How Male Gamers Perceive Games with Non-sexualized Female Protagonists

Swedish Males Aged 18 and Above

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Abstract

Some game publishers and developers do not think that games with non-sexualized female protagonists are worth making because they would not sell. With close to a half of gamers being female (47%) it is a bit puzzling that they are not catered to. This could be because publishers think that male gamers, who they perceive as their main demographic, would not buy games with non-sexualized female protagonists. A study was done to see if that statement is correct. By questioning 91 Swedish male gamers, aged 18 and above, it was found that in games where one can choose the character’s sex 46% of the subjects play as a female character at least half of the time and in total 90% of the 91 subjects have at some point chosen to play as a female character. No one of the subjects have any negative thoughts about there being more games with non-sexualized female protagonists who are heroic in their own right and not a trophy, when asked 47% said it would be “Very good”, 24% said it would be “Good” and 29% said that they have “No opinion” in the matter.

Key words: Computer games, Gender, Female protagonist, Male gamer
Acknowledgements

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1 Introduction

A vast majority of game protagonists are what one could call a “White Hetero McStubbles”, meaning a white heterosexual male with stubbles, and there is an abundance of examples which share that point of view. While people of both sexes play games, women seem largely underrepresented as protagonists. As a game designer I want to see if the game industry could move onward from that cultural stagnation and the presumption that games are a “boy's club”.

Publishers seem to be afraid to publish games that have a female protagonist that are not designed for the male gaze. From an interview with Remember Me’s (See Appendix 1) creative director Jean-Max Morris on Penny Arcade Report:

By the time Remember Me was shown to prospective publishers, it was too late to change Nilin from a woman to a man, and this was enough to cause potential backers to abstain from publishing the game. ‘We had some that said, ‘Well, we don't want to publish it because that's not going to succeed. You can't have a female character in games. It has to be a male character, simple as that,’’ Morris told the Report. (Prell 2013)

Games with female protagonists also receive a far smaller marketing budget than games with male protagonists which means they get less exposure in the form of advertisement. (Kuchera 2012).

Not even Mass Effect (See Appendix 1), a game series where one can choose the main character’s sex, ethnicity and sexual orientation (though female options are fewer than male when it comes to Love Interests) gets a cover with both “default characters”, only the male is represented.

Picture 1 - Mass Effect Trilogy, Bioware
In an article on IGN (a well known game news and review website) it is shown that the male heroes have in the later years become less and less distinguishable, to the point of practically looking the same. It is done by taking some of the latter games with male protagonists and comparing them at first side by side and then placing one picture atop of another, with lowered opacity. They all are white males with short dark brown hair and almost all have some kind of stubbles. Their facial expressions are the same as well, looking a bit angry towards the viewer. In that article there is also a speculation for why this could be and a question of risk:

My thinking is, they're uniformly bland so players can project themselves onto them. But really, does that happen? Or does it just make for incredibly forgettable lead characters? (Kolan 2011)

While the lack of female protagonists is not the only problem it is one of the biggest, when it comes to protagonists in games.

This thesis investigates what stance adult Swedish male gamers have towards female protagonists that are non-sexualized and are as heroic as their male counterparts in games today.

1.1 Background

According to ESA (Entertainment Software Association) a large portion (47%) of gamers today is female (ESA 2012:3). In the same document it is also stated that:

Women 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (30%) than boys age 17 or younger (18%) (ESA 2012:3)

With there being more adult women who play games than teenage boys it would only make sense that there would be more games that allow female characters do the same heroics as the male characters. While the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) is based in the USA it is feasible to assume that the numbers are similar in Western Europe.

IGN also conducted an interview with the developer, Ubisoft Montreal, behind Assassin’s Creed 3 (see Appendix 1) where the developer stated that they did not even consider having a female protagonist and do not intend to have one in the upcoming sequel; there might be a female protagonist in future installments however (Dyer 2013). Epic, the developers behind Gears of War (see Appendix 1), have in some installments playable female characters, but when the Official Xbox Magazine asked Chris Perna (Gears of War’s art director) in an interview if there would be a female in a star role it was answered with “If you look at what sells, it's tough to justify something like that”, which is an interesting statement seeing as earlier in the article it is mentioned how female gamers have expressed positivity towards Gears of War’s female characters and what Perna thinks about it:

‘They feel empowered,’ he said. ‘They put on that armour and they walk around with these massive weapons and I think they get a kick out of it - I get a kick out of seeing it.’ (Evans-Thrilwell 2013)

As far as I could find during this research not one of the publishers or developers who claim that games with female protagonists would not sell can point to any study made in that field, nor have themselves invested in (marketing) studies regarding the issue.
According to gamesindustry.biz and polygon.com, both game news websites, at least some games with female protagonists who are heroic and can take care of themselves sell well. With *Starcraft 2: Heart of the Swarm* (See Appendix 1) selling 1.1 million copies during the first two days (McWhertor 2013) and the 2013 reboot of *Tomb Raider* (See Appendix 1) selling 3.4 million copies during its first month (Handrahan 2013). So it is a bit puzzling when publishers say that they probably would not sell (Kuchera 2012). Then again both *Starcraft* and *Tomb Raider* are longtime established franchises, where *Starcraft 2* has many prominent male characters, with the first playable lead female character only available in the expansion *Heart of the Swarm*.

In a study by EEDAR (Video Game Research and Consulting) it was discovered that out of 669 games with a discernible protagonist for the seventh console generation (See Appendix 3) in the genres action, shooter and RPG (Role Playing Game) only 24 were with a female protagonist (Kuchera 2012). That means that only 3.59% of those 669 games have a female lead, that is far less than the percentage of female gamers (47%).

