Gatekeeping: Women, People of Color, and the Video Game Community

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GATEKEEPING: WOMEN, PEOPLE OF COLOR, AND THE VIDEO GAME COMMUNITY

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Preface

There is an old photograph in my house. Thanksgiving, 2000: I was five years old, watching a cousin of mine play a game on the Super Nintendo console. This photo coincides with much of what I remember from that age; I remember sitting on the floor with my dad and playing Super Mario Bros. on the Nintendo Entertainment System. I can still hear my mother flat out disallowing me from quitting video games when I cried with frustration at how bad I was when I got my Game Boy Advance; she knew I would get better at them. I remember exactly how quickly and intensely I fell in love when my best friend from elementary school introduced me to The Legend of Zelda, a franchise that would change my life. These are some of my earliest memories, and they all revolve around video games. They are part of my identity. I am a gamer.

I also recall discussing the perceived complexities of my race with my black mother and white father at a young age. I remember learning the words “biracial” and “mixed,” what they meant to my parents, and I am continually discovering what they mean to me. I remember becoming aware that I was a girl and constructing a self-image and a persona based on images I saw around me from princesses to Powerpuff Girls. Though I have learned more and changed as I have grown up, these early lessons of self are part of my identity, as well. I am a woman of color.

I never saw any contradictions between these sides of myself. Such a thing never occurred to me until I was eight years old. The only games that I had really been exposed to until that point were Mario and Zelda titles, both of which feature white male protagonists saving white princesses. I thought little of this,
though Peach and Zelda were always my favorite characters because they were
girls, like me. Then, in 2003, I got the newest Zelda game: The Wind Waker. The
game featured a pirate girl named Tetra. She was blonde haired and blue eyed,
but her skin was beautifully, wonderfully brown. For all intents and purposes,
she looked like me. I was overjoyed to meet this character, though I didn’t know
why.

Towards the end of the game, it is revealed that the pirate Tetra is actually
this game’s Princess Zelda. I remember the way my heart welled up as a glowing
light surrounded her. My favorite character was going to be a little brown girl--
she was going to be me! But when the light faded, Tetra was gone, and the Zelda
I knew stood in her place, with her long pink dress and stark white skin. Though
I recognized her, I no longer knew how to feel about her.

The message I received as a little brown girl who loved this game and
these characters was: we know that you’re here, but we do not value you. We can
put you in this world, but we will keep you at a comfortable distance. You
cannot be the princess. In that moment, I realized the importance of
representation. I began to wonder why the developers chose to make the pirate
brown and the princess white. From there, I wondered why the main characters
in the games I played were always white and male. These were questions that
grew in my mind with every game I played that had the same patterns: white
male protagonist, white female leading lady with a smaller role and a scarcity of
female counterparts, and few (if any) people of color outside of the occasional
villain.

Then, in the summer of 2014, the Gamergate controversy exploded. An
anonymous online collective of gamers under the label “#GamerGate” attacked
female developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu (Quinn had been a target since February 2013, before the events started gaining serious traction) and critic Anita Sarkeesian with rape and death threats to their social media accounts, homes, and in phone calls, doxxing (the release of their personal information to the public), and various other cyber assaults. Wu and her husband were forced to flee their home in the midst of the chaos. This was the event that opened my eyes to the reality that it was not just games and developer’s messages through them that had problems: the entire gaming community was poisoned.

Abstract

Gamers are a large, diverse group of people, but they are not treated as such within their own community. AAA video games are designed largely by and for white men at the expense of women and racial minorities. These groups are grossly underrepresented in video games and are often poorly depicted when they do exist in virtual spaces. Stereotypes and other negative attitudes towards these groups are exacerbated and furthered by their portrayals in video games. The wide quantitative and qualitative gaps between female characters and characters of color compared to white male characters has contributed to a toxic culture that privileges the white male voice above all others, dehumanizes women and people of color and erases them as members of the gaming community, and allows hate speech and threats to personal safety on the basis of race and gender to flourish.

Introduction

Representation in media has been a hot topic of late from outrage over the recasting of the beloved redhead Annie as a black girl in the 2014 remake of the
Annie, to the Twitter topic #OscarsSoWhite calling out racism in Hollywood due to all white Best Actor/Actress Oscar nominations in 2015 and 2016. The discussion is not limited to film; the GLAAD organization has kept track of the numbers of regular LGBTQIA+, female, of color, and disabled characters on television annually since 2005. According to the report of the 2015-2016 season, representation of all of these groups (with the exception of disabled people, who’s TV presence decreased for the first time in two years) has continually increased, though there is still a lot of room for improvement (Where We Are on TV). Following this pattern of better representation coinciding with the newness of the medium, films entering the world in the late 1800s with television following in the early 1900s, one would think that video games, invented in the late 1900s, would be ahead of the representation curve. On the contrary, discrimination and toxicity are endemic to the gaming community.

According to “Gaming and Gamers,” a 2015 study by the Pew Research Center, 48% of all US gamers are women. A 2008 Pew study, “Adults and Video Games,” found that in the US, 51% of white people, 51% of black people, and 63% of English-speaking Hispanic people in the US play video games. And yet, the International Game Developers Association found that 83.3% of developers were white and 88.5% of them were male in a 2005 survey of game developers in the US, UK, Canada, and Australia. 66% of respondents for this study were from the US. The overabundance of white males in game development has demonstrable effects on the limitations of female and minority representations in games, and by extension the gaming community. While this study is focused on the effects of representation in a United States context, some Japanese game developers and games released in the US that interact with the perpetuation of
racial and gendered stereotypes will be discussed.

A 2009 study entitled “The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games” found that white males were overrepresented in a survey of 150 games on various consoles released in the US from March 2005 to February 2006 compared to the US Census of the same year. 85.23% of all characters in surveyed games were male while only 14.77% of all characters were female. In terms of race, characters overrepresented white people by over 5% compared to the US census (80.05%/75.1%) and underrepresented all other major ethnic groups, with the exception of Asians/Pacific Islanders, who were overrepresented by just over 1% (Williams). The quantity of white and male characters stunningly mirrors that of white and male developers. Despite the fact that women make up roughly half of the US population, and women and people of color combined make up approximately half of the US gaming population, they are severely underserved both quantitatively and qualitatively in both games and the gaming industry.

Games across all genres, including The Legend of Zelda, Grand Theft Auto, NBA, and Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain often rely on stereotypes when creating their female and of color characters, or otherwise neglect or vilify them. These types of representations have consequences. Burgess et al (2011), Vang and Fox (2014), and Breuer et al (2015) conclude through their studies that these negative representations of groups in video games (in this case, women and people of color) influence player perceptions of these groups in the real world. The privileging of the white male perspective in games at the expense of women and people of color, even in games developed outside of the United States, leads to negative interactions during online play that target women and POC, the
social media storm following the release of the massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) *Rust* which randomized player avatars’ races, and #GamerGate.

**Literature Review**

One of the earliest examples of writing that focuses on representation in video games is Tracy L. Dietz’s “An Examination of Violence and Gender Role Portrayals in Video Games: Implications for Gender Socialization and Aggressive Behavior,” which was published in the psychology journal *Sex Roles* in 1998. Since then, this field research has blossomed. Representation in video games grew as a field of study throughout the 2000s, with much of the premiere research arising in the 2010s from scholars including Anna Anthropy, the game designer behind “dys4ia” which allows players a personal window into the process of gender transition, Dr. Kishonna Gray who has studied how blackness affects the player experience on the Microsoft gaming social platform Xbox Live, and Dr. Melinda Burgess, Dr. Stephen Burgess, and Paul Stermer who have published works relating to both gender and race in video games together.

Much of the research about representation in games, including Dietz’s article, revolves around gender. Although racial diversity was introduced to video games before gender diversity with the first black character being introduced in either *Basketball* (1979) for Atari 800 or Sega’s *Heavyweight Champ* (1976) (the latter has a character who could be coded as Black, though it is uncertain; thanks to its graphical capabilities, the former has a character with obviously brown skin), critiques of gender dynamics in video games have been more intense and varied. These include the use/overuse of the damsel in distress
tropes, objectification and sexualization, and violence against women, in addition to underrepresentation. While gender studies of games can be applied across racial lines, they are typically used in discussion of white female characters for the simple fact that most female characters that appear in video games are white.

While discussions of women continue to dominate the study of representation in video games, scholarship began to shift toward other demographics relatively quickly. Just two years after Dietz’s article, Nina Huntemann produced and directed “Game Over: Gender, Race & Violence in Video Games,” (2000). Note that the title mentions both race and gender. In terms of seeking out published work on racial representation in video games, it is common to find works that pair it with gender representation, while searching for gender representation on its own will yield plenty of results focusing solely on gender. This is not always the case, however. For example, Dr. Anthony Sze-Fai Shiu published “What Yellowface Hides: Video Games, Whiteness, and the American Racial Order” in 2006 on the treatment of Asian characters and culture in video games.

The content framework of literature in this field has remained much the same since study began largely because the video game industry has generally remained the same. While indie (independent) games have begun to carve their own path that often succeeds in terms of positive and diverse representation, AAA games (big budget productions from large studios) are the most played and most studied; this is where change has been the hardest to come by. Even as technological capabilities have evolved to give us more complex worlds and stories, character design has remained focused on white males (especially in lead roles) while developers still rely heavily on tropes and stereotypes for female and
minority characterization. Consequently, the discussions surrounding representations of them have not had much room for growth. However, the forms of discussion have branched out; while much of the scholarly research remains article based, several books have been written on the topic throughout the 2000s and online critique of video games in the form of dedicated blogs, video game news sites, and YouTube channels has exploded.

Online coverage is where a majority of gaming community engagement happens and controversy arises. For example, Anita Sarkeesian, the critic behind the organization Feminist Frequency, found herself the target of a harassment campaign in 2014 at the hands of the online collective Gamergate. Though Feminist Frequency is an organization dedicated to comprehensive examination and education about representation across all media forms, Sarkeesian was targeted primarily due to her crowdfunded series of reviews of gender representation in games on YouTube, “Tropes vs. Women.” Her reviews focus on issues such as lack of female body diversity, women as reward, and hypersexualization of female characters. While the community of game scholars generally agrees on these and other aforementioned points about problematic representation, an important and unique facet of gaming literature is that it is not all scholarly. The gaming community is alive online where everyone can contribute their own thoughts backed by their own research, and it is absurdly polarizing.

While this community has grown and developed itself, research about it has begun to emerge. In addition to studying representation in games, game scholars have begun to examine the community itself including the roles of women within the community and the experiences and treatment of women and
racial minorities as gamers. “Cheerleaders/booth babes/Halo hoes: Pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys,” (2009) written by Nicholas Taylor, Jen Jenson & Suzanne de Castell and published in Digital Creativity examines the position of women in the rising competitive gaming scene, while Gray’s “Deviant bodies, stigmatized identities, and racist acts: examining the experiences of African-American gamers in Xbox live” (2012) studies and engages with racism that black gamers experience in online play and their own thoughts on it.

