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## Introduction

I remember the first female character that I ever played as clear as day. *Pokemon Crystal*<sup>1</sup> - the first pokemon game where you had the choice of being a girl. I loved being that girl. She was spunky, blue haired, and exactly the same as her male counterpart. Even their pixel models were essentially the same - it's hard to assign gender to a cluster of pixels that small. Oh, but I loved her, I was so proud to be her, to tell Professor Oak that yes, I was a girl and I had a girl name thank you very much. It spoiled me - I assumed that I'd always get to be a girl - I assumed this was the norm in all games.

I was mistaken.

I got older and graduated out of my gameboy color; I moved onto games that had to be played while hooked up to the tv, ones that didn't just run off batteries, even some that worked on my computer. As this happened I gradually lost my ability to play as a girl, especially one who was essentially the same as her male equivalent. The girls lost clothes, lost words, lost actions, lost agency - and still I kept playing. The love I felt from that first time I played pokemon didn't fade - video games were part of me at that point - but I became wary.

By the time I was playing *World of Warcraft*<sup>2</sup> regularly, I understood. Girl characters were there to be *pretty* - even in universes where dragons were real, women existed to be sexy. It spoke to a wider problem because people actually believed it. As soon as other players, male players, learned that the one controlling that sexy night elf was also a girl the harassment started. Despite explicit statements of being a minor, of being uncomfortable, of not wanting to use private voice chat, it kept happening.

The story lines showed what creators thought of my gender too. The amount of games I played where I had to play as a man who couldn't save his wife/daughter/sister/mother from being brutally murdered in front of him, where to progress through the game I had to commit violence against women NPCs (non-player characters), where the only women there are to play are scantily clad and almost exclusively exist to be sexual, where the communities that surrounded those games saw nothing wrong with any of that, is innumerable.

This is why I'm making this project - I want to attempt to fill this glaring gap. My project, *Laochra*, is a collection of concept art focusing on women, in particular queer women and women of color. These characters I've made and the world I've crafted do their best, my best, to offer an alternative to conventional interpretations of women in games. *Laochra* manifests itself as an ebook - I don't have the coding skills to bring it into a playable realm, so it's collected for viewers this way.

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<sup>1</sup> GameFreak. *Pokemon Crystal*. Gameboy Video Game. Nintendo. 2001

<sup>2</sup> Blizzard Entertainment. *World of Warcraft*. PC Video Game. Blizzard Entertainment. 2004

## Context

### Games That Fail

To begin I'd like to talk about the *Grand Theft Auto*<sup>3</sup> franchise. The name implies that illegality is part of the gameplay and that all things morally wrong will probably be happening within the hours that you put into this game. What makes me pretty much incapable of playing this game is the way women are treated. A way to earn points in the game is to kill prostitutes - or have sex with, and then kill prostitutes; not exactly a welcoming environment. Said prostitutes are always women and the player character is always a man. It's forcing gendered violence and framing it in a way that's desirable, and always makes the woman the victim.

### Sexual Dimorphism

[Fig. 7]



The next big offender is *World of Warcraft*, an online game with a community of millions. In this game one can be a woman, play as a woman, and commit violence freely as a woman. However this time the issue lies not with playability but with the conditions of that playability. Those playable women of any race are always disproportionate to their male counterparts - sex dimorphism is taken to an extreme that's clearly meant to make male players who play men feel powerful and male players who play women feel attracted. As if this discrepancy in character design wasn't enough there's the issue of armor. One would assume that in a game about being a hero that, even if the female models are less physically

World of Warcraft Sex Dimorphism Chart

intimidating that armor would be the great equalizer. The difference is obvious.

Of course these don't even address the question of representation of marginalized women - women of color, women with disabilities, LGBT women, etc.. If they're present, which is rarely, then they exist as punchlines, as jokes, or as entities to be demonized by the hero. Marginalized people become set pieces in games and real life players take that away - it's perpetuating bigotry.



World of Warcraft Armor Comparison

### Games That Do Better

These experiences have led me to where I am - creating all the concept work for a game about the people who "aren't the target audience" of games, with us at the focus, as real people not just set dressing.

<sup>3</sup> Rockstar Games. *Grand Theft Auto*. Multi-platform Video Game. Rockstar Games. 1997.

One of the most influential of these games is *Metroid*<sup>4</sup> - perhaps the leader in “gender doesn’t matter so why not make them a girl” protagonists. The player is given control of Samus - a character who was exclusively seen in her heavy armor. *Metroid* first appeared as an 8-bit, side scrolling type game, and was/is wildly popular.

In recent iterations she has become something of a sex symbol with the release of “Zero Suit Samus”. The zero suit model also removes any identity ambiguity - Samus is confirmed for white, blonde, and able-bodied. Marginalized fans can no longer project themselves onto her.



Metroid Screenshot

A more recent example of successful female led games is the *Portal*<sup>5</sup> franchise. Players can’t see the avatar - which made it a surprise for many when they realized they were in fact controlling Chell, a woman.

Not only is the protagonist a woman but so is the major antagonist. They both have all the agency that the game has to offer.

