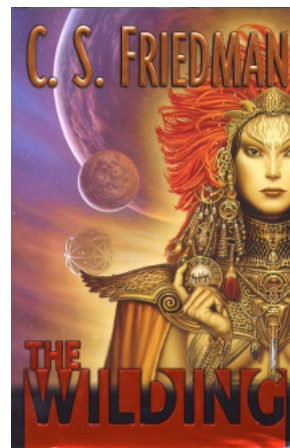# A New Storyteller:
## The Standardization of Fantasy Media and Why We Must Change

**A Graphic Novel by Amy Nagi**

Artists and authors of the fantasy genre reach beyond telling tales to create whole new worlds. These foreign lands are magical, expansive, elaborate playgrounds through which stories weave and characters find their dreams and deaths. These worlds have no bounds; some touch distant galaxies, some unearth mystical arts, others invite fantastic creatures to join humankind to play out our destiny and fight the ultimate battle. These stories relate to our imagination of what the world could be: idealizations, the perfect world, at least for some people. Artists and authors create sentient dragons and creatures of myths, but balk at the idea of writing a woman hero or even a realistic, three-dimensional female character. Women are given the standard roles: to be the captured princess or possibly the warrior in a chain mail bikini, always matching our society's standard of beauty, and never filling the role of the hero. For my project, I will write and illustrate a graphic novel that explores these gender representations in fantasy media. Through my story, I will point out gender-based clichés and stereotypes and display the harm that they inflict. Fantasy media is full of unrealistic and often insulting representations of women. They perpetuate a damaging image and alienate many people from the genre. Through illustration and storytelling, my project will assess existing content within the fantasy genre, react to it,

The fantasy genre spans several media. I have read fantasy novels by popular authors such as Robert Jordan, Piers Anthony, David Eddings, J. R. R. Tolkien, and many others. Video games also influence my project strongly, from large-scale online games such as Aion and World of Warcraft, to single-player games like Dragon Age and The Witcher. I have additionally examined a lot of fantasy artwork, ranging from cover art to graphic novels and individual illustrations. Though I now discuss these works within the context of my project, I first engaged with all of them outside of my project because the fantasy genre intrigues me and I have enjoyed its stories for years. Fantasy can be a source of inspiration and innovation. For example, Kaori Yuki's graphic



*Many of C. S. Friedman's fantasy and science fiction novels feature strong female protagonists and creative new worlds.*

novel series Angel Sanctuary has a diverse cast of characters, including a young girl who adamantly defies her "princess" role, and characters who tackle controversial topics, from religion to abortion, invite discussion rather than condemning one side and praising the other. For instance, Yuki's story includes angel and demon characters, some who act for good, others who spread evil, and most who fall somewhere in between. The range of characters displays the merits and problems of different ways of thinking and shows that each way is neither perfect nor entirely wrong. Her story takes place in a fantasy world, but resonates with problems that exist in our world, and that makes it meaningful. Likewise, C. S. Friedman's novels often contain unconventional worlds that break my expectations, as well as self-reliant female protagonists who I can relate to and respect. In her book Black Sun Rising, for example, the world's magic turns people's fears into reality rather than being tame or helpful, and an evil character ends up acting as a hero. There are many great fantasy works out there that speculate, innovate, and inspire. However, many standard practices within the genre are at best unimaginative, and are more often damaging.

Sexist portrayals are harmful in part because fantasy media is frequently a direct reflection of the real world. For instance, C.S. Lewis and Philip Pullman used their fantasy worlds to argue opposing views on religion. Lewis uses the death of Aslan in The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe to symbolize the crucifixion and rebirth of Christ. Pullman uses his trilogy, His Dark Materials, to debate the Christian view, such as when he "depicts the death of a God and the creation of a Republic of Heaven that has no need for a King." (Chattaway, 2007) Artists and authors employ fantasy to discuss realities, possibilities, and hypothetical situations, and even though their worlds are fictional, they relate heavily to views in our world. The ideas and portrayals of gender in fantasy are not limited to fantasy, but instead reflect and impact the existing attitudes of real people.

