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## Identity, Identification, and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An audience reception study

Adrienne Shaw

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# Identity, Identification, and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An audience reception study

## Abstract

ABSTRACT IDENTITY, IDENTIFICATION AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN VIDEO GAME PLAY: AN AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY Adrienne Shaw Supervisor: Dr. Katherine Sender Research on minority representation in video games usually asserts: 1. the industry excludes certain audiences by not representing them; 2. everyone should be provided with characters they can identify with; and 3. media representation has knowable effects. In contrast, this dissertation engages with audiences' relationship to gamer identity, how players interact with game texts (identification and interaction), and their thoughts about media representation. This dissertation uses interviews and participant observation to investigate why, when and how representation is important to individuals who are members of marginalized groups, focusing on sexuality, gender and race, in the U.S. The data demonstrate that video games may offer players the chance to create representations of people "like them" (pluralism), but games do not necessarily force players to engage with texts that offer representation of marginalized groups (diversity), with some rare and problematic exceptions. The focus on identity-based marketing and audience demand, as well as over-simplistic conceptualizations of identification with media characters, as the basis of arguments for minority media representation encourage pluralism. Representation is available, but only to those who seek it out. Diversity, however, is necessary for the political and educative goals of representation. It requires that players are actively confronted with diverse content. Diversity is not the result of demand by audiences, but is rather the social responsibility of media producers. Media producers, however, can take advantage of the fact that identities are complex, that identification does not only require shared identifiers, and that diversity in a non-tokenistic sense can appeal to a much wider audience than pluralistic, niche marketing. In sum, diversity can address both the market logic and educative goals of media representation. I conclude by offering three suggestions bred from this analysis. First, researchers should be critical of this emphasis on pluralism rather than diversity. Second, rather than argue video games should include more diversity because it matters, producers should include it precisely because representation does not matter in many games. Finally, those invested in diversity in games should not be to prove the importance of representation in games, but rather argue for it without dismissing playfulness.

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IDENTITY, IDENTIFICATION AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN VIDEO GAME  
PLAY:  
AN AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY

**Adrienne Shaw**

A DISSERTATION

in

Communication

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2010

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Identity, Identification and Media Representation in Video Game Play: An audience

reception study

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2010

Adrienne Shaw

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## ABSTRACT

### IDENTITY, IDENTIFICATION AND MEDIA REPRESENTATION IN VIDEO GAME PLAY: AN AUDIENCE RECEPTION STUDY

Adrienne Shaw

Supervisor: Dr. Katherine Sender

Research on minority representation in video games usually asserts: 1. the industry excludes certain audiences by not representing them; 2. everyone should be provided with characters they can identify with; and 3. media representation has knowable effects. In contrast, this dissertation engages with audiences' relationship to gamer identity, how players interact with game texts (identification and interaction), and their thoughts about media representation. This dissertation uses interviews and participant observation to investigate why, when and how representation is important to individuals who are members of marginalized groups, focusing on sexuality, gender and race, in the U.S. The data demonstrate that video games may offer players the chance to create representations of people "like them" (pluralism), but games do not necessarily force players to engage with texts that offer representation of marginalized groups (diversity), with some rare and problematic exceptions. The focus on identity-based marketing and audience demand, as well as over-simplistic conceptualizations of identification with media characters, as the basis of arguments for minority media representation encourage pluralism. Representation is available, but only to those who

seek it out. Diversity, however, is necessary for the political and educative goals of representation. It requires that players are actively confronted with diverse content. Diversity is not the result of demand by audiences, but is rather the social responsibility of media producers. Media producers, however, can take advantage of the fact that identities are complex, that identification does not only require shared identifiers, and that diversity in a non-tokenistic sense can appeal to a much wider audience than pluralistic, niche marketing. In sum, diversity can address both the market logic and educative goals of media representation. I conclude by offering three suggestions bred from this analysis. First, researchers should be critical of this emphasis on pluralism rather than diversity. Second, rather than argue video games should include more diversity because it matters, producers should include it precisely because representation *does not* matter in many games. Finally, those invested in diversity in games should not be to prove the importance of representation in games, but rather argue for it without dismissing playfulness.

## Table of Contents

<b>Copyright Notice</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>Chapter 1- Introduction- Kittens and Video Games</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 2- The Representation of Marginalized Identities:</b>	
<b>The literature and the problems</b>	<b>11</b>
Media by- Cultural Production	13
Media of- Textual Analyses	18
Media for- Audience Studies	28
The Trouble with Media Representation Literature- Cultural Identity Theory	32
Conclusion	37
<b>Chapter 3- The Argyle Method:</b>	
<b>Relocating studies of gaming, identification and representation</b>	<b>41</b>
A Situated Study, but not a Study of a Site	42
Studying Representation, but not Texts	44
Moving Game Studies Offline	50
Studying Identity, without Focusing on Identities	54
Studying Gaming, not Gamers	56
Studying Individuals, not Audiences	59

Method	61
Conclusion	70
<b>Chapter 4- Accounts of Identity:</b>	
<b>Moving beyond the constructed audience</b>	<b>73</b>
Critical Identity Theory	75
Construction of the Gamer	79
Identifying as a Gamer	85
Identity at/as a Nexus- Gender, Race, and Sexuality	88
Contextual Accounts of Gamer Identity	98
Performing Precarious Gamer Identities	103
Guilty Pleasures and Marginalized Media	117
Conclusion	120
<b>Chapter 5- Process, not Product:</b>	
<b>Identification and interactivity in video games</b>	<b>125</b>
Identification and Media	127
Identifying with or Identifying as?	132
Interactivity or Identification?	147
Identification in Different Types of Video Games	170
Playing as Other: Avatars?	182
Being Bad	186
Is Identification Important?	190
Conclusion	194

<b>Chapter 6: Representation Matters (?):</b>	
<b>When, how and if media representation matters to marginalized audiences</b>	<b>198</b>
Background Matters	200
To Whom It Matters	202
Why It Matters	207
Why It Does Not Matter	215
When It Matters	220
Social Matters	236
Concluding Matters	242
<b>Chapter 7- Conclusion: “Nice When It Happens”</b>	<b>248</b>
Media Representation without Identity Politics?	254
Nice When it Happens	258
Diversity, rather than Pluralism	263
Diversity without Defense	267
Just a game?	274
Final Thoughts	278
<b>Appendix 1: Recruitment Announcement</b>	<b>282</b>
<b>Appendix 2: Online Survey Consent Form and Questions</b>	<b>283</b>
<b>Appendix 3: Diagram of Interviewees</b>	<b>287</b>
<b>Appendix 4: First Interview Consent and Questions</b>	<b>288</b>
<b>Appendix 5: Gaming Interview Questions</b>	<b>291</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>292</b>

## List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Screenshot from <i>Settlers of Catan</i>	5
Figure 4.1	Opening scene of <i>Adventures of Lolo</i>	151
Figure 4.2	<i>Dance Dance Revolution</i> and <i>Mine Sweeper</i>	165
Figure 4.3	<i>Left 4 Dead</i> characters	177

## Chapter 1

### Introduction: Kittens and Video Games

Field Notes, December 1, 2009:

*It was World AIDS day and thanks to a reminder from a friend's Facebook update I had worn my red, argyle sweater vest, over a button-down shirt to commemorate the day. As it had become finally chilly after an extended, mild fall, I donned my leather jacket and took the trolley into West Philadelphia. This was my second interview with Pouncy<sup>i</sup>, rescheduled twice due to illness and other commitments. I walked up the steps to the house they<sup>ii</sup> shared with 11 other people, and several cats, and knocked on the door with stained-glass windows. As I entered, I said my hellos to the other housemates. One sat on the couch playing Sims on a laptop, while watching a Logo movie marathon in honor of World AIDS day. Currently, The Gloaming was on. Pouncy suggested that I should be interviewing this housemate because she had made a lesbian separatist community in The Sims. The housemate replied that, in fact, she was not currently playing with the lesbian separatist community. We then discussed how recently they had all watched the Sims having sex. We laughed at the fact that the Sims' clothes seem to disappear when they jump into bed. I was then invited up to meet the two new kittens the house was fostering.*

*Pouncy left to get a laptop to play on for the interview, while I watched the kittens wrestle and play and discussed my work with another housemate. Pouncy returned with a borrowed laptop, explaining that their laptop had recently died. We settled on a couch by the window as the housemate began making curtains on a sewing machine nearby. As Pouncy took off their sweatshirt, the housemate commented on the fact that we were wearing similar outfits. Pouncy laughed and said that the woman who opened the door, upon seeing me, said that I must be Pouncy's guest.*

*After struggling with the wireless connection for a bit, we moved downstairs again to use the desktop computer. Grabbing a jacket, as the first floor was chillier than the upstairs, Pouncy opted not to take the leather jacket so that we didn't look too much like we were wearing "lesbian uniforms." Settling down to the communal computer downstairs, we could hear the other housemates starting to watch Brokeback Mountain, the next offering in Logo's marathon. My attention shifted back-and-forth between Pouncy's playing of Settlers of Catan and the housemates' discussion of the movie.*

I relay this vignette at length because it encapsulates several different themes from this project: the uncertainty of field research and the seeming omnipresence of cats;

links between consumption and identity; the different types of sociality involved in media consumption; the way resources impact who plays video games<sup>iii</sup> and when; the fact that identities do sometimes guide consumption, but not always in the ways we assume; and finally, the different types of representation and audience activity made available by different media. All of these factors offer insight into how researchers might argue for the importance of diversity in media representation in the contemporary mediasphere and in relation to interactive digital games. This dissertation focuses on the relationship between identity, identification and media representation in an effort to question: 1. how and if people relate to the construction of the video game audience; 2. how and if people identify with media characters; and 3. how and when representation is important to audiences. It demonstrates that identities are multifaceted and articulated in relation to social dynamics; identification can occur in a variety of ways but also is not always important to audiences; and representation does not always, or predictably, drive media consumption. Further researchers, activists and interested producers need to engage more directly with the perceived triviality of the medium, not only the marginalization of certain audiences. Previous work on representation in video games often leads to arguments for pluralism in game content, not diversity.

Pluralism draws on market logic, in its emphasis on niche gamer markets and targeted content. It places responsibility for representation on audiences, who must demand (through consumption) representation. It relies on the segmentation of markets, often along the lines of singular identities (i.e. a Hispanic, genderqueer, lesbian player would only be marketed to on the basis of one of those identifiers). It marks identities in



ways that flatten the complexity with which they are actually experienced (e.g. stereotyping). It also presumes that consumers seek out media to see people “like them” based on these oversimplifications. Related to this, the pluralistic, market logic assumes a link between identity as a member of a particular group and identification with media characters. Pluralism, however, only gives the players the option of seeing marginalized groups represented if the player so chooses. It cannot fulfill the socially progressive goals of media representation. Diversity in video games, however, necessitates that all audiences will be forced to engage with different types of characters. Diversity is not the result of demand by audiences, but is rather the social responsibility of media producers. It requires that marginalized groups are not only represented because they are a profitable segment or because in a given text their representation matters; the assumed normative categories of male, White, and heterosexual do not need to be viewed as defaults when a case for the representation of marginalized groups cannot be made. Media producers can take advantage of the fact that identities are complex, identification does not only require shared identifiers, and that diversity in a non-tokenistic sense can appeal to a much wider audience than pluralistic, niche marketing. In sum, diversity can address both the market logic and educative goals of media representation. While pluralism further differentiates between norm and other, diversity promotes difference without fetishizing it.

Video games may be different from other media but not always for the reasons scholars have argued. Returning to the field note above, *Brokeback Mountain* is a particularly fortuitous counterpoint to a discussion of video games, minority representation, and audience reception. The film was heralded as a major mainstream

portrayal of homosexuality, but it recalled a history of queer readings of cowboy films. The movie itself was the fodder for a slew of parodies, offering queer re-readings of everything from *The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* to *Entourage*.<sup>iv</sup> *The Sims* offers a similar type of activity, but one encoded into the very core of the game. Though it does not offer unlimited options, one can create a lesbian separatist community as readily as one may make a heteronormative, 2.5 offspring fantasy. Yet, unlike most movies or TV shows, identifiers like gender, race, and sexuality are not always integral to game representation. *Settlers of Catan*, for example, is a board game that was subsequently released as a computer game, a version of which Pouncy played online with other people. Players try to control portions of the digital game board, which give them access to the different resources necessary to build up their civilizations. This all takes place in a relatively visually abstract screen (see Figure 1.1). However, as will be discussed later on, in several ways, identity, identification, and media representation were relevant even in this abstract setting.

Scholars generally assert that interactivity and play make video games unique. Audience activity, however, is present in other media, as the *Brokeback* example demonstrates. Audience activity need not just imply, moreover, an active reworking of the text. While I watched Pouncy play *Settlers*, I heard the housemates discuss whether Jack and Ennis are both actually gay. Reception and meaning-making are always active processes. Play, for these same reasons, is not the sole domain of games either. There was a lot of playful banter as the housemates watched the film. Media consumption is social

in ways that are not readily apparent in research that focuses on audiences as either masses or individual viewers.

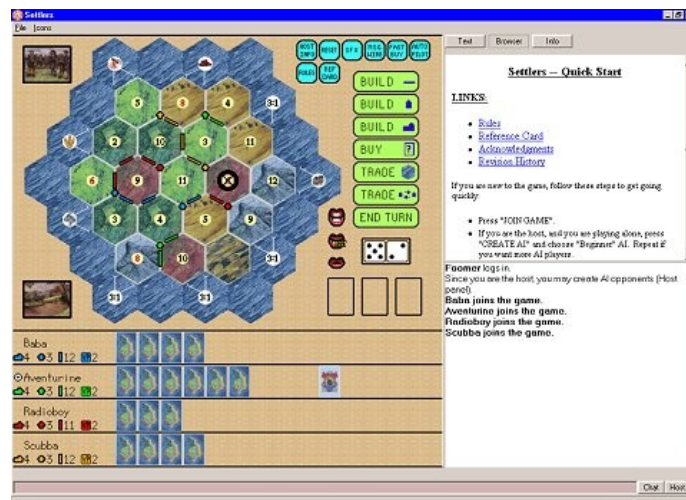


Figure 1.1: Screen shot from one version of *Settlers of Catan*

There is a sense, however, throughout the interviews conducted in this project and my previous research, as well as literature on video games generally, that there is something about video games that is unique. So what is different about video games? Two primary ways interviewees described this difference were the linked issues of identification and the politics of representation. Although not universally, interviewees often described identification with video game characters as a different (sometimes nonexistent) process from identification with other media characters. Interviewees in both my earlier and this current research, moreover, viewed the representation of marginalized groups in games as relatively unimportant. The reasons for both differences, and the fact that interviewee after interviewee noted the close relationship between the two, do not just help make sense of what is unique about video games. They also direct us to reconsider what is important about media representation as well as how we understand

the process of identification with media figures. That is to say, through a medium in which both seem unnecessary, we can question if and how identification and media representation are necessary in other media.

A tying thread throughout all of this is the contextual, performative, fluid nature of identity. Like identity, forms of identification and different representations are relevant in specific moments, in specific texts, and in specific contexts, which encompass both external social factors (e.g. where a text is consumed) as well as people's engagement with the text (i.e. the reason they are consuming the text). The construction (popular, academic, and industrial) of the audience shapes individuals' relationships with texts.

Harold Lasswell (1948) famously says that the goal of communication studies is analyzing "who says what to whom, in what channel with what effect." This formulation has generally defined the study of the media representation of marginalized groups.<sup>v</sup> The problem of who speaks and who is spoken for is omnipresent in discussions of representation (Davies, 1995, p. 105). A key problem in the area of representation studies, however, is that Lasswell's description really only provides a starting point for the study of media, though it is generally treated as a research formula. Moving from producers creating texts that are then read/viewed by audiences fails to account for the much more complicated social interactions that take place in the ongoing process of meaning-making. Stemming from this, researchers primarily discuss the representation of marginal groups in two ways: in terms of invisibility (symbolic annihilation) or in terms of positive versus negative representations. Both of these rely on a static notion of identities marked by specific identifiers. There is an assumption that "identity" is

something that can be pinned down, represented, and that the resultant portrayal can be described as either “good” or “bad.” Often identity is an assumed constant, through which we understand, critique, and argue for media visibility. This focus on specific identities and on texts as the site of meaning has limited the criticisms laid by this vein of research. I start with the audience as individuals as a way to back into these issues in another manner. I investigate why, when and how representation is important to individuals who are members of groups that have traditionally been marginalized in video games and mainstream U.S. media (focusing on gender, sexuality and race).

I begin with an overview of the literature on media representation and its links to assumptions about identity and identification. I also address some of the specific concerns of the representation of marginalized groups in video games. Next, I address the methodological concerns of this study. Rather than using specific identities as a way of framing this study of identification and representation in video game play, I argue that critical identity theory offers a better way of understanding when and how identification and representation come to be important. I do not focus on specific games, gaming platforms, or gaming audiences in an effort to further break away from the tendency of researchers to define their research subject in limited ways.

I focus on the video game play of people who, with some exceptions, fall outside the “heterosexual, White male” gamer stereotype. My goal is not to see how these people identify with characters in a way that assumes their marginalized status matters. Rather, I start with groups whose representation the media and scholarly work have asserted as important. It is often argued that this importance is related to these players’ abilities to

part of gaming cultures, as well as their ability to identify with and express themselves through video game characters. I do not focus on “gamers” necessarily, but rather individuals who play video games. I start with members of marginalized groups and I start with video games, not to isolate these players and their video game play from everything else, but rather as entry points into the study of representation. Further, by situating the game play of my interviewees in the context of their more general media consumption, I investigate the challenges posed by different media to discussions of media representation and identification.

The focus on specific identifiers and on texts has defined the study of minority media representation. Cultural production studies (*media by*) look at how producers construct their audience, typically focusing on specific identifiers, and create texts in a way meant to appeal to that targeted market. In textual studies (*media of*) the focus is on the representation of specific identifiers in texts. In audience studies (*media for*) there is a focus on specific kinds of groups of constructed audiences, often consuming a specific text or genre. In contrast, I embrace the idea that identities are neither wholly internally nor externally defined, and that audiences are always active but in video games necessarily so. It is crucial, thus, to focus on audiences when studying the importance of diverse representation in games. In this dissertation, I reconsider who games are *by*, *of*, and *for* from an audience perspective. In chapter 4, rather than look at how audiences are constructed I look at how and if people see themselves as a members of the constructed “gamer” audience and the implications this has for media representation. In chapter 5, instead of looking how groups are represented, I look at how and if people relate to

representations through the process of identification. In chapter 6, rather than look at how audiences react to particular kinds of representation, I look at whether representation is important to audiences. In each case, I look at the way identities, textual properties, and contexts shape how these processes operate. In concluding, I discuss how most interviewees asserted that both identification and representation are “nice when they happen.” This, I argue, offers a way of thinking about representation that does not focus on audience demands, constructed audiences, or analyses of individual texts.

The way researchers have argued for representation in video games, has generally resulted in pluralism rather than diversity. We are free to play in worlds that reflect us, but we do not necessarily have to learn to play well with others. Pluralism in this sense means that any audience member can seek out or create representations of marginalized groups in their video games or other media. Diversity, however, requires that audiences are confronted more directly with different types of characters, stories, and experiences. Pluralism insists that the representation of marginalized groups requires justification (e.g. the targeting of marginalized audiences). This type of defense of minority representation in media representation counters the political goals of representation. Diversity, in my articulation, requires that the marginalized are not forced to demand or justify their representation. In addition, the data suggest that those who argue for the importance of representation must, paradoxically, take seriously the frivolity of games (and other fictional media) as well as demand representation, in a way that does not serve to marginalize further the groups they are trying to help or the medium they are trying to change.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Alias.

<sup>ii</sup> This is Pouncy's preferred pronoun.

<sup>iii</sup> I use video game here as an all-inclusive term for digital games played on personal computers, video game consoles, handheld devices, mobile phone, etc. I will also use the more generic term games for this same purpose.

<sup>iv</sup> For a collection of *Brokeback* parodies see:

<http://theadventureofalifetime.wordpress.com/2007/10/15/brokeback-mountain-movie-parodies/> (Accessed April 27, 2010).

<sup>v</sup> These groups may or may not be statistical minorities in a given local or global context, but are usually defined as marginal by their lack of access to the means of mass media production (cording off for a moment user generated and independently produced content).



## Chapter 2

### **The Representation of Marginalized Identities: The Literature and the Problems**

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 reflected in interviews I have done for this and other projects. If you want people to watch/play/read something, you put people “like them” in it. Conversely, if “those people” do not buy that particular genre or medium, you do not care to represent them, unless you are just being a good person putting good things into the world. Second, it is important that people see people unlike them. This is the educational version, and typically neither producers nor scholars see it as a profitable. This logic also tends 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.

This is not a study of the representation of marginalized groups in video games. Rather, it is about how individuals who are members of groups, rarely seen to be part of the mainstream video game audience, discuss the importance of media representation and how they identify with media characters. That said, reviewing production and textual analyses of representation is important in situating the interjection posed by this dissertation. Specifically, the focus on specific identifiers and texts when analyzing

media representation from production-, textual-, and audience-centered analyses is a prevalent and problematic trend of representation studies.

A major problem in studies of representation is a narrowing of focus, whether that is on a given identifier or a particular text. Indeed, throughout the literature reviewed here there is a tendency to focus on specific types of identities and a dominance of texts as the site of representation analysis. We can roughly classify the different ways of looking at media representation into the categories of producer-, text-, and audience-focused inquiries (who media is by, of, and for). The cultural production literature focuses on issues of media ownership and its relationship to the representation of identities in media texts. Textual analyses tend to focus on issues of invisibility and stereotyping. Finally, audience-focused analyses emphasize the importance of media images to viewers/readers/players. Many analyses shift between these categories, and all three are consistently linked, but this taxonomy is useful in synthesizing the literature.

Within each section I discuss these concerns, who a text is by, of and for, in relation to video games. I also address some of the unique aspects of the medium, which make a textual based analysis inadequate for studying representation in video games. Whether this research looks at producers, texts, or audiences, usually the topic of study is specific identities (gender, race, ancestry, sexuality, religion, and so on). However, to delimit the research in this way forces a closing down of categories, which belies the complexity of identity posited in much contemporary, critical identity theory. I argue that beginning with audiences, and a fluid, performative notion of identity, offers a different and perhaps more useful way of discussing the importance of representation.

## **Media *By*- Cultural Production**

To argue that media representation is important we first must make sense of why and for whom it is important. Katz's model for analyzing minority media representation provides a good summary of the basic media representation argument. As outlined by Dayan (1998) and Gross (1998; , 2001), Katz directs us to look at whether a text is by, of and for the minority or the majority. There are two different positions studies of "who media is *by*" take, sometimes simultaneously. One focuses on the identity of producers. The other focuses on assumptions made by producers about their audience. Both are part of the study of cultural production

Academic and popular discussions tie the lack of portrayals of marginalized groups in video games, to the fact that creators of games are typically not members of marginalized groups. Work in this area emphasizes the identities of media producers, and argues that researchers must look at "the power relations (whether driven by economics, politics or other forms of social discrimination) which affect who is represented and how, who speaks and who is silent, what counts as 'culture' and what does not" (Couldry, 2000, p. 2). Put in Marxian terms, the ruling class rules because it controls the intellectual means of production, and makes the ideas that allow it to rule the dominant ones of society (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 172). Similar critiques are made of science (Sampson, 1993, p. 27) as of cultural products (Hebdige, 1997, p. 365). The inclusion, and even exclusion, of traditionally under- or misrepresented groups in games, requires active reflection and thought by developers. As Justine Cassell asserts, "[i]f the example of videogames for girls has taught us anything, it is that there is no such things as 'gender-

free' software" (2002, p. 17). There is no ideologically neutral game code. Though it is possible to imagine a game designed so players can more readily create an experience that fits their own desires, this potential is always at the mercy of the imaginations and perspectives of the programmers.

The cultural production literature also argues that when industries produce texts they do so for a particular audience (D'Acci, 1994; DiMaggio & Hirsch, 1976; Dornfeld, 1998; Henderson, 1999b). Espinosa, for example, concludes his ethnographic exploration of a television story conference with the assertion that "[t]he producer's perceptions of the audience function as an internalized, restraining mechanism which they bring into play at appropriate moments in the story conference" (1982, p. 84). Some argue that if producers want to draw a marginalized audience, they will shape their texts accordingly. 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<sup>i</sup> 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, moreover, 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, more diverse representation will follow. Such an argument, however, obscures the ways in which all audience constructions offer a limited view of the identities used to divide audiences.

Linking both the identity of producers and targeted audiences, both popular and academic discourses assume that members of a marginalized group will represent that identifier better, and that the representation of a marginal group requires the presence of members of that group in the media industry. Of Arab representation, for example, Shaheen argues, “[t]he industry has a dearth of those men and women who would be the most naturally inclined to strive for accurate and balanced portrayals of Arabs” (2001, p. 32). This is a prevalent argument in work on video game portrayals of women (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Gorriz & Medina, 2000), Arabs (Machin & Suleiman, 2006; Sisler, 2006), and LGBTQ individuals (reviewed in Shaw, 2009a). It is also described in work on the rise of gay content in television, film, and print news (Alwood, 1996; Benschhoff & Griffin, 2006; Gross, 2001). In reference to the lack of an African-American presence in mainstream news, Wood’s interviewees argue that “it is within the Black world that African-Americans can find meaning beyond those offered in American society” (2002, p. 109). Authorship in these cases can serve as a form of anchorage, to use Barthes’s (1980) term, to limit the number of readings an audience may have. This shifts the argument from the positive or negative quality of a given representation, to a focus on the authenticity and the producers’ right to represent a given identity, as seen in work on sexualized images of lesbians (Grover, 1996; Henderson, 1999a). That “we” can

represent “our” group better is questioned in some of this literature (see, for example, Sender, 2004), but the prevalence of this argument in popular and academic articles is telling of the centrality of identities in media representation research.

Producers of in-group representation of marginalized groups must wrestle with issues of representation that are, in some ways, more contentious than those that dominant group producers deal with. In-group produced texts also demonstrate the negotiation of identity groups from within. Regardless of how inclusive these texts attempt to be, “every assertion of a social identity... produces boundaries of inside/outside and functions as a normalizing, disciplinary force” (Seidman, 1997, p. 137). My previous work has looked at this in terms of comics by and about lesbians (Shaw, 2009b). In a different example, Catherine Squires (2002) argues that the marginalization of high risk groups, “gays and lesbians [sic], IV drug users, and prostitutes” (p. 69) resulted in a lack of coverage of HIV and AIDS in the Black press. This delayed the distribution of information on and resources for HIV and AIDs to Black audiences. As she puts it, “media ‘For Us and By Us’ is tempered by the definition of ‘us’ employed by the producers, Black or otherwise” (p. 69). Markers of African-American produced media, Cornwell and Orbe argue, “are confronted with two ideological questions: Do I create only favorable images of African-American culture as a means to counter the abundance of negative portrayals? Or do I produce realistic images of African-American culture that include both positive and negative features?” (2002, p. 40). Here the authors are speaking of the comic *Boondocks*. African-American readers’ responses to the strip mirror the paradox the authors describe. Reception was

either positive for *Boondocks* cultural “relevance” to their experience, or negative for its promulgation of Black stereotypes. Similar findings are presented in work on film, television and video game representations of African-Americans as well (Bobo, 2003; DeVane & Squire, 2008; Jhally & Lewis, 2003).

Texts are often the primary focus of production analyses. Work in this vein view media texts as produced from specific social/political/cultural locations, and investigate them as such. Moreover, this research tends to focus on specific kinds of identities. They rely on being able to say what group owns the means of cultural production and which Other is being excluded and misrepresented.<sup>ii</sup> As Hall argues, however, to take in-group produced media as an end-point in the struggle over representation is problematic. Speaking of Black culture, he says, “[t]here is, of course, a very profound set of distinctive, historically defined Black experiences that contribute to those alternative repertoires... But it is to the diversity, not the homogeneity, of the Black experience that we must now give our undivided creative attention” (1993, pp. 111-112). Links between the assumed *accuracy* of portrayals in a text and the identity of creators demonstrate the connections made between of identity and the study of representation. Identities, however, are fluid and contextual, as is the meaning of a given text. Instead of focusing on the production of texts, or the construction of audiences, this study analyzes how audiences relate to these constructions. In chapter 4, in particular, I look at how audiences see themselves (or not) as part of the gamer audience, and the implications this has for arguments for diversity in video games.

## **Media *Of*- Textual Analyses**

More often than not, representation studies focus on texts. This is logical as the texts do the representing, as it were. The problem of media representation is discussed primarily in terms of media invisibility and stereotyping. Concerns about invisibility grow out of Althusser's seminal work "The Ideological State Apparatus" (1998 [1971], p. 185). Using the metaphor of being hailed by a police officer, Althusser asserts that it is "in the turning," that a person realizes she/he is the "you" being called on, and thus becomes a subject of the state apparatus. Not being hailed is "symbolic annihilation," (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Tuchman, 1978) from the socio-cultural milieu. Whether or not one is hailed is important, but so too is how one is hailed. Jack Shaheen describes this in his overview of portrayals of Arabs in Hollywood films: "I am not saying an Arab should never be portrayed as the villain. What I am saying is that almost *all* Hollywood depictions of Arabs are *bad* ones" (2001, p. 11). The issue here is that, as Stuart Hall (1993) asserts, invisibility is usually replaced by "a kind of carefully regulated, segregated visibility" (p. 107). Most often, this is reflected in concerns about stereotyping.

Media representation is important, but in what ways depends largely on the researcher's perspective. Lasswell's focus on "who says what to whom, in what channel with what effect," relies on a transmission view of communication. "Within this model, communications technologies are the active and determining forces, whilst culture and identity are passive and reactive" (Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 71). Such assessments are problematic, however, particularly in regards to the wealth of work done on active



audiences and polysemy; but also, central to the argument of this dissertation, they rely on very specific and essentialized identities. The political investments involved in critiquing representations as good or bad are rarely interrogated; calling a representation positive or negative is not a value free judgment. As D'Acci (2004) argues, many descriptions of the negative effects of television representations rely on a notion of a "real" world which mediated images distort. She asserts that addressing media representation in terms of 'correctness' ignores questions of cultural production. The problem with media representation is that it is selective, not necessarily distortive, as Dyer (1999) discusses in his work on stereotypes.

Stereotypes are not necessarily negative and/or false. Like identities, they may be socially constructed but that does not mean they are fictitious. Their veracity, however, is less important than their power. Stereotypes are used as disciplinary forces, which clearly demarcate the norm from its Other. Richard Dyer unpacks the complexities of stereotypes and distinguishes between "types... which indicate those who live by the rules of society (social types) and those whom the rules are designed to exclude (stereotypes)" (1999, pp. 298-299). Rather than talking about whether stereotypes are true or offensive, it is better, he argues, to ask what purpose they serve in a text. Stereotypes are tools of power, as McRobbie describes in reference to Bhabha's work:

[T]he stereotype is an attempt to fix the colonial subject so as to thoroughly and emphatically know him or her. But Bhabha points to the paradox that the stereotype appears to embody the fullness of knowledge yet it is so anxiously repeated that there is a sense in which it cannot guarantee certainty. (2005, p. 109)

Stereotypes are powerful symbols, but they are also highly precarious. They must be constantly repeated, and reaffirmed, through media texts and social discourse to maintain

their hold on the social imaginary. Part of the tension of stereotypes, however, is the inherent instability of signifiers like gender, race and sexuality. The relative positive or negative qualities of portrayals do not exist within texts themselves, but rather the social hierarchies, disparities, and power relation to which they refer and support.

Just as stereotypes are neither inherently good or bad, judgments about what counts as a “positive” or “negative” representation are political questions, and must be interrogated as such. To say that a portrayal offers a negative representation of a group implies that said group is definable, and that there is a way the group exists in the world that is misrecognized. It is also worth emphasizing that it is highly problematic to separate out gender, sexuality, ancestry, ethnicity, race, religion, nationality, and so on in any analysis of representation. As a case in point, one can critique the infamous Atari game *Custer’s Revenge* (1982) for its overlapping offenses of sexism, racism, and colonialism (not to mention poor taste). In this game players control a mostly naked General Custer through a sea of arrows, so he can to rape a Native American woman tied to a post, in an effort to “score” as many times as possible (Chalk, 2007; Herz, 1997). Though it is definitely an outlier in video game history, it signals that although we might talk about how women, people of color and LGBTQ individuals are represented in video games any analysis which looks only at those identifiers in isolation will inevitably fall short.

Usually the existence of non-heterosexual, non-masculine, non-Anglo characters has been discussed in terms of “good” and “bad” representation (Barton, 2004; Glaubke & Children Now, 2002; Haggin, 2009; Huntemann & Media Education Foundation.,

2002; P. Miller, 2006; Pinckard, 2003; Scharrer, 2004). Most of this research is on representations of gender in video games (see for example Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Delp, 1997; Graner Ray, 2004; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008; M. K. Miller & Summers, 2007). There is less work on race/ethnicity/ancestry (Chan, 2005; D. J. Leonard, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Machin & Suleiman, 2006; Sisler, 2006) and sexuality in digital games (Consalvo, 2003a, 2003b; Shaw, 2009a). Williams *et al's* (2009) content analysis of the top 150 games, across nine platforms for March 2005-March 2006, looks at gender, race and age representation. They find that Whites, men and adults are systematically overrepresented in games, whereas women, Hispanics, Native Americans, children, and the elderly are underrepresented. There are, however, some methodological problems in studying representation in games in this manner.

Research on media representation tends to ignore medium specifics. The limits, opportunities, and meanings of a given representation are shaped by its production and consumption, how it is encoded and decoded. Researchers must take into account some of the particularities of video games when they discuss the representation of marginal groups in these texts. I do not argue that video games are interactive, in contrast to other media which are passive, as Wolf (2001) and others (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Jenkins, 2002) have argued. It is important, however, to take into account the fact that games, as games, require some special considerations when being analyzed as cultural texts.

The game text is not as stable as other media texts, as a great deal depends on how one plays them. There is a lot to be said for active audiences in all popular culture (Fiske, 1989b). The relationship between encoding and decoding can never be predetermined (S.

Hall, 1997 [1990]) and different audiences garner different meanings from the same text (Morley, 1992). This is not just true for the new media and fan cultures that Jenkins (2006b) describes, but also historical audiences as Butsch (2000) uncovers. What is different about games, however, is that audiences are not just *able* to be active—they have to be. They are what Aarseth (1997) calls ergodic texts, which require nontrivial work in order for readers/players to get through them. It is important to remember, as Newman (2002) asserts, that “videogames are not uniformly ergodic.” Activity in games can be as complex as role-playing as a fictional character in a virtual world, or as simple as trying to shoot pixelated ducks with an infrared gun as they fly across the screen. One may sit through filmic portions of a game (cinematics) or play a game without much thought. One may even watch another person play a game. A video game, however, cannot function without a measure of activity and involvement, beyond that which is required in other media like film, television, music, and even books.

Games have been studied primarily using two different approaches: narratology and ludology. Narratologists argue that researchers can look at games as cultural narratives and analyze them much in the way they do other media texts (Apperley, 2006; Murray, 1997). Ludology, however, focuses very specifically on looking at them as games, rule-bound play, and not as texts (Frasca, 2003; Juul, 2005). It is true that games do not exist in a “ludological vacuum” (Chan, 2005, p. 29), but neither can we ignore the extent to which play affects audience readings. King and Krzywinska assert, that “[a] number of factors can be suggested that might shape or determine the extent to which contextual associations are in-play in any particular game or any particular playing

situation” (2006, p. 60). Further, the extent to which these contextual associations affect the experience of play exists on a spectrum of possibilities. Play can be purely abstract, completely grounded in external contexts, or more likely somewhere in-between. “What is required here... is analysis of the game-as-playable-text— the material offered by the game itself— and consideration of a number of different ways in which the game text might be experienced from one occasion to another” (p. 65). The cognitive demand of various games can trump, for instance, the socio-political context behind the game. Not all players are equally attuned to the politics of representation, or at least do not think about them while playing video games. In my interviews, participants described the relationship between playing and the narrative in very different ways. Some felt more drawn into the plot because they were playing. Others felt playing, in essence, negated the importance of the plot.

When it comes to studying the representation of gender, race, and sexuality in games texts there are a few different issues one can take into consideration. Consalvo (2003a; , 2003b) focuses on how options for sexuality are made available, if at all, in her analyses of the heteronormativity of most games. Pinckard (2003) argues that one must look at games holistically in order to make sense of, in her example, gender representation in games. Her “Four Aspects of ‘Genderspace’” in games include:

1. The environment around the character outside of the game: the marketing, merchandising and advertising. The image of the character, and how that character is described. The iconic legacy of that character, apart from the actual character as function of gameplay.
2. The aesthetics of the character. The character’s appearances, movements, actions, voice, characteristics.

3. The programmatic aspects of the character. The character's choices, other character's reactions, and the encoded abilities and biases.
4. The character as avatar in a multiplayer environment- a special category. How other characters played by other people react to your character, and how you choose to interact with others. (p. 79)

Pinckard uses the first three to analyze the character Lara Croft, from the game-series *Tomb Raider*. She claims that although Lara could have been a feminist gaming icon, the aesthetics of the character, particularly in advertisements for the game, firmly anchored her as a sex kitten. One could use these criteria to analyze any group's representation in games. In his piece on race, Chan (2005) similarly argues that we can look at:

1. Aesthetics (music, clothing, environments, cultural references)
2. The "other" (enemies, non-player characters, etc)
3. The player (avatar, character creation, etc)

In addition to these, I would add the importance of analyzing the narrative, which, not coincidentally, is also where the representations of sexuality or non-normative gender identities most often exist.

Researchers can also consider the effects of platform (Bogost & Montford, 2007) and game code (G. King & Krzywinska, 2006; D. J. Leonard, 2006a) when looking at the ideological implications of the way games are designed. Fullerton, Fore Morie and Pearce (2007), for instance, analyze the gendered space of video games in terms of how they are encoded. Hayes (2007) too, describes the research which looks at games as gendered spaces influenced by particular social norms. Game code directs how we are allowed to play within a given gamespace (G. King & Krzywinska, 2006). Players are not necessarily slaves to the game code, however. Cheat codes allow players to reshape the gaming experience (Consalvo, 2007a; G. King & Krzywinska, 2006). Moreover, players

can use the options made available in the game in ways producers did not necessarily intend (G. King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 17). Game modification, or ‘modding,’ also allows individuals or groups to subvert games. We cannot, in sum, look at representation by just looking at game texts, because the intertwined aspects of representation and play necessarily entail a focus on audiences’ use of texts.

Most games scholars now accept that the best way to study video games lies somewhere along the ludology/narratology continuum. As Franz Mayra describes, we can distinguish between core gameplay and representation when looking at games, but we must recognize the dialectical relationship between them (2008, p. 18). Voorhees (2009), Bogost (2006), and King and Krzywinska (2006) make similar assertions. That is not to say that the ludological framework is unusable. For example, Juul’s (2001) conclusion is that “relying too heavily on existing theories will make us forget what makes games games: Such as rules, goals, player activity, the projection of the player’s action in to the game world, the way the game denies the possible actions of the player” (Conclusion). These are extremely important aspects of gameplay, which influence how we think about representation in videogames, as Galloway (2004) also argues. Malaby (2007) says that is it not play but contingency, “a mix of predictable and unpredictable outcomes,” that makes games truly unique. Related to this, Burill (2008) argues that because games are so indeterminate, we must use a performative approach to game studies, that takes into account both play and in-game representation. In chapters five and six in particular, I look at how these issues affect when and if identification and representation are important to people that play video games. Researchers should not collapse gaming as an activity,

with games as texts. Throughout this dissertation, I address how the ludology/narratology interaction, and the activity/text distinction, demonstrate that games are neither wholly like, nor unlike, other media.

Typically, research on textual representation critique portrayals based on 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 player position and the race of avatars. Both argue that, in most representations of minorities in video games, one might play at being a minority, but the player is not presumed to be a member of the marginalized group. A game like *True Crime*, for example, "pro-actively cultivates a sense of relative cultural 'otherness'....it constantly reminds the gamer that this is the 'other' side of Los Angeles" (Chan, 2005, p. 29). The implied audience is the dominant identity, opposed to the minority one depicted. Some scholars also look at how gender shapes how audiences interpret game texts (see for example Hayes, 2007). Playing as Lara Croft in the game *Tomb Raider* 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. Researchers, moreover, rarely allow for non-binary gender identity in study design.

In the literature on Arab representation in games, we can also see these assumptions about the importance of in-game representation to identification. Machin and Suleiman (2006) assume that by grounding the player's avatar in an Arab/Muslim



identity, Arab-produced war games counter the “bad Arab other” image in mainstream video games like *Counter Strike* and *Delta Force*. Similarly, Sisler (2006) assumes that the act of playing a game in which your character is Arab, created by Arabs, will cause an ontological shift in the nature of the gaming experience for an Arab gamer. Galloway (2004) likewise, uses his analysis of content to make claims about player investment in the games. “*UnderAsh* players then, have a personal investment in the struggle depicted in the games, just as they have a personal investment in the struggle happening each day around them.” He goes on to say that, American teenagers playing *America’s Army* have a corollary, though perhaps not as strong, investment in that game’s ideological perspective. These authors’ make very particular, but not empirically proven, claims about who plays these games and what they think about when they play them. This often starts with assumptions about which identifiers are important to players. It also relies on a deterministic relationship between identification *as* a member of a group and identification *with* a character.

Studies of representation often assume, whether they focus on in-groups or out-groups, that identification is important. The literature on the disconfirmation of stereotypes, for example, often asserts that if a person can identify, using one definition, with a member of the out-group there is a chance they will unlearn stereotypes they previously held about that group (Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004; Johnston & Ettema, 1987; Mares, 1996; Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001). Similarly, arguments about video games’ potential benefits in exploring different identities rely, in part, on the assertion that players actively identify with video game avatars in ways they do not in other media

(reviewed in Shaw & Linebarger, 2008). James Paul Gee (2003) has argued that the tripartite play of identities created through video game play can cause users to actively reflect on the construction of their own identities. In doing so, however, these studies assume that when people identify *as* members of particular groups, they identify *with* characters that are also members of those groups, and that interactive texts strengthen this identification. In chapter five, I question these assumptions and disentangle the way in which people identify *as* members of particular groups, from how they identify *with* media characters. I also discuss the distinction between interactivity and identification, in order to focus researchers' attention to when representation matters in relation to identification.

### **Media *For*- Audience Studies**

Media representation, it is often argued, shapes social reality. Jessica Davis and Oscar Gandy assert that “[m]edia representations play an important role in informing the ways in which we understand social, cultural, ethnic, and racial differences” (1999, p. 367). Speaking of gender, Julie D’Acci states that “television representations of gender... have very profound effects on very real human bodies, societies, and economics” (2004, p. 376). Media representation can form part of the “vast web of racial projects,” which mediate “between the discursive or representational means in which race is identified and signified on the one hand, and the institutional and organizational forms in which it is routinized and standardized on the other” (Omi & Winant, 2002, p. 240). Put more succinctly, scholars argue that “[h]ow we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from

representation” (Dyer, 2002a, p. 1; a similar formulation is presented in Morley & Robins, 1995, p. 134).

Researchers argue that media representations have beneficial or negative social implications for a given group. The explication of what is beneficial or negative depends on one’s point of view and politics (Gross & Woods, 1999, p. 20). Typically, authors to stress the implications of representation through a dichotomous relationship between the marginal, disadvantaged group represented, and the implied majority, empowered group who is (presumably) viewing. Shaheen sums up these two types of “effects”: “Our young people are learning from the cinema’s negative and repetitive stereotypes. Subliminally, the onslaught of the reel Arab conditions how young Arabs and Arab-Americans *perceive themselves and how others perceive them*, as well” (2001, p. 7, my emphasis).

The perspective a researcher takes, that of the in-group or out-group audience, shapes their arguments about the importance of representation. Looking at representation in relation to in-groups, some authors argue that it is important for individuals, minorities in particular, to see themselves reflected in the media. Lack of representation, as mentioned earlier, is symbolic annihilation. Representation, Larry Gross (2001) argues, has been especially important for sexual minorities. Unlike other minorities, who are raised in communities of their own in-group, often when members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community come out they are the only or one of the few ones they know, making media one of the only realms in which they might see others *like them* (p. 13). As Rohy puts it, “queers are liable to an intense library cathexis... Those whose difference is antifamilial, somatically unmarked, culturally veiled, and potentially

shaming are drawn to lonely stacks and secret research, where the archive enables self-definition” (2010, p. 355). Several authors have described a lack of representation as a problem for queer people of color in particular (Beam, 1999; Fung, 1999; Mercer, 1993; Takagi, 1999; Walker, 2001). It is not necessarily useful to posit differential importance based on specific social categories. The ways in which sexuality is hidden, unless it is marked by socially intelligible signifiers has corollaries in many other types of identity, (e.g., mixed-racial or religious identities). Moreover, the assumption that sexuality is the only identity that can cause people to be markedly different from their families is shortsighted (e.g. cases of adoption, disabilities, etc.). The more general assertion, that people want to see themselves, permeates discussions on media representation and is fairly consistent across the literature.

Alternatively researchers, particularly in the social psychology realm of communication studies, argue that *good* representation of marginal groups is important because it can combat negative stereotypes and bigotry in dominant groups (Oakes, Haslam, & Turner, 1994), or conversely *bad* representations can cultivate negative stereotypes (often studied using cultivation analysis described in Gerbner, Gross, Moran, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). As Gross asserts, “the media are likely to be most powerful in cultivating images of events and groups about which we have little firsthand opportunity for learning” (2001, p. 11).

There is no clear evidence that portrayals that address the needs of members of marginal groups to see themselves can properly address the issues of prejudice and stereotyping from out-group members. An overly positive portrayal of a traditionally

disadvantaged group can serve to counter stereotypes the dominant audience might have, but will not necessarily ring true to the experiences of members of the group portrayed. Furthermore, as seen in the work of Jacqueline Bobo (2003) and Jhally and Lewis (2003), a single text can achieve different ends in different audiences. In one study on portrayals of race in video games, for instance, the “out-group” members were more critical of portrayals of African-Americans in *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar, 2004) than “in-group” members were.

Peripheral social groups within the dominant class...enjoyed the satire of *GTA: San Andreas* but displayed concerns about stereotypical representations of race. Conversely, participants from socially and economically marginalized groups...used the game as a framework to discuss institutional racism in society. (DeVane & Squire, 2008, p. 279)

In the case of the latter group, their young interviewees were largely apathetic about racial representations in video games and used the game as a way of discussing social inequality more generally. They were less concerned with the game content in isolation and in fact found the representation of urban life in the game to be very realistic to their own experiences. Moreover, the very idea that we can describe representations of specific identifiers as *good* or *bad*, implies a stability of meaning of those identifiers that simply does not hold up to scrutiny. Looking at representation through the lens of audiences’ relationship to these texts, as this project does, helps address these issues in a way which can take into account the more nuanced ways in which representation becomes meaningful.

There is a wealth of research stressing the importance of media representation. Much of this problematically focuses specific identifiers in a way that proves to be

limiting. Similar problems exist in the growing area of minority representation in games. In addition, even production and audience studies tend to privilege texts as the primary site for the study of representation. We cannot study game texts outside of the complex relationship between players, games, and the greater milieu in which both exist and interact. Though we can analyze and deconstruct representations at the level of texts, we cannot address why representation is important; that is the goal of this dissertation. Thus, in chapter six, I look at when and how representation is important to video game players who are members of marginalized groups.

