

**LESSON: DAMSEL IN DISTRESS PART 3 (60 MINUTES)**

In this lesson or series of lessons, students will watch the 'Damsel in Distress: Part 3' video from the Feminist Frequency series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, compare the 'Damsel in Distress' to inverted versions of the trope, and explore how the 'Dude in Distress' functions differently in broader social contexts. Students will consider the dangers of nostalgia for past media trends acting to perpetuate outdated, sexist ideals, and will also explore how video games and other forms of media can instead be used to promote more inclusive beliefs and practices.

**LEARNING GOALS**

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

1. Compare the 'Damsel in Distress' to the 'Dude in Distress' and consider the significance and function of the inverted trope;
2. Learn about and consider the implications of the resurgence of the 'Damsel in Distress' trope in comparison to perpetuated sexist societal values;
3. Consider how video games and other forms of media can productively combat sexism and related belief systems.

**MATERIALS**

- Computer
- Projector
- Printed copies of 'Damsel in Distress: Part 3' note companions
- Chart paper and markers

**Before: Minds On**

Write 'Characters In Distress' on one piece of chart paper and tape it up on the wall or board. Use multiples for a larger class. Ask students to come up with as many examples of characters that are in distress as they can within 10 minutes. Encourage discussion – students can draw from TV, movies, books...or anything else if they can argue it contains the trope. Students can come up and write their answers on the piece(s) of paper informally. Review the concept of a plotline that involves a protagonist, antagonist and story arc that, in quest or hero genres, often involves someone in distress requiring aid offered by the hero. **[10 MINUTES]**

Discuss the findings with the class – go through specific examples the students identified and examine the amount of titles as well, alongside any initial observations students have about the lists. **[10 MINUTES]**

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## During Action:

Watch the 'Damsel in Distress: Part 3' video (places to pause due to time restraints or opportunities for embedded discussion and/or activities below):

- 1:05 Does the 'Dude in Distress' exist?
- 1:25 *Super Princess Peach*
- 3:05 Other inversion plot devices
- 4:35 Damsel in Distress vs. Dude in Distress Comparison
- 6:55 Fan-made Gender Hacking and combatting the status quo
- 8:10 Independent Developers and Love Letters to the Damsel trope
- 10:40 Self-aware trope use and Damsels as objects
- 12:05 Ironic Sexism
- 12:40 Humour and the Damsel in Distress
- 17:55 Sexist Parody vs. Parody of Sexism, subverting the Damsel trope
- 19:50 Deconstruction of gender roles: A game concept
- 21:15 Co-operation and Mutual Aid in video games **[25 MINUTES]**

**Differentiated Instruction:**

- Note companions to help students work through definitions and content, including collaboration following viewing;
- 'Pause and Reflect' opportunities throughout viewing

## After: Consolidation &amp; Connection

Ask students if they have any additional observations concerning the lists they made at the beginning of the class. Prompt discussion with the following questions:

- How does the 'Damsel in Distress' trope function in (an example from the list)?
- Do any of these examples use either trope in a way that is self-aware and clearly referring to the trope itself? Can we think of any more examples that use 'ironic sexism' possibly outside of video games in popular culture?
- How are the examples we identified for 'Character in Distress' different between genders? Are there any similarities?
- How does the game concept shown in the video reject the 'Damsel in Distress' trope? Can we think of any examples of video games, movies, or tv shows that actively employ a similar approach?
- How does this change our experience of perceived gender roles? **[15 MINUTES]**

**POST-VIDEO ACTIVITY OPTIONS**

These activities can be used in-class or as summative evaluations (assessment of learning), provided they also work to prove students are reaching curriculum expectations within the courses in which this lesson is being used. These activities are also flexible depending on resources and needs – students can work independently or collaboratively.

**1. Game Review** (reference Feminist Frequency reviews when they become available)

Ask students to read game reviews of a few games they like/have played before. As a class, work through some of the things game reviewers look at when they review a game (playability, originality, storyline, etc.). Then ask students to pick a game they have played before and review it based not only on this criteria, but also as the game relates to the 'damsel in distress' and other gendered tropes. Examples of guiding questions include:

- Are characters of different genders represented in ways that empower them within the narrative, or disempowered in ways that do not connect clearly to the plot? Could the game have been altered to be more inclusive?
- Do the game mechanics require the player participate in unnecessary violence? If the game is a more violent game (i.e. first person shooters), ask if there are ways the game could be more dynamic with regards to story.
- What is lacking in this game with regards to character development, plot, etc.?
- What did this game do well?

If students have not played a game enough themselves to perform a fair review, they may also have the option of writing a book or movie review asking similar questions about character use and gender representation.

**2. Gender Hacking**

While it is clearly articulated in the video that "equal-opportunity damselling" is not the answer, the idea of the gender hack serves as a way for students to begin to question why men and women are often found playing the same types of extreme gender binary representations in video games.

For this activity, students will be asked to pick a video game featured in the video 'Damsel in Distress: Part 3' that stars a male character, and loosely rewrite the story to feature a more relatable male character. Many of the video games rely on male characters that are hyper-masculine, hyper-dominant and aggressively independent. Students will be encouraged to rewrite these characters to be more realistic in their presence and tactics, and by rewriting their relationships/interactions with other characters to be more cooperative and agency sharing. Students will then be asked to reflect on the process, and how normalizing the male lead position makes them consider the destructive nature of extreme gender roles in narrative. Furthermore, students should discuss how deconstructing artificial representations of gender opens the

doorway for a diverse inclusion of gender for protagonists, allowing for more dynamic and empowering gameplay.

### 3. This or That Presentation

Have students collect memes, cartoons, video clips, artifacts (e.g. clothing, mugs, posters), etc. from the internet that they identify as sexist parody or parody of sexism and print them out (video clips you can print link and use back of paper) and set up a gallery of everyone's examples around the room with their identification on the back. Create a list for everyone with each example numbered and have students go around the room, observe each example and mark down whether they think it is sexist parody or parody of sexism. Once everyone has evaluated all examples each person presents their own example and reveals why they think it is parody of sexism or sexist parody. Others can challenge the opinion if they identified it differently.

Alternatively, you could set up as an Ellen style "epic or fail", where each person presents their example and the audience either holds up a "sexist parody" or "parody of sexism" sign to take a class poll. After observing the vote, the presenter reveals and explains their own identification, which is open to challenge from the audience.