"It's a Boy Thing": AAA Games Still Seem to Primarily Address Cisgendered White Male Players

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Abstract

The boom in new technologies and the growth of the internet have contributed to the huge mainstream market for video games. However, despite the fact that video games have become mainstream, the stereotype that they are the exclusive domain of white male gamers persists, and those who do not fall into this category are still marginalised. This paper focuses on Crawford and Godbey's 1987 framework for analysing the lack of representation of non-white and non-male video game players. In addition to this, some developers who are committed to developing diverse and inclusive game characters continue to fall short of addressing the root causes of marginalisation in video games.

Keywords: digital transformation, video game, feminism, digital humanities

1. Introduction

Within the emerging new media sector, the computer games industry is the most established player (Dovey & Kennedy, 2011). The industry now has an enormous mainstream market, is well capitalised, and has weathered the 'boom and bust' cycle associated with new technology ventures (Dovey & Kennedy, 2011). However, the computer games industry has not always been regarded so highly. Only a few decades ago, gaming was widely considered a niche, offbeat subculture — the exclusive preserve of adolescent boys and mentally immature men (Schiesel, 2007). However, as the first generation of gamers grew older and family-friendly gaming systems such as Nintendo became commonplace in living rooms all over the world, gaming culture began to expand. Video games have become mainstream entertainment, owing in part to Nintendo's Wii (Schiesel, 2007a).

However, despite the fact that video games are now mainstream, the stereotype of gamers as white males is still very much entrenched — those who do not fit into this category are still marginalized. As a result, while women do play video games, video game culture is not always a welcoming environment for them, according to Pham (2007). In terms of gender, race, and sexuality, gamer members frequently face a lack of representation in game content (Williams, 2009). Meanwhile, these distinctions do not exist in isolation, and when a gamer's identity intersects with other identities such as gender, race, or sexual orientation, these individuals may be further marginalized.

Drawing on the framework developed by Crawford and Godbey (1987), this paper will analyse the reasons why non-white and non-male video game players lack of representation. I will show through examples from several contemporary games that game developers are increasingly diversifying the characters and content in their games. I will argue, however, that such measures fall short in several respects, and fail to address the root causes of marginalisation in gaming.

2. Gender and Race

2.1 Gender

Gender is the primary lens through which we study representation in games, texts, industries, and audiences

(Burrill, 2008, cited in Shaw, 2011). Gaming is a leisure activity, and participation or non-participation is generally considered an autonomous choice based on how an individual wishes to spend their free time. However, Crawford and Godbey (1987) provide a long-established framework for investigating the reasons for non-participation in video games, which undermines the notion that the choice of whether or not to play is an entirely free one.

Crawford and Godbey (1987) seek to understand why women refrain from playing video games by examining both the internal and external barriers that game participants face. Intrapersonal barriers include psychological states like stress and anxiety, previous socialisation to specific activities, and subjective judgements about the 'appropriateness' of certain leisure activities (Crawford & Godbey, 1987, 122-124). There are also barriers arising from interpersonal interactions or relationships, such as the impact of engaging in leisure activities on the relationship between a couple. Finally, external or structural barriers exist, such as a person's working time or economic ability (Crawford & Godbey, 1987, 122-124). All of these impediments can restrict an individual's access to certain leisure activities.

Women face significant internal barriers as a result of the gendered construction of gamer identity. Despite numerous studies challenging the predominant image of gamers as white, heterosexual, adolescent males, this stereotype remains stubbornly ingrained in the public imagination (Bergstrom, Fisher & Jenson, 2016, cited in Shaw, 2011). Moreover, there is a large body of research (Bergstorm, 2018; Thomham, 2016; Beasley & Standley, 2002) on gender and play suggesting that play is still widely construed as a 'boys only' space (Burrill, 2008). Such stereotypes have caused female participants to reject the label 'gamer', as they feel they do not fit the traditional image (Shaw, 2011). Moreover, stereotypically feminine playing styles (e.g., prioritising sharing and cooperation over competitive or aggressive play), are often delegitimised as traits of 'casual' gamers (Consalvo, 2012; Kubrik, 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013). This makes it easy to relegate female participants to the status of dabblers, who are less committed or serious than so-called 'real' gamers (Kutcher & Stebbins, 1981). Consider Eve Online, a massively multiplayer online role-playing game set in space. Eve Online has obtained a reputation as a 'man's game', with a player community that is notoriously hostile to female players, who account for just 4% of the total player base (Bergstrom, 2018). Commenting on the lack of female players in Eve Online, the publisher, CCP games, speculated that women were simply less interested than men in science fiction (Leray 2013, cited in Bergstrom, 2018). Even more controversially, CCP claimed that women were put off by the game's heavy reliance on scientific content （Joseph Leray, 2013). Bergstorm (2016) argues that Eve's creators and fan base pre-determine who will dislike the game by perpetuating the stereotype that women are uninterested in hard sci-fi, thereby reinforcing Eve's image as a 'male game'. Using such gender stereotypes about gaming preferences to determine who will be interested in the game has excluded potential players who do not belong to the relevant demographic (Bergstorm, 2019). Furthermore, Eve's new player tutorials actively omit important information, encouraging players to consult external resources such as the 'newbie guide,' which contains exclusive clues that suggest the community would be less friendly to women (Bergstrom, 2018). Some women stated in interviews that they concluded the game was 'not for them' and thus decided not to attempt playing it (Bergstrom, 2018).

