Thrall of Despair: Women in the Workplace

by

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Submitted to the Board of New Media

School of Film and Media Studies

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

May 2019

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Gender roles have been present for centuries, ingrained in the culture and forming the norms of society and in most recent times have developed into pronounced issues. These issues have found their way into many parts of society even finding its way into the workplace. In 2016, the median annual earnings for working women stood at $10,086 less than their male counterparts (Laughlin). With such drastic numbers still existing, it is clear there must be ongoing issues that many are either refusing to talk about or recognize. Many who refuse to acknowledge this data, believe the gender pay gap is a woman's own doing and it is her who needs to change. But is this the case? What are the issues women face in the workplace if any? Why have these issues come to be and why do they still exist? Even more importantly, by looking to the use of art based video games, how is it they can be better used for educational purposes and teaching empathy?

Over the last 50 years, the pay gap between men and women has been steadily closing, but at a slow pace. It may be decades before it closes within a reasonable amount. According to data taken in 2016, the pay gap is still considerably large, as the yearly median wage for women stood at $40,675 whereas it totaled $50,741 for men. This data took into account over 300 different occupations and made sure to include both ones predominately dominated by one specific gender and those with a more equivalent dispersion. (Laughlin) One contributing factor to the wage gap that is often ignored and/or denied are women's choices in occupation. It is common for many to see the topic as a one-sided dilemma; a problem either caused by a patriarchal society or one that came about due to women's choices alone. The situation, however, is much more complicated than it seems as it derives from a combination of both factors rather than just one. Going back to the data gathered on annual median wages in 2016, it became clear that women were more likely to be employed in lower paid occupations than men (Laughlin).

This is mainly due to women preferring occupations in which they enjoy and are more naturally rewarding, versus those that have external motivational factors, such as money (Leslie 404). Naturally rewarding occupations, in this case, refer to those that help to benefit society and its people (Smith and Gayles). Women also have a much higher tendency to take more time off for personal responsibilities within their life, including but not constrained to raising children (Leslie 404).

So why is it that women often choose these types of occupations versus others? It seems right to jump to the conclusion that the way they were brought up as a child must have had an impact on them, which in turn led them to such choices. However, it would seem that these choices are more of a biological construction rather than a sociological one. Studies in which gender targeted toys were swapped show just how biologically rooted these natural tendencies are. In the majority of cases, the respective genders (male and female) fall back into the natural pattern of playing with the toys that were targeted for them (Sommers). Of course, there are always exceptions to this, but for the most part, giving a Doll to a young boy is more than likely to result in the Doll becoming some sort of weapon rather than used as intended. Fascinatingly enough the same test was performed with several primates closely related to humans such as the rhesus monkey, and the result played out no differently. The male monkeys preferred to play with objects such as balls, whereas, the females went on to play with Dolls. To push this even further, when researchers exposed female rhesus monkeys to male hormones before birth, as they grew, they exhibited more rough-like play behavior that was on similar levels compared to their male counterparts (Sommers). If the nature of such interests were truly social constructions then what are the social constructions that are causing the monkeys to exhibit such similar behaviors? It would seem fit to conclude, that such appeals are more of a biological construct than social.

However, keeping this in mind, this does not mean that biology is a final say in our interests; rather it only causes a strong predisposition to such natural tendencies. As a final note, it is crucial to point out that accepting this theory does not in any way deny the discrimination which women face in the workplace, especially when it can be just as effortlessly proven.

Although countless occupational choices are made by women without any external influence, it is not always the case. Take for example occupations in science, technology, engineering, and math which are to a great extent dominated by men. This topic might seem insignificant considering women's choices in occupations was just previously discussed, but it is rather crucial. According to the National Science Board in 2016, "Women in engineering majors enter college with the same levels of interest and intent to persist in the major as male peers, yet fewer women complete undergraduate degrees in STEM fields and persist into related careers." (Smith and Gayles) It is unlikely that the majority of women go through a shift of interest considering their intent to persist in the field is on par with men, yet men are not suffering from the same results. One of the many contributing factors of this lies within that fact that women tend to see their ideas as having no place in a male-dominated scene (Smith and Gayles). Men can speak freely with minimal questioning and are more likely to be taken seriously. Women, on the other hand, are not so fortunate. Their male counterparts refuse to apprehend any idea they produce seriously, and any solution to a problem women pose is questioned. This discriminatory behavior can cause confidence to wane and a decrease in passion. Even though this type of behavior is ongoing in occupations, the roots of it lie in education. A relatively small study done in 2016 as part of a larger project, showed just how prominent these issues in education are. The study took a group of ten women who were to graduate that year and focused on their experiences at college. This group consisted of an ethnically diverse selection of high achieving