Not being able to see the protagonist is a big theme in many games - and often developers use that to just default the player to male - but there are games that don’t.

Both *Gone Home*<sup>6</sup> and the

*Nancy Drew*<sup>7</sup> franchise use the first

person camera technique to hide the player character and both games explicitly state that the protagonist is a woman.

*Gone Home* delves into a queer narrative about two young lesbians falling in love told through the protagonist wandering around a seemingly abandoned house.

*Nancy Drew* is an icon of girl power - taking the

detective/crime genre back from the men (sherlock holmes, hardy boys) and declaring it hers.

Both games tell compelling stories and don’t have to sexualize their women. They prove that games with female protagonists can be and are successful.

These few games are also not a pass for the game industry, there is still work to be done. That does beg the question: What, beside female protagonists, is the common factor in all these amazing games? They all branch away from “classic” violence based video games. None of these games feature violence as part of their gameplay mechanics, and thus violence against women (either passive or aggressive) doesn’t exist. Which brings about another question, is it possible to have lead women and violence coexist in a game together?

## **Violence**

That’s where I come in. Video games generally are escapist wish fulfillment fantasies and, as such, I think women should be able to be violent as well. However, these fantasies are reserved for straight white men, which is too much like real life to be enjoyable for the “non-target audience”.



Official Portal 2 art - Chell and GLaDOS

<sup>4</sup> Nintendo. *Metroid*. NES Video Game. Nintendo. 1986

<sup>5</sup> Valve. *Portal*. Multi-platform Video Game. Valve. 2007

<sup>6</sup> Fullbright. *Gone Home*. PC Video Game. Fullbright. 2013

<sup>7</sup> Her Interactive. *Nancy Drew*. Multi-platform Video Game. Her Interactive. 1998

People talk about how game violence is directly related to real-life violence, but I think it's a healthy release of perfectly normal violent urges. However, women aren't assumed to have the urges that make game violence fun, and so aren't given fulfillment fantasies that address those urges. This creates the idea that "non-target audience" members don't want games with violence, which isn't true at all.

Game violence is freeing - a fulfillment fantasy of a situation where I'm powerful enough to take control and fight back against bad guys. It's a healthy outlet for urges that everybody experiences that are unhealthy to keep in or to exercise in real life. It's a vent, it's an indulgence, and we all deserve it. That's the kind of violence I want to harness - an oddly joyful, fun, violence.

## Methodology

### Origins

Along with violence I also want to break into classic themes that the straight white male contingent has had a strangle hold on for far too long. Again, they're the ones who always get to play out the good vs. evil narrative and I want to take that back - why can't a queer brown girl

slay the dragon and rescue the princess for once? I want to see what women in the driver's seat of high fantasy would look like - that's the question, the inquiry, that my project seeks to answer.

I'm looking for that answer and to find it, I started with the classics. I went to Dungeons and Dragons to cherry pick the things I liked about it, the archetypes of characters that I wanted to have in my theoretical game. I started with the frame so that I could have some kind of direction when I actually started making things. I talked to the people who I play DnD with and from those conversations I distilled an admittedly huge list of classes, which I think parsed down into a list of 12 archetypes with each other progressing into another archetype throughout the gameplay. That brings the total to 24 archetypes for characters, still quite a few but much fewer than what I started with. The progressions were where I took these classics and made them my own. I modified and swapped until I came up with ones that made sense to me as well as deviated from the norm.

PRIMARY	SECONDARY
BERSERKER	VALKYRIA
DRUID	WARDEN
MAGE	SORCERER
ROGUE	THIEF
SEER	ORACLE
TINKER	MACHINIST
WITCH	MORRIGAN
MYSTIC	RUNECASTER
BARD	HARMONIST
WARRIOR	GUARDIAN
HUNTER	BEAST MASTER
MONK	PALADIN

Progression Chart

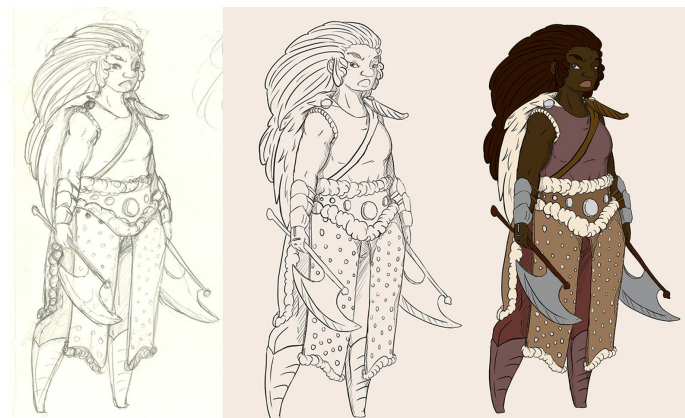
### Character Design

From that point I started to draw. I made different versions of the same archetype, trying to find my ideal version of that character. I knew from the start that, if I was going to make a game about women, then I was going to make a game about **all** women. I also knew that I wanted them all to be different from each other and for their looks to scream their personalities. I went with different body types, skin colors, ages, sexualities - all in an effort to make them feel real.

