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Finding Identities: Identities in Video Games from a Gender, Race, and Identity Representation

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Abstract

In this paper I will bring light to the exploration of gender, race, and identity in video games. While also having a focus on how the representation crosses with social and cultural contexts. I will be researching different games from many different genres, which will show light to the way video games reflect and shape societal attitudes towards gender, race, and identity. When using close textual analysis and theoretical framework from topics that include critical race theory, media, and feminist theory. This research will help to seek to explore the nuances and complexities of representation in gaming which implicates video game players and the industry in its entirety.

Throughout our lives we have all be previewed to media. Rather it be from television, to music, to video games, to even news articles. There are different ways the representation is shown in media like gender, race, and identity. These representations play every important role in the social stereotypes, attitudes, and beliefs. This influences how many of us view each other as individuals epically how we interpret each other's cultures. Video games have become of the most influential and lucrative business in the world today especially due to the increase of social media presence and marketing. Different games are enjoyed form different ages, races, and genders through the entire world. People enjoy games like Mario, Call Duty and Grand Theft Auto which have been major cultural phenomenon's due to the impact these games have had on the world, the fan bases are truly strong. By researching representation in video games, it is very important to be able to distinguish the difference between gender, race, and identity. Gender representation is a reference to how male, female, and non-binary characters are portrayed like in video games. Race representation refers the portrayal of different racial and ethnic groups. Identity representation refers to the inclusion of sexual orientation especially in the LGBTQ+ community. This paper will argue that the representation of gender, race, and identity in video games is reflective of social norms and values which reinforce them. While examining various games and genres the research will highlight the ways that video games serve a cultural impact perpetuates stereotypes and racial basis. This draws on critical race theory, feminist theory, and media theory. This analysis aims to deepen our understanding of the impact that representation in video games has on individuals and society at large. This will help to advocate for more inclusive and diverse representation in the game industry.

Feminist theory is a theoretical framework that explains gender inequalities in social aspects, and it allows there to be understanding to address issues related to gender especially within representation within media. This is important because it challenges the traditional gender roles and stereotypes, advocates for gender equality, and also for women's rights as well. Critical race theory is a different focus as it focuses on race and racism which gives us a deep dive on how race intersects with other social identities and stereotype inequalities. It allows us to analyze the ways in racial stereotypes and biases are within our society and allows us to look for a change in the structures of oppression that many face. Media theory on the other hand plays a role in society as it includes how the way media can shape and reflects societal values. It allows us to examine how media representation has influence on the rest of society due to collective identities and social dynamics. While researching video game representation all these theories intersect and allow us to understand gender race and identity are being portrayed in video games. For example, the feminist theory helps us to understand gender and challenges that in games while critical race theory helps to look for any racial biases and stereotypes that may be shown in video games. Media theory then gives us a great framework of understanding how representation in media has influenced norms in our society. While doing research we could see that representation in video games do have a specific portrayal of gender race and identity. There has been research found that video games often reinforce and show existing social norms and stereotypes due to the sexualization of female characters and marginalized racial minorities being stereotyped. By connecting feminist theory critical race theory and media theory we can analyze video game representation the aims to educate the impacts that these social norms have on society in order to bring recognition and inclusivity of representation within the game industry as we can see how much power is being given within the industry that affects society as a whole.

Gender representation in video games is a very interesting and deep issue that reflects societal norms and values. In games traditional gender roles are typically portrayed as women being sexualized or even being in distress. While male characters are usually portrayed as very muscular and dominant and often the protagonist. The traditional gender roles and stereotypes have a big impact on how individuals perceive each other. There was a study done by Gurevitch titled *Mass Media and Society: Still a Man's Game: Gender Representation in Online Reviews of Video Games* which highlights issues about women in video games especially in the video game Grand Theft Auto being sexually objectified. For example, "Women in games often reflect traditional gender roles, sexual objectification, or stereotypes such as the "distress". Male characters are frequently depicted as big and muscular, and LGBT characters have been slow to appear due to the heteronormativity of the medium" (Gurevitch, 2005). This shows the in fact that video games have on gender due to how the stereotype of how women are viewed and how males are also viewed can be pushed on societal norms as we may know this is not an accurate depiction of every single woman or every single man. In addition to gender representation the portrayal of how black male characters in video games has a very interesting portrayal on society in the game industry. Research completed by Rohlinger titled *New Media and Society: The Virtual Census: Representations of Gender, Race and Age in Video Games* state, "In the action/shooter genre of urban/street games, both blacks and Latinos are typically portrayed as "brutally violent, casually criminal, and sexually promiscuous," while in sports, blacks are typically portrayed as "verbally aggressive and extraordinarily muscular and athletic." African Americans are represented as aggressive or athletic characters more often than as protagonists or heroes" (Rohlinger, 2019). This shows how the stereotypical agenda of black males are being pushed in video games for them to be seen as aggressive, thieves and thugs especially in the Grand Theft Auto San Andreas and GTA5

