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## Cursed: An Experiment in Gender Roles in Video Game Concept Art

Gillian Renk  
*University of Northern Iowa*

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**CURSED: AN EXPERIMENT IN GENDER ROLES  
IN VIDEO GAME CONCEPT ART**

**A Thesis Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors**

**Gillian Renk  
University of Northern Iowa  
May 2012**

This Study by: Gillian Renk

Entitled: Cursed: An Experiment in Gender Roles in Video Game Concept Art

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation University Honors

Apr 30, 2012  
Date

~~Signature~~  
Kenneth Hall, Honors Thesis Advisor, Art

5/7/12  
Date

~~Signature~~  
Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program

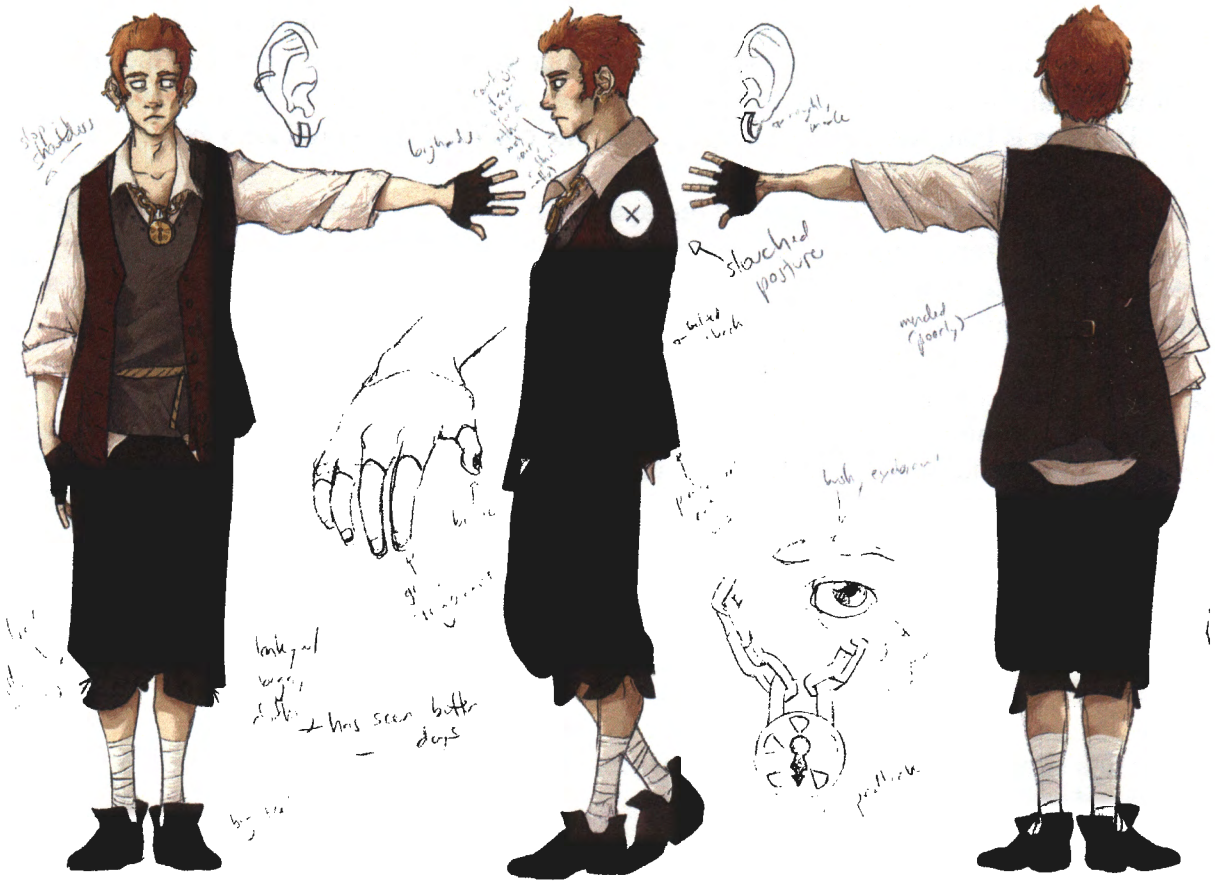
## Purpose

The purpose of this project was to create a game concept, in the form of an art book, that featured characters who play somewhat nontraditional, reversed roles as an experiment in gender equality in video games. This was mainly done with a slant toward women, as women are becoming a larger part of the gaming community and, as such, may seek games that are more aligned with their own interests. Character designs were done with the individuals' roles in mind as well as how their appearances would make the player sympathetic toward them. For instance, as explained in an article by Zoe Flower, females are not necessarily inclined to play less attractive characters than are men, but less exaggeration may be employed in order to make the characters seem more realistic and relatable to the average gamer.<sup>1</sup> Flavor art, showing scenes from the game's story and emphasizing the broad feeling of the game, is focused on these characters rather than on location. Additional pieces serve to flesh out the concept, covering both characters and scenery, so that while the project focuses on the characters and their portrayal, the finished piece as a whole is applicable on the level of being a developed game concept. The idea is that, with these concept pieces, one could go on to produce a game.

