# The Gaming Trifecta: Understanding the Exclusion of Female Video Game Protagonists

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## Introduction

Shortly before *Assassin's Creed: Unity* was released in 2014, questions began surfacing about why Ubisoft had no footage of playable female characters despite them being on the company's feature list for the game. In response to the rising wave of questions, Alex Amancio, Ubisoft's creative director for the game, stated, "It's double the animations, it's double the voices, all that stuff and double the visual assets…It's not like we could cut our main character, so the only logical option, the only option we had, was to cut the female avatar" (LeJacq, 2014). Amancio's comments sent fans and professionals reeling in a flurry of anger, some taking up the hashtag #womenaretoohardtoanimate as a means of firing back at Ubisoft. The situation escalated when Jonathan Cooper, former Animation Director for a different *Assassin's Creed* game, countered Amancio's statement by saying, "In my educated opinion, I would estimate this to be a day or two's work...not a replacement of 8000 animations" (LeJacq, 2014).

Cooper's statement and many others (Borrelli, 2014; Lindsey, 2014; Burch, 2014; Moleman, 2014) led to the inevitable conclusion that women weren't necessarily too hard to animate—the developers had constructed the entire city of Paris on a 1:1 scale with impeccable attention to detail—but that the task of creating playable female characters simply wasn't a priority or even an assumed standard. The entire situation sent the message that females aren't as necessary in video games as males are. If Cooper is correct about female characters not being too difficult to animate, then why is there still a massive lack of female representation in video games?

This article posits that the gaming trifecta—a network of gamers, developers, and financial factors—impacts the representation of female playable protagonists. I will examine the potential reasons why playable female protagonists are typically excluded from video games with unchangeable, set protagonists, specifically through a case study of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, and identify the relationships among those reasons through my gaming trifecta theory, using a content analysis approach. This case study of *Assassin's Creed* is important because Ubisoft has tried to integrate female protagonists into several of the franchise's games but has done so in a way that players perceive as meaningless and mediocre. There continues to be a lack of female representation.

I have framed this paper around Ubisoft's *Assassin's Creed* franchise. Not only is *Assassin's Creed* the highest grossing Ubisoft franchise—one of its recent releases sold 1.51 million units during the first week of its release (D'Angelo, 2017)—but its games attempt to provide a platform for female representation that other video games lack. Through the experimental platform of *Assassin's Creed*, Ubisoft has tried several times to create non-optional and optional female-led video games. This situates the franchise as the perfect case study to examine female representation in video games that typically only have designated playable protagonists. Furthermore, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise is known for its progressive ideals—they have a message that lingers on the screen before each game starts up that reads, "Inspired by historical events and characters, this work of fiction was designed, developed, and produced by a multicultural team of various beliefs, sexual orientations and gender identities." Yet, for being so progressive and diverse as a development team, they don't necessarily seem to consider diverse representation as an industry standard, but more like an indeterminate, long-term goal.

**Background**

Although I provide some general examples, quotes, and statistics about video games throughout this paper, the primary video game franchise I focus on is *Assassin's Creed* in part because each game in the franchise typically limits player agency by restricting the type of protagonist they must play as. This player-protagonist restriction pulls gender representation into question because there are so few female protagonists that are actually represented in games with set protagonists, like *Assassin's Creed*.

*Assassin's Creed* is a video game franchise created by the video game publishing company, Ubisoft. It is one of Ubisoft's most successful video game franchises with ten major installments, over twenty spin-off installments, and more installments to come in the near future. In the games, players take on the persona of a (typically male) protagonist belonging to the Assassin Brotherhood or (less commonly) to the Templar Order. Players carry out side tasks and main missions by obtaining collectable items, assassinating enemies, and unveiling the ulterior motives in the fight for power. The games are interesting and exciting for thousands of players, but the lack of playable female protagonists is palpable, especially since players do not get the option to design their own protagonist as is the case in other games, like *Skyrim*. Although the *Assassin's Creed* franchise tries to create powerful and inspirational female characters, like the female African-American protagonist in *Assassin's Creed: Liberation*, the games the franchise produces tend to lack equal representation of playable female protagonists.

Understanding the differences between protagonist specifications can help provide a clearer picture for how Ubisoft attempts and fails to generate female representation in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. A playable protagonist is the

controllable character that the video game's plot follows for the duration of the game. In some games, like *Skyrim*, players are able to design their own character's appearance and initial capabilities; they are able to choose the gender of their protagonist. *Assassin's Creed* games typically have only one to three protagonists per game that are predefined and unchangeable. Having a predefined protagonist restricts the player's agency.

