

Key 3: Craft Characters

Craft characters that will engage players and enhance the gaming experience, by thinking about portrayal, diversity, and construction.

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Key 3 Overview

This section is divided into three learning achievements that you can work toward as you craft the characters in your game:

1. **Portray:** Learn what the research says about real-world impact from in-game experiences, to inform character portrayals.
2. **Diversify:** Build a diverse character roster, from protagonists to NPCs.
3. **Construct:** Construct multidimensional characters with distinct personalities, motivations, and backstories, applying GDI's 5Ps to support comprehensive character development.

At the end of this section, you will find the list of references covered in this section.

Achievement 1: Portray

Learn what the research says about real-world impact of in-game experiences, and use that awareness to inform character portrayals that prioritize experience and engagement.


Introduction

The effects of characters' embodiment on players are both:

- Internal: shaping a player's personal self-concept.
- External: contributing to beliefs about a group's social status or power relations between various groups.

Why do portrayals matter?

Avatars are more than just cosmetic choices for a player.

- The "Proteus effect" is the phenomenon where an avatar's age, attractiveness, height, skin color, and gender influence aspects of players' behavior, including their extraversion, aggression, and risk-taking. This is named for Proteus, a god of the sea in Greek mythology who was able to change form.
-  Research on "gender swapping" in games reveals players exhibit different behaviors, depending on the character's gender, such as healing-related behavior. For example, men that played female characters engaged in more healing-related behavior, and women that played male characters engaged in less healing-related behavior.¹

¹ Yee, N., Ducheneaut, N., Nelson, L., & Likarish, P. (2011, May). Introverted elves and conscientious gnomes: The expression of personality in world of warcraft. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 753-762).

- Research on adolescent socialization shows that the strong stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in games can impact the development of gender roles in teenage girls and boys, reinforcing gender stereotypes.²
- In one study, teens described typical male video game characters as "physically powerful, dominant, violent, mean, and cocky." These descriptions suggest a vision of manhood that is "hypermasculine," promoting "strong sexual attitudes towards partners, a craving for action and danger, and approval of physical violence" as core aspects of masculinity.^{3,4}
- Some research suggests that when games include both sexism and violence, it can lead to an increase in support for statements like "It is okay for a guy to use any and all means to 'convince' a girl to have sex," and a decrease in empathy for female victims of violence among male players who strongly identify with their in-game characters.⁵
- Other research reveals that men exposed to sexualized avatars through long-term gameplay had a greater tolerance for sexual harassment and showed higher rates of rape-myth acceptance.^{6,7,8,9}
- Research outside of gaming suggests that objectification makes women appear less competent and less than fully human in political and workplace contexts,¹⁰ and links objectification to violence against women.^{11,12,13}

² Dill K., & Thill K. P. (2007). Video game characters and the socialization of gender roles: Young people's perceptions mirror sexist media depictions. *Sex Roles*, 57: 851–864.

³ Scharrer, E. (2005). Hypermasculinity, aggression and television violence: An experiment. *Media Psychology*, 7, 353–376.

⁴ For a detailed discussion of masculinity and gamine, see: Ouellette, M. A. (2021). *Playing with the guys: Masculinity and relationships in video games*. McFarland.

⁵ Gabbiadini, A., Riva, P., Andrighetto, L., Volpato C., & Bushman, B. J. (2016). Acting like a tough guy: Violent-sexist video games, identification with game characters, masculine beliefs, & empathy for female violence victims. *PLoS one* 11, no. 4: e0152121.

⁶ Dill, K.E., Brown, B.P., & Collins, M.A. (2008). Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 44(5): 1402-1408.

⁷ Fox, J., & Bailenson, J.N. (2009). Virtual virgins and vamps: The effects of exposure to female characters' sexualized appearance and gaze in an immersive virtual environment. *Sex roles*, 61, 147-157.

⁸ Beck, V.S., Boys, S., Rose, C., & Beck, E. (2012). Violence against women in video games: A prequel or sequel to rape myth acceptance?. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 27(15), 3016-3031.

⁹ Driesmans K, Vandenbosch L, Eggermont S. (2015.) Playing a videogame with a sexualized female character increases adolescents' rape myth acceptance and tolerance toward sexual harassment. *Games Health Journal* 4:91–94.

¹⁰ Heflick, N.A., & Goldenberg, J.L. (2009). Objectifying Sarah Palin: Evidence that objectification causes women to be perceived as less competent and less fully human. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45(3), 598-601.

¹¹ Glick, P, Larsen S., Johnson C., & Branstiter, H. (2005). Evaluations of sexy women in low-and high-status jobs. *Psychology of women quarterly* 29(4): 389-395.

¹² Cheeseborough, D., Thekia, J., Overstreet, N., & Ward, L. M. (2020). Interpersonal sexual objectification, Jezebel stereotype endorsement, and justification of intimate partner violence toward women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 44(2), 203-216.

¹³ Rudman, L.A., & Mescher, K. (2012). Of animals and objects: Men's implicit dehumanization of women and likelihood of sexual aggression. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 38, 734-746.

- Studies indicate that women may internalize objectified representations of other women through repeated exposure to objectification in media. This psychological process of self-objectification is associated with depressed personal efficacy,¹⁴ increased preoccupation with one's appearance, decreased body satisfaction, depression, and disordered eating.¹⁵

Consider: Which characters are violent? Is there a double standard for violence?