As a preface, much of my research focused on Japanese role playing games (also known as JRPGs), since they tend to be more formulaic in their character roles and “party” formations (the group of characters that the player controls for the majority or entirety of the game). The Final Fantasy series and the Xenosaga series are prime examples of these sorts of games.

The game that these concept pieces contribute towards is called “Cursed”, and a brief version of the plot is as follows: a young man, displeased with his fate, decides to try and change it by stealing a powerful, magical artifact. In doing so, however, he displeases the deity of his world and he is cursed—a padlock snaps around his neck and he is trapped in a local cathedral. He is told that the only way to reverse this spell is to learn how to be a better person, and that the artifact will unlock the padlock when he has achieved this. Before he can make any progress, though, the artifact is stolen by an evil cult, and the young man—with the help of a powerful church crusader, a childhood friend, a young magician, and a brilliant engineer—must endeavor to get the object back, while still struggling with his own curse.

Following this introduction, I will cover the images themselves and then an analysis of the experience and completed project.



stomached posture

looked back

stomached posture

looked back

minded (poorly)

looked up, legs, & skin - has seen better days

looked up, legs, & skin

posture

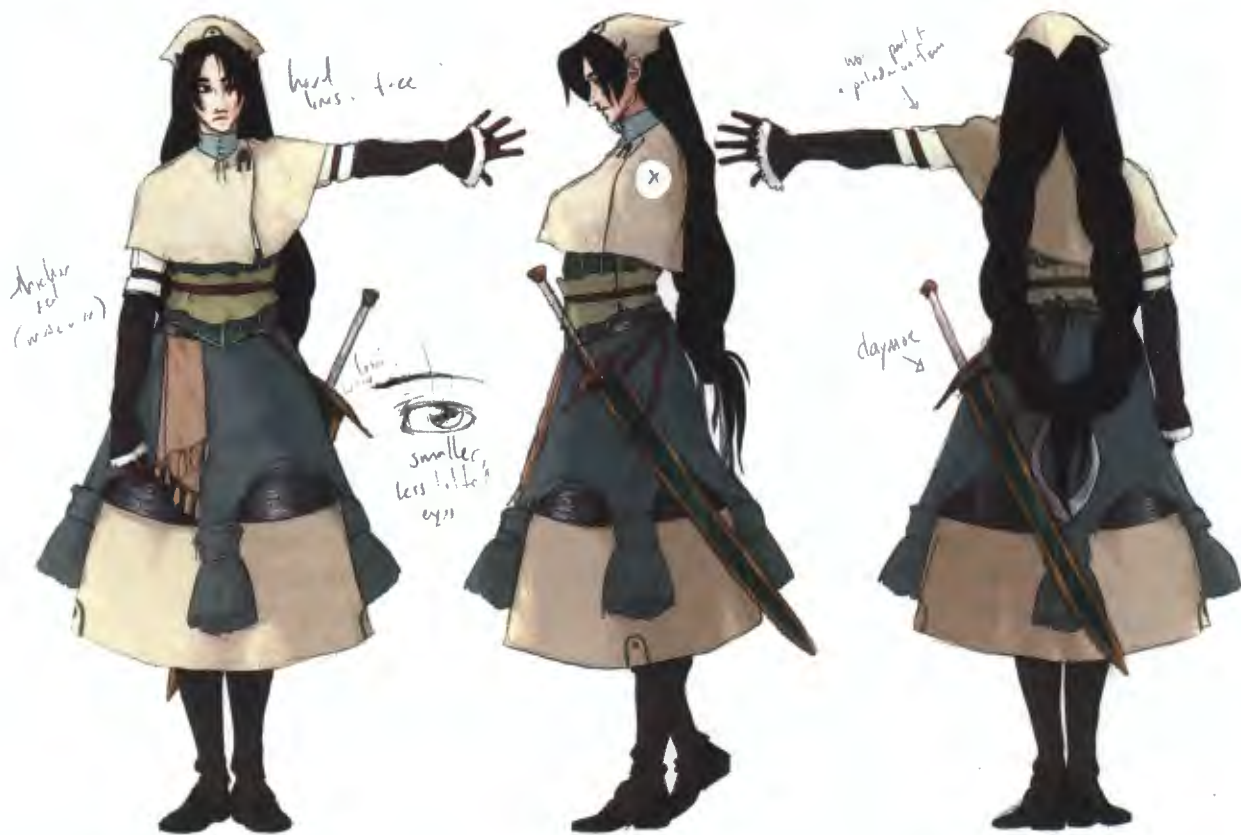
This is the main character of the game. Calen is a 19-year-old street urchin, essentially. Personality-wise, he is stubborn, unhappy, sarcastic, selfish, and just generally rather negative. When he was young, his parents passed away suddenly, and though they left him their house and belongings, Calen harbored a sort of intense anger that they would die and leave him alone. To get back at them in his mind, he refused to stay in his house and slowly began living on the streets, picking fights with other kids and stealing food when he needed it. By 19, he had accomplished very little in his life, as he was too unmotivated to find a job or be responsible. In an attempt to improve his life, however, he decided to try stealing an important religious artifact from his local church, as it was rumored to give someone unbelievable powers, grant wishes, or any number of incredible things. In stealing this, however, he found himself cursed by the reigning deity, forced to stay in the church at all times until he has learned to be a better person. Naturally, this curse and the artifact that led to it are central to the overarching story.