These studies focusing on the players rather than the games employ interviews to enhance their research. Other studies (both those that focus on games and those that focus on gamers) rely on playing or watching games, sampling games across platforms to obtain quantitative data, and observing gamers in and out of play. Using these methods, video game scholars have concluded, broadly, that representations of women and people of color in games are lacking in both quantity and quality. All groups are grossly underrepresented, and are often in minor roles and poorly or lazily designed when they exist at all. These negative or subpar representations can indeed alter players’ perceptions of these groups. Those altered perceptions in turn contribute to the negative experiences of women and minority gamers, who are often forced to silence themselves within toxic communities or face harassment and hate speech. The dominant voice of the gaming community then becomes that of the white male, whose perspective AAA developers then continue to privilege in the vicious cycle of representation in games.
Survey Methodology

In order to study the relationship between race, gender, representation, and gamer culture, I conducted an online survey of 310 individuals. I posted the survey to my personal Facebook profile, a Facebook page dedicated to my university’s graduating class of 2017, and enlisted the help of Tumblr users with blogs dedicated to gaming and/or gender and race issues in games. Respondents were asked to identify their race, gender, consoles they played, and whether they identified as a gamer. They were then presented with the following questions:

How well, if at all, do you think that people of color are represented in video games? Why or why not? How well, if at all, do you think that women are represented in video games? Why or why not? Describe your experiences/interactions with video games relating to your race and gender. Describe your experiences/interactions with the gaming community (other gamers encountered in person or online) relating to your race and gender. How do you think more diverse representation in video games would affect the gaming community?

The racial demographic breakdown of respondents was as follows: 13.8% black, 77.8% white, 3.5% Hispanic, 4.2% Latino/a/x, 6.1% East Asian, 1% South Asian, 1.3% Middle Eastern, 1% African, and 5.3% other. The gender demographic breakdown of respondents was: 55.5% female, 31% male, 1.3% transwoman, 2.3% transman, 3.9% gender fluid, 3.5% gender non-conforming, 4.8% genderqueer, and 6.8% other.

Overall, the survey respondents agreed that racial minorities are poorly represented in games. Many people cited underrepresentation (an overall lack of characters of color) along with recurrent stereotyping in terms of poor or
negative representation in characters. Respondents also generally agreed that things are only slightly better for women in games; many cited a lesser extent of underrepresentation compared to characters of color, but frequent hypersexualization and poor character development in terms of negative representation.

Responses were somewhat less harmonious regarding the final question of the survey: How do you think more diverse representation in video games would affect the gaming community? Regarding this question, a majority of respondents believed that diverse representation in games would encourage diversity within the gaming community and phase out much of the toxicity therein, as well as lead to more interesting games. However, a notable number of responses were more negative, stating that diverse representation wouldn’t change anything, doesn’t matter, or would create greater division within the gaming community. The negative responses to this question typically came from men, especially white men.

While the majority of respondents did agree that women and people of color occupy a more challenging space within games and the gaming community, white men, and sometimes men of color, were most frequently the exceptions. For example, female and minority participants were more likely to write that they hid their race and/or gender while playing online to avoid harassment while talking about their experiences with games and the gaming community, while (mostly white) male participants were more likely to skip the questions about these experiences or provide evasive answers, by comparison. Those men who did choose to answer usually said that their gender never came into play or they never thought about it. (White) male respondents were also the
most likely group to say that they did not see any problems with representation of women and/or POC in games.

I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of consensus in the survey results. However, the points of dissent are worth noting, as they are consistent with the problems associated with representation and gamer culture. White males are incredibly overrepresented in video games and as gamers. Consequently, they are less likely to find problems with the current structure of games and the gaming community as the privileged group. While the survey data identified this privileged mindset predominately in white males, males of other races demonstrated similar thinking. Although non-white men may have expressed some issues with racial representation, they were less likely to see a need for change or positive potential outcomes of change within the gaming community than their female counterparts. Herein lies a major problem with game development: as a field dominated by white men who encouraged not to challenge the status quo by virtue of their own sex and race as well as thinking exhibited by male gamers, major character development often begins with a white male avatar as the “blank slate.” Because these (largely mono-chromatic) big developers often ignore women and racial minorities as a market, they become comfortable with referring to stereotypes for character creation. The survey indicated, however, that women and people of color are not only a viable market, but that they (and many white men) have a strong desire to see change across the gaming community. These findings will be referenced throughout this essay. To read the individual survey responses, visit: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Jkxp1Sa4n6Fx8OHvHWce7Z9XXDY7BVOxoQzAhk1faT8/pubhtml
Psychological Framework

Stereotypes often function as oppressive, discriminatory tools in discussions of media representation. To understand why, it is critical to first understand how stereotypes work. In particular, the concepts of the “ingroup” and “outgroup” come into play in this discussion. Humans are social animals and as such we are all compelled to search for similarities between ourselves and others to construct our identities as individuals alongside our senses of belonging within a group (Shkurko, 188-189). It is easy, and necessary, for us to see individual diversity within groups that we identify with (ingroups), but that becomes more difficult when discussing groups that we do not belong to (outgroups). Stereotypes are a sort of mental shortcut that allows us to form understandings of outgroups based on gathered information through personal experience, ingroup interaction, and existing cultural framework.

On the surface, the notion of stereotypes is not inherently problematic; a common belief is that stereotypes arise from a “kernel of truth.” These kernels, however, are often negative traits exhibited by certain individuals in a group and exacerbated by people outside of that group. Because negative characteristics make more pronounced impressions on the human mind (Martijn, 462-463), it is easier to fixate on them and understand them as inherent to an outgroup of people due to unfamiliarity. As a result, stereotypes, as we know them today frequently have deep roots in racist and sexist ideologies. Left unexamined, these pervasive ideas are often accepted as fact and used to further solidify discriminatory mindsets as realities.
Using this perspective, white male game developers and gamers can be understood as the “ingroup” while women and people of color make a collective “outgroup.” In this case, the outgroup suffers as a result of irresponsible uses of stereotypes by developers that fuel gamers’ prejudiced perceptions of women and POC rather than challenging them, thus cultivating toxic gamer culture.

**Race in Games**

*Depictions of Race*

Recognizing the use of stereotypes in character development as ill-advised at best, and immoral at worst, it is then possible to examine their function in the context of video game design. In terms of characters of color, designers often draw on (and consequently perpetuate) stereotypes of various racial groups, some more harmful than others.

African Americans, Hispanic, and Latinx people face similar problems in terms of negative stereotypes. These groups are often placed in the context of urban gangs, such as in *Grand Theft Auto* in which the Hispanic and Latinx gangs deal primarily in drugs and weapons trafficking/dealing, and African American gangs deal primarily in stolen vehicles, in addition to drugs and arms. Though less common, each of these racial groups has at least one gang across the series that also deals in human trafficking and/or prostitution. For the Latinx community, this is about the extent of their representation. *Scarface: The World is Yours* (Radical Entertainment) acts as a sequel to the 1983 film *Scarface* which tells the story of Cuban immigrant Tony Montana and his rise from refugee to drug lord. *The World is Yours* is a sort of alternate ending to the film in which Montana survives the assassination attempt that ends his life in the movie and instead
seeks revenge against his would-be murderers. The entire game is essentially a killing spree with room for only violence and rage. While most games featuring white protagonists also make use of varying degrees of violence, they also flesh out the characters as people as well as their motivations (often noble ones like saving someone they care about or fighting for a cause) for the violence they commit. The absence of this in *The World is Yours* perpetuates the myth that Latinxs are inherently violent, in addition to building off of an existing character who followed the stereotype of Latinxs as drug traffickers. According to Williams, though Hispanic people make up approximately 12.5% of the population, they are only 2.71% of all video game characters and were not protagonists of any games surveyed. Since they are often lumped together with Latinxs, there has not been much room for their own character growth outside of these tropes.

African Americans face problems with representation in sports games, as well. Conversely to most other games, here they are overrepresented. However, this is not necessarily a positive thing. The *Madden NFL* and *NBA* games use real professional athletes as characters. They also include fights between athletes which sometimes break out during real sporting events.
While on the surface this appears to be an attempt at greater realism, it can also be interpreted as a depiction of black hypermasculinity and aggression. These are characteristics often highlighted (or in some cases fabricated) by media. For example, in recent years #BlackLivesMatter activists have staged protests across the country. While covering these, news outlets are more likely to use derogatory words to describe them and their actions, most recognizably, “thug.” By including violence in these games and excluding black people from most other genres, sports games uphold negative stereotypes of black men.

Even games that do challenge stereotypes often fall short. One particularly painful example is *Watch Dogs 2* (2016) in which two black men are in leading roles. The protagonist, Marcus Holloway, joins a “hacktivist” collective called DedSec composed of members from diverse racial and gender backgrounds; one of these is another black man, Horatio “Ratio” Carlin. For the first half of the
game, Marcus and Ratio have several meaningful interactions that are authentic representations of Blackness in America including playful, joking interactions and one scene where Ratio talks to Marcus about routinely being the only black person in the room and receiving compliments on his “articulate” speech from white coworkers at his Silicon Valley-esque job. These interactions are refreshing for black players and potentially educational for white players; however, they are limited. Ratio’s purpose abruptly shifts when he dies off screen early on in the game. Rather than a vehicle for the player to understand race, Ratio becomes a plot device, never spoken of again after Marcus takes the gun beside from his body and vows revenge against the perpetrators.

Figure 2: DedSec, without Horatio

Ratio’s story ends quickly, vaguely, and unceremoniously, bringing to mind real life victims of police brutality whose circumstances of death are often
swept under the proverbial rug and briefly spark outrage that eventually quiets down and leaves the forefront of the national consciousness. Similarly, Ratio’s character development is lost with his death and after the initial scene where Marcus discovers his body, the player is allowed to forget he was ever there. While Marcus’s subsequent use of violence in the game is not extremely problematic given his chance to develop as a character in the game, Ratio’s ephemeral life serves as a grim reminder of the victimization of black people in real life.

Asian people have a slightly more complex relationship with representation in games. While Japan is one of the largest players in the video game industry, most Japanese AAA productions feature white protagonists and predominately white casts. When Asian characters are present, though, they have their own unique stereotypes to contend with as well as some that are similar to what black and Hispanic/Latinx characters face.

Phi, a Vietnamese American man, writes that his first experience with Asian American representation in video games was in *The Suffering* (2004) in which the ghost of a white prison guard has extensive dialogue justifying the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII; this is the only form of presence that Asian people have in the game. Beyond this, there are very few examples of Asian American representation in video games and most Asian characters that do exist are stereotyped or eroticized. East Asian men are most present in fighting games such as the *Dynasty Warriors* series, which is based off of Chinese historical texts, and as gangs like the Triads in the *Grand Theft Auto* series, while the most notable examples of South Asian men are the order of assassins in the first *Assassin’s Creed* game (2007) and as the terrorist group
Cordis Die in *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* (2012). East Asian women, while still rare, are the most common demographic found in video games owing, Phi argues, to the western notion of the East as “inherently feminine.” They are often represented as “mysterious, exotic, sensual” people who appear as femme fatales (Ada Wong, *Resident Evil 2*, 1998), kimono wearing damsels (Kimora Lee Simmons, *Def Jam: Fight for New York*, 2004), or prostitutes (*Shell Shock: 'Nam 67*, 2004). In *Shell Shock*, multiple “American” avatars are available to choose from, but none of them are Asian. Aside from prostitutes, the only other Asian people who appear in the game are Vietnamese enemies. These representations of Asian men and women that criminalize and sexualize them reinforce cultural stereotypes of Asian people as exotic, perpetually foreign, and, like black and Hispanic/Latinx people, violent.

*Darkness as Evil*

The notion of darkness representing evil is a trope that has long been present in media. *Star Wars, Harry Potter,* and *Sleeping Beauty* are just a few examples that use black clothing and dark motifs to suggest characters’ malevolent alignments. Many mainstream video games take this one step further with skin tone.

