The GDI Playbook

The GDI Playbook is divided into five topics, which we call "Keys," to help you craft engaging and meaningful games. Each Key includes achievements that you can work toward as you explore.

Feel free to jump around the Playbook to find the tools most helpful to you, or work straight through it to build up a foundation for your work. Each Key is filled with information, examples, and resources.

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Introduction to the GDI Playbook

The Geena Davis Institute (GDI) is a research-focused organization with the mission to inspire authentic portrayals in entertainment and media. Because media, including video games, influences social, cultural, and personal values and perspectives, the Institute advocates for conscientiously designing narratives and characters. You're here because you want to create games that are fun and inclusive, but sometimes figuring out how to do that — and how to do that well — is challenging. Good news, though: We're here to help! We've crafted a playbook to help you understand, reflect on, and address possible biases in your game's narrative and character development. Our goal is to support game developers with tools to make positive shifts in representation and inclusion.

What do we mean by representation?

Representation refers to who is seen on screen and how they are portrayed, including their appearance, narrative significance, and characterization.

What do we mean by inclusion?

Inclusion is the idea that marginalized groups should be considered in the initial design and conceptualization processes of development.

Representation is nuanced, so the GDI Playbook will not cover every challenge you might encounter — it is a tool, not a checklist. As you'll see, we recommend pairing this with expert consultation, additional resources, and inclusive company practices to achieve your goals.

Thank you for taking this journey with us!

Key 1: Craft Your Approach

Key 1 Overview

The Geena Davis Institute has been a pioneer in promoting diverse representation in entertainment and media by focusing on six major identities and their intersections: gender, race/ethnicity, LGBTQIA+ identity, disability, age, and body type.

We've found that it is important to be aware of how individuals' experiences vary depending on their intersecting identities, and how our own identity shapes our perspective.

Key 1 is divided into two learning achievements that will shape your approach to designing your game:
1. Self-reflection: Tap into personal reflections to guide thoughtful and respectful creative choices.
2. Intersectionality: Explore and understand how individuals' identities overlap and influence their experiences, to help you create authentic, multidimensional characters that will resonate with your players.

At the end of Key 1, you will find definitions of the core concepts covered in this section.

Achievement 1: Self-reflection

Tap into personal reflections to guide thoughtful and respectful creative choices.

Introduction

We all have preconceptions that impact our work. They can be related to societal norms, stereotypes, or personal experiences.

Self-reflection involves being open and candid about how our thoughts, backgrounds, and experiences can shape what we create. "Reflexivity" is a term for this approach.[1]

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[1] GDI's primary basis for the reflexivity approach is the following: Soedirgo J, Glas A. Toward Active Reflexivity: Positionality and Practice in the Production of Knowledge. *PS: Political Science & Politics*. 2020;53(3):527-531. doi:10.1017/S1049096519002233. Retrieved from: https://politicalsciencenow.com/toward-active-reflexivity-positionality-and-practice-in-the-production-of-knowledge/

Why It Matters

Personal experience can influence the types of stories that you tell and how you frame in-game actions and perspectives.

During the writing process of your game, reflect on how your social identity and your team members' social identities might sway the narrative and research process for the game.

This can begin a conversation about how the team's backgrounds might influence stories or platforms, unintentionally favoring one group over another. And this self-awareness can help you craft more inclusive games.

Try It: Mapping Your Social Identity

Here's an exercise to help you better understand your social identity — in other words, how you identify yourself in relation to others — and how it shapes the stories and characters you may create.

Considerations

1. For each identity, reflect on how you identify and how this shapes your perspective. Keep in mind that you may not have just one answer and may choose "not applicable."
2. Reflect on how experiences as a member of these identity groups might affect your interpretation of the story you're telling.
3. Ask yourself who you are in relation to the communities represented in your game.

Questions to Ask

- **Age:** How old are you? Do you identify with a specific generation, like Gen Z or the millennial generation?
- **Body Size:** Body neutrality means not dwelling on the shape or size of your body. But many people face discrimination due to their body size. Have you?
- **Disability:** Do you have a disability? This includes physical, cognitive, and communication disabilities, and some mental health issues.
- **Education:** What level of formal education have you completed? Do you have vocational training?
- **Ethnicity:** What is your ethnicity?
- **Gender Presentation**: What gender do you identify with?
- **Language(s):** Do you speak multiple languages?
- **National Origin:** In what nation were you born? Do you feel an attachment to that place?
- **Race:** What race do you identify with?
- **Religious or Spiritual Affiliation:** Do you identify as a member of a particular religion, or do you have another type of spiritual affiliation?

- **Sexual Orientation:** Do you identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual, or another sexual orientation?
- **Socioeconomic Status:** Socioeconomic status refers to your family's financial security. What is your level of financial security?

Chart to Map Your Social Identity

You can download the chart here to record your thoughts.

Social identity	How do you identify?	How does this identity shape your perspective?
Age		
Body Size		
Disability (Physical, Emotional, Developmental, Mental Health, Neurodiverse)		
Education		
Ethnicity		
Gender		
Language(s)		
National Origin		
Race		
Religious or Spiritual Affiliation		
Sexual Orientation		
Socioeconomic Status		

Here is another exercise for more practice: the University of Michigan's Social Identity Wheel.

Questions to Guide Writing with Self-Reflection

These questions can help guide you:[2]
- Who do you suppose says the words your characters say? Why would they say them?
- Who does the narrative benefit? Does it create or reinforce inequalities?
- Is the story told from the perspective of a group with power? Is this a story that is promoted widely in the real world?
- What assumptions are being made in the narrative?
- Does the story ignore the perspective of a marginalized group that should be included?

Take Action

- Workshops: Attend workshops, seminars, or conduct rigorous research while you conceptualize your game. See our resources page for more information on where to find workshops.
- Record Keeping: Keep a detailed record of your thoughts and decisions throughout the development process, occasionally referring back to your notes from the social identity mapping exercise to keep awareness top of mind.

Achievement 1 Complete!

Apply It
Incorporate regular team discussions and workshops focused on exploring personal biases and perspectives, fostering a collective understanding of the importance of mindful representation in your game.

Achievement 2: Intersectionality

Explore and understand the role of intersectionality in creating authentic, multidimensional characters that will resonate with your players.

Introduction

The term "intersectionality" was coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, and considers how an individual's various identities can combine — or intersect — to create unique experiences of oppression and discrimination.[3]

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[2] More guidance on this approach available from University of Michigan here:
https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/inclusive-teaching/dominant-narratives/

[3] Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review, 43*(6), 1241-1299.

Why It Matters

Thinking about character design through an intersectional lens will improve diverse representation in your game and allow for more accurate portrayals of characters' identities.

For example, queer characters should be racially diverse to accurately reflect the real-world queer community. And thinking about the intersection of race and queer identity will lead to white, Latinx, or Black queer characters being portrayed in ways that reflect their unique experiences as queer people of color or as white queer people.

Intersectionality and the Nuances of Representation

Accurate representation requires considering identity intersections and their nuances.

An intersectional lens considers the intersection of gender, race, age, class, and other identities and the impact of multiple systems of bias and/or prejudice on a character's internal identity and on how the character is perceived.

Examples of Intersectionality in Media

- At the intersection of gender, race, and skin tone, differences emerge in terms of both who is on screen and the prominence of their role. **Read more here**.
- Asian women are more likely than white women and other women of color to be visually and verbally objectified on screen. **Read more here**.
- Harmful tropes about Muslims have existed on screen for decades, but these tropes vary for Muslim men and Muslim women. **Read more here**.

Take Action

- Watch: **The urgency of intersectionality | Kimberlé Crenshaw | TED**
- Explore more about intersectionality in this guide from Dr. Olena Hankivsky: **Intersectionality 101**.

Achievement 2 Complete!

Apply It
Establish a protocol for ongoing education and research on intersectionality, encouraging your fellow game designers to actively seek diverse perspectives and experiences to inform character creation.

Core Concepts

Explicit Bias: A kind of bias that people are aware of having, like when someone has a conscious preference either for or against particular groups.

Implicit Bias: Unconscious beliefs that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions. These biases are often rooted in societal norms and can impact how we perceive and interact with others, particularly in relation to characteristics such as race, gender, or age.

Intersectionality: A framework for understanding how multiple aspects of a person's social and political identities (for example, gender, race, class, and sexuality) combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 1991).

Reflexivity: The process of being aware of how one's background and experiences shape their perspective, and actively considering these influences in order to improve the objectivity and quality of one's decisions or perspectives.

You have attained Key 1! Next, Key 2: Craft Stories

Key 2: Craft Stories

Key 2 Overview

This section is divided into three achievements that you can work toward as you craft your game:

1. Context: If your game is set in a real time and place from history, what historical and cultural realities do you want to reflect? Incorporate research, expert consultation, and collaboration with team members to make these choices.
2. Challenge: Develop narratives and characters that actively challenge identity-based stereotypes and biases.
3. Counternarrative: Write more complex stories and broaden narrative opportunities by featuring diverse perspectives, voices, and experiences using creativity and innovation.

At the end of this section, you will also find the list of core concepts covered in Key 2.

Introduction

This step considers the building blocks for crafting representation equality in gaming narratives. After all, these narratives are the backdrop for characters' identities.