### **The Trouble with Media Representation Literature- Critical Identity Theory**

Throughout the literature reviewed above, media representation is closely tied to identities. However, as Hayes describes:

Recent scholarship challenges not only the normalcy but also the functionality of conceiving identity as singular and coherent, instead acknowledging that all identities are partial, fragmentary, and unstable. Although it may be necessary for us to retain some semblance of a consistent identity in our lives, it may also be desirable for us to be more accepting of contradictions and partiality in our identities. (2007, p. 46)

We can describe media images as a type of institutionalization of particular discourses about identity (P. L. Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Seidman, 1997). The process of defining who is, and is not, represented flattens how those particular identities are understood. “[T]he accommodation of identity quickly runs into the problem of the enormous scope of that term ‘identity’: identities are multiple and overlapping and context-sensitive, and some are relatively trivial or transient” (Appiah, 2005, p. 100). The problem with media representation research is that these studies tend to rely on essentialized notions of identity in their analyses of these narrative constructs.

However, “the essentializing moment is weak because it naturalizes and dehistoricizes difference, mistaking what is historical and cultural for what is natural, biological, and genetic” (S. Hall, 1993, p. 111).

At a party for participants of the workshop *Beyond Media Censorship: Speech and State in the Middle East*<sup>iii</sup>, I spoke with Naomi Sakr, a Middle East-media scholar, about my research on the representation of Arab and LGBTQ characters in video games. She asked, “and what about the representation of gay Arabs?” I laughed, both because no such representations existed and because her question cut right to the point of the problems I was seeing in my research. Sakr’s question signals that the same singular-dimension thinking of representation that is evident in media industry discussions of representation was influencing my research, shaping my questions, in ways which caused me to miss the point (though she was kind enough not to say it this way). I was, as Hayes describes in reference to gender, looking at my audiences too narrowly.

To better understand women’s— and men’s— orientations toward gaming, we need to take into account the complexity of people’s identities, not just gender alone, but its interplay with and enactment in combination with personal histories and cultural factors that play out different in individual’s lives. (2007, p. 24)

A recurrent theme in my own research has been the limitations of my presuppositions about the importance of both media representation, as well as the “identities” that were my focus. Participants did not always want to play with avatars “like them,” nor was identification itself always a goal. Finding out that individuals did not identify the ways I and other researchers suspected, signals that my approach to the audiences was problematic, particularly my privileging of particular identity categories. There is a wealth of critical social theory, however, that offers another starting point.

In a great deal of social theory, the concept of identity has been an unresolved problem. That said, it is striking that Raymond Williams' book *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* has no entry for identity. He does have an entry for individual, a potential synonym though it lacks some of the same connotations of identity. It useful to compare the two terms, individual and identity, however, as they are conceptualized in similar ways, at least in Western social thought. As Williams describes "[i]ndividual originally meant indivisible. That now sounds like paradox. 'Individual' stresses a distinction from others; 'indivisible' a necessary connection" (1983, p. 161). The notion of an individual person, he argues, is a modern invention. Earlier references referred to an individual as something like an atom, the smallest piece to which anything can be reduced. Later various shifts in Western European society (i.e. shifts away from feudalism and the rise of Protestantism) changed the concept of the individual. Williams then discusses the distinction between individuality and individualism. Individuality stresses "both a unique person and his (indivisible) membership of a group" whereas individualism is "a theory not only of abstract individuals but of the primacy of individual states and interests" (pp. 164-164). I use the term individual to reference the people I spoke to in the course of my research in order to emphasize that they are speaking as agents with particular points of view; I do this to value their individuality, but not to stress their individualism.

Returning to work on identity specifically, according to Sampson, "[t]he dominant... tradition of inquiry into human nature has increasingly sought the human essence in the characteristics of self, mind and personality said to be found *within*... the



self-contained individual” (1993, p. 17). This is a very western specific notion, in contrast with other cultures, as Geertz explains (1979, p. 66). Addressing the shifting ways in which this relationship has been conceived, Hall (1996) outlines three theories of identity: the Enlightenment subject, which presumes an internal, static identity; the sociological subject which grants that the social (outside) impacts the self (inside), but still implies a stable self; and the postmodern subject which has no static, internal, permanent identity.

Hall’s analysis of this de-centering of the subject begins with Marx, who unlike Enlightenment era philosophers did not take the individual as his starting place. Rather, individuals were merely products of historical-social conditions. This is elaborated by Althusser (1998 [1971]), who addresses the interpellation of the individual subject by the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) more specifically, and argues that individuals are produced within specific moments, “in the turning” to the hail of the ISA. Hall goes on to describe Freud’s work on the unconscious which demonstrates that “identity is actually something formed through unconscious processes over time, rather than being innate in consciousness at birth” (p. 608). He then addresses semiotics and the work of Saussure, which de-essentializes linguistic meanings and helps set the stage for identities without essential bases.

The work of Foucault and feminism form the final two de-centering stages in Hall’s analysis. For Foucault, institutional discourses shape how people think about themselves as subjects. The individual for Foucault is produced through power relations, not only limited by power (1982, p. 781). The individual is the product of this historical

process, and becomes a subject through the obfuscation of the connection between the process and individual identity. This subjectivity, however, requires agency. “[P]ower is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free. By this we mean individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments, may be realized” (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). In turn feminism, as well as critical race and postcolonial theory, explore “how ‘subjects’ bearing gender and racial characteristics are constituted in social processes that are amenable to historical explanation and political struggle” (Gilroy, 1996, p. 385). Building from this, in feminist and queer theory, Butler argues that identity is a performance. For Butler it is not just that practices and discourses are shaped by powerful institutions, but that subjectivity is constantly performed and made natural by subjects (p. 190). “If gender attributes... are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (p. 192). The concept of performativity highlights the absence of internal identities, but also that structures themselves are “empowered” via performance.

It is important to note that the concept of a postmodern, fluid identity is not universally welcomed. In terms of feminism, for example, both Benhabib (1995) and Fraser (1995), in their essays in the book *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, assert that it is necessary for feminism to take a particular stance. They are writing against the more positive takes on postmodernism offered in that volume by Butler (1995b) and Cornell (1995), (though this simple division admittedly glosses over the intricacies of their arguments). Fraser argues, for example, that deconstructive

theorizing is useful in untangling webs of power, but reconstruction must then take place in order to engender social change. “Feminists *do* need to make normative judgments and to offer emancipatory alternatives” (p. 71 italics in original), she argues. Deconstruction can be useful, however, as Turkle describes: “When identity was defined as unitary and solid it was relatively easy to recognize and censure deviation from a norm. A more fluid sense of self allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity” (1995b, p. 262). McRobbie asserts that deconstructing stable identities can make movements like feminism stronger (2005, p. 69). As Bhabha states in an interview, “the possibility of producing a culture which both articulates difference and lives with it could only be established on the basis of a non-sovereign notion of self” (Rutherford, 1990, p. 212). I use critical identity theory as the basis for the articulation of the importance of media representation, in a way that may alleviate some of the problems in the media representation literature described above.

## **Conclusion**

Analyses of the representation of specific identities do serve an important intellectual and political purpose. They often rely too much, however, on static notions of those identities. To move beyond this, it is necessary to start with audiences. Dayan suggests that “in order to avoid a reductive approach to a complex phenomenon, one must also examine the ways in which identity constructions, once proposed in public, are received in the private realm” (1998, p. 111). One must not start with assumptions about what identities will matter to interviewees. Rather I begin with individuals who consume media texts and see when and if representations of identifiers are articulated as important

to those people. As Davies puts it, “the ‘we’ who seek voice are not necessarily entities that can be identified in relation to other peoples’ identities, even others who seem to be our clones” (1995, pp. 94-95). Some previous ethnographic audience studies on media have taken a more expansive approach to identity. Mankekar, in her study of women watching television in India, for example, expands E. Valentine “Daniel’s notion of the fluidity of selves by focusing on how power, pleasure, and knowledge impinge on the construction of subjectivity at intersections of gender, sexuality, nation, class, and community” (1999, p. 16). In this dissertation, I incorporate a similar critical identity theory into my argument, so that my work does not contribute to the problems inherent in reifying specific identifiers, namely the promotion of pluralism, rather than diversity.

Arguments for representation tend to start with texts. Media texts are constructed for a particular audience, which influences (but does not determine) who will consume them. The texts offer a particular worldview to this constructed audience, as well as those who consume this media even if they are not targeted audiences. The audiences then work within this structure; the text limits, but does not determine what they can do with it. Researchers can take into account what audience is being “hailed” (Re: Althusser, 1998 [1971]) and what worldview they are being offered by the text, including what images of people “like” and “unlike” them are displayed. Many of the studies on representation reviewed above, however, tend to stop here.

We cannot argue that representation is important without first unpacking *why* and *when* it is important. In this study, I look at how individuals relate to the industry’s construction of the audience, and whether and how they identify as gamers (or members

of the audience). Then I look at how and interviewees identify with video game characters and avatars, and media characters more generally. Next I look at how and if representation of their specific groups is important to interviewees, and when media representation is important to them. I conclude that researchers, activists, and interested producers need to focus on de-marginalizing video games as a medium, in order to strengthen the argument for diversity in video games.

It is not simply an issue of whether or not people generally think representation is important. It is the distinction between realism and fiction, between serious and play, which form the biggest divides between those who see diversity in media as a necessary goal, and those who see it as relatively trivial. I also argue that the way minority representation has been made to matter, through marketing and assumptions about audiences' interactions with texts, promotes pluralism, in the sense that groups are only represented if they are targeted as a market. The defense of representation on the basis of marginalized groups' need to see people "like them," leads to niche marketing (pluralism). In contrast, diversity in video games should be promoted as valuable unto itself. This is feasible in part, because players' relationships with in-game characters are complex and, in part, because interviewees stressed that they did not only need to see people like them in their media. Researchers should question, moreover, the assumption that diversity requires a defense in the first place. Marginalized audiences are often called upon to demand representation, but media producers are not sufficiently called upon to see diversity as an integral part of their products, rather than a feature only included if the case for such inclusion can be made.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

<sup>ii</sup> While I do not argue that social and cultural critics, or even non-academics, are totally unable to define who is “empowered” and who is “subjugated,” demographic shorthand for these categories result in a flattening of complex social relationships. Power is produced in moments, not an inherent property of identifying as, for example, White, male, heterosexual, upper class, etc.

<sup>iii</sup> This event was held at the Annenberg School for Communication in April of 2007 by the Center for Global Communication Studies.

## Chapter 3

### **The Argyle<sup>i</sup> Method: Relocating Studies of Gaming, Identification and Representation**

Decades ago, I gave up my childhood dream of being a veterinarian due to an allergy to cats. I assumed that such bodily concerns would be less of an issue now that I have settled into the “life of the mind,” the relative refuge that is academia. That was, at least, until half of the interviewees who allowed into their homes had cats.<sup>ii</sup> Entering home after home with feline inhabitants threw into relief what I had already known before— research is always filled with uncertainty. Such uncertainty can stem from the fact that our own backgrounds shape how we approach our research; a non-allergy afflicted researcher might never have noticed this trend at all. It is these minor shifts in attention that, in turn, shape our findings. I have been, for example, repeatedly encouraged to try to make sense of the relationship between cat ownership and video game play.<sup>iii</sup> Our predispositions to certain types of data factor into our analyses. In addition, researchers never know going in what impact they will have on their participants and what impact their participants will have on them. Methods are an ongoing process, and thus in some ways it is for ease of reading and not a clear distinction between data collection and analysis that I separate out this methodology section.

This is a reflexive methods section, as I agree with Bird that “methods matter because the choices made, along with the very characteristics of the researcher, play into and ultimately shape the conclusions of any research” (2003, p. 9). As a mid-20s, White,

queer woman who has played video games for most of her life and who studies the representation of marginal groups in media, I did not arrive at this topic of study by chance. These factors, moreover, influenced my interactions with my participants, leading to easy rapport, or differences to overcome. For the same reason, the details of this study shape what I conclusions I can make. Often when I tell people that I study audiences' thoughts about media representation and identification in video games, they ask me which game I look at or what type of gaming I focus on. I, in turn, reply neither, I focus on individuals who are members of marginalized identity groups and look at what and how they play. This usually results in a blank stare or polite nod. With this experience in mind, I explain my approach, in part, by what I am *not* doing in this project.

### **A Situated Study, but not a Study of a Site**

This project took place from July 2009 through January 2010, with the bulk of interviews occurring in October through December. By foot and by SEPTA, I traveled the many neighborhoods of Philadelphia: West Philly to North Philly to South Philly, University City to Fishtown to Bella Vista, numerous areas in between and to some of the outer suburbs as well. The seasons changed. As I began to wind-down my interviewing, Christmas lights had replaced the vivid greens of late summer. Too often media studies assume placelessness to the “field” in which they are engaged, but just because our projects are not defined by space, does not mean that our data are free from geographic anchoring.



Researchers define their field in many different ways. One may study a specific region, as Gray (2009) does in her study of rural queer youth or Abu-Lughod (2005) does in her study of television in Egypt. One may also focus on specific communities of users, defined by specific texts, genres, or online spaces (see for example Bird, 2003; Campbell, 2004; Radway, 1984; T. L. Taylor, 2006b). One may also look at how a specific geographic space, and sense of belonging to that space, is played out through various media uses (D. Miller & Slater, 2000; Morley & Robins, 1995). We can discuss how audiences located in one country consume texts produced in another (D. Miller, 1992; Parameswaran, 1999) or how local audiences consume nationally produced television (Abu-Lughod, 1997; Manekekar, 1993). We can also locate consumption, historically or currently, in locations such as the home, theaters, online worlds, and so on (Butsch, 2000; Crawford & Rutter, 1997; Nasaw, 1993). This project does not approach geographic space in any of these ways. Instead of setting the boundaries of my field, I begin from a particular location, a geographically, temporally, intellectually specific location.

I choose the term location as it does not rely upon *a priori* limits, but rather articulates how I situate my vantage point in this study. The term location requires that I know where I am starting from, but allows me to move in many directions. Rather than start with a focus on space, or a focus on identities or texts as will be described shortly, I see instead how space shapes the data. This is not a project about Philadelphia in any particular sense, but the location of this project within its geographic boundaries inevitably shaped who I spoke with and of what they spoke. As an urban area that contains several universities, my interviewees came from a broad spectrum of socio-

economic backgrounds as well as places of origin.<sup>iv</sup> Though my project is located in a specific space, it is influenced by the histories of interviewees' lives. A graduate student from Southeast Asia, an unemployed artist from Southern California, a city worker from rural Georgia, a childcare provider from North Philadelphia, and a neurologist from the Jersey Shore are just some of the individuals who make up the participant pool. These experiences influence the accounts analyzed herein.

### **Studying Representation but not Texts**

Typically, studies of representation begin with texts. One could study the issues I look at in this dissertation through a textual as well as an audience analysis. Mankekar (1999), for example, makes a clear argument for analyzing texts as well audience interpretations in her study: "the pretext of my ethnography is to evoke the contexts in which texts are interpreted and to demonstrate the inextricability of text from context" (p. 20). A study that starts with a game may reveal interesting things about how players interact with that game, as Hayes (2007) has shown with two women playing *Morrowind* (Ubi Soft, 2002). A solely textual approach to video games is problematic, however, because games are even less stable texts than other media. Moreover, studies which do focus on a specific game text cannot be extrapolated to game play in general, considering the wide variety of types and genres of games, and often fail to take into account the interplay between video games and other media.

Games are structured in a way that results in some preferred readings. Not all encoded play is equal, however. Some games very clearly define the gaming experience for players, including a pre-assigned avatar or clearly defined storyline and tasks. Others

allow players to explore, have more avatar and narrative choices, and include various other player decisions in the game mechanics. Using sexuality as an example, optional homo- (or bi-) sexuality is one unique representation option made possible in this medium. In the games *Bully* (Rockstar, 2006), *Fable* (Microsoft Game Studios, 2004), *the Sims* (Electronic Arts, 2000-present), *The Temple of Elemental Evil* (Atari, 2003) and *Fallout 1* and *2* (Interplay Productions, 1997, 1998) players have some options for engaging in homosexual or even bisexual relationships (Barton, 2004; Consalvo, 2003a, 2003b; Ochalla, 2006; Thompson, 2004).<sup>v</sup> Race and gender are also often options in games that allow players to design avatars. *Mass Effect* (Bioware, 2007), for example, though certainly not alone, famously allows players to customize their avatar in terms of both physical and personality characteristics. What I find most interesting about this kind of representation, however, is that it indicates the inclusion of queer reading practices into the very game code.<sup>vi</sup> By offering players options, designers expand, while still structuring, players' ability to create their own textual experiences. These game-enabled queer readings call into question the centrality of textual analysis in studies of representation.

Similarly, it takes hours (60 or more in some cases) to fully play through a game once, let alone play through the various options made available. In Williams *et al's* (2009) content analysis games were played, albeit by expert players, for only 30 minutes. In order to get a more thorough understanding of representation in video games, it behooves researchers to start with audiences rather than texts. In addition, translation and local adaptation make it difficult to analyze globally exported game texts as a single

entity. Translation, as Ricoeur (2007) argues, can only ever be approximate. Sometimes, translation of games changes the implications of some types of representation. For instance, rumors of transgender characters in games are hard to research because of the localization process. The characters Poison and Roxy from *Final Fight* (Capcom, 1989) were reportedly women in Japan. Representatives of Capcom's American division were worried that critics would be upset that the game included hitting a woman, so the Japanese designers offered to call them transvestites (Kalata, 1999). When they ultimately released the game in the U.S., Poison and Roxy were switched out for male characters, though through video game culture lore they are still claimed to be early transgendered characters in video games. Similar incidents of homosexual content being expunged from games exported from Asia to the U.S. are described in the Wikipedia article on LGBTQ characters in video games, but have proved difficult to verify (Wikipedia, 2006). In-game representation, for all these reasons, cannot be fully addressed by textual analysis alone.

Giddings (2009) argues that rather than study game texts, researchers should study the "event" of gameplay, the moment in which players engage with a text. This, I argue, is still too narrow. Rather, we might look at video game play as part of media as practice. Couldry asserts elsewhere that we should look at the whole environment of media flows, rather than audience consumption of discrete texts (2000, p. 87; , 2004). Applying this to video games, "would imply not only attending to videogame consumption (or the practice of playing games), but also to how the gaming practice is related to other media practices and how it is socially organized" (Roig, San Cornelio,

Ardevol, Alsina, & Pages, 2009, p. 91). It also entails looking at games in terms of everyday life, as Enevold and Hagstrom (2009) do in their ongoing study of mothers and gaming in Sweden.

Methodologically it makes a great deal of sense to look at media texts in the context of their production and reception. Similarly, it makes sense to look at audiences in context of their whole experience of being audiences, across media, and in relation to social systems.

We have to try to take into account more than the classic linear relationship, involving producer, text, reader, effect. Instead, we must try to see how media use fits into the entire complex web of culture, understanding how it articulates with such factors as class, gender, race, leisure and work habits, and countless other variables. (Bird, 1992b, p. 251)

In sum, the key might be to see both media and identity as processes, not end-products. In retrospect, this seems like an obvious suggestion, as communication is a process and media and identity are both forms of communicative practices. Both media representation and identity are built upon shared meanings and are part of the circuit of culture Hall describes (1997a, p. 1). Such an approach is more in line with Carey's (1992 [1989]), drawing on Dewey's, articulation of the ritual view of communication, as opposed to the transmission view. The transmission view refers to communication as a process in which a sender imparts, gives, transmits, and so on, a message to a receiver. In contrast, the ritual view of communication is concerned more with how communication helps to maintain social organization and represent shared beliefs. Rather than look at the representation in a text or specific identity category, researchers can look at the webs of meaning to which both are tied.

Textual studies of media representations often focus on the contemporary moment or look at historical trends. However, is the amount of representation important, or is it the salience of a specific representation that is then consumed repeatedly? The ebb and flow of media consumption is an important consideration in the study of representation. This came up in several interviews in terms of video games.

Evan: Towards the end of high school, it sort of dropped off. [...] And then, I don't think I picked it back up until jeez maybe, maybe five or six years ago. [...] I really don't play that often. [...] Like I'll pick it up, and I'll play every evening after work or school for two, three, four weeks, and then I'll put it down again for months.

In these binges he plays one of the two games he own and enjoys, *Call of Duty* (Activision, 2003) and *007: Nightfire* (EA, 2002). Interviewees also discussed watching their favorite movies, reading their favorite books, and so on, over and over again. When researchers talk about representation, they often do not take into account the fact that we do not live in time bubbles where only the media from the past few years can enter. Kat, for instance, was born in 1988 but professed a love of 80s movies. A focus on texts from the contemporary moment obscures many of these issues.

Rather than approach the issue of representation in game texts, I use an ethnographic approach to study marginalized players of video games. There is a long history of qualitative and ethnographic research, usually feminist in nature, on audiences who are traditionally under- or misrepresented in media, fans of disparaged media, and more generally speaking disempowered audiences which I draw on in this study (Abu-Lughod, 2005; Ang, 1989; Bird, 2003; Bobo, 2003; Gillespie, 1995; Hermes, 1995; Manekekar, 1993; Radway, 1984; T. L. Taylor, 2006b). This is not an ethnographic study

in the strictest sense (without delving into the debate on what ethnography is in the strict sense<sup>vii</sup>). In part this is because there is no definable field for me to enter into; not even a contentious and “quotation-marked-off” one, like the Harlem Jackson (1999) analyzes.

An ethnographic sensibility, however, informs this project.

The goal of an ethnographic approach is not to find knowledge that is “truer” than positivist studies. As Geertz describes:

Doing ethnography is like trying to read (in the sense of ‘construct a reading of’) a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior. (1973, p. 10)

Similarly, Jackson argues, ethnographic communication studies “must include not just an investment in ethnographic holism but also a turn away from objectivist assumptions about qualitative research techniques as transparent windows for seeing otherwise external media effects” (2008b, p. 676). As cultural studies has shown, the relationship between audience and text is never predetermined or fixed (Fiske, 1989a; S. Hall, 1997 [1990]). As put by Faye Ginsburg:

[I]f there is some original contribution to be made by an ethnographic approach, it is to break up the ‘massness’ of the media, and to intervene in its supposed reality effect by recognizing the complex ways in which people are engaged in processes of making and interpreting media works in relation to the cultural, social, and historical circumstance. (1994, p. 13)

In ethnographies of media audiences “the prime requirement is to provide an adequately ‘thick’ description of the complexities of this activity” (Morley, 1992, p. 173). This has been done effectively for online gaming (Klastrup & Tosca, 2009; N. Taylor, Jenson, & de Castell, 2005; T. L. Taylor, 2006a), or online spaces more generally (Boellstorff, 2008; Campbell, 2004), and to some extent for a single-player game by Hayes (2007).

My study expands on this literature into the realm of predominately, but not exclusively, offline gaming in everyday life. This includes both single player and multiplayer games, which can be played via the internet as well together in the same room. When I distinguish between online and offline play, it is not in the sense used by Newman (2002) to describe engagement with the game (online play) and passive watching of a game (offline play). Rather, the distinction here is made between online persistent worlds, like those described in Castronova's (2005) and Taylor's (2006b) work, and more closed game texts. Although I discuss online gaming at times, the primary focus of this study is individual, offline, video game play.

### **Moving Game Studies Off-line**

Video games, for all their academic trendiness, are rarely studied outside of four foci: the massively multiplayer online realm; fan studies; educational games; and violence effects research. The first two focus on gaming as a social activity. It is in fact so popular to study the social aspects of gaming, that I often have to clarify that I do not study online gaming whenever I discuss my work. The social aspects of video games are stressed by a many authors in the field of game studies (Castronova, 2005; Crawford & Rutter, 1997; Jansz & Martens, 2005; Jenkins; D. Williams, 2006). Dmitri Williams (2006) argues that studying gamers is important as "gamers don't bowl alone," playing on the title of Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone* (2000) which asserts that U.S. society is increasingly alienating. Studies, which look at gaming as a social activity, find, unsurprisingly, that the gamers are social. Although according to Crawford and Rutter's research 55% of gamers game together (1997, p. 273), that still leaves a significant number of people who



game alone and have been studied, so far, in very limited ways. They argue that textual analyses of video games focus on the individual experience, however ethnographic research on games rarely does. I argue, moreover, that researchers should not allow the text to stand in for the individual player.

The different types of sociality in gaming, and I would argue all media consumption, are extremely complicated. Discussing Morley's work, Storey describes this in terms of television.

Watching television is always so much more than a series of acts of interpretations; it is above all else a social practice. That is, it can be a means both to isolate oneself (Don't talk to me, I'm watching this), or to make contact with other family members (watching a programme you are indifferent about, or worse, in order to make contact with a particular member of the family or the family as a whole)... In these ways, the cultural consumption of television is as much about social relationships as it is about interpretations of individual programmes. (2003, p. 19)

There are many different social arrangements in which one can play games, moreover. Games can be played alone or with others. The latter is not inherently more social than the former however; an interviewee from a previous project argued that video games are "the most social way to be anti-social that I know of." In her example of *Dance Dance Revolution*, she said, "you can be dancing with someone else, not looking at each other, just moving to some arrows." Playing together does not necessarily imply playing *together* in a social sense, even while in the same room or while playing the same game. Games can also be played alone-together, i.e. playing a massively multiplayer online game while sitting alone in your apartment, which, because it often requires more communication between players, could be considered more social than offline co-gaming.

Just studying online play and community formation obscures the other, perhaps more mundane, socialities of gaming. For example, several interviewees told stories similar to Sasha's description of game nights from her childhood.

Sasha: We used to have little pow-wows, me, my brother and step-sister. And we used to make homemade Rice Krispy treats in the bowl—just in the microwave. Used to eat it out of the bowl and play *Super Mario Bros.* and *Duck Hunt* on Nintendo. Every Friday. She would beat us because she was like 12 and I was like five, but that was fun nevertheless.

When Juul (2010) reviews different social aspects of gaming, however, he tends to focus on multiple people playing the same game at once. Though he is careful to explicate the different social interactions this may entail, his account obscures other ways in which people might play together.

Studies of the social aspects of games often presume that people must play *together* in order to play together. Games can also be played together-alone, however, if two partners sit in the same room playing on their respective computers, handheld devices, or on separate televisions (and mixtures of all three types of devices). Indeed, during one of my interviews, a participant's partner sat on the floor near us playing his Nintendo DS, while I watched her play *Halo* on the Xbox 360. Later, while waiting out a sudden thunderstorm and making plans for the evening, I played on my cell phone while she played on her DS and her roommate played on the Xbox, talking to each other all the while. In media studies, there is a focus on simultaneous consumption rather than the act of being together while consuming media. In Pouncy's first interview, however, they described the act of reading with a friend.

Pouncy: Yeah, like my best friend and I would go get *DragonLance* books at the bookstore and then we'd hang out like lying on her bed reading them. Like each of us reading our own book, and her brother would come in and be like, "What the hell are you doing? You could do that by yourself." And we're like, "Shut up!"

Media are not inherently social or solitary, but rather contextually so. I situate gameplay in the lives of interviewees in order to address this issue in a more nuanced way. The relationship between sociality and the importance of representation and identification encompass some of the more interesting aspects of this study.

Moreover, researchers rarely critique the negative connotations of playing alone. Game studies academics miss an important opportunity when they do not interrogate the disparagement of solitary play. Butsch (2000), for example, describes how early radio moved from being communal to familial. Even later, it became an individual activity. This shift to private listening "provided grounds for critics to decry 'hypnotic,' 'narcotic,' effects of broadcasting on individuals" (p. 207). There is a social and political function to valuing certain types of consumption and play over others, something cultural analyses of video games should interrogate.

In general, research on video games assumes an active player. No study of games takes into account the phenomena of the non-playing game watcher, though Newman (2002) asserts the importance of doing so. Evan, for one, described how his father passively consumes games: "I don't think he ever touched a paddle in his life. He only watches. He still does. [...] My father sits in his recliner and my brother sits on the sofa and my father just watches him play." Evan's father, he described in another interview, even got mad at Evan's brother for finishing a game while the father was not home. Elise, Julia's partner, similarly enjoys watching games unfold, but does not wish to play herself.

She is an example of the secondary-player Newman describes; “[t]he secondary-player role is frequently taken by players who like the idea of games but find them too hard and is just one example of the ways players appropriate videogame experience in manners often not intended by producers (or observed by researchers)” (2002). Though I do not study this type of game reception here, it is worth consideration in future research.

This is a study of individuals’ accounts of their video game play, following from both feminist and phenomenological research perspectives (Garko, 1999; Kauffman, 1992; Lotz, 2000). I do not focus on interviewees’ experiences and non-social gameplay to reify the individual. “To reflect on the individual experience of culture does not mean turning our backs on the social; instead, thinking about the individual story plunges us immediately into the web of relationships out of which we are formed” (Couldry, 2000, p. 7). I argue that approaching issues of identity, identification and representation through individuals’ interpretations will hopefully offer a more grounded understanding of all three and demonstrate the social aspects of these topics.

### **Studying Identity without Focusing on Identities**

Though I do study the representation of marginalized groups, I do not study specific groups as such. I begin with individuals who, with a couple of exceptions, fall outside the heterosexual, White, male, gamer stereotype. This was done for very specific reasons. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) and Glaser and Strauss (2006 [1967]) stress that who one selects to interview depends on what type of knowledge and categories one is trying to develop. Similarly, Mankekar argues that researchers must find participants in response to the context and goals of the projects even if this means rejecting the

constructed objectivity of the random sample (1999, p. 16). As Abu-Lughod describes in relation to her ethnographic study of television viewing in Egypt:

[M]y methodological decision to work with the urban intelligentsia that produces and comments on television and with only some marginal social groups... allows me to highlight how this pedagogical encounter is related to class and gender, and how national ideologies are themselves related to power. (2005, p. 12)

I did not select people who identify as something other than solely White/Anglo, male, and heterosexual, to further “other” them. Rather, it was to recognize the complexity of those identities, which are often spoken of in very narrow terms. Calls to have a diverse representation in video games, largely hinge on proving that people who do not fit norm of the heterosexual, White, male, adolescent gamer stereotype (and marketing construction) do in fact play these games. These discussions of the representation of women, LGBTQ, and people of color in video games, however, often offer a reductivist view of these identity categories, which this dissertation attempts to correct.

When and how particular aspects of identity become relevant in the process of consuming media is important if one is asking audiences about representation. This usually involves starting with a specific audience and seeing how they relate to a representation of that “identity,” however operationalized. Yet, methodologically there are some problems with studying this without presupposing the relevance of a certain identity marker. Part of the problem with Jhally and Lewis’s (2003) work on *The Cosby Show* and Lind’s (1996) study on race and television news, is that the studies were organized with the assumption that race and class would be salient differences to audiences’ interpretations of the shows. This is reasonable, as race was particularly

salient in the texts studied, but how might one get at what identities are relevant in these texts without presupposing the obvious characteristics?

By using sexuality, gender, and race as starting points for selecting interviewees, I do not argue that these categories will matter to the interviewees' senses of self. Rather, I argue that these are identity categories whose representation has been made to matter in both popular and academic discourses (a mattering my own earlier work has been guilty of propagating). The challenge I pose, however, is in leaving this as a starting point, not a predetermining lens through which to interpret my results. "[I]n order to research people you wish to help, you need to understand and use the categories by which they understand themselves" (Valentine, 2007, p. 139). If the identities do not matter, or matter differently, or challenge the ways in which these identities are assumed to matter, then I will have made my point.

### **Studying Gaming, not Gamers**

Video game play is often isolated out from other media. Gamers, like other audiences, "are cordoned off for study and therefore defined as particular kinds of subjects by virtue of their use not only of a single medium but of a single genre as well" (Radway, 1988, p. 363). We need to get a sense of what gaming looks like in an everyday sense, which fan and hardcore player studies cannot offer. There are, for example, many different ways in which people consume video games. Beyond expanding on how individuals identify with video games, this project seeks to reexamine where and how researchers study video game play. Laurie Taylor (2007) asserts that it is important to analyze both the particularities of the platform and context of video game play. She

argues that video game studies focus too much on PC play and not on video game consoles, handheld devices, etc, often ignoring the different audiences and types of play each platform engages. Even her distinction here may be problematic, however, as individuals often play multiple platforms. Individual games, moreover, are available on multiple platforms, and are played in multiple contexts. Gamers come from and play within various cultures, countries, genders, races, classes, ages, etc., and consume games in relationship to various other media, as discussed by Jenkins (2006a). There is very little research on how to address this methodologically, however. Thus far, the answer has been segmenting different types of gamers and gaming. Addressing the studies of videogames outside of these categories is one goal of the present study.

Much of the limited view of gaming culture has been based on the industry's construction of the hardcore gamer as the ideal market (Kerr, 2006, p. 104). Assumptions about what gamers play influences how researchers approach the field. Similarly, what researchers play affects their investigations, as they often study the types of games they enjoy. Dovey and Kennedy caution games studies scholars against this, "[a]s reflexive critical thinkers it is essential that we also pay attention to our own internalized technicities and tastes and to the way in which they inflect and determine the choices we make about which games to study and how to study them" (2007, p. 151). Whether discussing identity based in social demographics or media consumption, we must be critical of how we define our audiences.

When it comes to both the demand for and creation of representation of marginalized groups, it is paramount that a group is defined as part of the audience and

see themselves as audience members. In the case of video games, one must be seen as, and see oneself as, a gamer. Typically, the industry divides gamers in terms of types of play, often hardcore or casual players.<sup>viii</sup> It is perhaps more accurate to say that hardcore and casual refer more to the effort that goes into making games, than it does players' approaches to the game. There is, for example, nothing casual about playing *Farmville* on Facebook for hours on end, just as there is nothing inherently hardcore about playing an hour of *Halo* (Bungie, 2001) with friends at a gaming party. Similarly, that a given game is designed to be multiplayer or single-player does not determine with whom players do or do not play. *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) can, up to a certain point, be played as a solo game. *Legends of Zelda* (Nintendo, 1986) can be played cooperatively when friends act as "backseat drivers" on single-player games.

Both text and platform foci run the danger of using terms set by the industry to define academic study, a problem Ang (1991) describes in relation to studying television audiences in *Desperately Seeking the Audience*. Similarly, as Turner summarizes, "[t]he category of the audience, Hartley argues, is a fiction of those who speak for it, those who research it, those who try to attract it, and those who try to regulate and protect it—the critics, the academics, the television industry and the broadcasting regulatory bodies" (1996, p. 134). A great deal of game studies, and media studies more generally, focuses on audiences as defined by the use of particular platforms, rather than as complex persons of varied media diets, lives and contexts. More than half of the respondents to my initial survey, for example, played on more than one platform. Only eleven interviewees claimed to play on only one platform (three on computers, eight on consoles). Addressing



the self-created “fictions” of individual players’ understanding of themselves as “audiences,” rather than imposing one of my or the industry’s creation, is one goal of this dissertation.

### **Studying Individuals, not Audiences**

In general, video game studies focus on “hardcore” gamers. Video games are also often studied as isolated texts or experiences. “There has been a lack of research on the meanings and motivations associated with gaming, the place of gaming within everyday routines, their relation to identity, their position as a nexus for a range of consumption practices” (Crawford & Rutter, 1997, pp. 273-274). Addressing video games in the context of general media consumption is one goal this study. Similar to Gray’s (2009) study of rural LGBTQ youth and their use of media, I start with individuals and work backwards into their consumption of media rather than looking at them as particular types of audiences.

Although framed as an audience study, this is not a study of audiences *per se*; rather it is a study of individuals’ media use. In a review of audience studies, Allor (1988) concludes that all previous models of the “audience” are problematic as they continue to rely on distinct notions of the “audience,” whether as a physical entity or an abstract position, and texts. Similarly, Ang argues, “[t]he television audience... is not an ontological given, but a socially-constituted and institutionally-produced category” (1991, p. 3). Allor asserts that “to take the social subject seriously, the heterogeneous practices that frame individuated engagements with texts, discourses, and ideologies need to be taken into account” (1988, p. 229). We must see media consumption as situated

within the everyday lives of interviewees, as well as situate those experiences and individuals within wider contexts. This is, in fact, the only way to study meaning.

We are forced... by the nature of meaning itself as the construct of a reader always already situated within an interpretive context, to conduct empirical research into the identities of real readers, into the nature of the assumptions they bring to the texts, and into the character of the interpretations they produce. (Radway, 1984, p. 13)

For this very reason, we have to view the importance of representation as situated within larger contexts, rather than focus on only a single text, kind of audience, or particular identity category. In the end we must look “through both a microscope and a telescope at the same moment” (Allor, 1988, p. 230).

There are two exceptions to the narrow conception and study of video game play in the literature. One is Schott and Horrell’s (2000) investigation of girl gamers’ relationship to gaming culture.<sup>ix</sup> Even their study, however, isolates gaming from other aspects of the participants’ lives. Another exception is Hayes’s (2007) case study of two women playing *Morrowind*. Her focus is on their use of the game text, rather than the medium itself. She looks at how two women approach a game world that offers a variety of play choices. This still does not go as far as I argue it could, because her focus is on a specific text.

Audience studies “produce” a particular type of media audience, a function which has political implications (Griffiths, 1996, p. 62). The value of ethnographic study “lies in its shift of emphasis away from the textual and ideological construction of the subject.... It acknowledges the differences between people despite their social construction, and pluralizes the meanings and pleasures that they find” (Fiske, 1989a, p. 62). It requires

allowing participants to speak for themselves, in a way quantitative analysis cannot.<sup>x</sup> The study of identification and identity requires is a holistic approach to media texts *and* audiences. The work of Seiter (1999) and Hoover, Clark and Alters (2003) are good models for this. By asking people what media they consume, and then seeing how *they* relate it back to the construction of their identities, these studies add an important nuance to the typical approaches to identities and media consumption. Though both projects still use specific categories to delineate the selected audiences (profession and religion), they place the individuals in wider frames than many other reception studies. In this dissertation, I attempt a similar task with members of marginalized groups who play video games.

## **Method**

### **Recruitment**

Originally, I wanted to interview women, Arab, and LGBTQ gamers. I altered the focus for two reasons. First, in the Philadelphia area it proved difficult to find an adequate number of Arab/Arab-American interviewees. Second, the intellectual and political goal of this project was to think more expansively about identity. Thus, defining my “sample” in contrast with the stereotype of the White, male heterosexual gamer was more useful than recruiting specific types of gamers. Therefore, I sought out interviewees who were not male-identified, not solely White/Anglo-identified, and not heterosexual-identified. I wanted to avoid, however, assuming that the choice of these groups would necessarily mean that the interviewees are either concerned with representation of those identities or that those identities are particularly salient for them. Thus, I did not say in

the recruitment announcement that I was looking for people who were members of marginalized groups (recruitment announcement is included in appendix 1). Instead, I used a pre-study, online survey to sample from when recruiting interviewees. As I was focused on video game play, however, I did mention that I was looking for “hardcore gamers, casual gamers, and everyone in between.” This may have primed interviewees to think of their play in relation to the category gamer, but it seemed a necessary wording to elicit participants who play video games.

I used a range of approaches to recruit interviewees, primarily through snowball and convenience sampling. Though both sampling methods may have limited “generalizability,” I argue that they were necessary to find the particular types of participants this study required. Like Valentine (2007), I was in some ways forced to rely on imagined communities to find interviewees. I posted the announcement to various student, social and community organizations, online and off, as well as on Craigslist and in public spaces in different Philadelphia neighborhoods to solicit participants.

### **Survey**

The survey is included in appendix 2, as is the survey informed consent form. The primary purpose of the survey was to garner demographic and media consumption data in order to recruit interviewees in a way that would not require me to signal the specific groups I focused on. Survey participants were asked their age, media preferences, educational background, profession, as well as their racial/ethnic/ancestral, religious, gender, and sexuality identifications. In the end, 113 surveys were completed. The majority of respondents were solely White/Anglo (68.1%), male-identified (62.8%),

and heterosexual (74.3%). Twenty-nine respondents identified with a sexual identity other than heterosexual (five declined to respond to that question), 42 identified with a gender other than male (including one transgender and one genderqueer individual). Thirty-six identified with a racial or ancestral category other than White/Anglo (including people who identified as another category *and* White/Anglo).

Of the fifty-two total people who fit into one or more of the selection criteria. I contacted 38, 27 of which agreed to be interviewed (see Appendix 3 for diagram), and all but two completed both interviews. In addition, I interviewed Chuck and Rusty, two white, heterosexual, male-identified video game players, who had filled out the survey, were the partners of Carol and Tanner respectively, and had expressed interested in participating. Also, Elise, Julia's partner, was present at and took part in Julia's first interview though she herself does not play video games. When I selected interviewees, I attempted to achieve a balance across the categories of race, gender and sexuality, by sending interview invitations to equal numbers of individuals who were not male, not heterosexual, and not solely White/Anglo, in addition to making an effort to find people who fit into more than one of those categories. In the end, the only underrepresented group was non-heterosexual, White/Anglo males, though I did email several non-heterosexual, White men who filled-out the survey. Interviewees were offered \$20 per interview in compensation, though some declined payment.

The survey worked well for multiple reasons. First, as hoped it allowed me to find people who claimed the identifiers I was looking for, without signaling that that was why I was interested in their responses. Often interviewees were curious as to why I picked

them, usually because they assumed they did not play enough to be included in a study on gamers. This was actually the second benefit of the survey, as it allowed me to find people who play video games but do not necessarily identify as “gamers.” Third, it allowed me to get a sense of respondents’ video game and general media tastes prior to the interviews. This made it possible to create an interview group that was diverse across more than the usual social demographic categories.

### **Interviews**

Interviews were crucial to getting the type of data I needed in this analysis.

The interview method... is to be defended ... not simply for the access it gives the researcher to the respondents’ conscious opinions and statements but also for the access that it gives to the linguistic terms and categories (the ‘logical scaffolding’ in Wittgenstein’s terms) through which respondents construct their words and their own understanding of their activities. (Morley, 1992, p. 181)

I conducted two separate interviews, as drawing out interactions over time with a person allows for “a more honest and realistic picture” (Gauntlett, 2007, p. 100). Interviewees are always performing in some regard, and indeed one interviewee described approaching the first interview like a job interview, so multiple interactions offered the chance to get different information from participants. It was particularly useful that some second interviews took place in a different venue from the first. I could balance a more formal first interview in an office with a more relaxed gaming interview in someone’s living room. In addition, as one interviewee stated, having the second interview gave her an opportunity to think more about the questions I had asked previously and elaborate on her answers. First interviews ranged in length from 30 minutes to two hours. Gaming interviews lasted from 30 minutes to four hours.

The first interview (appendix 4) was conducted in a convenient location and time for participants, ranging from coffee shops to their homes to their offices to meeting rooms in the building in which I work. Interviewees were asked to sign an informed consent form before the interview (also included in appendix 4) and, due to institutional regulations, asked to sign a payment voucher at the end of the interview. In the interviews, I used a modified “life history” approach, described in Langness and Frank (1965), to get a sense of the interviewees and their media consumption over time. These were not life histories as such; it is “usually not advisable to attempt a life history until one has known the person and/or been in the field for some reasonable period of time” (Langness & Frank, 1965, p. 39). I was, however, able to gain a surprising amount of detail from relatively limited interactions with participants. I heard from more than a few people, “I never tell anyone this but....”

I began with questions about the interviewees’ general backgrounds. I then asked them about their history with video games and other media tastes. During the second half of interviews, I focused on two things: 1. the interviewees’ thoughts on media representation and 2. how and if they identify with media characters in general and video game characters in particular. I also wanted to get a sense of when/if representation and when/if identification was important to them. This approach does raise some ethical questions. As Langness and Frank point out, “The problem of privacy in life-history studies goes beyond the problem of disguising the identity of informants in other kinds of ethnographic research, for the reason that the individuality of the subject is precisely the object of detailed inquiry” (1965, p. 120). To temper the risk I use aliases, chosen in most

cases by the interviewees themselves<sup>xi</sup>, and as vague as possible descriptions of their life details.

The second interview (appendix 5) was a “gaming interview” as described in Schott and Horrell (2000) and as used in one of my previous studies. Interviewees did not sign an additional consent form for these interviews, but did have to sign another payment voucher. I had interviewees play a game that they had chosen ahead of time when possible, or gave them a choice of games if necessary. Seven interviewees played on the Nintendo Wii, five played on a PlayStation 2 or 3, eight played on XBoxes, two played on both the Wii and XBox, one played on a PSP<sup>xii</sup>, and four played on laptops or PCs. These interviews took place in a variety of locations, including participants’ homes, coffee shops, my home, and classrooms. While observing interviewees play, I talked with them about the game, what they were thinking during certain periods of play, and what they liked or did not like about the game. When they completed a level or reached a stopping point in the game, I asked more questions about the game in relation to their other playing experiences and other media. We also talked about identification and media consumption. By moving back and forth between talking and playing, and rephrasing questions from the first interview, I was able to get nuanced responses on these complex issues.

In Schott and Horrell’s study, the “gaming interview...was devised to facilitate a more ‘play like’ atmosphere and generate questions about female playing experiences as they occurred” (2000, p. 40). It was also a necessary methodological choice to help interviewees think through identification. As Jonathan Cohen (2001) describes,



“identification engages the audience member during reception” (261) and is better studied by talking with participants during and immediately after media consumption. The gaming interview resulted in different types of responses than the more straightforward first interview. In general, participants spoke more and had a specific game in which to ground their responses. On some occasions, I even played along with them and in three cases watched them play with their partners. I scheduled follow up interviews as necessary.

I am aware of my own relationship to my interviewees, in a manner similar to that described in Murphy and Kraidy’s review of ethnographies in global media studies:

What emerges from a reading of these different forays into textual self-reflexivity is a sense of the ethnographers as self-conscious dancer. The ethnographer has entered the dance floor to dance with the others, but who the others are to the ethnographer shapes the ethnographer’s way of moving and interacting, indeed, of the ethnographer’s own sense of self and community. (2003, p. 315)

During more than one gaming interview, I was often asked my own input on what choices an interviewee should make, and had to decide how to respond based on the situation at hand. As I watched interviewees play, I know that I changed the experience of playing the game. Due to various constraints, some participants had to play in classrooms or meeting rooms where I had set up consoles (not really a typical gaming setting). Most people are not used to having someone simply watch them play. To correct some of this imbalance, I played along with interviewees in some cases and even refrained from recording in others, to make it seem less “experimental.” In addition, the very act of asking about media representation and identification may have produced an awareness of these issues, which was not previously there. Indeed, several interviewees

mentioned never having thought about how and if they identify with media characters. As the process of interviewing itself is hardly natural, I am not too preoccupied with these issues. My goal was to find out how people explained their experiences with video games, not an attempt to go unobtrusively inside their heads while they play (such a feat is impossible). To some extent, these problems exemplify the inherently artificial nature of research, but that does not mean that we cannot learn something from these data.

### **Other Data**

In addition to data from the interviews themselves, I was in email or personal contact with several interviewees following their initial participation. Some interviewees, for example, emailed me follow up thoughts following interviews or would discuss my research with me if we saw each other in a another setting. I also draw heavily from my own video game play and media consumption. In addition, I made it a point to seek out games or other media texts (or articles about them) that I was unfamiliar with, if interviewees mentioned them at length. Though I do not engage in textual analysis, I did feel it was important to get a sense of the texts interviewees referenced. Finally, I draw on media coverage (online and offline) on the representation of marginalized groups in video games and other media, as well as informal conversations I have had about video games, media representation, and identification.

