

# GENDER ROLES IN VIDEO GAMES

2021's Game of The Year



Carolina Magalhães Dias

I Education, Gender and Prevention – Porto, 24-25 March 2022

## SEXISM & GENDER STEREOTYPES IN THE MEDIA

- Sexism is a symptom of the unequal power relations between men and women that are rooted in patriarchal societies.
- Gender stereotypes function as a social reproduction of this gender inequality, pushing women and men and girls and boys towards traditional gender roles and creating the false idea of *opposite* sexes and opposite roles.

## SEXISM & GENDER STEREOTYPES IN THE MEDIA

- The media are extremely important for the socialization of gender and have in general followed a path (television, publicity, magazines, news outlets, etc) of **sexism and gender stereotypes**.
- Exposure to the media has significant influence on self-image, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours of people and, particularly, **children and young people**.
- People interpret what they see in the media to attribute specific meaning to social relations or identities.
- In **mass media**, compared to female characters, male characters appear more frequently, talk significantly more, and engage in **active** behaviours more, such as achieving and showing leadership.

(Bakan & Bakan, 2019; Garrard, 1982; Gallagher, 2016; Gallego, 2003; Jansz & Martis, 2007; Pollock, 2003; Stermer & Bukley, 2012)



## VIDEO GAMES



- Games are not only directly influential on individuals but also **affect the culture, knowledge, norms, and values of society.**
- Children and young adults may use video games, just as much as other media forms, as sources of information to determine what behaviours and attitudes are considered appropriately masculine and feminine.
- Most video games are interactive (unlike passive media forms), take many hours to complete and/or are designed for repeated play: not a one-time experience but an **ongoing experience that reinforces its social messages.**

(Bakan & Bakan, 2019; Beasley & Standley, 2002; Grimes, 2003; Jansz & Martis, 2007)

## VIDEO GAMES

- First studies found an underrepresentation of female characters and low number of female characters as main characters.
- Female characters frequently hypersexualized, with minimal clothing and an unrealistic body image.
- Problem with video game research: constant technological evolution and an avalanche of new games being launched every year.

(Bakan & Bakan, 2019; Beasley & Standley, 2002; Dietz, 1998; Dill & Thill, 2007; Gao et al., 2017; Gestos et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2009; Kondrat, 2015)



# STEREOTYPES & GENDER ROLES IN VIDEO GAMES

- Woman protected vs Man protector
- Women as reward (Samus from “Metroid”)
- Passive or supportive role vs the male’s active role
- “Damsel in distress”
- Sexual object



# STEREOTYPES & GENDER ROLES IN VIDEO GAMES

- The “Lara Phenomenon” (Jansz & Martis, 2007)
- More women as protagonists and with powerful and active roles
- However, still often hypersexualized
- Women as protagonists, as main characters, as powerful
- Female character with thoughts and opinions, with a role beyond her relationship with the male character(s)



# GENDER ROLES IN GAMEPLAY

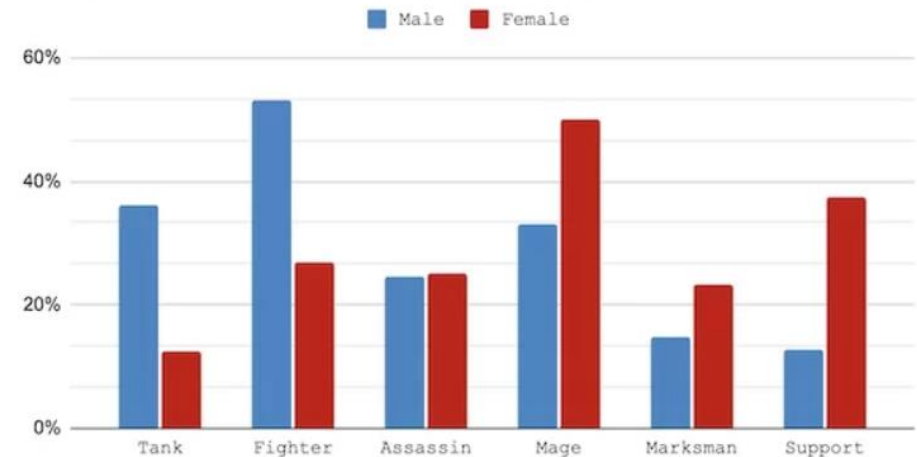
- Multiplayer video games, if they have a cooperative component, often have different roles that players should fulfil.
- Most sets of roles have at least one “**supportive**” role and at least one “**damage dealing/active**” role.
- Often the **supportive** role is filled by female characters and the **damage dealing** or **active** role is filled by male characters.
- These roles may or may not be associated with the **weapons and/or abilities** that different characters use: magic damage, ranged weapons, melee weapons, supportive abilities (such as ground control, restraining enemies, strengthening other character’s abilities or weakening enemy’s abilities)
- Often, in video games, female characters are more often users of magic and ranged weapons than of melee weapons; and male characters are more often melee weapon users than female characters.

