

Itinerary #3

Character Creator

Stereotypical gender roles and diversity in video games



JFF – Institut für Medienpädagogik

Competences



1.1 Evaluating data, information and digital content



2.2 Sharing through digital technologies

2.4 Collaborating through digital technologies

2.5 Netiquette

2.6 Managing digital identity



5.3 Creative use of digital technologies

Tags

- Games
- Gender
- Character
- Avatar
- Non-binary
- Role expectations
- Values
- Stereotypes
- Diversity
- Gender balance
- Intersectionality

Time frame

3.5 / 5 hours

Audience

Young people aged 14 - 21 years
6 - 30 participants

Overview

The theme of the workshop is the stereotypical and binary representations of male and female characters in popular video games, the critical handling of these facts and the creative creation of avatars.

The workshop aims to help participants to develop a critical view of gender roles in video games. For this purpose, current, prominent video games (so-called "AAA" titles) will be discussed together with regard to the gender aspect and afterwards, avatars will be created via a character editor. In a further step, the specially created characters will interact with each other in virtual environments and be reflected upon together.

With the help of digital character editors such as Character Creator 3, participants will be able to create their own game characters without having to adhere to a ready-made format. Physical characteristics can be freely chosen and combined with poses and gestures. In this way, a creative examination of one's own social gender and identity can be experienced and discussed.

Context

The workshop can offer particular added value for adolescents and young adults who deal with the supposed duality of gender roles or, more generally, with the issue of diversity. The playful experimentation with a self-created identity can create a protected space for reflection on one's own location. However, attention and a sensitive approach on the part of the instructors is also important, as negative experiences made in relation to the topic may be unintentionally triggered.

During the lecture at the beginning of the workshop, sexually charged, albeit abstract, digitally generated images of bodies can be part of the presentation. This circumstance should be pointed out in advance and discussed if necessary.

In the course of the open discussion and reflection rounds, it is desired that the participants share their own experience with gaming and the gamer scene with regard to gender roles. It is important that the speakers feel secure and understood. For this reason, it can be helpful to define common rules of conversation at the beginning of the workshop in order to provide a safe and non-discriminatory space ("Safe Space"). These rules can, for example, be written down on a flipchart or notice board and placed in a position where they are clearly visible to everyone for the duration of the workshop.

The central component is the digital board game of the same name, available in open source in German. The English version is in development. Unless more localized versions become available, we recommend using the game only with pupils who have a sufficient level of German or English proficiency.

Objective

The stereotypical depiction of "classic" female or male persons runs through the entire media landscape and is also present in video games. The binary representation of gender and the associated behaviours is far removed from social reality. Gender in this context refers to the social gender of people, therefore not to gender aspects bounded to biological characteristics. People who cannot find themselves within the narrowly defined framework of male or female are often subject to discrimination and underrepresented in most areas of society. This is also the case in video games.

Requirements

Venue:

- 1 large room
- Tables, chairs, projector
- Drinks, snacks
- Moderation material (paper, pens, markers, tacks, adhesive tape, etc.)
- Notice paper, pens for the participants
- A flipchart to note down the agreed rules of the conversation

Media:

- Per group (we recommend a group size of 2 persons) one laptop or desktop computer with the program Character Creator 3.
- The program Character Creator 3 by Reallusion Inc. can be used after activation free of charge without restrictions for 30 days. Alternatively, or after the trial period has expired, the program can be purchased online at www.reallusion.com/store for currently 199 US\$ (as of August 2020).

Working Methods

SEGMENT 1: Introduction and overview

Approx. 45 min.

- Getting to know each other and excursion on Youtube
- Overview of the structure and content of the joint workshop
- Query of first experiences concerning the topic
- Establishing rules of conversation, raising awareness of a safe space (see CONTEXT)

At the beginning of the workshop, there is a round of introductions. Depending on the number of participants and the own time frame, the level of detail should be deliberately chosen. Questions or statements linked to the topic of gaming and/or gender roles can be given during the introduction round. These questions/statements can be used early on in the workshop to obtain a rough overview of the participants' previous knowledge, which can be used as the workshop progresses.

- What video game are you playing now?
- Which is your favourite game?
- Which characters from video games did you find particularly cool?
- What is typically female for you, what is typically male?

It's also exciting to do a short trip together on YouTube, search for videos for the creation of female characters and to skim through them together via projector. The most prominent videos in the German language serve the stereotypical features (as of August 2020), which will be reflected later.