### **Analysis**

I analyzed quantitative data from the survey with SPSS. Some quantitative analysis of data from the interviews, particularly in chapters four and five, was done in Excel as well. Interviews were recorded digitally, and I personally transcribed them in

full. The written transcripts and field notes were then analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 2006 [1967]). Themes from the three primary research foci—identity, identification, and media representation—were analyzed separately but overarching themes that crossed all three areas were also found during the course of analysis. All qualitative data was uploaded into the qualitative software program NVivo, but largely I analyzed this data in hardcopy form and then transferred my notes to the program.

As I intend to share this research with the interviewees, I must reflect on the effect this may have on my analysis. For one, not only do I know some my interviewees in other contexts, several of my interviewees know each other and even vague descriptions may be recognizable to them. All of these factors may, also, affect how critical I am and what data I include, as I too was familiar with some of my interviewees previously. As identified by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995), becoming too close to one's informants can shape theoretical claims. Aware of this, I follow Kauffman's challenge to ethnographers to "construct places to stand from which to critically examine our own already-standings, places informed by others who call us to account" (1992, p. 200). I welcome this challenge to both reflect on my own standpoints on the issues of media representation, identity and identification, and the chance that my interviewees might not share these. I will make this dissertation, when complete, available to all interested interviewees and I welcome their feedback.

## Conclusion

This is a study of representation that does not look at texts. It moves game studies from the realm of virtual worlds and back into the everyday lives of players. It studies marginalized groups without focusing on specific identities. It looks at gaming rather than gamers, and individuals rather than audiences. These are all, I argue, necessary shifts from the typical approach and help produce a different kind of knowledge about identity, identification and media representation.

In this study I “back into” media use, as Bird (2003, p. 116) and Gauntlett (2007) describe, by starting with the audience as people rather than as types of players or markets. This is offered as a scaled-back version of Radway’s (1988, p. 369) suggestion that media researchers take a random group of people, to see where, when, if and how they interact with media, in order to get more complete view of media consumption. Although I started with particular kinds of individuals, those that fall outside the heterosexual, White, male stereotype of American gamers, it was not to make claims about these groups in particular. Rather, my aim was to look how members of groups whose representation in video games has been critiqued, discuss the importance of representation and their own connections to media texts. That is to say, I did not start with the *a priori* assertion that the categories of gender, race and sexuality “matter” to my participants, or that being marginalized in some way shapes their media consumption. An overarching theme of this dissertation is breaking away from social categorization, in favor of social contextualization. In it, I take seriously the insights of critical identity theories as a way of rethinking how researchers study and talk about identity,

identification and media representation in terms of audiences. In the following chapters, I discuss the results of this approach.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> According to Wikipedia, the overlapping diamond patterns of argyle are used to create a sense of three-dimensionality, movement, and texture ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argyle\\_\(pattern\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argyle_(pattern)), accessed July 4, 2010). Similarly, the use of “argyle methods” here is meant to add depth to this research, so that it does not, as research often can, flatten its subject beyond recognition. That it also refers to the “lesbian uniform” sweater-vests mentioned in the field note which began chapter one, is a happy coincidence.

<sup>ii</sup> Thirteen gaming interviews took place in interviewees’ homes (3 involving couples); cats were present in seven of these homes.

<sup>iii</sup> Pet ownership has been found to be correlated with political positions for example (Mutz, Forthcoming). I do not have enough data on pet ownership in the greater Philadelphia area to make anything of my interviewees’ predilection for feline companions.

<sup>iv</sup> Most interviewees (17) were from the Philadelphia-New Jersey area, three more from other parts of Pennsylvania, and 10 were from other states or countries. The majority (18) grew up in suburban areas, while six were from urban environments and six from rural areas.

<sup>v</sup> Interestingly, in *Fable* regardless of how many NPCs of either gender you “marry”, once you “marry” a male character your male avatar is marked in the character screen as gay. Anecdotally, my character had a wife or husband in every village in the game (polygamy is a less celebrated option made available in this game) but was not listed as bisexual.

<sup>vi</sup> As Benshoff and Griffin describe in relation to film “[q]ueer audiences...learned how to read Hollywood films in unique ways- often by looking for possible queer characters and situations while ignoring the rest” (2006, p. 64). Across media, non-dominant groups can appropriate texts in a “struggle within signification” (Hebdige, 1997, p. 367). For more on queer readings see: (Doty, 1993).

<sup>vii</sup> This debate is outlined by other authors in much more detail, particularly with regards to the relationship of communication and media studies and ethnography (Jackson Jr., 2008b; P. D. Murphy, 2008).

<sup>viii</sup> As defined by Juul, the stereotypical casual player “has a preference for positive and pleasant fictions, has played few video games, is willing to commit small amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and dislikes difficult games.” A hardcore player, on the other hand, stereotypically prefers “emotionally negative fictions like science fiction, vampires, fantasy and war, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games” (2010, p. 29). He acknowledges later though, that rarely do players fit easily into these stereotypes (p. 146).

<sup>ix</sup> Starting from a snowball sample, Schott and Horrell interview both children and adult gamers. Problematically, their analysis relies on an *a priori* distinction between male and female video game play. In addition, they do not discuss the number of interviewees, in what is an otherwise extensive methods section, and do not describe any other factors about their interviewees besides age.

<sup>x</sup> Being in dialogue with research participants is a suggestion Krippendorff has often made to the field of social research (1996, p. 321).

<sup>xi</sup> I gave all interviewees the option of selecting an alias of their own via a follow up email. If they did not respond, I selected an alias for them. Interestingly, several people chose aliases they used as handles in various online and offline role-play activities.

<sup>xii</sup> PlayStation Portable, a handheld gaming device.

## Chapter 4

### **Accounts of Gamer Identity: Moving beyond the constructed audience**

In *Black British Cultural Studies* (Baker, Diawara, & Lindeborg, 1996), the authors discuss two phases in the theories about identity and culture. “The first phase deals with issues of access to representation and the interrogation of the accuracy of media stereotypes and so on. The second phase moved black British cultural studies towards the question of the cultural construction of identities” (Turner, 1996, p. 212). Most research on gamers has remained in that first phase. There seems to be no end to the studies which “disprove” the gamer stereotype (see for example: D. Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008). Yes, not everyone that plays video games is a straight, White, adolescent male as the popular stereotype presumes. In order to move towards the second phase of the study of identity and culture, however, here I focus on the construction of gamer identity through individuals’ relationships with industry constructions, academic research, and popular representations.

Research on media audiences typically interrogates how the industry constructs the audience, or how audiences use media despite these constructions. In contrast, in this chapter I look critically at how interviewees define themselves in relation to the game industry’s and public discourses’ construction of the gaming audience (gamers). As reviewed in chapter 2, a great deal of research on representation in video games looks at how the audience for games is constructed and the impact this has on representation. This type of research is often reactionary and seeks to find an alternative truth(s) to these

audience constructions. Instead, I use the insight offered by critical theories of identity in order to disentangle the mechanisms that form gamer identity. I demonstrate that the construction of the medium itself, rather than the construction of the audience, is a necessary site for critical action in the politics of representation.

To borrow a turn of phrase from Simon de Beauvoir (1989 [1949]): one is not born a gamer<sup>i</sup>, one becomes one.<sup>ii</sup> This is perhaps even more explicitly true of being a gamer than it is of women in de Beauvoir's original formulation. As an identity defined by consumption, the act of identifying as a gamer is more clearly a choice than are identities written more directly on the body, defined by familial relations, and/or legal rights. It is not, however, an inconsequential choice. In this chapter, I describe how interviewees account for whether and why they identify as gamers. First, I discuss the construction of the gamer audience, from both an industrial/popular discourse perspective and an audience perspective. Being targeted as a gamer, however, does not a gamer make. Identity as a gamer is produced in part through structural (which is not to say natural) identities like gender, race, and sexuality. It is called upon, and made relevant, in specific contexts. It is performed via consumption practices, but it is a precarious identity. Other people's opinions shape whether individuals feel they can or should identify as gamers. Many people view gaming negatively. This leads people to not identify as gamers, not openly identify as gamers, and even to not play games. All of this contributes, as will be shown later, to whether or not people feel the need, or right, to demand representation in video games.



Researchers tend to focus on video game representation in terms of specific identity categories. The demand for representation based on these identity categories has led (indirectly perhaps) the video game industry to target identity markets defined by essentialized notions of those groups. Rather than argue that the gamer identity is too narrow or blissfully democratic (it is neither), I assert that those invested in diversity in video games must focus their attention on the relationship of people to the medium and not the construction of the audience as such. This is a potentially fruitful tactic because gamer identity is mutable, as it is shaped more than most identities by external forces.

### **Critical Identity Theory**

In response to Spivak's essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Lisa Nakamura asks, "can the subaltern read?" (2006, p. 29), in reference to the work of critical theorists like Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, and (of course) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She goes on to argue that, although "there is no shortage of theoretical fire power if one is looking for critical theories of cultural difference" (p. 29), the adoption of 'theory' into cyberculture studies leaves a lot to be desired. Nakamura asserts that the "high theory" turn in cyberculture studies is, like in ethnic and women's studies before it, a compromise, which sacrifices relevance and accessibility for intellectual respectability. There is a disconnect between theorizing about cyberculture, and actual research on interfaces and new media objects (p. 32). I do not use critical theories of identity here because I believe that new media reflect these theories' conception of the self, though authors like Turkle (1995b) and Filiciak (2003) make this point well. Instead, I assert that these theories are

particularly constructive in deconstructing gaming and gamers as objects of study. These theories also are useful to this analysis of how individuals articulate their identities.<sup>iii</sup>

The institutional construction of identities is a prevalent theme in both media representation and social theory. Couldry (2000) argues that we must think about the culture through the self, *as well as* the self through culture, “correcting both for the irreducible complexity of the individual and for the structuring power of the social” because “it is the *tension* between the different sides of the problem that is crucial” (p. 131 italics in original). Many authors have argued for the critical rethinking of the “essentialness” of identity (see for example Appiah, 2005; Gilroy, 2004b; S. Hall, 1996). There is a empirical evidence that identities are experienced at the nexus of the individual and the social (for two recent examples see Grey, 2009; Valentine, 2007). Many contemporary theorists have argued that identity exists between rather than within individuals. “[I]dentity is a construction that is the result of interactions, relationships, and influences between individuals and institutions” (Means Coleman, 2002, p. 7). We are not, as earlier structuralist theory would argue, wholly shaped by external forces. That everything we do is inherently social, does not mean that social structures determine our actions, as Latour (2005) argues.

It is impossible to disentangle our personal actions completely from the matrix of social ties in which we find ourselves. Identities are performed, but only within the context of systems of meaning which allow those performances to be intelligible. These identities are precarious, as Butler (2009) develops in her most recent work. What Butler’s latest articulation allows for, as has been consistently debated and reformulated

from Marx through Spivak, is that we can conceive of the self, the individual, identity, as the result of a momentary, fraught and complex intersection between the social and the individual. This act creates subjects and agents simultaneously, through the process of interpellation. Interpellation, remember, is a two-way interaction. A person must turn to the hail to become a subject. In this chapter, I explore how and if people who play video games turn to the hail “hey gamer,” and the implications for diversity of in-game representation if they do not believe that they are the ones being hailed.

Identifying as a member of a group is part of the process of identity formation. This entails connections, rather than the reification of difference some identity politics and studies of fan communities rely upon. In an unnecessarily dichotomous formulation, Figueroa Sarriera states that “[i]f *identity formation* operates in a mode of exclusion, then the *identification process* operates in a mode of inclusion, connectivity within ruptures” (2006, p. 102 italics in original). In contrast, I argue that identification is a more useful way of understanding identity formation, as Hall (1966) describes in his essay “Who needs identity?” Identities and subjects are made in specific moments, via a process we can call identification.

The notion that an effective suturing of the subject to a subject-position requires, not only that the subject is ‘hailed,’ but that the subject invests in the position, means that suturing has to be thought of as an articulation, rather than a one-sided process, and that in turn places *identification*, if not identities, firmly on the theoretical agenda. (p. 6)

Hall argues that a focus on identification is more politically useful than the focus on identity, as it allows for the self-definition of the individual rather than on defining them from the outside. In an interview, Bhabha also discusses this concept of identification,

though perhaps not intentionally referencing Hall's discussion: "The people' always exist as a multiple form of identification, waiting to be created and constructed" (Rutherford, 1990, pp. 220-221). I focus on how people *identify as* gamers, rather than gamers as a fan group or industry construction. Identification does not entail audiences creating their own "identities," but rather working within a context in which particular identities are being articulated. We can think of this in terms of reflexivity, as Giddens explores: "*the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*" (1991, p. 57 italics in original). That is not to say that identity is wholly self-defined, but rather researchers can look at how structures shape identities through individuals' reflexive articulations of their identities.

Here I look at interviewees' reflexive interpretations of how their relationship to gaming, as well as the relationship between games and larger social structures, defines them as gamers or not. The construction of the video game audience may affect the representation of groups in games. It also shapes, though it does not determine, who identifies a gamer. Demands for representation cannot simply focus on making the category of gamer more expansive, however; attempts thus far have simply resulted in the further marginalization of marginalized audiences. Female gamers, for example, have been appealed to as "girl gamers." Gay gamers are marketed to via ads placed in gay magazines (Sliwinski, 2006). This defines them as particular kinds of gamers who are discursively distinct from an implied mainstream gaming audience. The social status of gamer as an identity, moreover, affects who is willing to adopt that label, and in turn,

what they expect, in terms of representation, from the medium. This is where those interested in arguing for diversity in games must turn their focus.

### **Construction of the Gamer**

“In recent years, the concept of identity has had its corset removed and hangs loosely and precariously in the domain of culture and politics,” begins Akeel Bilgrami in her essay in the invaluable collection *Identities* (1995, p. 198). In many ways, the act of describing gamer identity implies a tightening of the strings once more. The narrative of gamer identity, against which my interviewees define themselves, seems static. It is one that is familiar to anyone who has taken a passing glance at the “pop culture phenomena of gaming,” as Asa Berger (2002) dubs it. Being a gamer typically conjures up the image of geeky, young men, who are often White, middle-class suburbanites. Gamers play certain kinds of games, including epic role-playing games (RPGs) and bloody first-person shooters (FPSs), which is different from simply playing video games in a more general sense, like those on the Nintendo Wii. Gamers spend an inordinate amount of time and money on their hobby. Rather than describe gamer identity as a definable, limited category, I demonstrate that it is instead a contextualized one. What I describe here are the traces of group formation Latour discusses (2005, p. 34). This is distinct from work that seeks to analyze the creation and boundaries of gaming culture.

The category of gamer is often defined in terms of who video games are by. The “rise of computer game culture,” for example, is described by King and Borland (2003) in terms of a particular history of the industry as seen through the eyes of some of the its early organizers. Their subcultural capital, including pen-and-paper role-playing games,

science-fiction fandom, and the like, forms the basis of game culture. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) also define video game culture by way of the major discourses used by members of the video game development industry. Acculturation is required for entry into the field, thus these discourses shape who enters the industry. This, Dovey and Kennedy argue, has an effect on the products that emerge. In another piece, Dovey and Kennedy (2007) argue that “star” biographies on the “founding fathers” of gaming help promote a culture where technical proficiency, geek cultural capital, maleness and Whiteness have defined gamer identity.<sup>iv</sup> This narrative of gamer identity permeates popular understandings of gamer identity as well.

Even within the industry, gamers are often constructed in the game maker’s image. Aphra Kerr (2006) traces the inner workings of the digital games industry and finds that designers sometimes assume that their own preferences will be the preferences of their consumers. Kerr points to the highly masculine quality of the video game industry, for example, as a reason for the male-centeredness of gaming culture, game content and game spaces (p. 14). In their study of the design process of two virtual cities, Oudshoorn *et al* (2004) also find that designers tend to use their own preferences, assume those are the preferences of end-users as well, and draw on normative assumptions about gender in the design process. This is the logic behind the argument that more diversity in the video game industry is a necessary step towards achieving greater diversity in game texts. The industry is merely asked to allow people with different assumptions into the field, rather than question their own assumption (which would be a more radical suggestion). This ignores, among other things, that it is the relationship between

individual designers and the industry, not something inherent about the different identities of the designers, which shapes the products.

When game makers assume that their audiences are “like them,” and make their products accordingly, they make games for a heterosexual, White, male audience (following from industry statistics<sup>v</sup> anyway). Game developers create games that they think appeal to their target market. These games are successful and thus the companies continue to produce them over time. As only successful genres are reproduced, this process results in a narrower vision of what “gamers” play. “What unfolds in the managed dialogue of commercialized digital design is a process in which commodity form and consumer subjectivity circle around each other in a mating dance of mutual provocation and enticement” (Kline, Dyer-Witheford, & De Peuter, 2003, p. 196). This is particularly displayed in what Kline *et al.* (2003) describe as the “militarized masculinity” prevalent in many video games.

Valdiva (2002) argues, that who is represented in *and* who is the presumed audience of video games are both important in addressing the problems related to representation. The construction of an audience directly influences what representations are put into texts, as cultural production studies have shown. The definition of what a gamer is, affects how games, for both gamers and non-gamers, are designed. The lack of representation of marginalized groups in games, stems from the fact that members of those groups are assumed not to be gamers. Those excluded from the market are unlikely to demand representation, however, unless they think they *should* be seen as members of the audience. They may react to offensive representation or corporate practices, as has

been done by African-American consumers (Weems Jr., 1998) or gay film and television audiences (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Montgomery, 1979). They will not necessarily *demand* representation, however. In contrast, the task of gamer identity-affinity sites, like [gaymer.org](http://gaymer.org), [womengamers.com](http://womengamers.com) and the more encompassing (in terms of its focus on intersectionality), *The Border House* blog is to offer a space for those upset with representation in games to express their displeasure with and demand for representation.

Cultural production analyses demonstrate that industries shape and divide the market into segments based on the presumed value of those segments (Blumer, 1996; Ewen, 1976; Marchand, 1985; Ohmann, 1996; Sender, 2004; Turow, 1997). When groups assert their location and importance in the market, they adopt the same perspective; viability as a market segment is integral to the representation of their group(s) in media. One might argue that this represents a kind of hegemonic dominance, as described by Gramsci (1994). The industry insists that they only create what audiences will buy, and in turn individual audience members assume that purchase power is their only way to demand representation from media makers. Gitlin has described this in terms of other media industries.

So the magazine rack re-creates the long-lasting division of American culture into fragmented interest groups. As shoppers, people find satisfaction in the knowledge that they aren't alone in their enthusiasms. What they get from magazines is a kind of involvement, a feeling of participating in activities larger than themselves, built on standards independent of their lone egos. Organized consumption provides badges of identity: the result is a restricted pluralism of consumption. The market is formally open but can cater only to those interests that can be expressed as desires for commodities. By the *laissez-faire* logic that prevails in broadcasting today, the courts uphold the argument that, where there are so many channels, the free market will automatically end up serving minority tastes. If there are enough viewers who want unconventional movies, an entrepreneur will arise to serve them and succeed at it. By the same logic,



however, if no such entrepreneur arises or if one tries and fails, the demand must not have existed. Demand knocks only after the fact. (Gitlin, 1983, p. 330)

Demand for representation of marginal groups, the industry declares, must come from the audience. As Gitlin points out, however, representation is only provided as part of the “restricted pluralism of consumption.” Groups are representable only insofar as they are marketable.

To assert one’s presence in the marketplace, however, does not ensure an equal place in mainstream game texts. The ‘girl games’ movement, for example, did not result in the creation of a place for female gamers in the hard-core gamer market, but rather made content designed to be ‘for girls’ a peripheral interest (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Hayes, 2007; Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008). This kind of targeting distances women from mainstream games. It also is likely to alienate women who do not connect with those appeals. Carol described this in one interview: “The marketing for girls’ games that I see is so atrocious. It's like everything has to be pink.” In the context of discussing the possibility of marketing games to a gay audience, Devon and Ephram brought up the girls’ games example as well:

Ephram: I think it can happen I don't think it's really going to happen a lot. Like it's happened with girl gamers already where they had these awful awful...

Devon: Oh those were awful...

Ephram: Here's girl games, and everything is pink and has ponies and you can decorate stuff and cook...

Devon: And yeah that's what girls want.

Devon and Ephram pointed out, moreover, as I have elsewhere (Shaw, 2009a), that gay representation comes up against a great deal more resistance than representations of

women or people of color. Representation of sex, and in turn sexualities, is highly curbed in a medium often viewed as “for children.” The moralistic attacks on media portrayals of non-normative sexualities compound the resistance to display of these identities in video games.

Players who are members of a marginalized group accept, if begrudgingly, the lack of representation of that group in video games because they are not part of the adolescent, White, heterosexual, male gaming market. At times, this results in a sort of defeated apathy. Sasha described, representation is “not important, but it's nice! Even though it's not going to happen. They've been doing this shit for years, so it's not going to change.” At other times, individuals argued that their group is a good market for video games or that not marketing to groups is not only discriminatory, it is illogical. Carol recounted a scene from the show *Mad Men* in which the character Pete tried to convince executives from a television company to sell to African-American markets. The executives in this episode clearly allowed their racism to trump their desire for money but, Carol pointed out, “it's stupid to not market to people who have money to spend on your product.” Sasha, in another interview, made a similar point: “by excluding certain characters you are more likely to exclude certain markets. [...] That's why they made a Black Barbie.” There is an assumption, then, that if only the industry could get beyond its myopic view of its market, they could make a lot more money by offering more diversity in their product.

This focus on market logic is one way audiences account for the lack of representation. This also offers them one form of resistance to a lack of diversity in

media: voting with their dollars. Marketing to particular groups, however, results in the same sort of marginalization that under- or misrepresentation does. As Morley and Robins assert “the very celebration and recognition of ‘difference’ and ‘Otherness’ may itself conceal more subtle and insidious relations of power” (1995, p. 115). The issue for them is not so much how identities are constructed, but rather “an understanding of who is being differentiated from whom” (p. 57). Research that uses this kind of market logic repeats many of the oversimplifications, the static notions of identity, evident in the industry’s construction of the audience. It can be used to argue for pluralism, but does not offer a strong case for diversity. Interpellation by cultural industries, moreover, is not the only factor in whether or not people see themselves as part of the audience. Other social structures, such as gender, race, and sexuality, shaped individuals’ relationships with gaming culture.

### **Identifying as a Gamer**

Tanner and her husband Rusty have both played video games for about 30 years. Rusty, however, identified as a “full-on gamer,” whereas Tanner said that she identified as a gamer at one time, but goes back and forth about identifying as one now.

Tanner: I guess there were times when I would say yes and times when I would say not really. I guess overall yeah, as someone who is maybe drawn to games more than the average person [...] But not like a full on gamer-gamer kind of person where it's a major part of what I do with my recreational time.

In another interview, she concluded that she is “a gamer at heart,” but that does not lead her to declare herself a gamer. She contextualized her internal (“heart”) definition of herself within a particular time in her life and the definition used. Interestingly, she mostly plays Nintendo Wii party games like *Wii Sports* and *Mario Kart* now (she said

that time constraints and waning interest shifted her game play). These Wii games are mainly targeted a casual gamer market. Tanner, however, is perhaps among the most “hard core” of all the gamers I interviewed, were I to use the industry’s and game studies’ understanding of that concept. She has been interested in games her whole life, and has a collection of old consoles in her basement. She does not play all the time, but rarely goes more than a few months without playing. Other interviewees, like Violet, Tracey, Evan and Julia, play games that are marketed more to the hardcore gamer market but do not identify as gamers either. Over simplistic assumptions that playing video games, even certain types of video games, marks one as a gamer have obscured the other reasons people may or may not be invested in this identity.

According to Foucault, subjects are produced, not just limited, by power (1982, p. 781). Drawing on Foucault, Butler states that “[d]iscourse does not merely represent or report on pre-given practices and relations, but it enters into their articulation and is, in that sense, productive” (Butler, 1995c, p. 138). Institutions identify “to the individual the ‘true’ self, whereby (s)he comes classified as an object in various ways for others and is tied to the ‘true’ self as a subjected or politically dominated being” (Marshall, 1990, p. 16). Zipin (1998), similarly, describes how individuals are made subjects via the construction of “selves.” The obfuscation of the creation of the gamer subject by industry, academic, and popular discourse hides the extent to which this shapes people’s relationship to this medium. How the gamer-self is constructed has important implications for representation. Market logic assumes that people prefer to consume media that represents them in some way. If a group is not the target audience for a text,

then, that group is not represented. In response activists, scholars, media producers, some audience members, and other stakeholders find ways to demonstrate that said group is indeed a viable market. The problem, however, is that this has dominated how we understand the relationship between audiences and representation. Who identifies as a gamer demonstrates the impact of representation, and elucidates why some players of video games are ambivalent about the representation of these groups in games. The meanings attached to “gamer identity” by industrial, academic, and popular discourse shapes people’s relationship with the category.

It is not just relating to the institutionalized gamer identity that makes one a gamer. Other factors shape a person’s relationship with this identity. Other identities, including gender, race, and sexuality, shape interviewees’ relationship to the category of gamer. Context, including the research moment, social relationships, and temporal and geographic contexts shape how and if people see themselves as gamers. Identities, as Butler (2009) argues, are performed but they are also precarious. I discuss this in terms of the relationship between subcultural and social capital and gamer identity. Gamer identity is performed, through the deployment of subcultural capital including recourses (ex. time, money, desire), abilities, and knowledge. Gamer identity is also claimed or rejected as a form of social capital. People rejected gamer identity, in part, because they viewed games as peripheral to mainstream media culture, as well as a guilty pleasure, a juvenile pastime, and as a medium that is inherently unimportant. All of this factors into the discussion of identification with video game characters and representation in video games described in the next two chapters. Rather than change how people understand gamer

identity, its construction, and the marketing discourse that calls upon, I argue that the goal should be to change how audiences think about their relationship with this medium.

### **Identity at/as a Nexus- Gender, Race, and Sexuality**

In their review, Dovey and Kennedy argue that “[g]ames culture is ... a critical site where discourses around technology, technological innovation and technological competence converge with dominant conceptions of gender and race” (2006, p. 131). Lisa Nakamura has made similar claims about cyberculture more generally (2002b; , 2008). Identifiers like genders, races/ethnicities, and sexualities can shape how individuals relate to gamer identity. Interestingly, however, in this project only gender was correlated with accounts of who identified as a gamer and who did not. No other category, including race, sexuality, religion, education, age or type of gaming platform, demonstrated such a striking disparity between who identified as a gamer and who did not.

Some interviewees did mention use of a particular gaming platform as a reason they may or may not identify as a gamer, but when I analyzed the combined survey and interview data this was not the case. Interviewees who were non-heterosexual mentioned sexuality, specifically whether or not gaming culture was largely homophobic or mostly open-minded, in the course of the interviews; though there was no consensus on whether gaming culture is homophobic or not. Interviewees only mentioned race when they described the “straight White dude” gamer stereotype. Not being White was never articulated as a reason for not identifying as a gamer, nor was gaming culture described in direct racial terms by interviewees. Often gamers are described as young, though there

are endless studies asserting that the average gamer is in their 30s, yet age was not mentioned by interviewees as a reason for identifying as a gamer or not. All of the interviewees, ranging from their early 20s to late 30s, technically grew up with video games, though some did not start playing until their teens and some played when they were kids and then again when they were older. Although race, sexuality, age, and platform shaped people's relationship with gaming, these did not determine whether people identified as gamers. Even though gender was correlated with gamer identity, interviewees rarely gave it as a reason for not identifying as a gamer.

Although gender was not mentioned as a reason for identifying as a gamer or not, there was a definite correlation between gender and gamer identity. Male interviewees were much more likely to identify as gamers than female, transgender or genderqueer interviewees were. Of the 29 interviewees that played games (Elise, Julia's partner took part in one interview but does not play video games), twelve identified unequivocally as gamers (four female-identified and 8 male-identified). Three "sort of" identified as gamers (two female- and 1-male identified) and five asserted that they are "not really" gamers (4 female- and 1 genderqueer- identified). Eight said that they were unequivocally not gamers, seven of whom were female-identified and one of whom was male-identified (he is also transgender, though I hesitate to claim that is may be the reason he does not proclaim a gamer identity more readily). This finding is unsurprising, as it has previously been reported that women are likely to underestimate the amount of time they play and do not generally identify as gamers (Aquila, 2006; Lucas & Sherry, 2004; T. L. Taylor, 2006b; D. Williams, Consalvo, Caplan, & Yee, 2009; Yates &

Littleton, 1999). Moreover, a great deal of early research on gender and games have focused on the ways in which games are “boys only” spaces (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000).

Gender only came up explicitly in two interviews. Klara said that gamers are “usually guys. I know one girl gamer [...] I don't really consider her as a gamer. I don't know maybe my perception of gamer is too extreme, but she considers herself as a gamer and she likes playing it.” While Janet and I walked to a second café, as our first meeting location closed before the interview was over, she asked if I was talking to people about the gendered aspects of gaming. This was because she had originally thought my research focused on female gamers<sup>vi</sup>, and because in past conversations with her own friends they had discussed gaming as a very male domain. In the other interviews I might have pushed more to find out if the hesitance to identify as a gamer was somehow a deference to gender norms. However, the primacy of gender as a factor did not emerge until after data collection was completed. I also find it more interesting to look at the ways in which people accounted for why they did or did not identify as gamers, without presuming an effect of a specific identity. That gender was so relevant to gamer identity without necessarily being consciously articulated is, moreover, an interesting finding.

The prominence of gender as factor in gamer identity, may be related to the fact that gender is the primary way in which representation in games, the texts and the audience, have been discussed. Video games are a notoriously gendered pursuit (Burrill, 2008; Graner Ray, 2004). A great deal of research on gender in gaming focuses on how (and if) female gamers play, rather than game content as such (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Lucas & Sherry, 2004). Hayes explains that the response to the under and



misrepresentation of women was to develop a genre of girls' games, based on psychological generalizations of gendered play (p. 25). However, "[b]y focusing on their absence from gaming culture such research ignores the voices of those women and girls who do engage with computer games" (Yates & Littleton, 1999, p. 567).

The way researchers and marketers discuss gender difference in gaming often promotes the traditional correlations between masculinity and technology, and the converse disassociation of femininity and technology. This affects, Justine Cassell argues, how women who are good with computers feel about themselves (2002, p. 5). Carol's comments echoed an awareness of this critique, when she lamented that she only ever played video games when men she was dating played<sup>vii</sup>: "I somehow feel a little pathetic that I never really got anything on my own. It was always sort of like I needed an excuse to have that." One might argue that the women who do not identify as gamers feel that they have less expertise with gaming. Nearly everyone who asserted that they were not gamers, for example, said it was because they "don't play enough," which might be a proxy for an assessment of their own skills. I watched all of them play, however, and they were all adequate and in some cases excellent players.

Sasha was the one exception in that not spending enough on video games, rather than not playing enough, was the reason she gave for not identifying as a gamer. She was a very skilled player. She beat me (soundly) five rounds in a row on *Marvel vs. Capcom* (a fighting game), and I am hardly a novice player. She indirectly related her expertise to gender, however. It motivates her because, she says, "when I'm playing a guy. I get fully absorbed because I really have to win. Because he just expects me to lose anyway,

because I'm a girl." She plays against her brother and his friends in order to get better, because for her gaming is highly competitive. Although she said the men she plays are gamers however, she still did not think of herself as a gamer.<sup>viii</sup>

Gender is a factor in media consumption, but most research has demonstrated that this is because socialization and power relations shape the gender differences in media practices (Ang, 2003, p. 50; Bird, 1992a; Butsch, 2000, p. 180; Morley, 1986). The socialization of individuals as members of specific groups influences their interaction with particular media texts or genres (see for example Hoover, Clark, & Alters, 2003; Morley, 1986; Seiter, 1999). Play theorists have also asserted that gender socialization shapes play practices (Roberts & Sutton-Smith, 1962). Carr's (2005) study of a games club at a girls' school in the United Kingdom similarly demonstrates that social context and gender socialization can shape video game consumption. Rather than say that women play differently from men based on natural predispositions, it is more likely that gender norms help shape relationships with gaming (as explored by Williams et al, 2009), though perhaps not always consciously or in expected ways.

Bhabha's discussion of hybridity is particularly useful in articulating the relationship between gamer identity and other ways of identifying, specifically his concept of the "third space." This "third space" does not entail the hybridizing of two identity categories that are taken for granted. Instead, there is something specific about the experience of being in that third space, which is not the result of adding the experiences of two different identity categories together. "The notion of hybridity invokes the fusion of two (or more) components into a third term irreducible to the sum

of its parts” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 14). Or as Valentine discusses in relation to transgender as an identity category, “age, race, class, and so on don’t merely inflect or intersect with those experiences we call gender and sexuality but rather *shift the very boundaries of what ‘gender’ and sexuality can mean* in particular contexts” (2007, p. 100 italics in original). Spelman argues, similarly, that “far from distracting us from issues of gender, attention to race and class in fact help us to understand gender” (1988, p. 113). Other identities, similarly, shape how individuals identify as gamers.

Ephram, who is Devon’s partner, identified as a gay gamer, or gaymer. This is an excellent example of an identity that is not additive, but rather exists in the space between two group affiliations.

Ephram: We're still gamers, but we're not the typical gamer I guess. And I think it's just a way of differentiating us and letting people know right off the bat. Kind of weeding out some of the, for lack of a better word, some of the douchebags in the game that would otherwise not be really cool with it.

Here he articulated his gaymer identity in the context of online gaming. Ephram also tied identifying as gaymer to the fact that he and his partner were early members of the online, gay-gamer community, [gamerexperimentations.org](http://gamerexperimentations.org), where the term gaymer was (it is claimed) first coined. Not all gamers who are not heterosexual identify as gaymers, and participating in gaymer communities does not necessitate being gay and a gamer, as I explored in earlier research (Shaw, 2007). Regardless, in both the previous and current project, gaymer is an identity experienced at the intersection of, at the disruption posed by, two categories that are not always easily reconciled. Gamers are not gay, and gays do not play video games— or so the dominant discourses go. This does not imply that either

of those groups is definable, but rather everyone always-already exists within various third spaces.

Sexuality shaped how some LGBTQ interviewees related to video game culture, but not whether they identified as gamers. Some mentioned homophobic speech in online gaming spaces in the context of characterizing gaming in general as an unwelcoming space. Both Ephram and Devon found ways of challenging or avoiding such speech in their online play, as did Pouncy when playing *Settlers of Catan*.

Pouncy: If someone is taking a really long time to take their turn some people say, “Hey stop watching gay porn.” Be like, “Man sorry that *Harry Potter* slash fiction just really makes me hot.” (Both laugh). And they’ll be like, “Ew, are you gay?” And then I have to decide where to go from there. Usually like, “Yes. I’m a huge hairy faggot and I have so much dick in my mouth right now.” Something like that.

There is a dominant assumption, as I discuss elsewhere (Shaw, 2009a), that gaming culture is at best heteronormative and at worst blatantly homophobic. Some interviewees, after asking me about my other research, were often surprised (as are many academics and passing acquaintances) to learn that there is any LGBTQ representation in video games to be studied. Not all interviewees, however, felt that was the case. Zahriel, for example, pointed out the queerness in many of the Japanese texts that form the basis of gaming culture. Tanner and Rusty discussed gender-play (often interpreted as a queer practice) as a common element in pen-and-paper role-playing games, though they disagreed as to whether there was a stigma attached to this practice. Sexuality may shape people's relationships to gaming, but it does not affect whether they identify as gamers. I argue that this may be because gaymers are not yet a targeted market. Gay content tends

to be optional; some gamers might be gay, but the industry does not make games for gay gamers.

Race was similarly not correlated with whether interviewees identified as gamers or not, but also was not brought up in interviews in relation to gamer identity (though it was discussed in terms of identification and representation). I recognize that being a White interviewer may have made interviewees less likely to bring up race as a dominant factor, though they did discuss it at other points of the interview. It is also possible that Whiteness in gaming, like Whiteness in general, is often uninterrogated. That is to say, if race seems to disappear as a dominant factor in how people relate to the category of gamer, this may be because Whiteness itself often disappears as a subject of inquiry (Dyer, 2002a). Moreover, even though games are often produced by North American and European countries now, they are still commonly associated with Asian countries.<sup>ix</sup> After the “video game crash” of the early 1980s, and the decline of arcades and Atari (an American company), the rise of the video game console in the late 1980s and early 1990s came primarily from Asian companies like Nintendo, Sega and Sony (Wolf, 2008). It was not until Microsoft released the XBox in 2005 that a non-Asian company began to make a mark on the video game hardware market. Though games may be made in the West, there is still an Asian-ness about gaming (including ties to Asian popular culture), which makes easy assumptions about how gaming culture is raced problematic.

I also posit that not being targeted, may be part of why race, like sexuality, is not as salient a category as gender when it comes to identifying as a gamer. The industry, as evidenced by the fact that they have not published racial statistics on their audiences,

seems to be uninterested in the intersections of race and gaming. This is symbolic annihilation from the construction of the audience as well as texts. The Entertainment Software Association publishes “Essential Facts” about their audience every year. In all of the reports since 2004<sup>x</sup>, the only demographic data reported in relation to game sales was age and gender. It is unsurprising that the game industry does not address sexuality in their research; not even the U.S. census has felt able to ask that question. The absence of race, however, indicates that it is not important to the way the industry thinks about their audience. Only the Kaiser Family Foundation has published data on race and video game play, though only on children. In 2002 they found that African-American and Hispanic children play more video games than their White counterparts, and that low- and middle-income children play more than children from families with higher incomes (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002, p. 1). As of 2010, those differences still appear to hold true (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010, pp. 5, 25). Perhaps the industry feels that it does not have to address this market, as they are clearly already buying the product.<sup>xi</sup> Race, it seems, does not matter when it comes to the construction of the gamer audience.

In one interview, Cody may have alluded to race in the context of explaining why it is “ok” for him, who identified as African-American athlete, to identify as a gamer. Cody said that there has been an increased visibility of athletes playing video games: “what else are you going to do in that break of time that you have from practice to other stuff. It's a form of entertainment. It's like anything else.” This movement of games into the mainstream, via athletes, may serve as a way of signaling race without mentioning race. In two out of three of the most popular U.S. sports the majority of professional

athletes are African-American (W. M. Leonard, 1997). Related to this David Leonard (D. J. Leonard, 2004) and Dean Chan (2005) have both described sports games (along with crime games) as being the primary place people of color, African-Americans typically, are represented in video games. These sports games are also the games Cody plays most often. What is interesting about Cody's assertion, is that when games became "like anything else" it became "ok" to play video games. It is not that video games are marketed to a bigger more diverse audience. Rather, video games are losing their place as a distinct medium that only particular (i.e. White) audiences use.

Both race and sexuality may shape conversations within gamer circles, if one chooses to interact in those circles. The marking of gender as a salient category through research and marketing, however, may more directly shape whether one feels invited to take part in the conversation. I argue that the attention paid to gender in both scholarly work and marketing has made gender a dominant way of how people think about their relationship with gaming. The act of marking "girl gamers" as a market, whether women feel adequately appealed to by those attempts or not (usually not), makes gender a salient category when talking about games. Marking a medium or an audience as distinct acts as its own form of marginalization. This is distinct from the symbolic annihilation of race and sexuality seen in the construction of the gamer audience. The example of gender demonstrates, however, that the solution to the invisibility of race and sexuality is not the creation of a plurality of video game markets. Those who seek to make game texts, the audience, and the industry, more diverse must be wary of overemphasizing specific

identity categories and the uniqueness of this medium. They must also be attentive to the contextuality of gamer identity, as I explore next.

### **Contextual Accounts of Gamer Identity**

The meanings of identity categories shift, as do individual experiences of those categories, in different contexts. There has been a lot of work done on this in terms of diasporic identities. Ong (1999) and Ang (2001) explore, for example, Chineseness in transnational contexts. Identities are relative, as Rosenau (2003) discusses in relation to the “Proliferation of Identities.” Immigrants, he explains, exemplify the ways in which culture and identities are not so much about location as they are relationships. These relationships are geographic and temporal, but they also exist within a normative structure. The geographic mutability of identity applies to how others interpret individuals as well. Devon, for example, identified as half Cuban and half European-American. Growing up in Miami, people viewed him as White, but when he moved to Philadelphia people who found out he was half Cuban would say he was Spanish. He elaborated on this in the second interview:

Devon: I look White-ish and I don't speak Spanish, so I was always the gringo in Miami. And then I come up here and I've had people say that I'm not White. And I'm always confused [...] But I've had people, when they find out I'm half Cuban, they're like, “Oh, so you're not White.” I'm like, “I...guess?” I don't know that's weird. I've never not considered myself White. I mean it's not like I'm sitting around—“I'm White, doot dee doo...” (Laughs).

Some theorists might call this an intersectional identity (Bhattacharjee, 1997; Crenshaw, 1991; Mohanty, 1991; Takagi, 1999; Walker, 2001). However, as Devon articulated, he did not see himself at an intersection *per se*. He was both and neither, which resonates



more readily with Bhabha's "third space" than it does with intersectionality. His identity did not shift in different contexts, but how others interacted with him did.

The relevance of particular identities in particular social interactions helps make further sense of how people identify as gamers. Returning to Althusser, subjects are made through interpellation.

For Althusser, the notion of an essential self disappears as a fiction, an impossibility, and in its place is the social being who possesses a socially produced sense of identity- a 'subjectivity'. This subjectivity is not like the old unified individual self; it can be contradictory, and it can change within different situations and in response to different kinds of address. (Turner, 1996, p. 20)

This is particularly true of the research moment. When recruiting people to talk about video games, for example, they assume that you are calling upon them to answer as gamers. Indeed, though I was careful not to include categories of gender, race and sexuality in my recruitment announcement, in order to focus on people who play video games I did say that I was looking for "hardcore gamers, casual gamers, and everyone in between." Snowball sampling and distributing the recruitment announcement through my social networks allowed me to encourage anyone who had played any sort of digital game to fill out the survey. Yet, even then, many people wondered why I wanted to interview them, particularly as they did not see themselves as gamers. This is because both the word gamer in the recruitment announcement, as well as the focus on gamers in most game studies and popular discussions on gaming, empowered gamer as a meaningful category. In many ways, this is the precise reason I did not emphasize that I was looking for people who were members of marginalized groups in the recruitment announcement. As in my past research, it would have put individuals in the position of answering as

members of that particular group. Interviewees who did not identify as gamers were not sure what they had to offer my research. Conversely, the two interviewees who fit the standard image of a gamer assumed that their viewpoints were “a dime a dozen,” as Chuck put it. There is an expectation that, as an interviewee, one called upon to speak from a particular point of view. Interviewees wanted to know which identity I was attempting to hail when I made them research subjects.

Researchers must be conscious of over-simplifying the identities of their participants, which is part of the political project of this dissertation. Yet, at the same time, in any social situation people perform in particular ways. Interviewees were quite conscious of the roles the context asked them to take. At a talk I gave at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee a member of the audience asked if I was turning my interviewees into avatars through the research process. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that the interviewees created their own avatars based on the expectations they thought were placed upon them in the interview space. The avatar in this instance is similar to the notion of performative identities, not just metaphorically speaking, but in that the very act of performing identities is analogous to the act of creating avatars. Avatars are created within specific systems structured to make some forms of being intelligible and not others. We can create these avatars but certain types of choices, or performances, shape how we are allowed to interact with a gamespace, or in this case the research moment. The very act of creating an “interviewee avatar” is done in answer to a demand placed upon them by the structure of the research moment.

How interviewees identify themselves in the interviews, in turn, must be understood as a particular momentary articulation of how they view themselves in relation to what they believe is the purpose of the study, rather than the solidified identity Gauntlett (2007) assumes in his Lego study.<sup>xii</sup> Some interviewees, for example, identified themselves using certain identifiers on the survey, but in different ways in the interview. Sexualities shifted from bisexual or queer to gay, races from Latino/White to simply White, multiracial to Black, male to transgender<sup>xiii</sup>. Non-gamers became gamers and “sort of” gamers became “not really” gamers. This still demonstrates, however, that gamer identity is performed, or not performed, in relation to social contexts in which gamer has become an important category. Furthermore, as this dissertation argues, the *way* researchers and marketers make gamer identity important should be a central focus for those invested in promoting diversity in video games.

In her ethnography on *EverQuest*, Taylor (2006b) found that her identity as a member of a particular server became relevant during a “real life” *EverQuest* convention: “I never really thought of myself as specifically a ‘Bailerbents player’ until this moment where, in a huge hall filled with people, it becomes a shared identity and easy point of connection” (2006b, p. 3). This particular space made her identity as a specific kind of gamer relevant. Similarly, identifying as a gamer was not a constant state for interviewees; rather it was viewed as relative, as Janet described.

Janet: I always think of that as a comparative term, and I know people that are so much more into gaming than I am. [...] I guess in more of an objective sense than I am. It's like I don't really think of myself as a hardcore biker but then I talk to people who don't ride bikes at all and they're like, "Wow, you ride seven miles a day?!" [...] I don't think of myself as a gamer. But I guess I am.

Choosing to identify as a member of a particular group can also involve aligning oneself with a particular political perspective. Caine, for example, said he felt an affiliation with those who rally against the ravings of lawyer and violent games legislation proponent Jack Thompson, even though he does not play the games Thompson condemns. There can be a political position involved in identifying as a gamer. This is displayed in the blogs [GamePolitics.com](http://GamePolitics.com) and [Videogamevoters.org](http://Videogamevoters.org) (among others), as well as reviews of candidates' platforms regarding video games released by gaming magazines and websites during national elections.

In a broader sense, Caine viewed gamer identity as a subset of his identity as a geek. This particular political position made his gamer identity more salient. For many types of identity, political investments require people to identify as members of a specific group. This is the type of investment most arguments for representation rely on, and hope for, when they state that people want to see people “like them” in their media. Political investments often galvanize marginalized audiences to care about representation around the the hope that there are social rights to be gained from increased media visibility.

Identity is not temporally consistent either, as Yoshino (2007) describes in the development of his identity as a gay man. People have shifting relationships with their identities over time. Renee described this at length in terms of her religious identity.

Renee: My family has considered me Catholic for years. Born under a Catholic family. Baptized Catholic. Went to catechism, confirmed, the whole deal. And I've never considered myself to be a Catholic because it's never felt like, the relationship between me and the church has never been one of agreement [...] And then as time goes on, I realize there are things about it that I do identify with. And it's the tradition of it. It's that my family's always been there. It's that every holiday I've ever had has some relevance in the Catholic Church. And so I found words that make it make sense. [...] And in that point, that relationship, I

identified myself as a recovering Catholic. And it was like, and that felt ok. That was the sense of where I fit there. And then over time, it became like a cultural Catholicism and like now, I feel really comfortable identifying myself that way.

Renee's discussion here demonstrates the complex back and forth between identities, institutionalization, ritual, social bonds, and self-definition. Although this example still privileges self-definition, it demonstrates the way context affects how people define themselves. Similarly, gamer identity can shift over time. In an email exchange a few months after the original interviews, Connie said that she would not have identified as a gamer at the time of the interview but, as she had recently bought a Wii, she currently does: "I had been a gamer growing up and now am it again." Chuck said that he identified as a gamer now that he plays so much, but he went through a long period where he did not. Moreover, when he was a child, though he played video games, he did not identify as a gamer: "That wasn't a thing. There wasn't a gamer. You were an 8-year-old boy, you played Nintendo." Recent research and popular discourse have conflated the act of playing video games and being a gamer. Gamer is a particular construction that both researchers and marketers have helped create; both have a role in recreating the category of gamer. So far, this has only involved developing new ways of defining gamers. Context, however, also shapes whether or not people identify as gamers. Those who wish to alter the construction of this category must be attentive to this, as well as the performance and the social precarity of gamer identity

### **Performing Precarious Gamer Identities**

Butler describes identity as a performance. "[P]erformativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effect through its naturalization in the

context of a body understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (2006, p. xv). This notion of performativity highlights the absence of internal identities, but also that structures themselves are empowered via performance. Butler’s concept of performativity, as she explains in her response to Benhabib (1995), is not akin to Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical self. People are not simply playing parts in different social contexts (though I would argue people do that as well). Rather, for Butler the performance of gender is much more like a speech act (Austin, 1962). The performance of gender is what constitutes gender. These performances must draw on a broader system of meaning, which helps render those utterances, those performances, intelligible.