(Gao et al., 2017; Leo, 2021)



(Game: Overwatch)

Percentage of Male vs. Female League of Legends Champions by Role



Percentage of Male vs. Female League of Legends Champions by Role

(Source: Leo, 2021)



# it takes two

The title "it takes two" is rendered in a large, bold, yellow font with a red outline. The letter 'i' in "it" is replaced by a yellow silhouette of a character with a backpack. The letter 'o' in "two" is replaced by a yellow circle containing a red silhouette of a character. The background of the title area features large, grey mechanical gears and a red tomato.

**Play Local**

LB

**New Game**

Continue

Chapter Select

Minigames

RB

New Game



Player One

skuldandy



Player Two

**Join**

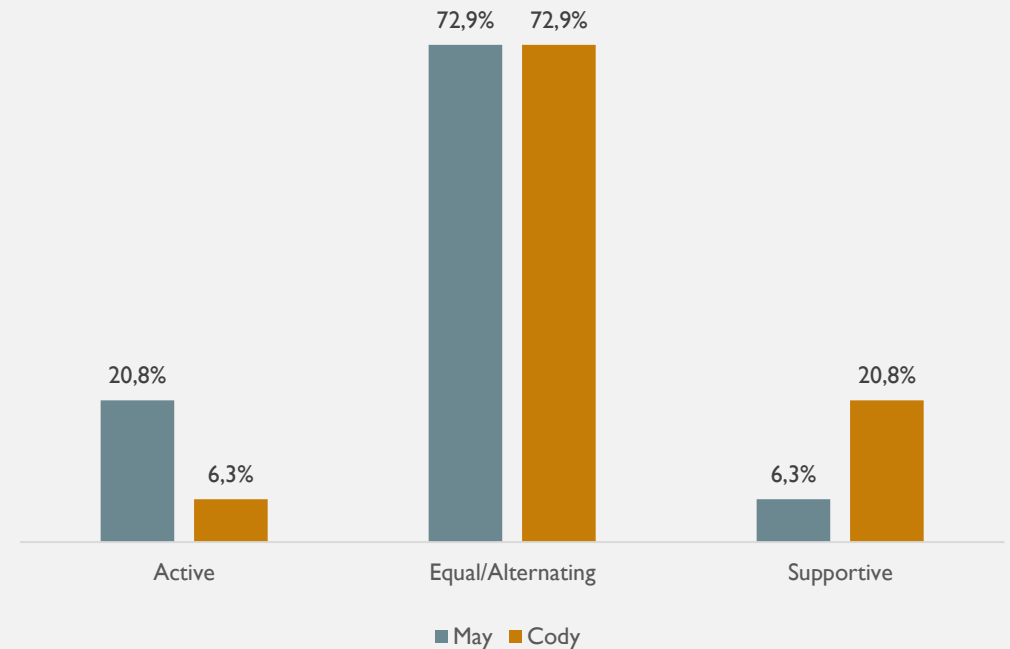


**B** Back

## IT TAKES TWO: GAME ROLES

- Throughout the game, the main characters go through several game sections, and in each section they fulfil different roles.
- Note: minigames were not included in analysis as they are optional.
- The game is divided into 48 sections and each section was analysed according to the roles that the two characters filled:
  - “active”
  - “supportive”
  - “equal/alternating”.

