

Three Shadowed Dimensions of Feminine Presence in Video Games

Cosima Rughiniş

University of Bucharest
Schitu Măgureanu 9,
Bucharest 010181, Romania
cosima.rughinis@sas.unibuc.ro

Răzvan Rughiniş

University Politehnica of Bucharest
Splaiul Independentei 313
Bucharest 060042, Romania
razvan.rughinis@cs.pub.ro

Elisabeta Toma

University of Bucharest
Schitu Măgureanu 9,
Bucharest 010181, Romania
elisabeta.toma@sas.unibuc.ro

ABSTRACT

Representations of femininity in video games and other media are often discussed with reference to the most popular games, their protagonists and their sexist predicament. This framing leaves in shadow other dimensions. We aim to identify some of them and to open a broader horizon for examining and designing femininity and gender in games. To this end we look into games with creative portrayals of feminine characters, diverging from the action-woman trope: *The Walking Dead*, *The Path*, and *80 Days*. We talk in dialogue with scholars, but also with a digital crowd-critique movement for films and games, loosely centered on instruments such as the Bechdel-Wallace test and the TV Tropes.org wiki. We argue that the central analytical dimension of female character strength should be accompanied by three new axes, in order to examine feminine presence across ages, in the background fictive world created by the game, and in network edges of interaction.

Keywords

Gender, femininity, aging, tropes, Bechdel-Wallace test, TV Tropes.org, crowd critique, *80 Days*, *The Walking Dead*, *The Path*

INTRODUCTION

In this article we focus on the *portrayal of feminine characters* in single-player story-rich video games, such as RPGs and digital fiction. In order to examine feminine presence, we decided to play and study three games which have been noted for their creative gender representations: *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009), *80 Days* (inkle 2014), and *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games 2012). This has been a more adventurous journey than expected. We initially planned to ground our findings in content analysis, aiming to create a

Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG

© 2016 Authors. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

typology of characters outside the trope of action-women. At some point during this analysis we realized that we were missing not only a finely-tuned typology of feminine figures, but entire dimensions of perceiving femininity through gameplay. In what follows we propose three such dimensions – hoping to contribute to more gender-aware vocabularies of game critique and development: the *aging* axis, the axis of perceptive *focus* on protagonists vs. the broader world, and the *feminine sociability* axis.

We did not look closely into representations of masculinity and other gender and sexual categories – but we hope that our approach and proposed dimensions of analysis will be relevant for the study of other related identities, too. We selected single-player story-rich games because they shape players’ experiences of in-game gendered identities and interactions through constrained character and plot options.

We examine games taking into account their *openness through play* – as players’ experiences depend on their styles and choices. It is essential to keep in mind that games create emerging stories (Consalvo and Dutton 2006), co-authored by players with rhetorical tools, some offered by the game and some external to the game, including paratexts and various cheating resources (Consalvo 2007). Still, in this paper we do not study players’ interpretations or reactions, limiting our analysis to what the selected games offer through character design.

EXAMINING FEMININITY IN VIDEO GAMES

There is a growing thread of reflection on gender portrayal in video games, both in academic texts and in other media – such as popular culture journal articles, blogs, vlogs, wikis, or game reviews.

Scholarly analyses of feminine representations in video games may be broadly divided into surveys of game collections and in-depth case studies. Researchers who have conducted such surveys have consistently documented several features of feminine presence in video game worlds:

- Women are underrepresented – both in player and support characters (Dietz 1998) (Williams et al. 2009) (Downs and Smith 2009) (Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess 2007) (Dill et al. 2005) (Beasley and Collins Standley 2002);
- Women characters, more than men, are presented with sexualized or hyper-sexualized features and outfits (Dietz 1998) (Kondrat 2015) (Downs and Smith 2009) (Jansz and Martis 2007) (Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess 2007) (Haninger and Thompson 2004) (Beasley and Collins Standley 2002);
- Men characters, more than women, are portrayed as violent (Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess 2007);
- Women characters are often presented as victims from PC- and NPC-perpetrated violence (Dietz 1998), frequently inhabiting the “damsel in distress” trope (Dickerman, Christensen, and Kerl-McClain 2008) (Dietz 1998);
- There is a trend of including powerful female characters in video games – the so-called Lara Croft phenomenon (Jansz and Martis 2007);
- Yet, these action-women characters have been criticized for combining hypersexuality and violence into an unrealistical portrayal of women shaped for

the male gaze (Kennedy 2002; MacCallum-Stewart 2014; Mikula 2003; Schleiner 2001).

Lara Croft herself has attracted significant attention from scholars – due to its immense success for both male and female players, and its ambivalent reception by critics (MacCallum-Stewart 2014, Kennedy 2002). Lara appears to be a ‘boundary object’ (Akkerman and Bakker 2011; Star and Griesemer 1989) – accommodating identities, desires and preferences from diverse communities of players, and supporting widely divergent gender sensibilities and ideologies (Mikula 2003). To illustrate: Schleiner discusses Lara as an instance of Female Frankenstein Monster, Drag Queen, Dominatrix and Femme Fatale, Positive Role Model, and Vehicle for the Queer Female Gaze (Schleiner 2001). Its popularity has also highlighted the issue of *relationships between players and the characters they play*: when men play as Lara, this may be read as a transgender experience, though strangely lacking any transformational effect, since “it seems much more likely that the pleasures of playing as Lara are more concerned with mastery and control of a body coded as female within a safe and unthreatening context” (Kennedy 2002). For others, playing as a female character may occasion a subjective experience of protecting a woman, rather than identifying with a woman (Mikula 2003).