Examples:

- GTA V Online | Pretty Female Character www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SbDmsokj0 (783,000 viewed)
- GTA 5 ONLINE | Alex's Female Character Creation www.youtube.com/watch?v=blaNHwfefWk&t (1.3 million viewed)

Afterwards, the rough procedure/content of the joint workshop can be presented and, if possible, recorded on a flipchart or similar. In this way, the participants and also the workshop leaders have an orientation aid.

Working Methods

SEGMENT 2: Input/presentation

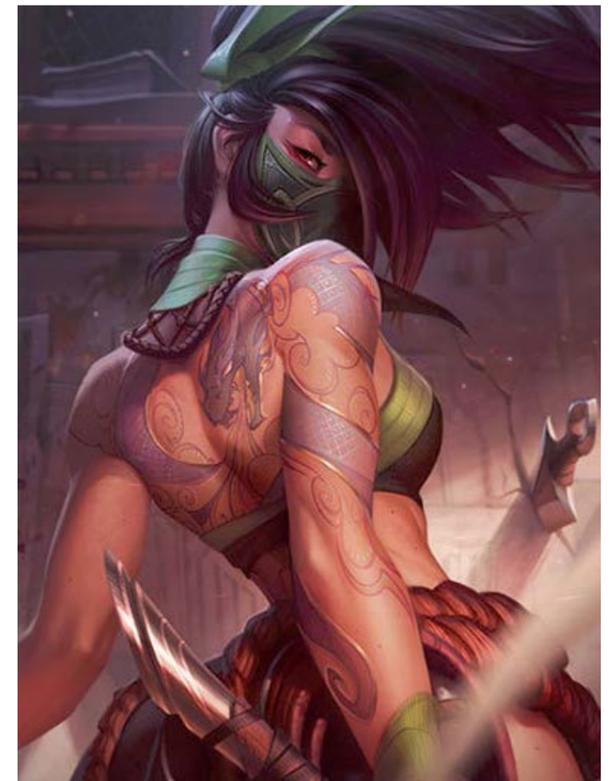
Approx. 45 min.

- A presentation introduces the topic

A presentation by the workshop leaders can outline the topic and draw attention to the main points of the content. Screenshots of stereotypical female or male characters from well-known titles encourage an open discussion. The following questions can be helpful:

- What is femininity, what is masculinity?
- Why do video games reproduce stereotypically and often exaggerated gender characteristics?
- What is perceived as attractive? How important is the attractiveness of the game characters?

The depicted characters usually serve a binary, archaic, misogynous role model. Masculine characters are dominant, heroic, strong, muscular, are portrayed as acting individuals and are disproportionately often the protagonists of the game plot. Female characters are often young, pretty, emotional, weak, subordinate and presented in a rather passive way. A well-known video game that can be mentioned in this context is the free playable "League of Legends". "LoL" has been an established name in professional e-sports for years and, 10 years after its release, has a large fan base of 80 million active players (status 2019, source: wikipedia.org/wiki/League_of_Legends).



Copyright by Riot Games

If one compares the female humanoid characters with their male humanoid colleagues, it is noticeable that the former in particular predominantly represent a slim, sexual ideal of beauty. The diversity of body shapes, clothing and behaviour is much greater among the male characters. This fact has an impact on the people who consume these games. Such effects can be discussed with the participants. Appropriate questions are:

- How do the represented beauty ideals and behaviour patterns influence me or other consumers?
- Can you identify with these characters?
- Can girls and women identify with the mostly male main characters?

This or something similar is the case in most AAA titles, although in more recent titles these stereotypes are increasingly being broken. Exemplary is the development of the protagonist "Lara Croft" from the series "Tomb Raider", which has been published since 1996. While the early titles still featured absurdly exaggerated female sexual characteristics, the current representatives of the series represent a far more complex, less sexualised and above all self-confident heroine. The development towards this kind of female character can be observed in industry-wide. This fact is a good discussion point for the participants and a call to consume even critical video games and the narratives they contain.



Working Methods

SEGMENT 3: Character creation

Approx. 60-120 min..