Of the three main characters that regularly recur in the *Legend of Zelda* franchise, two are white and only one, the villain Ganandorf, is brown. His first appearance was in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) where he was a representative of the Gerudo tribe, a people who are described throughout the game as “desert-dwelling thieves.” Aside from Impa, the last member of another tribe that was dedicated to serving the Hylian (white) royal family, Ganondorf
and the Gerudo are the only people of color who appear in the game. Note that though the character Sheik is technically of color, they are not counted, as they are only an alter ego of Princess Zelda. Although the Zelda games are Japanese, Ganondorf and Impa occupy cultural spaces very familiar in the American mindset. Impa, a single childless woman, is the young Princess Zelda’s nursemaid, and Ganondorf is adult Zelda’s captor. Though her role throughout the game strengthens, Impa starts out as nothing more than a mammy figure, a woman of color devoted to loving and protecting a white child, while Ganondorf represents the perceived threat that men of color pose to white womanhood (such as the character Gus in Birth of a Nation (1915)), a threat that can only be overcome by white manhood, in this case the hero, Link, who slays Ganondorf and rescues Zelda.

Figure 3: Link vs. Ganondorf in Ocarina of Time official artwork (Nintendo)
The dichotomy of dark/brown=evil, light/white=good is even more pronounced in the *Zelda/Dynasty Warriors* crossover title, *Hyrule Warriors*. The game’s story mode introduces two characters: Cia and Lana. Cia is a brown skinned, black-clad dark witch out to destroy the kingdom of Hyrule and its princess, while Lana is a lily-white skinned sorceress who appears to aid the princess and the hero in defeating Cia. Later on, the game reveals that Lana and Cia are two halves of a whole person, the Guardian of Time. The Guardian formerly resided outside the mortal realm until the imprisoned Ganondorf stealthily corrupted her heart, separating her goodness and light (Lana) from the rest of her (Cia). At the end of the game, Cia and Lana make amends as Cia dies; the darkness literally vanishes, leaving only her “better half” behind. After beating the game’s main quest, the Guardian of Time costumes are available for download for Cia and Lana, who are both playable in other modes of the game. While the character models, dressed in pure white, fairly modest outfits, look largely the same, they try to retain the essence of both characters including their different eye colors, weapons, and facial expressions. One of the only differences not reflected in the downloadable costumes is skin color; as the Guardian of Time, Cia is depicted with white skin, emphasizing that this version of her is “good.” The blatant portrayal of a brown woman as the essence of a person’s corruption and a white woman as her purity is plainly racist in itself. However, taking the game as it is, the complete erasure of Cia becomes an equally large problem. Developers could have easily given the Guardian light brown skin and a neutral colored outfit if their goal was to demonstrate the two halves of the human spirit coexisting in harmony after a tumultuous battle between them. Instead, they opted for an ending that implies that the dark aspects of human
nature can (and should) be eradicated via purification, which in this case includes embracing whiteness. It is worth noting that in the 3DS version of the game, *Hyrule Warriors Legends* (2016), Cia’s life is spared and she and Lana remain separated, becoming the Guardians of Time. In this story, Cia is allowed to retain both her brown skin and dark clothes.

Figure 4: Cia in her normal outfit (left) vs. her Guardian of Time outfit (right)
**Whiteness as the Default**

Many survey respondents cited RPGs (roleplaying games) as progressive in terms of representation, since it is common for them to allow character creation. Players can choose to be male or female and customize their race and skin tone, hair type, and facial features depending on the game’s available options. However, these games typically assume whiteness to begin with, and some do not allow players to change that default.

*Fallout 4* from Bethesda was widely acclaimed for its incredibly detailed character creation menu that allowed players to sculpt nearly every inch of their character’s face. However, this game followed the long-standing precedent of treating whiteness as the default. Before the character creation screen is even revealed, an opening cutscene sets the stage for the game’s world and story. The voice of a male soldier speaks, and although his face is never shown, those that are, including a mother and child, the men who contribute to building up *Fallout’s* society, and the voice’s wife, are all white. When the cutscene is over, the voice is finally given a face, that of a white man, standing beside his wife.
The player can then swap between the couple to create their male or female avatar. In either case, they must start off as a white person. The same is true for other acclaimed RPGs including *Skyrim* (Bethesda), *Dragon Age Inquisition* (BioWare), and the online multiplayer RPGs *Guild Wars 2* (ArenaNet) and *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard).

Other games outside the typical RPG genre have emphasized elements of customization throughout the game, but lack the same robust character creation functions. For example, *Fire Emblem: Awakening* (Nintendo, 2012) introduces numerous characters with different personalities and fighting styles and allows the player to select which warriors they want to use in each level as well as pair them up as teammates in battle and as romantic partners. This allows the player incredible control over their battle strategy, and later in the game, the statistics and attributes of the second generation of fighters born to couples from the original roster. However, when creating the main player character, customization
options are limited. The player can choose a preset body type, hairstyle and color, face, and voice, in addition to their gender (male or female only). The avatar is white regardless of all of these things and there is no option for skin tone selection. In fact, of all of the playable characters (excluding nonhuman characters and special characters unlocked via an update downloaded from Nintendo’s SpotPass feature for the 3DS console), only two are definitely of color. The global phenomenon Pokémon (Nintendo) follows an almost identical formula, allowing players to catch wild monsters, give them nicknames, and customize their movesets to create their own strategy for victory. Over the course of seven generations over twenty years, while the ways that players can interact with their Pokémon have only increased, including choosing a buddy to follow behind them and the ability to pet, feed, and groom them, skin tone selection was only introduced in the most recent installments, Sun and Moon (2016), after outfit customization was introduced in X and Y (2013) and the option to play as a girl in Crystal (2000).

A similar problem occurs with the Animal Crossing series (Nintendo). These games center on a human moving into a village of anthropomorphic animals and have always had a high level of environmental customization available. This includes the ability to decorate and expand one’s in-game house, modify the village itself by planting trees and flowers, and choosing to donate special items (fossils, fish, bugs) to the town museum or sell them to the shopkeeper to buy more furniture. The customization reaches new heights in the franchise’s second latest installment, Animal Crossing: New Leaf (2012). In this game, the player takes on the role of mayor and is able to not only choose the layout of their town at the start of the game, but is also able to build structures,
create their own museum exhibits, create a town song and flag, and, with prompting, modify their villagers’ catchphrases and greetings. While the player can do all of this and more in *New Leaf*, they cannot choose to be brown. The extent of character customization in the *Animal Crossing* series is changing one’s hairstyle, hair and eye color, and clothes; race is. In each game, it is possible to get a “tan” to darken the avatar’s skin tone, but there are limitations. Since the game operates in real time as it syncs with the game console’s date and time setting, it only allows the player to get a tan in the summer months during daylight hours. A workaround for this is included in *New Leaf* in Tortimer Island, a location that the player can visit at any time where it is summer year round. However, the player is also limited to getting one shade darker per day in *New Leaf* as opposed to up to three shades in a day in previous installments. Skin tone selection was not introduced until the 2015 franchise spinoff, *Animal Crossing: Happy Home Designer*.

*The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015) is a perfect example of another problem with whiteness as the default in games: the complete absence of people of color in worlds where monsters exist. Following the game’s release, it received widespread critical acclaim for its characterization, storytelling, and world building earning ratings of 10/10 on both Steam (an online gaming store and community) and GameSpot, a gaming news website who’s rating system classifies 10/10 as “essential.” However, with the exception of Polygon’s May 13, 2015 review, six days before the game’s release, few if any other publications immediately pointed out the glaring lack of a single person of color in the entire 100+ hour-long game. black writers including digital entertainment author Sidney Fussell and South African digital culture and ethics writer Tariq Moosa,
have since written on Witcher 3’s aversion to brownness in humanity. Both writers, whose articles on the game are featured on BoingBoing and Polygon, respectively, cite “historical accuracy” as a common defense for the lack of human diversity. Indeed, Witcher 3 is based in Slavic mythology (Moosa). But mythology is not history and griffins and elves certainly aren’t, either. What people who employ the defense of “historical accuracy” in the face of these fantastical beings are saying, then, is that a world with magical creatures is more plausible than one where people of color are present or contribute meaningfully to the world. This perspective is likely influenced by the Eurocentric view from which US history is taught, which deems contributions from white men, often at the expense of people of color and women, the most influential to our society.

Moosa also points out that the “historical accuracy” defense is typically applied to justify “awful” actions in fantasy spaces such as multiple instances of sexual assault in the Game of Thrones series, which is also home to magic and dragons which no one seems to have trouble accepting. By contrast, Skyrim, though imperfect, does have one black human race in addition to three elf races, three white human races, and three nonhuman races amidst its world of wraiths, Draugur zombies, and dragons.

In black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film, Adilifu Nama writes that the “coded connection between blackness and alienness is a recurring feature in [science fiction] cinema.” The same logic can be applied to Witcher 3; Fussell points out that one questline in the game is a poignant reflection on race and prejudice. The protagonist, Geralt, encounters a cult called Eternal Fire that once burned mages at the stake, and is now burning nonhuman races. To this, Geralt responds, “Hatred and prejudice will never be eradicated. And witch
hunts will never be about witches. To have a scapegoat—that’s the key. Humans always fear the alien, the odd.” Fusell cites this as a nod to the 1964 essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” which talks similarly about villainizing minorities. It is rather infuriating that a game that appears to be so in tune with the concept of racial persecution and injustice presents it without the presence of any real world groups affected in the game’s world.

Another argument commonly espoused in defense of a monochromatic human race in games with social commentary is “objectivity.” Many gamers and critics believe that it is imperative that game reviews be treated with scientific-level objectivity (while in reality, no qualitative assessments about video games, or anything, for that matter, can be made without subjectivity). For them, issues like racial and gender representation are subjective, political, and therefore “unnecessary [or] radical” (Fussell). Excluding people of color from the narrative is consequently viewed as a way to address social issues from a logical perspective without any emotional tethers, when in reality these discussions are still political and subjective even without those that they have impacted present. Leaving out minorities in stories inspired by their oppression is a way of further dehumanizing them (literally) in the virtual space.

The problem with treating whiteness as the default character setting/human race is not just in RPGs or other games with a wide range of customization. In most titles, the main character is a white person, evidenced by Williams’s virtual census. All of this reinforces the existing false narrative that white people, particularly white men, are the primary consumers of video games. Whiteness is treated like a blank slate when in fact it is its own race, and one that is continually privileged at the expense of others. By coding white as
“normal,” everything else becomes abnormal or irrelevant. This lack of diversity in perspective combined with images of people of color as stereotypes, and often as evil, only serves to discourage and silence gamers of color and exacerbate racial division in the gaming community by subtly (and overtly) broadcasting the message that people of color only exist within limited realms, and have no place in others, and should not be taken seriously or valued outside of where they “belong.”

**Women in Games**

*The Male Gaze and Body Homogeneity*

The male gaze is a term coined in 1975 by feminist film critic Laura Mulvey. In her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” she frames the Freudian psychological pleasure of looking at and being looked at “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance...[as] split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its [fantasy] on to the female figure which is styled accordingly,” (Mulvey). This logic has been further applied to feminist thought and media studies such as in Bedford’s et al analysis of the male gaze in modern media contexts ranging from film and television to news media and political issues and coverage. They point out that white men chair all six corporations that own 90% of media and are heavily invested in the entertainment industry and men also make up the majority of staff in lower levels of these fields. Thus, it is men who are in charge of creating media and in doing so they perpetuate long present images of women created by and for men.

