100 Greatest Video Game Characters

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ALICE

(est. 2000)
Franchise: *American McGee's Alice*
Developer: Rogue Entertainment

The world of action games is replete with well-muscled males blasting their way through scores of bad guys whether for good (kill the Nazis!) or bad (kill the cops!) reasons. Sprinkled throughout action games are, unfortunately, only a few women protagonists—the Lara Crofts of the gaming universe, holding their own in what seems to have become a stereotypically male cosmos. Perhaps one of the strangest yet most exciting examples of a female protagonist in an action game is Alice Liddell of the *American McGee* franchise, the latest game from which is *Alice: Madness Returns* (*AMR*). *AMR* takes the well-known heroine from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, adding bloody mayhem and dark, foreboding tones to the familiar surreal tale—an uncanny exemplar of violent femininity.

Despite the darkness and the M-rating (for mature audiences), Alice never seems like all that vicious a character, particularly since so many of her opponents are fantasy characters. Slicing up playing cards, goblins, or animated tea kettles never reaches the level of controversy of *Grand Theft Auto*. And much of the violence she engages in is presented with an air of whimsy, whether grinding peppers at bad guys or swatting them with a hobby horse. Granted, Alice's world has a dark, even nightmarish tone, and that combination of whimsy and nightmarishness feels like something from a Tim Burton movie.

AMR is particularly noteworthy for how it combines femininity, dark-gothic overtones, and the action genre. In many ways, it feels like a feminine game; not a game designed for women or girls necessarily, but one that acknowledges Alice's femininity while still retaining her identity as a badass. Alice as a character is strong, witty, intelligent, and a lot of fun to play, but she fights in a dress, creates an aura of butterflies when she flies, and her best friend is a cat. Femininity as a construct can be difficult to define because it varies from culture to culture. Further, modern conceptualizations of femininity rely not just upon differences between women and men as dictated by society but also on differences in individual choices made by women and men.[3] The concept of femininity can, of course, play into gender stereotypes, but Alice remains particularly interesting given the juxtaposition between her demonstration of both feminine and non-feminine qualities. It's a positive that *AMR* doesn't try to be *Call of Duty* with long hair, and it takes material from a unique story in atmospheric directions, with a particularly introspective look into guilt, families, and insanity. *AMR* raises the thought of whether some aspects of traditional femininity fit with female power; this may be one way of challenging sexism in society.

The essence of this hypothesis is rooted in classical conditioning. Most discussions of female sexuality in the media focus on an implicit dichotomy between the absence of sexualization versus the sexualization of women being inherently bad. But it's also worth observing that sexualization often occurs in the context of female submissiveness in the media; thus, it's not always clear whether the presence

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of sexy female characters or passive female characters is the root of potential negative effects. Previous work on this "Buffy effect" has suggested that the presence of strong female characters negates the impact of sexualized imagery on men's attitudes toward women.[4]

This is an intriguing thought, but despite some early evidence,[5] it's still speculative. It may be the case that the sexualization of female characters may not always be inherently disempowering, or bad. This is not to be taken as supportive of sexualization; rather, if we are to come to a sophisticated understanding of female power, sex, and violence in entertainment, it is important to rise above the moral stances too often emblematic of media psychology.

The tricky thing for media entertainment that seeks to combine female power with sexuality is balancing the feminine with action-oriented roles that may traditionally be masculine. What is most interesting about Alice is that she isn't merely a cookie-cutter of customary male protagonists but manages to be true to the source material, to add a dark edge, and to forge a new path forward for female protagonists.

Industry data suggests that women are making up an increasing number of the gamer population.[6] Granted, at present women may not always gravitate as often as men toward the action genre. With more characters such as Alice, we may see not only more women in action games, but more women and girls drawn to this genre. Just as with positive developments in other areas, greater diversity and representativeness in games among both characters and players will undoubtedly draw men and women players together, and generate new revenue for the game industry. That women can be powerful *and* sexy may be more than just madness.

Similar Characters: Chell (*Portal*), Jade (*Beyond Good & Evil*), Lara Croft (*Tomb Raider*)

—Christopher J. Ferguson

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THE ALIEN

(est. 1982)
Franchise: *Alien*
Developer: Fox Video Games

In 1979, the Alien burst onto cinema screens, traumatizing moviegoers. Audiences recognized the Alien as unique, unstoppable, and terrifying: an ideal "other" that redefined the genres of science fiction and horror.[7] Moreover, the Alien went on to become one of the most mythic and influential antagonists in popular culture and gaming history. The Alien was designed as a creature of nightmarish Freudian qualities that combined both our unconscious desires and unease regarding the role of technology in the shifting social boundaries of the 1970s.

The Xenomorph's first appearance in video games was in 1982 in a playable, but droll, *Pacman* clone on the Atari 2600 home console. Two years later the Alien made its debut on early home computers in *Alien* (1984), a game that, despite the