The analysis of media consumption is one part of unpacking how research participants construct and perform their identities. Most studies tend to focus on the former, the individual’s act of construction (Barker, 1997; Caughey, 1994; Fisherkiller, 1997). Using a different approach, Robins and Aksoy (2005) provide a model for studying media consumption, drawing on the work of John Dewey and Victor Turner, that moves beyond a closed notion of “identities” and investigates the importance of experience in media consumption habits. In their example of Turkish migrants watching Turkish television, the viewers’ motivation was not the reinforcement of a Turkish identity, but a way to make Turkish culture ordinary again. Steele and Brown (1995) address the performance of mediated identity in their study of teenagers bedrooms. They look at the ways teens use media in constructing their sense of self. Rather than focus on particular texts, they look at how the adolescents piece together various texts and the influence of social relationships and dynamics, including race and gender, on this

selection process. Kerr, Brereton, Kucklich, and Flynn (2004) similarly look at video game play in the context of other media consumption.

There is something commonsensical about imagining that we can get a sense of people's identities via their media consumption. As Gross describes, "[b]eing gay did not make me a reader, but it powerfully directed my reading choices and shaped my tastes" (1998, p. 88). Zahriel, in recalling her childhood television consumption of *Bosom Buddies*, stated, "[m]y fascination with cross dressing came at a very early age." Media consumption makes up part of our narratives of self (Giddens, 1991). As Gray describes in regards to her interviewees, "[y]oung people's experiences and understandings of media engagements indicate that they experience these narratives as possibilities [...] different physical, familial, and class locations are necessary parts of the story if we are to understand how media matter to their queer identity work" (M. L. Gray, 2009, p. 164). This was, in part, why I focused on interviewees' media tastes in the survey and in the interviews.

Participants shared this assumption that media choices signify certain identity types. When Connie came to my home for a gaming interview, she perused my bookshelf and said, "Ok, I see what you're like." Hatshepsut similarly tried to get a sense of me from my selection of games brought in for her gaming interview. Most wanted to know if and what games I played. I bonded with many interviewees over shared media tastes. My own ambivalence about identifying as a gamer was probably reflected in the fact that interviewees did not consistently assume I was a gamer. Some assumed I was not until I displayed some gamer knowledge. Others assumed I was and were surprised at my

ignorance when they mentioned a game with which I was unfamiliar. In some cases interviewees assumed that I knew more about gaming than they did. In others, we recognized our shared feelings of not wanting or feeling capable of making that identificatory leap to gamer-dom, even though we played many video games.

How others see us, shapes if we identify as gamers. That is the other side of performance: the precarity of identity. In her recent work, Butler (2009) has proposed that precarity works hand in hand with performativity. Precarity refers to the ways one must perform identities in an intelligible way, in a way that others can "read," in order to be recognized. One might perform in a variety of transgressive ways in order to destabilize categories, but "to be a subject at all requires first complying with certain norms that govern recognition – that make a person recognizable. And so, non-compliance calls into question the viability of one's life, the ontological conditions of one's persistence" (p. xi). She discusses this at the level of the nation-state and citizenship, but her articulation is useful for a variety of types of identity. Identifying as a gamer, for example, does not necessitate fulfilling a specific set of criteria, and yet being recognized as a gamer implies performing intelligibly the codes of game consumption. Identifying as, and being seen as, a gamer is done in relation to social norms surrounding that category. The position of gaming in other social hierarchies also affects whether people identify as gamers.

One way of unpacking the relationship between culture, power, and identity in relation to media consumption is to look at Bourdieu's three types of capital (1984, p. 114; , 1997): cultural , social, and economic, or put more colloquially: what you know,



who you know and what you own. While economic capital can lead to cultural and social capital, this is not an immutable connection. One can convert social and cultural capital, for instance, into economic capital. In this way Bourdieu offers a much more nuanced definition of class than Marxism, which defines it solely in terms of relationship to the means of production (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 34). Structures shape, but do not define, how individuals interact with others. People can deploy strategies, strategies defined in the social structure, in their practices as agents. Dominated agents must have the resources to recreate the social system in order to reshape the system.

It is only when the dominated have the material and symbolic means of rejecting the definition of the real that is imposed on them through logical structures reproducing the social structures and to lift the censorships which it implies...that arbitrary principles of the prevailing classification can appear as such and it therefore becomes necessary to undertake the work on conscious systematization and express rationalization which marks the passage from doxa<sup>xiv</sup> to orthodoxy. (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 169)

In this dissertation, I argue that researchers, agents positioned to recreate these definitions, must take the steps to redefine gamer as a category and its relationship to mainstream media culture.

### ***Gamer Cultural Capital***

When he arrived for the first interview on a rainy, October day, Devon sported an orange t-shirt with a picture of a 1980s-era Nintendo controller and the word “Gamer” on it. This made the question of whether or not he identified as a gamer rather redundant, but I asked it anyway as one should be hesitant to make assumptions based on outward appearances. Indeed, Devon mentioned being a gamer a few times during the interview. Specifically, he defined this identity in terms of consumption of specific types of texts:

“it's my main hobby. [...] I like to play games, board games, video games, it doesn't matter. I also play *WoW*<sup>xy</sup> [...] I played *EverQuest* when that was out. Oh my gosh, wasted so much time on those games.” Consumption, the spending of resources (time, money, energy) on selected texts and objects, has long been described as a way of displaying identity or group belonging (Bourdieu, 1984; Hebdige, 1979; Simmel, 1957; Thornton, 1996; Veblen, 1965 [1899]). This is particularly true in studies of fan cultures (Barker, 1997; J. Gray, Sandvoss, & Harrington, 2007; Jenkins, 2006b).

The relationship between identity and media has been looked at both in terms of how identities shape media choices as well as how media consumption potentially shapes identity (Trepte, 2006, p. 260). Jackie Stacey, for one, argues that “[s]pectatorship” should be viewed “as part of a more general cultural construction of identities” (1991, p. 199). What is interesting here is that interviewees reflexively interpreted how their consumption defines them as gamers, or members of other groups, or not. That is, they do not play a certain type of game to display some attachment to a gaming identity; rather a certain type of engagement with consumption is indicative to them of their right to claim that identity. Gamer identity is a consumption-based identity, not just an identity to which consumption habits are attributed.

It is in the context of certain social constructions of gamer that individuals identify as gamers. As Bourdieu describes, social agents must make choices within certain social frameworks. In doing, so he argues for of theory of power which is much less deterministic than structuralism, while simultaneously maintaining the power of external structures on shaping individual choices (1990, p. 9).

[R]ejection of mechanistic theories in no way implies that... we should bestow on some creative free will the free and willful power to constitute, on the instant, the meaning of the situation ... and that we should reduce the objective intentions and constituted significations of actions and works to the conscious and deliberate intentions of their authors. (1977, p. 73)

While the pre-determinedness of their choices remains crucial, choice is a substantial factor in this theory (1977, p. 15). The assumed freedom people have in identifying as gamers masks the ways industrial, popular and academic discourses define this identity.

The tastes and practices of those that play video games do not define gaming culture, although there are texts that are prominent in interviewees' memories. Twenty-two interviewees brought up playing the *Mario Bros* games, and eleven mentioned *The Legend of Zelda* series. Interviewees viewed these texts as part of generational culture, rather than as part of gaming fan culture (though they exist as both). There is not necessarily a static standard of gaming, however, to which one looks in order to assess one's gamer identity. As Bourdieu describes, culture is a representative practice, symbol, more than it is an objective reality (1977, p. 2). "Culture, for Bourdieu, refers to the resources or to the material, the code and frames that people use in building and articulating their own worldviews, their attitudes to life and social status" (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 26). He calls this the *habitus*<sup>xvi</sup>, the process by which people internalize outer structural dynamics. "[H]abitus which results from the homogeneity of the conditions of existence is what enables practices to be objectively harmonized without any intentional calculation of conscious reference to a norm and mutually adjusted *in the absence of any direct interaction* or, *a fortiori*, explicit co-ordination" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 80). A similar influence can be seen in individuals' relationship to the category of gamer, for example.

Sometimes people said they were not gamers because they did not play certain types of games, like games with deep narratives or games focused on killing. Amy might play a game “on the caliber of *World of Warcraft*” once every few years, but as for the puzzle games she played on a more regular basis she said: “I don’t really consider them video games as much.” Interviewees deemed certain games as outside the gamer *habitus*. Ephram described his sister as a casual gamer because she only plays *Dance Dance Revolution* or *Rock Band*. Other forms of consumption, demonstrate a claim to the gamer identity. Connie stated, “I think of gamers as folks who play video games very often, owning not just older game systems but also new systems and games.” According to Klara, “a gamer by today's definition is either someone who either plays *WoW* or *Halo*, and like a PS3 or XBox. I mean I have a Nintendo 64 and a Wii and those aren't usually associated with gamers.” Certain types of games, amounts of play, and general knowledge, constitute the cultural capital of gaming (re: Bourdieu, 1997). Chuck described getting “in jokes” and knowing who developers are as part of why he identifies as a gamer. These kinds of cultural capital are necessary, but not sufficient for identifying as a gamer. Both Pouncy and Christine did not consider themselves gamers, yet both keep up with video games to some extent by following reviews and new releases; instead, Pouncy identified as a nerd and Christine a casual gamer.

Just playing a certain type of games for a certain amount of time does not define one as a gamer, however one cannot really be a gamer without engaging in video game play in some particular ways. We can see correlations between this and how Michaels describes the historical and social forces which shape cultural identity: “cultural identity

in the twenties required, as we have seen, the anticipation of culture by race: to be a Navajo you have to do Navajo things, but you can't really count as doing Navajo things unless you already are a Navajo" (1992, p. 677). Gamer identity was described by interviewees as a general approach to games, often tied to a willingness to sacrifice one's time, a form of consumption (time is money after all). Tala, for example, identified as a gamer because, as she put it, "I'm not ashamed to admit that I play video games and I truly enjoy them and that I don't feel that an evening is necessarily wasted by playing a video game." This also requires, she stressed, a willingness and ability to be critical of games, a reflexive distance cultivated by true consumers but not casual dilettantes.

Elaborating on this theme, Bryan has many friends that play video games of various types, but he did not consider any of them a gamers. He identified as one, however, because if he had nothing else he had to do his first choice would be playing a video game. This is because it is not just if one plays, but one's attachment to the medium. Hatshepsut identified as a gamer even though she doesn't currently own a game system. Someone stole her old console, and upon moving to Philadelphia from California, she was still in search of work at the time of the interview: "But once I find a job I'm going to go out and buy video games (laughs). It'll be my first priority after that." Perhaps unsurprisingly, articulating how and if one is a gamer is intimately tied to consumption, however, it is not necessarily in the conspicuous sense described by Veblen (1965 [1899]). It is not as simple as playing games or not, or being in possession of the cultural capital symbols of gaming culture (a murkily defined concept at best), but rather using these as part of one's performance of gamer identity.

In every instance, interviewees articulated not identifying as a gamer by a lack of adequate consumption. “I don’t play enough” was a sentiment echoed by seven out of eight interviews who said they were not gamers. Sasha, the final non-gamer, still tied that fact to consumption however: “I don't think I would spend my last dollar on a game. I wouldn't pay to go to a video game show.” Inadequate knowledge about gaming (another form of subcultural capital) was another reason people gave for not identifying as a gamer. Julia did not think of herself as a gamer because, “I don't think I know enough about games to you know to go into a game store and start throwing stuff around like I know what I'm talking about. I don't know what I'm talking about!” Her partner Elise, however, countered, “but you get into it with the guy—(to me) there's a guy in GameStop over in a strip mall by us—(to Julia) and like you, to me it seems like you know what you are talking about.” Julia went on to explain that this was only in the context of *Castlevania* (Konami, 1986-present), the series of games she was discussing. She did not view her cultural capital as enough to earn her identity as a gamer.

Though gamer identity is a chosen one, people might be excluded from becoming one in various ways. “Play is situational and reliant not simply on abstract rules but also on social networks, attitudes, or events in one’s non-game life, technological abilities or limits, structural affordances or limits, local cultures, and personal understandings of leisure” (T. L. Taylor, 2006b, p. 156). Several interviewees pointed out that they did not play as children because their families could not afford consoles. Some saved money with siblings to buy consoles. Others only played computer games, because the purchase of a computer could be justified by their parents for academic purposes. Still others received

used consoles from family friends. Even now, cost affects their decision to buy consoles or identify as gamers. Gregory played many games, and has for most of his life, but he did not think of himself as the kind of gamer that seeks out tournaments or would pay full price for a game: “\$60? That’s a T-Mobile bill! Girl, that’s electric!” He said later in the second interview that he buys nearly all of his games used, and stressed that when he had a PlayStation2 part of the logic for buying it was that it could also play DVDs. He got his PSP<sup>xvii</sup> after his cousin found a sale on them and because he can access the internet through it.

Though class does not define who identified as a gamer, it did shape at a basic level how people engage with the medium. Income directly affected whether or not people could afford to engage in the proper amount of consumption to earn gamer status. That is not to say that economic capital was a necessary precursor to cultural capital. Other resources, however, like time (to seek out deals) were necessary to compensate for a lack of funds. Related to this, interviewees, or people they knew, who lacked certain levels of manual dexterity or who possessed physical disabilities could not play certain kinds of games.<sup>xviii</sup> Others played because health problems required them to spend a great amount of times indoors and it provided them with a more engaged form of entertainment than less interactive media. Researchers cannot only assume that people play because they love games, or do not play because they do not understand them. The assumption of choice has obscured researchers’ and marketers’ understanding of the gaming audience writ large. When women felt less able to claim gamer cultural capital, for example, it indicates that gender shapes who can use this capital. Gender makes precarious the

performance of gamer identity by women. Moreover, claiming gamer cultural capital, for anyone, has social repercussions. Some are positive, yes, but some are negative, which is why some people disavowed the importance of representation in this medium.

### ***Gamer Social Capital***

Gamer identity is a form of social capital, in both a positive and negative sense. Being a gamer can result from, and in, establishing connections with other gamers. For some people, not having connections with others who self-identify as gamers was a reason they did not identify as gamers. At the same time, the negative “geeky” connotations of video game play led some people to reject gamer identity. In order to maintain their social status they deny, down play, or even hide their gaming. In sum, not everyone can or does equally convert their gamer cultural capital into gamer social capital. In turn, gamer social capital shapes, in some ways, whether one’s game play counts as gamer cultural capital.

Devon described the positive aspects of gamer social capital.

Devon: Whenever I make friends, I’m always excited if somebody else plays video games [...] I think a lot of people that identify as gamers have similar personality types. Outside of the fact that we all like video games, if we weren’t talking about video games we could also talk about similar things.

Having a social circle defined by gaming was part of what defined the gamer identities of Zahriel and Ephram as well. Connie similarly attributed her newly rekindled gamer identity to the fact that she now talks with other people about games. Those that did not identify as gamers related it to the fact that they were not social about it. Violet said that because she does not play online she does not consider herself a gamer. Several interviewees mentioned the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* as a touchstone of gamer



credibility.<sup>xix</sup> Losing this, as Malcolm felt he had since he no longer played *WoW*, can problematize one's ability to identify with this category. When asked if he identified as a gamer, Malcolm said, "I don't really have any gaming cred, as it were, anymore. So yeah, I would still check that box, but that's just because I would still sort of think of myself as that. But I don't think a gamer would consider me a gamer."<sup>xx</sup> There is an uneasy tension between how people identify themselves, and how others imagine them as gamers.

Gaming can also act as a form of social capital outside of gamer circles. Klara's mother is Japanese and her father is Norwegian. She said that her mother was not a gamer, but she would really get into games when around her Japanese friends because of games' association with Japanese-ness. That is, performing as a game player in certain social contexts allowed her to express her Japanese identity. Renee, who did not identify as a gamer, still felt like she gained status from her familiarity with games.

Renee: It's funny, because I've always played them I don't even think about it anymore [...] Again not a gamer, so it's not geeky, because geeky means gamer and playing games is something that is totally different. But at this point, I'm 30. I've been playing video games as long as I can remember. I had some friends over and we were playing video games and I was like, "Oh I got a new game. Like you guys aren't game people but you will like this" [...] One of my friends was like, "It's kind of cool to see you totally geek out." And I'm like (looks shocked), "Pardon you I'm not 'geeking out'!" [...] But it's kind of this thing like wow, you've really been doing this for like 30 years. So it's kind of like a little identity thing I guess. Like a little feather in the cap (Laughs).

Even though she does not convert her cultural capital into gamer social capital or gamer identity, Renee gains a sort of status from her gaming abilities.

Identities are not only positive. We might identify *as not* something just as we might identify *as* something else. As McRobbie describes, "[o]thers are an integral, necessary part of who we are" (2005, p. 30). Both difference and sameness help define

identity (Sampson, 1993, p. 92). Identifying as queer, for example, may be expressed as identifying as not a member of a particular gender or sexuality, not just because it is an all-encompassing category, but also because it can be articulated as a category that defies categorization. Identities can also be formed via disidentifications, in Munoz's (1999) sense, when individuals see themselves in and yet not fully represented in the portrayal of a group. Generally interviewees, like Yates and Littleton's (1999) focus group participants, discussed this in terms of the negative connotations about gamers.

Bryan and Evan both eschewed video game play in high school, in part because it was not a cool thing to do. Tracey referenced the negative associations about gamers when he stressed, "So I'm a gamer. I'm just not *obsessed* with it." Sara was a bit ambivalent about identifying as a gamer because "there's that whole negative connotation that gamers are nerds." Carol did not identify as a gamer because, as she says, "I'm so used to the people who do identify as gamers that I've know over the years—I haven't, I guess I never related to them [...] I feel like I don't fit in with that geekier antisocial aspect of it." To Renee, who has played video games consistently for most of her life, "gamer has an image in my head and its Snickers and Mountain Dew and 3 o'clock in the morning." Cody recognized the negative stereotypes about gamers, but defied them.

When asked if he identified as a gamer he said:

Cody: Yeah. Why not? I mean on the outside, no. But you know I don't ever hide my love for video games. I don't really care what people think about it [...] I think people label [gamers] as kids who sit in their basement [...] Like I'll beat you in a video game basketball game, and I'll kick your ass in real life.

It is important to note here, that he does not display his gamer identity either, even if he identified as one. This is because the performance of identities in the social sphere has important implications, as Evan described.

Evan: Actually being with [my boyfriend] changed my perception of gaming a little bit. Because I never felt guilty or like, it should be a guilty pleasure that once every six to nine months I'd play games. I was like, I don't do it often. It's not like I waste my life away doing it. But even that little bit [he] criticized and I was like now I'm starting to think it's juvenile, maybe I should get rid of my game system.

As shown here, there are many different levels, from high school coolness to romantic relationships, in which identifying as a gamer, or even just playing video games, can be a problematic social position to inhabit. Like other identities, choosing to identify as a member of a particular group affects one's relationship to others, as well as the investments one has in that identifier. When it comes to gamer identity, defined by consumption, this investment, or lack thereof, is applied to the medium as well. People tied their opinion of games to whether they thought representation in video games is important.

### **Guilty Pleasures and Marginalized Media**

Evan's statement above also emphasizes another theme from the interviews, the guilt surrounding certain types of media consumption. As with a variety of marginalized genres, from soap operas (Ang, 1989) to romance novels (Radway, 1984), there is a stigma attached to certain media, a guilty pleasure. Not even those who consume these texts necessarily speak highly of them. Some texts, genres, and media are viewed as either feminine or juvenile, and hence negatively.

Like Radway's (1984) romance readers, some players described video games as a drug habit. Bryan, for example, referenced the game he played for the second interview, *Disgaea* (Altus, 2003), as the "crack" that got him back into gaming. Amy referenced the addictive property of games several times, and claimed this as a main reason she did not play more. This articulation of popular media as a narcotic has its roots in early mass culture critiques, like those of the Frankfurt School (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1993). "[T]he dominance of the ideology of mass culture apparently even extends to the common sense of everyday thinking: for ordinary people too it appears to offer a credible framework of interpretation for judging cultural forms" (Ang, 2000, p. 267). Games are also "silly" and thus not to be taken seriously, as Newman (2008) reviews. Interviewees echoed this sentiment.

Several interviewees acknowledged minor embarrassment or disparagement of their other media tastes as well. They often signaled this by laughing after they admitted they consumed a particular television show, or averting their eyes slightly when they acknowledged a guilty pleasure. Tracey was ashamed to admit that he watched *Desperate Housewives*. Carol, even though she does not "really believe in guilty pleasures too much" watched *Gossip Girl* "and it is a little embarrassing." The social dimensions of identity, the performance of self enacted through media consumption, explains some of these negative feelings.

Renee: So whenever anyone asks that question about what do you read I always go to this stockpile of really good books that I've read. And for some reason you want to be like, "I read good books." And I do enjoy them. I really do. But I also really enjoy—which I never answer this question truthfully, but it's true— I really like books about vampires.

Guilty pleasure, like shame more generally, is a product of social interaction as Sartre (1989) describes. At the same time, however, guilty pleasures also indicate that we do think of ourselves as being certain *kinds* of people. “Shame bears directly on self-identity because it is essentially anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a coherent biography” (Giddens, 1991, p. 65). Consuming disparaged texts, though a person may enjoy doing so, chafes against this sense of self that person has developed and wishes to perform.

This will be addressed more in the next two chapters, but the fact that video games are seen as a guilty pleasure and as a (sometimes) negative medium affects whether or not people think that representation in games matters. When teaching undergraduates about video games, for example, my students rarely consider games as important as television or film. This is particularly true when it comes to analyzing minority representation in games. Some people see games as stupid, childish and violent; as a former student put it, “I’m not really insulted that my group is being underrepresented in video games. I don’t care that the hand holding the gun on the screen<sup>xxi</sup> is not black.” This may be in part because, as some interviewees and former students have discussed, there is less critical attention to representation in both popular and academic discourse about games than is paid to other media. Audiences, thus, do not have the theoretical tools to address this medium. It also recalls the high/low culture critique offered by MacDonald (2006 [1960]) or the Frankfurt School (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1993), though articulated in a manner which both counters and embodies the fears of those critics. Rather than argue that low culture is damaging, interviewees argued

that it is inconsequential and thus cannot do real damage. This is because video games and their audience are viewed as marginal.

Those who wish to argue for the importance of representation in games must deal more directly with the marginality of the medium. Zahriel pointed out, that “most people have a television. Not as many of us have a console attached to it, you know.” She went on to argue, as I do here, that combating this marginalization might offer the solution to the problem of representation in video games: “People are starting to say, ‘Hey wait. A lot of people play video games. A lot more people play video games than we thought.’ They don't have to play in the closet any more. Yay!” The site for struggle then, is not the construction of the gamer audience necessarily, but the construction of games as a particular type of media.

## **Conclusion**

As reviewed in chapter two, arguments for the representation of marginalized groups in games, are often made in conjunction with the assertion that members of these groups are or could be gamers. Cultural production studies argue that the lack of representation of marginalized groups in games is attributable to the fact that the gamer market, at least in Europe and the North America, is constructed as primarily young, heterosexual, White and male. Researchers tend to position their work in opposition to this construction, question the construction, and offer their own alternative constructions. This is an important line of inquiry when it comes to the politics of representation in video games. To say that the representation of marginalized groups is important in video games because members of these groups *could* be gamers, however, misses the point. In

this chapter, I moved beyond the construction of the gamer market and looked at how audiences relate to this construction. I used critical identity theory to make sense of this process of identifying as a gamer. The audience is an industrial construction, yes, and these constructions shape how people approach media. Whether people see themselves as members of the intended audience or not shapes their reactions to the medium. Simply adding diversity to games, however, will not automatically make the gamer audience more diverse. Other factors such as the relationship between “gamer” and other identities, different contexts, individual performances of and the precariousness of gamer identity in relation to cultural and social capital, and games’ position in relation to mainstream media culture are important factors as well. Activism and research on the politics of representation in video games must deal directly with the marginality of games as a medium.

Butler (1995c) argues that resignification can subvert the discourses which construct gender (p. 135). “The deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated” (Butler, 2006, p. 203). The goal of researchers, activists and audiences should not just be to redefine what it means to be a gamer. Those who wish to change representation in video games do not need to offer a different or alternative formulation of gamer identity. That is not to say that differences among those that play video games are unimportant. Differences are important. However, “what is called for is the difficult work of cultural translation in which difference is honored without (a) assimilating difference to identity or (b) making difference an unthinkable fetish of alterity” (Butler,

1995c, p. 140). The marketing of games to women is a prime example of this. The attention paid by researchers and marketers to the gender inequity in video games resulted in the further reification of the alterity of female-identified video game audience members. These approaches may have resulted in a kind of media pluralism, but pluralism is not the same as diversity. Diversity, however, is the logical political conclusion of the research reviewed in chapter two.

The argument that links representation of marginalized groups in games to the expansion of the gamer audience assumes that players want and need to identify with on-screen characters. To appeal to female gamers, for instance, people assume that female characters must be included in the game. As discussed here, this does not take into consideration the other factors that shape gamer identity. Moreover, there is little research on the link between how players identify *as* members of specific groups and how they identify *with* video game characters. In the next chapter I address the complex processes that shape how and when players identify with video game characters and avatars.



## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> The term gamer is also often adopted by people who are avid board game and/or pen-and-paper role-playing game fans. Some interviewees pointed out that their identity as a gamer encompassed these types of play as well. In the context of this dissertation I use gamer specifically in relation to video game play.

<sup>ii</sup> I was inspired to use this quote after a talk at the Annenberg School for Communication by scholar Carla Ganito entitled: "One is not made, but rather becomes, a feminine mobile phone."

<sup>iii</sup> I contrast this with Gauntlett's (2007) claim that, based on his findings, individuals have a unified sense of self regardless of what postmodern theorists may claim. More than being simply intellectually interesting, contextual theories of the self actually offer good explanations for how individual interviewees talk about their identities.

<sup>iv</sup> Other work looks at how cyberculture in general has been gendered as male largely because of the exclusion of women's voices from texts which serve as the cultural substance and points of reference within that subculture (Flanagan & Booth, 2002).

<sup>v</sup> This demographic outline is drawn from the raw survey data from IGDA's 2005 workforce diversity survey. I was given permission to use this data during another research project (Jason Della Rocca, Personal Communication, July 20, 2007).

<sup>vi</sup> Researchers must always negotiate participants' expectations, recognizing that even as we try to "naturalize" the research process we are never going to get an unobfuscated glimpse into the lives of our interviewees. Interviewees are always-already performing.

<sup>vii</sup> Interestingly in an interview with Carol's husband Chuck, he confessed that he felt guilty that they always buy video game consoles together, even though he ends up playing them the most. She, in turn, enjoys playing them but needs an excuse to make the purchase.

<sup>viii</sup> Her mother actually walked through during part of the gaming interview and insisted that I really should talk to her son, who is the "real gamer." Upon watching Sasha play, however, she said "but she's doing alright." Sasha seemed annoyed by the exchange.

<sup>ix</sup> An interactive map of game developers is available online: <http://www.gamedevmap.com/>. Accessed June 22, 2010.

<sup>x</sup> This is the earliest report I could access.

<sup>xi</sup> A similar argument was made for why the WNBA actively did not target the lesbian market: a. they were coming anyway and b. they did not want to increase the association between women's sports and lesbianism.

<sup>xii</sup> In Gauntlett's study participants use Legos to create representations of their identities. As they create single creations that do not reference media, Gauntlett claims that identity are both not fragmentary and not informed by media.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Not because the participant transitioned during the research process, but because he identified as both male and transgender.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Doxa* is the naturalization of normative practices into an apparent objective reality. *Doxa* is the “common sense” that does not have to explain itself to exert its influence. The “effect” of the *habitus* and *doxa* are visible in individual practices. The norms which structure these practices are produced through systems like education. Power, in either case, is not something tangible and assertively wielded. Rather its presence and influence exist in a largely symbolic manner.

<sup>xv</sup> Shorthand for *World of Warcraft*.

<sup>xvi</sup> It must be said that this term is not original to Bourdieu; it was used by both Mauss and Weber "to designate human activity in its real and immediate context... as the structured and determined attitudes that produce structuring and determining practices" (Bell, 1997, p. 77). Bourdieu, however, has helped developed it further, arguing that it “is not only a structuring structure...but also a structured structure: the principle of divisions into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes” (1984, p. 170)

<sup>xvii</sup> PlayStation Portable, a handheld gaming device.

<sup>xviii</sup> Making games accessible to individuals with visual, hearing, and physical impairments is a small if growing area of interest in the game development community; there is, for example, a special interest group in the International Game Developers association dedicated to accessibility issues.

<sup>xix</sup> Related to this a friend pointed out that she began to feel like a gamer once she started playing *WoW*. Indeed my own ambivalence with identifying as a gamer is tied to the fact that I do not play this or other MMORPGs, and that I feel doing so is a necessary form of “gamer cred” for me to openly accept that categorization.

<sup>xx</sup> In deference to the demands of his graduate thesis and teaching responsibilities, Malcom’s gaming is mostly confined to quick flash games on his computer. Juul notes that such life demands often lead once hardcore players to prefer casual games (2010, p. 51).

<sup>xxi</sup> Here the student is referencing an assertion made in the documentary *Game Over: gender, race and violence in video games* (Huntemann & Media Education Foundation., 2002). The commentators in the movie point out, as have other scholars (G. King & Krzywinska, 2006) that in FPSs, where the identity of the avatar is of no consequence, the hand (the only part players see of their avatar) is always given a White skin-tone.

## Chapter 5

### **Process, not Product: Identification and interactivity in video games**

In the 1980s, Clair Huxtable of *The Cosby Show* was my mother's TV-mom idol. She was exactly the type of mother my mother wanted to be, strong and independent yet caring and always there for her family. If I were to read this as a researcher investigating identification there are many ways in which I might approach this viewer/character relationship. I could signal it as an instance of surprising cross-racial identification, or conversely an expected identification along the lines of shared gender. I might claim that it was a case of aspirational identification, in relation to their differing class status. In knowing my mother, however, I doubt that any of those are particularly true. There is something in Clair that my mother both recognized in herself and wished for herself. She simultaneously saw their similarities and their differences, and it is that which allowed her to connect to the character.

The complexity of this relationship between my mother and a television character is probably so familiar as to seem academically uninteresting. When taken down to the level of actual viewers the broad strokes of research, which describe identification as either a result of sameness, or interesting when it occurs across difference, are rendered obviously flat. Yet what interests me in the example above is that the phenomena we see vary greatly with what identifier we as researchers deem important. Research on representation and identification often conflates identifying *as* a member of a particular group with identifying *with* a media character<sup>i</sup>. Researchers tend to extrapolate identities from identifiers (gender, ancestry, sexuality, etc), which are themselves unstable

signifiers. What it means to be a woman, Asian, or bisexual is relative and contextual. If one draws from the discussion of identity in the previous chapter, one sees that, as Latour describes, “[r]elating to one group or another is an on-going process made up of uncertain, fragile, controversial, and ever-shifting ties” (2005, p. 28). This is also a useful way to think about how people identify *with* characters.

Arguments for representation in video games often hinge upon assumptions about who plays the games. In the market logic sense, marginalized groups should be represented in video games, so that members of those groups can play games without feeling excluded. In the educative sense, the marginalized should be represented *well*, so that those who are members of the corollary non-marginalized identity groups do not have a skewed sense of those marginalized groups. In either case, there is an assumption that inhabiting a specific identity category will determine how people approach texts. As explored in the previous chapter, however, identity can shape but does not determine our relationship with another identity. The problem, is that identities are used as the “independent variable” in audience based studies on representation: “it seems that what we expect from the term *identity* will be cultural specificity, and that on occasion we even expect *identity* and *specificity* to work interchangeably” (Butler, 1995a, p. 441). That identification is part of the process that forms identities, however, does not mean that specific identities, like gender, race and sexuality, define identification with characters.

Further, many assume that people identify more closely with video game characters than with other media characters due to the interactive nature of games. This, however, conflates the activity of playing games with how the games as texts are

interpreted. I use Stromer-Galley's (2004) distinction between interactivity as a process and product as a tool for distinguishing the game text from gaming as an activity. Games are interactive in terms of their ludic and narrative properties, but they are also bodily and socially interactive. These factors shape players' relationship with the game text, and how or if they identify with the on-screen characters.

In this chapter, I disentangle the ways individuals identify *with* video game and media characters in ways that do not always correspond to identifying *as* members of specific marginalized groups. I explicate the difference between digital game characters and avatars, as well as the game as a text and gaming as an activity. I discuss how games' ludic, bodily and social interactive aspects result in players' identifying *as* themselves rather than identifying *with* the game characters/avatars; whereas narrative aspects of games help players identify *with* characters. I also discuss identification's ties to perceived realism and its relative unimportance when it comes to texts used for fantasy and escapism. That is not to say that people cannot identify with fictional characters. When people use texts for fantasy, however, they view representation as trivial and thus see identification as unimportant. This also influences how and if interviewees view the importance of media representation, as explored in the next chapter.

### **Identification and Media**

In media studies, identification has generally been looked at in quantitative and media effects studies, ranging from video games player-character connections (McDonald & Kim, 2001; Schneider, Lang, Shin, & Bradley, 2004) to the effect of identification on aggression in television audiences (Eyal & Rubin, 2003) to the effect of

celebrity endorsements on consumer behavior (Basil, 1996) to how viewers choose television programs (Edwards, 2001; Harwood, 1999). Other research looks at the relevance of gender similarity in identifying with television characters (Hoffner, 1996; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005) or sexual identity in interpreting a teleplay (Jodi Cohen, 1991). Konijn and Hoorn (2005) sketch out the psychological processes of identification. Psychoanalytic perspectives tend to focus on texts (see for example Metz, 1985; Mulvey, 1975). Indeed, some work on identity and identification in game studies has investigated the usefulness of psychoanalytic perspectives (Carr, 2002; Rehak, 2003; Santos & White, 2005) or social psychology (Klimmit, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009). Claims about how players identify with video game characters, or even media characters more generally, are rarely examined in any qualitative, audience-focused way. Work on identities in specific video game texts has largely focused on textual analysis (see for example Beasley & Collins Standley, 2002; Bryce & Rutter, 2005; Delp, 1997; Everett, 2005; S. C. Murphy, 2004). Audience research in this area often focuses on online gaming (Castronova, 2005; Eladhari, 2007; Filiciak, 2003; Mortensen, 2007a, 2007b) or virtual spaces more generally (Boellstorff, 2008; Turkle, 1984, 1995b).

Many studies start by looking at how one specific identity (gender, race, sexuality, etc.) shapes audiences identification with and interpretation of a text. Such studies tend to essentialize identities and their impact audiences' approaches to texts. It is important to analyze what identities texts make available for identification. Media, however, cannot simply transmit identities "from above." Similarly, the contexts from which audiences approach a text affect how they are going to read it. This is seen, for

example, in the ways socio-cultural context impact audience responses to texts (most famously analyzed in Liebes & Katz, 1990). It is necessary to tie this idea that audiences bring their own “baggage” to their interpretations of texts to the previously discussed critical theories of identity. Evans and Gamman, for example, argue that gaze theory is complicated when one looks at the fluidity of identity categories, “because identity itself is not fixed, it is inappropriate to posit any single identification with images” (2004, p. 215). Those that argue that marginalized groups should be represented in games, so that members of those groups have characters to identify with, collapse *being identified as* a member of a group, with identifying *as* a member of that group. In turn, they assume that players identify *with* video game characters who are also members of that group.

Largely, research on media representation focuses on race, sexuality, gender, and, more recently, global studies have done work on national or regional identities. However, that we are concerned with these identities is a very specific, historically, socially, and politically constructed emphasis. Researchers often take for granted that these identifiers are important to participants. Ethnographic methods, like those used in this study, are one way of correcting this imbalance: “Only ethnography can begin to answer questions about what people *really* do with media, rather than what we imagine they *might* do, or what close readings of texts *assume* they might do” (Bird, 2003, p. 191 italics in original). By starting with individuals, and not investigating their identification with a specific predetermined text, this study offers a different take on these issues.

A further problem, is researchers do not clearly, and consistently, define identification as a theoretical concept. Jonathan Cohen (2001), in his article “Defining

Identification,” argues that in media studies identification is often talked around but it is not clearly explicated or studied. Some authors, particularly in social psychology, describe identification as taking the perspective of a character (Jonathan Cohen, 2001; Oatley, 1994; Zillmann, 1991). Going further than this, some authors define identification as the process by which a viewer/player/reader takes on the role and mindset of a fictional character (Jonathan Cohen, 2001; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004). Many of these are cognitive based approaches, which seek to quantify audience relationships with media characters. Definitions include references to homophily (McCrosky, Richmond, & Daly, 1975; Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2009), parasocial interaction (Giles, 2002; Hoffner, 1996; Horton & Wohl, 1956), empathy (Zillmann, 1991), transportation (Green & Brock, 2000; Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004), presence (reviewed in Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003) and combinations of those (Eyal & Rubin, 2003; McMahan, 2003). More qualitative research looks other forms of engagement with characters (for examples see Abu-Lughod, 2005; Ang, 1989; Jonathan Cohen, 2001; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Radway, 1984).

Rather than start with a set definition of identification, I instead asked interviewees to tell me whether they identify with video game or other media characters, and what identification meant to them. Often asking the second question resulted in interviewees changing or clarifying their answer to the first. Though some wondered why I did not ask for a definition first, trial-and-error proved that this was a necessary step. Asking interviewees to define identification resulted in several versions of, as Pouncy put it, “the little card you show the cops.” Tanner made a similar reference; identification to



her was “another symbol that could represent you.” Both of these reference a different identification process, which entails *being identified as* a member of a particular group. When I asked interviewees if they identified with media characters first, however, their definitions focused more on whether they identify *with* characters.

My take on identification here is a phenomenological one, in that I am interested in interviewees’ conscious identification processes. As Schutz describes, in reference to phenomenology, “[e]very experience is, thus, not only characterized by the fact *that* it is a consciousness, but it is simultaneously determined by the intentional object *whereof* it is consciousness” (1970, p. 58). As some interviewees pointed out, identification may be primarily subconscious. Audience research, however, is limited by the fact that researchers cannot study the unconscious aspects of identification. Moreover, if the argument is that people will *demand* representation of people “like them” because they can identify with those characters, then these connections must be describable if they are to be politically productive. Identifications become meaningful and useful when they are articulated. As Renee described it, identification involved being able to express one’s connection with a specific category.

Renee: I think of it more as self-labeling. Like, because you can feel identified with something, but you don't necessarily consider yourself identified with it until you use a word to describe it, like until you are able to label what that relationship is [...] It's the words that give that the meaning.

When I describe whether and how interviewees identify with characters here, I am only interested in the extent to which they articulate this process of identification. This is because identification needs to be consciously communicated for it to be useful in the demand for representation.

### **Identifying *with* and/or identifying *as***

Part of the problem in the perceived relationship between identification and the importance of media representation, is the assumption that identification *with* a character is the same as identification *as* a member of a specific group. Although identity, as described in the previous chapter, is part of an identification process, the act of identifying with a fictional character is slightly different. In chapter four, I looked at how interviewees related to the institutional/social category of gamer; that is how and if they identified *as* gamers. In this chapter, I look at interviewees' relationship to texts, how and if they identify *with* video game and other media characters.

Most people I spoke with had not thought of, or had trouble working through, the definition of identification and coming up with examples of characters they identified with. This is hardly surprising considering scholars who study this issue do not agree on what identification means. I asked the question during both interviews, and no interviewee could remember their previous answer, but largely the core of their definitions did not change. Each of my interviewees defined identification somewhat differently but there was one tying thread—finding a connection with a character. The ways interviewees connected with media characters encompassed the expected identifiers, as well as life experiences, personality, actions and choices. In general, it was described as either an emotional or an intellectual connection (or both); a “gut feeling” as Cody put it. As Tala described, in reference to media characters generally, “I empathize with them. I see qualities of myself within them.” Emotionally this connection can be sympathetic or empathetic. Some interviewees, however, said that these feelings occurred

in lieu of identifying with characters. According to Tanner, for example, “We started watching *Bones* recently and I guess I kind of identify with the main character there, just being sort of a strong-willed independent woman in a field that is male-predominant [...] But I don’t really feel a strong connection, it’s more like entertainment.” Here, though she identifies *as* a similar sort of woman as the character, she does not identify with the character *per se*.

The conflation of identification *as* and identification *with* is perhaps why there was so much variability in how interviewees described how and if they identified with media characters. Carol, for instance, described several different kinds of identification. One entails, she said, saying that a particular actress would play me in a movie, or seeing myself in a character, identifying *as* that kind of person.

Carol: But there’s other kinds of identification. I’m a big *Buff*y fan. I would get in these conversations with other fans of the show and we’re talking about them like they’re actually people [...] Or I would get worked up and emotional during certain plot points. I know they’re not real. So there’s that kind of relating.

This type of identification entails identifying *with* the experiences of fictional characters.

Sasha too described occasionally having emotional connections with singer Mary J.

Blige, though she can also relate to people on a more superficial basis as well.

Sasha: I relate to people in different ways. So it depends. Like sometimes when I’m sad, I like to listen to old Mary J. Blige. Like back when she was depressed, her songs were the shiiiiit. [...] And I’m like, “Wow, I really, I understand what you are saying.” Some people, just like some celebrities, I’m like, yo, I would really wear that.

These superficial, in her words, forms of identification are types of identification *as* the kind of person with a particular type of style, but her connection with Blige is more specifically identification *with* the singer’s music and experiences. Although she shares

gender, sexual, and racial identifiers with Blige, those are not the reasons she identified with her, though they may help (Sasha did not say that however). In a more mundane example, Amy was bothered when characters had her name. Having grown up with a name made popular by *Rocky II*, I understand the sentiment. In hearing their name, a person may feel that they are being identified *as* a character, at the same time they feel no identification *with* the character; or their name is attached to meaning (or catch phrase) that they would prefer it not to have.

In a different form of connection, Anya stated that she could identify with characters that were like people she knew. Indeed, a few interviewees mentioned that relating to or feeling like they could be friends with characters was a better description of their relationship with characters than identification, in the sense of seeing themselves as the character. Violet felt that caring about a character was more important than identifying with a character in video games. Bryan described identifying with a narrative rather than a particular character: “I’d say the way that I do identify with a story is with the story itself.”

We can see these variations by comparing two interviewees’ thoughts about identification. Devon and Ephram are partners. I conducted separate first interviews with them, but did a joint gaming interview at the apartment they share. They played the zombie survival-shooter *Left 4 Dead* (Valve, 2008) in cooperative mode while I watched. In the frenzy, they occasionally shot one another and their computer-controlled teammates. They came within feet of completing the “book”<sup>ii</sup> they had selected, but died at the last moment and opted not to continue. When we discussed identification in

relation to this game, they said that they had discussed their separate first interview definitions of the term. Each saw the process of identification differently.

Devon: I would say identification is when you feel that you and the character are going through similar situations. Not necessarily, you know, saying, you know I have fought zombies before. But saying that you could identify with the character if you're like, "Oh, if I was in that situation I would do the same things." Or even though the situation is different I can see similarities between—yes I've never fought zombies but I've been stuck with 3 people that I don't know very well and we've had to work together and people snipe at each other or whatever.

Me: And accidentally shoot each other... (All laugh).

Devon: And accidentally—shit happens. So... (Shrugs and chuckles).

Ephram: I think there has to be something that ties the two together. Like there has to be some kind of similarity. Whether it's coming from the same background, or coming from the same experience, there has to be some kind of commonality between the two people. I don't know, it's kind of similar to the way you (to Devon) were talking about you know, you can kind of identify with the experience they are going through but for me it has to be a little more, I guess, more concrete? I don't know if that makes sense. Like, I think we had this discussion after

Devon: Yeah we had the discussion afterwards (referring to first interview).

Ephram: After we were talking about it. And I was kind of like I can identify with an Asian person or I can identify with a gay person or and to a lesser extent I can kind of identify with other minorities. But it's more of a, I guess and empathy or sympathy towards it versus identification. I don't know.

Even though Ephram focuses on identifying *as* someone in a similar social position, he says that this is not the same as identifying *with* the character *per se*. Identification *as* can result in empathy or sympathy, but not the taking on of a character's role. In the first interview, he said, "I have to be able to not just kind of empathize with the situation but

really be like that person is me. That person is a gay person or is a minority and is really struggling because of that.” Identifying *with* the character however, as Devon pointed out, does not necessitate that type of concrete connection.

Identification *as* a member of a group can lead to identification *with* characters, as some interviewees described. Unsurprisingly, finding some sort of similarity with a character was a primary way in which interviewees described the process of connecting with characters. These similarities could be in terms of physical or social characteristics like race, gender, sexuality, religion, ancestry, body type, nationality, class, and so on. Gregory said, identification means “do I think it represents me or my group of people whether it be Black or gay or middle-aged men living with their parents (laughs).” Evan, similarly, said he could not imagine identifying with a female character. There is a problem, however, when researchers and marketers assume that this type of identification *as* becomes a determining factor in media choices. As Ephram discussed in the second interview, sometimes it gets frustrating identifying with the minority position: “It just got to the point that I just got tired of it. And I just want a break [...] If I hear one more coming of age of a minority overcoming adversity I’m just going to scream.” The very reasons that identifying *as* or *with* a character may be meaningful, can also be the very reasons for not wanting to see texts that include those types of characters.

Identifiers like race, gender, and sexuality, moreover, will not necessarily engender identification. Evan, for example, really identified with the hero Link from *The Legend of Zelda* but not Mario from *Mario Bros* despite their assumed shared heritage.

Evan: The neighborhood I grew up in was all Italian-American, but I didn't even get that Mario and Luigi [...] It wasn't like oh Italian-American, middle class plumbers that's like my family. It wasn't like that! It was just fun and colorful.

He identified with Link, however, because in a lot of his media consumption he identified with heroic characters. Similarly, many interviewees described connecting with characters behaviors, personality, or choices.

Anya: It doesn't necessarily have to be age, race or anything like that. More of what they are doing in the situations they are in.

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Amy: I think it's more the actions. Like if I would do what they would do. So like, it could be a balding elderly man or a night elf, it's just a matter of doing, if they are doing the same stuff that I would be.

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Hatshepsut: It's not as easy as like your ID card. I think there's a lot more to identification than what's obvious. I think it really has to do with the person, thoughts, beliefs, feelings.

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Devon: Like if I was in that situation I would do the exact same thing [...] it doesn't have to do with physical characteristics or anything like that. It's just more interactions.

Interviewees viewed identifiers like gender, race and sexuality in abstraction as surface level connections. Kat described, "at first glance you're going to automatically assume that someone your age, race, gender, is going to be someone you'll connect with more because you assume you'll have a common way you'll see the world." There are other ways of connecting with characters, however, as many interviewees pointed out.

Christine: I feel like there are certain aspects and values about a person that they can sort of pinpoint in themselves and identification is when you can recognize that in other people or other things [...] Not on a shallow level though, not just being a woman or something like that [...] just a connection based on similar interests and goals and values in life.

Identification can also entail other forms of connection. Julia did not identify with media characters, though she might “connect” with them if she sees “where they are coming from.”