Outside discussions of *Lara Croft*, we found little in-depth examination of femininity in games. Soukup optimistically but briefly mentions the existence of alternative representations (Soukup 2007): “On the other hand, not all representations of women in video games rely on sexist stereotypes. In popular games such as *Half-Life*, *Radiata Stories*, and *Elder Scrolls*, women are not sexualized and often are represented as competent, intelligent, and assertive. Unfortunately, in an industry courting the young male consumer (gamers), these representations remain a minority” (p. 162). Kirkland criticizes the stereotypical and misogynistic representations of *Silent Hill 1* and *2*, while discussing in some detail the androgynous Heather from *SH3* in light of her possible relations with male players: “Heather combines the imperiled video game heroine who permits masculine detachment, with the ambivalently-gendered final girl who facilitates male character investment.” (p. 174). Grimes analyzes female protagonists in action-adventure video games, highlighting the difference between attractiveness and sexualization and proposing a *continuum of stereotypical representations*, in correlation with physical appearance (Grimes 2014). In a more critical vein, Labre and Duke discuss at length how *Buffy* is transformed in the video game by sliding towards the sexualized and violent pole (Labre and Duke 2004): “The video game almost completely eliminates *Buffy*’s caregiving side as a hero, even as it amps up the portrayal of her sexual characteristics” (p. 149). Du Preez analyzes in depth several selected feminine characters, concluding that they re-instantiate *archetypes of femininity* and reproduce masculine power (du Preez 2000). Looking at a different game genre, Rughiniş and Toma discuss gendered tropes in art games, identifying a rhetorical reliance on ‘sketchy wives’ to convey philosophical messages, but also the occasional presence of disruptive ‘funny heroines’ (Rughiniş and Toma 2015).

The *dominant framing* of the academic discussion of gender representations in video games includes several elements, largely shared by the works cited above:

- A preference for analyzing games with the *highest commercial success*;
- A main focus on *game protagonists* (mostly player characters);

- A secondary focus on *populations of game characters*, portrayed through dominant tendencies such as numerical underrepresentation and gender stereotyping;
- Attention to *sexist representation*, with few highlights of creative feminine characters, besides discussions of Lara Croft. Analyses of other powerful and sexy action-girls stress their stereotypical, male-oriented design, contributing to the general critique of feminine representation in games;
- Sexist representation is discussed especially in terms of: *instrumentalization* of women characters as ancillary to male protagonists; *sexualization*; *violence* against women, and violence as a rhetorical resource in the portrayal of ‘strong’ action-women.

Given the massive dominance of these patterns in analysis, we felt incited to discuss some remarkable, rather eccentric feminine characters as a source of inspiration and, possibly, a fresh perception lens. Our attempts to classify these characters have quickly turned into a puzzle, further amplified in our exploration of the emerging *crowd-critique* movement for games and other media.

EXAMINING FEMININITY IN GAMES THROUGH THE CROWD-CRITIQUE MOVEMENT

There is a growing body of discussions concerning gender in video games on blogs, vlogs, game reviews, wikis, forums and other digital media. This plurilogue is closely interwoven with the large scale, distributed work of analyzing and critiquing gender representations in movies. We have argued elsewhere that this movement can be understood as a form of *impromptu crowd science*¹ - in which large numbers of participants engage in systematic monitoring of games and movies, create empirical data and produce various analyses, often relying on visualization software. We could also describe it as a *crowd-critique movement* – a massive, collaborative and often distributed reflection on gender representations in media. The emerging knowledge has a distinct profile in comparison to academic discussions, and we think that we stand to win by bridging both threads in our work.

Much of movie crowd-critique movement is centered on the increasingly popular *Bechdel-Wallace test* (Bechdel 2013; Bechdel 2005), which we discuss in a dedicated section below, including its applicability to games.

A second distinctive feature consists in the discussion of *tropes*, which takes place on a variety of media and channels. Collaborative platforms play an important role in aggregating knowledge for both topics: the Bechdel-Wallace test results are centralized on the Bechdel Test Movie List (Contributors of bechdeltest.com 2016), while tropes are proposed, discussed and classified on two main wikis (Contributors of “All the Tropes” 2016; Contributors of TV Tropes 2016). The wikis cover both films and games.

Anita Sarkeesian’s Tropes vs. Women series has also contributed to the massive debate and public awareness of tropes as a critical instrument (Sarkeesian 2014a) – while at the same time being marred by violent reactions.

¹ Blinded reference to a manuscript currently submitted for publication.

It is noteworthy that both *the application of Bechdel-Wallace test and the discussion of tropes in movies and video games are much more effervescent in the crowd-critique movement than in academic research*. For example, Sarkeesian has discussed extensively the *Damsel in Distress* trope in video games (Sarkeesian 2013), its hybrid forms such as the “Damsel in the Refrigerator” and the “Euthanized Damsel” (Sarkeesian 2014b), and forms of irony and reflexivity when dealing with the trope (Sarkeesian 2014c). She also elaborates on the trope’s relevance for the portrayal of women – addressing the skin-deep superficiality of women characters, how their deaths are more significant than their lives, how they are systematically subjected to violence, and how they are used in the service of motivating male characters’ violent quests. In contrast, the “Damsel in Distress” trope is a minor topic of interest in academic reflection on feminine presence in games, being occasionally mentioned but without in-depth discussion. Of course, researchers do examine extensively the issues of violence against women, instrumentalization and the ancillary functions of women characters; the difference is that they make little use of the *vocabulary of tropes* for clarifying or classifying portrayals of femininity. As we argue below, this intricate vocabulary is useful as a perception lens for feminine presence, and can occasionally help to detect notable absences.

An interesting practice in crowd-critique consists in compiling *lists of notable feminine characters in games*, with various criteria of selection (Hartlaub 2009; Rougeau 2013; Ewalt 2013). The rhetoric of the list encourages ranking and permits quick navigation through characters’ profiles, usually defined by an image and some highlighted features. On the downside, the list does not encourage reflection on *types* of characters, typically presenting them as instances of the same kind (but Ewalt 2013 makes an exception).

OUR THREE-DIMENSIONAL PUZZLE

In the last two decades Lara Croft has become a veritable phenomenon, through the growing numbers of action-women in video games, and through the intense debate that it generated. In the same period, increasingly more games started to feature more eccentric feminine protagonists of different styles; still, these emerging forms of femininity have received much less attention, in academic and crowd-critique as well.