According to Joystiq.com (a game news website), 7 out of 10 of the top selling games of 2012 were only playable as a male character, two were games where the player could choose their character’s sex (where a majority of the options were male), and one game where one technically does not control an avatar (See Appendix 1 for description of mentioned games). The top four games have only the option of playing as a male character (Mallory 2013).

### 1.2 Hypothesis, aim, questions and definitions

It can be assumed that if more than half of the gaming population is male and there are a vast amount more games with male protagonists, then male gamers like assuming the roles of male protagonists. If male gamers like to play as male protagonists then female gamers might like to play as female protagonists. If games with male protagonists can reach sales figures in the millions with only roughly half of the population being male, then surely games with female protagonists can reach approximately similar numbers, assuming they get the same marketing budget and are treated as male protagonist games. Both in Kuchera’s and Prell’s articles it seems that some publishers and developers do not seem to think that games with female protagonists will sell good enough so they do not dare to spend money on their creation and/or publication. This paper will investigate if those publishers are right or wrong when it comes to supporting games with female protagonists; are at least Swedish male gamers as uninterested in female leads in games as some publishers and developers assume they might be?

I hypothesize that Swedish male gamers do not object to playing as a female protagonist who is not specifically created for the male gaze. It could turn out that Swedish male gamers would not play games with female protagonists; in that case the reasons for why this is should be researched. Either way, it seems like a bad strategic choice to dismiss potentially half the market.
The aim of this thesis is to investigate if female protagonists who are non-sexualized would be appealing to Swedish male gamers, aged 18 and above. The following questions will be the focus of this thesis:

- Is there any truth to the publishers’ statements that games with female protagonists are not worth making because they would not sell (Kuchera 2012)? If it is true that male gamers do not like games with female protagonists then hopefully an indication can be found as to why.
- How many of the subjects, Swedish male gamers aged 18 and above, are positive towards female protagonists and playing as them? How many of those who play as female characters in RPG’s (Role Playing Games) think that games with female protagonists are a good idea? The reason why RPG’s are chosen in this case is that in mainly this genre the player can choose the sex of the character.
- Is there any significance when it comes to age and gender inclusiveness? Are some of the age groups more interested in female protagonists than the others?
- Are there some specific genres which are more popular amongst those who have a positive attitude towards female protagonists? Are there some specific genres which are more popular amongst those who have a negative attitude towards female protagonists?

Non-sexualized female protagonists in this case are those who are clad in clothing that covers them coherently (plate armor with a cleavage is incoherent), do not show more skin than a male would in the same position, have a steady pose (e.g. box cover art) that does not portray them as vulnerable, have a facial expression which is not flirty, submissive and/or erotic, have their own agency, motivations and goals and not just a pretty trophy for the heterosexual male to receive upon completion of the mission. These traits are in fact the opposite of how a majority of female characters are portrayed now and what roles they have.

The Male Gaze is a term used on objects and subjects that are specifically designed to attract the attention of a heterosexual male and look sexually attractive to him, an object of desire. Subjects of the male gaze do not contain aspects that a stereotypical heterosexual male could find undesirable. A scantily clad female who poses in such a way that one can see as much of her body as possible and has an inviting facial expression is a design for the male gaze. A normally clad female with a facial expression and similar pose typically found in male illustrations is not a design for the male gaze.

1.3 Previous research

There does not seem to be a study which looks at male interest in non-sexualized female game protagonists, which is one of the motivations for this thesis, but there are some which look at some of the aspects of gender in games. Research in this section looks at how female characters are portrayed, how they differentiate from male characters and how female players are treated.

While there are some female characters present in the gaming culture, it was found in a study at 49 articles containing 115 characters from U.S. video game magazines, that most of them are sexualized and/or made more innocent along with being lighter clad than males. Even on occasions where females are shown as aggressive they often are also shown with some sexiness. Males tend to be more aggressive and dominant and not as sexualized. (Miller & Summers 2007).
Game magazines are one of the conduits which relay the look and feel of games, to varying degrees. They relay what the game looks like, so if the game has scantily clad women and burly armored men the magazines will relay that, however it can occasionally vary how aspects of the game are portrayed. Game magazines can also contain marketing material from the developers and/or publishers from the games.

Some might say that males are also sexualized because of their large muscles and/or occasionally very light clothing, but Malin Lövenberg discovered that male sexualization is a rare matter, even males with little clothing do not appear sexualized because of their stance, the direction of their gaze and what body parts are shown. Even though males may be wearing revealing clothing they do not display sexual appetite, by looking away from the camera, have aggressive facial expression and/or by having a stance that reminds more of combat readiness than display of body and/or invitation. Her thesis is also from the Game Design and Graphics department on University on Gotland (Lövenberg 2013).

Males seem to be designed to portray strength and combat ability and have somewhat practical clothing while females seem to be primarily designed for the male gaze and portray sexual availability and submissiveness, they may be equal in terms of game mechanics but they mostly seem to be very distinct in aesthetics and designed for the male gaze.

Karen E. Dill and Kathryn P. Thill confirm that male characters in games are portrayed in gaming magazines as more aggressive, less sexual and have more covering clothes than the female characters. While there are female characters in games, they are not shown with the same empowering traits males are. From a survey of teens it was discovered that “stereotypes of male characters as aggressive and female characters as sexually objectified physical specimens are held even by non-gamers” (Dill & Thill 2007). It was also found that by often using unrealistic body imagery of females in media made men find ‘real’ women less attractive (Dill & Thill 2007:852).

This could be summed up as “You give them what they want and they want what you give” phenomenon. Many people start to expect that what is given is the only thing that is available. However, always using hyper versions of either sex might not be good; males who grow too accustomed to the unrealistic proportions in female figures might start finding real women less attractive. The “macho” male characters might also perpetuate the notion that males use violence as their preferred method of solving problems.

