

Authors' version

The final publication is available in:

Human-Computer Interaction: Interaction Technologies

Lecture Notes in Computer Science Volume 9170, 2015, pp 640-648

[http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-20916-6\\_59](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-319-20916-6_59)

## **‘Sketchy Wives’ and ‘Funny Heroines’. Doing and Undoing Gender in Art Games**

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**Abstract.** Gender analysis of video games has increased its public visibility through the Gamergate controversy. We examine several casual art games in order to explore the diversity of both conventional and counter-stereotypical gender representations. We find significant reliance on stereotypical presentations, especially in ‘sketchy wife’ characters. Such tropes may offer rhetorical resources to communicate, in brief lapses of gameplay, messages about life, death and the human condition. We also find creative ways of tackling gender displays through character description and game mechanics. Art games may thus serve as a laboratory for experimenting with doing and possibly un-doing gender.

**Keywords:** Serious games, art games, procedural rhetoric, gender

### **1 Introduction**

The #Gamergate controversy [17] has brought to forefront of public debate the issue of gender in the video game culture, as a culminating point of a gradually increasing awareness of women’s absence, stereotypical representation, and objectification in games and gaming communities. The rise of systematic critique regarding gender in videogames, exemplified by Sarkeesian’s analysis of ‘Tropes vs. Women’ [22] has been paralleled by the growth of the indie ‘art’ games, which were too a topic of heated debates, mainly discussing whether they are proper games, or not. The so-called ‘art games’ claim to make a point about human condition and society, and occasionally to comment on the game genre itself, combining social critique and aesthetic statements, usually at the expense of conventional playability and fun. We take a closer look at gender in art games – an intersection that has received little explicit attention to date.

Given the attempt of art games to question received wisdom, to stimulate reflection and controversy, to ‘modulate’ reality [19] rather than escape it, we ask: How do they

deal with femininity and masculinity? In her analysis of ‘Tropes vs. Women’, Sarkeesian praises three well-known art games for their take on death as a meaningful human (and women’s) experience [23]: ‘Dear Esther’ [26], ‘To the Moon’ [7], and ‘Passage’ [18]. She also recommends ‘Where is My Heart’ [6], and ‘Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery’ [25], as instances of games that subvert the ‘Damsel in Distress’ trope [24]. We start from these art games, and we examine them and several more in order to find out how they formulate femininity and masculinity. How is gender used as part of their rhetoric?

## **2 Gender as a rhetorical resource: gender displays in games**

Players need to make sense of the game fictive world – characters, situations, scripts – while playing. Games include, therefore, clues on which players rely to interpret the situation and the available actions. Some of these signs amount to what Goffman terms ‘gender displays’ [9] – symbolic actions or features through which characters manifest their femininity or masculinity.

Gender is a rich and easily available cultural resource. Once a character is defined as masculine or feminine, a wide repertoire of stereotypes and scripts become available to players to make sense of what is expected from her or him and what is to be done. Occasionally, this affords the possibility to be surprised if expectations are contradicted by gameplay events. Gender is thus used as a rhetorical resource, enabling the delivery of a meaningful, persuasive message by alignment or misalignment with players gender-based expectations.

Therefore, it often happens that characters in games are explicitly gendered – either independently from players’ choice, or through their options for a masculine or feminine character. This initial gendering is achieved mainly through appearance – using smaller or bigger bodies with gendered shapes, colors (such as pink / blue), clothing, and voice.

Characters display their gender not only through bodily appearance but also through their stories: what is their mission and role in the game? What are their actions? What are their personality traits? Invoking available stereotypical gender representations, some traits and roles are expected from characters by virtue of their gender: activity / passivity, authority / submission, emotionality / rationality, kindness / violence – and, of course, being a playable character versus a support, non-playable character.

There is an interplay between players expectations based on characters’ gender, and the actual roles, actions and personalities that characters acquire or unveil through gameplay. This interplay may reproduce gender stereotypes or may challenge them, creating novel forms of femininity and masculinity, or just obscuring the distinction. As a consequence, gender is done - or undone [5] - through gameplay [28].

Games are not stories, of course [3,14] – but they may generate stories through gameplay, with players as co-authors for the emerging narrative. Games are ‘talkative’ – but it is still players who must experience them, interpret and formulate their

message [20]. Therefore, players also have a role in creating the kinds of femininities and masculinities that develop in the gameworld.