His role where gameplay is concerned is that of a thief—he is quick, has a small weapon that does little damage, and he focuses on snatching items off of enemies and other tasks suited to a “support” role.

To understand why Calen is designed the way he is, I need to do a bit of explaining. As I said, I am mainly referencing JRPGs, as they follow a very standard pattern of character roles. The main character is almost always male, the plot usually centers around him with the rest of the party as supporting characters, he usually has some development throughout the plot, he is likable and meant to be easy to relate to, and he is most commonly a good fighter in combat. These traits are very evident in the Final Fantasy series, for instance, where nearly every game in the series is headed by a male character.

While I did not want to differ from the male lead tradition, I did want to change things up in terms of his personality and combat role. Calen is meant to be utterly unlikable from the get-go. He is constantly rude to other characters, he is unhelpful in most situations, and he starts out very difficult to use in combat. Part of his curse entails being blind when outside of a church (a provision set in place by the deity once the story forces the cast to set out on an adventure), meaning he has to rely on assistance to do much of anything. He has the help of the deity who cursed him, as this figure is following him around and guiding him, but this only lessens the problem—it does not solve it. In the case of combat, if a player is focused on Calen, it will be difficult to see enemies and attack them, making him very inconvenient character to use.

In this game, a huge emphasis is placed on Calen's development as a character—instead of being an aspect of the main conflict, it is more as if the main conflict is an aspect of Calen's development. While this may make him harder to relate to in the beginning, the interactions he has with his fellow party members do begin to change him, and those changes and encounters are the sort that are meant to speak to a player. In this way, Calen does play the traditional role of a lead male in an RPG, he just does it in a backwards and unusual sort of way. This is how he suits the idea of role reversal.



Marien is the second character introduced in the story. A high ranking paladin in the church, she is patient, kind, and reserved, while also being stern about her beliefs and her work as a crusader for the resident deity. Her backstory is fairly straightforward—she grew up with a very strong sense of piety, and she always protected younger kids if she saw them being bullied. When she was old enough to choose her path, she joined the church with the intention of becoming a paladin so she could always protect people in the name of the deity. She arrives on the scene of the story when she is sent to Calen's local church to protect the artifact.

Her combat role is that of a melee fighter who is also capable of using spells—she doesn't necessarily specialize in either side, making her weaker in strength and magic, but she is more useful as a whole package, so to speak. She mainly focuses on healing magic, being able to restore health to injured characters.

As with Calen, Marien is not a complete reversal, but she is definitely a different spin on an archetype. Generally, a JRPG party that has three females will put them in very specific roles. One character will be a healer (and often a love interest), one will be a tough or powerful sort of character (this usually pertains to magic, though there are a couple instances of unusually strong melee fighters), and the last will be a quick and spunky individual, usually assigned as a thief of some sort. Cursed is an unusual case, in that the females in the party outweigh the males, but there are still three female individuals. I did not want them to follow the usual archetypes of healer/powerful/quick, so Marien, for instance, is a healer with a strong emphasis on physical strength. She uses a claymore, a two handed sword that requires a good deal of hefting to use properly, and she is decked out in chainmail and heavy fabrics. While she does use healing magic, it's meant to be only half of her role and a reference to the holy work she does.

