

Virtual Representation:
Diversity and the Ethical Responsibility of the Video Game Industry

Brittany Green
Southern Utah University
MGMT 4200
Dr. Alan Hamlin
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Video games, like most forms of mass media, have faced controversy over their content. For video games, the first big controversy was over the presence of violent content and whether prolonged exposure to that content leads to violent or other antisocial behavior.

More recently, the so-called GamerGate debate, which, among other disagreements, focused on diversity and representation of female and minority characters, took over the video game community and, for a brief time, spread to the general online community.

The focus of the debate asks two questions: whether women and minority characters in video games are underrepresented or represented in a stereotypical, negative manner; and whether there is an ethical obligation on behalf of video game designers to change that perceived negative representation.

In this paper, I will look at the issue of diverse representation in video games, present both sides of the debate and present my opinion on whether I believe video game designers have an ethical obligation to increase diversity in games.

The Video Game Industry

According to the Entertainment Software Association (2016), who provides a yearly snapshot of statistics on the \$23.5 billion video game industry, nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of American households have at least one person who regularly plays video games. The average video game player is 35 years old, and 59 percent of video game players are male.

Despite popular stereotypes of players being teenage or young adult males, women over 18 actually represent a higher proportion (31 percent) of players than boys

ages 18 and younger (17 percent). However, the frequency and genre of video games played by men and women show a different story. A 2015 Pew Research Center study found that 49 percent of Americans play video games and ten percent consider themselves “gamers,” or people who dedicate a significant amount of time and energy to video games and the video game community. Men are more than twice as likely as women to consider themselves gamers, (15 percent to 6 percent) and a full 33 percent of men ages 18 to 29 consider themselves gamers compared to 9 percent of women in the same age group (Duggan, 2015, p. 2).

Wohn (2011) looked at the demographics of players of “casual” games versus more “hardcore” games. Casual games, usually found online via social networks like Facebook or on mobile devices, usually require a lower time commitment (“although players can certainly choose to play for long periods of time” [p. 199]) and portray more “positive” narratives than traditional games. A majority of these casual gamers tend to be women, while the more typically-studied video game audience, which Pew (2015) would likely consider “gamers,” are younger males. In the discussion of video game representation, the games primarily cited are those of the more “hardcore” genres, and are the games I will be focusing on in this paper.

Demographics of Video Game Designers

A 2016 survey of game developers (Weststar & Legault) found that the industry is more white and male than both its users and the U.S. population.

72 percent of survey respondents identified as male, 23 percent identified as female, 1.8 percent identified as transgender (compared to an estimated 0.3 percent in the general U.S. population) and 3 percent identified as “other” (p. 10).

75 percent of respondents identified as white/Caucasian/European, 8 percent as Asian, 7 percent as Latino, 3 percent as African-American and 2.5 percent Arab or West Asian.

The proportion of respondents who identify as members of the LGB community is significantly higher than in the general U.S. population. 4 percent identified as homosexual, 10 percent as bisexual and 7 percent as “other,” compared to a total estimated 2.2 to 3 percent of the population as a whole identify as LGB. The remaining 80 percent identified as heterosexual.

Stereotypical Representation in Video Games

A 2009 study (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory) found that adult white men are comparatively significantly overrepresented across video games compared to members of other demographics, finding that male characters account for 85.23 percent white characters account for 80.05 percent of all video game characters in the study, which both account for a higher proportion than those demographics in the U.S. population as a whole.

Going further, representation of those other demographics (women and minority groups) was found to be negative and stereotypical.

Middle Eastern. Sisler (2008) found that those of Arab or Muslim descent tend to be portrayed stereotypically with “[a] headcover, loose clothes, dark skin color,” and often with signifiers to “international terrorism and/or Islamist extremism” (p. 208). The “...diverse ethnic and religious identities of the Islamic world have been flattened out and reconstructed into a monolithic representation,” (p. 214), and usually that representation is one of an antagonist.

African-American. Cicchirillo (2015) found that negative stereotypical representations of African-American characters (violent, criminal and aggressive behavior) in games confirm “...already held stereotypical beliefs that are primed from an avatar/character representation,” (p. 124) and show a significant difference in responses to those stereotypical traits after participants had played white and African-American characters, saying “the results also showed a significant interaction effect between participant race and avatar race for aggressive affect” (p. 122).

Women. Near (2015) looked specifically at representations of female characters on video game box art, finding that women were more likely than men to be perceived as sex objects, sexier, more attractive or in ways that were otherwise sexually suggested, and that these sexually suggestive portrayals were often positively correlated with higher sales.

However, Duggan (2015) found that 33 percent of people who play video games and 46 percent of gamers do not think minorities are portrayed poorly, while only 9 percent of video game players and 10 percent of gamers *do* think minorities are portrayed poorly (p. 4-5). Only 13 percent of blacks and 11 percent of Hispanics think most games portray minorities poorly, compared to 7 percent of whites (p.12-13).

26 percent of video game players and 35 percent of gamers do not think women are portrayed poorly, while 16 percent of game players and 24 percent of gamers *do* think women are portrayed poorly (p. 4-5). These responses show no differences by gender (p. 12-13).

The Debate Over Diversity

There Are Stereotypes

An abundance of studies, including the few I cited above, show that there is indeed a stereotypical (often negative) representation of women and other minority groups in video games, especially the more “hardcore” video games that top best-seller lists and win game awards.

