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Diversity without Defense: Reframing Arguments for Diversity in Games

Adrienne Shaw
Temple University

Abstract

Most media studies arguments for the representation of marginalized groups have focused on exploring why more diversity in cultural texts is important. Points that have been made encompass everything from claims of direct media effects to analyzing how trends in representation reinforce hegemonic norms. Because of this, we tend to only see diversity as being possible when a strong “good business sense” case can be made. In contrast, by treating diversity, rather than pluralism, as the expected norm, we can begin to think more creatively about representation beyond niche marketing and simplistic assumptions about what “good” and “bad” representations are.

Keywords: video games, feminism, representation, gender, sexuality, diversity

Résumé en français à la fin du texte

Introduction

Cutting through disciplinary differences, theoretical interventions, and methodologies, when it comes to research on representation, there is one fairly consistent theme: Representation Matters! Media studies arguments for the representation of marginalized groups largely focus on exploring why more diversity in media is important. Points made encompass everything from claims of direct effects to analyzing how trends in representation reinforce hegemonic norms (Gross, 1998; Hall; 1997). In my recent book, *Gaming at the Edge* (2014), I took a slightly different approach to punctuation via an audience-based study: Representation matters? My goal was to investigate if and how representation came to matter to people who play games and are members of marginalized groups, looking at the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality.

Although my participants expressed a wide array of positions on this central question (representation matters?), one thing was very clear: seeing people like them in the media they consumed was not the primary driver of their media choices. Yet, many still regularly embraced the importance of representation in a general sense. They rejected direct media effects theories, embracing a more active audience description of their own relationship to the media they consumed. Some did express the possibility that representation had a great effect on others, somewhat like a third-person effect (Davison, 1983), particularly on children and young adults. However, they rejected market logic-driven forms of representation that only represent groups well when they are being targeted as consumers. Many of my participants insisted that they did not necessarily need to see one specific aspect of their identity (like sex, gender, sexuality, race, etc.) represented in all their media, because their identities and relationship to media characters were complex enough to let them feel like they could connect with a wide array of media characters. But what they did need is people like them, in an expansive intersectional sense, to be seen. Representation matters because it makes their identity legible.

Building on that project, I want to suggest a slightly different approach to punctuation moving forward: Representation matters. By doing so, I am not rejecting the importance of exclamations and questions. Rather, I am suggesting that representation being important in the social sense is well established, and yet we consistently feel called upon to defend it. Based on my own

research, I posit that the exclamation point approach, though unintentionally, actually helps reinforce the lack of diversity as a norm. That is, we only see diversity as being possible when a strong case for it can be made, such as a good business sense or a direct effects case; and that is precisely how ideology works. The status quo gets to be enshrined as such while we constantly have to explain why exceptions to the norm might exist.

Embracing “Representation matters.” allows us to refuse to be put on the defensive. “Representation matters.” forces those opposed to diversity to fight our certainty rather than dismiss our exclamations, while also not placing the burden of demanding representation on particular bodies. I have yet to hear a good articulation of why diversity in representation is bad for anyone. All of the arguments I have seen dismiss the discourses in favour of “representation does matter” out of hand, but they never actually make the case that diversity in media is a bad idea. At most, they point to specific failed commercial examples, but even then fail to take into account marketing explanations for those failures. New arguments for representation can offer new possibilities for what representation and critiques of representation can look like. In *Gaming at the Edge* (2014), for example, I suggest that we can actually argue for more diversity in games precisely by pointing to where representation is not as important in games. Building upon that, in this article I reconsider the history of how games came to be so narrowly targeted, what waves of feminist history show about how we might counter the dominance of particular forms of white hegemonic masculinity in games, and consider critically how arguments for representation have shaped resistance to increased diversity in video games. I conclude that “Representation Matters.” can help restructure the debates around who gets to be in games, and offer some suggestions for how feminist game scholars in particular might frame their work moving forward.

But, Representation Matters!

Now do not get me wrong: coming from a cultural studies perspective, I do think there is plenty of evidence that representation matters. Even from an audience perspective, certainly, some people care a great deal about representation in games and other media. They want the characters on the screens, playable or not, human or not, to occasionally look like, act like, think like, or

interact in the world like they do. It is easy to jump from those experiences to marketing arguments that say we should have more female characters in games so more women will play games. But not everyone feels that way.