Additionally, she is not a love interest—instead, she acts as a mentor to Calen and the rest of the party. As the oldest character, she is the most experienced and, somewhat by extension, the wisest of the group. The concept of a powerful fighter who also bestows wisdom and advice is not a new role—characters like Auron from Final Fantasy X and Ziggy from Xenosaga often have poignant words for the younger, less experienced characters. It is unusual, however, for this character to be female, thus adding another role reversal to Marien's repertoire.



Tamarin is Calen's childhood friend who moved away when they were both pretty young. Energetic and helpful, she is every bit Calen's opposite. The only thing that mars her positive attitude is a hair-trigger temper that her old friend has a tendency to activate. Backstory-wise, Tamarin's history is much like Calen's, had his taken a slightly different path. After moving out of the city and into the desert, she lost her parents when she was young, and she was left to fend for herself. However, instead of being angry and wallowing in her loss, she decided to try and make a life for herself. Quickly maturing, she decided to teach herself archery and start hunting in the desert. Soon, she was an expert on the area, and she began working as a guide for those who wanted to cross the sands to reach the southern towns. She meets up with Calen and Marien when they visit the northern city to report on the artifact's disappearance, and she joins them shortly after hearing what happened. She simultaneously wants to assist in something so important and wants to protect Calen, whom she disappointingly finds fairly pathetic. Since Calen is still whining about his blindness at this point, this is not a bad assumption.

In battles, Tamarin uses archery to attack enemies, making her a long range fighter. She is a quick character, certainly not as physically strong as Marien, but she is meant to be a survivor—she can weather attacks very well, thanks to years of living in the rather harsh environment of the desert.

While a woman wielding a bow and arrow is not necessarily out of the ordinary (see Fran from Final Fantasy XII), and being quick is more traditionally associated with females, Tamarin's reversal comes out in her personality and role in the story. To some degree, she does play the role of a love interest—throughout the story, it becomes clear that there are some feelings between the two, even if they spend most of their time arguing. Tamarin's influence, in fact, is a primary reason that Calen changes his attitude. However, many love interests are kind and demure, with very little temper except in acceptable circumstances. Tamarin, on the other hand, is easily angered and spends much of her time scolding people for behaving poorly. She has good intentions, but she is meant to be flawed.

She is very much an “alternate” version of Calen—they are similar in history and in development needed, but Tamarin is positive and made a name for herself, while Calen is negative and refused to do anything but waste his time. They help each other change for the better, because of these similarities and differences. This is how her role is reversed; instead of being a peaceful lover who assists the lead, she is a scrappy fighter who has her own problems to deal with alongside Calen.



uniform coat makes him as a low level mope  
bag full of papers + spellbooks



decent posture



thin squinted eyes (terrible eyesight!) (seems to correct vision!)



decent posture

Braniard is the youngest member of the party, a fact that is evident in many parts of his character. He is quiet and intense, at one moment, and talkative and excitable at another. Magic is his passion, and while he spends a good deal of time studying and observing, he is just as likely to begin a tangent about some idea he had, particularly if asked a spell-related question. A student at the magic-based school started by the church, Braniard was recognized early on as having a great deal of potential, but he has difficulty using that potential. He worked very hard, but his spells weren't up to par. Sympathetic, his instructors decided it might be best for him to practice his abilities in the real world for a short time. When the party arrives in the northern city, the home of the school, the instructors ask Marien to take the boy with her so he can work on his magic. Not surprisingly, she happily agrees.

As one might expect, Braniard fights using spells. While magic is not necessarily a female-only ability, females tend to play the role of a mage simply because they are intended to be physically weaker and better suited to a mind-based task. Braniard may not be physically strong, but he is certainly male, so he reverses that traditional role almost immediately.

Another way in which Braniard differs from the norm is in his role as a young character. Children or younger-minded characters are often portrayed as either completely incompetent and prone to causing trouble, or they are prodigies in their field, brilliant at whatever it is they do. I wanted Braniard to be less polarized, so he has a great deal of potential talent and very few results. He has many years to improve his skills, so he isn't an expert just yet, but at the same time it is implied that once he figures out what he's doing wrong, magic may simply “click” for him, and he'll become an extremely powerful mage.

To some degree, he also acts as an example of another male character. What I mean by that is that a party that is mainly women might come across as making a statement about female superiority, especially when one male character is useless and the women are very competent. Braniard serves to show that it's not a matter of males versus females—it's a matter of a group of people with different skills. It just so happens that the main character, a male, also needs to do a lot of growing up. Once again, the role reversal is a bit more subtle, but the addition of other roles in the party makes Braniard unique.