Women may feel less entitled to free time than men due to gender stereotypes and externally imposed social expectations. Gender-related social norms can also impose external barriers to women's participation in gaming — for example, the expectation that women should bear the primary responsibility for childcare (Jackson & Henderson, 1995). Bergstrom (2018) discovered that many women who stopped playing the social networking game *YoWorld* did so not because they had lost interest in the game, but because some external barrier was limiting their leisure time. *YoWorld* can be played via Facebook, and its players are predominantly female. The women surveyed cited not having enough time to play video games due to their hectic work schedules, coupled with heavy household and family responsibilities such as childcare (Bergstrom, 2018). Women who no longer play *YoWorld* say the time they have available to play the game is fragmented (Chess 2017) and women have long felt they are not entitled to leisure time. External factors like these contribute to the lack of female representation in video games by discouraging women from playing them.

The lack of female representation in games, according to Beasley and Standley, is due to the fact that female characters are frequently sexually objectified or marginalized, in addition to the internal and external factors that keep women out of the game (Beasley & Standley, 2002). Based on a survey of video games sold in the United States, Beasley and Standley's research suggests that female characters in video games are not given the same treatment as male characters, and that female characters are more likely to be created from a male perspective, portraying them as unrealistic, for example, by exaggerating their femininity.

In adult video games, 70% of female characters show cleavage; 86% of female characters wear clothes with low or revealing necklines and 48% of characters wear clothes without sleeves. In comparison, only 22% of male characters do not have sleeves and 14% do not have high necklines (Beasley & Standley, 2002). To use an example, the main character in the video game *Tomb Raider*, although an active and capable female character, is also portrayed as having oversized breasts and a Barbie doll-like thin body. This is in marked contrast to the well-

developed muscles and toned physique possessed by the equivalent male character (Martis, 2007). Female characters in video games are not only treated differently in terms of appearance, but also in terms of playability, with male characters being more often playable than female characters (Miller & Summers, 2007, p. 139). Men were frequently given "more weapons and abilities than women," while women were frequently placed in complementary, less active, and often less important roles (Near, 2012). Video games often set up female characters as passive, helpless characters who act as "shipwreckers" who inspire the male protagonist to action, or as negatively valued, sexualised characters who act as secondary antagonists to the "bad girls" (Near, 2012). According to Ivory (2009), this game's content may appeal to male players, but will not attract female players. Therefore, if game publishers believe that marginalising or sexualising women in games will increase sales to the male demographic, they will reinforce this content, thus allowing marginalised and sexualised female characters to continue to flourish (Near, 2012). The sexualisation and marginalisation of female characters has created a convention that makes video games a male-only space (Jansz, 2005). In this space, men are not only overtly privileged, but it also means that a specific male perspective remains the norm. The absence of female characters, or their portrayal as sexy and powerless, therefore not only maintains the link between masculinity and privilege, but prevents female players from 'invading' it (Kimmel, 2008). The marginalisation and lack of representation of women is not only reflected in game characters, but also in real life. Women are underrepresented at gaming events and tournaments, for example at gaming league events (Taylor, 2012), and despite the fact that there are more women at events than ever before, they are ignored and dismissed due to the masculinisation of video game culture and space (Gray, 2013).

2.2 Race

Since 2004, reports on games sales have included data on age and gender, but not race, implying that race is irrelevant to how the games industry views its audience composition (Shaw, 2011). While there is a growing literature on depictions of race in video games, there are relatively few accounts written from the perspective of players of colour describing their experiences as players (Zindela, Roome & Farouk, 2019). Not only is racial representation lacking in video games, but the way in which characters of color are framed in game content contributes to racial marginalization.

According to research, harmful racial stereotypes and racialized 'othering' are frequently used as means of fulfilling (white) players' fantasies. In video games, protagonists are overwhelmingly white, whereas "characters of colour […] are often relegated to nameless, threateningly violent and mindless 'enemies' that the player-controlled protagonist must completely eradicate" (Zindela, 2019, p. 9). More generally, characters of colour in video games are frequently depicted through the imagination of white people, reducing them to exotic and often threatening stereotypes associated with travel, violent conquest, or criminality (Gray, 2014). These stereotypes are often informed by socially constructed assumptions about racial hierarchy (Zindela, 2019, p. 12), which are often presented in video games as objective and fixed facts (Guess, 2006, cited in Zindela; Roome & Farouk, 2019).