For example, the portrayal of violence and aggression among male characters may intersect with race when Black men in video games are portrayed as physically strong and behaviorally aggressive in socially unsanctioned ways (for example, as thieves, gang members), while white men are also portrayed as aggressive but more often in socially sanctioned ways (military, law enforcement).¹⁶

Level Up: If your game necessitates physical violence, think about how you can lean into that without glorifying and lionizing *mindless* violence, and about if choices about who is perpetuating violence reinforce stereotypes.

Consider: How is violence sanctioned?

For example, the “fridged woman” trope is a storyline where the male hero’s backstory involves the violent murder of a woman he loves. Not only does this trope require women’s trauma, but we also witness the male hero grappling with his guilt for his failure to perform his socially expected, patriarchal role of being the protector of women. His violence is sanctioned because it is in response to his love for a woman and is a means to recuperating his role as protector.

Level Up: Create female characters with purpose beyond motivation for male violence by flipping the script or humanizing the victim. Instead of instilling the male character with guilt, instill them with a sense of justice or morality.

Consider: Do you unconsciously dehumanize certain types of characters?

Dehumanization occurs when an individual or group is seen as less than human. Dehumanized groups are perceived as more dangerous, less in control of their behavior, and outside the realm of morality, which justifies the use of violence and aggression against them.¹⁷

¹⁴ Behm-Morawitz E., Mastro D. (2009). The effects of the sexualization of female videogame characters on gender stereotyping and female self-concept. *Sex Roles*, 61, 808–823.

¹⁵ Moradi B., Huang Y. P. (2008). Objectification theory and psychology of women: A decade of advances and future directions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 32(4):377-398.

¹⁶ Burgess, M. C. R., Dill, K. E., Stermer, P., Burgess, S. R., Brown, B. P. (2011). *Playing with prejudice: The prevalence and consequences of racial stereotypes in Video games. Media Psychology* 14(3): 289-311.

¹⁷ Goff, P. A., Eberhardt, J. L., Williams, M. J., & Jackson, M. C. (2008). Not yet human: Implicit knowledge, historical dehumanization, and contemporary consequences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 94(2), 292–306.

Here are some ways that character’s visual descriptions can lead to dehumanization:

- **Mechanistic descriptions:** Mechanistic dehumanization is a specific form of dehumanization where individuals or groups are portrayed or described as if they were machines or objects, rather than living, feeling human beings. This concept involves stripping away the attributes that are associated with human warmth by emphasizing coldness, rigidity, interchangeability, and lack of agency. Visually, mechanistic dehumanization can emerge if characters are emotionally hard, physically robotic, or transform into mechanistic objects, such as a character who transforms into an armored tank.
- **Animalistic descriptions:** Animalistic descriptions can be a form of dehumanization when individuals or groups are likened to beasts or wild animals. Here, individuals or groups are described or depicted as having animal-like qualities, such as being primitive, bloodthirsty, barbaric, or lacking morality. Their physicality is also shown in animalistic ways, such as drooling, hypermuscular bodies, or with their bodies carrying disease.

Level Up: Develop characters with complex motivations or experiences for their behavior and actions, and think about how to highlight the role of context (such as poverty, education) on social behaviors and actions.

Consider: Are any of your characters portrayed primarily by their sex appeal or sexualized behavior?

Character sexualization is when a character is designed in a way that emphasizes their sexuality. Hypersexualization is when that sexualization is excessive. “Excessive” can be subjective, but some possible indicators are unrealistic body proportions, revealing clothing, sexually suggestive physical positioning, and sexual objectification. These indicators will be discussed in Achievement 3.

Take Action

- Eliminate opportunities for sexual violation of female characters.
- Question the necessity of reinforcing or rewarding domination of female characters.
- Remember that intentional game design that limits sexual objectification and gender-based violence is an important intervention point to address harassment in gaming.
 - A recent study found that 6 out of 10 players reported quitting a game permanently due to “harassment” and hate within that game’s community.¹⁸

¹⁸ Toxic Gamers Are Alienating Your Core Demographic – The Business Case for Community Management. Take This. Retrieved from: https://www.takethis.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ToxicGamersBottomLineReport_TakeThis.pdf

Level Up

- Enhance players' connections with the experiences of female characters in ways that do not rely on her physical appearance or sexuality.

Achievement 1 Complete!

Apply It

Regularly review and analyze player feedback regarding character portrayal, prioritizing adjustments to mitigate oversexualization and dehumanization of marginalized groups, like women and people of color.

Achievement 2: Diversify

Build a diverse character roster — from protagonists to NPCs.

Introduction

Several recent studies have shown a demand for more character diversity and more nuance in how these characters are represented. For example:

- The Google for Games 2022 “PC & Console Insights Report” found that over 70% of respondents agree it is very important or important that games feature diverse characters *and* stories.¹⁹
- In a 2023 Niko Partners report, over half of surveyed gamers in Asia reported dissatisfaction with how women are represented in games.²⁰
- A 2023 survey from Australia found that the majority of respondents noted the importance of portraying diversity in video games, inclusive of accessibility, age, culture, language, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.²¹

But inclusion alone is not enough. How diverse characters, cultures, and their narratives are shown also matters, which we'll explore throughout this section.

Consider: Character Roles

How do players connect to the different character roles in your game?

