

# Gendering a game: Strategies for Team and Content Management in Student-based Game Design

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What is a  
meaningful  
social  
experience?



CREDITS

WALL

VISIT GAMBIT

Chika 3

RENAME



HELP!

## BUILDING A MAZE

EDITOR MODE

To build a maze, drag and drop Turnabouts from the bottom toolbar to the hex map above.



To delete a Turnabout, just drag it off the map or replace it by placing another Turnabout over it.















# Unexpected Issues

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## Artists did not take into account player preferences

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1. Art/design that did not take into account player preferences. It's not enough to say "this game is for adult women" (or whoever the audience may be) and then simply tell the artists that "we need (more) female characters." Stress what the research says players want in their avatar design, in their game design, and in gameplay choices. This reinforces the legitimacy of the request, relying on what actual players want, rather than simply the preferences of the product owner. Use concrete examples: for example "90% of female players want the ability to choose the gender of their avatar. That is why we are creating the option of selectable gender." OR: "research by Yee et al has found the MOST IMPORTANT customizable avatar element for players (male and female) is HAIR. So we want to have options for different hairstyles, and make this feature higher priority than other features, such as different face styles or body types."



# Player as 'he'



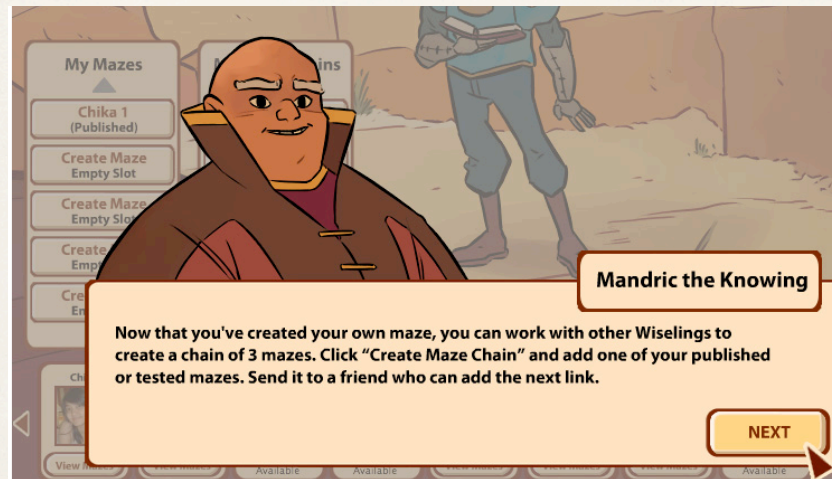
2. Gendered references to the player as male. To counteract this in the future we are employing two strategies, over and above continually modelling behavior through referring to the player as 'she' ourselves: a. Have team members take pen/paper notes during sessions with product owners about what game is for, who it is for, target audience, etc. Writing down such things creates additional documentation, also ensures team members must process the information and have it readily available. At the beginning of a project a lot of information is being conveyed, and it's easy to forget what might not seem relevant at first glance. b. Have artists create (rough) art assets early on of what the imagined player(s) looks like, print and hang in obvious places in the team's space. These serve as visual reminders of 'who' the game is being created for.

# Do you want to play as a girl?



3. Game writing and references that use inappropriate terminology such as 'girl' for woman. Our lead designer (a woman) talked about women as girls and uses this term in writing, including in elements that were to be included in the game's dialogue. This was likely an unconscious action that was corrected fairly easily by pointing out the phrasings and suggesting different word choices.

## Time constraints & art asset/ avatar creation



4. Artists assigned to create male and female avatars would often create male avatar first. This led to a couple of problems: lack of time to create female versions, and thus the ensuing problem that existing (male) assets would be put into test builds and marketing materials much more often than the female avatars. To correct this issue, we consciously began to communicate the order in which we wanted assets created, specifying female first, and then male, in order to rectify the balance. This was done without drama, simply making decisions about priorities. Again we referenced the research to support this decision.

# team dynamics

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5. Team dynamics: the art team was composed of a white male, japanese male and white woman. Due to their personalities, the white male emerged as the leader, and the other two rarely offered opinions or directions in team meetings, although their work was very good, and sometimes more appropriate for the game's design. Yet the lead, in his own enthusiasm for the project, pushed things along in directions the PO and GD sometimes disagreed with. He also created more male-centric assets for the game, despite the repeated direction to create more female-centric assets. The policy at GAMBIT was not to officially appoint leads, but to let them emerge. In the future this situation could be mitigated by the following: a. if art is deemed a critical part of the game's appeal, and the game is designed to appeal to more women, it could be prudent to ensure at least two female artists on the team, if at all possible. b. Our PO and GD were not well versed in design language, and so had a harder time talking with the art team about what the game demanded. In doing this project again we would have called in GAMBIT's Art Director to talk with the art team about directions to take, the necessity of gender balancing, and so on. c. If necessary, talk/interview artists in advance of project or as project is getting underway, and appoint a team leader that is not only the 'best qualified,' but also has the best leadership abilities to manage the team AND make the necessary design choices for your type of game.



# choose your battles

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5. Keep a sense of humor and expect to see these issues emerge (and be thankful if they don't). Most of the problems we faced could be met with patience and perseverance, but since they were unexpected, they led to frustration and confusion, which was magnified over the game's very short development time. Just as we don't expect students to automatically know how to work as a team, or how to do SCRUM development, we should not expect them to be free of biases and stereotypes that are endemic not only in games and game production but in popular culture as a whole. And to expect it of female developers simply because they are female is just as misguided. Being able to step back and talk more widely about these issues as a team would also be very helpful, and set a tone for what is expected. Even taking an hour early on, and having 'reality checks' of 15 minutes in subsequent weeks, would have kept the issue current, and encouraged team members to continually re-situate their perspectives and approaches.

# Summing Up

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- \* Use research to boost support for player interests
- \* Visual and written reminders of who the player is
- \* Ordering of asset creation
- \* No assumptions about intent
- \* Explicit planning can (help) reduce drama
- \* Student leadership is a fraught thing



thank you!

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