women, whom all had previous external experiences in engineering outside of school. During the surveys that were taken by the ten participants, a common theme rose shared by many, underestimation. One of the participants, Alisa, mentioned an experience in which while working on a group project her male partners erased her work. They had assumed the work was not correct, and even after Alisa talked to them about it, they proceeded to double check the work with the professor. (Smith and Gayles) Such discriminatory acts, however, come as no surprise. There are many widespread myths about gender and superiority versus inferiority, and implicit bias is one of the more common causes of such beliefs. At very early ages, children are open to stereotypes and preconceived judgments including ones on gender, in which over time they develop into misinformed perceptions (Smith and Gayles).

Myths surrounding gender differences state that men and women have considerable psychological differences. However, many of the studies on the subject have proven otherwise. In 2005 psychologist Janet Shibley Hide went on to prove the Gender Similarity Hypothesis, the theory that men and women are similar on almost all psychological variables (Hyde 581). To prove this theory, Hyde collected major meta-analyses that had been carried out in the latter half of the 20th century. The data she collected included an ample amount of psychological traits and abilities including leadership abilities, aggression, computation abilities, and others. All traits and abilities were put in a list that included the study and variable at hand, the ages of the people studied, number of reports, and the differences concluded between genders. The differences between genders were measured as followed: $d <= 0$ (close to zero), $0.11 < d < 0.35$ (small), $0.36 < d < 0.65$ (medium), $d = 0.66\text{-}1.00$ (large), $d > 1.00$ (very large) [note d = difference]. Hyde's analysis concluded that 78% of gender differences were close to insignificant. Aspects in mathematics, leadership, self-esteem, and much more were seen to have differences ranging

from 0.01-0.20. These numbers didn't even come close to showing a significant difference. Some of the traits with the substantial difference between genders were variables such as throwing distance (physical strength aspects), and attitudes about things like casual sex, which were found to be more prominent in men. (582-586) It is also critical to take note that these traits only help to define gender groups. Therefore, not all of the people in the respective groups will be confined to all said traits. Differences in traits also vary to great lengths depending on circumstances such as age. In conclusion, all implications that state men and women are psychologically different on a higher level with men triumphing over women are false. As children grow up exposed to these false stereotypes, they become misinformed contributing to these issues at hand.

Returning to the negative perceptions male students have about their female counterparts, another issue arises as it rubs off on women. One of the other participants in the engineering research study, Faith, reported having to deal with this same type of negative stereotyping from one of her female colleagues. According to Faith, this female colleague thought Faith was one of the women who hung around men to get answers. Faith claims this as something men often say to explain why women may be performing well. (Smith and Gayles) However, Faith was not the only one to report this. In fact, it seemed to be a widespread issue among female students. Initially, this may seem surprising considering women want to escape these stereotypes, but instead many are displaying these same toxic behaviors towards other women. As it turns out, the development of these negative perceptions along with displays of more masculine behavior is due to a coping mechanism which women try to take on. This coping mechanism is most commonly used as an attempt by women to be accepted rather than shunned. However, such actions prolong problematic gender cultures instead of disassembling them. (Smith and Gayles)

Such coping mechanisms are not just present in educational environments but also in any male-dominated space in the workplace. Unwelcoming environments will continue to lend themselves to decreased self-confidence and ability to work, hindering women for as long as they continue (Smith and Gayles).