Distribution of Roles by Character





# EQUAL ROLES



# EQUAL ROLES





## ACTIVE – SUPPORTIVE ROLES

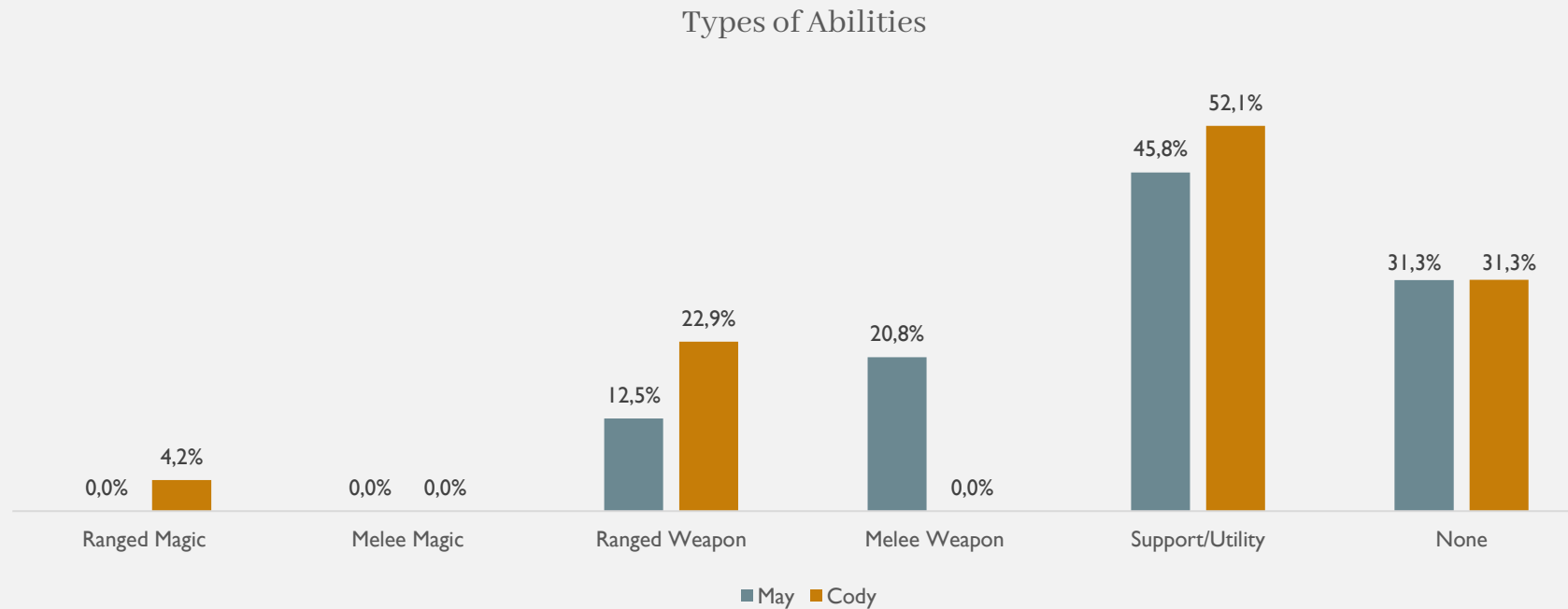


## ACTIVE – SUPPORTIVE ROLES



