"He could be a bunny rabbit for all I care": Exploring identification in digital games

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ABSTRACT
Little empirical research has investigated how players identify with video game characters. In this paper, I use data from interviews with video game players who are members of marginalized groups, to interrogate the links made between how players identify with video game characters and the importance of representation. I discuss how games' ludic, bodily and socially interactive aspects result in players' being self-reflexive rather than identifying with the game characters/avatars; whereas narrative aspects of games help players identify with characters. Different types of games, moreover, shape the types of relationships players have with the onscreen characters. This paper looks at the links between how players identify with different kinds of video game characters, and concludes with the implications this has for arguments about the importance of the representation of marginalized groups in video games.

Keywords
Identification, representation, audience reception, minorities

INTRODUCTION
In media representation studies generally, and studies of minority representation in video games specifically, there are two main arguments for the importance of representation. First, people want to see people like them. This is part of the market logic argument: If you want people to watch/play/read something, you put people "like them" in it. Second, it is important that people see people unlike them in order to garner a broader view of the world. This is the educational argument and, typically, it is not seen as profitable. These arguments also tend to assume that it is possible to define what is "good" or "bad" about a given representation; good representation educates, bad representation is harmful. In both cases, there is a sense that researchers and marketers can predetermine how people see themselves (their identities) and how they will position themselves vis-à-vis a given text (through identification), and that this is why media representation is important.

The quote in my title comes from Julia, who identified as an African-American, gay woman in her late 30s, while she played the game *God of War*. She goes on to say of Kratos (the player-character in the game) that, "He's just the thing on the screen. He's holding the knives, that's all." She was not the only interviewee who felt this apathy towards the identity of her on-screen character, though most were more ambivalent than apathetic. This troubles the dominant assumption that players invest heavily in the identities of their characters, an assumption which conflates the activity of playing games with how the games as texts are interpreted. Moreover, different gaming contexts shape the types of choices players make in terms of how they create and play with/as the

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character/avatar. This paper looks at the relationship between how players identify with different kinds of video game characters, and concludes with the implications this has for arguments about the importance of the representation of marginalized groups in video games.

Little empirical research has investigated how the process of identification operates in video games, however, and what this might mean for demands for diversity in this medium. In this paper, I use data from a larger study on video game players who are members of marginalized groups to interrogate the different ways in which players connect (or not) with video game characters. I discuss how games' ludic, bodily and socially interactive aspects often result in players' being self-reflexive rather than identifying with the game characters/avatars per se; whereas narrative aspects of games help players identify more directly with characters. Different types of games and gaming contexts, moreover, shape the types of relationships players have with the onscreen character. Players do not automatically take on the role of avatars, which has important implications for how one can argue for the importance of diversity in games.

REPRESENTATION AND IDENTIFICATION IN GAMES

Textual studies of representation critique portrayals on the basis of who is the presumed audience for a text; what group the researcher thinks is the intended audience for the text, shapes the researcher's analysis of that representation. Leonard (2004) and Chan (2005), for example, discuss the relationship between players and characters in terms of race. Both argue that, in most representations of racial minorities in video games, one might play at being a minority, but the player is not presumed to be a member of that group. The implied audience is the dominant identity, opposed to the minority one depicted. Similarly, playing as Lara Croft *Tomb Raider* (Edios, 1996-2009) is assumed to "mean" different things if a player is male or female (Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001), as one implies cross-gender role-play or objectification and the other assumes same-sex identification. Either analysis relies on problematic assumptions about gender identity, as well as the process of identification. These phenomena, moreover, are rarely studied in a way that accounts for intersecting identity categories (i.e. race, gender and sexuality).