Portraying females as objects of desire for the heterosexual males might give non-gamers the impression that the only thing games are about is violence and sexual objectification of the female body, which might result in alienation of potential female gamers and in some cases male gamers as well.

In a paper about looking at male and female authors writing female characters in novels by Cheryl Lange, it is suggested that males can write ‘accurate’ female characters, although females are a bit wary of men writing female characters (Lange 2008). Some male authors are afraid to write female characters because of the possible scrutiny from females if the female character is not ‘accurate’ enough. Some are afraid of being called not a real man by fellow men if one can identify with women (Lange 2008:2).
It could be very similar in the game industry where men do not dare to create female characters because they are not confident that they can manage to make inoffensive female characters or that they could get a reaction along the lines of “You made a game where you play as a woman?” in a derogatory way from fellow males.

Many games come with a multiplayer option and some games are pure multiplayer such as MMORPG’s (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games). Many FPS (First Person Shooter) games have a multiplayer option and in many of those the players can use voice communication by the use of a microphone. This allows the players to communicate with team members and in some cases also opponents as well, through the use of one’s own voice. In an observational study where multiplayer matches were played in a game, the tests’ conductors used prerecorded male and female voices to give the other players an indication of what sex the tests’ “player” is. It was discovered that parts of the online gaming community show hostile behavior towards assumed female gamers. Female voiced players received three times as many negative comments than male or mute players did. However, females get more friend invites and messages than male or mute players (Kuznekoff & Rose 2012).

There seems to be a paradox behavior in the online game community. At the same time as female gamers are frowned upon, they also seem to get what seems like positive attention on the single merit of being female.

Females in Television situation comedies who are not thin are used as objects of comedy by males by insulting their weight and bodies, and the audience seems to laugh at it. The heavier the female the more and worse insults are used (Fouts & Burggraf 2000).

This shows that if females in media are not perceived as beautiful by the accompanying males, they are used as objects of ridicule to humor the audience.

The previous research shows that female characters certainly are not treated in the same way as the male characters. Female gamers are not treated the same way male gamers treat each other. One can speculate on how many more females would be playing games if they were not verbally harassed, forced into male gaze objects or being made fun out of. Maybe males would be more comfortable with creating stories with able females in the main role if fellow males did not belittle them for that.

1.4 Method and materials

This investigation will take shape in the form of a quantitative survey where a questionnaire is used as the source material which polls the target group, Swedish male gamers aged 18 and above. Due to time constraints, this thesis’ scope is limited to only the Swedish male gaming population. The age limitation of 18 years is set so that every subject has possible access to the same games as every other participating subject. The reason why females are excluded from the questionnaire is that it is assumed that females most probably do not mind female protagonists in games and most likely also welcome them.
Questions with several alternatives are used and the online version is spread through social media and acquaintances to third parties. Paper versions of the questionnaire are used to poll subjects in the immediate area and the Internet version is used to reach subjects that are not in the immediate area. Both methods are used to get an as good sample as possible. Approximately 100 subjects are expected to answer with half of them coming from paper questionnaires and the other half from the online questionnaire.

The first questions are control ones where the subjects’ gaming habits are established: subject’s age, most played genres in games, and hours spent per week gaming. Preference of avatar sex in role playing games is also asked about to see how many are comfortable and/or interested in playing as a female character.

The genres included in the questionnaire are:

- FPS (First Person Shooter)
- MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game)
- RPG (Role Playing Game)
- RTS (Real Time Strategy)
- Action RPG (Action Role Playing Game)
- Action Adventure
- Platformer
- Fighting
- MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena)
- Racing
- Sport

See Appendix 2 for examples of titles for the genres.

A question which asks in which environment, single player or multiplayer, the subject is most comfortable in playing as a female character is posed to see if peer pressure and/or others’ behaviour toward one’s avatar have any impact on the choice of the avatar’s sex. A follow-up question is posed to those that answer “single player”, where they answer why they are not as comfortable with playing as a female character in multiplayer. Of course there is also the option which says that there is no particular reason, that they just prefer single player games.

A picture with a male and a female character with very little difference are put next to each other.
This picture is two pictures put together by me, to remove as much white space as possible. This is a very good illustration where both genders are on equal footing. The characters have the same pose, armour style, facial expression and weapons. The only difference being hair amount and colour, and eye colour. The subjects are asked which game they would most likely play, the one with the male or the female protagonist and a third option for those who do not have a preference for the protagonists’ sex. A follow-up question is posed to those that prefer the cover with the male character; it asks if there is anything that could change the subjects’ mind to choose the female one instead.

The last two questions in the questionnaire asks how the subject would feel about there being a higher percentage (“at most every other game” is taken as an example) of games with female protagonists who perform the same heroics as male protagonists. There is a follow-up question to those who perceive that as a negative, which asks why they feel that way.

The questionnaire is built so that the basis of the players’ habits, their opinions on female lead characters and if they have interest in playing as such can be quickly determined. Its focus is also on finding out why the male gamers would not want to play as a female character.
By using such a focused quantitative questionnaire one can quickly investigate if Swedish adult male gamers are positive or negative to playing as a non-sexualized female protagonist. A small and focused questionnaire can also reach the highest number of subjects with the least amount of time, giving a good overall look into the target group’s opinions. While there are some questions posed which give an insight as to why some gamers would not want to play as a female protagonist there are no further questions which go more in depth as to why. To truly find out why some like and why some do not like playing as a female protagonist, a qualitative research should be conducted. There are also no questions which investigate why some male gamers play as female protagonists. By sending out the questionnaire online blindly there is a risk that subjects may not answer truthfully. By not posing these questions in person there might be some who misinterpret the questions and answer them incorrectly.