Time Period

Does your narrative occur in a real place or time, like during the Middle Ages or the U.S. Civil War? If you air for cultural accuracy, research the political, social, and cultural realities of that time period.

History is far more varied than is often portrayed, so explore the perspectives and experiences of nondominant groups from that period. Those realities shape your story and the identities of all the characters in your world. Be sensitive to historical treatment of marginalized people and if/how you choose to portray the realities of the time.

Be aware that players may have mixed reactions when a game attempts to address historical inequities with new possibilities, such as the option to play the role of a Civil War general as a woman. Historical-based video games are inherently fictional, as players are literally stepping into the past, so taking inspiration from history to create a contemporary, engaging and inclusive player experience will naturally involve some elements of creative freedom if the intent of the game is entertainment.

In-Game Example

Mafia III

In 2016's *Mafia III*, you play as Lincoln Clay: a 23-year-old man of mixed race who goes to a New Orleans–like city to find redemption and revenge against the mob. The developers at Hangar 13 carefully developed the environment, characters, music, and narrative. *Mafia III*'s team featured a Black, queer senior writer and a diverse team that prioritized historical accuracy and authentic representation of the 1960s in the U.S. South, leading to a powerful backdrop for the story.

Read the NPR article *How One Video Game Unflinchingly Tackles Racism With History And Raw Interactions* [here](#).

Environment and Worldbuilding

Do your characters reflect the environment in which the story takes place? It doesn't matter if that environment is imagined — a rich world means a rich variety of identities.

Ask questions. Are there a specific set of rules for your world? Is there a social structure? Characters emerge from a set of social structures that afford certain advantages and limit others.

For example, adding a Black female protagonist to a game without thinking through how this character's race and gender shape her experience in her fictional world makes her identity less meaningful.

To bring depth to your character, reflect on your world's broader social structures. Simply swapping character identities to create the appearance of a diverse cast won't have the same impact.

Contextual Themes

Does your content highlight structural sources of inequality?

Many inequalities are the result of large-scale systems or structures that cannot easily be changed. For example, someone's socioeconomic status influences their access to education, healthcare, and other resources. Recognizing the larger factors that play into a character's life is important for accurately portraying their experience.

Does your story hit on any bigger themes about groups and power, such as colonialism, terrorism, war, or genocide?

Misrepresenting these themes can be especially hurtful, so do careful research for accuracy and to note potential sensitivities. Great resources include organizations from nondominant communities dedicated to accurate representation. Check out our resources page for ideas.

Narrative Goal

Does any part of your story hinge on a particular identity, like featuring a woman working in a male-dominated field?

If so, aim to actively involve folks with that identity right from the outset of story writing. Ideally, team members who are part of the represented group would contribute directly to creative content since this can help avoid character tokenization.

In-Game Example

Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)

Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna) shows how creative development in close partnership with communities represented can be effective. The idea for the game, which is based on a traditional Iñupiaq story, originated with Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), a nonprofit that represents Alaskan Native people in the Cook Inlet region, so the developers (E-Line Media and Upper One Games) worked closely with them. The creative team traveled regularly to Alaska to consult with tribal community members and the CITC on the game's narrative and visual design. This close collaboration was met with a positive response from both the industry and players: It was nominated for over 50 "best of" lists and many awards, with over 3.5 million downloads and an average rating of 9/10 on Steam. The success of this partnership led CITC and E-Line to continue their work together on impact games and other collaborations.

Read more about the partnership process from the perspective of a CITC member here.

Take Action

- Research: Develop a comprehensive understanding of the culture or society you want to portray. Examine various aspects of social life, such as rituals, beliefs, norms, behaviors, and the material environment.
- Visit: Visit the actual location of your game (if it has one) and speak with the communities being portrayed.
- Consult: Consult with leaders of relevant community groups, nonprofit organizations, and/or subject matter experts. Check out our resources page for ideas.

Achievement 1 Complete!

Apply It

Start with regular team discussions and workshops focused on exploring personal biases and perspectives. The key is being on the same page about the importance of mindful representation as you construct the game's narrative.

Achievement 2: Challenge

Develop narratives and characters that actively challenge identity-based stereotypes and biases.

Introduction

Narratives set the stage by establishing context and themes for characters. However, narratives can also perpetuate identity-based stereotypes, bias, and/or underrepresentation of marginalized groups when they are built around tired tropes. We'll take a look at a few of those next.

White Savior

The "white savior" trope refers to a character who is commonly portrayed as a Western, educated, white person who saves "primitive" people from their "ignorant" or "savage" ways of life. For example, this includes stories of explorers who tame "barbaric" indigenous populations and bring them Western ideas or inventions.

Why it's tired
These narratives perpetuate a cultural hierarchy where Western culture is seen as superior. They also perpetuate the myth that native and indigenous people are barbaric, savage, uncivilized, and uneducated.[4]

Hero's Journey

A "hero's journey" story is a common narrative structure centered on a protagonist who leaves their home in search of a reward, and who returns as a changed person after their successful journey.

Why it *can be* tired:

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[4] Read more: Bezion, Kristin. (2018). "The Perpetual Crusade: The Rise of Tomb Raider, Religious Extremism, and the Problem of Empire." In Woke Gaming. Eds. Kishonna L. Gray and David J. Leonard.

The hero's journey frequently reinforces the belief that masculine-coded skills are more desirable than feminine-coded skills when quests favor physical strength and violence, and when the hero shrugs off collaboration or teamwork, which is common in this type of story.

Damseling

The "damseling" trope refers to when a male hero character is on a journey to save a female character in crisis.

Why it's tired:
In these stories, the women lack agency because they cannot save themselves, and they are reduced to a prize to be won or a treasure to be found.

In-Game Example

Double Dragon
Double Dragon is a 1987 beat-'em-up arcade game that opens with a muscular man in a tank top punching a woman named Marian in the stomach and carrying her off screen. The protagonist (or, if the game is played cooperatively, two protagonists) then emerges from a closed garage and begins fighting the villain's henchmen. The ultimate goal of the game is to rescue Marian, who is the protagonist's girlfriend. In this example, the significant female character exists solely to motivate the actions of male character(s).

The Fridged Woman

"Fridging" is a term coined by comic book writer Gail Simone relating to a plot in *Green Lantern* where the hero comes home to find that his girlfriend has been killed and stuffed into a refrigerator by one of the comic's villains. In narratives that use the "fridged woman" trope, the male hero's background includes the violent murder of a woman he loves.

Why it's tired:
Not only does this trope necessitate women's trauma and present a narrative in which the female character lacks agency, but we also witness the male hero grappling with his guilt for his failure to perform his socially expected, patriarchal role of being the protector of women. Research by media scholar Emma Reay finds that dead children and women in video games are often used as a device for legitimizing hypermasculinized violence.[5]

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[5] Reay, E. (2023). The kid in the fridge: Sacrificial children and vengeful masculinity in contemporary videogames *Journal of Games Criticism 5*(1)

Level Up

An alternative to the hero's journey is an ensemble cast. This format provides an opportunity for creators to stand out from the crowd of games using the tired hero's-journey-style narratives and enhance player engagement since each main character can have a unique backstory, motivations, and abilities that contribute to the overall impact of the story and game experience.

Explore more about the opportunities of ensemble casts in this video featuring a presentation by writer and narrative designer, Desiree Cifre [here].

Achievement 2 Complete!

Apply It
Actively challenge and/or refine story elements that may perpetuate stereotypes.

Achievement 3: Counternarrative

Write more complex stories and broaden narrative opportunities by featuring diverse perspectives, voices, and experiences using creativity and innovation.

Introduction

Counternarratives are narratives that challenge dominant points of view or the status quo, and are typically from the point of view of a marginalized voice.

Why it matters:
Narratives that assume white, masculine norms contribute to a cycle of underrepresentation — in other words, they continue to marginalize those who are already marginalized — and reinforce the idea that certain identities are, by default, "normal," while others are less important or even invisible.

Counternarration interrupts dominant narratives by focusing on new, diverse points of view. The strength of narratives that center on the point of view of marginalized identities lies in their ability to reimagine, resist, and remake ideas. And that makes for more engaging games!

Questions to Ask

- What are the different perspectives of your narrative's time period?
  - Whose perspective are you prioritizing, and why?
  - Whose point of view is missing?

- Are there lesser known people that should be featured? For example, historically, stories about scientific discoveries usually highlight men, even when women were integral to those discoveries. This is known as the "Matilda effect." Read more here.
- Does your game center the experiences of underrepresented or marginalized groups?
- Does it elevate the voice of underrepresented groups?
- How does your content actively challenge tropes and stereotypes about the groups represented?

In-Game Example

Say NO! More

A successful example of a counternarrative is the 2021 game "Say NO! More," whose narrative empowers the player character — an intern — to refuse to do demanding tasks or requests in a workplace setting. The game critiques corporate work culture in the U.S., which encourages overworking and prioritizing the needs of the company over workers' health and well-being. Additionally, the avatars in the game are identity-inclusive; players can select from diverse facial features, body and face shapes, skin tones, clothing, and hair when designing their avatar.

Take Action: Industry Resources

Authentic representation requires not only awareness among content creators but also the direct involvement of the voices who can speak to diverse perspectives and the nuances of identity.

