

Video game designers envision characters who are more like us

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Is it possible to hold hands with a video game character? That is, in many ways, a ridiculous question, but is one posed by the developers of "Murasaki Baby."

Players are asked to guide an infant through a world fashioned out of a childhood nightmare, where safety pins are transformed into deadly birds and wooden ducks are one's last refuge to safety.

"Murasaki Baby" isn't the next big thing. A small team in northern Italy from a company called Ovosonico is currently putting the finishing touches on the game with ambitions to reshape the way we connect with virtual [characters](#). But it's not exactly a fringe title either - Sony will publish it this fall for the company's touch-screen-enabled PlayStation Vita.

The game does, however, emphasize fragility in an industry that broadcasts machismo. Two or three years ago, a game in which one held the hand of an infant and sought to protect her and her purple balloon would have been an outlier.

Smaller, more independently minded games have been providing players with new experiences and adventurous characters. There is, for instance, the cat in Infinite Fall's forthcoming "Night in the Woods," a human-like feline who is struggling to reconnect with old [friends](#). Or the more abstract protagonist of Capybara's yet-to-be-released "Below," a sword-and-sorcery wanderer who sometimes sounds like a male - and

sometimes sounds like a female.

Such freedom of choice and emotional depth have become the norm for independent games. It's even evident in the just-released arcade-style game "Super Time Force," where one cycles through a cast of outlandish human and dinosaur characters every few seconds, and in this summer's "Lifeless Planet," where a lonely astronaut wanders a deserted outpost.

When asked why his studio chose a little girl for "Murasaki Baby," Ovosonico's co-founder Gianni Ricciardi shot back with an even better question: "Why not?"

Still, when "Murasaki Baby" was shown recently at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), North America's largest [video game](#) trade show held annually at the Los Angeles Convention Center, it did appear to be an oddity among the other event's offerings. E3 is where video game powerhouses such as Sony, Microsoft, Nintendo, Electronic Arts, Activision and others spend millions to sell the industry and the media on the next big thing.

Floor space at the in the Convention Center was dominated by multi-leveled pop-up pavilions that offered glimpses of the latest updates to muscled franchises such as "Call of Duty," "Assassin's Creed," "Battlefield" and "Batman: Arkham." The Convention Center walls were plastered with posters of weapon-toting guy after weapon-toting guy.

When illustrator Scott Benson was trying to discuss his indie game "Night in the Woods" and its main character - a cat who has meaning-of-life conversations with his old pals - he was drowned out by the melodramatic warfare on display in the latest "Metal Gear" trailer.

Although the convention has always emphasized such testosterone-laden, special-effects bonanzas, this year's event started to give way to a new

sensation: fatigue.

Why aren't the range and breadth of characters in indie games evident in top-shelf games from major studios - and why must nearly every top-shelf game feature an angry white male?

When faced with this line of questioning, Ubisoft Montreal found itself at the center of a controversy during the June 10-12 conference. Developers said in interviews at E3 that the four-player team mode of the upcoming "Assassin's Creed Unity" would not feature female characters because of the added production work crafting dual genders would entail.

The topic suddenly became the focus of the media at E3, and Ubisoft ultimately released a statement pledging continued "diversity in our playable characters." "We're trying to expand to be more diverse and less cliché," Ubisoft CEO Yves Guillemot said at a news media event.

As attendees questioned just how much extra work it would entail to render female characters, Nintendo, which has long released games with plots centered almost exclusively on a damsel-in-distress story line, poked fun at its own history.

Nintendo presented an animated scene in which Princess Peach - Mario's oft-kidnapped belle - received an apology for having been constantly taken hostage.

It kicked off Nintendo's rather triumphant and expansive showing at E3 - nearly every game the company featured there showed women in prominent roles, including 2015 title "Splatoon." The company's famed mascots of Mario and Luigi were nowhere in sight on the latter, which offers a wildly wacky reinvention of the multiplayer shooting game.

Earlier, Nintendo's game design master, Shigeru Miyamoto, the man who shaped modern games with inventions such as "Donkey Kong" and "Super Mario Bros.," had said through a translator that there has long "been a request for female characters."

"It's safe to say that since long ago the majority of [game designers](#) themselves were men," Miyamoto said. "So it wasn't necessarily that they didn't like female characters, but they didn't maybe know how to portray them well."

Insomniac Games' upcoming Xbox One title "Sunset Overdrive" avoided the gender controversy entirely, as it gives players to the ability to customize their own protagonists. Advertising has centered on a down-on-his-luck slacker, but in showcasing the corporate-world-gone-amuck action title, creative director Marcus Smith noted that players can go through the game as whatever character their hearts desire.

"You can be male. You can be female. You can dress in between. You can be different races. You can be different body sizes," Smith said.

When Nintendo gives more power to its princesses than its plump Italian plumbers and game designers talk of dressing "in between" a man and a woman, it's evidence of an industry that's better trying to represent its increasingly broad audience.

Benson and [game](#) designer Alec Holowka said a number of attendees who stopped to play "Night in the Woods" remarked that it was sad, as its lead character struggles to manage her own expectations and daydreams about burning her house down. "It's hilarious to hear that here," remarked Benson, as Holowka joked that games where people "get stabbed repeatedly in the eyeballs" are more accepted.

"People are used to saving the world," Benson explained. "A big, huge,

world-ending crisis is kind of boring. But having a broken heart or being disappointed feels like the apocalypse."

He added, "I don't want to say this is deeper, but hopefully it's different." This year, he's not alone.

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