



March 21-25, 2022
San Francisco, CA

Three Opportunities to Improve Character Design in the Games Industry

March 23, 2022

Dr. Jess Tompkins, she/her

 @jess_tompkins_

 in/jesstompkins/

#GDC22



What this talk is...

Sharing opportunities to
improve character design at
the *social & cultural levels*.



What this talk is not...

A primer or tutorial on how to design characters.



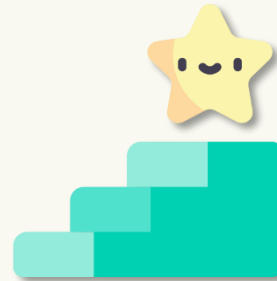
If you learn nothing else...



1. What can you do?

Lean *towards* motivation driven design.

Lean *away* from market trends for what appeals to different genders.



2. What can studio cultures do?

Allyship is not enough.

Be the change you want to see.



3. What can educators do?

Change begins in the classroom.

Integrate media & gender studies into game dev curriculum.

I'm not here to convince you
that this matters...

We're operating from the
perspective that *IT DOES
MATTER.*



What we know

- Historical overrepresentation of white male characters. (Williams et al., 2009).
- Dominant gaming culture is resistant to change.
- Corporate environment may hinder innovation in studios.



I asked myself, what do
devs themselves think
about video game
character design?