Use resources that industry organizations provide to support hiring balanced development teams, such as:

- EmpowerUp: This toolkit and resource hub from Ukie supports U.K.-based game studios, publishers, service providers, and employees to benchmark where they are on their individual equity, diversity, and inclusion journeys, and provides tailored resources and content accordingly.
- Women in Games International (WIGI) offers programs, newsletters, panels, workshops, and networking events in an effort to increase professional representation and normalize diversity in the games industry.

Take Action: Support

- Follow and support activists and organizations that have focused on the power of counternarratives:
  - Initiatives: Activist-journalist Tanya DePass created the initiative #INeedDiverseGames, a movement that advocates for diversity and inclusion within the gaming industry and community.

○ Nonprofits: Nonprofit organizations like AbleGamers, Black Voices in Gaming, Dames Making Games, Queerly Represent Me, and GLAAD108 are fostering more diversity in game design by providing resources for creatives from marginalized backgrounds.

○ Recognition: Games for Change, a movement that focuses on using video games for social impact and positive change, created a category for "Best Narrative Game" in 2022.

■ The 2022 winner, *Dot's Home*, is a story about a time-traveling Black woman who learns about her family's history and the traumas of systemic racism by exploring her grandmother's house in Detroit.

■ In 2023, the winner was *Gerda: A Flame in Winte*r, which is a role-playing game that follows a young nurse trying to rescue her husband from the Gestapo during World War II.

Take Action: Organizational Structure

Establish organizational elements to consider power dynamics during the creative process.

● Recognize that power imbalances can exist among the team or in the workplace between writers and management that can impact story development.

● What systems are in place to ensure a safe environment for all team members of varying seniority to speak up if they see issues?

In Key 3, you'll explore how to support counternarratives through dynamic character development.

Achievement 3 Complete!

Apply It
Encourage a culture of openness to diverse storytelling.

Core Concepts

Tokenization: The practice of including a small number of individuals from underrepresented groups in order to give the appearance of diversity. This practice makes token individuals a stand-in for a larger group.

Social structures: The arrangement of institutions in which humans live and interact with one another such as social life, customs, traditions, roles, and norms.

You have attained Key 2!

Next, Key 3: Craft Characters.

Key 3: Craft Characters

Key 3 Overview

This section is divided into three learning achievements that you can work toward as you craft the characters in your game:

1. Portray: Learn what the research says about real-world impact from in-game experiences, to inform character portrayals.
2. Diversify: Build a diverse character roster, from protagonists to NPCs.
3. Construct: Construct multidimensional characters with distinct personalities, motivations, and backstories, applying GDI's 5Ps to support comprehensive character development.

Achievement 1: Portray

Learn what the research says about real-world impact of in-game experiences, and use that awareness to inform character portrayals that prioritize experience and engagement.

Introduction

The effects of characters' embodiment on players are both:
- Internal: shaping a player's personal self-concept.
- External: contributing to beliefs about a group's social status or power relations between various groups.

Why do portrayals matter?

Avatars are more than just cosmetic choices for a player.
- The "Proteus effect" is the phenomenon where an avatar's age, attractiveness, height, skin color, and gender influence aspects of players' behavior, including their extraversion, aggression, and risk-taking. This is named for Proteus, a god of the sea in Greek mythology who was able to change form.
- 💡Research on "gender swapping" in games reveals players exhibit different behaviors, depending on the character's gender, such as healing-related behavior. For example, men that

played female characters engaged in more healing-related behavior, and women that played male characters engaged in less healing-related behavior.[6]

- Research on adolescent socialization shows that the strong stereotypes of masculinity and femininity in games can impact the development of gender roles in teenage girls and boys, reinforcing gender stereotypes.[7]
- In one study, teens described typical male video game characters as "physically powerful, dominant, violent, mean, and cocky." These descriptions suggest a vision of manhood that is "hypermasculine," promoting "strong sexual attitudes towards partners, a craving for action and danger, and approval of physical violence" as core aspects of masculinity.[8,9]
- Some research suggests that when games include both sexism and violence, it can lead to an increase in support for statements like "It is okay for a guy to use any and all means to 'convince' a girl to have sex," and a decrease in empathy for female victims of violence among male players who strongly identify with their in-game characters.[10]
- Other research reveals that men exposed to sexualized avatars through long-term gameplay had a greater tolerance for sexual harassment and showed higher rates of rape-myth acceptance.[11,12,13,14]

[6] Yee, N., Ducheneaut, N., Nelson, L., & Likarish, P. (2011, May). Introverted elves and conscientious gnomes: The expression of personality in world of warcraft. In *Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on human factors in computing systems* (pp. 753-762).

[7] Dill K., & 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.

[8] Scharrer, E. (2005). Hypermasculinity, aggression and television violence: An experiment. *Media Psychology, 7*, 353–376.

[9] For a detailed discussion of masculinity and gamine, see: Ouellette, M. A. (2021). Playing with the guys: Masculinity and relationships in video games. McFarland.

[10] Gabbiadini, A., Riva,P. , Andrighetto, L., Volpato C., & Bushman, B. J. (2016). Acting like a tough guy: Violent-sexist video games, identification with game characters, masculine beliefs, & empathy for female violence victims. PLoS one 11, no. 4: e0152121.

[11] Dill, K.E., Brown, B.P., & Collins, M.A. (2008). Effects of exposure to sex-stereotyped video game characters on tolerance of sexual harassment. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology 44*(5): 1402-1408.

[12] Fox, J., & Bailenson, J.N. (2009). Virtual virgins and vamps: The effects of exposure to female characters' sexualized appearance and gaze in an immersive virtual environment. *Sex roles*, *61*, 147-157.

[13] Beck, V.S., Boys, S., Rose, C., & Beck, E. (2012). Violence against women in video games: A prequel or sequel to rape myth acceptance?. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, *27*(15), 3016-3031.

[14] Driesmans K, Vandenbosch L, Eggermont S. (2015.) Playing a videogame with a sexualized female character increases adolescents' rape myth acceptance and tolerance toward sexual harassment. *Games Health J*ournal *4*:91–94.

- Research outside of gaming suggests that objectification makes women appear less competent and less than fully human in political and workplace contexts,[15] and links objectification to violence against women.[16,17,18]
- Studies indicate that women may internalize objectified representations of other women through repeated exposure to objectification in media. This psychological process of self-objectification is associated with depressed personal efficacy,[19] increased preoccupation with one's appearance, decreased body satisfaction, depression, and disordered eating.[20]

Consider: Which characters are violent? Is there a double standard for violence?

For example, the portrayal of violence and aggression among male characters may intersect with race when Black men in video games are portrayed as physically strong and behaviorally aggressive in socially unsanctioned ways (for example, as thieves, gang members), while white men are also portrayed as aggressive but more often in socially sanctioned ways (military, law enforcement).[21]
Level-Up: If your game necessitates physical violence, think about how you can lean into that without glorifying and lionizing *mindless* violence, and about if choices about who is perpetuating violence reinforce stereotypes.

Consider: How is violence sanctioned?

For example, the "fridged woman" trope is a storyline where the male hero's backstory involves the violent murder of a woman he loves. Not only does this trope require women's trauma, but we also witness the male hero grappling with his guilt for his failure to perform his socially expected, patriarchal role of being the protector of women. His violence is sanctioned because it is in response to his love for a woman and is a means to recuperating his role as protector.

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[15] Heflick, N.A., & Goldenberg, J.L. (2009). Objectifying Sarah Palin: Evidence that objectification causes women to be perceived as less competent and less fully human. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *45*(3), 598-601.
[16] Glick, P, Larsen S., Johnson C., & Branstiter, H. (2005). Evaluations of sexy women in low-and high-status jobs. *Psychology of women quarterly 29(*4): 389-395.
[17] Cheeseborough, D., Thekia, J., Overstreet, N., & Ward, L. M. (2020). Interpersonal sexual objectification, Jezebel stereotype endorsement, and justification of intimate partner violence toward women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *44*(2), 203-216.
[18] Rudman, L.A., & Mescher, K. (2012). Of animals and objects: Men's implicit dehumanization of women and likelihood of sexual aggression. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, *38*, 734-746.
[19] Behm-Morawitz E., Mastro D. (2009). The effects of the sexualization of female videogame characters on gender stereotyping and female self-concept. *Sex Roles*, *61*, 808–823.
[20] Moradi B., Huang Y. P. (2008). Objectification theory and psychology of women: A decade of advances and future directions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *32*(4):377-398.
[21] *Burgess, M. C. R., Dill, K. E., Stermer, P., Burgess, S. R., Brown, B. P. (2011). Playing with prejudice: The prevalence and consequences of racial stereotypes in Video games. Media Psychology 14(3): 289-311.*

Level Up: Create female characters with purpose beyond motivation for male violence by flipping the script or humanizing the victim. Instead of instilling the male character with guilt, instill them with a sense of justice or morality.

Consider: Do you unconsciously dehumanize certain types of characters?