¹⁹ Google for Games. (2022). PC & console insight report. Retrieved from <https://games.withgoogle.com/reports/2022-pc-console-insights-report/>

²⁰ Niko Partners. (2023). Female gamers in Asia. Retrieved from <https://nikopartners.com/female-gamers-in-asia/>

²¹ Brand, J. E., Wilson, T. W., Jervis, J., & Huggins, P. M. (2023). Australia plays 2023. IGEA. Retrieved from https://igea.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/IGEA_AP2023_FINAL_REPORT.pdf

- POV (point-of-view) characters are especially important for a player’s investment and connection to the game because they serve as an access to the world. POV characters are also likely to be embraced by fan communities for derivative art and entertainment purposes, such as fan art, fanfics, and cosplay.
- Prominent NPCs (nonplayer characters) that support the POV characters are also vital to a game’s worldbuilding, narrative, and overall tone because they are often the sources of information, comedic moments, drama, and heart throughout the gameplay.
- Competitors (like villains, bosses, and attackable NPCs) represent power and often reflect social anxieties, so broadening diversity among competitors can add depth and nuance to the game while also broadening players’ exposure to diverse identities playing the competitor role.

Consider: Heroes and Villains

- If your game includes heroes and villains, strive for balance in representation.
 - Although both heroes and villains play a big role in a story, an overrepresentation of people from marginalized backgrounds (like people of color and/or people with disabilities) as villains can perpetuate unconscious bias about which social groups are inherently good — or inherently evil.
 - Players from marginalized communities are often stuck “playing the enemy” rather than playing the protagonist because characters that represent their identities aren’t heroes as often.²²
- Be mindful when your villain has an origin story related to their identity.
 - Try to avoid further stigmatizing marginalized identities with your villain origin story. For instance, a physical disfigurement that sets a villain on their path of vengeance is a storyline that stigmatizes disability by reinforcing a common trope that disability causes someone to be evil.

Consider: Dialogue

- Take note of your dialogue — how your characters speak, how much they say, and what they talk about.
 - Pay attention to accents, intonations, affectations, and cadences. These are tools to help build diversity, but they require cultural and social sensitivity.
 - For example, implying a nonhuman character’s race through slang and dialect risks reinforcing reductive stereotypes.
 - 💡 In a study of video game dialogue, researchers found that male characters speak twice as much as female characters, with almost 94% of games including more male-dominated conversations. The study’s authors note fewer female characters in games but also highlight bias in whom they talk to and what they say. Biases even pop up in

²² Goldberg, D. (2015). The state of play: Creators and critics on video game culture. Seven Stories Press. (Chapters 3 and 6)

some game algorithms, such as when some NPC roles, like guards, are encoded male by default.²³

Take Action

- **Reflect.** Create playable characters that reflect the diversity of their gaming world.
- **Make it interesting.** Take time to write complex and multidimensional characters who are interesting; avoid tokenization or stereotypes. Explore more in Achievement 3.
- **Assess your character landscape.** Would increasing the representation of marginalized communities improve the game’s cultural accuracy — and its engagement and appeal?
- **Cast authentically.** When relevant, cast voice actors that share an identity with the character they portray.
- **Break stereotypes with NPCs.** Challenge identity-based stereotypes with NPC interactions — think critically about whom the NPC represents and how they provide useful information or side quests.
 - Explore more about how to write NPCs with agency in this GDC presentation from Meg Jayanth: [Writing NPCs with Agency for 80 Days and Beyond](#)

Achievement 2 Complete!

Apply It

Take time in character creation to step back and look at how all of your characters fit together, considering how the identities of all characters — from POV to NPC — will impact players’ experience.

Achievement 3: Construct

Construct multidimensional characters with distinct personalities, motivations, and backstories, applying GDI’s 5Ps guidance to support comprehensive character development.

Introduction

This section explores designing characters that do not reinforce identity-based tropes and stereotypes.

We’ll also take a look at characterization, applying a framework we call the **5Ps**, which can help creators examine the identifying characteristics, attributes, skills, and dialogue of their characters. The 5Ps are ...

Prominence

²³ Rennick, S., Clinton, M., Ioannidou, E., Oh, L., Clooney, C., T., E., Healy, E., & Roberts, S. G. (2023). Gender bias in video game dialogue. *Royal Science Open Society* 10: 221095.

Power

Personality

Proficiency

Profession

The focus in this section is on gender, race/ethnicity, disability, and queer stereotypes, but this framework can be applied to other identities, including socioeconomic status, religion, age, body size, and more.

Gender Expression

Gender expression “is how a character presents gender outwardly through behavior, clothing, voice, or other perceived characteristics.”²⁴ In video games, human characters tend to be perceived as cisgender men or women, as opposed to transgender men, transgender women, and/or nonbinary people. In this section, most of our guidance is for designing characters with male or female gender expressions, but we also offer suggestions for increasing nonbinary and transgender representation in the LGBTQIA+ section.

Visual Design and Gender Expression

- **Hypersexualization:** Sexualization is when a character is designed in a way that emphasizes their sexuality. Hypersexualization is when that sexualization is excessive. “Excessive” can be subjective, but here are some indicators:
 - **Unrealistic body proportions:** For female-presenting characters, this might include a tiny waist with wide hips, disproportionately large breasts and/or butt, and disproportionately long legs. Male-presenting characters might appear unrealistically muscular, physically large in stature, and have chiseled jaw lines and countable abs.
 - **Revealing clothing:** Revealing clothing exposes breasts, thighs, butt, midriff, and/or lower back. Characters of all genders can be shown in revealing clothing.
 - 💡 Game mechanics often reveal a gender disparity between skill and survival. Male characters typically acquire more protective armor as they level up, but female characters continue to be portrayed in revealing and impractical (and nonprotective) clothing even as they grow more powerful.²⁵
 - **Submissive, dominant, or sexually suggestive physical positioning:** For female-presenting characters, submissive positioning includes being in a kneeling position, twirling hair, touching their body, and an unstable stance, such as with the knees turned inward. Male-presenting characters often show dominant positioning like physically

²⁴ Wamsley, L. (2021 June 2). A guide to gender identity terms. *NPR.org*

<https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq>

²⁵ Yee, N. (2014). *The Proteus paradox: How online games and virtual worlds change us-and how they don't*. Yale University Press.

