A quest to unravel the secrets of gender inclusive game design

-A qualitative study on the design process of female protagonists

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Abstract

This thesis revolves around the almost unexplored subject of gender inclusive game design. The main research question is *How can game design become more gender inclusive* and the secondary research question used to examine this is: *how the design process is affected by a female protagonist*. Female protagonist in games are lacking and have been scares thorough history. Times are changing, and the female protagonist are on the rise. How can the design process be evolved to continue the trend?

The study is conducted by using the qualitative method of in-depth interviews with the people who are closest to the problem, the game developers themselves. The results are compared to previous research on the topic and analysed by using the MDA- framework to examine and look at game design as a design artifact. The study gives an insight into the mind of a game designer and what the process of creating gender inclusive games entails. It is a very opinionated topic and that really shows in the result. To achieve gender inclusiveness seems for some, to be as easy as working a few more hours on the protagonist’s gloves, and for others as difficult as trying to fight a social and political construction. The one unanimous opinion is the value of the players, the audience need be vocal about the demand for gender inclusivity and diversity in games. Developers need to be in symbiosis with these demands. The game design artifact is dependent on the diversity of both its developers and the audience.

*Keywords: game design, gender inclusiveness, gender inclusive game design, female protagonist.*
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1. Introduction

The female protagonist is on the rise! During the late 2010’s there has been an influx in 
female protagonist in video games. According to an article in Forbes *the 20 best video games* 
of *2017* (Kain, 2017) 20% of the games had a predetermined female protagonist compared to 
0% predetermined female protagonists the year before (Kain, 2017). Although this is 
excluding games where the player gets to pick the gender of the protagonist where 40% of 
games had the choice of gender and the year before that had 25% (Kain, 2017) but includes 
games where there is more than one protagonist.

This is of course a huge step towards a more gender inclusive gaming experience, but it is 
still far from being equal. According to a study made by Ipsos GameTrack (Ipsos MORI, 
n.d.) in collaboration with the interactive software federation of Europe (ISFE, n.d.) called the 
new faces of gaming 44% of Europe’s gamers are female (Mena, E., & Cookman, B, 2017). 
Gamers are not a homogenic group, a broader demographic needs a more open approach to 
gender inclusiveness.

This study applies qualitative methods to examine and deconstruct the different aspects of 
game design that is vital to developing gender inclusive games. The purpose of this is to see 
how game design can be evolved to include more and better female representation.

1.1. Background

1.1.1. The evolution of the female protagonist

From a pink bow to tough robot slayer, the female protagonist has come a long way since she 
first showed up in the world of videogames. It’s possible to argue that the pink bowed Ms. 
Pac-man pacman from 1981 self-titled arcade game Ms. Pac-man (Arcade museum n.d) is 
one of the first female protagonists.

In the book *gender inclusive game design*, the author Sheri Graner Ray (2004) claims that the 
graphical limitations of the first video games made it harder to recognize a protagonist’s 
gender, it was mostly recognized by longer hair or something that resembled a dress. Instead 
the gender of the characters was represented by the box art of a game.
Ms. Pac-man was one of the few games where the player got to take on the role of a female character. Sheri Graner Ray argues that females during the early era of video games were often designed to follow a storytelling trope called the damsels in distress (Ray, 2004). The Longman dictionary of contemporary English describes damsels in distress as “a young woman who needs help or protection” (Longman, n.d). This was first popularized in video games 1981 when the arcade game Donkey Kong released (Nintendo, 1981). In Donkey Kong the players’ goal was to rescue the helpless princess Pauline from a huge Gorilla. The creator of Donkey Kong, Super Mario and Zelda Shigeru Miyamoto said in an interview with Kotaku (Totilo, 2013).

“Well, yeah, back in the days when we made the first Donkey Kong, that was a game we first made for the arcades, the arcades were not places girls went into often. And so we didn't even consider making a character that would be playable for girls” (Totilo, 2013, para.13).

Donkey Kong started a trend in the industry that is still around today. Two of the game company Nintendo's hit video games Super Mario (Nintendo n.d) and Zelda (Nintendo n.d) both share this trope of saving the princess, although it has been a topic of discussion about the latter of the two that Zelda's role in the Zelda franchise could be interpreted differently. In the Zelda franchise you play as Link a hero set out on a journey help the princess, the premise differs from all the games, but the goal is always to help Zelda stop the evil forces in the Kingdom (Ray, S. G, 2004).

Although the damsels in distress trope was very big during the early era of videogames hope was not lost for strong female representation in video games. In the 1986 Nintendo game
Metroid, the player takes on the role of the Bounty hunter Samus Aran. In the end of the game the armed hero’s identity is revealed, Samus is a female. There is however a problem with the reveal of Samus identity. The original ending is Samus taking of her helmet to reveal her femininity, if the player completes the game under a certain amount of time the ending becomes Samus undressing to a bikini to reveal her identity instead (Shoemaker, B, 2009). Even though the ending has been criticized Samus is still being seen as a strong and empowered female protagonist.

(Nintendo Life. N.d; Sharpio, J. 2014, August 21)

Samus went on to be featured as the protagonist of 12 Metroid games, which made her one of the most prominent female protagonists in videogame history. The Metroid games told very little of Samus personality and sometimes depicted her without her armour in a sexualized way, but she was always portrayed as a strong and capable bounty hunter (Shoemaker, B, 2009). That was until the 2008 Nintendo game Super smash brawl. The character zero suit Samus is a different character to the original armoured Samus. The zero suit is her suit without the armour attached to it, It’s a skin tight revealing bodysuit. The trend of sexualizing Samus continued in the 2010 game Metroid M Other M, more of Samus personality is explored and explained at the expense her being portrayed in her so called zero suit a lot more than previous titles of the series (Sharpio, 2014).
In the later Nintendo games in the Super Smash Bros series, zero suit Samus is yet again a different character from the Armoured Samus (Minor, 2018). In the magazine *Nintendo life* in an article discussing the sexualisation of Samus opinions of the fans differs. Out of 801 votes 19% thinks that Samus image had been damaged by design choices, 32% answered that they think she had been sexualized, but did not think that it was a significant issue. 26% did not think that she had been overly sexualized by Nintendo and 20% says that they definitely not think so, and that these were normal and appropriate designs for the character (Sharpio, 2014).

The sexualization of females in video games has been a hot topic for discussion since the new media video games became popularized in the early eighties. In a 2002 study from the journal *mass communication & society* (Beasley, B., & Standley, T. C, 2002) 47 randomly selected games from Sony and PlayStation were analysed to find out if females were represented in the same way as men according to their clothing. Out of the 597 characters that were analysed 71 of them were female and 41% of the females were portrayed as big busted dressed in ways to bring attention to their bodies, and 31.03% of those women appeared in games that are rated E (ESRB Ratings Guide, n.d) which meant that they were supposed to be suited for children (Beasley, B., & Standley, T. C, 2002).