Take, for instance, this quote from video game designer and professor Brenda Braithwaite: "It took them a while, but developers eventually got hip to the fact that there are women out there who want to control female characters [in video games], and now they're getting hip to the fact that there are LGBT[1] gamers out there who want to control LGBT characters" (Ochalla, 2009). This quote synthesizes some of the key assumptions made by those who study and create these texts; namely, that there is a clear line to be drawn from identities defined by particular identifiers, a corresponding demand for representation and, if this identifier marks a profitable niche, some resultant form of representation. Notice, however, that women and L, G, B, or T, are described here as separate categories of identity. If a player is both a woman and L, G, B, or T, their video game wants are presumed to be different from the (assumed) heterosexual women appealed to previously. Critiques such as these generally imply that if only the industry used a different or more expansive definition of their audience, representation that is more diverse will follow. They also assume that this type of identifier matching is important to players' ability to identify with their characters.

Identification in video games, however, is not well understood. There is a prominent assumption that because video games are interactive, players automatically take on the role of the main character/avatar (Gee, 2003; Murphy, 2004). There is not, however, a

great deal of audience research on identification in video games. Most studies of identification in contained video games rely on textual analyses (Carr, Buckingham, Burn, & Schott, 2006; de Mul, 2006; Garrelts, 2006; King & Krzywinska, 2002; McMahan, 2003; Rehak, 2003; Richard & Zaremba, 2006; Slocombe, 2005). Many of the previous accounts of identification in video games, moreover, do not necessarily define identification, a running theme in most studies of the topic (Cohen, 2001). For the purposes of this paper, I rely on interviewees own definition of the term, which tended to focus on seeing the character as separate from them at the same time they formed a sympathetic or empathetic connection with that character. I also address the ways interviewees felt the process of identification in video games is different from other media. Rather than simply critique the availability of the representation of certain identities in video games, researchers must also interrogate how and if players identify with those portrayals. I argue that the act of playing obscures, and can even supersede, the process of identification with characters in some games. This is crucial to developing more focused activism and research on the politics of representation in this medium.

METHOD

The larger project from which this paper stems was a three-stage study. First, I used a general survey, administered online, to locate potential interviewees. The survey allowed me to sample from marginalized identity categories I use as the starting point for this study without making it necessary for me to signal that these are identities were of interest. A sample of interviewees who identified as non-heterosexual, non-male, and/or not solely White/Anglo (i.e. those that fell outside the heterosexual, White male gamer stereotype prominent in the U.S.), were then selected from the completed surveys. Of the fifty-two total people who fit into one or more of the selection criteria, 38 were contacted and 27 of those agreed to be interviewed. I also interviewed two heterosexual, white male partners of two of those interviewees, and the non-gaming, queer white female partner of one other participant. As I was interested in people who play video games, rather than "gamers" *per se*, I also sampled across the types of games, platforms, and amount of time they play.

Next, I conducted two separate interviews. In the first, I used a modified life history approach (Langness & Frank, 1965). I focused on participants' history with video games and other media, thoughts on media representation and how and if they identify with fictional characters. The second interview was a "gaming interview," as described in Schott and Horrell (2000). This method is particularly useful in seeing how, and if, audiences identify with characters, as it engages those questions in the act of consumption (Cohen, 2001). I had interviewees play a game that they had chosen ahead of time when possible, or gave them a choice of games if necessary (in their homes when possible, in another location when necessary). Seven interviewees played on the Nintendo Wii, five on a PlayStation 2 or 3, eight on XBoxes, two on both the Wii and XBox, one on a PlayStation Portable, and four on laptops or PCs. While observing them, I talked with them about the game, what they were thinking during certain periods of play, where they saw themselves in relation to the character, and what they liked or did not like about the game. Most played solitary games, but two played online games and five played games with others while I watched. All names used for interviewees are aliases, many chosen by interviewees themselves.

INTERACTIVITY OR IDENTIFICATION?

It is generally asserted that the interactive qualities of games make the possibility of identification greater in video games than in other media (Wolf, 2001, p. 3). As King and Krzywinska explain:

> The activity of the players is essential to the realization of much of what unfolds in the playing of games, even where the parameters are clearly established in advance. As a consequence, the player can seem more directly implicated than traditional media consumers in the meanings that result. (2006, p. 169)

Often these assumptions are derived from auto-ethnographic accounts (Consalvo, 2007; Crawford & Rutter, 1997; Williams, Hendricks, & Winkler, 2006). Murphy asserts, for example, "when I game I am both player and character simultaneously" (2004, p. 224). Some of my interviewees similarly said that video games' interactive properties made them feel more connected with their characters. As Cody described it, "generally you have direct control over the guy in a video game, whereas you are watching someone in a movie." Hatshepsut similarly said, "the more control I have over the character, the more I feel I'm in the character." In most of their descriptions, however, it seemed that interviewees identified *as* the on-screen character, in the sense that they are taking on the character's role in the game world, but they do not identify *with* the character in the intellectual/emotional sense.

