

Changes in the Image of Female Characters in the New Media Era

– Taking the Identity V as an Example

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Abstract: This study examines innovation in gender role presentation in *Identity V*, a handheld game by NetEase, praised for its gothic art style, emotional storytelling, and asymmetric gameplay. The principal focus of the research centers on the portrayal of female characters in *Identity V*, examining how these characters, through their strength, intellect, and multifaceted personalities, challenge conventional gender role assumptions and foster the embrace of gender diversity and inclusivity within the broader socio-cultural dialogue. The study further reveals that these depth-rich female characters have inspired a powerful wave of subcultural creativity, encompassing diverse fields ranging from digital painting and literary creation to live narration, which together build an ecosystem that stimulates innovation in digital art. While the feminist movement has led to positive changes like narrowing the educational gender gap, persistent societal misconceptions and negative stereotypes threaten these gains, underscoring the necessity to protect progress in gender equality.

Keywords: Gender role challenges, Feminism, Video game culture, Subcultural creation, Gender diversity.

1. Introduction

As an iconic handheld game that blends gothic art with asymmetrical gaming experiences, *Identity V* has become an important cultural focal point for gender role diversity and equality thanks to its innovative gameplay and subtle female character design. This article succinctly outlines the evolution of gender-related topics within game studies, highlighting that although some advancements have been made, instances that explore gender diversity and challenge conventional gender stereotypes remain limited in gaming narratives. The main thrust of the study is to analyse how *Identity V* leads to a shift in players' gender perceptions and facilitates cross-cultural dialogue through a uniquely female character model. The character analysis integrates in-depth exploration of character backgrounds, insights from the gaming community, and discussions on social media and professional forums to provide a thorough understanding of the intricate relationship between character design and players' gender perceptions. By comparing the roles of 'Clerk' and 'Coordinator' with traditional gender frameworks, the study illustrates how these roles inspire players to reflect on and challenge

existing gender stereotypes through their intelligence, autonomy, and complexity. This research is crucial as it underscores video games' influence on societal gender perceptions and equips game developers and advocates with empirical data on fostering gender diversity. Additionally, it reveals the growing market demand for diverse gender expressions, guiding corporate strategies that honor gender differences.

2. Female Characters of *Identity V*

2.1. Characterisation of Female Characters

In *Identity V*, the Clerk and the Coordinator are beloved female characters whose narratives challenge traditional gender norms. The Clerk role, typically linked with masculine traits like intelligence and observation, is redefined by Keigan Nicholas Keogh as a calm and intelligent woman. Her character subverts conventional femininity, symbolizing a rebellion against her predetermined life, ultimately emerging as a decision maker. Her journey of self-improvement resonates deeply, often evoking tears among players. Despite her affluent background, she struggles with self-expression and impartial judgment due to family expectations. Transforming her appearance through costly overeating, she seizes power initially held by her brother, championing justice and supporting the marginalized.. As her influence expands, her principles become perverted, leading to an eventual misuse of her authority, which mirrors societal tendencies to undermine women and their entitlement to autonomy. [1]. In the Chinese version of the game, the official occupation for her is a recorder, but in the international version, the official translation of her occupation is 'clerk'. This explanation is to avoid any misunderstanding caused by the translation. By portraying the *Identity V*, the game shows players that women can also perform well in professions that are traditionally considered 'masculine', which has won high praise from players. The popularity of the Clerk in the game also reflects the acceptance and recognition of this character.

The Coordinator, Martha Behamfil, holds the official title of airman in the Chinese version of the game; however, the international edition designates her role as 'coordinator'. [2]. This explanation addresses translation challenges. The Coordinator role is technical, often linked to masculine traits like mobility and courage. Male dominance in pilot training perpetuates gender stereotypes. A successful Coordinator needs physical fitness, professional skills, and psychological resilience. Martha Behamfil's story defies these norms; she excelled in mounted shooting, became a captain, and showed bravery with a flare gun. Although she didn't become a pilot, her contributions to ground signal guidance highlight achievements in a non-traditional female domain. Martha's character illustrates that women can thrive in unconventional fields, challenging societal expectations. By emphasizing tactical skills, technological expertise, emotional intelligence, and leadership, Martha redefines traditional gender roles.