Lastly, we have Emelev. Another younger character, Emelev is practical and high-energy, with a very right-brained sort of mind, but in keeping with the theme of being a bit immature, she is easily frustrated when things go wrong for her. Growing up in a small village, she picked up tinkering at a young age and started building little statues that became tiny robots, which then became small vehicles and, eventually, actual machines. She also had a great interest in fighting—when a traveling mercenary came to her town, she was star-struck, and she begged him to teach her how to spar. Surprisingly, she won him over, and she came out of it as a fairly capable fighter using a spear. By the time the main party travels through her town, she is running a small workshop where she and a friend build mechanical things. Excited by the prospect of traveling in the world, she leaves the shop to her friend and sneaks away with the party.

In what I believe to be one of the larger role reversals in this game concept, 15-year-old Emelev is the physically strongest fighter in the party. While she doesn't have Marien's experience, she really packs a punch with her spear, and she loves battles enough to really put her heart into the fight. She also has mechanical knowledge, so outside of battle she can assist with anything that requires some kind of engineering.

Like Braniard, there was the issue of making sure Emelev was not a standard young character. She is certainly not useless or problem-causing, and while she is extremely talented when it comes to building machines, she is by no means a genius at it—or at anything. She's more a “street smart” sort of individual (which contrasts Braniard's “book smart” traits), practical and gifted with good common sense.

As a female character, there was a danger of her becoming the quick, energetic archetype, so she took on the role of a brawler, someone who can really take and give out powerful hits. I also did not want her to be a standard “tomboy”, since I think it would be a bit predictable to make the girl who loves fighting also be the type to hate dresses and girly things, to act like and wish she was a boy. Emelev loves fighting and making things, but she only dresses in boyish clothing because it's practical to her—if she's going to be running around, why wear a skirt? And her lack of concern with her appearance mainly comes from distraction, as she's usually trying to do seven things at once. The girliest, nicest thing she wears is a barrette (and if you asked her, she would likely say it was to keep her hair out of her eyes). Of all the characters, it is highly possible she has the strongest role reversal, as she breaks out of a particular archetype that is, in itself, breaking out of another archetype.



beautiful  
& ideally  
colored

hard  
marks etc,  
his face  
before  
the claims  
- very fair  
- good in  
the maps

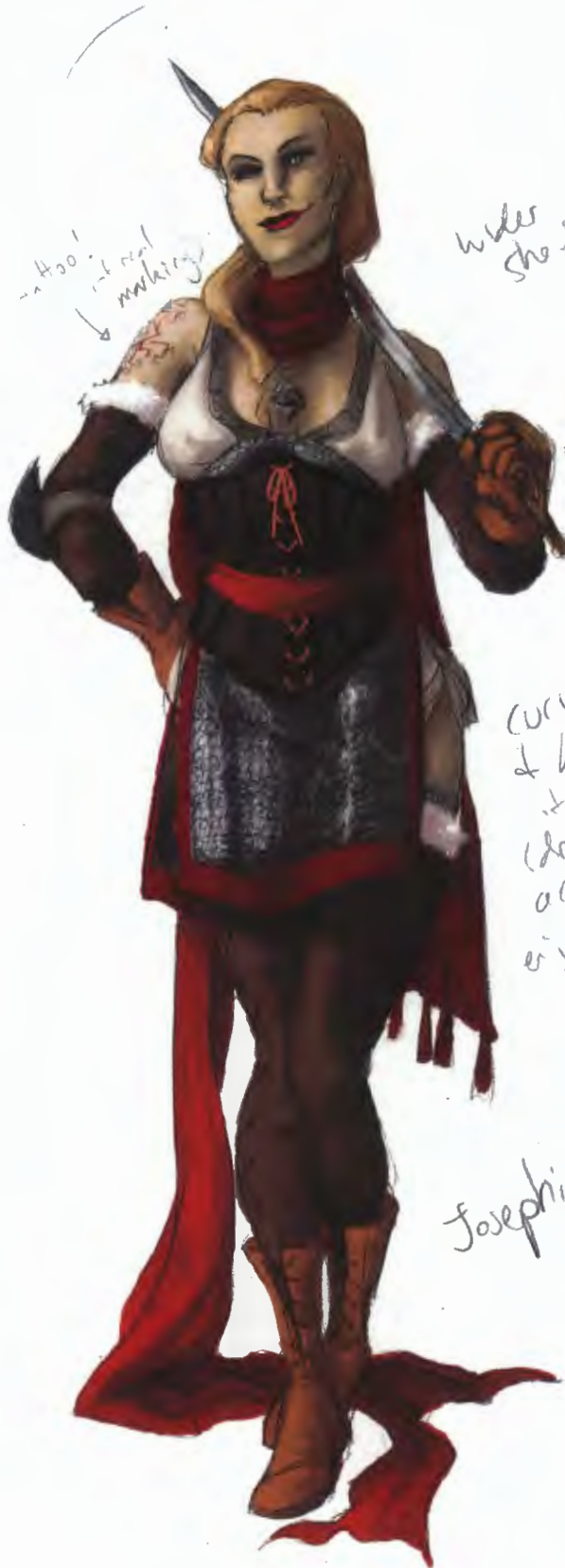
fancy  
armor  
ble his  
head of  
the paladin

Nathaniel  
(big bad)

The villains in *Cursed* are, to some degree, intended to be antagonists not only to the main characters but also to the idea of role reversal. Where the main cast exhibits examples of varying degrees of archetype-breaking, the villains are composed entirely of archetypes.

