

**PIXELATED PASSIVITY: THE DAMSEL AND THE BOMBSHELL TROPES IN
VIDEO GAMES**

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Abstract

Youngsters around the world widely played video games before the boom of social media. During the 1990s, video games became a popular household entertainment in most developed countries. As the subjugation and objectification of women are common in every realm, video games are also not untouched by it. In the present research paper, an attempt has been made to analyze the problematic stereotypical representation of female characters as “damsel in distress” and as “sexy sidekicks” in video games and the negative impact of playing these video games on the players as well as society. By analyzing key examples from iconic franchises such as Super Mario, Snow Bros., Tomb Raider, and Need for Speed, the study investigates how these archetypes reinforce passive, dependent, and hypersexualized roles for women.

Keywords: video games, damsel, patriarchy, women, heroism, portrayal, stereotype.

Before the boom of online games, children across the world played remote-controlled offline video games. The craze for video games in the 90s era was at peak. Video games follow the same type of game narration as stories and are mainly focused on a hero and his heroic activities, including jumping, shooting, fighting with a monster, rescuing damsels, and others. Representing female characters as damsels was the main objective of video games in the late '90s, and this worked well for the video game designers and developers as they did not have to put much effort into creating a base storyline for the game. Looking at the history of video games, the number of male players is more than that of female players. The first home video game was *Magnavox Odyssey* created by Ralph H. Baer in 1972. During that period, there was existence of sexism in video game industry because women's representation

was nonexistent in the early years of the evolution of video games. The reason behind this is the lack of female video game developers.

In 2013 Canadian-American feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian made a YouTube video series named *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. In this series Sarkeesian explores and critiques the tropes used in video games to represent women. There are total 18 episodes in this series. The first three episodes deal with the “Damsels in Distress” trope and the final episode explores “The Lady Sidekick” trope. The remaining episodes explore tropes such as sexy villainess, fighting sex toys and females as background decoration.

The “Damsel in Distress” is a very popular gender trope used in literature and popular culture. In this trope, one or more “men” rescue a woman who has been kidnapped or put in other danger. The term “damsel” is often presented as beautiful, famous, and upper-class or aristocratic. “Damsel in distress” in literature has multiple examples in all genres of literature.

In mythology, the character of Sita from the ancient Indian epic *Ramayana* is portrayed as a damsel. Ravan kidnapped Sita, and later her husband, Lord Ram, rescued her. Likewise, in folklore, there are numerous world-famous examples such as *Snow White*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Rapunzel*, etc. All these were rescued by their prince charming. Moreover, films also use this trope as the majority of superhero films represent their lead female character as a vulnerable young beautiful woman who, most of the time, requires rescue by a “male hero”. Betty Rose in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), Lois Lane in *Superman* (1978), Mary Jane Watson in *Spider-Man* (2005), and Rachel Dawes in *The Dark Knight* (2008) are portrayed as damsels. Other than superhero films, Elizabeth Swan in *Pirates of the Caribbean* and Ann Darrow in *King Kong* (2005) also portrayed damsels.

Video games strengthen the stereotypical image of women both as “bombshell” and “damsel”. In *Games Girls Play: Contexts of Girls and Video Games* (2020) Carolyn M. Cunningham writes:

Not only are female characters physically represented in stereotypical ways, their roles within video games tend to be passive. Female characters are often victims of violence, submissive, or “damsels in distress” who are rescued by male protagonists.

(Cunningham 18)

Super Mario, one of the most popular video games of the decade, and almost played by every video gamer, represents women as helpless, delicate, and dependent. In this video game, Princess Peach waits for Super Mario to take her out from prison. Super Mario, as the name itself reveals, is a character that possesses all the heroic qualities such as Bravery, power, intelligence, etc. In this video game, Super Mario is on a quest to rescue Princess Peach from eight different prisons located in eight different worlds. In all these eight worlds, Super Mario faced many obstacles and dangers, but ultimately saved Princess Peach every

time. Children play this game and get addicted to it. Super Mario becomes so popular that not only kids but also adults get fascinated with this game.



Super Mario, 1985

Later, during the 1990s- 2000s era, another franchise released *Super Mario Bros. 2* (1988). In this series, players got the option to choose Princess Peach as a playable character for the first time. Moreover, new female characters were also introduced Princess Daisy in *Super Mario Land* (1989) and Rosalina in *Super Mario Galaxy* (2007). In *Super Princess Peach* (2005), the roles are reversed as Peach becomes the main protagonist and she rescues Mario as well as his brother Luigi. Though the portrayal of Peach was strong and bold, her powers that she used while rescuing Mario and Luigi were emotion-based, such as joy, rage, etc., and some critics saw it as reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Likewise, in the 90s, Japanese company, Taoplan, released *Snow Bros.* In this game both Nick and Tom are friendly snowmen, and together they are on a heroic mission to rescue the kingdom's princesses, Puripuri and Puchipuchi, who had been kidnapped by the monster Browser. *Snow Bros.* again, like *Super Mario*, a patriarchal game developed by male creators represents the same stereotypical ideology towards women as *Super Mario*. In *Snow Bros.* there are a total of 50 levels, and in each level, the snow brothers together fight the enemies, monsters, and other obstacles that come in their way to rescue their respective princesses from prison.



Snow Bros. 1990

Female characters have no active role or characterization; both are kidnapped by monsters and passively wait for their rescue. In 2022, a modern remake of the original game, *Snow Bros. Nick and Tom Special*, was released by CRT Games. In the old version *Snow Bros. 2: With New Elves* (1994), the representation of female characters is almost non-existent in terms of active role, while the new updated version of *Snow Bros.* added some new features and visuals, but it did not significantly make any change in the role of the female characters. The lack of playable female characters remained.