2.2. Costume Design of the Female Characters of the *Identity V*

The costume design of the character plays an indispensable role in the characterisation and backstory narration. Compared with other games on the market, *Identity V* shows a higher degree of matching between character and costume in female character costume design, reducing hyper-sexualisation and strengthening the professional attributes and personal traits of the character. The hyper-sexualization of female characters emerged as a significant representation of the male-centric cultural viewpoint. [3]. Research has shown that although female characters outnumber male characters in games, this unbalanced distribution is rooted in the fact that game design is often centred on male audiences. Further analysis indicates that female characters are given more emphasis on the representation of sexuality than male characters, presenting an extremely sexualised look. The images frequently portray exaggerated anatomical traits, including pronounced breasts and hips juxtaposed with slender

waists, resulting in an abnormal body ratio. [4, 5]. These designs tend to overemphasise sexiness and neglect the deeper character and story background of the characters. In contrast, the *Identity V* conveys a more diverse and in-depth image of women through the costume designs of the Clerk and the Coordinator (only these two roles are singled out for analysis in this paper), which is undoubtedly a positive practice of changing the image of women's roles in the new media era.

The Clerk's costume features a retro academic style with a dark robe and high-collar shirt, accented by a refined necktie, likely inspired by Victorian formal wear. This attire aligns with The Keigan's clerk role while conveying an intellectual and mysterious presence. The loose fit and details shift attention from gender to professionalism and intrinsic qualities.

The Coordinator's styling effectively reflects her background as a courageous pilot, featuring a classic flight jacket, practical trousers, and a matching helmet inspired by WWII female pilots. The design emphasizes her dynamism and autonomy, avoiding gender stereotypes while appealing to the audience through functionality and the character's adventurous spirit, which highlights her resilience and determination.

The game's character clothing aligns with their occupational traits, portraying the Clerk's academic nature and the Coordinator's heroic essence, achieving a harmonious internal and external representation. Elements reflecting both character identity and historical context are incorporated, ensuring adherence to historical accuracy and transcending gender stereotypes, while honoring history and integrating modern values. Additionally, the design prioritizes the character's inner qualities—intelligence, courage, and professionalism—over exterior sex appeal, creating a multifaceted model of femininity.

3. Female Participants in Offline Competitions of *Identity V* Game

Although academics have yet to reach a unified consensus on the definition of eSports commentators, given that eSports has been included in the category of sports, there is a close link between eSports commentary and traditional sports commentary. On this basis, the definition of eSports commentary can draw on the theoretical framework of sports commentary. Wang Qun asserts that the fundamental duty of sports commentary is to elucidate the rules of sporting events, thereby assisting viewers in dispelling uncertainties and enhancing their comprehension of the game. [6]. Another viewpoint comes from Wei Wei's book which states, Sports commentary represents a unique genre of linguistic expression dedicated to the coverage of competitive sports, fitness endeavors, and various athletic events. It seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of sports occurrences through detailed descriptions and narratives, often encompassing elements such as predictions, critical commentaries, and the crafting of an engaging atmosphere. [7] Drawing on the above definition, eSports commentators can be regarded as individuals who use their unique language art to analyse and narrate eSports events, not only answering viewers' questions, but also assuming the responsibility of predicting the game, providing professional commentary and enhancing the atmosphere of the game, making them specialists in the field of sports commentary.