However, occupation types and myths of male superiority do not mark the end of the contributing factors of the wage gap. Additional research going beyond occupation types looks into companies individually at the corporate pipeline and what data it may reveal. A detailed observation of the corporate pipeline will reveal yet another issue plaguing the workplace. The number of women holding power positions in most companies on the C-suite level, the highest position in the company, is minimal. (Sheth et al.) In 2017, two companies, McKinsey&Company and LeanIn.Org, partnered up to do further research on the corporate pipeline. These two companies collected pipeline data and surveys of HR practices from 222 companies with employment stretching over 12 million people. (McKinsey&Company 3) HR stands for the human resources department, the part of a company responsible for payrolls, hiring people, and other similar jobs. Surveys taken by HR include company policies and practices which then get shared with thousands of other companies. On top of the pipeline data and HR practices, 70 thousand employees also took part in personal surveys regarding gender, opportunity, career, and work-life issues. Based on data collected, the number of women present at each level of the pipeline decreased as the level of power increased. During 2017 men at entry level positions stood at 52 percent while women totaled 48. These numbers may seem like a relatively small difference, but from here on out differences dramatically increase. For example, men in Vice President positions totaled 72 percent leaving women a meager 28 percent. Going up to the C-suite level, the difference increased even further with men rising to take up 79

percent of the positions. (McKinsey&Company 5) Now looking away from the upper-level positions, there is something astounding about the number of women in the entry-level. During the year the survey was taken 57 percent of college graduates were women (McKinsey&Company 4). Despite more women completing education than men, men are hired at higher rates, so why is it that the gender group completing more education are the ones landing fewer jobs? Well if individual pipelines between occupations are studied, it seems that occupations like technology struggle to get women at the entry level (McKinsey&Company 6). This topic needs no further explaining as the low numbers of women entering STEM occupations had already been previously discussed.

When analyzing the lower rates of promotion among women, they are just as interested in promotion as men but face an issue as they are less likely to receive advice on how to advance (McKinsey&Company 10). To climb to the higher ranks in business, it is crucial for one to have a mentor to help guide them. Having a sponsor/mentor allows employees to cut around the set hierarchy in a workplace, which is increasingly inherent for women. (Carbajal) If women faced no discrimination in the workplace promoting without a sponsor would be hard as is, but if you were to add on all of the unnecessary discrimination they face, a promotion would become almost impractical. It is increasingly hard for women to find people willing to sponsor them due to the majority of higher positions consisting of men. The issue with the majority of sponsors available being men is the lack of proper communication between men and women. Both men and women feel as if men simply don't have a good grasp of what it is like to identify with a woman, therefore making clear communication between the two hard. It is also common for professional women to feel as if they are supposed to be living up to expectations of what the male managers' wives would be expected to do. (Carbajal) As a result, female workers are

judged by how well they care for others and perform other wifely/motherly actions rather than the work they wish to be doing. These expectations are more commonly known as emotional labor, with emotional labor referring to the actions of managing feelings and expressions as part of a job. (Ex. showing compassion as a nurse) It also doesn't help that 50 percent of men think that their managers are already diverse, 60 percent of men believe their company is already doing everything it can to promote diversity, and 15 percent of men believe that gender diversity puts them at a disadvantage. (McKinsey&Company 14-15) For equality to exist, men have to ditch cognitive bias and take more women under their wing, helping them to rise in position. (Carbajal) This does not imply that women need a man's help, but they do need mentors. If the majority/all mentors available are men and they are refusing to accept women to be mentored, men will continue to have an unfair advantage. Men in higher positions need to ditch this bias and be more accepting of all genders mentoring all who are deserving.

Still, on the topic of promotion, women who do find themselves in upper-level positions may end up in a troubling situation. In some instances, corporations may allow women to take a higher position but as a figurehead. In this position, companies can portray themselves as diverse and ethically responsible without giving any real power to women. (Carbajal) Companies will be able to maintain the illusion of supporting and creating equality for women as long as they continue to be placed within such roles. Outside of this picture, even if a women were to hold a position of power, the discrimination they face isn't necessarily any less as gender biases continue to affect them. Due to gender biases and issues with being taken seriously, women are forced to adopt "male" standards of leadership (Carbajal). Of course with enacting such behaviors to get what they want, women are much more likely to receive negative feedback about being too bossy (McKinsey&Company 16) or be viewed as emotional and subjective

(Carbajal). No matter the path a woman chooses, it seems as if they are bound to face discrimination for something.