- overpowering female-presenting characters — for example., lifting them, throwing them — or subtle sexual innuendos.
- **Sexually objectified:** Sexual objectification is when a character is treated as a commodity (something to be bought, sold, bartered, etc.), or when parts of their body are a substitute for the whole person, such as when a player views the game between a character’s legs, from behind, or when the camera zooms in on a character’s chest, butt, or mouth.

Questions to Ask

For some of your characters, ask the following questions to better understand who is sexualized and who is not. Does this character ...

1. Have unrealistic body proportions?
2. Wear revealing clothing? Does their clothing fall off or rip in certain scenarios?
3. Appear physically submissive or dominant in their standard poses?
4. Appear sexually objectified?

Example

Several years ago, a video surfaced that used animation switching to swap the bodies of Catwoman and Batman, drawing out the stark contrast in their movements, mannerisms, and how the audience was meant to view them.²⁶ Observing Batman moving like Catwoman is a useful lens for thinking about gender, sexual objectification, and the “male gaze,” which is the tendency of visual media to cater to the perspective of a heterosexual male audience.²⁷ [Check out the video here.](#)

Common Gender Tropes in Gaming

- **Femme Fatale:** A woman who uses her sexuality to manipulate, control, or kill. She is mysterious, seductive, and alluring. This trope reinforces the idea that women’s power and agency stem from their physicality, and it weaponizes beauty and sexuality in a way that demonizes femininity and sexual agency.
- **Damsel in Distress:** A vulnerable, helpless woman who is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing a core incentive or motivation for the protagonist’s quest. This trope reinforces the idea that women are objects to be bought, sold, won, or bartered, as well as the idea that women do not have agency.

²⁶ Taormina, A. (2019, November 28). Batman and Catwoman Switch Bodies in Creepy Arkham Knight Video. *GameRant*. <https://gamerant.com/batman-catwoman-animation-game-video/>

²⁷ Mulvey, L. (2009). *Visual and Other Pleasures*. 2nd edition. NY, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

- **Domestic Goddess:** The motif of “Madonna and Child,” a famous painting from the Italian Renaissance, symbolizes maternal care and the innocence of children. Characters designed in the image of this motif idealize and prioritize women as caregivers, largely excluding men from caregiving expectations and roles.
- **Healer:** A female character (often ethnically indigenous or native), who cares for the emotional and physical well-being of others, often with spiritual or magical abilities. This portrayal reinforces feminine personality traits and behaviors, and can suggest that caregiving is exclusive to women.
- **“Sexy” Corpse:** A female character who is primarily featured as a sexualized dead body. This character is sexually objectified and lacks agency.
- **Fridged Woman:** This is when the male hero’s backstory involves the violent murder of a woman he loves. This trope not only necessitates women’s trauma but also relishes in the hero’s guilt over his failure to perform his socially prescribed, patriarchal duty of protecting women.
- **Anti-Hero:** A flawed male character who may have questionable morals but ultimately seeks to do the right thing. They usually have a rough exterior and don’t care about being liked.
- **Wise Mentor:** An older, experienced male character who provides guidance and knowledge to the protagonist.
- **Meathead:** A male character whose main traits are physical strength and aggression, but they lack intelligence and emotional complexity.

In-Game Example

Horizon Zero Dawn: Aloy

In the post-apocalyptic game *Horizon Zero Dawn*, it was important to the women-led development team that the game’s female protagonist, Aloy, had an interesting and complex personality, regardless of her gender. She is not defined by her female identity, nor are her abilities or achievements diminished by comparing them to those of men. Her physical features are realistic, as is her attire — which is actually suitable to her tasks!

Bonus: The narrative interrupts the “frigid woman” trope when another female character, Ersa, not only survives being captured for a sacrifice but also goes on to lead an army that would eventually defeat the king who was responsible.

[Read more here.](#)

In-Game Example

Witcher 3: Geralt

While Geralt, the protagonist of *The Witcher* series, exhibits traditionally masculine-coded skills, like being physically dominant and highly skilled in combat, he is also portrayed as a complex, nuanced, and deeply human character. He does not always choose violence; he frequently relies on others, accepts

their support, and is supportive and affectionate to those in his care. All of these traits are typically coded as soft or feminine, and not associated with the kind of man’s man Geralt appears to be on the surface.

Marginalized Racial and Ethnic Groups

Marginalized racial and ethnic groups are those that have less power and status in a given community or society.

In the United States, people who are white tend to enjoy a privileged social status and have more economic power than people who are Black, Latinx, or Native American, according to studies that look at prejudice and discrimination in media, hiring, housing, and more.

