Cherokee Cowherd

Gene Gort

Visual Culture, Spring 2020

05/12/2020

<p align="center">Video Games: Virtual Parallels Reality</p>

Since it's rise to popularity in the 1970s, video games have provided a massive cultural shift in the ways that we entertain ourselves and how we use and view technology. Gaming has allowed us to transform innovative technology into a participatory activity that offers a form of escapism. It offers the participant the opportunity to disconnect from life and immerse themselves in an alternate dimension. With this change, it begs the question: What is the gaming industry's impact on the users? How does the gaming world shape our lens of the real world? As I explore this topic, sexism, gender expression, sexuality and race come into play. Not only will I discuss the issues but the work being done to shift the conversation, and ultimately the culture.

In the process of disengaging from the real world around us, gamers are still being fed ideas from reality. Everyday millions of people turn on their consoles, boot their favorite game on PC or click on a mobile app that allows them to exist in a hyperreal dimension where they can customize their experience. From this we have created a new language, a community, and a culture based in our real-world views and ideologies. Gaming conventions, internet forums, and fan-made work are an added layer of player participation with some going as far as creating custom content that others can add into their own game. Gamers exist within a subculture that has become the world's biggest source of entertainment. It is more connected to other forms of media consumption than outsiders realize, as the values on

display within the game reflects real life. Video games and the online community create a vessel to introduce us to other culture's we may not get to experience in our real-world communities. A great example is how games are filled with iconography that are used as shorthand to navigate uncharted alternate reality. By appropriating iconography from different parts of the world, a new language is created. It's also a way we inject our own cultural values into the game through use of religious symbolism, storylines from ancient text, and societal cues to further immerse users. With this, the topics of morals, values and life lessons are embedded into the storylines providing the user with an opportunity to make unique decisions that may not present themselves in everyday life. This in turn means some of the uglier parts are exhibited through the way we represent the protagonist and the NPC's (Non- playable character) within their universe.

"Games offer opportunities for players to explore, practice, and re-enforce cultural and social identities (Wikipedia)". In-game stories tend to be told through the same lens: straight, white, male protagonist. The NPC's they interact with are the same stereotypes we see repetitively throughout mainstream culture. Women are presented with unrealistic bodies types, they are receivers of most of the violence, and their only purpose is to be used as a plot device to move the story forward. Historically, video games have been marketed specifically to the male population due to a widespread misbelief that men play more video games than women. This also speaks to the culture of gaming being defaulted as a masculine activity that only men are allowed to partake in. Not unlike many activities throughout history, there is a clear presence of sexism alive in the gaming community both as a user and a developer. In the beginning of arcades, women were dressed and posed suggestively on game cabinets to entice teenage boys to come play. The same way a wealthy man with "*good taste*" would

have commissioned a portrait to be posted above a fireplace, or the way modern way we use the female form to sell a pair of jeans or perfume. The female characters featured within the game were a cluster of pixels labeled as a princess needing to be rescued, stylized similarly to the women in ads. This narrative hasn't changed much since the 70's with them fulfilling the role of a wife, daughter or sister needing to be saved or their death avenged. The female NPC's serve to push storylines forward and experience the brunt of the violence. In turn, their agency has been removed as they are at the mercy of the main male protagonist. They exist for the protagonist to possess and feel victorious while pressuring women to fit into an ideal in both the physical form and in gender norms in the same way as billboards and magazines. People of color rarely exist in these universes. On the rare occurrences that they do, they tend to fulfill a conventional presence. They have outdated appearances, exhibit stereotypical characteristics, and only appear for short periods of time. Black male characters show up in large hyper-masculine frames who play sports embodying the typical portrayal of black men. Black women are the "loud and ghetto" caricature while Latinx and Asian women are exoticized with offensive accents. This representation of sexuality, gender and race in the video game industry has reinforced misogynistic views and racist stereotypes while pushing forth exaggerated body types and patriarchal role assignments. Since gaming imitates life and the discourse is changing around these subjects, this means the gaming industry has to evolve with the times as well. As with real life, not all of the gaming community fully embraces this change and actually work to keep the gaming community as a male centered one. Some games are self-aware of these flaws both in game and society and make a meta-commentary within the game but, this doesn't put in the work to address and correct the problem. 46% of the gamer population is made up of women with men at 54%. The trend of the being almost

50/50 has been on the rise since 2016. (Source) Over 2 billion people around the world play video games according to Microsoft, landing the video game industry as the top earner in entertainment (Business Insider).