Dehumanization occurs when an individual or group is seen as less than human. Dehumanized groups are perceived as more dangerous, less in control of their behavior, and outside the realm of morality, which justifies the use of violence and aggression against them.[22]

Here are some ways that character's visual descriptions can lead to dehumanization:
- **Mechanistic descriptions**: Mechanistic dehumanization is a specific form of dehumanization where individuals or groups are portrayed or described as if they were machines or objects, rather than living, feeling human beings. This concept involves stripping away the attributes that are associated with human warmth by emphasizing coldness, rigidity, interchangeability, and lack of agency. Visually, mechanistic dehumanization can emerge if characters are emotionally hard, physically robotic, or transform into mechanistic objects, such as a character who transforms into an armored tank.
- **Animalistic descriptions:** Animalistic descriptions can be a form of dehumanization when individuals or groups are likened to beasts or wild animals. Here, individuals or groups are described or depicted as having animal-like qualities, such as being primitive, bloodthirsty, barbaric, or lacking morality. Their physicality is also shown in animalistic ways, such as drooling, hypermuscular bodies, or with their bodies carrying disease.

Level Up: Develop characters with complex motivations or experiences for their behavior and actions, and think about how to highlight the role of context (such as poverty, education) on social behaviors and actions.

Consider: Are any of your characters portrayed primarily by their sex appeal or sexualized behavior?

Character sexualization is when a character is designed in a way that emphasizes their sexuality. Hypersexualization is when that sexualization is excessive. "Excessive" can be subjective, but some possible indicators are unrealistic body proportions, revealing clothing, sexually suggestive physical positioning, and sexual objectification. These indicators will be discussed in Achievement 3.

Take Action

- Eliminate opportunities for sexual violation of female characters.

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[22] Goff, P. A., Eberhardt, J. L., Williams, M. J., & Jackson, M. C. (2008). Not yet human: Implicit knowledge, historical dehumanization, and contemporary consequences. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 94*(2), 292–306.

- Question the necessity of reinforcing or rewarding domination of female characters.
- Remember that intentional game design that limits sexual objectification and gender-based violence is an important intervention point to address harassment in gaming.
  - A recent study found that 6 out of 10 players reported quitting a game permanently due to "harassment" and hate within that game's community.[23]

Level Up

- Enhance players' connections with the experiences of female characters in ways that do not rely on her physical appearance or sexuality.

Achievement 1 Complete!

Apply It
Regularly review and analyze player feedback regarding character portrayal, prioritizing adjustments to mitigate oversexualization and dehumanization of marginalized groups, like women and people of color.

Achievement 2: Diversify

Build a diverse character roster — from protagonists to NPCs.

Introduction

Several recent studies have shown a demand for more character diversity and more nuance in how these characters are represented. For example:
- The Google for Games 2022 "PC & Console Insights Report" found that over 70% of respondents agree it is very important or important that games feature diverse characters *and* stories.[24]
- In a 2023 Niko Partners report, over half of surveyed gamers in Asia reported dissatisfaction with how women are represented in games.[25]

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[23] Toxic Gamers Are Alienating Your Core Demographic – The Business Case for Community Management. Take This. Retrieved from: https://www.takethis.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ToxicGamersBottomLineReport_TakeThis.pdf

[24] Google for Games. (2022). PC & console insight report. Retrieved from https://games.withgoogle.com/reports/2022-pc-console-insights-report/

[25] Niko Partners. (2023). Female gamers in Asia. Retrieved from https://nikopartners.com/female-gamers-in-asia/

- A 2023 survey from Australia found that the majority of respondents noted the importance of portraying diversity in video games, inclusive of accessibility, age, culture, language, ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.[26]

But inclusion alone is not enough. How diverse characters, cultures, and their narratives are shown also matters, which we'll explore throughout this section.

Consider: Character Roles

How do players connect to the different character roles in your game?
- POV (point-of-view) characters are especially important for a player's investment and connection to the game because they serve as an access to the world. POV characters are also likely to be embraced by fan communities for derivative art and entertainment purposes, such as fan art, fanfics, and cosplay.
- Prominent NPCs (nonplayer characters) that support the POV characters are also vital to a game's worldbuilding, narrative, and overall tone because they are often the sources of information, comedic moments, drama, and heart throughout the gameplay.
- Competitors (like villains, bosses, and attackable NPCs) represent power and often reflect social anxieties, so broadening diversity among competitors can add depth and nuance to the game while also broadening players' exposure to diverse identities playing the competitor role.

Consider: Heroes and Villains

- If your game includes heroes and villains, strive for balance in representation.
  - Although both heroes and villains play a big role in a story, an overrepresentation of people from marginalized backgrounds (like people of color and/or people with disabilities) as villains can perpetuate unconscious bias about which social groups are inherently good — or inherently evil.
  - Players from marginalized communities are often stuck "playing the enemy" rather than playing the protagonist because characters that represent their identities aren't heroes as often.[27]
- Be mindful when your villain has an origin story related to their identity.
  - Try to avoid further stigmatizing marginalized identities with your villain origin story. For instance, a physical disfigurement that sets a villain on their path of vengeance is a storyline that stigmatizes disability by reinforcing a common trope that disability causes someone to be evil.

[26] Brand, J. E., Wilson, T. W., Jervis, J., & Huggins, P. M. (2023). Australia plays 2023. IGEA. Retrieved from https://igea.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/IGEA_AP2023_FINAL_REPORT.pdf

[27] Goldberg, D. (2015). The state of play: Creators and critics on video game culture. Seven Stories Press. (Chapters 3 and 6)

Consider: Dialogue

- Take note of your dialogue — how your characters speak, how much they say, and what they talk about.
    - Pay attention to accents, intonations, affectations, and cadences. These are tools to help build diversity, but they require cultural and social sensitivity.
    - For example, implying a nonhuman character's race through slang and dialect risks reinforcing reductive stereotypes.
    - 💡 In a study of video game dialogue, researchers found that male characters speak twice as much as female characters, with almost 94% of games including more male-dominated conversations. The study's authors note fewer female characters in games but also highlight bias in whom they talk to and what they say. Biases even pop up in some game algorithms, such as when some NPC roles, like guards, are encoded male by default.[28]

Take Action

- **Reflect.** Create playable characters that reflect the diversity of their gaming world.
- **Make it interesting.** Take time to write complex and multidimensional characters who are interesting; avoid tokenization or stereotypes. Explore more in Achievement 3.
- **Assess your character landscape.** Would increasing the representation of marginalized communities improve the game's cultural accuracy — and its engagement and appeal?
- **Cast authentically.** When relevant, cast voice actors that share an identity with the character they portray.
- **Break stereotypes with NPCs.** Challenge identity-based stereotypes with NPC interactions — think critically about whom the NPC represents and how they provide useful information or side quests.
    - Explore more about how to write NPCs with agency in this GDC presentation from Meg Jayanth: Writing NPCs with Agency for 80 Days and Beyond

Achievement 2 Complete!

Apply It
Take time in character creation to step back and look at how all of your characters fit together, considering how the identities of all characters — from POV to NPC — will impact players' experience.

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[28] Rennick, S., Clinton, M., Ioannidou, E., Oh, L., Clooney, C., T., E., Healy, E., & Roberts, S. G. (2023). Gender bias in video game dialogue. *Royal Science Open Society 10:* 221095.

Achievement 3: Construct

Construct multidimensional characters with distinct personalities, motivations, and backstories, applying GDI's 5Ps guidance to support comprehensive character development.

Introduction

This section explores designing characters that do not reinforce identity-based tropes and stereotypes.

We'll also take a look at characterization, applying a framework we call the **5Ps**, which can help creators examine the identifying characteristics, attributes, skills, and dialogue of their characters. The 5Ps are …

Prominence
Power
Personality
Proficiency
Profession

The focus is on gender, race/ethnicity, disability, and queer stereotypes, but this framework can be applied to other identities, including socioeconomic status, religion, age, body size, and more.

Gender Expression

Gender expression "is how a character presents gender outwardly through behavior, clothing, voice, or other perceived characteristics."[29] In video games, human characters tend to be perceived as cisgender men or women, as opposed to transgender men, transgender women, and/or nonbinary people. In this section, most of our guidance is for designing characters with male or female gender expressions, but we also offer suggestions for increasing nonbinary and transgender representation in the LGBTQIA+ section.

Visual Design and Gender Expression

- **Hypersexualization:** Sexualization is when a character is designed in a way that emphasizes their sexuality. Hypersexualization is when that sexualization is excessive. "Excessive" can be subjective, but here are some indicators:
  - **Unrealistic body proportions:** For female-presenting characters, this might include a tiny waist with wide hips, disproportionately large breasts and/or butt, and disproportionately long legs. Male-presenting characters might appear unrealistically muscular, physically large in stature, and have chiseled jaw lines and countable abs.

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[29] Wamsley, L. (2021 June 2). A guide to gender identity terms. *NPR.org*
https://www.npr.org/2021/06/02/996319297/gender-identity-pronouns-expression-guide-lgbtq

- ○ **Revealing clothing:** Revealing clothing exposes breasts, thighs, butt, midriff, and/or lower back. Characters of all genders can be shown in revealing clothing.
  💡Game mechanics often reveal a gender disparity between skill and survival. Male characters typically acquire more protective armor as they level up, but female characters continue to be portrayed in revealing and impractical (and nonprotective) clothing even as they grow more powerful.[30]
- ○ **Submissive, dominant, or sexually suggestive physical positioning**: For female-presenting characters, submissive positioning includes being in a kneeling position, twirling hair, touching their body, and an unstable stance, such as with the knees turned inward. Male-presenting characters often show dominant positioning like physically overpowering female-presenting characters — for example., lifting them, throwing them — or subtle sexual innuendos.
- ○ **Sexually objectified:** Sexual objectification is when a character is treated as a commodity (something to be bought, sold, bartered, etc.), or when parts of their body are a substitute for the whole person, such as when a player views the game between a character's legs, from behind, or when the camera zooms in on a character's chest, butt, or mouth.