When interviewees mentioned specific identifiers, some asserted that they identified with characters because of these characteristics only in the absence of other, deeper, ways of connecting with characters. Ephram discussed this at length in regards to a one particular movie, the name for which he could not recall.

Ephram: It's about this character, these two gay characters, where they have to live in a different country, but they are both originally Chinese [...] And I think it was a good example of how you could have a gay character but not have it completely be about the whole experience [...] I just happen to identify with you closer because you are gay. I can understand your experience but you are also going through this real human issue and problems. That was a lot more relatable and I could identify as him.

Caine said that he could identify with “a character who I can relate to on some level, whether it’s in terms of actions [...] skin tone, racial or religious identity. Large part of it is actions I can identify and empathize with, and that’s the baseline and the others are sort of additions to that.” Hatshepsut said that in video games where characters are less developed, she might identify with characters based on physical characteristics. In other media, with fleshed-out characters, she can find other ways of identifying with characters.

Most literature assumes that identification involves taking on the role, the identity, of characters. For several interviewees, however, music engendered a great deal more identification than other media. Evan, for example, said that he identified very strongly with the music he listens to; it evoked particular emotions and fantasies. Both



Renee and Sara described identifying with and identifying themselves in terms of the music they enjoy. Christine also identified primarily with music, rather than media characters. She felt an emotional connection to the music and said it reflects how she sees herself. She, like some other interviewees, also said she identified with a particular musician, KiD CuDi. She said, “He's not a person you can really classify as any one type of way, so people are kind of confused by him. And I feel the same way about myself, which is why I immediately took to his music.” Interviewees described life experiences, similar histories, and similar life approaches as more meaningful ways of identifying with fictional characters or media personalities, than were identifiers like gender, race and sexuality.

Identifying with experiences was the main way interviewees connected to characters. Chin finds a similar phenomenon in her ethnographic study of poor, African-American children in Hartford, CT. She finds that, though “[a]dults tend to assume that the physical aspects of toys—their gender, skin tone, hair, determine how children will use and relate to them,” children connect with dolls in much more complex ways (2001, p. 171). Rather than want dolls that were physically similar to them, the children expressed “the desire for dolls who lived like them and the kids they know” (p. 171). In many ways, they felt more under-represented in terms of their class-based experiences than race. Justine Shaw, author of the comic *Nowhere Girl*, describes a similar anecdote. Although her comic is about a twenty-something, Asian-American lesbian, many of the fan letters she received were from adolescent males “who didn’t fit into the straight-male pecking order at school” (Johansen, 2003). They identify with the experience of being an

outcast, not the identifiers of “lesbian” or “Asian.” Green’s (2004) research demonstrates that transportation is influenced by whether or not individuals have previous experiences that lead them to connect with a fictional character more readily. Like Alice Hall’s interviewees, the “personal experience not only served as evidence, but also established a standard to which specific media portrayals were compared” (2003, p. 631). This, as will be discussed later, has implications for how people understand and critique media representation as well.

Identifiers like race, gender and sexuality can entail having similar life experiences. Often, however, studies that focus on these identifiers conflate those two different forms of relating. In the context of nationality, Gilroy argues, “[c]onsciousness of identity gains additional power from the idea that it is... an outcome of shared and rooted experience tied, in particular, to place, location, language and mutuality” (Gilroy, 2004b, p. 100). Certainly, identifiers can be shared points of connection in this way, but shared experiences do not *only* arise from shared identifiers like race, gender or sexuality, as Kat described.

Kat: I would be able to identify with a 50-year-old, Black man who was also from Georgia and also went to my high school much more than I would be able to identify with a 21-year-old, white female who lived in Canada and was like a scientist or an engineer and like I couldn’t relate on a personal or social level. I think that common geography and common history bonds people.

In much the same way that individual identity categories cannot encompass all the individuals who possess the identifiers associated with those identities, individuals encompass multifaceted ways of identifying with characters. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) emphasizes that the terms gay, straight, bisexual, etc., for example, cannot

actually encompass the diversity of individuals within those groups. In all types of identification, we simultaneously identify with other identities, a fact which troubles all ‘overarching’ identity groups. Assuming that any particular identity, like gay, White, or transgender will be the primary salient identity of a given individual is overly simplistic. Sedgwick argues further, that the importance of identifying *as* a member of a group does not mean being unable to identify *with* other groups. Simply because a person chooses to watch one movie because it reflects their sexuality, does not mean that they are unable to enjoy a movie that does not, or that they undergo psychological contortions in order to do so.

The ways interviewees identify with characters make up their narratives of self, as Giddens (1991) describes. Creating such narratives can even help individuals connect with non-human characters in games. Connie, for instance, chose a car in the racing game she played for the gaming interview because she once owned the same model. In another research project, one interviewee said she could really connect with the wolf character Amaterasu in the game *Okami* (Capcom, 2006), because it reminded her of a dog she used to have. Further, when Gauntlett (2007) argues that postmodern notions of a fragmented identity are disproven by his creative interview techniques, he is inadequately reflexive on the methods he uses. He looks at fixed representations of the self, rather than narratives of the self, which is perhaps why he does not find that people’s identities are fluid. Constructing representations of the self does offer a very coherent view of identity. This is a momentary articulation however, as Hall describes.

The fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by

a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any one of which we could identify with— at least temporarily. (1996, p. 598)

For the same reason, one cannot look at the single avatar created by a player for one MMORPG and assume they can read from that the player's identity. Narrative approaches offer the chance for a more complex picture of interviewees' identities. Garcia Canclini asserts, that "[i]dentity is a narrated construct.... The narrative proceeds by adding up the feats through which the inhabitants defend their territory, order their conflicts, and establish the legitimate ways of life there in order to distinguish themselves from others" (2001, p. 89). How and if people identify with media characters, is part of these narratives.

Several interviewees pointed out that they can find many different ways of connecting with characters in media texts. Zahriel identified very strongly with all types of characters and it was important to her across media, and indeed just how she approached life. She discussed it as part of being an actor.

Zahriel: Well there's an element of living vicariously through the character. You know, putting myself in their shoes so to speak. [...] At my most romantic I think I tend to try to find a happy medium between what I would want being me in that situation and where the character wants to go. [...] So if we ever met in you know some alternate future universe or something they'd be like, "Hey, you played my game. Good job. I like what you did there." You know?

She said people as inherently multifaceted and believed that anyone can identify with anyone else if they make an effort. Similarly, Pouncy said:

Pouncy: I feel like my personality is very broad and I have a lot of diverse traits in my personality and I'm able to extrapolate that into a diverse character base. I feel like, like I can go the very nerdy, steampunk route in one thing but also find myself in a gladiator character in another thing. I mean it's all fantasy but its different aspects. But also, like I wouldn't be able to do the womanizing space man *per se* (laughs).

Not everyone can identify easily with anyone else, but studies that focus on specific identifications tend to narrow the understanding of when and how audiences connect with texts.

Much as identity can be both positive and negative simultaneously, identification and disidentification are parts of the same process. As Munoz (1999) describes, “[d]isidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within a structure nor strictly opposes it” (p. 11). This is, quite similar to Hall’s (1997 [1990]) famous negotiated readings, in contrast to preferred or oppositional readings, as outlined in *Encoding/Decoding*. Staiger explains, “[d]isidentification is an instance in which an individual sees another individual and both assumes some commonality that might result in normal identification and simultaneously realizes that the two are not the same” (2005, p. 154). There is an assumption here, however, about what would constitute “normal” identification, one that assumes identification *as* is related to identification *with*. In the case of identification *with* a character, however, the relationship between positive and negative identification is somewhat different from identification *as*. A woman may articulate her identity as such because she does not identify as a man, genderqueer, or transgender. Gilroy describes identity in terms of difference.

[S]elves— and their identities— are formed through relationships of exteriority, conflict and exclusion. Differences can be found within identities as well as between them. The Other, against whose resistance the integrity of an identity is to be established, can be recognized as part of the self that is no longer plausibly understood as a unitary entity but appears instead as one fragile moment in the dialogic circuits. (2004b, p. 109)

In the case of identification *with*, however, one might identify *with* an Asian character even though one identifies *as* Latino.

Based on interviewees' discussions it is perhaps best to consider disidentification and identification as part of a simultaneous process. Disidentification arises when one connects with a character because of some characteristic, but feels distanced from them based on another. A few interviewees also pointed out that they may disidentify with a character or text because the representation is an unrealistic one of an experience they would otherwise identify with. This can also lead them not to enjoy a particular text, as Hoorn and Konijn analyze: "Although similarity may enhance involvement and dissimilarity may elicit distance, positive charged dissimilarity or negatively charged similarity may simultaneously increase both involvement and distance, and may lead to ambivalence" (Hoorn & Konijn, 2003, p. 257). According to Janet, "I guess it's more of a negative than a positive identification that's important to me." She discussed this particularly in terms of physical, human-on-human violence, which she did not enjoy watching. She avoided media that portrayed scenarios or characters she did not identify with, rather than prefer texts with which she did identify.

Related to this, one can look at the way identification makes certain identities relevant. Referencing the work of Manthia Diawara, Staiger states "the basic dynamics for identifications with characters exist for all spectators regardless of identities. However, if textual ruptures occur, a spectator might recognize a personal identity (such as black, Marxist, gay) that is separate from the characters with whom the spectator is identifying" (2005, p. 162). Hatshepsut said that identification could be this kind of

momentary process: “Sometimes there’s certain moments or certain things that happen that I can identify with.” In other instances, however, she may feel dissimilar to the character. She said that, with some characters, “there can be certain aspects that I do identify with but I really feel like I’m an individual person and although we might have a lot of things in common, there’s always going to be a lot of differences too.” This is similar to the way in which different identifiers become salient identities in specific contexts. Moustafa Bayoumi’s (2008) interviews and observations of seven Arab and Arab-American twenty-somethings, for example, demonstrate the ways the individuals’ identities as Arab, Arab-Americans, or Muslims became relevant at different moments of their lives (ranging from fights over religious freedoms to serving in the U.S. Army’s deployments in Iraq). Identification, linked with identity, is also both positive and negative. I know who I am because I identify with that kind of character, but also because I do not identify with another kind of character.

The interplay between a person and a media character requires that neither fully collapses into the other. Put in psychoanalytic terms<sup>iii</sup>, “[r]ecognition is thus overlaid with misrecognition: the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego” (Mulvey, 1975, p. 61). Identification *with* requires that a person see that which they are identifying with as separate from themselves. In this sense, we can think of identification much in the same way Butler does.

[I]dentification always relies upon a difference that it seeks to overcome, and that its aim is accomplished only by reintroducing the difference it claims to have vanquished. The one with whom I identify is not me, and that ‘not being me’ is the condition of the identification. Otherwise, as Jacqueline Rose reminds us,

identification collapses into identity, which spells the death of identification itself. (2004a, p. 145)

This is actually quite similar to descriptions of identification in video games. Gee (2003) discusses this in terms of a “tripartite play of identities,” made up of the player’s own identity, the identity of the avatar she/he plays, and the interplay between the two which is expressed as a projection of her/his own identity on a virtual character.

The tripartite play of identities (a virtual identity, a real-world identity, and a projective identity) in the relationship “player as virtual character” is quite powerful. It transcends identification with characters in novels or movies, for instance, because it is both *active* (the player actively does things) and *reflexive*, in the sense that once the player has made some choices about the virtual character, the virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about what the player can do. The virtual character redounds back on the player and affects his or her future actions. (Gee, 2003, p. 58)

What Gee points to here, however, is a problematic conflation of interactivity and identification. Just as identification *as* does not necessarily lead to identification *with*, and vice versa, interaction does not necessarily demonstrate or require identification. In video games, as will be explored below, the act of playing involves a less clear distinction between player and the on-screen character than there is in other media.

The focus on specific identities has created an oversimplified understanding of how audiences relate to texts. Separating identification *with* from identification *as* demonstrates that people are able to connect with characters in a multitude of ways. Researchers, activists, and video game makers alike can argue for the importance of representation in a way that takes advantage of this. It is not useful to argue that identification is a political and economic reason for media representation; it is however, encouraging to know that people are able to connect with characters for a variety of



reasons. Indeed, both the political and economic goals of identification can be satisfied without focusing on specific identifiers. It also encourages those invested in the importance of representation to look specifically at when it does matter to people's ability to identify with texts. I explore this in more detail in the next chapter.

### **Interactivity or Identification?**

Studies of identification in video games often assume that because video games are interactive players automatically take on the role of the main character/avatar. 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; G. King & Krzywinska, 2002; McMahan, 2003; Rehak, 2003; Richard & Zaremba, 2006; Slocombe, 2005). Focusing on texts to study identification has its drawbacks with many media, but video games compound these issues. Many of the previous accounts of identification in video games, moreover, do not necessarily articulate what they mean by identification, a running theme in most studies of the topic. They also fail to engage with the question of whether or not, and why, the process of identification in video games is different from in other media. The act of playing obscures, and even supersedes, the process of identification with characters in some games.

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). King and Krzywinska explain this claim.

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. Murphy asserts, for example, “[w]hen I game I am both player and character simultaneously” (S. C. Murphy, 2004, p. 224). Other authors describe similar experiences (Consalvo, 2007b; Crawford & Rutter, 1997; J. P. Williams, Hendricks, & Winkler, 2006). Some interviewees said that because of video games’ interactive properties they connected more with video game 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 seems that people identify *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 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 a misnomer. When a person creates a representation of themselves in games, online or off, that is an avatar. The term avatar implies self-representation.<sup>iv</sup> Video game characters, on the other hand, are entities unto themselves, which players control. Lara Croft, Mario, the Master Chief, Blanka, and so on, are characters, not avatars.<sup>v</sup> This distinction is particularly important, as it is possible to identify with video game characters, whereas avatars are extensions of the player’s self, rather than a separate entity with which a player might form a connection. Moreover, it is important to distinguish between involvement in games as

texts and 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 can be embodied and social. With the exception of the narrative aspects, game involvement does not necessitate and may even preclude identification *with* characters.

### ***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 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." Calleja (2007) describe six broad categories of game features, which correspond to a different experiences of immersion and involvement. These are tactical, affective, narrative, shared, performative and spatial involvement. These do not, however, necessarily entail or engender identification. 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. Renee, for example, 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." In some ways, it is possible that the interactive qualities of games circumvent identification, though some interviewees did identify with video game characters.

As a step towards making sense of these conflicting perspectives I used some of Cohen's (2001) questions developed to measure identification in film and television as talking points for most of the gaming interviews.<sup>vi</sup> As in a previous study, this allowed me to discuss the differences between player/avatar and viewer/character relationships with interviewees. Below is a brief overview of interviewees' answers to the six questions culled from Cohen's questionnaire, followed by a more thorough examination of the overarching themes.

*1. While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed.*

Most interviewees answered affirmatively that this happens at least some of the time when they played video games. This was often a qualified yes, however. Usually it was contextually dependent, in that several interviewees expressed that this was more likely to happen if they were playing alone. Sasha was the one exception, because she said that she gets more absorbed when playing against men because she feels she has to prove herself. Context and reason for play mattered to involvement, because wanting to win, as noted by many interviewees, was a reason for getting absorbed in video games. Interviewees described spending a significant amount of time playing as both a cause and effect of this kind of absorption into the game. Though Caine and Malcolm, like Newman (2002), noted that the interface can pull one outside of the game. When a player must stop in the midst of a fight to search their inventory for a healing potion, this pulls the player out of the action of the game. If I accidentally press an attack button while trying to talk to an NPC in *Fable II*, and have to reload my last save point because suddenly the whole town is afraid of me, it distracts me from the flow of the narrative.

2. *I think I have a good understanding of my 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 had to do with the fact that some characters were too abstract to connect with, especially for interviewees playing *Wii Sports*. Speaking of the Mii<sup>vii</sup> avatars Renee said, "They don't have feet!" Kat too said that she didn't identify with the Mii, "because it doesn't have legs."<sup>viii</sup> On the other hand, in games with strong narratives, understanding the story allowed players to get a sense of their characters. Narrative can pull players into games with non-humanoid characters as well. 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" (see Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1: From opening scene of *Adventures of Lolo*

Julia did not identify with fictional characters in general but when she played one of her favorite games, *God of War* (Sony, 2005), for her gaming interview, she had a sense of the character Kratos' goals because of the narrative. Hatshepsut played the same game in her interview, but unlike Julia had not played the game before and so had less of a grasp

on the story, and thus felt like she understood the character less. Similarly, when Violet originally played through *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft, 2007) she said she did not follow the storyline, and so she did not feel she really got inside the character's head.

3. *While playing, I felt I could really get inside the character's head.*

4. *At key moments in the game, I felt I knew exactly what my character was going through.*

For the next two questions, interviewees generally said that these statements were not true for them, in the context of the games they played for the interview or in video games in general. In terms of feeling they know what their characters are going through, in *Left 4 Dead* (Valve, 2008) Ephram and Devon said that this was only true 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. Stories with strong narrative components, however, made it possible for interviewees to get into characters heads. In terms of both questions, 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. I'm not like, 'Oh shit a zombie!' (Laughs). But the spirit is there." There is less identification *with* or even *as* a character here. Rather, the self-referentiality to video game play does not allow the distance necessary for identification with characters. Some players actively experience the in-game situation, which calls upon a different form of engagement than an emotional or intellectual

connection with a character. They think about what they are doing, not what the character is doing or what they as the character are doing.

5. *While viewing the program, I wanted the character to succeed in achieving his or her goals.*

6. *When the character succeeded I felt joy, but when he or she failed I was sad.*

The last two questions often resulted in smiles or laughs from interviewees, and almost entirely resulted in affirmative responses from interviewees. Largely this was because the goals of the character were the goals of the player in most cases. As Tracey articulated, “no one wants to be a loser.” Even when Renee and Malcolm answered no, it was because they did not care what the character’s goals were, only their goals mattered. For question number six, most interviewees corrected that they did not necessarily feel sad so much as frustrated with the outcome. There were a few occasions where players described crying because of events in the game. However, they did not necessarily articulate this as feeling as one with the character. Tala said, “I would say more satisfied when they succeed and irritated when they fail (Laughs).” Evan said he was not sure if he was feeling the character’s emotions or feeling his own emotions in relation to what the character is going through. He told me that a few years ago, the first time he played through *Call of Duty* a soldier from his team (also the only female in the group) was killed. He called to his then girlfriend in the next room, “They killed her!” To this, she replied, “So? Why do I care?” He said that her reaction pulled him back, made him remember that it was not real. Interviewees described reacting emotionally as one way of

relating to characters, but it was not necessarily the same as identification with the characters.

The interactive nature of games is part of the reason these questions proved difficult to answer. Video games are a quintessential interactive medium. In some ways, this interactivity is what makes identifying with video game characters so hard to parse from involvement with the texts. One of the problems with looking at identification in video games in the same way Cohen (2001) does for film and television, is that involvement is distinct from identification in video games.

Tanner: I think I can more 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 do not think about their relationship with the character *per se*, rather they think about what they, the player, are doing. The narrative aspects, such as they are in some games, allow players the space to identify with characters. They can think about their actions in terms of the history of the character. For example, when playing a wrestling game during the second interview Cody said he could identify with his avatar when playing through the storyline option on the game. When he plays sports games, however, "I like them kind of look like me or act like me." Connecting with characters because of narrativized experience is distinct from playing as the character in games without a narrative.



Some theorists talk of presence in video games as a form of and in lieu of identification. Presence entails involvement linked by attention according to Klimmt and Vorderer (2003). Video games demand attention and involvement, thus players are potentially more “present” in them. Vorderer (1992) distinguishes between “a distant, analytical way of witnessing the events present in a medium (low involvement) and, in contrast, a fascinated, emotionally and cognitively engaged way of enjoying the presentation (high involvement)” (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003, p. 347). The former often leaves viewers more space to judge a text, whereas in the latter state they are too absorbed to make such judgments. We may also consider these as two different types of witnessing, as Peters (2001) describes.

Peters (2001) writes, that media can allow us to witness events without actually being there at that moment in space and time. “Presence is fragile and mortal; recordings have durability that survives in multiple times and space” (p. 718). However, this is a problematic form of witnessing, as we are not actually there; it suffers “the ontological depreciation of being a copy.” Video games exist as an interesting contrast to other media in this sense, as presence can be a highly important part of the game play experience. So too is action, as “playing a game requires at least points or periods of temporal convergence where the time of the game world and the time of the playing merge— and the player can actually *do* something” (Juul, 2001). Video games allow players the experience of being involved in an event “*as it happens*” (Peters, 2001, p. 719).

Video games thus offer an interesting compromise between those two types of witnessing or involvement. The game player can be an analytic observer, particularly but

not solely during cut-scenes. Bryan, for example, recalled that after a long day of work he sometimes sits down and watches the beginning half-hour cinematic opening of *Xenosaga* (Monolith Soft, 2003). One might also just engage in button-mashing to get through a three-minute fight in a game like *Soul Calibur* or *Marvel vs. Capcom*. People may, as Vorderer points out, shift between the two different forms of involvement during a single text. When Klimmt and Vorderer (2003) discuss presence in relation to digital games, they mean high involvement rather than distanced analytic involvement. The intense involvement of games, ergo, does not imply full identification. Identification necessitates a level of distance, as discussed above. Full involvement, immersion, attention, presence, are all possible outcomes of the close symbiotic relationship between player and the on-screen character/avatar. Identification with, however, is a distanced process.

It is often argued that interactivity makes new media different from old media. I do not support this overgeneralization. Interactivity is certainly important to how researchers understand identification in video games. According to some writers, active control over the outcome is the appeal of games (T. Grodal, 2000; Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003). It is important, however, to make sense of what interaction means in order to make use of it as a concept. Interactivity in video games is not just about pushing buttons and making things happen on the screen. If that were the case then there is very little difference between holding a video game controller and channel surfing with a remote control. What is meant by interactivity, however, is an unsettled question (Bucy, 2004; Myers, 2003).

People consume video games, like any medium, in a different manner from other media. As Taylor describes, “[p]layers do not just consume, or act as passive audience members of, the game but instead are active co-creators in producing it as a meaningful experience and artifact” (2006b, p. 133). Audiences using other media are not passive in the sense of being brainless dopes absorbing mediated messages, but there are ways in which video games call for a different kind of audience analysis. Bucy (2004) asserts that “interactivity should be regarded primarily as a perceptual variable,” thus to some extent the fact that players view games as interactive is an important difference from other media. Not all players/audiences view games as actively engaging or other media as primarily passive, however. Janet played games, for example, because it allowed her to engage in an activity that took up mental energy without being emotionally engaging. Sara played to zone-out and relax, and Klara played to take up time while she faced post-college unemployment. Broadly speaking, however, responsiveness of games to player action marks their consumption as different from other media (which is not to say better or more thoughtful). The industry constructs games, and audiences view games, as responsive to players’ wishes. This responsiveness to player input masks the way the choices available in games are structured and limited.

When it comes to player involvement in games one consideration that we must remain cognizant of is that these are games. That does not mean we can approach games without, as Juul (2005) claims, taking into account their narrative and representational elements. Players, however, are not just reading or viewing stories to see where the characters end up. They engage with texts that often, though not always, have end goals

and rewards. According to Violet, “because I’m actively doing it [...] it’s definitely not that I identify with him as a character but just the act of doing it.” This causes two disruptions to the way we usually think about identification and representation. First, the player’s goals and character’s goals are typically not separate. The player is not “rooting” for a character to succeed, they are trying to win the game. Second, the story and the act of playing are not always distinct, as Bryan described.

Bryan: I don’t feel like, “Oh my, that’s me!” You know? It’s still like I have the objective. And in that sense I feel outside of the character, but it’s still like there are certain parts of the narrative and the story where it’s totally like, oh yeah that’s why I’m playing this [...] And then in *Bard’s Tale*. There’s no separation there. [...] And yeah I’m going to tell this person off because that board<sup>ix</sup> was really hard and I had to go through it ten times and now you are giving me fifteen cents for my troubles, fuck you. That’s much more identifiable and I feel much more a part of that.

Identifiable for Bryan, in this sense, means identifying himself in the action of the game, not identifying *with* the character. There is an assumption in the literature described above that, because players are actively controlling avatars, they identify more strongly with these characters. This is not necessarily the case.

None of these are examples of the kind of involvement Cohen is interested in when it comes to identification. Absorption, as interviewees described it, referred mostly to ludic elements of the games. As in a previous study, my interviewees’ answers to Cohen’s questions indicated that video games create a state of flow, “the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4). Flow is not necessarily the same process as identification, however, though some theorists would disagree on that point. Green, Brock and Kaufman (2004), for instance, argue that transportation, closely tied to identification, is an

important factor in media enjoyment. Transportation is “a convergent process, where all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative” (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701). They further theorize, that “[i]nteractive media may be particularly transporting, and thus particularly enjoyable, forms of entertainment because they allow users to easily leave their physical and psychological realities behind” (p. 323). Transportation is similar to “flow,” and the authors suggest part of the identification process. Like presence, researchers write of transportation in terms of potential media effects, and offer it as the reason people chose to use certain media. That it is sometimes a goal for audience members, however, does not mean that it is *the* reason for media consumption. Although transportation may be sufficient for enjoyment, it is not always necessary. Enjoyment, moreover, does not necessitate identification.

In addition, identification with characters in video games would require taking on their point of view rather than merely acting through them. Giddens (1991) argues that motives are intimately tied up with a concept of the self as autonomous (p. 64). When it comes to playing a game, the motives of the player and the motives of the in-game character are not necessarily distinct nor wholly the same. As the player actively experiences what is going on in the game, they are not necessarily as concerned with engaging with the thought process of the character. Tala described this process as, being “one with the character but not of the character.” The exception would be games with developed characters where the player wishes to play as that character; here players may attempt to understand the character’s thought processes rather than merely controlling their actions.

Often, however, it frankly does not matter what the character is thinking, as the player ultimately decides what to do next. Similarly, the character's goals are in many cases the same as the player's goals. Kat described, "as far as winning and losing, I could sympathize with the character in that regard. [...] But the avatar probably wasn't feeling that, it was probably me putting my emotions there." The motivations of the character are only relevant in so far as they are part of the goals of the game. That is not to say that the process of identification is different in video games than it is in other media, but that at times identification is not the point. Renee, for instance, feels a strong attachment to Mario.

Renee: I'm always Mario. Always. To the point where my six-year-old nephew, I come over and he's like, "Here aunt [Renee] you're Mario." It's good. But, in that one like, it's his game, it's his world, it's his space; it's my game, my world, my space. But I don't feel like I'm an Italian plumber, you know what I mean? But in books and in movies you have a different kind of characterization so you like, you identify more with the words that they are using or the clothes that they are wearing or whatever. But in a video games it's a little different, you kind of identify with the adventure, I guess.

As Christine put it, "I'm only really thinking about what I'm doing and how my actions are affecting the character's actions." Revisiting the ludology/narratology divide, Malcolm said that in games there are two senses in which one can understand a character. The first is in terms of using the characters skills and abilities optimally. The second is when deeper games also allow players to get a sense of what kind of choices the character would make and feel encouraged to make those kinds of choices as they play. In those instances, where players identified with character, it was because of the narrative.

Juul (2005) argues that narrative aspects of video games do not really relate to the game as it is experienced during play, and thus the narrative cannot express the essence

of the game. Newman (2002) too argues, that the character development and narrative aspects of video games exist in the cut-scenes<sup>x</sup>, the marketing of the game, the intertextual references, but not in the play itself. This argument, however, too quickly dismisses the importance of intertextuality. Taking a “serious game” as an example, playing as a young Palestinian in the First Intifada in *UnderAsh* (Afkar Media, 2001) may only relate to an actual story of rebellion via cut scenes and on screen text, but that information is part of the game logic, part of, some authors argue, the motivation for playing. King and Krzywinska see this interplay when they discuss *UnderAsh* and *Special Forces* (Hezbollah, 2003).

Does a powerful impression of agency created within a game reinforce broader cultural/ideological notions of agency— or does the pleasure involved lie in some level of acknowledgement of the fact that such agency is, precisely, *not* available in the outside world? (2006, p. 207)

In games based on either real events or fictional texts from other media, part of the point of playing the game is that reference, that relationship, between what one is doing in the game and larger social/cultural narratives.

Researchers should not assume, however, that players simultaneously consider the narrative and play the game. Hatshepsut said, of the narrative in games, “while I’m playing I don’t think about it, but like say a cut-scene comes on between levels, I’ll pay attention to what they are saying if I think it’s going to help me when I’m playing. But while I’m playing it’s gone, I’m just playing.” 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. As such, it is also important to look at the interactive aspects of gaming as an activity to get a fuller picture of how players consume these games.

### *An Embodied Activity*

Gaming is both an embodied and social activity. In terms of bodily engagement, some researchers interpret the strong self-referentiality of physical engagement as an emotional or intellectual engagement with games that translates into identification. This is perhaps because, as Giddens argues, awareness of the self is intimately tied to the body. The body has been the focus of many social theorists' work (Bourdieu, 1984; Butler, 2004b; Foucault, 1980; Grosz, 1994). The assumption that bodily involvement signals anything interesting spans the social sciences. This is seen in experimental psychology studies of media reception (see for example Carnagey, Andersen, & Bushman, 2007; Reeves, Lang, Kim, & Tatar, 1999; Reeves & Nass, 1996). Work on ritual emphasizes the centrality of the body in linking the individual to the social collectivity (Bell, 1997; Rappaport, 1999; Strathern & Stewart, 1998). In a similar vein, several authors emphasize the importance of looking at the body in video game play (Behrenshausen, 2007; Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Eugenie, 2005; Gregersen & Grodal, 2009; Torben Grodal, 2003; Lahti, 2003). This discourse about video games seeks to make game play more acceptable by more firmly locating it with the body. This rhetoric has historical roots. "The enormous range of discussion about electricity, nature, and the body attempted to locate electricity, a force of unknown dimensions, by means of the most familiar of all human landmarks, the human body" (Marvin, 1988, p. 151). Yet what these new technologies also do, is lessen the distance between player and text, thus reducing the distance between player and text; distance necessary for identification with characters. This lessening of distance often makes players seem more closely identified



with their characters. I argue, however, that this is a misreading of the embodied reception process.

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. “Video games are not something players look at; video games are something players do” (p. 353). Behrenshausen draws on Merleau-Ponty, who asserts that we should “go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement” (1961, p. 162). I concur, that video games are physically involving. This is increasingly true of platforms with motion sensitive controllers, Nintendo’s Wii being the most famous, as well as games, like *DDR*, *Rock Band*, and *Guitar Hero*, with atypical or what Juul (2010) calls mimetic input devices.

Beyond this, however, some players get quite animated while playing. Evan, for example, mentioned that his brother’s whole body gets into it when he plays, even if what his body is doing wouldn’t make sense with the actions going on in the screen. As I watched him play, Evan did this as well. In the first of two<sup>xi</sup> gaming interviews, as he navigated James Bond through the snowy German landscape to get into the castle, he ever so slightly shifted, dodging bullets and looking around corners. Christine similarly tried to urge her Wii bowling ball in the right direction as she watched it roll down the lane. This is not unique to video games. I have seen many people try the same telepathic technique in bowling alleys. My sister and I both duck, “making the car shorter” we

jokingly say, when we drive into a parking garage with a low ceiling. Participant's 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, as some people jump during scary movies or cry during tragedies. I have met three people, separately, who acknowledged that long sessions of playing games like *Grand Theft Auto* have felt their bodies want to run down pedestrians while driving, or conversely more afraid of motorists (rightly so it seems).

An interesting shift occurs when we think about video game audiences as active in this physical sense. De Certeau (1984), for instance, argues that the withdrawal of the body from the experience of reading (specifically the shift from reading aloud to reading in silence) alters the relationship between reader and text. He argues that this distancing frees the reader from the predeterminedness of the text; "Because the body withdraws itself from the text in order henceforth to come into contact with it only through the mobility of the eye, the geographical configuration of the text organizes the activity of the reader less and less" (p. 176). Video games may represent a shift in the opposite direction. Indeed, perhaps "the most powerful effects of video games may be determined less by ideological dimensions than by certain forms of embodiment, by the way in which the player controls/produces the sounds and lights that engulf, produce, and define a 'rhythmic body'" (L. Grossberg, 1988, p. 383). A game that entails full bodily involvement like *Dance Dance Revolution* does perhaps discipline the body, in Foucault's sense, in a way that a game like *Mine Sweeper* does not (see Figure 4.2).

Players can extract themselves from this type of commandeering of their bodies, however, by disengaging their bodies from playing. Though some interviewees made floors shake with their exuberance, others could play Wii games with a barely noticeable movement of the wrist. Level of embodiment, regardless, was not correlated with the level of identification.

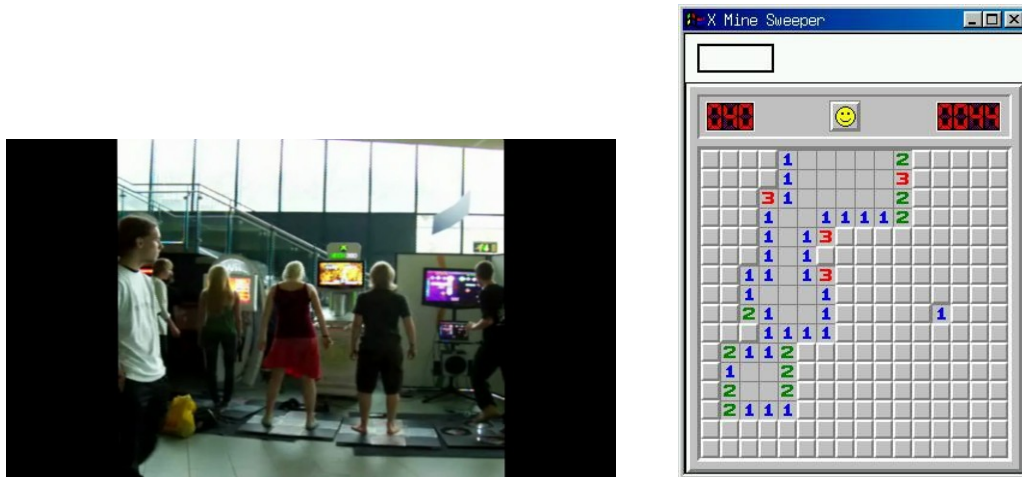


Figure 4.2: Left, two people playing *Dance Dance Revolution* at Assembly, a gaming convention in Helsinki, Finland (2009). Right, *Mine Sweeper* screen shot.

### *A Social Activity*

Games can also involve different types of social engagements. We can think of this in terms of Stroman-Galley's (2004) discussion of the dual meanings of the term "interactivity," in her explication of 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 for many reasons, but in particular 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). My gaming interview with Carol and Chuck Faygo illustrated the way both types of interactivity can intersect.

Field Notes, November 11, 2010:

*Tonight I went over to the Faygo’s house. We had dinner and played Rock Band for a few hours. Zahriel, a mutual friend, joined us later in the evening. Before playing the game, Carol showed me their various rock stars. Some were total fantasy creations. Others were based on their friends or people they once knew. One was a “dream Carol” which Carol let me play. We spent nearly 20 minutes just playing dress-up with the avatar. When we were done, she said, “It’s an honor to have you play my character and trick her out so nicely.” While we each chose a character to start with, we switched instruments as we played so no one stayed as a specific character. We played everything from Queen to No Doubt to Sleater-Kinney to the Jackson 5 to Beastie Boys. I found it hard to pick songs when it was my turn, both because some songs are not as fun to play on certain instruments or to sing, and there is a certain level of neuroses involved in choosing music in front of people who are much more knowledgeable about it.*

*The fun was in play rather than mastery I think, but mastery was involved as well. We’d high five if someone achieved a “flawless” performance, and laugh (but not derisively) when someone got “most gutsy” as an achievement despite (because of) a low score. We laughed at songs with ridiculous words, like “fat bottomed girls.” Zahriel and Carol would change words as they sang some songs, hinting at the implied rape in one song and adding, “when we 69ed” to the lyrics of “The Summer of 69.” In some ways, it was not as much about the individual score, as it is the overall experience. When we were done with Rock Band, Chuck and I played Left 4 Dead as Zahriel watched and Carol did some work before driving me home. Zahriel “backseat-gamed” while Chuck and I played the split-screen game.*

*Rock Band* is interactive on multiple levels. First, as a product, it allows players to design their own characters (with some limits), and select and buy an array of music (with some limits). Players can create rockers that are exactly 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. It is bodily engaging, whether one is singing or playing the guitar/bass or drums. 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 what makes this activity social, however, as the *Left 4 Dead* example demonstrates. The use of the text as the basis of social interaction is what makes this type of play social. 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 process of interactivity 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 put a lot of thought into their characters, for example, we 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.

There are also different forms of sociality made available in different contexts. Massively Multiplayer Online Games are a prominent example, which I will discuss in a moment, but there are other examples as well. While playing a solo game, Janet might text a friend for advice on a particularly difficult puzzle. When he was younger, in the

days before networked consoles, Cody and his friends would call each other on the phone while playing the same game in their separate homes. In a different example, during her gaming interview Kat created a series of Miis based on her friends because she said, “I think it's more fun to play when you like know who you are playing with and so I played with people who I was familiar with.” Game researchers, and other media scholars, tend to overlook these types of interactions. Green *et al* (2004) assert, for example, that factors that detract from transportation limit enjoyment. They use the example of the many annoyances (crying babies, talking, etc.) that detract from transportation and thus enjoyment in movie theaters. Making fun of aspects of video game, discussing choices made during play, or even making jokes while co-watching a movie with friends, however, are forms of media enjoyment that necessarily preclude transportation into the narrative. That is not to say that transportation is not enjoyable, but that enjoyment of media is amorphous; it shifts in relation to different types of texts and contexts.

Related to this, something rarely considered in relation to identification, but that shapes both how individuals identify with characters, as well as the relative importance of representation, is the context of consumption. Tala said of *Eternal Darkness* and its insanity effects,<sup>xii</sup> that “playing in the dark, it does freak you out. I do follow what the character is going through.” Both Zahriel and Sara 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. Evan for example noted that the gaming interview made him feel self-conscious, “Because you do get into it. You’re like she (referring to me) knows that I’m not killing

enough Nazis.” Sometimes context also was also related to the fact that individuals seek different things from different texts. Carol liked “playing badasses” in video games, whereas the kinds of characters or people she identified with in other media were more realistically related to how she saw herself. Most often, however, interviewees said that the way context shaped identification was relation to online play.

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., with or without player interviews (Chee, Vieta, & Smith, 2006; Eladhari, 2007; Mortensen, 2007b; T. L. Taylor, 2006a; 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. Devon described this in terms of playing *WoW*.

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, “[w]ithin 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” (S. C. Murphy, 2004, p. 233).

Playing as an avatar that is like or unlike you in some way, is different from performing as oneself (or another) in a social space. Unlike closed games, “in online games, one’s avatar become a persistent, representation of self; one that often remains immutable once it has been chosen” (MacCallum-Stewart, 2008, p. 38). Cody said, that in *WoW*, “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 identification with avatars in online and offline spaces is different may answer Steen *et al.*’s (2006) and Consalvo’s (2007b) respective questions of “what went wrong” or “what happened” when *The Sims* went online. Beyond the technical changes to the game both articles outline, the shift from offline to online play changes the context in which players are interacting with their avatars. Social contexts, generally, can shift the players’ attention from their relationship to the character to their relationship with other people.

### **Identification in Different Types of Video Games**

There are, then, aspects of video game/player interaction that are specific to these texts. Identification with characters may occur in light of narrative elements, but ludic, body, and social interactive properties of games make players more self-referential. Researchers must also take into account the variety of types 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, is the best initial example for me, 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, based off an author's writing, and the character you play is the hero of those stories. So he's already got a personality built up before hand. So there it's more zoomed out, like in *Mass Effect*. And then there's some games where, specifically strategy games, where you see the entire picture writ large and so you're ordering individual personalities around, but you're also doing the same with the grunt troops, 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***

Players can have several different types of relationships with avatars. 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. The player picks and chooses from the set and created characters to make a team for each level/board. 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 previous interviewees expressed as well. The true equalizer that video games represent may not be the often-presented, free-for-all, anyone-can-be-who-they-want utopia. Rather, the true leveling ground video games make available is that all identities are hard to represent in a nuanced fashion, or at all. In games, the relevance of character’s identities can be limited. Julia said of the character Kratos in *God of War*, “he could be a bunny rabbit for all I care. You know what I mean? It doesn’t matter. He’s just the thing on the screen. He’s holding the knives, that’s all.” 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 ludological (mostly) irrelevant. Comparing films to games, Devon said “in movies there’s never that type of situation, where you have someone that is so a blank slate that you could write yourself into it.” Game characters, perhaps because of this, are often undeveloped. Due to this shallowness, interviewees described avatars as puppets, chess pieces, and dolls, not necessarily characters 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.”

It has been argued that this shallowness makes it easier for players to place themselves into 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, “[t]he 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. McCloud's claim is not based on any empirical evidence, however, and has been criticized by some scholars (Frome, 1999). Moreover, 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. McCloud bases his theory primarily on visual information (i.e. sketches versus detailed drawings). When extrapolated to character development, however, this under-development fails in its intended goals. Games that leave characters too empty lose (perhaps intentionally) the chance that players will identify with the characters.

Carol: When I play zombie shoot-em-ups there's already pre-set characters [...] just the like (unclear) Asian guy, the feisty loud mouth Black cop, and then like you know a stripper-type that's avenging her brother's death and she's got you know—she's a badass and she's cool but she's also got like enormous boobs

(laughs). On the one hand, they named her Varla, which is the name of the super badass in *Faster Pussy Cat Kill Kill*, so that's cool. But not so easy to relate to.

Evan, among other interviewees, said that it is possible to get a sense of these archetypical characters because, “I guess for me it probably has to do with whatever my preconceived notions are of that type.” That is not, however, necessarily the same as identifying 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.

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 who their characters are, and what they might be thinking. 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.” This does not necessarily entail creating a full back-story, but as Devon said, “since they don’t give you much you can really write whatever you want into the character.” Caine expressed a similar sentiment, though argued that characters are archetypical enough that understanding the characters in this way is an easy process. Character depth, when it exists, it is usually narrated within the game. Intertextual associations can also help develop depth.

Thus, when it comes to identifying with set characters, we should not just look at the game text in isolation. In a convergence media culture (Jenkins, 2006a) characters

appear across texts. Intertextuality offers another way for players to understand pre-set characters. Sasha can get a sense of the players in the sports games she plays because she knows about the players in real life. Evan, similarly felt he had a good sense of James Bond in *007: Nightfire* (EA, 2002) because the character was more fully developed in other texts. Cody said that he could identify with the wrestlers in the game he played, mostly because he used to watch wrestling as a kid. Zahriel did not pay much attention to the narrative of *Halo* when she used to play it often. “It wasn't until later on, I really wasn't playing much anymore but I was bored and had the resources here, the books and stuff, that I really started getting, like understanding the philosophy and the whole myth, the whole storyline.” When Juul (2005) argues that narrative elements of games are not relevant to the experience of playing the games, this ignores some of the important ways players identify with characters.

### ***Choosing Characters***

In games where players can choose their characters, one can distinguish between strategic choices and ones made based on identification. 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) points out, as does Jenkins

(2003), that 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 matters so little to some players.

It is also in these texts that purely textual studies of identification fall particularly flat. Hutchinson, for example, sketches out the types of identification made available in the fighting game *Soul Calibur*. She acknowledges that in a game with multiple characters and battle combinations, “one would have to analyze each and every possible permutation on its own merits. But this kind of analysis does not make sense in the context of the fast-paced adrenaline-fuelled playing experience” (2007, p. 291). She goes on to argue that “the type and degree of choice available to the player changes greatly between different numerical structures affecting the player’s relationship with character in terms of identification, role-play, and performance of the self” (p. 292). She still focuses on the text in making inferences about how and if players identify with their in-game characters, however. Rather than view character choices or creation as a text from which to read player identity, it is more useful to engage interviewees in discussions of whether identification plays a role in how they choose characters.

During their gaming interview, 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 (see Figure 4.3). This was not the kind of game

either typically played, but it is cooperative and has discrete end-points, making it ideal for the interview setting.



Figure 4.3: Louis (far right) and Zoey (kneeling) from *Left 4 Dead*

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.<sup>xiii</sup> Ephram chose to play as Zoey, described as a college student home from school. All the characters have the same mechanics, though Zoey, according to Ephram, "is smaller so you can shoot around her." Some of their reasons were aesthetic. According to Devon, the other two male characters are a bit "grizzled," 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 also felt an affinity for what little of Lewis' personality he could glean from the game's short opening sequence. That is not to say, as the literature often assumes, that Devon took on Lewis' role while they were playing the game or that he viewed Ephram as taking on Zoey's role. Indeed, both only referenced Francis and Bill, the remaining computer-

controlled members of the team by their character name. In any case, choosing characters can be done based on either strategic or identificatory reasons. The latter is, it seems, 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. 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. This may explain why she kept crashing the car repeatedly during the interview, in an attempt to see how much damage she could inflict; She was not playing the game for herself. If she had played on a console she owned, or had continuous access to, she could have added to and improved upon the car. The research setting did not allow for that type of investment, however. 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.

Much as identification with a character 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 off other people they knew or celebrities. On their Wii, 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 with a name modified by the adjective 'lil'<sup>xiv</sup>. 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. Rusty described later that he rarely created characters that looked like him because he used games for escapism. When I ran into him a few months later, however, he told me he had recently started playing *Star Trek Online* (Atari, 2010) and created an avatar that was more similar to him. Amy said she creates characters that look how she wants to look or characters that look nothing like her, rather than create characters to look like she thinks she does. 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). “When was the last time you wore your hair in pigtails?” “Would you 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 choices about 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 from scratch. Caine also described moving back and forth in this game between identifying as the character and seeing the character as separate from himself.

Caine: In this case, it's sort of a mix. Because as you might have noticed the way the dialogue options are structured, you choose a general phrase and the character will say something more specific. Of course, sometimes you choose a general phrase intending one thing and the writers thought you meant something completely different. And so Shepard says a line and it's like "No, no Shepard! What are you doing? I didn't mean that! Don't be a jerk Shepard, stop it!" So it's sort of a fluctuating, middle-ground between the two.

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 herself. One was the “fantasy” version. She wore crazy costumes, had big colorful hair, and (at least when I played her) 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; the outfit she picked was very similar to one I had seen her wear before in fact. As discussed previously, we see that the distance between player and avatar complicates how we usually think about identification. 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 separate from them. In the game *Mass Effect*, for example, players select one of three pre-set back-stories for their Commander. Caine tried to play his character in a manner that reflected that narrative. Again, narrative was central to identification with the avatar, just as it was for the set character.

### **Playing as Other—Avatars?**

A great deal of academic attention has been paid to playing as the “Other,” typically in terms of race and gender, in relation to all of the above types of player/character relationship (set characters, characters chosen from a list of options and player-created characters). Leonard argues, “there has been little theoretical or ethnographic work regarding the allure of ‘virtual cross-dressing’ . . . . What does it mean . . . when virtual reality provides space and ability to transcend one’s spatial confinement and one’s own identity to enter foreign lands and othered bodies?” (2006a, p. 87). One might, for example, create an interesting textual reading from the fact that when Christine played *Wii Boxing* she, an African-American woman, used a white, male avatar to defeat an African-American, male opponent. Such a reading would not take into account the fact that Christine felt no connection with her avatar. She was more interested in beating the game than in the appearance of the avatar. She went with the first Mii that appeared on the starting screen, and the computer randomly selected the opponent.