2 Results

With 91 Swedish male gamers polled, aged 18-44, it shows that most (22%) subjects were 21 years old and that the group’s average age is 23.27. The ages 30, 34, 35 and 44 only had one entry each. Approximately half of the polled subjects are university students so the average age of 23.27 deviates from the average gamer age, which is 30 years according to ESA (Entertainment Software Association) (ESA 2012:3). 41 of the subjects answered online and 50 answered on paper, the percentage is 45% online and 55% on paper.

The answers from those few that are above the 30 year mark do not differentiate in any special way from the other age groups, however.

The most popular genres are RPG (Role Playing Game), FPS (First Person Shooter), Action RPG and closely followed by Platformer games. The least played genre is Sports.
The time spent gaming is more evenly spread, though most 18 year olds spend 31+ hours a week on average on gaming. Higher ages have more variation but generally the younger the subject the more time the subject spends gaming.

When it comes to games where one can choose the protagonist’s sex it was found that 44% play as mostly male, 21% play mostly as female, 20% play both sexes equally, 10% play only as male and 5% play only as female.

So 46% of the subjects play as a female character at least half of the time. In total 90% of the subjects have at some point chosen to play as a female character.
Half of the subjects would feel more comfortable with playing as a female character in single player, 27% feel comfortable in playing as a female character in a multiplayer game and 23% said that the game being multi- or single player is not a factor regarding their comfort in playing as a female character.

However, 44% of those who chose single player answered in the following question that the reason why they chose single player is that they prefer single player games in general, there is nothing specific in multiplayer that affects their comfort in playing as a female character online. Though there are some who find some things uncomfortable, or lacking, in multiplayer when it comes to playing as a female character, the most popular reason is “I feel uncomfortable when some male hits on me in the belief that I’m a real female” which was chosen by 24% of those who chose single player instead of multiplayer.

Picture 6 – Gender preferences in RPG’s

Picture 7 – Things that make male gamers uncomfortable online as female characters
A. I don’t want my friends to see me as a female character  
B. Female players get treated badly  
C. There are fewer options for female characters  
D. I feel judged if I play as an attractive female  
E. I feel uncomfortable when some male hits on me in the belief that I’m a real female  
F. None, I just prefer Single player games  
G. Other:

Most of the “Other” options are that the players try to create an extension of themselves in the game and seeing as they are men they choose male characters, a few added that they do not identify as female and that they do not get the connection to their character as they would to a male character. Some said that they do occasionally play as female characters online. One added that it feels “false” to play as a female when one is a male and another said that he is not taken as seriously if playing as a female character. Another added that he is not uncomfortable in playing as a female character and finds it amusing to play as a female character and trick others into believing that he is a real female.

![Cover preference chart]

*Picture 8 – Preference of game box cover*

When asked about which cover the subject prefers, the male or the female one (see Picture 2.), the answer “No preference” was most popular with 74% choosing it. The female cover received 16% and the male cover received the least, 10%. When asked what could compel them to choose the female cover instead the male, of the 9 participants who answered “male cover”, 7 of them chose option “A. Nothing, I only want to play as a male”, the other two chose “C. If she had more muscles” and “E. If she looked happier”.  

Two of those who had chosen “female cover” also chose “B. If she wore revealing clothing” in the follow-up question meant to those who chose “male cover”, and two who had chosen “No preference” chose “A. Nothing, I only want to play as a male” and “D. If she was more feminine.” One who chose “No preference” added under “Other” this comment: “If she looked more like the average woman”; no definition of what might be perceived as an “average woman” was added.
2.1 Interest and acceptance of female lead characters

When the question “How would you feel about there being a higher percentage of games with female protagonists who do the same heroics as male protagonists (saving others, can get herself out of trouble, leading warriors etc.)? (Note: at most every other game)” not a single subject answered “Bad” or “Very Bad”.

The most chosen option was “Very good” with 47% subjects choosing it, “No opinion” was chosen by 29% and “Good” by 24% of the subjects.

While no one actually needed to answer the last question “If you answered “Bad” or “Very bad”, why? (Check all that apply)” some left a comment in the “Other” option. All of them said practically the same thing, that the protagonist’s sex is not important, but rather the characters’ personality and how well the game is designed. One of the subjects’ elaborated that in games where one can create your own character he tends to create an extension of himself. However, he does not mind playing a predefined character that does not align with his personality and/or sex at all seeing as he then visits the world from the character’s perspective.

Some of those subjects who filled in the paper questionnaire said, after finishing it, that it was a peculiar research subject and could not think of why anyone would hold the opinion that heroic female protagonists would be a bad thing.

2.2 Age and female acceptance

There does not seem to be any correlation between age and female acceptance. No age group with several subjects had all of its members in the same option group. Most multi-subject age groups had a majority of their members in the “Very good” group and the rest divided up between “No opinion” and “Good.”

2.3 Genres and gender

Dividing the subjects into three groups, based on which option they chose regarding acceptance of female characters and then cross-referencing with what genres they play yields the following results. In general the percentage follows the ratio of the “Very good”, “Good” and “No opinion” answers showing that no specific genre is much more positive towards female protagonists. However, Racing and Sports genres seem more indifferent towards female protagonists than the others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Very Good</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>No opinion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FPS</td>
<td></td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMORPG</td>
<td></td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RPG</td>
<td></td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTS</td>
<td></td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Action adventure genre also deviates from the general ratio but much less drastically than Racing and Sports.

Those who play RPG’s, Action RPG’s and Platformers seem slightly more positive towards female protagonists than others.