3.1. Female Commentators and Players

The exceptional performance of *Identity V* female pro player Wan Wan (formerly Hua Yulu) in the eSports realm showcases her outstanding skills and strategic thinking, challenging stereotypes about women's participation in competitive gaming. Her ability to analyze and perform under pressure demonstrates that women can excel in high-level competitions, contributing unique strategies. In the new media landscape, Wan Wan has established a standard for female gamers, motivating others to pursue their ambitions and advocate for gender equality. Through social media, she shares her journey and promotes positive narratives, encouraging youth to dismantle gender stereotypes.

Notably, the increasing involvement of female professionals and a significant proportion of female spectators in *Identity V* tournaments indicate a gradual shift toward gender balance in eSports. This trend not only affirms women's capabilities but also reflects the broader movement for gender equality in the digital entertainment industry, underscoring eSports' role in fostering social and cultural progress.

4. Social influence

4.1. Influence on Players' Cognitive Attitude

In *Identity V*, the rich diversity of female character design has notably shaped players' views on women's abilities and status. These characters go beyond traditional support roles, exhibiting a variety of skills and distinct personalities. This evolution enhances awareness among players, especially males, fostering greater recognition and respect for women's essential roles, including their leadership and strategic acumen. Additionally, with over 60% of players identifying as female, this representation positively influences community perceptions, a trend evident in both mainstream and professional gaming. According to 2023 statistics from the *Identity V* Professional League (IVL), female audience members exceeded 60% [8]. A notable finding highlights IVL's distinction from traditional e-sports, which typically attract predominantly male audiences. The substantial increase in female viewers has become a key draw for the tournament, altering the previous gender viewing ratio and establishing a unique presence in the e-sports landscape. This shift underscores the widespread recognition of gender equality in game design, ultimately transforming players' perceptions of gender roles.

4.2. Impact on the Game Industry

The intricate design of female characters in *Identity V* has reshaped player perceptions and redefined the gaming landscape. Take the character 'Little Girl,' for instance; her design masterfully combines gothic aesthetics with profound emotional depth, showcasing psychological complexity and survival strategies amid adversity. This enhances the game's immersive quality and deepens player engagement. This innovative approach transcends mere atmosphere building, facilitating a profound exploration of the character's internal growth and journey, thereby enriching the overall gaming experience with emotional and intellectual depth.

Identity V exemplifies the strength and resilience of female characters, from the sensitive Perfumer to the courageous Coordinator, redefining women's roles in gaming. This approach has attracted many female gamers, establishing a new standard for gender equality and diversity in game design. Consequently, it has fueled user base growth and influenced business models and market strategies, prompting adaptations like enhanced tournament broadcasts for female audiences and a greater presence of female commentators and reviewers, thereby enriching gaming culture's gender diversity.. The workplace climate and public discourse are working in tandem to encourage women to cross the gender barrier and explore STEM and other career fields that have traditionally been seen as 'male domains'. The increase in STEM education initiatives and scholarship opportunities designed for women has greatly enhanced their access to education and career prospects within these fields. [9], thus demonstrating the positive effects of specific policies and advocacy initiatives. Such progress is not limited to the gaming industry, but extends to a wide range of specialised fields such as science, technology, engineering and maths, mapping out society's overall progress in advancing gender equality and diversity. Taken together, these joint initiatives have effectively strengthened women's inclusion in STEM fields and opened up broader pathways for them to pursue their career aspirations in traditionally gender-imbalanced occupations.

4.3. Impact on Society and Social Culture

The female characters portrayed by *Identity V* have had a profound and multidimensional ripple effect on society and the youth subculture sphere. Within the context of this subculture, these characters have become central to the inspiration behind fan-created works, cosplay, and homoerotic cultural trends. They serve as catalysts for the intricate and varied expressions of non-mainstream culture, effectively reflecting the defiant essence of youth subculture's intrinsic adolescent characteristics and the distinctive identities of niche communities. [10]. The rebellious and marginal 'subculture' spirit embedded in the characters indirectly challenges the mainstream authority on a stylistic level through their distinctive personalities, complex narrative backgrounds, and exquisite visual aesthetics while maintaining a distance from mainstream culture.

