LESSON: **DAMSEL IN DISTRESS PART 2** (60 MINUTES)

In this lesson or series of lessons, students will watch the 'Damsel in Distress: Part 2' video from the Feminist Frequency series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,* and will consider how contemporary video games exploit women. In particular it will examine how video games enact violence upon their female (damsel'd) characters that can normalize real life violence against women through 'mature content'. Students will also investigate how video games can work to help players explore challenging issues such as loss and death.

LEARNING GOALS

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

1. Learn about how variations on the Damsel in Distress trope (i.e. The damsel in the refrigerator and the mercy killing) are used to serve as ways for video games to incorporate 'mature content';

2. Consider how games that 'use' violence against women mirror real life issues of domestic violence, and often normalize these problems;

3. Investigate how video games can instead work to help players explore difficult issues such as loss and death, instead of glorifying violence as an answer.

MATERIALS

- Computer

- Projector

- Printed copies of "Damsel in Distress: Part 2" note companions

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Before: Minds On

A trigger warning is included in the video itself, which teachers should elaborate on during the lesson as it deals with discussions surrounding violence in video games and the broader implications of violence in media, especially as it pertains to various forms of violence against women. This video does include mature content and language. **[5 MINUTES]**

The video 'Damsel in Distress: Part 2' deals in part with how video games can normalize violence against women in real life contexts. To facilitate preliminary discussion surrounding lived experiences of violence, the video includes personal accounts from women who have experienced various forms of violence. The following videos are examples of slam poetry performed by women who discuss their own experiences of violence in various forms. Videos should be chosen at the discretion of the teacher based on the age of students and any specific needs or concerns students might have. Some contain explicit language.

"Shrinking Women" by Lily Myers: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zQucWXWXp3k **[3:33]**

"Trigger Warning" by Briana Zora Libby: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtUaTk8e-Rg **[3:17]**

"Two Hands" by Muggs Fogarty: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzxznrTNqdg **[3:13]**

"Girl Code 101" by Blythe Baird: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B-8v54uji3k **[2:55]**

"Somewhere in America" by Belissa Escobedo, Rhiannon McGavin and Zariya Allen:
    https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OadZpUJv8Eg **[3:47]**

Discussion should follow these videos regarding the lived experiences of women in the context of perpetuated violence. Some conversation starters to facilitate discussion on this difficult topic are:

- Are there any emotions, experiences or reactions that weave these stories together? What are they?

- What are these people trying to say in these expressions of their experiences?

- Why do you think poetry was their chosen medium and is it effective or not?

- Do you think their voices are heard or represented in alignment to their experiences in other media outlets? **[15 MINUTES]**

During Action!

Watch the 'Damsel in Distress: Part 2" video (places to pause due to time constraints or opportunities for embedded discussion and/or activities below):

1:35   Review of the Damsel in Distress
4:15   Emotional Bonds as 'Justification' of the Damsel as Plot Device
5:15   Victimization of Women to appear 'Dark and Edgy': *Women in Refrigerators and Gail Simone* (6:00), *The Damsel in the Refrigerator* (8:45), incorporating 'mature content' (10:20), *Violence against women – defined* (10:45), *The Mercy Killing* (12:25), *Euthanized Damsel* (12:40).
16:55   Consequences of Violence in Games and Violence against Women
20:35   Gameplay Mechanics and Violence
21:00   Media and the Cultivation Effect: Dominant Gender Paradigm
22:00   Gender ideals (women as symbols of female ideal and innocence, men as upholding patriarchal duty to protect) and *The Failed Hero Story* (23:00)
23:15   Responsibly exploring loss and death in video games
  [25 MINUTES]

Questions to Ask During Video: to prompt critical analysis thought process

- What do you notice about the clothing/colours/voices of the 'female'/'male' characters?

- What assumptions are made about the sexuality of the 'female'/'male' characters?

- What expectations do we have for the 'female'/'male' characters when we are presented with the game?

- Would you have wanted to play Dinosaur Planet? Why or why not?

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

- Drawing from familiar characters for reference

After: Consolidation & Connection

Following the video 'Damsel in Distress: Part 2,' ask students to consider the slam poetry video(s) watched at the beginning of the lesson in the context of the damsel in distress trope, and how violence is used to exploit female characters to maintain a certain image.

- How does the pattern of violence in video games (and other forms of media) relate to the lived experiences described by the slam poets we listened to?

- In the video, the term "Violence against women" is used to refer to "images of women being victimized or when violence is linked specifically to a character's gender or sexuality". How does this definition relate to the experiences of the women discussing their own violent experiences?

- How could video games and other forms of media work to combat the pattern of violence against women which the poets discuss in various forms? **[15 MINUTES]**

POST-VIDEO ACTIVITY OPTIONS

1. **Alternative Game Pitch**
   This activity requires students to pick a genre of video game that is not explored in the video 'Damsel in Distress: Part 2' (e.g. racing, puzzles, strategy, sports) and deconstruct the motivation for the player in those games. What appeal or reward or experience do those games offer that attract players? Reflect on what devices/mechanics are used in gameplay and what is achieved by these. Examples of key gameplay motivations students may decide attract players include adrenaline, problem solving, innovation and competition.

   After students have identified alternative motivators to game play, ask them to redesign a quest type game that is featured in the video 'Damsel in Distress: Part 2' using an alternative motivation to the thrill of violence. Because it is suggested that unnecessary violence (often against female characters) is used to give games a 'dark and edgy' quality that allows them to stand out in the industry, students will be asked to find ways they could remove unnecessary violence from games while still attracting players. This could involve deepening character development, enhancing settings and backstories, and altering game play mechanics to achieve desired effects. Students will be asked to create a 'pitch' for the altered game.

2. **Creating Slam Poetry**
   Have students use slam poetry as a way of exploring issues raised in the video 'Damsel in Distress: Part 2'. Students can keep close to the topic of video games and the concept of enacting violence on characters, and explore specific concerns raised in the videos, or they could address broader issues surrounding gendered societal expectations, norms and values. Students should be encouraged to discuss topic ideas with their teacher and peers.

The following TED Education video on slam poetry can help introduce the process to students: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f8VcV8v2LE

The poetry can be created in an hour-long workshop where students play with form and concept, polish and present the poems to each other, or work in pairs to produce videos of their poems to share with the class.

3. **Comparing the Positive Effects of Video Games and Movies**
    Students will be asked to pick a video game they think is emotionally positive or productive in helping players work through issues or concerns (either a game mentioned in the video or a game that has impacted them positively), and a movie that they believe has the potential to positively impact the viewer. This activity will ask students to compare how interactive media might help players explore difficult topics in ways that are healthy to movies and more one-sided forms of media which help viewers explore these topics in different ways. This can be done either as a discussion on different forms of media and their impact, or as a more personal, reflective exercise on students' own relationships with media.