The primary theme of the male gaze cited in both this study’s survey responses and gender based video game research is the issue of
hypersexualization. In many games where female characters are present, they are given exaggerated bodies that emphasize their breasts and buttocks at the expense of their waists. They are also typically found in revealing skintight clothing even when the situation is inappropriate. Fighting games are notorious for these tropes; the Mortal Kombat, Street Fighter, and Soul Calibur character rosters are filled with female characters who fit these description.

Figure 6: Women in Mortal Kombat; from left to right: Jade, Kitana, Mileena, Sindel, Sonya
These characters are but a small fraction of hypersexualized women in one game genre. The issue is present across countless games including *Nier: Automata*, the protagonist of which is a feminine cyborg called 2B whose thong-clad rear end can be seen beneath her skirt during fighting sequences, cutscenes, and actions like climbing ladders throughout the game, which spawned the creation of thousands of pieces of sexual fan art and game modifications, and sparked controversy within the gaming community. Yoko Taro, the producer of *Nier*, took to Twitter in the midst of the situation to say, “Due to the 2B butt controversy, many outrageous drawings are being made. Collecting them to share individually is a pain. It would be great if we can group them together to make it easier to distribute them every week,” which fans subsequently did, sending Yoko zip files of hundreds of fanart pieces. Yoko’s reaction to controversy surrounding the choice to sexualize his female protagonist is indicative of not only the pervasiveness of the male gaze in gaming, but the
general indifference that male game developers exhibit towards sexualizing female characters.

Fiske and Cikara conducted studies regarding the relationship between sexualized images of women and empathy. Both studies concluded that heterosexual men who scored high when tested for hostile sexism (the belief that women seek to subjugate and control men through sexuality and feminist ideology) were the least likely to exhibit empathy for sexualized women. Both studies cite a deactivation of the medial prefrontal cortex, a region of the brain responsible for recognizing other people and the perceiving their ability to think as we do, when viewing sexualized images of women. To illustrate this, Cikara writes that people were more prone to describing images of women dressed provocatively verbs that imply being acted on (for example, “handled”) and images of modestly dressed women using verbs that imply the ability to act (“handles”). Fiske goes on to discuss that functional MRI scans reveal areas of the brain associated with recognizing “manipulable objects” become active when recalling images of sexualized women. This revelation works well in conjunction with Cikara’s finding that straight men with high hostile sexism scores who view images of sexualized women quickly and easily deprive them of agency, meaning that they perceive them to be less capable of not only thought, but control over their own lives.

In video games, hypersexualized female characters are often present for the explicit pleasure of the presumed male player. For example, the protagonist of the game Lollipop Chainsaw is a buxom cheerleader name Juliet who wears a sports bra and a miniskirt that barely covers her bottom. If a player tries to look under said skirt by adjusting the camera angle, Juliet will block the player’s view.
Within seconds, the achievement “I swear! I did it by mistake!” can be unlocked. By fixating on the angle for several minutes, though, the player can force Juliet to give up and allow them to get an eyeful. While the time it takes to get a peak at Juliet’s undergarments on purpose (that is, not including action during gameplay) can be read as an attempt to get players to consider the creepiness of their actions, the fact that there is an achievement for this behavior at all encourages players to engage with it, turning Juliet’s discomfort and tarnished dignity into a goal and a literal object: an achievement. A similar situation occurs in Asura’s Wrath with the “View of the Valley” achievement in which the player must stare at a scantily clad waitress’s breasts for a few seconds until she covers them up. In this instance, the player is encouraged to further objectify a woman who is already deprived of much of her agency by virtue of her existence as a non-playable, non-speaking character whose face is half hidden by a large veil, which discourages the player from looking anywhere but at her large chest. The very concept of these achievements supports Fiske and Cikara’s notions of sexualization as a tool of objectification and dehumanization, especially in an environment where hostile sexism is already very high, like the gaming community.

Another problem with female video game characters is a lack of body diversity. Looking at the examples above, one can plainly see that all of the women are all tall and slender with large assets. Even female characters with more realistic body proportions do not deviate much in terms of height, weight, age, or looks. The popular online team-based fighting game Overwatch is a good place to examine this problem. While Blizzard did a lot of good in terms of creating a diverse cast of characters with playable characters from many
countries across the seven populated continents, the women on the roster, for the most part, look very similar from a distance.

![Figure 9: Women in Overwatch; from left to right: Tracer, Widowmaker, Pharah, Symmetra, Mercy](image)

This image shows half of the female characters in Overwatch, of whom four have incredibly similar figures. Even Pharah, despite her obvious combat armor, has long, slender legs and a slim waist like her counterparts. During fast-paced gameplay, it is very easy to mix up most of the female characters at a glance, which can impact player performance as each character has a unique skillset and must be combated accordingly. Compare this image to a few of Overwatch’s male characters:

![Figure 10: Overwatch characters; from left to right (men only): McCree, Lucio, Junkrat, Roadhog, Torbjorn, Reindhart, Winston](image)
This photo shows Zarya, one of the two female characters who are not skinny, alongside seven of the twelve playable male characters in *Overwatch* (note: the author is including Zenyatta, a robot coded as male, but not Bastion, a genderless automaton). In this sampling, there are not only multiple species represented (Winston being a super-intelligent gorilla), but widely varying heights, weights, ages, and facial structures as well. Even in a game that prides itself on diversity, the requirements to exist as a woman are remarkably stringent compared to the men in this universe. With 80% of the women in *Overwatch* being both thin and conventionally attractive (70% if you add “young” to the checklist), it is clear that this game was still designed with the male gaze in mind.

*The Role of Women*

Women in games often find their opportunities as limited as their clothing sizes. One extremely common and recognizable trope is that of the damsel in distress. In part one of her “Damsels in Distress” videos of her YouTube series “Tropes vs. Women,” Anita Sarkeesian defines a damsel in distress as, “a plot device in which a female character is placed in a perilous situation from which she cannot escape on her own and must be rescued by a male character, usually providing the core incentive or motivation for the protagonist’s quest,” (2013). Her first example is a poignant, painful reflection of developer’s gravitation toward this trope.

Sarkeesian opens the video with “a game no one ever got to play,” *Dinosaur Planet*. The game was in development in 1999 for the Nintendo 64 by the studio Rare. It featured an anthropomorphic fox woman named Krystal as one of two playable characters. With the help of her magical staff, Krystal
traveled through time and battled prehistoric monsters on her quest to save the world. While it was in progress, however, Nintendo executive Shigeru Miyamoto noticed that the game bore similarities to his *Starfox* series and the game was rebranded into *Starfox Adventures*. This included giving the protagonist role to *Starfox* hero Fox McCloud and relegating Krystal to the role of damsel in distress. While Fox uses the staff that formerly belonged to her to fight his way across the landscape, Krystal is trapped inside a transparent crystal prison wearing less clothing than in her *Dinosaur Planet* design, leading to the moment that Fox discovers her and voyeuristically ogles her frozen body as saxophone music plays in the background.

![Figure 11: Krystal in Dinosaur Planet](image1)  
![Figure 12: Krystal in Starfox Adventures](image2)

This example illustrates how the damsel in distress trope can also function alongside that of the hypersexualized woman. Sexualization and objectification deprive the target of agency in the minds of viewers; the damsel in distress has the same effect. By quite simply disallowing female characters from acting, the games explicitly rob them of agency. In Krystal’s case, the two work together with the addition of the male gaze explicitly demonstrated through Fox McCloud
to achieve the same effect, arguably strengthening it. Even when female characters are not necessarily sexualized, the damsel in distress trope is still explicitly tied to femininity.

Princess Peach is arguably the most classic example of a damsel in distress: a beautiful, kind princess whose entire character centers around being captured and awaiting rescue in each non-spinoff installment of the *Super Mario* series. She is the perfect damsel and also incredibly feminine. Nintendo’s other major princess, however, demonstrates a more complex interaction between femininity and distress. Sarkeesian states that Princess Zelda is most active in *Ocarina of Time* where she disguises herself as Sheik, an ambiguously gendered Sheikah who appears throughout the game to give Link helpful advice and teach him songs that allow him to travel across the kingdom of Hyrule, and *Wind Waker* where she spends the majority of her time as Tetra, the tomboyish captain of a roaming pirate crew. Under these guises, Zelda exhibits both agency and capability as a character. In both games, however, becoming more feminine is her downfall. In *Ocarina of Time*, she is captured in a familiar crystal prison within three minutes of revealing herself to Link. In *Wind Waker*, once she transforms from Tetra into Princess Zelda, the king of Hyrule (Link’s companion in this game) tells her that the adventure is too dangerous for her and forces her to wait and hide in the castle where she is eventually captured anyway.

It is worth noting that despite these subtle ties between femininity and being a distressed damsel, the titular princess of the Zelda franchise is never treated as a sex object in the games; her body proportions are always reasonable given her age, and her clothing is always modest. Her design encourages players to empathize rather than objectify, and to ascribe agency to her, harkening back
to Cikara’s comparison of modest vs. immodest images of women. Indeed, Princess Zelda does possess more agency than the typical damsel in nearly all games in which she appears. While earlier games don’t leave much for her to do aside from wait to be rescued (as is expected of the typical damsel in distress), in most installments she takes on a more active role in helping the hero, Link, during at least a small portion of the game (such as conjuring magic to combat the final boss in *Four Swords Adventures* or firing arrows at Ganondorf from horseback in *Twilight Princess*). In a few games, she even has her own quest line apart from Link, such as in *Skyward Sword* wherein she goes on her own spiritual quest to awaken the consciousness of a goddess sleeping within her. These moments of strength, while refreshing and gratifying, do not erase the fact that Zelda is put in danger and must be rescued at least once in every game, reducing her role in these moments to a tool for the male protagonist’s advancement.

Many damsels in distress exhibit moments of defiance or capability similar to Zelda, such as Victoria in *Hitman: Absolution* (2012), who fights back against a group of men that eventually capture her despite her superhuman abilities, or Marian who, after several reboots of the game *Double Dragon* that always open with her getting punched in the stomach and abducted, delivers a solid blow to the final boss at the end of *Double Dragon: Neon* (2012)—but only at the very end of the credits when the game is over and the boss is already defeated. At the end of *Starfox Adventures*, Krystal even gets a chance to fight back against the main villain, Andross, who imprisoned her, but her tactics prove fruitless. While the utility of their actions varies, the fact remains that simply acting for oneself does not completely negate the status of damsel in distress within the context of the rest of the games.
On the opposite side of the damsel in distress role where the woman exists to be rescued, many women exist in games to have violence inflicted upon them. The situations and settings that incorporate violence against women in games are disturbingly numerous and diverse. These scenes are often used to emphasize the immoral nature of a male character such as Vaughan Kendells, a cruel character in *Dragon Age: Origins* (2009) who, staring down a group of young women, tells his friends to “grab a whore and have a good time.” It is also extremely common to use women’s suffering as part of the environment of the game world. In *Watch Dogs* (2014), there is a repeating event of a domestic dispute between a couple. The player has the option to intervene, but must keep their distance until the man starts choking the woman; if they approach before then, the man will flee, and though the woman will be safe, the player will gain no experience. If they are too late, the woman will die, but the player can still hunt down the man, leaving the woman to be disregarded and forgotten. Similar events occur in *Far Cry 3* (2012) and *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013) where the player will encounter women already being beaten or about to be sexually assaulted or otherwise. Though these interactions are intended to illicit moral responses in players, in any of these situations that are not related to missions, they can intervene to help the women in trouble for experience, or choose to watch as they suffer with no penalty. Similar to the defense against all white human races in video games, when confronted with the issue of sexual and gender based violence in games, many people in the gaming community site “historical accuracy” as a reason why violence against women is necessary. These presentations of violence do nothing to challenge its existence in the real world.
and only further the notion that women are doomed to suffer in any and all worlds.