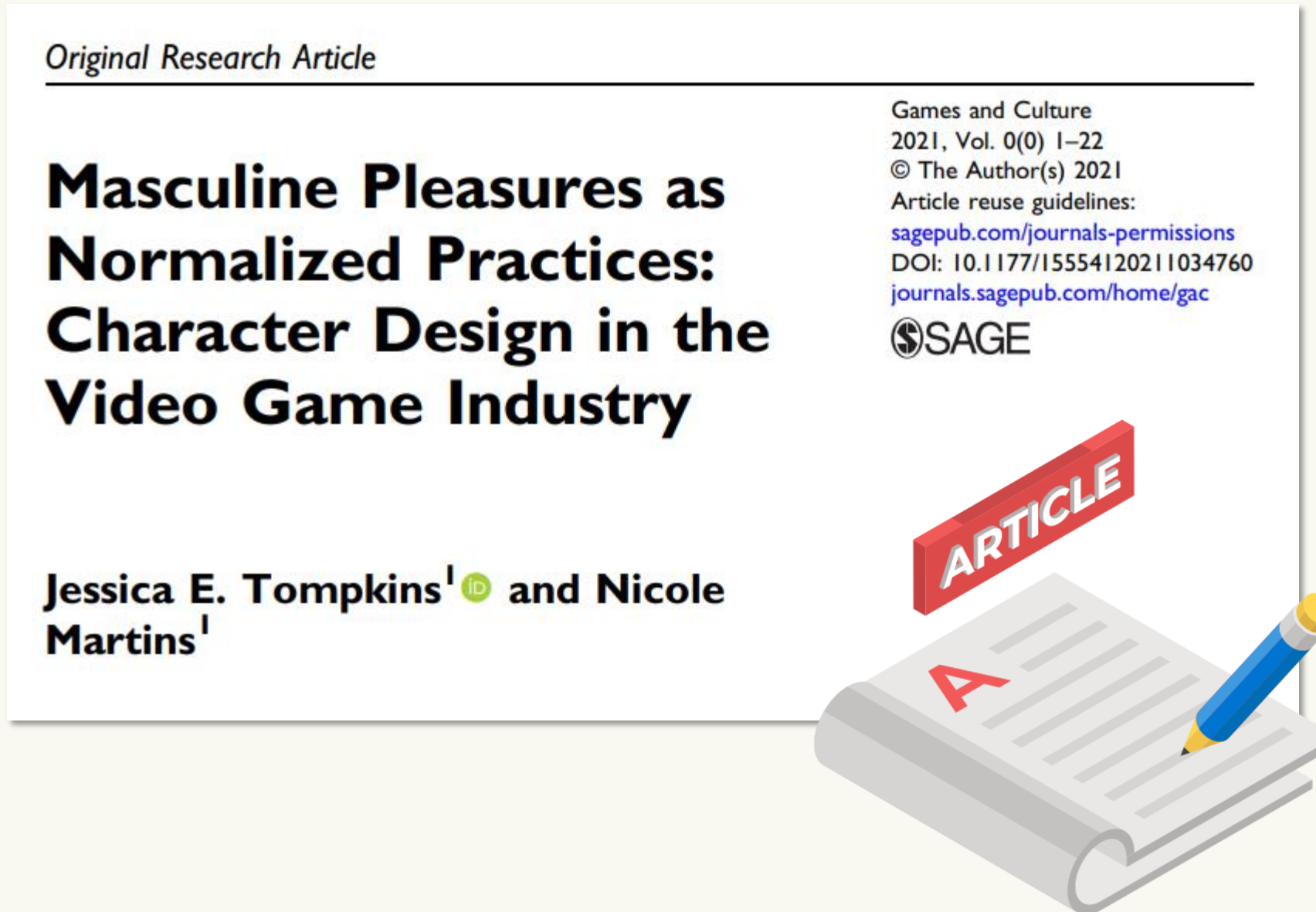
What I did

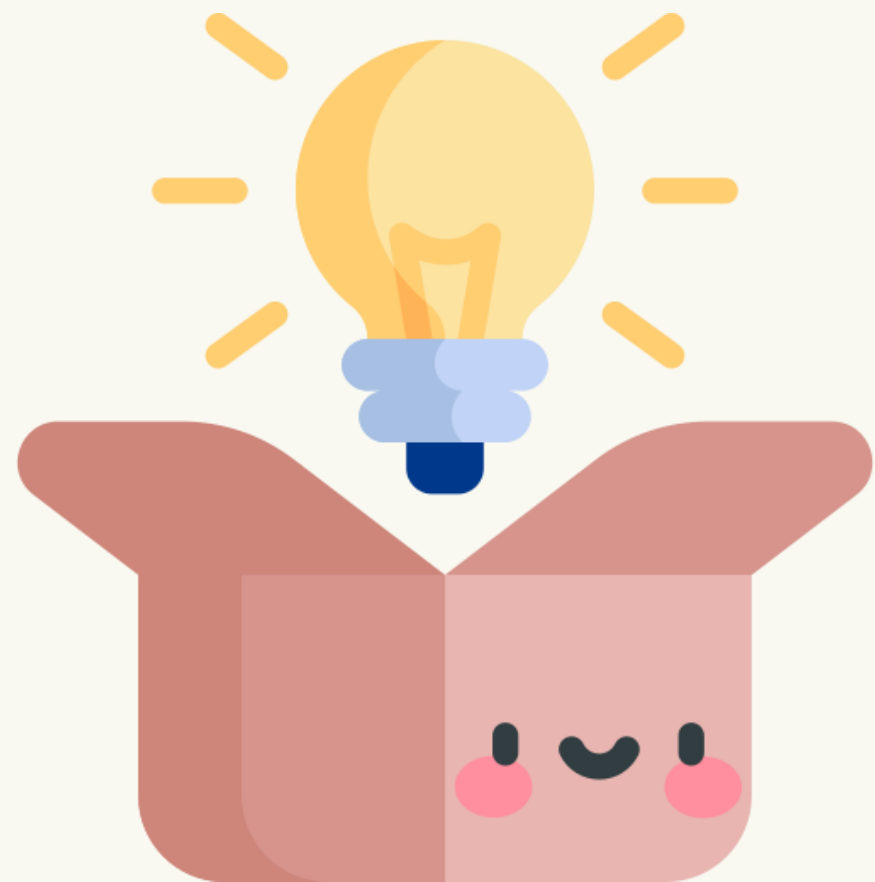
- 19 interviews.
- Transcribed each interview.
- Applied qualitative analysis to generate thesis statements.



What I learned...

1. The industry historically consists of similar dudes who make games for other dudes like themselves.
2. People who *care and are vocal* drive the most change when it comes to character design.





Cool.
But what do we
do with that?!

How the industry operates



Devs & Publishers overlook motivational & behavioral player segments in favor of demographics.