Following a survey of children ages 11-18, Rosalind Wiseman and Ashly Burch found that a fair number of participants had no preference when it came to their player character, though they do say girls preferred having a female character more than boys preferred having a male character (Hall, 2015). Heidi McDonald (2015) has similar findings regarding romance options, where heterosexual players care less about the optional same-sex relationships in games with romance options, but homosexual and bisexual players care a great deal about having them. However, Wiseman and Burch's data show that the gender difference is mostly driven by the high school girls, as looking just within age groups, middle school boys cared more than middle school girls about playing as male characters. There are some interesting generational and social context issues going on here that require more in depth analysis. A nice supporting piece of data to my own research with adults is Wiseman and Burch's finding that the vast majority of their respondents did not care about the gender of the protagonist (Hall, 2015).

Wiseman and Burch's reading of their findings is similar but slightly different from my own. They suggest that creating a large number of male protagonists is turning potential female players away; thus it is good business sense to make more female protagonists. This can be explained by the fact that they are developers who were presenting their findings at the Game Developers' Association annual conference. However, lots of people say similar things both inside and outside the industry. In 2009, Brenda Brathwaite (now Romero) was already saying: "It took them a while, but developers eventually got hip to the fact that there are women out there who want to control female characters, and now they're getting hip to the fact that there are LGBT gamers out there who want to control LGBT characters" (Ochalla, 2009). Constructed this way, however, the argument treats gender and sexuality as mutually exclusive. It also positions marginalized groups' representation as contingent upon their consumption of the medium and gives the impression that if no women played games, there would be no case for representing women well or making them protagonists in games. Even Wiseman and Burch insist that game

designers should include female protagonists if they do not want to push girls away (Hall, 2015). But what if they do? Perhaps that is why misogynists are so intent on driving women out of gaming. If the majority of arguments are framed this way, the mere presence of women as a desirable consumer base does seem to be enough to change game content.

The trouble, moreover, is that when we jump so quickly to the “women play games, therefore they should be represented in games” argument, we ignore that there is no such thing as a singular woman to be represented. Forms of femininity and relationships to female as a sex and to feminine as a gender identity are complex. Gender and sex are not inherently tethered to one another, and neither is truly binary (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Moreover, they intersect with race, class, sexuality, nationality, religion, embodiment, etc. Relatedly, if we always approach representation as good business sense, then we are only suggesting representation matters to in-group members to the extent that they are an interesting market, despite the fact that the wide variety of media representation studies suggest it matters because media representations reinforce hegemonic ways of seeing the world. To put it over simplistically, representing minorities well to themselves might do some psychic good, but it does not do much towards breaking down power structures.

Going back to Representation Matters? for a moment, one of my former interviewees articulated the importance of representation in media broadly in this way: “[Seeing people like me in media] shows that I’m being heard and seen and I’m being acknowledged and I’m here.” If representation in media is a form of evidence for what forms of being in the world are possible, then it is important for everyone to see, not just for the people who might appear, on a surface level, to look like those characters. That is, representation has to be about more than niche marketing.

Moreover, the marketing approach, evident in Romero’s quote and the Wiseman and Burch discussion of their results, dismisses those players who do not care, personally, about sharing identifiers with games’ player-characters. Take my interviewee Julia, for instance, who when talking about Kratos in the game *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica Studio, 2005) said: “He could

be a bunny rabbit for all I care.” If we take players seriously when they say they do not care what the thing on the screen looks like, does that negate all arguments for more diversity in games? I do not think so. If Kratos could be anything and the game would be as enjoyable (though certainly there would have to be narrative changes), then why not a woman, why not a Black trans man, why not, indeed, a bunny rabbit? If it truly does not matter, then there is very little reason for white male characters to be treated as the default norm. Not defending representation as all important is just as powerful to me, and less marginalizing and essentializing, than saying there should be more female player-characters so high school girls will play video games more. It would also be less dismissive of the 40% of girls who did not prefer playing as a female character in Wiseman and Burch’s study (Hall, 2015).

One thing Wiseman, Burch and I agree on though is that if representation does not matter to a fair percentage of players, then perhaps the dominance of heterosexual, white, cisgendered men is not necessary. They suggest it is not necessary because girls play, but I suggest that even if game designers think their target market is hetero/white/cis male players, they can create more diverse games. Diversity should be more than a marketing hook to draw new audiences. By treating diversity as the expected norm, we can begin to think more creatively about representation beyond niche marketing, outside of treating gender, race, sexuality, etc. as distinct issues to be handled, and move beyond simplistic assumptions about what good and bad representation looks like.