- Introduction to the operation of the editor and to the task
- Creating the characters in small groups

The participants are divided into small groups and sit at a PC/laptop. The devices should have Character Creator 3 installed and be updated and started. Alternatively, if there are enough terminals, the participants can also work alone on creating characters. The advantage of this variant is the stronger personal touch that characters created in this way get. In the small group version, on the other hand, the added value is the discussions and negotiation processes among the participants. It is also advisable to arrange the small groups in such a way that all groups have similar technical know-how (i.e. to combine technically experienced people with less experienced people). We recommend a group size of 2 persons. Before the practical creation of the avatars begins, the workshop leader(s) will give a short introduction into the operation of the program. Afterwards, the further procedure is discussed together. Helpful questions can be here:

- Which characters do we want to create?
- Are they humanoid or not?
- How clearly should gender be represented?
-

Alternatively, fixed tasks can be assigned:

1. Create an avatar
2. Which biological sex, which gender is the created person?
3. Think about it and discuss it.
4. Create a non-binary person (additional

question: Does a non-binary person have to look completely "normal"?)

In addition, participants should be informed that they should then present their created characters to the other groups. The small groups should also come up with a short background story about their character during the creation process. Character traits, skills, strengths and weaknesses can also be part of this consideration. After a certain procedure has been agreed upon, the work can begin in the small groups. The workshop leader should be present and available in the room for this phase of the workshop, in case questions about the operation of the system arise. Initial discussions about the figures can also take place or questions can be asked about them. Besides an interested attitude of the workshop leader, a certain restraint is also important. The participants should not be forced to express their own ideas, as this would distort the results and, in the worst case, get in the way of an exciting discussion afterwards. Towards the end of the phase, the participants should be informed in good time of the expiration of the time. There should be enough time for making screenshots. In these screenshots the characters should be seen in at least one "typical" and one "untypical" pose. The finished characters can then be saved as a project within the program for security reasons. For the following presentation of the results, it can be useful to transfer the screenshots via a USB stick to the workshop leader's computer. In this way, the characters can be presented via the projector.

Working Methods

SEGMENT 4: Presentation of the created characters, evaluation and reflection 60 min.

- Short presentation of the created characters by the small groups
- Round table discussion
- Workshop evaluation: final round

The small groups present their creations, their background story and further details (see above). Questions from the workshop leader and other participants are welcome. At the end, the "untypical" poses can also be shown. Afterwards, the small groups are dissolved and the whole group reflects together.

Guiding questions can be:

- What did the creation of the character feel like?
- Was it all fun?
- Were there any differences of opinion within the small group?
- How were those differences resolved?
- Who would build such a character and why?
- Would you like more complex character creation options for your favorite games? What should change in the gaming industry/scene?

Finally, the workshop will jointly reflect upon:

- What do I take with me from the workshop? What did I like and what didn't I like? What open questions do I still have?

In a nutshell

The workshop focuses on stereotypical gender roles and diversity in video games. By way of example, game characters from well-known video games will be analysed and classified. Afterwards, individual characters will be digitally created and discussed.

Additional options / Variations

- The workshop could also take place "virtually". For this purpose, the workshop could be moved to so-called Virtual Game Spaces (e.g. Mozilla Hubs/ Spoke). The created characters could be imported here and then "spatially" interact with each other. However, the program Character Creator 3 does not offer an easy way to transfer the character models. Characters must be converted into suitable file formats. This is possible to a limited extent by uploading the created characters to the Sketchfab platform. Sketchfab models can then be imported into Mozilla Spoke. A video tutorial can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=WoKuRH7-JhE
- Alternatively, the workshop could be held entirely in the Virtual Game Space RecRoom. In RecRoom you can customize your own avatar, even if the possibilities are less diverse than in Character Creator 3.



Sources/Links

- Link to download the test version of Character Creator 3: www.reallusion.com/de/character-creator/download.html
- Link to purchase the Character Creator 3: www.reallusion.com/store/product.html?l=8 p=cc
- Gamegirls and Gameboys – computer games and the subject of gender, Game Life brochure on the subject: games.jff.de/gamelifesh_geschlecht/
- Mozilla Hubs: hubs.mozilla.com
- RecRoom: recroom.com
- How To Rec Room – customizing outfits! www.youtube.com/watch?v=ontD4ldaKJ4
- Background Link: Representation of men and women in digital games *In Street Fighter are all half-naked!* www.spieleratgeber-nrw.de/Darstellung-von-Mannern-und-Frauen-in-digitalen-Spielen.4817.de.1.html