

Gender Equality in Video Games

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ENG 317

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Dear Sir/Madam,

Firstly, I would like to thank you for your time reading this report as well as the ability to do this survey. Gender Equality in the Video Game Industry has been a very prominent topic the past few years, and it is only recently that research and studies have started looking at the medium in a more critical light. With a more diverse customer base now than in previous years it is more important than ever to push the industry in the right direction for the future.

The included survey report is a very basic look into the idea of gender and the influences it has on people who spend time playing video games. While just under half the people surveyed said that the gender of the main character did not influence their decision to play a game; the majority said that the gender of the main character did affect their decision to play any given game. This alone means that there is still a ways to go before gender equality through representation can be reached, and is just one question of many that can be asked and thought about as we think of solutions to a prevalent issue. The problem does not effect just one gender, but all genders- and while the report focuses mainly on men and women; it is plain to see that if the industry still struggles with two genders than other genders are still beyond grasp. There are massive issues with realistic representation with both male and female genders, and as is common in American media, this leads to poor expectations about what people should and not be like and strive to be like. Not every game is of course, guilty about these kinds of stereotypical portrayals; but the games that tend to be the biggest offenders are the more prominent ones- the blockbuster titles that sell millions of copies within the first six months of release.

However, with surveys like this- it is very easy for people to become enraged and childish. Rather than choose to look at the problem, they respond with answers that discourage any mature behavior and many times mock the very problem that is being addressed. Fortunately, those kinds of answers only serve to illustrate one of the underlying problems: many people don't think this is a real issue. There are really, three ways of looking at it the most basic senses- all of which to are to be addressed. Going forward, there is no easy way to 'fix' the problem-- but awareness and finding out what people truly think about the topic will be key. Media as a tool usually fixates on the loudest group, and sometimes those groups are the minority.

Again, thank you very much for your time and if you do have any questions please feel free to contact me. My email address is jess.k.hanson@gmail.com and is the easiest way to get a hold of me.

Regards,

-Jess Hanson

abstract

As a conclusion, the most apparent piece of information we can gather is that representation of both the male and female genders are not fair or realistic. While male characters are seen in a more positive manner than females, both graphs sit in a neutral zone with emphasis on the negative side. Normally, we see that it is the idea that female characters being misrepresented is the more apparent problem, and it is certainly the one we hear most about. The data, however shows that this is also true of masculine characters. The idea of a overly-masculine, hyped up, solider, Caucasian male hero type is just as used and over played as the over sexualized, damsel in distress female. Even though roughly 53% of gamers are male, they are less likely to talk about it or even bring it up as a problem. Conversely, female gamers are more apt to play as characters opposite their own gender. The stereotypes are clearly irritants to many people who play video games, either because of the unjust portrayal or because of the need for something new and different. In such modern times as these, the small amount of data that I have collected shows that the industry clearly needs to move on. When we look on the data on a overall scale, and then on a male vs female perspective, the results are a bit surprising. Given that men generally play more video games, but females tend to be more vocal about these issues; it is worth noting that men seem to have more of an issue with the gender generalization.

Many smaller studios, ones that create and publish independent (hereby referred to as 'indie') games are much more likely to break out of this box of stereotyped female and male characters. We see a much more diverse cast of characters in these indie games that just aren't found in games created by larger studios. While many of the people surveyed would still like to know the gender of the main character, they still want that underdog- they still want to have a main character that grows and develops, not a static character who does not change at all. The most amazing thing of all, is that the survey does not talk about, or even hint at any games or game genre in particular, yet many of the comments made by participants point out the same stereotype over and over again; a stereotype that is based on the gender of the character that is to be made, making those automatic assumptions.

With this in mind, we must realize that when creating characters- gender is only one of the many pieces of the puzzle. Gender is however, the gateway to creating a relate-able and likeable character- and for many people, that still matters. So instead of creating characters that are “ overly-masculine, hyped up, solider, Caucasian male hero types” and “ over sexualized, damsel in distress female”- we should be looking at characters that are strong on their own. Strong, smart, empowered,

lazy, funny, helpful and helpless; gender should help define, not be the definition. The survey only explores a very basic and shallow idea of male characters and female characters, and why people feel the way they do, but the insight it provides is powerful and valuable and can prove key to the future of video games.