High turnover leads to loss of diverse talent and valuable institutional knowledge.



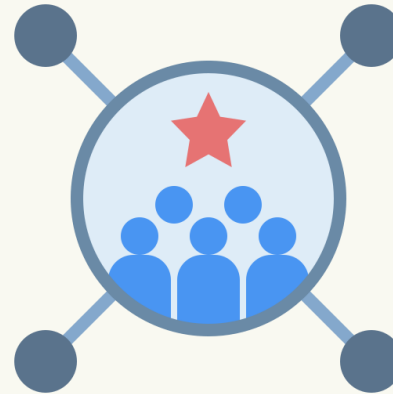
Students model their own designs after successful formulas in AAA games.

How the industry *should* operate



Demographic consumer markets overlook motivational & behavioral player segments.

1. Motivation driven design



High turnover leads to loss of diverse talent and valuable institutional knowledge.

2. Allyship is not enough



Students model their own designs after successful formulas in AAA games.

3. Change begins in the classroom



Opportunity #1: What can you do?

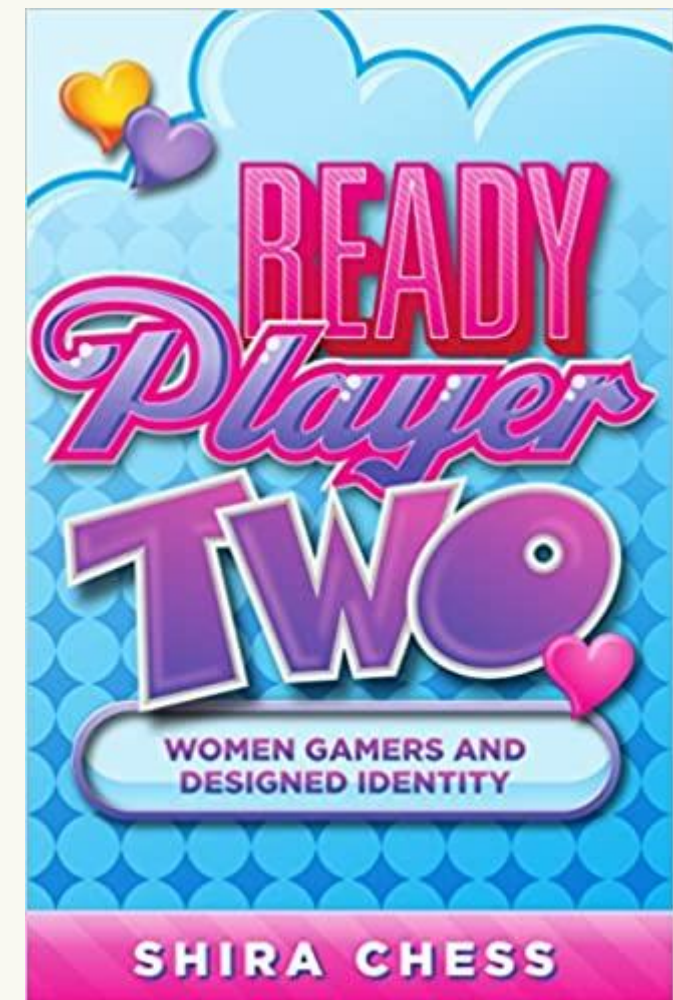
Lean *towards* motivation driven design.

Lean *away* from market trends for what appeals to different genders.



Lean towards motivation driven design

- Tendency for AAA and mobile companies to design games for gendered people.
- ‘Games for men’ and ‘games for women’ reinforces gender binary.
- Lots of assumptions baked-in.
 - Ignores those outside gender binary



GAMER MOTIVATION MODEL



Action "Boom!"	Social "Let's Play Together"	Mastery "Let Me Think"	Achievement "I Want More"	Immersion "Once Upon a Time"	Creativity "What If?"
Destruction Guns. Explosives. Chaos. Mayhem.	Competition Duels. Matches. High on Ranking.	Challenge Practice. High Difficulty. Challenges.	Completion Get All Collectibles. Complete All Missions.	Fantasy Being someone else, somewhere else.	Design Expression. Customization.
Excitement Fast-Paced. Action. Surprises. Thrills.	Community Being on Team. Chatting. Interacting.	Strategy Thinking Ahead. Making Decisions.	Power Powerful Character. Powerful Equipment.	Story Elaborate plots. Interesting characters.	Discovery Explore. Tinker. Experiment.