Questions to Ask

For some of your characters, ask the following questions to better understand who is sexualized and who is not. Does this character …
1. Have unrealistic body proportions?
2. Wear revealing clothing? Does their clothing fall off or rip in certain scenarios?
3. Appear physically submissive or dominant in their standard poses?
4. Appear sexually objectified?

Example

Several years ago, a video surfaced that used animation switching to swap the bodies of Catwoman and Batman, drawing out the stark contrast in their movements, mannerisms, and how the audience was meant to view them.[31] Observing Batman moving like Catwoman is a useful lens for thinking about gender, sexual objectification, and the "male gaze," which is the tendency of visual media to cater to the perspective of a heterosexual male audience.[32] Check out the video here.

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[30] Yee, N. (2014). *The Proteus paradox: How online games and virtual worlds change us-and how they don't*. Yale University Press.

[31] Taormina, A. (2019, November 28). Batman and Catwoman Switch Bodies in Creepy Arkham Knight Video. *GameRant.* https://gamerant. com/batman-catwoman-animation-game-video/

[32] Mulvey, L. (2009). *Visual and Other Pleasures.* 2nd edition. NY, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.

Common Gender Tropes in Gaming

- **Femme Fatale:** A woman who uses her sexuality to manipulate, control, or kill. She is mysterious, seductive, and alluring. This trope reinforces the idea that women's power and agency stem from their physicality, and it weaponizes beauty and sexuality in a way that demonizes femininity and sexual agency.
- **Damsel in Distress:** A vulnerable, helpless woman who is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing a core incentive or motivation for the protagonist's quest. This trope reinforces the idea that women are objects to be bought, sold, won, or bartered, as well as the idea that women do not have agency.
- **Domestic Goddess:** The motif of "Madonna and Child," a famous painting from the Italian Renaissance, symbolizes maternal care and the innocence of children. Characters designed in the image of this motif idealize and prioritize women as caregivers, largely excluding men from caregiving expectations and roles.
- **Healer:** A female character (often ethnically indigenous or native), who cares for the emotional and physical well-being of others, often with spiritual or magical abilities. This portrayal reinforces feminine personality traits and behaviors, and can suggest that caregiving is exclusive to women.
- **"Sexy" Corpse:** A female character who is primarily featured as a sexualized dead body. This character is sexually objectified and lacks agency.
- **Fridged Woman**: This is when the male hero's backstory involves the violent murder of a woman he loves. This trope not only necessitates women's trauma but also relishes in the hero's guilt over his failure to perform his socially prescribed, patriarchal duty of protecting women.
- **Anti-Hero**: A flawed male character who may have questionable morals but ultimately seeks to do the right thing. They usually have a rough exterior and don't care about being liked.
- **Wise Mentor:** An older, experienced male character who provides guidance and knowledge to the protagonist.
- **Meathead**: A male character whose main traits are physical strength and aggression, but they lack intelligence and emotional complexity.

In-Game Example

Horizon Zero Dawn: Aloy

In the post-apocalyptic game *Horizon Zero Dawn*, it was important to the women-led development team that the game's female protagonist, Aloy, had an interesting and complex personality, regardless of her gender. She is not defined by her female identity, nor are her abilities or achievements diminished by comparing them to those of men. Her physical features are realistic, as is her attire — which is actually suitable to her tasks!

Bonus: The narrative interrupts the "fridged woman" trope when another female character, Ersa, not only survives being captured for a sacrifice but also goes on to lead an army that would eventually defeat the king who was responsible.

Read more here.

In-Game Example

Witcher 3: Geralt

While Geralt, the protagonist of *The Witcher* series, exhibits traditionally masculine-coded skills, like being physically dominant and highly skilled in combat, he is also portrayed as a complex, nuanced, and deeply human character. He does not always choose violence; he frequently relies on others, accepts their support, and is supportive and affectionate to those in his care. All of these traits are typically coded as soft or feminine, and not associated with the kind of man's man Geralt appears to be on the surface.

Marginalized Racial and Ethnic Groups

Marginalized racial and ethnic groups are those that have less power and status in a given community or society.

In the United States, people who are white tend to enjoy a privileged social status and have more economic power than people who are Black, Latinx, or Native American, according to studies that look at prejudice and discrimination in media, hiring, housing, and more.

Additionally, the term "colorism" refers to a form of discrimination based on skin tone, where skin tone influences how members from marginalized racial or ethnic groups experience discrimination and prejudice. Typically, individuals with darker skin tones face unique challenges, prejudice, and discrimination.[33]

Visual Design and Race/Ethnicity

- **Cultural Specificity:** Cultural specificity refers to distinct experiences, cues, or qualities of a culture. For example, while Asian and Latinx are terms used to describe racial groups, there are many different Asian and Latinx cultures. Mexican, Cuban, and Salvadoran cultures have unique customs, foods, expressions, and more. When possible, ensure that your character's culture is visually specified accurately and clearly.

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[33] Monk, E. P. Jr. (2019). The unceasing significance of colorism: Skin tone stratification in the United States. *Daedalus, 150*(2), 76-90.

- **Physical Features, Clothing, and Accessories:** Physical features should be diverse and authentic, not exaggerated or caricatured representations of racial traits. For example, Latinx characters shouldn't be uniformly dressed in sombreros or as mariachis, unless it makes sense in the context of the narrative. Clothing and accessories should reflect cultural accuracy rather than resorting to stereotypical or clichéd items that perpetuate narrow views of a particular race or ethnicity. For instance, if an Asian character is a martial artist in a game, is their clothing accurate to their cultural background? Additionally, conscientiously design hair texture to be culturally accurate. The resource *Code My Crown* provides insights for designing Black characters' hair in video games.
- **Skin-Tone Diversity:** When designing human characters for your video game, include a diverse range of skin tones. This ensures greater accuracy of racial and ethnic groups, and can have a profound impact on player engagement and emotional connection to the game. For reference, see the Monk Skin Tone scale. Unconsciously, many people associate lighter skin tones with "good" and darker skin tones with "evil"; this also includes nonhuman skin tones, with lighter and darker colors associated with good and evil, respectively. Avoid reinforcing this racial bias when choosing characters' skin tones.

Questions to Ask

When designing characters' aesthetics, consider the following questions to assess racial and ethnic visual representation:

1. Are characters' cultural backgrounds visualized without being stereotypical or inaccurate?
2. Are the character's physical features, clothing, and accessories exaggerated caricatures of their racial or ethnic cultures?
3. Do your characters have varied skin tones?
4. When writing characters of various races, ethnicities, and skin tones, are you perpetuating a hierarchy that could be reinforcing harmful stereotypes?

Common Racial/Ethnic Tropes in Media

- **Mystical Native:** An indigenous character portrayed as having innate spiritual or mystical powers. This trope can paint traditions from indigenous cultures as illegitimate, which justifies their erasure. Moreover, it is reductive, especially when indigenous characters in games are nearly always a version of this trope.
- **Thug or Gangbanger:** A character who is a member of a criminal gang that is menacing, violent, and self-serving. These gangs are usually Black or Latinx. The trope reinforces the association of Black and Latinx communities with criminality, and justifies their higher prosecution and incarceration rates. These characters are often dehumanized animalistically with their physical movements and other gameplay.
- **Model Minority:** An East Asian character who excels at school, work, and nearly all aspects of their life. This trope reduces East Asian characters to a single dimension (excellence) but ignores the many struggles that East Asians face, especially in communities where they are a racial

minority. It can also create the false perception that East Asians (especially immigrants) do not need social, financial or other resources. It also homogenizes East Asian ethnicities, erasing the vastly different experiences of various Asian communities, such as Vietnamese or Chinese ethnic minorities 💡The term "Model Minority" was introduced in the U.S. in the 1960s and was used to pit Asian immigrants in contrast to Black Americans, who were seen as a "problem" minority. Read more, here: https://geenadavisinstitute.org/pr-api-study-i-am-not-a-fetish-or-model-minority/

- **Exotic Foreigner:** A character from a non-Western background portrayed as mysterious, alluring, and fundamentally different. This trope reinforces the belief that Western traditions are normal, and non-Western traditions are abnormal.
- **Angry Black Woman:** A Black female character who is portrayed as aggressive, loud, hostile, and irrational. This trope reinforces a prevalent stereotype about Black women that suggests their legitimate concerns and issues are irrational and can therefore be dismissed, and this stereotype is used to justify discrimination against Black women. It also puts them in the position of self-monitoring and regulating their behaviors and emotions so as to not activate this readily available stereotype.
- **The Maid:** A typically Latina character who works as a maid, in a private house, hotel, or other establishment. This trope reinforces beliefs that Latinas' roles are in service to others, and is an implicit signal that Latinx people are undocumented and therefore are limited to very few occupations. Portrayals of in-home childcare workers are usually from non-Western countries including, but not limited to, Latin America.

