# Mis/Represent: Women & Visible Minority Representation in Videogames

by

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### Abstract

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This work examines stereotypes and representations attributed to visible minorities in AAA videogames. Looking through modes of identity creation, along with the demographic composition and history associated with game character creation, I seek to illustrate the ways in which visible minorities and women are represented and the challenges they face. Mis/Represent aims to empower women and visible minorities, bringing forth representation issues through a gaming platform and Social media campaign. Users choose from signifiers that relate to their personal identity. Once completed, they are given an artist's rendition of a famous gaming character, redrawn to resemble a visible minority or a positive female representation, illustrating the potential for more progressive character creation. The project concludes by asking the participant to create their own rendition of a character that they feel best represents them. That character would then be shared on social media to distribute the efforts of awareness further.

#### Keywords

Identity Formation; Gaming Representation; Gender; Visible Minority; Game Characters; AAA vs. Indie;

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For those who kept me afloat. Thank you

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Chapter 1

Introduction

## Chapter One – Introduction

AAA is a classification term used within the videogame industry for games that have the highest development budgets and levels of production, with the expectation of being among a year's bestsellers. AAA is not an acronym, rather a grading system, with each letter ranking commercial success (by critics or reviewers), innovative gameplay and financial success, respectively. AAA can best be compared to blockbuster movies in Hollywood. As such, games that are not considered AAA have been referred to as B Titles. By exploring modes of identity creation and the demographic makeup and history of game character creation, I seek to illustrate some ways in which visible minorities and women are represented and the obstacles challenging them.

I begin the discussion with modes of meaning making and authorship engaged by children as they play and learn. The focus is to understand how individuals assess their surroundings as children, carrying certain notions regarding identity into adulthood. Leading the discussion into identity formation and semiotics via an unfolding of feminist theorists' work, such as Kristeva, De Lauretis, Butler and Mulvey, framing issues of representation, subjectivity and performance in relation to virtual spaces. I follow with an examination of videogame demographics and character creation in the AAA industry with the intent to shed light on the different practices used in the development of a skewed projection of different groups of individuals in society, affecting the way individuals view themselves and others. This is discussed through psychological work presented by theorists such as Lacan and Tajfel, along with play theory as presented by Huizinga and gaming theory by Hardwood and Anderson. With the advent of online avatar creation, some players perform different identities in an effort to break the mold, yet I show that these attempts come under restrictions and backlash from the industry and gaming community alike. This effort will be discussed further with the creation of LGBTQ guilds in World of Warcraft (WOW) and the response by Blizzard Entertainment, the creators of WOW, and the online gaming forum to the LGBTQ community. By studying the different games and strategies afforded to players both online and offline, we get a clear understanding of the structure of the industry in game creation, character creation, advertising and the cultural associations held by gamers.

In an effort to distance themselves from this hegemonic hetero-centric framework, some indie game creators have begun to bridge the gap between consumers and producers, making games that represent visible minorities. Most recently, female developers and developers belonging to the LGBTQ community have been the most notable in their attempts to break the hegemonic cycle. With access to tools and game creation platforms, some game developers are recreating past efforts to challenge the status quo to create provocative and inclusive games and characters, pushing the boundaries for equal representation. I examine questions that must be addressed in order for equal and positive representation in the industry to be achieved.

"Mis/Represent" the project, aims to tackle the issues outlined above through a creative experiment, aiming to empower women and visible minorities. The interface is a simple selection screen that allows users choose from signifiers that relate to their personal identity. This mimics the idea behind many avatar creator applications within games, but rather than having physical elements combined to create a character, they simply make selections based on textual signs. Once completed, they are given an artist's rendition of a famous videogame character, redrawn to resemble a visible minority or a positive female representation. This illustrates the potential for more progressive characters and a positive direction in character creation. Due to the obvious and problematic nature of attempting to create all possible representations, the project concludes by asking the participant to create their own rendition of a character that they feel best represents them. The image that the participant creates would be shared on social media to distribute the efforts of awareness further.

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Chapter 2 Identity Formation & Semiotics

# **Chapter Two – Identity Formation & Semiotics**

Beginning the discussion with the ways in which representations are formed and disseminated, I look at the ways in which identity is created and the different ways displaying, performing, and retaining information about how an individual views their own identity in comparison to others around them. To do so, examination of psychological development theory is necessary, especially with regards to social interactions starting at early childhood. A process of authorship and meaning making is furthered with cognitive developments through play, adapting and familiarizing children with their immediate surroundings.

Notions and images given to children are carried with them into adulthood, often creating biased views of others and repressing modes of expression. By examining semiotics through a feminist lens—focusing on theorists such as Mulvey, Kristeva, De Lauretis, and Butler—I open up the discussion to the power dynamics created within social interactions in society. Semiotic identity analysis also allows room for expansion on the heterosexual, male dominated structure of hegemonic signifying chains—the social signs placed on women and visible minorities within a dominant cultural framework—of representation and performance.

The latter part of the chapter extends the discussion of subjectivity into the videogames, bridging experiences between the real 'offline' world and the 'online' virtual world.

#### **Identity Formation & Games**

Identity formation is a critical aspect of personal development, beginning during infancy and continuing throughout an individual's life. This notion is presented in Erik Erikson's Stages of

Psychosocial Development theory. One of the main aspects of his theory revolves around the ego identity, which is in a constant state of flux as one gains new information and experiences through daily social interactions with others. As an individual moves through to new stages of development, each challenge faced can either hinder or further develop a person's identity. In psychology, the reference to identity encapsulates all the beliefs, ideals and values that shape and direct an individual's behavior. The combination of these gives us an integrated sense of self and through competence in each stage of development, our behaviors and actions change accordingly. If the person feels that they have not overcome an area in their life, they will feel a sense of inadequacy. During this period of growth or change, the potential for both progress and failure are high. If an individual deals with the challenge successfully, they will emerge with strengths that will serve them the rest of their lives. If they fail to overcome the challenge, they may not be able to develop the skills required to obtain a strong sense of self and identity. These challenges can arise in many different forms including interactions with family, friends, co-workers and society as a whole. Refer to appendix F to see an outline of Erikson's development, outlining the different stages one passes through along with the different outcomes experienced. For the purposes of this project, I will focus my attention on the ways in which identity is affected by representations in the media, especially the role played by videogames in the dissemination of knowledge and social constructs.

The discussion surrounding the methods in which meaning is created in a digital game starts by understanding the ways games engage us and create realities beginning in early childhood. Digital games continue to gain popularity not only in entertainment in the form of the videogame, but also in early childhood education. A Hypercontextualized Game (HCG) is a digital game rooted in the player's specific and current reality. "HCGs are locally designed games that help players to gain

information and understanding about different subjects and places through the use of specific elements of the continuously changing context of the game" (Sedano et al. 2013, 822). HCGs are characterized in two ways. First, they involve elements from the player's reality or context attached to a specific location. Second, they encourage the player's active engagement with the context by raising awareness of predefined themes, which are connected with and move beyond the perceived reality or the "hyper". In doing so, HCGs seek to interweave subject matter and purpose by using the resources available in the player's immediate context. The player ultimately unlocks location specific knowledge as they experience and play the game. As such, these types of games can be very effective in familiarizing children with the notion of reality and how certain actions have consequences, both in a game or real life. The idea that we play from the moment we are born is a commonly held belief among behavioral scientists, deeming it a natural part of our development (Florescano, 2006). Through play we communicate our understanding of life and surroundings. It is within our inherent motivation to play that we find our sense of engagement, particularly affective engagement, which is defined by the sense of personal connection and identification with other individuals, including "emotional engagement referring to one's own values, attitudes, and emotions" (Sedano et al. 2013, 825).

This form of early childhood engagement transcends into digital gaming, where children translate their real-life social encounters and power relations into both online and offline gaming experiences. Children go through a process of meaning making and authorship gained from their beliefs, knowledge and socio-cultural integration. Semiotics is a way of understanding how individuals form actions and thoughts—the behaviours that are carried out automatically—and are shaped by a system of cultural messages and conventions. Children are given multiple images, sounds and text requiring an ability to interpret them 'instinctively'. Since these social conventions are established at a young age, they become an unconscious cultural formation and reaction to the space they inhabit. In doing so, children become an author—a person that creates and interprets social signs by:

(Inter) acts with and orchestrates semiotic resources both internally (designing and negotiating) and externally (negotiating, producing and disseminating)...they donate meaning by taking in information and reinterpreting it, by making new connections...they assume or assign discursive positions in ways that always interweave with their sociocultural environment (Winters and Vratulis 2012, 537).

This process of 'assemblage' is extremely important in the way we interpret our digital self into our surroundings and with the individuals we encounter in our everyday lives, creating a cycle of communication. What Winters and Vratulis mean by assemblage is precisely the ways individuals attribute meaning through a multi-modal process of combining gathered social information. This demonstrates that within today's society—where the acquisition of meaning through multiple technological resources— it is valuable to recognize the complexity that 'authors' face in creating meaning. Adopting layered and integrated ways of delivering messages can be a more effective model in changing behavior. To be able to create a successful change in attitude towards an ideology, a change in behavior is necessary. Using a videogame can be effective for such change with its inherent motivation to play and learn. The processes and stages for entertainment-based learning for social awareness come from Bandura's social-cognitive theory of 1986, which includes feelings of competence, autonomy and relatedness. This notion directly relates back to Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychological Development discussed earlier in relation to childhood development, following through into the next section with they ways we form representations in adulthood.

#### Women & Representation: Feminist Semiotics

These modes of meaning creation follow into adulthood and play an increasingly important role as we become situated in discursive power structures that inform our social and cultural representations. By looking at feminist theorists' writings on semiotics, the oppressive factors in society that control the subjective gaze imposed unto both women and visible minorities become clear. Taking on Mulvey's Male Gaze theory, the ways that male theorists and culture place signs on women's bodies exemplify practices that are perpetuated by videogame culture. For instance, in film, a scene would focus on the curves of a woman's body, putting the audience in the perspective of a heterosexual male, invoking the male gaze. The male gaze denies women human identity, relegating them to the status of objects to be admired for physical appearance. Their body thus becomes signified for visual pleasure—as an erotic object for the characters within the narrative to enjoy. The videogame industry has assumed the place of the male in positing the female body as an object – merely for the enjoyment of the heterosexual male gaze. Julia Kristeva was one of the first major contributors to feminist critical reworking of semiotic theory, serving as an important element into the distribution of power dynamics between individuals. Kristeva's theory looks at representation as dynamic, no longer simply defined by a mere remote sign. Godard summarizes Kristeva by writing;

<sup>[</sup>It is] a redistributive function to bring about change and heterogeneity that constitutes a decentered "speaking subject". Meaning is located not in the isolated sign with its relation of signifier and signified, but is produced "intertextually" (a network of differentiations) through the interaction of verbal texts and the texts of society and history within the transformation of the "ideologene" (value-laden utterance) as a "signifying practice" (Godard 2003, 2).

Through our differences, meaning is created within and beyond the subject. Kristeva's theoretical writings insert a "third person" –an internal opposition—to the centered subject. Having the capability of multiple representations of one 'self', the subjective structure is broken. No longer can someone be looked at as centered whole, or one dominant representation, but rather as fragmented differentiations. It becomes problematic to label individuals merely on broad master signifiers. Master signifiers are traits that are generally assumed about an individual simply through their appearance, such as race, gender, or relative age. It is then of great importance that identity be one that is composed of a multiplicity of meanings and signs in order to avoid sweeping generalizations about a certain group of individuals. Through context we come to understand certain identities and the modes in which representation must be attributed. Godard (2003) once again clearly illustrates this point by referencing Judith Butler's work by saying:

There is no authentic sexual identity: 'woman' is an unstable term that gains its signification only as a relational term. It is 'performatively produced' through the repetition of 'coherent gender sequences' which order varies attributes. The performative, a speech act, posits signification as a doing not an image, a doing whose meaning effect is context dependant (5).

Butler's notions of performativity relate directly to linguist and semiotician, Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure surmises that the values of terms are based on their surrounding or context, positing gender as one of those relative terms in which social value is credited to. A 'sign' as being made up of both a signifier and signified defines the Saussurean Sign. The signifier is the word, the combination of letters, attached to a sound-image that denotes its meaning. It is through interpretation of the signifier where meaning is created. The signified then becomes the concept, the conceptual 'object' to which the signifier refers. The signified 'object' is created by the perceiver and is specific to them, as the signifier acts as a cue for thoughts and images. Even though we may share similar concepts through our shared Things that give meaning word / image. signifiers, the images and thoughts signified are specific to each signifier Sign = individual. signified It is crucial to disrupt and

rethink the signifying chain in order to break the hetero-normative



dynamics that exert their power into the videogame industry. It becomes difficult to assert notions of identity in a broader context, especially in relation to gaming, when the signified has no voice in the conversation. Teresa de Lauretis' work takes on semiotics as an infinite reworking; constantly challenging cultural practices in order to develop a position for subjects without a voice to partake in the conversation. As identity is presented as recombination of fragmented parts—that shifts and moves through relational social constructs—so does the patriarchal dominant ideology. Examples of this shift can be seen throughout media history. Assertiveness by minority groups to gain a more positive representation in literature, film and music has led to cultural acceptance and visibility in each medium. Through discursive modes of action, the "norm" cannot be sustained and must shift according to social relations. The space for female desire will open up due to a narrative reworking that involve a multiplicity of speaking positions (De Lauretis, 1984). Subjectivity then becomes a reworked social order, whereby the individual being represented has a personal affiliation to the information being produced. Different modes of significations become behavioural combinations of both representation and self-representation. Subjectivity is constructed through a direct engagement

to the discourses and practices that give value, meaning and affect to society.

#### Virtual Spaces & Multiple Identities

Virtual worlds have seeped into human consciousness, blurring the lines between virtual and real. Virtual spaces tend to inherently mimic the real world, creating images and projections that are sometimes extremely realistic, enabling users to feel as though they are physically immersed in the environment. Participants therefore have the ability to replicate personal real life interactions through social communication and interaction amongst others, constantly forming new identities and assessing others'. The traditional meaning of identity has been expanded, recognizing the various societal and cultural changes, intertwined with the impact of globalization and recent technological innovations (Stryker and Burke, 2000). Due to the increasing availability of cross-border and cross-cultural interaction, individuals are able to borrow aspects from different cultures and incorporate them into their own personal identity. This is displayed in the gaming realm through what Lisa Nakamura describes as "identity tourism". Players choose to perform a racial type, crossing over boundaries to temporarily indulge in an appropriation of a stereotyped figure. Simulating the token subject of the Asian male samurai figure, a player is able to appropriate a racial identity without any of the risks of being part of that specific minority in real life (Nakamura, 2012).