Similar results are found in another more recent study published 2012 *Selling gender: Associations of box art representation of female characters with sales for teen and mature*
rated video games (Near C.E, 2012). 61% of the games showed female characters in any role, 21% of those where sexualized. The study concluded that having a sexualized female on the box art versus having a non-sexualized female were indifferent to each other, however the study showed that having a female represented on the box art cover decreased sales, sexualized or not (Near C.E, 2012).

At the same time that Samus became more sexualized another very famous female protagonist grew from objectified to empowered. Lara Croft the protagonist of the *Tomb Raider* franchise started her journey 1996 and have been the protagonist of 25 games after that (Tomb Raider Games, n.d). In this first iteration of the *Tomb Raider* franchise Lara’s clothing is very revealing consisting of a small pair of bootcut shorts and a cropped top which is very unfit for her line of work. Lara is an adventurous archaeologist in the likes of Indiana Jones (Han, H., & Song, S, 2014).

Skin tight clothes and a very disproportionate body was Lara’s aesthetic until 2013 when the *Tomb Raider* franchise were acquired by the game developer Square Enix (Tomb Raider, n.d). Square Enix rebooted the series and gave Lara a new look and personality. Before 2013 Lara’s story were inconsistent and her personality did not stand out very much, she was a hero for sure but like her male counterparts she did not have a very throughout developed personality. However, in the 2013 reboot the player follows Lara’s development from an ordinary college student to the hero she is today. The later games in the reboot continues Lara’s journey to heroism and also shows a more emotional side of Lara as she tackles her inner demons (Han, H., & Song, S, 2014).
In the Forbes article *the best videogames of 2017* 20% of the games had a predetermined female protagonist (Kain, 2017). Amongst these are the games such as: *Uncharted: the lost legacy*, a game that makes two female supporting characters the new protagonists (UNCHARTED: The Lost Legacy, n.d.). *Hellblade Senua’s sacrifice* a game that is centred around the female protagonist Senua’s nightmarish adventure into Viking hell to fight for the soul of her dead lover (Ninja theory, 2017). *NieR: Automata* the player takes on the role of a female android 2B leading the war between androids and machines to reclaim earth to the humans (Square Enix, n.d). *Horizon Zero Dawn* takes place in a distant post-apocalyptic future, the protagonist Aloy is on a journey of self-discovery. She grew up in the wilderness and have both the looks and skills of someone with her background (Aloy, n.d). These are all different and unique female characters that dares to break the stereotype of the strong and sexy femme fatale of yesteryear.

The female protagonist is certainly on the rise. She has grown from an objectified damsel to an empowered role model. This trend continues to evolve, and gender inclusive game design seems to be the new norm.

1.2. Purpose and research question

Designing a character that can represent and be role model for females is not an easy task. The purpose of this thesis is to find out how game design can become more gender inclusive by examining the design process of a female protagonist from a game designers perspective and what the developer’s opinions on gender inclusive game design are.

The main research question is: *How can game design become more gender inclusive* and the secondary research question used to examine this is: *how the design process is affected by a female protagonist*.

1.3. Limitations

The study is limited to games where a female protagonist is predetermined, games where there are more than one protagonist and at least one of them are female, and games where a premade female protagonist exists. However, games that present the player with the choice of creating their own customized protagonist are not included. The study is also limited to video
games such as arcade, console and pc games and does not include mobile games. A lot of games had a genderless protagonist and these games are also excluded from the study.

There are many games where a protagonist can be customized however the player wishes, where the character can have whatever gender and race as the player chose. These are excluded from this study because they do not present the designers process of making a female protagonist but rather how the world reacts to the players creation which is another topic and discussion.

2. Related earlier research and Framework

2.1 Related earlier research

Although gender inclusive game design is a generally unexplored and new area there are books and research about game design that also brings up the topic of gender inclusiveness.

2.1.1 The vague topic of gender inclusive game design

The concept of inclusive is split in ambiguous opinions but they all come to the same conclusion, it is needed to expand the market and thereby profit (Adams, E., & Rollings, A, 2007, Schel, J, 2008, Ray, S. G, 2004, Brusk, 2016). How that is supposed to be achieved however differs greatly.

In the book *fundamentals of game design* (Adams, E., & Rollings, A, 2007) when the topic of how to reach out to a broader audience is brought up the concept of stereotypes as an effective way of design is shunned. The book claims that men and women's interest overlap considerably and that female players are not inclined to play games surrounding stereotypical feminine interest. Instead Adams and Rollings claims that developers should focus on making games that interests everyone no matter gender, this is done in consideration of not offending or prevent the potential customer base. The claim is however made with a contradictory statement after that suggest that generalities do exist. Such generalities are: Men and women like to learn differently; men and women have different attitudes toward risk. Men and women have different conflict resolution styles and that Women enjoy mental challenges and finding elegant solutions to problems (Adams, E., & Rollings, A, 2007).
Another book that make similar claims about the difference between the male and female audience is *the art of game design* (Schel, J, 2008). The author makes a distinct difference between men and women and insinuate that male players like to see: mastery, competition, destruction, spatial puzzles, trial & error and that female players likes: emotion, real world, nurturing dialog & verbal puzzles and learning by example (Schel, J, 2008).

Others view the subject differently. According to the book *gender inclusive game design* the avatar is the designer’s way of communicating to the player. The protagonist is vital to ensuring that the player is comfortable, great graphics and good gameplay does not matter if the player feels uncomfortable (Ray, S. G, 2004). Ray claims that the easiest way to make the protagonist appealing for all genders is to provide the game with a non-sexualized female protagonist as a choice (Ray, S. G, 2004).

In the essay *computer game development: diversity and inclusiveness* (Brusk, 2016) from the book *Art and Game Obstruction* the author describes gender inclusive game design as games that are free of sexism and gender stereotypes that shows diverse representation, it is also suggested that games have to broaden their aesthetic to accommodate a more diverse audience. The suggested method to reach these goals is to make the game development more diverse. The author describes this idea as a cycle. In order to close the cycle, the industry have to make an effort to create games that are more inclusive in terms of representation. This shall in return bring new people with different background and perspective to the industry and make games more attractive to different players and diverse developers (Brusk, 2016).

2.1.2 The problem of identifying with a virtual avatar

Another problem with making gender inclusive games is to make the player identify with the protagonist. The book *the fundamentals of game design* describes the players relationship like that of a reader's relationship with the hero of a novel. The reader is looking forward to knowing what will happen to the hero and depending of the way the story is told get to walk in their shoes (Ray, S. G, 2004). The ideal protagonist is described by Lankoski in the book *Character-driven game design* (Lankoski, P, 2010) as strong but preferably vulnerable, this makes the character likable and allows the audience to identify easier with the hero.
According to Ray (Ray, S. G, 2004) men generally don’t identify in the same way with their avatar as female players do. In the book gender inclusive game design, the author compares this phenomenon to the sociological concept The pyramid of power (Ray, S. G, 2004).