In recent years, *Assassin's Creed* developers have created games with optional protagonists such as *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate,* which introduced playable twin protagonists Jacob and Evie Frye. Having optional protagonists means that players are able to alternate between two or more main protagonists at their choosing. In *Assassin's Creed: Syndicate*, players are able to choose which twin they want to play as, but there are also missions that are restricted to each twin.

Other types of protagonists that developers have introduced are limited protagonists—protagonists that are only playable for specific missions or sequences during gameplay but are not the primary protagonist. *Assassin's Creed: Origins* has a playable male character as the primary protagonist, but there are brief sequences in which players are able to play as the protagonist's wife, Aya. These sequences are so short that Aya cannot be considered as a primary protagonist; she is a secondary, limited protagonist.

### Methods

In order to compile data and conduct research, I've employed a content analysis approach by combining empirical data and factual evidence retrieved from scholarly articles, websites, interviews, and social media platforms: evidence drawn from both game developers and gamers alike in order to understand the three points of the gaming trifecta (gamers, developers, and financial factors) from all perspectives. I have also collected data about each of the *Assassin's Creed* video games (from the main franchise and select spin-off games) in order to introduce statistics about male-led games, female-led games, and optional or limited protagonist games within the franchise. To obtain a complete record, I have acquired every main franchise game available, played them all to collect data about the different protagonists in each game, and collected data from official game web pages and articles that correlate with my research topic. The following section is a compilation of my data and findings.

### Data/Findings

In my search to uncover the reasons for such a limited number of playable female protagonists in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, and in the gaming community as a whole, I discovered several disheartening but altogether unsurprising statistics about the gaming industry. In a 2007 study, data showed that "males were almost five times more likely to be portrayed as the primary character…than females" in video games (Burgess, 2007). Others would argue that there are plenty of video games in which players get to customize their

characters or choose from several different avatars, but "even for games where players could pick the character's gender, there were still more male characters (60%) than female characters (40%)" to choose from" (Robinson, 2008). In the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, the gender gap between playable protagonists is even worse.

From the research I conducted, out of the ten major installments of the *Assassin's Creed* franchise, only two installments have optional or limited playable female protagonists while all ten installments have one or more playable male protagonists. That means that only 20 percent of the major installments feature playable female protagonists even though their male counterparts in the major installments are represented 100 percent of the time. Furthermore, the ten major installments only feature three playable female protagonists (all three of which are only optional or limited protagonists) while they feature 17 playable male protagonists, some appearing in more than one installment but most being primary, non-optional protagonists (see Graph 1: Major Installments). Out of 24 total major and spin-off installments (not including downloadable packages and extensions for the major installments, games designed strictly for multiplayer functionality, Facebook games, board games, card games, or games in beta stages), only four games have playable female protagonists (most being optional or limited) while 22 games feature playable male protagonists. Furthermore, in those 24 total games, there are only five playable female protagonists (only two are non-optional, primary protagonists) while there are a whopping 34 playable male protagonists in which some are repeat or optional protagonists, but none are limited protagonists (see Graph 2: Major and Spin-off Installments). In this scenario, female representation increases slightly to 20.8 percent while male representation increases to 141.6 percent.
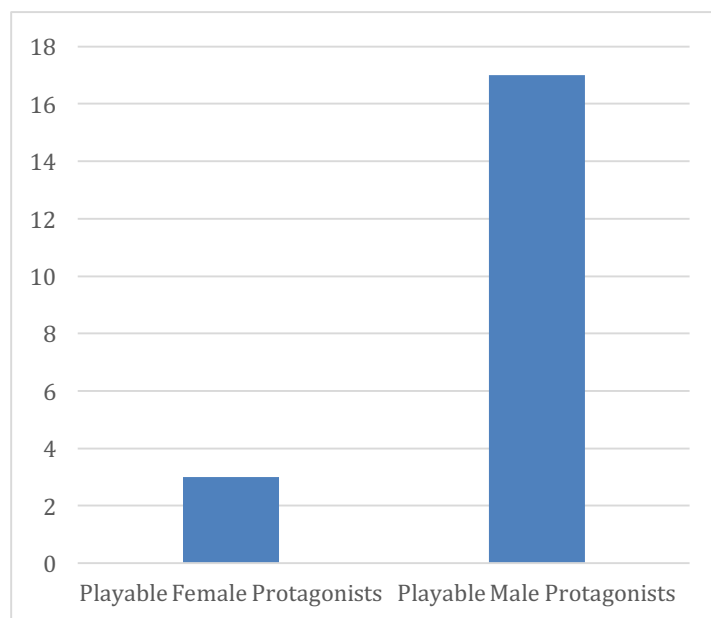