This form of interaction is both influenced by and from virtual and real world experiences, crossing over the boundaries of social communication. Even though most social interactions occur directly with other individuals playing the same game, identity formation and representation is constantly occurring even when performing in solitary gaming experiences. The relationship a user creates with a virtual character shapes the views and attitudes the user has about themself and others in society (Nagy et al, 2014). Social memberships to group such as ethnicity, gender or religion fits within a framework of identity creation and relation (Segal, 2010; Tajfel, 1981; Taylor, 1997). Players recognize that their personal identity is not far removed from the ones they associate with in virtual worlds. An individual's identity becomes a two-fold representation: one that exists in the real world and ones that are portrayed virtually (Jerry and Tavares-James, 2012). These two parts are not seen as separate entities, rather as facets of a larger whole. The user goes through of a process of reflexivity, continually addressing the gap between their online and offline self. Their sense of self becomes extended into a virtual environment. Players must make decisions about how and if they wish to divert from their "real" self and the meanings associated with their decisions. This question becomes particularly important psychologically as users do not see their characters or avatars as artificial entities, but instead seem them as being living units (Belisle and Bodur, 2010). The correlation between virtual identity creation and physical personal development of self in the real world becomes an interesting phenomenon. As an individual continually grows and changes through their social physical environment, so does their virtual self. Virtual identity construction becomes a cyclical and continuously iterative process, inclined to change by a variety of individual and groupbased factors within certain space specific realities.

Avatars take on an important role in the creation process for representation of the self. They become drivers for users to communicate their conception of self to other players in the virtual world. Players develop an exclusive relationship with the avatar created, a term Powers (2003) refers to as "avatar attachment", which is expressive of identity and self-conception, and is resolved by feelings of communication, identity, and presence in virtual spaces. Since an individual is able to reconstruct their virtual identity, a variation occurs whereby some players choose to present their actual physical selves—although the extent to which real physical representation is limited by the game character standard of representation (i.e. muscular male and sexualized female bodies)-while others opt to present a fictional self. It then becomes difficult in trying to determine a reasoning of why players choose to dramatically alter their virtual self. This reasoning is particularly associated with online gaming context, where players form alliances in fictional virtual worlds. Our personal ideological preferences and outlook dictate the types of relationships that are formed. The virtual world follows the same logic, borrowing from our lived experiences. Depending on what social group we wish to interact with in the real world, translates into our affinity to associate with them virtually. Individuals create what Ebaugh (1988) describes as "sets of behavioural expectations associated with given positions in the social structure" (18). This means that roles are seen as functional for the social system within which they are inserted. The position is institutionalized or commonly expected and has an understood designation in a given social structure, such as a banker (work organization), father (family), or priest (religious organization). In the gaming environment, a player would often choose a particular character with specific character traits, in order to gain an advantage within the framework of the play mechanics. For instance, if they wish to succeed in an environment where physical abilities such as speed or swiftness are an asset, they may choose a fit female character as opposed to a larger muscular male character that may be slower and less mobile.

The examination of Goffman's Self-Presentation theory (1959), Turkle's Multiple Identities (1997) and Huizinga's Magic Circle (1955) lead to an understanding of how players use these virtual online worlds as a means for socialization. In Goffman's theory, he uses imagery in theatre to represent the significance of human social action and interaction, likening role-play to the modes of social exchanges conducted in the real world. For instance, every person on stage assumes a role, each



Figure 2- Visualization of Goffman's Self-Preservation Theory. (Source: Unknown)

playing a variety. The audience consists of other individuals who observe the performance and react to it. The front region or stage, where the actors perform, informs the audience of who that character is and what their function may be. Backstage is where the actor reveals their true nature and is shed from the persona projected to the audience. This resembles social interactions online as many put forward a different mask from the one they wear in their everyday encounters, even though some attributes may bleed over from one to another. In Turkle's Multiple Identities, the advent of the internet—and widespread use of cell phones and computers—has created a virtual reality where we self-fashion and self-create, projecting ourselves onto the screen as an alternative form of selfexpression. Thus, a player can explore aspects of themselves that are not afforded to them in the real world. Speaking directly to gaming, Turkle explains that players can create multiple characters and participate in a variety of games, fragmenting and decentering their identity, multiplying without limits. Johan Huizinga's Magic Circle is a space of dreams and fantasy, where real-world events can have special meanings. Everything inside of the circle is transformative, an escape from everyday problems. Every time someone exits the circle back into the real world, they bring meaning and experience with them. Huizinga (1955) describes the marked off space as a temporary world within an ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act. In the virtual realm, the magic circle becomes permeable, creating a relationship between virtual and the outside worlds. By having characteristics derived form the outside world, the virtual realm is entered with behavioral assumptions and attitudes. In doing so, elements of the virtual space are evaluated in terms of their significance in the outside world, gaining importance on both sides of the circle's membrane. Consequently, it becomes increasingly difficult to fully segregate the two worlds. The image below show Huizinga's magic circle in visual form.



Figure 3- Visualization of Huizinga's Magic Circle. (Source: Adams and Rollings 2009, 8)

The theories mentioned describe an effective space for individuals to try to gain acceptance, social-connectivity and support for personal situations or minority status in online gameplay. Through online integrative play, real-life friendships form and others are strengthened. Players actively engage the meaning and significance of their online role-playing activities into their daily lives. They do so through two modes of identification, particularly in relation to sociality (Doh and Whang, 2013). The first is identification with the game character, whereby the avatar is a reflection of our own self-concept; a mental association intrinsically tied to our own self-image. The second is group identification, where the process of gaining self-worth is acquired through group membership and connected with the players' inclination to socialize and form relationships with others. Through psychological matching, Doh and Wang (2013) outline Hoffner and Buchanan by saying that "the player changes their thought patterns, emotional responses, and behaviors to match those of another person in an effort to achieve rewards or other valued outcomes such as maximizing their potential, enhanced self-esteem, or create social bonds" (36). Following this stream of thought, the conclusion brought forth is that the players perception of the online game world becomes an extension of reality—where their virtual and physical identities are not split—rather becoming an integrate identity. The game experience shifts from mere play into social self-development. A person is able to occupy multiple roles simultaneously when playing an online multiplayer game. By taking on multiple roles—off-line, online, in-game character and embodied person—a collective identity is created, one that plays a dynamic role in the creation of a performance of a different race, gender or sex. This involvement underscores Judith Butler's notion of "Indeterminacy" (1990), even though she allocates it for gender performance, I believe that social gaming can extend the scope to include many different forms of expressive performance beyond gender. These notions are illustrative of the ways in

which online gaming has the capability to not only change an individuals perception of the virtual world, but how it transcends and merges with reality, echoing Huizinga's Magic Circle.

The rules and mechanics of play become the drivers of a procedure that allows the player to create meaning as they move through the virtual space. Differing from earlier forms of entertainment, videogames have the capacity to shape notions of identity and ideology through direct interactions with the medium. As Bogost (2007) describes, "the videogame is the only medium of mass appeal across many ages, demographics, and social and ethnic backgrounds that relies on conceptual frameworks—rule-based interactions—as its core mode of signification" (120). This is an important aspect to note, as it actively engages the viewer to create meaning as they progress through the game. If one group or ideological perspective dominates the framework, it can be a detrimental tool used to exploit marginalized groups. The best example is the domination of males in the industry (IGDA DSS 2014). This allows heterosexual male game creators to produce through a subjective male gaze towards female characters, creating images of women as sexualized, physically exaggerated and mostly inconsequential to gameplay, serving simply as amusement for the male player. Another example is the presentation of African-American characters in videogames. Due to the lack of black game creators, white males are able to create characters through their own perceived notions of black culture. In doing so, most black characters are stereotyped as being criminals, thugs and uneducated, all to the detriment of a large minority group.

In this frame of mind, Barthes' notion of the modern myth can be invoked and placed upon videogames in the discussion towards the form of communication of ideological beliefs conveying a certain group's set of practices. The myth is seen as a form of signification, following an earlier discussion of Saussure's sign. As discussed with Saussure, the myth takes the place of the signified, which can be seen as a cultural association, one that is perceived by an individual and is removed from denotation or a signifier. The myth appears neutral, but is motivated to reinforce the status quo. For example, Barthes discusses the image around red wine, pointing to how it is seen as a social



Figure 4- Visualization of Barthes's Theory of the Myth. (Source: As found in http://aragec.com/)

equalizer, a national drink for the French and the drink for the proletariat. Despite its harmful effects to health, it is viewed as life giving due to its red blood-like color, often associated with Holy Communion. In the gaming industry, the myth becomes an effective tool shaping a player's notions about groups of people through different modes of identification. The notion of the myth can be correlated to Gramsci's observations around the modern world's hegemonic forces at work—the influences of the dominant groups agenda—inflicting the rest with their perspectives. Exploitative social relations remain enforced, systematically exerting its power on groups without a voice to retaliate. Looking through a Marxist lens, this form of oppression occurs when the dominant group gains control over the means of production, which is quite evident in the gaming industry. Videogames fundamentally legitimize inequalities of wealth, power and privilege that are entrenched within existing patters of social relations and "in tandem with the most important power institutions within a social system" (Cassar 2013, 338). This discussion becomes even more important when

subjectivity is formed in the age of digital communication and community engagement.

Having discussed modes of authorship and identity formation—along with the hegemonic practices that subject certain individuals in society to discriminatory practices—sheds light on the ways in which real world experiences bleed into the virtual gaming world. Individuals project imagery of others through a lens only fitting to their own. Without a voice to counteract the status quo, stereotypical representations are allowed to flourish and circulate through a production of culture. The limited framework offered by AAA platforms is one of the many reasons gamers and developers have begun to create indie titles that adequately represent their identities and perspectives. Social awareness around the issues of sexism, racism and homophobia have also surfaced on social media and through prominent videogame critics and developers. In the next chapter, we will delve into the videogame industry to see the affects characters that are currently being created on the individuals they represent.

Sherif Taalab

Chapter 3 Minority Representation in Videogames

# **Chapter Three – Minority Representation in Videogames**

This chapter will discuss the ways in which popular media influences modes of cognitive social identity formation, both personally and as a group. I begin the discussion by presenting multiple media and social theories presented by Lacan, Tajfel and others, to understand the different modes of identity broadcasting and perception and the relationships created between them. Moving into the videogame domain, the discussion shifts into identifications associated with gaming culture, as well as the different tools used to create 'specialized' games for specific minority groups. I then indicate the ways in which gender, sexual, and racial minorities are currently represented in videogames and the obstacles and backlash they must overcome in order to break through the hegemonic power structure that exists.

#### Mass Media

As the popularity of videogames continues to grow, it has become vital to understand the dynamics of identity portrayal and its effects. In the same ways that theory has proposed that cultivation effects have been created through television (Gerbner et al., 1994), videogames can be seen to follow the same direct path on influencing players' thoughts on different social groups. Before looking directly at game studies, I would like to introduce this section with theoretical discussions revolving around social identity, group identification and influence of the media.

Following the theoretical work of Jacques Lacan, mass media directly influences the cognitive modeling of social identity formation. Personal identity is not an autonomous self, rather a decentered subject, constituted in relation to others (i.e. family, friends, mass media, etc.). Social groups that appear more often in media tend to enjoy a greater status in society, through their projections in television programs and film, making entertainment media a substitute for the images we see in our daily lives (Hardwood and Anderson, 2002). Hardwood and Anderson's "ethnolinguistic vitality theory argues that the media work as a mirror for existing social forces as much as a casual agent of them" (Williams et al. 2009, 819). We can make a direct correlation between the imbalances of social identity formation, social power, and policy formation in our everyday lives to the images and messages we see on the 'screen'. The symbols and structures presented in videogames, especially in relation to certain social groups, support a cognitive processing version of the vitality theory. The presence – or more importantly the absence—of a set of images in videogames affects the set of impressions that the player has about real life social structures (Shrum, 2002). The amount of time a certain object is given visibility or how often an action is taken makes it more likely for it to be recalled at a later stage. This is the basis for the notion of cultivation posed by Shrum (2002) where "a set of ideas about the real world are in large part based on the accessibility of constructs, which in turn are influenced by how often those constructs are viewed in the media" (Williams et al. 2009, 819). Throughout media entertainment history, cultivation theory has moved along with the broader social movements that occur within society. As acceptance and popularity grows for a specific social group, so does their representation in the media. This trend can most recently be seen in the positive representations of LGBTQ individuals on American television and film within the past decade, specifically in the past five years. As the numbers of LGBTQ characters and themes gain more visibility in mainstream American media, so does their social acceptance in the real world, as can be seen with the advancements in marriage equality and social benefits awarded to the LGBTQ community within the past few years.

members of a certain group to

It is important to note that representations in broadcast popular media—positive or negative in nature—can greatly influence self-esteem and identity within the group being represented.





discriminate in favour an "in" group that they belonged to rather than another "out" group. Tajfel points to three important variables that contribute to the emergence of in-group favouritism. The first is the extent to which individuals internalize an in groups membership as an aspect of their selfconcept. The second variable is the extent to which the prevailing context provides ground for comparison between the two groups. The final aspect is the perceived relevance of the comparison group, which is directly shaped by the status of the in-group. The presence of that group in entertainment media, functions as an indicator for members of that community to know that they play a vital role in society. If they remain absent or negatively represented, they may feel powerlessness and insignificance. This can lead to a very skewed mode of participation, especially in the gaming industry, since it continues to perpetuate the stereotypical imagery and lack of positive representation put forward by film and television decades ago. Portraying certain groups in a negative light—or not portraying them at all—may deter groups of people from becoming active participants in the industry. By having minority racial, female or LGBTQ individuals only be seen as secondary or uncontrolled characters in videogames, these groups can be seen as having secondary roles in real life. As individuals play videogames, they constantly create subliminal mental associations with a certain group of "others". Through accessibility and recall approaches, mental modes of relationships are made about how people view one another and how much attention they invest in everyday social interactions.

Identifying the relationship between an individual and their perceived identity in a videogame is the basis from which the issue of representation in videogames must be approached. Not only does the focus need to be on how an individual views themself in the characters portrayed, but also in terms of how they view themselves as gamers, which is an important identity marker when studying the ways that the videogame industry creates games for their market. I am not denying that an element of fantasy exists when engaging in videogame play, yet the persistent typification of a certain group of individuals into stereotypical representations further solidify negative or sweeping generalizations in the minds of others.

An identification-based approach allows scholars to recognize that an individual may identify with a variety of social categories (e.g. being a woman and Latina and bisexual and a gamer), without the *a priori* privileging of a particular category at the outset (Shaw 2011, 30).

Meaning that there is no privilege or advantage given to one specific aspect of a person's identity, allowing each to have an equal weight. This allows individuals to migrate from one form of identification to another based on their relationship to a certain game or character. It also allows space to address the association between identity, game play and representations in games by not relying on labeling players based on certain identity markers. Researchers, explicitly in the gaming community, should consider self-reflective articulation of identity in shaping of social structures. Self-reflective articulation acknowledges an individuals ability to move from one identity marker to another, illustrating the fragmented state of modern personal identification. Even the process of identification as a gamer is an essential component to the construction of the gaming audience and their relation to the medium itself.