![Diagram of the pyramid of power]

The pyramid of power can be used to demonstrate power differences in any situation, in this case however Ray (Ray, S. G, 2004) uses it to discuss why females find it more difficult to identify with a male avatar. The pyramids upper layer in this case represents the males, the book claims that this is because the western world is mainly patriarchal as males control the majority of the wealth and hold the position of power. Ray (Ray, S. G, 2004) claims that why men don’t feel uncomfortable with a female protagonist is because people are not only comfortable in their own strata they can also move down to fill a role that is beneath them and still be comfortable with the rules of that particular level. Although for a female to take on a male protagonist’s role she has to move up the pyramid and take on a role for which she don’t know the rules and therefore she is more likely to be uncomfortable with this role.

Trying to design something gender inclusive is not straight forward, although a few frameworks have been developed recently to try and make game design understandable and applicable. One of them is called the MDA framework.

2.2 Framework

The MDA framework was developed during the game design and tuning workshops at the Game Developers Conference in San Jose 2001-2004 by the game designers Robin Hunicke, Marc LeBlanc and Robert Zubek (2004) due to a gap they saw in the game industry. Games
designers, developers, game critics and game researchers needed something to make game design universally understandable for every field and they created MDA framework.

The fundamentals of the framework are the idea that the content of a game is more like artifacts of design then they are media. MDA stands for Mechanics = the game components, Dynamics = the behaviour of the mechanics and Aesthetics = the players response when interacting with the game. From a player’s perspective these are translated to Mechanics= rules Dynamics = system and Aesthetics = fun (Hunicke, et.al., 2004).

The MDA defines aesthetics as what makes the game “fun”. When knowing why people are invested in a games aesthetics a model can be made to describe what gameplay dynamics and mechanics that would fit the game (Hunicke, et.al., 2004).

To create the aesthetics and fun dynamics are needed. Dynamics are how to make the game design aesthetics fun and mechanics are the fine tuning of the game dynamics to create an even better experience for the player. The MDA was made to make a clear distinction and dissection of different aspects of the game design artifact, thereby making it more understandable and easier to analyse (Hunicke, et.al., 2004).

The MDA is very useful when analysing a certain aspect of the game design artifact. Like how to design a well-represented female protagonist since the MDA explains how different aspects affects each other and how to make it easier analysing game design (Carroll, J.2016, June 21).
3. Method

3.1 The choice of topic

44% gamers are female and deserve to be represented as heroes too. To design a protagonist that is a well-represented female all comes down to the design choices, ergo I choose to have my subject be about how the design process is affected by a female protagonist. By interviewing and analysing what game designers thought of when making these characters a correlation might be found, and thereby I could find out how games in the future could become more gender inclusive.

3.2 Method of choice

To be able to get the information I wanted for this study a qualitative study was the most apt choice. If the study would instead be about the topic of the consumers opinion about female protagonists in video games the study could be quantitative and still answer the same research question *How can game design become more gender inclusive.* Although, since I wanted to examine the topic from a designer's perspective the study had to be qualitative. By conducting interviews, it was possible to gather more in-depth answers from the game designers. It also gave the interviewee the possibility to ask to follow up questions that helped answer the main research question in a more comprehensive way. Choosing a qualitative study also became necessary due to the simple fact that it does not exist very many games with a predetermined female protagonist.

3.3 Empirical study

3.3.1 The story of a frustrated students road to semi relevant information.

It all began with a search engine. I started by using the search engines *Primo* and *Google Scholar.* I tried several different ones such as *Scopus* and *Web of Science* but found that all the articles I found there were also found on *Primo or Google Scholar,* so it felt redundant to use them. *Primo* and *Google Scholar* also gave me more relevant articles to the topic of gender inclusive game design and had easier ways of searching for related topics.
For example, looking at the picture of my search with the phrase *Gender analysis in game design* I got 7 related results to continue further with my research. Although many of the related search terms lead to similar articles. My other search terms were:

Video game gender differences, female protagonist video games, games female protagonist, game development gender, game design protagonist, designing a protagonist, gender inclusive game design, gender inclusive games, game design, female protagonist, gender analysis in game design.

These were the search terms I used for *Google Scholar* and *Primo* database. I also used the related search terms that *Google Scholar* suggested. In the book *Researching information systems and computing* the author Oates (2006) claims that the most important part of the searching part of a research process is about finding your key words and the build around those concepts. First the topics are split into different concepts that's the **bold** words in the matrix underneath. According to Oates (2006) the researcher shall then find similar words and phrases that can be used to express the concept. I used this method to make my searches more precise. I also combined the different concepts to get my results.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protagonist</th>
<th>Game design</th>
<th>Gender inclusive</th>
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<td>game development</td>
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</table>
My searches gave a lot of results for example: when I searched the term *Gender inclusive game design*, I got 124 000 results. The problem was not the number of results, it was the fact that most of the results contained irrelevant data.

I got one relevant result out of that search. The reason for this is that most of the research that exists on the subject of gender inclusive game design is about how female characters are represented in video games or female gamers representation. Relevancy in this case are articles that are about or touched the topic of gender inclusive game design since that is what this study aims to examine. Articles about representation is not completely unrelated to my thesis however and therefore I used a lot of these articles for my background research instead (Beasley, B., & Standley, T. C, 2002; Near C.E, 2012; Han, H., & Song, S, 2014).

When I found an article that had a relevant title and keywords I started to read the abstract. If the abstract held up to the topic of my research I went on to read the article. I found 8 articles that I thought relevant by this method. When it comes to the topic of reading the full article Oates (2006) deems it unnecessary although I do not always agree with that. In this case I wanted to gather as much information I could about the subject especially since the search result were so scarce. So, I ended up reading all the articles I found relevant. I quickly found out that a lot of these articles referenced each other and that they all were about the same subject.

This made me question my own methods. I had to rethink my research strategy. The first round of research had led me to relevant articles for my background but not for my literature review, but they did give me a hint on where to look. I started to look into the references of those articles. I found a book that a lot of articles referenced when discussing game design called *Fundamentals of game design*. The book was not available through Google Scholar but by using *Primo* I found out that I could borrow the book via the university library. By this method I found Fundamentals of game design and gender inclusive game design. Other material like the essay from the book *Art and Game Obstruction* were found by using the
search engine Diva and the article *De-gendering games: toward a gender inclusive framework* was found by searching *gender inclusive game design* on Google Scholar, the books *the art of game design* and *character driven game design* were also found on *Google Scholar* but through direct references from articles and not by using my search terms. I then examined the books index to find chapters that sounded relevant for my research and started reading and analysing these.

I used *Diva* to find relevant bachelor theses on similar subjects although I used all my search phrases nothing of relevance showed up. The one thing I found were the article *Computer game development: diversity and inclusiveness*. The problem here were the same as the articles, they were mostly about how females were represented in video games or about very specific parts of game design, such as puzzle game level design or how Vikings are represented in games.

3.3.2 Whose opinion is credible? A critical look at the chosen books content and authors.

Most of my literature are books. Oates (2006) claims that books should scarcely be used for a literature review in research, although books that are aimed at academic can be used for citation. There is also the question of credibility, if the empirical data is lacking from a book how can it still be a credible source?