One reason for this *curious lack of coverage* may be that games that feature creative feminine characters are also remarkable in other ways, which attract more of players’, reviewers’ and scholars’ interest. Let us briefly examine *The Path* (Tale of Tales 2009) and its reception as regards the girl protagonists, given that it features not one, not two – but seven feminine player characters, and a couple of non-player characters as well. *The Path* is a psychological horror game, but also an interactive story and an art game, based on the Little Red Riding Hood. The main player characters are six Little Red Riding Hoods, sisters of different ages and personalities – whose intimate thoughts and vulnerabilities we are left to explore by accompanying them into the forest and taking them to meet their own personal Wolf. The game delves into girls’ experiences, without communicating that it is a game ‘for girls’. Given its atypical cast of feminine protagonists and its intricate portrayal of their personalities, one could expect that it would become a topic in the discussion of gender representations in video games. Yet, this has not happened quite that much. For example, Suellentrop discusses the game as an instance of the ‘slow video game movement’, deploring its bugs while praising the overall experience. He also touches on gender representations, but rather as a passing remark (Suellentrop 2009): “*The Path* does at least try to present an interactive way for game players to experience empathy rather than to exert agency—to walk in the footsteps of young girls without trying to author their stories for them. And it's also worth praising

a game for having girl characters who look like neither Lara Croft nor Barbie.” Is there more to say about feminine presence in *The Path*?

In the scholarly literature, *The Path* has been discussed more for its creativity as digital fiction than for its disruptive take on femininity. Ensslin analyzes its rhetorical functioning as digital literature in a chapter dedicated entirely to this game; she touches on gender representations in the Conclusions (Ensslin 2014), noting that it “offers a new take on its much debated sexual connotations, psychoanalytical interpretations, and feminist concerns. *The Path* offers a postmodern pluralistic and procedural approach to victimized female identity and enacts different versions of the underlying fairy tale theme to expose the temptations and dangers facing young people – especially females – at different stages of adolescence” (p. 90). Ryan and Costello also appreciate and analyze it as an instance of interactive storytelling, distinguishing two implicit ludic contracts connecting the player and the game (Ryan and Costello 2012); they do not address gender representation.

A similar situation applies to other games with creative feminine characters. *80 Days* (inkle 2014), an interactive fiction based on Jules Verne’s novel, has received much acclaim for its gameplay, fictive world, and ideological subtlety. Yet, for all its dozens of surprising, disruptive feminine characters that we encounter in localities through which we get to travel as *Passepartout*, accompanying Ph. Fogg, game reviews largely ignore its innovations in this respect. As for scholarly discussions, presently Google Scholar indexes no academic references to the game whatsoever. The only insightful comments on *80 Days*’ feminine representations that we could find belong to the game writer Meg Jayanth, in dialogue with Jess Joho (Joho 2014; Jayanth 2014). We will discuss it in the dedicated section below.

The Walking Dead is a notable exception to this situation, which we interpret as a form of selective attention that overshadows unconventional, non-action-figure feminine characters. Telltale’s game has received sustained critical acclaim and detailed analyses for its treatment of gender – covering both masculinity and femininity (Chambers 2012; Albor 2014; *HowManyPrincesses* 2013; Walsh 2014; Cebulsky 2015; Scharr 2014).

To make a long story short, there are many unorthodox feminine characters in video games, who suffer from obscurity, if not outright oblivion, in academic and crowd-critique of gender representations in video games. We have only encountered a fraction of them – but even this is enough to suggest that feminine presence can be designed and observed on other, shadowed dimensions, in addition to protagonists’ strength. In what follows we propose three additions to the current discussions, distinguishing between characters as nodes, and their interactions and relationships as edges (see **Figure 1**):

- The character *ageing* axis, inspired from games featuring young girl protagonists;
- The character *focus* axis, inspired from *80 Days* and its broad focus in designing a world-with-women;
- The character *sociability* axis – suggested by the Bechdel-Wallace test for movies and games.

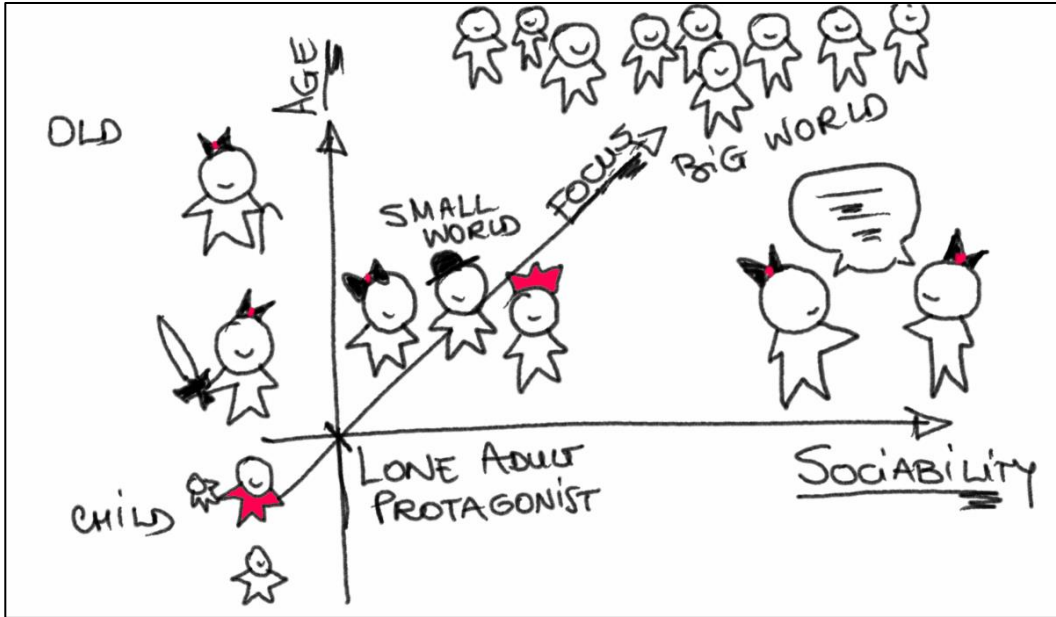


Figure 1. A sketch of the three proposed axes: aging, perception focus on the protagonist or the broader world, and feminine sociability. Source: Authors.