### **Gender & Women in Games**

It is important to note that self-reflective articulation is stunted in the videogame industry due to the construction of games towards what is known as a 'hardcore gamer' as opposed to the 'casual gamer'. By limiting their audience, the mainstream AAA videogame industry inadvertently diminishes their scope of the individuals who fall into predetermined categories. For example, a hardcore gamer can be seen as someone who plays a First-Person Shooter (FPS) such as the *Splinter Cell* franchise, yet someone who may be classified as a casual gamer may spend a *significantly larger portion* of time playing *Angry Birds* or *Farmville* on Facebook. A research study conducted by
Adrienne Shaw (2011) aims to shed light on this dilemma by interviewing individuals who identifies as a "gamer" and asking them why. In a series of interviews, Shaw sought to obtain personal feelings players had to social constructions in games and in what ways could these under-represented groups get higher visibility in the gaming market. She took a sample of 29 interviewees ranging from early 20's to late 30's, whom all experienced playing videogames from a young age. They ranged in gender, ethnic background and sexual orientation.

In reference to a question posed about if one identifies as a gamer, the results were:

- 12 unequivocally identified as gamers (8 male, 4 female)
- 3 'sort of identified as gamers (1 male, 2 female)
- 5 'not really' identified as gamers (4 female, 1 gender-queer)
- 8 unequivocally identified as non-gamers (1 transgender male, 7 female)

These results reflect the common held belief that videogames are a boys only club. They also show the hesitation females have in identifying as gamers, in part due to underestimating gaming time, coupled with the market's targeted modes of advertising to a male audience that deem certain types of games only suitable for a hardcore gamer. During her interviews, the topic of gender only came up twice explicitly—yet played a dramatic role in the shaping of individuals gaming identity as a subliminal factor or fear of establishing inclusion—reflecting the means by which representation in games, texts and the industry has been focused on issues surrounding gender. Shaw (2011) asserts that: The way researchers and marketers discuss gender difference in gaming often promotes the traditional correlation between masculinity and technology, and the converse disassociation of femininity and technology (35).

This has an effect in the ways in which women view themselves when engaging in technology and videogames. The power dynamics created here create a space where socialization of a particular group influences their relation to the specific media. Gender then becomes a dominant factor in media consumption, inadvertently informing female bodies about their identity in relation to that of a male body performing the same task of playing a videogame.

Videogame advertising affects the perception of videogames—dividing player communities and creating a different status for feminine and masculine games—further entrenching male dominance in the gaming market and marginalizing females to a sub-genre. The genre known as "girl games" situate feminine videogames in a domain different from that of popular gaming culture. This creates a space that is only acceptable for female players that effectively distances the male player from either playing the game or acknowledging his interest in the game, due to a cultural stigma. A prominent example of a highly successful game that managed to attract a large female following is *The Sims* franchise. It has been noted that between 65-70 percent of *The Sims* players are female (Boyes, 2007; Waters, 2006). Many male players consider *The Sims* a "girly" game due to the nature of domesticity and family life narrative involved in gameplay, often being described as a virtual dollhouse (Wirman, 2014). Although, "it breaks the dominant code of masculine gender positioning effected by digital gaming-not simply in that it allows players to identify with female characters but, more significantly, because it does so in a conventionally 'feminine' domestic setting" (Kline, DyerWithford and De Peuter 2003, 275). Designers can see *The Sims* as a potential site for social change with the reclaiming of the domestic space. It may be a positive aspect for the ability of the game to attract a large female demographic and also presenting women in a non-stereotypical male fantasy role, but falls short in being taken "seriously" as a game. Most gamers—white, male, heterosexual youth—regard *The Sims* as a game that doesn't carry much cultural capital (Wirman 2014, 76). The capital is in reference to the player's skills and knowledge that influence their attainment of recognition and status within the gaming community. Due to the over-saturation of heterosexual male dominant perspective that permeate the community, males are reluctant to express their interest in the game in fears of being labeled a sissy or gay (Wirman 2014, 75). A male's involvement in "feminine" practices becomes a threat to ones heterosexuality, where gendered gameplay not confined within a hetero-normative structure—female characters in minimal clothing and unrealistic body expectations—is not supported by the community.

The gendering of the game is reinforced in the AAA industry by means of advertising. Marketers, when appealing to the female demographic, often use *The Sims*' resemblance to a dollhouse. Although, in an effort to court females, they influence other players opinions about the game and other types of games that may follow the same trajectory. The gendering of the game is pushed forward by its advertising in women's magazines such as *Working Woman* and *Cosmo*, with little attention or marketing effort towards actual game themed journals and magazines. It becomes an almost double-edged sword when trying to evaluate the game based on its accomplishments and failures. Its deviation from the "proper" or more traditional game standards of being violent, competitive—and its cultural normative association with masculinity—is why they were able to gain a strong female following (Wirman, 2014). The gendering of games is not specific to females, and can be actively seen in the ways the industry markets games to young males. Most Role-Playing Games (RPG) or First-Person Shooters (FPS) dominantly features a strong heterosexual male protagonist. The characters are created to appear hyper-masculine and in extreme physical fitness, often glorifying acts of war and violence. Those games are mostly targeted towards heterosexual males through male dominated magazines, trade shows and gaming conventions. Although, more recently, successful games such as *Journey* (2012) and industry giant *Nintendo* have broadened their audience by creating either non-gendered characters or appealing to a larger gender demographic by basing their console games on family participation and group dynamics, rather than single-player RPG.

#### Sexual Identity in Games

When it comes to the discussion of a person's sexual orientation and their personal relationship of gamer identity, it becomes a multiplicity of identifying factors that coexists in a singular space. Seen through Bhabha's (1994) third space, the articulated relationship is between a person's two or more identifying factors merging with that of a third term composed of a sum of all its parts. In the context of our discussion this evokes a "gaymer" identity, which is:

An identity experienced at the intersection of, at the disruption posed by, two categories that are not always easily reconciled. Gamers are not gay, and gays do not play videogames—or so the dominant discourses go. Gaymer exists in Bhabha's 'third space' (Shaw 2011, 36).

It is difficult to assess exactly what single factor explains the extreme lack of LGBTQ representation in videogames. From research conducted in the industry, with game developers and audiences, it is a combination of a few factors including the construction of the audience by the industry, the lack of LGBTQ developers in mainstream gaming corporations, and the hesitation by the industry include such content in fear of public criticism and negative repercussions (Shaw, 2009). It is precisely through this discourse that LGBTQ individuals face exclusion from the gaming sphere. It becomes problematic when gay themes are not represented as it signals to the community that their lifestyle is not of importance or worth recognition in the videogame sphere. The hetero-centric dominance of the videogame becomes an ideological problem, whereby gamers and developers must intervene in order to gain positive recognition and discontinue to be harassed and subjugated to stereotypical imagery. Proponents of the current power structure continue to argue that there is no need for LGBTQ content in videogames since sexuality has no place in videogames. Yet they fail to realize that the production of mass culture often express 'straightness' or dominant hyper-masculine tropes as being 'normal'. This view supports the notion that queer identity is already embedded within the larger ideological framework and hence there is no need for specific LGBTQ content to be specifically included. Although, the problem is not whether queer readings of videogames allows individuals to play vicariously through a straight context but the attempt to understand the place and issues surrounding representation of sexual identity in videogames by members of the industry itself. "To be understood fully, games have to be situated within the cultures in which they are found, including the wider industrial/economic context" (King and Krzywinska 2006, 217).

Another issue LGBTQ players face within the hetero-centric domain of videogame culture is the portrayal of the hardcore gamer—the white, heterosexual, adolescent male—as being intrinsically homophobic. Proof of this is often given in the shape of online gaming forums, where phrases like "that's so gay" or words like "fag" or "pussy" are often used either pejoratively or as a direct insult (Shaw, 2009). For instance, in reference to World of Warcraft's (WoW) online guild creation, Blizzard Entertainment, the creative force behind *WoW*, put forward a press release stating "topics related to sensitive real-world subjects—such as religious, sexual or political preference, for example—have had a tendency to result in communication between players that often breaks down into harassment" (Terdiman, 2006, online game). It is increasingly evident that while players attempt to escape harassment from the physical world, the rules and regulations that govern our physical space are tied to our virtual settings. The hetero-normative regulation within the game is manufactured and secured not only by the developers, but also by the communicative practices between players in an online virtual world. It is interesting to see that aside from regulating ideologies, *WoW* also develops fantastical digital bodies within a hetero-normative framework where male characters are typified as hyper-masculine, while female representation is hyper-sexualized. With an increasingly high number of players, most of the communication occurs on message boards, similar to that of a chat site. Players are also able to form "guilds", or a community based around a certain theme or ideology, to be able to keep in contact and share information with one another. Even though players have the opportunity to create new identities or avatars of themselves-essentially blurring gender/race/sexual roles in a transgressed form of participation—they still exist within a dominant hetero-normative perspective and culture. For example, discussions around gender "takes place in a, usually, firmly heterosexual context, in which, for instance, homosexual acts are seen as unnatural and opposed to the supposedly natural and biological preordained order of heterosexuality" (Kafi 2008, 63). As seen by Blizzard Entertainment's press release for the regulation of "appropriate" material, players are still oppressed

from expressing certain views and ideologies they deem important to their virtual identity. These rules are not only enforced, but allow other players to harass and verbally abuse members of other guilds without any reprimand. Often when women and/or LGBTQ individuals assert their preferred identities, they are confronted with users claiming that there is no space for them in these virtual worlds and should remain quiet, otherwise they are simply "asking for it". In effect, the discussion moves away from tackling issues of power relations and places the blame on the group being victimized, claiming their own responsibility for the discrimination received. By placing legitimate concerns on the margin, users are forced to confine to hetero-normativity and misogyny. Disallowing personal identities from proliferating, players are required to play by the hegemonic guidelines set out by the majority. The discursive power structure placed in these online spaces affect both members of the community and onlookers. They all become part of a broader social practice that frames the way they feel about themselves and others.

The content of videogames is highly subjective to large gaming corporations and is shaped by what the industry thinks its audience will be comfortable with and what they desire. The fear of criticism from their audience prevents the industry and advertisers from including LGBTQ themes in their games. Some feel they will be branded as a 'gay game' only appealing to small niche market, while others fear that by including gay characters, their heterosexual "norm fan base" will refuse to play certain games based on a gay theme, storyline, or character. This dissuades large companies from delving into those themes amplifying social problems. As they are beholden to investors and shareholders, mainstream gaming companies must take into consideration their return. Courting certain demographics can be especially difficult when disseminating the AAA videogame industry. The funding and organization of a company carries a heavy weight when responding to forms of social activism and inclusion of content they deem to "unfavourable". It is within the indie gaming community where marginalized groups, particularly LBGTQ individuals, are able to voice their concerns. Indie game developers and smaller firms have the luxury of being able to include "controversial" content in their games due to not having a responsibility towards shareholders and ability to create games with a much smaller monetary value of creation. They are also not particularly concerned about reaching a mass market and are able to curb their production for smaller niche demographics. One issue large gaming companies have is the misconception about who their audience is and it continues to be one of the greatest failures of the industry to capitalize on a growing demographic. By ignoring the voices and concerns raised by women, ethnic and sexual minorities, the gaming industry continues to pander to the same target audience they claim to represent. On the other hand, developers seem to agree that the lack of LGBTQ content in videogames is not necessarily systematic exclusion but one of convenience and practicality. When sexuality is portrayed in AAA videogames, the narrative focus is through heterosexual lens as it remains to be the untouched normative structure that easily resonates with audiences and that for all other sexual identities to be portrayed, their existence must be defended. Most contend that there is a difficulty in portraying these characters without relying on stereotypical imagery.

The history of gay visibility reveals the tensions between invisibility and limited visibility, between typification and stereotyping, and between needing to find telegraphic ways of representing gayness and doing so at the expense of gay people (Sender 2004, 13).

By not having a diverse workforce representative of the LGBTQ community creating games in the industry, heterosexual developers relying on stereotypes can be extremely offensive at worst, and at best sometimes be read as an attempt to please a social group for the sake of diversity inclusion.

Many gamers believe that gameplay holds an equal or higher regard in the videogame experience than that of physical representation (Shaw, 2009). Therefore, the presence of different sexualities should be included organically into the gameplay mechanics, without the attentive need to make it a contentious issue. In simulation gaming, where open-narratives exist, sexuality unfolds organically as choices are given for the player to take any path they wish to pursue. It becomes an explorative narrative where a player can become and play with whatever facet of their identity they wish to project. By showing homosexuality as simply another aspect of a person's identity, it becomes a normative mode of playing the game. What is failed to be seen here, is that just as any aspect of a person's identity, be it their race, gender, or sexuality, must exist as matter of fact, just as the white heterosexual male exists now.

#### **Racial Ethnicities in Games**

The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) has been publishing annual reports since 2004 about facts on their audiences. In all their reports up till now, the only two demographics present are gender and age. This not only leaves out issues of sexual orientation, but an even more vital sector of the population, ethnic minorities. It is evident in how the industry does not regard race as an important factor to consider in their audience. It becomes even more problematic in light of the Kaiser Family Foundation (2002, 2010) data published on videogame player's ethnic background. Between 2002 and 2010 the numbers continue to rise in their indications that African-American and Hispanic children play more videogames than their White counterparts, along with evidence showing that children from low- and middle-income families also spend more hours playing videogames than children from families with higher incomes. By ignoring these findings, the gaming industry goes through a process of an almost systematic racism in its lack of construction towards such audiences that may have their grounding in a system beyond videogames. It mirrors the process of identity formation through meaning creation and exchange with other social demographics. This process reflects the ideas of Paul Du Gay in his book *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production* (1997). The book reworks our notions about the relationship between culture and economy. As the title suggests, Du Gay outlines two ways of describing the terms together as a whole. First, to highlight the idea of *production of culture* in its drive for the production of 'culturally increased' goods. This notion is articulated by presenting culture as a product of the economy, such as films, advertisements, or games. In this case, culture is seen as having its own existence, influenced and directed by economy. The second term focuses on the idea of 'cultures of production', which emphasizes an interest in the actors and practices participating in organizational context. Here, the focus is on the installation process of the economic practice, including the production of knowledge attributed to this economy, such as market research. We are then left with the question of how economy *is* cultural (Du Gay, 1997).

It is vital to assess videogames as the cultural artifacts they are. Videogames are not merely entertainment and fictional storylines, but actively engage players in the creation of a social dialogue and offer a means of distributing meaning and cultural ideologies. These notions can become extremely powerful in propagating cultural views on African American, Hispanics and Middle Eastern individuals as they are constantly being represented as thugs, gang members, and terrorists. Games such as *Grand Theft Auto* give ammunition to the larger White demographic in its justified real world actions against people of minority status. The fact that videogame producers and scholars render games as 'pure fantasy', 'explorations of space', or 'mere entertainment' amid discourses of color-blindness at the same time that...fans praise games for elucidating the savagery of people of color, whether in South Central Los Angeles or Iraq, demonstrates a need for serious undertaking regarding virtual gaming reality. The cost and consequence is not just the reification of stereotypes but legitimizing, normalizing, and sanctioning state violence, inequality, and despair. (Leonard 2005, 87).