All the books that I have used for my research are written by experienced people in the field. *Art of game design* is written by a game design university professor (Schell, 2008). The book *gender inclusive game design* is written by Sheri Graner Ray who have been a game designer since 1989, the book was also nominated for game developers book of the year 1996 (Sherri Graner Ray, n.d.). Another veteran of the trade is the author of the book *fundamentals of game design*. The author Ernest Adams have worked in the game industry as a game designer, design consultant and speaker at game conferences since 1989 (Adams, E. 2007). He also founded the international game developer’s association in 1994 (IGDA, n.d).

All the books are also review and supervised by their colleagues. Lankoski (2010) that wrote the book *character driven game design* even had two assigned supervisors that continually review the book and Ray (2004) had input from the women in game development branch of
IGDA (n.d) during the writing process of the book. All books claims are also supported by references.

According to Oates (2006) books can be used as valid literature if they aimed at academics and in the assessing chapter of Oates she claims that if the author is eminent in the field or published in a university press the literature is credible (Oates, 2006). Therefore, according to my assessments using Oates criteria the critical evaluation of the books content and authors deem the literature credible and eligible to use in my literature review.

3.3.3 A quest to find the creators of female heroes

What my literature review shows is a lack of research on the subject of how gender inclusive game design is achieved. I had to reach out to the ones designing female protagonists to find the answer to this. Since the purpose of the thesis is to find out how game design can become more gender inclusive.

The first strategy was to find games that had a female protagonist. A quick Google search showed me a list from Wikipedia which resulted in a list with 200 pages of titles (Wikipedia, 2018). I immediately knew that that method would be overwhelming and probably irrelevant since a lot of games on that list were old games where the company that developed the game did not even exist anymore. I changed my criteria, since the thesis is about how we move forward and evolving game design I wanted to find developers who had released a game with one or more female protagonists in recent time. Because there is not a definition of how many years that considers as recent I chose the last five years 2013-2018 as my definition of recent.

Gaming and game development is a relatively new phenomenon and therefore a lot of information and contact comes through social media. Because of this I knew I the easiest way for me to find the information I wanted was this way. So, I started with the social media page Twitter with the search term game designer. Under the tag people a number of personal twitter pages pops up, unfortunately this number is limited and would only show me the people with the most followers, which is not a bad thing per se but did not give me the information that I needed, out of 57 results only 5 had made games with a female protagonist and two of them were from the same company. Alas I gathered these results and searched for
the developer’s website and contact page, many of them had forms to fill but some had direct
emails to the developers.

This was not effective, and I knew I had to find a better way. From my personal previous
knowledge of the gaming industry and games I knew that indie games tend to be more
progressive and have more female protagonists. So, my next search term I used the hashtag
search function on twitter and searched for #indiegamedeveloper and #indiegames and
looking under both the latest and top tags. This was way more effective since I did not get a
restricted number I got what seemed like an infinite wall of tweets with these hashtags.

My next strategy was to both use my previous knowledge of games with female protagonist
combined with articles in entertainment magazines on the subject of female protagonist. As I
stated previously gaming is a rather new media and a form of entertainment, therefore a lot of
information is found on fan sites, fan made wikis and in magazines. I also used the game
distribution platform Steam (n.d) by using their premade search tag female protagonist. These
three methods combined gave me most results and although it was not efficient and very time
consuming it was the most efficient strategy that I had.

When I had gathered a list of games and developers I started to reach out to them, either by
e-mail, Facebook messages, twitter direct messages or by contact forms on their webpage. I
thought I was going to reach all of them but in fact I would soon learn that a lot of companies
are very hard to get in contact with. Many of them do not have an email or form and only
have customer support as a way of communication, and almost all the twitter pages I found
where locked so that direct messages could not be sent. This could be argued was my own
fault for not researching how twitter worked enough before using that as my method,
although as previously said I did find other ways to contact a lot of them but not everyone.
After all this inefficient work I finally found 23 game developers with female protagonists
that I could contact. Out of all of these 8 answered and 2 said they would get back to me with
information but they did not, and 2 others said they unfortunately did not have the time. 5 of
them where however willing to participate but due to scheduling issues two of them did not
have enough time for the interview. I needed to broaden my searches and emailed the three
universities in Sweden that teaches game design, by this method one university answered and
that is how I found my fourth.
3.3.4 Communication all over the world, how to set up an interview with people on the other side of earth

Now came the most difficult part of my data gathering, to orchestrate interviews all over the world. According to Oates (2006) the best way to conduct an interview is by face to face contact with the person, facial expressions can be read, and it is easier for the interviewee to feel comfortable and open up for the interviewer. This would have been ideal for me, but since none of the Swedish companies with female protagonists responded to my contact attempts I had to use other methods.

I had initially sent out an email where I asked for an interview preferably over the online communication tool Skype but if they were not available via email or in one case messenger chat instead. Two of the informants were interviewed over Skype one via messenger and one via email. This became the best solution due to the fact that my informants lived in Singapore, Australia, California, North America, Canada and Norway. It became a huge problem when scheduling because time zones had to correlate and a lot of the interviews where done much later than planned because of this.

3.4 Operationalization

Now I had my developers, but I needed the right questions to get relevant results to my research. Because I had to be flexible with the interview methods I also had to be flexible with the type of interview I conducted. To get the relevant results from the informants with different methods I had to use a semi-structured interview method. Oates (2006) describes this method as a list of themes and questions with an opportunity to be flexible and change the order of the questions or make it possible for the interviewer ask additional questions.

Because of this a sort of questionnaire to use as guidelines for the interview had to be made. At first the questions were only centred around the research question *How can game design become more gender inclusive* and not tested against any framework to examine relevancy. They were solely based on my literature review and background knowledge about game design and then catered to answer questions related to my research question. I needed something to help me understand how to analyse game design. By searching for different
frameworks about game design I found the MDA framework (Hunicke, et.al, 2004) that I explain and described in 2.2. Framework.

The MDA describes game designs as an artifact and offer a way of easier analysing parts of game design (Hunicke, et.al, 2004). I was interested in finding out which parts to improve and how to improve the artifact therefore I choose to use the MDA framework both to create my questions for the interview and to analyse the empirical data I got out of them. My questions then became what can be read in the interview questionnaire in the appendix.

Since I ended up using the MDA framework I had to focus on finding out the three main components of the framework. For example, the question Describe one of your protagonists and How has the genre affected the design of the protagonist is meant to bring out a discussion about how Aesthetics affects the design artifact of a game. Other questions like What made you choose to have a female protagonist? -Follow up: How has that affected your design process? and What type of attributes do you assign to the protagonist? were asked to get an insight into the way the designers and developers used the dynamics and mechanics to create a gender inclusive game (Hunicke, et.al, 2004). Other questions that might seem irrelevant and personal does have a thought put into them like the question Tell me a little about yourself and your experience in game development not only is it there to help move the interview along with a friendly and open tone since Oates (2006) suggest such questions should be included it is also favourable for the thesis to know what knowledge the interviewee has about game design and is a good way to compare the data like is there a difference between new and experienced game designers.

