

**LESSON: WOMEN AS BACKGROUND DECORATION PART 2 (60 MINUTES)**

In this lesson or series of lessons, students will watch the 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 2' video from the Feminist Frequency series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*. Students will continue to explore how the 'Women as Background Decoration' trope is used in various ways to develop the plot, character, setting and tone of game worlds. Students will then consider the broader social consequences of the trope, and begin to think about how games can subvert narratives perpetuating the myth that patriarchy and misogyny are inevitable aspects of reality.

**LEARNING GOALS**

By the end of this lesson/series of lessons, students/viewers will:

1. Delve deeper into the 'Women as Background Decoration' trope and explore how it functions in a way that uses violence against women as a plot device, to develop characters and setting, and to set the tone of game worlds in video games;
2. Consider the implications of the normalization of violence against women through the brutalization of 'inessential' female bodies in video games and other narratives;
3. Explore ways interactive media and other narratives can combat systemic and gendered oppression instead of perpetuating such violence through replication.

**MATERIALS**

- Computer
- Projector
- Printed copies of 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 2' note companions

**Before: Minds On**

This lesson comes with a trigger warning, as suggested in the video itself. Students should be warned about the violent in-game content shown in the video, and a discussion should be held around the importance of approaching content critically. **[5 MINUTES]**

Brainstorm ideas around the word 'violence' and its definition, expanding on the idea of violence as encompassing both physical aspects and emotional and systemic forms. Encourage students to mention examples and draw from media that they believe contain violent elements. **[10 MINUTES]**



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### *During Action!*

Watch the 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 2' video (places to pause due to time restraints or opportunities for embedded discussion and/or activities below):

- 0:40 Review of the trope definition
- 1:10 Dual role of women: Sexual Playthings/Victims of Male Violence
- 2:35 Sexualized dead bodies, 'Drop dead gorgeous' trope
- 3:50 Brutalizing women's bodies as game world development
- 7:20 Rape and sexual assault as 'emotional currency'
- 9:10 Side missions: Female NPCs as Helpless Damsels or Dead Victims
- 16:25 Character Development of Villains and Female Trauma
- 18:15 Sexual Violence, Mature Themes, and Trivializing Real Problems
- 20:30 Angry Anti-hero Male Narratives
- 23:30 Replication vs. Critique
- 24:30 The problem with perceived inevitability of violence and narrative as a method of challenging oppression **[30 MINUTES]**

### *After: Consolidation & Connection*

#### Differentiated Instruction:

- Note companions to help students work through definitions and content, including collaboration following viewing
- 'Pause and Reflect' opportunities throughout viewing
- Emphasis on the use of visual examples

Following the video, ask students for their overall impressions and anything they thought was particularly shocking, or that they did not expect to see. They could also comment on their experiences with graphic video games such as the ones shown in the 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 2' video. Some additional discussion questions could include:

- Where else have you seen similar treatment of women in media?
- Were the images you saw in the video games included shocking to you? Why or why not?
- How might the brutalization of 'inessential' female Non-Playable Characters trivialize the experiences of women who have been victims of assault? (If the lesson for the 'Damsel in Distress: Part 2' video has been previously completed, ask students to make connections to the experiences of these women in particular)
- How could Non-Playable Characters be used in ways that are dynamic and add to the flavouring of game worlds without being brutalized or otherwise disempowered?
- What is the difference between a villain and an anti-hero? How does playing as an anti-hero impact the gameplay experience? **[15 MINUTES]**



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## POST-VIDEO ACTIVITY OPTIONS

### 1. Replication and Critique

Students will pick a movie, TV show, book, video game or other form of media that they believe contains explicit forms of violence against women, and will then pose an argument regarding whether they think it replicates or critiques violence based on the distinction made in the 'Women as Background Decoration: Part 2' video. This can take the form of a blog, video blog, presentation, or a written form based on the needs of the class.

An example a teacher might use could be Suzanne Collins' trilogy *The Hunger Games*, which some have argued uses the violence that occurs in the novels as a way of critiquing both physical and systemic forms of violence. By contrast, game franchises like Grand Theft Auto replicate violence without critiquing its presence in reality.

An example a teacher might want to use could be the short game by Nina Freeman called *Freshman Year* (this is a free browser-based game available here: <http://ninasays.so/freshmanyear/>) This game depicts the assault of a woman in a social setting, and includes issues such as women's attire and alcohol consumption to critique a culture of 'victim blaming'. Again this could be contrasted with game franchises such as Grand Theft.

### 2. Game Pitch

Students will be put into groups and will come up with a game concept that takes an overarching issue (i.e. violence against women, sexual objectification and exploitation, racism, xenophobia, patriarchy, homophobia) and uses narrative as a way to subvert oppressive systems currently in place. Students will create character designs, a general plot line, ideas about game mechanics and how the game would actually work, and design sketches for the setting/game world. They will also need to come up with a target audience and promotional item for the game idea, such as the outside of the game's case, a poster, or an ad.

In their groups, students will present their game pitch to the class, and will discuss how the game would work to undo oppressive belief systems, while also considering the game's playability.

#### *Alternative Activity:* Call to Action

Students will be organized into groups to design an innovative campaign that combats the issue of violence against women. Using the concepts and realities presented in the 'Women as Background Decoration Part 2' video, students will develop a campaign name, message, and target or mission to accomplish. Students will select a platform to share this message and outline how they would do this in a way that captures an audience, shares factual information and requires a call to action. Students will present their group's campaign to the class and facilitate a feedback discussion which includes suggestions, other resources, and useful partnerships.

To support and generate ideas, other viral campaigns can be shared and discussed based on their



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effectiveness, bias/non-bias/sources of information, longevity, and impact. Some campaigns to review may include: the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge, #Kony2012, Facebook Display Picture Modifications, Essena O'Neill's Instagram Reredits, etc.

### 3. Exploring Villains

Seeing as violence against women (and violence in general) is often used as a way to build the villain's character development, students will be asked to analyze a villain of their choosing and whether violence informed who they are in the narratives they inhabit. For this activity students can draw from movies, TV, video games, books, comic books/graphic novels and other forms of media. Students will be asked to consider how the villain they chose could have been developed in ways that did not include unnecessary violence or, if violence is a key component to the villain's development, how this violence impacts the experience of the viewer/player and their understanding of the character. Students will be asked to present the information about their character and open up a discussion surrounding this character in class. To extend this lesson, students could be asked to select a villain from history and research whether there is any violence or trauma in their background that influenced their actions.