In his work on disidentification, “Munoz underlines that perhaps in cross-identity identifications individuals do not abandon their own identity as they ‘step’ into the other person’s subjectivity” (Staiger, 2005, p. 154). Moreover, if individual identities are complex, dynamic and contextual, easy correlations between identities based on social demographic categories and avatar choice are almost impossible. Similarly, we must consider whether it was a strategic choice to play as one kind of character over another. The oft cited “oddity” of cross-gender avatar selection (described in Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001; Yee, 2001) in video games may not in fact be that remarkable, if the

ways in which people interact with video game characters does not necessarily require identification in the sense of matching identifiers with a character.

As previously discussed, players' choices may be strategic. MacCallum-Stewart states when men choose female avatars, "they often chose these for ludic, rather than gendered reasons.... Thus, man playing woman has become a normal practice, and not one that is seen as either aberrant or subversive" (2008, p. 27). Interviewees cite similar reasons for choosing some avatars over others. In a follow up email, Hatshepsut described this in relation to one game.

Hatshepsut: *Mercenaries* has three characters to choose from — A typical tiny, busty woman, an average sized man "of color" (I think?), and a brawny, kick ass, white dude. My first instinct would be to choose the female, but the weapons are so big compared to her that she looks like she'll tip over. I'm going with dude who looks like he's indestructible. I don't care where he came from, what school he went to, or what his nickname is. I just want him to get the job done. The game is *Mercenaries*, not *Runway Models*.

According to MacCallum-Stewart, "players also regard swapping gender as interchangeable with race or other signifiers of difference" (p. 35). Chan (2005) critiques this kind of representation when it comes to race. He, like Leonard (2004), argues that in some sports games, where there is "a gameplay incentive to 'be Black,'" that the mostly White game audience plays as Black characters in a way that is cleansed of any transgressive or socially progressive qualities (p. 28). The very notion that these choices are ever transgressive, however, does not take into account the players' reasons for choosing to play certain avatars.

MacCallum-Stewart argues that it has become normal to play as another gender, and that now, it can sometimes be an aesthetic choice to play as another gender. Beyond

tactical choices, sometime players choose to create or dress their avatars for aesthetic purposes. In one interview, Malcolm told me that he used to play *EverQuest* with a man who had a female avatar, for which he “had a set of equipment he would wear on his female character when she was in town and a different set when he was off adventuring, just based on the aesthetics.” Klastrop and Tosca observe, that the “way our character looks is important to us, even in cases where appearance plays no role whatsoever in the reward system of the game” (2009, p. 4). They use ethnographic methods, surveys and interviews to analyze the role of fashion in the *WoW*. They find, much as Simmel (1957) does in his analysis of fashion and class, that aesthetic choices play the dual role of differentiating avatars from everyone else and displaying status and group belonging within a normative social hierarchy. When engaging in battle players choose the gear best suited for fighting, but not all game interactions require this. Though generally character/avatar appearance choices have been analyzed in online spaces, gaming and otherwise (Boellstorff, 2008; Castronova, 2005; Kafai, Fields, & Cook, 2010; Nakamura, 2008; Steen, Greenfield, Davies, & Tynes, 2006; Stromer-Galley & Mikeal, 2006; T. L. Taylor, 2006b), they are not often looked at in individual game play choices, though Hayes is a notable exception (2007).

Sometimes there is a sexual component to choices to play the “Other” according to MacCallum-Stewart. She claims that when some players choose opposite gender avatars it was because the “avatars were deliberately and consciously objectified by players...in order to negate claims of deviance or atypical responses about their adoption of differently gendered avatars” (2008, p. 35). As her participants were heterosexual, it

makes sense that this would be her reading of their choices. What about when homosexual players choose avatars of another gender, however? Ephram says he always plays as the female characters (Devon said that he does not like playing female characters).

Ephram: I don't know I like the idea of a female character kicking ass kind of thing. I think it's mainly like the Xena-effect (both laugh). Like I'd watch Hercules and be like eh. But I watch Xena and it's the same thing...

Devon: Just as bad, but it's so much better.

Ephram: So I guess that's the only way I can think of it.

This was perhaps an aesthetic choice rather than a sexualized one, which makes the cross-gender play acceptable. However, like MacCallum-Stewart's interviewees who "choose women avatars because they like to look at them" (p. 34), Devon sometimes created or chose characters based on attractiveness. "I'm going to be playing this character forever, you know, if I'm going to be starting at their face or their butt or whatever, I want it to be sexy (chuckles)." Ephram also said that Devon always plays as the character Lewis in *Left 4 Dead* because "he's the only attractive guy." When creating or making character choices on the basis of aesthetic or sexualized reasons, players are not so much creating avatars, but rather what we might call avatars. This is another form of interactivity with game texts, one that is perhaps simultaneously ludic, embodied, and social, that does not result in identifying with or even as the created character/avatar. The characters were created primarily to be objectified, not for functional or identificatory purposes.

## Being Bad

There is a great deal of worry, popularly and even academically, about players identifying closely with the violent aspects of many games (Bryce & Rutter, 2006; Carnagey, Andersen, & Bushman, 2007; Dill & Dill, 1998; Gentile & Anderson, 2006; Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999; Sherry, 2001). As shown thus far, however, players connect with game texts in ways that too varied for such stark pronouncements. “Being bad” does occur in some games. It is more interesting, however, to look at when and how players choose to dance along the moral spectrum, than to simply assume that they are slowly becoming deviants through repeated car-jackings and the murder of rabbits. We must consider how the demands of the game, both online and off, shape what players do, as T.L. Taylor discusses.

[The] context-dependent play strategy highlights the ways players approach *EverQuest* not with one preset orientation but often shape their play styles and activities against a variety of factors. In this regard, the “cycling through of identities” (a la Turkle) seen in other internet spaces is as much an instrumental and relational decision about how to facilitate play within any given context. (2006b, p. 50)

Related to this, one way many interviewees described identifying with media characters had to do with whether or not they would make the same decisions as the characters.

Morality is one way viewers/readers interact with a text, which may in turn lead to identification (Smith, 1995). Caine, for example, defined identification as “saying, you know, why yes that is a horrible decision to make, I’m not sure what I would do but given the choices I would go with choice A.” According to Konijin and Hoorn’s (2005) findings, although their participants felt more distanced from “bad” characters, their appreciation of those characters was not significantly different from “good” characters.



They also assert that players can make judgments about characters' ethics, aesthetics and epistemics without necessarily identifying with that character. Media do not necessarily directly shape how we think of ourselves and how we think of others. Rather, researchers can draw on Noel Carroll's clarification thesis regarding media and morality to understand the complex interaction that takes place between audiences and texts.

Clarificationism does not claim that, in the typical case, we acquire new propositional knowledge from artworks, but rather that the artworks in question can deepen our moral understanding by encouraging us to apply our moral knowledge and emotions to specific cases. For in being prompted to engage our antecedent moral judgment we may come to augment them. (1998, p. 313)

We can explore this process specifically when it comes to games that allow players to be "bad." In games, it is not just an issue of identifying with morally ambiguous characters.

Some genres give players the opportunity to make choices for avatars. Sometimes this entails making moral decisions, deciding whether to be good or bad. Identity, if not identification, becomes relevant if the player feels uncomfortable, or comfortable, choosing to be "bad." Some interviewees said they could never choose to be bad when given the option. Devon said, "Whenever there are games that have a lot of moral choices that you are supposed to make, I always do the goody-goody type, because I just can't, I can't do the bad things." His partner Ephram said he could, however. A similar exchange occurred when I spoke with Carol and Chuck. Chuck, like Devon, said he could not bring himself to be the bad guy, though Carol said she could. Sasha said it would depend on the time and context she was playing: "I'm sporadic. Just because somebody might pick the hero, I'll just be the bad guy. It depends on who I'm playing!" Some interviewees were perfectly willing to be the bad guy in games where being bad allowed them to see the

different storylines, if they wanted to role-play as a certain type of character, or simply to see what would happen if they were mean. Interviewees, however, only discussed this in terms of games where their actions had no real impact outside of the game.

In online spaces, interviewees felt that their actions more directly reflected the kind of people they were, and thus were less comfortable “being bad.” This is distinct from Taylor’s (2006b, p. 43) discussion of the importance of reputation in online games like *EverQuest*. There she refers mainly to a player’s abilities and good standing as guild members. Choosing the morally ambiguous route in online games, however, was a different matter. As Cody pointed out, in games like *WoW* and *EverQuest*:

Cody: You are that person, essentially. [...] The character isn't talking for you, you're talking for it. As opposed to you watching someone else talk on a game. [...] You know there's another real person on the other end. [...] So it's an interesting dynamic. I think it's more, more interactive but might be less fun. [...] You're going to have real life conflicts. (Chuckles).

Malcolm was willing to take the “less noble option” in a closed game like *Dragon Age*, but not when he played *WoW*. “The fact that it doesn’t impact other people, that is a significant difference between the two instances.” This is because, as Devon described, in MMORPGs “your character is in that case more an avatar than in any other situation, because that is how you interact with other people that you’ve never met before, that’s their first impression of you is through your character. So that influences things.”

Bryan described *The Bard’s Tale* as a game where he really identified as the main character, primarily because the game allowed him to choose nice or snarky responses to non-player characters (NPCs). He typically chose the nice option: “I pick nice more often and that definitely mimics how I view myself.” When he played through a section of it

during the gaming interview, he asked me whether he should choose the nice or snarky responses. The researcher in me was torn between engaging in this playful moment and insisting on just observing him play. As was often the case in this project, keeping the gaming interview fun was integral to encouraging discussion and thus more worthwhile than any attempt to create an unobtrusive research environment. We went back and forth between nice and mean choices, laughing at the results. We both used the research context as an excuse to explore options, including being bad, that we would not have taken normally. A few interviewees, in fact, used the interview setting to explore new games or modes of play. Some played in less invested ways than they normally would (e.g. not saving the game, not replaying if they lost, etc.). This was not always the case, however. Some interviews, those who were particularly competitive for example, played to win regardless of the setting. Players who played on their own systems, moreover, typically played in more invested ways (as they could save the results and benefit from their successes later).

Eventually Bryan and I came to the dog in the game, a computer controlled sidekick who will follow you throughout the game if you are nice to it. Bryan had told me before that he could never bring himself to be mean to the dog. When the time came, neither could I. Bryan admitted that he had hoped that I would go for the snarky option, giving him an excuse to see what would happen. However, perhaps as with those playing online games, I could not make a choice that would reflect negatively on my own morality in front of another person. As with character creation, these decisions can, but do not always, demonstrate something about how people think of themselves. Playing in

different contexts, however, shifted whether players performed their own personalities or if they were willing to explore different options.

### **Is Identification Important?**

Most interviewees did not view identification as important or even a guiding factor in their media consumption. It can shape whether or not one likes a text, as Caine explained.

Caine: To some degree, it is kind of what I look for [...] Part of the reason I avoid playing the *Grand Theft Auto* games is because I have no particular desire to play a character who winds up going around and stealing cars and murdering people [...] Or I read a book where the protagonist is utterly despicable and I say, “Wow, I don't really want to read this.”

As Tanner described, “You're not going to be drawn to something that has no relevance or no commonality, to you [...] But I don't think that I actively seek or gravitate towards the things that are most like me.” The danger is that, stemming from the market logic described previously, caricatures often stand in for these kinds of connections. As Connie points out, “I don't think people should follow stereotypes, but I think people will be more immersed in the game if they find themselves in the game, or find part of themselves in the game, regardless of what the character looks like.”

Identification is not a necessary part of media enjoyment. As Sasha pointed out, *NCIS* was among her favorite television shows (in fact it was on in the background during our first interview) and yet she does not identify with any of the program's characters. Malcolm was a fan of the show *Girlfriends*, but not because he identified with the characters or their experiences.

Malcolm: There was this one show, *Girlfriends* [...] It's about four black women and the issues that they deal with. Absolutely no identification, as you would say,

for me. Now granted they were attractive, but there isn't a shortage of TV shows with attractive people on them. It was just that it was so well written and so amusing that I would watch it on a regular basis, even though I had no identification with that.

Renee said that Malcolm X's autobiography is one of her favorite books. She went on to say, however, "I identify very little with him as a human, but I think it's awesome and I really like it. And I don't seek materials out, going, 'Ooo look, it's about a 30 year old, somewhat over-weight girl traipsing through life' [...] It's cool when it happens, but I don't seek out media or anything that does it." Often interviewees described identification as "nice when it happens." Interviewees did not always see identification as an important goal. In part, not needing to identify with characters occurred because individuals fulfill different needs through their media use. Several interviewees described playing video games as a way to zone out, for example. Not all interviewees wanted or needed to identify with characters, in video games or other media. Most had trouble coming up with examples of characters or media personalities they identified with, even though all were eventually able to come up with definitions for the term.

Several interviewees described interacting with video games as different from other media. In part, this may be because they tied identification to realism. When identification occurred, as will be discussed in terms of representation, interviewees stressed that realism was a necessary factor. Gregory said that, in terms of television and movies, "maybe because we got a sense that even though it's dialogue and it's written there's still the idea of real people being there. Seeing real people. Instead of the game which we know is animated in stuff like that, or to a certain degree is fake." When Julia said that she does not identify with video game characters it was because they are too

fantastical, “nothing that I have experienced in my daily life has ever, you know, been like that or— it’s just over-the-top.” Speaking of the game *God of War* specifically, she said, “to identify with someone there has to be some point in time where you found yourself in that situation. For me. I’ve never fought harpies in a loin cloth (laughing).” Similarly, Anya stated realism is important, “whether its reality or preferred reality I guess.” If she had not actually experienced what the character is experiencing, or can imagine experiencing it she did not feel she could identify with the character. For Bryan, “identifiable is a character that is believable,” but that does not mean he has to be able to see himself as that character. Even if he is “not necessarily the like well that could be me—I don’t think I identify that way. Like the whole point of enjoying entertainment is to go somewhere else.” Even though identifying with characters was not important to Amy, she said, “If I think they are doing something that makes no sense that really agitates me.” This resonates with Alice Hall’s interviewees’ assertion that “[s]omething was realistic if the audience could either feel the characters’ emotions or have an affective response to the characters as they would a real person” (2003, p. 635). Realism and identification have, perhaps a co-constitutive rather than a linear relationship with each other. Perceived realism, moreover, was correlated with transportation in a story in Green’s (2004) study. Stemming from this, media representation is important because of it is realism, not a connection based on specific identifiers, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

Fantasy on the other hand, seemed to involve aspirational identification. Tracey, who was the most uncomfortable with answering whether or not he identified with media

characters, referenced making aspirational connections with characters: “I don’t think it’s somebody I identify with, I just think that it’s somebody that you just like, just has a cool power.” He went on, as he did throughout the interview, to reference comic book characters. At times, we want to see ourselves in the place of characters that are as we wish to be. Indeed, Chuck called identification “escapism to the next level.” Referencing video games Zahriel said that:

Zahriel: It is kind of an idealized self in most situations. Knowing that I’m the fat lazy one sitting on the couch playing video games— it definitely inspires me to go out there and do more things but at the same time it’s nice to know that if I can’t I can always come home and live vicariously through somebody else’s creative vision.

For Evan, identification was one of the main appeals of video games. Describing playing when he was younger, he said that he enjoyed *The Legends of Zelda* because he could identify strongly with the main character, “Like I wasn’t actually sitting Indian-style on the floor in the basement in front of the TV. I was this little dude with a sword and killing monsters.” Interestingly, many of the interviewees who mentioned playing *Zelda* made similar comments. Connie for instance, said that she really identified with Link, because “he’s kind of like little underdog elf guy that rose to the top because he was smart.” This identification occurred in part because this was how she thought of, and wished to be, herself. The same was true for Evan, who typically identified with heroic characters.

Fantasy and escapism do not necessarily entail identification. Rusty did not really identify with characters, though he said, “I sometimes wish I could be that FBI agent saving the day.” However, he made a distinction between escapism and identification.

Rusty: Probably one of the reasons I love to play video games is because it lets me either be the guy conquering the world or he's slaughtering people or saving

the world; the kind of things that I don't do in real life. So, in that kind of thing, I'm pretty comfortable with my identity. I do play video games to escape.

Identification entails a reference to the real, but escapism allows him to enjoy “playing a strategic game where you are nuking cities. That's the kind of thing I would be horrified with in real life. But! If it advances the game, sure.” As Hatshepsut said, “Typically for me, the games I play, they're like things I would never do in real life. So that's another reason I don't identify.” Researchers, and marketers, cannot take for granted that players actively identify with video game characters. Audiences do not always want to, or need to, actively connect with fictional texts. Identification *as* and identification *with* characters are blurred by the interactive aspects of games (ludic, narrative, embodied and social), as well as the different types of relationships between game characters/avatars and players.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have outlined two sets of issues that must be unpacked in order to make sense of how and if players identify with video game characters/avatars. First, though people may identify *with* characters because they identify *as* members of a specific group, that is not the only way in which they form connections with texts. Second, in addition to conflating interactivity with identification, game studies have often conflated the activity of playing games with game texts themselves. In addition to the ludic, narrative, embodied and social aspects of video games, researchers must also consider that different types of relationships between players and characters/avatars made available in different types of game texts. Players do not automatically take on the role of 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. 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. Moreover, different gaming contexts shape the types of choices players make in terms of how they create and play with/as the character/avatar.

Researchers cannot look at choices made in a game text in isolation. This has a few implications for how video games are studied as media texts. First, the assumption that characters who are marked by specific identifiers can lead players who also have those identifiers to connect with those characters trivializes the ways and reasons people identify with media characters. Second, researchers cannot study identification in video games the same way they do in other media. Rather, they must actively engage with the way audiences interact with texts in their social context and build from there. 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. Third, the data here demonstrate that playing as, creating or choosing characters in games, whether online or off, cannot be confused with identity play. Playing as a character or with an avatar does not imply necessarily identifying with that character or avatar. Fourth, 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 fact 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 to identify with the character/avatar on the screen. These types of characters do not have, for example, narratives with which players can identify. Games in which players might identify *with* their characters are the ones in which there has been less diversity. Overall, pluralism has taken the place of 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). However, it seems that the only types of games in which the representation of marginal groups is seen to matter are ones in which the player is responsible for those representations. This hides the fact that games, broadly speaking, do not force diversity upon their audience.

Finally, as with gamer identity in the previous chapter, when people view fantasy as relatively trivial this mitigates the importance of identification. This is something those invested in the politics of representation must grapple with more directly. That does not mean that researchers need to make people take entertainment seriously; video games are meant to be fun. Those that want to argue for the importance of representation, however, must find a way of articulating that importance outside of the realism/fantasy dichotomy. As I discuss in the next chapter, the realism/fantasy dichotomy is the primary way interviewees discuss whether representation in media matters.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> These can include fictional characters, media personalities, set, chosen or player created video game characters, or virtual avatars.

<sup>ii</sup> The game is divided into “books,” which are in turn divided into “chapters,” or levels.

<sup>iii</sup> Though, I would argue, psychoanalysis cannot fully engage with video games, because due to their interactivity they cannot play on voyeuristic fantasy in either the scopophilic or narcissistic sense.

<sup>iv</sup> The original meaning referred to the physical manifestation of a Hindu deity on Earth.

<sup>v</sup> 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.

<sup>vi</sup> In later interviewees or interviews that were cut short, the questions were omitted because the underlying issues were addressed during other points of the interview.

<sup>vii</sup> 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*.

<sup>viii</sup> In some games, probably to make animation easier, Miis feet or hands are not actually attached to their bodies by arms and legs.

<sup>ix</sup> Level.

<sup>x</sup> Cut-scenes, also called in-game movies, are sequences in which players have little or no actual influence on what is happening on the screen. They are generally used to add plot details and move the narrative forward in a way game play itself cannot.

<sup>xi</sup> Due to a technical mishap, the recording of the first gaming interview was lost. Evan was kind enough to go through the process a second time.

<sup>xii</sup> In this game, players have a “sanity meter.” The more they are seen by the game’s enemies, the lower the bar drops. As it lowers, the avatar “goes insane” and various weird phenomena begin to happen. This includes the camera view tilting, shadows that look like bugs crawling across the screen, volume on the television going up and down, game freezes, or even the “blue screen of death” indicating a system crash.

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.l4d.com/> accessed May 14, 2010.

<sup>xiv</sup> In the interest of anonymity, I do not reproduce the entire name.

## Chapter 6

### **Representation Matters (?): When, how and if media representation matters to marginalized audiences**

I began this dissertation with the assertion that researchers must take a step back and really interrogate whether and how representation is important. As discussed in chapter two, often media representation has been addressed in terms of ‘good’ verses ‘bad,’ or non-existent, representations of particular identities. Researchers and theorists describe media representation as unquestionably good and important, and argue that positive representation can lead to social benefits. As Fraser famously critiques, however, “[b]y equating the politics of recognition with identity politics, it encourages both the reification of group identities and the displacement of redistribution” (2005, p. 245). Recognition is not the same as redistribution. The African-American businesswoman in *Diner Dash*<sup>i</sup> (PlayFirst, 2007) might be counter-stereotypical, but she does not automatically call into question larger racial disparities in society. Recognition, and in turn representation, remains important nevertheless however, as Valdivia (2002) describes in her review of the work of bell hooks. She argues that recognition is both indicative of and helps to perpetuate social disparities. Yet much of the work on representation, particularly in video games, in some ways serves to exacerbate these inequalities. The pluralism that stems from market logic-based representation, focused on specific identifiers, in many ways, creates separate-but-equal visibility. This is distinct from the transformative goals of media diversity.

One of the problems with conventional approaches to media representation is the focus on producers, texts, and audiences defined by specific identifiers. Even work on

sexuality, race, and gender in video games tends to focus on specific groups, specific texts, and specific kinds of gaming. In chapter four, I discussed the ways marking specific audiences in this manner further pushes the marginalized to the periphery of gaming. Furthermore, as shown in chapter five, people connect with media in much more complex ways than this approach allows. A wealth of social theory and research has demonstrated and explored the complexity of individual identities.

This chapter ties together the threads of the previous chapters by addressing the issue of representation via audiences rather than texts. I do not do this to deemphasize the importance of textual analysis, but rather to posit that the importance of representation does not live in texts alone. It is similar to identity in this sense; “[I]dentity is a construct, but the artistic, folkloric, and media narratives that shape it are realized and transformed within socio-historical conditions that cannot be reduced to their *mis-en-scene*. Identity is theater *and* politics, performance *and* action” (Garcia Canclini, 2001, p. 96 italics in original). Representation is part of a process of meaning-making, but textual analyses tend to focus on the finished product. Here I discuss why representation is and is not important to individual interviewees, in order to reframe how we as researchers address this issue. Largely researchers argue that media representation is important for out-groups (in the educative sense), yet many of the arguments for representation focus on in-groups (in the market logic framework). I argue that this distinction exacerbates the problems of representation. In addition, those who argue for the importance of representation in video games, and other fictional texts, must grapple with the paradox of arguing for the seriousness of games in a way that is not dismissive of play.

## Background Matters

One of the key research areas that discuss representation, in relation to identity, is the sub-area of the uses and gratifications literature, Social Identity Theory (SIT). According to Blumer (1985) early uses and gratifications studies did not pay enough attention “to the social group memberships and affiliations, formal and subjective, that might feed audience concerns to maintain and strengthen their social identities through what they see, read and hear in the media” (p. 50). Later studies in the area, thus, began to look at whether individuals “seek media portrayals that strengthen their identification with a particular social group and/or make that identification more positive” (Harwood, 1999, p. 123). Authors in this literature argue that individuals want to see people “like them” in the media, because they are able to identify with them. In one study, Harwood (1999) finds that respondents prefer to watch television shows with characters who were a similar age to them. He argues, “social identity reinforcement is sought by more highly identified viewers, but not by those less strongly identified” (p. 130). That is to say, media representation may be more important to those for whom an identifier has become a primary identity. Though studies in this vein are quantitative and survey-based, Gross’s (2001) description of gay audiences’ reactions to Billy Douglas (played by Ryan Phillippe) coming out as gay on *One Life to Live*, is one non-quantitative example of this theoretical perspective (p. 216). Seeing others “like” them allows individuals to feel seen, and this in turn validates their identities.

Not all research supports the SIT claim. Abrams and Giles’s research, for example, contradicts Harwood’s results: “Although highly identified African Americans

were likely to avoid television, they were not likely to select television for ethnic identity gratifications” (2007, p. 129). This finding, points to one of the key difficulties in studying whether or not gamers *care* about representation in video games, specifically that those bothered by under- or misrepresentation are less likely to play. This may be because, beyond driving consumption, identity can be made relevant through media reception: “Racial identity becomes salient when African American audiences oppose what they see and hear from an ideological position as harmful, unpleasant, or distasteful media representations” (J. L. Davis & Gandy, 1999, p. 368). This is similar to Munoz’s (1999) concept of disidentification, as explored in the previous chapter.

Identification and representation, moreover, are simply not equally important for all people. Throughout both popular and academic discourse about representation, audiences’ investment in having particular aspects of their identities represented is usually fore-grounded as the logic behind the importance of media representation. The broader political goals of media representation, however, require that those who are not members of marginalized groups see “good” representation of marginalized groups. There is, thus, a disjuncture between the economic justification of representation and its social importance.

What happens, moreover, when audiences don’t care? Troubling the common narrative that desire for representation comes from audiences, in my past work with female, LGBTQ, Finnish, and Arab gamers, interviewees were largely unconcerned with the politics of representation. Similarly, DeVane and Squire’s (2008) adolescent, urban, African-American interviewees were largely ambivalent, even apathetic, about racial

representation in *Grand Theft Auto*. I have spent a great deal of time trying to make sense of this ambivalence. To some extent, it may be a methodological artifact. It may represent a type of “covering.” According to Yoshino (2007), marginalized groups in the current historical moment are asked to *cover* their differences as embodied in the sentiment “*Fine, be gay, but don’t shove it in our faces*” (p. 19, italics in original). Society does not demand that they convert, or pass, in the way it once did, but gays are asked to downplay their differences. To ask individuals whether they think the representation of a specific group or identity is important to them is also a very loaded question. It asks them to value a specific aspect of their identity above all else. To assert too much desire for representation could potentially essentialize one’s identity and one’s marginality.

I want to unpack this ambivalence about representation. Valentine (2007) argues that it is inherently problematic to assume that it is merely a lack of education that leads his interviewees to not identify as transgender. Similarly, I argue it is wrong to dismiss gamer ambivalence as a “false consciousness.” As James Carey puts it in an interview with Larry Grossberg, “whether consciousness is true or false, it’s the only consciousness we have, and you have to deal with it” (2006, p. 220). To take this ambivalence seriously, to understand it for what it is and why it is expressed in the way it is, is a much more useful task. To argue for the importance of representation, we must first understand why it is not always important.

### **To Whom It Matters**

To whom is representation important? Arguments focused on the influence of media portrayals tend to emphasize the educational and political import of media



representation. As discussed in chapter two, the assumption that representation is important to and desired by marginalized audiences is also a prominent theme in this literature; this is part of the market logic argument for media representation. In both cases, however, there is an assumption that those who are marginalized care about representation of the identifiers that contribute to their marginalization. Conversely, the market logic argument seems to presume that the non-marginalized do not wish to see people unlike them in their media. Contrasting two pairs of interviewees, however, offers another perspective from which to view this issue.

Rusty identified<sup>ii</sup> as a heterosexual, White male in his late 30s, who grew up in the suburbs of Chicago, and currently lives with his partner Tanner<sup>iii</sup> in a suburban, professional neighborhood of Philadelphia. On my first visit to their house in early fall, he had made dinner, which we ate on their deck while discussing, among many things, his annoyance at cut-backs on leaf pick-up in their neighborhood. Gregory, in contrast, identified as a black, gay<sup>iv</sup> man in his early 30s, who was born and raised in a middle-working class family in Philadelphia. During our interview, in the North Philadelphia house he shares with his mother and younger sister (who he helps care for), Gregory mentioned that his neighborhood had been “hot” lately, as a number of police officers had been shot over the previous months. One of the reasons he plays video games is because spending time outside runs the risk of police harassment.<sup>v</sup> Indeed, I noted on my second visit to his house that a city “no loitering” sign was hung un-ironically near the bus stop on his block.

Based on the assumptions described above, it seems easy to contrast Rusty's comments with those of Gregory. Rusty asserted that he does not think much about whether he identifies with characters or about representation: "I just kind of know who I am and that's the only thinking I do about that." In part, he ties this to the fact that he sees himself as boring, and views games as away to escape, rather than find, himself. "I'm White; I'm boring (laughs). I want to be that Orc that could rip a car in half with my hands, or you know blasting cities from orbit." In contrast, representation is important to Gregory. He stated very specifically that seeing people like him in media "shows that I'm being heard and seen and I'm being acknowledged and I'm here." Though it is rhetorically useful for me to contrast Rusty and Gregory based on their social demographics, to rely on those as the explanatory factors for their differing opinions is overly simplistic. These two men are different in terms of their racial, sexual, and class identifications. Their geographic locations, both former and current, set them in even greater relief from one another. However, it is more than this that explains their differing takes on the importance of representation, which can be seen by looking at a counter-example.

Kat identified herself as a White woman in her early 20s, did not disclose her sexuality, and was raised in what she called the "WASPy" suburbs of Atlanta. I contrast her answers here with Julia, who was in her late 30s and identified as an African-American, gay woman that grew up in Northwest Philadelphia. Julia did not feel particularly strongly about representation. She argued, however, that this was because she did not identify with the signifiers that typically signal Blackness. Her partner Elise<sup>vi</sup>,

who took part in the first interview, made a similar comment about queer identity and representation.

Julia: It's not important to me. I would think it's important to most other people because of what most other people do. You know they tend to do what people like them do. So, I mean, ok (both laugh) for instance, for me personally, I don't listen to R & B. I don't listen to rap. I don't watch BET. I don't have the weave. I'm not saying this to offend. (Both laugh).

Elise: Not to generalize! (Laughing)

Julia: All I'm saying is that, not to generalize, if that's what you're into, but I don't. I'm not like that, so I don't look for that [...] because it's not what I'm into. I don't identify with those people, even though they are Black. We have nothing in common whatsoever. So I don't, for me, [representation is] not important at all.

[...]

Elise: Being gay is this much of my life [holds up thumb and forefinger slightly parted] you know what I mean. [...] I mean we tend to hang out with gay people, just I think by virtue of being into the same stuff, but I don't think I would specifically watch a show, like we never watched *Queer Eye* or *The L Word* or anything. It was sort of like we would, but it wasn't like, "Oh my god there's a queer person!" You know what I mean?

Julia also believed that lack of representation in video games is not an issue, because they are "just games." For Kat, however, representation is very important, even in video games. Due to this, when she discussed the importance of seeing people like her in media, she felt that it is important but that diversity in media in general is important, and this tempered her need to see people specifically "like her."

Kat: It's important to me. I can think of, I don't know beauty advertisements for me. I always get upset when it's like these picture-perfect people who I can't identify with at all because I'm never going to have like a twiggy body, or perfect lips, or a perfect complexion, or any of that. And it's frustrating to me that our advertisers try to paint this alternate reality that's just never possible. And they try to encourage people to, or they psychologically encourage people to think that that is reality. And in movies I'm definitely more prone to go see a movie if I see someone who looks like me and who has encountered situations like me, rather

than someone else. But at the same time, I definitely value diversity. I mean as a White, American girl, I wouldn't be offended if they put more diversity in there. Because I think that's beneficial. I don't think that our media needs more White, American girls, you know?

Representation is not only important in terms of racial, gendered, and sexual identities. Like Kat, many interviewees stressed the lack of diversity of body types and physical appearances in media, much more than the usual identifiers of race, gender, and sexuality. Moreover, diverse representation is important, Kat argued, because society is diverse. Lack of diversity is misrepresentation, an attempt by producers to present an alternate and unrealistic version of reality.

Tying these two comparisons together, we can see that the importance of representation is not, in fact, tied specifically to the often-marginalized identifiers most research tends to emphasize. That is not to say that people did not stress these marginalized identities when they described representation as important, but that there is not an inherent correlation between marginalization and feeling that representation is important. Rather, there is an approach to media evident in these four interviewees' comments that cannot be reduced to social demographics. For one, some people did not care about representation when they view video games, or other media, as unserious. In addition, some people were not invested in seeing representation of people like them, because they were all too conscious of the ways in which media representation cannot encompass the diversity of those who share an identifier. Certain types of texts and contexts also shape the way audiences interpret portrayals. It was not if a group is represented that was important, so much as the function of a specific representation, an issue discussed throughout Dyer's work (1999; , 2002a). Representation of people "like

them,” for example, did not inherently make a text more appealing to interviewees, for much as targeting marginalized gaming audiences as peripheral emphasizes their exclusion from the mainstream gamer market.

These findings help me develop a critique of representation, which focuses on the way diverse representations are available most often in the very games in which representation matters least. The data here also indicate that the market logic focus on marginalized groups as the target for diverse representation hinders the more political goals of media diversity. This has resulted in pluralistic version of representation, but not diversity in a more general sense; diversity that might actually address why people here said representation is important. Representation is important in a social sense, not the individualistic sense stressed by market logic. Too often, however, the argument for the importance of representation relies on a focus on realism, as contrasted with fantasy. Interviewees’ responses reflected this as well. Representation is important to those players who want their media to be realistic; it is important to those that want their fiction to present the world in a manner that conforms to their expectations of that fictional world, as well as their real-life personal experiences.

### **Why It Matters**

Why does representation matter? Interestingly, arguments for the representation of minorities rely on making the games more realistic. Arguments against representation as a goal emphasize fantasy. In either case, however, there is an assumption that recognition requires a reference to reality, but fiction is immune from recognition requirements. Members of the industry have argued on International Game Developers

Association (IGDA) discussion boards, as have gamers on various game discussion websites, that because games exist that do not include characters, the representation of women, homosexuals, people of color, etc. is not an issue (i.e. if they do not want to play characters that are not like them, they do not need to play games with characters). Similarly, it is a common assertion in those venues, and echoed by some interviewees, that games are fantasies and thus discussions of “realistic” representation are irrelevant. This ignores, however, the very realistic bases of many fantasy games (Chan, 2005; Haggin, 2009). Whether games fantastical or realistic, the representation of certain identities and not others it is telling of the assumptions made by game makers. “The moment any choices are made about what material to include, how to treat it and what kinds of activities are required of players in order to succeed, particular meanings—or the potential for such meanings—are created” (G. King & Krzywinska, 2006, p. 172). Researchers must be critical of the unquestioned use of White, English-speaking, heterosexual, and male as normative, and the use of other identities to mark difference. In addition to this, however, they must also deal critically with the dominance of this dichotomy between realism and fiction in how people make sense of it and how representation is important.

Representation is often interpreted in terms of realism. Even “bad” representation is justified using this frame. Chan (2005), for example, argues that in war games’ problematic representation of groups are often couched in authenticity claims, particularly when games reference historical events. As she played a lot of *Madden*, I asked Sasha if she thought it was a problem that usually the only games with

representations of African-Americans were sports games. I explained Leonard's (2004) critique of the ideologically problematic aspects of this. She responded, however, "of course there's going to be a lot of Black characters like on *Madden* and *NBA Live*, because it's an *exact* replica of what is out there!" Sasha is correct to point out that these specific game texts provided mimetic versions of professional, American athletic organizations. The problem researchers can investigate, however, is not the veracity of a given representation. Rather, they can focus on the deployment of realism in discussions of representations. Chan (2005) makes this argument in terms of texts and producers, but I think that those who wish to create change in representation in video games must also look at how audiences use the realism/fantasy dichotomy.

Realism in video games is not a simple black-and-white concept. Galloway (2004) argues that games can be divided into two groups, "those that have as their central conceit the mimetic reconstruction of real life, and those resigned to fantasy worlds of various kinds" (though one might amend this to add the placeless, characterless games Juul (2005) describes). He also distinguishes between two types of representation: 1. how groups are represented (stereotypically or in-depth) and 2. graphics (abstraction vs. realistic). Critics must, he argues, look at both levels when they discuss representation in games. He goes on to argue that researchers must also assess games in terms of realism of action. We cannot, he argues, study games' "realistic-ness" without looking at the audience's interactions with the game.

Building on to this, researchers can also look at audiences' expectations for realness. When representation did not matter, it was because interviewees described game

texts, media texts in general in fact, as forms of escape and fantasy. As seen above both Rusty and Julia dismissed the importance of representation by stressing the fantastical aspects of games. Bryan made a similar point.

Bryan: If I'm playing *Rock Band* and I'm dressing up my rock character I'm going to give him a green mohawk and leather pants which is not something I would rock in real life. Do I identify more with a character who is a short brown-haired boy who's got plainish clothing or is wearing a monkey suit to go to his job?<sup>vii</sup> No, probably not, because it doesn't make for a good game.

In the same way that identification with video game characters was not always important, players did not always care how those characters were represented (even if the player created those representations). That is, people did not play video games to see a reflection of reality necessarily; indeed, many said that was definitely *not* the purpose of games. Some made a similar argument for media in general. Amy argued that she can easily separate fantasy from reality, and thus does not think that media representation is important.

Amy: I totally don't. I'm thinking about all the various articles about like there aren't enough people of various races and things like that [...] Like for example, *Friends*, New York City with very few black people, that sort of thing. I don't care. I have no problem distinguishing reality from fiction. So I don't think it's any issue.

This is also a common argument against the importance of representation in video games. Some people emphasize what games' scholars call the "magic circle" of play as a way of cordoning games off from concerns about realistic representation.

This notion of a "magic circle" of play, as something distinctive and separate from "reality," draws from Huizinga's (1955) work on play, though Caillois (1961) argues that this concept may be a more accurate description of games than playfulness



generally. It is also an issue which has been much debated in contemporary game studies (for discussions of this see Consalvo, 2009; Malaby, 2007; Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). In debates over representation in digital games it is a common theme (discussed in Shaw, 2009a). Often the excuse for not “dealing” with issues of representation are based in the idea that these are fantasy worlds and should not be encumbered with reality, or that they represent the reality of the fictional worlds they create. Yes, *Grand Theft Auto* is violent, misogynistic, and racist. It is a gangster fantasy, how could it be otherwise?

In his book *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*, game designer Raph Koster (2005) argues that the assertion that “it’s only a game” stems from the fact that the puzzle, the game mechanics behind the story, are what players are really seeing when they play. He goes on to say, however, that the proper matching of narrative and gameplay reinforces the overall experience. “Players see through fiction to the underlying mechanics, but that does not mean the fiction is unimportant” (p. 162). Caine, for example, discussed realism versus fantasy in relation to a pen-and-paper role-playing war game that he played, which involved painting models. “Because of the science fiction nature you have a bit more freedom and creativity in painting together a force. Eh, I want to make this guy blue. Whereas if it’s a historical game, I would feel very guilty painting up a tank to be blue, when that sort of tank was never blue.” As a history major, with a focus on military history, he was particularly attentive to historical realism in this regard. In games that he felt were meant to be realistic, representational issues were highly important to him. He was more flexible, though he prefers diversity in a broad sense, in fantasy texts.

Realism matters differently to different people and in different texts, however. Countering Amy's point above, Gregory declared in one interview, "it's just unrealistic, some of these shows. Like *Friends*. Are there no Black people in New York City?!" Both see it as unrealistic, but they differ on whether or not that matters. Devon discussed realism in terms of what constitutes good gay representation.

Devon: I guess when I see it and I believe it [...] You got the token gay friend. They're fabulous [...] I'm sure there are people like that but they're not the only, not all gay people are like that [...] You never see gay nerds, you just don't see them. [...] I think it's important that things seem realistic in that sense because a lot times in cases like *Fable* and *The Sims* it makes sense that there isn't a difference, because in many ways there isn't.<sup>viii</sup> But then when you're watching things on TV they're trying to— because there are differences but they are playing up the wrong differences. They're playing up the fact that if you're gay you're fabulous instead of playing up you know like if you're gay there are a lot of challenges in life.

The differences that make a difference to representation here are the hardships experienced by those that are marginalized.

Other interviewees attacked this lack of realism in representation as well. Tala stated that, "I would like to see people more naturally depicted. [Later in the interview] The current standards of beauty are unrealistic, that's the problem." Tala went on to explain her distaste for reality television because it is, ironically, unrealistic. Conversely, Janet said she primarily watches reality television, "because it's got actual people represented as opposed to a narrow subset that are considered ok to show on television." Her observation here is similar to Gross's argument, that there is more representation of the LGBT community in reality television precisely because the presence of such individuals validates the shows' claims to present "reality" (interviewed in Sender, 2006). Granted, Janet and Tala described different types of reality television. Janet watched

Discovery Channel-esque shows, which are different from the *Real World* progeny Tala castigated; but the relation to reality is still a prominent issue. Devon too described the importance of realism and representation, in relation to documentaries: “I watch a lot of documentaries that have to do with sex or gender or sexuality [...] You feel like you’re not the only person whenever if you watch a documentary about gays in the workplace or something like that.” This is similar to Gray’s (2009) interviewees who discuss the power of documentaries and online coming-out stories because they provide evidence of “queer realness.”

It is important to note that interviewees did not discuss realism in the sense that media should be realistically accurate, in a quantifiable sense. Rather, interviewees used realism as a way of making media producers responsible for what they portray. No one assumed that media should mirror reality. As Bird argues, “[w]e know that television does not mirror reality (nor do people want it to), but that it refracts back a sense of reality that speaks to people in different ways” (2003, p. 115). According to Alice Hall’s (2003) research, audiences have many different ways of thinking about realism in media. Machin and Suleiman too found that, “for many computer game players naturalism is experiential rather than perceptual” (2006, p. 18). Their seven interviewees engaged very different definitions of ‘realistic’ when evaluating war games, much of which appeared to be based on the player’s identity, political ideology, and motivations for playing. For several of my interviewees, *good* representation was believable representation, and believable representation drew on the diversity interviewees saw in themselves and their world.

Often when researchers focus on representation, they emphasize what the text portrays. The absence of certain types of representation, however, is striking to researchers and interviewees alike. As Janet put it, “I mean there is certainly no shortage of White women. But like, there's definitely an incredible dearth of people who are fat and just doing normal things that aren't specifically about being fat.” As a White woman, she does feel she is represented, but her body type and sexuality (she identified as gay in the interview and queer in the survey) rarely are. Caine, who grew up in Maryland after his parents emigrated from Pakistan when he was very young, discussed this in terms of South Asian characters being absent from games or the negative representations of Muslims prevalent in most media.

Caine: I can think of one video game where I recall a South Asian character having any sort of role. And it was a positively presented role, which made me happy. But even still, it was a passive rather than active role [...] These days, it's more usual for it to happen and be in a negative light, which is rather frustrating. I look at shows like *24* where most of the Muslim characters who come on screen are complete antagonists and wind up getting killed off in various gruesome ways throughout the course of the show. That is frustrating. But, every once in a while there is positive representation and I'm very glad to see that.

When interviewees did express that representation was important to them, it was largely in this vein of critiquing what representations exist or do not exist in relation to realism. In this and in my previous research, interviewees did not necessarily say that they always sought out representation. This is because, as Taylor describes, “[p]eople may not know what they *could* enjoy” (2006b, p. 102). Wanting representation, the act of desiring it, is a very different issue from critiquing portrayals that exist. This is a nuance the market logic argument for representation glosses over. For many interviewees, representation was “nice when it happens.” In some ways, as will be explored in the next chapter, this

sentiment pushes back against the assumption that audiences need to demand representation for it to exist. The reason representation mattered to some people was because they saw the under- or misrepresentation of certain groups as unrealistic. This, they hypothesized, may lead to negative effects in the world at large. It was not, however, because they needed to see people “like them.”

### **Why It Does Not Matter**

In terms of representation mattering to specific individuals, opinions varied, as described above. This was because the reasons individuals go to media impacts what matters to them in the texts they consume. For some people representation in games is just not important. As Sara says, “I like TV shows that make me think. Stories that make me think. The ironic thing is that I think a lot of the games I play aren't necessarily ones that make me think.” Although uses and gratifications research (see Katz, Blumer, & Gurevitch, 1973-1974; Ruggiero, 2000) is maligned by some scholars (see Severn & Tankard, 1997), an individual’s reason for using a particular text or medium is directly related to how they interpret that text, and thus the relative importance of representation. Julia, for example, said, “The things I look for in TV is different than things I look for in books.” As discussed in the previous chapters, the characterization of games as trivial leads some people to view representation in video games as unimportant.

There also seems to be a relationship between how individuals describe how they identify themselves and the importance they give to seeing people “like them,” but not in the way usually assumed. This was evident in Julia and Elise’s exchange above; seeing people “like them” is largely immaterial to their media consumption. This is not, as

assumed in the Social Identity Theory literature, because these identities are less “salient” for them, but rather that the typical articulation of those identifiers does not correlate with their experiences. Christine, an African-American woman in her early 20s discussed this in terms of both race and gender: “I guess it all, it has a lot to do with how you grow up, and I didn't really grow up in any one particular community and I've never really viewed my being a woman as something... It's just too broad of a category for me so it's not particularly meaningful.” Malcolm was a graduate student who had lived in the U.S. for 15 years but grew up in South East Asia. He said that it was not important to see people like him because, “I guess I probably have less of a self image than other people [...] I never really had any particular, I don't know, mental frame.” He also acknowledged that he very rarely sees people like himself in media, but he said that this did not bother him.

Related to this, some of the reasons people said representation was not important to them indicated that they were cognizant of the problems of representation. That is, they were aware of the back-and-forth over what is positive and negative about various representations. Interviewees recognized that tokenization and stereotyping are dangers of demanding diversity in representation.

Chuck: When I think of diversity, how it's done in the media— do you remember when Burger King tried to have like the [Burger King Kids Club] where it would be like the kid in the wheelchair who's named Wheels, and there's like the one Black kid, the one Asian girl. That stuff always drives me insane.

Largely those problems stem from a focus on specific identifiers without the acknowledgment that identities are not reducible to individual signifiers. Yes, group differences exist. However, the ways these differences are marked often oversimplifies these differences. As Kat described, “I definitely don't think that we should overlook that

different cultures have different ways that they've been raised and that has shaped their reality, but saying that you're born with an inherent value and capacity is not appropriate (laughs).”

Sometimes always seeing characters that looked like them was a reason interviewees gave for representation not being important to them. This was particularly true of interviewees who did not see themselves as marginalized. Chuck, for instance, said in response to whether or not seeing people “like him” is important, “No, because it is almost all me (laughs). I'm a straight, White male who is 29. That's what 99% of media is for: me. I wouldn't mind it if it wasn't.” It was not, however, only those in the presumed majority of the gaming audience who said this. To Amy, who identified as a heterosexual, Asian-American woman in her late 20s, having people that look like her in games was not important because, as she said, “I consider myself fairly generic looking. And I think video games, to have memorable characters, would look more outrageous or something.” The literature on representation asserts, as did some interviewees, that representation is only or most important to the marginalized. Pouncy, for example, said, “I feel like that's only really important if you're not a White dude, because so much media representation is already aimed towards White dudes.” This was not always the case, however.

Sometimes interviewees said never seeing people “like them” was a reason they did not care about representation. Some described this as an apathy bred from resignation over never being portrayed. It could also arise from the fact that the rare occasions in which one was represented, did not resonate. Evan recalled that, having struggled with

his own identity over time, and because he tends to identify with heroic characters, seeing people like him is not was relevant to him: “I don't think I identify with people like me [...] I'm a transman [...] they're not really depicted in movies and if they are they're not really heroic *per se*.” In this case, he disidentified with portrayals of transmen, and this led him to be uninterested in representation. However, in another interview he referenced *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word* as texts that, by all accounts, should have resonated with him as an early 30s, White, middle class, bisexual transman. He stated, “It was like queer content that was very specifically something that had to do with me and my lifestyle, and you want to talk about underrepresented— I had no interest.” He did not watch these shows at all; he did not avoid them because he could not relate to them. Though the first can be explained as a form of disidentification, the latter indicates that for some people seeing people *like them* is just not a driving factor for their media consumption; at least not always.