Nathaniel is the “big bad wolf” of the story—he is the one pulling all the strings as far as the conflict in the plot goes. In actuality, he is an evil being originally created by the deity to be an equal and an assistant in maintaining the world. He became twisted with jealousy when he saw that the deity was loved by the people and he was unknown to them. After unsuccessfully rebelling, he changed his form to that of a human and decided to undermine the deity and the church from within. He joined the church and rose to the highest rank among the paladins, and it is from there that he causes trouble. Naturally, when the cast meets him, they believe him to be a paragon of goodness and a prime example of a proper paladin; it is not until the finale that they realize he has been behind everything bad that has happened.

Nathaniel is, at his core, your traditional ancient evil. He is comparable to the Bible's Lucifer—a fallen or rebellious creature who now seeks to destroy that which created and loved him. He is intelligent and extremely powerful, and he is obviously a very good liar, since he has been masquerading as a human for years. Of course, none of this is unusual—villains are very often very powerful, very smart, and very sneaky, particularly when they are behind some sort of giant ruse (see Seymour Guado from *Final Fantasy X*, Wilhelm from *Xenosaga*, Venat from *Final Fantasy XII*).



-Also!  
int. real  
making

wider  
shoulders

supplious  
handguard

Curvy  
& knows  
it  
(dresses  
accordingly  
enjoys blasphemy)

Josephine



Josephine is Nathaniel's right hand woman. She was once a paladin of the church, but she was lured by the idea of gaining power through more evil means. As such, she was corrupted and her powers are basically that of a paladin's but meant to corrupt rather than heal. She is vain and takes great pains to make sure she looks as beautiful as she imagines herself—and she dresses to show it all off.

Female villains often go the vain route, especially if they aren't the main antagonist (Leblanc in Final Fantasy X-2, Scarlet in Final Fantasy VII). Dressed basically for sex appeal and with very little depth beyond devotion to her cause and to her appearance, she is a pretty bland character and an example of someone who is flat and entirely unlikable. Her abilities are fairly standard—her powers are “being evil and causing evil” and that's about the extent of it all. Josephine is possibly the best example of a stereotypical character—this sort of evil bombshell has been done quite a number of times before.

Ward

Ward

Corrigan



Corrigan stands apart from the other two villains in that he is far more neutral than strictly evil. A traveling mercenary, he considers working for Nathaniel to be just another job. Jaded and tough by nature, he is a gruff man who's learned that life doesn't always give the opportunity to be a good person. Sometimes, to survive, one has to forsake morals. To go with his rough, burly attitude, he uses lances to fight.

Even beyond video games, the idea of a battle-hardened mercenary who straddles good and evil is a common archetype. Corrigan even has the typical aspect of eventually switching sides and becoming a "good guy". He was Emelev's original teacher (hence their similarities in fighting styles), so when she pleads with him late in the story, he decides what he is doing is wrong. Despite him being only partially villainous, I still wanted him to maintain the more stereotypical character build.



Flavor pieces are intended to show off the sort of world the game takes place in, as well as depicting scenes from the game itself. They're often used to advertise and therefore are good examples of the palette, cinematics, and attitude that the game provides.