The ageing axis and the *Adventurous Alice* trope

The vast majority of feminine characters discussed either in academic or in crowd-critique of video games are young, adult women. To be more precise, in our experience the only notable exception to this rule is 8-year old Clementine from *The Walking Dead*. Clementine is the only childish character to feature in Top Female Characters lists (Rougeau 2013), gaining praise for her relative complexity in relation to other child characters (Smith 2015).

Yet, Clementine is not the only feminine character in video games who is (or seems to be) a child. Other notable girls are Ellie (*The Last of Us*), Aurora (*Child of Light*), Nona (*Never Alone*), Ida (*Monument Valley*) and at least four of the Red Riding Hoods in *The Path* (Ruby, Robin, Rose and Ginger). We propose that this series is serious enough to warrant the formulation of a trope that captures *young, curious, exploring girl characters*. Famous figures from the literature come to mind – such as Coraline from Gaiman’s homonymous story, Dorothy from Baum’s *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and Carroll’s Alice, with her travels in *Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. We propose to call the trope *Adventurous Alice* – since Alice offers a great illustration of this character.

We were certainly surprised to conclude that such a trope has not been formulated until now – at least we could not find a convenient match on trope wikis. For example, The ‘Alice in Wonderland’ character page (TV Tropes Contributors 2015) refers to several related tropes – such as “child heroine” which actually links to the gender neutral “kid hero” trope, then there is “plucky girl” or “spirited young lady” – which are interesting, but have a different focus. A search for all “child” or “girl” tropes does not lead to a better fit. Thus, if reviewers will agree, and maybe even if they don’t, we plan to contribute the *Adventurous Alice* trope on the TV Tropes wiki. It is also possible that a more specific trope, such as *Dark Adventurous Alice*, could accommodate girls who

explore grim territories – such as Coraline, Clementine, or the Red Riding Hood sisters from *The Path*. We will surely think about this after the DiGRA deadline, when we go back to having a life. But we are digressing.

A trope is a device for focusing attention and priming interpretation. If a trope becomes widely recognized, its use may lead to unforeseen consequences – such as the violent responses to Sarkeesian’s discussions of Tropes vs. Women, or the rejection of the Manic Pixie Dream Girl trope by its own author, Nathan Rabin (Rabin 2014; Kornhaber 2015). This is a risk we are willing to take, for the sake of analytical benefits. The *Adventurous Alice* trope immediately suggests a move forward in portraying feminine characters: a *diversification of ages and life stages*.

The relatively broad age span of characters in *The Path*, covering early childhood up to early adulthood, is one of its significant breakthroughs in representing feminine presence. The game is no longer about empathizing with a specific character, instead offering a broadly-encompassing vision on doing and undoing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987; Deutsch 2007), and displaying one’s gender (Goffman 1979) in different stages of life. Of course, some stages are left out, such as later adulthood, old age and old-old age.

If feminine child characters are largely shadowed by young, strong, sexy female heroines, what could we say about old women in video games? They are even more neglected, both in representation, reflection and scholarly study. Nevertheless, old feminine characters are systematically present in various subgenres – such as casual games (Mosberg Iversen 2015) and art games (Rughiniş, Toma, and Rughiniş 2015). It is certain that more elderly characters can be spotlighted, thus enriching the public discussion of feminine presence in games.

The focus axis: Inkle’s 80 Days around a world-with-women

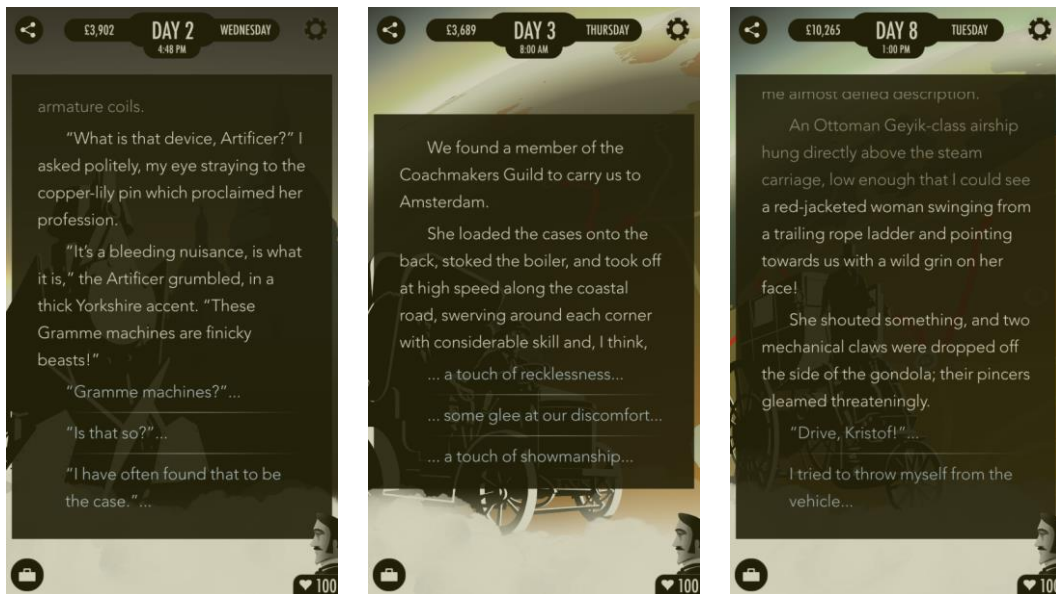
Scholarly and crowd-critique of video games work under the assumption that feminine presence in video games is best achieved through strong female leads, preferably player characters. Surveys routinely estimate the presence of women characters among protagonists and among secondary characters, yet the latter is discussed only as a matter of statistical representativeness. Little, if any attention is given to how episodic, ancillary feminine characters are portrayed, other than by identifying tropes of victimization and instrumentalization.