As discussed in the previous chapter, people are perfectly capable of enjoying media that does not necessarily represent them.

Bryan<sup>ix</sup>: I saw *The Hangover* recently [...] and yeah, ok, that could have been me. Goofy White guys, lost in Vegas. I've done that. Not to that extent, but I could see myself at someone's bachelor party and being in crazy situations. [...] But it doesn't make some other movie that has a character that has nothing to do with me— *Slumdog Millionaire*, nothing to do with me. It's some game show contestant, right. I've never been on a game show. But still a great story.

As Hatshepsut described, the relative importance of representation is specific to a text. If she was watching a movie set in China, she was not going see people like her, an early 30s, African-American/Native American, queer, female artist from California. However, she went on to say, “It's important to me in some cases, where if it's supposed to represent



the people or the world in general, then I expect to see people that look like me as well as other people.” Again, she judged representation as important in terms of realism.

Finally, the way one was targeted was a reason for not caring about representation. Chuck described this in relation to being a comic book geek: “when they do kind of aim for me, I’m usually insulted. It’s like with comic book movies, for example. I’m a huge comic book geek, but I hate the movies because it’s shoved into my face, like, oh this is what I really like.” Similarly, Violet, a heterosexual, White woman in her early 20s said:

Violet: I do not like watching shows where characters are like me. Like I don’t like dramas where the characters are my age— like for example, *The Hills* is supposed to be for people like me, I think. I think it’s marketed towards people my age. And I don’t enjoy that show [...] I think shows I like to watch are kind of like the video games I like. Almost an escape rather than a reflection.

This recalls the previous discussion of realism versus escapism. It also points to the same sort of critiques of “girls’ games” discussed earlier. An anecdotal example from an essay by Stephanie Bergman emphasizes this point. She describes an interaction between a girl and some boys talking about video games on the New York subway: “The concept of ‘girl games,’ on its face, is detrimental to the little girls who game. It’s because companies are creating games ‘for girls’ that the boys had such a hard time understanding how this girl could be playing something other than Barbie” (2000, p. 330). As described in chapter 4, marketing marks a group as a particular kind of audience, and can shape a person’s relationship with a medium/genre/industry.

Interviewees’ resistance to targeting is also part of the constant tension between representation and exploitation, between being given a voice and being pandered to,

which is often traced throughout media studies discussions of the representation of marginal groups. According to Davies's (1995) overview of screen theory and critical history accounts of representation, writers are "conscious of the problems that any voice that was given would be appropriated by those who wished to traduce them for their own interests" (p. 94). Some people, recognizing this, rejected the boxes media-marketers tried to place them into via targeting. This included rejecting the importance of representation, which often results from or contributes to that type of marketing. The primary reason representation did not matter to some people was because it was not important for them to see people "like them" in their media. The plural version of representation, that the market logic argument supports, is not why representation was important. Rather, people said diversity in representation in general, not only done for the sake of targeting, was important.

### **When It Matters**

Media portrayals, like marketing, flatten the real-world existences they reflect. As Plato famously laments, artistic representations imitate but offer incomplete knowledge of the world (2000, pp. 313-345). When audiences recognize this, they also observe that individual identities are extremely complex. No media text can perfectly reflect an individual or a group in its multifaceted totality. Similarly, seeing certain forms of representation are not necessarily the driving factor in media choices. That is not to say that representation is *not* important, just that it is not inherently important. It is, rather, relatively important to an individual's identity, the text itself, and the context in which a text is used. Identity matters, because how people understand their own identities shapes

what types of representation are important to them. Textual properties matter because they can shape how audiences interpret a given representation. Finally, context matters because representation is important in the broad social relationships in which people find themselves, not in a single, isolated text.

### ***Identity Matters***

For some people the representation of certain identifiers is extremely important, though not always. Gregory explicated the nuances and complications of representation, specifically in relation to his sexual and racial identities.

Gregory: I used to watch *Queer as Folk* all the time, and I was like this is the only fucking town where there is no gay Black people! (Laughs) [later in the discussion] You ever see that show called *The Wire*. Everyone talks about it. My mom loves that show. I never watched it. But, they said it's a good show. I don't know. I mean, that might depict something, but everybody in the hood ain't a drug dealer. You know what I'm saying (Laughs).

In discussing two shows, which purportedly include characters “like him,” Gregory offered an exemplar for the very issue with which I began this dissertation. Focusing on single identifiers in discussing representation, even focusing on intersectional identities (*The Wire* addresses race and class, among other categories), has its limits. A similar sentiment was present in other interviews as well. Zahriel felt very strongly about the representation of women.

Zahriel: I'm very much a feminist. I've always felt that women were misrepresented and underrepresented in most media [...] I was always infuriated by my *Star Wars* action figures because the women looked like very bad drag queens. Leia looked like a duuude wearin' ear muffs [...] There's a game called *Super Princess Peach* for the DS [...] just reading it infuriated the crap out of me. Because Princess Peach, who is finally able to try and save Mario and Luigi now they've gotten kidnapped, she's got like four basic powers which are tied to her emotions. Angry, sad loving and I forget what the other one is. But, she basically gets PMS and breathes fire. When she's sad she cries a river and makes trees grow

so she can do the beanstalk shuffle and stuff. When she's all lovely dovey they all fawn over her. And it's just like what century are we living in again?

She discussed this in the context of feeling as though some of the positive strides she saw made with the representation of strong women when she was younger (e.g. *Wonder Woman* and *Charlie's Angels*) were reversed later (e.g. *Beverly Hills 90210* and the *Real Housewives* shows on Bravo). Carol made a similar point in her interview, "I think with movies and TV and music it's a little frustrating how retrograde everything is." In part, Zahriel's and Carol's frustration was tied to the ebb and flow of representation, as they described it. This counters the progressive narrative often offered up by historical surveys of representation (critiqued in Shaw, 2009a). It also points to the fact that audiences judge representation in the context of the broad history of media, not simply in terms of what is available now.

It is also important to note, that Zahriel tied her feeling that representation is important to her identity as a feminist, not just as a woman. Other interviewees described it as important because they want media characters that they can identify with, but not only in relation to identifiers like gender, race, and sexuality. Those were important to some interviewees, certainly. Devon said he goes through phases where he just needs to find movies with gay characters.

Devon: And then I'm like, these movies are so bad, why can't we have good directors? And I watch them anyway and I do enjoy them because I can identify with the characters even though so many are lousy, absolutely lousy. During those little phases it's really important because I'm really craving something to identify with during that time.

Renee, on the other hand, said of the musicians she enjoys, "I feel like they are the same kind of people [...] It's not so much that they have the same skin color or the same hair

color, but they dress similarly or I feel like I'm kind of quirky in some ways in the things that I choose to put on in my everyday life and they are quirky in that sense, in that style.” Other interviewees, like Sara and Malcolm, made similar claims in regards to their senses of humor. For some interviewees, then, it was important to their enjoyment of media to see people like them. What “like them” meant, however, was not necessarily or always, tied to the identifiers typically used to analyze media representation in the context of socio-political recognition.

The importance of identifiers to choices people made in games varied. For instance, when Connie played a Texas Hold 'Em game, she was annoyed that she was only given two choices to begin with, a male or female character. The male character was a card shark, while “they describe the girl and it's like, ‘made some bad choices in life and wants to buy a house from her mom and is really trying to go out on a limb and play poker’ (in whiny voice).” Connie ended up picking the woman because the actual personality of the character did not matter in the context of playing. Given more choices, however, she would have chosen a male character with a personality like hers over a female character. Earlier approaches to representation were right to argue that identity can shape how people approach a text. Finding characters “like you” is important, but only if the reason you are going to the text is to seek out reflections of your identity. What “like you” means, moreover, is variable and contextual.

### ***Textual Matters***

Usually texts are the focus of representation studies. Texts are central to representational issues after all. Just looking at texts in isolation, however, does not shed

light on why representation is important. A “bad” representation is only a problem in the context of a mediasphere in which those are the only kinds of representations that exist. Leonard’s (2004; , 2006a; , 2006b) and Chan’s (2005) critiques of the representation of African-American athletes only resonate in a mediascape in which, as Stuart Hall (1997b) describes, this kind of representation of Black athletic bodies is prominent. Social history is part of why the representation of one group as the “baddies,” versus another group, has meaning. As Alice Hall describes, “[m]edia interpretation...is inherently a social activity. Even when audiences are watching a TV program or movie alone, they are interpreting it through criteria they have developed through interactions with others” (2003, p. 638). That is why, for example, the representation of African<sup>x</sup> zombies in the trailer for *Resident Evil 5* (Capcom, 2009) created such an uproar (Godinez, 2008; McWhertor, 2008). Many comments following the online articles about the controversy insisted that it was hypocritical to critique this version of the game, but not the earlier iterations of the game, which featured infected zombies in Spain (among other countries). It was not, however, the game in isolation which was the problem. It was the broader racial, colonial history that it tapped into, which made the choice of an African-setting controversial.

As reviewed in chapter two, in order to understand how people think about representation in games we must take into account the interplay between the narrative and play aspects of games, as well as the broader cultural logics in which these games are played (discussed in G. King & Krzywinska, 2006; Mayra, 2008). Though we can analyze the representation of groups in texts, this does not help us get at why representation matters. More specifically, in order for representation to be important in a

socio-political sense, it needs to matter within a text. As Dyer (1999) describes, how stereotypes are used, matters more than that they are used. Hatshepsut discussed this as well.

Hatshepsut: With certain games where the characters are stereotypical it's like, you like to see characters that are a certain way, that are different representations. But at the same time it can be offensive because it's stereotypical [...] They have to actually have some purpose, value in there. Not just entertainment I guess.

Diversity in games is great, but in many games, producers must walk a fine line between stereotype and archetype.

How identities are signaled is important, but why is crucial as well.

Representations of identifiers, like identities, become relevant, salient, and are experienced in relation to specific moments of articulation. It is also related to the individual's reason for engaging with the text. As Janet pointed out, "I guess it depends on what I'm getting out of it, how important that is to me." Moving to a non-game example, she discussed this in terms of the types of people and bodies represented in the yoga DVDs she gets from Netflix, "I'm like, oh man they should totally make a yoga DVD with somebody who's like kinda old and has bad knees like me. That would be great." In the context of other kinds of shows, however, that kind of representation was less important, "I don't require like, somebody on a cooking show to be old and have bad knees because that's not really relevant to the product that I'm consuming." Turning to games, she made a similar argument.

Janet: I guess it would depend on how important that was in the game. Like if I'm playing *The Sims* I want to play someone who looks like me because why should I have to play a character who doesn't look anything like me? [...] If I was playing a fighting game, I wouldn't want a character who looked like me (laughs) because

I would be terrible at it. I understand that I'm not particularly suited for some modes (laughing).

When representation matters is as interesting a question as if it matters, and as Janet pointed out here, some of that mattering is tied to the mechanics of the game.

In the last chapter, I discussed the relative importance of identification in different types of games. This is true of representation as well. Specifically, sometimes the mechanics, the ludic elements of games, mattered more to players than representation. Newman (2002) argues that play is largely kinesthetic rather than visual, thus appearance does not necessarily matter when it comes to playing video games. Carr (2005) too suggests that “[n]on-players... tend to overestimate the importance of representational factors in games... but seasoned gamers routinely distinguish between the ‘look’ of a game and its gameplay” (p. 478). This may be an overstatement, however, and indeed the fact that several interviewees discussed graphics and visuals of games as a draw is evidence to the contrary. Overall, interviewees described the relationship *between* play and representation as important.

In my previous research, players often asserted that representation must matter, either to the mechanics or to narrative of a game, in order for its inclusion to be valued. In the context of this project, interviewees stressed that there is a relationship between whether they care about the appearance of their avatar and game mechanics.

Representation, which interviewees tended to describe in terms of how they went about choosing an avatar, matters differently in different games. Cody, for example, who identified as a heterosexual, African-American male in his mid 20s, said that how he chose a character depended on the type of game. When he played *EverQuest* or *WoW*, he



did not care what his character looked like. He picked the one that had the abilities he needed to do well in the game. When playing a skate boarding game like *Tony Hawk*, which is more realistic, he would pick the African American avatar if available, “why not?” When he played sports games, he picked the athletes he most identified with, being an athlete himself. He showed me the player her created to play through the storyline option on the wrestling game he played during the gaming interview. It did not look like him necessarily, as the wrestler had dreadlocks (which Cody did not), had lots of tattoos (which Cody did not visibly have), and wore a gas mask and leather cape (which Cody did not seem likely to wear). It did however have Cody’s skin tone and a similar name. According to Cody, “I just wanted to make the guy as nuts as I could. No real reflection of me. That was fun, I didn't ever think to make my own guy would be fun, but it kind of was.” In contrast, when creating an avatar on XBox live, which was supposed to be a representation of him, and he made it look like him as much as possible. In an interactive medium like games, the relative importance of representation can be traced through the ways players make decisions about their characters. That is not because researchers can somehow decipher a player’s identity from their avatar design. Rather it is because the process of making those decisions illuminates when, how, and if, self-representation is important to them. This also allows researchers to focus on the way game designers limit player’s choices in some game texts but expand upon them in others.

Game mechanics can make representation matter or not. Some interviewees stressed that representation was less of an issue in games. As Janet described, “In gaming I guess it's not nearly as important because it is a lot more about what can this character

do [...] like in Wii Golf I don't really care. I just sort of make the icon look like me because I think it's funny, but not because like I would feel uncomfortable swinging a golf club if I knew that like I was playing as a male character. I don't really care (laughs).” Amy, Anya, and Julia all made similar arguments. Connie chose the female avatar in *Lee Trevino's Golf* because she had balanced abilities and thus allowed Connie to “beat the pants off of just about anyone who challenged me [...] I didn't pick her for her gender. I picked her because I liked the fact that she was balanced in all the abilities.” Researchers can look critically at when and how games make certain options available to players, as interviewees did.

Players often work with and within the gameworld, because they have to if they want to play (T. L. Taylor, 2003). As Hayes (2007) describes in her findings, players' use of a game involves an interplay between their own dispositions and the game's mechanics. That is, they balance what they enjoy doing in the game with what will make them successful in the game. Researchers can interrogate representation by taking into account how players interact with these texts and how representation is tied to game mechanics. In light of this, researchers should be critical of the way certain identities matter in some games and not others. Representation is important because people want *other* people to see people like them, not because they themselves need to see a reflection of themselves all the time.

Diversity in games, however, typically entails making diversity optional, pluralistic, particularly with regards to gender, race and sexuality. This means, first, that players only see people “like them” if they make the effort to create those

representations. Second, the political goals of diversity are not necessarily realized, because dominant group members do not necessarily have to see people unlike them. Some interviewees discussed video games as a medium uniquely suited to maximizing on market segmentation in this regard, because they can give people the option of playing as people “like them” via character creation tools. Carol discussed this specifically in terms of games like *Rock Band* or the ability to create Miis on the Nintendo Wii. Sasha said that avatar customization allows players more choices, “like Nintendo Wii, they have like all shades. You can like customize a shade. Because everybody comes in different colors. You know all Black people aren't dark skinned. All Caucasian people aren't pale.” What is fascinating in Carol’s and Sasha’s articulations, is that video games were assumed to overcome many of the essentializing problems of representation. Specifically, through avatar creation and character choice, games are assumed to offer nuances not available in other media. These are purely aesthetic nuances, however.

Avatar creation tools and character options make video games more readily suited to providing audiences with the opportunity to create more diverse visual representations than other media. Yet these are limited options. Speaking of bodies in a general social sense, T.L. Taylor (2006b) points out that “[s]ome bodies are ascribed legitimacy and some are not” (p. 117). Avatar options, like bodies, “not only become places in which we express our identities but, because they are socially constructed, they offer or deny particular formulations” (T. L. Taylor, 2006b, p. 117). A few interviewees discussed this in relation to creating avatars that end up being the “skinny” version of the player, as avatar creation tools do not include a variety of body type options. Kat also pointed out

that, while making Miis during her gaming interview, “it was interesting to see the things that weren't there. Like there were no dreadlocks, there were no weaves. I don't know. It was interesting.” Similarly, during a casual conversation a friend of mine, an African-American woman in her early 40s with short salt-and-pepper hair, expressed annoyance that she could not find *her* hair when making a Mii to play *Wii Sports* at a friend's house. Making exact replications of oneself is not always the goal in using these tools. Several interviewees described making characters that were attractive or created aspirational versions of themselves. Certain types of game spaces and texts, however, encourage self-representation, and even in the ones that do not researchers can still be critical of the limits placed on avatar creation. When the choices included in those spaces limit the types of “selves” that can be represented, audiences notice the absence.

In addition, this focus on self-representation, like market logic, places the burden of responsibility for representation on audiences. It also marks diversity as the exception to the norm of heterosexual, White and male. Several interviewees pointed this out.

Janet: I guess I'm really aware of that on a racial level. The fact that there's such an intense level of tokenization. I guess I'm very aware of the extent to which White male is seen as like the default, and so like these are all regular people plus one Black person— Black people aren't regular people? Or like, these are all regular drivers but we'll show one female driver. She's not a regular driver. She's a female driver.

One of the ways researchers can critique representation in games is by looking at what options are made available, but they should also pay attention to *when* they are made available. As discussed in the previous chapter, options are often only available in games where identification *with* characters is less likely. What choices are made available also

demonstrate the industry's very limited construction of its audience, as Sasha described in relation to gender.

Sasha: Even when it comes to car games, they never have like one pink car. They always have like monster truck, tank, motorcycle, but it's all manly motorcycles, manly trucks. They never had anything like geared towards females [...] If it was geared towards girls it was like, oh this is *The Brats* video game. I don't want to play that (Laughs). I want to play an adventure game with a female. Make her good looking but not too like manly. [...] They never had like a medium. Except for like *Tomb Raider* [and the Princess from *Mario Bros.*] But when you are playing *Super Mario Bros.* you can't choose to be the princess in the beginning. You got to be Mario.

Zahriel similarly discussed how in some games, like *Zelda*, which is one of her favorite games, and *Halo*, which she played in the gaming interview, gender does not matter to the game and yet the protagonists are still male. "Where it's painfully obvious that they could have used a woman if they wanted to, that really annoys me [...] or you could make the character gender-neutral [...] You could just make a person who is very androgynous, who could go either way, and leave it at that. But they just default to men." In games where there are choices of avatars, she felt that games tend to make room for a gender choice, though these are only choices of binary gender. The problem is not just the lack of choice, but the seeming resistance to use female, or even androgynous, as a default.

According to Turkle, online environments, though perhaps offline ones as well, allow us to view "identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated" (1995a, p. 180). We must question the "freedom" of identity and identification some video game theorists (and marketers) assert are available

in these spaces, however. Filiciak argues that video games provide new ways of constructing identity outside of “oppressive” structures:

The possibility to negotiate our ‘self’ minimizes the control that social institutions wield over human beings.... Avatars are not an escape from our ‘self,’ they are, rather, a longed-for chance of expressing ourselves beyond physical limitations, they are a postmodern dream being materialized. (2003, p. 100)

This freedom, however, is potentially much more like the freedom Rose describes:

“Freedom is the name we give today to a kind of power one brings to bear upon themselves” (1999, p. 96). Alec Charles argues that, in general, games provide only the illusion of agency, and that “in appearing to satisfy its audience’s desire for agency, in fact sublimates and dilutes this desire” (2009, p. 289). Similarly, these games tend to provide diversity in a way that is marketable, but not necessarily socially transformative. Indeed, games more than many other media, manage to profit from making a single text pluralistic, without having to face the potential backlash of making it actually diverse.

### *Context Matters*

Video games do not offer players infinite options. Games are structured in ways which encourage and value certain types of play over others, which Malaby (2007) describes as the contingencies of play. In terms of representation, different identities “make sense” in some games in ways they do not in others. This is not that different from identities in the social world more generally. We can and do identify ourselves in a variety of ways, structured in part by our social context. Certain types of identity are relevant in different moments, and in different social configurations. For example, gender, as Butler (2006) explains, is performative. We are not, however, free to perform

it in any way we wish. There are norms that structure the enactment of gender and make it intelligible. Such performances, however, signify differently in different contexts.

Similarly, where people play and whom they play with influences the self-representation choices they make. Ephram discussed this in relation to playing online with his partner Devon.

Ephram: Definitely, when I'm playing with my partner, we kind of create the characters to kind of mimic our relationship. Like in *Final Fantasy XI* he would always pick the larger character and I would always pick a smaller character, because that's just how we are in stature [...] And we kind of base our characters around our personalities [...] If we're playing together we'll build it with each other in mind.

Rarely do researchers consider that when audiences create content they, like other media producers, are creating these representations for specific audiences.<sup>xi</sup> Online self-representation is not just the performance of one's identity, nor does it necessarily entail role-playing. However, that space can shape individual choices and thus the relative importance of the options made available.

Nakamura (2002a; , 2002b) and Haggin (2009) describe this in terms of cyber-realms. In virtual spaces it is assumed that embodied identities, like gender and race, no longer matter. Because of this, these identities actually become all the more relevant.<sup>xii</sup> When gender, race, and sexuality are considered unimportant in online spaces, it is through the pretense that everyone is the same. Usually the assumption is that everyone is heterosexual, White/Anglo, and male. Pouncy described this in terms of the online version of *Settlers of Catan* they played during the gaming interview. "Unless someone has an overtly feminine sounding name in their screen name everyone assumes that everyone is male. Well, I don't (laughs) but most people." Pouncy discussed at various

points in this and the first interview that there is, at times, a lot of homophobic language used by other players. Pouncy also does not play with people who have overtly religious screen names and icons. Social context affects both their experience and interactions with games.

In a previous study, I asserted that the reason the gaymers I interviewed did not care about representation was perhaps attributable to a distinction between online and offline play. I hypothesized that online homophobia was a much more important concern with this group of interviewees, who largely played online, than representation in game texts. At the time I posited that “as games are often played with others, and due to the increase in online gaming they are played with others outside one’s social network, bigotry is a much more salient issue than the sexuality of characters *per se*” (Shaw, 2007, p. 338). The dynamics shown here demonstrate that it is not just the text, but also the context in which a text is consumed that shapes players’ experience of representations.

The relative importance of what avatars players chose, shifted in respect to whether they played online or offline. In the game *Diablo II* (Blizzard, 2000), for example, which Malcolm played during the gaming interview, each class of character only comes as one gender: “If you choose one class you're playing a male character, if you choose another class you're playing a female character.” He played as both a male and female avatar during the gaming interview.<sup>xiii</sup> On the other hand, when he played *WoW* would not play as a female character.

Malcolm: Picking a female avatar just has way too many random issues associated with it [...] there's always fourteen-year-old boys playing out there and they see the avatar as female and even if they know psychologically that 90% of



the people that play these games are male, they are still going to, you know, hope that that's a female and try to interact with you in that way.

This is because playing in an online environment changes the types of and implications of choices players make. In online spaces, people represent themselves to an audience who will make assumptions about them based on the aesthetic and ludic choices they make.

The interpretation of those choices are shaped by the way those games spaces are designed. If, for example, everyone in *WoW* had to play as an androgynous or even female character, or if there was not a distinct difference between the appearance of different genders, the implications of playing as a female toon<sup>xiv</sup> would be altered.

Pulling together all of these ways identity, text, and context shape how representation is experienced by individuals, I return to my gaming interview with Pouncy. As previously discussed, the game Pouncy played for the second interview does not have characters as such. One might argue then, that we cannot talk about this game in terms of representation. That implies, however, an over-simplification of representation. We can relate this to a debate over *Tetris*, reviewed by Ian Bogost (2006), which is often used to encapsulate the ludology/narratology debate. Janet Murray (1997) argues that you can read a “story” in Tetris. Specifically she interprets it as an allegory for contemporary American life. This is resoundingly dismissed by Markku Eskelinen (2001) who focuses on the properties of participation made available in the game. Bogost goes on to conclude that “[i]n both interpretations, something is lacking” (p. 100). I argue, moreover, that beyond the play and narrative aspects of the text, researchers have to look at the way players approach the text. As Pouncy described, one can certainly read a game like *Settlers of Catan* in terms of its representational elements, “I used to play with a friend of

mine who refused to call the little houses settlements (laughs). She's like why don't we just hang a fucking Israeli flag over them if we are going to call them settlements! But, no, I don't really think about that so much.” This is because, as Pouncy stated later, “I think part of the pleasure of playing the game is not thinking about the overt political undertones that you can dig out of the story.” That is to say, it is not just that the ludic aspects overtake the narrative, but that the purpose of interacting with the text shapes the relative importance of representational issues. Often this purpose is playful; those who wish to argue for the importance of representation in games must contend with this more directly.

### **Social Matters**

Popular and academic constructions contend that media representation affects how other people see us as members of social groups. This is not just in relation to identifiers like race, gender, and sexuality. Violet, for example, described this in terms of the reality show *The Biggest Loser* and body types.

Violet: It offers people a chance, whether you are really obese or normal, to see people who are like you or not like you. And I think it inspires the people who may be overweight to be healthy or it's not some problem with who they are. It's not that they are a bad person, other people are going through the same thing. And for people who aren't overweight, when they watch the show it's kind of like [...] this is going to sound horrible but it allows you to see past what you would see on the street [...] it reminds you that they are not just the fat.

Pouncy, during one interview, wondered if a game that subverted the heteronormative narrative of most games, could produce a similar effect: “So you're on a quest and you have to like have this great prince help you out and he's like we have to rescue my true love. And he's just like some random prince, but the thing is his true love turns out to be

another random prince.” A few other interviewees brought up similar hypothetical scenarios for games. These types of representation would confront out-groups with representation, which is the demand of diversity that cannot be fulfilled through pluralism alone.

Typically, when people write about the importance of representation in video games, they try to convince marketers that they are limiting themselves by not appealing to a diverse audience. The political goals of representation, however, focus on those that are not members of these groups. Representation is important in the context of the entire mediasphere, not only niche marketing. For example, Devon posted about one of his gay film binges to his Facebook page and it resulted in a bit of an uproar from his social network.

Devon: They’re like, “I don’t know why it’s so important to have a gay movie.” And I’m like, “That’s because you’re not gay (laughs) and that’s why you don’t realize how important it is that everywhere you go” — you know I think they would be offended if everywhere they go everything was a gay movie.

People often cite this type of articulation when they assert that representation matters because marginalized groups want to see themselves in media. Ultimately, however, interviewees said that representation was socially important, not important to them as individuals. It was not merely important for individuals to see themselves reflected in a mediated mirror. When Tracy said, “everybody wants to see themselves,” it was in reference to a sentiment Sasha explained: “it’s uncomfortable to be the minority anywhere. Even if it’s in real life. If you’re a six-year-old, you don’t want to go in the three-year-olds’ class.” People do not want to feel alone and unseen. Representation is important because it is an external acknowledgment of one’s existence. This was

intertwined with Gregory's assertion, that people want to see themselves because they want people like them to be seen.

The interviewees who felt they were "mainstream" (regardless of whether they may be seen as marginalized in some way) did not think they needed, or in some cases had the right, to say that representation of their group is important. Related to this, representation does not matter if you can "find yourself" in the media in some way as previously discussed. In an increasingly pluralistic and alternative-channel-filled mediasphere, it is possible that many people feel that they can find media that "speaks" to them. In some ways, this may be why my current and previous interviewees felt more ambivalent about representation than did participants in earlier media research. When one is not accustomed to seeing representation of themselves, any representation becomes noticeable. As Evan described, representation is not "important to me, but it happens so infrequently that it certainly sticks out when it does happen and it's very noticeable." Overall, however, as will be discussed in the next chapter, interviewees described representation, like identification, as "nice when it happens." This is distinct from actively desiring representation of people like them.

Regardless of whether people felt that it was important for them to see people like them in media, everyone said that it was important for other people. In some cases they displayed what communication scholars call a "third person effect" (see Davison, 1983; Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000), based in the assumption that "those" people did not usually get to see themselves, and thus representation is important to them.

Renee: That's funny, that's really funny because I don't really think it's important to me. But I think it's important to other people, to see people that look like them.

Like I see people that look like me all the time and so I don't think of it as that important but I think that if I didn't see people that looked like me all the time I would think that I would think that it's important. But that's a lot of I would thinks.

Part of this stems from the idea that individuals, as Renee described, felt that they did get to see themselves represented in some aspects of their identity. Pouncy made this point, for example.

Pouncy: I feel like the media is full of representations of people who look like me in terms of skin color and— well, I don't feel like my gender is represented very often in terms gender not being a binary which is not a way that a lot of people look at that— But more in terms of characters that think like me and have my values.

People can think of themselves, and sometimes even their 'group,' in a nuanced and inclusive manner. When they talk about other groups, however, they tend to view them as static and cohesive. This is in fact the very trouble of representation. We can see correlations between this and Bird's (2003) study of four focus groups' attempts to create ideas for television shows featuring a White character, an American Indian character, and a female character. She finds that participants rely on stereotypes of characters of other racial identities when in the homogenous focus groups. People see other groups as defined entities, while they see themselves and their groups as multifaceted and complex. In turn, part of the problem of saying that media makers *should* offer diverse representations, is that when producers try to represent groups they tend to think narrowly about what membership in those groups entails.

Several interviewees described the lack of representation of marginalized groups as a problem for young people in particular. Usually people said young people need positive reinforcement of their identities.

Pouncy: Just because representations in our media of people who aren't White dudes oftentimes suck. And they are unrealistic or just really don't represent the broad range of people who aren't straight, White dudes out there. And yeah, it would be great if all the people who aren't straight White dudes growing up were able to see heroes that represented themselves doing awesome shit.

Carol too stated, "I mean if you aren't represented and you're marginalized and you're young and you are sort of forming your sense of self then. It's easy to think 'What's wrong with me? How come I'm not in this game?' I think that's really simplifying it, but yeah absolutely." Similarly, Sasha asserted, "it's nice to show kids that they have a variety, and just to be a hero you don't have to be a guy. There could be girl superheroes and you can choose them to play." She went on to compare this to President Obama, who she said offers "children of any other race besides White children hope that they can be president." Janet has niece, who is mixed race, and was worried about her exposure to certain types of representation, "Like my niece has darker skin and very, very curly hair, and like all the dolls she wants to play with have straight hair and light skin and it does make me wonder— why don't you like those other dolls? We bought you some. Why don't you like them? Where are you getting that from?" Such worries are tied to the compelling and disturbing findings of Kenneth and Mamie Clark's (1939; , 1940) famous doll study, recently recreated in the documentary *A Girl Like Me* (K. Davis, 2005), in which African-American children exhibit a marked preference for White dolls over African-American dolls. There is, moreover, a great deal of research on the importance of media representation for children (see for example Greenfield, 1984; Johnston & Ettema, 1987; Kinder, 1991; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2004) and a tradition in cultural critique of worrying about children (Barber, 2007; MacDonald, 1957). This, it seems, is absorbed

into lay theories about media effects on children (described in Hoover, Clark, & Alters, 2003; Seiter, 2003), as demonstrated in my interviewees comments.

Interviewees were hesitant, however, to say that representation *should* matter to other (adult) people. Janet qualified her worry about her niece by describing her own position as potentially proscriptive.

Janet: I don't always think it's a bad thing. If you're going to into a gaming environment as a bespectacled Asian dude and you want to play a gigantic blonde Amazon, like it's no skin off my ass. I don't think you should have to sit down with a therapist and fill in a form, like whether it's ok for you to do that (chuckles). Whether it's culturally acceptable. Whether this panel of experts says it's ok.

Moreover as Anya points out, to some extent the emphasis on representation may be a form of hegemonic discourse.

Anya: People definitely say that [representation is] important [...] I want to say part of it is political correctness. Like it's supposed to be important and society and media tells you that it's supposed to be important so that's why people argue for it. But I don't know how many people really stop and think about whether it's important.

Nick Couldry (2003) has discussed this in terms of the “myth of the mediated center,” the assumption that “‘the media’ has a privileged relationship to that ‘centre’, as a highly centralized system of symbolic production whose ‘natural’ role is to represent or frame that ‘centre’” (p. 45). The very notion that media representation is important, is tied to assumptions about social power. The media are assumed to be the primary site at which we can make sense of social reality. This in turn, is why people think that media representation signals or is the path to social equality. Media becomes the target for treatment, when it is only a symptom of social ills.

This focus on media derives from assumptions about media effects. As Gregory points out, however, in an excerpt that seems to cover vast swaths of social and communication theory, “some people are influenced in so many different ways [...] you learn from all different places. You can learn from friends, you can learn from reading a magazine [...] you could have ten people play this game and they all take something different from it.” Here we see incidental references to active audiences *a la* Fiske (2006), polysemy (re: S. Hall, 1997 [1990]; Hebdige, 1979), and personal influence (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 2006). The assumption that representation matters, is rarely disentangled from why it matters. It matters if, as some scholars suggest, media help shape our world views (Gerbner, Gross, Moran, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). As Gregory suggests, however, this is not a deterministic process. Arguments for the importance of representation cannot ignore the active meaning-making process, nor can they focus too specifically on the individual, marginalized audience member as the primary target for media representation.

### **Concluding Matters**

Most research on audiences and media representation focuses on how members of specific groups understand representations of that group or members of an opposing identity group (one race vs. another race, one gender vs. another gender). In contrast, this study focused on how and if people discuss representation as important. As it turns out, representation was not necessarily important to members of a marginalized group by virtue of their being members of marginalized groups. In part this is because if a specific identifier (e.g. female, African-American, or bisexual) was not central to how they think



about themselves, then seeing it represented was not going to be important to them. Audiences are also attuned to the many shortcomings of representation, including tokenization and the narrow-view of specific identity categories that often stem from attempts at representation. Some people, furthermore, were fed up with media or simply did not think it is was important as is often claimed.

Following from all of this, it is overly simplistic to say that people want to see people like them in their media, which is the basis of the market logic argument for representation. Both texts and audiences are impossible to pin down in terms of either singular meanings or specific identities. One might ask then, if identities are complex and audiences are active, can we still talk about the importance of representation? The short answer is yes. The representation of a specific group present in a given text is not important in isolation. The way in which representation matters exists, like identity and identification at the nexus of several of factors including: a given audience member's reasons for using a text; how individual players/viewers understand their identities; how and if the representation is made relevant in a given text; the context in which the text is consumed; and the social sphere in which those texts are created and consumed. That representation does not always matter, frees us to focus on these times in which it does matter. Specifically, it is important that media offer a diverse view of the world, not simply a pluralistic and targeted version of representation.

Regardless of whether or not people said it was important for them to see people "like them," they believed other people did think that representation was important. In some cases, interviewees described this as a third-person-effect. They assumed that more

vulnerable people, like children or those who are marginalized, *need* to see representations of people like them. In other instances, however, while the individual interviewee did not feel a strong need for representation, they were aware that other people did; that is, if public discourse discusses representation as important, then perhaps it is just important to everyone else and not that individual. Related to this, if a person felt representation was important, they assumed others felt likewise. Generally, however, there was not much evidence that representation was central to how people chose their media, although that is the assumption of the market logic argument.

It is interesting that media makers and scholars, as stakeholders, those whose very livelihoods center on these texts care more, more readily and vehemently argue for the importance of media representation than did audiences, at least in my findings. Media producers believe their products are important and effective; how else would they make money with them? Similarly, media scholars, particularly those that research marginalized media, are often in the position of articulating the importance of their chosen topic by relating it to these well-established discourses. In Williams *et al*'s (2009) "census" of characters in top-selling video games, for example, the authors emphasize a possible cultivation effect on video game players of viewing such a narrow representation of the world. King and Krzywinska (2006) similarly emphasize the ideological implications of the lack of diversity in video games. Scholars and interviewees tied these claims to assumptions about realism. In relying on the dichotomy between reality (truth), and fantasy (in which truth does not always matter), the argument for representation sows the seeds of its own dismissal.

Overall, people are aware of the arguments for the importance of representation. People's assertions about the importance of representation, were tied to their assessments of the importance of realism in a given text. They judged representation as accurate, and in turn good, in terms of realism. Conversely, bad representation is unrealistic. Alternatively, they dubbed representation as unimportant in texts they used for escapism, or which they viewed as primarily fantasy. Related to this, for some people representation in video games did not matter, because this medium is primarily unrealistic. The goal of researchers and activists must be to deal with the fact that, for those that think that video games' main purpose is not to reflect reality, the argument that games are misrepresenting reality holds little value. Again, the paradox those dealing with issues of representation in fiction must face is arguing for the seriousness of fantasy without diminishing enjoyment of the fictional.

To recap, there are two main themes across these three data chapters. The first is that market logic appeals to pluralism, but the political goals of media representation require diversity across the mediasphere. The second is that media researchers' focus on the "real" in analyses of representation dominates how audiences (and researchers) talk about diversity in representation. Together they demonstrate that researchers must be more attentive to the way they present and argue for representation. In chapter four, I discussed the way appeals to peripheral gamer markets (ex. the focus on girl gamers in research and marketing) do not help make the gaming audience more diverse. In fact, those targeted as a "different kind" of gamer, see themselves as not included within the primary gamer market nor the targeted niche market. Similarly, the marginalization of

gaming leads people to be less invested in claiming gamer identity. In chapter five, I described the way misconceptions about how players identify with video game characters and avatars have glossed over the different types of identification and interaction made available by these texts. Researchers should be more critical of the fact that the games in which identification *with* a character matters least are also the games in which the representation of marginal groups is often player-created/chosen, which is pluralism not diversity. In addition, the fact that some people use these texts purely for fantasy challenges the assumption that people always want to identify as or with media characters or that representation is always important to them. Finally, in this chapter, I illustrated that diversity across media is what makes representation matter. At the same time, people see representation as important to realism, but not necessarily when they use texts for escapist reasons. In the concluding chapter, I will explore the implications all of this has for how researchers, activists, and producers approach the politics of representation in video games.

## Notes

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- <sup>i</sup> A time management game popular on mobile devices and “causal” gaming websites.
- <sup>ii</sup> All descriptions of interviewees’ identifiers are a combination of survey and interview data.
- <sup>iii</sup> Tanner identified as a heterosexual, White/Arab/Arab American, female in her late 30s from the New Jersey Shore area.
- <sup>iv</sup> Gregory actually filled out the survey twice and selected gay once and bisexual another time. In the interview, he simply said he had been in a relationship with a man for six years, and only referenced being gay over the course of both interviews.
- <sup>v</sup> Henry Jenkins (2000) has argued that video games provide alternative play spaces to children who grow up in spaces where it is increasingly difficult or unsafe to play outside.
- <sup>vi</sup> Elise did not fill out the survey, so I do not know how she identified. She appeared to be White/Anglo and a woman, however, and called herself queer in the course of the interview.
- <sup>vii</sup> Here Bryan is referencing his appearance at the time of the interview.
- <sup>viii</sup> Here he references the fact that it made no difference to the narrative if you played as a heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual character in these games.
- <sup>ix</sup> In his survey response, Bryan identified as White and Hispanic/Latino. He also identified as a heterosexual male in his 30s.
- <sup>x</sup> The earliest critiques going around on the game-related listservs thought the game was set in Haiti, which resulted in a different but related set of critiques.
- <sup>xi</sup> A discussion of this is available on the blog *Wow Musings*, written by a games scholar and internet researcher Dr. Rosa Mikeal Martey: <http://wowmusings.wordpress.com/2010/03/19/144/>
- <sup>xii</sup> In a famous New Yorker cartoon by Steiner states, “on the internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” This cartoon emphasizes the potential distancing of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ identities. However, analyses of how people use the Internet find that offline identities are emphasized in the online world (Campbell, 2004; D. Miller & Slater, 2000). Perhaps nobody *knows* you are a dog on the Internet. However, if you are the only dog you know and you want to know that there are others like you ‘out there,’ proclaiming your ‘dog-ness’ becomes an important part of how you present yourself online. This is particularly true for marginalized groups.
- <sup>xiii</sup> He had played through this a game on previous occasions and had played as all of the characters at some point.
- <sup>xiv</sup> This is the term for the player’s in-game character in *World of Warcraft*.

## Chapter 7

### Conclusion: “Nice When it Happens”

Caine: I would say, even in a setting where it’s far-future, aliens everywhere, in the best of media you’ve still seen efforts to try and present a more diverse perspective. I’m reminded of the original *Star Trek*, where Gene Roddenberry said, “No, we’re going to have a Black lady as a member of the bridge crew.” Now point out that, even though he said that, poor Uhura didn’t really get that much to do. But even still it was so significant a step that at one point the actress who played Uhura, Nichelle Nichols, was considering leaving the show. She actually got— Martin Luther King Jr. said to her, “No. You can’t do that because you’re presenting such a positive role model for Black people everywhere.”

As Caine points out here, even in fantasy realms, like video games and science-fiction shows, the representation of marginalized groups can be important to audiences. Why it matters, however, is an important question. Nichols’s autobiographical account of the story reveals an even more important detail of Martin Luther King Jr.’s insistence.

According to Nichols, he said:

This is not a Black role, and this is not a female role. You have the first non-stereotypical role on television, male or female. You have broken ground.... Don’t you see that you’re not just a role model for little Black children? You’re more important for people who *don’t* look like us.... There will always be role models for Black children; you are a role model for everyone. (1995, p. 164)

This is the more expansive understanding of representation for which this dissertation argues. The market logic argument asserts that producers create portrayals of marginalized groups *for* marginalized audiences; these audiences, in turn, must want, consume, and demand this representation. This, however, is pluralism not diversity.

Everyone, not just niche markets, must see diverse representation if it is to be politically and educationally valuable. Moreover, what the evidence in this study suggests is that a

focus on specific identifiers need not be the only way we think of representation. Critical identity theory can empower researchers, activists, and media makers alike to argue for diversity in representation in a way that does not focus on segmented identities. Media representation arguments can “build upon the contributions of cultural studies to dispose of the idea that identity is an absolute and to find the courage necessary to argue that identity formation— even body-coded ethnic and gender identity— is a chaotic process that can have no end” (Gilroy, 1996, p. 394). I assert that researchers must be more conscious of the way they research the politics of representation. The representation of the importance of media representation, is as important as media representation itself.

Many different authors have argued for the importance of representation. Charles Taylor (1994), for instance, argues that representation is an important form of recognition. He states that the politics of recognition rests on the thesis that:

[O]ur identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. (p. 25)

Taylor goes on to say that the recognition of individuals can take into account particularities, but at the more social level we are asked to, ironically, recognize people in a difference-blind fashion (p. 43). The politics of recognition assert, he argues, that paradoxically we must see people as individuals, but groups as not inherently disparate from one another. This is the particular challenge faced by those who study the politics of representation. We face the dual task of seeing our research participants as nuanced individuals, and making arguments for the recognition of entire groups in ways that value, without essentializing, the differences between groups.

This need to simultaneously recognize difference without codifying it, is a fundamental paradox of the politics of representation, described by Julie D'Acci (2004). D'Acci asserts that studying the representation of "identity" in media, specifically gender in her example, puts researchers in a thorny position. On the one hand, we must interrogate how identities are produced through popular media, and celebrate non-traditional representations of marginal identity groups. "But on the other hand, we face the importance of not replicating (even inadvertently) the gender binary while we demonstrate its cultural construction" (p. 380). She goes on to say that, researchers must not ignore the importance of identities and how they are created through and influence social interactions as well as media consumption. Thus, "we face the importance of recognizing the need for groups forged within the terms of the binary's inequalities... at the same time as we try to break the binary apart" (p. 380). Put differently, research results must be considered as part of the very social processes they study (discussed in Bourdieu, 1990, p. 18; Krippendorff, 2000, p. 7). Audience studies produce a particular type of media audience, a function which has political implications, particularly "when raised alongside issues such as... how research data are mediated and (re)presented back to the audience" (Griffiths, 1996, p. 62). Even as studies of representation critique media portrayals of marginalized groups, they often reify, in some ways, the identity categories they interrogate. In contrast, this dissertation disentangles the relationship between identity, identification and media representation in a way that does not collapse each one into the other two. They are related, but not deterministically so. How the importance of



representation is represented matters, for the very same political reasons authors have long argued representation matters.

The audience, in a general sense, is the target of media representation, but not the focus of media representation studies. Usually arguments for the importance of diverse representation in video games entail one or more of the following assertions: 1. Media industries disserve certain audiences by not representing or marketing to them; 2. everyone should be provided with characters they can identify with; and 3. media representation has knowable effects. These issues are studied by focusing on texts. In contrast, this dissertation engages with how audiences relate to the construction of the gamer market, how they interact with game texts (through identification and interaction), and their thoughts about the importance of representation. The data demonstrate that the focus on marginalized groups as the source of demand for minority representation encourages pluralism and niche marketing, but not diversity in representation. Video games may offer players the chance to create representations of people “like them” or to chose narrative (or moral) options that reflect their identities. These games do not provide the opportunity, or force, players to engage with texts that offer representation of marginalized groups (with some rare and problematic exceptions).

Diversity in, not pluralism of, representation is integral to the political aims of media representation studies. I argue that the targeting of specific identity markets, and the assumption that the marginalized must demand representation, serves to marginalize groups further. Unmarked categories, like White, male and heterosexual, become the identifiers that are included in games (and research), unless a case can be made for not

doing so. Static identity-focused analyses are not the best way to demand representation, because “[p]olitics that ignores our identities, that makes them ‘private,’ is useless; but nonnegotiable identities will enslave us whether they are imposed from within or without” (Phelan, 1989, p. 170). Being sensitive to identity is not the same as using identity as an analytic category through which to analyze data.

I argued in chapter 2, that the problem with approaches to identities and media, both in terms of identification and media representation arguments, is that they focus on external labels and identifiers. As described in chapter 3, studies of video games must, as all studies of media should, negotiate the ever-present tension between producer intent and audience use. “Such work offers provocative insights into the disjunctive relations between intention, text, and effect, by studying how producers make decisions and how audiences interpret works in unpredictable and destabilizing ways” (Ginsburg, 1994, p. 13). In a medium defined by audience activity, this is particularly evident. Moving outside of textual analysis, this dissertation demonstrates the value of contextualized audience-centered analyses of representation, how and when representation is important in to video game players. It also takes into account the indeterminacy of identifying as a member of a group, identifying with media characters, and the importance of representation. As Gilroy describes, a “political understanding of identity and identification— emphatically not a reified identity politics— points to other more radical possibilities in which we can begin to imagine ways for reconciling the particular and the general” (1996, p. 394). A focus on audiences requires that we understand how individuals identify themselves, both in relation to a medium (i.e. as gamers or not) and

in relation to individual texts (i.e. identification). This is the only way to understand why and when representation in those texts are important to audiences.

An overarching theme in the interviews conducted for this project, was that representation and identification were not necessarily important, but they were “nice when they happen.” There are two potential explanations for this seeming ambivalence. First, in the contemporary mediasphere audiences have access to relatively more diversity than was true in previous decades. Second, people viewed video games as relatively trivial, and thus representation in them as inconsequential. What “nice when it happens” indicates, moreover, is that individuals were pushing back against the attempt to locate responsibility for representation with the audience. Market logic, and the targeting it inspires, places the impetus for representation on consumer demand. So too do character selection and creation tools. Both emphasize pluralism. Interviewees, however, because they did not personally need to see themselves constantly reflected in the media, rejected that responsibility of being the locus of demand. Instead they argued that producers should imbue their texts with organic, realistic (i.e. not tokenistic) diversity.

