

Passing the Torch: Female Protagonists in Video Games

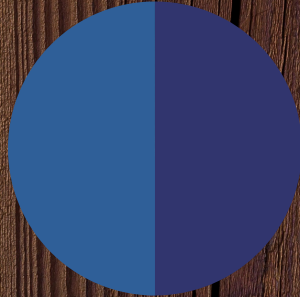
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Introduction

The Bechdel test (also known as the Bechdel-Wallace test), is a measure of the representation of women in fiction. It asks whether a work features at least two women who talk to each other about something other than a man. While this measure has many limitations and does not dictate the quality of the project, it does highlight a systemic pattern of women having less important roles than men in games. In a research article published by Jessica E. Tompkins, Teresa Lynch, Niki Fritz, and Irene I. Van Driel, they found that when viewing video games under the lens of ambivalent sexism, the “social psychological theory posits that sexism consists of hostile and benevolent attitudes about women.” (Tompkins 236) Steadily, however, women in games have begun to grow beyond their traditional roles, and in recent years, there has been a sharp increase in games that feature a female lead or that have more layered female characters. Using the Bechdel Test as a guideline, I decided to examine 2 games from 10 popular video game franchises to see if there was change in how they handled their female characters.

Methods

I used the Bechdel Test on 10 different video game franchises that started with a male protagonist vs future games that featured a female protagonist instead. I started all the way back from 1980 with the Pac-Man series to the Last of Us 2, which was released midway through 2020.



Results

Out of the 20 games I analyzed, half of them passed the Bechdel Test. I found that even games that started out with almost no female characters in the story often evolved to include more in succeeding titles, and in many cases, even replace the male protagonists with female ones. Some franchises handled this gradually, building up the female characters as initial side-kicks before making them the protagonist in succeeding titles. In titles that shared the same chronology with previous games in the franchise, almost all of the previous male protagonists fulfilled some sort of mentor role to the younger female hero.

Discussion

From my analysis, it seems fair to say that the video game industry is changing. What was once viewed as something strictly made for teenage boys has become something closer to an artform made for a wide audience of both men and women. The Bechdel Test was not a perfect method, but it did highlight a phenomenon that has existed all the way back in 1982: Female characters taking up the mantle as protagonist *after* their male counterparts. Almost all game franchises that feature a female protagonist first feature a male one. All of the evidence points towards video games becoming more inclusive over time, and female gamers to feel more represented in gaming. Soon, I believe that video games will start to shift less from the male mentor/female student dynamic and move towards games catered to female audiences from the very start instead of somewhere down the line.

References:

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