I also choose to end the interviews with very open-ended questions. Oates (2006) writes about how it is favourable to talk to the interviewee. The interviewee tends to tell a person they feel like they connected with more about their subject and themselves, therefore these questions came later in the interview so that we had already had a pleasant conversation. It is a risk to have open ended questions like the semi-structured interview method entails, but it is also a way of getting to hear people describe for themselves the thoughts and values that they put into the artifact and that is key to knowing what mindset that can make game design evolve (Oates 2006).
3.4.1 Analysis and how to use the MDA framework in practice.

to be able to make sense of the result an analysis had to be done. It started with transcribing. According to Oates (2006) it is important to capture the interviewees words as spoken therefore I choose to transcribe my audio tapings of the interviews. To present this however I made the choice to reproduce the interviews by splitting the relevant information from them in to two topics: Game design in practise and gender inclusiveness. To present the result as explicit as possible I chose to make it so that each game has their own section with an introduction and summary under the two topics game design in practice and gender inclusiveness. Game design in practice is a collection of what the informant said that is connected to the subject of how they use game design or their thoughts on game design in general. The topic gender inclusiveness is a collection of the answers where they expressed thoughts of gender and gender inclusiveness in video games. Then I used the result to make an analysis that reconnect the results with the MDA framework I used to create the questions.

To make the analysis easier to comprehend for the reader I started to thoroughly analyse the data. This was done by looking for phrases in the result that showed signs of Mechanics, Dynamics and Aesthetics. This was done by colour coding the phrases according to the components of the MDA (Hunicke, et.al, 2004).

since it is a 2d runner you have to have a very clear shape design and very clear colour and making it pop compared to the background. so, it had to be designed in a way where looking at the character running from the side looks good and energetic and fun, interesting.

The above is an example from informant 2s interview. From this colour coding I could draw the conclusion that the MDA components found in this sentence revolved around the concept of the 2d runner genre. To make it understandable and presentable to the reader I then created a matrix that revolved around the concepts found by this method and then show how the MDA components were used for that concept.
3.4.2 Ethics

Because of the difficulty in communication I choose to anonymise all the informants. Since I have followed Oates (2006) advice and guidelines for the structure of my methods I decided to follow it on the subject of ethics too. Oates (2006) claim that it is important to get clear consent from the interviewees before publishing the research. Since I had trouble with the communication of my interviewees and it would be difficult to get a signed contract from all the informants, stating that it would be okay to include personal details, I could not in good conscious have their names and company be exposed and it might even not have been legal with some of them. I decided to take this in to consideration and made all the informants anonymous.

They are named as informant 1, 2,3 and 4 and their company as game developer 1,2,3 and 4 and to not make it easy to guess what company and who they are the protagonist are named by only a letter and the details of the games are kept as ambiguous as possible. Another difficulty when it comes to ethics and anonymisation is pronouns. I have chosen to use the gender-neutral pronoun them/their/they in singular (Mora, 2018).
4. Result

In this chapter each of the informants interview will be summarized under the titles game design in practice and gender inclusiveness. There will also be an introduction for each informant which contain a summary of the games they are describing and a little about themselves to make the topics that are discussed easier to comprehend.

4.1 Informant 1

Informant 1 is the creative director of the studio developer 1. They got their first indie game funded and when that went well they got a bigger team and made the game that are discussed in the interview, game 1.

Game 1 is an exploration game or as they are called Walking simulator. It contains little action and is a game where you explore and find clues to reach the end of a narrative. The story revolves around protagonist A, a 17-year-old girl who are exploring her family's mysterious past, this is done by shifting perspective and taking on the role of not only A but also other family members in imaginative ways.

4.1.1 Game design in practice

The game contains several switches between different characters thought the game. Informant 1 describes the difficulty of these through a design standpoint.

“L was the first character we created, there was actually some concern having her be female because A we knew was going to be female and having two female voices to understand like making it clear for players that they were switching. Which is kinda a weird concept in the game to switch protagonist. And yeah especially since it is two relatively young women, we are switching between.”

He describes the problem of these switches between perspectives as something that can be difficult especially when it is about two females. People tend to differentiate manly voices easier then young female voices according to the informant. They did stick to that decision anyway and the informant explains that it was not an outspoken decision to make it more
gender inclusive it was made to have more balance between men, women and also different ages. For aesthetic reasons they did that to not make the game to uniform.

Although they explain that the decision to have a female protagonist where not a conscious decision, to make the protagonist a woman the game design was affected by it in several ways.

“A little suspense is good but trying to push it away from the conventional tropes, there was not any specific reason to have a female protagonist other then it just felt better like it felt like it spoke to the themes that we were interested in exploring.”

When the informant describes the process of creating the game from an idea to a finished product, informant 1 explain that first they came up with situations ages and gender and second and depending on that the gameplay is created. The story is created by first seeing what kind of gameplay and characters the player enjoys and not the other way around.

“And we look at how players responded. and wrote characters to fit those expectations, either matching them or running counter to that expectation.”

In the interview the informant talks a lot about the design decision of trying to make it clear that the game was not going to contain combat.

“We tried to subvert expectations. I'm very interested in ways that we can surprise players and coming in with the sense that this is going to be a walking simulator for example was going to be a useful thing because players sort of let their guard down after a while.”

This would show to be more effective because of the main protagonist’s gender, her being a woman and a young one at that made the player feel more nervous about walking around in a big mysterious house and it also subverted the expectations of combat even more.

When asked how the design process was affected by the decision of having a female protagonist the informant explained that it didn’t really change the mechanics of the game but
rather enhanced them. The part of the design process that were affected by a female protagonist the most were the aesthetic parts of the design.

“Like in the case of A we definitely worked more on her character model then i think we probably would have. like her gloves are a good example, we spent three weeks or something working on her gloves. And that is something that we definitely would not have done if it were a male.”

They express the need to define features more when the protagonist is female, especially since the game is set to the first-person viewpoint which means that the player can only see part of their player characters body as the camera is centred where the characters head should be. The informant explains that there is not much to do to express a character from this viewpoint however they did spend more time to express A’s looks than the male characters.

4.1.2 Gender inclusiveness

“...And somehow we ended up with a story about three women. Not intentionally we just kind of backed into it.”

When asked about the choice of a female protagonist the informant explains that it was not a conscious choice. They do express a wish for it to have been more conscious but has no explanation for it other than it felt like the right choice.

“It felt more interesting, and I'm not quite sure why that was. But there's no positive explanation for it, I can't claim that it was an attempt at diversity or any like high minded principals.”

They explain it as more of an aesthetic choice that made the character more interesting and vulnerable although after a while into the interview they explain it further.

“I do sometimes feel a little guilty that it’s not something I approached, I feel like I should have approached it more consciously but really just comes out of aesthetic concerns and in this case it kind of happens to line up with more progressive ideas. I think that having female characters there are so many reasons of having them for purely
aesthetic ground, it just more interesting to explore wider areas of humanity so that all
that our heroes are not space marines.”

The informant expresses that gender has not really been something that concerned them before
although later in life they have now started to make more subconscious decisions that made them
make more as the informant calls them “gender oblivious” choices. They convey their feelings
about the subjects as wanting to make a character interesting oblivious of gender.