The assumption that secondary women characters are meaningful through quantity rather than quality requires empirical validation. While it may offer an adequate commentary on the design of extras in games in general, it does not hold for *80 Days*. Inkle’s game invites the player, aka *Passepartout*, in literally countless interactions with episodic women that may be strong, quirky, malicious, smart, violent, drunk, protective, romantic - or in any other way. While the player character is doubtlessly male, as is his quintessentially calculated and emotionless master Phileas Fogg, the game animates dozens of feminine characters, in incessantly surprising roles. In this case we use “incessantly surprising” as a description of our experience, which of course may not be shared by other players: we did not cease to be amazed by the presence of women and, occasionally, girls, in places and roles where we did not expect them (again and again). To illustrate, the characters that we met were: artificers (engineers of steam-based machines and automata); ship captains; ship mechanics; drivers; pirates; bodyguards; scientists; thieves; young women in love; dancers; a kleptomaniacal girl – and the list continues. In **Figure 2** we illustrate with screenshots an artificer, a coachmaker and a

pirate: we can notice that even on the small screen of a mobile phone these characters acquire depth through conversational nuances, emotions and interaction with the player.

Women characters are highly varied as regards their profession, personality, tone and interaction style. They are also connected to their world and share their experiences and opinions gladly. They sometimes lie, cheat, or otherwise try to manipulate us (as Passepartout). In brief, 80 Days invites players around a world that is actually inhabited by vivid, often startling feminine characters – all of them secondary, episodic and nonplayable.

Therefore, 80 Days invites us to explore feminine presence in games on yet another dimension: decentering our focus from protagonists, we can examine the background characters, the social world (human and non-human) in which the adventure unfolds. Is that world a flat decoration, or a living environment? What about the fictive women who populate the game’s fictive universe? Are they just living props eligible to be counted in character surveys, or do they have a life of their own?



(a) Artificer

(b) Coachmaker

(c) Pirate

Figure 2. Illustrations of ancillary feminine characters in 80 Days. Source: Authors’ gameplay screenshots

As we have mentioned, the most illuminating comment on gender representations in 80 Days belongs to its writer, Meg Jayanth: “If you’re inventing a world, why not make it more progressive? Why not have women invent half the technologies, and pilot half the airships? Why not shift the balance of power so that Haiti rather than barely postbellum United States is ascendant in the region? Why not have a strong automaton-using Zulu Federation avert the Scramble for Africa? Why not have characters who play with gender and sexuality without fear of reprisal? History is full of women, and people of colour, and queer people, and minorities. That part isn’t fantasy—the fantastical bit in our game is that they’re allowed to have their own stories without being silenced and attacked. That their stories are not told as if they’re exceptional” (Jayanth 2014).

Observers and designers alike stand to win from *shifting the attention focus from protagonists to a deep-world-full-of-characters*, when thinking of feminine presence in games.

Through this lens we can better appreciate the representations of femininity in *The Walking Dead II*, which also includes quite a significant transformation of feminine presence (Walsh 2014). It is not only that some characters become stronger or richer, but *the world itself becomes populated throughout with diverse feminine figures* (Chambers 2012), who also span the aging axis.

The Bechdel-Wallace test and feminine sociability

Where are we now? We have started our analysis from a focus on the main nodes in the network of characters: protagonists. By looking into several games with slightly eccentric characters, we have discovered a trope in feminine presence that has received little attention to date: the inquisitive child heroine, exploring a strange world – or even a grim landscape of dangers – with curiosity, determination, and a touch of oddity. We proposed to call it the “*Adventurous Alice*” trope – and we moved on to investigate *the new dimension that it suggests: aging*. Children, teens but also older characters *expand the central nodes of feminine presence onto an axis of time passage and life stages*, asking players and developers to reflect on how we deal with various ages in gameworlds.

With *80 Days*, we have moved further away from the main character nodes, uncovering the potential for meaningful feminine presence in the remote, ancillary roles of episodic characters. We can *shift our attention focus from protagonists to the characters that inhabit and enliven the entire fictive universe*, and we can ask ourselves what kinds of femininities can be revealed by interacting with this world.

The third dimension that we propose now is no longer related to the characters themselves – that is, to the nodes of the character network, but to their *edges*. We have formulated this dimension by reflecting on the Bechdel-Wallace test for movies and its surrounding debates: we can call it ‘*the feminine sociability axis*’.

The Bechdel-Wallace test derives from Alison Bechdel’s 1985 comic strip ‘The Rule’ (Bechdel 2005), which humorously stipulates three conditions that make a film viewable: 1) that it should have at least two women characters, who 2) talk to each other, 3) about something else than a man. Since the 2000’s the test has become much more serious, growing into a widely used criterion for discussing feminine presence in films. The Bechdel Test Movie List collaborative platform archives test results for more than 6300 movies, to date. People use these criteria to discuss particular films, but there is also an increasing trend to produce statistical analyses and visualizations on Bechdel-Wallace test data for populations of films (Hickey 2014; Karlsson and Karlsson 2015; Mariani 2013; McDonald 2015).

The Bechdel-Wallace test has also stirred critical appraisals (Collin 2013), because it may happen that a film with weak feminine characters passes the test, while one with strong women characters fails it (‘Gravity’ is a much discussed instance). The issue is, then, whether the test is just a weak and error-laden indicator of feminine character strength – or maybe it points to something entirely else? The typical justification for continuing to use the Bechdel-Wallace test is that it gives a useful diagnosis for large populations of films, while being of little relevance for any individual creation (Wilson 2012; Anders 2014). Nonetheless, we think that this is an overly defensive account of the test value,

and that it continues to be used precisely because it refers to *something else than character strength*. The very fact that films with powerful women characters may fail this minimalist test indicates that representation of femininity cannot be completely described by examining characters in isolation. *Another dimension is required: one that describes the interaction of women characters*. We agree with Selisker (2014) that the test is an inquiry into the *edges* of a character network, rather than into the quality or strength of its nodes: “Bechdel testers ignore most of a film’s content in order to create what is essentially a character-network within each text, where each character is a node, and lines of shared dialogue constitute edges (or lines) between them. The Bechdel Test looks for female community, in both the conventional sense of the word and somewhere near the its more specialized sense in network theory. Bechdel jettisons conventional thinking about agency in literary texts in order to describe it as a network effect: that is, agency in our thoroughly connected world might be described as the potential reach of our ideas within a network” (Selisker 2014).