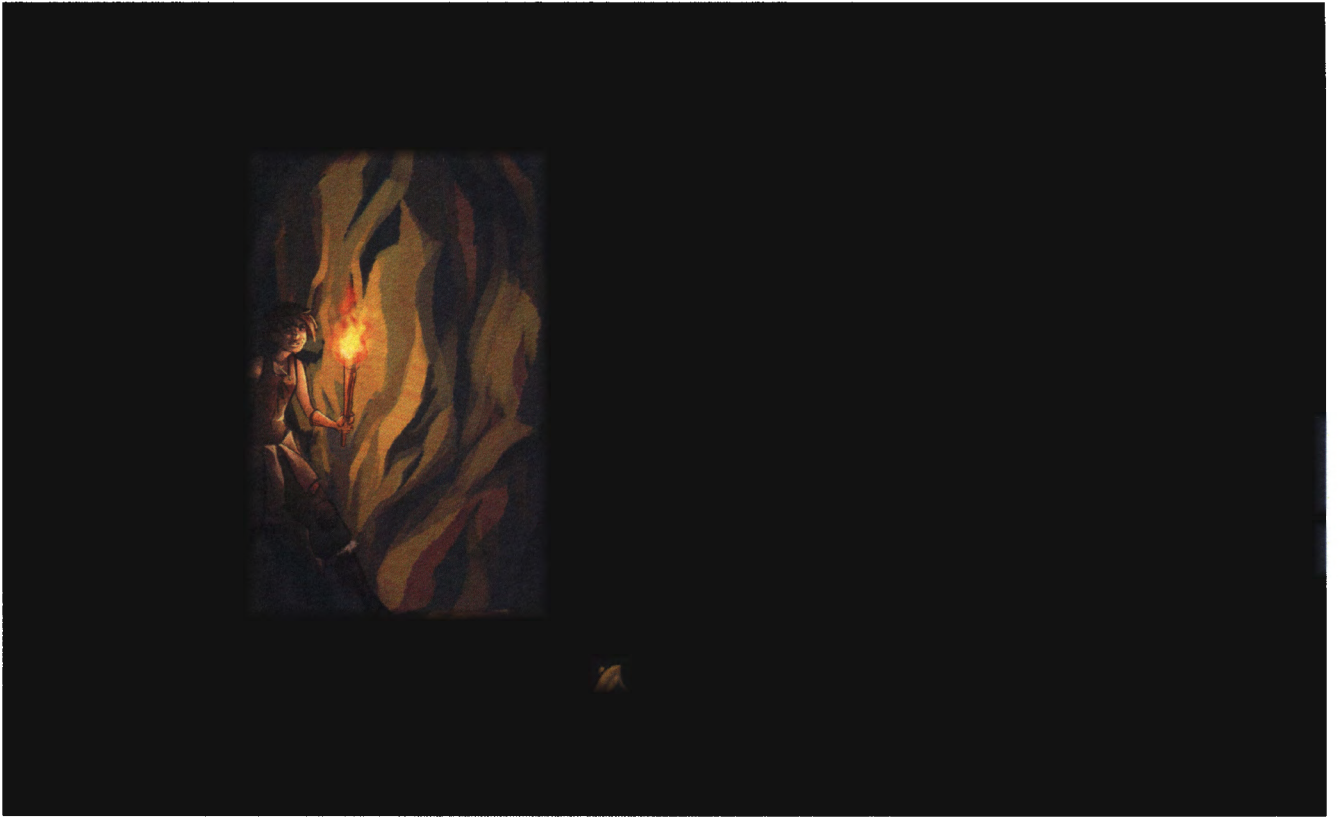
This is the most iconic image from the game—it depicts Calen as he is being cursed. The padlock appearing at his neck is the physical manifestation of his tie to the church and the deity, and it can only be unlocked by the broken pieces of the artifact he stole.

The idea was to show off his shock at his newly stolen goods breaking into pieces and casting a spell on him. Cooler, brighter colors are associated with the deity throughout the story—green and yellow in this case, and blue in the case of Marien's magic (depicted later) and the artifact itself. This is supported in the colors of higher ranking members of the church—Marien's uniform features a great deal of green, and Nathaniel's paladin armor includes blue and gold. Lower ranking members have warmer colors, but they are more desaturated, since hot reds and darker colors are associated with the villain and the cult associated with him.



To show off some of the combat scenes that would be played through in the game, I did a piece depicting Tamarin and Braniard taking down some of the more common enemies in the game—dark, corrupted versions of real life animals and, in some cases, human beings.

In keeping with the color theme, even though Braniard is a low ranking member of the church and therefore wears warmer colors, his spellbook and magic is still a cooler color because it is associated with the deity.





I wanted to give every character a place in a flavor piece, so I chose one of Emelev's shining moments for her art. Stuck in a cave, late in the story, she encounters an individual who has been following them for a long time. As it turns out, she recognizes this individual—it is Corrigen, and he has been told to stop the group at all costs.

Since, in the production of an actual game, this piece could be used for advertisement, it was not my intention to spoil the story. Additionally, making the shadowy figure more mysterious adds intrigue and suspense to whatever it is Emelev is facing in that dark space, protected only by a little bit of warm light.



Lastly, Marien's flavor piece was also an opportunity to show off Josephine. Since the two women are appropriate rivals, given that one is a paladin and the other abandoned the paladins, it seemed appropriate to show their showdown late in the game.

Once again, color contrast plays a role here. Bright reds dominate the image to show that Josephine is wildly using her powers, which were given to her by Nathaniel. However, Marien is calmly and patiently casting a spell belonging to the deity, as evidenced by the bright blue glow.