On the subject of women being unable to escape discrimination, there is one last issue I would like to discuss, the motherhood myths. Motherhood myths are possibly the most common excuse used in the workplace as a justification for the continued discrimination against women. These myths are assumptions that women are naturally given parenting abilities and it is best for mothers to stay home to bond with their children nurturing them. Within countries that promote fathers taking parental leave, people still believed that women who focus on work are posing a threat to the children and the family. Countries with high motherhood penalties are subject to this worse than others. (Verniers and Vala) If mothers choose to work, they are neglecting the child, but if they are taking care of the child, there is a stronger excuse for lack of pay. Women in the workforce who decide to become mothers also often suffer beratement as their expectancies cause clashes in schedules. A participant from the experiences of women in engineering study, Kayla, provided a fitting example of this claiming her boss berated employees because of expectancies that would clash with their schedules (Smith and Gayles). Mothers are not the only ones who are impacted by this as many expect that all women at some point will become mothers. (Verniers and Vala). To expect that all women will be mothers and leave the workforce whether it's permanent or just for a while is a wild claim. Both men and women leave the workforce at about the same rate and the majority of those who do, do so to look for other jobs. In 2017, the number of women leaving or planning to take a leave of work to take care of a family stood at 2 percent. (McKinsey&Company 8) Based on these numbers and other facts, there is no justification for these myths or accusations that employers and others claim causing women to suffer consequences. Lowering pay for an expectancy of something in which statistics

show are very unlikely to happen, is irrational. As a final note, it is critical to realize that men are not the only ones enacting these ideas on women, so are other women. Men tend to rely on these explanations more than women, due to women having a higher likelihood to get away with. Women tend to do it to maintain good judgment on other women, however, in doing so they are not helping the problem, rather further inducing it. (Verniers and Vala)

As a concluding point, it is worth mentioning that all of these issues exist despite there being laws in place to prevent them. Almost every state in the US has laws on discrimination against sex/gender, Alabama excluded. (ncsl.org). But even without the state taking action, federal laws put prevention into place as long as the company has over 15 employees (blr.com). Not surprisingly data in 2016 shows Alabama as one of the states with the greatest gender pay gaps, although it did not stand the highest. Louisiana held the highest pay gap between the states, sitting at a 30% difference. States like New York, Florida, and surprisingly California have the smallest wage gaps. (Sheth et al.) California may especially seem surprising considering it is home to Silicon Valley where most of the major tech companies are located, and technology and women usually don't fare well. However, according to research, top performing companies are usually closer to equality, especially when it comes to promoting women. For example, in 2017, in average companies, women were less likely to be promoted to manager by 18 percent, whereas top performing companies on average only stood at 4 percent (McKinsey&Company 10). In conclusion, even with state and federal laws enacted not enough proper action is taken. Falsified ideas of superiority and motherhood need to be done away with, women must learn to speak up and take action, and women need to stop discriminating other women as men do.

In realizing the full extent to which these issues exist, I am faced with the question of how to make others more aware of said issues through an art form? In general, art is a great way

to express problems in society. Since art is such a powerful visual tool, it has been used as a platform by many to represent ideas or to connect with the people. While exploring the possibilities of using art as a platform to portray the gender pay gap and its issues, I got drawn into the idea of using videogames. When debating the use of videogames, it wasn't the everyday genre of videogames I was looking at, rather a subgenre of them, art games. Art games serve a different purpose than mainstream videogames. They tend to be made to either emphasize art or get a reaction from players and usually involve some level of interactivity. ("Art Game") Now when it comes to critiques on videogames, it seems as if negative views always follow them. A majority of these negative perceptions stem from people criticizing the promotion of violent behavior and other actions that games seem to portray. (Begley) Despite such critiques, I believe videogames can serve as an educational tool especially when it comes to teaching empathy. Now empathy is not to be confused with sympathy. Empathy, unlike sympathy, is a cognitive skill, a skill which increases a person's ability to understand situations that are not their own. Sympathy, on the other hand, refers to the pity one may feel towards another's difficulties (Boltz et al. 4). So how does empathy work and what makes it possible? What is it that causes us to observe others and feel in a certain way? Well, according to fMRI studies, sensing our own emotions versus others is inherently no different (Boltz et al. 4). fMRI refers to magnetic imaging that is used to look at blood flow in the brain and wherever the blood flows too is where the brain activity is taking place. During such tests, researchers were able to figure out that our brain activity as we smile is no different than if we were to view someone else smiling (Boltz et al. 4). Empathy games, in turn, try to achieve this by placing players in environments that invoke emotions towards subjects such as poverty, illness, and more (Begley).