There are other times where the player is encouraged or required to perpetrate violent acts against virtual women. In God of War III (2010), there is a level where the player, as Kratos, must shove a half naked, tied up princess through an area as she pleads with him to spare her life. Her sole purpose is to be strapped to a large gear to a gate open long enough for the player to pass through it, after which the gear will grind, the woman will shriek, and the player will be able to go back and observe the carnage. In Grand Theft Auto IV (2008) and Grand Theft Auto V, the player character can pay prostitutes for sexual favors that regenerate lost health and power, then kill them and take back their money. This is an example where players are encouraged to participate in violence against women, though not required, as there is virtually no penalty for killing these women (aside from the slim chance of being arrested and having some money and items taken from you before being dropped outside) and a monetary reward for perpetrating violence in addition to rewards that can be gained from items like drinks within the game. In this way, prostituted women are treated as equally disposable as a single use health item. This uncritical approach perpetuates the existing image of sex workers as unworthy of any sort of empathy, respect, or compassion. It even furthers the notion that women in this line of work are deserving of any harm that comes to them as a result once they have fulfilled their “purpose.”

On the matter of women deserving harm, there is a common thread between a scripted repeating encounter in Red Dead Redemption (2010) and in the “Damsels in Distress” mission during Assassin’s Creed II (2010): in the former, a
man pins a woman to the ground and yells, “You think I’m a joke? Then laugh, bitch, laugh!” as he stabs her repeatedly. As with the encounters in *Watch Dogs* and *Grand Theft Auto V*, the player can choose to intervene, or simply watch. In *Assassin’s Creed II*, a man kills a courtesan and the player must then give chase, but each time the man stops he has captured another courtesan. If the player gets too close, he will kill her and say a random line, one of which is, “It wasn’t my fault. She laughed at me! She made me do it,” then move on to the next nameless escort.

In April 2015, a man murdered a woman in front of her twelve-year-old child because she laughed at him. Countless other women have been attacked, maimed, or killed for rejecting men’s advances. These lines that may seem absurd in the isolated context of a video game are actually reflective of real life events. The presence of dialogue and events like these, and those mentioned previously, in games without any real moral or mechanical consequences does very little to draw critical attention to the heart of issues concerning violence against women. Instead, they sensationalize and normalize them at the expense of real women’s lives and trauma.

*Metal Gear Solid 5: The Example of Quiet*

Hideo Kojima’s *Metal Gear Solid* series is known for its complex storylines and emotional twists. It also has a history of objectifying women. In the very first quest of the very first game, *Metal Gear* (1998), the player as the male protagonist Solid Snake is afforded the ability to spy on a woman (Meryl Silverbough) as she exercises in a tanktop and panties in a jail cell. It is this ensemble that Meryl wears when the player first interacts with her after following her into the
women’s restroom. Since then, the franchise’s objectification of women has expanded to affect almost every woman in the series in some way, culminating with Quiet in *Metal Gear Solid 5* (2015).

![Image of Quiet from Metal Gear Solid 5](image)

**Figure 13: Quiet in *Metal Gear Solid 5: The Phantom Pain***

Quiet is an amalgam of all of the problems with representations of women that have been discussed in this essay. Most plainly, although there is nothing particularly exaggerated about her body, her outfit is very revealing.

Controversy arose when her character design was released in 2013, which Kojima assured gamers would be justified in narrative when the game was released. The reason turned out to be, Quiet’s body is infested with parasites that force her to use photosynthesis to breathe through her skin and wearing too
much clothing could suffocate and kill her. This is a flimsy explanation when compared to The End, a character in *Metal Gear Solid 3* (2003) who is infected with parasites very similar to Quiet’s, but who is fully clothed throughout the game.

In addition to sharing similar physical conditions, both Quiet and The End are skilled military snipers. Yet, only The End, an elderly man, is allowed to remain fully clothed while Quiet, a young woman, is forced to strip down in the name of survival. When examining how she is presented throughout the game alongside this comparison with her parasite-ridden counterpart, it quickly becomes obvious that the primary function of Quiet’s nudity is for sexual gratification rather than her own well-being. Throughout the game, the camera ogles her body, giving the player no choice but to join in and at one point, while cramped in a helicopter, the player can get a clear view of her chest. If they stare long enough and their relationship level is high enough, Quiet will then turn
around, providing a view of her minimally covered rear end. In the infamous rain scene, Quiet dances suggestively in the rain for a few moments before removing her shoes and tights so she can roll around in the water. By this point in the game, Quiet has fallen in love with Snake and appears to exist for his benefit in this moment. The camera follows her borderline pornographic movements, as she, like Krystal, becomes an explicit object of the male gaze, both to the protagonist and the player.

Figure 15: Quiet in the rain, *Metal Gear Solid 5*

Quiet’s position as a sex object even extends to the real world. On her design, Kojima also said that it was intended to inspire cosplay (the practice of dressing up as a fictional character, often for conventions) and to sell toys. And indeed, there is a Quiet doll that features changeable heads, weapons, and soft breasts, which Kojima emphasized in a 2015 promotional tweet, allow for
“pushing and lifting.” Players are encouraged to objectify Quiet in the virtual space, as well as the real world.

In the midst of the rampant objectification of Quiet including the invitation to players to touch a “real” version of her inappropriately, it is often forgotten that much of her storyline relies on violence being committed against her. She is first introduced at the beginning of the game; she has been hired to kill “Big Boss” (Venom Snake). She is unsuccessful, however, as Snake’s associate Ishmael douses her with chemicals (one of which infected her body with the infamous parasites) and lights her on fire, forcing her to jump out of a window to escape. Later, when the player encounters her for the first time during gameplay, she opens fire on him. As Venom Snake, the player is required to fight her and has the option to capture her to later use her as a buddy, or kill her, ending her storyline before it begins. If the player lets Quiet live, they will later witness a cutscene in which Quiet is tortured by the Diamond Dogs (Snake’s organization) who subdue, drug, tie her up, place a bag over her head, pour salt water on her (which burns her skin), and expose her to high voltage shock (with and without the bag to mediate her facial expressions) to interrogate her after she attacks a guard on Mother Base, the headquarters of Snake’s organization, the Diamond Dogs.

Quiet later becomes a damsel in distress during a quest later in the game when she is captured by Soviet Forces. During this mission, she is incapacitated by enemy soldiers and suffocated by being forced into a long sleeved shirt and pants, choked, and held underwater. It is only when the soldier responsible takes off her pants to violate her corpse that Quiet is able to breathe again and, with her hands behind her back, decimates the enemies, even crushing the genitals of
her would-be rapist. In some respects, this is a satisfying scene as the player gets to see a woman defying the possibility of rape and taking revenge on those who committed extreme violence towards her. However, throughout this sequence, since she is not wearing pants, the player is treated to many views of her nearly bare buttocks as if to remind them that she is still available for voyeuristic sexual gratification even after escaping from the clutches of sexual violence. She was subsequently injured by a heavy artillery round and has to be dragged to safety by Venom Snake. However, this is the second instance of optional violence against her, as the player can choose to let her die or give up after failing the mission. This moment in particular is a bizarre combination in which Quiet is objectified while displaying agency.

The most important part of Quiet’s agency, however, revolves around violence, as she does not speak for most of the game. She is revealed to be infected by parasites that affect her vocal cords based on the language she speaks and will eventually kill her if she speaks English, so she takes a vow of silence as an act of self preservation and so as not spread the infection around Mother Base. She does have a short conversation in Navajo with Code Talker after the torture scene, but for the rest of the game she is required to be seen and not hard, enhancing the dehumanizing element of her sexualization, as she is robbed not only of choice in the matter of her clothing, but of her ability to speak for herself, which allows the player to perceive her as thoughtless, as with images of sexualized women. It is not until the end of her storyline when she must communicate with a character named Pequod over a radio to communicate Snake’s location that she breaks her vow, as Pequod does not speak Navajo. After this short scene, Snake loses consciousness. Once he is revived, Quiet is
gone, but he tracks her footprints to a cassette tape hanging from a tree, which contains a short monologue in which Quiet admits that she wanted to express her (romantic) feelings for Snake, but couldn’t due to their lack of a “common tongue,” which seems odd as the recording is in perfect English. To reiterate, Quiet’s vocal cord parasite had the ability to kill her if she spoke enough English, and she devotes an entire paragraph to Snake. Ironically, the dialogue begins, “I did not choose to be Quiet,” almost as if the character is aware of how she has been acted upon by the game. However, she embraces the title at the end (“I am Quiet…I am…the absence of words.”), almost as though having fulfilled her personal goal of confessing her feelings to Snake, she no longer feels the need to speak at all. In this way, Quiet’s entire plotline, beginning with an attempt on Venom Snake’s life and ending with sudden absence and a confession of love, is contingent upon the male protagonist’s existence, whereas he could easily exist without her (and again, is given the opportunity to do so at least twice in the game).

Quiet’s physical strength is often used to deny arguments that she is a problematic or flat character. Prior to being infected with parasites, she is already a skilled military sniper with incredible willpower. After being infected, though, she develops superhuman strength, speed, endurance/durability, and recovery. She is also able to turn invisible, teleport, and phase through objects. If the player chooses to let her live and use her as a buddy, she proves very useful in combat during gameplay and is shown more than holding her own in cutscenes. Many gamers argue that such a physically strong woman must have agency of her own, despite how she is treated by the game. This ignores the fact that her sexuality is her primary function based on how her body is presented
throughout the game. Her strength and abilities incentivize players to keep her alive and travel with her, but what they primarily gain is her body, and as the game progresses, ever more ways to visually explore it. Kojima said in 2013 that Quiet is meant to “satirize” the typical woman found in video games. However, *Metal Gear Solid 5* packs practically every major stereotype of women in games into Quiet and does nothing to comment on, critique, or challenge them beyond making her able to take down large groups of men singlehandedly (provided she is at least half nude). Brutally forced into the same roles as her predecessors, Quiet consequently becomes a towering feat of misogyny in both games and game development.

**The Gaming Community**

*In the Real World*

Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and David Ta conducted a study comparing the relationship between white college students’ video game play and their perceptions of black and Asian people. Using cultivation theory, which states that “the more time people spend 'living' in the television world, the more likely they are to believe social reality portrayed” (Cohen), they found that portrayals of black people in video games influenced their perceptions of them in real life more than actual contact with black people did. As I’ve examined thus far, black people are scarce in video games and when AAA titles include them, they almost exclusively employ black men. The portrayals of these rare characters across genres consistently reinforce negative stereotypes about black men as hypermasculine criminals. As for what this means in the context of the study, Behm-Morawitz and Ta surmise that, “the relatively consistent set of virtual
representations of minorities in video games is familiar and represents a
dominant and historical shared cultural understanding of minority groups in the
United States.” In short, video games support the mental ease of stereotyping by
presenting a single narrative of black people, whereas real life interactions with
black people, who are as nuanced and complex as anyone, complicate the
notions of black personhood. As a result, these interactions do not make as
strong of an impact on white people as an ingroup developing an understanding
of black people as an outgroup. Though the study did not include portrayals of
Hispanic or Latñix people in video games, it is reasonable to conclude that since
they are often represented as criminals, like black people, existing negative
cultural perceptions about them would similarly be reinforced.

