings made with it from the games in my study can be used to form a five point baseline for designing better female characters:

1. **Presence** is the first requirement for representation. There should be a number of female characters present in a game to create opportunities for diverse representation.

2. Examining character **backgrounds and roles** proves that placing female characters in positions of power and expertise alone is not enough to make the characters actually powerful or experts, but they have to be able to act in those roles as well. Additionally, the female characters should have meaningful relationships with other characters, especially relationships based on something else than family relations or romantic interest. The female characters should also have relationships with each other, and not only with male characters.

3. **Participation** turns female characters from passive observers to active agents. In addition to participating in action, it is important to make sure the female characters' actions are motivated by their individual goals instead of being dependant on other characters. It is also worth remembering that the characters' actions are meaningful only if they have an effect on the game's story.

4. **Speech** tells about relationships between characters. Female characters should have a voice in games, and they should not speak only to male characters or only about male characters. Female characters should not only talk, but they should also be talked about, and the talk should not be only about their appearance but primarily about who they are and what they do.

5. **Gendering** female characters by emphasising their

femininity on physical or behavioural level, if practised systematically, reduces the female characters to gender stereotypes. Additionally, portraying the female characters as objects of romantic and sexual interest for the male main character of a game creates an implied demand for a heterosexual male player.

Following these five points helps creating female characters that are not only pixel babes but active agents. Not only are they present in games, but they come from various backgrounds and they are seen acting in various roles and positions. They have meaningful relationships with other characters. They participate in action motivated by their own goals, and what they do affects how the game's story progresses. They have a voice, and they share their thoughts and ideas on various topics in discussions with other characters, who do not always have to be men. Other characters talk about their person and their deeds. They are women, but they are not portrayed primarily as such by overemphasising their femininity. In essence, they are active agents and personified characters who do not only exist for and dependant on the male characters or the male player.

Endnotes:

(1) The study data consisted of 16 digital games published on PC, Playstation 3 or Xbox 360 in years 2010 and 2011. All the games contained personal characters, narrative elements and dialogues. All the games were also included in the lists of Top-20 most sold PC and console games in the USA. The lists were published by the Entertainment Software Association (2012; 2011).

(2) Ariel Hanson's page in the StarCraft Wiki <http://starcraft.wikia.com/wiki/Ariel_Hanson>.

(3) The Bechdel test originates from Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* published in 1985. It measures if a movie (or another work of fiction) has at least two named female

characters who talk to each other about something other than a man.

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Acknowledgments:

This essay has been written within the research project Ludification and the Emergence of Playful Culture (276012), funded by the Academy of Finland. The essay is based on my master's thesis in Digital Culture published in 2013 (Friman 2013a). Some of the preliminary results have been previously published in Finnish in a non-peer-reviewed article (Friman 2013b).