

Empowering female characters in video games

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| Previous compulsory steps / Prior students' knowledge | None in particular. |
| Learning objectives | Discover programming with the first levels. Supplement a class on coding concepts with the harder ones. |
| Subjects | Arts, English as a Foreign language, Literature/Reading, Media education |
| Recommended Age | 15-18 |
| Material needed | Computers with internet access |
| Sequence duration | 60 minutes |
| Individual or group activity | Group activity |
| Skills developed (after learning goals) | Collaboration and teamwork, communication, creativity, critical thinking, cultural skills |
| Extension / differentiation activities (at the end of the sequence) | <p>This scenario can be used to analyse the representation of characters with disabilities around the theme of “Can disability be more than a superpower or an evil trait in video games?”.</p> <p>Interesting videos to use include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘Video game characters who are disabled’ by SVG • ‘Why The Sims Needs Disabilities ft @EnglishSimmer [CC]’ by Jessica Kellgren-Fozard |

Step by step: how to implement the sequence

In this sequence, you are going to analyse the representation of female characters in fiction based on the example of video games. This can be related to several topics in arts, literature and media education, such as:

- Representation of different groups in media,
- The limiting effect of stereotypes,
- Good principles for character creation and characterisation.

As a preparatory activity, separate your class in groups and ask them to perform the following tasks:

- Watch a video from Feminist Frequency's playlists:
 - o [Tropes Vs. Women In Video Games – Season 1](#)
 - o [Tropes Vs. Women In Video Games – Season 2](#)

Feminist Frequency is a YouTube channel created by media analyst Anita Sarkeesian. Her videos on negative tropes about female characters in video games are presented in an interesting way as she analyses stereotypes with humour and her aim is not to express the idea that video games are bad, but that creators could portray female characters better.

- Research at least one female video game character, such as:
 - o Aloy from the Horizon series: [Horizon Zero Dawn - E3 2016 Trailer | PS4](#)
 - o Ellie in The Last of Us Part II (caution: the trailer depicts blood and horror): [The Last of Us Part II – Release Date Reveal Trailer | PS4](#)
 - o Frey Holland from Forspoken: [Forspoken - PlayStation Showcase 2021: Story Introduction Trailer | PS5](#)

- [Kassandra from Assassin's Creed Odyssey: Assassin's Creed Odyssey: Gamescom 2018 - Kassandra Cinematic Trailer | Ubisoft \[NA\]](#)
- [Kena from Kena: Bridge of Spirits: Kena: Bridge of Spirits - State of Play Trailer | PS5, PS4](#)

All the videos above are trailers announcing the games of their features, which makes them accessible to people who do not know the games.

You can also propose to students who play to research and present classic female video game characters and the evolution of their representation, such as:

- Lara Croft from the Tomb Raider series, whose body was one of the main selling arguments of the game in the 1990s;
- Samus Aran from the Metroid series, an armor-clad character who was revealed to be a female only at the end of the game, her gender having no impact throughout the story. However, depending on how well the player completed the game, at the end she takes off her armor and is depicted showing more or less clothes;
- Zelda from The Legend of Zelda series, who evolved from being the princess to rescue to being a warrior, a ruler, a pirate, or a scientist that Link, the male hero, gives a hand to.

Ask your students to prepare answers to the following questions for their characters:

- What is their goal?
- Do they have a job?
- What seems to be their character?
- Do they embody any concepts or values?
- How are their relationships with others depicted?
- What do others say about them?

- How do you learn about them (from showing them in action, from their own words, from others' words, etc.)?

On the day of the class, animate a discussion following these steps:

1. What trope did you learn about by watching one of the videos by Feminist Frequency? What did you think about it? (20 minutes)

At this step, make sure to tell students that they are not expected to fully agree on all arguments made. Some of the tropes might sound too simple when they are summarised, and students who play might love characters who seem to embody a trope but actually goes beyond it. Remind students to be respectful of one another's opinions, not to interrupt each other, and to remember that the goal is not to say that video games are bad altogether, but to explore instances in which gender depiction could be more positive.

When a student presents a trope, ask others if they watched the same video and whether they have anything to add about it.

2. Which character did you research? (20 minutes)

Ask a few students to present one of the characters they researched and to give the answers to the questions they had to prepare. Ask the rest of the class if they have anything to add to this description, or if they understood anything else about the character.

Then, ask your students if they think that the character looks strong or empowered (i.e. That they will have a meaningful impact on the story of the game).

If you offered some students to research the evolution of one of the classic video female video game characters, offer them to show images if they wish to.

3. Why do you think it is important to create characters that go beyond the trope of a specific group, in this case female characters? (10 minutes)

As a basis for this discussion, you can share the 5 statistics about the impact of biased representations of women in movies and on television in the following article: [‘How Media Portrayal Affects Women, And What Geena Davis Is Doing About It’](#) by Bruce Y. Lee.

The point at this stage is not to say that, for instance, the sexualisation of female characters is bad per se, but that its omnipresence is problematic. The same goes for other tropes: if a female character has to be rescued in a movie or game, it is not inherently bad per se, but it transforms into a negative trope if female characters are only shown as weak and helpless.

A good example to discuss can be the Final Fantasy XIII series (composed of 3 games: Final Fantasy XIII, Final Fantasy XIII-2, Final Fantasy XIII: Lightning Returns), in which the party goes to rescue the heroine’s sister, thus changing the usual damsel in distress dynamic in which a male rescues a helpless female. Interestingly enough, in the second opus, the sister who was rescued in the first game becomes the protagonist. She leads a party to save the world and to look for her sister (the heroine in the first game) who has disappeared.

References

Feminist Frequency (2017). Tropes Vs. Women In Video Games – Season 1 [YouTube channel]. Retrieved September, 10th 2021 from:

https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn4ob_5_ttEaA_vc8F3fjzE62esf9yP61

Feminist Frequency (2017). Tropes Vs. Women In Video Games – Season 2 [YouTube channel]. Retrieved September, 10th 2021 from:

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PlayStation (June 6th, 2016) 'Horizon Zero Dawn - E3 2016 Trailer | PS4' [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4-FCsiF5x4>

PlayStation (September 14th, 2019) 'The Last of Us Part II – Release Date Reveal Trailer | PS4' [Video]. Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=II5UsqP2JAK>

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PlayStation (September 9th, 2021) 'Forspoken - PlayStation Showcase 2021: Story Introduction Trailer | PS5' [Video]. Youtube.

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Ubisoft North America (August 21st, 2018) 'Assassin's Creed Odyssey: Gamescom 2018 - Cassandra Cinematic Trailer | Ubisoft [NA]' [Video]. Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzxkEfGMbGY>

Video games quoted:

- Assassin's Creed Odyssey: <https://www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/assassins-creed/odyssey>
- Final Fantasy XIII (series): https://square-enix-games.com/en_EU/games/final-fantasy-xiii
- Forspoken: <https://forspoken.square-enix-games.com/>
- Horizon (series): <https://www.playstation.com/en-us/games/horizon-zero-dawn/>
- Kena: Bridge of Spirits: <https://www.emberlab.com/>
- The Last Of Us (series): <https://www.playstation.com/en-us/games/the-last-of-us-part-ii/>
- The Legend of Zelda (series): <https://www.zelda.com/>
- Metroid (series): <https://www.nintendo.co.uk/Games/Nintendo-Characters-Hub/Metroid-Hub/Metroid-Hub-627595.html>
- Tomb Raider (series): <https://tomraider.square-enix-games.com/>