It is important here to distinguish between video game characters and avatars. Avatar is often used to describe the visual, digital embodiment of the player in the game world. When applied to video game characters, however, this is imprecise. When a person creates a representation of themselves in games, online or off, that is an avatar. The term avatar implies self-representation.[2] Video game characters, on the other hand, are entities unto themselves, which players control. Lara Croft, Mario, the Master Chief, Blanka, etc., are characters, not avatars.[3] This distinction is particularly important because if players see the character as separate from themselves they might identify with it (using the definition above); self-representation through avatars, however, is a different process. It is also important to separate involvement in games as texts from involvement in the activity of playing video games. Stromer-Galley's (2004) distinction between interactivity as a social process and interactivity as a property of texts is useful here. Games are interactive texts in terms of their ludic and narrative properties. As activities, however, they are embodied and often social events. With the exception of the narrative aspects, however, game involvement does not necessitate and may even preclude identification *with* characters, at least in this exploratory study.

Ludic and narrative interactions

Newman (2002) questions the assumption that players identify with video game avatars or characters: "Rather than 'becoming' a particular character in the gameworld, seeing the world through their eyes, the player encounters the game by relating to everything within the gameworld simultaneously." Indeed one interviewee, Malcolm, said, "When you are playing the character, there's so much more going on and you are so much in control that you don't really have that outside perspective." Caine also noted that the interface could pull him outside of the game. Renee said that in video games, "you've got 30 seconds to not screw it up too bad (laughs). There's not a whole lot of back story involved." It may make sense to look at games as a reactive, rather than an interactive medium as Arsenault and Perron (2009) and Schott (2006) describe. All of these factors

make players too self-reflexive, in many cases, to actually engage in the relatively distanced process of identification.

In order to make sense of interviewees conflicting perspectives, I used Cohen's (2001) questions developed to measure identification in film and television as talking points for the gaming interviews. This allowed me to discuss the differences between player/avatar and viewer/character relationships with interviewees. These questions proved difficult to answer, but primarily this demonstrated the difference between identifying with video game characters and characters in other media. Most interviewees, for example, answered that they could get fully absorbed while playing a game. This was often a qualified yes, however. Context and reason for play mattered to involvement, because wanting to win (for example) was a reason for getting absorbed in certain video games more than strong connection to characters. Affirmative answers to Cohen's questions that would have indicated identification had occurred in television viewing, merely signaled that a game was good, not that the player identified with the on-screen character.

When it comes to understanding their character in the game, interviewees' answers varied greatly with kind of game they were playing. Interviewees were evenly distributed, between answering affirmatively and negatively to this question. In part, this was because some characters were too abstract to for such a connection to take place; speaking of the Mii[4] avatars, for example, Renee said, "They don't have feet!" On the other hand, in games with strong narratives, understanding the story allowed players to get a sense of their characters. Narrative can even pull players into games with non-humanoid characters. Speaking of the puzzle game *Adventures of Lolo* (Hal, 1989), Zahriel said, "I identified with Lolo, every now and then. Poor little guy stuck in this place […] I would curse the guy that put me in this stupid thing and stole my girlfriend."