The fantasy genre tends to contain archaic gender roles and harmful representations. Female characters are commonly displayed with exaggerated sexual anatomy, wearing revealing clothing that doesn't match the situation, and in "pin-up" poses. They are also far more likely than their male counterparts to have a passive role or be captured and rescued, and are much less likely to hold a leadership position or be a primary character. This trend is not limited to fantasy media, but it is heavily perpetuated here. A recent study of 133 video games supports my observations, finding that "male characters are vastly more likely to appear than female characters in general", with 85.23 percent of all characters being male, and 89.11 percent of primary characters (Williams, D., Martins, N., Consalvo, M., and Ivory, J., 2009). Female characters appear infrequently and much more likely to fill secondary roles. I have even played games before in which no female characters existed at all. In a study of race representation on television, Dana Mastro found that "a medium's general depiction of a group does have an impact on its users' perceptions of that group, albeit moderated by their real-world experiences." (Mastro, D., E. Behm-Morawitz, and M. Ortiz, 2007) and "the absence of portrayals should lead to a feeling of relative unimportance and powerlessness" (Mastro and Behm-Morawitz, 2005). Even though this study focuses on television, its findings carry over to other media. It is alienating to grow up as a girl and find that when I try to play games with my friends, my gender is highly underrepresented, and the representation it does have primarily exists for visual appeal. I was rarely able to play a female character at all, much less a positive portrayal of one. Even the strong "action girl" deferred to the male hero and generally never used her strength in a meaningful way. The story mainly referred to her for her appearance, suggesting that, despite her skills, her visual appeal remained of primary importance. The occasional female hero who came along was the same, catering to established depictions of sexuality that exist for male enjoyment and deny female sexual agency (Lara Croft's exaggerated figure, Bayonetta's pole dancing). Because of the prevalence of this, I began to drop out of the gaming community and lose interest in technology in favor of more approachable hobbies that did not exude such a misogynistic attitude. Likewise, gender roles in fantasy books frustrate me and make me very selective of what I read. Such representations are pushing girls away from activities and experiences that help them develop important skills and knowledge.

My project will reach out in particular to two groups: younger girls who are affected by sexism and stereotyping, and people who unknowingly perpetuate existing stereotypes. The genre can feel threatening and insulting when girls and women are repeatedly portrayed as unimportant beyond being sex objects. My project makes the statement that yes, these clichés exist, and they make people feel negative about themselves. To the audience of girls, this project will acknowledge that many people share their feelings, and
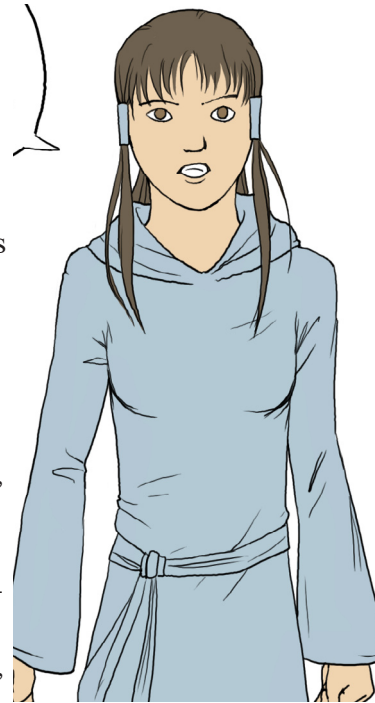
*Kalli (left) and Alana and Catyn (below)*

will encourage them to become storytellers and create work that treats all people with respect. My project impels girls to actively take part in the genre and bring about the needed change. This project will additionally encourage change by increasing awareness of the issues among the many people who haven't previously thought about the way existing portrayals affect others. I have had friends who were surprised when they found out how I felt about such portrayals, and agreed that yes, when you think about it, it is insulting. My project will raise awareness, so people who enjoy the genre can understand why some of us have a hard time with it, and can work to change it. Most people I know who enjoy fantasy would gladly have others find a similar enjoyment in it.

My story will follow the character of Kalli. Kalli is an average teenage girl, nothing extraordinary about her, living in the real world (as opposed to a made-up fantasy world). She represents me and my reactions to the clichés and portrayals that she meets in the story. In that sense, this project is partially autobiographical. Kalli begins the story reading a book while walking through her world. She transitions into the fantasy world of her book and begins to interact with it. This new world that she explores is a representation of common fantasy themes, character archetypes, and plotlines. The first character Kalli meets, Alana, makes her uncomfortable in their difference; Kalli has a healthy figure but perceives herself as plain, short, and ungainly next to the sexualized figure of the fantasy girl. Kalli feels discouraged but won't give up on this world so easily. Alana states that she doesn't belong here, but Kalli decides that she will find her place in this world.

The second character Kalli meets is Catyn, a lively warrior girl, who Kalli is excited to see, despite Catyn's lack of sensible clothing. Kalli becomes a bit discouraged again though when she discovers that both these characters defer to a third: the male protagonist Rayn, a cutout "unlikely hero" stereotype who begins the story as an adolescent boy with less training and ability than either of the two women.

Trying to fit in to the world and culture, Kalli agrees to the others' demands that she wear "proper" clothing for their world. This experience does not go well for her, but she journeys on with them as they go on a quest to defeat evil. On their journey, the villain attacks them, and Rayn comes to save the day in an over-dramatic, satirical scene. He fails. Kalli, breaking from the story's mold, convinces Catyn to step out of her secondary role and become the hero. This graphic novel will end by showing Kalli back in her own world, beginning chapter two of the book she was reading in the beginning. I will suggest the idea that she entered a story that treated her gender unfavorably, and she was hurt by it but worked to change it and become the new storyteller. It is easy for girls to write off fantasy (and especially fantasy video games) as a boy's club, but I want to encourage them instead to improve the genre and add their own unique viewpoints.

This project is a forty page printed book. I began it by writing a summary of points I wanted to focus on and then developing them into a page-by-page storyline script. I then started to sketch out the pages digitally, planning my panel layout and composition. I went over the completed sketches with black outlines before adding color and shading. The entire project is digitally illustrated and printed through an online self-publishing company.