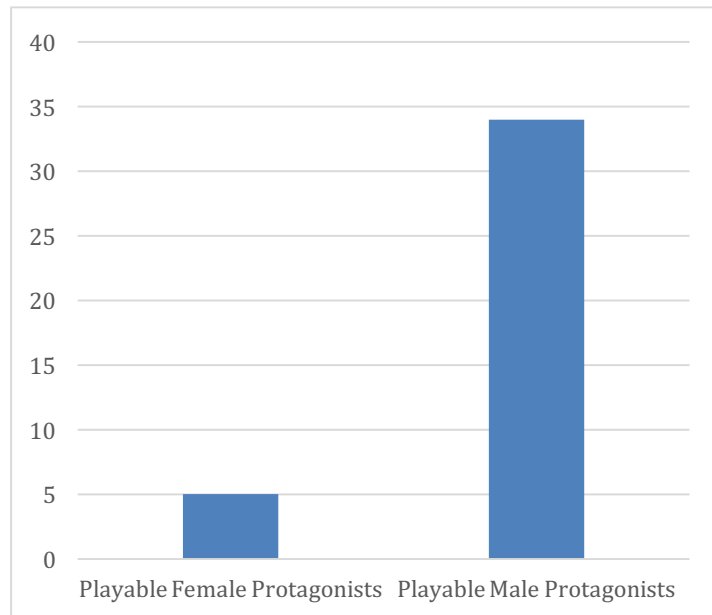Figure 1: Playable Protagonists in Major AC Installments

Figure 2: Playable Protagonists in Major and
Spin-off AC Installments

According to my data, the *Assassin's Creed* franchise clearly lacks equalizing
gender representation in relation to playable protagonists, and it isn't the only
video game franchise either. For there to be such unequal gender representation,
rhetorical forces must be working behind the scenes within the gaming
community's two primary branches (also parts of the gaming trifecta): Gamers
and Developers. In order to illuminate relational causes for the lack of gender
representation in video games, I determined that I would need to understand how
gamers and developers felt about the issue, how they reacted to it the issue, and
how they understood the issue.

In the 2014 *Assassin's Creed: Unity* fiasco, when Alex Amancio claimed the
development team didn't have enough time to create the earnestly-awaited
optional female characters, gamers lashed out ferociously. Hundreds of gamers
took to social media platforms to criticize Amancio's excuses with the hashtag
#womenaretoohardtoanimate, all with similar messages claiming that the
developers were capable of the extra animations but didn't want to put the effort
into designing women. Media critic, Anita Sarkessian joined the call for equal
gender representation, saying, "There is still a tendency for game studios to treat
female representation as some kind of extravagant goal, rather than simply
treating it as standard in the same way they handle male representation"
(Sarkessian qtd. in Mulkerin, 2016).

The backlash from the lack of female protagonists and representation in the
*Assassin's Creed* franchise demonstrates that many gamers are looking for more

equal gender representation in the video games they play. Ironically, when video games with playable female protagonists are created, those games tend to receive far more criticism and negative reviews from players. In a Reddit survey of player's favorite *Assassin's Creed* game, only 0.25% of voters said that their favorite game was the female-led *Assassin's Creed: Liberation*. Almost 2000 people participated in the survey, but only 5 people voted for the female-led game as their favorite. The three games that came in with the most votes were all male-led games (Reddit, 2018).

In a spin-off game, *Assassin's Creed: Liberation*, the predefined protagonist is a woman of African American and French descent living in New Orleans. The game was expected to have extraordinary potential and character development, but somewhere along the line, the expected potential missed its mark. In fact, several gamers reacted negatively to *Assassin's Creed: Liberation*, claiming that the game would bug out several times in one sitting, causing players to restart different missions on multiple occasions, shut down their console when their female protagonist got stuck, and lose in-game progress for no apparent reason.

