LESSON: MS. MALE CHARACTER (2 HOURS)

In this lesson or series of lessons, students will watch the 'Ms. Male Character' video from the Feminist Frequency series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, and explore various aspects of gender identity and the treatment of gender with regards to character development. Students will become familiar with and explore the implications of the following concepts in both video games and broader contexts during this lesson and related activities: the Ms. Male Character, gender signifiers (feminized), gender binaries and gender presentation (continuum), 'marked' characters and relational characterization, and the phenomenon of the 'male by default' mentality.

LEARNING GOALS

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

1. Consider how the Ms. Male Character trope and other methods of gendered character development are used in a wide variety of video games and popular media;

2. Explore the implications of restrictive, socially constructed notions of gender through the imposition of feminized gender signifiers (and gendered expectations) in the context of both video games and real-life experiences;

3. Critically analyze the construction of characters in both video games and other forms of media, and explore the consequences of shallow characterization and other related concepts as they pertain to socially constructed norms and assumptions.

MATERIALS

- Computer
- Projector
- Printed copies of 'Ms. Male Character' note companions

Before: Minds On

Have students draw a male or female character quickly on a piece of paper. Ask them to add a feature to that character to show that they are brave. Ask them to add another feature to show that they are resourceful. Finally, ask the student to write a sentence or two to describe their narrative. Ask a few students to share how their character's strengths and personality are reflected in their appearance. Have a discussion about what we would know and not know about each of the characters if we had stopped at the first step of their drawing (e.g. the sex/gender of the character they drew). **[15 MINUTES]**

If this is the first lesson being used in the *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* series, a preliminary discussion regarding 'critical analysis' as a process of questioning, and 'tropes' as identified patterns will help students understand the goal of the videos (helping viewers question the media they use/consume and the broader implications of media). Alternatively, a brief outline of the video will help provide students with a foundation for understanding some of the concepts discussed. **[5 MINUTES]**

During Action!

Watch the 'Ms. Male Character' video (places to pause due to time restraints or opportunities for embedded discussion and/or activities below):

0:50   Pac-Man and the History of the Ms. Male Character
4:30   Design Elements *(Gendered Character Development and*
8:45   *Feminized Gender Signifiers)*
       The consequences of gender signifiers *(enforcing gender binary vs. representing a continuum of gender, 'marked' vs 'unmarked' characters, 'Personality Female Syndrome' and shallow characterization, homophobia/transphobia in character development)*
13:40 'The Smurfette Principle' and Katha Pollitt
16:15 Consequences of the Trope *(Relational characterization, 'male by default' mentality, gender norms and expectations)*
19:50 Marketing and Promotional Materials *('male by default' cont.)*
22:40 Broader Contexts and Uses of the Trope
23:10 Examples of Games that avoid the Ms. Male trope **[25 MINUTES]**

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

After: Consolidation & Connection

Ask students to reconsider the characters they discussed at the beginning of class, keeping in mind the concepts covered in the video. Some questions to consider:

- How do the concepts discussed in this video apply to the character you drew?

- What role do gender signifiers play in the design of some of the characters we created?

- Did any of the concepts mentioned ('Personality Female Syndrome,' 'The Smurfette Principle,' etc.) change how you think about any of the characters mentioned?

- Why do you think some developers opt for more 'simple,' stereotypical female characters? Relate this question to discussions regarding lazy characterization and marketing.

- Did you represent your character through any default gender signifiers? Why? **[15 MINUTES]**

Introduce Post-Video Activities **[30 MINUTES – 1 HOUR DEPENDING ON IN-CLASS WORK]**

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. **Comparing Eras**
   Katha Pollitt's article "Hers; The Smurfette Principle" is mentioned in the 'Ms. Male Character' video, and in this article Pollitt provides a foundation for the phenomenon of relational female characters – where a female character is defined entirely by her relationships to her male counterparts, and is often the only female in a narrative. Print off Pollitt's article (or have students use laptops/tablets to view the article) and ask students to work in groups to compare Pollitt's article and her argument from the early 1990s with the argument posed in the 'Ms. Male Character' video. Encourage students to ask the following questions, using their own knowledge and research:

   • Are the problems Pollitt discusses with regards to the inequality of effective gender representation still prevalent today?

   • In what ways has this issue become better or worse?

   • How does this fit into different forms of media (video games, advertising, movies etc.)?

   This activity might require students to look into references made in Pollitt's article to provide context for her argument, and this task can be facilitated by the teacher or done independently by students.

   The article can be found here:
   http://www.nytimes.com/1991/04/07/magazine/hers-the-smurfette-principle.html

2. **Character Creation/Revamp: Rejecting 'Personality Female Syndrome' and Gendered Signifiers**
   Option 1: Have students come up with a character concept for a female protagonist, where students will be encouraged to delve deeper into the process of character development. This activity can be short (a one-hour workshop) or can take the form of a larger project. Students will begin by reviewing the character they made in the opening of the lesson with and critique the decisions they made to represent gender. Students will then be asked to consider ways they can avoid using the gendered signifiers outlined in the video 'Ms. Male Character', and build their own character. Ask students to select a list of at least 5 characteristics and 5 strengths, then ask students to write a short bio or narrative for their character. Finally they can design and create their character using a medium of their choice. The completed bios and creations can be displayed and presented to the class.

OR

Option 2: Have students take a digital image of one of the female characters mentioned in the 'Ms. Male Character' video (i.e. Wendy, Dixie Kong) or another Ms. Male character, remove the gendered signifiers and replace them with physical attributes and costume design that is more representative of their personalities or the roles they play in the narratives they inhabit. Since many of the characters are represented only by their gender and little reflection of their individualism is given, have students imagine what their personalities would be like. If students are unfamiliar with the fictional world they live in, provide a summary of the game and have them rework the female character to enhance the game by making her presence provide a more interesting, useful, or engaging element to the storyline.

3. **Problematizing Gender Binaries**
   The goal here is to put into focus how ingrained gender binaries are in society in spite of the ultimately constructed nature of definitive gender categories. Have students bring in a game or toy (or a picture/video of a toy or game), and ask them to research whom this artifact is marketed towards and what this says about gendered expectations and norms. For example, what does it say about societal values when typically race cars are exclusively for boys and dolls for girls? Have students present their findings to the class.

   Sources for examples include:
   http://thesocietypages.org/socimages/pinterest/#gender
   https://twitter.com/genderdiary
   Image search: Gendered versions of toys like Kinderegg for girls or girls and boys Playmobil