“I think we are at a point where we can stop talking about the strong female character
and just have interesting characters. It feels like it but I’m not really the one to make that
call.”

When asked if the informant thinks game design will change to be more inclusive in the future
they answer:

“Almost certainly change, but mostly because the designers who are coming in to the
industry are coming from more diverse backgrounds. I think that historically most
designers of games have been not only men but men of a very narrow band of experience.
I think having more empowered women as writers and directors and producers has
helped create movies with a more diverse viewpoint.”

the informant explains it as having a more diverse audience demanding inclusiveness and
developers also being more open and diverse as a means to make games more inclusive.

4.2 Informant 2

Informant 2 is a student that enrolled at Uppsala university program of game design on Gotland. They
have only made a few games at game jams before making game 2, a competition where you have 8
hours to come up with and create a game. Now the informant and a group of seven other students are
making the arcade runner game 2. The protagonist is a teenage girl named B. B is from a small town
and moved to the big city, she is now overwhelmed by the hustle of the city and just needs to run. The
player controls B and have to avoid obstacles to go as far as possible over the rooftops of the city.
4.2.1 Game design in practice

Informant 2 describes the process of designing B and that it was defining the aesthetics that where the hardest part of making B look female.

“So, there is this thing if you design a very very simplified humanoid with very little gender characteristics they will be automatically read as male by the majority of the population. Because the less gender characteristics you have the more they are more like a stickman and the more people just read man.”

The informant admits that their first prototype was just a stick figure and everyone in the team also referred to the character as a him. They came to the conclusion that if they were to make the character female, they had to enhance the aesthetics of the character.

“The original prototype was just a black stick figure, and everyone was like yeah that’s a guy, so you have the guy running. it seems like the default, so if you want to go another way you have to give it the extra. Like with pacman like the miss pacman has a little bow and lipstick and eyelashes you have to add these extra characteristics to signify that.”

B was given a long ponytail and instead of being a stick figure they built onto the body and gave her a frame that could subtlety be read as female. Other than that, the genre of the game was really what affected the design mostly.

“Since it is a 2d runner you have to have a very clear shape design and very clear colour and making it pop compared to the background. so, it had to be designed in a way where looking at the character running from the side looks good and energetic and fun, interesting. “

Other than the aesthetic of the character, the informant claims that their game design process where not affected by the choice of having a female character.
4.2.2 Gender inclusiveness

When asked why the informant and the team chose to have a female character they answer that, when the time came to define their character they wanted to make her female because they saw that the representation where lacking. They reconnect this to the problem mentioned before, the default are almost always male so the choice where a very conscious one.

“Well it really was just that idea like women are very underrepresented in games and it was just like hey we are gonna make a game and like this is just an 8-week project and there is really no difference between making a male or female protagonist. Like in this game and story it is still the same story we are trying to tell so gender does not matter in this case. So, it basically just free representation if we just like have a female protagonist.”

The informant explains that the choice of having a female character can sometimes be seen as a political choice but also claims that the choice of not representing women is just as much of a political choice.

“If we make a male character we are saying just as much as if we are making a female character. We are just saying something in favour of the status quo.”

When the discussion of what makes a character good female representation, they answer that it is hard to describe the good without talking about what is bad. the informant then proceeded to describe the problem with over saturating the market with the same type of female character whom are overtly sexy and seductive.

“So, if you want to have one or two characters in a roster that are like sexy or behave in that way or shows a lot of themselves it is not as effective because every character is like that.”

The informant expresses that he thinks the solution is more well-rounded characters, that they feel human and not just like traits put together. They believe that a change is coming but primarily because of the loss of profit if gaming companies don't try to appeal to a wider market.
“So, I mean it is a little sinister and just profit driven, but I mean at least it is good representation… It's because they want to attract a bigger audience and they do not want to exclude women. that is good and sensible.”

4.3 Informant 3

Informant 3 is an art Graduate that has been developing games as a hobby for the last ten years and started the studio game developer 3 two years ago. The game that were discussed during the interview is a newly released visual novel roleplaying game: game 3. The game has two female protagonists named C & D who are knights and together they are sent out on a quest to save the kingdom.

4.3.1 Design in practice

The informant describes the design process of a female character to not be very different than designing a male at least not in the design process but rather in the execution. According to informant 3 since the game is an rpg, the mechanics of the game is not affected but he did think about the attributes assigned to the characters. Both characters are strong in the sense that they can deal damage.

“I designed D so she also can deal some good damage, so makes her pretty balanced character, usually healer character is pretty useless except for healing.”

Other than that, the informant does not describe more of the design process that went into making the game or their thought on game design.

4.3.2 Gender inclusiveness

The informant explains that the reason to have two female protagonists is a selling point in the anime genre that the game fits into, but also to avoid being cliché with a generic, handsome and cool hero that is common to the genre.

When asked what the informant consider good female representation he says:
“Strong Female Character (not only protagonist) is the one who not depends on other too much, the kind of "I can do it by myself" not the typical stereotype "weak" woman who need other to be protected.”

But the informant also expresses a wish that games should strive to have armour and clothing that are practical instead of revealing badly fitted outfits.

“I just hoping in future that will change, and we will see actual female protagonist that strong and not "selling her body" to the customer.”

4.4 Informant 4

Informant 4 is the narrative director of the game developer 4 studio. They are a major publisher also called a triple-a game developer, which means that they make a lot of big-budget games and this game, game 4 are their first with the choice to play a premade female protagonist. The game is an action adventure rpg where protagonist: D are a mercenary who decides to leave her isolated existence to go on an adventure that will end in her having to save her family from a great evil. The story is fictional but involves both real historical characters and mythical creatures.

4.4.1 Game design in practice

Informant 4 describes the biggest design challenge of game 4 where to be able to design a game that were made for two protagonists.

“One common misconception that we run into is that people tend to think we had one character in mind when writing the story, when the truth of the matter is, the story isn’t about gender. We wrote a story about a character who is trying to reunite themselves with their family, and the story fits both.”

The struggle as informant 4 explained it where to create two characters that had the same personality and the same story no matter the chosen gender.

“When we’re making an action-adventure RPG, generally you want your heroes/protagonists to feel capable and powerful, allowing the player to inhabit that fantasy.”
They explain that they wanted D to feel believable in the role of a hero just as much as her male counterpart therefore they choose to give her certain attributes. They made her strong as a warrior mechanically but also gave her an emotional and compassionate personality.

4.4.2 Gender inclusiveness

“...we always wanted to be able to include a female protagonist as one of the main characters in the franchise, and it has been an absolute joy doing so.”

When asked why they choose to make a game with a female protagonist the informant claims that they had wanted to make a protagonist of the franchise female for a long time but could not do this without resources from another studio. This time they had that, which made it possible for them to make two protagonists.

When the informant is asked what they think qualifies as a strong female protagonist they answer as such:

“I don’t think female characters need to be strong, as such, but I do believe that they should be well-rounded (in terms of design). They need to be thought-out, to have weaknesses, flaws, strengths, and dreams. The more human your protagonist is, the better they are as a character, and this applies to all protagonists regardless of gender, women just need their time to shine.”