How Did We Get Here?

Part of how we talk about representation in games is tied to problems with how we tell the history of games, both in a popular and an academic sense. For instance, it is often taken for granted that games were once a boys-only domain and now, increasingly, women play games. Certainly, a lot of game advertisements from the 1980s and 1990s do hail a particular form of heterosexual masculine subject. However, lived experiences and advertisements rarely correlate. Gaming as an activity has been much more omnipresent and its audience much more diverse in reality than is evident in the advertisements.

Women have been a part of the game industry and have been players of games, as long as games have existed. Digital games have also been influenced by feminisms since the beginning. As Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) point out in *Games of Empire*, digital games were invented during second wave feminism and, while the impact of that context was not always evident in their content, it was part of the social milieu into which games were born. Nineties cyberfeminism, they argue, helped shape both the Girl Games movement (i.e. female friendly games for young girls) and the Grrl Gaming movement, which they describe as “a more kick ass affair, appearing in the hyperviolent world of shooting games through the amateur player production of female ‘skins’ or avatar identities and the formation of female game clans such as PMS or Babes with Attitude” (2009, p. 21). They argue that these player-created female avatars, in turn, demonstrated to the industry that maybe they should include women as an option when they make their games. But then, what happened? Why are there so few women in the games industry? Why is it common knowledge that games are a masculine hobby?

Certainly the industry is not very diverse. Two reports, nearly ten years apart, show that the majority of people in the industry (at least those who read English and took the survey) are heterosexual, white, males (IGDA 2005; 2014). In 2005, 88.5% of respondents were male, 83.3% were white, and 92% were heterosexual. In 2014, those numbers changed a bit: 76% were male, 81% were white, and 86% were heterosexual. Although it would be easy to say things got better looking at some of the changes in numbers, it is important to note that the 2014 data includes students and professors, whereas 2005 was a survey of people working in game companies. The 2014 report even points out that 30% of the students surveyed were female, which might be part of what is driving that jump from 11% to 22% female respondents. The 2014 report also oddly collapses Africans and African Americans, but it is unclear how or if folks in the broader Black diaspora were included. Moreover, they continue to use English only surveys, meaning that large portions of this global industry are being left out of the picture of what the game industry looks like. It would be interesting to see how much all of these numbers change if you remove students and teachers, and if you parse this out by role in the industry. But, no matter how you slice it the industry is pretty homogenous.

The thing to remember though is that this is not simply an accident of history. People who are members of marginalized groups have always worked on games, since the beginning, but there is clearly something in how the industry has been structured that has reinforced this homogeneity. I suspect it follows much the same reason all tech jobs have become such male dominated fields. As Janet Abbate (2012) points out in *Recoding Gender*, women were the original computer programmers, back when it was clerical work (though clerical work that required those women to have advanced math degrees). It was the post-WW2 professionalization of the computer industry that helped push out women, people of color, and anyone who could not get the college degrees that served as gateways to the new industry. Aphra Kerr's (2006) *The Business and Culture of Digital Games* and Casey O'Donnell's (2014) *Developer's Dilemma* detail some of the dynamics of who gets to be in the game industry, including how norms in hiring and industry culture serve as gate keepers. Moreover, as Laine Nooney (2013) points out, the very way game history has been recorded leaves out those who were/are on the margins: "There has always been more girls to game history than Roberta Williams—we just have not always known where to find them." Finally, in her overview of how game culture became associated with masculinity, Carly Kocurek concludes that early popular coverage of video games countered moral panics around the new medium by "presenting gamers and gaming as representative as an emergent ideal of masculinity" (2015: p. 191). Gaming was made a masculine field, and is continually remade as such.

The hegemonic norms of the game industry also inform game fandoms. Pointing to how women who enjoyed SierraOnline's graphic adventure games felt turned off as the industry shifted to hardcore console gaming (that is, they liked those specific kinds of games, but did not necessarily identify as gamers), Nooney asks: "Is the weird historical trick here that what we have written thus far are not histories of gaming but a history of gamers and that is why so much gets left out?" When I tell non-game studies people that I study games, they often say: "I haven't played games since Atari, Pong, Pac Man, Mario, etc." I wonder sometimes if this is because this is the last time the person I am speaking to remembered games being *for* them. Even the casual games movement does not seem to have changed this feeling, as the term "gamer" has become so heavy with cultural signification that people tell me they do not play games... except

CandyCrush... SingStar... Rockband and so on. Even though Jesper Juul has argued that the “casual revolution” has meant that “video games are fast becoming games for *everyone*,” casual games are still framed in a manner that sets them outside gaming culture (2010: 152).