Leonard's argument may seem to be overly exaggerated; yet when placed alongside the percentages of representations of minorities along with their representation in games, his cultural study of videogame dynamics and their effects on real life social interactions may not be so farfetched. *Children Now*, a community-based organization in California found some staggering results when examining the role of 53 gaming hero characters in 2002. Out of all 53 heroes, 46 of them were identified as White. Asians and Pacific Islanders made up 8 percent, while African Americans and Hispanics made up 4 and 2 percent respectively. Almost all black characters were made up of athletes in sporting games, compromising 80 percent of characters. When taking a look at black females in games they make up 90 percent of background or secondary characters as props, bystanders and victims in the storyline. They are also the highest group of individuals to become victims of violence, making up 90 percent.

When representing racial minorities, the gaming industry relies heavily on stereotypical imagery to support the game mechanics and overall narrative. Each with their own trope, images of radicalized individuals are used as a normative hegemonic dialogue about the people they portray. Asians are often seen speaking poor English, martial artists and foreign *(Dynasty Warriors, Crouching)* 

Tiger), African Americans as either athletes or violent (Madden, NBA, GTA: San Andreas), the Middle Eastern terrorist (America's Army, Centcom, Desert Strom: Splinter Cell) and the Hispanic criminal (Vice City, Uncharted) (Leonard 2005, 85). The stereotypes displayed cause harm on multiple levels that may not be completely superficial, often not registering as being offensive in a player's mind. Taking for example the plethora of First-Person Shooters (FPS) that depict the Middle East, or third world countries in general, as primitive and a centre for terrorist activity. On the surface, the game is portrayed as being a realistic experience of military life in the throes of war. Yet what it subconsciously delivers is a distorted image of a region, its people and culture. They reflect ignorant notions about races and flatten groups of people into a mere image. They also contribute to the public's view on racial issues and ideas about a certain group, affecting both institutional and personal relations (Leonard, 2005). Furthermore, stereotypical imagery serves as a mask—a place where we can perform race—without having to deal with the consequences. They inadvertently affirm dominance of race and privilege through play. It acts as a minstrelsy, where a desire to "try on" the skin of another race, breaking down the boundaries of a dangerous or unacceptable participant in the safety of a virtual realm. Videogames become "less a sign of absolute power and control than of panic, anxiety, terror and pleasure" (Rogin 1998, 35). We cannot simply look at these images as a racial issues, but one that reflect dominant discourses and fears amongst the notions we have about a certain group of individuals. Rather than merely focusing on the statistical representation of racial minorities, the study into the affects these virtual characters have on one another and the ideals they project is crucial. There is a need to teach about games due to the intrinsic fact that they teach so much about others and ourselves. They inform our development of virtual literacy and social construction.

Sherif Taalab

Chapter 4 Videogame Demographics

## **Chapter Four – Videogame Demographics**

#### **Developers**

Understanding workplace demographics amongst game developers in AAA gaming corporations demonstrates the ways in which minority representation and women in games is cultivated. Since the focus of this paper is based on Western standards, it is crucial to keep in mind that the statistics and findings represent data responses from primarily English speaking countries. As a source, the International Game Developers Association's (IGDA) 'Exploration of Workforce Diversity' and 'Quality of Life' studies are used. The IGDA is the largest professional association for game developers worldwide. Based in North America, the studies conducted are joint efforts done through institutions in Canada and the United States. The 2005 'Exploration of Workforce Diversity' study is used since it is the most comprehensive study to come out of the IGDA on workplace diversity. More recently, the IGDA has been conducting 'Quality of Life' surveys in an effort to get a clearer understanding of the issues facing game developers such as compensation, personal priorities and issues affecting overall satisfaction of the workplace and industry as a whole. To date, the IGDA has conducted three 'Quality of Life' surveys; One in 2004, 2009 and most recently in June 2014. First, I will discuss the results from the 'Exploration of Workforce Diversity' study, as it is most pertinent to this issue. I will then follow up with the most recent 'Quality of Life' survey from 2014 to see how the industry has changed since 2005 and the issues current game developers express.

#### **Exploration of Workforce Diversity Study (2005)**

The survey portion of the study received 3, 128 responses from participants living in the

USA (66%), Canada (18%), the UK (12%), and Australia (4%) and contains a margin error of +/-

1.752% at the 95 percent confidence level.

Based on the findings of the study, it concluded that the typical game developer is as follows:

- Male
- White
- Heterosexual
- Able bodied
- 31 years old
- University educated

Looking at ethnicity of respondents is illustrative that workforce diversity is weighted towards one particular group. The breakdown of ethnic background is as follows: White (88%), Asian (7.5%), Hispanic/Latino (2.5%), Black (2%), and other (4.7%).

*Mis/Represent: Women and Visible Minority Representation in Videogames* 

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# **ETHNIC BACKGROUND**



#### Figure 6 - Ethnic Background Demographics (Info from Workforce Diversity Study (2005)

The commonly held belief of skewed demographics of designers in the gaming industry dominated by Caucasians hold true. The numbers are even more staggering when taking into consideration the gender demographics of major gaming companies. Out of all the respondents in the study, 11.5% identified as female, while 88.5% identified as being male. Women on average earn \$9K less annually than their male counterparts for the same positions.

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This may represent a lack of interest for female developers to join the industry, but when asked about diversity and industry demographics, most female respondents claimed that there needs to be more women in the industry. They directly blamed the industry for maintaining the status quo by favouring males and perpetuating sexist practices that are considered part of a 'boys only' club, and the relegation of women to roles such as 'Booth Bimbos'. Booth Bimbos is a reference to attractive female models that are hired to give presentations at trade shows where the audience is predominantly male. This practice continues to shun females from participating in the industry and allows the repetitive misogynistic practices in game character creation, whereby females are represented solely for the pleasure of the heterosexual male audience.



Figure 7- Gender Demographics (info from Workforce Diversity Study (2005)

When looking at the demographics of sexual orientation in the workforce, one begins to get the picture of why the representation of AAA gaming characters is heavily skewed to favour white heterosexual males. Heterosexuals make up 92% of the respondents. This places members of the LGBTQ community at a great disadvantage of being fairly represented in the industry, both in games and in the company structure. The LGBTQ respondents were as follows: Gay/lesbian (2.7%), Bisexual (2.7%), Transgender (0.96%), and declined to answer (2.5%). Most LGBTQ individuals feel that the industry is not currently diverse and feel that the only way to make it so is to have LGBTQ individuals actively breaking through the industry parameters to be able to voice their opinions.



Figure 8- Sexual Orientation/Transgender Demographics (info from Workforce Diversity

#### **Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS) (2014): Demographics**

In order to gain a more systematic approach to how we understand game developers worldwide, the IGDA decided to take a different method in how it conducts its 'Quality of Life' survey in order to help prioritize its advocacy efforts and initiatives. Thus, in 2014 they launched the new Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS) in partnership with Western University in Ontario, TÉLUQ in Quebec and M2 Research and the Georgia Institute of Technology. The survey was open to anyone involved in the videogame industry in both a professional and academic setting. Kate Edwards, Executive Director of the IGDA writes:

Moving forward, the DSS will serve as the IGDA's core annual method by which we inform ourselves and the industry about the critical questions around developers' satisfaction. For the sake of the long-term health of our industry, we will continue to strive to discern the demographic composition of game developers worldwide and tap into their knowledge, experiences and opinions on their well being and on the state of the industry (IGDA DSS Summary Report).

The DSS was opened for feedback from March 17, 2014 till April 28, 2014 and garnered 2,202 responses. Kate Edwards, Johanna Weststar, Wanda Meloni, Celia Pearce, and Marie-Josée Legault authored the study.

For the sake of this research, I will only focus on the issues that pertain directly to issues of diversity in the workplace, looking at categories such as gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. The diversity of the demographic makeup of the industry seems to have increased slightly over the past 10 years since the 2005 study, yet it still needs much more growth. The breakdown of the survey shows

that the majorities of the respondents are male (76%), between the ages of 30-35 and live in North America. To get a clear understanding of the demographic breakdown, the IGDA divided each signifier into a summarized snapshot of the industry.

#### Gender

In terms of gender formation, the survey shows that 76% of the respondents identified their gender as male, with 22% identifying as female. Only 0.5% of the respondents identified as male-to-female transgender, and 0.2% as female-to-male transgender. An additional 1.2% selected "other" as their response to this question.

These numbers show a significant change when it comes to the makeup of female developers compared to the IGDA's 2005 Diversity Survey, in which women made up 11.5% of the sample. Although it is important to note that 12% of the respondents identifying as students, 30% identified as female. This could imply that gaming educational programs are making a good effort in attracting females to their programs. This comes as a welcomed statistic for the anticipation of greater gender distribution in the industry in the coming years.

#### **Race and Ethnicity**

When looking at demographics of race or ethnicity, there is less of an increase in diversity from previous studies. The overwhelming majority identified as Caucasian at 79%. The second highest group identified as Hispanic/Latino (8.2%) with East/South-East Asian (7.5%) coming in third. Surprisingly, Africans and African Americans only comprised 2.5% of respondents, despite North America having the largest collection of developers globally, and African Americans representing the largest ethnic minority group. This represents a slight overall increase in ethnic diversity since the 2005 Diversity Survey, where Hispanic/Latino made the largest gain by jumping up from 2.5 %.

#### Age

The age survey received the largest range of sample responses ranging from 14 to 82 years old. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of respondents were in the 30-35 year range making up 27% of the sample, virtually unchanged from previous recordings. The second largest age group was 25-29, representing 25% of the respondents in the survey, probably due to an increase in independent and indie developers. The third largest age group was made up of 35-39 year olds at 17%.

#### **Sexual Orientation**

In regards to sexual orientation, the numbers also seem to have remained stagnant over the last decade with 2.8% as homosexual, virtually unchanged from the number of homosexual respondents in 2005 with 2.7%. There seemed to be a slight increase of individuals who opted for the 'other' category, with 4.7% compared to 2.5% in 2005, compromising of individuals who may identity as asexual, pansexual or felt the need to decline to answer the question due to privacy or relevance. The only group that saw a significant increase in visibility was individuals identifying as bisexual, up to 6.5% from 2.7% in 2005. Increase in individuals identifying as 'Other' and 'Bisexual' have affected the number respondents identifying as heterosexual, decreasing it to 86% from 92% in 2005. These numbers may reflect advancements in LGBTQ rights over the past decade, especially in North America, with acceptance of this community growing increasingly year after year.



Figure 9- Sexual Orientation Demographics from DDS (2014) (Info from © 2014, IGDA)

#### Developer Satisfaction Survey (DSS) (2014): Diversity & Discrimination

As previous IGDA studies have done before, they present a section of their survey that analyses the responses to questions pertaining to the amount of diversity in the industry and their overall satisfaction with the status quo. They also present the participants with questions on personal experiences revolving around issues of discrimination either in the workplace or during the hiring process. Looking at these results gives a direct insight into the structure the videogame industry in its application of diversity hiring. This section will be divided into two parts: the first focusing on the attitudes of employees towards diversity in the workplace and the second concentrating on the ways in which participants have either experiences discrimination towards themselves or others.

#### Attitudes regarding diversity

In order to be clear on the meaning of diversity for the purpose of the study, the survey

contained a preamble explaining that it meant the differentiation between individuals based on age, ethnicity, gender, physical ability, race and sexual orientation. The majority of respondents felt that diversity in the workplace—and the industry as a whole an important aspect to game creation—with 75% claiming that diversity was 'very or somewhat important' in the workplace, and 79% feeling it was 'very or somewhat important' for the industry.

In regards to the advancement of diversity in the industry, the surveyed results seemed to be more in conflict with one another. Respondents who felt that the game industry has increased in diversity over the past two years was at 34%, compared to 28% of respondents claiming that it had remained the same. About another third (35%) indicated that they were unsure if diversity had increased, while only 3% have said that it had decreased. These figures show that over half of the participants (67%) did not see a positive trajectory to diversity inclusion in the industry over the past couple of years. The most positive inclusion in the past decade has to be the modest gains made by women in their representation in the workforce. Similarly, ethnic minorities have made less significant advancements, in their presence in the videogame industry.

Based on the research conducted, it is clear that some AAA companies have begun to take notice of the benefits of workplace diversity in the industry. Yet they need to do more work to reach a state that is much more equal and representative of the current population, especially in North America. For instance, a third (33%) of surveyed participants maintained to having no knowledge of diversity programs within their companies, with another astonishing third (29%) claiming that their employers have no diversity programs whatsoever. These numbers are quite significant when compared to respondents that were aware of diversity programs or partnerships to foster diversity (between 10-20%).

When discussing industry-hiring practices, the consensus was split in half when reporting on equal opportunity. Less than half (46.5%) of the participants reported an equal opportunity hiring policy. About 40% claimed that their company does not consider diversity in their hiring process, while another 40% remained neutral on the question being asked.

#### Discrimination

Companies in the videogame industry have made an effort over the past decade to address issues of discrimination in the workplace by setting up certain policies. Yet they have failed considerably in informing their employees of such policies and the procedures required to file complaints. For instance, about only half of the respondents (55%) in the survey reported their company having a discrimination policy in place, with 48% reporting a sexual harassment policy. Of these participants, 30% claimed that their company actually had a complaint procedure and only 28% said that there is a disciplinary process in place. Only about a third of participants felt that policies in place we adequately enforced, while about a quarter were completely unaware of a policy in place.

In order to get personalized responses to specific cases of discrimination in the workplace, the IGDA DSS asked two questions and aggregated their results.

The two questions were:

"Have you perceived inequity towards YOURSELF (Figure 18) or towards OTHERS (Figure 19) on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, ability, or sexual persuasion in any of the following areas?" The majority of respondents (60% and 55%, respectively) answered

"None" to both questions. However, of those who identified forms of discrimination, 20% of respondents reported *observing* both social/interpersonal discrimination and microaggression, while 15% and 14%, respectively, reported experiencing these discriminatory behaviors firsthand (IGDA DSS, 2014).

Looking at both the Exploration of Workforce Diversity (2005) and Developer Satisfactions (2014) surveys gives an understanding into the demographics makeup of the AAA videogame industry. It illustrates the attitudes and thoughts videogame developers have about working in the industry and the forms of systemic discrimination that exists within it. By examining areas such as gender, age, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, it allows for an exploration of the direct factors that play into the creation of characters and games. In the next section, I will examine the prevalence of characters and their representations based upon the same factors described in both studies. In doing so, I aim to observe the relationship between demographic makeup of the AAA industry and the characters they produce.