The game's distinctive female characters have elicited significant emotional engagement within the player community, particularly among female players seeking personalized expression and self-identity exploration. This serves as a potent medium for identity projection. Through artistic outlets such as cosplay and homoerotic art, participants have forged deep connections between their emotions and the virtual personas they inhabit. This interaction has enhanced individual representation while promoting community cohesion and reinforcing identity and belonging.[11]. In this process, the *Identity V* not only expands the dimensions of youth subculture expression, but also implicitly disputes the existing cultural order and social structure in symbolic and stylised expressions, further promoting the subcultural group's in-depth exploration of self-cognition and identity construction. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity offers a fundamental framework for examining how *Identity V* facilitates the dynamic development of self-identity. [12]. The game integrates multicultural elements and historical insights to create a 'third space' that flexibly defines social identity, facilitating continuous transformation. Player interactions with the game's symbolic system reveal a dual process of deconstructing and reconstructing past identities, showing how cultural hybridity enriches self-expression and enhances self-identity within a broader socio-cultural framework.

The work critiques traditional gender norms by presenting resilient and complex female characters, fostering discussions on gender diversity and inclusion. Its feminist impact promotes gender equality, empowers women's roles, enhances labor conditions for economic independence, and advances social and cultural diversity.

A particularly significant finding is the research data from UNESCO, which indicates that gender equality education initiatives aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals have led to an average 15 percent increase in the enrollment ratio of girls in primary schools across participating nations, thereby considerably reducing the gender disparity in basic education.[13] These advancements have dismantled gender bias, elevated women's societal status, and balanced rights between sexes. Nonetheless, misconceptions about feminism persist, obstructing gender equality's progress. Thus, sustaining this positive trend demands public vigilance and the use of educational resources and critical thinking to safeguard achieved gender equality.

Character subculture creativity is emerging across illustration, literature, video editing, and live streaming, forming a dynamic content creation ecosystem. This development has enriched Internet cultural diversity, fostered collaboration among digital artists, and underscored the communication essence of game culture in the modern information age. With the rise of character subculture, commercial ventures like merchandise, brand promotion, and themed events have surfaced, reflecting corporate emphasis on gender diversity and cultural variance in marketing, particularly appealing to diverse audiences, notably women. The spread of these character images has prompted a critical examination of gender representation in media, questioning how to effectively portray gender diversity in popular culture and leverage games and media to foster positive social and cultural progress.

5. Conclusion

After outlining this study's analysis of the innovative roles of female characters in *Identity V* and their positive effects on gender equality and cultural diversity, it is essential to refine future research directions. Broadening the case study to encompass diverse gaming and cultural contexts will enhance our understanding of gender expression and cultural identities, elucidating the complexities of gender roles in gaming. The next step involves incorporating quantitative research methods. Utilizing large-scale surveys and data analyses will enable systematic evaluation of player acceptance of gender-inclusive roles and their influence on individual gender perceptions, thus providing quantitative evidence to support insights into in-game gender dynamics.

Incorporating cross-cultural perspectives enriches the discourse on gender roles in gaming, revealing the interaction between globalization and localization in advancing gender equality while acknowledging cultural variances. Ongoing assessment of social impacts is vital for the study's depth. By exploring the societal implications of gender diversity in gaming—especially in education, the workplace, and policy—the aim is to connect virtual gender portrayals with real-world social structures. This research lays the groundwork for gender discussions in *Identity V*, highlighting the necessity for further investigation. To overcome current limitations, it is essential to compile diverse case studies, enhance international empirical research, and merge quantitative and qualitative methods to validate the game's gender design's influence on players' gender perceptions. This approach strengthens the theoretical framework and offers practical insights. Future research should explore this promising area further, fostering innovation to achieve significant results at the intersection of gender equality and digital culture.

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