When it comes to the gaming audience, the common knowledge that video games used to just be for guys and are now, in an ever present now that never becomes a then, gaining more female players is a bit myopic. If we look at the Electronic Software Association reports from the last eleven years (as far back as they are available), the gender split actually has not changed that much.¹

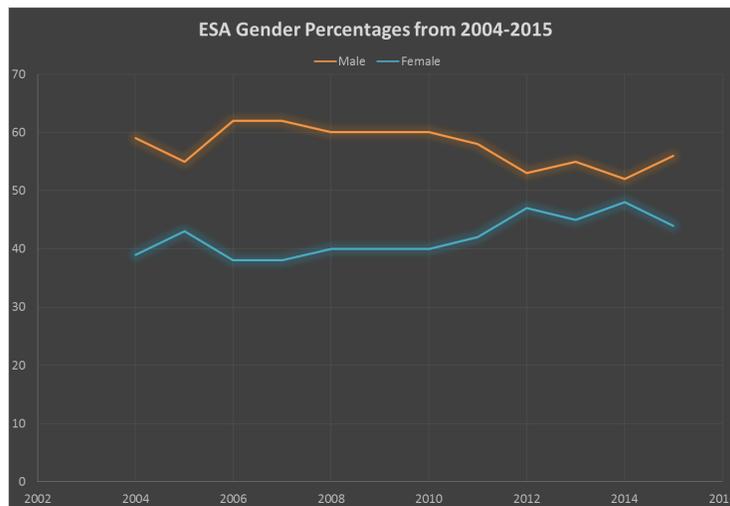


Figure 1: ESA Gender Percentages from 2004-2015

If anything they look a little cyclical, though this data is limited by the fact that they only go back to 2004, and that ESA does not provide much info on how data was collected and how data collection changed over the years. Still, the gender split waivers between 60/40 and 50/50. Yet every year or so, there is another news story proclaiming with surprise that nearly half of video game players are women. Women play games! Adults play games! It is actually surprising that a headline in 2014 says the industry does not know so many women play games given how much

¹ These reports are not all clearly archived through the Electronic Software Association’s website, so each was found by using a search engine to find “ESA Essential Facts” for every year prior to 2016 until none could be found (e.g. 2003 and before).

that story has been repeated over and over for nearly a decade now (Jayanth, 2014). It is almost as if the industry does not care.

It is also important to recognize that the ESA is a lobbying organization whose job is to convince policy makers, as well as the general public, that games are GOOD! They might not be the “other white meat” or “incredibly edible”, but the organization promoting games is seeking to do something very similar to rehabilitating their products’ image.² Games, they report, fix everything from the economy to art, education to health. If games are critiqued as being exclusionary, then they will prove just how diverse their audience is, though they only consider age and gender as relevant factors. They have never reported on race, sexuality, disabilities, class, etc. Claims that “everyone plays games!”, however, ring false against subcultural and pop cultural representations of gaming as a particular kind of activity engaged through particular kinds of bodies. As Mia Consalvo and Chris Paul (2013) point out, within game culture certain types of games count. This is why gamers and people in the industry often dismiss the ESA’s claims that lots of women game by saying they do not play real games. When the industry wants to be good or when some gamers want to dismiss claims that game culture is exclusionary, then the “nearly half of video gamers are women” headlines are trotted out. If one suggests this is a reason games and the industry should change, the “oh, but women only play... [insert whatever casual game is currently popular]” refrain plays once more.

Since the 1990s, many of the attempts to rectify the under- or misrepresentation of women in games have focused largely on courting new female players and designers via “female-friendly” game content. Many of these efforts are driven by the idea of getting more women in the game industry, a clearly necessary equity task given that the industry is so homogenous. Projects that push for more women to enter the industry, however, tend to assume all women are feminists. This assumption in turn allows misogynists to point to female friends discounting feminist arguments as evidence that feminist critiques are wrong. Of course the spirit of such programs should not be too quickly discounted. They are trying to address the very real issue of how

² “The other white meat” was an advertising slogan from the U.S. National Pork Board. “The incredible, edible egg” was a campaign from the American Egg Board to encourage people to eat eggs. In both cases, the campaigns were in response to claims that those products were unhealthy.

women are integrated into games as an industry, a culture, and a commercial product. The unfortunate outcome of gender being such a primary focus of attention in the analysis of games for a long time, however, is that gender in turn became one of the ways people understand their relationship to games.