Disability

Disabilities can come in many forms, such as physical, sensory, cognitive, and mental health disabilities. We use the term "disabled people" instead of person-first language (e.g., "people with disabilities") because members of many disability-focused communities advocate for wording that acknowledges that one's disability is a permanent part of their life, and therefore, they do not want to separate it from their identity. Disabilities are not undesirable traits or flaws in need of being cured.

Visual Design and Disability

- **Villainizing Facial Disfigurement:** Facial disfigurements, scars, or other physical marks are often a visual shorthand for villainy. For individuals living with scars and facial disfigurements these portrayals can perpetuate stigma and discrimination. By consistently linking villainy with facial disfigurement, media narratives contribute to a culture that values physical perfection and ostracizes those who do not conform to these narrow standards of beauty. Learn more from the *I Am Not Your Villain* campaign.
- **Weaponized Prosthetics**: Weaponized prosthetics is when disabled characters with missing limbs are given prosthetics that double as weapons. Examples include characters with prosthetic legs that transform into cannons, or prosthetic arms that turn into advanced weaponry. While on the surface this might seem like an empowering portrayal by showcasing disabled characters

as powerful and resourceful, it subtly reinforces the idea that people with disabilities must compensate for their disability by exhibiting extraordinary abilities or characteristics. This trope can also contribute to the mechanistic dehumanization of disabled characters, reducing them to their assistive devices and their potential for violence or action.

- **Device Accuracy:** Assistive devices should be rendered accurately. For example, wheelchairs vary, and certain disabilities necessitate unique chairs. Authentic representation of assistive devices will contribute to more realistic and inclusive portrayals.
- **Avatar Customization** Offer choices that reflect a multitude of disabilities, including those physical and cognitive.

Common Disability Tropes in Media

- **The Supercrip:** A character whose disability is offset by superhuman abilities, suggesting that to be remarkable people with disabilities must overcome or compensate for their disability.
- **Medical Oddity:** A character who is depicted as a medical oddity or an object of curiosity. This trope is common in the genre of horror games, where disabled characters are often depicted as unnatural or as medical experiments gone awry.
- **Inspo Porn**: A disabled character whose primary role is to inspire able-bodied people, often by overcoming their disability in unrealistic ways. These stories limit the autonomy of disabled people, reducing them to a prop or a plot device.
- **The Villainous Disabled Person**: Portraying disabled characters as bitter, evil, or twisted due to their disability. Their disability is often a mark or a source of their villainy, which contributes to the stigmatization of disabilities.
- **The Helpless Disabled Person**: A disabled character who is portrayed as entirely dependent on others, reinforcing stereotypes that disabled people are a burden and to be pitied.

LGBTQIA+

LGBTQIA+ identity represents people who do not identify as heterosexual and cisgender, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual/agender individuals. The plus sign is to be inclusive of sexualities, genders, and noncisgender/nonheteronormative identities that are not otherwise directly referred to in the initialism.

Visual Design and Queer Identity

- **Personalization**: Empowering queer individuals to create LGBTQIA+ characters in the video games they play fosters authentic representation and storytelling within the gaming community because it allows players to explore diverse identities and shape narratives that resonate with their own experiences.
  - **Avatar Customization:** Allow gamers to construct avatars and character bodies that are queer to foster agency and permit authentic representation. This can be particularly important for queer individuals who may use video games to explore their relation to

gender and romantic attraction, especially when those gamers do not feel comfortable exploring those identities in their physical world. Consider some of the following ways in which a gamer can construct queer bodies in your video game:

- **Diverse Gender Expression:** Permit players to select nonbinary or null gender identity options. Allow gamers to change the gender expression of their avatars throughout the process of the gameplay.
- **Customized Names and Pronouns:** Allow players to customize their avatar's name and pronouns to avoid their misgendering in virtual spaces. Include gender-neutral and nonbinary options (e.g., they, xe) and multiple pronoun (e.g., she/they) sets. Allow gamers to update these throughout the gameplay experience.
- **Diverse Physical Features:** Provide comprehensive customization options that encompass a broad range of physical features, including body types (e.g., pregnant bodies), facial features (e.g., facial hair, jawline), hairstyles, and body movement and behavior (e.g., gait, emotes, if a character stands to use the toilet).
- **Customized Voices:** Integrate a variety of voice options or customization tools that allow players to choose or modify their avatar's voice. These features allow players to create avatars that align with their preferred gender expression.
- **Clothing and Accessories:** Include a diverse selection of clothing and accessories that are not strictly associated with a particular gender, including options such as piercings, diverse hairstyles and colors, and unisex clothing options. This can also be applied to customizable weapons, props, and emotes. This enables players to create avatars with styles that resonate with their individual expressions of gender and cultural identity.

- **Queer Relationships:** Bring queer romantic relationships into the narrative by showing same-gender couples in similar ways to how opposite-gender couples are shown, such as allowing characters of any gender to court other characters. Also include nonromantic familial relationships, such as having queer parents or having a queer child. This can include relationships for playable characters but also characters in the background.
- **Queer Iconography:** If your game features celebrities or well-known gamers and influencers, include members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Include nods to LGBTQIA+ identity in game environments, such as a Pride flag hung at a character's business or planted in a character's front yard. There are many ways to visually signal inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community, such as pronoun pins and more than 20 Pride-flag designs and patterns.
- **Queer Player and Nonplayer Characters:** Beyond avatars, PCs and NPCs can be designed to visually convey LGBTQIA+ identity, using the recommendations above.

Questions to Ask

To check whether your game is inclusive of identifiably nonbinary, trans, and/or queer characters, consider the following questions:

1. How are characters in your game gendered?
    a. *Pronouns:* In some games, this is done through dialogue and narrative, such as referring to a guard NPC as "he," using a particularly gendered name (e.g., Dick, Jane), and using male voice actors.
    b. *Physical Cues:* In other games, this may be done with visual cues, such as when women characters are identical to men characters but with exaggerated lips and eyelashes. This is a common way nonhuman characters are gendered.
    c. *Default Options*: In games where the gamer is creating a playable character, they are often offered stock male and female avatars to begin with.
2. Can characters in your game be identified as outside of the gender binary? Can characters in your game be identified as transgender?
    a. This can be accomplished by allowing players to select their personal pronouns, not defaulting to a stock male body and stock female body, and allowing nonbinary pairings of physical attributes (e.g., a masculine-presenting character body that has a feminine voice, a feminine-presenting character that wears only "men's" clothing).
    b. This can also be accomplished in games where characters engage in romantic, sexual, or familial relationships by allowing players to create queer relationships and families.
3. Does your game have queer NPCs?
    a. For example, are there nonbinary NPCs? Are their other characters in your game that can be identified as LGBTQIA+?

Common Queer Tropes in Media

- **Queer-Coded Evil Villain:** This character is a supervillain whose traits and behaviors are stereotypically associated with LGBTQIA+ identities (e.g., hypereffeminate male villain, hypermasculine female villain). While not explicitly stated or confirmed as queer within the narrative, these characters exhibit mannerisms, fashion choices, or characteristics that align with harmful stereotypes traditionally linked to the LGBTQIA+ community. This coding can reinforce prejudiced ideas that associate queerness with villainy or deviance, which then justify violence toward queer people. This trope also contributes to the marginalization and misrepresentation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in storytelling, often portraying them as morally ambiguous or antagonistic figures based on stereotypes.
- **Queer Tragedy:** In these instances, LGBTQIA+ characters are disproportionately subjected to experiences of suffering, adversity, or physical and sexual violence within fictional stories. For example, common overused narratives include queer victims of brutal hate crimes, dying HIV/AIDS patients, and young queer adults running from their unaccepting families. This

stereotype reinforces the notion that queer individuals are destined to endure tragic narratives, perpetuating negative and stigmatizing assumptions about the LGBTQIA+ community.

- **Bury Your Gays:** This is a narrative pattern in which LGBTQIA+ characters, especially those in same-sex relationships, are disproportionately subjected to tragic or untimely deaths within fictional stories. This stereotype perpetuates the harmful idea that queer characters are more likely to meet unfortunate fates, reinforcing negative and outdated stereotypes about the LGBTQIA+ community.
- **Gay Best Friend:** This character, often a gay man, is the best friend to the lead, reinforcing the notion that their sexuality is their defining feature rather than a facet of their complex identity. This stereotype often reduces LGBTQIA+ characters to one-dimensional, flamboyant sidekicks whose primary purpose is to provide comic relief or serve as accessories to the typically heterosexual protagonist.
- **Nonhuman Is Nonbinary:** This is a trans, intersex, and/or nonbinary character that is in some way not human (in other words, a nonbinary alien, a transsexual robot, an agender "blob"). In extreme cases, they may be depicted as having some combination of both male and female genitalia and can be regarded as horrific, freakish, unnatural (and thus needing to be fixed), and/or fetishized. While these characters normalize identifying as neither a man nor woman, they can make nonbinary identities seem fictional, otherworldy, or fantastical.