Other players were less concerned with the obvious bugs in the system and more irritated with how developers made it easier for the protagonist to defeat high level guards and complete what should have been the more challenging missions in comparison with male protagonists from similar spin-off games. One player commented that the game is "only worth buying if [it's] on sale with a serious discount." Even those who enjoyed the graphics in the game and didn't mind the frustrating bugs couldn't deny that the game was created by developers who seemed uninterested in developing the female protagonist past an angry, determined female assassin without any depth or desire. Gamer reviews claimed that *Assassin's Creed: Liberation* started out decently but progressively grew meaningless in part because the "character motivations [were] non-existent, barely discernable, nonsensical, or super-weak" (Yang, 2015). The developers had an opportunity to use their New Orleans setting and half-French, half-African American female assassin to promote serious character development like they had done in the past for other male-led games like *Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood* or *Assassin's Creed: Revelations*, so why didn't they?

Temporarily turning from gamer review and preference toward developers' understanding and logic, I began to understand why games with female protagonists are so lackluster. According to Geoffrey Zatkin, it's all about money and gamers' product reception:

> In terms of pure sales numbers, in the first three months of availability, games with only a male hero sold around 25 percent better than games with an optional female hero. Games with exclusively male heroes sold around 75 percent better than games with only female heroes. (Zatkin qtd. in Chambers, 2012)

With incredibly low sales numbers and critically negative reviews of female-led games, developers viewed a larger picture where games with playable female protagonists just weren't making the cut. The decision to include a playable female protagonist actually decreases the total amount of revenue taken in by the developers; however, the amount of money they put into female-led games may also affect gamer review and reception as well as effect general sales numbers.

As I compiled data from various sectors of the gaming community including developers, gamers, publishers, and even the games themselves (what McAllister refers to as the *Computer Game Complex* or the totality of the game industry), I began to notice a distinct rhetorical framework propelled by three primary forces: Gamers, Developers, and Financial Risk (see Figure 1: The Gaming Trifecta). These three forces create a troubling sort of gaming trifecta that works to bar women not only from quantitative protagonist representation but from the gaming community as a whole.

Ken McAllister stated that it is important to obtain a "comprehensive awareness of how the different agents are involved in making and managing meaning" (McAllister, 2004, p. 46). In order to fully understand how the three forces within my theory of the gaming trifecta use rhetorical context to create such meaning, it is important to identify how they rely on each other to reaffirm or revise their systems of understanding.

**Implications & Conclusion**

The gaming trifecta, which causes the unequal representation and exclusion of females in video games and in video game culture, provides the complex and circular location for blame in gamer experience and reception, developer creation and perception, and financial risks and restrictions, but the cycle is seemingly impossible to stop.

Gamers call for equality but when presented with female-led games, they provide negative reviews due to poor quality and system issues. When developers notice the gamers' negative reviews about female-led games and the sales numbers associated with those games, they conclude that gamers must not like games with playable female protagonists; furthermore, developers recognize that their poor sales numbers from female-led games do not bring in the same amount of revenue as their male-led games, so they are inclined to create female- and male-led games using unequal budgets. In fact, "female-led games received roughly 40 percent of the marketing budget as male-led games" because the industry believes that female protagonists simply won't sell (Zatkin qtd. in Chambers, 2012). If the female-led games aren't receiving as much funding as male-led games are, it's no wonder they aren't selling. No gamer wants to buy a game that isn't up to the same standards as the male-led games produced by the same company.

Figure 3: The Gaming Trifecta

In the spin-off *Assassin's Creed* games in which there were female protagonists, like in *Liberation* or *Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China*, players found that the games were too short (only lasting about 6–10 hours) for the amount of money they were being asked to spend on it. Furthermore, the games were often riddled with glitches and bugs, had uninteresting or incredibly predictable plots, and unpopular side missions and/or main quest objectives. Gamers simply aren't interested in a game that isn't fun, engaging, and well-constructed. Thus, the endless cycle of the gaming trifecta.

Remaining within the gaming trifecta's cycle only decreases the percentage of video games with playable female protagonists, particularly in the *Assassin's Creed* franchise where the gender discrepancy is already incredibly high. Unfortunately, unless Ubisoft is willing to take a financial risk by developing and releasing a fully funded female-led game to the public instead of a minimally funded and poorly designed game, quantitative female exclusion will continue to rise, and female representation will remain an indeterminate goal for the future, barring gamers from agency and preference without so much as a second thought for the rhetorical causations between gamers, developers, and finances. It may be possible that Ubisoft will make more attempts to create female-led games in the near future[1] or, for the sake of monetary security, games with optional female protagonists. This possibility, as well as the hundreds of other video games with their various protagonist options, could point the way for future research and analysis of female representation in video games under the gaming trifecta.

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[1] All research for this paper was conducted between January 2018 and April 2018.

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