In my own work, for example, I have found women less willing to identify as gamers, regardless of what they play (Shaw, 2012; 2013). That is not to say that women refused to identify as gamers, or even that they said gender was a reason they refused, but there do seem to be clear and noticeable gender divides in who is willing to invest the gamer as a label, or interested in doing so. Similarly, Wiseman and Burch's study found that 65% of girls surveyed said they were not gamers, while 65% of boys said they were (Hall, 2015). Other studies have described the multifaceted nature of gamer identity (De Grove, Courtois, and Van Looy, 2015; Grooten and Kowert, 2015) and the way discourses about gamers affect how people describe their gameplay (Bergstrom, Fisher, and Jenson, 2014). "Gamer" has become imbued with meaning and is an investment in a fandom. It is more akin to film buff than moviegoer, which is why it is unproductive to call everyone who plays games a gamer. But people do not need to be gamers to count, and for us to care if and how they play games. This was actually a core argument of the so-called "death to gamers" articles which circulated in August 2014, and which in turn became one of several factors that rallied people to the GamerGate cause. I will return to that later.³

So what happened? Why do we continue to forget that women have always made and played digital games? The video game industry crash of the 1980s resulted in a narrowing of the target market, at least in the United States. American game marketers, as well as the game press, began targeting a safer core of white, cis male, young boys and teens... or so the story goes; Koucurek (2015) questions this oversimplification. Graeme Kirkpatrick observes in his analysis of 1980s and 1990s UK gaming magazines, by the 1990s "the gender identity of gamers has been firmly consolidated" (2012). At the same time, amid rhetoric that games are a key entry point into STEM careers and games are boys' toys, the girls' games movement focused its efforts on

³ It is outside the scope of this paper to provide a true comprehensive summary of such a complex phenomenon as GamerGate. For an overview of GamerGate, see Chess and Shaw (2015), Massanari (2015), and Mortensen (2016).

developing games to get girls interested in gaming. Marketing games for girls as a niche audience, however, helped reinforce the idea that mainstream games were for a male audience. As Amanda Cote (2015) demonstrates, mainstream gaming companies more or less ignored the girls' games movement. Her analysis of *Nintendo Power* shows that, from 1994 to 1999 (the core era of the girl games movement), the magazine continued to represent gamers as male, and constructed games culture as a heterosexual, masculine culture. The more recent push towards casual games similarly brackets out these games for everyone, which allows so-called hardcore games to remain targeted to a narrow audience. And as many have argued, game critics and people in the industry who are pushing back on treating this specific group as core now clash with a fan-base that grew up as the core market. This is the history that helped create GamerGate, among many other cultural and social shifts too numerous to cover here.

Moreover, the trouble of emphasizing gender is that efforts to organize women in game development, to get young girls, as well as women interested in gaming, and to represent women better in games reinforce the idea that gender is binary and fails to acknowledge how gender performance intersects with things like sex, sexuality, race, etc. As Dietrich Squinkifer, creator of games like *Dominique Pamplémousse* and *Quing's Quest*, discussed at their keynote during 2014's *Meaningful Play* conference, organizations that promote women in games are not inherently welcoming to people who are gender queer, non-binary, or transgendered. Games that treat gender diversity as a simple picking of female or male avatars are not really representing gender diversely. There are many ways in which an overemphasis on gender as an organizing factor of movements to fix the game industry reflects earlier articulations of feminism as only interested in a collective identity as women, and too often resulted in the erasure of lesbians, women of color, women who do not come from economic privilege, transwomen, and everyone who lives at the intersection of those and other marginalized positions. Perhaps, then, part of the way forward is to revisit feminist history.