The case for women is somewhat different. As numerous representations
of women in games revolve around or at least allow violence to be committed
against them, interaction between men and women in the gaming community
often takes on the tone of gendered violence rather than stereotyping. Rape jokes
and threats are especially common both in online play and community
interactions as a means of silencing, othering, and otherwise ostracizing women.
A well-known specific example is the Dickwolves incident. In 2010, Mike
Krahulik and Jerry Holkins published an issue of his online gaming comic
“Penny Arcade” that included a joke where a character said he had been “raped
by dickwolves” to set up a punch line about MMORPGs. Many people, mostly
women, who were outraged by the joke voiced their concerns and even staged a
boycott of the gaming event Penny Arcade Expo where “Dickwolves” t-shirts
and other merchandise were being sold. The creators of the comic responded
with a follow up strip sarcastically warning readers not to let the comic turn
them into rapists. Over the course of several months, supporters of the comic created a faction called Team Rape (RareAnimalPreservE) and harassed people who spoke against the Dickwolves comic and anti-rape activists. While the merchandise was eventually discontinued and Krahulik and others involved with “Penny Arcade” apologized, Krahulik later called the removal of the merchandise “the biggest mistake the company had ever made” when responding to a question at the PAX Prime convention in 2013. He later published a blog post under his alter-ego “Gabe” where he still defended the original comic, but expressed regret for “everything [they] did after that initial comic strip.”

Anastasia Salter and Bridgett Blodget discuss the ingroup/outgroup dynamic in terms of gender in the gaming community by examining this incident. They state that while the culture of the gamer began as one centered on an outsider mentality, “their in-group dynamics have expanded upon women-hostile concepts of masculinity within the larger social sphere. This discourse, as amplified across social networks and in public online spaces, allows for extreme and virulent lashing out against those who are perceived as others, most notably women.” As women have entered the gaming space, they have brought a different perspective on games with them, which often includes calling out misogyny in games and gamer culture. In the case of the polarizing Dickwolves incident, Salter and Blodget write, “contention existed over control of the ‘gamer identity’ and showed how attempts made to improve the ‘gamer’ image were limited by the inability of members to face serious discussions of systemic issues.” This statement rings true across issues of race and gender in games, leading to hostile behavior and discourse in online play and game development
as well as the community.

In 2013, Facepunch Studios released *Rust*, an online multiplayer survival game, through the computer gaming service Steam. Unlike many online multiplayer games, *Rust* did not have a character customization screen; every player avatar was a bald white man. This did not immediately raise any concerns as whiteness is regarded as the default in games. In 2015, however, developers released a patch for the game that randomly made half of the avatars Black. Each avatar was linked to the player’s Steam login ID, making race unchangeable without creating an entirely new Steam account. The reaction was immediate; game reviews and comments on Steam were flooded with questions of how to change skin tone and negative backlash against the change.

**Figure 16**: Player reactions to *Rust* on Steam after the race randomization update

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Claptrap • Mar 15 @ 2:44pm

**How do i change my skin?**

i'm black i wanted to be white
Not trying to be racist i just wonder why i cant find it

[MM]Brulzie • Mar 12 @ 2:53pm

**Rust has had its day.**

Too many patches that bug the game more, player characters linked to steam id, so i'm black !! I'm sure there are black people that don't want a white character... rust devs, so out of touch. Bored of rust now, flame me if you want, i'm completely done with it.... I'm still running the 2 servers i have for those that still want to play.....Reign of Kings has taken top slot ;)
Dr. Kishonna L. Gray, founder of the critical game lab at Eastern Kentucky University, writes in her research of player interactions on Xbox Live that whiteness and maleness are perceived as the normal (“default”) gamers, just as they are presented as such in games. This perception leads to the labeling of anyone who does not fit those confines as “deviant.” Gray discusses this deviancy in terms of the experience of the African American male conversing with other gamers during online play in first person shooter games. In her studies, she observed that white male gamers would attack black male gamers using racist language (particularly the N-word) based on how they sounded if they spoke in African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Similarly, following the race randomization update, Rust, which is also a first person shooter, experienced a noticeable surge in racist language. Developer Garry Newman said in an interview with Kotaku, "It makes me wish I’d set up some analytics to record how many times the N-word was used before and after the update. It was used quite a bit from what I’ve seen.” While in Gray’s study players were racially attacked for audibly presenting as black while in Rust the same was true for visually presenting as black despite the fact that all avatars were randomized. In both cases, Blackness was marked as deviant and singled out with attacks on big lips, AAVE, the penis size of black men and even black mothers “as a means to situate blackness as inferior [and confirm] the domination of whiteness over the other within the space,” (Gray). White gamers challenged the citizenship of Hispanic and Latino gamers who spoke with a Spanish accent to the same effect. One participant in Gray’s study, screen name ChrisisNice, said, “Man this happens all the time. It ain’t nothing new. And Xbox don’t care. We just expect it. Sometimes it can happen e’er day. That’s what if I’m not playin’ wit my boys,
then I ain’t even on the mic.” Many other participants shared the same mentality. This demonstrates that the typical player on Xbox Live experiences racist language in one way or another and chooses to simply deal with it rather than report it; racist behavior has become normalized in the virtual space. Interestingly, though, Newman and his team noticed that in Rust, players cooperated to hunt down and kill other players in-game who used racist language. Perhaps some grasped the lesson that Newman said he hoped players would learn: “I would love nothing more than if playing a black guy in a game made a white guy appreciate what it was like to be a persecuted minority.”

Despite Newman’s intentions and Rust’s ability to recreate the experience of black players on a surface level, the experiences of black gamers and white gamers with black avatars in Rust are fundamentally different. As Gray found in her study, black gamers are often resigned to harassment due to the normalization of it within the virtual space. However, the study also showed that resignation was bolstered by understandings of racism in the real world. The following interaction was recorded between a black male participant in Gray’s study (Silentassassin321) and Dr. Gray (Mzmygrane):

Silentassassin321: You know how many times I’ve been called nigga to my face?
Mzmygrane: How many?
Silentassassin321: None. You know how many times I’ve been called nigga online?
Mzmygrane: How many?
Silentassassin321: Too many ta’ count. You know what that tells me?
Mzmygrane: What?
Silentassassin321: Of the dozens of white dudes I see every day, most of them I call friend, at least two ah’ three wanna call me nigga.

Gray terms Silentassassin321’s mentality a reaction to being victimized within the virtual space. I argue that it is also the result of being victimized by
racism in society and consequently not being surprised by it elsewhere. White people, however, have never experienced this victimization in real life or in gaming; they have consistently been the dominant group, immune to race-based oppression but able to enforce it implicitly (lack of representation of minorities in video games) and explicitly (racist hate speech in online gaming). When a situation like *Rust* arises, the possibility of virtually experiencing racial oppression regardless of their real life status as the dominant group causes discomfort, confusion, and outrage. It is interesting to note here that the solidarity *Rust* players showed to combat racism in-game rarely occurs in situations like the interactions recorded in Gray’s study. According to the results of my survey, most players of all races (including white) who dislike the use of racial and gendered hate speech online simply choose not to engage with the community to avoid being victimized by online offenders or, like ChrisisNice, because Xbox “doesn’t care” about these problems. It can be argued, then, that the anonymity of race in *Rust* affords players who would otherwise avoid conflict the ability to combat racial oppression in what they perceive as a meaningful way. While Xbox Live acts as a mirror for society wherein racism exists, but can often not be dealt with on an individual level and is not addressed at the institutional level, *Rust* affords agency to disempowered gamers by literally making race a variable and simultaneously removing it from the equation of online interaction. Newman added a patch that randomized players’ gender (male or female) and assigned them to players’ Steam IDs in 2016, but fewer effects of that update have been logged thus far.

Despite the struggles that men of color face in online play, the environment seems to be more hostile towards women than racial minorities. In
Gray’s study, she was able to talk to a white male gamer, username GoState88, who used the N-word toward a black male gamer. When asked why he did so, he argued that his use of the language was intended to be annoying and that the word “doesn’t mean anything anymore.” He did not view it (or himself) as racist, a viewpoint shared by many white male gamers. On the contrary, sexist/misogynistic language is also exceedingly common in video game spaces, and many who use it have no problem admitting their belief that women are not “real gamers” or are bad at games or their dislike of feminist ideology, equating it with censorship (such as the Dickwolves incident) and oversensitivity.

Figure 17: Examples of male gamers’ disdain for women in games
I spoke with Dr. Gray about her experience as a gamer and a games researcher. When I asked her about the reasons she started researching community interactions in the digital space, she told me that not only had she experienced racism, she had experienced sexism from men of all races within the gaming community, including requests for sexual favors, pictures of her, and her social media profiles. These were experiences that she noticed were routine for other women.

This is also reflected in the survey I conducted where the overwhelming majority of women who responded said that they experienced online harassment (expressions of shock, sexual solicitation, insults, exclusion, bullying, threats) during gameplay so frequently that they either try to present as male or don’t use a headset to communicate at all, which is not a foolproof method as some who had feminine-seeming screen names reported getting sent hateful private messages. Even one male respondent said that he received similar remarks when choosing to play with a female avatar online. One woman described a horrific incident where after playing in a Call of Duty: black Ops 3 game online, the men in the party heard her voice and asked her “strange and sexual questions.” After she left the party, she says, they “tracked [her] down somehow they sent [her] pictures in the mail and threatened to rape and kill [her]. One of the men said he was a part of the KKK and hated Hispanics/Latinos/Mexicans and that he would slit [her] throat and throw [her] back over the border. [She didn’t] know how he found out [she] was Hispanic/Latina.” Incidents like this are disturbingly common for women involved with games. Female gamers, game journalists, and game developers share an almost universal thread of experience with online harassment. When confronted with discussions of misogyny in
games, many male gamers argue that it is not a problem because games are not real. However, they simultaneously ignore and perpetuate the struggles of women involved with games whose lives are impacted by people who bring that misogyny into the real world.

In spite of this problem of rampant harassment, very little is being done to fix it in the industry. When I spoke to Dr. Gray, she told me that people are too hung up on numerical values to see the big picture. Xbox Live in particular, she said, “bragged that harassment wasn’t a problem on their system—they said racism wasn’t a problem at all” when she began researching the platform in its earlier days. However, they made this claim using only numerical data gathered from player reports. While the process to report player behavior on Xbox Live has been streamlined in recent years, it used to be quite cumbersome. Players would have to to have to figure out the offending player’s screen names on their own and choose from a list of “antiquated, vague categories [of behavior]. …There was no clear-cut way to say this person was being racist or this person was being sexist, so must people said forget it; I’m not going to file the complaint at all,” (Gray). This pattern is still persists as female and minority gamers choose to deal with harassment by simply expecting it, like the participants in Gray’s study, or separating themselves from it all together, like the women I surveyed. In either case, gamers are being denied the full experience of online gaming due to hate speech that the game company does not proactively condemn and combat.
The People vs. GamerGate

In 2006, BioWare game writer Jennifer Hepler said in an interview with the gaming website Killer Betties, "While I enjoy the interactive aspects of gaming, if a game doesn't have a good story, it's very hard for me to get interested in playing it." She further added that she would like to see a fast forward option to get through combat, similar to what sometimes appears in games during story-oriented cutscenes, speaking as a working mother who has very little time to sit down and play for hours, but still enjoys the stories in video games. Many gamers took her to mean that she wanted story privileged over gameplay and viciously attacked her for it. In 2012, after the release of Dragon Age II, which Hepler wrote for as the Managing Editor, a harassment campaign against her was launched when her comments were unearthed.