3 Analysis and conclusions

Some game publishers and developers claim that games with female protagonists would not sell and therefore do not invest in developing/publishing such games. Presumably they assume this because they do not believe that there are enough females who would buy these games and that males would not want a game which has a female lead in a similar position as a male lead. To verify if this is correct in reality, at least in Sweden, a study was performed with a questionnaire where 91 subjects, males aged 18 and above, were polled. How many play as female characters in games where one can choose the characters’ sex? Are they locked down in only playing as a male and cannot imagine themselves playing as a female? What do they think about there being a higher percentage of games lead by a heroic female protagonist, compared to the current market situation?

The results are surprisingly unanimous, not a single subject had negative views towards heroic female protagonists. Even some of those who do not play as female characters chose the option “Very good” or “Good” when asked about a higher percentage of female protagonists. This could mean that they believe that it would help the game medium evolve, that they know female gamers who would buy such games, that they themselves might play games with a fixed female protagonist and/or they are tired of the current stories available with male leads.

Some subjects had added that when playing games where one can create their own character they tend to create an extension of themselves and thus choose to create a male character. However, one also commented that there is no hindrance in playing a game with a predefined female protagonist because then you see the world through that character’s eyes, in that case the character’s sex and personality does not have to align with the player’s. It would not be surprising if this is how many male gamers think, that the protagonist’s person does not have to align with their own person for them to be able to experience a world through those characters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Genre</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action RPG</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action Adventure</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platformer</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fighting</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOBA</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racing</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The female game cover received more votes than the male cover, which I personally find hardly surprising. The male looks like many other male protagonists, as it is discussed in the IGN article by Patrick Kolan, making that character potentially uninteresting and forgettable. Most did however choose the “No preference” option; this means that the subjects are not locked down in playing only as a male character. A higher percentage of subjects preferred the female cover; 16% chose female while 10% chose male. And the fact that 26% of all of the subjects seem to prefer playing as a female in RPG’s when given the choice shows that there is an active interest in playing as a female character. In total 90% of all subjects have chosen to play as a female character at some point and 46% of all of the subjects play as a female character at least half of the time.

However, the motivation for doing so was not researched and there are games which let you dress your female characters in clothing and/or armor which is designed for the male gaze. Some might just play as a female character to have something that they find nice to look at and some might play as a female character because they have been playing as a male many times already. Some might play as a female because of their gender identification, there is a vast amount of reasons which this thesis did not have the time to research and that should be further investigated both by the academia and the developers and publishers.

In a follow-up question to those who chose the male cover instead of the female cover (or no preference option) it was asked what could compel them to choose the female cover instead of the male cover. This question yielded some interesting results, while a majority of those who did chose the male cover answered that nothing would compel them to choose the female cover because they only wish to play as a male there were some who did in fact choose “If she was more muscular” and “If she looked happier.” It is interesting that some wanted her to be more muscular, granted the female version is only almost as muscular as the male version and muscles tend to be an indication of strength, which can be handy in combat situations.

While only one said that having her look happier would be a thing that could compel him to choose the female cover it would not be surprising if there are more with this mindset. The reason why that was an alternative in the questionnaire is that a female in our culture cannot look objectively as grim or aggressive as a male because that is interpreted by some that there is something wrong with her and/or that she is much more aggressive than the male counterpart. Females are expected to look pleasant and preferably be pleasing, if they are not, they may be perceived as threatening and males seem to dislike the idea of females being threatening.
Two who chose the female cover also answered the question but with “If she wore more revealing clothing” and one who had chosen “No Preference” when it comes to covers answered that “If she was more feminine” then he would have chosen the female cover. This is rather interesting seeing as in comparison she is not looking as grim, only almost, as the male counterpart and she is rather feminine. It could be that some males are frightened of females that exhibit strength similar as males; they have learned that females are subordinate and that they are ‘at the bottom of the food chain’ so if a female seems ‘above’ them then they might be afraid of being perceived as subordinates after being used to not being that. A female who is not as feminine as they would prefer, might have a similar effect. Those who chose both the female cover and that they would pick the female cover if she wore more revealing clothing most probably play female characters who they create for their own gaze. One added that it would be better if the subject in the female cover looked more like an average woman, though no specification were given as to what would count as an “average woman.” It could have been the bright green eyes and the unnaturally red hair that was too eye-catching.

It would not be surprising if publishers and developers think that a game with a female protagonist designed for the male gaze would be a more viable option than a game with a female protagonist that would make females feel empowered if they perceive males as the only viable demographic option when it comes to games with action heroes. However the 2013 reboot of Tomb Raider had the biggest launch sales-wise in the franchise’s history and Lara Croft, the game’s protagonist, is a non-sexualized heroine in this installment. Although Tomb Raider is a long since established Intellectual Property which received plenty of marketing and might not have been as popular sales-wise if it did not use its well-known name.

The question which asks about what the subjects think about a higher percentage of games with female protagonists asks specifically about “female protagonists who do the same heroics as male protagonists (saving others, can get herself out of trouble, leading warriors etc.)” so those who answered positively are positive towards female characters and not female shaped objects of desire. If such a large percentage of male subjects seem to be fine with female protagonists and are not locked down to only male protagonists, then games with female protagonists could very likely sell just as well as games with male protagonists if the games receive the same attention marketing wise. Add in the fact that several commented that the sex is not as important as the character’s traits, the game design and the story. In the article by Kuchera about lacking marketing funds for female lead games it is stated that the reason why female lead games do not sell as well is because they are perceived to be niche games and as such do not receive the same treatment from marketing. The fact that games which represent about one half of humanity is considered niche is troubling. However, as it is mentioned in Kuchera’s article it could be used to make people notice a game with a female protagonist by that merit alone and use that as a marketing ploy, thus changing something negative to something more positive.
One wonders if those publishers and developers who say that games with female protagonists would not sell have read the ESA’s (Entertainment Software Association) information which states that almost half of those who play games are female and that there are more adult females who play games than there are adolescent males. Apparently they must think that if males would not play games with a female protagonist, then females would not play games with a male protagonist. That would then mean that there is an entire market which is almost as big as the perceived current one to monetize on. The market potential alone should warrant more games with female protagonists that are not made for the male gaze. However, this is only speculation.