> "But despite women now representing a significant stake in what has become a multi-billion-dollar industry, the last decade has seen gaming become **notorious for sexism**, sexual harassment and trolling. It's an issue that has remained largely unchanged for years. A 2012 US study found 80 per cent of gamers think **sexism is rampant** in the gaming community and revealed that 63 per cent of women had been called c**t, bitch, slut or whore while gaming." *(Source)*

While proper representation within in the gaming industry as both employees and consumers are lacking, there's almost none for the transgender community. There has been a small list of trans characters throughout gaming history, but most examples feature transsexuality as a character flaw rather than an authentic identity. To be clear, there are some trans-icons in the gaming community but, the characters themselves have not been identified as trans in the storyline or declared trans by game developers. Rather, they are re-appropriated by trans gamers, such as Sephiroth from Final Fantasy. They use gender-neutral pronouns but they are shown as half-alien. This disparity in proper representation is most linked to the actual demographics of game developers. The lack of diversity within the workforce, translates into lack of diversity in games simply because they lack enough perspectives to make fully- fleshed out characters and avoid the common errors we see in media. They are unconsciously releasing different stories with similar themes and views because they lack the resource of a different perspective. Female identifying game developers account for only 22% game developers in the world.

> "A 2014-2015 report published in 2016 by the International Game Developers Association found that people of color were both underrepresented in senior management roles as well as underpaid in comparison to white developers.[9] Gaming convention organizer Avinelle Wing told Newsweek, "The industry has an even bigger problem with race than it does with gender."[10]Many have pointed out that this lack of diversity

within the industry has contributed to a lack of representation within video games themselves.[10][11] Dennis Mathews, a game designer at Revelation Interaction Studios, suggests that the exclusion of non-white game developers leads to stereotyping within video game development and marketing. Developer prejudices impact who counts as a game's target audience, leading many developers to pigeonhole or ignore non-white gamers. As Mathews puts it, "Those stereotypes tie into publisher decisions of what games get picked up and what should be put into games."[12]

Data from 2017 reflects that the video game industry is a male dominated one with men accounting for 74% of the workforce, with women at 21% and trans/non-binary developers accounted for only 5% (Statista). Some of the gaming community tries to thwart attempts of change in how we make and view gaming citing the conversation of race, gender and sexuality are all forms of propaganda forcing it to change to a more leftist space. This information is very telling as to why representation within the gaming community is such an issue; there simply aren't enough voices and differing perspectives in the room.

> "Another important step is getting more school-aged girls into STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects. "We need to show them that game development is a real career option," McLean explains. Part of this will be ensuring that game developers consider representation when designing new characters. "I think that needs to continue; young girls need to see themselves represented in games, as do people of colour, as do non-binary people, as do LGBTQI people, as do disabled people – we have a long way to go."

Fortunately, we have moved the needle forward in terms of representation for women, people of color, and assign gender roles. One way that game developers have been tackling the issue of gender and race representation in gaming is removing the "male" and "female" options and allowing the player to customize their character at will with options being unisex. Players have the option to change their body type, facial features, skin tone etc. according to their own wants through slider bars instead of an assigned default appearance by the game developers. The corrective work of sexuality comes in the form of multiple choices for love interests through

either various storylines to choose from or various NPC's you can interact with. "The Last of Us" is one of the highest-rated and critically acclaimed games in recent history featuring a queer, female, protagonist with part II slated to release in June of this year. Beloved characters have been revamped in new releases such as Lara Croft who was originally overly busty with an unrealistic small waist and shorts. The camera was set up to focus on her body in a suggestive way. In the recent remakes her bust has shrunk, she wears pants and the focus has moved to a proper storyline rather than her appearance.

As we continue to make strides to push the needle forward, there is pushback just like any other subject. Every time a change has been made; it always comes with some form of resistance. The gaming community is no exception. Like we have seen in the past, this should not be a deterrent but rather, a sign that progress is being made. The gaming community is already diversified, and the industry is working to catch up. Now that we are aware of this issue, we can continue the conversation about making real change not only in gaming but also in society.

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