Figure 18: Reddit post of Jennifer Hepler's interview obtained from Kotaku; Hepler (pictured) is crudely name-called by the poster who also used the words in the top right corner to describe her/her views; the original caption called her the “cancer that is killing BioWare"
Fans were upset that the combat system in *Dragon Age 2* differed from its predecessor’s and upon discovering Hepler’s quotes, viciously targeted her assuming (falsely) that she had contributed to the changes. The above image defaming Hepler includes quotes from her interview taken out of context so as to give the appearance that she does not like video games and to support the original post author’s stance that Hepler does not belong in the game industry, even though her job as a senior had nothing to do with gameplay (Crecente). Hepler left BioWare in 2013 to write a book, but endured harassment during the remainder of her career with the studio.

This example highlights an epidemic problem in the gaming community of terrorism against women that intensified in 2014 with the GamerGate controversy, which is perhaps the most well known and most terrifying example of online harassment in the gaming community. The group is infamous for harassing women in games, most notably developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, and critic Anita Sarkeesian. It all began when Quinn’s ex-boyfriend, Eron Gjoni, published a lengthy blog post detailing her infidelity in their relationship with multiple men, highlighting Nathan Grayson, a writer for Kotaku. The Internet erupted in a witch-hunt for Quinn all the while calling for “ethics in game journalism,” as people claimed that she had slept with Grayson to get positive reviews for her game *Depression Quest* (2013). However, Grayson never wrote more than a passing sentence about in two larger articles, one of which (a list of independent games admitted to the online gaming Steam store by players) was published in January, months before their relationship began. The group began attacking Wu for speaking out against their actions, and Sarkeesian, who
already received hateful messages for her “Tropes vs. Women” series, saw attacks against her intensify. The ethics claim quickly falls apart once GamerGate’s actions are examined. All three of the above women had their personal information, including their home addresses, stolen and made publically available and were at some point driven from their homes by extremely violent threats to their person, including graphic descriptions of rape and murder to them and their family members, by GamerGate. Sarkeesian and Wu also involved law enforcement in their cases. While Sarkeesian called the police when she was forced to leave her home in late August 2014, Wu, among other victims, compiled extensive evidence of the violent harassment against her and submitted it to the FBI. However, very little headway has been made in cases of this nature. In October 2014, Utah State University received several bomb threats after booking Sarkeesian for an appearance, which she was forced to cancel when local law enforcement declined to offer protection for the event. Now, in February 2017, it was reported that the FBI has dropped the GamerGate case after finding and talking to the perpetrators and accepting confessions and promises of reformation from them. I was able to talk to Brianna Wu, cofounder of Giant Spacekat, about her experiences as a female game developer and as a target of GamerGate attacks. Wu feels that the FBI’s treatment of the case “speaks to how little our society values women.” She went on to say that people are “interested in seeing women suffer, but they’re not interested in doing anything about it,” on the fact that throughout the incident, she was repeatedly approached by the media to talk about the horrors of the experience, but there have been no policy changes to curb this type of harassment. This is a plain reflection of how women
are treated in video games where they often exist to have violence acted upon them, and helping them is usually optional. Representations of women in games then become part of a circle where mistreatment of them in real life has influenced the recreation of similar behaviors virtually, which continues to normalize them, and arguably enhance them in cases like GamerGate. Wu is currently running a congressional campaign partly inspired by her experiences in the gaming industry; “when I win,” she says, “the first thing I’m gonna do is call the FBI and get them to come to the office and explain themselves… I don’t want any woman to be failed by law enforcement the same way I [was].” In our interview, she spoke specifically about supporting policy combating doxxing and swatting (the act of sending false reports to law enforcement to with the intent to have them invade an innocent person’s home; GamerGate has employed this against people in the gaming industry and critics of their actions (Hern)) and encouraging people in her party to do the same.

I also conducted an interview with game writer Jay Castello, who tackles issues of race, gender, and sexuality in games and game culture in her writing. She shared a transcript of an online conversation she had with a self-identified “GamerGator” on the social media site Tumblr (username: thugquinn). Castello initially made a post pointing out the irony in the logic GamerGators employ when criticizing “SJWs” (social justice warriors; people who speak up about inequalities based on race, gender, orientation, and class). Thugquinn responded with a rape joke. Castello (username: feminstgamingmatters) decided to follow up with him and sent him a private message, which led to the following exchange:

feministgamingmatters
A genuine question: Why are you so angry?

_thugquinn_
I'm tired of feminists and similar saying everyone is equal. Unless you're white and or male ofc. Oh yeah and women can't be sexist? I don't know your stances but thks is tumblr so i expect the worst

_feministgamingmatters_
So you counter that with rape jokes?

_thugquinn_
Hmmm. I really like doing that because a lot of you think even the slightest mention of rape is the worst thing ever. And i like being offensive. Free speech ftw

They talked over the course of several days in a message thread rounding out at 11 pages. Over the course of the conversation, thugquinn specifically cites frustration with Anita Sarkeesian and her work (specifically the crowdfunded aspect) as the reason for his frustration, even going so far as to say that he would have “more hope for humanity” as a member of the terrorist group ISIS. This frustration, he says, is the reason he attacks people online and makes rape jokes.

When Castello pressed him further about his motivations for making rape jokes and his enjoyment of being offensive, he countered by insisting that being offended is a choice that people make, independent of the actions of others (despite identifying his own speech as offensive numerous times):

_thugquinn_
Someone might take the offense on that rape joke. But remember offense can only be taken. I can try to get someone to take it, but they are always the ones who do.
That's why i don't get offended

_feministgamingmatters_
If someone punches you, you take the punch, but it's still the puncher's fault
At the bottom line, you keep saying you like offending people, and I just think that's a bizarre thing to want to do

_thugquinn_
It wouldn’t be the puncher’s fault if everyone keeps jumping in front of him. I’m just setting up and hoping someone jumps in front of me. And it’s not bizarre, offended people are crazy fun to watch.

They eventually started discussing issues of racist and sexist speech in gaming. Thugquinn contended that using such language is just “swearing” and is not indicative of peoples’ actual beliefs, like . He even cites the KKK as an example of “real racists” in his assertion that language alone does not matter. In general, he was far more concerned with journalists’ and feminists’ discussions of racism and sexism/misogyny among gamers, taking such criticisms as a personal affront while actively engaging in that behavior (content warning for racist/sexist/vulgar language ahead):

**thugquinn**

oh yeah , a cop got fired because he said something racist online? seems completely fine to me you know... not like he totally didn't get paid to beat up niggers and likely was just shittalking someone.... and yes gamers CAN be racist and sexist... but the examples it gives is just funny... and ends up calling them misogynists while i’m pretty sure i’m for equality but nigga i called some people bitch ass cancer fuckface slut.... you don’t like what i’m fucking saying? press the fucking mute button.
like , you guys like making non problems into problems

**feministgamingmatters**

Why did you suddenly start being aggressive and throwing out slurs just because I pointed out that literally nobody says all gamers are terrible?

**thugquinn**

did you look that far over the point?

i wasn't being aggresive to you

i was showing just because i said racially tainted slurs i’m not a fckin racist.

or sexist

or whatever

**feministgamingmatters**

Well, aside from the fact that using slurs is a racist/sexist thing to do, you completely didn’t follow what I was saying to the point where I got genuinely confused. I have literally been saying this whole time that no one thinks all gamers are racist and sexist. No one has ever said that.
Which is what you said GG was against, so...that would make GG’s point invalid, surely?

thugquinn
-thinks using slurs is racist/sexist- this is the problem with feminism....swearing isn’t supposed to be literal omfg and i didn’t mean they think LITERALLY all gamers are racist/sexist. but think they think literally using a slur that could be interpreted as misogynistic./racist makes you just that --
because if that were true i’d be a KKK member
the amount of times i use nigga
nigga

Finally, Castello addressed GamerGates “ethics in journalism” claim, which proceeded as follows:

feministgamingmatters
What I’m saying is, since GG claims it’s only about ethics in games journalism, but spends all its time offending feminists rather than talking about real issues...it’s not a movement about ethics.

thugquinn
well , it is.. the offending isn't what gamergate is about... it's how fast you guys get offended that is the problem....

thugquinn
well , it is.. the offending isn't what gamergate is about... it's how fast you guys get offended that is the problem....
wel not really the main focus of GG but a nice chunk of it and if you really got offended you can always press that block button

feministgamingmatters
You could talk about ethics in games journalism all day, even ones about feminism, without enjoying offending people and doing it on purpose.

thugquinn
yeah... but that isn’t as fun

The circuitous logic and cruelty employed by thugquinn are widely indicative of GamerGate and their functions. His insulting statements are similar to many of the tamer messages that female game developers and critics face daily. Even men in the industry endure threats from gamers on a regular basis,
but it is often not to the same scale as the coordinated cyber terrorism attacks orchestrated by GamerGate against women.

Psychologist Raymond Mar writes, “Researchers have repeatedly found that reader attitudes shift to become more congruent with the ideas expressed in a [fictional] narrative.” In terms of video games, the underrepresentation of women and people of color communicates to white male gamers that people different from them do not belong in the realm of gaming. When they are absent (or are present in their ascribed roles as sex objects and criminals, respectively), no adverse reactions from white males occur because nothing is perceived as out of the ordinary. However, when these roles are challenged, as in the cases of the Dickwolves incident and Rust, a fear of the social order being upset manifests itself in the form of attacks against gamers of color and women across aspects of gaming culture to maintain the status quo. For women, the devaluing and (passive or active) encouragement of violence against them rampant in games has laid the groundwork for the ideals of GamerGate to fester within the gaming community and grow into an organized effort to keep women out of games using similar threats of violence in the real world.

**The Role of Developers**

As many of the problems facing the gaming community are directly related to games themselves, the position of developers must be examined in terms of both their power and their complicity in both the games they make and their professional practices. In the US, white men have traditionally dominated the field of game development since it began in the 1960s when women and racial minorities still experienced explicit systematic legal oppression. The
consequent objectification of women and structured absence of people of color in games likely began as a product of the time, but has since become the standard for video games developed globally.

Gray argues that racism and sexism in games are unintended consequences of the privilege that white men experience in the US following the logic that regardless of medium, all creations will reflect the ideology of their creators despite attempts at objectivity. As a result, the industry sees frequent reproductions of similar narratives and characters (heroic stories about white men). “They’re not being racist, they’re just going on what they know about the world,” she adds. What they know, however, is often framed by a culture where non-white people are frequently criminalized in media and women are often reduced to their appearances (and women of color are often fetishized and stereotyped to a different degree). These realities for women and racial minorities often go unnoticed by white men (Cerna, Hess) and consequently result in games that uphold the norm rather than challenging it. Furthermore, Gray contends that developers are often discouraged from or don’t feel the need to change the formula that has been present since games’ beginning because it continues to make money. However, she also cites Anna Everett and the PEW Research center as sources that have found that despite making up a smaller portion of the gaming community, minorities are the financial backbone of gaming, as they tend to buy console games more frequently than white male gamers. What this means, then, is that developers are either unaware of or indifferent to the diversity within their market. Jamie Madigan writes in her study, The Psychology of Video Game Avatars, “[games feel] more interactive and immersive” when players are able to create avatars that resemble idealized
versions of themselves. According to Gray, developers use this as, “justification for always creating a white dude as a main character, which begs the question, what about people of color in the space? What about women in the space? But again, that’s not their target demographic.” Again, this indicates that game developers (predominantly white men) have a very particular idea of what the gamer looks/should look like (white men) and in the absence of meaningful interaction with minority gamers or discussions of representation, continue to reproduce homogenous, problematic content.