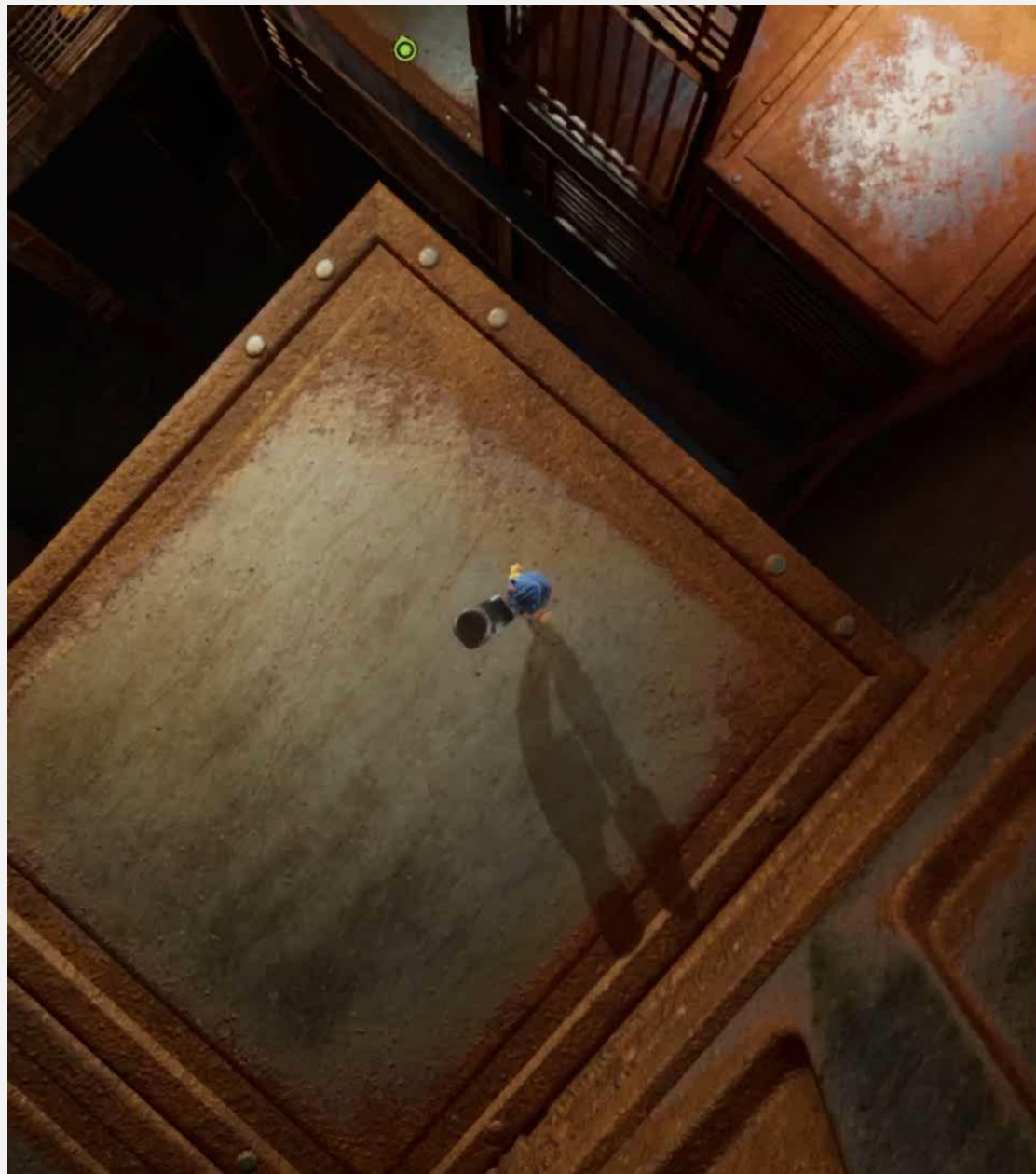
## IT TAKES TWO: ABILITIES

- In each section, May and Cody receive different abilities: different from other sections' and different to each other's.