In the present paper we shall focus on the so-called casual ‘art games’. These are typically indie games that claim to have something to say about the human condition – taking it upon themselves to kindle reflection, emotions, and deeper experiences in addition to, or instead of conventional entertainment. Casual art games are typically single player, and afford players a limited liberty in shaping the game story. Therefore, much of the gender displays in casual art games are constrained by game design.

In this paper we examine several games in order to identify various ways of using and thus re-creating femininity and masculinity through gameplay. Our guiding question is: what strategies for doing, re-doing and undoing gender can we find in casual art games?

### **3 Doing gender: from ‘damsels in distress’ to ‘distressing damsels’**

In the typical ‘damsel in distress’ scenario frequent in video games [22], feminine characters wait to be rescued by masculine characters. This trope is not so frequent in the art games that we have selected. Still, there remains an unbalance in agency, as male characters are, as a rule, the playable characters (‘ALZ’ [4], ‘Home’ [13], ‘Every day the same dream’ [16], ‘One chance’ [2]). There are also a few games with two characters playable at once, including a man and a woman (‘To the Moon’ [7], ‘One and One Story’ [15]).

Feminine characters are sometimes used to restrict the masculine character’s actions, being depicted as ‘distressing damsels’ (such as in ‘Passage’ [18]), needing protection or attention (‘One and One Story’ [15]), and generally lacking agency (‘Every day the same dream’ [16], ‘Passage’ [18], ‘ALZ’ [4], ‘Home’ [13]). In several of the abovementioned games they appear only as ‘sketchy wives’ – cursory presences that serve to enhance the context for the masculine character’s action (‘Every day the same dream’, ‘Passage’, ‘ALZ’, ‘One chance’).

In ‘Passage’ [18], an already classical art game by Jason Rohrer, the feminine character is portrayed as a companion. When she dies, the masculine character is slowed down, as a sign of his grief. As a companion, the feminine character does not get to be active. She only takes part in the mechanics of the game by slowing down the masculine character and making his accumulation of points more difficult, as they require more space to travel together and thus, occasionally, they do not fit through the labyrinthine paths.

In some games, actions are permitted regardless of the gender of the character, but the results differ by gender. For instance, the blue square in Rod Humble’s ‘The Marriage’ [12], another art game which has received significant public and scholarly attention, enlarges when interacting with others, while the pink square enlarges when it gets close to the blue square. A message about a stereotypical view of men and women’s needs in marriage is thus conveyed through the use of procedural rhetoric. The

woman is portrayed as needing to feel loved by her husband, while the man is portrayed as needing contact with people outside his family.

When they are playable and even rescuers themselves, women characters' deeds may be constructed as witty or funny ('Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery' [25]), somehow lacking the solemnity conventionally associated with men's heroism. While the heroine of *Sword and Sworcery* is not created through comical role-reversal [23], and she is carrying the quest through her own powers, her comments are whimsical, creating a humorous and often self-ironical atmosphere. We also found two 'serious heroines'. Interestingly, their quests are terminated by death - either through her own death ('Love's Cadence' [1]) or through the lover's death ('A love story' [11]).

In 'One and One Story' [15] both characters (the feminine and the masculine one) are playable at the same time, but the masculine one is more active and, also, he seems to be the narrator of the story. The feminine character also appears a few times as impossible to control and having to be saved by the masculine character. While the narrator tells the story "When she saw me she ran to me..." the feminine character becomes impossible to control and runs whenever she sees the masculine character, putting herself in danger. One of the players (TornPaperBird, 2014) ironically commented on the Kongregate website: "When she saw me, she ran to me." "Apparently not noticing the large pit of spikes that she could easily jump over."

Dylan Carter's 'ALZ' [4] is a game about a man with Alzheimer's disease, with difficulties in making sense of the world around him. His condition is expressed through glitches in the graphics, time and space jumps, and the reaction of his wife (or daughter?), whom he cannot recognize anymore. The 'sketchy wife' has a non-playable apparition in the game, in order to express concern and to illuminate the male's character condition.

Stephen Lavelle's 'Home' [13] is a game in which the playable character is an old person who arrives in a retirement home. The game play is built around the needs of the old man, with a rhetoric of failure [27]. Whatever the player does to fulfill Charles' needs, due to time shortage it is impossible to achieve balance and the physiological and psychological state of the character deteriorates very quickly. He inevitably becomes depressed, artificially fed, and confined to bed. When he finally gets to see his daughter, you understand from their talk that he has also lost his memory, not remembering that she comes to see him every Monday. Yet, he presents himself as happy, accepting his degradation – inviting players to question the typical family and social organization of elderly people's lives.