Additionally, the term “colorism” refers to a form of discrimination based on skin tone, where skin tone influences how members from marginalized racial or ethnic groups experience discrimination and prejudice. Typically, individuals with darker skin tones face unique challenges, prejudice, and discrimination.²⁸

Visual Design and Race/Ethnicity

- **Cultural Specificity:** Cultural specificity refers to distinct experiences, cues, or qualities of a culture. For example, while Asian and Latinx are terms used to describe racial groups, there are many different Asian and Latinx cultures. Mexican, Cuban, and Salvadoran cultures have unique customs, foods, expressions, and more. When possible, ensure that your character's culture is visually specified accurately and clearly.
- **Physical Features, Clothing, and Accessories:** Physical features should be diverse and authentic, not exaggerated or caricatured representations of racial traits. For example, Latinx characters shouldn’t be uniformly dressed in sombreros or as mariachis, unless it makes sense in the context of the narrative. Clothing and accessories should reflect cultural accuracy rather than resorting to stereotypical or clichéd items that perpetuate narrow views of a particular race or ethnicity. For instance, if an Asian character is a martial artist in a game, is their clothing accurate to their cultural background? Additionally, conscientiously design hair texture to be culturally accurate. The resource [Code My Crown](#) provides insights for designing Black characters’ hair in video games.
- **Skin-Tone Diversity:** When designing human characters for your video game, include a diverse range of skin tones. This ensures greater accuracy of racial and ethnic groups, and can have a profound impact on player engagement and emotional connection to the game. For reference, see the [Monk Skin Tone scale](#). Unconsciously, many people associate lighter skin tones with “good” and darker skin tones with “evil”; this also includes nonhuman skin tones, with lighter

²⁸ Monk, E. P. Jr. (2019). The unceasing significance of colorism: Skin tone stratification in the United States. *Daedalus*, 150(2), 76-90.

and darker colors associated with good and evil, respectively. Avoid reinforcing this racial bias when choosing characters' skin tones.

Questions to Ask

When designing characters' aesthetics, consider the following questions to assess racial and ethnic visual representation:

1. Are characters' cultural backgrounds visualized without being stereotypical or inaccurate?
2. Are the character's physical features, clothing, and accessories exaggerated caricatures of their racial or ethnic cultures?
3. Do your characters have varied skin tones?
4. When writing characters of various races, ethnicities, and skin tones, are you perpetuating a hierarchy that could be reinforcing harmful stereotypes?

Common Racial/Ethnic Tropes in Media

- **Mystical Native:** An indigenous character portrayed as having innate spiritual or mystical powers. This trope can paint traditions from indigenous cultures as illegitimate, which justifies their erasure. Moreover, it is reductive, especially when indigenous characters in games are nearly always a version of this trope.
- **Thug or Gangbanger:** A character who is a member of a criminal gang that is menacing, violent, and self-serving. These gangs are usually Black or Latinx. The trope reinforces the association of Black and Latinx communities with criminality, and justifies their higher prosecution and incarceration rates. These characters are often dehumanized animalistically with their physical movements and other gameplay.
- **Model Minority:** An East Asian character who excels at school, work, and nearly all aspects of their life. This trope reduces East Asian characters to a single dimension (excellence) but ignores the many struggles that East Asians face, especially in communities where they are a racial minority. It can also create the false perception that East Asians (especially immigrants) do not need social, financial or other resources. It also homogenizes East Asian ethnicities, erasing the vastly different experiences of various Asian communities, such as Vietnamese or Chinese ethnic minorities 💡 The term "Model Minority" was introduced in the U.S. in the 1960s and was used to pit Asian immigrants in contrast to Black Americans, who were seen as a "problem" minority. Read more, here: <https://geenadavisinstitute.org/pr-api-study-i-am-not-a-fetish-or-model-minority/>
- **Exotic Foreigner:** A character from a non-Western background portrayed as mysterious, alluring, and fundamentally different. This trope reinforces the belief that Western traditions are normal, and non-Western traditions are abnormal.
- **Angry Black Woman:** A Black female character who is portrayed as aggressive, loud, hostile, and irrational. This trope reinforces a prevalent stereotype about Black women that suggests their legitimate concerns and issues are irrational and can therefore be dismissed, and this stereotype is used to justify discrimination against Black women. It also puts them in the position of self-

monitoring and regulating their behaviors and emotions so as to not activate this readily available stereotype.

- **The Maid:** A typically Latina character who works as a maid, in a private house, hotel, or other establishment. This trope reinforces beliefs that Latinas' roles are in service to others, and is an implicit signal that Latinx people are undocumented and therefore are limited to very few occupations. Portrayals of in-home childcare workers are usually from non-Western countries including, but not limited to, Latin America.

Disability

Disabilities can come in many forms, such as physical, sensory, cognitive, and mental health disabilities. We use the term “disabled people” instead of person-first language (for example., “people with disabilities”) because members of many disability-focused communities advocate for wording that acknowledges that one’s disability is a permanent part of their life, and therefore, they do not want to separate it from their identity. Disabilities are not undesirable traits or flaws in need of being cured.

Visual Design and Disability

- **Villainizing Facial Disfigurement:** Facial disfigurements, scars, or other physical marks are often a visual shorthand for villainy. For individuals living with scars and facial disfigurements these portrayals can perpetuate stigma and discrimination. By consistently linking villainy with facial disfigurement, media narratives contribute to a culture that values physical perfection and ostracizes those who do not conform to these narrow standards of beauty. Learn more from the [I Am Not Your Villain campaign](#).
- **Weaponized Prosthetics:** Weaponized prosthetics is when disabled characters with missing limbs are given prosthetics that double as weapons. Examples include characters with prosthetic legs that transform into cannons, or prosthetic arms that turn into advanced weaponry. While on the surface this might seem like an empowering portrayal by showcasing disabled characters as powerful and resourceful, it subtly reinforces the idea that people with disabilities must compensate for their disability by exhibiting extraordinary abilities or characteristics. This trope can also contribute to the mechanistic dehumanization of disabled characters, reducing them to their assistive devices and their potential for violence or action.
- **Device Accuracy:** Assistive devices should be rendered accurately. For example, wheelchairs vary, and certain disabilities necessitate unique chairs. Authentic representation of assistive devices will contribute to more realistic and inclusive portrayals.
- **Avatar Customization** Offer choices that reflect a multitude of disabilities, including those physical and cognitive.