Despite videogames having no real-world consequences, in-game decisions and events following those decisions matter a lot to certain individual players. In turn, these decisions players must make are great opportunities for making players feel guilt, accomplishment, and a plethora of other things (Boltz et al. 5). Due to this assortment, videogames pose as a great way to observe the consequences of actions (6), without the real world harm of such events. Now, what separates videogames from other medium is the use of "I." Videogames are all about the engagement and emersion of the player. (pov.org) Other mediums tend to primarily focus on the artist's intentions and ideas whereas the viewers/interactor's experience and exploration come second. Even though this certainly isn't always the case, it is more often than not. However, in my opinion, videogames are arguably the pinnacle of this type of exploration using the "I." Despite this, it would be a mistake to say that videogames would allow us to have even greater understandings of situations as this isn't necessarily the case. So rather than trying to invoke this, it is better to stick strictly to the idea of teaching empathy, something videogames excel in. (Wilcox)

To better understand how videogames can display such concepts let's look at a few good starting examples starting with *Paper Please*. *Paper Please* is a game in which players serve as a border inspector verifying the identities of those wishing to pass through. At your job, you must work to earn enough money to provide both yourself and your family with shelter and food. Just as with real border jobs, you encounter all of the different types of possible people wanting to cross the border. Some of the people trying to cross are terrorists and hold the potential to do great harm if they manage to pass through. For most players morals keeping the terrorists out of the country is a no brainer. However, choices are much more complicated than keeping terrorists out. What about characters who are trying to escape injustice in their own

countries coming to seek a better and safer life? Letting these characters slip by may seem like the right choice, but there are many problems in doing this. How would you know if the character's story was valid, and even if it was would you be willing to sacrifice your pay and put your family at risk for helping? (Boltz et al. 6-7) These situations in which players get a small taste of here others must deal with daily in real life. How often is it that we question what it is like for the people working at the border struggling with decisions they may not see as morally right. What about the people trying to cross the border, what about their stories and their motivations to try to cross legally or illegally?

In this same quick thinking, ethical decision-making environment another similar game, *Migrant Trail: A Game of Human Proportions*, also deals with the topic of immigration. Here the player can play as part of a group of immigrants trying to cross the border illegally. Players must survive on limited resources and avoid border control or get caught. During the player's journey, members of the immigration party may be injured. From here players must choose between leaving injured party members or risking their own lives, dreams, and safety to help. On the flip side, players may choose to play as border control. However, the choices they must face are no simpler than those of the immigrants'. The difficult decisions come as players may find the belongings of an immigrant who is missing. Players must choose to search for the missing immigrant who may have perished on the way there or to continue to search and catch even more immigrants resulting in more pay. (Boltz et al. 7) These may prove to be tough moral choices for some, do you choose to be efficient at your job, or help the families of immigrants who were participating in illegal activity. Now again, to reiterate on the subject, with neither of these games will players gain a better understanding of what it is like for the people in these

situations. What players may develop, however, is the ability to imagine the possibilities of circumstances that others may have to deal with just as in these games.

Returning to the subject of videogames receiving negative critiques for promoting violence, not all violent and dark situations in games are used in a bad light. A great example of an empathy game successfully using dark themes and violence without promoting it is *Papo & Yo*. First released in 2012, *Papo & Yo* was the first empathy game to receive attention globally. The story of this open-world puzzle game revolved around the dark, twisting life of a kid who grew up abused by his drunken father. (pov.org) In the game, the player plays a young abused boy who has found himself in a dream world where he meets this monster. Despite being told the monster is incredibly dangerous the boy tries to approach the monster regardless. Oddly enough the boy does find the creature to be harmless and as the player progresses completing puzzles, the monster will save them from dangerous situations. However, there is a twist to this. The monster loves to eat these poisonous frogs but in doing so will become berserk and try to kill the player. This transformation is a display of the boy's father as he goes on a drunken rage inflicting harm. (rockpapershotgun.com) As players progress and experience the story, they will find the game dwells a lot on the potential harsh quality of family relations in some households, allowing players to indulge on ideas of what other children face. Although household/family issues are common in society, every situation and experience is unique. Due to this, it is easy to brush off others because of one's own experiences. Overall, this game serves as one of many dark and violent games that do not promote but teach others to grasp an idea of the harsh experiences others face. Building off of similar themes there are dozens of other games that could provide good examples such as *Ds4ia* or *That Dragon, Cancer*.