Empirical studies of intra-gender conversations have shown that discrepancies between women-to-women talk and men-to-men talk are considerably higher than inequalities in character presence. Mičić examines the top-grossing 20 films and estimates that female-to-female interaction represents only 4% of the time spent in same sex interaction (Mičić 2015). The Bechdel-Wallace test taps exactly into this less visible zone: do women actually talk to one another – or are they interconnected only through masculine nodes?

There is some debate on how the Bechdel-Wallace test can be applied to video games, and whether it needs changes. For example, Nixon creates the following version of the test: “1. Must have at least two named female characters that are meaningful to the story or gameplay (...) 2. At least one of the aforementioned female characters must be a player character or a playable character or NPC in the player’s party (...) 3. The female characters must interact with each other in a manner representative of the dialogue/conversational style of the game (...) 4. The characters conversation is about something other than a man” (Nixon 2013). Other authors have worked with different adaptations (Feit 2010; Agnello et al. 2012). It is beside the scope of our paper to discuss these nuances. We conclude by *noticing that the Bechdel-Wallace test opens a third dimension in the examination of femininity presence in games, focused on feminine sociability*.

CONCLUSIONS

We started our paper from a review of current discussions of femininity presence in video games, which we find overly focused on top-ranking games, protagonists, and discussions of sexism. We argue that this persistent focus has led to overseeing an emerging phenomenon: the multiplication of eccentric, non-action-figure feminine characters. We illustrate our case with three games featuring feminine characters in various guises: *The Path*, *The Walking Dead* series, and *80 Days*.

The Path and *The Walking Dead* are remarkable, among others, through their reliance on *child heroines*. This type of character has received little attention to date, both in academic and crowd-critique discussions of gender in video games. We propose a new trope, *Adventurous Alice*, to help identify characters who fit the series of Alice, Dorothy, Coraline and other brave, curious and whimsical girls. This trope points to a neglected dimension in studies of feminine presence in games: the *axis of aging*. The most popular and widely discussed characters are *young adult women*. When attending to this axis, we notice that *children represent a significant type of feminine presence, and there is*

evidence that old women also feature systematically, at least in certain niches. It often happens, across various media, that young girls and older women are either invisible, or portrayed, stereotypically, as symbols of powerlessness and dependency. Therefore, a broader representation of femininity across the continuum of age is important because it *gives players opportunities to empathize and interact with girls and older women as agentic persons, rather than victims or barely sketched props.*

By playing and thinking of 80 Days, we identify *a second shadowed dimension of feminine presence: the depth of focus.* While most analyses look at protagonists and discard auxiliary characters either to simple numbers or to flat pictures, 80 Days proves that this need not be the case. Although its protagonists are male, the game creates a *world-full-of-feminine-characters* displaying widely varied skills and personalities. The *focus axis* invites us to consider carefully the roles of femininities in the creation of the entire fictive gameworld in which protagonists unfold their adventure. It also invites us to pay attention to women not only as extra-ordinary heroines or victims, to be glorified or saved, but also as *normal persons, with normal lives, in many and manifold areas of life.*

Last but not least, we argue that feminine presence requires not only well-formed characters, spanning the aging axis, in the foreground but maybe also in the background. Feminine presence is also consolidated alongside *a third axis: feminine sociability.* Debates around the Bechdel-Wallace test applied to movies and games point to the radical incompleteness of strong feminine characters who only interact meaningfully with male counterparts. In real-life and in fiction, *interaction between women creates a sociability network that sustains the agency and autonomy of its node-characters.*

Further dimensions can probably be added to describe the (in)flexibility of gender categories, their relevance or irrelevance in shaping people and interactions in the game world, and potential relationships between players and characters. We aim to explore them in our future work. Until then, we are hoping that Adventurous Alice will gain acceptance as a character trope for films and games, and that more studies will examine femininity in video games alongside the *aging, focus* and *sociability* axes.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agnello, Anthony John, Joe Keiser, Samantha Nelson, Derrick Sanskrit, and John Teti. 2012. "Something Other than a Man: 15 Games That Pass the Bechdel Test." Gameological. <http://gameological.com/2012/07/something-other-than-a-man-15-games-that-pass-the-bechdel-test/>.
- Akkerman, Sanne F., and Arthur Bakker. 2011. "Boundary Crossing and Boundary Objects." Review of Educational Research 81 (2) (April): 132–169.
- Albor, Jorge. 2014. "Masculinity in 'The Walking Dead in Harm's Way'." <http://www.popmatters.com/post/182527-masculinity-in-the-walking-dead-in-harms-way/>.
- Anders, Charlie Jane. 2014. "Why The Bechdel Test Is More Important Than You Realize." io9. <http://io9.gizmodo.com/why-the-bechdel-test-is-more-important-than-you-realize-1586135613>.
- Beasley, Berrin, and Tracy Collins Standley. 2002. "Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an Indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games." Mass Communication & Society 5 (3): 279–293.
- Bechdel, Alison. 2005. "The Rule." Dykes to Watch Out For.
———. 2013. "Testy."