Lean towards motivation driven design

- Motivations for women and men are somewhat distinct, but the size of the effect is small.
- There is more overlap in motivations between women and men than there are differences (Quantic Foundry).

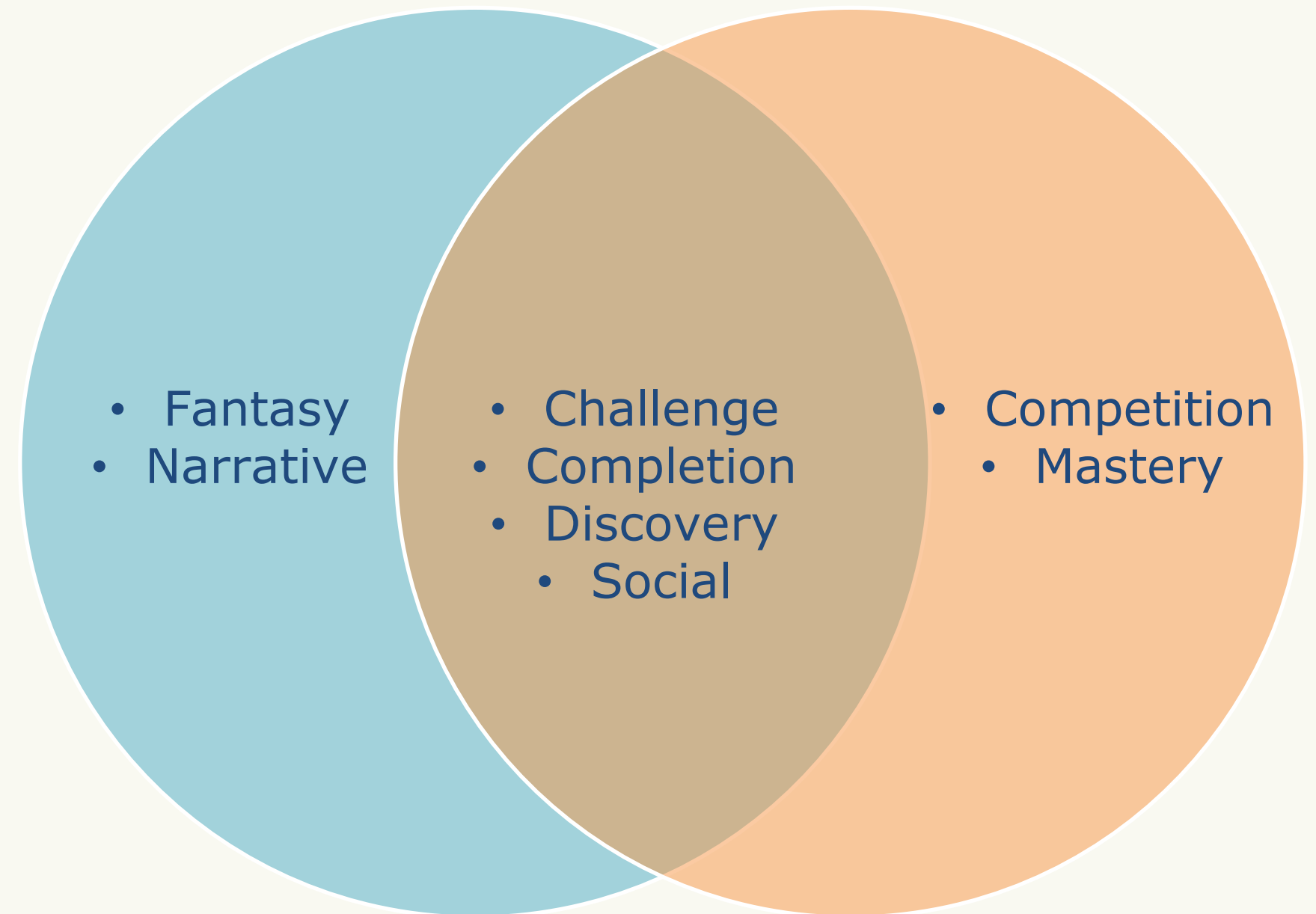


Illustration only, this is not representative of how the math works.