Now looking at the different game genres that could have potential use, despite RPG games being one of the best ways to involve empathy through the use of trying new identities and the exploration of decisions (Schrier 832), it is but one outlet to do so. Interpretation, perspective taking, and reflection, etc. are all crucial to ethics education as a whole. Considering that games like these encompass most of these features, along with the addition of the fact that in 2014 59% of Americans play games, videogames are a potential tool for teaching skills such as empathy. (Schrier) Now some do find issues with using videogames as a teaching tool as they question if players are more focused on beating the game than being involved in the teaching (pov.org). If this is the case, it certainly isn't possible to thoroughly avoid. However, the effects could be dampened significantly for most through a game that focuses less on progression such as Paper Please.

As a closing statement, I would like to point out that empathy certainly might not be a definitive end to issues in society that others are either ignorant of or fail to understand, but it is a way for progression and beginning of conversations (Boltz et al. 8). Empathy-based art videogames in any regard can provide a structure for not just the young to learn and develop new skills from, but even the old. Placing players in emotion-filled situations while being forced to make hard moral/ethical decisions, can open people up to new ways of imagining things. As one's skill to understand different contexts other than their own grows, the larger the ability to acknowledge and respect other's problems will be.

Now with an understanding of how I would approach the research I had done on the gender pay gap, it was time to pull my ideas together and start the process of making the game. Throughout my projects journey, I faced some considerable challenges the least of not which was creating a game based on women experience in the workplace as a male. Taking such

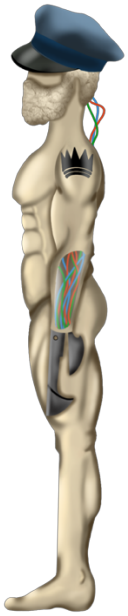
an approach carried a lot of risk as embedding my own ideas of the woman's experience was sure to create conflict between viewers/players of my work. As a male, it is not possible to understand the woman experience outside of the facts studies may provide me. For instance, I may learn through studies that women face ongoing emotional labor in the workplace. Although this is relatively simple to understand, these facts do not provide me with the woman's experience. To understand why this as an issue, I must first discuss the goal I had in mind for the game. The primary object of my project was to help others grasp better understandings about situations outside of their own, particularly the gender pay gap in this case. With this goal in mind, I initially saw no possible path to express empathy without the use of emotional/mental experience. No emotional/mental based encounters meant there would be no route for players to be sympathetic. Usually, when trying to express empathy, sympathy would not be excluded as it provided situations with a more realistic feel and force players to be more engaged. So from here, I was left with one question. How could I create and display empathy without the use of sympathy?

As a solution, I embraced the fact that although sympathy would create a strong emotional impact on players, it was not necessary to get people thinking about the subject. In fact, after some pondering, I realized that I could potentially use my placement as a male to an advantage. Now many may share the philosophy that those who do not experience certain situations have no right to discuss them. I, however, believe this to be fundamentally wrong. Now this example may seem out of the box and completely out of context, but its exaggerations will help better understand my philosophy. Imagine you grew up in a community where killing lower class citizens were acceptable, and this was something you experienced your entire life from the day you were born. What if one day one of them begged you for their life, how would

you respond? As someone who has grown up with this placement in society, you could not fathom what that other person is experiencing. Now just as with more realistic situations, there will be those people who will be affected by this person begging for their life. The issue, however, is that most lack this ability. Despite this, all it will take is one person coming to a different realization. This one person will then spark an even more extensive disturbance possibly leaving one more within the group questioning the situation. Although in the end, not everyone's beliefs will have changed, there will have been enough of a chain reaction for the majority to make a difference. Returning to the gender pay gap this comparison is just as valid despite its extreme exaggerations. For as long as women discuss these issues there will always be those willing to accept the possibility of such circumstances, but it is not enough. I follow a philosophy in which both groups should be part of the situation, those who directly experience it and those who learn about it through some method.