Some developers do take the time to speak about issues of representation in gaming—usually to uphold the status quo in the industry. Returning to Witcher 3, Polygon writer Arthur Gies wrote a comprehensive review of the game in which he discussed gameplay and mechanics, story, world building, characterization, and overall design. At the end of the article, he devoted a few paragraphs to discussing the sexualization of female characters, including the protagonist’s adopted daughter figure, and wanton use of violence against women. He briefly mentions the lack of racial diversity in the last paragraph, but lists only the “oppressively misogynist” treatment of women as the game’s major detractor in his final review summary, giving the game an 8/10. One day following the article’s publication, Adrian Chmierlaz, co-owner and creative director at The Astronauts studio, wrote a response to Gies’s critique, almost entirely devoted to refuting his arguments of sexism and racism in Witcher 3. He first accuses Gies of “pushing his personal agenda” by even mentioning these issues rather than focusing purely on the technical aspects of the game, like many in the gaming community who believe that representation in games should not be discussed. This action calls into question Gies’s journalistic integrity, similar
to the supposed function of GamerGate. Following this, he writes, “The Witcher is the Slavic mythology, and while dragons fit, non-white races simply do not—the same way white people are not a part of Egyptian mythology,” interestingly failing to point out the regular whitewashing of Egyptian culture and mythology in video games like Serious Sam (2001, 2002), The Dagger of Amon Ra (1992), and Nancy Drew: Tomb of the Lost Queen (2012), which tell the stories of white heroes against a background of Egyptian culture, history, and mythology.

Chmierlaz also points out that non-white humans exist in the lore of the Witcher series and cites one non-white character, the sorcerer Azar Javed, from the first game. His thesis on the racial side of the argument, after citing these pieces of evidence, is, “So it would not be a problem if the third Witcher featured non-white races. It’s just that it’s also not a problem when it doesn’t. It’s a non-issue.” Generally speaking, Chmierlaz, like many developers, is utterly indifferent to the inclusion/exclusion/treatment of people of color in video games.

Like many in his field, he is also a staunch defender of the norms of violence against women in video games. The world of Witcher 3 is one in which entire monster classifications for the player to fight are based on scorned women, villains are frequently shown torturing and maiming women or surrounded by female corpses, and a man who savagely beat his wife to the point of miscarriage is allowed to explain why she deserved it and the player is given the option to sympathize with him (Gies). To all of this, Chmierlaz asks, “But…why is such a world a problem?” He continues to ask similar rhetorical questions about whether brutality should not be allowed to exist in art and offers no critique of Gies’s argument except to post screen captures of his tweets about watching Game of Thrones, a TV show infamous for sexualization and violence against
women, and to call his article an “echo” of Anita Sarkeesian’s Feminist Frequency videos. He also falls into the same trap of using moments of female strength to negate problematic female depictions, as with Quiet and DDN. Chmierlaz quotes Gies’s article in which he acknowledges that many powerful women exist within the world of Witcher 3 along with victimized ones. He then asks how such a world can be “oppressively misogynist” as Gies writes, ignoring Gies’s discussion about objectification and sexualization of said women until later, and presents the possibility that Gies is insinuating that the creators of the game are misogynists as the only logical explanation for his critique. Under this premise, he proceeds to ask: “[W]hy the hell do you defecate on years of developer’s blood, sweat and tears by implying their work is sexist and misogynistic?” (Chmierlaz). This reaction reflects a problem across game development: an unwillingness to take criticism, especially when faced with issues like gender and race. Wu has experienced this defensiveness personally working in the field of game development. When discussing sexism with her male peers, she finds that, “Some of them realize there’s a real problem, realize we’ve got to do better, and they’re really interested in being part of that solution. The other half of them--I don’t know how else to say it—they’re just straight up sexist in ways they don’t understand, they like the game industry exactly as it is, they are unwilling to think outside of this little box. …They get defensive; they think they’re too smart to be sexist.”

The problem is not limited to male developers, either; female developer Ola Rogula published a YouTube video in 2013 critiquing Feminist Frequency after sharing a Sarkeesian video on her Facebook page and engaging with a lot of negative feedback from her female fanbase. Throughout her video, she asserts
neither game developers nor the “nastiest trolls” that Sarkeesian gets (who, again, routinely send her graphic rape and death threats) really “hate women” and therefore the term “misogyny,” which she defines as the outright hatred of women, is too “harsh” and “hurtful” to use when discussing game developers and depictions of women in games. She goes on to trivialize the struggles that women in game development face on the grounds that she has never experienced them working in the indie game scene (which is vastly different from the AAA industry as developers are smaller, even sometimes individuals, and have more creative freedom in their productions). She also asserts that the dearth of women in game development is due to “biological” differences between men and women and offers indie gaming as an alternative for underrepresented groups because she personally is “not interested” in games from big developers with female protagonists. Despite their different takes on representation in games (Rogula agrees with Sarkeesian’s characterization of the problems with depictions of women, but not the cause), Rogula and Chmierlaz share a similar fallacy: as game developers, neither of them examines misogyny in the context of their field beyond what they personally know. In defense of their products and of themselves, game developers become complicit in perpetuating racism and sexism in games by refusing to interact positively with criticism.

Consequently, developers’ hiring processes become reflective of the stances that they perpetuate and defend, contributing to the vicious cycle of reproduction. In her discussion of her interactions with male colleagues, Wu says, “I know a lot of white men in game development and they’re good people! … But at the same time, their solution[s] to structural sexism in the game
industry are answers that don’t require them to do anything or think about their behavior.” These solutions, she elaborates, include getting more women to study computer science, and getting more women to apply to game development positions; they offer these, however, without elaboration on how they can contribute as game developers, assigning responsibility to outside entities. This also ignores the structural problems of advancement within game development. While overt sexism and racism are certainly not commonplace, covert methods certainly are in the form of mistrusting women who work in the technical side of gaming, not looking at applications from people of color, and affording more opportunities to young, beautiful women (reproducing the lack of age/body diversity in video games in real life) while ignoring older women who have worked in the field longer—all of these things were described to me by Brianna Wu based on her personal experience. For men, she says, there is a “good ol’ boys” system in place where “men promote each other, and they promote their buddies because it’s easiest and it’s about their comfort.” Wu firmly believes in “being honest” in discussions of structural issues in game developments, and that means “making [white men] uncomfortable.” She asserts that discomfort and honest discourse is the only way that they will grow to recognize these problems, learn from them, and improve.

I spoke to John Hodgson, a white man who is a game developer at Blizzard Entertainment, and he broadly agrees with Wu. He acknowledges that large studios have a “propensity to accept and construct a cultural environment for white males like myself,” adding that he is “certain that women and minorities are treated with more distrust than someone of [his] race and gender in the field of game development.” In his personal experience, Blizzard has
worked to support diversity in the games they make and the developers they hire. He mentions that sometimes the resulting feedback from fans on these changes in games is “overtly racist or sexist (and therefore may be safely disregarded).” Hodgson also believes that diverse hiring is essential to not only Blizzard’s goals of diversifying games, but to widening the player base and improving games overall. While his perspective is uncommon in his field, it is not unheard of. With people like Hodgson, a member of the privileged group within the field of game development who is aware of its problems, and Wu, a vocal advocate for equality within and outside of the industry, it is possible for developers to change the gaming community for the better, from the ground up.

**Conclusion: The Next Level**

The problem of toxicity in gaming culture is too nuanced to be resolved quickly or easily; it will take concentrated efforts from all sides. For players, this means not giving into or being intimidated by trolls. What this small subset of gamers has going for them is organization; by making themselves the loudest voice in the community, they have become the central focus of it and have even been able to form collectives like GamerGate dedicated to advancing their beliefs. If gamers who believe in diversity and positive representation, or at least condemn or even dislike hate speech in online play, acted similarly, the pushback alone could at least allow female gamers and gamers of color a chance to interact safely online. For critics, this effort means interacting with civil discussion and working to expand their research and body of thought.

Real progress, however, must begin with developers. If the dominant attitude among game developers continues to persist unchallenged, then the
status quo will remain intact and the progress of gamers and critics will eventually stall. To begin, developers like Wu and Hodgson must become leaders of conversation in the field and not allow their peers to shy away from issues of race and gender representation or player toxicity. They must push for their companies to make it easy for players to speak to them, such as conducting focus groups, and make a genuine effort to listen to what they want, rather than making assumptions about consumer demand. Currently, this is quite difficult because the loudest voices are those of trolls who viciously attack developers over small issues, but if moderate players collectively fulfill their role in this progression, it will make discussion easier on developers. Game companies must also take up more active responsibility in tackling the issue of online harassment, such as creating systems that monitor player behavior and result in automatic account suspensions or bans for hate speech.

Most importantly, though, is the issue of diversifying the field of game development by hiring more women and minorities and making a genuine effort to listen to their thoughts and ideas. Many developers often say that the lack of minority and female employees is a pipeline problem—that those groups simply aren’t in the applicant pool. Often, they aren’t, but that is largely because of institutional factors that start practically at birth. Minority children face low-income environments, bad school districts, and limited academic and personal opportunities, and police brutality while girls are often discouraged from behaving “like boys” in early childhood (getting dirty and playing with tools, for example), which manifests as a disinterest in “masculine” pursuits like programming and engineering that worsens as they grow older. As Wu stated, even men in the industry who realize this problem often expect it to fix itself or
for someone else to attend to it. At the end of my interview with Dr. Gray, she put forth a different notion that beautifully summarized what developers have the power to do: “We have to put that burden on those companies and the people in the industry to have to be invested. If they’re really trying to do something, [they’ve] got to start in those schools--elementary school programs, get those kids interested, making sure their after school programs are just as valuable and fruitful as those kids in good areas and school districts. There’s a lot more to that story, and I think people need to know that.”

Nurturing the growth and interest of girls and children of color is critical to ensure a vibrant future for games. As for what developers can do right now, though, allowing women and minorities to consult with development teams and have creative freedom as designers is the best way to ensure that change begins immediately. When Dragon Age: Inquisition was in development, writers for the game wanted to include a transgender character. However, none of them knew what that experience entailed. They decided to talk to real transgender people and while the final character, Krem, wasn’t perfect, he was a much better representation of a trans man than the story that the writers originally conceived, which was full of stereotypical notions about what that experience meant, including an unsupportive family, being outed by another character, and sexual assault as a character motivation. Writer Patrick Weekes admitted that many of these things had not occurred to him as being stereotypical because that was not his lived experience. Regarding assault, Weekes was fairly adamant about keeping that storyline intact, but after much convincing from the consultants the story line was removed. In a later interview, Weekes said, “I eventually realized it was about trying to find the stories that,
even if they’re not happy, upbeat stories, aren’t about that sadness, aren’t about the assault, it’s important to get past that. [The consultants] called that out and we got Krem to a point where that sexual assault was not the defining point of Krem’s existence again. It was about trying to figure out the balance between presenting respectfully, inclusively and showing ‘hey this is the truth of your lives’, but also you paid money for the game and you want something that’s going to be uplifting and not something that just goes, ‘hey just a reminder that your life is really hard’,” (“How Trans Consultants Saved Dragon Age: Inquisition).

Because of the work of these consultants, Krem became a positive representation of a transman that people like him could relate to and people dissimilar from him could learn and grow from. This is an important lesson that all game developers should take heed of: there are horrors in this world. Sexual assault, gang violence, drug abuse, domestic abuse—all of these are real problems that women and minorities face. But there is so much more to them as human beings that game developers have scarcely scratched the surface of. Women and minorities, as well as other LGBTQ groups, have the power to transform the gaming landscape into a thoughtful, welcoming place with diverse characters that reflect diverse players, if only given the chance.
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