#### Characters

Looking at the most recent and comprehensive studies undertaken to illustrate the lack of diversity in characters in videogames, it can be seen that in relation to the general population, identity representation in videogames in vastly underrepresented. Since the vast majority of games are created within and for the American market, it is vital to study the representations and demographics of the market in the United States. The study was undertaken by Dmitri Williams (University of Southern California), Nicole Martins (Indiana University), Mia Consalvo (Ohio University), and James D. Ivory (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University) and published in New Media & Society in 2009. The large-scale content analysis of characters in videogames was used to answer three research questions that sought out to address issues of representation amongst gender, race, and age in comparison to the U.S. population. To obtain a clear understanding of mainstream industry dynamics, their sample included 150 games between March 2005 and February 2006 (For relative purposes, it was beneficial to use a study that obtained data from the same time the IGDA developed their workforce diversity study) across nine platforms including: Xbox 360, Xbox, PlayStation 2 (PS2), PlayStation (PS), Nintendo GameCube, PlayStation Portable (PSP), Nintendo Gameboy Advance (GBA), Nintendo Dual Screen (DS), and PC.

The titles used constituted for 95 percent of all game sales on the chosen platforms within the sampling period, giving the researchers the ability to have a highly representative framework for the gaming universe created that year. Sales figures were used to determine the relative use and popularity of the games. These figures were then used to create a weighting system based on the number of copies each game sold, giving a greater weight to games with higher purchase than those with lower ones. In doing so, it gave the researchers a stronger understanding of the types of games actually played and purchased. The sample of games included 8572 characters, each with a specific unit and code- to determine their statues as wither primary (player-controlled) or secondary (computer-controlled). If the game contained a list of primary characters from which the player could choose from, the character was just at random to give all genders, ethnicities and age groups an equal opportunity to be selected. The characters were also coded on variables based on race, gender, and age. Out of the 8572 characters studied, only 4966 were used for this particular study due to their representations as human characters and not non-human or quasi-human. To be able to base their findings against the general population, they collected U.S. census data and from special reports derived from the 2000 census.

#### Gender

The first facet studied was the comparison in gender representation. As presented in the 2014 IGDA DSS survey earlier, the overall difference in character representation was 76/22 percent between males and females respectively. This is a massive disparity when compared to the gender distribution in the actual population, which is 50.9 percent for males and 49.1 percent for females. This shows that females were underrepresented by 34.33 percent. This figure is more enhanced when taking a look at their roles in the game. Females were generally represented as secondary characters in games—meaning they are not controlled by the player—giving male characters the role of primary action takers in videogames. The graph below gives a visual percentage representation of the primary and secondary breakdown of characters between males and females.

*Mis/Represent: Women and Visible Minority Representation in Videogames* 



Figure 10- Primary & Secondary Character Distribution between Genders (Source: Info taken from IGDA DDS 2014 and 2009 Character study)

Race

The second area of study focused on the representation of race in videogames in comparison to the general population. In proportional representation to their actual numbers in population, the researchers displayed their findings based on the percentage each group was underrepresented in a videogame compared to their numbers in the U.S. population. The only two groups that were overrepresented were Whites and Asians with 6.59 percent and 25.75 percent respectively. Every other group examined was underrepresented, obviously some more than others. The numbers are as follows: Blacks (12.68%), Hispanics (78.32%), Biracial (42.08%), and Native American (0.9%). Representations of South Asian and Middle Eastern decent were not visible. Again when taking into consideration the appearance of a character in a primary role, the gap begins to widen further. White playable characters account for 84.95 percent of all primary characters. This is a wide lead in comparison to Blacks (9.67%), Biracial (3.69%), and Asians (1.69%). Hispanics and Native Americans were not represented as primary characters in any of the games studied and merely existed as secondary characters. The graph below demonstrates the over-representation and underrepresentation of individuals by race.



Figure 11- Race Distribution of Characters vs. U.S. Census by Percentage (Source: Info taken from Character study)

#### Age

The third and final section looked at the differences in age representation. It is safe to assume that most games represent the adult population at a much higher frequency than that of other age groups. Adults appear in videogames 86.88 percent of the time, which is an over-representation by 47.33 percent, compared to their actual numbers in society. Teens seem to be represented fairly equal to their numbers in the population, leaving children and the elderly being under-represented. These numbers change once again when examining their roles in gameplay. Both children and teens' percentage points rise when taking into consideration their role are primary characters, going up 8.9 percent and 13.3 percent each. As expected, the numbers for the elderly drop 1.34 percent. In a somewhat surprising turn of events, adult numbers drop to 76.5 percent. Although due to the vast amount of secondary and "foil" characters-which support almost every game- adults make up a large percentage of those numbers, making secondary representation even less representative. The graph below shows the over-representation and under-representation by age.



Figure 12- Age Distribution of Characters vs. U.S. Census by Percentage (Source: Info taken from Character study)

The study conducted highlights the systematic representation of videogame characters in the largely mainstream game creation structure. The results show that white, male adults are over-represented as characters in videogames in comparison to the actual U.S. population, which mimics the results found in the IGDA's study of workforce diversity. Due to this over-representation, other groups are vastly under-represented, with females lacking the most. Other groups being highly misrepresented are Hispanics, Native Americans, children and the elderly. This form of under-representation may be the direct cause for the perpetual cycle of misinformation and representation by the gaming industry. For instance, Latinos/Hispanics may become disillusioned by their representation in videogames leading them to grow less interested in fields that lend themselves to game creation such as computer science—preventing them from wanting to become game developers

themselves—reinforcing the current standard of white male domination of the industry and its production of trope characters. This may be even more crucial to representations of children in games. With a growing population of digital natives and game-players, children continue to make up a larger portion of game players each year. Without characters that adequately represent either themselves as children or a particular ethnic group, their orientation to others is informed.

The disproportionate representation of the general population in relation to game characters can also be directly attributed to the drive for consumer demand, which creates the cycle, specifically in regards to gender. The likelihood of males developing an interest in and becoming game developers is higher than those of females—due to their extreme under-representation—maintaining the role of males in game character creation. It can be supported that developer demographics, along with the perceived notions about who game players are amongst marketers, continues to create an imbalanced approach in terms of proportional representation in videogames. Due to the stereotypical nature of mainstream marketing to label game players as young, white males who seek to become powerful white adults seems to be a key driver behind the creation process. From this skewed perspective, the gaming industry leaves a large demographic untapped and a whole aspect of gaming is left untethered. Female game players make up about 38 percent of the market, yet only represent 15 percent of characters, making them an extremely undeserved demographic. In the case for Latino/Hispanic players, who play games more per day on average that their White counterparts, and who make up almost 13 percent of the population, are only represented as 2 percent of characters. In doing so, developers and business people alike, avoid a large section of their market. Diversity in the industry is important in order to create positive authentic representations of characters that are not based on stereotypes. Having a greater variety of games and characters will attract a wider and more engaged audience, allowing different voices in society to contribute to flourishing medium. It becomes beneficial for the producer and consumer as both will be pleased by the returns and positive influence generated within the videogame industry. By attracting to a larger demographic, the AAA industry will be able to make larger financial gains through its far-reaching appeal. In turn, the consumer will be more engaged in stories and characters that relate to their personal identity, possibly fueling a greater interest in the medium as both a gamer and developer.

Sherif Taalab

Chapter 5

# **Moving Forward**

### **Chapter Five – Moving Forward**

#### Indie Developers & Social Awareness

Online digital gaming, along with the emergence of indie game makers, has reached new heights within the last decade. With the availability of tools and the ease it has created in making games, some gamers have taken it upon themselves to fabricate a new culture of gaming; one that vehemently distances itself from the hegemony created by AAA sellers through modes of patriarchy, domination, and exclusion. As indie filmmakers have done in the past, by separating from the ideals and standards portrayed by Hollywood, gamers today are creating visual informative games that attempt to educate and make relations to their underrepresented audience, namely minorities.

The trend seems to be rising when discussing developers' desires to work for independent or large AAA studios. Based on the over 2,000 responses gathered from IGDA's DSS of 2014, 49% of respondents claimed they would rather work for an independent studio, compared to the 36% who preferred working in a AAA organization.

A clear indication of the advancement for social awareness, especially towards minority groups and women, are the numerous initiatives taken by indie gamers to break down boundaries, creating games that tackle hard issues for the very people affected by them. The Games for Change Festival that began in 2004, is a great example. "Games for Change" is a non-profit organization that facilitates the creation of games for humanitarian and educational purposes. Bringing together individuals from multiple fields including government, media, academia, gaming, and the arts, it

provides an open platform to exchange ideas and foster new projects. They provide advocacy for social gaming and an opportunity to engage the public in the debate of what they deem important. In doing so, they inspire and campaign adoption of policies by government agencies and stimulate private investments into social change. During the Games for Change Festival of 2008, one game in particular stood out as a prime example of how a social game can affect public inquiry into a social issue. I Can End Deportation (ICED) was created by youth at the international human rights organization "Breakthrough", highlighting the participatory nature of new gaming strategies. The gameplay revolves around the real-life experience of five immigrants, who fall out of the U.S. immigration system. Speaking about the game, Mallika Dutt, one of the creators, said the game was created to "reframe the immigration debate, and to create an immigration policy that respects due process" (Davies 2008, 2). In three months time, the game was downloaded more than 100,000 times. This example points to the advocacy roles that participatory games are beginning to play. It also illustrates how games can play a central role in the discussion of grave social issues affecting society at the time—considering the dismal shape the U.S. immigration system was in 2008—and how in recent years, major reforms continue to be revised and debated in Washington. Although, it continues to be a challenge for games to serve as "serious" modes of social change, as most videogames are still met with skepticism. Most educators have not yet embraced the idea that gaming, especially digital gaming and online social interactions, can bring about positive social effects. Designers also acknowledge that measuring the ability for games to bring about tangible change, in the form of social movements and real-world organizing is difficult. Game designer Eric Zimmerman argues that "if we are to understand the effects of social gaming, we must not look at
them as simple cause and effect, rather as a means of learning about processes and systems to understanding social and political realities" (Davies 2008, 2). For instance, a game like *PeaceMaker*, developed in 2006, posits players as either the Israeli prime minister or Palestinian president to try and bring about Middle East peace. Here an individual is required to steer through the complex political system and historic relationship between these two important nations that acquire much global media attention. Education and game scholar James Paul Gee states that:

Games are arch problem solving spaces; games are a process of continuous assessment when you're solving problems...what we are doing in games is giving people new tools that will allow them to surmise new possibilities. (Davies 2008, 3)

By approaching videogames as popular culture artifacts, some indie developers reflect contemporary realities by tackling certain anxieties and modes of representation. Alongside indie gamers and smaller studios attempting to develop more inclusive games, social activists have also begun to voice their opinions on the current state of the videogame industry. One of the most notable and vocal media critics today is Anita Sarkeesian. Her fight for equal and positive representation of women in current videogames has garnered a massive media following. As the director of Feminist Frequency, Anita works with a team to develop reports, videos and talks aimed at highlighting misogyny and harassment in the gaming industry and community towards females and female characters. Launched in 2012, *Tropes vs. Women in Videogames* project series was released online to both positive reviews and an extremely negative backlash. Neil Druckmann, Writer and Creative Director of games such as *The Last of Us* and *Uncharted 4* said of the series: Feminist Frequency's Tropes vs. Women in Videogames series has become essential viewing for developers. The videos have been instrumental in affecting an industry-wide discussion about the representation of women in games. The series was influential in putting me on a path to create and write stronger, more complex female characters. (Feminist Frequency Annual Report 2014, 6)

Even though some developers have expressed satisfaction with the push from female critics and developers for stronger female characters in games, many in the gamer community responded exceedingly negatively with the controversy centered around the Twitter hashtag #GamerGate. Targeted primarily towards game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, along with Sarkeesian and game journalist Leigh Alexander, the controversy surrounded notions of sexism in videogame culture and how women continue to be subjected to a hate campaign of misogynistic attacks. Initially generated on Twitter with the use of the hashtag #GamerGate, it later spread throughout the web on online forums such as Reddit and 4Chan, where the largely anonymous violence continues. The abuse included doxxing (researching and broadcasting of personally identifiable information about an individual online) and threats of rape and death, including one threat of a mass shooting at Utah State University where Sarkeesian was scheduled to speak. The *GamerGate* controversy continues at the time of writing and has been framed as a culture war over gamer identity, gaming culture diversification and the blatant attack on women.

#### Expert Interviews: Toronto Indie Developers

The purpose of my interviews with indie game developers was to understand the opinions surrounding notions of minority representation in videogames in the Toronto indie and DIY gamemaking scene. The questions asked and information collected is supplemental to my research surrounding the issue of AAA gaming representation.

I have conducted five separate interviews with independent game developers who mostly work out of the Bento Miso Studio. Bento Miso is a membership-based collaborative workspace for independent designers, developers and game-makers based in Toronto, Canada. Bento Miso hosts Dames Making Games (DMG), a network known for working towards diversity in games. I acknowledge that my interview sample pool is small, taking into consideration only a portion of the community. The five participants involved were selected for a range of differing backgrounds and cultures, and comprised of three men, two women, including White, Middle Eastern, Asian, LGBTQ, and heterosexual identities. The intent was to get differing points of view from different members of game culture. Despite talking to individuals from a variety of cultural, gender, and sexual backgrounds, answers to the questions seemed to follow the same line of conversation and extremely similar answers. What follows is a summary of the discussions. For full list of questions, please refer to Appendix A.

When asked about the decisions made in game design and if they personally take into account diversity when creating characters, all of the developers said yes. They all consider the idea of having a plurality of characters as beneficial to the gaming experience with the potential to reach a wider audience. Some create characters that don't have specific ethnic or gendered features as a means of moving beyond typical characteristic modes and making it accessible to anyone who wishes to play with the character. One participant, commented on her personal awareness during character creation, which I found to resonate amongst other participants as well:

I don't want to make just another action hero...I wanted to make sure that it's multicultural and that characters are diverse. I actually have a character in my videogame who is a single mom (Anonymous, Personal interviews, 2014).

Most interviewees believe that the main reason AAA gaming studios tend not to venture into that specific territory is as a precaution against commercial risk. They believe that with the lack of diversity in the industry along with the amount of money that goes into creating a game causes larger studios to be wary of failing on their investment and upsetting shareholders. They are simply not allowed the luxury of experimentation and possible failure of a game. In quite a lot of instances, developers in the studios wish to explore different narratives but are stifled by producers. In some cases such as the Ubisoft offices in Montreal, seasoned designers are given more leeway in being able to create differing characters and storylines, but that is an exception. The notion of diversity and inclusion, especially female participation, is becoming a hot topic issue that the industry will have to appease at some point.

Most interviewees believed that the current videogame industry is moving in a more positive direction when it comes to representation, although it still has a long way to go. The two main reasons given for the slow pace of the industry to catch up to other forms of media (i.e. television and film) is due to its maturity and high level of induction. The consumer videogame industry is fairly young compared to film and television, which is almost a century old. Due to its age, the videogame industry has not yet had the time to grow and mature into a medium that is capable of expressing an array of storylines and characters as other media outlets. Some of the developers interviewed believed that the lack of induction is because of the high level of skill required to not only make games, but to play them. Many people who did not have the luxury of owning gaming consoles as children are not familiar with the mechanics of gameplay and sophistication of navigating a virtual space. Due to gaming's expensive past, it was predominantly catered to a White privileged group of individuals who pioneered the movement. As games and gaming culture become more engrained in society, and as the price of games and their availability becomes more prevalent, the direction will begin to shift.