This also resonates with the thoughts the informant has on the future of gender inclusive game design. They express that the female protagonist they created where loved by critics and fans alike but that they are not fully there yet. They believe that the community have to keep o being vocal about their want and love for diversity so that more developers and future developers will be inspired to become more diverse.

“The more diverse we can be behind the screen, in our communities, the more we can push for more diverse, more inclusive content in our games.”
5. Data analysis and discussion

In the following section of this thesis will the result of the empirical data be analysed compared and discussed to the results of the literature review according to the themes they were summarized around. Thus, the titles of this section will be the same as the results titles: Game design in practice and Gender inclusiveness. This is followed by an analysis and a discussion to find a correlation with the gathered data and the MDA framework.

5.1 Game design in practice

Game design in practice does not have a definite frame, it is not certain and does not have a specific set of guidelines on how to do it. Therefore, opinions on the subject vary. This is apparent in the case of gender inclusive game design too and was seen throughout my research. There is however some almost unanimous thought on the subject.

The process of designing a male and female protagonist does not differ greatly. Informant 1 describes this as a need to define features from an aesthetic standpoint rather than a technical one. Both informant 2 and informant 3 state the same. Informant 4 did not talk about if or how the aesthetics were affected. It seems like it is not how the female works that is difficult it is how her femininity is shown to the player. The book the fundamentals of game design claims that players do not want to play games surrounding stereotypical feminine interest and that seems to also apply to the protagonist. She is supposed to look feminine but not act too feminine. This becomes very apparent when looking at informant 2s stick figure example. The stick figure is male by default, it jumps, and it runs in a certain way. To make it female feminine characteristics has to be added. The same problem came to be when informant 1 created his protagonist, to know that it was a female protagonist a lot more work on the aesthetics were done. Although informant 4 did not mention the protagonists looks they did talk about how the abilities of the female protagonist did not differ from the male. They do look different aesthetically but have the same strengths and attributes.

Game design is in its core user centred. The developers are making a game for the audience. How the audience is seen by the developers however differs a bit between the interviewees and the gathered literature. It is a divide amongst the authors opinions too. The authors of the two books fundamentals of game design (Adams, E., & Rollings, A, 2007) and the art of
game design (Schel, J, 2008) claim that female and male audience differ in their opinions of what types of games that are good and what genre that a specific gender tends to enjoy more. Ray has a similar point of view in her book gender inclusive game design. She states that men generally do not identify in the same way as female players do. None of the Interviews mention this type of audience behaviour. They do mention the audience and the demand for more diverse games but not the demand for games especially made with a specific gender in mind.

The biggest difference between the researched literature and what the interviewees opinions on the subject of the usage of game design in practice, is the thought of how much gender affects the design. According to the interviewees it is first and foremost a change to the artifacts aesthetics that is affected and according to the books and articles it seems like the whole artifact should be changed depending on who the target audience is.

5.2 Gender inclusiveness

On the topic of gender inclusiveness in gaming and how to evolve game design to become more gender inclusive the opinions between the informants and the literature seems to correlate. Although this is true, not all the informants made a conscious choice to have the protagonist female.

Informant 1 did not make the choice consciously but claims that they wished it were so, they express that they do not really think of gender that much and that making the protagonist female just happen to be because it felt more interesting and that the intention is to make interesting characters oblivious of gender. In Lankoski (2010) book Character-driven game design something that resonates with informant 1s statement is written, according to Lankoski (2010) the ideal protagonist is strong but also vulnerable which in turn makes for a character that allows the audience to identify with the hero, without the mention of gender as a deciding factor. This statement is very similar to informant 4s opinions about strong female protagonists, they believe in always designing well thought-out protagonists regardless of gender. As stated previously under the title the problem of identifying with a virtual avatar in the literature review another existing problem with designing a protagonist is to make the player relate and identify with it.
A solution to these types of issues were mentioned when the informant where asked if they thought that gaming would become more gender inclusive in the future and the question of what made a strong/well rounded female character. Informant 3 expresses this as a need to get rid of the stereotypical weaker females similar to Brusks (2016) opinion of having games that are free of sexism and gender stereotypes. Informant 1 and 4s solution is to achieve gender oblivious thinking and design. Informant 2 also seems to share these views as they describe the solution as to make characters that feel human, not only by putting traits together and putting then in a female body but by giving them a human personality as one would with a male counterpart. Adams (2007) the writer of the book the fundamentals of game design also suggests that games should be made to suit everyone no matter gender, and by doing that not offending the potential customers.

Although informant 2 thought that characters being more humanized is more important than the gender they do claim that the choice of gender always ends up becoming political no matter the consciousness of it or not. He explains it as either as simply following the status quo or choosing to defy it. These opinions fit well with Ray's (2004) theory of the pyramid of power. Ray (2004) claim that the sociological and political state of society plays a part in how the choice of a protagonist gender matters to the game development. Ray (2004) describes it as: if the player is put in to the role of anyone above them in the pyramid of power they generally feel uncomfortable.

Brusk (2016) opinion on the solution to make game design more gender inclusive is described as a cycle, if games were more inclusive more diverse people of different backgrounds and perspectives would seek out the industry and then in return create more diverse games. Informant 1 also expresses the hope that game design will change in the future because of more diverse designers, however he also mentions a more diverse and vocal audience as the reason why game design is becoming more diverse. Informant 2 also expresses this., they say that although it might be primarily about profit for the triple-a developers the means justifies the ends. Counter to that statement informant 4 who are an employee of a triple-a company expresses the same thoughts as the rest of the indie informants. A vocal and diverse audience encourage diversity among both future and present game developers.
5.3 Analysis of data using the MDA framework