For example, The Tinker is a character that I wanted to look mischievous. I knew that I wanted her to be linked with The Berserker textually, but for them to be very different visually. The Tinker became young, with silly hair and big clothes, while the Berserker is a muscle bound woman, with furs and huge hair. They're an unlikely pair, but textual evidence will lead audiences to learn of their surprising connections.

For the secondary forms I engaged with my community. I went online and asked how people who could identify themselves as “gamers” felt about the community and about representation. A came to one startling conclusion - we hide ourselves. Women and minorities who game hide themselves. We choose names that are ambiguous, play as male characters so as not to draw attention to ourselves, don't speak on chat channels, only play with people we know - all these things in an effort to protect ourselves.

That's a power that marginalized groups have and I wanted to harness that for me second forms, for the more powerful forms. All the second forms have masks or face coverings as a response to that real life power. Their masks are voluntarily put on and grant them more power than if they didn't have them, additional armor, and my characters wear them as an ode to people they represent.



Sketch to finish drawings - Top: Tinker  
Bottom: Berserker

## **The Technical**

Once a pencil sketch had been made I scanned these copies and brought them into my computer. From there I redrew them digitally, focusing on cleanliness and cohesive design. These images were then colored, each with six different color palettes to find out who these character were through color story. This is a process I use for most of my artwork on this project.

Once I knew what they looked like, I needed to know who they were and needed to make them real. When I think about characters that feel very real to me they're ones who have distinctive voices, stories, and themes. Music does a lot of work to tell stories and I knew that it was needed for these characters. I outsourced the music to a music student and each character got their own theme.

I wrote scripts, backgrounds for these characters from their own point of view, giving a look at their life as it was “pre-game”. The writing process helped me know the characters as well as know the plot. To bring these scripts to life I sought out voice actors, friends and strangers. I very much wanted to maintain the diversity that my project is built on in my casting

of these characters. My voice actors are all people who identify with womanhood on some level, with a great many being women of color and queer women. I don't want my game to be a game where these types of women are kept out and I didn't want to erase the identities of my characters by not making an effort to diversify the cast.

This project has to be fun, has to be joyful, a celebration of the non-target audience, of all that we can be, of occupying a space that should be open to everybody already. The project is about joy, power, and what it means to be indulgently yourself in a space that theoretically should have no limits to who can enjoy it. These thoughts fueled me and my making process.

## Creative Work

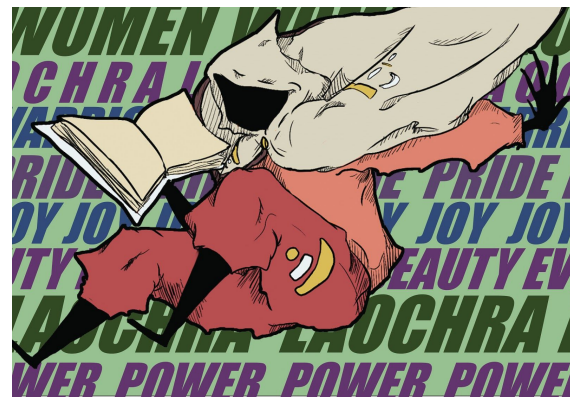
Laochra came to life at the gallery, hoping to draw viewers into the world and let them explore it. From the installation, to the book cover, to the promotional postcard, Laochra has manifested in a way that's about sparking imagination and drawing people in. The first image is of the project as it exists, installed in the gallery. The second image is of the cover of the print copy of the book - immediately the characters are there and shown with distinct personalities. I've also included the promotional postcard image which has been designed to tell viewers immediately what ideas are relevant to the project. Finally I've included one of the landscapes that I made for the project - it's one from Qadir and I believe it shows both the style that I work in as well as the personality that saturates all of the art created for Laochra.



Laochra cover image



Qadir - a landscape



Laochra postcard image

## Conclusion

This is what high fantasy with women at the forefront looks like. I have found an iteration of the answer and managed to retain the joy and the fun that I set out with at the beginning of this project. I wanted to make something about “non-target audience” people and I succeeded. I wanted it to be accessible and enticing to women from all walks of life and it does great bounds towards that. I wanted to make something I’d be proud of and I’ve certainly done that.

Laochra lives in the digital, in the communal space of the internet. It can be purchased in full, or consumed in bits through my internet postings. It’s something that was inspired by the people I knew shared my experience and I found them through the internet, through the very games that drove me to make this project. It lives because of online communities so that’s where it exists.

Laochra isn’t over - this gallery isn’t the end of my thoughts or the end of my work about this project. I have plans to keep writing about these characters and this world, as well as make animations and perhaps even begin to fabricate props or costumes. I’d love to find somebody who could help me make this an actual game - to bring it to players everywhere so they too can find their heroes.

Laochra is ever growing and ever expanding - if I allow it there will always be more work to do. These characters and this world have become a part of me, and I think that this game would do that little girl who played *Pokemon Crystal* proud.

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