Lean towards motivation driven design

When defining your game's audience, think about the motivations your game will **FULFILL *FIRST***.

- Leverage your insights partners in market research, user experience research, and analytics to help.
- Your players aren't homogenous, and your research friends are here to help you understand why!



Lean towards motivation driven design

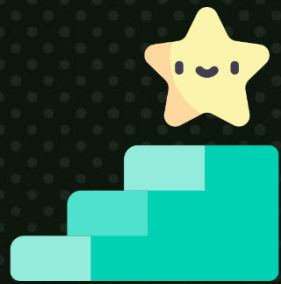
Stop over-indexing on market assumptions. This leads to stereotyped content.

- Players are frequently motivated to play as / customize characters who resemble themselves.
 - Many folks can't make characters who look like them without diverse content!
- About 1 out of 3 men prefer playing as female characters (Quantic Foundry, 2021).



Tell interesting stories about interesting characters, just fit your player motivations into that.





Opportunity #2: What can studios do?

Allyship is not enough.

Be the change you want to see.



Be an ally, but also change structures

Allyship in the workplace is important.

- Allyship helps produce incremental change.
- Allyship can be limited to select interpersonal relationships.
- Allyship needs to expand to include structural changes.



Be an ally, but also change structures

We all need to do more than ‘nice guy’ work by being agents of change.

- Get involved in studio cultural improvements and Employee Resource Groups.
- Partner with people experience / HR.
- Work with research partners to grow playtester participant pools to include more diverse folks.



**When diverse folks make
and playtest our games, this
improves how game
characters are designed.**





Opportunity #3: What can educators do?

Change begins in the classroom.

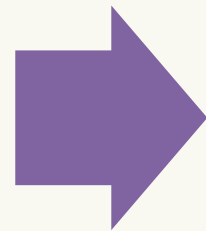
Integrate media & gender studies
(diversity, equity & inclusion) into
game dev curriculum.



**1.
Motivation
driven
design**



**2. Allyship
is not
enough**



**3. Change begins
in the classroom:**
DE&I integrated
into game design
educational
curriculums

Integrate media & gender studies into game dev education

Tropes and stereotypes aren't taught in the game studio – they're broader social and cultural teachings.

- These should be challenged as part of a standard game design and development curriculum.
- Not too political for classrooms.