The main story in *Home* is about the physical deterioration associated with old age. Although the caretakers (all feminine characters) seem nice and supportive, the player is forced to fail at taking care of Charles' most basic needs, and nobody seems to be able to help him, not even his daughter. The feminine characters, although apparently invested with agency, cannot influence Charles' life.

'One Chance' [2] is a game focused on deciding how and with whom to spend your time, when the end of the world is near because of your own fault. The player is a scientist who accidentally invented a pathogen which will destroy the world in six days, and can now choose whether to go to work or spend time with his family. The

wife has a cursory non-playable appearance and she is unavoidably killed at some point or another (either through suicide or murder), in all gameplay scenarios.

## 4 Un-doing gender?

We have identified two possibilities for un-doing stereotypical gender classifications and scripts, in the selected art games:

1. Feminine characters may be portrayed with *counter-stereotypical or androgynous roles, features and relationships*, thus disrupting established gender tropes; the ‘funny heroine’ is such an example – with humor deriving from masculine-feminine role reversal, or from characters’ wit.
2. Gender may be designed as *ambiguous*, and sometimes as *irrelevant*, involving the player in the attribution and design of femininity and masculinity and making gender ideology a player’s option.

### 4.1 Counter-stereotypical characters in ‘A love story’

‘A love story’ [11] is a simple puzzle RPG. In ‘A love story’, it is the feminine character who has to overcome obstacles in order to meet the masculine character. Minimal color clues are used in character design to indicate gender: the feminine (playable) character is pink, and the masculine one is blue, while all other aspects are identical.

From a procedural point of view, the game makes a point about gender conventions, by using the feminine character as the rescuer and the masculine one as the rescued one. However, the narrative of the game does not render the heroine successful. At the end of the game, after being rescued several times, the masculine character dies.

Gamers may react to an unconventional approach to gender. One comment on the Kongregate website [11] is: “A real gentleman would walk all that way, climb those hills and would swim through those deadly lakes of water. Poor lady.” (deadmonday 2012) Ironic or not, this comment is proof that breaking gender conventions is a noticeable activity.

### 4.2 Gender irrelevance and twists in ‘To the Moon’

Freebird Games’ ‘To the Moon’ [7] is an adventure RPG. John, a primary character - yet not the playable one - is old and dying. After his wife passes away, he hires a team of scientists to change all his memories of his life, so that he could die happy, with the knowledge that he accomplished his dream: to go to the Moon. The player does not know why John wishes to go to the Moon, but they find out that the Moon has a special significance for both John and his wife, River.

The team of scientists (Dr. Eva Rosalene and Dr. Neil Watts) is the playable character. The player gets to control each scientist in turn, one at a time, as the game requires it.

Gender becomes an aspect of the romantic connection between John and River. This portrayal of romantic love invokes traditionally gendered scripts, but only on a superficial layer. Both River and John are complex characters and their gender is not relevant for their passivity or activity in the game, or for their romance story. There are other characteristics rendering them passive or active, and they do not rely on sex differences, but on their background stories as they are revealed to the player during their search for clues. River has Asperger syndrome, which is important because it affects her capability of communicating important memories to John, while he also bears a grave problem. He had suffered a trauma in his childhood and was given strong pills to erase his painful memories, therefore making him unable to remember an important part of his and River's romance story together – a source of tension in their relationship.

Gender is used in order to build a romantic climate. There are resources that the player has to obtain in order to make sense of the game and solve the puzzle; however, gender is not relevant for these clues. The clues refer to John and River's memories together, but there are no stereotypes made available for giving meaning to the game.

Gender also appears in the professional relationship between the two scientists, though they are portrayed as complex personalities, with versatile and unpredictable reactions. For example, Dr. Rosalene is at first rather compassionate, while Dr. Watts more pragmatic - but Dr. Rosalene surprises the player when she eliminates River out of John's memory. When Dr. Rosalene tries to take River out of John's memory, Dr. Watts becomes the playable character and tries to stop Dr. Rosalene. She sends zombies for Dr. Watts and puts traps in his way. After this intermezzo, it appears that she had actually devised a hidden plan, turning out that her intentions were good and perfectly compatible with the romantic ideal of finding love. In the end, she appears as a mastermind. Moreover, the zombie scene is disruptive and humorous, enhancing Dr. Rosalene's sense of humor. The very end of the game also displays a strong emotional side to the until-then cynical Dr. Watts, inviting the player to re-interpret the masculine character altogether.