It was not expected that the RPG (Role Playing Game) genre would be the most played one. FPS (First Person Shooter) was expected to be the most played genre closely followed by Action RPG and then RPG if one looks at what kind of games have been highlighted lately. This might have impacted the results slightly, that or RPG is in fact a genre that most people play. When looking at genres and acceptance of female protagonists, the RPG genre does not excel in any way. To get more precise results one should do a far more extensive study with more varied subjects and a higher amount of subjects.

When it comes to the question regarding what the subjects think about a higher percentage of games with female protagonists 29% of them chose the “No opinion” option. With such a neutral question it can be interpreted in several ways. From a positive angle this means that those who do not hold a strong opinion about the protagonist’s sex will still buy a game regardless, as long as the other components in the game are found satisfactory. However, the same people will also not care if the female representation is lacking. Those who do not care do not help by being bystanders, they perpetuate the current situation. But the remaining 71% seem positive towards future games with female protagonists and just may choose a game with a female on the cover instead of the one with a white guy with stubbles, even if just to see if there is a new experience in there.

Initial results seem very promising with such a high percentage of subjects being positive towards female protagonists. However, a bigger study must be conducted to get even more accurate results; it is a little bit surprising that not a single one was in any way negative towards heroic female protagonists. But this does show that men who think that way are in a small minority. Some of the subjects thought that it was a peculiar thing to research because why would not games with female protagonists sell? Having such a focused questionnaire might also have had an effect on results, someone might be skeptical to the idea of there being more games with female protagonists but did not want to be that outlying data point, though it is more likely that they do not care if there are games with female protagonists or not, because their needs could be fulfilled already. It does not look like the statement that games with female protagonists would not sell holds much truth, at least not in Sweden.

While not touched upon in this thesis, let’s not forget about People of Color and members of the HBTQ community, while PoC have had minor representation in the form of sideline characters, HBTQ members have had barely even that in the game media. As it is right now the game media is very white, male centric and heteronormative in its nature. When it comes to games with a predefined protagonist it would not be surprising if it is easier to convince a publisher to create a game with a colored male protagonist than it is to convince them to publish a game with a female protagonist, even more so if she is not white, and a game with an HBTQ protagonist is probably far off into the future. However, all of this is pure speculation as of now and could be subject for future research in the field of game protagonists.
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Appendix 1 Games

Remember Me:

It is a game set in the future where the player takes the role of Nilin, a memory mixer, who has lost her own memory and is now trying to recover it. The game involves free-running, climbing and unarmed combat. Nilin has a device strapped to her right forearm with which she can remix people’s memories and/or kill them by overloading their brains. This is done by accessing people’s minds through implants. As the player progress more abilities become available to choose from to develop Nilin’s melee arsenal.

Mass Effect 3:

In this trilogy of science-fiction role playing third person shooter the player creates their own version of the human protagonist “Commander Shepard”, one can decide on sex, ethnicity, face and hair, so one can create a character to ones’ own liking. There are several classes to choose from, all with their own feel and mix of tech and biotic (telekinetic) powers and weapon training. Much of the time is spent running around on different locations and shooting enemies but depending on how one plays as much time can be spent on conversing with NPC’s (Non Player Character). All conversations are fully voiced and “Shepard” has both male and female voice acting. During conversations one can choose from different options to decide what one will say to the NPC(s), which often leads to differing outcomes. During the games the player will encounter NPCs which might end up as companions and follow on the journey. Some can be romanced and it is up to the player to decide Shepard’s sexuality, though romancing is purely optional.

Assassin’s Creed 3:

Assassin’s Creed 3 is the fifth installment in the Assassin’s Creed series. The player assumes the role of Desmond Miles, a descendant of a long line of prominent Assassins. He is forced into the “Animus”, a machine with which one can relive ones’ ancestors’ memories. One plays then as the several ancestors throughout the games to find several artifacts, “Pieces of Eden”, which hold great power and can decide humanity’s fate. While playing as an ancestor the player can utilize free-running skills in an open world which becomes bigger the further one gets in the game and a manner of weapons to assassination the targets, be it thrown daggers, hidden blades, sword etc. The first game plays out in the Middle East, the second in Renaissance Italy and the third in America during the independence war.

Gears of War series:

The games are third person shooters which are set on the fictional planet “Sera” which were colonized by humans sometime in the past. After long wars between the human factions the sentient beings “Locust” emerge from the planets’ inside to attack the humans. The player assumes the role of Marcus Fenix, a soldier, throughout the three released games (a fourth game has been announced with a different protagonist). These are games where cover based combat is key, running from cover to cover and utilizing blind fire to shoot over cover without the risk of getting shot oneself but without any accuracy. One can rise above the cover to shoot accurately but runs the risk of getting shot. In the games there is the assault rifle know as the “Lancer” which has a chainsaw bayonet. The game is known to be gory with large blood spatters.
**Starcraft 2: Heart of the Swarm:**