Supporters of increased diversity point out these stereotypical representations, saying that they provide unfair negative stereotypes that extend outside the game and lead to a more divided community overall.

However, opponents point out that few video game players and self-reported gamers do feel that minorities and women are portrayed negatively; even minority and female players tend to disagree with the assumption that these negative portrayals do exist.

Additionally, a longitudinal study that looked at the influence of video game exposure on sexist beliefs and attitudes found that video games actually have *no effect* on overall beliefs, much like similar studies on violence and exposure to television:

Both the design of the current study and its main findings are more in line with previous cultivation studies on violence in video games that found no or only very limited evidence for cultivation effects. The weak—and mostly nonsignificant—effects that were found in the current study also do not deviate too much from average cultivation effect found for television exposure. (Breuer, Kowert, Festl, & Quandt, 2015, p. 200)

The study found that video games are only one of a multitude of experiences and exposures people have, and they often cite other influences, including interpersonal relationships, when forming opinions of bias and prejudice.

Better Representation

Supporters point out the discrepancy in the demographics of video game players and the characters that play video games, saying that players want to buy and play games that more closely mirror their own lives and experiences.

Wohm's (2011) analysis backs up this claim, pointing out that there are more female main characters in casual games and that more women play casual games. However, others argue that perhaps there are more female main characters in these games and more male main characters in "hardcore" games because of the players who focus on them; it's the game that follows the user, not the user that follows the game.

Some also argue that the lack of diversity in game characters is just a result of the success of those games. Sisler (2008) notes, "moreover, the highly competitive nature of the game market, together with high production costs, reinforces the iteration of proved and successful patterns in game genres and content." If games with stereotypical portrayals of minority characters are already so successful, and few gamers see a major issue with the representation of those characters, is there an economic incentive to continue creating those games? Will an artificial push to create more "diverse" games prove to be a bad budget decision?

Within the Industry

This attitude of a need for greater diversity is shared by creators within the video game developer industry.

The 2016 study of developers found that 82 percent of respondents indicated that diversity in game content is considered "somewhat" or "very" important, an increase of 11 percent over just one year before, which suggests that the GamerGate controversy seems to have had an effect on those within the industry. Additionally, 21 percent said

that the industry should focus more on “diversity in game content” to ensure future success.

In a 2016 interview, Andrew Wilson, the CEO of Entertainment Arts, one of the industry’s largest game creators, mirrored that attitude, saying:

As we think about representation inside games, what is the most important thing for us, like it is in movies and books and TV and all other forms of entertainment, is to really capture the true nature of the community that’s engaging in that content.

It’s really just the creators inside of our organization saying, “Hey, I’m looking at who’s playing our games. We know that they want to look into the games that we make and see people like them so that they can better relate to those games. We want to capture that.” (Plante, 2016)

The industry is already starting to respond to the call for more diversity. The last few years have seen some major releases with female or minority leads, including *Assassins Creed III: Liberation*, *Mafia 3* and a new Lara Croft game.

Start with the Developers. Many people calling for an increase in game diversity say the change needs to start by changing the demographics of the video game industry itself. As Marcus Montgomery, lead game designer at Limbic Software, told *Newsweek*:

There’s always going to be a critical nuance that’s more explored if you are from a particular demographic. Like, I’m a heterosexual male, I have no idea what it’s like to be a lesbian woman. I don’t think any kind of research is going to allow me to get the right nuance. (Ong, 2016, p. 53)

The push for greater diversity in stories has to come from within the industry, or the diversity will feel forced and unnatural, and attempts to remove stereotypes may backfire. Wilson says the industry is making that push for a more diverse workforce by looking at young female gamers and encouraging them to become engineers, investing in schools in ethnic communities and recruiting from other underrepresented countries or communities (Plante, 2016).

Around half of (47 percent) of game developers in 2016 say that it appears that the games industry has started to become more diverse, an increase of 10 percent over just one year prior (Weststar & Legault).

My Opinion - An Obligation?

As a female gamer, I've played characters with sexualized bodies and far fewer clothes than a person of their profession should really be wearing (chainmail bikinis are inadequate armor for a warrior). I've had discussions with other women and with members of other minority groups (whether African-American, Middle Eastern, LGBT or others), and we all agree that there is definitely something to be desired when it comes to representation and diversity in video games.

However, an overwhelming majority of the more dedicated gamers had a negative reaction towards the GamerGate controversy and the demand to increase diversity in games. When I posed the question that is the topic of this paper - "Does the video game industry have an ethical obligation to increase diversity in games?" - I got a lot of vehement "no" responses.

From my perspective, a lot of the pushback from dedicated gamers towards the debate isn't because they don't feel there is stereotypical presentations of minority groups, but because the demand for diversity seems to be coming from *outside* the gaming community. There is a feeling that people who don't even play these violent or stereotypical games are now demanding they change, and members of the gaming community don't like being forced to change.

I think that any change has to come from within the community, and it has to come from creating a more diverse video game development industry. Right now, the industry is not diverse, and creating artificially diverse games would feel forced. As

Montgomery told *Newsweek*, a straight man can't adequately tell a story about a lesbian character, and to force him to do that would create a weak and unfair portrayal.

So to answer the question, no, I don't think the video game industry has an ethical obligation to create more diverse characters *right now*. I think increased diversity will start to come more organically as the industry itself becomes more diverse.

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