Generally, interviewees did not feel they were able to "get into the heads of characters." While playing *Left 4 Dead* (Valve, 2008) Ephram and Devon said they only got into the characters' heads on the most basic level; the "oh shit, zombies are coming to kill us" level. Unless they had intertextual references, most interviewees felt that video game characters were not developed enough for them to make those kinds of inferences. The interactive aspects of video games made the process of identification qualitatively different from other media. Tala said, "I'm going through it with the character. So I'm going through dealing what they are going through but reacting a little bit differently." There is a self-referentiality to interactivity that does not allow the distance necessary for identification with characters. Some players think about what they are doing, not what the character is doing or what they as the character are doing. Interviewees, wanted their character to succeed, but only because the goals of the character were the goals of the player in most cases. Tala described this process as, being "one with the character but not of the character."

The interactive nature of games is part of the reason identification questions proved difficult to answer. Interactivity makes identifying with video game characters hard to parse from involvement with the texts.

> Tanner: I think I can identify with characters portrayed on the [television] screen more readily. Which seems weird because I have no control over those characters on the screen. Yet, I'm the one who is working the avatar on the video game screen. So that's kind of strange, I guess. Maybe I don't feel the need to identify

> with something that I am controlling. I would like to engage in a different way by identifying with a character in a story on a [television] screen.

The ludic aspects of games often cause players to be too self-referential to take on the role of their character. They did not think about their relationship with the character *per se*, rather they thought about what they, the players, were doing.

As the player actively experiences what is going on in the game, she/he is not necessarily as concerned with engaging with the thought process of the character, the exception being games with developed characters where the player wishes to play as that character. In those games, players may attempt to understand the character's thought processes rather than merely control their actions. Often, however, it frankly does not matter what the character is thinking, as the player ultimately commits the action. As Christine put it, "I'm only really thinking about what I'm doing and how my actions are affecting the character's actions." That is not to say that the process of identification is different in video games than it is in other media, but that identification and interactivity cannot be conflated. In those instances, where players identified with character, it was because of the narrative. These narrative and ludic properties of games affect whether or not and how people identify with the video game text. However, gaming is also an activity. Thus, it is also important to look at the embodied and social aspects of playing, in order to get a fuller picture of how players consume these games.

An embodied and social activity

Gaming is both an embodied and social activity. One might even interpret the strong self-referentiality of physical engagement as an emotional or intellectual identification. This is perhaps because, as Giddens (1991) argues, awareness of the self is intimately tied to the body. There are many different ways that video games engage the body. Behrenshausen (2007), using the example of the game *Dance Dance Revolution* (*DDR*), argues that games studies should not just look at games in terms of visual representation but also in terms of physical performance by players. This is increasingly true of platforms with motion sensitive controllers as with Nintendo's Wii and Microsoft's Kinect, or even with games like *Rock Band*, and *Guitar Hero*. Interestingly all of these are marketed to combine the embodied and social elements of gaming.

Even beyond how the game is controlled, some players are quite animated while playing**.** Evan, for example, mentioned that his brother's plays with his whole body. As I watched him play, Evan did this as well. While playing *007: Nightfire* (EA, 2002), he navigated James Bond through the snowy German landscape to get into a castle, Evan shifted his body ever so slightly. He dodged the bullets aimed at Bond and looked around corners as he urged James to do likewise. Christine similarly tried to telepathically urge her Wii bowling ball in the right direction as she watched it roll down the lane (an act that occurs in physical bowling alleys as well). Participants threw down controllers in disgust at their failures, or leaped up at their success. In a different form of bodily response, several interviewees mentioned feeling their heart pound as they played particularly intense portions of games. This is not unique to games, of course, as some people jump during scary movies or cry during tragedies. Level of embodiment, regardless, was not correlated with the level of identification according to interviewees. Involvement did not beget (or necessitate) an emotional investment in the character as a such.

Games can also involve different types of social engagements. We can think of this in terms of Stromer-Galley's (2004) discussion of the dual meanings of the term

interactivity: interactivity-as-product and interactivity-as-process. Interactivity-as-process refers to social interaction between people, which can occur in a variety of forms. Interactivity-as-product references the technological aspects of a text that allow users to interface with a system, be that a digital game or a webpage. She argues that conflating the two is problematic, particularly as it "occludes an ability to see that product interacts with process; that is, it is possible that the degree or features of medium interactivity might affect outcome variables of human interaction" (p. 393).