Starcraft is an RTS (Real Time Strategy) series where one has an isometric overview of the battlefield and can control a large amount of units. The series is set in the “Koprulu” sector in our galaxy where humans have some off-shoot colonies disconnected from Earth’s government. There are three warring factions, the Terrans (humans), the Protoss (psionic aliens) and the Zerg (a swarm of different animalistic beings, controlled through psionic force by one entity). All three of factions have their very own units and playstyle. In the “Heart of the Swarm” expansion to Starcraft 2 the player basically assumes the role of Sarah Kerrigan (AKA “Queen of Blades”), a human infested with a Zerg virus, who controls the majority of the swarm’s broods through her psionic powers. Her goal is to kill Arcturus Mengsk, a cruel tyrant, who left her on a Zerg infested planet where they turned her due to her having high psionic potential. In the first game and its expansion, Brood Wars, with a total of six campaigns (2 for each faction) the player controls the Zerg and has Kerrigan as a lead figure in two of them. The rest have different male leads and the first part of the Starcraft 2, “Wings of Liberty”, and the player assumed the role of Jim Raynor who had fallen in love with Kerrigan before her infestation. He also wants to bring down Mengsk.

**Tomb Raider:**

In the game one takes the role of the iconic Lara Croft before she is a tomb raider. Lara and her companions get shipwrecked on an island which is populated by previously shipwrecked men who have gone insane and are now part of a bloody, human sacrificial sect. Climb cliff edges, explore the island which is a host to a manner of dangers, rescue Lara’s companions and discover old tombs with relics hidden on the island. Use guns, a mountain climbing pick and a makeshift bow and arrows to defend yourself against both sectists and animals. In this game Lara has a realistic body type and a wider personality.

**Call of Duty: Black Ops 2:**

The eighth game in the Call of Duty series, not connected to the Modern Warfare storyline. It’s an FPS (First Person Shooter) with a single player, multiplayer and co-op component. In single player the player takes the role of Alex Mason, protagonist from CoD: Black Ops, and Alex’s son, David Mason, in two connected story lines. One story line takes place during the cold war in the late 1980’s and the other taking place during a future cold war in 2025. There is a game mode where one assumes an RTS (Real Time Strategy) commander kind role where one can order soldiers around in specific scenarios. The player can also go into an FPS mode, directly controlling a ground soldier.

**Madden NFL 13:**

The 2013 installment of the American football game, where the player can play all the individuals in a football team, can play single player and multiplayer, either online or with several controllers connected to the same machine. As it portrays the NFL league only male players are available.
**Halo 4:**

A science fiction FPS game which changes to third person perspective when entering vehicles and the like. The player assumes the role of Master Chief, a human cyborg in power armor, who has to protect humanity from an overwhelming alien threat. An almost constant companion to Master Chief is an AI called Cortana, she sometimes is projected as a hologram, “naked” without detail on genitals or breasts. One can use both human and alien weaponry which can be found in the world and from killed enemies. The game can also be played cooperatively in splitscreen.

**Just Dance 4:**

Fourth game in a series which uses motion sensitive controllers or motion sensors to read the players’ movements which are then matched to the displayed templates. The game uses licensed songs and with them shows dance moves which the player follows, the more accurate imitation the higher the score. The game can be played by one or two players, if playing with someone else then can either do so cooperatively or competitively. The game can also be used in workout sessions. The players can choose from a series of preset avatars, both male and female.

**NBA 2K13:**

A basketball game where the player can play all the individuals in a basketball team, can play single player and multiplayer, either online or with several controllers connected to the same machine. As it portrays the NBA league only male players are available.

**Borderlands 2:**

A sequel to the first Borderlands game, set on the same fictional planet Pandora, a science-fiction FPS which switches to third person perspective upon entering vehicles. In the sequel the player can choose from four (five, if one has the right DLC) new protagonists, three males and one female: a sneaky one, a muscular heavy gun wielder, a more tactical gun and ordinance soldier type and a female telekinetic (and elemental) power user. They are mercenaries looking for a mysterious alien vault which is said to hold great riches. The players level up by killing enemies and thus unlock new powers. Gain money and new weapons by killing enemies and opening chests. The different characters have different kind of powers. The player takes missions from NPC’s which often involve killing someone or something. Can be played by a single player or up to four players online in a cooperative mode.

**Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3:**

An FPS where the player assumes the role of different male soldiers, playing the story from different perspectives (but on the same side of the conflict). The world has been plunged into a third world war and it is up to the player to through the different characters’ missions complete missions which turns the tide of the battle in their favor. The missions are mostly following a predetermined path and shooting every enemy to be allowed to continue. There are also vehicular sections where one is an armed passenger.
*Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes*:

It is a LEGO action-adventure game where the player can assume the role of Batman and other superheroes from Batman’s universe, such as Batgirl, Flash, Wonder Woman and Superman. It is an open world game where one can deconstruct certain things, made from LEGO bricks, naturally, and build new things to get to previously unreachable places and to solve puzzles. The heroes have their own unique powers which fit their character. The game can be played cooperatively in splitscreen. The goal is to recapture all of the escaped convicts from the Arkham Asylum.

*FIFA Soccer 13*:

A football game where the player can play all the individuals in a football team, can play single player and multiplayer, either online or with several controllers connected to the same machine. As it portrays the male soccer leagues only male players are available.
Appendix 2 Questionnaire

(The questionnaire used was only in Swedish, here there are translations)

1. Ålder (Age):

2. Vilka sorts spel spelar du? (Markera alla som stämmer) (What kind of games do you play? (Check all that apply))

   A. FPS (Battlefield, Call of Duty, Team Fortress 2)
   B. MMORPG (Guild Wars 2, World of Warcraft, EVE online)
   C. RPG (Skyrim, Dragon Age, Fallout)
   D. RTS (Supreme Commander, Starcraft, Age of Empires)
   E. Action RPG (Mass effect, Dishonored, Deus Ex)
   F. Action Adventure (Tomb Raider, Uncharted, Batman Arkham Asylum)
   G. Platformer (Braid, Super Mario, Limbo)
   H. Fighting (Street Fighter, Mortal Kombat, Soul Calibur)
   I. MOBA (Dota 2, League of Legends, Heroes of Newerth)
   J. Racing (Need for Speed, Flatout, Gran Turismo)
   K. Sport (Fifa, NHL, Madden)

3. I genomsnitt, hur många timmar per vecka ägnar du åt att spela? (On average, how many hours per week do you spend playing?)