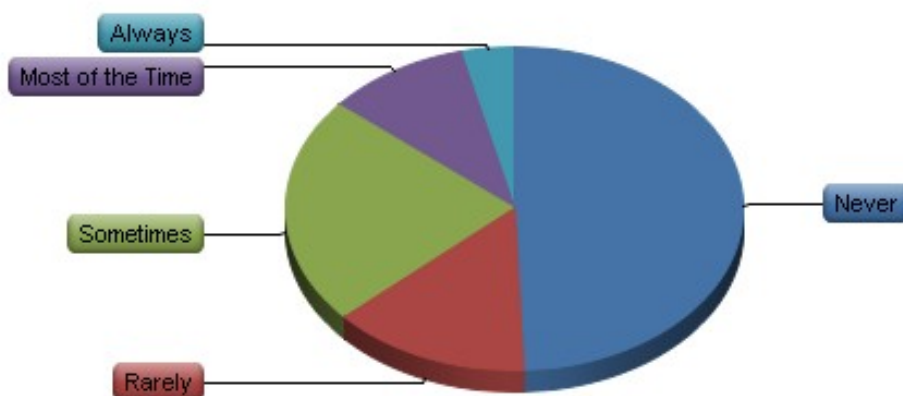
The survey is broken up into 5 sections with 2 questions each, and while each question is very basic- they provide us with those basic answers that point out just how flawed the industry really is, even though there is a very real component of the people who refuse to speak up and point out that these types of characters are not OK. Currently they sell, and they sell well- until they don't, or until people become loud enough, things will not change.

section

ONE

The first set of questions in the survey deal with two very basic questions; questions that people tend to deny and lie about in order to avoid the types of aggression and conflict that are very common with this subject- they are aimed to simply determine an honest answer up front.

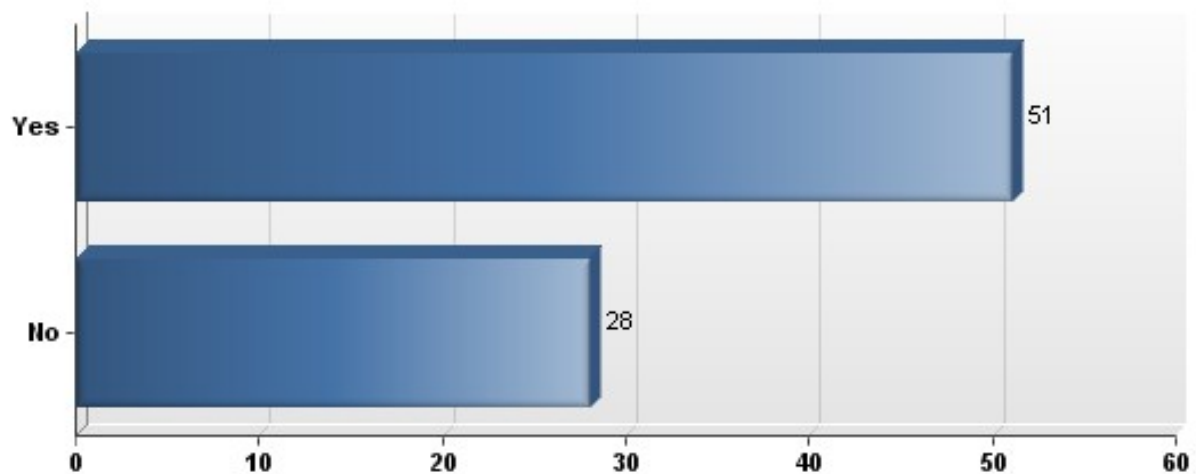
Question One: “Does the gender of the main character influence your decision to play a video game” As you can see here, nearly half- 43% of the people surveyed said that it never influenced their decision to play a game- some even answering the question in a defensive manner when given the opportunity to provide feed back later on in the survey.



Nearly a quarter of people said it sometimes effected their decision, and a few responded as it always

affecting their decision- 4%. When breaking down the data further, it becomes very interesting to note that the females who took the survey were more likely to let the gender of the main character influence their decision.