Integrate media & gender studies into game dev education

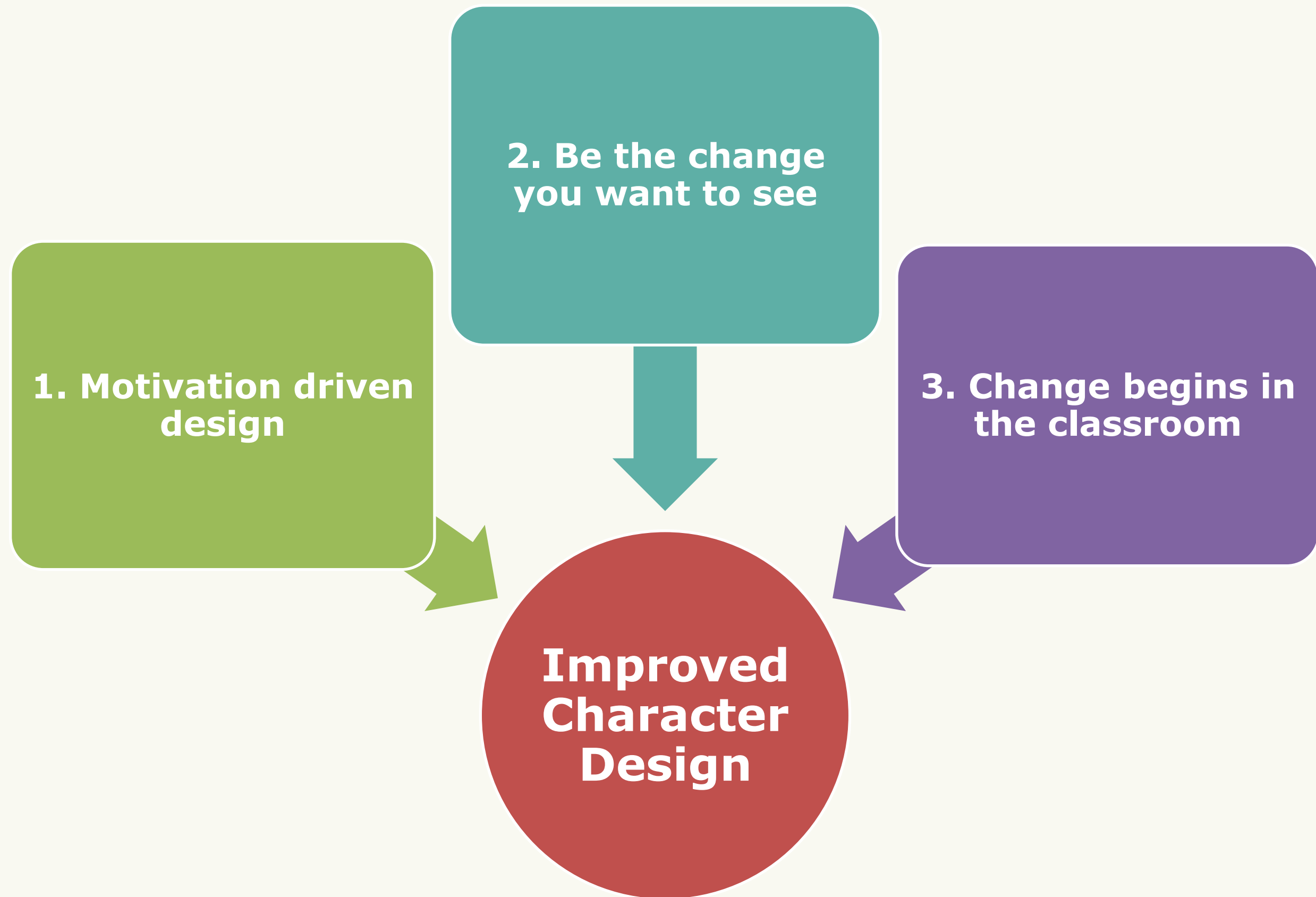
Prepare students to think critically about design decisions, to challenge status quo approaches, and be agents of change.

- Teach them to wield design tools responsibly.
- Encourage them to think more creatively.



When we impart this wisdom on the future generation of devs, we inspire them to think with inclusion as the default.

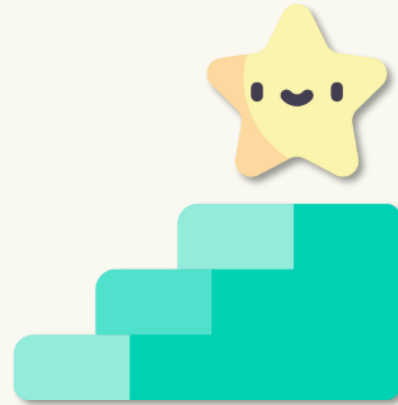






Lean towards motivation driven design

Lean *away* from market
trends for what appeals
to different genders.



Allyship is not enough

Be the change you want
to see.



Change begins in the classroom

Integrate media &
gender studies into game
dev curriculum.

Recommended Readings

Thank you to these
GIANTS whose shoulders
I stand on...

- Dr. Kishonna Gray
- Dr. Adrienne Shaw
- Dr. Shira Chess
- Anita Sarkeesian
- Dr. Amanda Cote
- Dr. Nick Yee



Scan QR code
or visit
bit.ly/gamesDEI

GDC

March 21-25, 2022
San Francisco, CA

Scan QR code
or visit
bit.ly/gamesDEI



Thank you!

Questions?

Jess Tompkins, PhD, she/her

 @jess_tompkins_

 in/jesstompkins/

#GDC22