The topic of gender inclusiveness is an abstract concept that can be hard to transfer onto the game design artifact. To better explain which parts that affects the game design artifact of a protagonist and how they do it I have used the MDA frameworks (Hunicke, et.al, 2004) components as themes to help make an analysis of the gathered data. It has been gathered into the matrices below. Every informant has their own matrix to make it easier to understand how the different game design concepts is affected by the MDA components. Each matrix is sorted by the different components of the MDA framework where M = Mechanics the fine tuning of a games dynamics, D = dynamics how to make the games aesthetics fun and A = aesthetics what makes the game fun not to be confused by the previous use of the word aesthetics to describe the looks of something or someone (Hunicke, et.al, 2004).
## 5.3.1 Informant 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
<th>Dynamics</th>
<th>Aesthetics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Multiple minor protagonists with various gender.</td>
<td>Gameplay after the gender and age is created.</td>
<td>Create fun and exciting situations.</td>
<td>To not make the game uniform.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Player testing</td>
<td>Analysing player response and wrote characters that fit into or run counter to those expectations.</td>
<td>Trying different situations and genders for the players.</td>
<td>Characters that are created for the players</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-combat gameplay</td>
<td>The protagonist gender enhanced the suspense</td>
<td>Made the genre a walking simulator</td>
<td>Players know that there will be no combat but still have suspense and mystery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First person controls</td>
<td>Thorough work on details that fit the persona of the protagonist</td>
<td>Details on the protagonist hands and feet.</td>
<td>A more expressive outfit and general aesthetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female main protagonist</td>
<td>Having the protagonist be young and also pregnant.</td>
<td>Putting a more vulnerable protagonist in supposedly dangerous situations.</td>
<td>A more interesting plot with more “at stake” for the protagonist and enhanced mechanics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3.2 Informant 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
<th>Dynamics</th>
<th>Aesthetics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Protagonist Aesthetics</td>
<td>Evolved feminine characteristics instead of a basic stickman.</td>
<td>Protagonist is given a long ponytail and colourful clothing.</td>
<td>A character that looks female despite the minimalist art style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2d runner genre</td>
<td>Making the protagonist's ponytail show the direction in which the character moves.</td>
<td>Clear shape design and colour.</td>
<td>Running from the side looks more fun energetic and interesting.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3.3 Informant 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
<th>Dynamics</th>
<th>Aesthetics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rpg genre</td>
<td>balancing stats for all classes.</td>
<td>Attributes make them good in damage no matter the role.</td>
<td>Female characters with balanced abilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female protagonists</td>
<td>Make the females be strong and capable.</td>
<td>Defy clichés of a male Hero.</td>
<td>Interesting female character that fits the genre.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5.3.4 Informant 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Mechanics</th>
<th>Dynamics</th>
<th>Aesthetics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The choice of playing a female protagonist</td>
<td>making a story that are indifferent to the</td>
<td>made the story playable from more than one</td>
<td>A good story about a character who is trying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>gender of the protagonist.</td>
<td>perspective</td>
<td>to reunite their family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action-adventure rpg genre</td>
<td>Giving the same attributes of being strong</td>
<td>Making the character strong mechanically</td>
<td>A hero that is powerful and capable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and skilful warrior no matter gender</td>
<td>but also emotional.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.3.5 MDA matrix discussion

The informants above do claim that the game design where not affected much or at all by the choice of having a female protagonist. Although analysing what the informants says about game design by looking at it as an artifact and by breaking it down using the MDA framework it becomes more apparent that the choice of having a female protagonist did affect game design and also how it was affected.

The aesthetics section shows that a lot of the reasons as to why the games are fun is because of the female protagonists and how she is designed. Looking at the mechanics and dynamics of the concept gives insight of how the aesthetics were completed. It becomes obvious that more thought, conscious or not where put into the design decisions. The developers were affected by having a female protagonist.

This is most obvious when examining the concept female protagonist in the matrixes. For informant 1 it gave the player higher stakes and made the dynamics of being vulnerable more apparent which in turn made the aesthetics more appealing. For informant 2 it meant that instead of just being a lifeless stick figure the character where given female characteristics that made her more interesting and thereby made the aesthetics of the game more interesting.
The matrices tell a story of how a developer’s mind have worked around the different concepts to make something great and gender inclusive. For informant 4 having to make a male and female character pushed the boundaries of the mechanics and storytelling to become more gender neutral and the same could be said for informant 1. They all show how the game design artifact came to be the finished game product. The MDA framework does not only give insight on how to analyse game design as a design artifact it also gives the one using the framework an insight into the mind of the creative people who develop games and the creative process that the made the concept into what makes the aesthetics.

What the matrices show are that each developer had to take the protagonist gender in consideration on several aspects. For some became a challenge but might also have led to what makes the games good. The game design where affected by the female protagonist and vice versa the protagonist where affected by the game design to become more evolved and thought out characters. It might not always come naturally, but it always affects the artifact one way or another.
7. Conclusion and contribution

The journey has been long and tiresome and now it is over. I have had to overcome several obstacles when it came to the ambiguous subject of gender inclusive game design. One of the most apparent conclusions that can be drawn is that there exists a big gap in the research of a subject that should be a more topical. Game design is a rather new area of research and that did of course affect the results of this study. One thing is for sure, game developers are busy people.

7.1 The quest is completed but what are the rewards?

The primary research question of this study where: *How can game design become more gender inclusive* and the secondary research question used to examine this were *how the design process is affected by a female protagonist*.

Well, how can game design become more gender inclusive? Opinions amongst the informants differ, but the most coherent one is that the game design artifact is very dependent on the diversity of both its developers and the audience. There has also been an influx of more vocal minorities in the gaming community that expresses the need for diversity that has pushed even the triple-a big budget game developers to create more inclusive products.

When looking closer at game design as an artifact and how inclusiveness can be achieved in practice, the research shows that it is not such a mechanical strain as it is in fact a reward. The mechanics and dynamics of a game are not affected negatively by making the protagonist female. On the contrary it hyphens the mechanics and, in the end, makes for a more aesthetically pleasing game with no extra cost. The only difference is if they are feminine or not, the mechanics are unchanged or even enhanced by making a female protagonist. This seems to be the case even for different genres.

What my studies has concluded is that the subject of gender inclusive design seems to be rooted in a much more complex and political agenda that stretches way beyond the game design artifact. Some might suggest that the only way to move forward is by making gender neutral design decisions and other claim that a statement towards or against the status quo is
always made conscious or not. And some claim that by simply giving that stickman feminine features some level of inclusiveness has already been achieved.

This is a lot of uncertainties and I am well aware of that, that is why more research is needed. Not only by curious students like me but also by the people that have expertise and insight of the topic, the game developers themselves need to be involved in the research.

Although gender inclusive game design remains an ambiguous topic, this thesis has contributed with not only giving other people that have an interest in game design an insight in what gender inclusive game design entails but also made it even more clear the need there is for more research on the subject. This study provides a good start for someone who wants to learn more about how to analyse game design and gender inclusiveness in it as an artifact.

One very apparent thing that is lacking from this study would have benefited from are the comparison of how the game design artifact is affected differently by a male and female protagonist. Another way to further study this topic would be to reach out to the audience. According to the results of this study audience responses to and voice about diversity seems key to the evolvement of gender inclusive game design. When it all comes down to it, without players there is no game.
8. References


9. Appendix

9.1 Glossary

The definitions below are gathered from the online Merriam-Webster dictionary (n.d).

**Gamer/player**: a person who plays games.

**Genre**: a category of artistic composition characterized by a particular style.

**RPG**: short for role playing game, a type of video game genre.

**Action adventure (RPG)**: a rpg featuring characters involved in exiting and usually dangerous activities and adventures.

**2-D**: a two-dimensional form

From *Wikipedia* (n.d):

**Walking simulator**: an adventure game focused on gradual exploration through observation with little action.

From *Giant-bomb* (n.d):

**Endless runner**: the player controls an avatar that can not stop running forward, the goal is to keep running and not hit the presented obstacles.
9.2 Interview questionnaire

Interview questionnaire

-Tell me a little about yourself and your experience in game development:

-Describe one of your protagonists:

-What made you choose to have a female protagonist?

  -Follow up: How has that affected your design process?

-What type of attributes do you assign to the protagonist?

-What type of games are you developing/have you developed?

-How has the genre affected the design of the protagonist?

-What qualifies as a strong/well rounded female protagonist?

-Do you think the game design will change in the future to be more gender inclusive?