Participants expressed the need for the Canadian game market to better represent the diversity that is Canadian society, but acknowledged that it is not so simple since they mostly cater to a global audience. However they do believe that the indie gaming industry is doing a good job in their representations, particularly in the Toronto scene. All participants have expressed their delight in seeing a wide range of games that not only represent different background, sexualities, and genders, but also personal storylines and progressive narratives. Although, they believe that there is not sufficient demand from the public for change to occur on a larger scale. They believe, as with other forms of media in the past, the indie market must pave the way for progression and with its relative success, larger studios will look to successful indie games and start to incorporate those narratives and characters into their own games.

It's the indie influence...If creating a game about queer issues and its successful, the AAA company will look at it and let devs (developers) create those games (Anonymous, Personal interviews, 2014).

Participants were split on the issue on which faction, the producers or the audience, carries more responsibility in having positive portrayals of minorities in games. Some believed that the industry must better represent the widening population before a public outcry. Others felt that as long as current exclusionary games are selling, there is no need to change the modes of representation, thus it is up to the consumer to demand it.

The last series of questions garnered extremely similar results. They felt that a sort of "vicious circle" that exists in the gaming industry, whereby studios claim to portray the current social fabric, and by buying those games and feeding into those narratives, society is molds and is molded by the images being portrayed. One of participants interviewed claimed:

You're going to have blockbuster entertainment [in regards to videogames] that is informed by the market that they are targeting and the target market is informed by the content that they are consuming. It's really a chicken and the egg problem (Anonymous, Personal interviews, 2014).

To be able to move away from the typical character and narrative tropes, consumers must begin to change the ways they perceive the gaming experience and society. Especially now with children having immediate access to digital spaces from a young age, it is imperative for the industry to change its current status to be able to positively affect society's social formations. To be able to effectively change the industry, a wider range of people must be able to enter the gaming community and place their voices from within. In doing so, they will have a variety of social representations that are not reliant on common stereotypical imagery.

### **Bridging the Gap: Producers & Consumers**

By providing a space and "opportunities to research audiences, users, and contexts of reception and to deploy a discourse of audience empowerment, meaning-making, and identity performance" (Ross 2012, 158), game character creation can begin to reflect the real world demographics lived by many. This is the mindset in which many indie game-makers have taken in their approach to communicating meaning to their audience, which highlights the emergence of "prosumers" and "produsers". That is to say, the gap between the individuals who create media and the participants or ones who consume it, has been significantly diminishing over the past decade. The creative process has been made more democratic and efficient by taking the audiences' perspective into consideration, while also supplying the tools necessary for "audience" members to be able to create their own games and outreach strategies.

Both producers and audiences are now mutually exclusive in a social context, only bridged through the former's use of purposive techniques whereby observed acts of consumption substantiate a past audience and/or sample group stand in for a putative future audience (Ross 2012, 161).

Thereby the capacity of production and observation or reception exists in an intermediate space for individuals, only to be extracted through the uninterrupted participation of the audience members in a closed system. New game creation methods become a cultural extension driven by the

audience, in a circular communicative realm of ideas. Producers reflexivity become entwined with their audiences' perspectives on cultural ideas, thinking about media that they themselves would like to consume, deeming their audience to being viewers 'just like them'—since those very producers are currently socialized within the groups for which their products are created. An example of how a shift in ideology has been achieved is a game created by Afkar Media titled Under Siege. The developers of the game attempt to shed light on the inequalities that occurs when representing Muslim communities in games by celebrating the heroism of the anti-Zionist movement during the events of the Second Intifada between 1999-2002. As much as this can be viewed as a piece of propaganda, it can also be seen as a form of virtual resistance to a real world issue. Where games celebrating American military action and dominance are considered simple gameplay, it is interesting to see the discrepancies between these two forms of expression. In this sense, "...videogames have the power to become an empowering device, in the sense that people can make their own culture from a range of commodities granted to them by culture industries (Cassar 2013, 347). Given the vast reach of online games, these notions are not bound by location to a certain place or society, but are able to reach a much larger community of like-minded thinkers who can influence and challenge long held cultural beliefs. It creates social situations described by Meyrowitz as "information systems", a given pattern of access to social information, a given pattern of access to the behavior of other people (Meyrowitz 1985, 37).

There is an effort amongst indie developers to break stereotypical imagery and dominant tropes that are projected by the larger gaming industry. Having the ability to create based on their own experiences and identity; they are starting a dialogue about the ways in which the "norm" can be tackled.

To see the merits of equal representation in the market, some indie game developers, like filmmakers before them, have taken it upon themselves to portray positive identity representations. By means of social media and debates, critics of AAA have gained traction in bringing forth concerns of the consumer to the public domain and igniting a marginalized discussion. The ways in which these voices have seeped through the boundaries of the AAA industry with developers and gamers slowly accepting new forms of expression are emerging. To break the cycle of production, the push for equal representation must not simply start and stop in indie gaming, but must challenge the dominant forces of industry giants in their distribution of cultural artifacts. In the next chapter, I will discuss the process by which I am personally attempting to raise awareness to the issue of minority representation. My project is another voice in the current chorus of pushback from the prosumer population to change the status quo.

Sherif Taalab

Chapter 6

**Thesis Project** 

# **Chapter Six – Thesis Project**

## **Paper Prototype**

In an effort to raise awareness about, and subvert, the social and cultural issues discussed in this paper, I attempted to create a tool that played upon typical avatar creation models. *Mis/Represent* was developed as a social experience to highlight long held stereotypical placement of minority groups and women in videogames. I wanted to give individuals the ability to view the negative effects associated with placing stereotypical imagery to a certain group of people. To embark on such a project, I needed to get an understanding of the different aspects that are represented in gaming and ones that are overlooked. My research focused on the top selling games of 2013, studying the attributes of the major protagonists and player-controlled characters in those games. Taking into consideration signifying aspects of an individual's identity witnessed in videogames and society, I created nine sections of choices to start:

- Ethnicity
- Physical ability
- Age
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Body type
- Religious affiliation
- Level of education
- Profession

Each of these sections was weighed based on their prominence within a current AAA videogame, giving certain sections such as gender, body type, sexual orientation and ethnicity higher score points as opposed to level of education or religious affiliation. That means that more

importance was given to traits that play a greater role in the process of game character creation. Each one of these signifying decks contained a variety of selections to choose from, fitting each category respectively. Following the same logic as before, each choice in the deck had a different score grade based on its prevalence in a top game in 2013. For instance, since males made up about 89% percent of character protagonists compared to 11% for female characters, the score for the male choice card reflected a 90% percent



Figure 13- Peer playing initial paper game

increase from that of the female choice card. I aimed to directly relate the findings of the IGDA study into the demographic makeup and attitudes of the industry into the points awarded. The initial user testing was conducted amongst six of my peers, along with my primary advisor, to positive responses. After the initial user testing, I decided to create my second iteration of the paper prototype using a greater number of choice options within each category. Having a larger source of choices brings in notions of a decentered, multi-faceted identity as it relates to works of Lacan and Kristeva. The second paper prototype was created for the first thesis colloquium held at the Graduate Gallery at OCAD University. This allowed for other participants to interact with the experience and give feedback as how they believe it may move forward.



Figure 14- Upgraded card deck (Version 2)

The feedback was very constructive in allowing me to think about the next stage of the project, transferring from the physical to the digital sphere. Much of the feedback revolved around the

notions of bringing the experience closer to one that resembles a game, where the process is not as confined. Some of the participants felt that the experience might reiterate the reproduction of offensive representations currently displayed in AAA videogames, allowing little room for selfreflection. In order for me to be able to realize an experience that was critical of the industry, without being offensive, I needed to find a more productive way of increasing the engagement with the political and social discourse. The intent of the exercise needed to be clearer to the audience in order for it to play a positive role in its demonstration of information. Another aspect was the idea of privacy when making selections based on personal information. If this experience tool is to be presented in a public space, some may feel uneasy about their choices when someone else is lurking behind them. Keeping in mind the response I received I starting thinking about the next steps.

To address the question of privacy, I thought of creating a "privacy booth", one that would resembles the booths located at voting stations, in order for participants to feel more comfortable with their choices. Attempting to relate the structure of the booth back into notions of media, I researched images of 19<sup>th</sup> Century cameras and 20<sup>th</sup> Century tube televisions. This would tie into the concept of representation in media through the ages. I also wanted the booth to be completely foldable and lightweight, in an effort to make it easy to transport and set-up at different locations. For my initial construction, I decided to create the structure out of cardboard for its efficiency and low-cost.

Together with completing the privacy booth, I needed to begin to think about the ways I was going to implement my tool into the digital sphere, incorporating the feedback given to me. In order to get a stronger understanding on what it was I was going to create, the direction forward, and

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for whom, I decided to use POEMS (people, objects, environment, messages, services) (Kumar and Whitney, 2003).



Figure 15- P.O.E.M.S



Figure 16- Design Layout

Conducting the exercise allowed me to explore my options in the ways I could take the digital screen-based application. Since I was discussing issues around character representation in videogames, the most relevant age demographic would be individuals who grew up in the time when videogames were emerging, placing them from the early 1980's till now. It may also be interesting for individuals who have children and are interested in the types of games they play. As for all other aspects, it would really be an open platform for most people to be able to explore. I wanted to be sure to create a platform that could be relatable to casual and hardcore gamers alike. Taking into consideration the feedback, I decided to make a menu that would resemble a game, going through different "stages" of choices in the creation of an avatar. Once all personal attributes have been chosen, the player would receive an in-game character representation of how they would be projected in a top videogame in 2013. In doing so, I not only reflected upon the entrenched stereotypical representations placed upon visible minorities and women currently in the AAA videogame industry, but also the social semiotic underpinnings found in Mulvey's gaze theory and Barthes's notions of the modern myth. By perpetuating the clichéd images given to visible minorities and women in the industry, I was attempting to satire the idea of the modern myth by blatantly displaying its semiotic framework, so it is no longer neutral, but socially and culturally charged. Once the character is given, the users would then be mapped onto a visual graph as a demonstrative comparison of their representation amongst everyone else that has played the game. This graph further establishes notions of social configurations relating back to Tajfel's Social Identity theory, visualizing group dynamics between what constitutes "us" and "them". The "us" refers to groups of individuals that feel connected through a common trait, such as ethnicity or gender, with "them" being anyone else who

does not fit into the identifying marker that surrounds that specific group. It is important for the player to see such a display in order for them to realize the skewed nature of the AAA industry and the ways in which certain groups of people are presented more favourably than others. After the exercise has been completed, the participants would be given the options of adding their name to an open letter to the AAA videogame industry about their game character creation practices. This would be a concentrated effort to pressure the industry to make more of an effort in creating a wide range of character representations.



Figure 17- Initial Rendering for Home Screen



## **Digital Prototype: Phase One**

To be able to translate from the physical to the digital, I decided to use Unity, a game creation platform. The reason I chose Unity was to not only be able to use a program that many indie game developers use to create their own games, but to mimic a smooth, game-like experience. To achieve the effect of smooth transitions from one selection screen to another, I took the decision to place all the screens on one open plane, having only the camera position dictate which menu the player lands on. In order to get the point system to work, along with the creation of an image avatar for each player, it was required to be able to code every selection. The coding language I chose to work with was C#. In the next set of images, I show the initial layout of the screens on Unity in edit



Figure 19- Initial Digital Prototype for Home Screen

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Figure 20- Initial Digital Prototype for Choice Screen



Figure 21- Initial Digital Prototype for Score Screen

After another round of user testing amongst peers and advisors, including a second thesis expose where I demonstrated my work thus far, more constructive feedback emerged. The integration of the characters back into the gaming experience was an important aspect to consider, possibly through aspirational modeling. Drawing on the same frameworks in avatar character creation, some users believed that the inclusion of choice might benefit the project in moving away from the traditional constraints presented in the AAA videogame industry. One of the major points made was a perceived disconnect between the purpose behind the project and what was presented. Some participants did not fully grasp the purpose of the exercise by not having any indicators or information that supported the theory behind the practice. The second major opinion was to enhance the videogame component, with the addition of essential elements as intro screens or a demo, including improving the general layout and design. The feedback towards the aesthetics was expected, as it was simply a beta version of what I had envisioned, but it pushed me to think about the possible ways I was going to conceive the final design aesthetic. Would I go into the direction of a game, even though it is not entirely so, or would I be going more into a design experience tool? I was also confronted with the dilemma of building in game-like mechanics in play. I decided to reframe my narrative structure to figure out both the design direction and informational settings I would need to set up for the participant to have a proper framing of the exercise.

I resolved the issue of communication by directly incorporating it into the gameplay through informational screens. I chose to display a set of frames at the start of the exercise that would inform the participant of the direction of the project. The context into the industry was crucial for the player in order to obtain background information into the current state of the AAA videogame industry, especially towards character creation. I would then give them instructions as to what they must do in order to complete the exercise. Incorporating a gaming strategy into the exercise, I advised the player to do the exercise twice over. The first time they would enter their own personal attributes to obtain their actual current representation. Once they have completed the exercise, they would go second round entering information at will, either gain or lose points, getting different character results, to be able to see how other people doing the exercise may fair. The inclusion of fantasy was an issue that was brought up in the feedback, but one that I personally found to be inconsequential to the study I was conducting. My theory and practice revolved around notions of personal identity and the relationships formed in and around the characters that the AAA videogame industry creates. I am fully aware that some players choose other identities as a form of alternate expression, yet my focus was not on the subject of fantasy or Cosplay (a performance art in which individuals wear costumes and build accessories to represent a character or idea), but on the identification between an individual and their associated visual representation in a AAA videogame. For this reason, it was not of great concern for me to be able to create a platform that encompassed all the issues concerning character creation, as I have made effort to not include non-human, fantasy elements in my research.

For the interface, I wanted to create a display of multicultural faces in the background as an extension to the project. By incorporating real human faces as part of the experience, I though it would bring the real life connection into the gaming experience. This idea stemmed from my research into the ways in which individuals bring their real world lived experiences with them into the gaming world, in turn taking elements out of the gaming experience into their own lived experiences, as has been discussed with Huizinga's Magic Circle. The diverse set of faces would also

highlight the reason behind the project. Using images of celebrities as placeholders, I was going to later include images of my peers in the cohort to demonstrate the multi-cultural nature exhibited in one classroom in Toronto. Please see initial screens in Appendix C.