The creators of these video games are male and create these games for male kids. The young minds, while playing these kinds of games, develop a notion towards the other gender that they are weak and vulnerable, and therefore, they depend on them for protection and help throughout their lives. Not only this, but it also had an effect on female players' minds as they started seeing themselves as less competent. These types of video games maintain the gender inequality on screen as well as off-screen, as both male and female players get affected by the stereotypical notion regarding women.

According to Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977), People learn behaviors through observation and imitation, especially of role models or heroic figures. In terms of video games, this theory provides a clear description for why both children and adolescents reproduce the behaviors learned through playing video games. Players observe game characters that use power to rescue the damsels or achieve goals. These characters are often portrayed as powerful and heroic. With the popularity of particular video games, the main heroic character becomes a role model for players. While playing the video game, the player becomes the character and does not remain merely a spectator but also actively

controls the character, which leads to deeper identification with the character and internalization of the modeled behavior.

So, when male characters are repeatedly portrayed as heroes (lead protagonists) rescuing passive female characters or damsels, players may internalize traditional gender roles that strongly frame men as protectors and women as dependent. These roles get strengthened when victory in the game is bound to completing such rescues, probably affecting players' expectations of gendered behavior in real life.

Besides passive female characters, another popular representation of females in video games is that of sexualized female characters. The most prominent female character from a video game is Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* game series, released in 1996. Though Lara is portrayed as strong and courageous, when it comes to appearance, she, too, is presented as a sexual object.



Lara Croft from Tomb Raider, 1996

Lara's character was designed to gain the attention of male players, which made *Tomb Raider* a successful game. Popular film theorist Laura Mulvey described this as "Male gaze," and she states:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role

women simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.

(Mulvey 7)

The objectification was not limited to visuals or appearance; some fans even created unofficial mods (such as the infamous “nude patch”) to further sexualize Lara’s character, focusing to the extent to which her character became a cultural fantasy rather than a humanized protagonist. Anita Sarkeesian described Lara’s character as “sexy action heroine” trope rather than a fully developed female lead in her YouTube video series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*.

Developed by Electronic Arts (EA), the *Need for Speed* (NFS) video game series is primarily known for its emphasis on high-speed street car racing, car customization, and urban car culture. However, in particular in the early 2000s, the series became associated with the sexualization of women, often imaging wide marketing strategies focused mainly on the male gamer demographic.

Similarly, in *Need for Speed* series, multiple female characters are portrayed in all versions of the game, but none of them are playable. All of these female characters (Nikki, Mia Townsend, Carmen Mendez, Melissa, Rachel Teller, and Ana Rivera) are portrayed as both passive and sexy sidekicks. As *Need for Speed* is a racing game, the female characters fall into the “hot car girl” trope, which portrays female characters as models in short skirts and crop tops, stylized for the “Male gaze”.



Need for Speed: Most Wanted, 2005

In the early 2000s, games in this series, such as *Need for Speed: Underground* (2003), and especially *Need for Speed: Underground 2* (2004) and *Need for Speed: Most Wanted* (2005), frequently portrayed women as hyper-sexualized figures. Moreover, the women characters in these were inspired and modeled by real-life models and celebrities. Female characters were typically limited to roles such as the player's guide and love interest. Furthermore, these non-playable female characters were often dressed in revealing clothes and portrayed as women with overtly flirtatious behavior.

Female characters are used in seductive roles to grab attention and appeal to young male audiences. This approach enhances the marketing of video games. Similarly, this marketing tactic is also used in the "*Fast and Furious*" film series, which is also based on street car racing. Women's representation as sexualized figures in video games made them popular and profitable.

Later, the gaming industry began to develop and mature, with a more diverse audience and increased scrutiny of representation, and EA gradually adjusted its approach. In *Need for Speed: Heat* (2019), the creators present fully developed female characters with definite roles in the story, rather than as purely sexualized figures, but they remained non-playable.

In 2007, social scientists Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson first developed and studied the theory of the "Proteus Effect". The term "Proteus" is derived from Greek mythology-Proteus was a sea god popularly known for his power to change shape at will. Due to his ability to change forms or identities, he transformed into many forms and became a symbol of adaptability, transformation, and fluid identity. So, the theory of the Proteus Effect depicts how the attitude and traits of one's avatar can lead participants to adapt those characteristics in virtual settings, including video games. For example, if a player chooses a charming or tall avatar, he or she may behave confidently.

Yee and Bailenson, in their research, found that participants who used more attractive avatars were inclined to exhibit greater self-realization and confidence. Therefore, in gaming, players, while playing heroic, authoritative, or leading avatars, perhaps behave or act more violently, roughly, or prejudiced in society.

Conclusion

Women's stereotypical representation in any area strengthens the notion that they lack voice, courage, knowledge, power, etc. In the case of video games, addiction is common among young gamers, and it also has a strong impact on their minds. Repetition of any activity made a person's performance brilliant. Similarly, the repetition of women's portrayal as "damsels" and "bombshell" in the early popular video games made people's notion strong towards the stereotypical portrayal. Unfortunately, when the developers create playable, bold, powerful female characters, they do not get the appreciation and popularity that they deserve.

So it can be said that due to the demand for strong male fascinating characters from most parts of the world, the video game creators maintain the disparity of gender representation in video games. Furthermore, to satisfy the male players' desire, the portrayal of female characters as damsels or sexy sidekicks continues today in online games.

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