Keeping all of this in mind, my first attempt at executing this was a catastrophe. The original idea I developed was to represent all of the factual causes and effects of the gender pay gap through a fantasy-like world in which players would be exploring as a female character. By taking a research-based approach, the hope was to avoid implementing any of my personal opinions/views on the matter. Through this representation, players would be playing this character placed directly into a work environment trying to keep themselves fed and sheltered by working. The approach could have been more abstract rather than dropping players directly in a work environment, however, the game was to be displayed in a gallery. In a gallery setting, players would spend no more than a couple of minutes experiencing what I had created. Within such a fast-paced setting, I thought it best if things were a bit more direct. Despite this realism, I did try to take on abstraction visually especially with the character designs.

On the topic of a fantasy setting and abstract visuals, I would like to discuss the original visual designs and their intentions starting with character design. For most games, character design is the most crucial element, and I certainly leaned towards this idea myself. Visually I wanted my characters to embody lots of these stereotypical views on men and women. The result was a muscle-bound, half Greek statue, half machine male and an objectified, weak, vulnerable, and busty nature-like female.



These grossly exaggerated, and dark representations of the body and gender characteristics were inspired by Janet Shibley Hide's study on the Gender Similarity Hypothesis, and the book *Men Are From Mars, Women Are from Venus*. I even gave the female characters trees growing off their backs which would eventually bear fruit. Once the fruit was ripe, players had a choice to plant the seeds producing a tree. If players planted the seeds, they would have to tend to the tree, nurturing it until fully grown. The tree was to be representative of children and players would face the same in work consequences as women do for having children if they care for the tree. Whether it was the open, vulnerable, and penetrable skin covering the female characters most important vitals or the all-powerful machine powering the male, the characters embodied a lot visually. Although at the time the visuals seemed like a great asset to the game, they were heavily critiqued receiving negative feedback. For one, I failed to realize that although I was trying to avoid the discussion of race and discuss women as a whole both my male and

female characters were too close to a white tone. There was also uncomfortably among viewers due to the dark tone of my piece, and there even was pushback against the visuals declaring my work to look as if it were praising these issues rather than critiquing them.

The visuals, however, were the least of my problems, as I received negative feedback on how I was displaying the women throughout their actions. Along with experiencing the issues women face in the workplace, I had designed the game so players could eventually reach the top of command in the company declaring that women are capable of making it. The issue here was since none of the male characters believed you had the potential and were doing everything they could to hold you back, the only way to progress to the top of command was to disobey orders and perform actions worthy enough to gain you a new position. This, of course, implied the idea of women needing to prove themselves to men, something I was unintentionally portraying. After receiving suggestions to push my project even further into the abstract and focus on representing my research more, I was unsure of what direction to take my project.

Despite abstract representations seeming like a simple task, they are rather increasingly complex. All design needs a foundation to start from but abstraction can muddle this structure making things uncertain. As I searched for a way to express my work through abstraction I was recommended *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*. In this short novel, Edwin A. Abbott uses shapes and a 2 Dimensional World versus a 3 Dimensional to discuss class issues. In this novel, a shape's class level is related to the number of faces they possess. The larger the number of faces the higher its' class status. Through Abbott's descriptions and illustrations throughout the novel, I developed a more open mind to how abstraction can work. Abstraction does not have to be complicated, it can be something simple such as basic geometric shapes. Keeping this newly formed idea in mind, I scrapped most of my original project. Starting the new project off I

decided to create the characters without specific intent. This time the characters were to be simple, abstract, fantasy creatures allowing me to focus facts through other means such as character interaction.

With character design out of the way, I aimed to create a new objective for the game. Unlike the original idea which promoted ideas of women having to prove themselves to men, I decided to remove the ability to climb rank within the job. Rather than having the game focus on how women can try to achieve equality in the workplace, I decided to focus on a deeper issue at hand. This deeper issue I reference is the realization that as a society although we may produce many studies proving hypothesized data on the gender pay gap, they do not have a lasting impact on society. I am not implying that these studies provided are not essential, but rather, I am arguing they are but one step in the entire process. The other half of this process involves having enough people passionate about the data to make an impact.