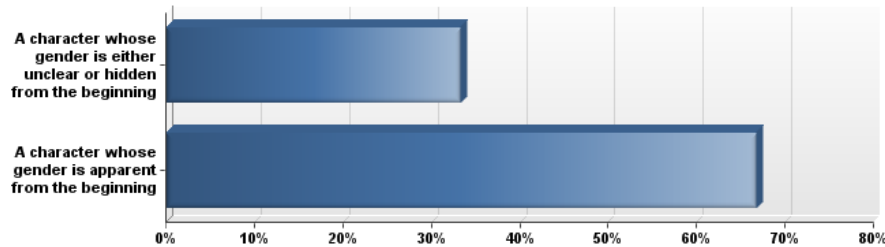
Question Two asks if a player has chosen to willingly played a character opposite their own gender given the choice. This freedom of choice is usually presented in most role-playing games and massive multilayer online games, although it is now becoming more common in other genres of games as well.



Clearly, 65% of respondents have- which can be indicative of the curiosity or desire to truly play another person, or the pull of a character so well crafted that people genuinely wanted to play as that character. It could even be a different reason all together, but these results are surprisingly not was expected when they survey is presented. Perhaps not as surprising is that if given the option, the females surveyed were less likely to play as the opposite gender given the option. Where females are generally portrayed in such a poor light, any chance to play as a strong female is more than likely highly desired. Men on the other hand, are more likely to play as the opposite gender- for reasons that may or may not be similar, wanting to play something other than the stereotype.

section TWO

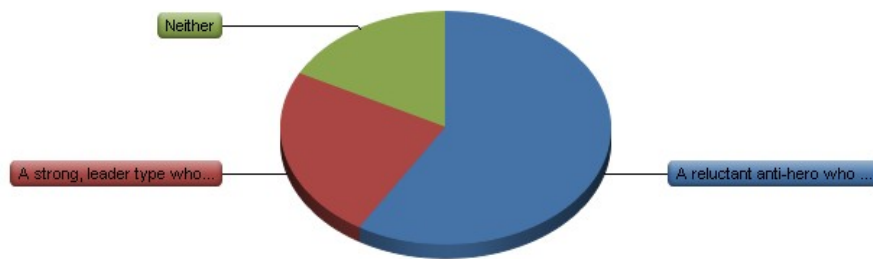
Question 3 simply asks if people were more inclined to play a game if they knew the gender of a character from the beginning, or if they would rather have some ambiguity.



67% of the people surveyed said that yes, they were more inclined to play a game where the gender was apparent from the beginning of a game; while 33% said that they were more inclined to play a game where the gender is unclear or hidden. The distribution as far as looking for male vs female preference is fairly equal; which would normally suggest that rather than this being a gender based preference at all, this is a personal preference. Again, gender is usually used as a basic identifier- we are culturally engrained with the idea of 'male things' and 'female things'; so if you can not associate something with being for 'boys' or being for 'girls' it becomes hard to people to relate. Characters that no one can relate to are often in literature doomed to fail, but we're talking video games, which have much more to go on for being successful; such as game play mechanics and their overall interactive nature. Given the rather simple nature of video games and their graphic capabilities during the 1980's and 1990's, it was much easier to hide the gender of a character- making those kinds of reveals more impressionable. Such an example being the character Samus in the game Metroid- there were simply no clues to the gender of the character you were playing through out the entire game, until the end of the game when the bounty hunter revealed herself as female. These kinds of surprises are fewer and far between, and with the stress of gender being all important- more of a negative shock than a positive one.