#### **Digital Prototype: Phase Two**

Due to the seriousness of the interface I developed, with the addition of real world elements, the ideals associated with gameplay were lost on the audience. It shifted from a place of satire to one that perpetuated the same stereotypical frameworks I was aiming to critique. As I proceeded with the design, it became clear that my message was still not being delivered to the viewer, often exciting feelings of offense and lack of openness from individuals. The images of the faces, coupled with the selection process, made the experience feel more like a census form that an engaging experience. The questions and feedback raised in the second thesis colloquium were still left unanswered. The experience mimicked existing forces in the industry and the message of satire was lost on the player, which caused concern as I was attempting to raise awareness to the issue of misrepresentation. Also, the idea of user engagement was not as effectively communicated as I had hoped. The process of selecting traits only to receive a representation that was deemed offensive and didn't excite the awareness I was aiming for. The issues received from the beginning of the project seemed to have remained, despite my efforts to change the narrative and attempts at greater gameplay mechanics.

After deliberations amongst my advisors and research into the initial aim of the project, I decided to tackle the issue with a different perspective and a greater freedom of expression on the part of the participant. Keeping the same mechanics I had developed, I shifted the discussion from

'victimization' to 'empowerment'. By reworking the narrative structure of the experience, I looked to modify and redistribute the power dynamics and cultural signs attached to visible minorities and women in the AAA videogame industry, using the works of De Lauretis and Butler as a guiding force. I started a new positive campaign to counteract the negative social backlash experienced by critics over the past couple of years. I chose to take the most recognizable and typifying gaming characters of all time, along with a few prominent characters from the last decade, and altered their appearances to resemble visible minorities and positive non-sexualized female roles. I wanted to show the player the possibilities and potential for positive change and rework dominant white, hetero-normative expectations that have been all too familiar with players over the past few decades. The participant would go through the same selection process, but rather than receiving a negative representation at the end, they would receive an artistic rendition of what may be possible. Since I am unable to speak for a majority of individual representations, I would then encourage the player to create a character of their own that they feel best represents their personal identity. They would be encouraged to share it through social networks and Twitter via the hashtag #MisrepresentME, once they have completed the digital process. This model would not only raise awareness to the issue of character representation and creation, but would enable the consumer to directly participate in the creation of their own videogame protagonist and share it with the community and industry.

Before I started working on the new design for the interface, I embarked on the process of recreating the videogame characters to resemble visible minorities and positive female representations. As expected, it was difficult for me as an individual artist to adequately represent a large majority of identity representations. Since I am only able to represent myself, the issue of relying on stereotypes to create alternate characters arose. Just as the AAA industry relied stereotypes to create their character, due to the lack of developer diversity, I was also presented with the same dilemma. How was I going to create as many positive representations without having to include imagery that many may see as culturally appropriated or even offensive? For instance, in an attempt to create a character with Jewish heritage, it was difficult to know what symbols and traits could be included without being comical and stereotypical, such as including a Kippah or the Star of David. To be able to resolve such an issue, I was to take a two-pronged approach. First, I would create renditions of characters that would resemble a certain ethnicity or religion, but try to leave room for interpretation. With that in mind, I started to sketch out fourteen main gaming characters:

- Cloud Strife: Final Fantasy
- Marcus Fenix: Gears of War
- Solid Snake: Metal Gear
- Mario: Super Mario
- Sepiroth: *Final Fantasy*
- Sam Fisher: *Splinter Cell*
- The Prince: *Prince of Persia*
- Link: The Legend of Zelda
- Lara Croft: *Tomb Raider*
- Cole MacGrath: Infamous
- Nathan Drake: Uncharted
- Master Chief: Halo
- Gordon Freeman: Half Life
- Ezio Auditore: Assassin's Creed

I chose these characters due to their prevalence and influence in the videogame world.

Selecting human-form characters from the past three decades of the industry, I wanted to be able to

have most people recognize at least a couple of the characters presented. The choices for the

characters were based upon multiple videogame websites' lists of the most influential gaming

characters of all time. These characters were an average between the top fifteen characters of five different lists. As can be seen, most of the characters chosen are male, for the exception of Lara Croft in Tomb Raider. It can also be witnessed that most of the characters are white heterosexual males in their 30's, with about three exceptions. This shows the relationship between the domination of the industry and the dissemination of knowledge in terms of character representations. This affects the ways in which women and visible minorities view the industry and themselves. By not having positive representations in the form of protagonists, women and visible minorities are excluded from the dialogue—subjugated to the stereotypical performer, supporting role, the victim—or even be completely erased from gameplay altogether. By redesigning these characters, it highlights the potential for change and takes a positive step forward in the inclusion of visible minorities and women to actively participate in the industry. I subverted the characters above to predominately present women in order to dispel notions of "girl games" and the divide between what participants in the videogame realm describe as hardcore gaming vs. casual gaming. I also wanted to emphasize Hardwood and Anderson's Ethnolinguistic Vitality Theory by allowing media to work as a mirror for existing social forces that play an active role in our society. To view the redrawn images, please refer to the Appendix D. The images shown are a sample of the larger pool of choices available for players.

## **Digital Prototype: Final & Exhibition**

By deciding to move into a positive direction of empowerment, some of my initial ideas for the design and environment surrounding the experience changed. Having a 'privacy screen' that blocked the vision of the surrounding audience, with exception of the player, was no longer

needed. I felt that the shift away from victimization,

removed the shame associated with choice selection. I want participants to feel proud of their choices and embrace the identity they feel best represents them. Having the more serious tone removed from the design interface was another challenge. To be able to directly relate it to the videogame industry, I took the initiative to remove any references to real life people. Doing so brought the experience out of a serious, and in turn presumed offensive, space and brought it to a more neutral ground. Instead of using real people's faces, I decided to use the original



Figure 22-Redesinged Lara Croft

images of the characters I chose to redraw, bringing in the videogame reference. It also tied the information given in the beginning of the exercise—informing the audience of the developer and character makeup of the industry—to the actual creations over the past three decades. Choosing lighter colours and a simplified menu selection, I wanted the experience to reflect the simplicity *Mis/Represent: Women and Visible Minority Representation in Videogames* 

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exhibited when selecting character traits in a conventional videogame setting.



Figure 23- Final Digital Prototype for Info Screen



Figure 24- Final Digital Prototype for Choice Screen



Figure 25- Final Digital Prototype for Character choice

able to have an endless reworking of diversified characters to accurately represent every participant in the experience. To be able to include a more participatory aspect to the experience, I will ask users to create their own characters and share them through a Twitter and Facebook campaign. Having the social media campaign as part of the experience becomes a necessity in being able to give authorship to the player. The gaming experience then serves as a tool for social awareness and an accelerator for the critique of the industry by allowing players to see the possibilities afforded to them. They must then be able to take the knowledge gained from the experience and apply it themselves, developing their own creation in an effort to take subjective control of their own identity. As part of the overall experience, the ability for the player to create or modify the existing artistic renditions will be available. The approach is non-digital, asking the players to create their own characters on drawing paper, or choose to redesign printed templates provided for them. The templates would be available at the exhibit, where drawing supplies will be provided to all participants to partake in the creation process. Once completed, they will be able to display them on a wall mount at the exhibit and share the image online through the social media campaign. The campaign is an additional voice to the conversation already taking place, surrounding issues of identity and representation in the AAA videogame industry. It becomes an effective way to distribute knowledge about the increasing interest in positive representations among players. The social order becomes reworked and the assertiveness by the minority becomes a powerful force in the shifting of the narrative. The expressive performance—of difference race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. and creating a personal attachment to an avatar—becomes a transgressed

form of participation where real world issues bleed into virtual spaces. In turn giving a voice to reject the status quo in the gaming world and pushing through the backlash to create meaningful multiple representations. In doing so, the dissemination of knowledge is



Figure 26- Participants using the digital application

transferred to the authors, giving them agency to portray their own identity, effectively reworking the signifying chain.

Since the projects debut at the OCADU Digital Futures Graduate Exhibition "Console//Console", it has received good reception from participants. Mis/Represent was set up by

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having one desk with an iMac for the digital portion of the project. Participants lined up by the tens, each watching the progress of the person before them. Right beside the digital application, I created a workspace of two tables, where the templates were places,



Figure 27- Children creating new characters

along with drawing and colouring materials for participant to be able to create their own versions of



Figure 28- Audience creating characters

the characters displayed. Having an analog system of creation, as opposed to attempting to create a digital character, extremely benefitted the experience as it made it accessible to everyone. The most engaged demographic were children and the elderly who found it very entertaining to be able to use the templates to create something new. Without the need for computer artistic skills, many participants were able to directly engage with the creation process.

It was very exiting to see the abundance of engagement

from youth since this new generation will the one creating games in the future, and if they

understand the need for greater representation, then it could spur a new wave in game creation in the

future. It was also very interesting to witness that most of the participants that were teenagers or older, who chose to create a new character, belonged to a minority status. This showed me that minority individuals felt the need to adequately represent themselves, due to the lack of representation currently exhibited. They would then be able to pin them up to a plastic board set up right next to the workspace, sharing their creations with the rest of the audience. Although, many of the participants opted to take their creations



Figure 29- Audience original character creation

home with them, rather than pinning it up to the board. Even though that was not the initial intent of the project, it was still moving to see people attached to their creations and wanting to keep it for themselves. Overall, the exhibition experience was a great success, with many audience members telling me that Mis/Represent was one of the best projects exhibited and that they thoroughly enjoyed taking part in the experience. Since the exhibition about a week ago, the online engagement has been minimal. Most of the posts currently exhibited on the Facebook and Twitter page are the ones I have been uploading periodically throughout the past few weeks. People are commenting and giving their input on the images and text being shown, but have not personally been creating their own characters. This may be due to the fact that the digital experience is not currently in an online platform. A large part of the experience was the digital interface, which informed and pushed participants to partake in the creation process. Thus, without a significant call to action, through a playful gaming experience, it seems as though people are not adequately engaged to be able to take the time to create their own characters. Moving toward a model for the masses, an online application should be installed to give participants the complete experience to be able to obtain awareness and create new renditions for the AAA industry to witness.

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Chapter 7 Conclusion

## Chapter Seven – Conclusion

## **Review & Reflections**

In order understand the ways in which visible minorities and women are represented in the AAA videogame industry, it was imperative to study psychosocial development as it directly relates to identity formation and perception, and observe cultural signs through a feminist semiotic analysis. From here I illustrated the ways in which social representations transgress into the virtual world of mass media, especially in relation to videogames, which has remained bound by hetero-normative frameworks that subjugated women and visible minorities to negative and stereotypical typifications. Researching the composition of characters in games and the demographic construction of the AAA videogame industry exemplified a direct correlation between the people creating the games and the characters represented. Having prevalence in the number of white, heterosexual males in the industry led to a standard and framework of character representation that benefitted one group's perspectives over and at the exclusion of the rest. To counterbalance this effort, some indie developers are making games that speak to their personal identity, creating storylines in games and characters that are progressive and inclusive. Videogame critics are also speaking out against the industry to pressure AAA companies to refrain from displaying homophobia, sexism and racism when developing new titles. In concert with these efforts, I created a project that allows players to choose from multiple identifying factors to refashion prominent videogame characters, laying bare the apparent stereotypes, and as to further the critique of the AAA industry. Further, I am encouraging others to join; players are able to recreate and share alternative, preferred hero images, and in the process, to help to raise awareness about the need for a positive change towards videogame creation.

The subject matter was chosen due to my personal relationship with the videogame industry. I have been an avid player since my youth and have always felt displaced from the representations given to me. I belong to a set of visible minorities, and my keen interest of analysis stemmed directly from that. Having played videogames since the early 90's, it was much a part of my visual media entertainment and education as film and television. As a form of cognitive social education, it was imperative for me to understand the ways in which videogames affect our behavioural, cultural, and social development. By looking at the Psychosocial Stages of Development presented by Erikson, along with Hypercontextualized Games, gave an insight into the attainment of cultural and social ideologies. The process of meaning making and authorship experienced at a young age feeds into the formation of ideas and perceptions of others as an adult. Personally, the subject matter and characters directly fed into my own self-expression and the ways I viewed others in society. This feeling was not particular to my own experience, but as the research has shown, it is an experience many women and visible minorities face.

The unfolding of the feminist writings of Mulvey, Kristeva, De Lauretis and Butler, pertaining to identity formation, subjectivity, and performance illustrated the ways in which we retain and project our desired self-expression. The examination of the 'male gaze' plays an important role in understanding the ways in which a dominant patriarchal culture asserts its power over women and fixes signs on the female body. By extension, these notions can be placed on individuals that are part of a visible minority group. Feminist semiotic analysis of identity helps in the unraveling of a unified representation, allowing for multiple modes of expression and identifications. By having a fragmented identity, a decentered self, identity becomes relative to the surrounding environment, becoming harder to contain and to assert a hegemonic power structure upon it. De Lauretis' reworking of the social order and signifying chain becomes a tool used by women and visible minorities to shift the dominant narrative.

The same social and cultural structures that govern our real world representations bleed into the digital videogame world, disseminating knowledge about a certain group of people to the public. Subjectivity transgresses into the virtual space, creating images that relate to our personal identity. Turkle Multiple Identities theory can be used to view this identification with characters and avatars as an extension, projecting ourselves in a digital space as an alternate form of self-expression. Players bring in their real world lived experiences into the videogame world, in turn, taking information from videogames back into the physical realm. As Huizinga describes, the Magic Circle become a space of dreams and fantasy, where real world events can have special meaning. These notions carry even more weight when engaged in online videogames, where social acceptance and psychological matching in the gaming community occurs. For instance, the creation of guilds in World of Warcraft sees people of similar interest or representations banding together for a common cause. Although, as this paper has shown, it becomes a highly contentious space as some guilds that don't fit the desired mold, such as the creation of an LGBTQ guild, tend to face abusive backlash from both the AAA industry and the gaming community. The rejection of difference in the community is all too commonplace as homophobic, racist and sexist language is used both pejoratively and as a direct threat. It then becomes extremely problematic as the notions of fantasy become sidelined due to the real harmful effects of exclusion and abuse.
The issues at play do not have to be as obvious as direct threats in a gaming environment, but can be witnessed in the games and characters pushed forward by the AAA videogame industry. By looking at the works presented by Lacan, Tajfel, and Hardwood and Anderson, the ways in which mass media and the AAA videogame industry can affect and disseminate ideologies surrounding women and visible minorities becomes clear. For example, the videogame cultural domain known as "girl games" such as *The Sims*, where the gendering of the videogame becomes problematic. By creating a specific gendered game, it places women in a confined space of expression, effectively culturally excluding them from being able to take part in different genres of videogames and "gamer" identities. The identification of a hardcore gamer becomes relegated specifically to boys who play First-Person Shooter (FPS) and Role-Playing Games (RPG), having women being labeled as casual gamers, even though they may spend more time and effort playing other types of games. This gendering also plays a damaging role for boys who enjoy playing "girl games" as they are afraid to express their interest in such games due to fear of losing respect from their peers.