Erosion, Not Evolution

We often hear the history of feminism described in waves, and it is important in feminist game studies to connect our research to those political contexts. In *Games of Empire*, Dyer-Witford

and de Peuter (2009) argue that there are some connections to be made between second-wave feminism and attempts at dealing with gender in the early games industry. They identify similar links between third-wave and cyberfeminisms, and 1990s girl game and grrl gamer cultures. As the feminist movement wave tale goes, the first wave of feminism was about suffrage, reproductive and economic rights. The second wave of feminism is often framed in relation to the Equal Rights amendment, *Roe v. Wade*, and Women's Liberation. It is where we get the phrase "the personal is political," meant to emphasize the way sexism pervades everyday life. The third wave of feminism is often characterized as embracing transnationalism, intersectionality, difference, and multivocality. The internet tells me we are now in a fourth wave of feminism, because kids these days use Tumblr more than glue sticks, and Twitter more than poster board. But the internet as a technology has been around since the second wave and has become an increasingly common household utility during the third wave (e.g. 1990s cyberfeminism), so maybe tools are not the only defining factor. Some have used "fourth-wave feminism" synonymously with post-feminism, a term which itself is used to encompass reactions to feminism from a wide range of political positions—most of which oversimplify feminist history and activism. Taxonomies make it really easy to oversimplify them.

But there is something useful in the waves. I suspect the wave theory works rhetorically to help us come to terms with the fact that feminists today are fighting many of the same fights feminists have been fighting for centuries. Reproductive freedom, sexual liberation, and economic equality have been on the table since the first wave. We still do not have the second wave's Equal Rights Amendment. And despite the fact that third- and fourth-wave feminists insist that we need intersectional and transnational feminism, reality rarely lives up to political ideals. That is not to say feminist activists have not accomplished anything. Waves work to erode rocks and beaches slowly. They break existing structures down, but in their wake leave new worlds behind. In response to a critique that the erosion metaphor might be too destructive, an audience member at one of my 2015 talks put it this way: erosion is what gave us the Grand Canyon.

It is also important to remember that at no time is the reality of history easily summarized by such taxonomies. There have always been disagreements within and among feminist movements.

Intersectionality, for one, was not invented in the 90s. Black feminists, in particular though not exclusively, have been arguing that feminism needs to be intersectional throughout all of feminist waves. From Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman Speech" in 1851, to the Combahee River Collective's Statement in 1977, about the importance of fighting against interlocking systems of oppression, to Bernice Johnson Reagon's 1981 call for "coalition politics" (later used as part of a key argument in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, though rarely do those citing Butler cite Reagon), Black feminists have been pointing out the limits of a gender-only focused feministic critique all along.⁴ If we are to chart any shift in mainstream feminism over the past few decades, it is fair to say that more people who identify as feminists are now aware of the importance of intersectionality. Increasingly we see popular conversations on representation reference intersectionality.

Waves work slowly, and while transformation takes time erosion is probably a better model than evolution when thinking about how change happens. Evolution is passive, probabilistic, and assumes change inevitably happens. Erosion, on the other hand, is active. It requires slow, constant, unrelenting activity to be sure, but it does not just magically happen on its own. Feminist games criticism, production, and scholarship have similarly come a long way. From starting conversations about the importance of representation in games, period, we are now in a better place to think critically about what inclusion and representation mean.

This all culminated, for me and others, in 2013. That year it seemed like everyone was talking about representation with renewed urgency. Momentum for this began before this certainly, but 2013 was a year that made it feel like everything came together: From the mainstream industry, 2013 saw EA's Full Spectrum mini-conference on LGBT issues in gaming and the #1reasontobe panel at GDC (a follow-up to 2012's #1reasonwhy panel). LostLevels, an unconference, happened for the first time outside of GDC to allow people who could not afford the conference's high admission costs to meet. GaymerX held a very successful LGBTQ focus fan convention in San Francisco. In the academic realm, the Different Games conference and

⁴ Sojourner Truth's speech is reproduced in Schneir (1994). The Combahee River Collective's Statement and Reagon's talk are reproduced in Smith (2000) [1983].

Queerness and Games conference were held for the first time, and are now going into their fourth year. Much as I hate the phrase, it seemed like things really did get better. This was not just a feminist game studies wave, but a whole ocean of feminist, anti-racist, anti-ableist, anti-classist, queer, social justice oriented games research, design, and fandom.

Then, in August of 2014, GamerGate happened. And while I do not have space to talk about all the particularities of GamerGate, I do think it is fair to say that the threats of hacking, doxing, swatting, and the dog-piling of harassment that some “gaters” engaged in raised the stakes of doing critical games work. When I cut through the multiple discourses and events around GamerGate, one thing is very clear: How we talk about representation popularly and academically really does matter to the extent that how we make our arguments shapes the type of opposition we see.