*Maybe I can be the hero this time*

Throughout my project, I use visual cues to depict Kalli's thoughts and opinions. The story begins in full color, and Kalli soon enters the black and white fantasy world. She remains in full color for a time, but loses a bit of color every time she tries to fit in and conform to the expectations of the fantasy world's culture. I draw her in a realistic style in contrast to the highly idealized characters of the fantasy world. Additionally, her style changes occasionally as she reacts to the other characters and situations. For example, she is drawn in a free, flowing style when she eagerly enters the new world, and will become more angular and sharply drawn when comparing herself to Alana's unrealistically curvy figure. Kalli visually communicates the feelings and reactions that many girls may have when introduced to the unfavorable stereotypes and gender representations of fantasy media.
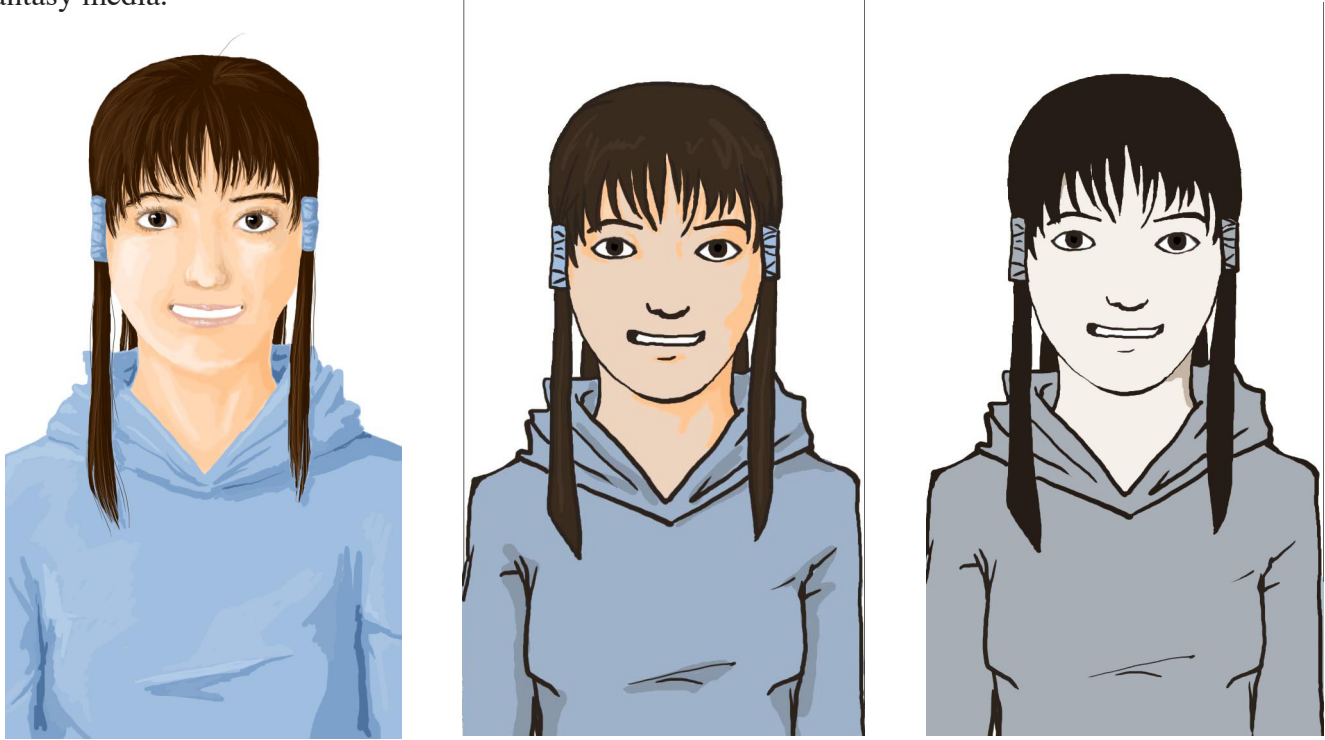


*Kalli's color will fade and her style will become less "real" as a result of her attempt to conform.*

A fantasy world can be a playground of innovation, with mythical creatures, inspiring heroes and thought-provoking antiheroes, and imaginative new models of government, religion, and society. My project strives to open this genre to the world and all its myriad viewpoints by fighting against the sexism and stereotyping that serves to exclude half the population. This project encourages more thoughtful and diverse fantasy stories by pointing out harmful clichés and depictions that are standard practice within the genre now. It is meant to inspire people to make positive changes and be more creative in a genre that should thrive on innovation. The structure of this story also leaves room for future installments, in which I can go into more depth or focus on related issues. I also would raise the question of whether the creator should have a social or moral responsibility, or if we should just have to deal with offensive representations. The project encourages storytellers to go beyond existing characterizations and create something meaningful and new, so that the next time you meet a female character in a story, she might be a real girl with her own personality and opinions, and she might surprise you.

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