By studying the primary characters of games in 2013, it can be seen that the predominance of white, heterosexual, male protagonists is extremely visible. Women and visible minorities are usually delegated to secondary characters or victims in games. This delegation not only affects the viewpoints of other people, but how an individual views their own identity. As Lacan describes, the media directly influences cognitive modeling of social identity formation. The white hetero-centric domination of the AAA industry allows a privileged group to dictate the knowledge given to the public, often producing stereotypical imagery that negatively portrays women and visible minorities. Not only is this done through its creation of characters, but also even in the ways in produces games and advertising. Going through multiple theories and studies conducted on issues of identity creation, subjectivity, and performance illustrates the ways in which this framework entrenches the dominant discourse. This demonstrates Barthes's notions of modern myth and its associations with Gramsci's observations on the modern worlds hegemonic practices by creating a cultural framework for representation through the viewpoint of the governing body of authors.

The demographic makeup of the AAA videogame industry has a direct correlation with the types of games and character that are created. The study has shown that due to the oversaturation of the industry by white heterosexual males, it comes as no surprise that the majority of protagonists developed represented that specific demographic. When given the task of creating a greater variety of characters, they produced stereotypical imagery to display other characters. This played a destructive role in the ways visible minorities and women were viewed. Over the past several years, the AAA videogame industry has taken note to the lack of diversity within its domain and has taken small steps in tackling this issue. It has improved slightly within the past decade, but many developers agree that more must be done to combat this lack of inclusion and diversity. Some developers have opted to join the indie developer community to be able to create diverse characters and progressive games. With the advent of tools and easier game creation platforms, some gamers have also taken on developing games, bridging the divide between producer and consumer. With my interviews with indie game developers in Toronto, many have claimed that the indie market gives them the freedom for self-expression and reflection. Unbound by the constraints of finance and demand, they are willing to create games that speak to a smaller market. Many believe that in order for the industry to recognize diversity, that more must be done to change it from within. By investing their efforts in the

indie market, they are actively engaging others in conversation around social and cultural issues affecting their lives. Festivals such as *Games for Change* have also encouraged people to develop games that challenge the status quo by creating games that are inclusive. Social awareness around the issue of diversity and inclusion in the AAA videogame industry has been a growing topic among gamers and critics alike, with many using social media as a tool to speak out against the industry.

I wanted to be able to rework the narrative structure in the videogame industry. Creating a platform that would allow the subversion of popular gaming characters and encouraging individuals to find new means of self-expression through games was the initiative taken by this project. By allowing players to choose from an array of personal signifiers, I wanted to allow for a multitude of identifications. In an effort to shift the social imagery surrounding representation in games, the characters I created predominantly belong to groups of visible minorities and women. As a tool of empowerment, I wanted players to obtain a positive reflection of their personal identity. Since I am unable to adequately portray a multiplicity of representations, I felt the need to include a participatory response in my project, rather than simply having an empowering visual experience of my own characters. By asking players to take part in the creation process, it gives them authorship and alters the nature of subjectivity to their control. They become in charge of distributing their own knowledge through the social media campaign, actively engaging in the transgression of normalization. It is a method of garnering public attention to a cause many developers and gamers have already begun to invest in. The project in essence becomes a tool for the dissemination of knowledge by women and minority groups to the larger videogame demographic, both the developers and the community itself, successfully subverting the signifying chain in order to adequately

representing their own identity and experience.

#### **Future Action**

I have argued that for significant change to occur in the mainstream, meaning—ideological beliefs, cultural relevance, gender identity, sexual preference—must be acknowledged and accepted in the creation of a social collective consciousness. I believe both forces at play must address the potential for change, with individuals resistant to the current state, becoming a part of the creation process and integrating themselves within the popular discourse. Taking on board Gramsci, the ruling body, the AAA industry, must be able to partake in an acceptance of its subordinate bodies—open to new and evolving circumstances—to sustain its authority. It is directly related to his theory of the hegemon; the minority then no longer becomes a subordinate marginalized voice—but a dominant player—where through a system of equivalences, both the minority and majority interests are reconciled generating a common agreement.

The solution to the invisibility of gender, race, and sexuality in gaming is not the creation of a plurality of videogame markets, but instead an insistence on diversity in the construction of the market (Shaw 2011, 39-40).

The equilibrium becomes a "contradictory mix of forces from both below and above both commercial and authentic marked by both resistance and incorporation, structure and agency" (Gramsci in Storey 2003, 51). Thus, the hegemonic state, enforced by dominant discourse, can only be sustained through its capability to integrate parts belonging to opposing cultures and values within it. I believe that power must be seen as relative to the time and space it is placed, constantly being

challenged from within and moved by oppositional forces. In order for a certain group or community to carve out their presence in history, they must be willing to fight for their own ideas. It is a battle individuals must undertake to break down the confines enforced upon them and make decisions that will affect their representation to the broader public. In order for this project to move forward, active engagement by the public is necessary. It is an educational exercise, intended to push the boundaries of self-expression and critique an industry that has been lacking in its inclusion of diversity. As such, incorporating a character creation tool to give players the direct participation of developing characters without the generic framework currently placed on avatar creators can further the project. Also, in order to get a broader and more engaged audience, the digital application must be included online. Mis/Represent becomes a significant actor in allowing individuals to playfully act in ones own identity and others, creating a process of self-reflection that benefits the videogame industry. This self-reflection can also affect game developers as well. By puncturing neutrality through reflection, the motivation becomes clear. By raising awareness around the issue, I hope to inspire others to do so and develop an interest in becoming developers the videogame world. Instead of creating games on the sidelines, women and minority groups must find a way within the industry to emphasize their "normalization" as a demand for representation. The interventions by these groups in a stagnant industry not only benefits them, but helps the videogame industry as a whole move forward attracting skilled developers and players that will keep the industry relevant and progressive for generations to come.

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## Appendix A Expert Interview Questions

## **Creative Process/ Decision Making**

- 1. When creating a videogame, do you actively think about the creative decisions and about certain characters or topics?
  - How much does the separation of labour affect the decision-making process or creative process?
  - How much influence do game designers have about the content being presented to the public, as opposed to producers/directors?
  - Is the process a top-down approach, or does the team have creative input in the story surrounding character traits?
- 2. Do you, as a game designer, think about the narrative or implications of negative representations of visible minorities in games?

### **Representations of Minorities**

- 1. Do you think that gaming is moving in a positive direction in terms of minority representations?
- 2. Do you think Canadian game-makers should do more to better represent its multi-cultural population?
- 3. Do you think there is sufficient demand from the public to include more positive diversity in videogames?

### Most Influential Games

- 1. In your opinion, which games have an influence in the social fabric of society?
- 2. What kind of message does current character formation have on social formation?
- 3. Why do you think current AAA games rely on the stereotypical white male trope for most of its games?

# Appendix B Coding

#### 1. Camera Holder

using UnityEngine; using System.Collections;

public class CharacterHolder : MonoBehaviour {

public Sprite [] spriteChar;

private SpriteRenderer spriteRenderer;

string Race; string Gender; string Bodytype; string Age;

void Start () {

```
spriteRenderer = GetComponent<SpriteRenderer>();
```

```
if (spriteRenderer.sprite == null)
spriteRenderer.sprite = spriteChar[0]
```

}

}

```
void Update () {
```

```
if (Race == "White" && Gender == "Female" && Bodytype == "Fit" && Age == "25-30")
{
    spriteRenderer.sprite = spriteChar [1];
    }
}
```

#### 2. Camera Movement

using UnityEngine; using System.Collections;

public class CameraMovement : MonoBehaviour {

CameraHolder targetScript;

float xValue;

void Start()

targetScript = GameObject.Find ("cameraholder").GetComponent<CameraHolder>();

```
}
void Update ()
{
    xValue = targetScript.cameraPos;
    transform.position = new Vector3 (xValue, -1,-56);
```

}

}

### 3. Score Value

using UnityEngine; using System.Collections;

public class CameraHolder : MonoBehaviour {

public float cameraPos; public float sum;

float Race; float Age; float Bodytype; float Gender; float Sexuality; float PhysicalAbility; float Religion; float Education;

public float tempScore; public static CameraHolder instance;

public string ScoreName;

public int CharVol;

public int [] totalscore;

public Sprite [] spriteChar;

private SpriteRenderer spriteRenderer;

string Race1; string Gender1; string Bodytype1; string Age1; public string buttonChar;

void Start () {

cameraPos = 0;

}

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```
instance = this;
  spriteRenderer = GetComponent<SpriteRenderer>();
  if (spriteRenderer.sprite == null)
    spriteRenderer.sprite = spriteChar[0];
void Update () {
  if (ScoreName == "Race") {
    Race = tempScore;
    Race1 = buttonChar;
  if (ScoreName == "Age") {
    Age = tempScore;
    Age1 = buttonChar;
  }
  if (ScoreName == "Bodytype") {
    Bodytype = tempScore;
    Bodytype1 = buttonChar;
  if (ScoreName == "Gender")
  ł
    Gender = tempScore;
    Gender1 = buttonChar;
  if (ScoreName == "Sexuality")
    Sexuality = tempScore;
  if (ScoreName == "Religion")
    Religion = tempScore;
  }
  if (ScoreName == "Education")
  ł
    Education = tempScore;
  }
  sum = Race + Age + Bodytype + Gender ;
  for (int i=0;i<CharVol;i++)
  {
    if (sum == totalscore [i])
    {
      spriteRenderer.sprite = spriteChar [i];
    3
```

}

#### 4. Character Holder

using UnityEngine; using System.Collections;

public class CharacterHolder : MonoBehaviour {

public Sprite [] spriteChar;

private SpriteRenderer spriteRenderer;

string Race; string Gender; string Bodytype; string Age;

void Start () {

spriteRenderer = GetComponent<SpriteRenderer>();

if (spriteRenderer.sprite == null)
spriteRenderer.sprite = spriteChar[0];

}

}

```
void Update () {
```

```
if (Race == "White" && Gender == "Female" && Bodytype == "Fit" && Age == "25-30")
{
    spriteRenderer.sprite = spriteChar [1];
    }
}
```

#### 5. Score Count

using UnityEngine; using System.Collections;

public class Score : MonoBehaviour {

CameraHolder targetscript; float playerScore; public float inputscore ; public string ScoreName ; public Menu menu; public string buttonChar;

```
void Start () {
```

```
targetscript = GameObject.Find ("cameraholder").GetComponent<CameraHolder>();
}
void Update () {
    void OnMouseDown() {
        menu.updateButtons (this);
    }
}
```

6. Menu

using UnityEngine; using System.Collections;

public class Menu : MonoBehaviour {

```
[HideInInspector] public bool pressed;
[HideInInspector] public Score lastScore;
```

void Start () {

}

}

public void updateButtons (Score currentScore) {

LightButton lightButton;

```
if (pressed) {
    CameraHolder.instance.sum -= lastScore.inputscore;
    lightButton = lastScore.gameObject.GetComponent<LightButton>();
    lightButton.turnOff();
}
```

```
lightButton = currentScore.gameObject.GetComponent<LightButton> ();
lightButton.turnOn ();
```

```
lastScore = currentScore;
CameraHolder.instance.ScoreName = currentScore.ScoreName;
CameraHolder.instance.tempScore = currentScore.inputscore;
CameraHolder.instance.buttonChar = currentScore.buttonChar;
pressed = true;
}
```

#### 7. Button

```
using UnityEngine;
using System.Collections;
public class LightButton : MonoBehaviour {
  public Sprite sprites1;
  public Sprite sprites2;
  private SpriteRenderer spriteRenderer;
  void Start () {
    spriteRenderer = GetComponent<SpriteRenderer>();
    if (spriteRenderer.sprite == null)
    spriteRenderer.sprite = sprites1;
    turnOff ();
  }
  void OnMouseDown() {
    turnOn ();
  }
  public void turnOff() {
    spriteRenderer.sprite = sprites1;
  }
  public void turnOn () {
    spriteRenderer.sprite = sprites2;
```

8. Spawn Character

}

using UnityEngine; using System.Collections;

public class Spawning : MonoBehaviour {

public GameObject obj;

public Vector2 buttonPos; void Start () {

```
}
void Update () {
}
```

void OnMouseDown() {

Instantiate (obj, buttonPos, Quaternion.identity);
}

### 9. Mouse Click

using UnityEngine; using System.Collections;

public class Mouseclick : MonoBehaviour {

CameraHolder targetscript;

float increment;

float preX;

[SerializeField] float inputincrement ;

[SerializeField] float distance;

```
void Start () {
```

```
targetscript = GameObject.Find ("cameraholder").GetComponent<CameraHolder>();
```

}

```
void Update () {
  targetscript.cameraPos = targetscript.cameraPos + increment;
  if (Mathf.Abs(GameObject.Find("Camera").transform.position.x - preX) == distance)
  {
    increment = 0;
}
```

```
void OnMouseDown() {
```

increment = inputincrement;

preX = GameObject.Find("Camera").transform.position.x;

} }

### 10. Restart

using UnityEngine; using System.Collections;

public class Restart : MonoBehaviour {

```
void Start () {
}
```

```
void Update () {
```

}

```
void OnMouseDown() {
```

```
Application.LoadLevel (0);
}
}
```

*Mis/Represent: Women and Visible Minority Representation in Videogames* 

Sherif Taalab

# Appendix C Initial Design Layout









*Mis/Represent: Women and Visible Minority Representation in Videogames* 

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EZIO AUDITORE: "ASSASSIN'S CREED"

LINK: "THE LEGEND OF ZELDA



SOLID SNAKE: "METAL GEAR"

THE PRINCE: "THE PRINCE OF PERSIA"

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ARTIST CHARACTER RENDITION

AUDIENCE CHARACTER RENDITION

## Appendix F Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development

Stage	Basic	Important	Outcome
	Conflic	Events	
Infancy (birth to 18 months)	Trust vs. Mistrust	Feeding	Children develop a sense of trust when caregivers provide reliability, care, and affection. A lack of this will lead to mistrust.
Early Childhood (2 to 3 years)	Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt	Toilet Training	Children need to develop a sense of personal control over physical skills and a sense of independence. Success leads to feelings of autonomy, failure results in feelings of shame and doubt.
Preschool (3 to 5 years)	Initiative vs. Guilt	Exploration	Children need to begin asserting control and power over the environment. Success in this stage leads to a sense of purpose. Children who try to exert too much power experience disapproval, resulting ina sense of guilt.
School Age (6 to 11 years)	Industry vs. Inferiority	School	Children need to cope with new social and academic demands. Success leads to a sense of competence, while failure results in feelings of inferiority.
Adolescence (12 to18 years)	Identity vs. Role Confusion	Social Relationships	Teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity.Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self.
Young Adulthood (19 to 40 years)	Intimacy vs. Isolation	Relationships	Young adults need to form intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success leads to strong relationships, while failure results in loneliness and isolation.
Middle Adulthood (40 to 65 years)	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Work and Parenthood	Adults need to create or nurture things that will outlast them, often by having children or creating a positive change that benefits other people. Success leads to feelings of usefulness and accomp lishment, while failure results in shallow involvement in the world.
Maturity (65 to death)	Ego Integrity vs. Despair	Reflection on Life	Older adults need to look back on life and feel a sense of fulfillment. Success at this stage leads to feelings of wisdom, while failure results in regret, bitterness, and despair.