Reframing the Argument for Representation

There are two main arguments for representation: we want to see ourselves reflected in our media and media affects our view of people unlike us. In both cases, there tends to be an oversimplification of what constitutes good and negative representation. Good representation is described as authentic, realistic, or showing groups well. Bad representation, on the other hand, is false, unrealistic, or shows groups negatively or stereotypically. What is wrong with that? Well, as Richard Dyer (1999) points out in his essay “Stereotyping,” critics tend to focus on whether or not stereotypes are true and proving that they are not. Lesbians should not be represented as butch because that is just a stereotype, for example. That is one way of approaching a problem, but in constantly saying that stereotypes are not true, we tend to perform the rhetorical act of saying people who are members of marginalized groups and perform stereotypically either do not exist or are somehow bad. There are many butch lesbians in the world, and their gender performance should not be ignored because of how it has been used in media representations to signify deviance. Rather than focusing on the truth of stereotypes, Dyer argues that we need to focus on how they are being used in a text. Are they being used to make those characters comical, to justify our hatred of them, to make what happens to them a fault in their person, and more generally to make them seem less than human compared to other

characters? Those moments when stereotypes are used to dehumanize are precisely those in which they promote patriarchal, white supremacist, and heteronormative ideologies in media. Too often people are focused on what a good representation of a given group looks like. Such questions are inevitably limiting. Races, genders, and sexualities are not fixable, knowable, static entities that can be pinned down and represented. Good representation necessarily fails to encompass the totality of a group in a single body and recognizes its own failure to do so. This requires substantially more diversity in games and all media.

For critics, Wiseman and Burch's findings (and my own research) suggest representation does not matter because the so-called target market does not always need to see itself represented. If niche marketing is the goal of representation, then proving that market doesn't exist is the primary form of resistance. Similarly, in the absence of empirical findings about direct effects, the argument that media representation matters is assumed to fall apart; and strong media effects are simply hard to find. In the conclusion of my book (2014), I argue that it might be more beneficial to think about the ways media representation creates what is and might be possible.

Rather than see demand for representation as a limitation on creativity, we could reframe it as a checkpoint in design. If we revisit those two ways people talk about media representation mattering, then we have a little more nuance to work with. One, media affects our view of people unlike us, specifically because if we do not have a wide range of knowledge about marginalized groups, media is one of the only ways we get to know them. If that representation is always the same, we only have a very narrow view of what the people who are like that (whatever "that" is) are like. This also means that representation of marginalized groups designed for a mainstream audience is often overly positive, to correct decades of misrepresentation. Two, we want to see ourselves reflected in our media, but no single media representation will ever be able to fully represent every member of a group because of the inherent diversity of human experiences. This also means that representation of marginalized groups designed for a marginalized audience can be more complicated. There can be negative representation of marginalized groups because members of those groups realized that those images do not represent the entire group.

The trouble with games is that the industry has actually done the opposite. Good representation or diversity has mostly been witnessed in games directed towards marginalized audiences. For years, people have said that to get a female-player market you need good representation of women. Good representation is not included in games for a male market, because it is assumed men do not want to see good representation of women— but, put in such stark terms, the statement sounds ridiculous. If games, as a field and an industry, focus on expanding representation simply because they want to get a new market, this means that they have decided that their typical market does not want diversity. Whether or not this is true is a question that still needs to be answered. Wiseman and Busch’s research is a good start, but it requires more contextualization to make sense of the apparent gender and age differences in children’s responses about whether and how they care about representation. My own work has focused instead on the corollary question: do people who are members of marginalized groups automatically and deeply care about representation?

For most interviewees, identifying with characters in media and seeing people like them in media (and especially games) was “nice when it happens.” Nice, I argue, is more than ambivalence or apathy. It is a defense mechanism, a pushback against being held responsible for one’s own marginality. That is not to say representation did not matter at all to them. They talked a great deal of how it mattered within specific texts, and this observation is similar to research findings I have from projects over the past ten years. Specifically, players are aware of how representation can come to matter in specific games. With this as an entry point, we can begin to critique games and how they represent groups in medium-specific, audience-centric ways.

What Now?