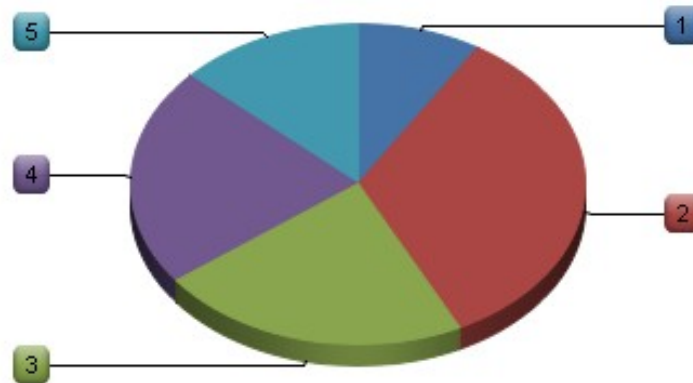
Once more in the feedback, I had people call to this question- asking for 'neither' option, as it did not 'matter to them'. In reality though, there is no third option. Either you know, or you don't. You can certainly make guesses; but they are educated at best and you are right, or you are wrong. In the store, you can have two of the exact same game- both covers have the main character, and everything is identical; expect on one the main character is in a bathing suit and on the other, they are covered head to toe in indistinguishable clothing. You at that point have to pick- the only other option is to not buy the game at all.

This is the only question in the survey that didn't directly deal with gender, but rather the general personalization of a character. Question 4 if the responder would rather play a game where the main character is a) a strong leader type who commands respect from fellow character, but never grows him/herself, or b) a reluctant anti-hero who is often overlooked, but gains much character development throughout the game, or even c) neither. There are of course, many different types of characters and development patterns, but for the purposes of main heroes- these tend to be two most common archetypes. Weighing in at 59%, most people said they would rather opt for the anti-hero with much character development, 24% at strong leader without character development and the remaining 17% said neither.

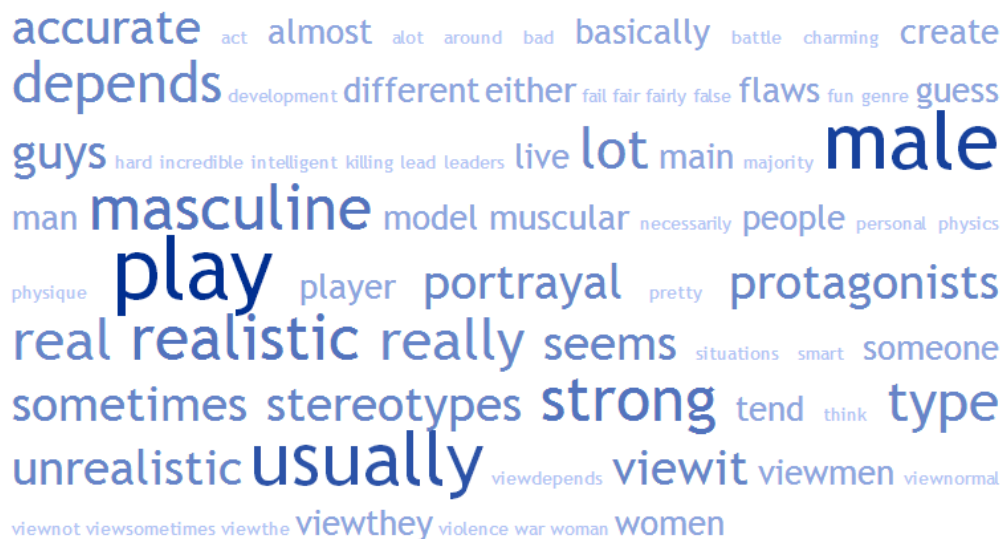


Paired with question 4, question 5 asked for an explanation of those who replied as neither. 3 of 13 responses gave viable answers- citing as their favorite, or the best characters do both; as well as mentioning that the growth was the important part, and even characters who start of strong can still grow, even if that meant the character in question would have to 'fall' in a sense. 3 people felt the need to defend the first question not having an option for neither, 2 people felt the need to provide the second grade answer of 'boobs' and 'I [like] poop' (which was spelled incorrectly)-- which as mentioned earlier is expected to happen for people who do not understand the problem, or think that the issue is indeed a joke. The rest of the answers were vague, with no real context as to why- such as "I don't have a preference" and "Choices are too polar". In this instance as well, females are more likely to play as one of the two options where men picked neither almost two to one in comparison to their female counterparts. The male respondents also were more in favor of the anti- hero choice over the strong hero type- a most surprising result indeed considering many of the games that have very prominent male leads fall under that category.