The game *Rock Band*, for example, is interactive on multiple levels. First, as a product, it allows players to design their own characters (within limits), and select and buy an array of music (within limits). Players can create rockers that are roughly "like them," totally unlike them, or randomly generated. It is only narratively interactive if players create narratives for their rockers and bands. It is interactive at a ludic level, both because players must perform the appropriate input to navigate each song successfully, but also because designing characters can be playful as is subversion of the song text (which interviewees did in one interview). It is also bodily engaging. Some players may play relatively stoically, others "rock out" to a greater extent. Finally, it can be, but does not have to be, a social activity. The act of playing the game together is not the only social aspect of it, however. Such sociality can include the display of shared stylistic tastes, musical tastes, or senses of humor. It can include discussion of the game by those not actively playing the game. The use of the text as the basis of social interaction is what makes this type of play social. The process of interactivity that occurred during a gaming interview in which Carol, Chuck, Zahriel and I played *Rock Band*, benefitted from but was not defined by the product's interactivity. This is the very reason Malaby (2007) argues that researchers should look at games as processes; Games can "change through the unintended consequences of practice" (p. 102). Some of these changes also negate the close connection between players and avatars. Even though Chuck and Carol, for example, put a lot of thought into their *Rock Band* characters, they did not actually play *as* or identify *with* those characters while playing the game. Instruments were switched, individual players did well or poorly in the game, and the on-screen characters were watched rather than inhabited.

Related to this, context of consumption is something rarely considered in relation to identification. Context, however, shapes both how individuals identify with characters, as well as the relative importance of representation. During her gaming interview, Tala said of *Eternal Darkness* and its insanity effects, that "playing alone in the dark, it does freak you out. I do follow what the character is going through." Both Zahriel and Sara also said that playing with other people around made them more detached from the game and less likely to identify with the characters. There was more self-reflection involved when other people were watching. Most often, however, interviewees said that the way context shaped identification mostly in online play. Some, for example, were more willing to make morally questionable choices in games they played alone than they were when they played online with others. Their online characters reflected "them," but characters played primarily offline did not always. Much of what we have learned empirically about how individuals' identities "work" in games has been in relation to online gaming, like Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), etc. (Chee, Vieta, & Smith, 2006; Eladhari, 2007; Mortensen, 2007; Taylor, 2006; Yee, 2001). These are different environments than solitary play however, as they rely on complex interrelations between online and offline identities in the playing of the game and the development of social relationships with other players. Playing as an avatar that is like or unlike you, is different from performing as oneself (or another) in a social space.

Unlike closed games, MacCallum-Stewart argues, "in online games, one's avatar become a persistent, representation of self; one that often remains immutable once it has been chosen" (2008, p. 38). Cody said, that in *World of Warcraft*, "on the one hand that person is a reflection of me, but on the other hand I'm talking to you as [Cody] not the character." That is not to say that players do not take on different roles in these virtual spaces. Devon described this in terms of playing *World of Warcraft.*

> Devon: My character collects the mini-pets that are available in the game. […] And then whenever we're like gathered in a group I'll just bring out the pets […] I'm not saying anything, just seeing if anyone notices. I'm just (makes hand gesture) I'm just dropping them out. So in that sense, I try to make him kind of personalized. You know, everyone plays this game, but I'm the guy that collects the pets.

When it comes to issues of identification, identity and representation in online spaces interviewees discussed it more in terms of being good or interesting players. This is because, as Murphy describes, "within the 'closed' virtual worlds of most video games, occupying an avatar is a different experience from going online and representing one's identity as a different race or gender" (2004, p. 233). Social contexts, generally, can shift the players' attention from their relationship to the character to their relationship with other people. So too can the type of player/character relationship created by a given game.

IDENTIFICATION IN DIFFERENT TYPES OF VIDEO GAMES

There are, then, many aspects that influence how and if players identify with game characters. Identification with characters may occur in light of narrative elements, but ludic, embodied, and social interactive properties of games tend to make players more self-referential. Researchers must also take into account the variety of relationships between player and avatar made available in different types of games. Caine described this at length.