game it depicts blacks as criminal gangsters who live in the slums. The representation of the LGBTQ plus characters in video games is also an aspect to deep dive on. Kaity Kline wrote an article titled *A Growing Number of Gamers Are LGBTQ+, so Why Is Representation Still Lacking?* It states, “GLAAD's research reveals that despite LGBTQ+ gamers comprising a significant portion of America's gaming audience, less than 2% of all games include LGBTQ+ characters or storylines” (Kline, 2024). This shows a lack of representation due to how the agenda is being pushed of LGBTQ plus people now being represented in video games as their identity has been taboo and not being represented enough in the public eye due to the scrutiny of do longing to that community has on people. They have been shunned and silenced in the gaming industry has tried to silence them by not including them within different storylines in games like Call of Duty or even Lost. Representation of gender race and identity video games are important when reflecting societal norms and values we could see by examining the representation that the impact that individuals in society has we can work towards being more inclusive with representation in the gaming industry which would create a more inclusive gaming environment.

There is a critical discussion that must be had about race and video games as it is a continuous issue due to its permutations of societal norms in stereotypes. In many different games people of color are often portrayed in a negative light which contributes to stereotypes and tropes and broadens the narrative of systematic oppression. Rico Norwood wrote in article called *Coding Blackness: A History of Black Video Game Characters* states, “Black culture has been, and is, integral to grappling with our collective understanding of video game history. People of color have often been portrayed in popular media as stereotypes and tropes that speak to an underlying structure of racism, patriarchy, heteronormativity, and other forms of systemic oppression” (Norwood, 2021). These stereotypes can help prove the narrative of how black characters are

depicted as aggressive or criminals, how Latino characters are usually looked at as gang members or poor immigrants and how Asian characters are looked at as exotic or nerds. Typically, the portrayal of characters of color have certain narratives that goes along with there are stereotypes. An example is how a black character could be portrayed as an athlete which plays along with the idea that black people, if they are to be good at something it typically goes with some form of sports profession or even music profession. Culture appropriation is also another issue that appears in the representation of race of video games. Muriel wrote *Video Games as Culture: Image Crises and the Influence of Culture and History on Video Games* it states, “Developers should also be sensitive to the use of religious elements or those drawn from cultural traditions. For example, the release of LittleBigPlanet was halted after intervention by a players who claimed to hear verses from the Quran in the game's soundtrack” (Muriel, 2018). This example shows the lack of awareness that developers sometimes may have within the video games about different cultures without fully understanding or respecting the premise of it. The use of a religious element could be highlighted as a company being insensitive to how that specific religion may have music that is theirs be so sacred then now turned into something for entertainment. The representation of race and video games is a big issue that requires a lot of careful consideration but if we address things like stereotypes and cultural appropriation developers are going to be more inclusive and respectful to how they portrayal people of color in their religions as well to build a better and more inclusive gaming environment.

There is an intersection of gender race and identities and video games that is very complicated but a very important issue that changes the experience that players have due to the representation of characters in the game. It is very important to understand how these intersecting identities have a big impact on gamers experience in order to create a more inclusive game. Hickey wrote in *Identity and Leadership in Virtual Communities: Establishing Credibility and Influence* it states, “I found that there were significant barriers across gender and race, and that certain supportive communities, specifically female supportive communities, actually served as a buffer for women, while showing measurable benefits for men as well,” she said, explaining that the communities also promoted women in the gaming industry” (Hickey, 2014). We can see in these communities that not only support women but also help with the growth of the gaming industry which helps to highlight the inclusiveness of gaming communities. Representation of intersecting identities in video games is an area within the gaming industry that needs to be paid attention too. Some characters who have multiple identities such as women of color or a Hispanic non binary man have a unique challenge and experience in the gaming world. The player experience online games heavily influenced by identity. For example, Jessica Buterbaugh wrote in an article called *Research Exploring Race and Gender in Video Games Is First of Its Kind its states*, “In online play, gamers of color may experience racial harassment once identified as such, including based on voice chat. This is particularly well-documented for women of color, whose issues are compounded by their intersecting identities. A 2020 survey conducted by the Anti-Defamation League reported that over half of online gamers experienced discrimination, including at least 30% of both black and Hispanic/Latino respondents” (Buterbaugh, 2016). This shows the need of gaming communities to be more inclusive and supportive of diverse identities. By having intersection of gender race and identities and video games this helps to fix a player's experience

due to the correct representation of characters in games. As we gain more understanding developers and communities can help to create a better gaming environment.

Due to the analysis of the representation in video games we could see the influence of stereotypes which shape the gender race and identity. These representations reflect social norms and helps to influence bad stereotypes that affect marginalized groups. Intersecting identities in gaming highlights the need a better and more inclusive space in terms of gave me communities and representation in full facets. To improved representation the developers can help create better and more diverse characters and gaming communities can help promote inclusion. If we strive to have a better more inclusive and representative gaming industry, we could create a gaming culture that is comfortable and fun for all players.

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