Section four deals exclusively with the portrayal of men, question 6 being a poll and question 7 being a free form response as to reason behind your score. Users were asked if they felt the portrayal of me in video games was fair and accurate from a scale to 1 to 5, 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree.



As you can see, 2 (disagree) held the largest percentage at 34%. Strongly disagree (1) was 9%, 3 (neutral) was 22%, 4 (agree) 22% and 5 (strongly agree) at 13%. More than half of the surveyed people feel that the portrayal of men as being not fair. As we can see in this tag cloud:

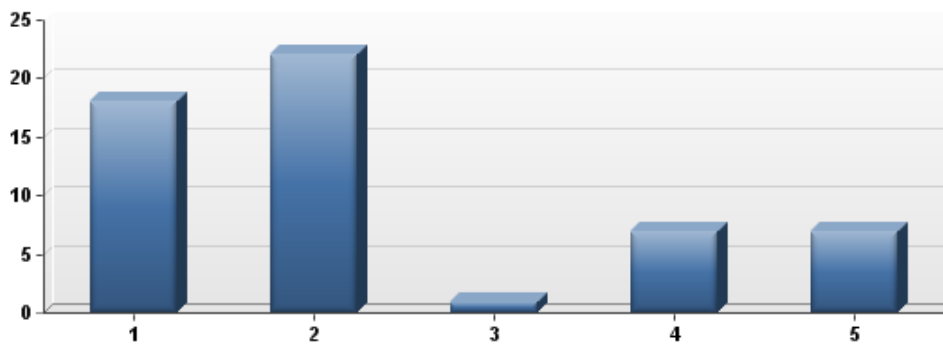


the buzzwords are all there, the larger the word, the more it was mentioned. The responses were less untied than expected, but many centered on the idea that the 'manly man' type was unfair, although there is a more average spread of character types, and that these general, aggressive portrayals are not as realistic as reality. Some people even pointed out that, while it was ultimately up to the type of game

you were playing- they are simply video games. Others even stated that they didn't notice, or didn't seen an issue which is also very possible of course- but these tended to be part of a minority. In the appendix with the raw data, all of the comments have been displayed and I have even highlighted some of the more choice comments for review- as it is hard to sum up all of them.

section FIVE

Like section four, section five deals with strictly gender portrayal, except this time about female characters. The rating scale was exactly the same, with the 1-5 system. This time, however- the graph looks like this:



While the tag cloud looks like this:



Immediately we see a very large shift. Not only are the views towards female characters more

negative than the males, but the words used shift from a strong, personality perspective, to one of physical appearance and sexuality. 33% polled in at strongly disagree (5), 40% at disagree (4), 1 at neutral (3) 13% at agree (2) and 13% at strongly agree (1)- vastly more negative than the male pole, which had more of a balance neutral overall. The comments are even more varied than previously, but most everyone points out that if they aren't used for visual aesthetics, they are used in a diminished mental capacity- but either way objectified. Many were also very quick to point out the very strong characters that do exist, but still acknowledged the problem with most other female characters. In both cases, we see that what is being presented to us most of the time is generally unappealing, and while people may not say something- that doesn't mean they aren't thinking it. Again, it is very hard to summarize all of the comments that were provided and have been attached. There is much in there to review, and with the exception of a few, are not to be taken lightly.

conclusion

The last question I asked was a simple question of the respondents gender. Male, Female or Other. You can not even start discussing gender until you are open to the fact that there are indeed, more than two genders and that it is a very tricky and touchy subject. That being said, I find the one actual person who identified as other could have some very unique insight that I wish they had shared more of- and the other person who identified as other was merely trying to mess with the survey.

After reviewing the survey data, it is only apparently that video games are in a very unique situation to do something wonderful with characters and gender on a wide spectrum. Not only have indie games seem to have embraced this idea and begun to explore routes of storytelling that the larger budget games wont. The gendered stereotypes stand, and are rooted in our culture on more than just the video game level.

With this, game development companies have already taken strides in which to even the playing field, but it will take time and more awareness about this issues for all genders before things truly being to change. It is apparently people want a change with more realistic characters, but are not willing to speak up and say anything.