- Burgess, Melinda C. R., Steven Paul Stermer, and Stephen R. Burgess. 2007. "Sex, Lies, and Video Games: The Portrayal of Male and Female Characters on Video Game Covers." *Sex Roles* 57 (5-6) (June 30): 419–433. doi:10.1007/s11199-007-9250-0. <http://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11199-007-9250-0>.
- Cebulsky, Bryan. 2015. "Masculinity in Telltale's The Walking Dead." *Gamemoir*. <http://gamemoir.com/opinions/masculinity-in-telltale-the-walking-dead/>.
- Chambers, Becky. 2012. "An Open Letter To Everyone Who Hasn't Played The Walking Dead Yet Essay." *The Mary Sue*. <http://www.themarysue.com/an-open-letter-to-everyone-who-hasnt-played-the-walking-dead-yet/>.
- Collin, Robbie. 2013. "Bechdel Test Is Damaging to the Way We Think about Film." *The Telegraph*. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/10450463/Bechdel-test-is-damaging-to-the-way-we-think-about-film.html>.
- Consalvo, Mia. 2007. *Cheating. Gaining Advantage in Videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Consalvo, Mia, and Nathan Dutton. 2006. "Game Analysis: Developing a Methodological Toolkit for the Qualitative Study of Games." *Game Studies* 6 (1). http://www.gamestudies.org/0601/articles/consalvo_dutton.
- Contributors of "All the Tropes." 2016. "All the Tropes." <https://allthetropes.org/>.
- Contributors of bechdeltest.com. 2016. "Bechdel Test Movie List - Stats and Graphs." <http://bechdeltest.com/statistics/>.
- Contributors of TV Tropes. 2016. "TV Tropes." <http://tvtropes.org/>.
- Deutsch, F. M. 2007. "Undoing Gender." *Gender & Society* 21 (1) (February 1): 106–127. doi:10.1177/0891243206293577.
- Dickerman, Charles, Jeff Christensen, and Stella Beatriz Kerl-McClain. 2008. "Big Breasts and Bad Guys: Depictions of Gender and Race in Video Games." *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 3 (1) (May 27): 20–29.
- Dietz, Tracy L. 1998. "An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior." *Sex Roles* 38 (5-6): 425–442. doi:10.1023/A:1018709905920.
- Dill, Karen E., Douglas A. Gentile, William A. Richter, and Jody C. Dill. 2005. "Violence, Sex, Race, and Age in Popular Video Games: A Content Analysis." In *Featuring Females: Feminist Analyses of Media*, 115–130. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Downs, Edward, and Stacy L. Smith. 2009. "Keeping Abreast of Hypersexuality: A Video Game Character Content Analysis." *Sex Roles* 62 (11-12) (September 2): 721–733. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9637-1. <http://link.springer.com/10.1007/s11199-009-9637-1>.
- Du Preez, Amanda. 2000. "Virtual Babes: Gender, Archetypes and Computer Games." *Communicatio* 26 (2) (January 4): 18–27. doi:10.1080/02500160008537909.
- Ensslin, Astrid. 2014. "Playing with Rather than by the Rules. Metaludicity, Allusive Fallacy, and Illusory Agency in The Path." In *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, edited by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Rustad, 75–93. London: Routledge.
- Ewalt, David M. 2013. "Are These The Top Women Game Characters of All Time?" *Forbes*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/davidewalt/2013/08/31/are-these-the-top-women-game-characters-of-all-time/#64c4d8931a55>.
- Feit, Daniel. 2010. "All The (Missing) Ladies: Creating a Bechdel Test for Video Games." *Venture Beat*. <http://venturebeat.com/2010/06/11/all-the-missing-ladies-creating-a-bechdel-test-for-video-games/>.
- Goffman, Erving. 1979. *Gender Advertisements*. Harper & Row.

- Grimes, Sara M. 2014. "“You Shoot Like A Girl!”: The Female Protagonist in Action-Adventure Video Games." In *DiGRA '03 - Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up*.
- Haninger, Kevin, and Kimberly M Thompson. 2004. "Content and Ratings of Teen-Rated Video Games." *JAMA* 291 (7) (February 18): 856–65. doi:10.1001/jama.291.7.856. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14970065>.
- Hartlaub, Peter. 2009. "Top 9 Greatest Video Game Heroines." <http://www.sfgate.com/entertainment/article/Top-9-greatest-video-game-heroines-3171696.php>.
- Hickey, Walt. 2014. "The Dollar-And-Cents Case Against Hollywood’s Exclusion of Women." *FiveThirtyEight*. <http://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-dollar-and-cents-case-against-hollywoods-exclusion-of-women/>.
- HowManyPrincesses. 2013. "How Telltale Got It (mostly) Right with The Walking Dead." <https://howmanyprincesses.wordpress.com/2013/05/26/how-telltale-got-it-mostly-right-with-the-walking-dead/>.
- inkle. 2014. "80 Days." <http://www.inklestudios.com/80days/>.
- Jansz, Jeroen, and Raynel G. Martis. 2007. "The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful Female Characters in Video Games." *Sex Roles* 56 (3-4) (February 2): 141–148.
- Jayanth, Meg. 2014. "Fancy, History and Respect." *You Can Panic Now*. <http://megjayanth.com/post/100280300365/fantasy-history-and-respect>.
- Joho, Jess. 2014. "80 Days Is the Alternate-Reality, Anti-Colonialism Adventure We All Deserve." *Kill Screen*. <https://killscreen.com/articles/80-days-alternate-reality-anti-colonialism-adventure-we-all-deserve/>.
- Karlsson, Laurel, and Joe Karlsson. 2015. "The Bechdel Test Visualizer." <https://bechdel-test.herokuapp.com/>.
- Kennedy, Helen W. 2002. "Lara Croft: Feminist Icon or Cyberbimbo? On the Limits of Textual Analysis." *Game Studies* 2 (2). <http://www.gamestudies.org/0202/kennedy/>.
- Kondrat, Xeniya. 2015. "Gender and Video Games: How Is Female Gender Generally Represented in Various Genres of Video Games?" *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology* 6 (1): 171–193. <http://compaso.eu/wpd/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Compaso2015-61-Kondrat.pdf>.
- Kornhaber, Spencer. 2015. "Why ‘Manic Pixie Dream Girl’ Won’t Go Away." *The Atlantic*. <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/09/the-manic-pixie-dream-girl-repents/404953/>.
- Labre, Magdala P., and Lisa Duke. 2004. "“Nothing Like a Brisk Walk and a Spot of Demon Slaughter to Make a Girl’s Night’: The Construction of the Female Hero in the Buffy Video Game." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 28 (2) (April 1): 138–156. doi:10.1177/0196859903261795. <http://jci.sagepub.com.proxy.ub.umu.se/content/28/2/138>.
- MacCallum-Stewart, Esther. 2014. "“Take That, Bitches!’ Refiguring Lara Croft in Feminist Game Narratives." *Game Studies* 14 (2). <http://gamestudies.org/1402/articles/maccallumstewart>.
- Mariani, Daniel. 2013. "Visualizing the Bechdel Test." <http://tenchocolatesundaes.blogspot.com.br/2013/06/visualizing-bechdel-test.html>.
- McDonald, Elizabeth. 2015. "The Bechdel Test: Female Presence in Modern Film." <http://research.prattsils.org/blog/coursework/information-visualization/the-bechdel-test-female-presence-in-modern-film/>.