### **4.3 Minimalist gender clues in 'Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery'**

'Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery' [25] is a witty and highly self-referential adventure RPG in which the playable character ('the Scythian') goes on a magical quest to find an artifact and vanquish the ghost that is guarding it. In her quest, she is aided by Logfella, Dogfella, and Girl.

The gender clues in this game are rare and either minimalist or ambiguous, as Dan Griliopoulos [10] argues. For example, when the playable character meets Girl and Logfella, it is one of the few instances with explicit descriptions for them, through which Girl is portrayed as "nice" and Logfella as "cool":

*“Far from the war-ravaged steppes of Scythia we met a dark haired girl in a sunlit Meadow. To the Mountain Folk of the Caucasus she was known as ‘Girl’ and she seemed nice.”/“To the Mountain Folk of the Caucasus he was known as ‘Logfella’ & he seemed cool.”*

We notice here a stereotypical difference in the characters’ descriptions: while the woman is presented as “Girl”, her identity being solely based on her gender, the man is named “Logfella”, his occupation being used as a gender display. Still, gender does not play a significant role in gameplay and in the emerging story.



**Fig. 1.** Body differences between Logfella (left) and the Scythian (right)

At first the gender of the playable character is unclear, since it appears as a pixelated figure with a sword. However, after encountering the two characters for which we obtain gender clues, we can also figure out the gender of the playable character, as it is visually rather similar with Girl, and with a smaller body size than Logfella.

As for the procedural dimension of gender display, Logfella is not very helpful and the protagonist (a feminine character) is rendered as more heroic than him. The masculine character does not take on any of the responsibilities assigned during the quest, although he offers his help.



**Fig. 2.** Body similarities between the Scythian (left) and Girl (right)

The Scythian is funny in a spiritual and witty way, while at the same time being a serious heroine. The humor of the game is not based on ridiculing her character or on role-reversal. However, through her slightly self-ironical voice (“We got the Megatome & we are the smartest!”), her success is rhetorically constructed as playful and lacks the dramatic effect that usually accompanies a masculine character’s victory. She is not completely invested in her mission, approaching it with a certain ambivalence or ‘half-belief’ [21]. The dramatic element is only accomplished in the end, when she sacrifices herself. Although far from the stereotypical and unimaginative representations of women in popular video games, ‘S: S & S’ does not offer the counterpart to conventional male heroes – that is a serious, powerful heroine without the need to sacrifice herself, and who is able to finish the quest victoriously through her strengths and insights.

## 5 Conclusions

When examining a set of casual art games, we find that stereotypical gender representations are quite often used. For example, we identify ‘the sketchy wife’ as a frequent trope: a cursory ‘wife’ character that summarily communicates her care, more or less convincingly. We may explain the recourse to such benevolent sexism [8], at least partially, through the rhetorical constraint of making a point through short, ambiguous and ambivalent gameplay. Gender displays serve as a precious rhetorical resource in sketching characters which are instantly recognizable.

There are also games that feature innovative representations of masculinity and femininity, such as ‘To the Moon’ [7], ‘Where is My Heart’ [6], and ‘Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery’ [25].

While art games make considerable less use of the gender tropes identified by Sarkeesian in mainstream games, such as ‘Women as Background Decoration’, ‘The Damsel in Distress’, or ‘Ms Male Character’ [22], we find that there is a frequent

reliance on the ‘sketchy wife’ as a rhetorical resource for minimalist games to reflect on grave themes, such as mortality or alienation. At the same time, there is considerable depth in the portrayals of femininity in several art games – including the ‘funny heroine’ of ‘S: S & S’ [25], and the scientist team from ‘To the Moon’ [7]. In between these two design poles, the evolution of gender displays in art games remains an open question.

## 6 Acknowledgment

This article has been supported by the research project “Sociological imagination and disciplinary orientation in applied social research”, with the financial support of ANCS / UEFISCDI with grant no. PN-II-RU-TE-2011-3-0143, contract 14/28.10.2011.

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