Common Disability Tropes in Media

- **The Supercrip:** A character whose disability is offset by superhuman abilities, suggesting that to be remarkable people with disabilities must overcome or compensate for their disability.

- **Medical Oddity:** A character who is depicted as a medical oddity or an object of curiosity. This trope is common in the genre of horror games, where disabled characters are often depicted as unnatural or as medical experiments gone awry.
- **Inspo Porn:** A disabled character whose primary role is to inspire able-bodied people, often by overcoming their disability in unrealistic ways. These stories limit the autonomy of disabled people, reducing them to a prop or a plot device.
- **The Villainous Disabled Person:** Portraying disabled characters as bitter, evil, or twisted due to their disability. Their disability is often a mark or a source of their villainy, which contributes to the stigmatization of disabilities.
- **The Helpless Disabled Person:** A disabled character who is portrayed as entirely dependent on others, reinforcing stereotypes that disabled people are a burden and to be pitied.

LGBTQIA+

LGBTQIA+ identity represents people who do not identify as heterosexual and cisgender, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual/agender individuals. The plus sign is to be inclusive of sexualities, genders, and noncisgender/nonheteronormative identities that are not otherwise directly referred to in the initialism.

Visual Design and Queer Identity

- **Personalization:** Empowering queer individuals to create LGBTQIA+ characters in the video games they play fosters authentic representation and storytelling within the gaming community because it allows players to explore diverse identities and shape narratives that resonate with their own experiences.
 - **Avatar Customization:** Allow gamers to construct avatars and character bodies that are queer to foster agency and permit authentic representation. This can be particularly important for queer individuals who may use video games to explore their relation to gender and romantic attraction, especially when those gamers do not feel comfortable exploring those identities in their physical world. Consider some of the following ways in which a gamer can construct queer bodies in your video game:
 - **Diverse Gender Expression:** Permit players to select nonbinary or [null gender](#) identity options. Allow gamers to change the gender expression of their avatars throughout the process of the gameplay.
 - **Customized Names and Pronouns:** Allow players to customize their avatar's name and pronouns to avoid their misgendering in virtual spaces. [Include gender-neutral and nonbinary options \(e.g., they, xe\)](#) and multiple pronoun (e.g., she/they) sets. Allow gamers to update these throughout the gameplay experience.
 - **Diverse Physical Features:** Provide comprehensive customization options that encompass a broad range of physical features, including body types (e.g., [pregnant bodies](#)), facial features (e.g., facial hair, jawline), hairstyles, and body

movement and behavior (e.g., [gait](#), [emotes](#), if a character [stands to use the toilet](#)).

- **Customized Voices:** Integrate a variety of voice options or customization tools that allow players to choose or modify their avatar's voice. These features allow players to create avatars that align with their preferred gender expression.
 - **Clothing and Accessories:** Include a diverse selection of clothing and accessories that are not strictly associated with a particular gender, including options such as piercings, diverse hairstyles and colors, and unisex clothing options. This can also be applied to [customizable weapons, props, and emotes](#). This enables players to create avatars with styles that resonate with their individual expressions of gender and cultural identity.
- **Queer Relationships:** Bring queer romantic relationships into the narrative by showing same-gender couples in similar ways to how opposite-gender couples are shown, such as allowing characters of any gender to court other characters. Also include nonromantic familial relationships, such as having queer parents or having a queer child. This can include relationships for playable characters but also characters in the background.
- **Queer Iconography:** If your game features celebrities or well-known gamers and influencers, include members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Include nods to LGBTQIA+ identity in game environments, such as a Pride flag hung at a character's business or planted in a character's front yard. There are many ways to visually signal inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as pronoun pins and [more than 20 Pride-flag](#) designs and patterns.
- **Queer Player and Nonplayer Characters:** Beyond avatars, PCs and NPCs can be designed to visually convey LGBTQIA+ identity, using the recommendations above.

Questions to Ask

To check whether your game is inclusive of identifiably nonbinary, trans, and/or queer characters, consider the following questions:

1. How are characters in your game gendered?
 - a. *Pronouns:* In some games, this is done through dialogue and narrative, such as referring to a guard NPC as "he," using a particularly gendered name (e.g., Dick, Jane), and using male voice actors.
 - b. *Physical Cues:* In other games, this may be done with visual cues, such as when women characters are identical to men characters but with exaggerated lips and eyelashes. This is a common way nonhuman characters are gendered.
 - c. *Default Options:* In games where the gamer is creating a playable character, they are often offered stock male and female avatars to begin with.
2. Can characters in your game be identified as outside of the gender binary? Can characters in your game be identified as transgender?
 - a. This can be accomplished by allowing players to select their personal pronouns, not defaulting to a stock male body and stock female body, and allowing nonbinary pairings

- of physical attributes (e.g., a masculine-presenting character body that has a feminine voice, a feminine-presenting character that wears only “men’s” clothing).
- b. This can also be accomplished in games where characters engage in romantic, sexual, or familial relationships by allowing players to create queer relationships and families.
3. Does your game have queer NPCs?
 - a. For example, are there nonbinary NPCs? Are their other characters in your game that can be identified as LGBTQIA+?