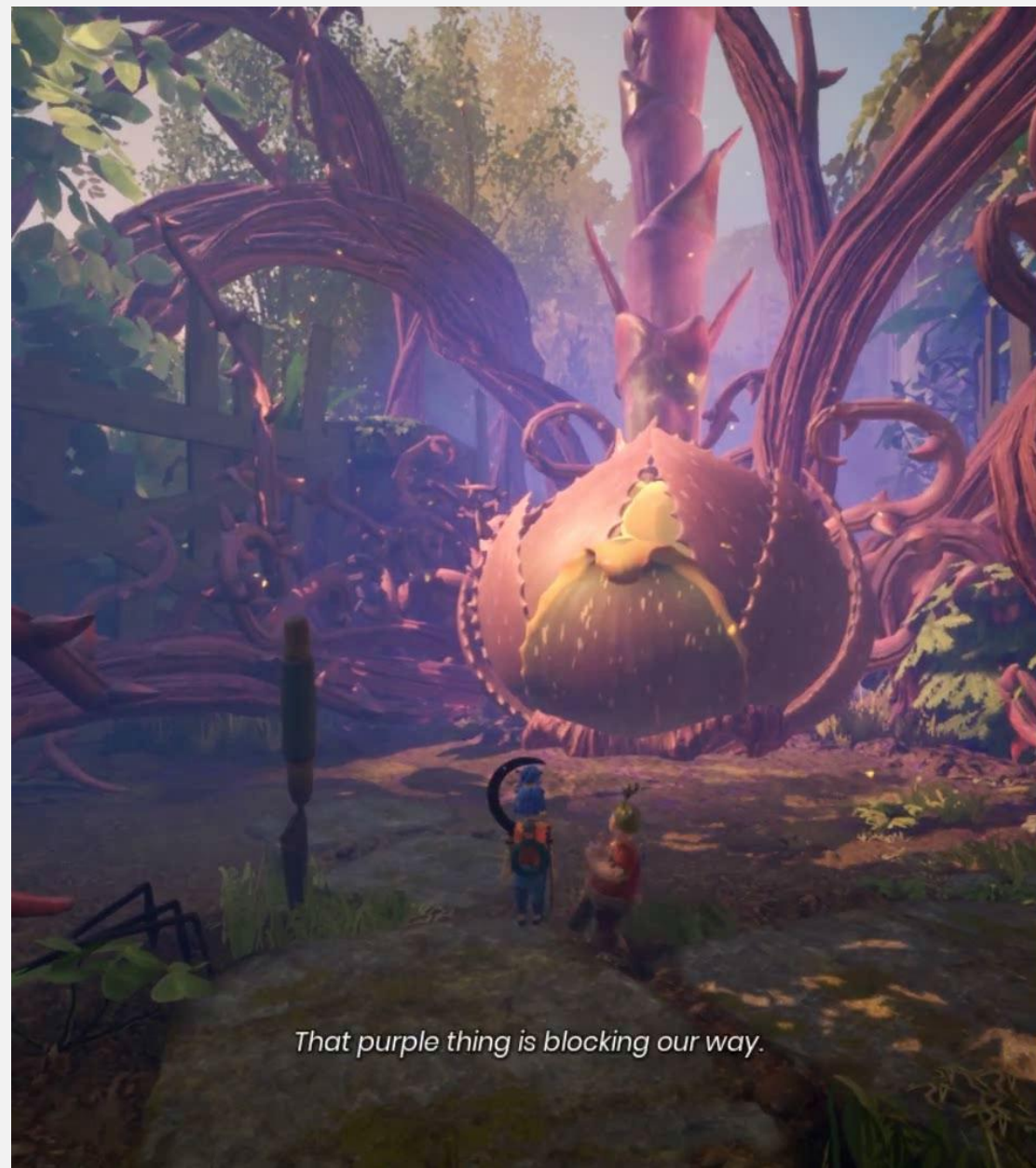













*That purple thing is blocking our way.*



That purple thing is blocking our way. Saving 

## CONCLUSION

- A noticeable effort by It Takes Two's developers to subvert player's expectations regarding gender roles when related to gameplay roles.
- A few traditional gender roles are still present, especially regarding the "real life" of the main characters.

# THANK YOU

CONTACT: CAROLINAJDIAS@GMAIL.COM

## References

- Bakan, U. & Bakan, U. (2019). Gender and racial stereotypes of video game characters in (MMO)RPGs. *Türkiye İletişim Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 34, 100-114. DOI: 10.17829/turcom.514500
- Beasley, B., & Standley, T. C. (2002). Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an indicator of gender role stereotyping in video games. *Mass Communication & Society*, 5(3), 279-293.
- Connell, R. (2005) *Masculinities*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dietz, T. L. (1998). An examination of violence and gender role portrayals in video games: Implications for gender socialization and aggressive behavior. *Sex Roles*, 38(5/6), 425-442.
- Dill, K. E., & Thill, K. P. (2007). Video game characters and the socialization of gender roles: Young people's perceptions mirror sexist media depictions. *Sex Roles*, 57, 851-864.
- Gallagher, J. (2016) Psychological effects of fitness advertising on female collegiate athletes, *J. Undergraduate Research in Communication*, 6(2), 24-34.
- Gallego, J. (2003). Producción informativa y transmisión de estereotipos de género en la prensa diaria. *Comunicación y Sociedad*, 16(2), 49–66.
- Gao, G., Min, A., & Shih, P. C. (2017). Gendered design bias: Gender differences of in-game character choice and playing style in League of Legends. In Proceedings of the 29th Australian Conference on Human-Computer Interaction, Brisbane, QLD, Australia, November 2017 (OzCHI 2017), 9 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3152771.3152804>
- Garrard, M., Broud, (1982) *Feminism and Art History*, Nova Iorque: Harper e Row Publishers.
- Grimes, S. (2003). "You shoot like a girl!": The female protagonist in action-adventure video games. Proceedings of the 2003 DiGRA International Conference: Level Up, Volume 2.
- Jansz, J., & Martis, R. G. (2007). The Lara Phenomenon: Powerful female characters in video games. *Sex Roles*, 56, 141-148. DOI: 10.1007/s11199-006-9158-0
- Kondrat, X. (2015). Gender and video games: How is female gender generally represented in various genres of video games? *Journal of Comparative Research in Anthropology and Sociology*, 6(1), 171-194.
- Leo, C. (February 2021). An analysis of gender and roles of league of legends champions. Available in: <https://cjleo.com/2021/02/08/an-analysis-of-gender-and-roles-of-league-of-legends-champions/>
- Pollock, G. (2003) *Vision and difference: Femininity, feminism and history of art*, Londres: Routledge.
- Stermer, S. P., & Burkley, M. (2015). SeX-Box: Exposure to sexist video games predicts benevolent sexism. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 4(1), 47-55.
- Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., & Ivory, J. D. (2009). The virtual census: Representations of gender, race and age in video games. *New Media & Society*, 11(5), 815-834. DOI: 10.1177/1461444809105354