In-Game Example

The Last of Us

The Last of Us series, particularly *The Last of Us Part II*, is recognized for its notable representation of LGBTQIA+ characters, primarily through Ellie, one of the main protagonists. Ellie's identity as a lesbian is a core aspect of her character, portrayed in a respectful and authentic manner throughout the game. The storytelling in *The Last of Us Part II* delves into Ellie's relationships, notably her romantic involvement with Dina. Their relationship is depicted with depth and complexity, emphasizing their emotional connection rather than reducing their identities to stereotypes. This portrayal contributes to the normalization of LGBTQIA+ relationships in video games and broader media. Moreover, the game doesn't center its narrative solely on the characters' sexual orientations. Instead, it weaves their identities into a larger, multifaceted story about survival, loss, revenge, and the complexities of human emotions. This approach helps integrate LGBTQIA+ representation into the game's broader themes, making it an integral part of the storytelling rather than a token inclusion. The game's portrayal of LGBTQIA+ characters, like Ellie, contributes to greater visibility and acceptance within the gaming community. And it has been critically applauded for its effort in presenting diverse and authentic characters whose identities are an essential part of their stories without being their defining feature.

Read more [here](#).

Try it out.

Make a character profile guided by the 5Ps for a few of your characters considering:

Prominence: How significant is the character to the game world?
Power: Does the character have agency?
Personality: What unique set of traits define the character and shape their interactions and reactions in the game?
Proficiency: What are the unique skills, abilities, and talents the character possesses in the game world?
Profession: What is the character's job, role, or professional background in the game world?

Prominence: How significant is the character to the game world?

The big picture:
- Who are your game's most prominent characters?
- Are characters from marginalized groups relegated to less prominent roles?

Keep in mind:
- In addition to playable characters, think about bystanders and other supporting characters including competitors, quest givers, villains, bosses, lower level antagonists (attackable NPCs).

Level Up: If your game does not feature LGBTQIA+ characters, are there characters who could be made to be queer through their backstory and personal relationships?

Power: Does the character have agency?

The big picture:
- Are marginalized groups important to telling the story, or are they just an accessory?

Keep in mind:
Agency signals freedom, autonomy, and self-determination.
- Considering gender, that means …
  - Female characters who are in control of their choices.
  - Women who are important to telling the story and not just an accessory.
- Considering queer identity, that means …
  - Self-determination in the character's queer identity.
  - Choices not limited by their queer identity.
- Considering disability, that means …
  - Self-determination about the character's care and/or accommodations .
  - Choices about their future.
  - Independence in their day-to-day life.

Personality Traits: What unique set of traits define the character and shape their interactions and reactions in the game?

The big picture:
- Do your characters' personalities reflect and/or reinforce identity stereotypes?
- Do they challenge them?

Personality and Gender Stereotypes

💡Studies find traits that embody agency and independence are more easily attributed to men than women, and that traits that embody nurturing are more easily attributed to women than men.[34]

- Do the characters in your game have empathy, and can they express emotions? Are they nurturing, sensitive, altruistic, vulnerable, empathetic, gentle, kind, submissive, passive, dependent, self-sacrificing, or anxious?
- Do the characters have the power to control their goals, actions, and destiny? Are they courageous, assertive, physically strong, competitive, violent, egotistical, selfish, self-centered, emotionally unavailable, dominant, or sexually entitled?

Level Up: When the story allows, show male characters who display a full range of emotions, including joy, sadness, and vulnerability.

Personality and Racial Stereotypes

Video game characters' personalities can inadvertently reinforce racial stereotypes when these characters are created following simplistic or prejudiced ideas. For instance, if a game consistently portrays characters of a certain race as having specific negative traits, such as aggression, criminality, or a lack of intelligence, it perpetuates harmful stereotypes associated with that racial group.

- East Asian stereotypes: stoic; innocent/pure or sexually deviant (women); studious.
- South Asian stereotypes: educated; culturally backward.
- Black stereotypes: violent or angry; sexually aggressive or promiscuous; poor.
- Latinx stereotypes:[35] hot-tempered; "spicy" or "feisty"; passionate; hypersexual; undocumented; poor.
- Native/Indigenous stereotypes: alcoholic; "savage" or uncivilized; uneducated; magical or mystical.

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[34] Scott, K. A. and D. J. Douglas. (2006). "Female First, Leader Second? Gender Bias in the Encoding of Leadership Behavior." Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes. 101 (2): 230-242.
[35] Read more: https://utpress.utexas.edu/9780292709072/;
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f8a09a4bd8bae2e8075da0b/t/5fac30581ef47e6e87eeb5b8/160512008960647/TTIE_Factsheet_LatinxPeople_November2020.pdf

Personality and Disability Stereotypes

Video game characters' personalities can inadvertently reinforce disability stereotypes when these characters are created following simplistic or prejudiced ideas. For instance, if a game consistently portrays disabled characters as having specific negative traits, such as being vengeful or victimized, it perpetuates harmful stereotypes.

Be mindful of stereotyping as …
- Victims (e.g., helpless, pathetic, deserving of pity, hapless, clumsy).
- Villains (e.g., evil, vengeful, jealous, angry, bitter, mentally unstable).

Personality and LGBTQIA+ Stereotypes

Video game characters' personalities can inadvertently reinforce queer stereotypes when these characters are created following simplistic or prejudiced ideas. For instance, if a game consistently portrays LGBTQIA+ characters as having specific negative traits, such as promiscuity, criminality, or deviance, it perpetuates harmful stereotypes associated with the queer community.

Keep in mind LGBTQIA+ stereotypes…
- Gay (men): hypereffeminate, sassy, promiscuous, deviant/amoral, hypersexual, more empathetic.
- Lesbian (women): hypermasculine, man-hating, hypercommittal, deviant/amoral, cold/less empathetic, assertive.
- Bisexual: greedy, deviant, evil (antagonists or villains), promiscuous, unfaithful, untrustworthy, deviant/amoral, hypersexual, indecisive.
- Trans: hypersexual/fetishized, mentally ill, promiscuous, untrustworthy.

Proficiency: What are the unique skills, abilities, and talents the character possesses in the game world?

The big picture:
- Do the skills and abilities assigned to characters reflect and/or reinforce stereotypes?
- Do they challenge them?

Keep in mind:
- Stereotypically masculine skills include leadership, critical thinking, risk-taking, speed, physical strength, shooting, hacking, and combat skills.
- Stereotypically feminine skills include sociability, empathy, healing, and magical powers, like shape-shifting.
- Stereotypical skills for disabled people include supernatural powers that stem from disability, savant, and genius.

Level Up: Create playable female characters that are equal in skill and ability to their male peers.

Profession: What is the character's job, role, or professional background in the game world?

The big picture:
Do your characters have occupations or professional backstories? If so, what fields? Do these occupation choices reflect and/or reinforce stereotypes?

Keep in mind:
- Male-dominated occupations include computer science, math, engineering, politics, government, business, construction, military, physics, and chemistry.
- Female-dominated fields include sociology, anthropology, arts, design, administration, service industry, medical fields, veterinary, eldercare, childcare, and education.
- There are not necessarily careers associated with certain disabilities. But do not let a character's disability limit the professions they are assigned.
- Stereotypical professions for gay men include interior design, theater, nurse, fashion, and hairdressing.
- Stereotypical professions for lesbians include athlete (e.g., softball), construction, and mechanics.
- Stereotypical trans professions include sex worker, stripper/dancer, drag performer, and fashion.

Achievement 3 Complete!

Apply It
Utilize the 5Ps framework for comprehensive character development.

Key 3 attained! Ready to keep going?

Next, Key 4: Craft Connection.

Key 4: Craft Connection

Key 4 Overview

We present two learning achievements you can strive toward as you craft connection:

1. Represent: Gather feedback throughout development from people you want to represent.
2. Listen: Refine games based on feedback.

At the end of this section, you will also find the list of core concepts introduced in this section.

Achievement 1: Represent

Gather feedback throughout development from people you want to represent.

Method: Build a Diverse Team

Think about representation behind the scenes. Surveys show that the gaming industry is not very diverse. According to the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) biannual survey from 2021:

- Women constituted about 30% of game-developer positions globally.
- Only 4% of overall respondents identified as Black, African American, African, or Afro-Caribbean.

Read IGDA's Diversity in the Game Industry report **here**.

Method: Paid Internships

Many aspiring game developers get their start through internships, but often, these opportunities are unpaid. This internship structure disadvantages talent from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who cannot afford to gain work experience without compensation.

Paid internships can elevate underrepresented voices in your creative development.

Read about the approach that ustwo games takes to internships here.

Method: Consult

Engage experts and organizations focused on the authentic portrayals of underrepresented groups.

If you have the resources to do so, identify and engage experts who can partner with you throughout creative development. Some approaches are project-specific contracts and ad hoc hourly consulting. Take a look at our resources section for organizations that can support you in your work.

If your team doesn't have members from the groups you intend to include in your game, and you're short on funds to hire consultants or offer paid internships, it's especially vital to carefully plan your approach, as we discuss in Key 1. Aim to involve sensitivity readers as well as your playtesters, which we'll discuss next.

In-Game Example

Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice, by Ninja Theory

For their game *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, developer Ninja Theory worked with trained experts, such as psychiatrists and audio specialists, as well as experts with lived experience, like individuals in recovery from psychosis-related disorders, throughout the development process — but especially at the start, in pre-production. These experts were not just sources of information but also an integral part of the iterative design process.
Read more here.