Common Queer Tropes in Media

- **Queer-Coded Evil Villain:** This character is a supervillain whose traits and behaviors are stereotypically associated with LGBTQIA+ identities (for example., hypereffeminate male villain, hypermasculine female villain). While not explicitly stated or confirmed as queer within the narrative, these characters exhibit mannerisms, fashion choices, or characteristics that align with harmful stereotypes traditionally linked to the LGBTQIA+ community. This coding can reinforce prejudiced ideas that associate queerness with villainy or deviance, which then justify violence toward queer people. This trope also contributes to the marginalization and misrepresentation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in storytelling, often portraying them as morally ambiguous or antagonistic figures based on stereotypes.
- **Queer Tragedy:** In these instances, LGBTQIA+ characters are disproportionately subjected to experiences of suffering, adversity, or physical and sexual violence within fictional stories. For example, common overused narratives include queer victims of brutal hate crimes, dying HIV/AIDS patients, and young queer adults running from their unaccepting families. This stereotype reinforces the notion that queer individuals are destined to endure tragic narratives, perpetuating negative and stigmatizing assumptions about the LGBTQIA+ community.
- **Bury Your Gays:** This is a narrative pattern in which LGBTQIA+ characters, especially those in same-sex relationships, are disproportionately subjected to tragic or untimely deaths within fictional stories. This stereotype perpetuates the harmful idea that queer characters are more likely to meet unfortunate fates, reinforcing negative and outdated stereotypes about the LGBTQIA+ community.
- **Gay Best Friend:** This character, often a gay man, is the best friend to the lead, reinforcing the notion that their sexuality is their defining feature rather than a facet of their complex identity. This stereotype often reduces LGBTQIA+ characters to one-dimensional, flamboyant sidekicks whose primary purpose is to provide comic relief or serve as accessories to the typically heterosexual protagonist.
- **Nonhuman Is Nonbinary:** This is a trans, intersex, and/or nonbinary character that is in some way not human (i.e., a nonbinary alien, a transsexual robot, an agender “blob”). In extreme cases, they may be depicted as having some combination of both male and female genitalia and can be regarded as horrific, freakish, unnatural (and thus needing to be fixed), and/or fetishized. While these characters normalize identifying as neither a man nor woman, they can make nonbinary identities seem fictional, otherworldly, or fantastical.

In-Game Example

The Last of Us

The Last of Us series, particularly *The Last of Us Part II*, is recognized for its notable representation of LGBTQIA+ characters, primarily through Ellie, one of the main protagonists. Ellie's identity as a lesbian is a core aspect of her character, portrayed in a respectful and authentic manner throughout the game. The storytelling in *The Last of Us Part II* delves into Ellie's relationships, notably her romantic involvement with Dina. Their relationship is depicted with depth and complexity, emphasizing their emotional connection rather than reducing their identities to stereotypes. This portrayal contributes to the normalization of LGBTQIA+ relationships in video games and broader media. Moreover, the game doesn't center its narrative solely on the characters' sexual orientations. Instead, it weaves their identities into a larger, multifaceted story about survival, loss, revenge, and the complexities of human emotions. This approach helps integrate LGBTQIA+ representation into the game's broader themes, making it an integral part of the storytelling rather than a token inclusion. The game's portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters, like Ellie, contributes to greater visibility and acceptance within the gaming community. And it has been critically applauded for its effort in presenting diverse and authentic characters whose identities are an essential part of their stories without being their defining feature.

Read more [here](#).

Try it out.

Make a character profile guided by the 5Ps for a few of your characters considering:

Prominence: How significant is the character to the game world?

Power: Does the character have agency?

Personality: What unique set of traits define the character and shape their interactions and reactions in the game?

Proficiency: What are the unique skills, abilities, and talents the character possesses in the game world?

Profession: What is the character's job, role, or professional background in the game world?

Prominence: How significant is the character to the game world?

The big picture:

- Who are your game's most prominent characters?
- Are characters from marginalized groups relegated to less prominent roles?

Keep in mind:

- In addition to playable characters, think about bystanders and other supporting characters including competitors, quest givers, villains, bosses, lower level antagonists (attackable NPCs).

Level Up: If your game does not feature LGBTQIA+ characters, are there characters who could be made to be queer through their backstory and personal relationships?

Power: Does the character have agency?

The big picture:

- Are marginalized groups important to telling the story, or are they just an accessory?

Keep in mind:

Agency signals freedom, autonomy, and self-determination.

- Considering gender, that means ...
 - Female characters who are in control of their choices.
 - Women who are important to telling the story and not just an accessory.
- Considering queer identity, that means ...
 - Self-determination in the character's queer identity.
 - Choices not limited by their queer identity.
- Considering disability, that means ...
 - Self-determination about the character's care and/or accommodations .
 - Choices about their future.
 - Independence in their day-to-day life.

Personality Traits: What unique set of traits define the character and shape their interactions and reactions in the game?

The big picture:

- Do your characters' personalities reflect and/or reinforce identity stereotypes?
- Do they challenge them?

Personality and Gender Stereotypes

💡 Studies find traits that embody agency and independence are more easily attributed to men than women, and that traits that embody nurturing are more easily attributed to women than men.²⁹

- Do the characters in your game have empathy, and can they express emotions? Are they nurturing, sensitive, altruistic, vulnerable, empathetic, gentle, kind, submissive, passive, dependent, self-sacrificing, or anxious?
- Do the characters have the power to control their goals, actions, and destiny? Are they courageous, assertive, physically strong, competitive, violent, egotistical, selfish, self-centered,

²⁹ Scott, K. A. and D. J. Douglas. (2006). "Female First, Leader Second? Gender Bias in the Encoding of Leadership Behavior." *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. 101 (2): 230-242.

emotionally unavailable, dominant, or sexually entitled?

Level Up: When the story allows, show male characters who display a full range of emotions, including joy, sadness, and vulnerability.