According to Burgess (2011), who studied the portrayal of game characters in the best-selling video games with regard to racial categories, game developers tend to portray black characters as athletes or threats to society who possess extreme weapons; Asians as martial artists; white male characters fighting in imagination realms; the number of minority males is less than the number of alien characters, and women of colour are frequently invisible. In the games Star Wars and Final Fantasy X, for example, white men are set up as heroes of war who save Western civilization and who fight to save a romanticized world. And in the game, GTA: San Andreas the black characters are set up as a threat to society, with their super-powerful weapons and gangly posturing. The Asian characters in Blade Runner are simply engaged in martial arts activities and do not threaten or save anyone but each other.

3. Responses and Limitations

In Europe and North America, at least, the underrepresentation of marginalized groups in video games is frequently due to the gamer market being constructed as predominantly young, heterosexual, white/white, and male (Shaw, 2011). To expand and diversify the video game market and redress the often problematic representation of women, some game developers have created games designed specifically for female players. However, according to Shaw (2011) argues that such efforts fail to address the issue of equality in mainstream gaming — the mere addition of diversity to a game does not necessarily make it more diverse in the hands of gamers. Indeed, these so-called 'girls' games' are themselves marginalised precisely because they are designed to serve female players (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000, cited in Shaw, 2011). This serves to further distance women from the mainstream games associated with men, since demarcating 'female gamers' as a discrete market reinforces the idea that gender is a relevant category in gaming. Moreover, games that are tailored to women and girls are often based on stereotypical notions about the sorts of activities female players should enjoy, For example, *Cooking in Diner Dash*, parenting in *Babysitting Mama*, and fashion and gossip in *Kim Kardashian: Hollywood* (Bergstorm, 2018). The marketing strategies for games are also unattractive to male gamers.

External barriers women face in society are also worth noting. If women could overcome the obstacles they face

at home and at work — such as inadequate career advancement opportunities and the unequal division of domestic labour — they would have greater choice when it comes to gaming entertainment. This issue, however, transcends the scope of the video game industry and is related to the inequalities women face in general.

There has also been a recent trend towards the representation of gender non-conformity in video games. *Fallen London* is an example of this, as the character creation screen allows players to choose between male, female, and a third gender, and allows players to choose the pronouns with which they would like to be addressed. In addition, all in-game items — including clothing and accessories — can be used by player characters without gender restrictions (Bragança et al., 2016). Another example is *The Sims 4*, which recently received an update that removed some of the games' previous gender-based restrictions on character creation (Bragança et al., 2016). For example, male-presenting characters can don female- coded clothing and become pregnant, and female-presenting characters can wear male-coded clothing and use the lavatory standing up.

As video games have evolved from a subcultural niche to a mainstream medium, various initiatives like the above have attempted to create more space and roles for women, LGBT+ people, and people of colour. Such initiatives, however, have merely scratched the surface. For example, most first-person shooters and RPGs continue to feature protagonists coded as straight, white, and masculine. And despite the growing diversity in game content, many 'mainstream' (i.e., white male) gamers are likely to continue to foster hostility towards other groups, hindering the gaming industry's efforts to attract a more diverse audience. For example, women are often subject to pressure and rejection from 'boys' clubs' (Gray, Buyukozturk & Hill, 2017). This explicit opposition to women through the formation of teams and thus the reduction or elimination of female participation in mainstream play spaces is an example of a hypermasculine response (Salter & Blodgett, 2012, p. 411). While these acts are not overtly violent, the oppressive nature of such marginalisation and exclusion can slowly lead to the devaluation of women over time (Gray, Buyukozturk & Hill, 2017).

4. Conclusion

While gaming has shifted from a subcultural niche to the cultural mainstream, marginalisation based on gender, sexuality, and race remains a serious concern. In this essay, I have examined the inequitable treatment of female gamers and gamers of colour, and the lack of representation of these groups in video game content. I have discussed some efforts on the part of the gaming industry to address these concerns, such as the development of 'female-friendly' games and the representation of gender non-conformity in gaming mechanics. However, such measures only superficially address marginalisation within gaming, doing little to remedy fundamental problems such as stereotype-laden game content and the exclusion of marginalised groups from the gaming community. Thus, to foster greater diversity in video games, steps must be taken to alter society's fundamental constructs and attitudes toward gaming as a medium, with perhaps the most effective solution being to normalise video games as an everyday activity for everyone.

To successfully address the marginalization of female players and people of colour in video games (Shaw, 2011). Those striving to expand the representation of marginalized groups in video games should concentrate on media development rather than market development, according to Shaw (2011). That is, simply acknowledging that the games industry's customer base is not restricted to white males is insufficient. This approach is based on an essentialised notion of identity to promote the target group though. However, this approach subtly labels these individuals as part of a niche gaming market; it does not result in a more varied video game business on a larger scale. Rather of focusing on gamers or marginalized groups, researchers should look at how video games affect people's daily life.

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