

100 Greatest Video Game Characters

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ELAINE MARLEY

(est. 1990)

Franchise: *The Secret of Monkey Island*

Developer: Lucasfilm Games

In *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990), players first learn about Governor Elaine Marley when they encounter one of her campaign posters on the M  l  e Island docks. Thereafter, they find themselves on a quest to prove their pirate mettle by stealing the fabulous Idol of Many Hands from her mansion, leading to a direct confrontation with the governor herself. Following this rather inauspicious introduction, Elaine goes on to become a central character in the *Monkey Island* series, playing a prominent role in all five games. Nevertheless, her inclusion as one of video gaming’s greatest characters perhaps raises a reasonable question: Why not Guybrush Threepwood instead? Guybrush, after all, is the playable protagonist of the critically acclaimed *Monkey Island* graphic adventure games. That said, Guybrush epitomizes a comedic, “bumbling hero” archetype already familiar to adventure gamers in 1990 thanks to earlier characters like Roger Wilco (*Space Quest*). Elaine, on the other hand, represents an important development in the depiction of women in video games. Although Guybrush almost immediately falls in love with (and later marries) Elaine, and the romantic advances of the villainous undead pirate LeChuck arguably serve as the games’ central conflict, the series avoids relegating her to the status of merely damsel in distress. Rather, the games consistently depict her as smarter, braver, and more capable than the men who surround her—traits that set her apart from her video game predecessors and establish Elaine Marley as the medium’s first significant attempt to problematize and redefine the familiar damsel role.

Players first encounter Elaine when she is introduced as the governor of M  l  e Island. Later installments expand her gubernatorial reach to encompass the entire “Tri-Island Area.” Her depiction as a woman in a position of political power is a notable rarity. While Guybrush is initially struck by Elaine’s beauty, at no point do the games overtly sexualize her character. For instance, she dresses throughout the series in what might be described as gender-neutral fictional pirate garb: a tunic worn over a blouse, pantaloons, boots, and a kerchief. More importantly,

the games consistently portray Elaine as an intelligent, resourceful woman, handy with a cutlass or blunderbuss, and more than capable of taking care of herself. As Clara Fernández-Vara observes, “Elaine was self-sufficient, and probably the cleverest person on Mêle Island.”¹ Whereas Guybrush often blunders his way through the obstacles in his path and LeChuck is the very portrait of buffoonish bluster, Elaine reliably demonstrates a capacity for forethought and strategic planning throughout the series. Her male counterparts’ shenanigans not only provide points of contrast that underscore Elaine’s strength, they also give her reasons to be strong—namely, to keep Guybrush out of trouble and defy LeChuck’s iniquitous ploys to win her affection. In turn, the trio’s interpersonal dynamics challenge familiar representations of gendered power in a way prior video games had not yet attempted.

While Elaine’s resourcefulness is a fixture throughout the series, it manifests itself most strikingly during *The Secret of Monkey Island*. Near the end of the game’s first act, LeChuck kidnaps Elaine with the intent of making her his undead bride. This development would seemingly set up the damsel-in-distress trope so familiar in popular culture. When Guybrush finally arrives at the chapel just in time to interrupt the ghoulish nuptials, “Elaine” is revealed to be two monkeys, one standing atop the other’s shoulders, wearing a wedding dress and disguised by a veil. The actual Elaine has already engineered her escape and arrived on the scene with a plan to vanquish LeChuck once and for all—a plan Guybrush derails by bursting in to “save the day.” Similarly, in *Monkey Island 2: LeChuck’s Revenge* (1991), Elaine again defies player expectations by coming to Guybrush’s rescue after he experiences a mishap involving fabled pirate treasure and a modest stash of dynamite.

Based on such actions, Esther MacCallum-Stewart identifies Elaine as an early example of a female video game character who “allowed feminine expression which did not necessarily always conform to passive ideals of the damsel in distress.”² Furthermore, Anastasia Salter suggests the *Monkey Island* series portrays Elaine as “more successful, level-headed, and intelligent” than Guybrush, to whom she only gives the time of day “when her own ambitions are met.”³ By exercising agency within what is essentially Guybrush’s narrative, Elaine subverts familiar video game representations of the “love interest” or “kidnapped princess” by serving as the author of her own fate and, in the process, distinguishing herself from many female characters both before and since.

Following the departure of series creator Ron Gilbert after *LeChuck’s Revenge*, later installments were regrettably less consistent in their portrayals of Elaine as a self-sufficient woman of action. For instance, she spends significant portions of *The Curse of Monkey Island* (1997) transformed into a golden statue by a cursed engagement ring unwittingly gifted to her by Guybrush. Nevertheless, she continues to play an instrumental role in repeatedly thwarting the re-resurrected LeChuck’s nefarious schemes throughout the series.

In addition to being a memorable character from a beloved franchise, Elaine takes on added cultural significance by challenging our taken-for-granted beliefs about the roles of women in video games and offering an alternative to masculine hegemony. While the *Monkey Island* series’ progressive approach to representation includes other strong female characters like Carla the Sword Master, the

mysterious Voodoo Lady, and pirate-hunter Morgan LeFlay, it is Elaine who undoubtedly shines brightest. In fact, Elaine's refusal to accept the damsel-in-distress role is evident from the earliest moments of *The Secret of Monkey Island*, when a pirate recounts the governor's history with LeChuck: "He's the guy that went to the Governor's for dinner and never wanted to leave. He fell for her in a big way, but she told him to drop dead. So he did." In turn, Elaine Marley's defiant self-sufficiency represents a piratical shot across the bow that signaled a profound shift in representations of gender in video games.

Similar Characters: Alyx Vance (*Half-Life*), Grace Nakimura (*Gabriel Knight*), Maureen Corley (*Full Throttle*)

—Jess Morrissette