> Caine: The more direct options you have to choose exactly what your character says, and I guess the less defined personality they have going in, then the more I can identify as that character. I guess *Baulder's Gate*, another role-playing game [...] where you create your own character. They start out as very much a blank slate and you choose precisely what they say, and that helps a lot in identification. But in a game where it's more mixed is *The Witcher*, another role-playing game, where you choose exactly what the character says. But he's got a pre-defined personality, because it's a licensed work […] And then there's some games where, specifically strategy games, where you see the entire picture writ large […] and it feels more like you're just watching the entire thing play out.

Caine described identifying *as* a blank slate character as a different form of connection than identifying *with* a character with a fleshed out story line. The former places more in the hands and minds of players, the character or avatar acts on behalf of the player. In the *The Witcher* however, as it is more "zoomed out," the player is acting through the character. We can look more closely at these different types of identification in video games by comparing identification in terms of set characters, player chosen characters, and character/avatar creation.

Set Characters

The extent to which players can identify with set characters varies, unsurprisingly, with the kind of game and genre. In some games, one might play as a specific character throughout the game, like Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* (Eidos Interactive, 1999-2009) or the Kratos in *God of War* (Sony, 2005, 2009). Other games have players play as several characters. For example, Tala, in her gaming interview, played the game *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* (Nintendo, 2002) in which the player switches between twelve different characters, from different time-periods, during the game. Other games incorporate pre-set and player created characters. Bryan played a game like this, *Disgaea* (Altus, 2003). The game included pre-set characters from the narrative, which follows Laharl, the prince of the underworld, and allowed players to create additional characters. In most of these kinds of games, as Devon put it, "basically you're playing a character that somebody else has already created. And in that case you can really understand where he's coming from, understand the choices he's making, even though maybe it's not the choices that you'll make."

Characters in these games can have more or less depth. As Newman (2002) describes, the identity of game characters is often only relevant in the cut-scenes and not in the action of the game, a sentiment some of my interviewees expressed as well. Burn's (2006) analysis of Cloud from *Final Fantasy VII* (Square Enix, 1997) notes a similar dual nature of that character as narratively developed, but whose personality is ludologically (mostly) irrelevant. Game characters are often undeveloped, according to interviewees. Due to this shallowness, they described the characters as puppets, chess pieces, and dolls, not necessarily beings to identify with. Hatshepsut said, "It's a game, like if you go play tennis you're not trying to identify with the ball or something."

A lack of depth does not necessarily mean that players cannot get into the heads of the on-screen characters, just that it requires more work for them. Even when there is no real character development, interviewees said they could create a sense of the characters' personalities. Gregory was able to explain the mindset of the pilot of the small spaceship icon in the game *Space Invaders*, despite the fact that this game has no character development: "everything rests on him and he has to save the world from the aliens." Character depth requires narration, even when it is the players doing the narrating.

It has been argued that this shallowness might make it easier for players to place themselves into characters'/avatars' shoes (Barton, 2004). Such claims are drawn from an assertion made by Scott McCloud (1993), that more iconic characters in comics make it easier for audiences to put themselves in the place of the character. In fact Bogost (2006) states that creator of *The Sims*, Will Wright, used McCloud's principles of comic design as the basis for his famous franchise. Specifically he drew on the idea that, as McCloud puts it, "the cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled…. We don't just observe the cartoon, we *become* it!" (1993, p. 36). Logically then, video games without well-developed characters would encourage players to put themselves in the place of the avatar more readily than games with detailed and clearly developed characters. In the case of some interviewees, this lack of detail caused them to be more self-aware than engaged in identification with the character. They were themselves, not the character, particularly in games that relied on caricatures. Games that leave characters too empty lose (perhaps intentionally) the chance that players will identify with the characters. Thus, merely creating character-types to represent marginalized groups is not the same as appealing to, or interpellating, marginalized groups through in-game

representation. Yet in many cases, this is the version of diversity created by the video game industry, as well as other media.

