

# Playing with Herstory. Representing Femininity in Historical Video Games

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## ABSTRACT

We propose a set of six topics of inquiry into historical games as regards their feminine characters, and we illustrate them through an analysis of *This War of Mine*, *Valiant Hearts* and *80 Days*. Historical games may include documented historical characters and fictive characters as well; the latter may aim to represent a type of real persons, or may be individualized as a purely fictional character. We argue that *This War of Mine*, *Valiant Hearts* and *80 Days* have both strong and weak points in their construction of feminine characters, when taking into account the proposed set of indicators.

## Keywords

Historical games; gender; herstory; agency; age; diversity.

## INTRODUCTION

While the critique of the dominantly masculine perspective and casting in history writing is well established for texts and films, the critical examination and rewriting of gender in historical games has yet to gain ground. The ‘Women in History’ addition to *Europa Universalis IV* in 2015 is a sign that change is about to happen in this medium, too (Chalk, 2015). In this short paper we propose indicators for a systematic comparison of herstories in video games, and we exemplify them through brief discussions of three video games that touch on historical accounts.

We identify six topics of inquiry into feminine characters in historical video games (see Table 1): the relationship between game characters and real persons; the proportion of women; whether or not characters display strong agency or not; whether they include player characters; their diversity of age, and other types of diversity. The first topic requires additional clarification: historical games may include both historical and fictive characters. Yet, fictive characters may aim to be representative for certain types of historically-existing persons, or they may be completely fictive.

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Feminine characters	TWoM	Valiant Hearts	80 Days	
Relation with historical characters	Fictive, representative	Fictive, representative	Purely fictive	Historical
Proportion	Balanced	Unbalanced (one woman)	Balanced (possibly more women than men)	Unbalanced (several women)
Agency	Strong	Strong	Strong	Strong
Player characters	Yes	Yes	No	No
Diversity of age	Low (Cveta is middle age, the others are young)	No	Yes	Unclear
Other types of diversity	Personal histories, skills, personalities	No	Personal histories, skills, personalities	

Table 1. Six topics of inquiry for examining representations of femininity in history games

## REPRESENTATIONS OF FEMININITY IN THREE HISTORY GAMES

### This War of Mine

This War of Mine (11 bit studios, 2014) is a critical war game inspired by the Siege of Sarajevo, proposing a potential counter-pedagogy for war game players (Toma, 2015). The playable characters are civilians, and their depiction attempts to be realistic. The game is designed in opposition to popular war games, which are played from the perspective of the trained soldier whose violent behavior appears as legitimate.

The playable characters are of different ages and genders, with various skills and personalities. Both feminine and masculine characters can be physically or psychologically tough or weak, depending on their background and personality, their diversity being chosen to portray a community of people taken by surprise by war. For example, Arica is stealthy and good in combat, her background being that of a cat burglar, while Bruno is a good cook, as he used to be a chef with his own TV show. Emilia used to be a lawyer and she is the least concerned with other people's emotions or morality issues, while Boris, who used to be a Warehouse worker, is rather sensitive to morality issues and eager to help other people. Cveta is the only feminine character who seems past her young age.



Figure 1. Arica and Emilia – two playable characters

## Valiant Hearts

While TWoM includes female characters in diverse roles, recreating the experience of a siege for a large number of civilians with diverse personal histories and skills, Valiant Hearts (Ubisoft, 2014) uses few feminine characters, from which only one is playable - Anna. Anna is a fictive character of uncertain age that instantiates a general type, and her roles are chosen to be representative for women's professional involvement in the WWI. The game has a strong commemorative character (Rughiniş & Matei, 2015), and Anna represents a type of war hero. Anna quit school to work in an ammunition factory and to help her country during war. As a playable character, she is a nurse. These two were the most common employment situations for women during the war. Anna goes on the battlefield looking for her father. She helps the wounded, including an amputation of someone's arm, and drives bravely, while being shot at by the enemy.



Figure 2. Anna and the cast of characters

Valiant Hearts also includes historical information as a background to gameplay. In Figure 3 we can see a presentation of nurses, which links the character of Anna to the many women who have worked in this field.

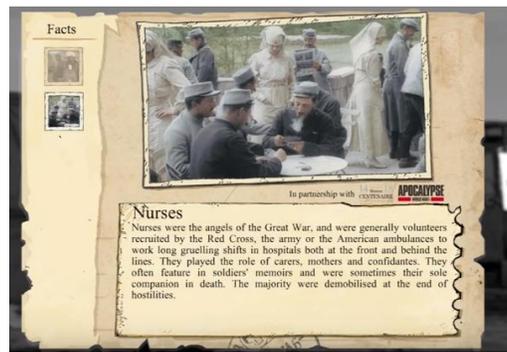


Figure 3: Historical information about nurses.

## 80 Days

Inkle's 80 Days (Inkle, 2014) is a recreation of Jules Verne's novel 'Around the World in Eighty Days' as an interactive, playable e-book. The player takes the role of Passepartout, who plans his master's travel around the world. This is not our world, though: it is a steampunk science fiction version of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which mixes historical accounts with fiction. While the playable character is masculine, there are countless feminine characters in the game. They have diverse roles, including many which would be considered stereotypically masculine, such as pirates, engineers (Artificers), pilots, mechanics and the like. They have a variety of personality traits – being occasionally

malicious, violent but also kind and supportive. They range an entire spectrum of ages, from childhood to old age, and they also have a diversity of sexual orientations. The game also includes references to several historical feminine characters – such as Queen Victoria or Esther Hobart Morris, but its strength in numbers and variety is striking as regards fictive characters.

## CONCLUSION

In current analyses of gender representations in video games there is a focus on the presence of strong characters, at the expense of other relevant discussions. We propose six indicators to orient examination of historical games and their inclusion of feminine characters. We start from distinguishing *three types of characters*, as regards their relationship with historical persons: fictive-representative characters, purely fictive characters, and historical characters. For each type we may then inquire into their *numerical representativity*, their *agency*, and their *diversity*. We distinguish *age diversity*, which is a general indicator that applies to any game, to *other types of diversity* that may depend on the specifics of the gameworld.

The representation of femininity in a historical game may thus be strong on a certain dimension and weaker in another one. Valiant Hearts includes only one woman as playable character, but sketches her to represent a recognizable historical type. TWoM includes multiple playable characters, which are more individualized, arguably maintaining their ability to point towards certain types of civilians caught in the Sarajevo nightmare. 80 Days relies on a wide diversity of women characters, some with stereotypically masculine occupations and personality profiles – thus using fiction to repair traditional historical accounts of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, its own historical accounts do not include too many real feminine characters.

There is considerable space for improvement in designing feminine characters in historical video games. Future developments stand to benefit from taking into account several indicators, rather than focusing only on the number and strength of characters.

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