How do we move forward from this history, though, without focusing so much on niche marketing or media effects arguments? How am I going to convince the video game industry to care about representation if I do not make a strong case for representation? First, I do not think the industry needs me to take care of it. Sure, games can increasingly offer a multitude of representational possibilities, but that is not the only kind of representation we need. Game developers need to challenge themselves to make games that offer more kinds of narratives,

more kinds of characters, and more kinds of mechanics if they want to promote innovation. Can designers look critically at their work and ask themselves why they made the choices they did? What would it mean to flip the race, gender, sexuality, embodiment, and voice of the character they have created? When creating avatar design choices, what has shaped the options made available? What logic underlies the structure of the options that are made, and what would happen if that logic was simply forgotten? The industry must treat diversity as a goal in its own right, rather than an exception to the rule or the sole domain of those who are marginalized. How they do that, if they do that, is up to them.

Second, how much has the game industry cared about what academics and critics have to say, already? Sure, we have seen changes in representation in games. We have seen changes to the structure of the industry. We have seen some changes to how the audience is envisioned. But those changes have been glacially slow if we consider how long people have been making the case for them, and whatever changes we have seen, there is still a long way to go. At my most optimistic, I assume that if I keep putting my case out there, eventually it will sink in and someday, maybe, more people will make similar arguments. At some point, all of those arguments together will influence some game designers to approach their job differently. I do not think aiming for erosion is the same as giving up though. Change takes time, which does not mean we need to be patient, but that we have to keep working.

Finally, at my most honest I can say that it is not my job to tell the industry what to do. I am not an industry consultant, and I am not being paid to fix the game industry (though I am certainly open to offers). Research need not serve capitalism. As T.L. Taylor (2004) asserted in a blog post on *Terra Nova*, game researchers need not think about their work in relation to what it means for the industry: “A lot of the work we do can certainly be used to retain players or find new demographics for games but I believe we have to retain a space for other kinds of work - often basic, often critical - to exist.” To that end, outside of grant proposals, perhaps we should stop demonstrating games matter by focusing on their market share or the size of the audience. There is a wealth of possibilities in representation beyond the mainstream AAA industry. Indeed, most

of the more interesting LGBTQ representation in games has come from indie designers working with the tools available to them to make and distribute games, and that has been true for decades.

In keeping with the diversity without defense argument (Representation matters.), knowledge production about media culture need not serve media industries directly or even at all. Research, like representation, lets us see the world in new ways and think creatively about how else it might be structured, and that should be impact enough to keep doing this work. Things will change as long as people invest in change. As Sarah Schulman says in *The Gentrification of the Mind*: “I’ve noticed through my long life that people with vested interest in things staying the way they are regularly insist that both change and accountability are impossible” (2012: 52). She then quotes Audre Lorde who says: “That you can’t fight City Hall, is a rumor being spread by City Hall.” Hope and optimism, particularly from marginalized positions, are revolutionary acts. So let’s keep insisting, hoping, and knowing that games can be better, rather than spending all of our energies proving why they should be.

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Adrienne Shaw is an Assistant Professor in Temple University’s Department of Media Studies and Production, a member of the Klein College Media and Communication graduate faculty. Her book Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture (University of Minnesota, 2014) won the 2016 Outstanding Book Award from the Popular Communication Division of the International Communication Association. She also co-edited Queer Game Studies (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) with Bonnie Ruberg and Queer Technologies (Routledge, 2017) with Katherine Sender. Her ongoing research project is the LGBTQ Game Archive (www.lgbtqgamearchive.com).

Résumé

La plupart des études portant sur la représentation des groupes marginalisés dans les médias cherchent à comprendre pourquoi plus de diversité est nécessaire. Les arguments avancés comprennent non seulement ceux fondés sur l’idée que les représentations ont des effets directs sur leur audience, mais aussi ceux qui analysent comment les représentations médiatiques renforcent les normes hégémoniques. Pour cette raison, nous avons tendance à voir la diversité comme étant possible seulement lorsqu’elle fait partie d’une stratégie commerciale. En revanche, poser la diversité, plutôt que le pluralisme, comme la norme permet de penser la représentation des groupes marginalisés de manière plus créative, sans la concevoir comme une stratégie de marketing ciblé et sans faire de présupposition sur ce qu’est une bonne ou mauvaise représentation.

Mots-clés : jeu vidéo, féminisme, représentation, genre, sexualité, diversité