- Mičić, Zorana. 2015. "Female Interactions on Film: Beyond the Bechdel Test. A Quantitative Content Analysis of Same-Sex-Interactions of Top 20 Box Office Films." Stockholm University. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:821217/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.
- Mikula, Maja. 2003. "Gender and Videogames: The Political Valency of Lara Croft." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 17 (1): 79–87.
- Mosberg Iversen, Sara. 2015. "'Not without My Kitties': The Old Woman in Casual Games." In *Foundation of Digital Games FDG'15*. https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sara_Iversen/publication/281447662_Not_without_my_kitties_The_old_woman_in_casual_games/links/55e823d808ae65b63899707c.pdf.
- Nixon, Sarah. 2013. "Applying the Bechdel Test to Video Games." *Not Your Mama's Gamer*. <http://www.nymgamer.com/?p=3184>.
- Rabin, Nathan. 2014. "I'm Sorry for Coining the Phrase 'Manic Pixie Dream Girl.'" *Salon*. http://www.salon.com/2014/07/15/im_sorry_for_coining_the_phrase_manic_pixie_dream_girl/.
- Rougeau, Michael. 2013. "The 50 Greatest Heroines In Video Game History." *Complex*. http://www.complex.com/pop-culture/NaN/Invalid_date/the-50-greatest-heroines-in-video-game-history/.
- Rughiniş, Cosima, and Elisabeta Toma. 2015. "'Sketchy Wives' and 'Funny Heroines.'" In *Human-Computer Interaction: Interaction Technologies*. Volume 9170 of the Series Lecture Notes in Computer Science, edited by Masaaki Kurosu, 640–648. Springer International Publishing.
- Rughiniş, Cosima, Elisabeta Toma, and Răzvan Rughiniş. 2015. "Time to Reminisce and Die: Representing Old Age in Art Games." In *Conference of the Digital Games Research Association - DiGRA 2015*, 1–12. <http://www.digra.org/digital-library/publications/time-to-reminisce-and-die-representing-old-age-in-art-games/>.
- Ryan, M., and B. Costello. 2012. "My Friend Scarlet: Interactive Tragedy in The Path." *Games and Culture* 7 (2) (April 4): 111–126. doi:10.1177/1555412012440314. <http://gac.sagepub.com/content/early/2012/04/02/1555412012440314.abstract>.
- Sarkeesian, Anita. 2013. "Damsel in Distress (Part 1)." *Feminist Frequency*. <http://feministfrequency.com/2013/03/07/damsel-in-distress-part-1/>.
- . 2014a. "Tropes vs. Women." <http://www.feministfrequency.com/>.
- . 2014b. "Damsel in Distress (Part 2): Tropes vs. Women." *Feminist Frequency*. <http://www.feministfrequency.com/2013/05/damsel-in-distress-part-2-tropes-vs-women/>.
- . 2014c. "Damsel in Distress (Part 3): Tropes vs. Women." *Feminist Frequency*. <http://www.feministfrequency.com/2013/08/damsel-in-distress-part-3-tropes-vs-women/>.
- Scharr, Jill. 2014. "Fight Like a Girl: The Walking Dead's Leading Lady." *Tom's Guide*. <http://www.tomsguide.com/us/the-walking-dead-clementine,news-18797.html>.
- Schleiner, Anne-Marie. 2001. "Does Lara Croft Wear Fake Polygons? Gender and Gender-Role Subversion in Computer Adventure Games." *LEONARDO* 34 (3): 221–226.
- Selisker, Scott. 2014. "Literary Data and the Bechdel Test." *Arcade*. <http://arcade.stanford.edu/blogs/literary-data-and-bechdel-test>.

- Smith, Ed. 2015. "Against Child Protagonists." Kill Screen. <https://killscreen.com/articles/against-child-protagonists/>.
- Soukup, Charles. 2007. "Mastering the Game: Gender and the Entelechial Motivational System of Video Games." *Women's Studies in Communication* 30 (2): 157–178.
- Star, Susan Leigh, and James R. Griesemer. 1989. "Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39." *Social Studies of Science* 19 (3) (August): 387–420.
- Suellentrop, Chris. 2009. "The Slow Video Game Movement." Slate. http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/gaming/2009/05/the_slow_video_game_movement.2.html.
- Tale of Tales. 2009. "The Path." <http://tale-of-tales.com/ThePath/>.
- Telltale Games. 2012. "The Walking Dead." <https://www.telltalegames.com/walkingdead/>.
- TV Tropes Contributors. 2015. "Characters: Alice in Wonderland." TV Tropes. <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Characters/AliceInWonderland>.
- ustwo. 2014. "Monument Valley." <http://www.monumentvalleygame.com/>.
- Walsh, Dave. 2014. "Five Ways That The Walking Dead Has Turned Feminist." MMANUTS. <http://mmanuts.com/gaming/five-ways-walking-dead-turned-feminist/>.
- West, Candace, and Don H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society* 1 (2): 125–151.
- Williams, D., N. Martins, M. Consalvo, and J. D. Ivory. 2009. "The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games." *New Media & Society* 11 (5) (July): 815–834.
- Wilson, Sarah. 2012. "Bechdel Rule Still Applies to Portrayal of Women in Films." OUDAILY. http://www.oudaily.com/l_and_a/arts_and_entertainment/column-bechdel-rule-still-applies-to-portrayal-of-women-in/article_d3dc6a7d-8fcb-589c-885a-649fe33db5e1.html.