In-Game Example

Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna)

Never Alone (Kisima Ingitchuna) shows how creative development in close partnership with communities represented can be effective. The idea for the game, which is based on a traditional Iñupiaq story, originated with Cook Inlet Tribal Council (CITC), a nonprofit that represents Alaskan Native people in the Cook Inlet region, so the developers (E-Line Media and Upper One Games) worked closely with them. The creative team traveled regularly to Alaska to consult with tribal community members and the CITC on the game's narrative and visual design. This close collaboration was met with a positive response from both the industry and players: It was nominated for over 50 "best of" lists and many awards, with over 3.5 million downloads and an average rating of 9/10 on Steam. The success of this partnership led CITC and E-Line to continue their work together on impact games and other collaborations.

Read more about the partnership process from the perspective of a CITC member here.

Method: Sensitivity Readers

Evaluate how your game resonates with representative groups by engaging sensitivity readers.

What it is: A sensitivity reader is someone who reads works-in-progress for offensive content, misrepresentation, stereotypes, bias, lack of understanding, etc. A sensitivity reader will often come

from a specific identity or community that the author is writing about. They create a report, which can include academic as well as personal experience, outlining the problems that they find in a piece of work and offering solutions for how to fix them.

We suggest that a game developer hire more than one sensitivity reader, especially if they are writing about a culture that they are not familiar with. Although many of us may share the same cultural background, we are all shaped where we grew up and our unique personal experiences.[36]

Why it matters: Not only does this process improve the quality of the content, but it also helps boost the likelihood that the content will be positively received by all audiences.

Questions to Ask

Establish a process for regular check-backs at key milestones in your development cycle, ensuring that the perspectives of team members or consultants continue to be authentically integrated. This step is especially important for games with lengthy development timelines since they often involve multiple changes in team members.

- Have team members or consultants been part of the conversation throughout the development process, not just once or twice?
- Have you established organizational practices and policies to ensure your workplace provides a safe space for team members of all backgrounds and seniority levels to speak up?
- Are team members' and/or consultants' perspectives meaningfully incorporated in the game?

Achievement 1 Complete!

Apply It

Establish a process for regular feedback with consultants or team members from relevant groups, ensuring that their perspectives are consistently integrated into the development process.

Achievement 2: Listen

Make a plan to collect, evaluate, and respond to playtester feedback on character and narrative choices, and refine elements based on that feedback.

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[36] For more on sensitivity readers, check out the guidance from University of Alberta:
https://guides.library.ualberta.ca/writing-editing-and-publishing-indigenous-stories

Method: Playtesters

Why it matters

Playtesting provides valuable insights from an outside player's perspective and can help developers understand how outside player's perceive representation and inclusion aspects of the narrative and characters.

This section provides information on who ought to be included to make playtesting inclusive, what questions to ask playtesters when soliciting representation and inclusion feedback, and how to incorporate that information when revising your game.

Even with limited resources, game designers can gain valuable insights toward their inclusivity goals from having people not involved in development play their game and provide feedback.

Steps for inclusive, informative playtesting:

- **Diverse Recruitment:** Try to recruit a diverse group of people to try out your game. To find players of diverse genders, ages, sexual orientations, and race/ethnicities, ask friends, family, friends of friends, and peers. If your game includes storylines and characters from marginalized communities, aim to recruit people from those communities to playtest.
- **Informed Playtesting:** Let your playtesters know that you are seeking feedback on identity-based representation, that you want feedback to refine aspects like cultural accuracy, and that you are interested in identifying possibly inaccurate and offensive narratives and portrayals.
- **Anonymous Feedback:** Provide feedback options that allow playtesters to share insights anonymously.. This will allow them to be more open and honest, and help you to weigh all feedback equally.
- **Check Back:** If playtesters identified specific issues, go back to them to ask whether revisions corrected issues identified. With anonymous feedback, this is more complicated, but one way to check is to give playtesters the opportunity to playtest again, if substantial edits were made.
- **Acknowledgement:** If playtesters helped shape your game in a substantial way, find a way to formally acknowledge them, such as by naming them in the end credits of your game.
- **Compensation:** Members of communities you engage with should be compensated for their time. If resources are limited, think of ways to continue your relationship with the communities you work with. This can include grant writing, free distribution of your game to that group, inclusion in future work, or helping that community with tasks they request in the future.

Questions to Ask:

- Do most of my playtesters share identities with the characters in the game?
- Do my playtesters identify with narratives presented in the game?
- Have playtesters been part of development throughout the process, not just once there is a shareable build?

- Are my playtester's perspectives meaningfully incorporated in the game?
- Have I established a lasting commitment to the groups I've consulted with, and have I credited them appropriately?
- Is there an ongoing relationship with playtesters whose experience is being portrayed or represented so that they can see and comment on changes over time?

Achievement 2 Complete!

Apply It: Formalize a dynamic feedback process with playtesters, thereby helping to refine game elements for enhanced connection with players.

Core Concepts

Inclusion: An approach of welcoming and respecting all identities in a way that an individual feels valued, respected, and heard.

Stereotype: Categorical representations that reduce groups of people and places to basic generalizations. Stereotypes often include making assumptions about individuals based on a group they are a part of, and can reinforce the dominant ideology and power of elite groups because they influence the audience's attitude toward the people and events being described.

Underrepresentation: Underrepresenting marginalized groups relative to their real-world population. This imbalance distorts one's view of society and can reinforce harmful stereotypes about marginalized groups.

You have attained Key 4!

Continue? Next, Key 5: Craft Belonging.

Key 5: Craft Belonging

Key 5 Overview

This topic is divided into two learning achievements that you can work toward as you craft belonging:
1. Assess: Measure player response to inclusive representation efforts, using player feedback and engagement metrics.
2. Endurance: Establish development practices that support lasting, positive shifts for inclusive representation in game content.

Achievement 1: Assess

Measure player response to inclusive representation efforts, using player feedback and engagement metrics.

Introduction

Set annual progress checks. These provide concrete data for leadership, aid in planning, and foster clear direction for and confidence in your team.

Game development is typically a long, multiyear process. Player response may be very different today compared with when your game is complete. For example, what will the social landscape look like when the game is released years from now?

We can't predict the future, but instituting an annual measurement process will help you anticipate these larger directional shifts because it allows you to identify trends and areas where results start to deviate from previous years.

Methods

There are many opportunities to gather player feedback and engagement, both quantitative and qualitative:

- Surveys
- In-game feedback
- Playtesters (as detailed in Key 4)
- Focus groups
- Game analytics

- Community forums
- Public game reviews
- Social media commentary

Questions to Ask

1. Are my measurements valid?: Do they measure what they are supposed to?
2. Are my measurements reliable?: Will I get the same results using the same measurement procedure?
3. Are my measurements replicable?: If someone else conducted this same procedure, would they get the same results?

Take Action

If you have the resources available, combine interpretative frameworks — such as thematic coding — with available software solutions.

- Thematic coding is a common way to analyze qualitative data by finding and sorting through patterns or themes in your findings.
- These resources can help identify conceptual themes within your data:
  - Atlas.ti
  - Lumivero

Achievement 1 Complete!

Apply It
Implement regular surveys and analytics to measure player response to inclusive representation, using both qualitative and quantitative data to inform future development decisions.

Achievement 2: Endurance

Establish development practices that support lasting, positive shifts for inclusive representation in game content.

Introduction

In Key 1, we explore how you can approach your game creation with the lenses of self-reflection and intersectionality. Implementing that approach in a way that solidifies lasting shifts in inclusive representation involves self-reflection before, during, and after your game's development.

And remember, we're all in this together. Collaborate with team members and industry partners to show a joint dedication to crafting inclusive content and spaces that promote connection and belonging for players from all backgrounds.

Document.

Keep a detailed record of your thoughts and decisions throughout the development process. This is especially valuable when you revisit this data or if you are trying to trace change over time.

Questions to Ask

- Have I been transparent about my development process?
- Have I reflected upon how my social identity influences my perspective of the world? Also, how does that relate to my team and my company?
- Am I open to other interpretations of my game?
- Have I connected aspects of my game to larger conceptual frameworks related to gender, race, etc.?

Organize your data, reflect again, and communicate.

- Organize and make sense of the data you've collected on identities and narratives in your game. Jot down initial thoughts about patterns, themes, or relationships within the data, which can help guide future analysis.
- Reflect on your own biases, assumptions, and preconceptions. How might particular perspectives influence the interpretation of the data?
- Share your reflections with other members of your team as a means of communicating insights and progress toward more inclusive representation.

Try It: Retrospective Activity (Process Tracing)

If you've published multiple games, look back at your past games and choose specific cases that are relevant to how you would like to understand representation in your game development. Select those that represent a variety of outcomes (including some good examples and some that need to be improved).

- What did or did not go well during that particular game's development?
- What actions and conditions caused that game to be developed well or poorly?
- Can you compare the processes between games that you believe are developed well and games that are not?

Take Action

An industry-wide commitment to prioritizing inclusive design and culture is the path toward gaming becoming a space that truly welcomes all players. You can start by supporting and advocating for internal programs and efforts that emphasize inclusive player engagement and connection.

Facilitate collaboration across teams, publishers, and gaming-related spaces to prioritize creating content and spaces of connection and belonging for all players.

Achievement 2 Complete!

Apply It

Embed inclusive representation as a core value in the development process, incorporating it into project timelines, team training, company values, and your decision-making framework.

You have attained Key 5!

Congratulations, you have completed the GDI Playbook!