As any final ideas were coming to close, the process of the new game began. Starting the game off, players would find a letter of acceptance from the company in which the character had applied for a job. However, upon reading the letter, one would find out that although they were accepted, they did not receive the position in the research lab. The company that the character applied to consists of two parts. There are the workers who do the simplistic work of finding ancient Artifacts, while the others work at a lab analyzing these artifacts to discover their history and worth. The Artifacts the players must find, are in plain view but are guarded by ancient puzzles made centuries ago. Despite the puzzles' complexity, the company considers solving them simple work, after all, how complex could they be if made centuries ago, especially with access to the advanced tools of the new age. As this inferior breed of a fantasy creature, the company does not see you fit to do the more scientific related work back in the lab.

The other type of fantasy creature back at the lab are the ones representing men at STEM jobs, a field of occupation that women particularly have trouble in as previously discussed.

Now within the job, you have been assigned to, the artifacts themselves are representative of something. There are three possible types of Artifacts to collect, chests full of valuable gems, an old table adornment, and some massive ancient statues. Unlike the rest of the artifacts, these statues are 3D models of the Venus of Willendorf. Thought to be made around 30000 BCE, they were believed to represent the nude female body with significantly exaggerated sexual features. Besides its large bust, the hips and stomach were significantly large, a feature possibly representing fertility. ("Venus of Willendorf")

Although the statues only embody ideas of female fertility and the body, I used them as a general representation of the false and disturbing ideologies and perceptions of women. If as the player collects the artifacts they collect two statues, they will receive a message alerting them that the manager would like a word with them. Upon talking with the manager, they will find out that according to lab results the statues hold very little value and they don't want you wasting time collected more of them. Once the news has been received, not long after a newspaper is published at the town tavern. Upon reading the newspaper, players will find further information

as the paper discusses how the public is interested in artifacts such as the beautiful, sought after ancient gems and not some worthless statues. As one may guess this is a representation of all the research being done to date and presented to the public on the gender pay gap, but of which no one is caring enough about to help change the situation.

Outside the scope of the artifacts, I tried putting a heavy emphasis on the interaction between the playable character and the creatures representing men. When the game starts players will be unable to interact with them for when they get near, they will disappear from view. Contrary to how it may seem the male characters are not running away from the player, rather they are ignorant of the player's existence. Later, after the collection of all of the Venus of Willendorf statues, the player will have caused enough ruckus for the public to start developing an awareness of the ongoing situation. Once the controversy over the statues blows up, the male characters will finally recognize the existence of the player. From here the player can now approach and interact with the male characters. However, the interactions are not what one may have expected as the interactions turn toxic. Although now recognizing your existence, some will choose to stay silent while others make angry remarks asking why you are sitting around chatting when you should be working. Essentially, after doing all of this work to grab the public's attention on the situation, no one cares any more than they did before you brought it to their attention.

As a final note, I would like to point out that similar to my original idea players would have the choice of having a "child." However, unlike what I had done previously I did not represent the child through a fruit tree. The issue with the fruit tree is that even without the presence of apples as the fruit, it still seems to reference ideas such as the ones with Adam and Eve. So rather than a tree, as players explore they will come across an object that will prompt

dialogue giving an option to take it home. Once inside of the player's house in a warmer and safer environment, the object will begin to deform over time and continue until it is ready to transform. Players are not forced to continue with the transformation. However, if they do, the player may find their hands full with a little creature that needs to be taken care of. Just as before if the player chooses to work while tending to the creature, they will receive toxic remarks on how they are disregarding the being. Choose to stay at home, however, and upon returning to work, players will receive rude commentary on delaying the companies schedule.

As one can see, not only do women suffer grievance and harm in the workplace leading to unfair pay but the causes behind the issues are unreasonable. Whether it is employers assuming all women wish to take on roles as mothers during some point of their career, or books on unproven gender theories being published men and women need to come together as a group and discuss these issues. I only hope that others strive to reach out to people to help them learn to empathize. I also hope that developers, content creators, and artists continue to push videogames to an educational means realizing a use other than leisure. The more we all discuss these issues, men and women, artists and nonartists, the broader the impact we may have on current or generations to come.

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