In concluding, I offer three suggestions bred from this analysis. The first is a methodological one: researchers should look more critically at the way representation functions in video games and gaming, in a manner that emphasizes diversity rather than pluralism. At the level of the audience, this necessitates looking at how audiences are marked or left unmarked, and the way gaming itself is constructed as a medium and an activity. In terms of interactions with texts, they must disentangle the game texts and games as an activity in order to account for the ludic, narrative, embodied and social

aspects of games. This will allow researchers to look critically the way pluralism, rather than diversity, is the primary way video games represent marginalized groups. The second is a practical one: rather than argue video games should include more diversity because it matters, producers can be encouraged to include it precisely because representation *does not* matter to players in many games. The third is a paradoxical one: the goal of those invested in diversity in game texts should not be to prove how important representation in games is, but rather to argue for the importance of representation in a way that does not dismiss the playfulness of gaming.

### **Media Representation without Identity Politics?**

This dissertation uses a critical identity theory approach to study representation in a way that takes into account the fluidity, performativity, and contextuality of identity categories. There is, however, “a price to pay for a politics rooted so strongly in consciousness and identity. The power of diversity has as its mirror image and companion the powerlessness of fragmentation” (Zimmerman, 1984, p. 680). Typically, stakeholders in media representation rely on specific identifiers, often race, gender, or sexuality. The logic for this is similar to that of identity politics. One argument for an identity approach to politics is that it functions as a type of imagined community formed for political ends. It is, in a sense, like nation-building in the way Hall describes it: “To put it crudely, however different its members may be in terms of class, gender, or race, a national culture seeks to unify them into one cultural identity, to represent them all as belonging to the same great national family” (1996, p. 616).

Some theorists argue that this glossing over of differences within potential members of a group is politically advantageous. Bernstein (1997), for example, analyses how different deployments of gay and lesbian identity were useful in political struggles situated in different local contexts. In this sense, identity politics, like identities, are momentary articulations of social relationships, rather than essentialized entities. Bernstein argues that it is not useful to describe “identity” movements as monolithic entities inscribing inner and outer positions, but rather movements that use particular identities to specific ends. To continue the comparison to Hall’s discussion of national cultures, when thinking of political groups formed around a certain identity, “we should think of them as constituting a *discursive device* which represents difference as unity or identity” (S. Hall, 1996, p. 617).

As previously discussed, however, a major critique of identity politics is that individuals do not fall within one identity category. Walker describes this in terms of being a feminine, African-American lesbian: “A femme woman of color... will probably not be recognized as lesbian, first because she is not white and then because she is not butch” (2001, p. 207). All three of her “identities” not only do not necessarily signify one another, their very construction often presumes a mutual exclusivity. To argue that she has no essential identity is not useful, however, because she still wants to be recognizable in all of her identities. “Having destabilized the unitary subject... it is not yet possible to set aside our interests in identity and representation... postmodern politics do and must continue attending to issues of identity and representation” (Walker, 2001, p. 214).

Critical theorist bell hooks (1998) argues that, like feminism, postmodernism tends to act

as an exclusionary discourse perpetuated by white male intellectuals. In its dismissal of identity politics, it tends to overlook the very real and lived experiences of being “other.”

The critique of essentialism employed by postmodernism, however, is useful she argues.

Employing a critique of essentialism allows African-Americans to acknowledge the way in which class mobility has altered collective black experience so that racism does not necessarily have the same impact on our lives. Such a critique allows us to affirm multiple black identities, varied black experience. It also challenges colonial imperialist paradigms of black identity which represent blackness one-dimensionally in ways that reinforce and sustain white supremacy. (p. 421)

John Jackson asserts, that “our critical goal is not simply to expose race’s enabling fictions; we must also find ways to rewrite them” (2005, p. 401). What I have sought to do in this dissertation is to deconstruct the relationship between the video game audience and game texts, which enable discourses about representation in games that promote pluralism without actually engaging with diversity.

Mouffe (1992) argues that understanding identities as complex and contextual requires that we rethink political identity in two ways. First “the political community should be conceived as a discursive surface not as an empirical referent” (p. 30). We can, as explored in this dissertation, view identity in such a way. Identity is a starting point for discussions about the importance of identification and representation, not an independent variable through which they should be studied. Second, she promotes “citizenship as a form of political identity that is created through identification with the political principles of modern pluralist democracy” (p. 30). Similarly, this dissertation has demonstrated that representation becomes important through identification, but that its importance does not lie solely in the ability of marginalized audiences to identify with texts. This is because,

following from the first point, identification can occur on variety of axes. Importantly, Mouffe argues that identification with a group identity necessitates that “*equivalence* does not eliminate *difference*” (p. 32). That is to say, the ultimate point of this research is not that everyone can identify with anyone and thus we do not have to worry about diversity in media. Rather, because identifications are not predetermined, producers’ reliance on only representing groups they market to is unnecessarily narrow. Indeed, diversity in and of itself (though not solely done for the sake of diversity) can be an attractive media feature.

In this dissertation, I have described the role individuals have in defining themselves, in relation to the construction of the gaming audience, through the processes of identification, as well as the way they come to understand the importance of representation. Though I focused on individuals, I did not do this imply that textual representation is inconsequential. Representation is important, as Rose argues.

‘The self’ does not pre-exist the forms of its social recognition; it is a heterogeneous and shifting resultant of the social expectations targeted upon it, the social duties accorded it, the norms according to which it is judged, the pleasures and pains that entice and coerce it, the forms of self-inspection inculcated in it, the languages according to which it is spoken about and about which it learns to account for itself in through and speech. (1990, p. 208)

Indeed, the effect of the construction of the audience on how individuals relate to gaming, as discussed in chapter four, is evidence for the impact of representation. How researchers and marketers describe audiences, shapes audiences’ relationship with a medium.

In chapter five, I discussed that although membership in particular groups does not predetermine identification with characters, there was a relationship between the

representation of characters and how and if people identified with them. Designers may not be able to assume how audiences will identify with texts but they shape, particularly via narrative, the potential for identification. In chapter six, while not all interviewees said that representation was important, when they did say it was important it was in the social-political sense described by theorists like Charles Taylor (1994). The problem with arguments for minority representation diversity in video games is that they tend to focus on pluralism rather than diversity. They emphasize peripheral markets, targeted on the basis of specific identifiers. Such arguments celebrate texts that depend on active audiences to create their own diversity in games. The political goals of representation, however, necessitate that diversity in media representation is available to all audiences.

### **Nice When it Happens**

When asked if seeing people who looked like them or were similar to them in some way, most (but not all) of my interviewees were actually a bit indifferent or at least offered qualified responses. They responded similarly to the question of whether or not identifying with characters in media texts was important to them. In fact only two interviewees responded differently to those two questions (one said representation is important while identification is not, the other said the reverse). Responses to these questions did not correlate with any identifiers (age, race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, etc) or type of gaming. Five said both identification and representation were definitively important and four were indifferent. Twenty-one offered qualified answers and discussed their importance in some texts over others, certain kinds of media, genres,



and so on. Of these, twelve specifically used “nice” or “bonus” to describe identification and representation.

Devon: I really like the Fable games and I think it's great that you could play the character as a gay character, but that's just like *a bonus*, it's not like I got the game in this case because that's what it was.

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Tanner: I think it is probably *nice to see* but I don't think I seek it out.

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Cody: I think it is *nice to see* people who look like you. But I don't know if it's a requirement.

Even those who did not specifically use that phrase, however, made comments in the same vein. Some interviewees described the character-creation tools in games like *Rock Band* as a bonus. Representation was “nice when it happens,” and it was a “bonus,” but there was not always an active desire for it. Interviewees expressed a similar indifference about having characters to identify with in video games and other media. This was true regardless of whether interviewees thought that representation and identification were important. That is, people who thought representation was unimportant, still said it was nice and those that said it was important said likewise.

Some interviewees argued that producers must simultaneously recognize, but not call attention to the diversity of experiences attached to inhabiting particular marked categories. The act of marking specific marginalized audiences through targeting, however, shaped the relationship people hailed by such targeting had with video games. The video game industry cannot simply assume that all gamers are alike, but neither can they assume that identifiers like gender, race, and sexuality are differences that make a difference to how people play video games. Similarly, identifiers can provide one form of connection between players and characters, but that does not mean that those identifiers

encompass the many other ways (emotional, experiential, etc.) people identify with fictional characters. People were critical of representation that was only used to emphasize a group's difference to the assumed White, male, heterosexual norm, particularly if such representation downplayed the struggles involved in deviating from the norm. These reasons are perhaps why interviewees in this and other projects did not necessarily demand representation. The act of demanding the representation of a group raises concerns about how that group should and will be portrayed. Rather, its importance was often seen as "nice when it happens," an articulation which expresses the importance of representation without developing proscriptive rules. It also reflects the emotional connection people have with media representation, which the cold, hard logic of the market cannot account for. "Nice when it happens," promotes diversity, but rejects being the target of pluralism.

This "nice"-ness was articulated in three senses, in many cases simultaneously so. First, people can enjoy media that does not include people "like them." Renee, for example, said that, "It's cool when it happens but I don't seek out media or anything that does it." In part this is drawn from the fact that audiences are active and can "make do" (de Certeau, 1984) with what texts provide them. As explored in chapter 5, players can interact with video games in a variety of ways that may or may not necessitate identifying with avatars. Identification is not the only pleasure gained from media texts. People also have much more expansive ways of connecting with media characters than research that focuses on specific identifiers can allow for. Indeed, as Rusty described, individuals can identify themselves in ways marketers and researchers rarely think of; "I guess when you

come down to it, identification, I don't identify with myself personally but more the things I belong to in real life: My family with Tanner, with our neighborhood, our house and how we belong to the community of this neighborhood.” These types of identity/identification cannot necessarily be cultivated through representation.

Representation, likewise, is not integral to enjoying all texts. Ephram said, “I guess it would be nice to see an Asian character or gay character that isn't a flaming homosexual or a huge stereotype of what an Asian person should be [...] But again, it's nice when it happens but I'm not too hung up on it.” Moreover, as described in chapter six, the importance of representation was relative to the importance of realism in a given text, whether people identified as a member of the group represented, the function of the representation in the text, and the context in they used a text.

Second, interviewees value diversity in a broad sense. As Carol put it, “it's always great to see things become less narrow-minded and a greater group of people acceptable.” In some cases when people said that it was not important to see people “like them,” it was because they want diversity in a more general sense in their media.

Pouncy: I'd love to see more queers in science fiction, video games. I'd love to see more people who aren't male-identified [...] but I'm not sure if that's because I would be able to identify with them more personally or just because I would be happy to see these institutions, video games and movies and TV shows, branching out away from representing white dudes.

It was diversity, not representation of one's identifiers, which interviewees' described as nice. This was also because, as explored in the preceding chapters, they did not only enjoy media that reflected their identities. Anya discussed this in terms of representation following our discussion of identification.

Anya: I think it's nice to see someone who's like you but I don't think I have to see only people who are like me. Like I don't, the whole movie or the whole TV program doesn't have to be about a white woman in their late 20s. I think I can appreciate stuff about male verses female, old verses young, race-wise, and stuff like that. So, it's kind of like the previous question that you asked [about identification]. It's nice but it's not something I look for. It's not super super important.

If diversity for the sake of diversity is nice, rather than imperative, what might this mean for how both researchers and producers approach the issue of representation? I shall return to this question in a moment.

Third, "nice" expressed the pleasant surprise. Some people, particularly in the context of some media, did not expect to see themselves as Sasha expressed, "I've just become accustomed to not even caring, or like thinking about my preference. Because I just automatically assume I don't have any." Carol made a similar comment.

Carol: But I don't consciously think when I'm watching TV there's nothing like me up there and that makes me upset [...] when something comes along that breaks that I'm always very very happy and encouraged. So it's important to some degree. I'll certainly tune out of the things that don't meet my expectations.

Previous research finds that feeling excluded might cause marginalized audiences to not consume or to reject parts of particular texts (Abrams & Giles, 2007; J. L. Davis & Gandy, 1999). They might also find ways of ignoring or engaging with a text differently. Evan, who studies gender, society and culture, pointed out that just being aware of interlocking systems of oppression did not mean that he would stop watching shows that he found offensive, "I might just watch it to see where this is going. But I don't know that it would make me stop doing that." Audiences can also find pleasure in media in spite of poor representation. T.L. Taylor, in her study of the MMORPG<sup>i</sup> *EverQuest*, finds that "women in *EQ* often struggle with conflicting meanings around their avatars, feeling they

have to ‘bracket’ or ignore how they look.... In many ways, women play *despite* the game” (2003, p. 36). Players are also capable of a variety of kinds of interactions with characters and avatars, in terms of both identification as well as the activity of playing video games.

“Nice,” although it does not emphatically demand action, is still useful to arguments for diversity in media. The three ways in which interviewees articulated representation and identification as being “nice” when they happen are useful in this regard. First, that people enjoy media that does not include people like them, means that singularly identity-focused market logic is shortsighted. Those who argue for representation should emphasize diversity, rather than pluralism in media content. Second, people think that diversity is important and there are important ideological implications to the constant defense of diversity. Third, making representation imperative or play serious, diminishes the joy of finding oneself reflected in a media text, and the joy of playing video games. It is paradoxically necessary to argue for the importance of representation of marginalized groups in video games, without allowing seriousness to overtake the fun of games. Similarly, researchers must account for the salience of particular identities, without ignoring the multifaceted quality of identities.

### **Diversity, Rather than Pluralism**

“Nice” may indicate a defense mechanism against constant marginalization. It may be a symptom of something akin to the racial paranoia Jackson (2008a) describes:

The point isn’t that race is less important now than it was before. It’s just more schizophrenic, more paradoxical. We continue to commit to its social significance on many levels, but we seem to disavow that commitment at one and the same

time. Race is real, but it isn't. It has value, but it doesn't. It explains social difference, but it couldn't possibly. (p. 11)

The same might also be said of gender and sexuality. "Nice" may also be the result of hegemonic discourses, in Gramsci's (1994) sense, the result of power dynamics that leave audiences feeling powerless. When market logic places the demand for representation in the hands of audiences, the audiences only have that power if cultural industries deem them valuable markets. Even in a medium like video games, which leaves a great deal of representational power (at least in certain texts) to the audience, researchers must consider that players must work within predefined norms. Moreover, the emphasis on player-created content allows for the illusion of diversity in games text. Many of these games capitalize on pluralism without actually have to make the games diverse in a way that would matter in a socio-political sense. For example, anyone can play *The Sims* and create same-sex pairings, but not everyone who plays the game will be confronted with queer content.

In most online articles critiquing the representation of marginalized groups in video games, in the comments section (barring a strict moderating system), someone often says something to the effect of: "What do you expect? Game designers and gamers are typically straight, White males. Of course most video game characters are similarly straight, White males." This is an argument that is the corollary to the market logic assumption that once video game makers target marginalized groups, games will represent those groups. One of the problems with this argument, is that much of the demand for representation is seated squarely with the audience.<sup>ii</sup> The audience referenced here is the fictional one, the most lucrative, imagined target for the producers' wares.

Indeed, who is represented, and how, has more to do with the industry itself and assumptions made about the audiences, than what audiences “want” in a more direct sense. An ideological sleight-of-hand operates through the market logic. Minorities must demand, through their consumption, representation of their group, but industries only target profitable groups.

Usually it is argued that representation is important to marginalized audiences’ enjoyment of media. This is, in turn, means that if you want to get a particular group to buy your product, you represent them in the text; this is market logic. If a marketer wants to sell games to women, people of color, or LGBTQ persons and they will put women, people of color, or LGBTQ people in the game. Individual identities are more complex than this logic allows for, however, as Zahriel describes: “I always think of human personalities being multifaceted [...] most human beings have the potential to pretty much reflect any other aspect of another human beings personality; it’s just a matter of recognizing that in ourselves and going there.”

In my own work, moreover, it has been less clear that audiences actually care about representation in such an active way. This troubled me. While game makers, journalists, and academics discuss the importance of representation readily, players seemed less adamant. I felt defeated, because I believed that media representation was an important and valuable goal. How was I as a researcher to argue for the importance of representation in media, if it appeared not to matter to players? However, if I take them at their word and assume non-marginalized gamers feel likewise, such assertions may be the perfect argument for why there *should* be a diversity of identities represented in media. If

seeing people “like you,” is not a defining factor in media consumption, not a necessity, then prevalence of traditionally dominant groups is *not* necessary for the marketing of media texts. I assert that diversity in games will not offend the heterosexual, White male gamers who play video games. There is, moreover, a great deal of evidence (e.g. *Grand Theft Auto* and *Tomb Raider*) that the mainstream gamer market is willing to play games with non-male, non-White/Anglo protagonists. Researchers and activists, then, have a ground from which to demand better representation of these groups in video games as both of the above examples being controversial ones. Arguments for diverse media representation, moreover, do not have to focus on specific identity categories and targeted audiences.

Doty (1993) makes this point in the conclusion of *Making Things Perfectly Queer*. He argues that “[b]y publicly articulating our queer positions in and about mass culture, we reveal that capitalist cultural production need not exclusively and inevitably express straightness” (p. 104). There are even some telling examples of this in other media, specifically when it comes to the representation of sexuality. Becker (2006) argues that the rise of gay content in 1990’s television was done to target the liberal, upper-middle class heterosexuals. Yaoi slash fiction, representations of gay male sexuality produced for the consumption of heterosexual teenage girls in Japan, is a somewhat similar example (McLelland, 2001a, 2001b). The representation of lesbian sexuality for the male gaze is another though more problematic example (Henderson, 1999a). The edited volume *Everything but the Burden* (Tate, 2003) analyzes a similar reappropriation of Black culture by Whites, a reappropriation that forms the basis of



Leonard's (D. J. Leonard, 2004, 2005, 2006b) critiques of African-American portrayals in video games. I do not think that these are unproblematic examples, nor are they exemplars for what minority representation in games should look like. They do offer evidence, however, that only representing marginalized groups when they are target markets is unnecessary.

Although it may have been the result of a social desirability bias, many interviewees said that they supported diversity in media generally, or at least that they do not just need to see media that includes people like them (which is not to say that they all thought that how groups are represented is important). Whether this is objectively true or not, does not matter much. The expectation that people are bigots, as discussed in the cultural production literature, affects media production more than the reality of their bigotry *per se*. Conversely, the expectation that audiences value diversity could be the basis of an argument for representation that is more politically advantageous than the pluralism of content currently prevalent in video games.

### **Diversity without Defense**

Nice can be part of why representation is important, but that is not the same as calling representation imperative; there is something *nice* about finding a representation that speaks to us in the media we consume.

Christine: I like being different but I don't like being so different that people can't relate to me at all. So when I find people or characters within media or artists that are similar to me I really treasure it cause— just having that comfort of knowing that there are other people like you is nice to have.

As discussed in the chapters five and six, however, no interviewee stated that they only want to see people like them in their media. People cannot only be appealed through

specific identifiers, as the market logic argument often implies. Similarly, the focus on specific identifiers in research on representation is not useful. Representation can become important in terms of these identifiers, but those are not the only ways people think about themselves, thus that focus is unnecessarily reductive. There is something, moreover, problematic in the very way researchers argue for diversity. The act of defending diversity, like targeting specific kinds of gamers, makes it exceptional rather than normative.

Mouffe says, that “to construct a ‘we’ it is necessary to distinguish it from a ‘them’” (1992, p. 30). This is why both research and market approaches to diversity in video games have tended toward a promotion of pluralism rather than diversity. There are parallels between this and multiculturalism in the more general political sense Gilroy describes.

Multiculturalism in both Britain and the United States has retreated from examining the concept of culture in any thoroughgoing manner and drifted towards a view of ‘separate but equal’ cultures.... In this approach, power exists outside of cultures and is therefore able to distort the proper relationship between them. (1996, p. 394)

Focusing on who texts are of, by and for tends to rely on a narrow view of “who” that results in oversimplification of identity and its relationship to identification and media representation. Gilroy makes this point as well.

It has been a core component in the scholarly vocabulary designed to promote critical reflection upon who we are and what we want, identity helps us to comprehend the formation of that perilous pronoun “we” and to reckon with the patterns of inclusion and exclusion that it cannot help creating. (2004b, p. 99)

While it seems self-evident and useful to tie individual producers’ or audience members’ identities to the identities of media characters, this often results in a severe

oversimplification of how individuals connect with media characters. Interviewees as described in chapters 4, 5, and 6 maintained that their identities are not reducible to simple identifiers. Christine synthesized this point.

Christine: In terms of having a certain amount of Black people, a certain amount of Asian people—I think it's important, but that's not the only aspect people should focus on. Those are really broad categories of humanity and it really has to get much deeper than someone's race, someone's sex. Like, not all Black people are the same, not all women are the same, not all Black women are even the same. So I think they need to sort of look at personality traits, as well and various other things, that are much deeper than just skin color and even like the amount of money you have. Those are just too broad, I feel.

I argue that researchers, and indeed anyone interested in encouraging diversity in video games and other media texts, must look at the power dynamics that are inflected in arguments about media representation. One of these dynamics is the emphasis on audience demand for representation (described above). Another is the sense that diversity, not a lack of diversity, needs defense.

There is a wealth of literature that argues that diversity in media is important, and should be demanded. Such demands do not sway businesses without the requisite financial evidence (e.g. niche markets). Tying together both positions, this dissertation offers a compromise of sorts. I argue that one way we can think about representation's importance is by thinking of it as “nice” rather than imperative. This presents an argument for the importance of representation that does not rely on effects or emphasize the representation specific groups. Rather, researchers can argue for diversity in media in a manner that takes into account the complexity of multifaceted identities.

Granted, we cannot just look to the commercial sphere for equality. At the same time, however, we cannot simply argue for the importance of media representation of

marginalized groups without an eye towards commercial concerns. Inclinations towards diversity in media, whether they are political or artistic, are tempered by the demands of capitalistic enterprise. The possibility for representation of non-male, non-heterosexual, non-White/Anglo individuals in video games have been consistently tied to marketing concerns. To take a political stance as a scholar, and argue for the importance of representation, does not necessarily mean eschewing these commercial concerns. Likewise, arguing against and within a market logic framework does not imply a bowing to the dominance of neoliberalism in this current historical moment. Indeed the market logic, whether promoting or preventing representation of marginalized groups, is not inherently at odds with more idealistic arguments for the importance of diversity in media. The insight this dissertation offers, is that idealism and pragmatism can be wedded.

The ultimate goal of this project is not just knowledge production, but also furthering the politically motivated project of promoting diversity in media representation. It reseats the responsibility for representation with the media makers. Charles Taylor asks of recognition, “[p]erhaps we don’t need to ask whether it’s something that others can demand from us as a right. We might simply ask whether this is the way we ought to approach others” (1994, p. 72). This is the question video game makers should ask themselves as they create texts; not questions of who they should represent and how. As this dissertation has demonstrated, those latter questions are shortsighted and potentially harmful. Relying on the construction of particular kinds of audiences similarly means that the only members of marginalized groups who are

represented are those in the position to be “good” consumers. If Gregory, for example, were to say that it was important to him that he see himself, then that would only be of interest to those marketers that wish to target him as a consumer. As he is currently an unemployed, gay, African-American male, in his early 30s, who lives with his mother, he is unlikely to be a target market for many game makers, let alone other media industries. Rather, what I call for is a reflexive approach to production.

As Gilroy describes, “[w]e need to consider whether the scale upon which sameness and difference are calculated might be altered productively so that the strangeness of strangers goes out of focus and other dimensions of basic sameness can be acknowledged and made significant” (2004a, p. 3). Market logic makes a social argument personal, as it stresses an appeal to individual consumers via an appeal to “group-ness.” The emphasis on consumer choice obscures the social and political importance of representation. In contrast, “nice when it happens” makes a personal argument into a social one. It admits the personal benefits of representation without accepting the responsibility for demanding representation. Rather, it allows diversity to be the social responsibility of cultural producers, not consumers.

Some might argue, that what I call for here amounts to dismantling the master’s house with the master’s tools. Those people would be calling upon Audre Lorde’s oft-quoted castigation of second-wave feminism. In that famous essay, Lorde calls on feminists to learn “how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house*” (1984, pp. 112, italics in original). What she discusses, however, goes beyond the way the analogy is often used. She argues that

the oppressed are often called upon to educate the masters, the oppressors. To assert that the marginalized demand that the center acknowledge them, however, is a displacement of responsibility. That displacement is the very core of the market logic argument for representation. It is also the logic behind games that offer players the option to create their own avatars, instead of integrating diversity into texts. Rather than call upon groups to demand representation, or display their need to be heard, researchers, activists, and interested producers can argue that the impetus is on everyone to acknowledge and celebrate difference. Market logic is more precisely the master's tools, which "may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (Lorde, 1984, p. 112). I concede that arguing that representation can be included in video games because it does not matter, and thus will not offend non-marginalized audiences, is in some ways a compromise. It is a compromise, however, that re-imagines the "tools" in a way that might foster change.

According to my interviewees, if you do not always see yourself reflected in media it is nice in the moments you do. Related to this, game designers often argue that their inability to develop thick descriptions of characters results in the lack of portrayals of marginal groups (Shaw, 2009). That is to say exposition is necessary to explain the non-hegemonic (the homosexual, the African-American, the female, etc.). Others must always be explained, or must always explain themselves. The rationale for including non-dominant identities in media texts typically assumes that it must matter to the text or to marketing. This obscures the tacit market logic that goes into using heterosexual, white, and male as the default identity categories in these games. In response to the claim that

non-hegemonic groups should only be represented when it matters, Caine pointed out that in other games, “if it doesn't matter, then how come all the protagonists wind up being White?” Individual audience members’ interactions with texts are complex and not determined by specific identifiers, thus the reliance on a construction of specific markets to argue for media representation is unnecessary. T. L. Taylor makes a similar argument:

If designers would rise to the challenge presented by a sociology of the body and a more complicated understanding (and rendering) of gender, the possibilities for evocative and immersive environments might begin to truly draw in a diverse gaming population and legitimize those already playing (2006b, p. 124)

There is even some evidence that this can be effective. For her master’s thesis Shaylyn Hamm (2009) designed female versions of two character-classes, a Medic and a Heavy Weapons, for the game *Team Fortress 2* (Valve, 2007). She designed both female characters to fall outside the scantily clad, lithe female video game hero and to maintain some level of similarity with their male counterparts.<sup>iii</sup> Interestingly, and returning to the previously discussed issue of realism versus fantasy and representation, she modeled one of female fighters on images of female snipers from the Soviet army during World War II. Related to this, the criticisms she received from respondents asked that the women have more realistic female shapes (e.g. curved hips, more realistic arms). After the design process, she fielded a survey asking video game players to assess the two characters. She found that:

The characters I created have body types, features, and ages that do not follow the ideal of what is typically marketed in the video game industry, yet they were well received by the majority of people who have reviewed them. My feedback also suggests that there is a desire among many gamers to see more varied female characters in games, and perhaps when more of such characters are introduced into mainstream games, the perception and role of females may become less limited. (2009, p. 39)

While a relatively small study (N=125) of a convenience sample, that both male and female video game players responded well to these atypical representations of female characters is promising. In sum, the arguments for the importance of representation do not have to rely on the marketing of texts to marginalized groups. Similarly, diversity can be normative rather than exceptional.

### **Just a Game?**

Interviewees' assertions that diverse representation is nice rather than imperative may also entail a certain level of feeling that representation in video games is frivolous, a guilty pleasure. Unless one feels that their identity, their sense of self, is actively under assault, seeking out representation is not necessarily required to one's continued well-being. Perhaps then, we might extend pleasure as Dyer describes in reference to gay politics to media representation: "pleasure remains a forbidden term of reference, particularly on the left. Pleasure is something you can guiltily have, have after the important things, or get as a reward for doing other things. As itself a goal, it is still not, so to speak paradoxically, taken seriously" (2002b, p. 168). There is pleasure involved in playing games and seeing oneself reflected in media texts. Pleasure, however, is something that happens; it is not necessarily something you demand. To some extent this "niceness" is also a way for audiences to decline the assumption that it is their job to demand representation. In part, what the "nice when it happens" theme signals is that players are not interested in carrying the responsibility for *caring* about representation.

Researchers, as well as producers and players must be cognizant of the ideologies encoded into video games: "Racial and gender stereotypes abound in the construction of



these avatars and an outright dismissal of avatar representation leaves unchallenged the political dimension of these representations” (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006, p. 93). Yet, these political dimensions cannot be articulated by dismissing the fun of games. The popularity of games, moreover, is not what makes representation in video games important. To say that representation in a medium is important in this way, necessarily means being able to describe specific effects of interacting with those texts. In their “census” of video game characters Williams *et al* (2009) argue, for example, that consumption of these games can cultivate a particular worldview for those individuals who have replaced most of their media consumption with video game play. The problem here is two-fold: first, video games’ prominence in popular culture should not be the only reason researchers study them; and second the effects are assumed to only arise in those (few, if any) people who *only* play video games. One could argue in response to both that, if games are a niche pastime and/or other media contain sufficient diversity, then representation in video games is not a problem.

Rather than say that representation in games matters, this dissertation untangles when and how representation comes to matter in games. How video games are viewed shaped how and when representation in them was important to interviewees. When I asked Carol if seeing people like her in video games was important to her she said that it is a nice surprise, but not expected.

Carol: Nice when it happens. I never really expect to at least not in video games. I mean I expect to more with movies and TV because it feels more possible. I guess because I grew up during the dawn of the video game era and it wasn't until more recently that the demographics of video gamers expanded and the types of games exploded, so my perspective is oh any character in a game being like me is not

really a possibility. So I didn't really come to expect it. But it's a pleasant surprise when it happens.

As explored throughout this dissertation, the discursively constructed difference of video games, in contrast to other media makes a difference to how people talk about representation in video games. Their frivolity affects how and if people identify as members of the gaming audience, how and if they identify with video game characters, and the relative importance of realism, and thus representation, to their video game play.

Instead of focusing on whether a representation in a given game is realistic, moreover, perhaps researchers should focus on the availability of representation in different types of games. Certain games allow for, or encourage, some kinds of interactions with video game characters and not others. Indeed, in some games, players do not identify with the in-game characters at all. This forces researchers to reconsider when and why both representation and identification are important. Certain texts and contexts alter how individuals connect with avatars, fictional characters, and media personalities. When representation is important, it relies on an appeal to realism that tokenism can never quite fulfill. Players do not identify with tokens and thus such representation cannot fulfill the market logic or educative goals of minority representation. What my evidence also suggests is that creators of any medium, must be willing to risk a lack of identification in order to get at a deeper identification. First, because people might connect, but not deeply identify, with people that are only caricatures or abstract characters based on visual cues. Second, because it is hard to predict why and how a person will identify with a character, perhaps specific identifiers should not be producers' primary focus. Moreover, the data here demonstrate that

identification is not always a goal for all individuals. Finally, players' (and non-players') attitudes towards games shape whether they think representation in games is important. The marginalization of gaming must be dealt with more directly in the struggle for diversity in video games.

Although Juul (2010) argues that games have become normalized, this misses an important point emphasized in several of interviews. People saw gaming as something separate from other media, and this has implications for demands for representation. Juul claims that though not everyone plays video games, nothing “prevents this from happening. Video games are fast becoming games for *everyone*” (2010, pp. 152, italics in original). That there are games that appeal to mass audiences, however, is not the same as saying that games in a broader sense are *for* everyone. The fact that only about half of interviewees identified as gamers, demonstrates this. Usually, popular, academic, and industrial discourses describe the core gaming audience as heterosexual, white and male. The primary way researchers and marketers challenge this construction is by focusing on female gamers. Such efforts focus on how female gamers identify with video game characters, and lead to the creation of female representations with which women (girls more often), it is assumed, can identify with. This, it seems, has actually made gender more of a barrier to feeling part of the gaming culture or identifying oneself as a gamer. The pluralism approach to representation in games does not lead to diversity in game texts or gaming (the activity) in a broader sense. What those invested in the representation of marginalized groups in video games should do instead, is focus on way the medium is spoken of. Paradoxically, this entails making a case for the seriousness of

representation in games in a way that does not ignore that play is part of what makes games games.

### **Final Thoughts**

In sum, what this dissertation has demonstrated is that researchers must be more attentive to their own representation of representation. Current trends in research on representation in video games promote pluralism rather than diversity. How researchers and marketers construct audiences has implications for how people relate to media and perform their identities as audience members. How people relate to texts, in terms of identification as well as interactivity, are shaped by their reasons for engaging in media consumption, as well as how texts and contexts shape that consumption. How and if people think representation is important in fictional texts is shaped by the relative importance of realism to these processes. That many of the research- and marketing-based arguments for representation, particularly representation in video games, focus on audiences' demands, has resulted in arguments for representation that focus on audiences' status as consumers. I argue, however, that this has resulted in a pluralism, which cannot be equated with diversity. Moreover, the fact that diversity itself must always be defended, unnecessarily insists that the marginalized demand attention from center. Finally, the focus on realism makes the arguments for representation in games emphasize seriousness in a way that belies the joy of play.

The goal of video game representation studies, and perhaps media representation studies more generally, should be to break away from this reification of groups, which reemphasizes their marginalization. Riggs describes this in terms of the interactions of

race and sexuality. “Our greatest challenge rests in finding a language, a way of communicating across our subjectivities, across difference, a way of negotiating the political and cultural borders between and within us so that we do not replicate the chauvinism and the reductive political agendas of the past” (1991, p. 64). A more nuanced understanding of identity, identification and media representation lays the foundation for understanding when and why media representation is important.

Identities are neither wholly externally, nor wholly internally defined. Market constructions and social relationships shape audiences', even active audiences', interactions with media. How people identify themselves does not define identification. Identification, in turn, does not necessarily drive media consumption. The way producers create texts, shape the options for identification with characters in those texts.

Researchers, and players, should be critical of the fact that the video game texts which preclude identification with characters (e.g. ones that make players more self-reflexive because of a lack of narrative and/or because players create their own characters) are the primary ones in which diversity is made available. Media representation is not only or even always important to people who are marginalized in some way. Moreover, the political goals of representation (recognition in a socio-political sense), necessitate that people who are not members of a particular marginalized group see representations of marginalized groups. That representation does not always matter in games, is actually a perfect reason for increased diversity in games. However, currently pluralism rather than diversity has been the focus of the gaming industry.

That is not to say that pluralism is not valuable. Pluralism, for example, promotes hospitality, in the sense describe by both Silverstone (2007) and Ricoeur (2007), and thus encourages the creation of a variety of texts directed towards many different types of audiences. Minority produced media for minority groups, for example, is certainly valued by audiences. There is merit in having media that allows and encourages audiences to create content, represent themselves in creative ways, and promotes, in new ways, the reworking of texts, which has always been available to audiences. The problem, however, is that these have all been used to stand in for representation in a more socially progressive sense. It may offer a form of recognition, in the sense used by Taylor (1994) and Honneth (2007), but only in that media industries recognize marginalized groups. It does not force recognition across social categories. Representation is not necessarily important because it affects how a specific group is viewed, but rather it makes up part of the social world in which groups interact. Diversity across media, not simply within texts marketed to a specific audience, is thus crucial to the political goals of media representation. Representation, in research, in marketing, in video games as well as other media texts, is part of, affects, and shapes audiences' relationship with media. As such, researchers, activists and producers cannot interrogate and correct representation in texts alone. Rather, any corrective must occur with the in very conceptualization of texts, audiences, and producers.

## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Massively multiplayer online role-playing game.

<sup>ii</sup> Even arguments that stress that members of a particular group must be part of the production process in order for there to be representation emphasize that those members are representatives of a particular niche audience.

<sup>iii</sup> Images from Hamm's designs are available here:  
[http://gamecareerguide.com/features/854/features/854/the\\_aesthetics\\_of\\_unique\\_video\\_php](http://gamecareerguide.com/features/854/features/854/the_aesthetics_of_unique_video_php) . Accessed May 29, 2010.

## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Recruitment Announcement

#### Want to talk about video games?

I am a graduate student investigating video game play and media consumption. I am looking for people who have played some form of digital game (console, PC, mobile, etc.) within the past year. How often you play is irrelevant, as I am looking for hardcore gamers, casual gamers, and everyone in between. Your participation will include filling out a short questionnaire and, if you volunteer, possibly being interviewed in-person. If you do take part in the in-person interviews, you will receive \$20 per interview in compensation (please note that I cannot provide compensation for the survey alone).

If you are interested in participating or have further questions please contact me:

Adrienne Shaw  
PhD. Candidate  
Annenberg School for Communication  
The University of Pennsylvania  
Email: [ashaw@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:ashaw@asc.upenn.edu)  
Phone: 802-999-8446



## **Appendix 2: Online Survey Consent Form and Questions**

### **INFORMED CONSENT FORM- Video Game Survey**

**Researcher:** Adrienne Shaw,

PhD Candidate, The Annenberg School for Communication,  
University of Pennsylvania

Email: [ashaw@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:ashaw@asc.upenn.edu)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this survey, which is part of my doctoral research.

Participation in this survey is completely voluntary. As part of your participation you will be asked to provide some brief information about your video game play, media consumption and demographic information on a survey. Your responses will be kept confidential and will be given coded identifiers known only to me. All personal identifiers (name, email and phone number) will be separated from your responses. At the end of the survey you will be given the option of volunteering to take part in one or two in-person interviews later on.

You are encouraged to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the study and the methods that I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me; please contact me at any time at the email address listed above at any point if you wish to withdraw from the project or if you are interested in my progress.

To fulfill the requirements of my institution's research protocols please acknowledge that you accept the below statement of consent

I agree that by taking this survey I am freely and willingly taking part in Adrienne Shaw's research project. I understand that information from this interview will be incorporated into research that may be published or presented at academic conferences. My identity and any information that may connect me directly with this research will be kept confidential. Moreover, I am under no obligation to answer any questions that I do not feel comfortable answering or that I do not wish to become part of Adrienne Shaw's research.

Check box acknowledging \_\_\_\_\_

\*If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this research that I cannot address, you may contact the Director of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614. If you have any questions regarding this

research or need additional information please contact me at (802) 999-8446 or by email at [ashaw@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:ashaw@asc.upenn.edu)

Thank you again for your time and assistance with this project.

**Video Game Survey-** Distributed online, via email, or on paper as respondents prefer.

Please tell me as much information as you feel comfortable sharing. All identifying information will be removed and kept separately from your responses. All questions are optional.

Name:

Email:

Phone number:

1. How long have you played video games?
  - a. 0-3 years
  - b. 4-6 years
  - c. 7-9 years
  - d. 10 years or more
  
2. How often do you play video games? (at least...)
  - a. everyday
  - b. once a week
  - c. a few times a week
  - d. a few times a month
  - e. once a month
  - f. a few times a year
  
3. What platforms do you play on? (circle all that apply)
  - a. Console (Xbox, PlayStation, Nintendo, etc.)
  - b. Handheld (PSP, Gameboy, Nintendo DS, etc.)
  - c. Mobile (cellphone, blackberry, etc.)
  - d. PC/Mac (MMORPGs, Solitaire, *the Sims*, *Civilization*, etc)
  
4. Name a few games you have played in the past six months:
  
5. Name a few television shows you watch regularly:
  
6. Name some movies you like:
  
7. What type of music do you listen to?

8. What are the names of some performers/musicians/bands/etc. you like?
9. Name some activities (sports, hobbies, events, etc) you participate in on a regular basis (within the past year):
10. What is your age?
  - a. 18-20
  - b. 21-24
  - c. 25-30
  - d. 31-35
  - e. 36-40
  - f. 41-45
  - g. 46-50
  - h. 50 and above
  - i. Prefer not to say
11. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
  - a. Less than high school
  - b. Some high school, no diploma
  - c. Graduated from high school- Diploma or Equivalent (GED)
  - d. Some college, no degree
  - e. Associates degree (ex: AA, AS)
  - f. Bachelor's degree
  - g. Master's degree
  - h. Professional degree (ex: MD, DDS, LLB, JD)
  - i. Doctorate degree
  - j. Prefer not to say
12. Do you identify as any of the following (Check all that apply):
  - a. African-American/Black
  - b. Asian-American/Pacific Islander
  - c. Latino/Hispanic
  - d. Middle Eastern
  - e. Native American/Alaska Native
  - f. White
  - g. Arab/ Arab American
  - h. Biracial
  - i. Multiracial
  - j. Other (please specify):
  - k. Prefer not to say
13. Do you identify as any of the following (Check all that apply):
  - a. Buddhist
  - b. Catholic
  - c. Hindu

- d. Jewish
- e. Muslim
- f. Protestant Christian
- g. Pagan/Wiccan
- h. None
- i. Other (please specify):
- j. Prefer Not to Say

14. Do you identify as any of the following:

- a. Female
- b. Male
- c. Transgender
- d. Uncertain
- e. Other (please specify)
- f. Prefer Not to Say

15. Do you identify as any of the following:

- a. Bisexual
- b. Gay
- c. Heterosexual
- d. Lesbian
- e. Queer
- f. Uncertain
- g. Other (please specify)
- h. Prefer Not to Say

16. Where did you grow up?

17. Occupation?

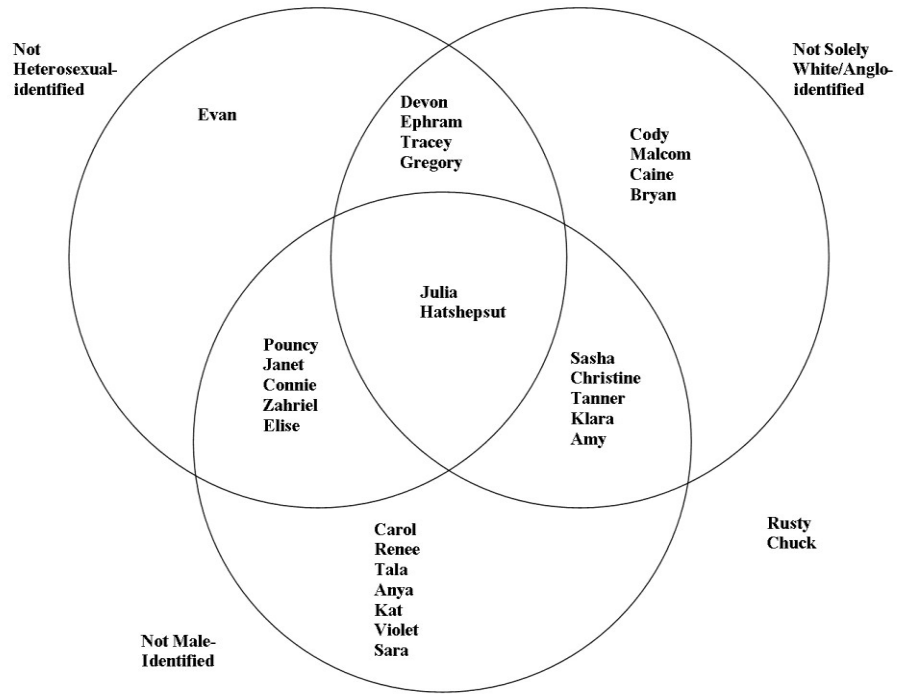
18. Other identifiers which are important to you?

19. A small sample of individuals who respond to this survey will be asked to participate in one or two face to face interviews. Compensation of \$20 will be provided at the end of each interview. Are you interested in being considered for the in-person interview stage of this project?

- a. Yes
- b. No

### Appendix 3: Diagram of Interviewees

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## Appendix 4- First Interview Consent and Questions

### INFORMED CONSENT FORM- Interview

**Researcher:** Adrienne Shaw,  
PhD Candidate, The Annenberg School for Communication,  
University of Pennsylvania  
Email: [ashaw@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:ashaw@asc.upenn.edu)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview, which is part of my doctoral research.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. In our face-to-face interview I will ask you questions about your experience with video games and your media consumption. This will not be a highly structured interview. You may end the interview at any time. If you are willing there will be a second follow up interview. This will include you playing a game of your choice in a setting you find most comfortable (options will be discussed at the end of the first interview). Participation in the first interview, does not commit you to the second interview. Compensation will be provided at the end of each interview (\$20).

If the setting allows and you are comfortable with it, the interviews will be recorded. These recordings will be kept on a secure laptop and transcribed by me. Your name will not be included in the written transcripts. Audio files will be archived for further revisions of this project, unless you prefer that they be destroyed once they are transcribed. If you do not want to be recorded, I will only take notes while we talk.

As before, you are encouraged to ask any questions at any time about the nature of the study and the methods that I am using. Your suggestions and concerns are important to me; please contact me at any time at the email address listed above at any point if you wish to withdraw from the project or if you are interested in my progress.

To fulfill the requirements of my institution's research protocols please fill out and sign the below statement of consent.

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (name), agree that today, \_\_\_\_\_ (date), I am freely and willingly taking part in Adrienne Shaw's research project. I understand that information from this interview will be incorporated into research that may be published or presented at academic conferences. My identity and any information that may connect me directly with this research will be kept confidential. Moreover, I am under no

obligation to answer any questions that I do not feel comfortable answering or that I do not wish to become part of Adrienne Shaw's research.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

\*If you have any questions or concerns about participating in this research that I cannot address, you may contact the Director of Regulatory Affairs at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614. If you have any questions regarding this research or need additional information please contact me at (802) 999-8446 or by email at [ashaw@asc.upenn.edu](mailto:ashaw@asc.upenn.edu)

Thank you again for your time and assistance with this project.

Adrienne Shaw

### **Interview 1:**

1. How would you describe yourself? Use any characteristics or terms you wish?
2. Tell me a little bit about where you grew up? Your family?
3. How long have you been playing video games?
4. What is the first video game you remember playing? Did you like it?
5. What other types of activities did you like at the time?
6. Have you played video games consistently since then? Why or why not?
7. What else was going on in your life when you did/didn't play?
8. What platforms do you play on?
9. What types of video games do you normally play? What are your favorite titles?
10. What do you look for in games? What are your criteria for good games?
11. How do you find games you might like to play?
12. Do you identify as a gamer?
13. What type of media do you generally like? Television? Books? Music? Movies?
14. Do you ever identify with characters in media texts? Can you describe why or why not? What does identification mean to you?
15. How do you define identification?
16. Is it important for you to be able to identify with media characters?
17. Has this changed at all over time?
18. Is it important to see people who look like you or are similar to you in some way in the video games you play? What about in other media?
19. Do you think other people want to play video games or watch films and television shows, etc. that include people who look like them or are similar to them in some way? Why do you think that is?



## Appendix 5

Gaming interview:

1. What game have you chosen to play today? Why?
2. What are the objectives of this game?
3. Does this game have a narrative? Do you think about the narrative while you play?
4. Is this game similar to other games you've played? In what ways?
5. What do you like about this game?
6. Are there any characters in this game? Which characters do you like in this game, if any? Are there any characters you don't like?
7. As you are playing where do you think of yourself in relation to the game? Do you see yourself as one of the characters? Do you see yourself outside of it? Is this similar to other games you played.

These are adapted from Jonathan Cohen's (2001) questions for measuring identification. I've found that they don't really work to measure "identification" as he defines it, in video games. They are however useful in getting players to describe what is different about video games from other media. Rather than asking these questions as written, in the past I've asked interviewees if they questions do or don't make sense when thinking about video games. First the game they've played, then video games in general, then in terms of other media.

8. While playing the game, I forgot myself and was fully absorbed.
9. I think I have a good understanding of my character.
10. While playing I felt I could really get inside the character's head.
11. At key moments in the game, I felt I knew exactly what my character was going through.
12. While playing the game, I wanted the character to succeed in achieving his or her goals.
13. When the character succeeded I felt joy, but when he or she failed I was sad.

Continuing from above

14. Can you tell me again how you would define identification?

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