The remaining images mainly serve to flesh out the world the game takes place in. At the top, the church in Calen's hometown is shown. Since the world is fairly medieval and European in style, the churches are based off of real world cathedrals from around the Gothic period and, in some cases, earlier periods. Each region has a different architectural style, with the south being more French inspired and lofty, and the north being more grounded and Germanic. Since Calen's city is closer to the north but not strictly in the same region, the architecture and main church are grounded while still being somewhat ornamental.

The middle piece shows off the weapons used by the main characters. The knife is Calen's—much like the young man himself, it is roughly hewn and somewhat low quality. He doesn't necessarily need a well-made weapon, since his role does not focus on combat. The sword is Marien's—simple, well made, and heavy. The long handle allows it to be held with two hands, which is necessary to wield it. The bow is, of course, Tamarin's and, as she likely made it herself, it is simple and practical. The book belongs to Braniard, and the symbol on the cover is the symbol of the church itself. Since he received the book in his classes, it is marked by that symbol. Lastly, the spear is Emelev's. A gift from Corrigen at the end of her training, it is hefty and well-made—not something a 15 year old could afford.

The final piece depicts underclothing for the main cast. While not strictly important to elaborate on the world of the game, it is somewhat useful to know what kind of clothing the characters wear. In warmer climates, it is possible that the individuals could remove the heavier pieces of their outfits (particularly Marien and Braniard, who are from the northern cities where it's frequently chilly).

## Reflection

I chose to create this project because, as a girl gamer, it is often disappointing to see female characters playing the same roles in every game. JRPGs are particularly notorious for keeping women as quick or magical—seldom are they allowed to be physically strong or tough. While games are still enjoyable with stereotypical roles, it would be refreshing to see females in the same gamut of roles as males, who can play anything from gunslingers to warlocks to toymakers. The same goes for appearances, too; though male characters often have the same problem as women, frequently portrayed as ideally muscular strongmen where women are busty and tiny-waisted, there is still more variation in male character designs than women. I wanted to create a game that followed some of the traditions upheld by RPGs while also breaking out of standard character assignments. Women would outnumber men, men would play the quicker and more magical roles while women were brawlers and fighters, and even the male main character would be less likable than usual.

To do this, I designed each character with a particular role in mind. Let's say a traditional “party” consists of a male main character who uses a sword, a young boy who causes mishaps and trouble wherever he goes, a wise man who uses an oversized staff as a weapon, a pleasant young lady who uses healing magic, and a spunky girl who is secretly a thief. Most JRPGs have characters that follow similar stereotypes as these—men are tough, women are quick, etc. In my own concept, I ensured that these roles were reversed, either in terms of how the character fights or in how the character is portrayed. Calen is the main character, but he is a quick thief. Tamarin may be spunky and use a relatively normal weapon for a female, but she attacks things head on and breaks out of the traditional “love interest” archetype. Marien uses magic, but she is primarily a fighter who uses a powerful weapon, and she has the additional role of being the oldest and wisest party member. Braniard is an average kid with a talent for magic, and Emelev loves fighting. It was all an attempt to make characters that reversed roles without being stereotypical opposites.

The world that houses the story and the characters was built to suit these designs, so it is secondary but every bit as important. Without a plausible setting, a church paladin who heals while also fighting with a big sword doesn't really mean anything. Within a world where there is a deity to worship and evil to vanish, where this character wants to protect others, and where she must advise a dopey teenage boy who made a god angry, this is a character who has depth and meaning. I did not develop the world as much as one might when making an actual game, since my focus was primarily on characters and role reversal, but introducing the world was crucial to the project.

This piece's importance becomes clear when comparing it to other game concepts. No, it is not completely off the wall—the story still deals with a battle between good and evil; the plot still revolves around a male who the players can relate to; it is still fantasy, and there are still characters who use swords, while others use magic. However, the intention is that, if a girl were to play this game, she might find more varied role models than she might in any other given JRPG. With female gamers becoming more prominent, it is important that they are given the same treatment as male gamers—they should have characters they admire along with characters they hate. No, not a game that is entirely cast by women, but one that appeals to all gamers and, perhaps, has something that particularly calls to young women.

As someone who intends to go into the field of video games, it was valuable for me to try and conceive of an entire cast, of a world they could exist in, and of a story that would tie it all together. As a female who plays video games, it was valuable for me to try and create a concept that appealed to me personally. To get this sort of experience, and to be able to inject my own opinions and opinions shared by at least some others, was one that I may not get to have again, but if I am given the opportunity, I now have more of an idea of how to approach it.

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