Personality and Racial Stereotypes

Video game characters' personalities can inadvertently reinforce racial stereotypes when these characters are created following simplistic or prejudiced ideas. For instance, if a game consistently portrays characters of a certain race as having specific negative traits, such as aggression, criminality, or a lack of intelligence, it perpetuates harmful stereotypes associated with that racial group.

- East Asian stereotypes: stoic; innocent/pure or sexually deviant (women); studious.
- South Asian stereotypes: educated; culturally backward.
- Black stereotypes: violent or angry; sexually aggressive or promiscuous; poor.
- Latinx stereotypes:³⁰ hot-tempered; “spicy” or “feisty”; passionate; hypersexual; undocumented; poor.
- Native/Indigenous stereotypes: alcoholic; “savage” or uncivilized; uneducated; magical or mystical.

Personality and Disability Stereotypes

Video game characters' personalities can inadvertently reinforce disability stereotypes when these characters are created following simplistic or prejudiced ideas. For instance, if a game consistently portrays disabled characters as having specific negative traits, such as being vengeful or victimized, it perpetuates harmful stereotypes.

Be mindful of stereotyping as ...

- Victims (e.g., helpless, pathetic, deserving of pity, hapless, clumsy).
- Villains (e.g., evil, vengeful, jealous, angry, bitter, mentally unstable).

Personality and LGBTQIA+ Stereotypes

Video game characters' personalities can inadvertently reinforce queer stereotypes when these characters are created following simplistic or prejudiced ideas. For instance, if a game consistently portrays LGBTQIA+ characters as having specific negative traits, such as promiscuity, criminality, or deviance, it perpetuates harmful stereotypes associated with the queer community.

³⁰ Read more: <https://utpress.utexas.edu/9780292709072/>;
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f8a09a4bd8bae2e8075da0b/t/5fac30581ef47e6e87eeb5b8/1605120089647/TTIE_Factsheet_LatinxPeople_November2020.pdf

Keep in mind LGBTQIA+ stereotypes...

- Gay (men): hypereffeminate, sassy, promiscuous, deviant/amoral, hypersexual, more empathetic.
- Lesbian (women): hypermasculine, man-hating, hypercommittal, deviant/amoral, cold/less empathetic, assertive.
- Bisexual: greedy, deviant, evil (antagonists or villains), promiscuous, unfaithful, untrustworthy, deviant/amoral, hypersexual, indecisive.
- Trans: hypersexual/fetishized, mentally ill, promiscuous, untrustworthy.

Proficiency: What are the unique skills, abilities, and talents the character possesses in the game world?

The big picture:

- Do the skills and abilities assigned to characters reflect and/or reinforce stereotypes?
- Do they challenge them?

Keep in mind:

- Stereotypically masculine skills include leadership, critical thinking, risk-taking, speed, physical strength, shooting, hacking, and combat skills.
- Stereotypically feminine skills include sociability, empathy, healing, and magical powers, like shape-shifting.
- Stereotypical skills for disabled people include supernatural powers that stem from disability, savant, and genius.

Level Up: Create playable female characters that are equal in skill and ability to their male peers.

Profession: What is the character's job, role, or professional background in the game world?

The big picture:

Do your characters have occupations or professional backstories? If so, what fields? Do these occupation choices reflect and/or reinforce stereotypes?

Keep in mind:

- Male-dominated occupations include computer science, math, engineering, politics, government, business, construction, military, physics, and chemistry.
- Female-dominated fields include sociology, anthropology, arts, design, administration, service industry, medical fields, veterinary, eldercare, childcare, and education.
- There are not necessarily careers associated with certain disabilities. But do not let a character's disability limit the professions they are assigned.
- Stereotypical professions for gay men include interior design, theater, nurse, fashion, and

hairdressing.

- Stereotypical professions for lesbians include athlete (e.g., softball), construction, and mechanics.
- Stereotypical trans professions include sex worker, stripper/dancer, drag performer, and fashion.

Achievement 3 Complete!

Apply It

Utilize the 5Ps framework for comprehensive character development.

Core Concepts

Animalistic Dehumanization: A form of dehumanization that strips away human characteristics — such as intelligence, rationality, and morality — by attributing animal-like traits to the human character, which serves to justify mistreatment, discrimination, or violence against the dehumanized character, such as likening a human character to vermin in dialogue.

Mechanistic Dehumanization: A form of dehumanization invoking machine-like attributes, such as being cold, rigid, indifferent, and/or without heart or soul, which serves to justify mistreatment, discrimination, or violence against the dehumanized character. (See: The Tank Trope.)

Proteus Effect: The phenomenon where an avatar's age, attractiveness, height, skin color, and gender influence aspects of players' behavior, including their extraversion, aggression, and risk-taking (Yee, 2014).

Self-Objectification: When individuals view themselves as objects, and their value stems from assessment of their physical appearance. It is associated with depressed personal efficacy, increased preoccupation with one's appearance, decreased body satisfaction, depression, and disordered eating.

Sexual Objectification: Occurs when a person is treated as a sexual object, rather than as an individual with thoughts, feelings, and agency.

Stereotype: Categorical representations that reduce groups of people and places to basic generalizations. Stereotypes often include making assumptions about individuals based on a group they are a part of, and can reinforce the dominant ideology and power of elite groups because they influence the audience's attitude toward the people and events being

Trope: A storytelling shorthand that provides familiar elements for audiences to easily understand and relate to. They often perpetuate stereotypes.

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Key 3 attained! Ready to keep going?

Next, Key 4: Craft Connection.