Choosing Characters

In games where players can choose their characters, one can distinguish between strategic choices and identification-based ones. When Sasha and Hatshepsut played *Marvel vs. Capcom* (Capcom, 1999-2009) and *Soul Calibur* (1999-2009) in their respective second interviews, both choose characters based on the fighters' abilities. As Newman (2002) describes, character choice in video games often has more to do with in-game advantages. Kinder (1993) too has pointed out that sometimes choosing a certain character, like when a male-identified player selects the Princess from *Super Mario Bros*, can have more to do with the ability advantages, which may, in turn, downplay "the risk of transgender identification" (p. 107). As Newman (2002) and Jenkins (2003) point out, researchers need to reconsider how and if players actually identify with these characters. Although Hutchinson (2007) analyzes the various types of identity play and resistance made available in fighting games like these, it is important to consider that the identity of characters may matter very little to some players.

During their joint-gaming interview, partners Ephram and Devon played the game *Left 4 Dead* (Valve, 2008), a shooter-survival game in which a team of four characters (either controlled by individual players or the computer) have to get from point A to point B through areas infested with zombies. Both of their choices encompass the various reasons players might choose to play as one character over another. Devon chose Lewis, described on the game's website as a junior systems analyst in an IT department.[5] Ephram chose Zoey, described as a college student home from school. All the characters have the same mechanics, but Zoey, according to Ephram, "is smaller so you can shoot around her." Ephram also tends to choose female characters, though he was not sure why: "I think it's mainly like the Xena-effect." Devon's choice was partially aesthetic (i.e. he found Lewis attractive). Also, the other two male characters are a bit "grizzled," but Lewis is a white-collared and a relatively jovial (considering the bloodthirsty zombie-filled world in which they find themselves) character. Devon stressed that he felt an affinity for what little of Lewis' personality he could glean from the game's short opening sequence. Choosing characters can be done based on either strategic or identificatory reasons. According to interviewees, it seems the latter is more likely only if the former is not an issue.

Creating Characters/Avatars

In terms of identification, choosing characters was only slightly different from playing set characters. Creating characters, however, was another matter. Interviewees described being much more attached to characters they created themselves, corresponding with Waggoner's (2009) findings in his study of *Oblivion* and *Morrowind*. This seemed to be true even when they did not recreate themselves or even make realistic, humanoid avatars. Connie played a racing game during her second interview, and said that she typically felt more ownership over cars she could customize and "own" in the gameworld. In a different example, Christine was not usually invested in game characters, except when she played *The Sims*: "I do feel more invested in them, because I control their lives basically. I don't feel emotionally connected with them, but I care more about what they are going through in the game." This is because, as Tracey stated, that when a person makes a character, "you start figuring out what the person's character or personality's going to be like, you know because you're creating them." Similarly, Caine said, "when you have a blank character that you're creating, you start telling their own

stories, whereas in other cases […] it's someone else's story that you're helping along." Interviewees did not necessarily create characters more "like them," but some did feel invested in what they had created. That is not to say, however, that they identified with them *per se*.

Much as identification with a character's social group does not necessitate identification as that character, self-representation is not always a goal of avatar creation. Interviewees' thoughts about creating characters that looked like them varied. Some people, for example, made avatars completely unlike them, or based them on people they knew or celebrities. On their Wii, partners Tanner and Rusty both had created Miis. Tanner's looked fairly like her and she even mentioned needing to edit it as she had recently changed her hairstyle. Rusty, on the other hand, had created a short, dark skinned character 'lil "Rusty." As a white male who is "6'1 200 pounds, lil' [screen name] sounds better." He seemed to enjoy the incongruity between the Mii's appearance and his own, as well as the discrepancy between the moniker 'lil and his actual physical size. In other instances, interviewees created representations of themselves that not everyone recognized as accurate. Renee described this in reference to her Mii.

> Renee: My sister came over and she was like, "Oh, who's that," and I'm like, "That's me!" And she was like, "When was the last time you wore those glasses?" I'm like, "I have them. I wear them like daily. I just usually wear them later." And she's like, "Yeah but why would you make your thing with the glasses?" I'm like "'Cause I'm someone who wears glasses. Shut up." (Laughs). […] So it looks like the me I think of.