   A. 1-5
   B. 6-10
   C. 11-20
   D. 21-30
   E. 31+

4. I rollspel där man kan välja kön, vilket av svarsalternativen nedan stämmer bäst överens? (Även om du inte spelar rollspel, välj det du tror du skulle göra) (In role-playing games where one can choose gender, which of the options below applies to you? (Even if you don’t play RPG’s, pick what you think you would do))

   A. Spelar mest som kvinna
   B. Spelar mest som man
   C. Spelar båda lika mycket
   D. Spelar enbart som kvinna
   E. Spelar enbart som man

   A. Play mostly as female
   B. Play mostly as male
   C. Play both as much
   D. Play only female
   E. Play only male

5. Var skulle du känna dig mest bekväm i att spela som en kvinna, i Single player eller Multiplayer? (Would you feel more comfortable playing a game as a female character in single player or multiplayer?)
A. Single player.
B. Multiplayer

6. Om du valde A. Single player, vilken aspekt av multiplayer skulle få dig att känna dig obekväm att spela som kvinna. (Markera alla som stämmer) (If you chose A. Single player, what aspect of multiplayer would make you uncomfortable about playing as a female character. (Check all that apply))

A. Jag vill inte att mina vänner ska se mig som en kvinnlig karaktär
B. Kvinnliga spelare behandlas illa
C. Det finns färre val för kvinnliga karaktärer
D. Det känns som om folk dömer mig om jag spelar en attraktiv kvinnlig karaktär
E. Det känns obekvämt om en manlig spelare stöter på mig i tron om att jag är en kvinna i verkligheten
F. Ingen, jag bara föredrar att spela Single player
G. Övrigt:

H. I don’t want my friends to see me as a female character
I. Female players get treated badly
J. There are fewer options for female characters
K. I feel judged if I play as an attractive female
L. I feel uncomfortable when some male hits on me in the belief that I’m a real female
M. None, I just prefer Single player games
N. Other:

7. Om du bortser från tidigare kunskap om spelet, vilket spel skulle du helst välja, det med kvinnlig eller manlig karaktär? (If you disregard any previous knowledge of the game, which game would you most likely play, the one with a female or male character?)

Mass Effect 3, Bioware
A. Den med en man på framsidan
B. Den med en kvinna på framsidan
C. Ingen preferens

A. The one with a male on the cover
B. The one with a female on the cover
C. No preference

8. Om du valde den med mannen, vad skulle kunna få dig att välja den med kvinnan? (Markera alla som stämmer) (If you picked male, what could change your mind to pick female? (Check all that apply))

A. Ingenting, jag vill bara spela som man
B. Om hon hade på sig mindre täckande klädsel
C. Om hon var mer muskulös
D. Om hon var mer feminin
E. Om hon såg gladare ut
F. Om hon såg vänligare ut
G. Övrigt:

A. Nothing, I only want to play as a male
B. If she wore revealing clothing
C. If she had more muscles
D. If she was more feminine
E. If she looked happier
F. If she looked friendlier
G. Other:

9. Hur skulle du känna om det fanns en större andel spel med kvinnliga protagonister som gör samma hjältedåd som manliga (Räddar andra, tar sig själv ur problem, leder krigare etc.)? (Obs: Som mest vartannat spel) (How would you feel about there being a higher percentage of games with female protagonists who do the same heroics as male protagonists (Saving others, can get herself out of trouble, leading warriors etc.)? (Note: at most every other game))

A. Väldigt bra
B. Bra
C. Ingen åsikt
D. Dåligt
E. Väldigt dåligt

A. Very good
B. Good
C. No opinion
D. Bad
E. Very bad
10. Om du svarade “Dåligt” eller “Väldigt dåligt”, varför? (Markera alla som stämmer) (If you answered “Bad” or “Very bad”, why? (Check all that apply))

A. Jag vill inte spela spel där jag tvingas att spela som kvinna
B. Spel skulle inte vara lika blodiga om de har en kvinna som protagonist
C. Det skulle bli färre spel som de är nu, och jag gillar hur de är nu
D. Jag vill inte ha kvinnor i spel som ”Battlefield” för att jag känner mig inte bekväm med att skjuta dem
E. Det är orealistiskt att kvinnor skulle göra samma saker som män i spel
F. Jag vill inte hoppa över lovande spel för att jag inte kan köra som man
G. Övrigt:

A. Because I don’t want games where I am forced to play as a female
B. Games wouldn’t be as gory if they have females as protagonists
C. There would be less games like they are now, and I like how they are now
D. I don’t want females in games like “Battlefield” because I don’t feel comfortable with shooting them
E. It’s unrealistic that females would do the same things that males do in games
F. I don’t want to skip out on a promising game because I can’t play as a male
G. Other:
Appendix 3 Seventh console generation

The consoles which are part of the seventh console generation are:

- Wii
- Xbox 360
- Playstation 3

The Xbox 360 was first released November 2005, the Playstation 3 and Wii were first released during November 2006.

Many of the games created for the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 consoles have been made available for the PC (Personal Computers with Windows as its Operating System) as well.