As with identities, how we think of ourselves is not always how others see us. Researchers must be careful, however, to not leap too quickly to the assumption that how people create avatars necessarily reflects how they view themselves.

Sometimes avatar creation reflected a balance of both self-representation and what makes sense for a specific text. When Caine played *Mass Effect* for his gaming interview, he showed me the version of the game's protagonist, Commander Shepard, he had created. It looked somewhat like him, though tailored for the gamespace: "I went with the same sort of skin-tone and beard, but there wasn't really a glasses option and since this guy is a ground-forces marine, that made sense. And then I gave him a scar just because it looked cool." I also noticed that his Commander Shepard was heavily built, in comparison to Caine who was tall and skinny. His decision to make it look similar to him was, he said in the first interview, a random one. Indeed several interviewees said that they made their avatars look like them simply because it was easier than creating something totally new. Caine also described moving back and forth in this game between identifying as the character and seeing the character as separate from him. He played this character as a specific type of character, but also put a bit of himself into the character.

In a different example, in *Rock Band* Carol had created two rockers that were "sort-of" versions of her. One was the "fantasy" version. She wore crazy costumes, had big colorful hair, and wore metal roller-skates with skulls on them. The other was more specifically her. She created it because her husband, Chuck, had created a character that she thought was made to look like her (he denied this), and she wanted to do the same thing only better. She played as that character during the interview and, while dressing up the character, mentioned that she never puts that avatar in clothes she would not wear herself.

As discussed previously, there are many different relationships players can have with the object they control on the screen. Creating avatars meant to be oneself, generally results in identifying *as* that avatar. Avatars not meant to be a self-representation did not necessarily result in the same type of identification as *with* a set character, but it was not a completely distinct process either. It depended on whether the player invested in creating a back-story for the character as a separate entity. In sum, identification requires distance at the same time it bridges that space between player/character.

CONCLUSION

Players do not automatically take on the role of characters/avatars. Playing as a character that is ostensibly "other" to you (in terms of gender, race, or sexuality) is not necessarily transgressive or perspective-altering. Playing as a character that is like you (in terms of demographic categories) does not necessarily engender identification. This calls into question both the educative benefits and the marketing benefits of playing as a main video game character that is a member of a marginalized group. Different gaming contexts also shape the types of choices players make in terms of how they create and play with/as the character/avatar. In addition, playing as, creating or choosing characters in games, whether online or off, cannot be confused with identity play. These data also demonstrate that identification need not only focus on the character/avatar the player actively uses, but that researchers might consider identification with non-player characters (NPCs), as well as the environment and narrative in which the characters are placed. Moreover, identification *with* characters is not always relevant or a reason for playing video games. Rather than simply critique the availability of the representation of certain identities in video games, researchers must also interrogate how and if players identify with those portrayals.

Building on this, researchers can be critical of the claim that games in which there has been the greatest amount of potential diversity in representation (i.e. games that entail creating or choosing one's own character) are also the games in which players do not tend identify with the character/avatar on the screen. Games in which players might identify with their characters are the ones in which there has been less diversity. Game makers have created a system in which, if one so chooses, they can add diversity to their game texts, or if one is marginalized they have the ability to create characters "like them" (within certain limits). This form of pluralism cannot address the broader social goals of media representation. Critics of the representation of marginal groups in video games must begin to address this use of pluralism rather than diversity more directly.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

[2] The original meaning referred to the physical manifestation of a Hindu deity on Earth.

[3] These characters are from the game series *Tomb Raider* (Eidos Interactive, 1996-2009), the *Mario Bros.* franchise (Nintendo, 1981-present), the *Halo* (Bungie, 2001-2009) series, and the *Street Fighter* (Capcom, 1987-2010) series of games.

[4] Miis are the avatars used to represent different players on the Nintendo Wii console. They represent different accounts saved on the console and can also be used to play various Wii games, like *Wii Sports* or *Wii Fit*.

[5] http://www.l4d.com/ accessed May 14, 2010.

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